

DR. AWKWARD AND OLSON IN OSLO

LAWRENCE LEVINE

St. Augustine, Florida

The long voyage between my first tentative effort at constructing a short palindrome of some forty letters, and the eventual completion of a palindromic novel numbering 31,594 words (or approximately 104,000 letters) some twenty years later, was an unrelenting lesson in many disciplines. There were lessons in trial and error, in logic, in vocabulary, in syntactics, and a wide-ranging lexical development that I never thought possible. Although I had always considered myself a more than ordinary lover of my native language, I had never before realized how metamorphic and submissive was this extraordinary English tongue, until the day I began manipulating its words, letter by letter, for palindromic composition.

I wrote my first extended palindrome in 1960. It came to 170 words (or 600 letters). I tried to give it as much sense as possible, and in this matter I think I clearly succeeded. For no particular reason I called my essay SO DO DODOS, and in verse form it read as follows:

Tacit, I hate gas,
 (aroma of evil), a nut, sleep,
 no melons, drawers, bards,
 Eta Delta, ebon, a hare, macaroni,
 stone raps, id, a lass lion,
 apses, ore, lines, a loner, war -
 oh, bait I hate! - jam, ugh;
 cabs, warts too, spas, Odin, rocs.

I revile dope, naps, a wagon -
 add a sob - oh, damn it!
 (so do dodos, ahem) - lepers? mark up a love -
 sips, editors, tops, rime, denim,
 repose (alas, simoleons), loops, rats, gals,
 a tar bag and a maniac Cain,
 a mad nag, a brat, a slag star, spools,
 Noel - O Miss Al Aesop, ermined emirs,
 pots, rot I despise; Volapuk,
 rams repel me (ha! so do dodos),
 tin, mad hobos, add a nog,
 a wasp, an epode, liver.

I scorn "I do," sap, soot, straws,
 Bach, gum - a jet? ah, it I abhor -
 a wren? O Ia! senile roses, pan oils, salad;
 I spare not sin or a camera (ha!

no Beatle), dates, drabs, rewards,
 no lemon peels, tuna,
 live foam or a sage Tahiti cat.

Obviously, I was on the right track. It was also obvious that the English-speaking world was not yet inordinately interested in protracted palindromes and, in truth, neither was I. Over the next five years I devoted an evening or two each month to enlarging the composition. Eventually, I added another 377 words, and sent the result to the Guinness Book of World Records. To my astonishment they declared me the world recordholder for the year 1975.

As champion, I didn't rest on my laurels; on the other hand, I didn't pursue the subsequent recordholders with marked assiduity. In 1980 I had reached all of 18,000 words when I suddenly realized the futility of proceeding along that line of palindromania. I could go on forever and would always end up with virtually nothing. A formless monster of dismaying length, a rodent in a squirrel cage, going nowhere very rapidly and very tediously, and ending up exactly where he started!

Over a period of time, the idea of writing a palindromic novel replaced the fruitless pursuit of mere length. When I fully accepted, I stopped adding to the endless word game and for a year or so considered the novelistic possibilities. If anything, I realized the enormity of the task, and decided to concentrate as much time and effort as I could spare. Approximately four hours of work per day went into the effort, or about 100 hours per month. I completed the novel in five months.

As in all palindromes, impeccable honesty was essential. One must not cheat by inventing words or coining new spellings. During the first days I wanted to be a purist. Use only common English words was the dictum: no variable spellings, no oddments, no obscure names of places or peoples, no obsolete words, no foreign phrases or Latinisms masquerading as good English. But of course this was all quite impossible. I soon settled down to the best I could do with the English approved by fifteen dictionaries, encyclopedias and other reference volumes for the final verdict on the existence and spelling of unusual words.

On the other hand, I was extremely cautious with alternative spellings, for example using *or* rather than *our* in *labor*, *honor*, etc. I almost always chose the American rather than the English spellings in such words as *woolen* and *traveler*. I was likewise cautious on the alternative spellings of place names such as *Surinam/Suriname*, *Nineveh/Ninevah*, etc. I also made use of occasional abbreviations, but these, for the most part, were in common usage: S.O.S., O.K., i.e., Mr., lb., re, AE (the writer), and the like.

"SAM X., MANY A FEZ I ABROGATE, NOT FEW AT SOME CIDEVANT FEDERAL CEDING.
 I LAME GOLA - NOR EVEN DR. AWKWARD, TI, YASI, E., ROME, C. NOT N.E.P.,
 ERO, A MA (MOM) - OH, ECCE PAPA!"

"A PAP? ECCE HOMO, MAMA! O REPENT! ONCE MORE I SAY IT!" DR. AWKWARD:
 "NEVER! ON A LOGE MALIGN I DECLARE DEFT NAVE DICE - MOST. A WEFT, ONE
 TAG OR BAIZE. FAY NAM, XMAS..."

EVIL? O ERA, SELAH! EVEN IN NINEVAH SORE HELP MET ON TIME IS EVIL OR
EVILED.

DELIVER OLIVES? I EMIT NO TEMPLE HERO'S HAVEN. IN NINEVEH ALES ARE OL-
IVE.

But all writers of palindromes realize that it is in the short
effort that the whole is the final beauty:

FOOL ALOOF

EMIL S. ELBERT SAW TRALEE 3-EEL ART WAS TREBLE SLIME
MURDER? NOT SO. BOSTON RED RUM

Yet it is also evident that in a protracted palindrome the parts
become the reigning interest; and although the whole is a colossus
to be admired and honored, the parts are the links of the marathon
chain composed of spliced emordnilaps that run to the exact center
of the palindrome where, on the other side, the emordnilaps contin-
ue with their new sense to the completion of the palindrome.

Which brings us to that perfect word which will one day certain-
ly find its way into the English lexicon. Emordnilap is a fine in-
version or reverse spelling of palindrome. Who first thought of
it? And how long ago? Emordnilap is the perfect designation for
a word, phrase or sentence that makes different sense when read
backwards:

ED, I CLASP MURFREESBORO
O, ROB SEER FRUMPS, ALCIDE!

SOT! TO TASTE VICTUAL MUFFINS, I DO SO SNIFF ARABLE GUMS.
SMUG ELBA! R.A.F. FINS? O, SOD! I SNIFF UMLAUT CIVETS AT OTTO'S.

BOSNIA PAIN! A MONOMANIA PETAL! LIES! O RARE WOMAN AMONG ANIMALS!
SLAM! I NAG NO MAN! A MOWER AROSE ILL, ATE PAIN, A MONOMANIA PAIN - SOB!

Thus, inevitably, and because he has no choice, the composer
of a palindromic novel becomes a tailor of words. He lays out hun-
dreds of small emordnilaps, and stitches them all together in their
assigned places, with the finished product the gigantic palindrome
that forms the whole work. And the exact center becomes the hinge
of the composition while, irrevocably, the story on both sides must
proceed to its destined end, quite as if the hinge were nonexistent.
It was the hinge that created for me the principal problem of the
novel.

It is evident that I had to keep constantly in mind two elements:
(1) palindrome-emornilap, and (2) development of the story. I had
little trouble mapping out the argument. The title, Dr. Awkward
& Olson in Oslo, were two names removed from a previous palin-
drome, and they gave me instant inspiration. The book, I decided,
would be a modern morality play in the form of a detective-chase
novel. It would be a contest between Dr. Awkward, a man of unre-
lieved vice, criminality, corruption and knavery, the avatar of
absolute immorality on earth, and Olson in Oslo, the manifestation
of human goodness and moral eloquence, a strong wise old gray-
beard, the conscience of the planet.

SAID DIAS: "PUTRID DIRT UP. EVIL AS I.L.AMIN ALIVE LIVED DR. AWKWARD.
DR. AWKWARD, DEVIL, EVIL ANIMAL IS ALIVE! PUTRID DIRT UP!" SAID DIAS.

"TIPS? DR. AWKWARD WAS A GRAVE ROBBER!" "HE WAS NOT, RAMONA NAN OMAR."
"OLSON IN OSLO WAS A NONPAREIL!" ROARED BARE WOLF FLOWER, A.B. "O, OLSON
WAS ELITE!" GASSED OREN NERO.

"O, RENNER ODESSA, G.E. TILE SAW NO SLOO, BARE WOLF FLOWER, A.B., DERA
OR LIE RAP. NONA SAW OLSON IN OSLO. RAMONA (NAN) O. MARTON SAW - EH?
- RED (BORE) VARGA SAW DR. AWKWARD SPIT!"

The plot involves a bumbling private eye, Sam X. Xmas, and his inamorata, Mabel E. Bam, who with eleven of their close associates succeed (with the conspicuous help of Olson) in tracking down and bringing Dr. Awkward to justice. After decades of malefaction, the man of monstrous evil will no longer pollute the planet. A plot, I thought, that was simple and straightforward - and highly moral. But now, determined to construct the palindromic novel, I found myself on shifting ground. I quickly realized that even a solid schema was only the beginning. I needed dialogue, action and whatever character development I could manage. I realized that a palindromic novel as a fast read, with pace, excitement and a believable plot with a slam-bang finish was a most distant possibility. Palindromes of great length do not lend themselves to simplicity. The word *simplicity* itself is fatal. To say SNAPS & SPANS is not the same as saying PAP, SIRE. PAP'S A PAP FOE, DAMN IT! TIN MADE OF PAPA'S PAPER IS PAP. The first is almost meaningless; the second is alive with possibilities.

To my great good fortune I discovered the grand stratagem. Willy-nilly, I fell upon the contrivance used by artists and poets from earliest times to modern Joyce: the free association of ideas. I decided that throughout the novel I would make constant allusion to a miscellany of curios, but make them as natural as possible, and always consistent with the flow of the story. Dialogue would become chaotic, images arise from nowhere, allusions and illusions drift nonsyntactically from here to there, and at last resolve, as they must, into the immediacy of the plot. This was certainly not at variance with the complexities of everyday thought and activity, where it is the rare individual who passes through an entire day without momentary disorders of reflection, disconnection of ideas, and confused impingements on the essential order of things.

DR. AWKWARD'S RAGE ESCALATED: "ROY! DRAT! AH, SAPRISTI! PEEP! I NIM!
O, DONNA'S RAE, YET A FLAN, GISLA REVES! EYE ENOS, SOR CAD, NA, HADES
SAP. OLSON IN OSLO - AH - DOOM!"

"DOOM?" SPAKE SAM X. "NO, I TARGET NINE PO HABIT HOOPS. O, CAW ME!
HADE, TSO, PIR, EVA C. NIN. OSLO ME, HADE. SOP RET NIO: TI BUS, N. ABE
EBAN? NOT SO, BOSTON."

DOC AWKWARD LAUGHED IN SOME GLEE: "EE! GYM!"

"MY GEE! EEL GEM! O, SNIDE H.GUAL, DRAW KWA COD. NOT SO, BOSTON?"

"N. ABE EBAN (SUBITO!) INTERPOSED: "AHEM!"

OLSON IN CAVE RIPOSTED: "AHEM? WAGO'S POOH! TI! BAH! OPEN INTEGRATION?
XMAS, E.KAP'S MOOD, MOOD - HA!"

OLSON IN OSLO PASSED A HAND ACROSS ONE EYE.

"SEVERAL SIGNAL FATE YEARS - ANNO DOMINI. PEEP IT, SIR PASHA. TARDY ORD. ETA LAC SEEGARS, DR. AWKWARD."

Thus every character speaks a private tongue that often has the most tenuous relationship to the conversation or problem at hand. Yet these characters do not spout nonsense. Each aside, each digression, each stream of conscious or unconscious babble leads to the resolution of a problem or a reflection. Dialogue is often like the fractured, tortuous dreams of sleep where events occur with only the frailest conjunction with what has passed. But words are bricks, and some are mortar, and both are masoned into place by the author who alone knows the scenario and the path he is taking, and that each digression contributes to the forward movement of the story, and to the validity of the emordnilaps that occur dozens of pages in the future.

"WON I? ODD, I VOTE WITH GUATEMALAN AIR DAHLIAS."

"SAIL HADRIAN. A LAME TAUGHT I WET OVID. DO I NOW?"

ONE PANEL. LOW'S ROES. O, TAME DESSERT CAMEL AS A CAMELOPARD I DO NOT EVER GIVE DAM - EH?

HEM, A DEVI. GREVE (TONO) DID RAP OLE MAC, A SALEM ACTRESS EDEMATOSE OR SWOLLEN APE - NO?

The novel is replete with like eccentricities, dottiness, oddities, a veritable circus of them. There is an endless succession of oafish blunders and clumsy performances. Each persona is a palindromic grotesque, in character as well as name:

'Red' N. Axel Alexander	Berg A. Zagreb
Otto I. Giotto	Oleg N. Angelo
Lear S. Israel	Nay Leverton O. Trevelyan
Toilet Eliot	Evita Dative
Lisa B. Basil	Parcel E. Crap
Emil S. Slime	Ava (Ugh) Guava
E. Sion Noise	Laida Radial

And scores of others.

They are all showoffs, punsters, exhibitionists, masters of logomachy and periphrasis. They swashbuckle even in sleep. They are not verbal tricksters - it is their only mode of speech. The inversion of phrases, the syntactical upsidedownness, the swarms of ideas, the interest in every singularity about them are made as natural as possible, consistent with the flow of the story. And, to one's surprise, the eccentric soon becomes the commonplace, and the reader, to his pleasant confoundment, accepts the strangeness as the norm. Or so one hopes.

"O, HOT SALT! A MOOR'S SERE PEEK AT A MAIDEN LAP!"

"PAL NED, I AM AT A KEEPERESS' ROOM AT LAST. OHO!"

"SIT, IF LO! GOLLIWOG, OGAM & GOG & MAGOG ARE NON-SITTING NITS."

"STING NIT! 'TIS NONE RAG OGAM & GOG & MAGOG. O WILL! O GOLFITIS!"

OLSON AROSE. HE PACED A STEP. "ARC AS IN MARCS. PRAXIS & GOD! - LOGOS. OSGI, TATS TOW. DO, GELB, RUB I BOB? I LAY A CUSPIDOR (A SNOT TUB). NO, WES OTT, SUR TEW. DOG NIDOR, SAM. ALL ONE TO ME."

"EMOTE NO LLAMA'S ROD! IN GOD WE TRUST TO SEW ON BUTTONS. A RO DIPS UCAYALI. BOB, I BURBLE, GOD WOT, STATIC SO-SO GOLD OG & SIX ARPS. CRAM, NI SACRA, PETS ADE CAPE. HE'S ORAN, OSLO."

But eventually we reach a crisis. Midway in the novel, as in every palindrome, a point is reached beyond which there is no return, except to backtrack, letter by letter, to the exact iota of the beginning. It is the point of the hinge. It is, in sum, the precise spot where the forward half of the palindrome begins to recite itself backward, and the backward half becomes the forward. In the novel, it occurs on page 83. Dr. Awkward, imprisoned, raves and mewls at his unaccustomed situation - and the center of the universe becomes his own name.

"NOSY BABEL BRA WITH GIMBALS - & AH, ABLATIVE CASES! O, DEAR BOG, I PISSED UP IN A WET AGENDA. LO! SARA PAAR, A HASH DAY I REGRAB, A NOSE NASAL. AH, TILSIT, A GREED IRED, I RAG DEAD NEDDA, RA, LUC. I DEPLORE MEDIA, RATS, GALS, A TAR BAG AND A MANIAC DR. AWKWARD 'CAIN,' A MAD NAG, A BRAT, A SLAG STAR. AI! DEMEROL, PEDICULAR ADDENDA, EDGAR! I DERIDE ERGATIS, LIT HAL, A SANE SON, A BARGE, RIYADH, SAHARA, A PARASOL AD. NEGATE WAN IPU, DESSI, PI - GO! BRAE DOSES, ACE VITAL BAHA & SLAB MIGHT. I WARBLE: 'BABY SON!'"

Thus, here, at last, the novel breasts its divide and plunges on to its foretold conclusion. The plot marches forward. Dr. Awkward is tried, justiced. He is convicted, condemned. He is shipped to a far Helena in the mid-Pacific, and the planet breathes easier.

On page 160 Sam X. Xmas addresses his friends and acolytes.

"OH, MY PEOPLE, DO NOT LUST AFTER GERONTICS OR AFTER OMAHA. REGAL LIPS SEND, O OG! DR. AWKWARD, TIG, ID, A DENIM AXE WON."

SAM X. XMAS ASKED: 'O DO I MAKE SENSE? DO YE FOLLOW? NOW ONE'S UPON A TIME, S.PARNELL, AN AVATAR, REFLECTED. BUT A RED NULLIFIDIAN I AM NOT, HE MUSED. ALBEIT HE WENDED NEW SEEKS & REMARKED:

'SAIL ALWAYS PER MAPS.'

'POLISH A POLICY AT SOME RISK.'

'PIRATES INOSCULATE.'

'A NOT SECRET SIN IS A SINIF LAID TO REST.'"

"TSE ROT? DIAL. FINIS A SINISTER CESTONA. ETA, LUC, SON. I SET A RIP, KSI. REMO, STAY - CIL, O PA HSI, LOP SPAM, REPS YAWL. ALIAS DE KRAMER & SKEES WENDED NEW - EH? TIE BLADE SUM - EH? TON. MAIN AID IF ILL UNDER A TUB. D. ETC., ELF ERRATA. VAN ALLEN RAPS EMIT AN OPUS ENOW ON WOLL. OFE YOD, ESNE, SEKA MI: O, DO, DEK, SA!"

SAM X. XMAS NOW EXAMINED A DIGIT.

"DR. AWKWARD, GOODNESS PILLAGER - AHA! MORET, FAROS, CIT. NO REGRET. FAT SULT, O NODE, L.POE PYM - HO!"

A final question. Why did I write Dr. Awkward & Olson in Oslo in the form I chose - as a novel? My final answer, I hope, is not disingenuous. I wrote the novel because to my knowledge no other person had ever composed an equal nonesuch. I decided, as it were, to be the first. And perhaps now that the first is a matter of record, there will be a rash of similar novels, some better, some worse.