DUAL CRYPTOGRAMS

M. DOUGLAS McILROY
Bernardsville, New Jersey

Newspaper cryptograms are usually easy to solve. They may get hard when they're made of words with unusual letter statistics. But no matter how hard they are, when you solve them, you can be sure you got the right answer. Cryptograms longer than about 30 letters (known to code-breakers as the 'unicity distance') just don't have two solutions. Or do they?

Short cryptograms with multiple solutions are easy to find. For example, abcdefg hijklmn decodes to thousands of phrases, the most likely being ones like DISPUTE FRANKLY, MODULAR KITCHEN, UNKEMPT HAIRDOS, MARXIST FLUNKY, NAUGHTY PROMISE or SKETCHY DRAWING.

I call a pair of texts that cipher into each other a 'dual cryptogram.' Any pair of the 14-letter phrases above is a dual cryptogram. Longer examples can be made by repetition: A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE to I HURT OR I HURT OR I HURT, or NEVER, NEVER, NEVER to SARAH! SARAH! SARAH! But this dodge won't get you very far. Authentically long dual cryptograms don't show up in wordplay books. Yet they can be made. Perhaps the sampling below will encourage some new logological activity.

Timid Doe (123 letters)

I'M HERE. TIMID DOE AM I. TOG ME PER HER, RON--HIDDEN; BUT GET YOU ME A VEIL SO I'LL NOT MEET A GAMY FATE--DOOM DOWN AT A DAMN WOOD. YOU, KATZ, MET A HOT EGO. YOU VIED; I SOON LOSE.

(A frightened soul, imagining herself hunted like a deer, asks her friend, Ron Katz, to find camouflage more complete than that which an acquaintance wears. She commends Katz for facing opposition in circumstances where she would feel certain of defeat.)

AS BOYO, NASAL LEO IS A NEW, SO COY, BOY. YET BALLOT URN WON HER, SO I GOAD ME (ADD TEN). SOON I WISH VINO--LEES LEFT IN, I LIST. FEEL HER JINX, SON. I, BEN, OWE HER GAOL, A MEET DEMO.

(The narrator, Ben, on losing a raffled date to snide Leo, lashes himself and begs for ten strokes more, then turns to cheap drink. Gripped by her spell, he imagines doing further penance in jail to prove his mad devotion.)
Maine Drag (129 letters)

I HEAR FOOL RED-COPED GENT RICO SUES PEPE RE WANTON DUO BROOE DARED HELP AL GET CODS IN GREAT ME DRAG. AS HE'D MET VIXENS IN WET FLOOD-KELP GROT, DUO DID BESOT AL RICO.

(A swell buffoon, Al Rico, while fishing for cod on a Maine dragger, met a pair of mermaids who lured him to their sea cave and boozed him up. Now he's suing the captain, Pepe, for leading him into embarrassment.)

O WAIL, KEEN LAS VEGAS PARD, LOVE THAT GAGA LA BIRDER. SHE FLEES SILAS WANG IN PAD VEST OR PLAIK CA SLIP. "IT WAS CAD MOZART OR BAD-KNEES YANG" PLED SHE. SOS, FATED IN LOVE.

(A sensitive cowboy gambler, smitten by a valley-girl naturalist who's fallen in with the infamous Mozart/Yang gang, desairs as his beloved is pursued in dishabille by one of the gang's victims, to whom she protests her innocence, crying out that the real culprits are the gang's notorious leaders.)

Sliced Birds (139 letters)

COLD BIGOT BANDS DRAGON; CAD REDS WANT MIND SANE. MILORD GOLDEN CAP. A MOON DREW EBB NOT FLOOD; A BOOR ROBS WINO REDS. HE IRONS A DIVOT AS HE BIDS--SAD!--AND HE'S MAILED MONGOL'S WEEDS.

(Write your own interpretation for this wild tale in which the law of gravitation seems to have been repealed.)

HENS FACED FIRST SLICER--HIS LOST BIRD PARX. TIRO PANELS CENSOR HIM. I PEER, SLOB, OFF RED KNEES. I FEEL LEFT BARE, LOST. GO ALERT--I SAWED IT--GO FAST: 'TIS IRS GOT PIANO'S PERCENT BOOST.

(This is a confused story of a hen-slicing contest and a lament that the taxman has claimed the profits of a piano sale.)

A Bus Named 'Fare' (176 letters)

I WAS PUT ON A BUS NAMED FARE AS I BIT M.I.T. BARN ISSUE ON A CAR GAS WAY, AS I HATE HOW, LIKE HIS PAWKY SUB, DUKE, FIRN POSSE GUN FOR US. CAN RUTS OF BASK PATH BATE IVY, LORN FOR JURY DUTY PUT ON US? CUB TALC HIT LUXE PAIR AS HE RUBS ME LOTS.

(In the gas line, I joined an argument with the snow troops, who are always looking for a fight, just as his canny sidekick, Duke, does. Though the argument was only about saving a barn at M.I.T. they still sent me packing on a bus; on entering it, I noticed the name-tag 'Fare'. The silver lining: perhaps the bumpy bus ride down the sun-bathers' path will take Mr. Ivy's mind off our call to jury duty. He was so distracted during my last massage that he knocked over the baby powder and got it all over that filthy-rich couple.) pawky=canny, firn=snowpack, bate=moderate, lorn=forsaken

A DIN FOR US! I WON SIBYL PITY IN A WAR BAR. WITS ANNOY US--I HIT KIN, 'DIE', IN A MIRY MUD. CAGY MAN FIDGE, NOW LOGY, PATS FUNNY
KO'S PUT ON HIS TORN UP WING--FIRM WIRY AXE CUTS. PUT VOTE LORE FOR US ON HOW RICH MAR COZY FIAT IN MY TOWN BY CURN.

(Raise a cheer! A fortune teller took pity on me down at the VFW, where those wise guys usually lay it on us. Heartened, and yelling "Die!", I pushed their cousin in the mud. As he fell, he cut his sleeve on some hanging tools--an axe and a wire brush. No longer his usual shrewd, edgy self, he rose in a daze, goggily patting the evidence of the knock-out blow. Now, please publish the story of the referendum where the rich folk succeeded in overturning the rule of a cozy few.) fidge=fidgeter, curn=few

Barns and Bees (inside out, backward)

And now for something different, a 72-letter word-palindrome whose halves form a dual cryptogram. The exchange map (ai)(bg)(ds)(eo)(lr)(nt) reverses the words within each half. This transformation is the same as converting each half into the other or turning the whole inside out.

BEES'-GARRET BARN GETS BOND-GILT BILLON. GOOD! GOOD BILLON-GILT BOND GETS BARN-GARRET BEES.
(Silver alloy with gold leaf bonded on is deposited in a barn that has bees in the loft—thank goodness!. Those pesky bees are enticed by very expensive whiskey.)

He Sora Cat (105 letters)

'These dual cryptograms are based on the inside-out-and-backward exchange map extended to cover the rest of the alphabet.

BIRD-LEG WITH ROAD LEGEND WAS SORA, DEAR KIM. I SAW RAIL BIRD CLAW AT TOM, FOND CAT, IN BIG-RIG CAB COT. CAN I NOT BOIL CAT AND GILD ITS EAR? HEX AN EAR?
(Filling in details of a now-legendary on-the-road bird story, the narrator has identified as a sora rail the owner of the claw that raked a cat in the sleeping quarters of a tractor-trailer. In the course of the story he reveals his own sick fantasies about making a cat fetish.)

GALS, ROB MANY LEIS. ROBOTS 'MID DELI SOIL JAW A DIM LIAR. GALS, PRIM IN NEW VET'S PIN AT GAB-LAB PIG PEN. PIT A TEN-GEAR, PIN ITS BARS, AND OIL YOU IT. OIL!
(The girls are told to make off with the leis that decorate the speech-lab commons room, littered with refuse from take-out meals. Cover is given by talking robots that distract a sorry vagrant posing as a veteran, who's making a few bucks as an experimental subject. The girls will be able to make their getaway on bicycles, but only if they tune the bikes first.)

The key to making dual cryptograms is a stock of words that encrypt into other words. From the word lists of Webster's Collegiate and a spelling checker, I have been able to extract stocks as large as 1035
words. (Hundreds of more obscure words could be added from Webster's Unabridged.) The biggest stock isn’t necessarily the best; none of my examples use it. My longest offering, "A Bus Named 'Fare'", came from a much smaller stock that was crafted to map as many little words (articles, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and helping verbs) onto each other as possible.

I invite you to try your hand at this new game. Word Ways wizards can surely improve on my stocks as well as my cryptograms. The rules are easy: word-boundaries are preserved, no letter maps into itself, case distinctions and punctuation don’t count. For a starter kit, I’ve appended two good stocks. Readers with big word-lists can use the letter maps of other examples to reconstruct more stocks; just apply the map and check the list that comes out against the list that went into it. The map (abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz) (ifvsakpwogynerejqjtdhmbzux) creates the biggest stock.

Stock for ‘A bus named Fare’; 541 words.
Stock for ‘Maine drag’; 924 words.

table containing letters and words
Addenda. When the original stock was augmented by a list of 10,000 American place names of six letters or less, these and 70 less familiar names popped up.