

ON THE ABUNDANCE OF PALINDROMES

JIM PUDER

Saratoga, California

A very long time ago there lived a tribe of primitive cave-people who had learned how to write but who could not yet speak in complete sentences. When, therefore, Thog the Thinker one day ascended the Speaker's Stone and casually let drop the first complete sentence that anyone had ever heard, the sensation was terrific. Thog's achievement was all the more astounding inasmuch as the tribe's wisest heads had long opined, in disconnected grunts, that the formulation of a complete sentence was a feat considerably beyond the compass of human ingenuity. In a state of high excitement, Skog the Scrivener rushed off to inscribe Thog's incredible sentence on the wall of the Cave of Culture lest it be lost from memory—as if anyone could ever forget those immortal words! For weeks afterwards, tribespeople crowded the Cave of Culture from dawn to dusk to stand in mute admiration of Thog's sentence, of the almost magically synergistic way in which all of its words meshed together in a common purpose. And when, about a year after that, Thog surprised even himself by discovering a second, entirely different complete sentence, the acclaim was just as great. Skog inscribed that one in the cave too, as he did "Thog's Third," which arrived a mere three months later.

Thereafter, as Thog and others began to produce new sentences with greater and greater frequency, Skog kept on inscribing them in the Cave of Culture, never for a moment doubting the importance of his efforts. After all, given the extreme difficulty of composing a complete sentence, how many of them could there possibly be? Surely, his recurring thought was, he must have collected nearly all of them by now, and to have a complete reference set on stone would be an invaluable asset to the tribe, not to mention an intellectual monument to his generation. And so Skog continued to incise in the Cave of Culture every new complete sentence that came his way, scribing in smaller and smaller glyphs toward the bottoms of the walls. But when at length the persevering Skog laid down his chisel for the last time, no one else even dreamed of taking up his task. In truth, Skog's project had by that time become something of an embarrassment to the tribe, many of whose members were by then uttering complete sentences of their own on an almost daily basis. And so the tribe abandoned the ultimately pointless attempt to record every new complete sentence, and all of Skog's patient inscriptions were subsequently reduced to rubble when, some years later, the Cave of Culture was enlarged to make room for a museum of shiny objects.

Originally written as a parable for the futility of any attempt to assemble a comprehensive collection of all known palindromes, this story might also serve as an allegory for the history of our own culture's perception of palindromes. From believing, as recently as 150 years ago, that only one or two sentence-length palindromes are possible in written English, we have since advanced to a second stage of palindrome sophistication in which we are aware of the practicality of a good many such literary palindromes. But whereas Skog's people (if not Skog himself) rapidly progressed from a similar intermediate state (as regards their view of complete sentences) to a third stage in which they realized that such sentences are actually quite commonplace and unremarkable, we seem Skoggishly stalled in stage two of palindrome awareness. As Bill O'Connor has previously observed in "Twenty Thousand Palindromic 'And's'" in the August 2001 *Word Ways*, a widespread impression persists that not only is the natural supply of palindromes somewhat limited, it may well be fast approaching a state of near-depletion in which

little more that is very novel in the way of new palindromes may be expected to be produced. Fortunately, this impression is unfounded; in reality, the reservoir of accessible palindromes which remain unreported is virtually limitless.

Well then, if the number of accessible (i.e., practically short) palindromes available to us is not so small as some may believe, just how many are there? This figure probably can not be calculated with any real degree of confidence, but an intuitive guess would be that, if a "passage" is considered to consist of one or more complete sentences, at least 100 million different palindromic passages could be made from one hundred or fewer letters. Rather than speak in terms of absolute numbers, however, it may be more helpful to focus instead on the relative abundance of palindromes. One way of doing this might be to show the extent to which the permutational possibilities of some well-known palindrome remain largely unexplored and unelaborated despite its long-standing familiarity.

Consider, for example, one of the oldest and best-known palindromes in the language, the centenarian "Was it a rat I saw?". This simple sotadic and its variants are comprised of two parts, the unchanging frame "Was it ... I saw?" and a variable central portion which can be any semantically appropriate anchored palindrome in which the anchor is a "t" at the right end. Historically, "Was it a rat I saw?" appeared in print at least as early as 1887, when it was featured on the front cover of *Palindromes*, a small book of illustrated palindromes by G.R. Clarke. A few years later, Sam Loyd published a puzzle constructed around "Was it a *cat* I saw?" and in 1946 the "rat" version was among the first group of palindromes submitted by Leigh Mercer to *Notes and Queries*. In his 1965 book *Language on Vacation*, Dmitri Borgmann praised "bar or a bat" and "car or a cat" variations as being among "the finest English palindromes ever composed," and in 1994 "Was it a rat I saw?" came full circle when it was once again featured in a small book of illustrated palindromes, this time Jon Agee's *So Many Dynamos*.

Many other books and articles have mentioned "Was it a rat I saw?" and variations thereof over the years, but fewer than a dozen such published variants are known to me. One might suppose that, after being so long in the public consciousness, "Was it a rat I saw?" would have been thoroughly mined by now for its more accessible variations, but that is not the case. The following list includes 222 such variations, at least 200 of which have not, so far as I know, been reported before. Unfamiliar words and sentences of more than ten words were for the most part avoided, but even so this collection does not begin to exhaust the available choices. Only the center variations are listed here, distributed among four basic permutations of the palindrome.

Was it a + bat + I saw?

+ bat + cat + gat + hat + mat + mini-mat + pat + rat + vat +
 banana bat + belle, bat, + B.M.O.C. combat + brewer, Bat, + caracara, cat, + greyer gat +
 hoodoo hat + mere mat + Moro mat + petite pat + rococo rat + rue, Seurat, + voodoo vat +
 barn in Rabat + barrow or Rabat + boozy zoo bat + cerise desire, cat, + creepy peer, cat, +
 feline's senile fat + hero's eyesore hat + peri's ire, Pat, + plaid dial, Pat, +
 "pure" Peru, Pat, + remote tome, rat, + venom, one vat, + vile deli vat +
 "baff" off a bat, + baton, not a bat, + career "treer," a cat, + cool gig, igloo cat, +
 flagon, O gal fat, + van in a vat +
 bad nap and a bat + cad, Nan, and a cat + canine yen in a cat + ceremonial ai, no mere "cat," +
 mad nabob and a mat + "rambutan in a tub" (Marat!) + "vertu," Oswald Law's outré vat +

Was it a + ban on a bat + I saw?

+ ban on a bat + can on a cat + canoe on a cat + canon on a cat + "Hanoi" on a hat +
 man on a mat + manor on a mat + van on a vat +

Was it a + bar or a bat + I saw?

+ bar or a bat + baron or a bat + car or a cat + carob or a cat + "Carol" or a "Cat" +
gar or a gat + mar or a mat +
bagel, or, Oleg, a bat + garotte, Lett, or a gat + reticular or a Lucite rat +
banana baron or a banana bat + rug gizmo or a giga-room ziggurat +

Was it + Ararat + I saw?

+ Ararat + *It* + *Natant!* + *Racecart!* + "Revert!" +
acetate, cat, + Alf's flat + Ali, Eilat + Al's slat + bedded debt + "cat tact" + Eliot's toilet +
, Ella, ballet + Elsi's islet + fads daft + far craft + Fargo graft + fat Taft + it fate, Taft, +
feds deft + fossas soft +, lasses, salt + Lem's smelt + Lew's welt + loco Colt + Luc's cult +
nebs bent + Ned's dent + Nile lint + odd Dot + "ogres' ergot" + oiled Eliot + old Lot +
ordered rot + Ovid's divot + reborn Robert + reseda desert + Rik's skirt + Ron's snort +
Roper's report I saw + Ross's sort + rube Burt + Ruby, Burt, + Sal's last + Sam's mast +
serene rest + Simon's nomist + simony, nomist, + "surf rust" + tame Matt + Tim's mitt +
"tub butt" + "tube butt" + Tums, mutt, +
, abbas, a sabbat + absurd Dru's bat + clumsy Ty's mulct +, Eustace, cat suet + Evy's sissy vet +
Lewd I Dwelt +, lover, a revolt + Lucy's sassy cult + Nanette's set tenant + Nat, cured, eructant, +
Ned's racecar dent +, Neil, a salient +, Nel, a talent +, Nemo, my moment + "Nip a pint?" + "No,
we won't" + Nurse Tate's runt + nuts, a stunt + Olwen's new lot + Ossian, Anais' sot, +
pews, nun, unswept + radical "acid art" + ragged "egg art" + Roper's selfless report +
salt, at last, + savannas, Anna, vast + Sidon, O monodist, + Sig, O logologist, + Silas's "A" list +
Simone, no "mist" + sin, Eilat alienist, + solenoids Dione lost + sudsy Lily's dust +
, sugar, a gust +, sullen Nel, lust + Wendel's sled newt +
Alf's sad ass, flat, +, Arden, a maned rat + Avar Clive's evil cravat +, Ava, Vilas's saliva vat +
Cats' rife first act +, Ella Mae, a mallet + felsite my metis left + inky Dee's seedy knit +
, Irwin, Amos's Omani writ + "Lebanon" on a belt + Nan, ever a revenant, + Nat and Ed natant +
Nat's old lost ant + Ned or a rodent + "Net no clams, malcontent!" + Pokes in anise kept +
rocs, Enid, in escort +, sacred nun, an undercast +, sere Vera, far Everest +
Seth, Tam's math test + Sid or a parodist + "Silo Iva," a violist, + sin in Elsa's Leninist +
substandard, Rad, Nat's bust + surtaxed, Dex, a trust +, uhlan, a banal hut +
unknown, uneven, unwon Knut +, Wendel, Bram's marbled newt +
, Ackroyd, a mad York cat + arsenic, Arn, in Racine's rat + Canada's sad Assad, an act +
"Capsaicin nix!" in Nicias' pact + farce capsulised, a *Desilu Spacecraft!* +
, "I piped, "a jade pipit +, "I wept, "a fat pewit +, likely lass, a Lyle kilt +
"Milkvat Sugarer," a Gustav Klimt + Nan, evocative, a Tina-Nita-Evita covenant +
Nedra, reveling nil ever ardent, +, nimrod, rank nard or mint +, O Bora Bora Rob, a robot +
, Öle, *Maced in Snide Camelot!* + sifaka-naked Ursa's rude Kanaka fist +
"sin rut" as Soho's Saturnist +, Sir Wyn, Nik's skinny wrist +
"Wend-well," Lam's small, lewd newt +
"attar," rat Tatar, or a "tattarrattat" + "en garde" if, lass Alfie, "Dragnet" +, entangled, Omar's
"Ra" model gnat net + no doxology, a gay "Go, loxodont!" + --pardon a peep—a nod rapt +
rag-garbed Urania Vain, a rude braggart + sin at Asa's as a Satanist + sopranos a-nod on a sonar
post
, ah, the "venin" nided in "Nineveh" that + (averting a gag) a gag "nitre vat" + insanitary Art's
stray rat in a snit + some, or, Roe, none, or, Roe, most + "Alfa Romeo: Par, a Poem or a Flat?" +
, O pert Nel, an *ab ovo* banal entrepot +, Rev, *Lacrosse for Pay* by a Professor Calvert +

It might be mentioned that the phrase “nided in” facilitates many additional variants of this palindrome. (To “nide” means to nest, and thus the “venin’ nided in ‘Nineveh’” variant above is an apt one.) Used with the initial word or phrase of many of the items in the foregoing list, for example, the phrase yields such new variations as “cat’ nided in ‘tact,’” “Nel nided in Lent,” “abbas’ nided in ‘sabbat,’” “milk nided in Klimt” and so on. What’s more, many t-anchored palindromes that are difficult to use alone in the “Was it ... I saw?” frame are readily accommodated with the “nided in” phrase. Whereas, for instance, “Was it Carter retract I saw?” would not be an acceptable sentence, “Was it ‘Carter’ nided in ‘retract’ I saw?” seems passably grammatical. Some other variants of this sort are “navel’ nided in ‘Levant,’” “Nestor’ nided in ‘rot sent,’” “Sit, Ned!’ nided in ‘dentist,’” and “roped’ nided in ‘deport,’” to name a few. Dozens of other “nided in” variants might easily be found, but to avoid monotony only the “Nineveh” example was included in the main list.

Diversified or not, long lists of variations on a palindromic theme seldom seem to make for very engrossing reading, but perhaps this one may at least convey a sense of the open-ended variability latent in many familiar palindromic prototypes, and perhaps thereby impart a new or fresh appreciation of the true natural abundance of palindromes.

Dutch Logology from AA to ZZ

In early 2002, the Dutch publishing firm Querido issued *Opperlans! Taal- & letterkunde* (ISBN 90-214-5433-5), a new and expanded edition of Battus’s 1981 landmark treatise of Dutch wordplay, *Opperlandse taal- & letterkunde* (reviewed in the August 1997 *Word Ways*). This comprehensive book should be on the shelf of every serious logologist, whether or not he is fluent in Dutch (the letterplay at least can be appreciated by the non-speaker). Unfortunately, there appears to be no US distributor; would-be purchasers must contact Querido by mail or Internet.

In the 21 years since *Opperlandse* first appeared, Battus has been diligently extending Dutch wordplay. Although the book is still deficient in word squares and their relatives (Chapter 6 in *Making the Alphabet Dance*)—Battus writes me that he doesn’t have good examples—it now includes Dutch versions of many topics discussed in *Word Ways* over the years:

- Eodermdromes (although not mentioning the spelling-crossover property of such words)
- Word worms (constructing words in 3-space)
- All 120 permutations of aeiou in words (facetious, sequoia, housemaid, ...)
- Switch words (in-terpret-in-g: palindrome inside a tautonym, followed by a palindrome)
- Interesting logological properties of number names (from 1 through 40)
- Pair and trio isograms (arraigning, deeded)
- Letter-shifts (cold to frog, cheer to jolly)
- Vowel-consonant word patterns (type collections for words of four to ten letters)
- Word-crashes with the alphabet (ABiDE)
- Agamemnon words (words with successive three-letter palindromes)

Dutch logology can contribute to English as well; a diligent and patient reader of the book is likely to discover various ideas and concepts little-exploited in English. The editor has prepared articles on two topics, and Mike Keith is researching one on literary chains (texts in which consecutive words contain the same letter).