

ON PALINDROMES

RICHARD LEDERER
San Diego, California

The ancient and popular Art of the Palindrome blazes out from the epicenter of the universe of letter play. Alistair Reid expresses what may be the very heart of the fascination for matters palindromic when he writes, "The dream which occupies the tortuous mind of every palindromist is that somewhere within the confines of the language lurks the Great Palindrome, the nutshell which not only fulfills the intricate demands of the art, flowing sweetly in both directions, but which also contains the Final Truth of Things." There is indeed something magic about the palindromic craft, the platonic form of making the alphabet dance.

In March, 1926, the San Diego Zoological Society published the first volume of its magazine and came up with the title *ZOONOOZ* – a palindrome that works both rightside up and upside down. While the 80-year-old *ZOONOOZ* is an outstanding example of the palindromic art and craft, the most elegant palindromic statements have been born during the last 40 years, since the publication of Dmitiri Borgmann's *Language on Vacation* and the birth of *Word Ways*. Moving toward its ineluctable rendezvous with logological destiny, our species is evolving a heightened wonderment at and facility with the universe of letters.

In the quirkily brilliant *I Love Me, Vol. I*, Michael Donner explains perspicaciously that palindromania has "at last [been] correctly understood to be not a disorder at all but rather the heightened sense of order we now know it to be." To help bring order to the universe of palindromes, I offer some rubrics for creating, identifying, and ranking great palindromes.

Ray Bradbury tells us that "creativity is constant surprise." That's why well-mixed anagrams, such as *reclaim/miracle*, *Episcopal/Pepsi Cola*, and *maraschino/harmonicas*, are inherently more pleasing than lightly shaken refreshments, such as *waddle/dawdle* and *however/whoever*. Well-mixed anagrams are, by definition, more surprising.

The brevity and simplicity of single-word palindromes, such as LEVEL, REDDER, and ROTATOR, make them relatively less surprising and elegant than longer and more challenging palindromic statements. Word-unit palindromes, such as FAIR IS FOUL, AND FOUL IS FAIR; FIRST LADIES RULE THE STATE, AND STATE THE RULE – "LADIES FIRST!"; and YOU CAN CAGE A SWALLOW CAN'T YOU, BUT YOU CAN'T SWALLOW A CAGE, CAN YOU? are only a half step above. Donner observes, "Composing word-unit palindromes is an entirely different kettle of fish from composing letter-unit palindromes. . . . The word-unit composer seems to require as good a grasp of syntactic possibilities as the letter-unit composer requires of spelling

possibilities. The only catch is that the two types of familiarity are quite distinct and perhaps equally hard to acquire.”

Reverse whole-word reversal palindromes, such as STEP ON NO PETS, RATS LIVE ON NO EVIL STAR and the widely-circulated ABLE WAS IERE I SAW ELBA also lack surprise. I agree with Borgmann when he says that such constructions are “really a sign of inferior craftsmanship, since almost anyone can juggle palindromic words and reversals around in almost mechanical fashion until a meaningful group of words emerges. . . . [W]hat requires genuine skill is the construction of a palindromic sentence which, read in reverse, has each word sliding over from one to another into the words used in the frontward reading.” The reconfiguring in the second half of the letter clusters and separating spaces in the first half of a palindromic statement contributes surprise and elegance to the logological adventure.

Because single-word palindromes, whole-word palindromes, and whole-word reversal palindromes involve words, i.e. morphological units, they occupy a lower stratum in the logological pantheon than do the more familiar kind of palindromic statement, which leap the spaces separating words. Not only are word palindromes less surprising; they are less logological because they involve morphemes (meaning-bearing units) more than they do letter units. When morphological manipulation starts, pure logology ends.

I'll illustrate with a few exhibits of other logological pursuits that demonstrate that the letter play's the thing, not the morphology:

- The unlexical transposition of multiple letters, such as the pairs *bedlam/lambda* and *stable/ablest*, is far more logologically satisfying than the looping of *songbird/birdsong* and *takeover/overtake* because logology is about letter play, not the syntactic rearrangement of morphemes..
- *Partially/partly* is not worth discussing as a kangaroo family because morphology dominates letter pattern. The disqualification of internal solids -- *assured*, *enjoyment*, *intoxicated* -- from the species of joeys is somewhat tied to the fact that such solids usually house meaning. *Contaminate/taint* and *rambunctious/raucous* are star pairings because the synonymy of the kangaroo and joey is accidental, not morphological. .
- Bookend words of the type *ligament = lint + game* work better than the type *departed = part + deed* because the bookends in the second class are essentially morphological, hence second class.

The choicest palindromic statements also exhibit subject-verb structure. Cobbling a subject-verb palindromic statement is harder to pull off and, hence, more elegant when the result is successful. Moreover, subject-verb syntax inspires the reader to conjure up a clearer image of persons or things in action. IF I HAD A HI-FI; LID OFF A DAFFODIL; and even the famous A MAN! A PLAN! A CANAL! PANAMA! do not amaze the readers and

conjure visions that dance in their heads as delightfully as do NURSE, I SPY GYPSIES. RUN!, SIT ON A POTATO PAN, OTIS, and STOP! MURDER US NOT, TONSURED RUMPOTS!

This matter of imagery is crucial to the greatness of a palindrome. The highest-drawer palindromic statements invoke a picture of the world that is a bubble off plumb yet somehow of our world. One *could* warn one's nurse that gypsies are nearby. Someone named Otis *could* sit on a potato pan, and shorn drunkards *could* seek to do us grave bodily harm.

Two of my favorite subject-verb palindromes are the ELK CITY, KANSAS, IS A SNAKY TICKLE and DOC, NOTE. I DISSENT. A FAST NEVER PRESENTS A FATNESS. I DIET ON COD. But as delightfully loopy as the first specimen is and as astonishing in its length and coherence as the second three-sentence jawdropper is, they do not summon vivid images to cavort in our mind's eye.

Using the rubrics of:

- elegance
- surprise
- reconfiguration of the letter clusters and spaces in the first half
- subject-verb structure
- bubble-off-plumb imagery,

I submit that the greatest palindrome ever cobbled is GO HANG A SALAMI. I'M A LASAGNA HOG.