

BORGMANN'S "PALINDROMES" ARTICLES: A JOKE GONE AWRY?

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Little remembered now are three notable articles on the early history and cultural significance of palindromes which were submitted by Dmitri Borgmann and published under his by-line in the November 1979, February 1980 and May 1980 issues of *Word Ways*. These were entitled, respectively, "Palindromes: The Rotas Square," "Palindromes: The Rotas Prehistory" and "Palindromes: The Ascending Tradition." Historical rather than logological studies, they are of considerable interest to palindromists of an historical turn of mind both for their comprehensive discussion of the well-known *sator* word square and for their deeply-researched survey of examples of ancient and medieval palindromic writing, many of which I have never seen mentioned elsewhere in wordplay literature. In addition, the articles jointly advance an intriguing thesis, to the effect that, by virtue of their symmetrical form alone, palindromes have historically been viewed as conveying, in some subtle psychological or even mystical way, a potent if somewhat occult meaning that both transcends and reinforces their text, and which endows palindromic writing with a power beyond that of normal writing. Carefully researched and written and with lengthy bibliographies which cite numerous rather obscure foreign-language historical and archeological sources, the articles give one the distinct impression of having had an academic origin..

Perhaps not too surprisingly, these articles went unmentioned in subsequent *Word Ways* "Colloquys"; probably most readers merely glanced at the densely-written pieces. (Although one of them, Harry B. Partridge, was stimulated to contribute to the February 1980 *Word Ways* an article offering his own take on the perennial *sator* square debate; according to Partridge's very plausible theory, the enigmatic language of the square is simply a Latin rendition of a quite sensible Greek language Christian text.) The problem, most likely, was that *Word Ways* readers are primarily wordplay-oriented, and these articles, for all that their subject is palindromes, contain precious little in the way of wordplay.

Unhappily, a worse problem attends these articles than mere reader indifference. I think that I have a fair acquaintance with Dmitri Borgmann's prose and with his habits of thought with respect to logological topics; and yet, as I perused these three articles for the first time recently (having finally acquired those particular back issues), I utterly failed to recognize any of the familiar hallmarks of his prose in what I was reading, and in fact noticed a good deal in it that was wholly uncharacteristic of Borgmann. What in the world? This was not The Master's voice.

To make a short tale of it, after study I have concluded, despite having no certain proof of the fact, that Dmitri Borgmann was not the author of these articles. It would be tedious to detail the many cogent reasons, both general and specific, why I have so concluded, and I will not bore the reader with a recitation of them. In any case, the truth should be perfectly plain to anyone who is reasonably familiar with Borgmann's style, mannerisms, preferences and predilections and who examines these articles critically. I'd recommend comparing the articles, in particular, to the palindrome and *sator* square sections of his book *Language on Vacation*, and to his February 1985 *Word Ways* article "The Magnificent Palindrome." Notice, for example, Borgmann's consistent disinterest in sentence palindromes, whenever circumstances do not compel him to deal with them, as opposed to his fascination with single-word palindromes and reversals, and compare that preference to the article writer's exclusive focus on sentence-length and longer palindromes—clearly, the two writers could not be further apart in this regard. And so on ad infinitum. In short, in no universe was Dmitri Borgmann the author of these articles.

That said, two significant aspects of this affair remain to be considered. One is the question of who *did* write the articles (or article, if these three articles were originally published as one.) Someone, 35 years ago, was done an injustice when *Word Ways* published his or her work under someone else's name, and we doubtless remain under an obligation to try to identify this person and set the record straight.

What can we infer about this unknown author? Well, for one thing, he or she was almost certainly British. (Don't be misled by the fact that American spellings are used in the articles—that means nothing.) There are several indications of this, such as the author's exclusive use of the term "rotas square," which is very much the British practice. Americans (including Borgmann) for some reason generally prefer the term "sator square," perhaps for its alliteration. Another indication is the author's exclusive use of the term "recurrent verse" when referring to any palindromic verse, a usage rare in America. (Borgmann never used the term.) And then there is the place in the third article in which the author is discussing modern exponents of "recurrent verse" and begins a sentence this way:

"Among these the most important British practitioners are Leigh Mercer and J. A. Lindon, who strike a note..."

The writer of these words obviously expects that his or her intended audience will, as a matter of course, be primarily interested in the *British* palindromic verse scene; ergo, it follows that he or she is most likely writing for an intended British readership.

We can also infer that this author knew a great deal about ancient history, had access to one or more large research libraries, had at least a reading knowledge of four or more languages in addition to English, and had had the luxury of being able to devote considerable time to researching and writing a lengthy, erudite article on a relatively minor topic for which he or she never expected to receive any remuneration. In short, a professional academician of some kind, who could afford to invest a generous amount of time in such articles because such articles, when published in a reputable journal, advanced his or her career.

Despite having these clues, I have so far had no success in discovering where and when these articles were first published. The latest date mentioned in their bibliographies is 1977, so we know that they must have been first published between 1977 and 1979, and also that they were probably first published in a British scholarly journal of some sort. However, my online searches of the databases of Oxford Journals (home of *Notes & Queries*, among other journals) and Cambridge Journals Online turned up nothing. A search of Google Scholar yielded one hit—the November 1979 *Word Ways* article. Can anyone suggest anywhere else to look?

The other salient aspect of this affair that can't be ignored is the extraordinary manner in which these articles first arrived at the offices of *Word Ways*. In his preface to *Word Ways*' second Dmitri Borgmann memorial issue (February, 1987), then-editor Ross Eckler recalled Borgmann's sometimes "ponderous" sense of humor, citing among other things this incident:

"His landmark article on the history of palindromes and the SATOR square, appearing in *Word Ways* in 1979-1980, was sent to me under the name of David R. Williams, a member of the National Puzzlers' League who had been mentioned in passing in *Word Ways* shortly before. It took a letter to Williams to satisfy me that I had been spoofed."

So not only were the article or articles that Borgmann submitted to *Word Ways* bogus, but so was the name of the author under which he submitted them. What inferences might be drawn from this circumstance? Well, for one thing, it seems evident that the two different deceptions must have been part and parcel of the same scheme—it would be astonishing if they weren't connected in some way. For another

thing, it implies that Borgmann never had any intention of plagiarizing this material. After all, if your plan is to steal the credit for someone else's work for yourself, you don't go about doing that by sending that work off to be published under a third person's name.

But if Borgmann's aim *wasn't* to plagiarize these articles, then what on earth *was* his intention in this daft affair? Unfortunately, all that one can do at this remove is to speculate. So let us give speculation a try:

Say it's the late summer of 1979, you're Dmitri Borgmann and you're a bit at loose ends. You'd like to think of some new devilry with which to harass your friend Ross, the editor of *Word Ways*, but what? You've already sent him a letter from the Sacred Council of Logology excommunicating him from logology for a variety of aesthetical sins. Then it hits you—why not try to sneak a fake *Word Ways* article past him? How amusing would *that* be? Let's see, first you need a dummy manuscript—nothing you yourself have written, since Ross is too apt to recognize your work. Ah, here's just the thing, a nice article on the history of palindromes in a minor British journal, written in a style quite distinct from yours. Now for a dummy author. You need someone whose name Ross will recognize as being connected with *Word Ways*, but with whose writing style he will *not* be familiar. Looking through back issues, you come across the name of Williams, a non-contributor, along with his mailing address. Perfect. So you transcribe the article, put Williams' name on it, and send it off to *Word Ways* with Williams' return address on the envelope. Of course, the postal markings may give you away at the outset, but then your deception is meant to be discovered or revealed at some point. As you see it, your practical joke can have one of three possible outcomes: (1) Ross will quickly tumble to your prank, he'll write to you to chide you about it, and you'll share a laugh over it; (2) Ross will take the bait and write to Williams to tell him that his article is accepted, Williams will write back to say "What?", Ross will then write to you to call you a few choice names from his rich vocabulary, and after a while you'll share a laugh over it; or (3) Williams won't write back, and so eventually you'll write to let Ross know he's been had, and when he's cooled off enough you'll share a laugh over it. It never occurs to you that Ross might guess that you sent the article, but not realize that you didn't write it.

But that is exactly what happens. Ross writes to say ha, ha, very funny, and by the way I really, really love your great article and I'm going to break it up into three parts and run it over the next three issues—under *your* name, of course. Now you're faced with a quandary. You like Ross and value his friendship, and it would pain you to have to dash his evident pleasure at having secured, as he thought, such an outstanding article for his cherished journal. On the other hand, to let such a misrepresentation proceed, with your name attached to it, might well be suicidal. If it were to be found out—not an especially remote possibility—your *Word Ways* career would be over. Your reputation would be in tatters. You might even land in jail. You realize that there's really only one thing that you can do in this situation, and so you do it—you blithely agree to the publication. True, it makes absolutely no sense for you to expose yourself, merely to spare a friend some temporary disappointment, to the perpetual ghastly risk that the plagiarism will at any moment be discovered and your reputation shattered. But that, nonetheless, is exactly what you do. Why? Because you're Borgmann. You live on the edge.

Well, perhaps events did not unfold in precisely that way, but my guess is that something similar did in fact happen. To summarize, even though he never would have had any personal desire to pass himself off as the author of the "Palindromes" articles, I surmise that Borgmann must have found himself enmeshed in a situation, *vis-à-vis* *Word Ways*' editor, in which he felt compelled for some reason to go along with the editor's assumption that *he* was the author. Any scenario which supposes that Borgmann ever *wanted* to steal the credit for the articles fails to account for his original attempt to pass them off as having been written by someone else. In all probability, this was simply an ill-considered Borgmann practical joke which, in stereotypical sitcom fashion, spun somewhat disastrously out of his control.