A word such as CIVIC, ROTATOR, or SEMITIMES, that is spelled exactly the same backward as it is forward, is called a palindrome. There are many short palindromes, but the number decreases sharply with increase in word length.

What is the longest English palindrome? If we define a word as one included in a standard dictionary of the language, the honors must be bestowed on KINNIKINNIK, defined in Webster's Third Edition as another name for the bearberry or for the silky cornel. The word is also found in smaller and still more recent dictionaries, the unabridged edition of The Random House Dictionary of the English Language being one example. An older reference work, Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico by Frederick Webb Hodge (originally published in 1907, but reprinted in 1965), gives a 12-letter, hyphenated variant spelling: KINNIK-KINNIK, in lightface type within the text of the article concerning the word. This variant is not merely a palindrome but also a tautonym, making it a sort of capstone in the realm of English logology.

A cursory survey of other European languages is sufficient to establish the fact that there are longer palindromes elsewhere. To cite a few examples, German contributes the 13-letter RELIEFPFEILER (a relief-decorated pillar); Swedish, the 13-letter ATT ORDIDROTTA (to contest with words); and Finnish, the 15-letter SAIPPUAKAUPPIAS (a soap-dealer). An examination of large dictionaries of these languages fails to substantiate any of these palindromes, giving rise to the suspicion that a certain amount of creativity was employed to produce them.

For English, flexible language that it is, to be eclipsed by a congeries of other tongues is unthinkable, and the time is ripe to construct an English word palindrome that shall endure for all the ages as a monument to logological ingenuity. Let us begin with a 7-letter palindrome, defined in the Funk & Wagnalls unabridged as "pertaining to the preservation of life":

THE EVOLUTION OF A PALINDROME

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If the word looks odd, it is because this is one of the many reformed spellings so popular in the dictionaries of a bygone era. To give the word its normal appearance, we tack on a letter at the end:

VITATIVE

The word is now impeccable in appearance, but no longer a palindrome, so we affix a letter at the front:

EVITATIVE

Here is a word obviously derived from the noun EVITATION and definable as "given to avoidance or shunning", but one that has never made it in the world of lexicography. Accordingly, we add a letter:

LEVITATIVE

We are back to a respectable dictionary word, meaning "tending to rise or float in the air", but a non-palindrome. To rectify the imbalance, we postfix an L:

LEVITATIVE

We are back to a perfect palindrome, but one to which no meaning can be assigned, compelling us to add yet another letter:

LEVITATIVELY

What we now see is the adverb corresponding to the adjective LEVITATIVE. Elementary as this observation is, it has escaped dictionary notice for lo, these many years. Besides, we have unbalanced the palindrome again, a fault for which there is only one cure:

YLEVITATIVELY

A penetrating inquiry into the origin and destiny of our language discloses that Y- is an inflective prefix acting to intensify the meaning of the word to which it is attached, as in the case of YCLAD (clothed) or YCLEPT (named). It follows that the 13-letter palindrome we have evolved is to be defined: "in a forcefully levitative manner". Purists who object to combining an Old English prefix with a Latin root are summarily referred to the dictionary-sanctioned word HYPERCONSCIENTIOUSNESS, consisting of a Greek prefix, Latin root, and Old English suffix.

As with other palindromes, the word is evident to all, its meaning easy to discover. Events of the sort, if not always palindromic, are, on occasions, at least circular.

Ordinarily, the question of origin is driven by the spelling:

Consider the word MARRIED, an adverb pronominal to intimate that certain persons are certain, sometimes literally so.

Next, WOMAN is a noun prefixed by a pronoun and to which a certain prefix is appended, as in the case of ACCENTED.

Since we have three palindromes, we can match them even with the constraint of each other being, as far as possible, whole, and
As we reflect on life and its problems, there comes to us a realization of profound significance to the palindromist. It seems self-evident that some actions and processes will always occur in a levitative manner, others never in such a manner, and still others sometimes levitatively and at other times not. It is this third group of events to which our attention is riveted. To represent the two alternatives involved succinctly, in the same style in which the choice between the words AND and OR is customarily shown (and/or), we are literally forced to evolve this word:

YLEVITATIVELY/NONYLEVITATIVELY

Will wonders never cease? What has formed itself before our eyes is a perfect, 29-letter palindrome! We have almost doubled the length of the longest word palindrome heretofore known in any language.

Ordinary mortals would be sorely tempted to stop here, considering the subject closed. Not so palindromists, of course, who are driven by an indomitable spirit to reach out for the stars.

Consider dictionary words such as MUCH-ADMIRED, TWICE-MARRIED, and WELL-SUITED. Each is an adjective consisting of an adverb prefixed to a verb participle. Since this is one of the standard methods used to form English words, it is our privilege to form an adjective consisting of some participle to which our 29-letter palindrome, an adverb, has been prefixed. Thus, an object might, under certain peculiar circumstances, be described as having been YLEVITATIVELY/NONYLEVITATIVELY-MOVED. This would mean that its motion was highly levitative during part of its journey, but not levitative at all during the remainder of its journey; or, that there was a vacillation between levitative and nonlevitative modes of transport, as dictated by fluctuating external conditions or forces.

Next, consider dictionary words such as GOD-GIVEN, MAN-MADE, and WOMAN-GOVERNED. Each is an adjective consisting of an agent noun prefixed to a verb participle. Since this is another of the customary techniques employed in forming English words, it is our prerogative to construct an adjective consisting of an agent noun prefixed to the compound adjective proposed in the previous paragraph but not yet created. There is ample precedent for doubly hyphenated compound adjectives in dictionary-sanctioned examples such as FOUR-TIMES-ACCENTED and TWICE-RE-ELECTED.

Since we intend to add word elements at both ends of our 29-letter palindrome, all that is necessary is to see to it that they are reversals of each other in order to preserve the palindromic character of the whole, and this should not be an inordinately difficult task.
Levitation is motion of a kind, and motion belongs to the domain of the physical sciences. To produce a palindrome worthy of our efforts, we must draw the additional word elements from the same domain. Casting about for something suitable, the word TARTRATED commends itself to our attention. That which is tartrated is that which is combined with tartaric acid. It follows that something separated from tartaric acid is DETARTRATED, an interesting palindrome in its own right, but of immediate significance to us for the words that can be derived from it: DETARTRATER, one who separates from tartaric acid, and RETARTRATED, recombinined with tartaric acid. Both of these words have been derived using prefixes and suffixes extremely common in English generally and in the physical sciences particularly. RETARTRATED, for instance, is an exact analogue of the dictionary words REHYDRATED and REOXIDIZED. DETARTRATER corresponds to words such as ELECTROPLATER and GRANULATER.

Combining our derivatives yields the palindrome DETARTRATER-RETARTRATED, conforming to a previously exemplified mold and meaning "recombined with tartaric acid by one whose customary function it is to separate substances from tartaric acid" -- a rare event, perhaps, but certainly a possible one being contemplated here. If the notion of substances toward or away from tartaric acid is sometimes highly levitative and at other times not at all levitative, then our entire complex of thoughts on the subject may be compressed into a word palindrome of 51 letters:

DETA RTRATER-YLEVITATIVELY/NONYLEVITATIVELY-RETARTRATED

Dictionaries list words such as AUTHOR-PUBLISHER, POET-PAINTER, and PRIEST-PHILOSOPHER, words used to attribute two functions to one individual. Could it be that our detartrater also does something else for a living?

Tartaric acid is not the only one with palindromic affinities. Another one is tannic acid, and an old edition of the Pharmacopoeia of the United States actually listed a drug described as detannated tincture of cinchona. With Sotadic insight, we recognize that our detartrater is also a detannater, known for having retannated substances when occasion demanded such heterodoxy. We are now in a position to expand our word palindrome to a 71-letter format:

DETA RTRATER-DETANNATER-YLEVITATIVELY/NONYLEVITATIVELY-RETANNATED-RETARTRATED

So far, our word is rather antiseptic and colorless. Let's add
color to the scene! To suffuse something is to overspread it with color. Derivative words follow pell-mell: suffuser, resuffuser, desuffuser, resuffused. Inserting the last two derivatives into our palindrome to invest the agent in it with a triple function gives us a 91-letter palindrome:

DETRARTRATER-DETANNATER-DESUSSUSER-YLEVITATIVELY/
NONYLEVITATIVELY-RESUFFUSED-RETANNATED-RETRARTRATED

The definition of our glorious palindrome? "Recombined with tartaric and with tannic acid, and re-overspread with color, sometimes in a highly levitative manner and at other times not in such a manner at all, depending on the requirements of the particular occasion, by one who combines within himself, normally, the functions of separating substances from tartaric and from tannic acid, and undoing or reversing the process of overspreading them with color."

Thoughtful readers will recognize instantly that the mainstream of modern living demands just such a word. Help spread the good word, so as to insure its emergence from the matrix of language... look for it in books, magazines, and newspapers... it is the word of the future!