NOTES ON PALINDROMES

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Outside of Sotades, the inventor of the form, the greatest palindromist in history may well be the late-Victorian poet Edwin Fitzpatrick, now principally remembered for his translation of Omar Khayyam which he entitled "The Rubaiyat of Charades and Palindromes". Although his rendering has been termed eccentric and even obscure by some, there is little doubt that he remained faithful both to the Tentmaker's rigid use of quatrains and his highly phantasmagorical sense of imagery. Little known even to this day, Fitzpatrick first received public attention in Howard W. Bergerson's excellent Palindromes and Anagrams, and indeed Mr. Bergerson remains the sole authority on this enigmatic and shadowy genius.

According to a baldly spurious extract from the journals of Fitzpatrick, a palindrome should resemble "two identical baroquely-ornate passenger trains which roar past each other through a long, luminous Alpine tunnel". In spite of numerous derailments and the fact that a caboose cannot pull a line of cars quite as effectively as a diesel locomotive (to continue his metaphor), palindromes continue to fascinate logologists, enjoying a status somewhere between verbal gimmick and literary genre.

Letter-unit palindromes fall into two categories, those with an odd number of letters (and which therefore pivot around a single letter), and those with an even number. Two of the latter may be easily combined by dividing one of the palindromes into two equal halves; the first half is then placed at the head of the remaining palindrome and the second half placed at its other end. In this way, one palindrome has completely enclosed another and, with luck, some longer phrases of continuous sense and syntax have been achieved. The two halves of the divided palindrome can also be transposed or switched and then placed around the ends of the undivided palindrome; and since either palindrome may be used as the divided one which then encloses the other, there is a total of four different ways in which two even-lettered palindromes may be combined. Of course, it is also possible to begin with an odd-lettered palindrome and add additional words to its two ends, thus working one's way simultaneously toward the beginning and end of the reversal.

One reason so many successful palindromes have been written in English is that the entire present tense conjugation of the verb to be (am, is, are) is easily reversible, as well as the verb was and the

pronouns I, word is reversible with aid of some have a highest such as at, monest diffi

What are power seems to concision, prop
ploy longer hatter have for the pal long phrase: instance, if l will have to lift Pa'" so then compen displaying its more. In the palindrome and point hav drained of m while falling the by Fitzpatrick throughout the

Set as Lo, O R. d IRTV
(1 D O s
Stem, Nag, Sag

See? Ric
Snore, No, Si
Familia
Now or a

Ebony a
Ned: Iop
We, caf Modify W ( Watt, O

What is it
Oh gate
As we s
pronouns I, we and it. But to the determined palindromist every word is reversible — at least in some conceivable context or with the aid of some spectacular feat of ingenuity. It is only that some words have a higher palindromic potentiality than others, with combinations such as ck, nd, nt and the single letters q and j presenting the commonest difficulties.

What are the general criteria of a "good" palindrome? The answer seems to be a combination of conventional literary values (wit, concision, perhaps lyricism) and the special ingenuity required to employ longer words and longer phrases (nonassimilative and mad as a hatter have both been used successfully). In any case, it is important for the palindromist to properly distribute his store of long words and long phrases over the first and second halves of his palindrome. For instance, if he uses the phrase "apt Filipino" early in his poem, he will have to deal with the more improbable exclamation "O, Nip, I lift Pa!" somewhere in the latter part of his work. Ideally, he would then compensate the second half with the next ingenious gem, relegating its more awkward mirror image for placement in the first section. In the palindrome below, it is apparent that almost all of the sense and point has been shunted into its second half, leaving the first half so drained of meaning as to be barely intelligible. The second palindrome, while falling far short of the consistent and unbroken eloquence achieved by Fitzpatrick in his prime, is more balanced, with meaning spread throughout the poem more evenly-handedly.

Set a ripe ... Lo, I rose.
R. daps ya, Jeb! IRT's lan'...
(I Drac', sax.)
O sob! Slay or seek! Nay!
Stem sorts a leg;
Nag, elder.

Red Leg, Angel,
Astros, Mets,
Yankees, Royals,
Bosox, A's,
Cardinals,
Tribe, Jays,
Padres, Oriole,
Pirates.

JITTERY REVERIE

See? Rio's a lag.
Snore, pastel bat noses (reverted).
No, Si, arm us! Anno Domini:
Familiar fort in Nam, Zulu Fred --
Now or after?

Ebony alpha-omega (midi), pert niece-elf.
Ned: logic, lvi! -- divine vertigo; gerbil's Nemo.
We, cafe wastrel, as we
Modify bed, untie mandala --
(Watt, O mod Fresno!)

What is a homonym, malcontents?
Oh gates, we stink on it
As we sort sad donuts.
Ah, won serfdom, Ottawa lad?  
Name it, nude, by Fido.  
Mews -- alerts awe: face women's lib.  
Re: "Go, git!" Re: "Veni, vidi, victi."  
(Golden fleece: intrepid image, Mo.)

Ah! Play no beret,  
Faro-wonderful Us man.  
Nitro-frail, I'm a fin, I'm ... (O Donna!)  
Sum: raison d'être verses on tablets  
Ape Ron's gala soirées.

Random musings on palindromes in literature: the opening sentence of Ken Kesey's novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is a verbal palindrome ("They're out there") ... Readers may recall that the fictional playwright Clare Quilty, the villain of Vladimir Nabokov's novel Lolita, once appeared in an advertisement endorsing a cigarette called Dromes. The palindromic Humbert Humbert -- a man of no small logological passion -- could have therefore guessed Lolita's lover if he had stumbled on the charade "Pal in Dromes" ... In his novel I Hear America Swinging, Peter DeVries says, "If the past is prologue, then the epilogue might be something instructively pointing us back to the start. I think every life is a palindrome, which can be read either backward or forward. Of course it may not make any more sense than a palindrome, but that is another matter, and beyond the pretensions of this poor chronicle."

Politically-minded palindromists have begun to take an interest in the abominable career of Idi Amin. In spite of his tyrannies, they insist he is the most fascinating political figure since Cambodia's Lon Nol, France's Laval, and the tenth-century German emperor Otto I.

A palindromist nascitur, non fit -- or at least we may coin such a phrase in the case of Edwin Fitzpatrick. The story is told of a young disciple of his who one day walked into the master's study and presented him with a lengthy palindromic ode which filled exactly two pages. Fitzpatrick nodded respectfully, leaned back in his armchair, calmly skimmed through the first page, and returned the entire manuscript to the surprised student. "But I spent three weeks on that ode!" cried the young man. "Aren't you going to finish reading it?" "But I have finished reading it," replied the smiling Fitzpatrick.