

OH, CELLO FULL OF ECHOES

HERBERT PFEIFFER
Offenbach, Germany

*Editor's Note: Readers may recall Herbert Pfeiffer's palindromic poem, "Plaudere, du Alp!", reputedly the longest palindrome in German, printed with a partial translation in the May 1985 Word Ways. He has subsequently written a book (Oh, Cello Voll Echo: Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig, 1992), containing nearly one hundred end-to-end or line-by-line palindromic poems (including "Plaudere"). Although one must be fluent in German to fully appreciate Pfeiffer's palindromic wonders, one can still admire such coined jawbreakers as **leinseidenhosen-regallagergrasmatten**, roughly translatable as a distinguished cabinet constructed of grass-mats for the storage of linen-and-silk stockings! The following is a translation of part of the appendix, describing the difficulties of German palindrome-construction; I am indebted to Holger Gruenert of Elizabeth NJ for the translation.*

The ordinary difficulties of authorship assume a grotesque character for the palindromist. To formulate a certain thought exactly backwards is not only roundabout, but also veiled in obscurity. Among poetic structures, the palindrome is then the most difficult. Such texts can be characterized as overconstrained: "figures paroxystiques", as called by the French word-game explorer Phillippe Dubois. Moreover, the palindrome has to satisfy disparate requirements. On the one hand it should be smooth and well-gearred; on the other, it must function as a vehicle for poetic invention, of innovation and amazement.

The game requires a strict observance of the rules. No X for a U! One mistake, no matter how small, cheapens the palindrome. The fruits of this "aesthetic of overcome difficulties" are often, as a result, a telegraphic style, silliness, the appearance of profundity, and an abnormal, dark, artificial German turn of phrase, ruled by the imperative mood!

In any event, German palindromes using letters as elementary particles are especially hard nuts. Our language will not obey the palindromist. The writer Theodore Wolff laments that it is mere child's play to invent a **perpetuum mobile**. Although the free positioning of words in German sentences is an advantage, the words are often too long, and the tight compactness of letters doesn't help in the game. Clusters of consonants (**Angstschweiss**, etc.) in particular are antithetical to the palindromist's progress. It was a heavy blow when 700 years ago the Swabian-Allemanian sibilant **sch** came into usage. The word **swin** became **Schwein!**

As might be expected, it is not easy to find a coherent story in the German letter-palindrome. Only the syntax-free structures from the studios of visual and concrete poetry, such as the ones by Timm Ulrich, are truly remarkable. They limit themselves to palindromes of single words or word-groups.

Manual techniques assume special significance in the construction of palindromes. One turns of course to aids for systematic permutation. Much like the Kabbalists with their voluminous letter-tables or, perhaps, Johann Christoph Männing with his etymology-tables for the production of poetry, the ambitious palindromist uses backward word-dictionaries and other "lists".

The quickest way to a good palindrome goes from outside in:

Ein Regent... ...t Neger nie.
Seidenhosen... ...n es ohnedies.

It also works the other way round:

...am Nil Esel in Ma...
...el, bis reversible...

Ordinarily, the hinge is built with the central letter or, more seldom, a blank.

First names are useful in many ways. They are hardly ever inflected and need no articles. Examples like **Amme Emma, der fette Fred** or the common **Tim** populate German palindromes. Moreover, names can play with Fate:

Folge Eglolf! [follow Eglolf]
Adelt Leda! [ennoble Leda]
Martre Bertram! [torture Bertram]
and so on.

The list is another fertile stratagem. Grammatical and syntactical hurdles can be thus bypassed:

Affin, Knie, Torpedo, Maid, Sumerer, Emus,
Dia, Mode, Protein, Kniff, A...

One further word about the compositions in this book. The poetic twist lies in two types of wordplay: patterns that consist of a single palindrome, and ones in which each line consists of a palindrome -- in the last analysis, middle-axle-poetry!

My reverse text **Plaudere, du Alp!** requires special mention. This eccentric piece of artistic prose is, by far, the longest palindrome in the German literature. A large number of more-or-less useful words from our literary language got worked in. The difficult struggle for "sense" (or at least thematic homogeneity) cannot be ignored, and inevitably leads to a confused, but yet broad, interweaving of narrative strands.

In reading such texts, mindful of the fact that letter-palindromes of the length of whole novels have been published in the English-speaking literature, one can believe (and some are convinced that it is true) that in the Middle Ages some were crazed by the rapture of palindromes. I can say out of my own experience that excessive

letter-transposition can lead to overnervousness.

In 1295, a pupil of Abraham Abulafia noted in his book **Die Tore der Gerechtigkeit** that by permutation and combination "the letters, in my eyes, became huge mountains, violent convulsions seized me, and I could not control myself; my hair stood on end, as if I were in another world."

Jawohl, it's exactly like that!

E I E R F R E I E		O	
E S S A Y A S S E		N U N	
E S S O B O S S E		S T E T S	
E X E H E H E X E		R E N T N E R	
G E I S T S I E G		G E I S T S I E G	
G E W E S E W E G		L E B E N S N E B E L	
G N U T O T U N G		R E L I E F P F E I L E R	
H O R R O R R O H		R E T S I N A K A N I S T E R	
L E G E R E G E L		R E G E L B A S I S A B L E G E R	
L E I T S T I E L		M U T N E G I E R E R E I G E N T U M	
L E S E R E S E L		S I A M E S E N E G O G E N E S E M A I S	
M A L A Y A L A M	M A E T R E S S E N H U H N E S S E R T E A M		
M A R K T K R A M			
N I L E S E L I N	B		G
R E I T S T I E R	E G E		E L E
R E N G E G N E R	G N U N G		S E N E S
R E U E F E U E R	E G E		E L E
R O M A N A M O R	B		G
S E R E N E R E S		Das I von NITRO,	
S I N A I A N I S		das L an ESEL,	
T A T E N E T A T		ein U (DATUM, UM, UTA),	
T R A B A B A R T		du nie lesen als A	
		dort in NOVI SAD!	

Ade, Lissi, Salli, Gitte, Biggi, Sara, Mizzi, Leila, Maia, Karin, Ina, Jane, Lilli, Minna, Anita, Irene, Lale, Sigi, Susan, Ines, Liane, Lea, Lolita, Karola, Lia, Liv, Elli, Jette, Dolli, Lis, Babette, Nana, Ida, Nadia, Nanette, Babsi, Lill, Odette, Jill, Evi, Laila, Lora, Kati, Lola, Elena, Ilse, Nina, Susi, Gisela, Lene, Ria, Tina, Anni, Milli, Lena, Janin, Ira, Kai, Amalie, Lizzi, Mara, Siggi, Betti, Gilla, Sissi, Leda!