

THE GOVERNOR, OR THE DEVIL

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When either intentional or accidental occult “messages” are discovered in the body of some prominent text, they are of potential interest to logology. Here is the story of one such “message” of recent occurrence whose true nature—accidental or artificial—is a subject of dispute. All of the particular facts cited herein were taken from a front page article in the October 28, 2009 *San Francisco Chronicle*, which article may be examined in its entirety at the *Chronicle*’s website, sfgate.com. (Once there, select: Home → Browse Previous Issue → October 28, 2009 → Go → Chronicle Page One Stories → Did Schwarzenegger...)

The story begins, the *Chronicle* theorizes, on the evening of last October 7, when California’s Republican governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, decided to crash a Democratic Party fundraising dinner in San Francisco. Arrived at this affair, Schwarzenegger was received, for the most part, with amused good humor, the one memorable exception to the general civility being provided by San Francisco assemblyman Tom Ammiano. Perhaps sensing a grand opportunity, with media present, to stage some political theater, the left-liberal Ammiano reportedly shouted a series of insults, including at least one indecent proposal, at the governor from the audience. The *Chronicle* darkly suspects that this incident may have had something to do with subsequent events.

Fast-forward three weeks. In an effort to pressure the state’s politically deadlocked Legislature to take action on a variety of critical issues, Schwarzenegger has begun routinely returning most of the bills passed by the Legislature and sent to him for his signature. In due course, back from the governor comes Assembly Bill 1176, a mundane measure by Ammiano authorizing state financial aid for the Port of San Francisco, accompanied by a more or less pro forma letter to the Assembly giving his reasons for returning it. The bill’s effective veto has been expected, but to the surprise of all (including, by its own sworn account, the governor’s office) the letter sent with it is soon discovered to contain an unseemly “coded message,” as the *Chronicle* termed it. Except for an abridgment of its signature space, here is the letter exactly as it was received by the Assembly:

To the Members of the California State Assembly:

I am returning Assembly Bill 1176 without my signature.

For some time now I have lamented the fact that major issues are overlooked while many unnecessary bills come to me for consideration. Water reform, prison reform, and health care are major issues my Administration has brought to the table, but the Legislature just kicks the can down the alley.

Yet another legislative year has come and gone without the major reforms Californians overwhelmingly deserve. In light of this, and after careful consideration, I believe it is unnecessary to sign this measure at this time.

Sincerely,

Arnold Schwarzenegger

As acrostics-minded readers may already have noticed, this short epistle contains a spectacular, if decidedly impolite, example of an accidental acrostic occurring in running text—provided, that is, that the acrostic actually was the product of chance. Naturally enough, given the circumstances, few were inclined to believe that it was, and in vain did the governor’s office, denying all culpability, scramble to produce previous Schwarzenegger missives containing such unintended acrostics as “soap” and “poet” in order to show that such uncontrived word-forming letter lineups do, in fact, often occur by chance. After all, not only were the statistical odds enormously against such a pat acrostic—notice the unlikely way in which it utilizes every line in the body of the letter, and how each paragraph just “happens” to delimit a single word of the acrostic, thereby neatly indicating the spaces between them—but the timing of the hidden message was also highly suspicious, coming as it did shortly after the San Francisco incident, over which the governor might plausibly be supposed to hold a grudge against the very legislator whose bill this letter vetoed. An “accidental” acrostic? Oh, please.

And yet, there are some nagging reasons to wonder whether the acrostic might not actually be the result of an incredible coincidence. First of all, besides the facts that contrivance was insistently denied and that such games would be out of character for Schwarzenegger in any case, there is the troublesome fact that the letter is addressed to the Assembly as a whole, not just to one member, and its offensive hidden message therefore applicable to all of that body’s members, Democrats and Republicans alike. But these difficulties with the prevailing “contrivance” theory of the acrostic’s origin are all eclipsed, in my opinion, by the simple fact that the acrostic’s host letter betrays no telltale hints of a contriver’s efforts to make it come out right in either its verbal or its mechanical parameters. Absolutely nothing about the letter, it seems to me, waves the red flag of artifice.

Those who have never attempted to deliberately manufacture an acrostic of this kind, in which the acrostic is not of the easy-to-create kind in which each letter is the first letter of a new sentence in the host text, but rather one in which the majority of the letters in the acrostic must come from words in the interior of sentences in the host text, are likely not to realize just how difficult it is to devise such acrostics without leaving some trace of the effort, something slightly stilted about the language of the text, or something unusual about the typeface, type size, spacing or margins used. Involved in creating this kind of acrostic is the practice of an arcane variety of constrained writing in which excellence is measured by the degree to which the language and various other parameters of the host text appear to be completely natural and unexceptional.

In the text in question, nothing about the language used looks the least bit suspicious, except perhaps for the too-informal colloquial phrase “kicks the can down the alley,” which supplies a needed “k” to the acrostic. But it should be understood that this happens to be a favorite expression of the governor’s, and one which he had often used previously in characterizing the Legislature’s alleged procrastination in dealing with important problems. (Having first learned English as an adult, Schwarzenegger’s stock of English colloquialisms is not vast, and having found one that works for him, tends to use it repeatedly in any context.)

As regards the mechanical aspects of the host letter, examination of the *Chronicle*’s photocopy of the original letter shows it to be typed in what appears to be Times New Roman typeface, which I believe is the default typeface of the still-widespread word-processing program MS Word 2003. Likewise, the side margins of the original appear to conform to Word 2003’s default setting of one and a half inches. Thus, if the governor had simply dictated the body of this letter to a secretary who had then typed it on a computer using Word 2003’s default settings, employing commonly-used 12-point type, the result would inevitably be the expression this remarkable acrostic, as readers may verify by their own experiment.

In short, nothing at all in the host letter evinces any sort of deliberate effort to contrive its hidden message. This being so, one must conclude that if the acrostic is in fact an intentional artifact, its fabricator must have been extremely fortunate in his or her choice of wording for the text, or else must be highly adept at this seldom-seen variety of wordplay, even by the standards of practiced wordplayers. And how likely is it that such a person would be found inhabiting, of all things, the staff of a politician? (And as to Schwarzenegger's staff, his chief of staff, it may be relevant to note, is a Democrat.)

As a nine-days' wonder, Acrosticgate failed to make it even to the two-day mark, as far as the media were concerned, nor did the politicians, their attentions claimed by far less esoteric matters, care to pursue it further. Half a year later, the affair seems unlikely to amount to even a minor footnote to California history. Still, the unsolved mystery of the origin of this amazing-if-accidental (and still noteworthy if not) acrostic remains a conundrum for logologists and others to ponder. Having now learned the circumstances of the case and the arguments on both sides, what is the reader's opinion of the mystery? Who was it, really, who stood chuckling behind the secretary who first typed the offending letter—was it the governor, or the Devil?

WORKING WEEK

SIR JEREMY MORSE
London, England

Captain Daunsy
Twined his dynamo
(Off sea-duty)
On sandy weed –
Cleared his yard thus,
As a fairy'd
Sweep a dust-ray.