

"PALINDROMES AND ANAGRAMS"

JEZEBEL Q. XIXX

The year 1973 will be remembered as witnessing the publication of a book that goes to the very heart of logology: Palindromes and Anagrams, by Howard W. Bergerson (Dover Publications, Inc., New York, paperbound, \$2.50). The author is a former editor of Word Ways, and he has collected into one, compact volume much essential material available nowhere else. Consequently, the book becomes a sine qua non for all serious logologists, as well as for all laymen interested in verbal curiosities.

The largest single section of the book -- 53 pages out of 137 -- is devoted to a collection of 1,169 anagrams and their sources, to the extent known. Most of the anagrams were supplied from the files of The National Puzzlers' League. A very high percentage of the finest anagrams in this collection was previously published in Language on Vacation by Dmitri A. Borgmann (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1965), since the author of that earlier work also had access to NPL files. Most of the anagrams being published for the first time in book form suffer from the defects that characterize the bulk of the anagrams current in NPL circles. Many are of 19th-century vintage, revolving around subjects unfamiliar to our generation, or using antiquated vocabulary. Thus, the anagram THE COLUMBIAN POSTAGE STAMPS = "A batch to gum on a P.M.'s epistles" apparently refers to the Columbian World's Fair Exposition held in Chicago in 1893, an event remote from the life of today. Or, THE SCARLET LETTER, BY NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE = "Can tell thee Hester hath worn an 'A' bitterly" uses two archaic words (thee and hath), refers to a work of literature written in 1850, and concerns the scarlet "A" used in colonial times as a punitive mark of adultery.

Many of the anagrams are faulty. Some were contrived by adding extraneous words that do not belong. For example, PATISSERIE = "I.e., pastries" includes an undesired "id est", and THE FOOL'S PARADISE = "False hope's road, it" uses a dangling pronoun as a crutch. Others are faulty in grammar. For instance, DEPUTY CORONERS = "Tend your corpse" switches from a plural base to a singular anagram, and CONTAMINATE = "Taint came on" moves from the present tense to the past tense.

Yet other anagrams are of questionable appositeness. Thus, HIP-POTAMUS = "Hi, pompous Pat!" makes no sense to me; neither does OUR CLARA = "Oracular", unless some medium of a former day is meant, whose first name was Clara. Included also are anagrams that

would have significance only for longtime NPL members. Example: THE EIGHTY-SECOND CONVENTION OF THE NATIONAL PUZZLERS' LEAGUE = "Then feeling a huge devotion to puzzle in Hotel Casey, Scranton". That convention was held in September, 1924.

These criticisms are leveled neither at the author nor at the NPL. They are merely a reflection of the fact that nowhere near 1,169 really good, modern anagrams have been devised. What does not exist obviously could not be included in the book.

11 of the 53 pages dealing with anagrams list the sources and mostly pseudonymous authors of the anagrams, where known, in fine print. This information is of interest primarily to NPL old-timers and to individuals like Will Shortz, a 23-year-old student from Crawfordsville at Indiana University, now preparing to write his master's thesis on the history of enigmology or enigmatology (the study of word, number, and logic puzzles, quizzes, and games) -- a singular breakthrough for logological concerns in the academic world.

A number of sections in Bergerson's work take up the subject of letter-unit palindromes of the sentence variety. About 475 examples are listed. The exact number is difficult to determine because the palindromes are split into several groups, are not numbered, and are sometimes presented in pairs. This is the largest collection of sentence palindromes ever published. There is, as might be expected, some overlapping with previously published material, such as the set of palindromes in Language on Vacation, or the palindromes that have appeared in the British journal Notes and Queries over an extended period of time, from about 1850 to the present.

As with anagrams, the main thrust of the effort has been in the direction of quantity rather than quality. The longer specimens, more interesting because of their very length, are usually flawed by lack of grammatical and/or semantic continuity, outright grammatical errors, and nebulous thought. Here are a few examples, from the group contributed by the British palindromist J. A. Lindon:

Dairyman, ample horde pets attack, limelit. Risk, sir, tile-
milk, cat-taste . . . Pedro, help, man! A myriad!
Report paracetamol is not in unit on silo, mate. Car apt. -- Roper.
"Dens? Do casinos reward? Mine don't. Ned, I've still (it's
evident) no denim drawers on," Isa cods Ned.

Human ingenuity being what it is, scenarios or contexts can probably be created to give all of the palindromes a semblance of rationality, but I suspect that the average reader will be inclined to dismiss quite a few of them as little more than gibberish.

Additional sections of the book present palindromes in verse form, cast in a variety of formats, and sometimes combined with sentence charades. Many of these were created by Bergerson, even when he attributes them to a fictitious 19th-century logologist, Edwin Fitzpatrick,

whose name is intended to remind us of Edward Fitzgerald, translator of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. These palindromes, in addition to being long, exhibit a graceful, poetic style. Although they suffer, as they must, from a certain nebulosity of thought -- admitted and rationalized away by Bergerson in introductory remarks -- they are a pleasure to read, inducing a sense of euphoria in the reader.

One curious aspect of these particular palindromes, brought on in part by the exigencies of palindrome construction, is the sensual current running through them: we are perpetually regaled by visions of erotic, nude women abed.

Even more delightful than Bergerson's poetry is the introductory and explanatory material occupying some 13 pages. This material seeks, very successfully, to impart to palindromes and anagrams a status, a dignity, and a future they have not heretofore possessed. I commend it as required reading for every positively-minded, forward-looking logologist.

Included in the first part of the book are a few other items of interest. One is a humorous sketch on "The Life and Death of Sydney Yendys", by George Marvill, recounting that individual's palindromic misadventures. I don't know quite what to make of it, since SYDNEY YENDYS is a pseudonym of Sydney Thompson Dobell, English poet, 1824-1874. The Sydney Yendys around whom this sketch revolves is stated in it to have been born in 1881 (an upside-down as well as left-to-right numerical palindrome). If the idea was simply to use a 12-letter palindromic name, some previously nonexistent one could have been concocted -- CONRAD DARNOC, or LEMUEL LEUMEL, for instance.

Another curiosity in the first part of the book is a 20-page chapter about Vocabularyclept Poetry, the author's name for the exercise of taking an existing poem and rearranging the words in it to form a new poem that is just as sensible as was the original one. Included in this chapter is material by A. Ross Eckler and by J. A. Lindon, previously published in Word Ways.

The book was not proofread too carefully. Here and there, typographical errors can be spotted. For instance, the anagram of LIFE INSURANCE should be "I rule finances", not "finance". Or, in THE CANTANKEROUS MAN = "Thus note a mean crank", the middle word of the anagram base is misprinted "cantakerous". Since there is a fixed internal relationship both in anagrams and in palindromes, such errors are easy to notice and correct.

In spite of the faults mentioned in this review, Palindromes and Anagrams by Howard W. Bergerson acts to fill a gap in the literature of logology that acutely needed to be filled, and it is hereby recommended to all readers of Word Ways.