

# PALINDROMES: THE ASCENDING TRADITION

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The first of the seven arts is grammar ... The word comes from the Greek gramma (letter).

--Ernst Robert Curtius, Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter (Bern: A. Francke, 1948), p. 50

Word play does on a small scale what poetry does with the form of language as a whole. Word play shows the poet's sensitivity to the most distant relationships.

--René Wellek, A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950, Vol. II, The Romantic Age (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 41

The accessibility of the palindrome in ancient times to the lands east and south-east of the Mediterranean implies evidence that its intrigues as a language form antedate the Romance language family and were operant in a murkier, and far more remote, period. Magic squares have been recovered from this history that are edged with palindromes and from which the Hebrew name Elôhim can be obtained, beginning with a central aleph (Wallis-Budge, 1930). Certain verses of the Pentateuch, known also as the Torah or the Hebraic laws, are written in the form of the recurrent verse and are contained in the Biblical Exodus. Likewise, a Samaritan codex has yielded a magic square which makes a corner at the axial character of its palindromic border (Gaster, 1925). For each of these artifacts recurrent symmetry is a patent feature. Additional artifacts of the palindrome's history may be found in the existing record of this distant time, preserved in sacred scriptures and mythologies. One well-known example can be taken from the words which filled the silence surrounding the burning bush encountered by Moses -- words which he took to be the voice of his most perfect God -- words which also bear the selective, secret aspect of a recurrent verse: AHYH ASHR AHYH (I am that I am). The enigmatic context of this Biblical verse (Exodus .III: 14) allows a translation that refuses to define the name of God at the same time that it communicates one. Moses descended from the holy place of his encounter and said not "who" God is, but rather that "He is," a line which is not without meaning (Wallis-Budge, 1930).

One of the first major importations of this and other Oriental influences upon western poetry and poetics occurred as Egypt became a part of the imperium Romanum in 30 B. C., although previous effects had been rendered through the gradual Hellenization of an expanding empire. One can point to similarities in the symbolism of Oriental and Occidental

mythologies to judge this influence, and the entire process can be seen as a fortunate and virtual enrichment of western thinking (Koenen, 1976). However, a more strategic view for the study of poetics would be to comprehend this movement as an extensive geographical dispersion of eastern mythic forms and dream materials, plus the improbable, forgotten histories that these represent.

Consulting papyri from this era that have come to rest in Danish, German, and other European hands, scholars have brought to light various palindromic cryptograms of direct significance for the philological study of languages and their ability to articulate the most embryonic of human ideas. A common palindromic incantation used as a hymn of divination ties the sun-god Helios to the ancient sorceress and earth-goddess Hecate. This has led to the suggestion that the recurrence of the sky-god to the earth-goddess from one day to the next was magically realized in their common incantatory palindrome, thus the primal marriage of the heavens and the earth was early recorded with the powers of elaboration wrapped up within the poetics of recurrent language. And this palindromic name, or evocatory formula, held in common by hymns on papyrus to both Helios and Hecate is also entered on a Greek amulet taken from a mummy that dates from the second or third century A. D. Next to this inscription on the same amulet are three more recurrent magic words, all of which are also the cryptonyms of supernatural powers placed there as a charm of protection. The first of these begins "Aberamentho. . .," and is known as a mystical name of Jesus in the gnostic language of certain Coptic cults (Preisendanz, 1949).

Hence it is known that language was recognized very early as a source of power, or as a means of marshalling the powers which were already deployed in nature and recognized by the mystic. It was also believed that a distinction separated the practitioners of demonic and natural magic, and that natural magic was simply a practical branch of natural philosophy. The Chaldeans called magi the same sort of people the Greeks called philosophers (Rice, 1976). The fundamental difference to the ancients between philosophers and magicians resided in their methods, not in their subject matter. Philosophers meditated and theorized on the secret effects of nature, but the magician experimented instead and sought to gain certain ends and sympathies with natural powers by seeking out and eliciting their occult design, a responsibility now given to the natural sciences.

Thus, the language magic which was for palindromes their role in archaic experience can now be understood as an inchoate form of natural science, at a time near its first stirrings. The palindrome as a language form carries a history in rough alignment with the constellation of human behaviours and beliefs known as the "magico-religious," or the paradigmatic concept that one may directly affect nature and others by an elaboration of secret powers such as those bound up within language, even though the precise mechanism may not be known. What was important to the mystic creator of palindromic verse and incantations appears to be a recognition of the numinous reality that stands in profile to the objects of the material world, and the recurrent verse was a tracing through language of this occult design. Hence, the study of the archaic

use of the palindrome is also the study of the early psychology of magic, and this in turn is intimate with primeval natural science, for the same human will and desire has generated each of these patterns of behaviour.

A solid comprehension of the magico-religious mood of human behaviour cannot be attained within the present figure of modern man, not unless within that figure there lie concealed vestiges which may recall his earlier forms and dawning awareness of his place in the world. The laws of symmetry can yet be seen as the animating force behind the animal and vegetable worlds, or as the governing pattern of the physical world. This governing pattern is eternal and unaffected by displacement in time and space, for a controlled experiment that produces a particular result in Egypt will produce the same controlled result in Spain, and will be repeated in Egypt six weeks later. Observations on the enduring cycles of generations and the seasons, the replenishing of the forests and the rivers, the re-occurrence of character traits and patterns within the world could not help but deliver a sort of mystical awe to the early poet who then yearned to make these things real in his verse. This is the "expressive" and mystical use of the palindrome within the magico-religious mood of human behaviour, a use which symbolizes the relationship of the poet, and other men by extension, to the cosmos.

But this is not the only use of the palindrome, nor is it a statement of the palindrome's early glow as a kind of natural science. The magico-religious function of language can also be used to achieve certain ends -- it can be "instrumental." And the separation of powers between the instrumental and expressive uses of the palindrome restates the distinction between the ancient philosopher and magician: on the one hand there is meditation and expression, on the other there is a practical application of poetic vision.

Close inspection shows that the historical evidence argues firmly for the mythical, expressive beginnings of the palindrome as a language form, for the magic squares which conceal the name of a deity, the recurrent verses from the Torah, and the traditional words of the Hebraic God to Moses appear to be the earliest use put to the palindrome by its first poets, tasks which are both mystically and mythically expressive of certain cosmological relationships. Only later do the rarefied and purely magical, instrumental uses of the recurrent verse appear in magic squares intended as protective charms and elsewhere as spells, incantations, oracular consultations and divinations of supernatural powers.

Furthermore, the artifacts which bear these records are solid proof of the passing of myth into magic, for they trace the unlighted continuity from the mythic expression of cosmological symmetry into the subsequent manipulative and instrumental use of this expression for the achievement of certain effects. And in this passage there is the beginning and far-off light of the tradition known as natural science, a conclusion which does not require much imagination once it is understood that for this dim period of history, as for the present, the powers of symmetry through time and space, and the harmony which can be recognized between the material and the numinous realities, represent for all effects

and purposes the primordial and singular tie between our thoughts, and these are for us truly the adhesive of the universe from which all the operations of the mind must, in great measure, depend.

The later use of the rotas square in the west bears out a magical, instrumental history. Its next earliest dating after the Dura discovery is from the first Frankish dynasty, the Merovingian period, somewhere between 500 and 750 A. D. There it appears in cryptic medicinal texts surrounded by magical figures and spells inscribed within circles. Its next appearance is in a manuscript Bible dated 822 A. D. now housed in the Bibliothèque nationale. Later discoveries show it written into a floor mosaic at Crémone, at the dungeon of the Loches châteaux, and added to manuscripts in libraries scattered across Europe from Rome to London, often in handwriting which came centuries after the original ink had dried and faded (Jerphanion, 1935). And for reasons which are not perfectly clear but which are reminiscent of Wescher's translation of 1874, Cyrus McCormick had the rotas square mounted as the sparkling logos for his original reaper midway through the nineteenth century.

The tradition of recurrent verse continues with the Roman Emperor Leo VI, 886-911 A. D., who unwittingly contributed several palindromic lines which he had probably taken from the tomb of St. Diomede, a martyr much admired by his father, to the now rare Excerpta varia Graecorum Sophistarum ac Rhetorum. One of these lines has enjoyed considerable renown, being inscribed on a holy-water vessel at the church of St. Sophia, another vessel unearthed at Constantinople, and also found along the lining of a fountain at Notre Dame (Allatius, 1641). This is the palindrome encountered earlier and usually translated "Wash my transgressions, not only my face." Emperor Leo serves as one of the few public, and thus visible, examples of the medieval continuation of the tradition in the Byzantine world, as do others such as Constantine Anagnostes and the archivists of the rotas square (Krumbacher, n. d.). However, the palindromes from this later period seem to have a somewhat differing intention behind their use as a language form than their predecessors in an earlier history. The palindromes taken from the tomb of St. Diomede are "commemorative," that is they are intended as poetic memorials to the dead, and their use as such adds a considerably novel attitude to the powers of recurrent verse. The palindromic verse form is one of heavy constraint imposed by its restriction to a pattern of recurrent symmetry, and it is the fate of this constraint that it should deny all efforts at translation. Grammar can be translated, but the intended significance of grammar and symmetrical form is beyond reach. Thus, the commemorative palindrome marks a tremulous achievement of language: because it cannot suffer the labyrinthine filters of translation it must forever remain in its original form, even after that language has worn away and is beyond recall. Hence, the remembrance of the dead is made everlasting within the devices of a palindromic verse.

The commemorative palindrome ranges widely throughout the Romance languages during the medieval period, often appearing within the same texts as the chi-rho monogram of Christ. The tradition is well documented in Spain where, among other locations, it appears in a copy

of Pope Gregory's commentary on the book of Job, written by a monk named Florentius from the monastery of Valerīnica in 945 A. D. The commemorative labyrinth of this rare, surviving copy is a series of twenty lines which, read horizontally, each become a palindrome. The uppermost reversible line contains an axial and unrepeated F, proceeding from which any number of directions yields a reading which asks that Florentius, the unworthy scribe, be remembered: Florentius indignum memorare (Williams, 1977).

The present record of the palindrome through the late medieval era and the Renaissance upheaval of humanism is a matter of faint clues and twilight insinuations. Dante repeatedly used the Old Italian palindrome omo to signify man in La Commedia and his other poetry. Étienne Pasquier brought to light many Latin and French palindromes for the curious and erudite of his sixteenth century France (Saintix, 1903). Even Shakespeare was capable of suggesting an elicitation of the magical powers of recurrent verse. During the witch's sabbath of Macbeth a recurrent verse falls at a location highly suggestive of the author's consciousness of its disposition as magical language

All: Paddock calls: --anon!--  
 Fair is foul, and foul is fair:  
 Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Alexander Pope remarks critically about this passage that the word Paddock was historically the name of a spirit imprisoned in the shape of a toad, and that the first of these three lines should be assigned to one of the three witches present. This renders the remaining couplet, the first line of which is a recurrent verse, to be spoken by the remaining witches as a response in concert, as a weird and magical chorus. Hence, the context of the verse and its form come together to suggest Shakespeare's intended use of the recurrent verse as a magical language.

Although the Oxford English Dictionary gives the entry of the word "palindrome" into the English language first to Ben Jonson, circa 1629, imprints of the word and examples of its meaning can be pointed out before this, even though the vocabulary with which they were created is strange to contemporary English and reminiscent of the Latin and Norman French still fashionable at that time. This was a sensitive period in the history of the language, for English overlapped with powerful influences, and the role of the palindrome as a poetic device was not lacking in the development of a new order. A few examples should suffice.

Enclosed within William Camden's Remains Concerning Britain, first published in 1607, is a letter to the author from his friend and mentor Richard Carew, eminent historian and antiquary. This letter is entitled "The Excellency of the English Tongue," and it is for the most part an apology for his native language. One passage in this letter yields several antiquated samples of the palindrome, one example of which is: I did level ere vue, vue ere level did I. And in the same volume Camden himself contributes four more palindromes, although they are each in Latin. An example is this couplet concerning Otto, who holds a mule, and Anne, who sports a table cloth:

"Odo tenet mulum, madidam mappam tenet Anna.  
Anna tenet mappam madidam, mulum tenet Odo."

The intention behind these verses is easily seen. Carew and Camden were deftly in touch with their place in history and in the development of languages, and it was their desire to portray the particular grace and perfection of their native tongue while drawing contrasts with a broad historical perspective. One of their touchstones along the way was to compare the powers of elaboration and meaning between the classical languages and their own native English tongue, the proof of which was to be judged, at least in part, from their respective abilities to generate palindromes. Other palindromes given by Camden were taken from stories about a noble lady of Elizabeth's court, a Roman lawyer, and an English scholar living in a rustic country town; these are, respectively, "Ablata & alba," "Si nummi immunis," and "Subi dura a rudibus" (Camden, 1870).

Thus, the recurrent verse has left behind its familiarity with the magico-religious mood of human behaviour, and has instead found itself extended towards proof of technical expertise and excellence in philology and poetics. It has also found its way along these same lines into the tradition of chivalric society as evidenced by certain works of John Taylor, the water poet. His collected works contain two palindromes from these early years of the English language which occur as concluding lines to poems in honor of certain noble figures of power. An example is to Anne, Queen of Great Britain:

These back-ward and these forward lines I fend,  
To your right Royall high Maiefticke hand:  
And like the guilty prifoner I attend  
Your cenfure, wherein bliffe or bale doth stand.  
If I condemned be, I cannot grudge,  
For neuer Poet had a iufter Iudge.

These lines are to bee read the fame backward  
as they are forward.

Deer Madam Reed:  
Deem if I meed.

In these lines of the water poet, which are exemplary of much of the later tradition and history of the palindrome, there is little to recommend the use of recurrent verse other than the hard-won form and technical expertise which it presents, as with Camden and Carew. And yet in these observations alone there is something which recalls the reputation which once held true for the palindrome, for the competence and excellence of both a poet and a language have been recommended by the higher form of expression bound up within the recurrent verse. Thus, the palindrome has perhaps lost its mythic and magical dimensions, yet it retains a function for the poet as commemoration, as a higher form of expression in the modern world (Taylor, 1973).

For the palindromes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one

must again turn to the language of the Greeks. Palindromic inscriptions accompanied by dates from the eighteenth century can still be seen at a monastery on Mount Athos, the Chamber of Deputies at Athens, and in a volume of the history of the church at Méléce (Pétridès, 1909). Perhaps the greatest commemorative palindrome of all was published at Vienna, in 1802, written by a priest from the Danube valley named Ambroise Pamperis. This volume consists of fifty-five pages and four hundred sixteen lines of punning and poignant Greek dedicated to the recently installed Czar Alexander I of Russia. The book was printed at the author's expense, probably in hopes that it would someday be recognized. It now rests in the shelter of the British Museum (Pétridès, 1909).

Approaching the present, the modern use of the palindrome as a literary device is a comparative rare phenomenon, yet worthwhile to its authors and well within the mainstream of twentieth-century letters. The *Ulysses* of James Joyce uses many literary parries and ripostes that date back to a dark antiquity of forms and manners, and the recurrent verse is one of these devices. Stephan Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, the two main characters of the novel, meet nearly midway through the book at a maternity hospital where they both seem to be comically and symbolically reborn. This meeting is somewhat like the reunion of father and son, Telemachus and Ulysses, in the original epic tale by Homer, and it is gaily celebrated in Joyce's tale by a drunken, night-town visitation to the pleasures of Bella Cohen's brothel. Two palindromes occur at the high point of this celebration, a mock ceremony of the divine trinity, their lines interlaced and contributing towards a total effect of glossalalia (Joyce, 1946):

#### THE VOICE OF ALL THE DAMNED

Htengier Tnetopinmo Dog Drol eht rof, Aiulella!

(From on high the voice of Adonai calls.)

ADONAI

Dooooooooooooooooog!

#### THE VOICE OF ALL THE BLESSED

Alleluia, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth!

(From on high the voice of Adonai calls.)

ADONAI

Goooooooooooooooood!

Although much of the intent here is to produce comedy and confusion, it can also be said that the voices of all the damned and the blessed are merely capable of cancelling each other out, and that neither may claim ascendancy or an effect upon the eternal will of Adonai. The glossalaliac

effect of the recurrent verse fits into the total context of the novel by contributing to the partial theme that existence is composed of a confusion of moral alternatives. Hence, Joyce's use of the palindrome is expressive of certain cosmological relationships and can thus be drawn into perspective with the earliest, mythic forms and content of recurrent verse.

Other twentieth-century efforts are less literary than Joyce, yet capable at times of bringing about a troubling sense of recognition of the powers which can still be found imbedded in language. British and American writers have given many palindromes to various articles in popular newspapers and magazines, and have thereby been instrumental in enlarging the number of recurrent verses in the English language far beyond what any other language can presently offer. Among these the most important British practitioners are Leigh Mercer and J. A. Lindon, who strike a note that parallels in many ways the service provided by the untold numbers of monks and recluses of the unending past who have spent much of their lives and sometimes their sanity sifting through the logic of languages in hopes of discovering there a key to a hidden symbolism of meaning and significance. Superficially this behaviour is misleading and pointless, but on a deeper level this human drive to comprehend mystery and to seek out the missing pattern of things can be seen as the essential statement of the totality of human inquiry. Once again, the production of palindromes can be understood as an attempt to gaze through the crystal surface of language to glimpse the relationship of man to a cosmological order. There is only room for a few examples here (Mercer, 1946-53):

Are we not drawn onward, we few, drawn onward to new era?  
A man, a plan, a canal -- Panama  
Niagara, O roar again!  
Sums are not set as a test on Erasmus  
So remain a mere man -- I am Eros

The contemporary French producers of the palindrome have not been idle. A Paris-based group of poets and mathematicians calling themselves the OuLiPo has published a volume that contains a palindrome of over five thousand letters by one of their number, Georges Perec (Anonymous, 1973). The group grounds its approach to language in a mathematical orientation, expecting to gain analytical forms capable of realizing latent attributes of language within the existing literature. This can be seen as a restatement, then, of the language magician's behaviour of probing the existing body of expression in order to come up with hidden forms and possibilities, a sort of excursion into the magico-religious vestiges of our common heritage and memory.

Thus, natural science, language magic, and the use of the palindrome in the magico-religious mood of human behaviour can all be tied together both historically and psychologically, based on evidence from a broad range of peoples and languages. Recognition of the powers of recurrent language to muster only vaguely understood sympathies from the forces which inhabit the material world, or to set up philological alignments with the mystic design of creation as an expression of the presence of



these forces, is so prevalent as to suggest a common sensitivity in all men's minds. The presence of the forms of symmetry and what these represent within the powers of language can be repeatedly shown to be a formal expression of significance beyond the grammar of the written word, as if an evasive and metalinguistic reality were anchored within the palindrome itself. And the presence of this formal quality continually ramifies as a linguistic invention that ultimately reverts our reflection to the cosmos, to the source of our common life.

These statements are also true for the use of the recurrent verse by Carlos Fuentes, in his novel Terra Nostra. Both in manners and events, the characters of this novel stand outside of time and are portrayed as the necessary units of history, the life and death of civilizations, and the birth and passing away of languages. Early in the story, a cripple falls from a bridge and perishes in the water below. As the face of the drowning man becomes obscure below the surface, a song rises up from a figure on the bridge above him (Fuentes, 1975):

--Este es mi cuento. Deseo que oigas mi cuento. Oigas. Oigas. Sagio. Sagio. Otneuc im sagio euq oesed. Otneuc im se etse.

This palindrome, like those in Ulysses, at first seems to be merely an enactment of glossalalia, but a closer inspection proves that the confusion of tongues and unintelligibility of this couplet falls meaningfully into the pattern of narrative as it unfolds within the story. The palindrome falls as an emblem of a mystic sensitivity to the pervading force of the strange history without true time which has been created within the novel.

Thus the history of the palindromic verse ends on the same expressive note upon which it began. Its first and last function has been to open new possibilities to what is a reality and hence can be expressed. The recurrent verse can be seen as one of the highest forms of articulation -- although it has forever trafficked upon the obscure -- for its intended significance has been to objectify an impossible but absolute meaning and to render this close through language. As a symbol, the recurrent symmetry of the palindrome adds its comment to our relationship with the world around us, and thus realizes the structures of our belonging to the cosmos, as does all true poetry. Hence, the poetics of the palindrome draws psychology and language as a whole into an arena of influences which is ultimately scientific and anthropological in scope.

The poetics of the recurrent verse stresses the fact that every word and line is, by definition, a work subject to the limitations imposed by the language and beliefs at hand, and that every verse must prove its stability as well as its capacity to endure and serve the needs it was created for. There is an unbounded and hieroglyphical psychology delineated by the forms of our thinking as they are filtered through language, and once it becomes clear that the grammatical aspect alone is inadequate when we come to appraise the energies spent in order to make known our individual perspectives, longings, and desires, we are at last coming close to an understanding of this second, active presence of language, its form. The poetics of the palindrome yields a unique starting point from which to launch out into an otherwise uncharted area, and it gives a few initial

compass readings to begin further discovery. But the forces at play here are difficult enough to judge from the remote past, which is with rapidity and obscurity becoming more problematic and like a dream in our own day, and they are destined to become more so in the future.

In the end, the poetics of recurrent language leads to certain conclusions about the general place occupied by man in his history. The palindrome as a verse form ranges broadly through the images of our common past from the modern period, to the medieval archivists, to the dim light of the first recorded literature. In each of these occurrences it is able to find a vein of human sensitivity just below the hardened surface of common language usage, as if man in the abstract had remained the same all this time. As a poetic device, it ultimately and repeatedly reverts our attention to the totality of objects which always remains just beyond the grasp of normal usage, just beyond the sum of our recorded experiences. Thus, the palindrome represents the attempt to extend man's greatest and most common artifice, his language, to a hidden absolute of meaning.

The profusion of the recurrent verse through history presents a strong argument for the belief that man requires this absolute and encompassing reference for his language, that it is impossible for him to do otherwise. Hence, the use of the palindrome in history has been a linguistic and poetic realization of his will for an elevated context within the cosmos, which is the everlasting achievement of all enduring poetry. The poetics of recurrent language focusses on the poetic act itself: the palindrome's articulation of cosmic symmetry can be recognized as an example of the sudden image, the flare-up of being in the imagination which reconciles the human heart to a worldly existence. Through this recognition, the poetics of the palindrome achieves a rediscovery of the non-linguistic roots of symbols which is the means of their unending vitality, for it shows at last how language is rooted in the elementary structures of the universe.

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