

Introducing Dr. O. Lord: In Praise of Palindromes

Sylvie was arranging some letters on a board—E-V-I-L.

'Now Bruno,' she said, 'what does that spell?'

Bruno looked at it, in solemn silence, for a minute. 'I know what it doesn't spell!' he said at last.

'That's no good,' said Sylvie. 'What does it spell?' Bruno took another look at the mysterious letters, 'Why, it's "LIVE," backwards!,' he exclaimed.

(I thought it was, indeed.)

'How did you manage to see that?' said Sylvie.

'I just twiddled my eyes,' said Bruno, 'and then I saw it directly.'

Lewis Carroll, Sylvie and Bruno Concluded

I was sitting in the lounge of a hotel near Toronto Airport, eagerly awaiting the arrival of Dr. Otto Lord, the well-known authority on radar and palindromes. (He prefers to be called either "Otto" or "Dr. O. Lord" for obvious palindromic reasons.) I had received a curt telex from Otto the previous day, asking me to meet him and promising me an exclusive interview on the subject of his most recent invention—a network of radars. The prospect of such an interview filled me with a sense of smug satisfaction, because I knew that the top brass at IEEE had tried, in vain, to persuade Dr. O. Lord to speak about his invention at the upcoming International Conference on Communications (ICC '86) to be held at Toronto in June 1986. Surely such an interview must be the scoop of the decade! Perhaps the readers may appreciate, at least to a small extent, my excitement in meeting this great man if they know as much about his life as I do.

But, before embarking on an account of his life, a short history and survey of palindromes—Otto's major passion in life—is in order. Of course, my narration, by necessity, must be brief. Those interested in further details can consult several references, such as [1]–[6].

A palindrome is a word, like *radar* or *rotor*, or a phrase, like *Never odd or even*, that reads the same backwards as it does forwards. Many languages like Latin and Sanskrit had a fine palindromic tradition before the invention of the first English palindrome. For example, Bombaugh [1] quotes the lawyer's motto—*Si nummi immunis*—which can be translated as "Give me my fee, I warrant you free." Also mentioned in [1] is the story of a lady who was banished from the court of Queen Elizabeth, "on suspicion of too great familiarity with a nobleman then high in favour." This lady adopted the emblem of the moon covered by a cloud, with the palindromic motto, *ABLATA AT ALBA* (Banished, but blameless). George L. Hart III, in a letter in *Scientific American* (November 1970) [5], gives an example of a palindromic poem—"the most complex and exquisite type of palindrome ever invented"—devised by the Sanskrit aestheticians, who termed it *sarvotobhadra* (perfect in every direction).

The earliest recorded palindrome in English, written by John Taylor in 1614 [3] [6], was

Lewd I did live & evil did I dwell.

The above palindrome depends on an ampersand in the middle and an old spelling of "dwell." A present-day rendition would change it to

Evil I did dwell; lewd did I live.

It took almost another 200 years to create the next popular palindrome [3]. Prompted by Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, it read

Able was I ere I saw Elba.

From then on, the palindromes came fast. By the 1870s, the *New Monthly Magazine* was publishing lines such as [1].

A stern Canadian parent might in earnest, not in fun, exclaim,

"No sot nor Ottawa law at Toronto, son!"

There are at present many good English palindromes (see [4] for a fine collection), but the best ones tend to be short. Here are a few famous examples:

Madam, I'm Adam.

Step on no pets.

Dennis and Edna sinned.

Egad! A base tone denotes a bad age.

Live not on evil, madam, live not on evil.

Sums are not set as a test on Erasmus.

A man, a plan, a canal—Panama!

The last one, a tribute by Leigh Mercer to the builder of the Panama Canal, is considered by many to be the finest in the English language. (J.A. Lindon, another fine word expert, honored the above gem of a palindrome by the parody—*A dog, a pant, a panic in a Patna pagoda.*) The following pair of palindromes by J.A. Lindon are truly remarkable:

Do, O God, no evil deed, live on, do good.

Live, O devil, revel ever, live, do evil.

As palindromes get longer, they tend to become less sensible. Some exceptions:

Straw? No, too stupid a fad. I put soot on warts.

Doc, note, I dissent. A fast never prevents a fatness. I diet on cod.

Palindromes in which words, not letters, are the units are easier to create, and more likely to make sense. Some examples:

Bores are people that say that people are bores.

Women understand men; few men understand women.

The world of palindromes is full of people with first names such as *Eve*, *Ada*, *Anna*, *Bob*, and *Otto* [2]. Other people with palindromic names include *Nella Allen*, *Norah Sharon*, *N.A. Gilligan*, *N.Y. Llewellyn*, and *Gregory*, *Roger G.* Of course, some names can become palindromes by the addition of suitable adjectives, such as *Evil Clive*, *Able Melba*, and *Analytic "City" Lana*. We know of at least three people with palindromic names who made it to the top—Premier Lon Nol of Cambodia, Premier U Nu of Burma, and Premier Laval of France. Good palindromes involving the names of U.S. Presidents are rare. The following are the ones often quoted:

Taft: fat!
No 'X' in 'Mr. R.M. Nixon'?
To last, Carter retracts a lot.

The term "Semordnilap" (palindromes spelled backwards) refers to words that spell different words in reverse. In *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (see excerpt at column's beginning), Lewis Carroll points out "Evil-Live" reversal. Edgar Allan Poe's frequent use of "dim" and "mid" is pointed out by Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's novel *Lolita*. Hazel Shade in Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* (1962) also likes reversing words, making "pot" into "top" and "spider" into "redips." The "dog-God" reversal plays a significant role in Carl Jung's analysis of a patient, as cited by A.A. Brill in *Freud's Contribution to Psychiatry* [5]. Even in the world of music, we can see such fascination: Examples are Stevie Wonder's album 'Eivets Rednow' (1968), Black Sabbath's LP 'Live Evil' (1983), and the record 'SOS' by Abba [6].

There are not many common palindromic words longer than seven letters [2]: *deified*, *rotator*, *repaper*, *reviver*. Less common but longer words include: *redivider* and *Malayalam* (a language spoken in South India). *Détartarated* is a contrived chemical term with 11 letters and *Kinnikinnik* is a dried leaf and bark mixture smoked by Cree Indians. Probably, the longest palindromic word is *saippuakauppias* (Finnish for a soap seller). What is the most beautiful palindrome? *Radar*, of

course! The choice of a palindrome for a name coined to symbolize the rebound of radio waves is truly one of the most interesting coincidences in "Palindromic engineering!"

We shall see in Part 2 of this article how Dr. O. Lord combines radars and palindromes to create one of the greatest inventions in communication networks—aptly named the *Ten Radar Net*.

References

- [1] C.C. Bombaugh, *Oddities and Curiosities of Words and Literature*, Edited and Annotated by M. Gardner, Dover, New York, pp. 59-63, 342-346, 1961.
- [2] D.A. Borgmann, *Language on Vacation*, C. Scribner's Sons, New York, Ch. 1, 1965.
- [3] W.R. Espy, *The Game of Words*, Clarkson N. Potter, New York, pp. 181-185, 1972.
- [4] H.W. Bergerson, *Palindromes and Anagrams*, Dover, New York, 1973.
- [5] M. Gardner, *Mathematical Circus*, Vintage, New York, pp. 242-252, 1981.
- [6] T. Augarde, *The Oxford Guide to Word Games*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 97-104, 1984.

Do you have an entertaining and/or educational item which is appropriate for the "Light Traffic" feature? Send it in to: S. Pasupathy, Department of Electrical Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada M5S 1A4.

“Deafness is something you put beside you not in front of you.”

LINDA BOVE / ACTRESS

Linda Bove performed with The National Theatre of the Deaf for nine years. She has also starred in the Tony Award winning show, *Children of a Lesser God*.



PHOTO: HELEN NESTOR

Believe in them. Break the barriers.

PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT OF THE HANDICAPPED, WASHINGTON D.C. 20210

PRODUCED BY THE SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS PRESS, LTD.