

POETRY AND THE PALINDROME

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Editor's Note: In the February 1984 Word Ways, Haim Kilov and his associate S. El'man translated an article by V. Khromov on Russian palindromes originally appearing in Nauka i Zhizn 9 (1970). This article alluded to an earlier one by Semyon Kirsanov (1906-1972), a well-known Soviet poet, in Nauka i Zhizn 7 (1966). The following is a translation of that article, with various amplifications in brackets. Note that certain Cyrillic letters transliterate into groups of English letters (ch, kh, sh, shch, ya, ye, yu, zh), marring the palindromic appearance. In addition, there appear to be a few lines where Kirsanov did not adhere to strict palindromy.

There exists an opinion that the construction of palindromes is no more than an idle pastime like rebuses or charades. As a matter of fact, rhyming was at times in the past treated in the same way. All too often, rhyming was called a bauble; however, if it were not for such a bauble, neither "Bronze Horsemen" [a very famous poem by Pushkin] nor "It" [a very famous poem by Mayakovsky] could have been composed. It appears that rhyming not only organizes a poetical work and provides its musical arrangement, but also creates the poet's own semantic and figurative associations. How, then can the construction of a palindrome help the poet?

From the poet's point of view, a palindrome is a peculiar sort of self-rhyme. A word seems to rhyme with itself, whereas in a palindrome a complete line, being read from left to right the same way as right to left, reminds one of a precise "descriptive rhyming" which, if one has a good feeling for the language, is also recognized as a skillful sound-construction by the ear. When I pronounce the palindrome "Mechtatel'! L'etat' chem?" [Dreamer! How'll you fly?], not only a sound effect but also a semantic and figurative (i.e., poetic) effect is produced, similar to the effect of a vibrant, unexpected rhyme, which is inseparable from the idea and image. Undoubtedly the famous palindrome "Ya idu s mechom, sudiya" [Me, judge, is coming with the sword of justice] is a poetical work. as it along with an inimitable word arrangement creates figurative images.

A poet should have a sublime feeling for a word, an ability to see its heart, to feel its origin and to know its cognates and its resources, in order to express a multitude of nuances and,

possibly, match it with other words. Children often read shop signs backwards, an activity often bearing fruit: such a game imperceptibly develops a feeling for words. When I was in gymnasium [analogous to the American high school] a long time ago, I observed the behavior of a seal at the zoo and involuntarily said to myself "Tyul'en' nye lyut" [The seal isn't fierce]. I immediately noticed that this phrase could be read backwards as well. Since that time I have often caught myself reading backwards.

Once, when a bus was forced to stop, a palindrome sprang to mind "Oselo koleso" [The tire went flat], though I had not consciously searched for it. On another occasion, "A vryot, sterva" [She's lying, the stinker - in written Russian, the letters *yo* (ë) and *ye* (e) usually look the same] escaped my lips. As time went by I began to see words in their "integrity" and such self-rhyming words and word-combinations appeared involuntarily, because of my habit of manipulating words from within. Reading a paper on the irrigation of cornfields, I found floating in my head an unexpectedly-complex palindrome with a touch of humor "Vodovozu! Ruku kukuruzovodov" [Water carrier! Let's shake hands with the corn-selectors].

However, the creation of more complex palindromic compositions, verses and poems is an extremely difficult and strange business. V. Khlebnikov's poem about Stepan Razin convinces me that a palindromic format demonstrates possibilities beyond the limits of the pun [V. Khlebnikov (1885-1920) was one of the most famous Russian futurist poets; Stepan Razin was the leader of a 17th-century peasant uprising and the hero of well-known Russian folk songs]. V. Khlebnikov's poem shows both high dramatic effect and aesthetic integrity. However, a great deal of it seems obscure to untrained eyes. However, an attentive reading of the poem reveals thoughts and images (especially in the episode of Razin's torture) which become especially keen and dramatic because of their palindromic form. The final line of the poem is most expressive, and can rightfully be regarded as distilled poetry: "My, nizari, leteli Razinim" [We, the down-dwellers, flew as Razin - Razin's uprising occurred downstream on the Volga; the word *nizari* contains *niz* ("down") and reminds the reader of *sizari*, the common Russian expression for a dove].

I myself often succeeded in creating palindromes with a humorous or ironic twist. Sometimes, I based them on fictitious names, as in the following palindrome designed to read like a circus poster:

Tsirk "Rits"	The "Ritz" Circus
Anons! Nona!	Announcement! Nona!
2 Yezdidze 2	The Two Yezdidzes!
Nayezdnitsa Tsin Dze-an	Horsewoman Tsin Tze-an
i komiki Kimoki	and the Kimoki Comedy Team!
Morzh Rom!	A Gypsy Walrus!
Na velosipede - Depisolev A.N.	A.N. Depisolev on the Bicycle!
Kloun N. Uolk	N. Wolc, Clown
i kazaki	and the Cossacks
Nikiforov i Vorofikin	Nikiforov & Vorofikin!

This was written at the same time as my early poem "Mary the Horsewoman". Of course, I have not tried to promulgate such work, considering it as nothing more than chess-playing with myself. However, the more time I spared for palindromes, the more I found new rhymes and rhythms emerging in my poetry; palindromes developed my ability to find resources for my "real" poems. I remember my gastronomic palindrome:

Kul'inar	Leo yel ranniy luk	Leo the cook	ate early onion species
Sirki i kris		Curd cheeses	and rats
Lakomo makal		Tastily dipping	
Bel khleb		White bread	
v		in	
ukhu,		fish soup,	
i yel klyei.		and he ate glue.	
Lukull!		Lucullan!	

I do not forecast any special kind of future for the palindrome in the development of poetry, but neither will I exclude the possibility of creating genuine poetical works using, in whole or in part, this poetical form. A poet may sometime appear who extensively uses mirror rhyming; this may come to be considered as natural as the calembour [punning] rhyming in Mayakovsky's poetry has become an inalienable and acknowledged aspect of his technique. I dreamt of writing a lyrical palindromic verse that would sound natural to the ear. Once I more or less succeeded, in my poem "The Forest Palindrome":

Lyetya, dyatel,	Woodpecker, as flying
Ishchi pishchi!	Search for food!
Ishchi, pishchi!	Search and chirp!
Vered derev	Pests of trees
Ishcha, tashchi	Searching, pull out
l chut' stuchi	And slightly knock
Nosom o son.	With your beak into the dream.
Budi dub,	Wake up the oak,
Yesh yeshchyo.	Eat more.
Ne suk vkusen -	Not that the bough is tasty -
Cherv' - v rech',	Worm - into speech,
Tebe - shchebet.	Twitter - for you.
Zhuk uzh	The bug is
Nye zelo polyezen.	Not very useful.
Lichinok konchil?	Finished with larvas?
Ti sit?	Are you replete?
Tyeplo l' pyet'?	Is it too warm to sing?
Yesh yeshchyo	Eat more
l dudi	And play the pipe
O lese veselo.	Cheerfully about the forest.
Khorosh. Shorokh.	It is wonderful. Rustle.
Utro vo rtu	Morning in the mouth
I klyey yolki	And the gum from the spruce
Techet.	Is leaking.