POETRY AND THE PALINDROME

HAIM KILOV
Riga, USSR
S. EL'MAN
Riga, USSR

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, move backwards, analogously to the behavior of "Tyul'en" (I have often tried to bring this palindrome to an odd echo, but it has never been possible).

Once, while in mind "Osel'shten" [She's lying] and ye (e) [I began to "globe" words and my hand on the Irish unexpectedly] Ruku kukur, corn-selector.

However, verses and verses and V. Khlebnikov's palindromic forms (V. Khlebnikov, futurist poet-painter upriser: Khlebnikov's integrity. Eyes. However, and images become especially form. The face fully be read [We, the downstream's mad, corn-selector] Tsirk "Rit Anons! No Nayezdnit komiki Morzh Rom Kloun N. i kazaki

1 myself (or ironic in the following)

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As a mater

says, "Tyul'en' nye lyut" [The seal isn't fierce]. I immediately noticed

that this phrase could be read backwards as well. Since that time

have often caught myself reading backwards.

Once, when a bus was forced to stop, a palindromic sprang to

mind "Oselo koleso" [The tire went flat], though I had not con-

sciouly searched for it. On another occasion, "A vryot, sterva"

[She's lying, the stinker - in written Russian, the letters yo (ё) and
eye (е) usually look the same] escaped my lips. As time went

by I began to see words in their "integrity" and such self-rhym-
ing 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].

V. Khlebnikov's poem about Stepan Razin convinces me that a palin-
dromic 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 pea-
sant 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 right-

fully 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"
Anons! Nona! 2 Yezzidzé 2
Nayezznita Tsin Dze-an i komik Kimiki
Morzh Rom!
Na velosipede - Depisolev A.N. Kloun N. Uolk i kazaki
Nikiforov i Vorofikin

The "Ritz" Circus
Announcement! Nona!
The Two Yezzidzes!
Horsewoman Tsin Tze-an and the Kimiki Comedy Team!
A Gypsy Walrus!
A.N. Depisolev on the Bicycle!
N. Wolc, Clown and the Cossacks
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
Sirk 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, pischi! Search for food!
Vered derev Search and chirp!
Ishcha, tashchi Pests of trees
I chut' stuchi Searching, pull out
Nosom o son. And slightly knock
Budi dub, With your beak into the dream.
Yesh yeshchyo. Wake up the oak,
Ne suk vksen - Eat more.
Cherv' - v rech', Not that the bough is tasty -
Tebe - shchebet, Worm - into speech,
Zhuk uzh The bug is
Nye zelo polyezen. Twitter - for you.
Lichinok konchil? The bug is not very useful.
Ti sit? Finished with larvas?
Tyeplo l' pyet'? Are you replete?
Yesh yeshchyo Is it too warm to sing?
I dudi Eat more
O lese veselo. And play the pipe
Khorosh. Shorokh. Cheerfully about the forest.
Utro vo rtu It is wonderful. Rustle.
I kleye yolki Morning in the mouth
Techet. And the gum from the spruce

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