

## Some Possibilities of Russian Combinatorial Literature

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### Abstract

The author presents a number of Russian poetic texts based on formal combinatorial techniques thus demonstrating perspectives for experimental literature. The examples provided include new techniques as well as modified versions of well-known techniques from the past. These examples refute the notations that the Russian language is not suited for formal experimentation and that these experiments lead to word game poetry exclusively. Formal restrictions can be instruments of Russian poetry.

### Introduction

The term *combinatorial literature* has been known since the 1960s, when the members of OuLiPo group, Le Lionnais and Berge proposed it for a type of experimental literature ([4], [12]). And long before OuLiPo, methods of connecting textual elements according to some combinatorial rules or artificial constraints have been known. These methods were conducted since antiquity by a number of writers in order to generate texts. Those authors include Ausonius, Pentady, Clement Marot, Jules Scaliger, George Harsdörffer, Quirinus Kuhlmann, Lewis Carroll, and many others.

The members of OuLiPo applied significant efforts to shift French combinatorial literature from the periphery to the mainstream literary movement. They systematically studied possibilities to apply the forms of elementary mathematics to poetry, and with such authors as Raymond Queneau, George Perec, Jacques Roubaud, and others, they succeeded to a large extend. In Russian literature, combinatorial poetry starting from anagrams and palindromes is still seen, at best, as experimentation on the margins of the real literature [6]. Some have posited even that Russian language is not suited for experimental writings ([7]), or that all combinatorial forms are simply exercises for the sake of the forms, though the works of such authors as Dmitry Avaliani, Elena Katsyuba, Boris Grinberg, and others refute this ([1], [9], [10]). Still, combinatorial poetry is mostly understood as word games based on letter-level constraints.

Here, I present my own poetic writings, demonstrating the possibilities of Russian combinatorial poetry. Most of these works are written in Russian with some of them translated into English.

### Defined Number of Letters in a Poem

The simplest restriction proposed by OuLiPo was the numerical letter restriction defining the number of letters used in the words of the poem. Thus, for the poem *Rail*, George Perec restricted himself to four letter words with four words per line, four lines per stanza, and four stanzas for the over all poem ([13]):

#### Rail

Tout sera pâle, gris	Vers quel état muet	Midi doré, élan haut,	Cela veut dire quoi?
tout sera trop long	tend leur fils aimé,	ciel bleu, eaux dont	Plus rien: lieu sans
aube, soir, jour, mois	noué dans tels sacs	Eole ride vent doux	joie, rues sans fête,
faim, soif, rêve noir.	dont sort même gêne?	pour dire code bête	dure nuit sans lune.

I have chosen a five-letter restriction, creating *Pentagrammatic pentastich* as a cycle of five poems each of five stanzas of five lines of five words of five letters. The creative task was to express thoughts and feeling in poetic language rather than to keep a restriction as such. Here is the last poem of the cycle:

**Песня пряжи (пентграмматический пентастих)**

Видно, снова шторм украл лампы,	Будто можно унять поток света,
Видно, опять хруст кости оленя,	Будто клюет ствол сосны дятел,
Видно, пепел зовет домой лодку,	Будто метет улицу пылью ветер,
Видно, надел жених венки криво,	Будто везде летят зерна проса,
Видна гладь канвы вдоль опоры.	Будто мертв, лежит чужой нищий.

Вдали машут крыла малой сойки,	После дождя вечер будет ясным,
Вдали целит осями лучей месяц,	После любви всякая тварь темна,
Вдали сорок небес легко тонут,	После, ветви качая, - сдвиг карты,
Вдали Аргус горит, гость героя,	После, брови хмуря, Марат тонет,
Вдали шторм умолк, остыл пепел.	После потоп, пусть после будет.

Вечно рвать, нитки целей будут,  
 Вечно лежат вдоль дорог камни,  
 Вечно цепки твоих речей пряжи,  
 Вечно ждать твоих песен звука,  
 Вечно звать анимы любви слова.

**A Set of Letters or Syllables in the Lines of a Poem**

The restriction based on changing of the number of signs in each line is known since antiquity as *rhopalic*, for example a Latin proverb “Amore, more, ore, re sis mihi amicus” [11]. It is also known by the name *snow ball*: “O le bon sens epais” ([14]). In *rhopalic* poetry, the number of signs in each word increases by one every word, decreases by one every word, or is changed by some combination of both. *Rhopalic* poem can be based on letter counts as in the lines cited above, or on syllable counts as *Rhopalic praise* by Ausonius, a gall-roman poet of the 4<sup>th</sup> century a.d. ([2]). The member of OuLiPo complicated the restriction to a *snow avalanche poem* which is a sequence of increasing *rhopalic* poems.

I called my poem *Universal gnomon* as its parts are similar to the whole poem as in the ancient carpenter instrument *gnomon* of the form of a frame. Here is the last, all-embracing stanza of the poem:

Я	I
За	Am
Ней	His
Хожу	Song
Лесом.	About
Кругом	Nature,
Деревья	Flowers’
Зеленеют.	Leaflets,
Красуются,	Developed
Расцветают	Four-legged,
Подснежники	Biped-animals
Благоухающие.	Walking along
Нежносветящие,	Under the skies’
Розовоперстные,	Twinkling light
Златосеребрятся,	That rings around
Искрорассыпаются	The distant forest
Солнышкозвездочки.	Where stay I singing!

Here, I express a shifting understanding of a human person, from uniqueness to recognition of the other, and then to the nature and harmony of the world.

### Fixed Letter in a Poem

Fixing a given letter in a line or lines of a poem is also a well-known technique. Usually the first, the last or the middle letters of the lines are fixed producing *acrostic*, *telestic* and *mesostic*, separately or all together. A Latin poem of unknown author provides an example of all these techniques where the goal of the author is to glorify holy name rather than exercise in word games poetry ([5]):

Inter cuncta micans	<b>I</b> gniti sidera coei <b>I</b>
Expellit tenebras	<b>E</b> toto Phoebus ut orb <b>E</b>
Sic caecas removet	<b>JESUS</b> caliginis umbra <b>S</b>
Vivificansque simul	<b>V</b> ero praecordia mot <b>V</b>
Solem justitiae	<b>S</b> ese probat esse beati <b>S</b> .

I used the similar letter restriction in the poem *Abecedary of despair*. Though declared in the title of the poem, the restriction is mostly not recognizable. The poem consists of 33 (26 in English translation) stanzas of six lines each with the appropriate fixed letters in the middle of the line. Here, the repeated letters are accentuated in boldface. So, a reader would read the poem as a common *vers libre*, which is a denial of any formal constraint. Or the reader can understand it as a poem based on the restricted formal technique in a very different manner from word-game poems. There are several alliterations on the stanzas' base letter in the poem. Alliteration is a well-developed, traditional poetic technique, which in this case increases the formal structure. Note also that the alphabetic restriction of the poem requires of the author to change the stanza structure for its translation into English, as the number of letters in the Russian and English alphabets differ. I provide here some stanzas of the poem.

#### абecedарий отчаяния

архитектура  
твоего лица  
арканы ресниц  
арки бровей  
дыхание, авансы губ  
апатия глаз

войны не будет. уже никогда  
спелый плод под ногами статуй  
мягкий знак посреди листа  
астры в китайской вазе  
согласные, вставшие на постой в глухой деревне  
выцветают, становясь все белей и растворяясь в мареве

взмах крепких крыльев  
курлыканье над десятком морей  
кривизна континентов  
касание ласковых рук  
куриная слепота, кроличья спесь  
и красота котов

#### abecedary of despair

architecture  
of your face  
traps of the eyelashes  
arches of the brows  
breath, advances of the lips  
and apathy of the eyes

precious blazes are dying  
pigeon circus escaped  
innocent laughter or cry  
Philistines, Cretans, long way away  
nests of lethargic snakes under foot  
cyclone, and screeches of loons

the waves of strong wings  
over the dozen seas  
curvature of the continents  
touch of the gentle hands  
waving good bye, moon blindness  
promising to return

верно, что в стихах английских метафизиков:  
 Герберта, Марвелла, в их сложных сопоставлениях  
 разнородных сущностей  
 в утонченных философских спекуляциях  
 в доводящих до озноба умопостижениях  
 насилие над духом поэзии

an instruction to the healing rite is lost. a patient  
 stands face to face with the blind priest  
 the capers, calling for  
 a dark bird, the lady of rain  
 a goal is achieved with the sunrise  
 light variations are possible

опять различая тебя, взгляд  
 за стекло, повторяющийся, отражения изо дня  
 в день, яд  
 говорящая копия  
 последняя капля  
 наконец узнавая

again distinguishing you. a bizarre look  
 repeating over the glass, summarizing  
 each day, hazardous poison  
 vocalized copy  
 an unmelodious terzetto. a drop of eternal  
 life. recognized at last

### Magic Square Structure

The following texts are created with the structure of a numeric magic square. That is, they can be read by rows as well as by columns:

Т	И	М	Е
И	Т	Е	М
М	Е	Т	И
Е	М	И	Т

This structure is an amplification of a structure of palindrome. A similar multiple palindromic poem was created in cooperation with Boris Grinberg. Here, Grinberg is the author of the palindromic phrase “пути и путы по опыту пииту” - “ways and chains for the mastery of a poet”, and mine is the visual realization for the reading turning and returning on the intersection points. So, ‘the ways of a poet’ are represented graphically with a picture of a net of restrictions:



Figure 1: Roads and chains by B. Grinberg and T. Bonch-Osmolovskaya

In word magical squares, the reversal of lines and columns is usually neglected, as in the following poem ascribed to Lewis Carroll ([8]):

I	often	wondered	when	I	cursed,
Often	feared	where	I	would	be –
Wondered	where	she'd	yield	her	love,
When	I	yield,	so	will	she.
I	would	her	will	be	pitied!
Cursed	be	love!	She	pitied	me...

I present here a poem in Russian of similar formal structure. The poem is symmetrical across the diagonal:

#### Моей дочери, которую от меня отделяют многие моря

Когда	ты от	меня	вдали,	и грусть-	печаль	уже	вползла,
Ты от-	ыщи	в лесу	тогда	сову,	и по-	смотри	в глаза.
Меня	в лесу	во сне	найдешь,	поймешь –	дожди	прошли	весной.
Вдали	тогда	найдешь	звезду,	она	зажглась	в ночи,	легка.
И грусть-	сову	поймешь –	она	заснет,	едва	луны	пройдет
печаль,	и по-	дожди –	зажглась	едва	звезда	мечты,	та грусть.
Уже,	смотри,	прошли	в ночи	луны	мечты,	а ты	сияй!
Вползла	в глаза	весной	легка,	пройдет	та грусть,	сияй	всегда!

### Complex Poetry

The structure of the next poem is a complication of the *antonym* technique which replaces all nouns *Sub* with their antonyms ( - *Sub*). For *complex poetic* technique the nouns *Sub* of the text are replaced by the three nouns *Sub<sub>1</sub>*, *Sub<sub>2</sub>*, *Sub<sub>3</sub>* correlated by their meaning to the first as ( *i Sub*, - *Sub*, - *i Sub*), for example: (spring, summer, autumn, winter); (north: east, south, west); (childhood, youth, maturity, old age); (fire: air, earth, water); (bitter: salt, sweet, spicy), and many others. Represented below are the poems transformed from a passage of *Eugene Onegin* by Pushkin. The beginning word of Pushkin's stanza is 'winter' so the transformed poems map to the other seasons. The epochs of four poems can be easily identified as: in Pushkin's verse it is any time of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in the following poems it is changed by political connotations to revolutionary 1900s, socialistic and repressive 1930s, and late socialistic 1980s years, with the possible return to 'normal life' beyond politics described in Pushkin's lines. Here are two poems of the cycle starting with words 'spring' and 'summer':

#### Времена года (по мотивам Пушкина)

Весна. Рабочий, негодуя,	Уж лето! Физкультурник бодро
На сходку поспешает вновь,	К открытому бассейну мчит,
Его товарищ, враг буржую,	Его подруга всенародно
Шпиону разбивает бровь;	На водной глади возлежит;
Наган за пазухой скрывая,	Старушкам помощь предлагая,
Бежит эсерка молодая;	Идут ребята, запевая
Ильич летит в броневице,	Гимн пионеров. Мудрый вождь
Надевши шляпу, в парике,	Не спит, с горгулией схож.
Вот грянул выстрел корабельный,	Горят все окна на Лубянке,
Вот комиссар, лихой пострел,	И, черный ворон загрузив,
Ведет старуху на расстрел,	Всесильным вдруг вообразил
Подписан уж указ земельный,	Себя слепой чекист. Но танки
Рабочим – трубы, мышь – котам,	Еще не подошли к Москве.
А ананасы – буржуйам.	И крепок город на Неве.

## Conclusion

These are some of the possibilities of Russian combinatorial literature: fixing the number of letters in each word of the poem, uniform increasing or decreasing the word length, vertical alignment of the chosen letters, reversal and vertical reading, and rule-based substitution of word sets. The restrictions can be of letter or syllable nature, as well as of other sizes not presented here. Some of the restrictions are modifications or amplifications of well-known forms, or a reminiscence of forms used in the past. To summarize, the possibilities of combinatorial literature are considerable, including those in Russian language.

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