Formal Literary Constraints in the Works of Boris Grinberg

Tatiana Bonch-Osmolovskaya

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of NSW, Australia
Humanities Dept., Moscow Institute for Physics and Technology, Russia
E-mails: tbonch@tpg.com.au, tatbonch@rambler.ru

Abstract

I present here some poems of Russian experimenting poet Boris Grinberg. For his search of expressiveness and new poetic messages, Grinberg explores various literary restrictions such as palindromes, tautograms, lipograms, and so on. This is in correlation with the ideas of the French group Oulipo, though until recently Grinberg was not familiar with the Oulipo's findings and developed these methods independently.

Introduction

Boris Grinberg is a contemporary Russian author working in experimental poetry. To the recent time, he was unfamiliar with the works of the French group Oulipo, nevertheless his poetic finding are made on the same concept of poetic restrictions developed by Oulipo. By his works, Grinberg explores multiple literary restrictions, as he understands conventional Russian language to be noticeably wide, so the poet needs constraint to condense the richness and variety of the vocabulary and to avoid ambiguity. Therefore, Grinberg confirms Oulipo's thesis [6] of the intensification of the expressiveness of the text via literary restriction.

By the permission of the author I present here some short poems of Boris Grinberg focusing on their formal structures and the poetic messages. I present poems in original Russian and in word-by-word translations following overall meanings only. To translate the poems obeying the same poetical restrictions would be extremely difficult task and is beyond the topic of this paper. I will demonstrate that in his poetry Grinberg both searches for existing literary restrictions and invents new methods. His poetic task varies from a simple exercise in language virtuosity while using best-known restrictions, to a tool of discovering new poetic messages while using rare and new-invented formal techniques.

Letter Palindrome for the Start of Combinatorial Practice

Grinberg started his practice in constrained writing by exploring the most popular forms such as letter palindrome. In the following poem, he practises in formal virtuosity by including a numerical series "one, two, three, four" into the palindromic text [4]:

КОДА	CODE
Гневит и мир...	It enrages even the world…
Примеры	Examples
течи рта в дни долгих игл:	of leaks of a mouth during the days of long needles:
один,	one,
два,	two,
три,	three,
четыре...	four…
Мир примитивен, гадок.	The world is primitive and dirty.

This poem has an obscure meaning, though a definite feeling of inner and outer imperfection is created, for the world (Мир примитивен, гадок – The world is primitive and dirty), as well as for a person (Течи рта в дни долгих игл – Leaks of a mouth during the days of long needles). Therefore, Grinberg achieves both letter virtuosity by finding a palindrome phrase for an arbitrary set of letters, and poetic expressiveness presenting his feelings.

Exploration of Rare Literary Technique: *Built-in* Lines

As Grinberg discovered combinatorial poetic possibilities, he began to explore literary sources for the search of other literary restrictions. This search followed by applying new formal techniques to the poetry as, in Grinberg's understanding, the less developed poetic methods could lead to profound poetic discoveries. The technique of *встрой* (*built-in*) proposed by Russian combinatorial poets Sergey Fedin and Dmitry Avaliani [3] consists in a segmentation of letters of a word or a phrase into two parts, so that the initial word/phrase and these parts are read together in the whole phrase of correlated meaning. In a line "СТранА. Страна ста ран" (A country. A country of hundred wounds) [4], the initial word 'страна' (country) is divided into two: 'ста' (hundred) and 'ран' (of wounds) which leads to the reading of the whole phrase as "страна ста ран" (A country of hundred wounds). Graphically, this *built-in* is presented by capitalisation of the letters on the edges of the original word as borders around the word 'ран' (of wounds). The graphics of the text echoes its meaning, reinforcing the impression of suffering on the detention inside the boundaries, so Grinberg's interpretation of life in the native country is presented by the simple formal literary technique.

Exploration of Extremely Rare Techniques: Elimination of Lexical Classes

In the next formal restriction, Grinberg follows the method proposed by Oulipo member François Le Lionnais, who wrote a poem *La rien que la toute la* without nouns, verbs and adjectives [7]. The poem has been known to Grinberg recently through the works of contemporary Russian researcher [2] and became a stimulus to surpass it in Russian by a poem on the same restriction and of significant lyrical message [5]:

СОНЕТ а ля Ле Лионне

Как будто снова там, где всё не так,
Где никого, лишь ты, и то наощупь,
(И хорошо хоть, что не натощак,
Когда не натощак, куда как проще!)

Всё ничего, но если еженощно
На все четыре, и назад – никак,
Уж лучше сразу навзничь… Но пока
Ещё нельзя. Вернее так – не можно!

Поскольку всё моё и так со мной,
Или во мне, тогда вообще на кой
Всё то, что вне? Я впрочем, не всерьёз, но

Я вне себя. Возможно потому,
Что мне не по себе. Ни по кому.
Всегда не рано. Никогда не поздно.

SONNET à la Le Lionnais

As if again there, where everything is not right,
Where there is nobody, just you, and even so only by touch,
(And it's good at least, that not on an empty stomach,
When not on an empty stomach, it is so much easier!)

It's all not bad, but if it's going every night,
On all fours, and impossible to go back,
Then better at once on your back… But so far
It's still impossible to do it… or rather you just can not!

Because all mine is with me anyway,
Or in me, then what is it all for,
All that which is beyond? I am, however, not serious, but

I am beside myself. Possibly because
I'm not feeling well myself. Nor anybody.
It's always not early. It's never late

The poem is written in one of the varieties of sonnet schemes: four stanzas are two quatrains and two tercets in six-feet iambus with a rhyme scheme AbAb bAAb CCb DDb. The vocabulary of the poem is determined by rejection of main word classes which leads to rejection of subjects and actions. On the other hand, Grinberg enriches the language possibilities by using the remaining words both in strict senses and referring to the known idioms and proverbs, and correlating the phrases of the strict senses to the figurative ones. This language virtuosity, together with addressing the question of the meaning of life, allows Grinberg to create an expressive lyrical poem based on the strictest literary constraint.

Monovocalism as an Amplification of the Lipogram Technique

Monovocalism is another extremely strict constraint explored by Grinberg. The method consists in the limiting the vowels in the text to one only. In Russian poetry, it was practised by some authors of the baroque era such as Ioann Velichkovsky [9] and at the present, by Grinberg only, who re-discovered the restriction and created a number of poems on almost all vowels. Grinberg implements the restriction over the whole poem including the title: monovocalism on vowel 'о' (o) is named *Только О* (Only O), monovocalism on vowel 'ы' (ui) is named *Вымыслы Ы* (Figments Y), and so on. That is, not only the topic of the poem is proposed by the title, but also a clue is given to the formal restriction. The following poem is a monovocalism on 'и' (i) [4]:

ЛИШЬ И	ONLY 'E'
Спит пилигрим и видит тихий мир,	A pilgrim sleeps and dreams of a quiet world,
Мир диких синих птиц и гибких лилий.	A world of wild blue birds and supple lilies.
Ни липких лиц-личин, ни истин, ни причин,	No sticky faces-masks, no verities, no reasons,
Ни лишних линий.	No excess lines.
Кипит прилив прилипчив и криклив,	An adhesive and flashy tide is boiling,
Хрипит, лишившись пищи, хлипкий хищник,	A weak predator is wheezing without food,
И жизнь кишит, лишь пилигрим притих…	And life is swarming, while a pilgrim is quiet…
Спит пилигрим. Спи, пилигрим.	Pilgrim is sleeping. Sleep, pilgrim.

In the poem, Grinberg creates a juxtaposition of the dream of the protagonist, a pilgrim in search for unnamed spiritual goal, and the material world raging for subsistence around protagonist. As the specific goal of the pilgrim is not named, it is the archetypical Eden with beautiful plants and animals, beyond the struggle for life. The uniqueness of this spiritual world has already been declared by the title of the poem, *Лишь И* (Only 'i'). In contrast to the cause–effect continuum of the material world, the universe of the pilgrim's dream is everlasting (ни причин – no reasons). The truths as human explanations of the inexplicable are also absent in this place (ни истин – no verities). The presented attributes of spiritual meditation are 'silence' (тихий – quiet) and 'beauty' (диких синих птиц и гибких лилий – wild blue birds and supple lilies), whereas the attributes of the material world are 'loudness' (криклив – loud), 'danger' (хищник – predator), and 'obtrusiveness' (липких – sticky; прилив прилипчив – tide is adhesive). On the whole, the poem is a detailed metaphor of a poetic search for external virtues undertaken in contrast to material welfare. In the last line, Grinberg encourages the lyrical hero as the author's *alter ego* to continue the search of the perfect world and follow the pilgrim's dreams regardless of the dangers and temptations of the material world.

Tauto-monovocalism as a Combination of Tautogram and Monovocalism

The following restriction is extremely complex and, to my knowledge, has no precedents in the history of formal literary experiments. The restriction consists in the combination of monovocalism and tautogram (all words of the texts starts with the same letter) restrictions. The topic of Grinberg's poem on the only vowel 'о' (o) with all words starting with 'с' (s) is a passionate appeal to an *alter ego* of the author to fulfill his poetic task [4]:

СОЛО	SOLO
Соло сорОк – сорОк сОрок:	Solo of magpies – forty magpies:
– Скоро! – Скоро!! – Скоро	– Soon! – Soon!! – Soon
Соло!!!	Solo!!!
Словно стон, словно сон сволочной –	Like a moan, like a nasty dream –
Скоро срок. Стороной, стороной	Its time is soon. In a bypass, in a bypass
СОрок соколов, сто сорОк	Forty falcons, a hundred magpies
Сонмом сполохов – скоро срок!	By a multitude of flashes – the time is coming!
Сплошной стоголовой сворой	By solid hundred-head pack
Скоро! Скоро! Скоро!	It is soon! Soon! Soon!
Скороговоркой скоморохов сточной,	By sew patter of skomorokhs,
Свободой склочной, словно стопкой сочной,	By quarrelsome freedom, as sappy shot,
Споро смолот Словолов.	Word-catcher is ground quickly.
Столько споров, столько слов!	So many discussions, so many words!
Сложно с собой Словоловом.	It's so difficult with yourself, Word-catcher.
Слово солово, слоново...	The word is blearing, is elephantine …
Стой спокойно, Словолов,	Stay still, Word-catcher,
Сквозь – стой,	Stay – through,
Сроков сорок сороков,	Though forty forties times,
Спой свой!	Sing yours!

The poem is written in three stanzas of unequal number of lines with accentual metre and pair rhymes. The lyrical hero is called 'Словолов' (Word-catcher) as a metaphor for a poet. The lyrical hero is surrounded by apocalyptic characters (сОрок соколов, сто сорОк – forty falcons, a hundred magpies; стоголовая свора – hundred-head pack; скоморохи – skomorokhs) who produce meaningless noise (Скороговоркой скоморохов сточной – Sew patter of skomorokhs; Столько споров, столько слов! – So many arguments, so many words!). In contrast, the protagonist is ready for the unique creative speech, (Спой свой! – Sing yours!). A voice addressing the lyrical hero by the phrase "Сложно с тобой, Словоловом" (It's so difficult with yourself, Word-catcher) is the voice of the creator of the character, that is, the author of the poem and, simultaneously, as the lyrical hero is an *alter ego* of the author, this voice is of the Creator of the author. A complaint is raised at the inability of Word-catcher to find exact expressions, instead operating by blurry words obtained with blood and sweat (Слово солово, слоново – The word is blearing, is elephantine). That is, the formal restriction becomes a tool to find the exact words by the strict sifting in a sense of a gold digger panning out gold, and the lyrical hero is supposed to work hard selecting words in the abundance of a vocabulary filtered through a strict constraint (Сквозь – стой – Stay – through). The task of finding the exact words in the face of the approaching apocalypse correlates to medieval and Hebraic writing. In this sense Grinberg is comparable to Cabbalistic sages searching for the true names of God, knowing that by enumerating them all, the world will come to the end.

The Virtuosic Combination of the Strictest Constraints in a Double Poem *ИГЛА – ИГРА*

The most complex formal restriction is realized by Grinberg in the following double poem *ИГЛА – ИГРА* (Needle – Game). The method of 'internal tautogram' [1] is applied for the poems, as the letter 'р' (r) is presented in each word of the first poem, and the letter 'л' (l) is in each word of the second; and by the transition from the first poem to the second, the letters 'р' (r) are replaced by the letters 'л' (l) producing the phrases of the differing meanings [4]:

ИГРА (рычарка) ГОРОД ДОРОГ	ИГЛА (калтавый валиант) ГОЛОД ДОЛОГ	GAME (growling) THE CITY OF ROADS	NEEDLE (guttural version) STARVATION IS LONG
Обрети ветра гора, розы загоритесь... Сиры правила. Игра жарит – покоритесь!	Облети ветла гола, лозы заголитесь... Силы плавила игла, Жалит – поколитесь!	Mountain, find winds, roses, catch fire… The rules are crippled. Game is hot – so, resign!	Lose all your leaves, willow, Vines, undress yourselves… Needle fused energy, It stings – get pricked!
– Город нагреет! – Дрань ржёт, Рясами зреет Храм, врёт!	Голод наглеет, Длань лжёт, Лясами злеет Хлам влёт.	– City is cheating! – The rabble is laughing, The church is maturing by cassocks, It is lying!	Hunger becomes insolent Hand lies, Rubbish on the spot Becomes angry by gossips.

Среди руна крестов
      ворчат,
Грянут утро рая...
Руки жаркие врача,
кроны вырезают.
	Следи, луна клестов,
	      волчат…
	Глянут, утло лая –
	Луки жалкие влача,
	клоны вылезают.
		They grumble among fleece of
		      crosses,
		Burst out the morning of heaven…
		Ardent hands of a doctor,
		cut out crowns.
			Watch over, moon
			 of the crossbills, wolf cubs…
			They will look, fraily barking –
			Dragging wretched bows,
			clones come out.

Морить? Обречь? Мерь прыть. Вправь речь!	Молить? Облечь? Мель – плыть. Вплавь – лечь.	To starve? To condemn? Don't rush! Set right the speech!	To beg? To vest? Shoal to swim. Lie down by swimming.

In the first poem on 'р' (r), the principles of classical drama are obeyed. In the first stanza, actions happen at the top of the mountain near the city in the evening and consist of conspiracy; in the second, they are in the city square at night and consist of a riot; and in the third, in the city cemetery in the morning and consist of sorrow; with the coda in a regent's temple, at dawn, presenting posterior meditation. The meaning of the poem can be understood variably, beginning with the palindrome subheading *ГОРОД ДОРОГ* which can be read either as 'city of roads', or 'city is expensive'. Metaphorically, the first stanza can be read as the conspiracy against strict rules (Сиры правила – The rules are crippled). The second stanza is a culmination when revolt occurs: the beggars (Дрань ржет – The rabble is laughing) are in revolt against the monks of the church. The third stanza is a dénouement – by it the poem returns to contemplative narration. This stanza is the most rhythmically uneven and semantically obscure, as it is difficult to restore order from chaos. After the violent night with storm and fire, the morning comes. The place of action is changed again to the village cemetery presented by the metonymy of 'кресты' (crosses) for graves and 'руно' (fleece) for sheep. The acting characters are 'врач' (doctor) who operates on people wounded in the battle (Руки врача <…> вырезают – Hands of a doctor... cut out), and a priest who promises heaven to the dead (Грянут утро рая – Burst out the morning of heaven). The final stanza of the poem is a code, the story takes place in the new city recreated after the riot, where the word and the law are going to prevail over instincts and passions (Вправь речь – Set right the speech). The fourth stanza is dynamic again, as four of its six words are verbs of rhetorical questions and imperatives. In the stanza, the regent of the city decides the fate of his people (Морить? Обречь? – To starve? To condemn?), having chosen a restraint (Мерь прыть – Don't rush!) which can be understood as a self-appeal to refrain from punishing the rebels, focusing on verbal government only (Вправь речь! – Set right the speech!).

The second poem on 'л' is less expressive, reflecting the changes from the active roaring sound 'р' (r) to the resonant sound 'л' (l). The fiery and rapid development of the first poem is counterbalanced by the linear fading to passive death in the second. In the first stanza of the poem, outer degradation of nature in autumn (Облети ветла гола, / лозы заголитесь – Lose all your leaves, willow, / vines, undress yourselves) is correlated to inner degradation of the lyrical hero of the poem caused by drug usage (Силы плавила игла, / Жалит – поколитесь! – Needle fused energy, / It stings – get pricked!). This leads to a passive life of the

lyrical hero described in the second stanza of the poem as obedient to suffering from hunger (Голод наглеет – Hunger becomes insolent). The third stanza is devoted to a description of multiple phantoms: visual (Следи, луна клестов, волчат… – Watch over, moon, / of the crossbills, wolf cubs; Луки жалкие влача, / клоны вылезают – Dragging wretched bows, / clones come out), as well as aural (Утло лая – Frailly barking). Linear development of the poem leads to an inevitable end as the lyrical hero submits himself to the shallow water and dies passively (Вплавь – лечь – Lie down by swimming).

Consequently, the double text, differing only by substitution of a growling, 'active' letter 'r' and 'appeased' letter 'l', is created, mostly defined by the limited vocabulary rather than by the deliberate choice of the author. However, the author is masterful enough to make the texts distinct in meaning and sentiments – the multi-version game and passions of the first poem is substituted by the passive fading of the second.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated that Grinberg is constantly in search for the literary restrictions – he studies multiple formal techniques and purposely uses one strict constraint after another in his poetry. For Grinberg, the reason for restricting himself in the most complex literary constraints is to get rid of surface thoughts and cliché expressions. Nevertheless, obedience to strict forms is not a final aim for Grinberg as he searches for poetic expressiveness rather than combinatorial virtuosity as such. By his poems, Grinberg proposes a profound meditation on the essence of the human life and death.

Until recently, Grinberg was unfamiliar with similar searches for literary restrictions undertaken by European experimenting authors such as Oulipo. Nevertheless, his search is surprisingly close to Oulipo's experimentation [8] by the overall understanding of a literary restriction as a powerful tool surpassing conventional poetic methods explored in the past.

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