Antisymmetrical Palindromes in Traditional European and Contemporary Russian Poetry

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Abstract

Palindromes are usually understood as symmetrical texts read the same forward and backwards. I present here a special kind of palindromes that have opposite or different meaning when read in direct and opposite direction. These texts which I would call antisymmetrical palindromes have been known as a literary restriction since the Middle ages, whereas poets unfamiliar with this tradition have been rediscovering this constraint technique and naming it anew when writing texts on this restriction. Contemporary Russian poets using this technique create multi-line poems with distinguished poetical meanings and increase the expressiveness of the text by adding a visual component.

Introduction

Palindrome is a well-known formal literary technique which has existed since antiquity. Palindromes are usually read forward and backwards letter by letter (letter palindrome) though in some cases the reversible unit is syllable (syllable palindrome) or word (verbal palindrome). The most popular form of palindrome is symmetrical when reverse (R) reading of the text (T) produces the same text (T):

$$R(T) = T : \text{madam, rotor, kayak; Sator Arepo Tenet Opera Rotas; Evade me, Dave…}$$

The subject of my presentation is very specific: antisymmetrical and dissymmetrical (P) palindromes that have an opposite or different meaning when read backwards:

$$P(T) = T^{-1} :$$

evil-live, god-dog; straw-warts, star-rats; trace-écart (French), amuser-résuma (French) ([3], 345; [4], 58)

This form of restricted literature has been known for centuries and has been used in both European and Eastern European literary traditions. Looking back in time for the origin of the term, we can go as far as to the late Middle Ages, when poets of *Grands Rhetoriqueurs'* group explored this restriction. There are several names for antisymmetrical palindromes: they are called *heteropalindromes* ([8], 489), or *semordnilap (*[3], 345), or *antigram* ([2]). In contemporary literature the names for this method include *semi-palindrome* or *half-palindrome,* and *reversgram* ([18]). It would be correct to note that antisymmetrical palindromes, as well as any other form of the literature of formal restriction, have been named differently during their long history, as authors of these texts, unfamiliar with the previous exploration of this constraint literary form, rediscovered the method and named it anew.

These texts could be related to *ergodic* literature as the reader should apply special efforts to read the text and understand its meaning. The *ergodic* literature, by the definition of the author of the term, Espen F. Aarseth, could be found in many cultural objects from ancient Egyptian inscriptions to Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* ([1], 66). In the case of antisymmetrical palindromes, the

reader should be aware of the existence of the text read in the opposite direction as it could change the meaning of the original text into the opposite one thus reversing or mocking the original message.

In Russian poetry, exploration of this method began during the baroque poetry period in the late seventeenth century, when Ioann Velichkovsky introduces the term 'рак прекословный'(conter-verbal crab) to distinguish these texts from symmetrical palindromes that he named 'рак словный' (verbal crab), defining 'contre-verbal crab' as 'вирш, которого слова, вспак читаючися, противный текст выражают' (contre-verbal crab is a text where words, when read in reverse, express the opposite meaning, [17], 74). In contemporary Russian tradition these palindromes are called 'оборотни' (turn-over palindromes, [5], 168–172).

Strictly speaking, most of letter palindromes are texts of distorted symmetry, that is dissymmetrical, as the resulting text is not an exact antonym to original, but presents meaning close to an opposite that makes a reader compare the original and resulting texts: evil-live, mood-doom... As for verbal palindromes, they are mostly antisymmetrical, as in these phrases the opposite meaning is easily achieved by following a simple method of reversing a text.

In this paper I will outline a short history of antisymmetrical palindromes in the European and Eastern European literary traditions and present some works by contemporary Russian authors who after a long period of ignorance rediscovered this technique anew and created a number of texts following this specific restriction.

Short History of Symmetrical and Antisymmetrical Palindromes in European Tradition

The word παλινδρομοσ (palindrome, *Greek*) means 'moving backwards'. The invention of palindrome in Europe is attributed to the Greek poet Sotade (circa 300 BC), providing another name for symmetrical palindromes: *sotadics* ([15], 312), while the Roman poet Porphyrius Optacian (4th century AD) became known for the first palindromes in Latin. Palindromes were considered to be magical phrases and related to exorcism. The dual readings of palindromes were thought to reveal the esoteric component of a text. According to Lotman ([13], 19-24), the dual reading of palindrome is associated with contraposition of apparent to secret, of ignoramus to sacral and esoteric. Lotman contends that the author of palindrome sees the world through a non-linear, holistic perception that turns the flow of time ([14], 218). The notation of some palindromes emphasises this holistic view: thus, an inscription on a font of a Byzantine church separated clean and unclean state of body and soul: νιψον ανομηματα μη μοναν οψιν (cleanse your soul as well as your face). The circular recording of palindromes effectively separates the ignorant outside area from the closed sacred area inside the ring.

Antisymmetrical verbal palindromes also have a long history, written in Latin in the Middle Ages, and centred on spiritual themes or on provocative topics. According to a legend ([6], 544), the following phrases were presented to Pope Clement IV by a Dominican friar:

Laus tua, non tua fraus; virtus, non copia rerum   Thy praise not fraud, thy virtue not thy store
Scandere te fecit hoc decus eximium.   Made thee to climb that height which we adore (*Latin*).

If the Pope was to read them backwards he would receive an opposite statement:

Eximium decus hoc fecit te scandere rerum   The height which we adore what made thee climb,
Copia non virtus, fraus tua non tua laus.   Not virtue, nor thy worth, rather thy crime (*Latin*).

Here we see a simple method of creating an antisymmetrical verbal palindrome: an object (A) is described by a quality (Q), paired by the negative particle with its opposite (N Q^{-1}), and the description consists of listing the pair in direct order:

$$A : Q , N Q^{-1}$$

When read backwards, the same object is attributed with an opposite quality, so that the meaning of the phrase is changed to the opposite:

$$Q^{-1} , N Q : A$$

The most well-known of these lines is a distich devoted to Abel's and Cain's sacrifices ([3], 61):

Sacrum pingue dabo non macrum sacrificabo –	A fat offering is not a great sacrifice –
Sacrificabo macrum non dabo pingue sacrum.	A great sacrifice is not a fat offering (*Latin*).

This text is attributed to St Mark of Novell of Florence. Interestingly, when read forwards, the phrase is a hexameter, while when read backwards, it is a pentameter.

Another example is a text which in reading forwards expresses feelings of Roman Catholics, whereas in reading backwards those of Huguenots:

Patrum dicta probo, nee sacris belligerabo –	Fathers ordered virtues, nor grand holy war –
Belligerabo sacris, nee probo dicta Patrum.	Sacred war, nor virtues approved the fathers (*Latin*)

Short poems have also been written on this restriction. In European tradition, poems in the form of verbal palindrome received a special name, *anacycle verses* ([19], 38). Around the turn of the sixteenth century, the group of *Grands Rhetoriqueurs* poets worked on extremely complex poetical restrictions, including this practice. In contrast to distiches cited above, their short poems express farcical rather than sacral meaning. In the following short poem Molinet describes women's virtues and vices ([19], 274):

Femmes sont douces, non rebelles,	Women are calm, not obstinate,
Gemmes luisants, non brunes perles,	Shining jewels, not dark beads,
Amiables, non estrangères,	Loving, not strangers,
Véritables, non mensongères.	Sincere, not liars (Old French).

Another poet Rhetoriqueur, Bouchet, uses this technique presenting the dual nature of the inhabitants of the Poitier province ([20], 246):

Poytevins sont loyaulx non caulx,	Residents of Poitiers are loyal, not mordant,
Feable non voulans meffaire,	Well-wishing, not willing evil,
Begnis non rudes, bons non faulx,	Friendly, not rude, kind, not false,
Manyables non a reffaire,	Obliging, not cheaters,
Amyable non pretz a braire,	Amicable, not brawlers,

Amoureux non trompeurs et fins,	Loving, not deceivers and frauds,
Traictables non voulans desplaire,	Tractable, not willing to disappoint,
Preux non noyseux sont poictevins.	Proud not squabblers are Poitiers (*Old French*).

Here, the negative opinion for the inhabitants of the Poitier province is hidden inside the panegyric lines, but can be revealed by reading the lines in reverse. The contrast between meanings of the forward and backwards readings produces a comical effect of removing a mask and finding an original ugly face. As we can see, these poets use the same simple formula of combining pairs of antonymes connected by a negative particle 'non', then reversing the order of reading to change the meaning to the opposite.

Traditional symmetrical palindromes are read the same forward and backwards, so that their beginnings and ends are undistinguishable, thus by Lotman they reverse the flow of time and enclose a safe sacred space where there is no destruction. Whereas in the case of antisymmetrical palindromes, the contrasting meanings represent two poles separated as far as possible from each other. That is, instead of a closed area of symmetrical palindrome, a bipolar space is created representing opposite topics: virtue and vice, life and death, Heaven and Hell. These pairs of contrasting meanings were meant to illustrate the basic religious concepts known to the public, or in some cases a contrasting readimg was hidden, so that only an informed reader would recognise the inner meaning of a phrase.

Antisymmetrical Palindromes in Eastern European Tradition

In the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries, during so called Eastern European baroque era, educated monks were moving from Europe to Poland, Ukraine and Russia to spread cultural and ideological knowledge, including literary concepts and forms. Ukranian poet Ioann Velichkovsky (mid 1600s-1701) followed the tradition of writing asymmetrical palindromes, starting with the same topic of Abel's and Cain's sacrifices ([17], 74):

Богу пожру жертву тучну не худую,	I will sacrifice to God fat, not thin,
Многу не малую, благую не злую –	Big, not small, good, not bad offering –

Худую не тучну жертву пожру Богу,	Thin, not fat offering; I will sacrifice to God,
Злую не благую, малую не многу.	Bad, not good; small, not big (*Ukranian*).

A direct reading of this poem again refers to Abel (fat; not thin; big; not small; good, not bad sacrifice), while the reverse reading to Cain (sacrifice is bad, not good; small, not big; thin, not fat). This distich is a paraphrase of the verbal palindrome by St Mark of Novell cited above, and Velichkovsky's aim as a teacher was to adapt the concept to the Russian cultural domain thus enriching this culture.

In the following asymmetrical palindrome Velichkovsky compares life and death:

Со мною жизнь, не страх смерти,	With me it is life, not fear of death,
Мною жити, не умерти –	Living by me, not dying.

Смерти страх, не жизнь со мною,	Fear of death, not life with me,
Умерти, не жити мною.	To die, not to live with me (*Ukranian*).

Here Velichkovsky refers to Eve and Virgin Mary as the person who brought sin into the world, and the person who brought there the redeemer, in accordance with a concept also well-known in the European tradition.

In addition to Velichkovsky's high meditative texts, mocking poems also existed in Eastern European baroque era ([16], 132):

Перевертыши про девицу	Upturn lines about a girl
Жила девица рынка недалече,	There was a girl living near a marketplace,
Слыла красою, не беспутной речью.	She was known for her beauty, not rackety talking.
Любила музыку, не баловство,	She loved music, not dabbling,
Хвалила простоту, не мотовство	She praised innocence, not extravagance,
Чиста была, не блудом промышляла.	She was pure, not whorish,
Свой возраст юный не срамит она,	She shamed youth not,
Хвалой, не поношением славна.	She was applauded not cursed (*Russian*).

The same contradicting topics of evil and good, life and death appear in Eastern European tradition similar to Western European tradition because educated poets familiar with the latter aimed to follow it in their writings. Through these texts written in Poland and Ukraine, the literary tradition of writing texts following literary restriction, including antisymmetrical palindrome, arrived in Russia, though in the eighteenth century with Czar Piotr the First's reforms, they were mostly put to an end and later arose anew without referring to the previous tradition.

Contemporary Russian Antisymmetrical and Dissymmetrical Palindromes

After approximately three hundreds years, at the end of the twentieth century, Russian authors again started to create antisymmetrical palindromes. This time, the authors were not aware of the Western tradition, instead exploring possibilities of the Russian language. First, there were simple palindromic phrases of opposite or different meaning: 'Я ударю дядю, тётю радуя! – Я ударю тётю, дядю радуя!' (I will strike an uncle to please an aunt – I will strike an aunt to please an uncle, by S. Gaydarov); 'Мир удобен – небо дурим' (the world is nice – we lie to the sky, С.Федин); 'На Ритке снег – Генсек тиран' (Snow over Ritka – Gensek (general secretary) is a tyrant, С.Федин; [5], 168-169). These texts are far from spiritual meditation, being rather word games, sometimes with hidden political allusions. Though there are specific attributions for authorships for these texts, they originated from the language itself and can be easily rediscovered again by another linguistic explorer.

On the contrary, Russian poet Elena Katsyuba writes antisymmetrical palindromeic texts aiming for specific poetic concepts. A contemporary author experimenting with literary techniques, Elena Katsyuba creates video-poems transforming her literary works into video-clips. She had opened a YouTube video channel (https://www.youtube.com/user/lenkalibel) to which she has uploaded her works ([10], [11]) on various literary constrains: anagram, palindrome and others. Elena Katsyba also uses visual graphics illustrating her short palindromes with photo images: http://foto.mail.ru/mail/libel46/55/ .

In the poem *Луна и мрак* (Moon and Darkness), Katsyuba presents an antisymmetrical verbal palindrome as a non-identical reflection of differing substances ([9], 110). Each line of the poem is an asymmetrical palindrome, so the whole poem can be read for two contradicting meanings:

<div align="center">

ЛУНА И МРАК

ЗАКАТ ЗАХВАТИЛ лес – ЛЕС ЗАХВАТИЛ закат

СТВОЛЫ ЗАСЛОНИЛИ омуты тьмы – ТЬМЫ ОМУТЫ заслонили стволы

Олово стало ЗОЛОТО – золото стало ОЛОВО

Валун был ФИЛОСОФСКИЙ КАМЕНЬ – камень философский был ВАЛУН

ТОРЖЕСТВО АЛХИМИИ победило неверие – НЕВЕРИЕ победило алхимии торжество

Пелась не СВАДЬБА – свадьба НЕ пелась:

ВЕЧНОЕ не единение молчащего и светящей – светящей и молчащего единенье НЕ ВЕЧНОЕ

Ей ПЛЫТЬ не острой звездой – планетой – планетой, звездой острой НЕ ПЛЫТЬ ей

Ему БЫТЬ не видимым – ощутимым – ощутимым, видимым НЕ БЫТЬ ему

ЛЕТЯТ, не теряя друг друга – друг друга теряя, НЕ ЛЕТЯТ

ЛУНА И МРАК

</div>

(Moon and darkness // SUNSET has captured the forest – a forest has captured the sunset / trunks shielded the sloughs of darkness – sloughs of darkness shielded the trunks / tin became gold – gold became tin / A boulder was the philosopher's stone – the philosopher's stone was a boulder / the triumph of alchemy defeated disbelief – unbelief defeated the triumph of alchemy / it was not a wedding singing – a wedding did not sing: / the eternal [is] not unification of the silent and the shining – unification of the shining and the silent is not eternal / for her, to float not as a sharp star, but a planet – neither as a planet, nor as a sharp star for her to float / for him, to be not visible, but perceptible – neither perceptible, nor visible for him to be / they fly not losing each other – losing each other they do not fly / moon and darkness (*Russian*))

The interaction of the moon and darkness is described as a unity of oppositions: reflection and absorption, light and shadow, decline and rise. The text could be read in multiple directions: from left to right as well as from right to left, and from top to bottom as well as from bottom to top. That is, the reading of the text makes undistinguishable past and future, reverting the time arrow in accordance with Lotman's notion (2000, 218). The meaning of the lines is modified by the reflection in the central vertical mirror: "ЗАКАТ ЗАХВАТИЛ лес" (Sunset has captured a forest) is transformed to "ЛЕС ЗАХВАТИЛ закат" (A forest has captured the sunset), and vice versa. In the left part of the poem describing moonlight, positive transformations are presented as the light appears: "Олово стало ЗОЛОТО" (Tin became gold), "Валун был ФИЛОСОФСКИЙ КАМЕНЬ" (A boulder was the philosopher's stone). Whereas in the right side of the poem representing darkness, the transformations are negative as the darkness spreads: "золото стало ОЛОВО" (Gold became tin), "камень философский был ВАЛУН" (The philosopher's stone was a boulder). In other lines, the mirror transformation is equally unproductive: "ВЕЧНОЕ не единение" (Eternal [is] not unification), or "единенье НЕ ВЕЧНОЕ" (Unification is not eternal). In the final lines, the moon and the darkness are described through mutual negations in the adjacent lines: "Ей ПЛЫТЬ не острой звездой-планетой – планетой, звездой острой НЕ ПЛЫТЬ ей" (For her, to float not as a sharp star, but a planet – neither as a planet, nor as a sharp star for her to float), and "Ему БЫТЬ не видимым-ощутимым – ощутимым, видимым НЕ БЫТЬ ему" (For him, to be not visible, but perceptible – neither perceptible, nor visible for him to be), concluding with unification in the last line of the poem: "ЛЕТЯТ, не теряя друг друга – друг друга теряя, НЕ ЛЕТЯТ" (They fly without loosing each other, losing each other they do not fly / moon and darkness). Altogether, the topics of the presented and other Katsyuba's poems on this restriction are far from spiritual and mocking topics as developed in the European tradition, instead aiming for poetical representation of the observed world.

One method of developing simple dissymmetrical palindromes consists of adding a graphical dimension to the text. In the following examples, the texts are written on a ring thus repeating the ancient writing of sacred palindromes:
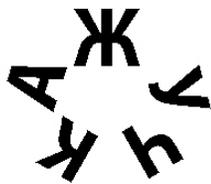
ЖУЧКА – ЧУЖАК
Zhuchka (dog's name) – a stranger, G. Lukomnikov
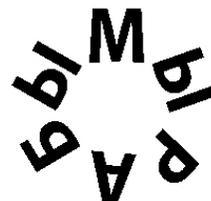
МЫ РАБЫ – МЫ БАРЫ
We are slaves – we are masters, S.Fedin ([5], 176-177)

There can be more prolonged texts read several times along the same circumference in different directions:

РАКАМ, МАКАР, МРАКА КАРМА!
To crayfish, Makhar, karma of darkness, S.Fedin ([5], 176-177)

More graphics could be added to a text, making it a visual poem, to emphasise the meaning of the text and increase its expressiveness. I would like to finish my presentation with my graphic work on a circular palindrome by Boris Grinberg: 'иконе венец – сцене венок' (crown for an icon, garland for a scene, [7], 99) where spiritual topic is developed as it has been done in the European tradition:

Conclusion

Antisymmetrical and dissymmetrical palindromes are known less than symmetrical, though they also have a long history of practice both in Western and Eastern Europe. They were created on similar topics: in direct and reverse reading the authors contrasted virtues and vices, Abel and Cain, Eve and Virgin Mary, Adam and Jesus, and other opposite subjects. The authors used a similar reversing technique to incorporate, overtly or covertly secondary meanings in texts in order to express political, ideological or personal protests, or to entertain a reader in literary mind games. In our days, the tradition of writing antisymmetrical palindromes still exists, and antisymmetrical palindromes are created for individual poetical purposes. This promising and easily practiced technique is also being developed by graphical methods where further poetical possibilities can be found.

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