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 extent. 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
tout sera trop long
aube, soir, jour, mois
faim, soif, rêve noir.

Vers quel état muet
tend leur fils aimé,
noué dans tels sacs
donc sort même gêne?

Midi doré, élan haut,
ciel bleu, eaux dont
Eole ride vent doux
pour dire code bête

Cela veut dire quoi?
Plus rien: lieu sans
joie, rues sans fête,
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 пряхи (пентграмматический пентастих)

Видно, снова шторм украл лампу,
Видно, опять крест кости оленя,
Видно, пепел зовет домой лодку,
Видно, надел женских венок криво,
Видна гладь канвы вдоль опоры.

Вдали мешут крыла малой сойки,
Вдали целит осыми лучей месяц,
Вдали сорок небес легко тонут,
Вдали Аргус горит, гость героя,
Вдали шторм умолк, остыл пепел.

Вечно рвать, нитки целей будут,
Вечно лежат вдоль дорог камни,
Вечно цепки твоих речей пряди,
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 proverbe “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 4th 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
За
Ней
Хожу
Лесом.
Кругом
Деревья
Зеленеют.
Красуются,
Расцветают
Подснежники
Благоухающие.
Нежносветящие,
Розовоперстные,
Златосеребрятся,
Искрорассыпаются
Солнышко-звездочки.

I
Am
His
Song
About
Nature,
Flowers’,
Leaflets,
Developed
Four-legged,
Biped-animals
Walking along
Under the skies’
Twinkling light
That rings around
The distant forest
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]):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Inter cuncta micans} & \quad \text{Igniti sidera coelI} \\
\text{Expellit tenebras} & \quad \text{Etoto Phoebus ut orbE} \\
\text{Sic caecas removet} & \quad \text{JESUS caliginis umbraS} \\
\text{Vivificansque simul} & \quad \text{Vero praecordia motV} \\
\text{Solem justitiae} & \quad \text{Sese probat esse beatiS.}
\end{align*}
\]

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>азбекадарий отчаяния</th>
<th>abecedary of despair</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>архитектура</td>
<td>architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>твоего лица</td>
<td>of your face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>арканы ресниц</td>
<td>traps of the eyelashes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>арки бровей</td>
<td>arches of the brows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>дыхание, авансы губ</td>
<td>breath, advances of the lips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>апатия глаз</td>
<td>and apathy of the eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>вонны не будет, уже никогда</td>
<td>precious blazes are dying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>спелый плод под ногами статуй</td>
<td>pigeon circus escaped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>мягкий знак посреди листа</td>
<td>innocent laughter or cry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>астры в китайской вазе</td>
<td>Philistines, Cretans, long way away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>согласные, вставшие на постой в глухой деревне</td>
<td>nests of lethargic snakes under foot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>выцветают, становясь все белей и растворяясь в мареве</td>
<td>cyclone, and screeches of loons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>взмах крепких крыльев</td>
<td>the waves of strong wings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>курлыканье над десятком морей</td>
<td>over the dozen seas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>кривизна континентов</td>
<td>curvature of the continents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>касание ласковых рук</td>
<td>touch of the gentle hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>куриня слепота, кроличья спесь</td>
<td>waving good bye, moon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>и красота котов</td>
<td>promising to return</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
верно, что в стихах английских метафизиков: 
ан инструкция к магической ритуале потеряна. Пациент встретился лицом с глухим священником
герберта, марвелла, в их сложных сопоставлениях
разорванное чудо
в утонченных философских эпистемах
достигающих озера умопомыслии
насилую над духом поэзии

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в утонченных философских спекуляциях
в доводящих до озера умопомыслии
насилую над духом поэзии

_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:

```
    T  I  M  E
   I  T  E  M
  M  E  T  I
 E  M  I  T
```

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 пути по опыту пишут” - “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 меня в лесу тогда сову, и по-смотрев весной.
Меня в лесу во сне найдешь, поймешь – дожди прошли в ночи, легка.
Вдали тогда звезды, она зажгла в ночи, легко.
И грусть-печаль, и по-дожди – зажглась едва мечты, та грусть.
Уже, смотри, прошли в 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 Sub1, Sub2, Sub3 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 19th 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,
На сходку поспешает вновь,
Его товарищ, враг буржуя,
Шпину разбивает бровь;
Наган за паузой скрывая,
Ильч подшиб в броневике;
Надевши шляпу, в парике,
Пролетят в поле асил.
Вот гринду выстрели корабельный,
Вот комиссар, лихой пострел,
Ведет старуху на расстрел,
Подписан уж указ земельный,
Рабочим – трубы, мышь – котам,
А ананасы – буржуям.

Уж лето! Физкультурник бодро
К открытому бассейну мчит,
Его подруга всенародно
На водной глади возлежит;
Старушкам помощь предлагая
Идут ребята, запевая Гимн пионеров.
Мудрый вождь Не спит,
Горят все окна на Лубянке,
И, черный ворон загрузив,
Всесильным вдруг вообразил Себя слепой чекист.
Но танки еще не подошли к Москве.
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.

References