

THE SHORT STORY OF UKRAINIAN PALINDROME

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Some say it all started as a game, and linguistic game has probably started as an exclamation. However, to begin the story of Ukrainian palindrome we will start with graffiti.

It's a small 3-letters-long inscription 'ANA' written on the wall of St.Sophia cathedral in Kyiv dating back to XI century AD.

There are hundreds of graffiti left on the walls of this ancient cathedral, but there is a reason why that rather insignificant word drew our special attention. Judging from the place of inscription and its graphological imprint, experts argue it might be written by princess Anna Yaroslavna (c. 1030 – 1075), future Queen Anne of France. Anna could read and write, which was rather exceptional for a royal offspring at that time, and though author of the graffiti is not certain, the probability of connection between the royal hand and first written palindrome in Ukrainian history is rather remarkable. Another important thing is the place where the palindrome is found – temple's wall. As mentioned by Dmitri A. Borgmann and other researchers, palindromes in ancient times were used as a tool to communicate sacred meanings. Not exactly the case here, but image of young princess self-reflecting at the temple's rock is not devoid of some mystic charm.

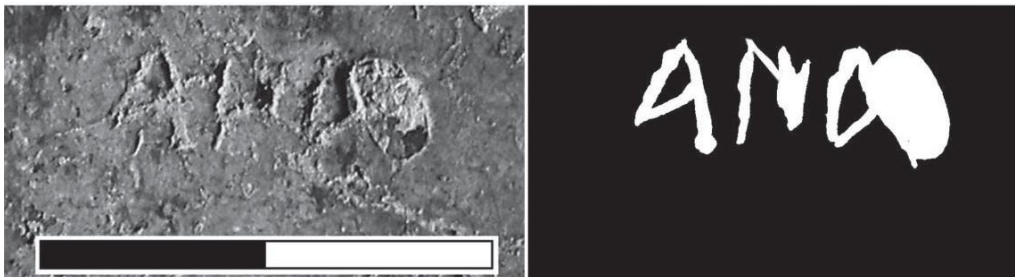
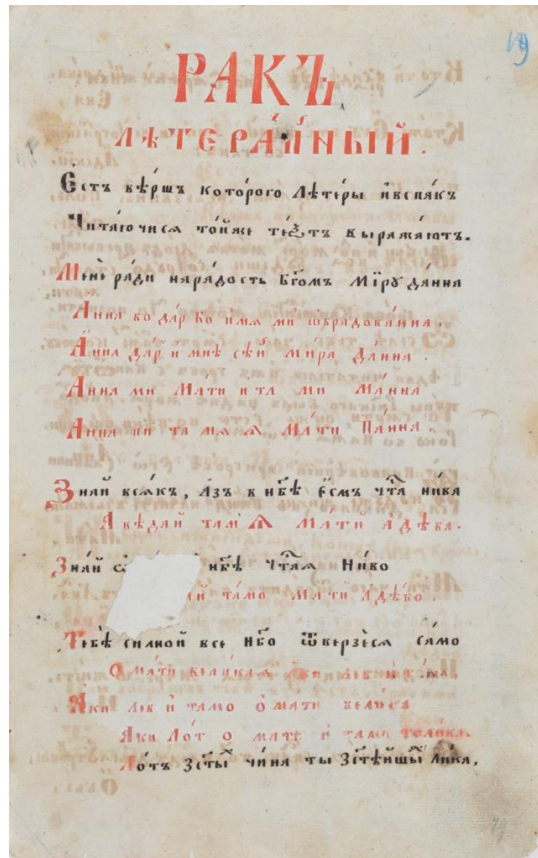


Photo of 'ANA' graffiti from the wall of St. Sophia in Kyiv

After this important discovery, we'll move directly to Baroque era to meet Poltava priest Ivan Velychkovskyi (1630-1701) – grandfather of Ukrainian palindrome. In 1691 he wrote his magnum opus "Mleko" ('Milk or Ewe's milk belonging to the Sheperd'). Together with another collection of poems "Clock and Semi-clock" the manuscript comprised of 33 pages was discovered at the beginning of XX century, edited and published in 1972. In "Mleko" Ivan Velychkovskyi introduces different forms of poetic word play, including palindromes, visual and pattern poetry. He defines palindrome as 'letter cancer' (probably in consonance with Greek *karkinoi*), while differentiating it from 'word cancer' and reversals (in Borgmann's classification).



Copy of the page from “Mleko” manuscript (1691) with palindromes and their definition

Curiously enough it features palindromic quatrain, echoing name Anna at the beginning of each line. It seems to be composed as address of Virgin Mary to her mother Anna. So, at the beginning we mentioned Anna as a queen, here we witness her as supreme mother – mother of the Mother of God.

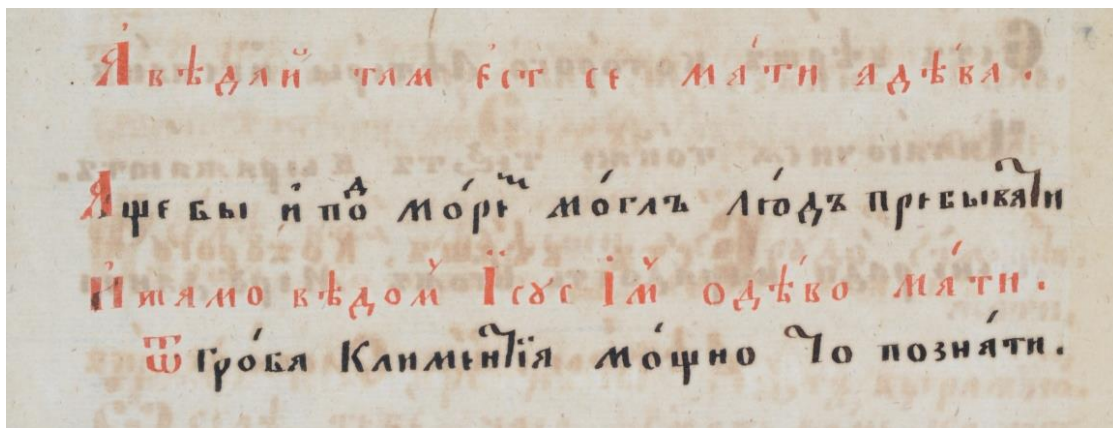
Анна во дар бо имя ми обрадованна,
 Анна дар и мнѣ сѣн мира данна,
 Анна ми мати и та ми манна,
 Анна пита мя я мати панна.

The verse precedes with other remarkable lines:

А вѣдай там я мати а дѣва (Know, I am the mother and virgin there)
 and

Аки лев и там о мати велика (As a lion great mother am I)

Lion (lev) reversal would be later frequently used by Ukrainian palindromists, following in the footsteps of I.Velychkovskyi.



Two more palindromes (in red) from “Mleko” by I.Velychkovskyi

Professor of Kyiv Mohyla Academy Mytrofan Dovhalevskyi in his lecture-book “Hortus Poeticus” written in 1736 (first published in 1973) reviewed different forms of baroque poetry, while including a chapter dedicated to ‘curios poetry’. Therein he provided some examples of Latin letter and word palindromes, while also quoting four lines of *Anna carmina cancrina* from Velychkovskyi’s ‘Mleko’.

After baroque era no traces of palindromes are found until the second half of the XX century.

First contemporary Ukrainian palindrome was reported to be printed by Hannah (oh, Anna again!) Cherin, who worked in the USA. In mainland Ukraine the pathbreaking palindrome evaded Soviet censorship in children’s book published in 1977 by Volodymyr Luchuk.

While these were just first shots, towards the end of the XX century Ukrainian literature had experienced a blast of palindromic zest. To some extent it paralleled booms of palindromy in 1991 and 2002 in the USA and other countries, but with international connections rather weak at that time, was completely a home-grown phenomenon. One can argue that palindrome composing was an indirect artistic response to Soviet dogma, or burlesque declaration of new Ukrainian literature. Somehow, in our view, it was primarily driven by poetic genius of a few outstanding personalities and their desire to explore new linguistic frontiers, while the ‘wind of change’ helped to push the process in favorable direction.



Photo of Mykola Miroshnychenko

The glory of a pioneer and grand-master of modern Ukrainian palindrome should be given to Mykola Miroshnychenko (1947-2009), who made palindromes passion of his life. His interest dates back to 1967, with the first palindrome composed in 1971:

І ні тіні
у шИТУ тиШУ
МОХОМ.

And no shadow
in the silence
sewed by moss.

І ні ріні
у ЛОХІВ віХОЛУ...

And no pebbles
in the blizzard of wild olives...

А смерк —
вИсі в зорі нИні
розвІсив, кремСА.

So twilight –
summits in the star tonight
hanged, shredS.

There is no adequate way to translate a palindrome, as either form or meaning should be sacrificed, so this imperfect presentation is aimed to give just a glimpse at Miroshnychenko's talent. He perfected his skills over the years, with mastery of language, ability to open unnoticed doors, shape new forms at his own will turning into literary magic.

But two substances are needed for a chemical reaction. So, it was not until the intervention of the younger generation of poets that palindromic explosion had shaken Ukrainian literature. It was a group of 3 poets from Lviv called LUHOSAD – the acronym derived from the first syllables of their surnames (the word *luhosad* could be translated as 'meadow garden'). Two of them – Ivan Luchuk and Nazar

Honchar were active palindromists, while Roman Sadlovskyi contributed some interesting visual pieces. Though exploring innovative forms of poetry, the group assigned itself to literal arrièrè-garde. It was true in some sense – the successive wave of poetry was represented with digitalized netizens of the newly independent Ukraine with different aesthetics and interests.

It was active exchange of ideas between Ivan Luchuk and Mykola Miroshnyshenko that helped to establish Ukrainian palindromic canon.

Ivan Luchuk, son of the abovementioned poet Volodymyr Luchuk, excelled in writing complex elegant baroque palindromes with trademark ironic juxtaposition. Works of another LUHOSAD member, Nazar Honchar, have zen-like sharp, and precise quality:

не здатен я перечитати
пере-пити-бити
перепитати
череп'яне?
та дзен!

I'm not able to read-over
drink-hit over
re-reiterate
earthware?
It`s zen!



Cover of the double book of palindromes by I.Luchuk and N.Honchar with photos of both poets

Two poets engaged themselves in the competition for a longest palindrome. N.Honchar made up “Молоко бентеж реве левержет небоколом” of 1691 letters (number is said to accidentally match the year when I.Velychkovskyi wrote his iconic ‘Млеко’), while I.Luchuk surpassed by far with a giant 3333 letters palindrome “Епос і нині сопе” (Epos still sniffs). Both poems were published in popular “Ratusha” newspaper in Lviv, with ‘Epos’ making its way to Ukrainian Guinness book. I.Luchuk had further refined his skill in composing palindromic

sonnets and translations (including ‘Picnic’ and “Aid for Scandinavian Alcoholic’ by J.A.Lindon).

Double book of palindromic corpus by Luchuk and Honchar “Велес – се лев / не здуру гуру дзен” was published in 2009.

To commemorate 300-th anniversary of Ukrainian palindrome Honchar, Luchuk (both from Lviv), Miroshnychenko and Moysienko (both from Kyiv) on September 29, 1991 established ГЕРАКЖИТ (Zealous Enthusiasts of Literal Cancer) group, which was later joined by a number of other occasional palindromists, including Ivan Iov and Myroslav Korol.

On December 31, 1993 declaration of PUP (Planetarian Union of Palindromy; *pup* means ‘navel’ in Ukrainian) was written in Lviv. PUP held its festival on 20.02.2002.

Palindromic experimentations by different authors were summed up in “The Cancer Constellation: Anthology of Ukrainian Palindromy” edited by I.Luchuk and M.Miroshnychenko and published in 2010. With more than 400 pages it features works of 44 authors, including such oddities as epic poem, a novel, visual palindromes etc.



Cover of the ‘Anthology of Ukrainian Palindromy’

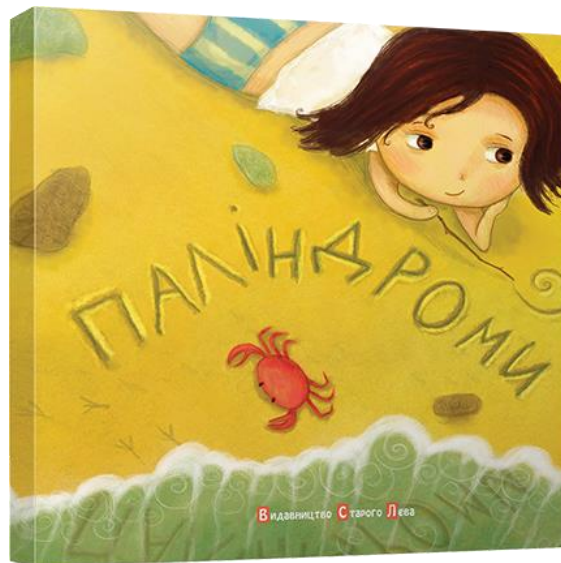
Judging from the content of the book, Ukrainian school of palindromy is reclining on poetry and even tends to exalt palindrome as the highest form of poetic expression. Its founders have strong philological background – M.Miroshnychenko was expert in Turkic languages, popularizing many rare forms of Oriental poetry. I.Luchuk graduated in Slavic philology, N.Honchar – in Ukrainian philology.

At the same time, palindromic experimentations were often presented as an element of visual poetry, while seemingly avoiding direct association with other forms of word-play and logology in general.

This misbalance was partially amended by the ‘mathematical’ group of Ukrainian palindromists, which has sufficient interest in other forms of literary chess, as defined by Howard W. Bergerson. Mykhailo Zarichnyi, former Dean of Mechanical-Mathematical Department of Lviv National University, apart from brisk palindromic one-liners (Е, ти дурен, ерудите! / Eh, you are fool, erudite) and magical squares, ventured into visual literal paradoxes and anagrams. Petro Shtabaliuk, known for laconic reversals, also composed a corpus of refined bitextual charades. Viktor Marach has probably the most profound body of works, featuring different facets of restrained poetry, including syllabic palindromes, circular reversals, squares, lipograms, charades, cento etc.

So far, Ukrainian palindrome enthusiasts haven’t established a specialized platform to be compared with “Word Ways”, but nevertheless made their way into mainstream periodicals and literary magazines. A number of theoretical research articles were presented by M.Miroshnychenko, I.Luchuk and Valeriy Bedryk.

As every palindrome has two parents – the poet and the language, finally a few words of praise should be spoken about the second co-author. Ukrainian language is lexically rich and flexible enough to give passage for thoughts echoing, while consonants and vowels follow in consecutive flow that allows for natural reversals. Also Cyrillic script provides almost exact sound-to-symbol representation, which is not the case for some other Slavic languages using Latin script, where dygraphs representing single phonemes often form stumbling blocks for a palindromist. The best Ukrainian writers viewed palindrome as a vehicle to travel into sublime linguistic levels, and, quoting M.Miroshnychenko “to get to the figurative and genetic memory of our language”.



Children book of palindromes published in 2015 by “Видавництво старого Лева”