

The Pursuit of The Element of Contrast in The Palindrome and Specular Poetry)

Asst. Lec. Noor Shakir Mahmood

The General Directorate of Education in Nineveh Governorate

Email: noor.shakir86@gmail.com

(السعي وراء عنصر التباين في شعر الكلمة المتناظرة والانعكاسي)

م.م. نور شاكر محمود جاسم

المديرية العامة للتربية في محافظة نينوى

Abstract

This paper deals with a special type of Poetry; Palindrome in which words or lines are repeated to be read from different directions in order to show difference and contrast of meaning within. Palindrome, in general, can be found in words, numbers, architecture and every where, denoting continuity since the end of the it means just the beginning again. Specular Poetry is Palindrome but in a special formula that there is a mirror line in the middle of the specular poem to reverse sequence of the previous lines as well as the meaning.

Key words: palindrome, specular, mirror, reverse sequence, Julia Copus.

المستخلص

يتعلق هذا البحث بنوع خاص من الشعر (الكلمة المتناظرة)، حيث إن الكلمات أو الأبيات تعاد وتقرأ من اتجاهات مختلفة لتعطي معنى مختلف وتضاد في نفس الوقت. شعر الكلمة المتناظرة، بصورة عامة، من الممكن أن يتواجد في الكلمات، الأرقام، فن العمارة وفي كل مكان، مشيراً إلى الاستمرارية كون النهاية تعني البداية مرة أخرى. الشعر الانعكاسي هو نوع من شعر الكلمة المتناظرة ولكن بنموذج خاص، حيث أنه يوجد في وسط القصيدة الانعكاسية بيت انعكاسي يعمل كمرآة لكي يعكس تسلسل ومعنى الأبيات السابقة و اللاحقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شعر الكلمة المتناظرة، الشعر الانعكاسي، المرآة، الترتيب المعكوس، جوليا كوبس.

1. Palindrome as a means of the contrasted continuity:

Some states of continuity can impose rules in the life since this continuity recovers, sometimes, double opposing faces; for example, this unity of contrast can be seen in the fact and phenomenon of the day and night; light and darkness, work and sleep...etc. The same matter can be applied to human's interests in Math, architecture, dates, music and literature in a form called Palindrome. From the Antiquity, many forms of Palindrome appeared under different names in different cultures and languages; Arabic, Latin, Greek, English and Russian until the English Poet Ben Jonson (1572-1637) derived the word Palindrome from the two Greek words (palin – dromos), meaning (again – direction) (Greene, 2012, p. 993). The basic and familiar type is letter by letter palindrome, in which a series of letters can be read and mean the same as if they are written backward or forward; for example, the word (madam) still has the same meaning and spelling as if it is read from left to right or from right to left. Palindrome can form phrases, e.g. (Madam, I'm Adam), regardless punctuation marks. In fact, numbers and dates can share this symmetrical sequence; the number (55155), the date 26/02/2062. Furthermore, in Square palindrome the same words can be read from left to right and from top to bottom and vice versa: for example this sentence:

S A T O R

A R E P O

T E N E T

O P E R A

R O T A S (Christie, 2021, p. 1)

In fact, even our genetic maps present symmetrical reversed sequences of DNA. Another dimension is added to the linear palindrome in an opposing process of the technique of ekphrasis, in which a poem is based on description of a concrete thing. In palindrome the abstract words (to be listened) are changed into concrete ones (to be viewed) not only in just a linear direction, but in an agricultural form. The critic Georges Perec in his article "History of the Lipgram" suggests that: "literary history seems deliberately to ignore writing as practice, as work, as play." (Varsamis, 2012, p.145). thus, palindrome technique is indulged into the object to create a kind of locative writing. However, this tendency to write palindrome phrases as similar as the shape of the building written on is increased for reasons that the unity of opposite, expressed in palindrome, facilitates memorization of the wisdom or ethics encoded, especially those written on religious places. A huge number of locative plandrome poems were collected in a pamphlet named "Coelum Orbis Teutonici" and one of these poems shows palindrome phrasis written on a rock fountain from where palindrome flows to indicate "the mystical" elements of "regeneration." (Eliade, 1989, p. 8) and continuity since palindrome ends to start again endlessly. Another type of palindrome is the non- symmetric I which the word or the group of words give a different meaning if they are read in the reversed direction; for example, evil – live. This kind is characterized by encoding meaning within; the same word has a semantic meaning in its forward reading and at the same time it has a pragmatic meaning in the reversed. These hidden messages are used to convey political or forbidden secrets. In his book *Semiosphere* (1992), Yu. Lotman clarifies the unity of opposites in palindrome and he explains how it is associated with the secret against the clarity and mysticism against ignorance. (Bonch, 2013, p. 104). Thus, palindrome are used by magicians and , at the same time, it becomes means to mysticism by religious men. This a destructive contrast concerning palindrome uses. Anti palindrome appears not just in poetry, but in all branches of literature, especially fictions. Playwrights use palindrome phrases , as well as the core meaning of palindrome which is the unity of opposites. In the very beginning of *Time Arrow* by Martin Amis (1949-2023) the main character is seen as a dying old man, surrounded by doctors in America. After his death, the narrator of the same character begins to narrate the events of the dead main character as a alive young man walking on the fields where the time is flashed back and the events are reversed. In fact, every element in this fiction is contrasted by the opposite one; death and life, old man and young man, America and Europe, peace and war... etc. To sum up, palindrome, in general, acts as a window into the unconscious. Furthermore, it is just like a mirror that duplicates the issue to be two (the real and the alternative), this is the principle of Lacanian theory of the mirror stage concerning the psychological development of human identity.

2. Specular, the Mirror Effect:

The specular poetry is a special type of palindrome and the founder of it is Julia Copus (1969-present). In one of her podcast, she explains its appearance and the secret of such a name, saying:

A specular poem is two stanzas, two verses [...]

but in reverse order [...] so, the last line of the

first verse becomes the first of the second [...]

I called it specular because my publisher wanted

Me to give it a name, the speculum is latin

for a mirror. (Copus, 2024).

Most specular poems deals with psychological issues as well as the tool of returning back in to the past as a means of skipism Copus' masterpiece "The Back Seat of My Mother's Car," (1995), the mirror poem, is written into two parts; the first part is twenty lines and the second one is the reversed sequence of the first part lines. However, the poem illustrates the agony of a little girl who is forced to be separated from his father because of her mother's divorce. In pathetic efforts, the girl tries to reach and touch her father's hands. Voicelessly, She screams loudly, calling him "Daddy" with burning desire to reconnect him. Unfortunately, the two barriers of "the car window" and the loud sound of its engine omit her father's speechless words and the sight of his body becomes dark and far to be seen or touched. Thus, the failure of touching sensation to be resumed and the dumbness of words to be called or heard can show the very painful sensations and tortured feelings:

You were mouthing something I still remember the

Noiseless words

Piercing me like that catgut shriek that flew up,

Furious as a sunset

Pouring itself out against the sky. The ensuing silence

Was the one clear thing I could decipher-

The roar of the engine drowning your voice,

With the cool slick glass between us. (Copus, 1995)

The previous last line of the poem ends with itself to be the first line of the second part of this specular poem. Thus, the speaker tries for the last time to reconnect with her father, using her unconscious imagination. Here, the little girl turns back the o'clock, from the far distance of separation into the nearest one and this is the very necessary element of surprise and contrast a specular (mirror) poem should built on. Psychologically, the little girl has anti-oedipal complex since she tries not to kill her father effect in forming her identity. The elements of barriers between two different worlds (the mirror or the window) are used again in "Raymond, at 60" (2012) which is another poem of Copus' specular poem to declare separation from the mother rather than the father. The speaker describes painfully the deteriorated situation of his mother's health and tries to reunite with her through touching and kisses, but his efforts are in vain since she passed away. As a sudden reaction, he also, as the little girl in the previous poem, returns back the o'clock to be a child lives with his mother:

That first time she'd taken him down to watch

The buses,

Holding his hand the entire short walk from

The house,

What was he? Eleven? Twelve? Too old (Copus, 2012)

Thus, the elements of life and death, youth and childhood, hospital and green area, coldness and burning emotions are contrasted by using the symbol of the window to be as a mirror which can reflect contrasted stages of forming self identity. According to Lacanian theory: mirror stage is very crucial to form as well as to show the instability of self- cognition and identity through the passage of time; "it also emphasizes the complex relationship between rationality and emotion, reality and fantasy in the process of individual's understanding of themselves and the world." (Yan, 2024, p. 190-192). Furthermore, through of the symbol of the mirror, as a physical object, many cinema makers and playwrights succeed to draw the depth of the human's identity besides their relationships with others and even within themselves, for an example, E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822) in his "Die Geschichte Vom Verlorenen Spiegelbilde," tell a story of a character who has no reflection on the mirror because he sells his reflection in order to stay with his beloved and to make his only body stay with his wife also. thus, this separation of the reflection from the body symbolizes the separation of the soul from the body. (Fagard, 2014, p. 6). However, not only alienation can a mirror stand for. It alludes to Narcissism, hallucination, madness and dual personality. In the first part of J. A. Lindon's (1914-1979) specular poem, "Doppelgänger" (1973) when the speaker enters the house with his wife he sees a ghost or his double persona, hiding behind bushes and looking at them. The speaker failed to fight this stranger who watches a woman near the gate. This sequence of events are reversed to be the contrast of every thing above, that after nights, the speaker thinks himself to be the ghost who is watching behind bushes and the earlier ghost is entering the house with the speaker's wife:

Entering the lonely house with my wife

I saw him for the first time

Peering furtively from behind a bush

He came, and I saw him crouching

Night after night

Night after night

He came, and I saw him crouching

Peering furtively from behind a bush

I saw him for the first time

Entering the lonely house with my wife. (Lindon) In fact, the idea of the supernatural double or what's called Doppelgänger is revealed to denote a separation of the character into dual; the real self and the supernatural or fantastic self and the hidden one. (Fonseca, 2007. P. 187-189). Concerning the above poem and according to Freud, the real identity, heimlich (canny) is the character of the speaker and the hidden identity, unheimlich (uncanny) is his reflection or shadow. Thus, mirror or specular poetry is the map of studying and improving patients' disorder mentality. Other representation can be added to the form of the specular poem as if it is reversed, for example, not from the middle, but vertically and from different directions. The same theme of pursuing the element of contrast still the constant necessity for all kinds of palindrome poetry.

References

- 1-Bonch-Osmolovskaya, Tatiana.(2013). "Antisymmetrical Palindromes in Traditional European and Contemporary Russian Poetry." *Proceedings of Bridges 2013: Mathematics, Music, Art, Architecture, culture*.
- 2-Christie, Marian.(2021). *From Fibs to Fractals: Exploring Mathematical Form in Poetry*. Beir Bua Press. Pdf.
- 3-Copus, Julia.(1995). "The Back Seat of My Mother's Car." The Poetry Archive, <https://poetryarchive.org/poem/back-seat-my-mothers-car/> Accessed 25 May 2026.
- 4-Copus, Julia.(2012). "Raymond, at 60." Wordpress, www.wordpress.com/setup/onboarding/ accessed 3 June 2026.
- 5-Copus, Julia.(2024). *Episode 391*. Writers Aloud. Rlf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04. Accessed 1 May 2026.
- 6-Eliade, Mircea.(1989). *The Myth of the Eternal Return: cosmos and History*. Arkana.
- 7-Fagard, Gawan.(2014). "Specular Visions Between Reflection and Projection. Andre: Tarkovsky and E.T.A. Hoffman." *Mimetic Surfaces*, July 2014.
- 8-Fonseca, Tony.(2007). "The Doppelganger." *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural*. Vol. 1. Greenwood Icons.
- 6-Greene, Roland.(2012). *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Politics*. Princeton University Press.
- 8-Lindon, J. A. (1973)." "The Doppelganger." PALINDROME POETRY.<https://writersblockmagazine.com/2019/11/05/palindrome-poetry/> accessed 1 June 2026.
- 9-Varsamis, Sotrios.(2012). " The Tradition of Spatial Writing: The Case of the Palindrome in Between Literature and Architecture." *Architecture Culture and the Question of Knowledge: Doctoral Research Today*.
- 10-Yan, Han.(2024). "Lacan's Mirror Theory and Self-Cognition," *Region-Educational Research and Reviews*, vol.6. issue 9.