

How fire and ice can be one twice: two corridors and a blend in Frost's great poem.

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In any written language, any poem is always a transaction in space – a filling of an area with verbal and visual music. Poems are language **placed in harmony**.

Some poets locate importantly similar linguistic items in ways that “make sense” visually. An obvious example: on the left margins of many poems there is a vertical corridor, because the poet had decided to have a number of the lines of the poem start in exactly the same way. A quick example is the Irish blessing shown below:

May the road rise up to meet you
may the wind be always at your back
may the sun shine warm upon your face
and the rain fall soft upon your fields.
Until we meet again my friend
may God hold you in the palm of His hand.

The strong linguisticovisual parallels in the first four lines draw the four verb phrases (headed by the verbs *rise, be, shine, fall*) into constellation, into parallelism. We are led to consider how they may pair into sameness or differences. The third and fourth subjects – *sun / rain* – are easily seen as polar meteorological opposites, for good and bad weather (or times). Their two verbs, *shine* and *fall*, are both seen as describing movement from heaven to earth. And we all need some heat to live – “warm” is a good amount of heat. Similarly, into each life some rain must fall – “soft” is a good amount of hard (luck). Thus in context, *warm / soft* becomes a conceptual “rhyme” for the polar pairing of the two subjects. And while the first three lines and with words having to do with the addressee (or their body parts), though *fields* is not technically a body part, still, since it is the source of the addressee’s sustenance, it too is drawn into another conceptual rhyme – the last word (all lines end in nouns) of the first four lines “is” the addressee) – and lo! even the last word of the differently-beginning fifth line is also the addressee!

What now of the first two subjects – the road and the wind? What is their role in this psalmic architecture? The road is our life – our path through adventures good and bad; wind can aid or hinder our passage – we can see it as a stand-in for fortune, especially after we have understood the softness of the necessary rain.

The first line is a beautiful image for a stance. There are always ups and downs in a life; the speaker enjoins their friend to be “up,” whether the road is passing through a valley or not. May you stay “up,” so that the road, whether “really” high or low, will stay up with you. Thus road and wind are not simply symbols of good and bad – rather, they concern the way the speaker hopes that their friend will relate inwardly to the circumstances of their path, whatever they may appear to be externally.

This poem is a wish that a number of things stay together: the friend and the road, the wind and the friend’s “direction” (and therefore, its ability to aid in the journey), the warmth we need and the way our face reflects our life’s experiences, and the way we sustain ourselves in the face of changing circumstances. The speaker is bidding farewell to the addressee; they will part for a while. But when the two are reunited again, in *we*, the poem’s only first person plural, in the subject of the poem’s

only repeated lexical item – *meet* – these two words also become the only place in the poem where adjacent syllables share the same vowel.

What prepares the ground for this phonetic encounter? Let us look at the places in the poem where the second person is mentioned. In line one, it is the line-final word; in the next three lines, it is *your* – the second to last word, and in the fifth line, the second person is included in the pronoun *we*. Thus in the first five lines, it moves from late in the line to early in it. Its last appearance is, like its first, as a direct object; the *meet* of the first line and the *bold* of the last line are the poem's only transitive verbs. And we discover that though the subject of *meet* is *the road* (a.k.a. life), and the subject of *bold* is *God*, they are only apparently different.

Phonetically, *road* and *God*

are similar; they are the subjects of the poem's only two monosyllabic lines, they follow the first and the last occurrences of *may*, and it is clear that the “up” where the friend is is also where God is. And when God holds you, the “two” of *You are One*. In short, the two friends are joined in God, as the old saying goes: a friend is one soul in two bodies.

This poem is like a spell: its placing of the same items (*May the*) in the same places entrains the eye of the reader, and I would argue that the moving of the words referring to the second person closer and closer to the beginning of the line, to the proximity of the Divine is also spatially iconic.

What I have discovered in my work with poems in a number of languages is that such corridors can be in many different parts of the poem, and that they can be not only straight lines, but also curved ones, and that they can also be closed curves, or ones polygonal in shape. I will not here present evidence for these claims; I will go into them in detail in *Ross* (in preparation). For today, I will only look briefly at a famous and chilling poem of Robert Frost's, to show a particularly clear instance of the use of poetic corridors.

Look where the corridor linking the two occurrences of *ice* intersects with the one that links the two occurrences of *fire*: at *bate*, which is what the poems suggests fire and ice are forms of. One might also say: the “differences” (of temperature, nature) **fuse** in hatred, and we are given a great sort of word play example of fusion to end the poem with: the last syllable of *suffice*, which blends *fire* and *ice*. And the way the poem ends! The chilling Latinateness of *suffice* – a “synonym” of *enough*, (coupled, to be sure, with a wish for you to rot in hell).

Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in **fire**;
 Some say in **ice**.
 From what I've tasted of desire
 I hold with those who favor **fire**.
 But if it had to perish **twice**,
 I think I know enough of **hate**
 To know that for destruction **ice**
 Is also great
 And would suffice.

Robert Lee Frost

Bibliography

Frost, Robert Lee. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York. (1969) p. 220.

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