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The Art of Fusion

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This paper is concerned with the way a poet [by which I will mean a writer of any deeply felt language – drama, novels, essays, epics, psalms, sutras, and of course also straight poetry] can achieve, in the mind of the reader, the fusion of two things which would, in normal perception, be taken to be distinct. My friend and colleague, the poet John Poch, has found a far better way to say what I am aiming at: The poem allows the paradoxical perception of seeing two things as being simultaneously distinct and identical. Perhaps one might go a bit further, to say that their distinctness is at a lower level of perception, and their identity at a higher one, in the way that linguists do in talking about various kinds of alloings (allophony, allomorphy, allosemy, etc.). If we are asked whether the rounded [s] of *sue* and the unrounded one of *see* are the same or different, when we say “yes and no,” we mean higher yes and lower no.

I believe that this type of yes-and-no perception of (un)identity is a characteristic of what we might call the state of poesis. This is the state of mind (where I take “mind” here to include thought, emotion, body and spirit) in which the poet rests as the poem is made, and also the state of mind which the made poem calls forth in the sensitive reader.

I mean none of this to be in the least controversial. I believe that this state of poesis has been known and commented on by writers and readers of literature in many epochs and cultures. I will cite only two here – one from a German poet, and one from an American one.

Later, he remembered certain moments in which the power of this moment was already contained, as in a seed. He thought of the hour, in that other southern garden (Capri) when the call of a bird did not, so to speak, break off at the edge of his body, but was simultaneously outside and in his innermost being, uniting both into one uninterrupted space in which, mysteriously protected, only one piece of purest, deepest consciousness remained. On that occasion he had closed his eyes . . . and the Infinite passed into him from all sides, so intimately that he believed he could feel the stars which had in the meantime appeared, gently reposing within his breast.

Rainer Maria Rilke
(in Mitchell (1982))

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We all know
that the power of a great poem
is not that we felt
that the person expressed himself well.
We don't think that.

What we think is
 “How deeply I am touched.”
 That’s our level of response.
 And the great poet
 does not express his or herself,
 but all of ourselves.
 And to express all of ourselves,
 you have to go beyond your own self.
 Like Dogen, the Zen master, said
 “We study the self to forget the self.
 And when you forget the self,
 you become one with all things.”

Gary Snyder (1980), p. 65

∞

I will not go on to provide more quotes, from other cultures and epochs. There is no shortage of poets who have expressed similar feelings. Instead, here I have a more modest, nuts and bolts concern. What I would like to know is this: Given that a poet has decided to write a poem based on this category of experience, what kinds of poetic devices can be pressed into service?

But before getting down to cases, let me retell a story about one of the world’s great poets:

Paul Valéry, both a poet and an inquisitive theoretician of poetry as an ‘art of language,’ recalls the story of the painter Dégas, who loved to write poems, yet once complained to Mallarmé that he felt unable to achieve what he wanted in poetry despite being ‘full of ideas.’ Mallarmé’s apt reply was: “Ce n’est point avec des idées, mon cher Dégas, que l’on fait des vers. C’est avec des mots.”

IT IS NOT AT ALL WITH IDEAS, MY DEAR DÉGAS,
 THAT ONE WRITES LINES OF POETRY.
 IT IS WITH WORDS.

In Valéry’s view Mallarmé was right, for the essence of poetry lies precisely in the poetic transformation of verbal material and in the coupling of its phonetic and semantic aspects.

Jakobson and Rudy (1979)
 (my translation of the French)

The theme of the present volume, in which we vainly try to use words to thank Paul Kiparsky for all he has taught us, is the word. I would like to muse in passing about what Mallarmé might have meant by writing with words, as opposed to the writing with ideas that Dégas had complained about his lack of success with. The difference between a word and an idea is that in the former, but not in the latter, there must be a phonetic event, a melodic and rhythmic happening. To write with words, then, we must know how to balance the conceptual or imagistic with the musical. Melody and meaning must interpenetrate, must dance with each other.

In this connection, there is one last quote which seems essential, from another famous French author:

Words have a soul. Most readers, and even writers, demand only that they have a sense. One has to find that soul, which appears in the contact of words with other words.¹

Guy de Maupassant

In what follows, then, I intend to explore what de Maupassant might mean with the phrase “the contact of words with other words,” and how this notion is involved in writing with words, especially insofar as fusion is concerned. Recent work by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner on the conceptual structure of blends is relevant here, though the particular devices that I will call attention to below may perhaps be primarily in evidence in literature, while the blends that they describe are a feature of thought as conceived of in the most general of ways. Cf. Fauconnier (1997) and Fauconnier and Turner (2002) for much discussion.

One poem which unquestionably is centered on the fusing of “two” things is this famous one of Carl Sandburg’s:

Fog

The fog comes
on little cat feet.
It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

∞

We are suddenly struck with cat and fog’s interconnections. But how can we go from an intellectual comparison of similarities and differences to a felt fusion? How is this magic done? Well, the poem has three main verbs – *comes*, *sits*, and *moves* – let us examine what their subjects are. The first has *fog* as its subject – we are sure of that. But what of this *it*, which is the subject of the second verb? It would appear to have to refer to *fog*, since normally, pronouns cannot refer back to the first noun in a compound (cf. **Cat-fanciers like to make them purr.*). But soft: The verb subjected by this *it* is *sits*, which is certainly a far cry from a normal activity, or posture, for fog. And then we have to imagine this *it* as also being able to be “looking”? Curiouser and curiouser. And when we finally learn that this *it* has haunches, I think that we have to lay down our weapons – Sandburg has relentlessly confused us into thinking that the *it* must have referred to a cat after all (but also, paradoxically, to fog, for that is what he said in the first line). So one of the poet’s methods here is to override normal syntactic constraints on pronominal reference through the collocational, or cooccurrence, properties of various of the poem’s subsequent words, and to use these latter to force us to revise, and blur, an earlier interpretation.

Experientially, Sandburg paints fog in a sonata structure – ABA. Our poem starts and ends with motion verbs (*comes* and *moves*), which sandwich a durative verb, a verb of stillness – *sits*, even though the word *looking*, which follows *sits*, tells us that there is no break in the activity of the fog. Paradoxically, this activity of looking, followed by the act of refraining from speaking, makes the center of the ABA structure the peak of the agency, the animacy, of the visitor to our city. What is relevant for our concerns here is the fact that the phonetic structures of *fog* and of *cat* can also be seen as being of the form ABA – two obstruents which sandwich a vowel: O + V + O. So the verbal melodies of *fog* and *cat* “rhyme,” in a way, with the structure of the kind of experience of fog that Sandburg wants to give us. This is one of the ways in which these two central words can be “in contact.”

Now let us turn briefly to the poem’s six bisyllables. We find that they are excluded from the two lines in which motion is mentioned. And they always come in pairs, as is obvious for the last four of them, which come in one pair per line, in lines 4 and 5. The first two, while they occupy adjacent lines,

1. Quoted in Shanon (1993), p. 3.

are paired by virtue of the similarities in their sound: They both begin with an [l] which is followed by a high lax vowel, which in turn is followed by a voiceless stop; they both close with a sonorant consonant. Note, however, that there is a tiny, but I feel perceptible, lengthening, as we move from *little* to *looking*.

First, the vowel [I] has a slightly shorter basic duration than does [U], as measured instrumentally (Cf. Heid (1998) Secondly, though I have no instrumental data, it seems likely that the syllabic [l̩] of *little* takes less time to pronounce than does the [I©] coda of *looking*. Thirdly, I assume that phonemically, *little* would be something like /litl/, while *looking* would be something like /luk#iNg/. Finally, the mere fact that one word occurs line-finally gives it a longer pronunciation. What this means is that the more we are in the clause of *sits*, the more bisyllabic we will be, and the longer the words, and lines will last. I am grateful to Kristin Hanson for pointing out to me that this central clause is the locus of the poem's feminine rhymes – the rhymes of lines 1, 2, and 6 are uniformly monosyllabic.

The next pair of bisyllables we find in line 4, which has one bisyllable beginning in [h] and one beginning in (phonetic) [s]. The following line has its two bisyllables come in the reverse order – the one beginning in [s] preceding the one in [h]. These three bisyllable pairs always appear on adjacent lines, so arranged that if the first member of the pair appears early in the line, its “echo” in the next line will end the line, and vice versa. Thus there is a deeply chiasmic, or crossing (literally, “x-like”), pattern that Sandburg sets up with his placing of the poem's long words, with traces of chiasmus for some of the monosyllables as well.

The fog comes
 on little cat feet.
 It sits looking
 over harbor and city
 on silent haunches
 and then moves on.

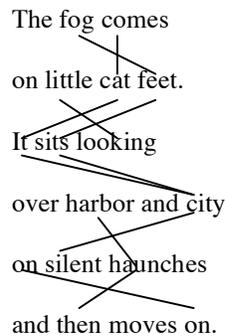
There are no more bisyllables to link up, but our ears hear more similarities: The last two monosyllables of line 2 have the front vowels [æ] and [i:] followed by [t]'s, and the first two words of line 3 are monosyllables whose front vowel [I] is also followed by [t]. Furthermore, the [t f] sequence between *cat* and *feet* is echoed by the [t s] sequence between *It* and *sits* (which itself is echoed in the final [ts] of *sits*). Thus if we also link these pairs of adjacent [t]-final monosyllables up, we are left with the following, more symmetrical structure:

The fog comes
 on little cat feet.
 It sits looking
 over harbor and city
 on silent haunches

and then moves on.

But we are not done yet. The first two syllables of line 3 – *It sits* – find their echo in the last two of line 4 – *city* – these two pairs of syllables being the only two places in the poem which exhibit sequences of high front vowels. Moreover, there are only two words in [f] in the poem – *fog* and *feet* – and two words which start in [k] – *comes* and *cat* – all four of which have the ABA structure obstruent + nucleus + obstruent. Thus Sandburg has placed the only word that resembles the word with which he is fusing *fog*, namely *cat*, in that it starts with [k], right after *fog*. And similarly, he has placed the only other word in [f] right after *cat*. So each of the two fuses is followed by a stand-in for its alter ego.

Finally, we can perhaps see a weaker link between the last two lines, which begin and end with the word *on*, and which each contain another stressed syllable which starts with a continuant and ends in [n] – *haunches* and *then*. This leaves us with the following chiasmic network:



Such chiasmic structures say: There are pairs of elements whose order is irrelevant. One can substitute for the other. But this is only a short hop from fusing such elements, for normally in language, the place in which a word appears in a string of elements is a fact of great import for its interpretation. A carthorse is not a horsecart. Chiasmus thus is another way of contributing to blurring the distinctness of two elements. Note, however, that these chiasmic structures that we have just examined do not link *fog* and *cat* in particular – they merely say that words of similar melody can move from the beginning of one line to the end of the next. This in itself is a fundamental characteristic of the state of poesis – the suspension of temporal precedence. But it does not directly fuse the two actors in our poem, as did the blurredness of the reference of *it*.

However. It is definitely a way of putting words “in contact.” And since there are only two words which contain [f], *fog* and *feet*, and two in [k], *comes* and *cat*, the semantics will link fogness and footedness, coming and catness. The closer the structure of the two words, the closer will be the links between their souls; since there are no other *f*-words in the poem, and since the two that occur are both *f* + V + Stop, they are strongly connected.

What of the words in [k]? Again, there are only two which start in [k]; they are both monosyllabic, and both end in coronal obstruents, so this will link them fairly closely, though less so than is the case for the two [f]s, for the first *k*-word contains a nasal that is not matched in the second. And what of the relationship of the two *k*-monosyllables to the other two velar obstruents, in *looking* and *fog*? Here I feel myself to be on ever quagmire ground; I will hazard a guess that perhaps we can learn from psycholinguistics what the confusion matrices are for various types of phonetically similar word-pairs are. Mistakes in first and second language acquisition should also be relevant, and probably data from straight phonology, involving a study of what kinds of feature differences are most overlookable in the definitions of commonly occurring natural classes. There are probably many more aspects to the killer problem that is lurking in the shrubbery here – to wit: What words does a given word in a given language remind its speakers of, and how much for each type of similarity? I will be forgiven for deferring a solution to this little brain-teaser in this short note, but it seems that any research program that takes de Maupassant’s dictum seriously

must sooner or later turn to this matter, and to another giant problem as well. Namely, words can be “in contact” not only phonetically, but also semantically, morphologically, etymologically, culturally, in terms of stylistic register Let us leave such thoughts for the army of future researchers who will no doubt figure all of this out for us.

I would like to move on to call attention here already to another formal device which we will see more clearly in other poems that seek to fuse – a sort of cousin of chiasmus – alternation. It is seen most clearly in Sandburg’s poem in the number of words per line: 3 • 4 • 3 • 4 • 3 • 4. I resist manfully the temptation to speak of linemes and allolines, but not by much. The lengths of the lines of this poem vary within the (higher) identity of still being lines.

A sequence of the form *xyxyxyxyx* . . . can make us “see double” – more prosaically, it almost forces us to seek a higher unity within which *x* and *y* can be seen to function as variants. Alternants are variants. In the case of a salient pattern, like that of line-length in words, while this alternation does not itself directly enact the fusion of fog and cat, it still hints: Fusion is the order of the day here. Be on the lookout for it.

If we ask: Why should poets prefer *xyxyxyx* . . . to a sequence of invariant repetitions – *xxxxx* . . . , the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins gives us a particularly clear answer:

In art, we strive to realize not only unity, permanence of law, likeness, but also, with it, difference, variety, contrast: It is rhyme we like, not echo and not unison, but harmony.’

Gerard Manley Hopkins³

But for now, let us return to the structure of the poem’s narrative. As we have noted already, the poem is clearly tripartite, conceptually, in terms of its three clauses, of arrival [lines 1 and 2, terminated with a period], rest [lines 3, 4, and 5, terminated with a comma], and departure [the last line]. Its two verbs of motion sandwich (or alternate with) one of lack of motion, and we are drawn to observe that the number of lines allotted to these three phases of the encounter with fog also alternates. The (primarily monosyllabic) sections of motion are short – two lines for arrival, one for departure, surrounding the three polysyllabic-rich lines of the section which describes the long intervening (subjectively it seems endless) section when we are in the thrall of the fog, when it holds us as effortlessly as a cat holds its tiny prey. So the number of lines per section – 2 • 3 • 1 – “rhymes” in its alternatingness with the lengths of the lines in number of words (3 • 4 • 3 • 4 • 3 • 4). Note too that the middle section has, as an average, 5.3 syllables per line, while the first and last sections have an average of 4 syllables per line.

Kristin Hanson has called to my attention that the impression of length for the central section arises not only from the relatively unsophisticated measure of the number of syllables per line, but also from the syntactic complexity of the center. For while all three sections start their first lines with the subject of their verb (a subject which has been zeroed, or elided, in the last section [after all, the fog has gone by this time too]), following this subject with their monosyllabic present-tense verb, and end their section with a sequence of words beginning with *on* (the first two of which are prepositions followed by body parts of the fogcat, with the last being a particle followed by the the zero part of the zeroed catfog), the central *sits*-section shows a massive insertion right after the Verb in the schematic formula: Subject + Verb (*I N S E R T I O N*) + *on* + X. What Sandburg gives us here is the poem’s only non-finite clause: *looking / over harbor and city.*

There are several features of this insert which contribute to our experience of stretched time. The first is the choice of complementizer: *-ing*. While the infinitival complementizer *to* would have been grammatically permissible, it is clear that the present participle extends the subjective time more than *to* would have. And the fact that *look over* is ambiguous between being a verb with a prepositional phrase object (as in *look over them*) or a transitive verb + particle phrasal verb (as in *look them over*) probably requires a bit more processing time, thus contributing to the complexity (and presumably subjective duration) of the insert. Most tellingly, though, there is an example of an extremely subtle semantactic construction at the end of the insert.

The words *harbor* and *city* are singular count nouns, and as such, they normally require articles (Cf. **(The) harbor was smelly, but *(the) city was fragrant.*) While there are count nouns that can appear

articlelessly after certain prepositions (like *to school, at college, in church*), *over* is not one of these. Moreover, remarkably, we see that if we subtract a conjunct, the construction withers: **We were looking over harbor*. What is going on here, instead, is a special process which allows the articleless conjunction of singular count nouns only if they can be interpreted as organic parts of a meaningful composite entity. Thus we find contrasts such as *House and [garden / ?*rake] were spotless; A lamp stood beside computer and [printer / ?*egg-beater]*. In other words, *X and Y* can only be conjoined as articleless singular count nouns if they have something in common. I suggest that what *harbor and city* have here is that they are artifacts that humans have made to protect themselves from the vast forces of the natural world. If Sandburg had written *city and harbor*, we would conclude that the fog was land-based, and moving out to sea. But in the order that he chose, we know that the fog arises from the immensest entity on the planet, the one over which we have the least control. It is the power of the sea which effortlessly covers and paralyzes our proudest constructions, our most ineffective defenses against chaos. And holds us long as it wants, dissolving our imagined mastery of the elements. What I find sensational in this line is the use of this shared-property coordination, to give it a name, in precisely the center of a context one of whose principle functions, if I am correct, lies in the fusion of *cat* and *fog*.

I will leave this small masterpiece after descending once more, to even smaller atoms of poeticity, than we have looked at thus far. The phonetic melodies of *fog* and *cat* manifest, as we have observed, an alternating sequence of Obstruent + Vowel + Obstruent. And in each of these words, if the initial consonant is a labial or a coronal, then the final consonant will be a velar, and vice versa. This reversal of frontness that the sandwiching consonants make is echoed by the two vowels – one is a front vowel, the other a back vowel.

It would take me too far afield to trace all the ways in which Sandburg has stitched an alternation-generated fusion into the weave of this poem; the interested reader can consult the longer analysis in Ross (1991). I will end with one final observation of the whole pattern which the poem's obstruents make. It appears that all of the lines but the fourth can be seen (within tolerable limits of abstraction) to contain an odd number of obstruents, and that all can be seen as manifesting an ABA(BA) pattern, where the alternants differ along axes of phonetic dissimilarity which are elsewhere of relevance in establishing the contact of words with other words.

Line 1:	ð	f	g	k	z	alternate in:	Voicing
Line 2:	t	k	t	f	t	alternate in:	Coronality
Line 3:	t	s	t	s	k	alternate in:	Continuancy
Line 4:	v	h	b	(d)s	D	alternate in:	Voicing (almost)
Line 5:	s	t	h	c#	z	alternate in:	Continuancy
(Line 6:	(d)ð		v		z	alternate in:	Coronality

To sum up these observations, we can see that Sandburg knew how to do what Mallarmé urged his friend, the painter Degas, to do: to write with words. He told Degas that poems are never written with ideas alone, but with words – and we know that words are a dance of idea, image and melody. Any poet in any country which has both fog and cats could have written a poem which put the two in sentences of motion, rest, and renewed motion, but just think what a tough musical row to hoe a German poet would have, who would have to make the German words for fog (namely, *Nebel*) and cat (namely *Katze*) evoke each other, or a Japanese poet, who would have to work with *kiri* and *neko*, or *brume* and *chat* in French – one's heart goes out to them. Sandburg's poet's eye / mind and poet's musical ear perceived: Here in English, it is possible to “write with” the two words fog and cat, and to let them fuse and blur, masterfully. And in their fusion, and in their melodic relationships with the other words of his poem, we come closer to knowing the souls of all.

Let us continue with a small jewel of a poem, by the great, unforgettable Denise Levertov (quoted in Packard (1974), p.97):

Living

The fire in leaf and grass
so green it seems
each summer the last summer.

The wind blowing, the leaves
shivering in the sun
each day the last day.

A red salamander
so cold and so
easy to catch, dreamily

moves his delicate feet
and long tail. I hold
my hand open for him to go.

Each minute the last minute.

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This poem clearly has three parts, each terminating in a line of the form *each X the last X*, where X is a time interval. As the time intervals get shorter, the urgency mounts, in this autumnal poem (the sun is weak, otherwise the leaves would not be shivering). It is in the third section, when the two animate beings in the poem are introduced – a salamander and the poet – that time seems to expand, as the two beings fuse. In the two previous sections, there have been two lines before the *each X the last X* line – in this slow motion section, instead of mere lines, we find two full sentences; and in each, an animate being is the subject, and in each, a body part is the object of the verb. In each of the sentences, the main verb is a transitive one, and we might expect that the object might be a patient object – one affected by the action of the verb. But we find that both verbs – *move* and *hold* – are strangely ineffectual. Usually, what is the object of move changes its location, and while technically, this is the case with the legs and tail here, what the salamander wanted was to move itself – and this desired motion is denied. The salamander might as well be immobile – it is fixed to the spot. And the semantics of this use of *hold* here are equally unexpected: normally, when we hold something, our hand is closed around it – here, the opposite is the case. Normally, we hold something to prevent it from moving – but here, the poet wants the salamander to go. But neither animate being can move, both are transfixed by the fleet passage of time, both are rooted in the vastness of the eternal moment. Poet and salamander become Two and One.

This eerie freezing is achieved in part by a play of vowels. There has been a dance between the high front vowel [iy] of *leaf* and the low front vowel [æ] of *grass* since the first line, and we have twice heard echoes of [iy] ~ [æ] through the salience of *each* and *last* in the refrain lines which are so important in the structure of the poem. We have come to expect that every third line will have the form of *each X the last X*; when we get to line nine, we almost find what we seek. The line starts with the expected [i] – but where is the [cæ] of the *each*?

Eureka! – it has gone wandering – it shows up after the other dancing vowel – the [æ] of *catch*, which word is followed by a comma. This comma makes it exceedingly hard to read on in the single breath which this sentence seems to ask of us. And after the comma comes a remarkable word: *dreamily*. This word is the poem's only word of any derivational complexity. It is based on the verb *to dream*, which must then be transformed into a noun, like *a dream*, so that it can receive the suffix -y, which converts nouns to adjectives (cf. *dust-y*, *dirt-y*, *juic-y*, etc.), which adjective is then adverbialized by the addition of

the last suffix *-ly*. So this is a dream through the parts of speech, from verb to noun to adjective to adverb, nothing is fixed, everything has fused – and what are the consonants of this category-shifty word? Why they are d...r...m...l – the last four of the consonants of *salamander*, in almost perfect reverse order, and with the three [æ]’s of that word replaced by three occurrences of its dancing partner – the vowel [i]. We are in a strange space semantically, transitivity has become feeble, objects and subjects are not so sharply different as we usually see them to be, words are coming unglued, or wandering aimlessly around between categories –

And in the middle of this, transfixed, an infinitely vulnerable salamander, subject to the whim of the giant being in whose hand it finds itself helpless, a giant being who feels equally vulnerable, in the vast hand of time. Or, as my friend Douglas Fraser has put it, more cogently than I would have known how to (personal communication), the poet is held fixed in the hand of the poem, as are we, the readers.

Both of these animate beings in the poem are so vulnerable that their differences seem to cease to matter. Here, in this timeless moment, they are one.

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For the next case of fusion, let us look at a beautiful poem by Mary Oliver, which I am grateful to my colleague Barb Rodman for giving me.

The Buddha’s Last Instruction

	¹ “Make of yourself a light,”
	² said the Buddha,
B ₁	³ before he died.
	<hr/>
	⁴ I think of this every morning
	⁵ as the east begins
	⁶ to tear off its many clouds
	⁷ of darkness, to send up the first
	⁸ signal—a white fan
	⁹ streaked with pink and violet,
S ₁	¹⁰ even green.
	<hr/>
	¹¹ An old man, he lay down
	¹² between two sala trees,
	¹³ and he might have said anything,
B ₂	¹⁴ knowing it was his final hour.
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	¹⁵ The light burns upward,
S ₂	¹⁶ it thickens and settles over the fields.
	<hr/>
	¹⁷ Around him, the villagers gathered
B ₃	¹⁸ and stretched forward to listen.
	<hr/>
	¹⁹ Even before the sun itself
	²⁰ hangs, disattached, in the blue air,
	²¹ I am touched everywhere
S ₃	²² by its ocean of yellow waves.
	<hr/>
	²³ No doubt he thought of everything
B ₄	²⁴ that had happened in his difficult life.
	<hr/>
	²⁵ And then I feel the sun itself
	²⁶ as it blazes over the hills,
	²⁷ like a million flowers on fire—
	²⁸ clearly I’m not needed,
	²⁹ yet I feel myself turning
S ₄	³⁰ into something of inexplicable value.
	<hr/>
	³¹ Slowly, beneath the branches,
B _{5a}	³² he raised his head.
	<hr/>
B _{5b}	³³ He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd.

I have indicated the sectioning that the poem's ten periods impose. The poem presents images from two scenes – the death of the Buddha, and the poet experiencing a sunrise. These are labeled with a set of subscripted Bs and Ss, respectively. That the use of alternation as a primary vehicle for the expression of fusion is evident – but fusion of what elements? Here I would suggest that it is the fusion of the Buddha and the poet, on one level, and, since the Buddha is metonymically connected to the light (and its source, the sun), on a slightly more abstract level, the fusion of these two humans with the light. And of course, as Giles Mitchell has helped me to see so clearly, the re-perception of death as an entry into light, which offers a different understanding of death than the one ingrained in the common English metaphor of life as a day. The re-seeing of death, often painted dark (cf. Dylan Thomas's line, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light"), as a new day, and as warmth and light, is found in many religious traditions. It is particularly consonant with the Buddhist understanding of an endless cycle of births and deaths, of each life as leading to the next. In brief, we might say that for a being who has made a light of himself, entering death is entering light.

The poem does not merely "say" that there is an infinite cycle of births and death – though it is usually true that most texts are about something, for a poem, its aboutness is less important than its deeds. In poetry, as elsewhere, actions speak louder than words. With respect to the cyclicity of life, this poem **cycles** us. We see this from the way the poem's narrative is crafted. The four "final" events surrounding the Buddha are: (1) He raises his head (line 32); (2) He looks into people's faces (line 33); (3) He tells us to make lights of ourselves (lines 1 and 2); and (4) He dies (line 3). So this poem **does** the end being before the beginning. Or, in the language I have been pushing, beginning and ending fuse.

Another way that Oliver lets light and poet merge can be seen in the pattern formed by the last two of the poem's four reflexive pronouns: ₁₇*yourself*, ₁₉*the sun itself*, ₂₅*I feel the sun itself* / as it blazes over the hills, ₂₉*I feel myself turning into something of inestimable value*. The first of these reflexives is in an injunction for a reflexivized NP to become a light. The second, in which the reflexive is an intensifying modifier of *the sun*, which in the poem is a kind of metonym for light, as we see from the fact that ₁₅*the light* is the subject of ₁₅*burns*, while ₂₆*the sun* is the subject of the near synonym ₂₆*blazes* – connects again the idea of light and reflexivity.

The next reflexive again modifies the sun. Thus the first three reflexives are set into relation with each other by virtue of the fact that all are linked to light. But the fact that the last two reflexives are both objects of the same subject and verb: *I feel the sun itself* and *I feel myself* is what links poet and light most strongly.

The insight that two structures which are adjacent to the same third structure acquire a metonymic equatability, in some sense, goes back to Zellig Harris's work on discourse. Harris's principle of discourse equivalence was that two strings which occurred in the same structural relationship to an identical third string would acquire a kind of "derived" identity, a lower-order identity. Schematically, Harris would argue that given AB and AC, where the two occurrences of A are identical (Harris would here write "A =₀ A", where the symbol "=₀" denotes total identity), would confer upon B and C a lesser kind of identity, one which he symbolized as "=₁" [Cf. Harris (1963)]. He postulated an unbounded sequence of "lesser identities," each being recursively defined after the model of "=₁". Thus given XM and YN, where M =₁ N, we can conclude that X =₁₊₁ Y.

I see Harris's notion as being of fundamental importance for the understanding of poetry; I propose to call it the Law of Corresponding Neighbors (LCN). In the example we have just looked at, the last two reflexives in our poem, we could write, with Harris, *the sun itself* =₁ *myself*. And let us note that the underlined phrases which follow these two =₁-ly equatable reflexives, namely, as it blazes over the hills and turning into something of inestimable value will then acquire an =₂-equatability.

The Buddha and the poet are fused more directly by another application of the LCN. There are very few words which repeat in the poem – two pairs of nouns (*light* [lines 1 and 15], and *sun* [lines 19 and 25]) – the fact that these are the only nominal repeaters also fuses them, all by itself) and three pairs of verbs: *say* (lines 2 and 13; both subjects are the Buddha), *think* (lines 4 and 23 – their subjects are *I* and *he*, respectively), and *feel* (lines 25 and 29; both subjects are *I*). The fact that both the Buddha and the poet appear as the subjects of the same verb, *think*, also increases the fusedness of Buddha and poet.

I will call attention to one last feature of the two occurrences of *think*: they begin and end another alternation, thus strengthening the fusion of their subjects. There are four universal quantifiers in the poem – three *every*'s and one *any*. The pattern the quantifiers make is shown below.

⁴I think of this every morning
¹³and he might have said anything,
²¹I am touched everywhere
²³No doubt he thought of everything

What strikes us here is the alternation of the pronominal subjects, with the *I* subjects beginning sentences that end with adverbial elements, of the form [*every* + adverbial nominal of time or place], and the *he* subjects beginning sentences that end with direct objects (in *-thing*). Since there are several features which these four lines have in common, the fact that the main verbs of the first and last of these four are both forms of the verb *think* fuses the two subjects, via an extended understanding of the LCN.

I note in passing that one of the effects of this poem is to dissolve our fear of death. Fear is alluded to only once – in one word of the last line: *frightened*. It is only the crowd of villagers who have any fear of death – it is clear that the Buddha, who raises his head with difficulty, to say one last thing, to show the way, has none. And it is only in this last line, which is linked to the first, for the first line is what the Buddha says, after he raises his head – that we discover that the events of the poem are part of a cycle, the great cycle of births and deaths. The author describes the villagers as “that frightened crowd,” a collectivizing way of referring to a number of people. Observe that if she had instead written, “those frightened people,” we would have found it easier to see that the fear resided within each onlooker. But by localizing the fear as that of the crowd, she lets us see it as a kind of mass hysteria. It is as if the fear had become stronger than the individuals in the crowd.

How can the Buddha help to dissolve such a mass of fear? Only by touching each individual heart, and letting that spoken-to person feel the illusoriness of their fear. The Buddha looks *into their faces* – a beautiful locution, because it implies that there is transmission. One person cannot look into another’s face unless the second not only sees the first one looking, but shares in some communication, whether verbal or silent. And by saying *the faces of that frightened crowd*, the poet has suggested, with the mild breaking of a selectional restriction (crowds do not have faces, only individuals in the crowd do – note how much less strongly we would feel that each member of the crowd had been communicated with if we had read “into the faces in that frightened crowd”), that the Buddha’s gaze has broken up the crowd into the individual beings that make it up.

The Buddha’s gaze is the vehicle of the light that his life has been lived to make himself into. And while the four sentences which describe the poet’s every morning sunrise are full of images of light, and of the warmth of the sun’s light, among the Buddha’s six sentences, the only references to light at all are in the first line, and inferentially, in the *looked* of the last line. The Buddha has made of himself a light, and the poet is following in his footsteps. She describes how the light comes to be an ever-stronger presence inside her. But this path of rising light is one for any person who elects to open themselves to it, and if we are lucky enough to have been opened by the poem, we may also feel, with the poet, the light as it comes increasingly into us.

I mention all of this because it borders on a more subtle fusion than any I have thus far talked about. The impact of this poem does not lie in the fact that in it we see how the poet and the Buddha begin to merge – it lies in the fact that we too join in this merger. I am as convinced of the correctness of this line of thought as I am unable to offer a single shred of evidence for it. That is, I can give no textual warrant for my claim, unless it be that the reader is to hear the *looking into the faces of the crowd*, the decollectivizing of the crowd, as having a force sufficiently strong that it can reach out of the poem to enter the heart of each member of the crowd of the poem’s readers.

I mention in passing here this possibility of such a subtle poet < reader fusion (I use the ‘<’ symbol between any number of things which I see as being fusees.), in the hope that future scholars, having more delicate tools than I have now to make use of, will be able to confirm (or disprove) the validity of this idea. Of course, it may be that what I am looking for a proof for is always, automatically, true by definition: that poetry is the kind of text in which any first person is intended to be owned, acknowledged, taken on, by the reader – to speak for the reader. This would relieve me of my embarrassment here, but at a high cost – it would change something that seemed empirical to a tautology. I am rooting for a non-tautological future.

The next poem that I would like to take a quick look at is even more famous than “Fog” – it is Frost’s beautiful “Stopping By Woods On a Snowy Evening.”

STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village, though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost,
The Poetry of Robert Frost,
Holt, Rinehart, and Winston,
New York. (1969) pp. 224-225.

I have argued, in Ross (1982), that there are a number of events in the third stanza of this poem that **stop** us there. One of the devices that Frost uses to achieve this goal is the fading out of agentivity in the occurrences of the first person (followed by a fading back in). The sequence of first-person mentions (including some implicit ones, i. e., zero pronouns) is as follows: *I think, I know, see me, my little horse, to ask Ø if there is some mistake, I have, Ø promises, Ø keep, Ø go, I sleep, Ø go, I sleep*. It is clear that in this sequence, as the first persons go from being the subject of a more or less agentive verb [*think*], to that of a stative verb [*know*], to an object, to a possessive modifier, to becoming a zero pronoun in the third stanza [after *ask*], we are losing more and more first-person participation in the syntax of the clauses in which these pronouns occur. But then, as the subject of one of English’s most stative verbs [*have*], the first persons come out of the non-existence of zero-pronominality, to the highly agentive verbs *promise* and *go*, this last one alternating with to the slightly less agentive verb *sleep*. It would seem fairly reasonable to claim that these first-person mentions trace a passage through what we might call a “valley of non-agentivity.”

Parallellly, if we observe the patterning of locatings in space that Frost gives us, we find four mentions of parts of the surroundings in the first stanza: two mentions of *woods*, one of (the *house* in) the *village*, and one *here*. In the second stanza, there is one clear one, locating poet and horse between the woods and lake, and maybe another one, if you think that denying the *nearness* of a *farmhouse* is one (Frost is oh so wily). We should note, in this regard, that there is a rhythm to the repetitions of the word *woods* – the poem’s most repeated lexical item. Excluding the title, *woods* recurs regularly every four lines – with one notable exception: line 13 (a disingenuous *is there some mistake* hangs in the air, should we have missed the hole in this lexical rhythm).

“The Trail Is Not a Trail”

I drove down the Freeway
 And turned off at an exit
 And went along a highway
 Til it came to a sideroad
 Drove up the sideroad
 Til it turned to a dirt road
 Full of bumps, and stopped.
 Walked up a trail
 But the trail got rough
 And it faded away—
 Out in the open
 Everywhere to go.

Gary Snyder (1986). p. 127

What fuses in this one is the poet and the path he treads. Snyder gives us a dwindling sequence of road sizes, from one associated with the City (and therefore even named [albeit ironically], and capitalized) to the smallest one, the trail. Beyond that, finally, lies traillessness. In the open (the “out” suggests that we have left the shelter of some interior space, which possibly has sheltered us), where there are no people, there can be no trails (except those made by animals). The non-place that Snyder is “going to” is of course the same one that Frost’s stopping takes him to (and us along with him) – the “space” of egolessness, of union with nature.

An interesting way that Snyder accomplishes this can be seen in the first sentence, whose first six lines all have feminine line-final words (i. e., lines whose last syllable bears less stress than the syllable which precedes it) – either in trochaic bisyllables (the first five lines), or in a phrase, *a dirt road*, which though in isolation would have nuclear stress on *road*, here, because of its close contrast with the compound-stressed *sideroad*, must, for me, at least, be read with more stress on *dirt*, thus becoming a sort of trochaic feminoid line-final. And then all traces of feminine line-finals come to a *stop(ped)*.

When we now ask, what is the syntax that is accompanying this transition?, we must answer: it is basically coordinate – the agentive first-person subject of line 1 is followed by five verbs of equal rank, all volitional verbs of motion (or the denial thereof), all but the last followed by a spatial preposition: *drove (down)*, *turned (off)*, *went (along)*, *drove (up)* [note: we are getting higher], *stopped*. This sequence is interrupted by two subordinate clauses in *til*, modifying the third and fourth of the coordinate verbs.

However. While it is syntactically unproblematic to delete *and* between all conjuncts but the last (thus instead of saying *snakes and snails and puppydogs’ tails*, we can abbreviate to *snakes Ø, snails and puppydogs’ tails*), in Snyder’s case, the gap of the deleted *and* which follows *sideroad* definitely brings us up short. It (almost) sounds like the subject that we should hear for *drove up* should be the *it* which was the subject of the previous verb. In other words, Snyder leads us down the garden path of: *it (the highway) came to a sideroad / (and) Drove up the sideroad*. Our first “mistaken” confounding of poet and path. But worse “confusion” is yet to come: what is the subject of *stopped*? Officially, it of course “must” be seen as being the poet – but now, the claims that highway, the referent of the second *it* can make upon being the subject of *stopped* are much stronger. So twice in this first sentence, we are “confused” about whether a verb’s subject is the poet or a path that he is on.

Our “problem” is compounded by the fact that these path words are being used both as objects of spatial prepositions, their natural habitat, and also as subjects of the verbs *came* and *turned*, verbs which normally have agentive subjects. In the second case, Snyder has slyly used an unexpected preposition after *turned*. Unexceptionable would be his saying; “Til (the sideroad) turned into a dirt road” – for *turn into* is

not a verb which requires an agentive subject – any theme will do. Another kettle of fish is *turn to*, which though it occurs in some sentences in which a meaning of “become” seems perfectly natural (like: *my blood turned to ice*), here seems, for reasons that elude me at the moment, to be slanting towards the “rotational (and volitional)” meaning we see in *I turned to Angelica and gave her a danish*. This vestigial personification of the subject of *turned (to)* thus diminishes slightly its conceptual distance from the driver, the “real” turner.

So one mechanism that Snyder makes use of here is what prescriptive grammarians would castigate with such terms as: unclear reference, ambiguous, etc. – as if there were no times when we wished for our references to be unclear.

An upshot of his heavy use of *Conjunction Reduction*, by means of which the repeated subjects of coordinate verbs are elided, is a number of clauses with no apparent subjects. This is true in spades of the last of the poem’s verbs (*to go*), where the subject is not only not apparent, but also not really decidable on. Our first guess is surely that the subject must be something like “one” – some non-specific human subject. But could we not also see the subject as being “trail” – or even, stretching it (for that is the default agenda of poetry – to stretch it maximally), everywhere? Punning irresponsibly, we can almost allow ourselves to hear the last line as an echo of a fast food menu’s *two hotdogs to go*. And where might Everywhere be off to?

If we have had a fusional seed planted by the deletions of Snyder’s first sentence, and can start off his second sentence taking the trail as not so very distinct from the goer on it, how will we hear this trail “getting rough,” or “fading away”? Will these words not take us to the everywhere to which Snyder is (always) headed – that “place” where the ego’s rigid and confining boundaries are dissolving, where poet and universe can become One?

Thus I conclude that studied ambiguity can be another arrow in the poet’s quiver, when the target is fusion. We have seen several arrows in this short note: alternation, and the Law of Corresponding Neighbors, the suppression of a pattern, to make an absence more perceptible. The list goes on and on, and further work will help it to go on even further.

But let there be a time free of argument, of the jostle of claiming. Let us end with a short, luminous poem, by the great Li Po, one for which any evidence would be beside the point, beside the twilight sky clarity of the poet’s intent:

The birds have flown away,
and now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.

Li Po, quoted in Kabat-Zinn (1994), p.140

Footnotes

1. Quoted in Shanon (1993), p. 3.
2. Cf. Cooper and Ross (1975) and the references cited there for some justification of this claim.
3. ‘The Origin of our Moral Ideas,’ quoted in (Jakobson, 1981b, p. 775)

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