

Title of the Course: The Universal Language of Poets and the Shape of Meaning

Alternative Title: Poetese and the Shape of Meaning

Description:

In any literate culture, poetry is **placed language**. Poets decides where on the page to put questions, long words, light or dark vowels. This course aims at explaining the basic elements and processes of “Poetese” (such as rhyme, metaphor, etc.) and also at showing how *corridors* – lines of similar elements – can add visual harmony to poetic impact. They can add to beauty.

Objectives:

This course will aim at familiarizing students with the types of devices that poets can use to make their work transcend the usual bounds of language – that can give it a huge heave-ho towards the eternal. Of course, there will be discussion of such traditional topics as rhyme, alliteration, meter, metaphor, etc. But above and beyond these well-known devices, there are a number of others which have emerged in my research on this topic in the past three decades. Some of these are named in the outline which follows below. I will not try to go into the details of what these terms mean in this brief overview. They are defined in the papers of mine that I have listed below, which I will be happy to furnish, should there be interest in them. Most of the terms, such as *sectioning*, *co-sectioning*, *splitting*, *lonering* and *sore-thumbning* deal with the distribution of linguistic elements. Some of these originate with me, but even if original, they are not revolutionary.

This is not the case with what I call *corridors*. Some poets place 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.

What I have discovered in my work is that such corridors can be in many different parts of the poem, and that they can not only be straight lines, but also curved, and that they can also be closed curves, or polygonal in shape. My intent in this course is to teach the students not only about the more traditional ways of structuring a poem, but also to offer them something like a research seminar, introducing to them the possibility of corridors and other visual devices, an area of research in which I have published nothing to date. Thus I hope to engage the students as co-researchers, and to make our course as discovery-centered as possible. No one in the room, least of

all me, will know what “the right answer” might be – we will all only be looking for next steps in what seems like a promising direction.

### Topical Outline:

- Week One: Some basic concepts of poetic structuration: parallelism, and the kinds of repetition it depends on how it leads to sectioning, co-sectioning, splitting, lonering, sore-thumbing. Rhyme schemes. Fusion.
- Poems: The Twenty-third Psalm; *Dhammapada*; Martin Luther King, “I Have a Dream”; The Declaration of Independence; Stallings, “Explaining an Affinity for Bats”; (May the road rise up to meet you); Hopkins, “The Windhover”; Frost, “The Road Not Taken”; Frost, “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”; Lennon, “Imagine”
- Assignment: find a sore-thumbed stanza in Dylan Thomas’s “Fern Hill.” Discuss the parallels in the “Serenity Prayer.” Diagram the parallels in a selection from a religious text of your choice.
- Week Two: Rhyme schemes revisited. Hologramming and numerical rhyme. Repetition revisited. The “eye” of a poem. The importance of line-initial and line-final positionings. Enjambement.
- Poems: Paz, “Viento, Agua, Piedra”; W. C. Williams, “To Waken an Old Lady”; Frost, “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” (revisit)
- Assignment: find arguments for sectioning Mark Smith-Soto’s “Manhattan Buddha” and Frost’s “Mending Wall.” Find a chapter of a book (not too long) that you are reading and section it.
- Week Three: Integering. Hologramming revisited. The soul of words. Repetition revisited. Sectioning revisited – a hidden stanza. Repetition revisited. The power of ambiguity. Deep puns.
- Poems: Hopkins, “Pied Beauty”; Stevens, “Domination of Black”; Klee, “Zwei Berge”; W. C. Williams, (So much depends)
- Assignment: What is the rhyme scheme of Dylan Thomas’s “In my craft or sullen art”? Is it connected in any way with the impact of the poem?

- Week Four: Simple corridors (straight lines). Chiastic structures. Hidden elements. Alternation. Suspension of linear ordering. Anagramming. Writing with words. Fusion revisited.
- Poems: Dickinson, (The gleam of an heroic act); Levertov, "Living"; Sandburg, "Fog"; Frost, "Fire and Ice"
- Assignment: Find three poems which have left-edge corridors.
- Week Five: Curved corridors. Sectioning and cosectioning revisited. Suspension of linear ordering revisited. Deep puns revisited.
- Poems: Frost, "Out, Out—"; Neruda, "Farewell y los Sollozos"; Frost, "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" (revisit); Frost, "Fire and Ice"
- Assignment: Consider Charles Olson's "These Days." Is it corridored? Does it contain partial anagrams? Are there corridors in Thich Nhat Hanh's "Please Call Me By My True Names"?
- Week Six: Hologramming revisited. Sore-thumbing revisited. Co-sectioning.
- Poem: Blake, "The Tyger"
- Assignment: Is Hopkins's "Pied Beauty" co-sectioned?
- Week Seven: Closed-form corridors. Sore-thumbing revisited. Deep puns.
- Poem: Stevens, "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard"
- Midterm take-home exam.
- Week Eight: Closed-form corridors revisited.
- Poems: Drummond, "Canção Amiga"; Cabral, "Rio e/o Poço"; Stafford, "Traveling Through the Night"
- Assignment: How might Kenyon's "Let Evening Come" be sectioned? Is there a warrant for postulating corridors for it?
- Week Nine: Repetition revisited. The one-end-of-line :: other-end-of-line :: back-to-first-end-of-line gesture.
- Poems: Stevens, "So-and-so reclining on her couch";

Assignment: How might Stevens' poem, "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" be sectioned? Is there a warrant for postulating corridors for it?

Week Ten: Polygonal corridors.

Poem: Hicok, "Other Lives and Dimensions and Finally a Love Poem"

Assignment: See if you can find a poem in which corridoring (or some other kind of visual structure) can be warranted.

Week Eleven: General discussion of the elements of Poetese, and of the kind of argumentation required to justify the postulation of a new one. For instance, how would you justify the addition to the theory of poetics of a new kind of rhyme (say, a rhyme in color, in which "chalk" would rhyme with "snow," "bucktooth," "salt," "Kleenex," and "sugar")? A new kind of alliteration? A new kind of trope? "Sloppy" sonnets (say "sonnets" with 17 lines) or villanelles? Free verse? Sound poetry? Concrete poetry? Does the addition of the notion *corridor* to the inventory of tools on the poet's workbench reduce to the claim that all poetry is (partially/virtually) concrete poetry?

Assignment: See if you can find a poem in which corridoring (or some other kind of visual structure) can be warranted.

Weeks Twelve – Fifteen

All will be more or less like the eleventh week, except that the discussion will revolve around either poems that I bring in, or those that the students bring in, as possible examples of vision-influenced texts. However, as the thumbnail description of Week Eleven suggests, a larger issue is always in the wings of the discussion, namely: what happens in a culture when a new form of poetry becomes recognized? Or a new form of art? Say, rap. Or electronic music. Or wrapping bridges or islands, as in the art of Christo.

There will be a final paper to turn in at the last class meeting, the topics to be arranged individually for each student in consultation with me. The grade will be a function of the work on the mid-term, the final paper, and class participation.

*Reading List for the course*

Papers by Haj Ross:

