

SYMPOSIUM  
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PRINCIPLE  
IN ART AND SCIENCE



# Some Simple Examples of Poetic Metaphor

by Kenneth Kronberg

Anyone who has ever attempted to teach someone something, that is, to *communicate a concept*, learns very early on that the difficulty is wholly other than that encountered when engaged in passing along “information”: because the teacher is immediately confronted with the requirement that the student be made to understand the concept for himself.

This problem is addressed time and again in Plato’s dialogues, where the question of whether “teaching” and “learning” are possible at all is held up to the most penetrating sort of *Socratic* scrutiny. In the dialogue *Meno*, for example, Socrates engages in a discussion with a group of aristocrats spearheaded by the greedy and self-seeking Meno, over the issue of whether “virtue” itself can be taught; that is, whether it is a teachable thing, or if it is

perhaps innate, or comes to be present in some people mysteriously, or by accident. In other words, how can you make someone virtuous, internally, in his own character and psychological make-up? Because as human beings, we are interested in having virtuous people, and not merely in people who have the most up-to-date available information about what someone or other says about “virtue.” And Socrates of course, wielding his characteristic irony, or negative dialectic, demonstrates that none of the dialogue’s participants has a clue concerning what “virtue” is, let alone how to teach it.

It is critical that the problem of how to teach a concept which the student must understand for himself—

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*Leonardo da Vinci, “Hurricane over Horsemen and Trees.”*

“virtue” in this case—leads directly to the dialogue’s investigation of the concept itself, because it demonstrates Plato’s insistence that the nature of ideas, of creative thought, is explicated by analogy to the method of teaching or *communication*. Thus, for Plato, both the science of knowledge (epistemology), and the science of being (ontology: what *is*), are studies whose subject matter is of the same sort as the subject matter of the teaching process itself: the Socratic *method*. Because, it turns out, upon reflection in many of the dialogues, that creative ideas can neither be, nor be understood, as if they were things; they are instead processes, generative, reflective of the fact that the substance of our world is transformation and change. The problem of how change can be ordered, what is the reason that underlies change, becomes, for example, the subject of the *Parmenides* dialogue’s development of the paradoxical relationship between the One and the Many. But it is worth noting that it is in the *Meno*, that there occurs Socrates’ celebrated exchange with the young slave boy, in which Socrates demonstrates the universal accessibility of the concept of *species difference* among cardinalities of the infinite, by leading this uneducated youth to recognize the geometrical incommensurability of the side of a square with its diagonal.

Lyndon LaRouche is the most recent representative of the tradition reaching back to Plato, to investigate and shed new light on these issues. Beginning in 1948-52, he recognized in the works of the Nineteenth-Century mathematicians Bernhard Riemann and Georg Cantor—especially in Cantor’s notion of the *Transfinite*—the seeds of mathematical representations of processes identical, in their species nature, to the process of creative thought. During the same period, he recognized in William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, a contemporary study of the use of ambiguity in Classical poetry, a demonstration of a more narrowly understood representation of what LaRouche came to call *metaphor* in questions of creativity and human communication. LaRouche’s own contribution on the principles of poetry has been reported by him in such locations as “Poe’s Conception of Poetry” (1978), “Why Poetry Must Supersede Mathematics in Physics” (1978), “Beethoven as a Physical Scientist” (1988), and most recently the “Metaphor” essay series in *Fidelio* magazine, beginning with “On the Subject of Metaphor” (1992).

In this last cited work, LaRouche addresses the problem of teaching, of communicating a concept, in the subject of geometry:

At an appropriate place in the secondary curriculum, the traditionalist teacher of secondary school geometry introduced the Pythagorean Theorem. The pupils of that class were guided to re-experience the mental act of the original discovery by Pythagoras himself, thus to reconstruct a copy

of that aspect of Pythagoras’ creative mental processes within the mind of each of the pupils. This new existence within the pupil’s own mind is itself an object of a special kind, a thought-object identified by the *metaphorical* name “Pythagorean Theorem.” The crux of this example is the fact, that the thought-object associated with the metaphorical name “Pythagorean Theorem,” is neither an object of the outward senses, nor an object which can exist explicitly within any medium of communication.

And again, in describing the Classical Humanist form of education:

In each case, first of all, the pupil replicates an original discovery. Within the student’s own intellect, there is approximately a replication of the mental processes of that creative discovery which was experienced earlier by the original discoverer.

(We recognize Socrates’ slave boy in these two examples. LaRouche goes on to highlight the ongoing process.)

Later, the pupil experiences another such crucial discovery, by an original source who depended, in turn, as the student does, upon the prior of these two original sources considered. So it continues. [SEE Figure 1]

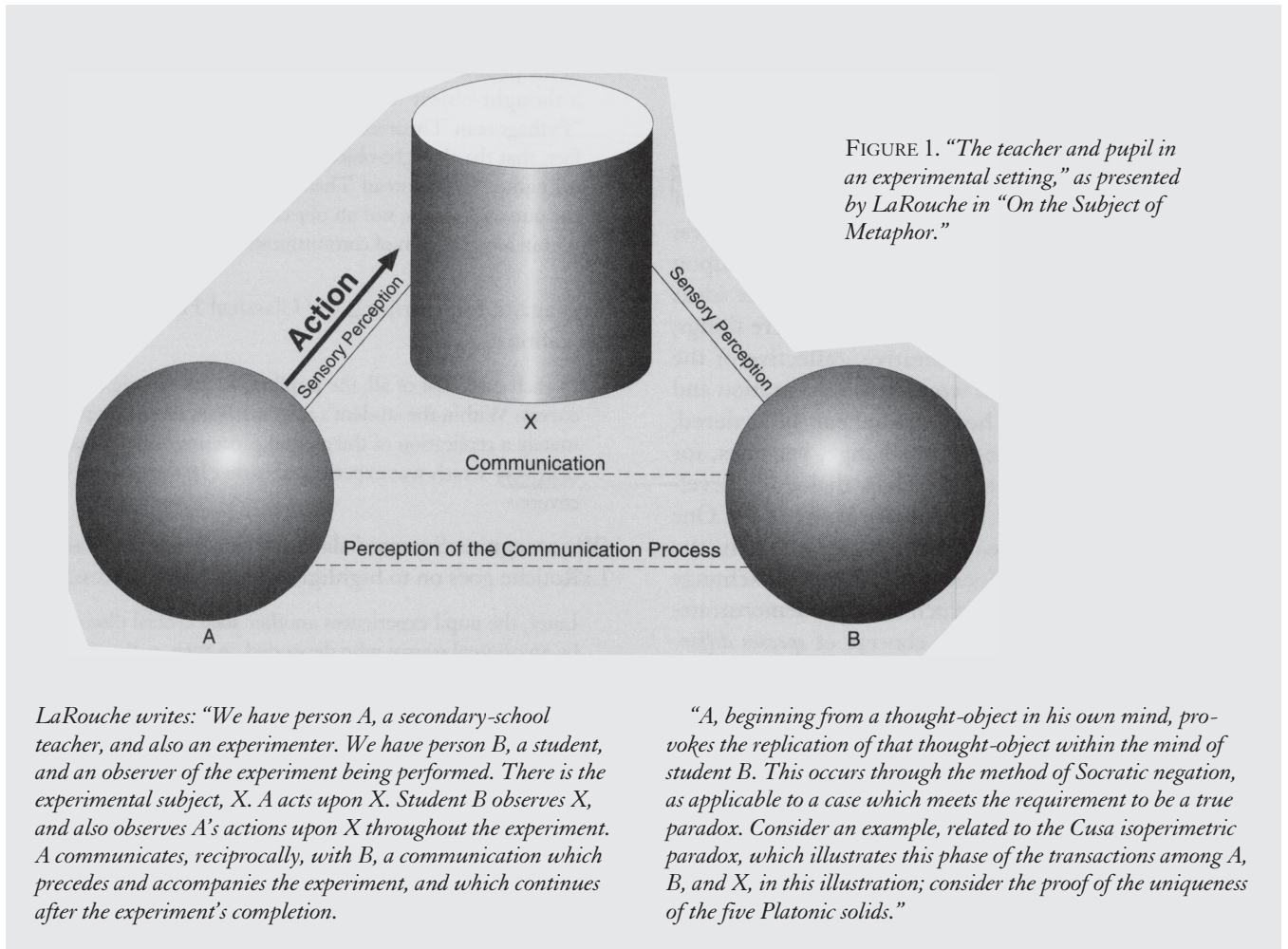
LaRouche describes a particular type or species of discovery, requiring a revolutionary change in axiomatic assumptions, typified by that of Nicolaus of Cusa’s investigation of the paradoxical effort to measure a curved line with straight line segments—the smaller the segment, the greater the number of points of difference between the two lines—which led to the identification of non-algebraic or transcendental functions, in addition to the arithmetical or algebraic functions known to previous mathematics, as

solutions to real problems for the case that there exists no solution solely by means of deductive methods of argument. Those non-deductive solutions, solutions by methods which cannot be represented explicitly by any linear medium, such as communications media, typify the class of thought-objects to which belong the pupil’s reliving of Pythagoras’ discovery . . . .

LaRouche characterizes such a solution-concept as

a leap of consciousness . . . required to discover the alternative to such a concatenation of merely negative [paradoxical] considerations. . . . [A]n apparent solution leaps into the mind of the successful discoverer. That solution, as a thought-object, cannot be directly depicted in terms of communications media available.

How can this indirect communication of such a thought-object (the Platonic idea [*eidōs*] or Leibnizian *Monad*), take place? It must



occur either by causing, dialectically, the creation of that [thought-object] in the mind of the hearer, or by prompting the hearer to recall such an earlier experiencing of the generation of that thought-object.

The accomplishment of this task is assigned to *metaphor*. Not the transmission of "information," but the communication of that class of concepts reflective of the paradoxes associated with change or transformation, in which the experience of creative discovery must be re-created indirectly in the other. In poetry, this is done by juxtaposing irreconcilable sense objects, two sensual (literal) effects, such that the creative discovery is generated in consciousness as a third, *intellectual* thought-object. Metaphor must play this role not only in artistic expression, but

as the essential poetic characteristic of any scientific or similarly rigorous communication. *Metaphor* is the key, the only possible means by which the unutterable is rendered *perfectly intelligible* in communication among two or more persons.

In Plato's lesser-known dialogue *Cratylus*, a humorous effort to link the poetic sound of words to the concepts they represent results in a game of fanciful etymologies where the point is made, that the meaning of words resides not in their literal denotations, but in the broader, shadowy connotative penumbra of unspoken associations and poetic images which bound them. In the middle of this game, Socrates, recalling the philosopher Heraclitus, reminds us that "all things are in motion, and nothing at rest." In the simple poetic examples that follow, we will examine *metaphor* as the form of unspoken communication of that class of thought-objects which reflect the paradoxes to be derived from this simple dictum of Heraclitus.

## Two Examples from the Nursery

### *Singing*

Of speckled eggs the birdie sings  
And nests among the trees;

The sailor sings of ropes and things  
In ships upon the seas.

The children sing in far Japan,  
The children sing in Spain;  
The organ with the organ man  
Is singing in the rain.

—*Robert Louis Stevenson*

Despite its simple, childish subject matter, this strophic poem is constructed along Classical lines, by an author who lived when these principles, although unspoken, were assumed to be the simple bedrock of composition. It comes from the best-known favorite amongst anthologies of children's poems in English, *A Child's Garden of Verse*, by the author who created the great adventures *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*.

The direct, literal subject is the universality of singing, that is, of music, and the lesson is a good one for young children. It proceeds through a series of examples of singing, organized geometrically in a sequence of ever-expanding concentric circles, beginning with the most familiar, and progressing to the increasingly exotic. Thus, (1) the nearby birdie (a mommy) sings of her eggs while cozying within a small, familiar home; later (2), the sailor (a grown-up) sings of ropes (that is, implements) in the unfamiliar environment of ocean and adventure. The pace of expansion doubles in the second strophe, increasing the density of transformations, where only a single line apiece is given to the mention of far-off destinations like Japan and Spain (3), places so different from home that singing itself must occur in a completely foreign language.

Thus far, the poem resembles many others in the collection, which are meant to focus the child's imagination on the act of discovery, by presenting contrasting relationships of the familiar and the unknown. But suddenly, the last two lines create a complex, telescoped irony, a metaphor, which lifts us out of the literal meaning and forces the discovery upon us: because, all of a sudden, the direction of motion changes. We are no longer traveling farther and farther to far-off lands; instead, the exotic organ man, the "far-away," is thrust right in front of us: we can see him on the street as we look from the window of our house on a rainy (mundane) day.

Thus, the irony has turned everything "inside out," like a glove that gets pulled off the wrong way! The far-off is suddenly the familiar, and *vice versa*. The irony here is itself the metaphor, the thought-object, of this little children's poem, authored by a man who went from a bedridden, tubercular English childhood to explore the wonders of the California Gold Coast and the Pacific South Seas.

### *Who Has Seen the Wind?*

Who has seen the wind?  
Neither I nor you:  
But when the leaves hang trembling,  
The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?  
Neither you nor I:  
But when the trees bow down their heads,  
The wind is passing by.

—*Christina Rossetti*

Clearly, this simple, strophic poem is for somewhat older children, because the literal subject matter presents a concept that cannot be addressed verbally at too young an age: the certain existence of non-material things, things we cannot see, or hear, or taste, or feel. These are the things of the spirit: thought, hope, goodness, love, and the God whom man imitates in consciousness. And in this poem, the devotional tone ("bow down their heads") most certainly is intended to imply reverence for the Almighty.

Many readers will immediately recognize the use of the wind as an image for such things, because it is used this way in one of the greatest and most familiar poems in English, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." In fact, it is likely that the author conceived this poem as an adaptation of the idea expressed at the very beginning of Shelley's "West Wind," of the wind's "unseen presence" driving the dead leaves of autumn.

At first glance, the two strophes seem almost so identical as to deny the possibility of development, without which metaphor is impossible. But this is the trick used in the poem to focus its meaning. Because so little changes, the inversion (irony) from the first strophe's answer

Who has seen the wind?  
*Neither I nor you:*

to the second strophe's answer

Who has seen the wind?  
*Neither you nor I:*

is unmistakable, almost joking; and the shifting of the rhyme ("you-through" to "I-by") is virtually the poem's entire musical content.

Now, what does this irony tell us? That I know that you know something, and that you know that I know something; that is, that "I know that you know that I know . . .," and that "you know that I know that you

know . . . .” Which means that between the two of us, there exists some third thing. We experience this third thing immediately, in the ironic inversion of the lines; but can we touch, or see, or taste this third thing, this *communication of ideas*, which we share, but which exists spiritually and not materially? Here again, the ironic juxtaposition creates the metaphor, and we experience the thought-object above the poem’s literal subject matter.

## Two Growing Up Poems

### *A Widow Bird*

A widow bird sat mourning for her love  
Upon a wintry bough;  
The frozen wind crept on above,  
The freezing stream below.

There was no leaf upon the forest bare,  
No flower upon the ground,  
And little motion in the air  
Except the mill-wheel’s sound.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

It goes without saying, that although this is a minor strophic poem with a limited subject, we are dealing here with a composer of infinitely greater power than the two previous poets. (There are many short, oftentimes fragmentary bits of poems in Shelley’s collected works, which show the poet working through ideas which reappear transformed in mature, developed form in the larger compositions. But in this case, this short work is itself a fully-composed poem.)

As *per* its title, the subject of the poem appears to be a meditation about loss. Death has come to the bird’s mate, just as it has come, through the change of seasons, to all nature: tree, wind, stream, forest, all are bleak. The widow bird is suffering. This is what the poet sees on his solitary walk through the woods; but although it is sad, the picture in itself does not constitute the true subject-matter of poetry, which is to say, metaphor.

But then, through the winter stillness, there penetrates a sound, and it is a sound of civilization, man-made and human. But the poet dismisses it with a bitter irony:

And little motion in the air  
Except the mill-wheel’s sound.

Why? Because it is the repetitive sound of an indifferent machine. Consider the situation from the poet’s standpoint. The bird is suffering, and the poet knows it, but no one else cares, or thinks to come to her aid;

mankind, in the person of the mill-wheel, is indifferent. Now, death is part of life, and nature cannot be unjust; but man’s indifference to suffering, that is injustice. The poet knows, immediately, that mankind must be roused from this indifference by a sense of justice; mankind must be mobilized! Remember, the poet is Percy Shelley, the sworn enemy of oligarchism and the murderous Castlereagh, who as a young man journeyed to the streets of Dublin to leaflet his revolutionary tracts among the oppressed populace.

The author does not explain this to us, because he wants us to understand it for ourselves. Instead, he creates an irony between the nature-picture which begins the poem, and its last line; and this irony creates the metaphor—the urgent need to rouse mankind—which is the thought-object of this short work. It is, incidentally, a metaphor which may be found in other famous works; for example, in *The History of the Ingenious Gentleman, Don Quixote de la Mancha*.

### *A Green Cornfield*

The earth was green, the sky was blue:  
I saw and heard one sunny morn  
A skylark hang between the two,  
A singing speck above the corn.

A stage below, in gay accord,  
White butterflies danced on the wing,  
And still the singing skylark soared,  
And silent sank and soared to sing.

The cornfield stretched a tender green  
To right and left beside my walks;  
I knew he had a nest unseen  
Somewhere among the million stalks.

And as I paused to hear his song  
While swift the sunny moments slid,  
Perhaps his mate sat listening long,  
And listened longer than I did.

—Christina Rossetti

Structurally, from a literal standpoint this poem by Christina Rossetti is almost the inverse of Shelley’s “Widow Bird.” After all, whereas Shelley took a walk in winter and found a bird mourning, Rossetti takes a walk in the spring and finds a bird singing and soaring with life-giving energy. The mood is quite joyous, and the playful freedom of the lark, who dips and soars as butterflies dance between him and the stalks below, expresses the optimism of tender, green youth. But, as in the case of the

“Widow Bird,” this springtime joyfulness cannot by itself constitute a poetic subject; it is not a metaphor, but a sort of simile, a soap-opera mood piece.

The poet is led to hypothesize the presence of an unseen love nesting below, if for no other reason than that the springtime demands it, and that the lark’s exuberant acrobatics must be directed to another, because joy and hope cannot be solitary, but must be reciprocated. (We saw in “Who Has Seen the Wind?” that the author is attuned to the invisible causes of visible effects.) Suddenly, as when a summer storm approaches, things become unsettled:

. . . swift the sunny moments slid,  
Perhaps his mate sat listening long,  
And listened longer than I did.

Coming as it does at the end of a happy poem about spring, the abrupt end line speaks an unspoken bitterness. But why? Is it just that the hour has grown late, the sun is sinking, and the poet must get home for dinner? Is that why she cannot stay to listen, as the lark’s mate listens? Or is it that she is suddenly overwhelmed by loneliness, by the absence of love in her own life, by her jealousy and rage at an unseen bird who joys in the songs and dances her husband makes for her?

For you see, the poet has no husband to love.

But the poet does not complain, literally; she is not looking for sympathy, but to communicate a concept. It is possible to understand love, real love, as taking joy in another’s accomplishments, and still to live without it. That is the metaphor generated by the ironic ending to this poem.\*

## Adolescence, and Beyond

### *May Song*

*[metrical crib]*

How glorious nature  
Illumines me!  
How the sun sparkles!  
How the meads laugh!

### *Mailed*

Wie herrlich leuchtet  
Mir die Natur!  
Wie glänzt die Sonne!  
Wie lacht die Flur!

The blossoms break forth  
From every branch,  
A thousand voices  
From out the bush

Es dringen Blüten  
Aus jedem Zweig  
Und tausend Stimmen  
Aus dem Gesträuch

And joy and delight  
From every breast.  
O Earth, O sun!  
O bliss, O romance!

Und Freud und Wonne  
Aus jeder Brust.  
O Erd, o Sonne!  
O Glück, o Lust!

O Love, O loved one!  
So golden fair,  
Like the morning clouds  
On hilltops there!

O Lieb, o Liebe!  
So golden schön,  
Wie Morgenwolken  
Auf jenen Hön!

You bless in splendor  
The freshly field,  
With breath of flowers  
The profuse world.

Du segnest herrlich  
Das frische Feld,  
Im Blütendampfe  
Die volle Welt.

O maiden, maiden,  
How I love you!  
How your eyes dazzle!  
How you love me!

O Mädchen, Mädchen,  
Wie lieb ich dich!  
Wie blickt dein Auge!  
Wie liebst du mich!

Just as the lark loves  
Singing and air,  
And morning blossoms  
The scent of sky

So liebt die Lerche  
Gesang und Luft,  
Und Morgenblumen  
Den Himmelsduft,

So love I you  
Warmbloodedly,  
Who give me the youth  
And joy and strength

Wie ich dich liebe  
Mit warmem Blut,  
Die du mir Jugend  
Und Freud und Mut

To dare new poems  
And dancing too.  
Be ever blissful,  
As you love me!

Zu neuen Liedern  
Und Tänzén gibst.  
Sei ewig glücklich,  
Wie du mich liebst!

—*J.W. von Goethe*

What an exuberant song of young love! All of nature, the whole of the May, is organizing itself to enhance this young man’s joy. Everything is morning fresh, sparkling, the sun warms him and the birds sing for him. He is like the skylark, ready to dare new dips and pivots as he soars through the air. He is in love with his sweetheart, he is in love with Love!

Everyone should, at least once, be where this youth finds himself.

And yet, in itself, this mood of infatuation is not itself

\* Readers who are worried about Miss Rosetti, should consult her later poem “A Birthday,” in which she announces

My heart is like a singing bird  
...  
Because the birthday of my life  
Is come, my love is come to me.

a subject for Classical poetry; and Goethe, who knows what a poem is, does not settle for it.

Let us examine the structure of the poem, which is composed of three strophic groups of equal length. Part I (strophes 1-3), presents the youth's infatuation, and the fact that all nature participates in it; this is summarized by the culminating exclamations

O Erd, o Sonne!  
O Glück, o Lust!

which conjoin nature and his love. (Readers who do not know German should consult the line-for-line crib supplied to the left of the poem. A recent English-language verse translation, which gives something of the musical sense of the original, is appended at the end of this article.)

Part II (strophes 4-6) advances on to introduce through direct address the loved one, who now takes the place of nature's sun in lighting and nourishing the world. It culminates in an ironic inversion

Wie lieb ich dich!  
...  
Wie liebst du mich!

reminiscent of what we saw in "Who Has Seen the Wind":

Neither I nor you:  
...  
Neither you nor I:

which subsumed metaphor asserts the presence of a third, unseen existence, different from both boy and girl, which is the love they share; although here, it is being loved, that is, being the recipient of love, which is what is important. (The English-language translation at the article's end nicely captures the exuberance of this inversion.)

Part III (strophes 7-9) gives us yet another skylark, advancing the poem further through a single sentence whose geometrically complex (dense) set of comparisons or analogies illustrate how his love gives him the freedom to be joyous and creative. And then Goethe gives us the final "zinger" that reaffirms and elevates our understanding of love, by turning the perspective inside out:

Sei ewig glücklich,  
Wie du mich liebst!

Despite the playful similarity, this is not the merely exuberant "How you love me!" that concluded part II. There is a double meaning that is difficult to successful-

ly represent in the cognate four English words, because the youth is simultaneously telling his beloved to remain forever happy as she continues to love him, but also that she should be forever happy "with this happiness in which you love me"—that is, it is the act of loving another (and not of being loved) that *brings* happiness. This is what the lovers share, what each "knows the other knows." The poet has set us up for this inversion with the final rhyme "gibst/liebst" (gives/loves), which conjoins together *giving* and *loving* at the moment the youth rises above his concern for himself, to reveal the joy of mutual love.

What is the gift love gives? It is the courage to create new songs and new dances: that is, love transforms the other, it *changes* the other and nurtures the other's creative powers. We experience this gift as joyful liberation. Goethe's irony creates the metaphor that lifts us to understand this, and distinguishes the poem as a Classical composition.

### *To My Mother*

Because I feel that, in the Heavens above,  
The angels, whispering to one another,  
Can find, among their burning terms of love,  
None so devotional as that of "Mother,"  
Therefore by that dear name I long have called you—  
You who are more than mother unto me,  
And fill my heart of hearts, where Death installed you  
In setting my Virginia's spirit free.  
My mother—my own mother, who died early,  
Was but the mother of myself; but you  
Are mother to the one I loved so dearly,  
And thus are dearer than the mother I knew  
By that infinity with which my wife  
Was dearer to my soul than its soul-life.

—Edgar Allan Poe

There is something mysterious about this sonnet. It is, literally, a mystery story, in which the author adopts the role of detective in an effort to discover the truth; he is a veritable poetic C. Auguste Dupin, sifting through the unreal to uncover the real. But while the action is driven relentlessly by the need to peel off layers of falsity, there seems to be an almost physical sensation that we are descending; so that, rather than rising upward with each new discovery, we appear to be being sucked deeper and deeper downward into a murky pit or confused, swirling maelstrom.

Of the two major variants of the strophic sonnet form, this one—the "Shakespearean"—is composed of three quatrains (four-line stanzas), followed by a final couplet that often presents in condensed form a metaphor which

summarizes the thought-object developed through the poem. Formally, however, Poe has grouped the sonnet into two parts that mimic the “Italian” sonnet division of initial eight-line octet, followed by a six-line sextet; this is clear from the division into two sentences, and in the shift in tone that occurs when the sextet begins

My mother—my own mother, who died early . . .

The poem’s title, “To My Mother,” is wholly deceptive. For we learn in the octet that the poem is addressed to someone who is actually

. . . more than a mother unto me,

whom the poet has installed in his affections following the death of Virginia. So, rather than the sort of “bird’s death” we encountered earlier, symbolic of earthly nature and the unavoidable passing of time, we are dealing here with a literal subject that is much closer to us: the death of our own flesh and blood. But it is also clear that Poe’s investigation is not of fleshly matters and sensory things, but of things spiritual.

An initial irony is presented, as the poet portrays the liberation of one (Virginia’s spirit) as bringing about the imprisonment (installation) of the other. Thus begins, in the sextet, a series of seeming paradoxes, interleaved with revelations and complicated geometrical relationships measured by a metric of “dearness” that simultaneously implies both love and valuation. Thus, the mother addressed in the poem is not the poet’s real (“own”) mother, but the mother of his loved one, while his “own” (real) mother—the mother whom he “knew”—is *merely* the mother of himself. And so on, culminating in the final paradox, that

. . . my wife  
Was dearer to my soul than its soul-life.

So it now appears that the poem’s subject is not anyone’s mother, but the poet’s wife. Not his wife actually, but the spiritual relationship between man and wife. We are dealing with familiar ground here, having learned about such unseen relationships in “Who Has Seen the Wind?,” “The Green Cornfield,” and “Mailed.” But the solution to this spiritual investigation seems to end in a conundrum, for how can something be dearer than the life which gives us the consciousness to experience it? How can something be closer to the soul, than the soul itself?

To overcome this paradox, the path of investigation forces the detective to jettison the familiar Euclidean

metric of *greater than/less than* (“more” than a mother; “dearer”) with which he began: because the truth proves to reside in a realm of “infinity”—the transfinite—where such metrics have no meaning, where quantity must give way to cardinality and the truth is found in what Plato called the *eidē*, in the *types* or *species* of existence. In speaking of the soul, our detective must enter the realm of Leibniz’s *Monads*.

To recapitulate. The poet, beset by a sense of loss, initially set out to recapture his lost wife. The effort to recapture her has forced a spiritual, that is *Psyche*-logical, journey of discovery, in which the subject matter becomes increasingly the method of investigation itself. The drive that propels the accelerating rhythms of the sextet with an almost desperate grasping to get *closer* to the truth, ends in paradox, which can only be resolved by leaping to a wholly different realm of thought. The investigation’s subject becomes the investigator; the subject of the metaphor, metaphor itself. The poet is freed when a self-discovered, crucial truth about the soul is realized: that it is a transfinite, generative process. This is the thought-object, the swirling maelstrom, captured in Poe’s sonnet.

## In Conclusion

### *Music*

Music, when soft voices die,  
Vibrates in the memory—  
Odors, when sweet violets sicken,  
Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,  
Are heaped for the beloved’s bed;  
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,  
Love itself shall slumber on.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

We began our examples with music in the nursery, the universal music of children. Here we have music again, but it is grown-up music; neither the full-rounded exuberance of Goethe, nor the dark mystery of Poe, but the clear, precise, Italianate English singing voice of Shelley. And we find in this little Classical poem variations on many of the characteristic philosophical themes developed by Shelley in his larger works: the delicate balance between sensibility and sense, our appreciation of nature’s beauty, memory, death, and the affirmation of the primacy of man’s intellectual powers.

This is no longer such a simple example. The density of things happening artistically in these eight lines, of



doubly-charged words and secondary compositional elements and secondary voices, is more than we can describe in our illustration summary. But the bare bones of the poem go like this:

Strophe I: Two precisely parallel examples of the same literal idea are given, each a couplet in length (the couplet is the shortest poetic unit of a fully expressed idea), developing a parallelism between the sense of hearing and the sense of smell:

Music, when . . .  
...  
Odors, when . . . .

(The second couplet seems to develop beyond the first, because the lines are a syllable longer, the last trochaic foot having been filled out with the feminine rhyme “sicken/quicken.”) The idea is straightforward: We can recall in memory a sound or scent, after the source of the sensation has ceased. The philosophical principle: the causes that stimulate and give life to (“quicken”) the sensations recorded in our thoughts, continue to live on in our thoughts after the material demise of the cause.

Strophe II: At first glance, the second strophe appears to be repeating the exact same form as the first, with a slight re-ordering of the syntax:

Roses leaves, . . .  
...  
...  
Love . . . ,

yielding two sets of parallels, Music-Odors and Roses-Love, and perhaps a linear sequence: Music-Odors-Roses-Love. (This sense is reinforced by the changed patterns of line length and scansion, which tend to unite musically the first and last lines of strophe II.) This would make the relationship between the two strophes similar to what we saw earlier in the children’s poem about the wind, in which two identical forms highlighted a seemingly minor inversion. But this isn’t true at all. It is, instead, a strongly felt misdirection, an ambiguity set up by the poet for the purpose of increasing the tension associated with the actual meaning of the poem, by confusing the geometrical relationship between strophe I and strophe II.

Closer examination shows that strophe II does not contain two examples, each a couplet in length, of the same idea (as does strophe I), but that instead, there is only one literal idea, albeit itself an analogy or comparison between two parallel things, presented in the second strophe’s four lines. Geometrically speaking, this means that the second strophe has telescoped or projected out

the couplet of strophe I into a quatrain; that is, there is an expansion process taking place, in which a greater density of relations appear in the same (condensed) space, and not a mere linear repetition.

What is this expanded literal idea? Just as rose petals (A) can, after the death of the rose (B), become a bed on which one’s beloved (C) sleeps, so a beloved’s (“thy”) thoughts (A) can, after her (B) death, become a bed on which Love (C) sleeps. I am labeling this analogy as a geometrical diagram for clarity, but also to convey how complicated it really is. Alas, however, it is even more complicated than that. Because the expression “thy thoughts” can mean both directly her thoughts, but also, the poet’s thoughts about her; in fact, if we look back at strophe I and the couplets out of which this quatrain is projected, we would conclude that the thoughts in the mind of the beloved are the stimulant that quickens the thoughts of her in the mind of the poet, and that the expression means both things simultaneously. This ambiguity is not accidental.

So now, as a result of this geometry lesson, we can state the literal gist of the poem: Even after her death, my beloved will live on (and my love for her will live on) in my thoughts, which is the true location of love.

Now, this is a lovely sentiment, but it is not a poem; for we have not yet shown a thought-object, some communication to the reader that lives for the reader’s mind as it lives for the poet’s.

Let us abandon our initial attempt as having been necessary, but not sufficient. Let us begin not at the poem’s beginning, but at its end.

Some readers may note an eerie effect of the poem’s concluding line. It presents, apparently, a simple, straightforward literal meaning—Love will continue to slumber, that is, live on—while at the same time it seems wholly unsatisfying, as if the meaning of the previous line remains incomplete, or unanswered. This eerie effect is actually written into the poem, because the seeming simple meaning is not the grammatical meaning at all (see the geometrical description of the grammar above); that is, the last line actually seems to mean two different things simultaneously. Shelley has built this ambiguity out of a pun on the verbal action “slumber on,” whose preposition can indicate both the meaning “slumber on [in time],” i.e., “continue to slumber,” and also the meaning “slumber on top of,” in this case, “slumber on top of a bed made of thoughts, like a bed made of rose leaves.” In fact, the double meaning of “slumber on” unites the two strophes; it defines the transformation in meaning from the couplets of strophe I, to the more complicated, expanded figure of strophe II.

This ironic double meaning is only the beginning of

the powderkeg loaded into that delicate “slumber on,” however. Think about it: what is the image evoked by Shelley in this line, which, although unspoken, we cannot help imagining? It is the picture of his beloved lying softly asleep beside him. Her face is calm; and as the poet gazes, watching her eyes move animated by dreams, he is suddenly overwhelmed by the desire to get *closer* to the silent thoughts he sees, to reach out for them and to grasp them. But he cannot possess these thoughts. They are elusive, fleeting, like the double-meaning of the verbal “slumber on.” Sometimes, he can re-create these thoughts within his own thoughts, he can make them live for him even though he cannot hold them or possess them: for they are like fragrant music. This elusive metaphor is the thought-object that animates the complex philosophical grammar of these two simple strophes, and that makes them live forever in the recollection of the reader.

Shelley addresses this issue of thoughts in very many locations, often using the same image of leaves he uses here. In the previously mentioned “Ode to the West Wind,” for example, in which all the elemental forces of nature are presented, he introduces the dying leaves of autumn, which the Wind scatters

... like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing.

But in that larger work, his purpose is to explore the more profound issue of thoughts in relationship to the creative energy of mind which conceives them. The Wind is that creative energy of transformation, that wild spirit (*maelstrom*) which simultaneously destroys and preserves, which brings wintry death as it sows the seeds of spring. It is the principle of true change, of generation, which is as pitiless toward the *status quo* as it is toward the past, and the poet appeals to it for unlimited access to its elusive, unseen power:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:

...

... Be thou, Spirit fierce,

My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

such that the fruit of metaphor might plant new thoughts in others:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!

(“quicken”!), and

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!

—so that the poet might become the agency of world justice, the Platonic “legislator” in Shelley’s phrase elsewhere, who can fulfill the responsibility he feels to *give* the gift of transfinite intellectual power known to him from his own mental process, to all humanity, and thus liberate mankind through the power of metaphor to break free from the dead axioms that shape and constrain man’s imagination, so that man may at last become truly human, to be able to act truly *in the image of God*.

Dr. Frederick Wills, the now-deceased Justice Minister of Guyana who campaigned courageously in the international political arena for the economic development of the Third World, and who was one of the founding leaders of the worldwide Schiller Institute, once commented to me on first-reading of a poem, that it was successful because it inspired in him new thoughts and the desire to write new poems himself. This is where the simple examples we have investigated lead us; and it is why the study of Classical poetry must serve as the starting point in our quest to make the principle of creative discovery once again central to the artistic and scientific endeavors upon which the future, and past, of mankind’s civilization depend.

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*May Song\**

by J.W. von Goethe

How fine a light on  
Nature today!  
The sun’s in glory!  
The fields at play!

What feats of blossom  
A twig achieves!  
A thousand voices  
Delight the leaves!

And every pleasure  
For girl, for boy!  
The sun-warm country  
Of joy on joy!

Oh love! O lovely!  
My golden girl!  
Like clouds at morning  
Your rose and pearl!

You lean in blessing  
On earth’s cool bloom,

The world a richness of  
Dense perfume!

O darling, darling!  
I’m wild for you!  
Your lashes dazzle:  
You love me too!

The lark loves singing  
Away up there;  
The flowers at morning  
Delight in the air,

As I adore you, with  
Blood a-thrill!  
It’s youth you give me,  
Ecstatic will

For newer music  
And dancing! Be  
In bliss forever,  
As you love me!

*translated by John Frederick Nims*

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