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“Song of the wave”: Frostian poetics of resurgence

As New England poet Robert Frost writes in the preface to one of his volumes, “a poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written. We read A the better to read B (we have to start somewhere; we may get very little out of A). We read B the better to read C, C the better to read D, D the better to go back and get something more out of A. Progress is not the aim, but circulation”,¹ putting into relief the dense generic intertextuality of his own poetic works which he purposefully chose to establish at the crossroads of the old poetic tradition and his own poetic modernity, constantly borrowing from both, and taking a slight formal and thematic distance from these influences. Such statement thus sums up his own writing technique of repetition and variation, of constant circulation between forms and models and poetic appropriation, making for challenging and puzzling reading. But the poet’s statement also highlights a more complex intratextual game at stake in all the volumes: the issue of double, circular reading of the poems because the collections form a vast chamber of echoes, a hide-and-seek game on multiple scales and levels—from the stage of the volume, down to the metric foot. This paper wishes to consider the Frostian play on intratextual echoes as a space of resurgence, in which the poems become the frame for a return or a revival of poetic occurrences, motifs and sounds, but re-used, re-appearing, circulating again with a difference and some typographic variations. We would first like to consider this poetics of resurgence through the technique of intratextual echoes in the original edition of Frost’s fourth collection, *New Hampshire* (1923), in which the staging of echoes is made possible through the interweaving of notes and grace notes. Such staging of Frostian sounds and of poetic inspiration (through the attention paid to the journey of the poetic breath in the volumes) also requires a system of microscopic, embedded reading in which the reader is guided from one line to another and expected to guess and trace the echoes of lost sounds.

¹ Frost, Robert. “The Prerequisites”, Preface to *Aforesaid*, 1954 (Poirier 815).

“The nearest boundary to escape across”:² interweaving notes

The hide-and-seek technique of Frostian resurgence bases itself on a dense network of intratextual echoes—understood here both in its first sense of repetition of a sound, and the return of an implicit reference. Reading one collection by Frost is actually accepting to adopt a circular approach and read each poem as closely interwoven to the next, as closely understandable through the next—reaching the meaning is indeed “escaping across the nearest boundary” of each poem to adopt an overall view of the intratextual and self-referential quality of the work. We would like to focus more particularly on Frost’s original edition of his fourth Pulitzer Prize-winning 1923 collection *New Hampshire*, as the most elaborate example of such technique of purposefully interweaving references and echoes.³ When it first came out, *New Hampshire* was originally structured as a triptych with the lengthened title *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes*. Such body of critical notes combined with some extra ornamental notes (the grace notes, as in a music score) altogether inscribed the volume into a playful mode thanks to the openly parodic and mockingly scholarly aspect of its structure and title.

The title page of *New Hampshire* carries the mock-scholarly subtitle ‘A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes’, indicating its tripartite division: the title poem, a section of ‘Notes’ (including thirteen poems, mostly dramatic monologues and dialogues), and a final section of ‘Grace Notes’ (featuring thirty shorter lyrics). Many items in the title poem are footnoted, and the reader is led to other poems in the ‘Notes’ section that ‘gloss’ these items ... The section ‘Grace Notes’, a musical term that means notes in a composition that are purely ornamental and do not further the exposition of a theme, features a range of poems that do not bear directly on the contents of *New Hampshire* but fill out the volume with a diversity of forms and themes. (Tyler B. Hoffman, in Lewis 230-31)

The parodic intertext is in this case a reference to T.S. Eliot’s long poem *The Waste Land* which had been published a few months before, in December 1922, and whose impressive body of critical notes was equally elaborate and obscure, paradoxically multiplying the number of possible interpretations of one item when the first role of a critical footnote is to frame it. Frost wrote his notes and grace notes the way Eliot did: for one given line, each note started by “Cf.”, followed by an intratextual paginated reference to another poem of the same collection for Frost (and to another intertextual work in Eliot).

² Quotation from the poem “New Hampshire”, in the *New Hampshire* collection (Poirier 158).

³ Such auctorial decision is made obvious in the fact that the later editions of *New Hampshire* no longer presented such technique, Frost having decided to erase all the critical body of notes, and shortened the volume’s title.

“Said some of the best things we ever said: ‘Cf. page 162, ‘A Star in a Stone-boat’; and page 201, ‘I Will Sing You One-O’ ”. (Poirier 168)

As Tyler B. Hoffman explains about the eponymous threshold-poem, the opening poem of the collection, “New Hampshire” (which is given the largest amount of notes and grace notes), the volume so acquires its own internal logic, and functions as a closed circuit, being its own critical echo and an open joke on the part of Frost against Eliot’s opaque critical gloss in *The Waste Land*.

For instance, when the title poem mentions ‘a man who failing as a farmer / Burned down his farmhouse for the fire insurance’, we are directed to a footnote to ‘The Star-Splitter’ in ‘Notes’, a poem that tells the story of that farmer in greater detail. Unlike Eliot’s footnotes, which refer readers to a list of scholarly citations meant to elucidate symbols within the poem but which often obscure them further. Frost’s footnotes lead the reader to other poems in the same book, as if to insist that outside knowledge is not necessary to interpret and appreciate the figures that he imagines. Frost thereby announces his text as a self-enclosed intellectual system and invites a wider range of readers than Eliot does. (Tyler B. Hoffman, in Lewis 230)

Such system of resurgence implying interwoven intratextual notes is only one side of the intricate Frostian chamber of echoes. The elaborate game of hide-and-seek initiated at the level of the volume is also taken up on a smaller scale, reaching the frame of the poem, the line, and down to the syllable itself. The strategy of resurgence thus becomes a system of microscopic, embedded reading: the Frostian reader is required to read into, guess words within words, and trace echoes of lost sounds from one metric foot to another. Some of the poet’s uncollected poems actually confront the reader with a dizzying practice of minute sound variations.

“The aim was song”:⁴ tracing echoes of lost sounds

The 1957 untitled sestet “*Her husband gave her a ring*”—belonging to the series of *Uncollected Poems*—illustrates the poet’s exploration of the repetition / variation diptych, thanks to an intricate play on recurring rhythmic cells. Sounds are staged to repeat themselves and to be pronounced hidden within other words of the poem, and no longer independently: thus aggregating the phonemes, the sestet establishes a network of deformed echoes between the signifiers without ever resorting to the signified.

Her husband gave her a ring
To keep her a virtuous thing.
But the fellow to whom I’m referring

⁴ Title of a *New Hampshire* poem (Poirier 207).

He gave her an earring for erring.
He also gave her a necklace
For being so sinfully reckless.

(Poirier 559)

The dizzying sound tricks of the sestet revolve around the reflection on the jewel symbol: crossed isotopies of luxury and lust are tackled here on a clearly ironical and playful mode. Modern Diderot-like “indiscreet jewels”⁵—the ring, the earring and the necklace—are the lavish and extravagant instruments of an adultery they condemn through their very combination of phonemes, and their strategic position in the stanza. These three lexical items superimpose onto the voice of the *persona* (“I”), acting as moral judge of such scene: the phrase “I’m referring” (line 3) can thus be heard both as a desire to name the seducer-lover (“to refer to someone”, to make allusion to someone), and as “referee”, the umpire of the game who guarantees the respect of the law and of good moral standards. The resurgence technique builds up a system of portmanteau words used as regular lexical items—the boundaries between signifier and signified are blurred in scattering clues of the adulterous fault, under the form of sound and visual echoes within the words themselves. Indeed, none of the characters of this love triangle is identified in this sestet in which the issue of naming is paradoxically solved when observing the clues given by the words carefully chosen by the poet. For instance, the adulteress’s identity—while being referred to as “her” (/h3:r/) five times in the stanza—will then be revealed by the repetition of the same phonemic combination /3:r/, in the terms “referring” and “erring”. The verb “referring” therefore enables to unveil the male seducer because it gathers together the sound of the adulterous misconduct (“erring”, used here as verbal ending), the jewel which led the woman to temptation (the “earring”, because of the doubled “r”), and the first letter of his identity (the “f” in “fellow”, line 3): “referring”. The following line (line 4) elliptically sums up such powerful phonemic resurgence phenomenon: “an earring for erring”, combining the guilty object (“earring”), sharing the doubled consonant “r” with the sin it has provoked (“erring”), and textually embracing the culprit of such crime (the “fellow”) present through the letter “f” in the preposition “for”. When pronounced quickly, this very expression in line 4, “an earring for erring”, can also be heard as “an earring for a ring”, thus balancing the guilty jewel of adultery (the earring) and the lawful jewel of marital love (the wedding ring). Presented in strong anaphoric position through the personal pronoun “he” in lines 4 and 5 (“He gave her”, “He also gave her”), the seducer is always the one poisoning the poem with the adulterous fault on a thematic level

⁵ *The Indiscreet Jewels (Les Bijoux Indiscrets)* is the first novel by Denis Diderot, published anonymously in 1748. It is an allegory that portrays Louis XV as the sultan Mangogul of the Congo who owns a magic ring that makes women's genitals (“jewels”) talk, and reveal all the adulterous and scandalous secrets of the Court.

(because of the two jewels he offers the lady—the necklace and the earring), but also on a visual level. In offering her the necklace, he brings the vowel “a” (“necklace”) back into the stanza when this very scarlet letter “a” was already cankering the first jewel (the “eararing”), and the verb itself (“gave”).⁶ The last line of the sestet uses the resurgence phenomenon to picture the adulterous woman’s tragic and irreversible fall into sin: “For being so sinfully reckless”. The gradation of the double adverb, “so sinfully”, placed in central position in this tetrameter, foreshadows the dysphoric suffix “-less” in the adjective “reckless”. The ternary rhythm of the sibilants (“so / sinfully / reckless”) both connotes a seducing serpent hidden under the jewel gifts, and the sarcastic mockery of the *persona* commenting on the scene. Within a condensed, framed, narrow stage of six lines, this poem thus paradoxically offers plenty of room for the Frostian poetics of resurgence to be displayed through the variation of repeated vowels or consonants, and the dissemination of homophonous phonemic combinations.

Both a riddler and a craftsman of the poetical line, endowing each poem with challenging, almost invisible sound effects, Frost enlarges his poetics of resurgence and takes it to a more figurative level with the introduction of two motifs—the wind and the wave—as possible emblems of his staging of the poetic breath and its flow of inspiration. The wind and the wave elements indeed compete to superimpose the resurgence phenomenon onto a metaphorical wandering along the lines, mimicking in their own twists and turns both the reader’s mental meanders to escape the Frostian acoustic maze, and the musical journey of the poetic *pneuma*.

“The breath of parted lips”:⁷ staging poetic inspiration

The Frostian staging of sounds is most perceptible in poems mimicking a music score, as Frost’s vibrant interest for music, and for the gradual precedence of song over speech, of sound over sense, is accounted for in many titles throughout the collections: “Our Singing Strength” (Poirier 220), “Five Nocturnes” (Poirier 346), “I Will Sing You One-O” (Poirier 201), “Pan With Us” (Poirier 32), “The Valley’s Singing Day” (Poirier 217). Inside this Frostian music box, some poems are specifically dedicated to a reflection on the birth and journey of the poetical breath, the poetical inspiration: the resurgence technique notably

⁶ Our underlining.

⁷ *The Breath of Parted Lips: Voices from the Robert Frost Place* is a collection of 130 poems contributed by Frost Place residents, many of whom have risen to prominence. Some contributors’ poems were written during their tenures on the farm of Franconia, New Hampshire (known as “the Frost Place”).

appeals to air and water imagery, incorporating the music-wind of “The Aim Was Song” or the orchestrated breaking of a wave in “Song of the Wave”.

In “The Aim Was Song”, the course and meanders of the wind follow a four-four time beat, developing the wind’s modulations and vagaries over four quatrains of tetrameters.

Before man came to blow it right
The wind once blew itself untaught,
And did its loudest day and night
In any rough place where it caught.

Man came to tell it what was wrong:
I hadn't found the place to blow;
It blew too hard—the aim was song.
And listen—how it ought to go!

He took a little in his mouth,
And held it long enough for north
To be converted into south,
And then by measure blew it forth.

By measure. It was word and note,
The wind the wind had meant to be—
A little through the lips and throat.
The aim was song—the wind could see.
(Poirier 207)

In this agon between the wind and man wishing to bend it, to control and discipline it, the multiplication of the verb “to blow” in the first two quatrains, and its gradual disappearance thanks to the softening of plosives into sibilants, both pave the way to a progressive metamorphosis of the wind first into *pneuma* –poetic breath of creation–then into “song”. The plosive consonants in “before, blow, blew, loudest, day, place” slowly acquire a sibilant quality, “through, lips, throat, song, see”. The rough, untamed beat of the gust of wind mutates into musical discourse (“word and note”) as soon as the wind learns to follow the right pace—the plurivocal phrase “by measure” repeated twice in a row (lines 12-13) both suggests such apt tempo and a suitable moderation in the musical performance. The new *pneuma* which circulates in the poem thus found the right “place to blow” –from the original breath born from the cheeks in the north, down to the vibratory, controlled quality of the song being produced in the south, through the screen of vocal cords and lips (“through the lips and throat”). While learning the difference between sudden squall and song in the geography of the throat, the anthropomorphic wind imposes its binary evolution in lines 7 and 16, perfectly balancing and embracing its former mistake and its successful correction around the caesura: “It blew too hard—the aim was song” / “The aim was song—the wind could see”.

Such progressive discovery and mastering of the poetical breath and inspiration is taken up again through the use of water imagery to depict the Frostian resurgence technique—its hide-and-seek playful quality is beautifully enhanced by a three-step backwash in the “Song of the Wave”.

“Rolling, rolling, o’er the deep,
Sunken treasures neath me sleep
As I shoreward slowly sweep.

Onward peacefully I roll,
Ever thoughtless of the goal,
Sea-bells round me chime and toll.

There is peace above, below,
Far beneath me sea-weeds grow,
Tiny fish glide to and fro,

Now in sunlight, now in shade,
Lost within some ocean glade
By the restless waters made.

Pushing onward as before,
Now descry the distant shore,
Hear the breakers sullen roar;

Quicken then my rolling pace,
With glad heart I join the race
O’er the white-capp’d glittering space,

Thinking naught of woe and grief,
Dancing, prancing, like a leaf,
Caring not for cliff or reef.

Lo! black cliffs above me loom,
Casting o’er me awful gloom,
And fortell my coming doom.

O! that I might reach the land,
Reach and lave the sunny sand,
But these rocks on every hand—

Seem my joyous course to stay,
Rise and bar my happy way,
Shutting out the sun’s bright ray.

I must now my proud crest lower
And the wild sea roam no more.”
Hark! the crash and mighty roar,

Then the wave's short life is o'er.
(Poirier 489-90)

In this youth poem in tercets Frost wrote when he was sixteen, the resurgence of the wave strictly follows the pattern of a three-step waltz, in a constant ternary movement of birth, breaking and death of this wave on the breakwater. The strong punctuation ending and framing each tercet initiates this impression of perpetual repetition, of endless return of the same flow / short pause / ebb pattern between the stanzas, as stanza 1 exemplifies: the formation of the roller (“Rolling, rolling, o’er the deep”) is briefly suspended by the insertion of a comment of the *persona*-wave (“Sunken treasures neath me sleep”), and finally breaks towards the shore in an imitative harmony of sibilants (“As I shoreward slowly sweep”). The twists and turns of the resurgence phenomenon are in accordance with the melody in “r” this “Song” performs, and the transformations undergone by the verb “to roll” throughout the poem: from the spreading of the “roll”(er), in the haste and eagerness to “reach” the shore, to its violent, fatal crash on the mole (“roam no more”, “roar”). Such linguistic verbal metamorphosis parallels the thematic metamorphosis of the wave itself, and finds its climax in the final tercet in which a coda is added—forming a quatrain, and the held final chord of the waltz. Such lengthened chord is formed of one distich pronounced by the *persona*-wave (“I must now my proud crest lower / And the wild sea roam no more”) omnisciently commented on in the following distich, depicting the dreary sound of the dying wave after closing the quotation marks (“Hark !”). The technique of Frostian resurgence with a slight variation is complete with the circular return of the elided preposition “o’er” in the last line of the “Song”, in which its original euphoric spatial meaning of powerful rise over the surface of the ocean is degraded to simply metaphorically symbolize the fallen, dying roller crashing into a myriad of water drops (“Then the wave’s short life is o’er”).

The Frostian game of repetition and variation typified by his poetics of resurgence in the volumes is thus played on different scales, whether his staging of poetic sounds addresses a whole volume through a system of intratextual notes and somewhat opaque references (as in *New Hampshire*), or the zooming scale of the poem, the line, and down to the metric foot. Having to accept such hide-and-seek rule in the Frostian game, his reader soon becomes the poet’s “partner in rhyme”—forced to guess and read words into words, tracking back the original sounds now lost in variation. As he becomes Frost’s poetic co-player in developing his auditory and visual memory, the reader endorses and treasures the poet’s saying: “It takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling / To get adapted to my kind of fooling” (Poirier 478).

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