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Sub Rosa: Frost's "Five-Petaled" Flower

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Robert Frost’s functional use of the pentad as a subliminal structural device represents one of the underlying subtleties of some of his poetry only recently discerned. His accommodation of this key number in “The Gold Hesperidee,”¹ for example, has now been corroborated in effect in a major talk of his, transcribed for the first time for the Frost centenary, during which he elaborated on the meaning of pentameter rhythm, the kinship of poetry to arithmetic and number in general, naming a mathematician en passant, and even deigning to designate the affinity as “very deep.”² Notably he chose to repeat the key digit five nine times in a short paragraph of the published speech, citing precisely “five things to be done with a poem” in the process.³ We may validly ask: Had then his use of number aesthetic significance for him elsewhere as well? Let us, in answer, first turn to other poetry of his to consider evidence of pentad patterns or, as is usually said, “pentagonal symmetry.” In “‘Out, Out—,’” for instance, the mountain ranges number five; although they symbolically relate to the buzz saw (“a jagged-tooth, saw-edge against the sky”), they also could point to the five fingers of the hand being tragically dismembered.⁴ This numerical correlation may not appear especially inviting to contemplate, however, and was most probably neither consciously nor unconsciously present; it can only be “read in.” Yet in his so-called rigamarole poem, “The Rose Family,” a rather more striking use of the pentad is noticeable; since its formal arrangement has not been fully dissected in the lab, it deserves closer analysis now.

At the outset, the overall pattern bears a more than, say, pictographic resemblance to William Carlos Williams’ experimental poem of approximately the same length entitled “The Great Figure.” The Williams construct was,
as is well known, deliberately based on the pentad form and in rather more than merely a titular capacity. First, it was occasioned by the Charles Demuth painting of an enormous number five painted in fire-engine red; secondly, as I have tried to show elsewhere, the poem structurally pivots around clusters of five units. Because Williams' poems in general have the same sort of pattern, such an analysis may at first appear hard to prove; however, it can be well substantiated by the poem itself—aided by the familiar supposition that the mind is able to take in, at the most, five units at one time as a Gestalt and that the natural affinity for this number may be based on the rods and cones in the eye. The Williams piece elevates our comprehension of the poetic role of the pentad meaningfully, but admittedly its obvious "pop" effect may lend itself to a somewhat low-keyed or merely impressionistic critical appreciation. "The Rose Family" may thus serve our purposes better, for it probes a bit more deeply into human comprehension of Nature and the universe.

For a starter, in his helpful initial commentary on the Frostian "family," a leading explicator has tried to rehabilitate the seemingly frail lyric, generally dismissed as little else than the rigamarole Frost termed it, by appropriately showing how "the form of the poem supports its content." He argued for the clear-cut influence of Robert Burns and Gertrude Stein concomitantly. In a previous exegesis, I then examined the further (to my mind, more arresting) debt to the "Rose-Leaves" of Austin Dobson. By happenstance, agreeably I discovered afterwards that I had actually been anticipated in making this correlation by an early reviewer of one of Frost's books. Nonetheless, to the ordinary reader, the most apparent purpose of the rigamarole is to satirize Stein, who is both affectionately and teasingly referred to as "The dear" in line seven. Because of her Jewish heritage, evident even in her most famous line as parodied by Frost ("Rose is a rose . . ."), the Judaeo-Christian tradition becomes thereby all the more à propos in our coping with the Frostian transformation as well.

Perrine pointed to the fairly self-evident effect that "all ten lines" (note the number, which happens to be a multiple of five) "end in the same rhyme sound," thereby emphasizing "the unity of rose, apple, pear, plum, and lady as all members of one 'family'" (the botanical Rosaceae as applied to the human species). In appraising such a rigamarole, he noted that "the basic meter—anapestic dimeter—is gracefully suitable for the subject, and is

5. R. F. Fleissner, "Homage to the Pentad: Williams' 'The Great Figure,'" Notes on Contemporary Literature, I (September 1971), 2–6. (The accompanying diagram, however, which I was not given to check in proof stage, was somewhat misconstrued.)
8. Babette Deutsch, "Poets and Poetasters," The Bookman, LXVIII (1928), 471–72, tells of "the piece called 'Rose Family,' which might have been written by Austin Dobson in his sleep."
skillfully varied." True enough, but let us carry such formal decipherment further. We duly observe that the count of the new "botanical" arrangement is five, that the average sum of words per line turns out to be five, that even the number of words in the title when correlated with those in the author's surname (both thereby relatable as extrinsic to the body of the poem itself) is again five. The Frost concordance, moreover, confirms that his use of this centralized digit (that is, one significantly halfway between one and ten) is prominent enough in his poetry, at least when compared with what he accomplished with other numerals (excluding the common first three). When his pentad accommodations affect his rose subject, then, the result is, metaphorically, a five-petaled flower.

Are we not perforce reminded of John Donne's charming poetic bouquet, "The Primrose"? There again a specifically feminine application of the pentad is structurally germane:

Live Primrose then, and thrive  
With thy true number five:  
And women, whom this flower doth represent,  
With this mysterious number be content;  
Ten is the farthest number; if half ten  
Belong unto each woman, then  
Each woman may take halfe us men. (ll. 21-27)

Although in this stanza only three out of seven lines are composed of five words each, other clusters can be discerned upon close reading: in both the third and fifth lines, clusters of five words follow and precede the pointing; the fourth line contains ten syllables (a multiple of five). The same sort of structure is evident in the Williams poem and, as we shall see, in Frost's.

Perhaps I should hasten to state that I do not wish to press for a "new" influence upon Frost's lyric. Elsewhere, however, I confess that I have documented his oblique appropriation of another, similar image in Donne's Songs and Sonets, the mathematical (geometric) symbolism from "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" in the seemingly slight piece which titularly echoes part of it, "Moon Compasses." My approach was subject to critical animadversion: in what turned out to be an all too cavalier survey of Frost scholarship, a Vermonter took me to task by challenging my suggestion that the last three dots in the Frost piece can be construed as playful ellipsis for "as with Donne." I did not, however, originally deny that the concluding periods may conventionally be taken as Romantically open-ended, but observed merely one valid imaginative replacement for the ellipsis.

Was the number five then in some way also the "true number" for Frost that

11. R. F. Fleissner, "Frost's 'Moon Compasses,' " The Explicator, XXXII (May 1974), item 66. Both Donne's poem and Frost's "The Rose Family" were dedicated to their spouses.
it was for Donne? I propose that at least in “The Rose Family” it was, although the association of the rose specifically with woman harks back to Stein and Dobson. For what it is worth, like the name Donne, Frost’s own name contained the requisite number of letters, even as did those of Burns and Stein, quaintly enough. Further, Dobson’s name is close enough to the requisite number of letters to be enlisted, too. Frost, after all, referred to Dobson’s poem about Rose, albeit in a facetious manner (though not unlike the tone of “The Rose Family”), in his famous essay “The Constant Symbol.” But such purely onomastic association is relatively minor, at least when compared with the intrinsic meaning the pentad might have had for Frost. Let us examine that now.

To begin, it seems likely that he was at least acquainted with the clustering in “The Primrose” (Donne having become so prominent, particularly after Frost’s “rival,” T. S. Eliot, stressed the Metaphysical’s import in a famous essay). Indeed, he most probably was well aware of the familiar application of the pentad for similarly well-stated Marian purposes in *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight* (evident in the prominent use of the pentangle on Gawayne’s shield and the ensuing discussion of its meaning). He also might well have been keenly aware of Chaucer’s ironic use of the pentad, again partly for Marian purposes, among others, in describing the five-times-married Wife of Bath. Since he was a professed classicist, he could have known of the Roman precedent for the Marian figure in Plutarch’s *De E Apud Delphum* (“E” being the fifth letter). (In any case, Alastair Fowler acquainted me privately with Plutarch’s concern with the pentad at Frost’s Bread Loaf School of English.) True, he may well not have thought a great deal about the association of the pentad to, say, the Five Wounds of Christ, or the rosary (The Five Joyful, Five Sorrowful, and Five Glorious Mysteries), or with Mary’s month (May) being the fifth. Such esoteric connections would doubtless have struck him as superstitious. Yet he would still have been very likely aware of the anagogic commonplace stemming from Dante and medieval tradition whereby the Virgin was venerated as The Mystical Rose. Again the meaning of the flower emerges. As is well known, he utilized Dante’s rhyme scheme for “Acquainted with the Night,” and, for what it is worth once more, to round my onomastic theme out, the Florentine’s surname again comprises the requisite pentad of letters. Perhaps if we envision the numerical correlations as actually too obvious to be far-fetched, more than special pleading is involved.

Let us therefore scrutinize the line-by-line structure of “The Rose Family” factually and as circumspectly as possible. The poet already provides the hint in reminding us that “The fact is the sweetest thing that labor knows” (from his “Mowing”). We see that the first four lines duly consist of five words each, the next two of a composite, six and four; the following two of a reversal of these (four and six). These average out to five apiece. This structure is of course

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elementary enough to be grasped by the common reader at a glance (or upon
first hearing), and Frost must have meant it that way. Only the ninth line goes
beyond the requisite bounds we have established, but for its own rather valid
reasons, as we shall see. Finally the tenth line encloses the little lyric, round­
ing it off with none other than five magical words. The use of the same end­
rhyme throughout, moreover, produces not only the required familial connec­
tion but lends itself harmoniously to what might best be welcomed as a multi­
petaled roseate appearance.

Why then the seemingly anomalous length of the ninth line? Evidently
because it is the most emphatic, needing more words to express itself. As Per­
rine has explained it, “a strong stress on the initial ‘You,’ signals the ‘turn’ of
the poem from the general to the personal.” Fine, but I should like to add that
the dash at the end conveniently provides an open-ended effect (reminiscent,
for us, of “Moon Compasses”), thus making the exact count of the words in
this simple instance relatively unimportant. This very exception proves the
rule, as it were, for the neglect of the roseate principle for just one moment
has the effect of calling attention to it elsewhere. We recall easily enough the
commonplace that a woman may be perfect in every respect but one: She can
have a slight disorder in the dress, in her manner of speech, or habits, which
makes her attractive for that very reason. For the point is that symmetry alone
can be aesthetically tedious.

On another level, the lack of symmetry in the ninth line conveys a deeper
meaning: It thematically reaches out to embrace love and not only in the
human but divine sense. At first blush, to be sure, such a “prettified” reading
may seem like overdoing it, since divinity has so often been associated in
human understanding with conformity and formality. But, Romantically, that
criterion is not always the case, and in spite of Frost’s dissociation from
Romanticism, he owed a considerable legacy to it. Whereas Nature, as lovers
of the golden proportion have shown,14 conforms excitingly enough to the
essentials of “pentagonal symmetry” (duplicated then in music, sculpture, ar­
chitecture, and the fine arts in general), love moves beyond computation as
such when it reaches out for the Infinite.

As a final coda, I ought to point out that, as I have noted elsewhere,15 it will
not do to claim Frost as a literary numerologist per se. He was not concerned
with such an arcane stance. The bearing of the pentad upon several of his
poems, most notably perhaps “The Rose Family,” relates rather to a classical
formulation (only by derivation Pythagorean) of the Golden Mean Proportion
alone. Such a basis then turns out to be natural rather than occult. As with
Frost’s poem, more than mere “rigamarole” is involved.

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five is basic to golden section proportionality (what Luca Pacioli termed la divina proporzione), for it relates
to the regular pentagram based on Euclidean construction in terms of division into extreme and mean ratio.
15. See n. 1 above.