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POETIC COHESION IN AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE:
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The study of sign language was just coming of age when Aaron Cicourel, in a contribution to a volume of interdisciplinary essays on sign, remarked that: "the limitations of gestural sign systems, if such limitations exist, are inherent in the cultural development of the deaf and not in the structure of sign languages" (Cicourel 1978). Since Cicourel's assessment, sustained inquiry has further revealed the complexity and subtlety of ASL, and the results of this research have filtered from the academic community (hearing and deaf) to the deaf community at large. The linguistic validation of ASL has had an enormous impact on signers and led to significant changes in the way that the deaf community behaves and regards itself. One such change is reflected in the growing interest in original poetic composition in ASL. The development of a documented body of poetry in ASL within the last twenty years—and its corollary, the development of a framework for poetic usage—has borne out Cicourel's assertion and has helped affirm the legitimacy of the deaf community and its language, both to those within the community and those outside it.

While poetic signing and research on ASL have each continued to burgeon, they have rarely crossed paths, leaving a curious shortage of literary or linguistic criticism on signed poetry. To my knowledge, only three people have written on the poetry and poetics of ASL: Klima and Bellugi include a chapter on what they term "art-sign" in The Signs of Language (1979); Clayton Valli has written a short essay on rhyme (1990); and Jim Cohn published a poetic manifesto to launch the founding of a poetry society among the students of NTID (1986). Valli and Klima and Bellugi offer convincing, if at times speculative, accounts of some of the structural features that differentiate poetic ASL from
conversational and other uses of the language. A complete account of the formal properties of poetic ASL awaits advance in the study of ASL prosody, but before proceeding with an analysis of Clayton Valli’s poem “Snowflake” (Valli 1989), I would like to summarize what seem to be the most significant structural features of poetic signing. First, ASL poetry exhibits a planned coincidence of like phonemic features exceeding that in other uses of the language. Handshapes, movement paths, and locations are concentrated and repeated to achieve an effect analogous to that of alliteration or rhyme in spoken language poetry. Also, Valli argues that ASL poets can impose a patterned recurrence of non-manual features on a text, a device he calls rhyme, but which may be more appropriately thought of as a form of syntactic parallelism.

Poetic signing is further distinguished by a general balance and fluidity of the articulators. The poet divides signing duty between the two hands so that the dominant hand does not outweigh the other, as it would in routine conversational signing. The flow of the signing is regulated so that it appears smooth and particularly graceful by comparison to the often choppy, staccato movements that result from the structural accidence characteristic of spontaneous or casual usage. Poetic articulation is generally slower and more fastidious than casual signing, marked at times by a deliberation that resembles citation-form signing more than conversational use.

ASL poets also intentionally violate conventional boundaries of signing space. Poetic expression regularly moves well beyond the conversational signing zone described by Siple (1978), a device that quite literally stretches the boundaries of communication. One of the effects of extending the customary signing envelope is the reclamation of iconic aspects of signs that have had their origin obscured during the process of linguistic regularization. Klima and Bellugi (1979) provide examples of iconic reinvention in poetic signing and rightly point out its purpose, a purpose also fulfilled, though not so ably, in the poetry of spoken languages: to reduce the transparency of language as a communicative medium and present it instead as an expressive object of art. Klima and Bellugi note a second effect that works in con-
junction with poetic violation of the signing space, and that is the poet’s creation of an overall design or spatial metaphor. A text, for instance, that begins high above the head and moves successively downward to a point below the waist might convey a heaviness or exhaustion that complements its thematic structure.

Another distinctive property of poetic signing is its strong tendency toward the preservation of sign structure. Citation-form features of signs are not liable to be jettisoned simply to ease articulatory effort, as happens routinely in casual usage. Rules such as Padden and Perlmutter’s “WEAK-DROP” (1987) occur less frequently in poetry than in conversation, again because the poem is not just a conduit but a linguistic object as well, an object meant to demonstrate the aesthetic qualities of its material of fabrication in that material’s most idealized and pure form.

In poetic ASL, features of signs are blended, both to enhance the overall grace of articulation (a characteristic cited above) and to create expressive new signs based on the concatenation of features from two or more existing signs. The artful blending of signs that occurs in poetry might at first seem to contradict the previous assertion that poetic ASL respects the language in its most idealized state, with poets avoiding the articulatory shortcuts of casual signing so that signs can be rendered as close to full citation form as possible. However, there remains a crucial difference: in casual ASL, signs are generally blended not for grace and possible semantic enrichment, but for convenience. Like the processes of co-articulation and assimilation that become more prevalent with casual speech, the slurred character of casual sign serves the purpose of accelerating the flow of information by conserving articulatory effort. The concatenation of signs in poetry, by contrast, is a form of linguistic play meant to enhance the expressive capability of the text.

All of the above aspects of poetic ASL contribute to an end that is definitive of poetry as a form: the training of attention toward the linguistic code itself (see Jakobson 1960). The repetition of phonemic features (handshapes, movements, or locations) highlights the linguistic architecture of ASL and often excises semantically extraneous transition movement. The artful blending of signs further reduces transitional movement, so that purely
mechanical elements of the code do not distract the textual focus from meaningful elements. Poetic use of ASL also reduces the transparency of conversational signing by slowing it down—demanding, in effect, that it be seen—and by moving signs outside the prescribed signing space, where the viewer does not expect to see them. In eschewing slang and preferring signs closer to citation than casual form, the poet presents the language at its "purist," as an object for aesthetic contemplation. The aesthetic dimension of the text is reinforced by the poet's attempt to invest signs with iconographic overtones, reminding the audience that language not only conveys substance, but has it.

Poetry calls attention to language in the same way that dance highlights and embellishes the mechanics of walking. ASL demonstrates this relationship quite literally, in a way that has no analog in spoken languages. While in conversational ASL the gaze of the interlocutors rests chiefly on each other's eyes, leaving the hands themselves largely to the peripheral field of vision (Siple 1978), in poetic ASL the poet tends to watch his or her own hands, leading the audience to do the same and thereby setting poetic expression on display.

All of the devices mentioned above are used by Clayton Valli in his poem "Snowflake," published on videotape in 1989 (Valli 1989). In the present essay, though, I want to focus on structural features of the text that lend it poetic cohesion on the discursive level: its narrative development, tone, thematic and argumentative interests, and use of imagery. The discussion involves an extended comparison between Valli's poem and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous "Frost at Midnight" (1798), which I use as a touchstone in the effort to demonstrate how the rhetoric of poetry articulates issues of human concern.

An English translation of "Snowflake" follows, and the text of Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" is appended in full at the end of the essay. Rather than attempt a strict linguistic glossing of Valli's poem, which of course would not convey its finished poetic quality, I have used devices like alliteration and syllable count to give the English version an appropriately poetic feel. Translation must distort an original text, but I hope I have remained faithful to the spirit of "Snowflake" and as true to its letter as is possible.
There is a window. I gaze out:
The tree, full-crowned, loses its leaves;
The slender grass waves, and withers.
No color, nothing's everywhere—
All is gray, clouds obscure the sun,
And a heavy darkness descends.

From nowhere a white snowflake falls,
Beautifully, and my heart beats.
A memory wells up, a vision
Of eyes, brown eyes I'll not forget
And a little boy looking up
As his father holds forth for friends.
Proudly he appeals: "Wait, watch this—
And turns then to the boy to ask,
With measured care, "What is your name?"
The boy looks up, in deference,
And strains to speak: "Me llamo es ..."
"Amazing!" declares the father,
Continuing with his discourse.
Proudly he appeals: "Wait, watch this —
"Then, turning to his son he says,
"Tell me now how old you are, boy."
"Soy cinco años" is stuttered.
"Such improvement! Just look at him!"
Swoons the father contentedly.

Two sentences. Two sentences!
Melting, the memory slowly sinks
Again into my beating heart.
Inspired, I survey the present:
Snow, white snow, now blankets the ground
And is piled against the tree trunk.
The sun slips from behind the clouds
Its rays warm the earth. One snowflake
Falls, lands, and passes into snow.

Translated from ASL by Alec Ormsby

I have divided the English translation into three stanzas, with
stanza breaks placed at the two points where the poet brings his
hands to dramatic rest in front of his abdomen. In Valli’s perfor-
mance of the ASL text, the first and third stanzas are isochronous (at just over 20 seconds each), with the middle stanza almost exactly twice this length (at just over 40 seconds). These breaks are further reinforced by their correspondence to obvious turning points in the poem’s thematic development. Thematically, both “Snowflake” and “Frost at Midnight” follow a standard Romantic tripartite pattern, one that has been discussed at length by M. H. Abrams in his Natural Supernaturalism (Abrams 1971). “Snowflake” devotes one stanza to each of the three developmental stages: the narrative begins with the speaker reflecting on the present, a reflection mediated through nature, which the poet depicts through images of the surrounding landscape; then, falling into reverie, the narrator recounts a scene from the past, a memory that proves less superficial than it might initially appear; finally, the poem returns to the present, with the narrator using the meditative interlude to reinterpret the landscape and, through it, his sense of self.

The titles chosen by Valli and Coleridge indicate the importance of the landscape in the poems, and both titles evoke the familiar connotations of the winter scenes in which the poetic action unfolds: darkness, dreariness, dormancy, discomfort, and the antithesis of life and regeneration. In “Frost at Midnight” the wintry scene in the opening stanza casts over the narrator a disabling mood of isolation:

’Tis calm indeed!  
so calm, that it disturbs  
And vexes meditation with its strange  
And extreme silentness" (lines 8-10).

The setting of the first stanza in “Snowflake” posits the narrator in a full, yet strangely null and, like that of “Frost at Midnight,” insular winter environment. The narrator of Valli’s poem is alone, enclosed, and although he gazes out on a landscape that hosts attractions—a tree, grass, clouds, and the sun; these are overwhelmed by a pervasive darkness (line 6) and spiritual entropy. The tree and grass enter dormancy (lines 2 and 3), and the light of the sun is thwarted (lines 5 and 6). In sum, negativity prevails, to the extent that “nothing’s everywhere” (line 4).
The degree of entropy in the first stanza of "Snowflake" exceeds that in "Frost at Midnight," but both convey the same fundamental mood, and both develop into a second stanza in which the narrator responds to the situation at hand by folding thought upon itself, resuscitating the memory of a painful episode from childhood. In "Frost at Midnight" the narrator's memory is of his loneliness as a young student sent to an urban boarding school, away from his family and the rural surroundings of his home. Closed in his room at school, the young narrator of the second stanza gazes into the fireplace, the grated "bars" (line 25) of which suggest the latent image of prison and reinforce the narrator's troubling sense of isolation from stanza one.

In "Snowflake" the memory that opens the second stanza likewise concerns a childhood feeling of separation, a separation that is emotional though not physical. As with "Frost at Midnight," the thematic link between the first and second stanzas in "Snowflake" is the narrator's sense of isolation; however, unlike the remembered child of Coleridge's poem, painfully cognizant of his loneliness at boarding school, the child in Valli's poem is portrayed as not fully aware of the barrier lying between him and those, such as his father, who are not deaf. By attending to the details of the memory and appreciating them in light of the philosophy of oral-only education, the viewer of the poem begins to gather a picture of the unhappy relationship between the boy and his father. That the child, being raised in the oral method, has no real grasp of what is happening in the recounted memory is clearly evident in the ASL text from the way in which Valli sets up the pronouns that refer to the participants. These pronouns are indexed by means of the body orientation of the poet: the father occupies the unmarked position of the poet (or performer) himself, and when he turns to speak to his friends (lines 12-13, 18-20, 24-25), Valli maintains an erect, upright posture, pivoting in an arc that extends from his left side around to a lesser angle on his right. This movement predicates an audience of friends gathered around him, at roughly his height, in a semi-circle shifted slightly to his left.

When the father addresses the boy, by contrast, he turns sharply to his right and stoops down. The visual effect of this
staging is to project the boy as peripheral to the action of the stanza, even though he is ostensibly its focal point. Moreover, from his vantage, the boy would be unable even to see the lips of his speaking father, to the extent that this might help him follow the discussion portrayed in the scene. With the exception of the two instances when the father turns specifically to address the boy (lines 14-15 and 21-22), he is shut off from all means of participation in the dialog. In both poems the sense of isolation, it turns out, arises from the inability to communicate, and resolution of the problem is moved toward in the final stanza of each poem, when the speaker circles back to observe the immediate natural world given the memory that has just passed. For Coleridge's narrator the psychological transformation comes from the solace of knowing that his infant will enjoy a relationship with the natural world that the speaker himself was denied. The last stanza reconsiders the winter landscape by opening with a benediction in which the narrator blesses his child while at the same time consoling himself:

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple tree, while the nigh thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon. (lines 65-74).

In contrast to the uneasy winter scene from the first stanza of "Frost at Midnight," this final stanza raises the sweetness of summer and envisions a winter equally so. The description of winter in the last five lines of the poem (lines 70-74) echoes the language of the first stanza by referring again to the "secret ministry of frost" (lines 1 and 72) and by stressing once more the preternatural hush that prevails. The "solitude" (line 5), "calm" (line 8), "strange / And extreme silentness" (lines 9-10), and "Inaudible" activity (line 13) of winter in the beginning of the poem is recaptured in its end by the "silent icicles, / Quietly shining to the quiet Moon" (lines 73-74). The silence of winter that disturbed
the speaker in the first stanza does not bother him in the final one because he has assured himself that it will not adversely affect his child. The child’s upbringing will afford him a relationship with nature that the speaker did not have. A key passage is found in the penultimate stanza, when the narrator, after reminiscing about his lonely, urban schooling, returns to the present to address his sleeping child on the contrast in their education:

For I was reared
In the great city, pent ‘mid cloisters dim,
And saw naught lovely but the sky and stars.
But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from all eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself. (lines 51-62).

I claimed above that the feeling of isolation that animates “Frost at Midnight” is, as with “Snowflake,” attributable to the problem of frustrated communication. It is in the foregoing passage that Coleridge explicitly identifies nature as a conceit for this theme. He calls nature an “eternal language” (line 60), a language from which the poem’s narrator was isolated as a child, so that in his adulthood the winter remains “silent” and “inaudible.” Communication is also frustrated between the speaker and his son, who is still a pre-lingual infant, a situation that interestingly parallels the language barrier separating the son from his father in “Snowflake.” Although his imperfect hold on the language of his natural surroundings disheartens Coleridge’s narrator, he is able to derive comfort from two sources. First, as I have pointed out, he is consoled by the knowledge that his child will be conversant in this language that he himself does not understand. Second, the very poem becomes an act of consolation, a communicative surrogate through which the speaker manages to express his troubling inability to apprehend the language of nature. “Frost at Midnight” in this way concretely triumphs over its theme, the disabling fact of communicative isolation.
"Frost at Midnight" is the linguistic product of a creative mind using memory to chart its position in the surrounding world. While this sense of position is insecure at the outset of the poem — nature has "vexed" and "disturbed" (lines 8 and 9) the speaker's mind; by the last stanza the speaker's tone is resolute, and he voices none of his earlier frustrations. The silence of winter remains, but the poet has answered its silence with the poem to establish a comforting certainty of self and mind.

Appearing in the final line, the moon functions as a landscape symbol that conveys the speaker's reevaluated sense of self. Coleridge has personified the moon (with an upper-case "M") to drive home its emblematic identity with the standard Romantic symbol for the human imagination, the moon figures preeminent-ly at the end of the poem, both as a literary symbol and as a word typeset on the page. First, as a symbol, the moon holds a commanding position in the sky, representative of the narrator's ultimate mental ascendancy over his surroundings. Second, "Moon" is the actual and proverbial last word of "Frost at Midnight," a synthesis of poetic signifier and signified: "Moon" is a word representing an object, the moon, which in the poem symbolizes a concept, the narrator's imagination, which is locked in a struggle with the very issue of what words are, of how language, meaning, and the ability to communicate are definitive of selfhood. That the narrator should have the last word in the poem, and in a symbolic sense be that last word, signals a thematic triumph, a validation, against self-doubt, of the ability to communicate.

The memory that Valli inserts into "Snowflake" propels the thematic evolution of his poem along lines similar to that of "Frost at Midnight." The last stanza of "Snowflake" returns, as does "Frost at Midnight," to the immediate natural world that the narrator described at the poem's outset. Again, following the flashback, the narrator's surroundings undergo a consonant transformation, indicating, metaphorically, a successful resolution to the poem's thematic crux. In the first stanza, as I have pointed out above, the description of the scenery is negative, emphasizing loss (line 2), decay (line 3), drab emptiness (line 4), and oppressive darkness (line 6). In the final stanza, on the other hand, the inspired speaker surveys the landscape once more (lines 29ff)
and describes it in positive terms: the snow is redundantly “white” (line 30), suggesting its superior brilliance and purity; it carpets the ground and is piled abundantly against the tree (lines 30 and 31), imparting a sense of plenitude that contradicts the earlier assertion of nothingness (line 4); and the sun returns from behind the clouds, bringing with it both light and warmth (lines 32 and 33).

The relationship between the landscape in “Snowflake” and the narrator’s reverie centers not only on the theme of isolation, but also on the human capacity for perceiving and communicating change. The memory recounted in the second stanza, in which communication is frustrated by the boy’s deafness, stands in contrast to the deaf poet’s ability reflect on and versify the episode. The alteration in the landscape from the first to the final stanza likewise testifies to the human faculty to observe and record change, and, as in “Frost at Midnight,” it makes a ready conceit for the power of the imagination. Even within the narrative context of the poem, what occurs is as much an imaginative reevaluation of the landscape as a physical transformation of it.

The bearing of imagination and perspective on nature is rhetorically embedded in the poem’s first stanza through a stock poetic metaphor that equates enclosure with the human mind. The vehicle of this metaphor can be any enclosure—a pen, a prison, a room, an arbor—and its tenor is the mind, with the ground for comparison being the encasement of the brain within the skull. The metaphor is often further embellished, as it is in “Snowflake,” with a window or peephole that represents vision, both in physical and figurative senses: as the eyes, through which visual stimuli are conducted to the brain, and as the perspective, or outlook, that the mind has on the world beyond the self. The first line of “Snowflake” introduces this window, through which the narrator observes the world from an implicit enclosure, presumably a room in a house. The metaphor emphasizes the importance of what the narrator sees and interprets as the world outside. It presents the poem’s landscape as a mental construct, which, as the audience knows, beyond the internal context of the poem, it is—the trees, grass, and sun here are all words on a videotape. Given this realization, a thematic coherence emerges in “Snow-
flake”: the poem is not just a pleasant account of a landscape and an incidental memory, it conveys how a poet’s mind has come to negotiate the complications of ontology, language, and self-expression.

The memory sequence in the second stanza lays out the problem confronted by Valli’s narrator: he is deaf, raised by a hearing father under oral-only education. The presentation of the scene makes clear the frustration and communicative isolation that the narrator, looking back, has experienced. I have already shown how the theme of isolation is brought out through the pronoun structure in this stanza, and I will add here that Valli emphasizes the linguistic rift by shifting languages. In my translation I represent this shift with a change from English to grammatically imperfect Spanish where the original text changes from ASL to halting signed English, Valli’s substitute, in the context of the poem, for spoken English.

While signed English has no aesthetic value for the ASL community (Battison 1974), Valli employs it here under special circumstances to advance the narrative of the poem. The child’s signed English answers to his father’s questions are articulated with considerable strain, which Valli conveys through rigid, hesitant execution. The purpose of this manner of articulation is to indicate how foreign and difficult spoken English is for the boy. When, in the third stanza, the poem returns to the present, the narrator passes sarcastic comment on the achievement just recounted (line 26): “Two sentences. Two sentences!” The comment pertains both to the amount of energy the boy has invested for such meager returns and to the unbounded effusiveness of his father’s pride, which in its course has reduced his son to an object for public display.

In the third stanza, as discussed above, the landscape is reinterpreted as a positive force, brimming with light, abundance, and warmth. The sun appears, performing the same symbolic office as the moon at the conclusion of “Frost at Midnight.” It stands for the poet’s creative imagination, which has turned a painful memory, a memory of communicative isolation and frustration, into the ultimate act of linguistic expression, a poem. The resolution is more powerful in “Snowflake” than in “Frost at
Midnight” because of the linguistic circumstances that attend Valli’s authorship: he is actually validating the possibility of poetry in a language, ASL, that was, within his own lifetime, considered unfit for the human mind and deserving of extermination.

Two significant facets of “Snowflake” reinforce the poem’s cohesion around the central thematic development I have discussed so far. The first is the motif of vision that Valli emphasizes throughout. Vision is important from the first line, in which the narrator is presented gazing through a window at the inhospitable winter. In stanza two, “vision” and “memory” (line 9) effect a play on signs in ASL, a play that captures the same double sense as the English word “vision”: literally, the ability to see with the eyes; figuratively, a vivid recollection or a prophecy. The sign Valli chooses for MEMORY uses two opposed C hands positioned about half a foot apart slightly in front of and higher than the forehead (the “bubble,” as it were, that appears above a cartoon character to surround its caption)

The different meanings of “vision—‘memory,’ ‘prophecy,’ and ‘sight’—coalesce in line 9, because Valli has moved the feature specifications for MEMORY to a second location in a way that draws attention to the phonemic structure of the sign: first, the “bubble” occupies the position out from and above the forehead, where it signifies MEMORY; the left hand then preserves its location, shape, and orientation; while the right hand breaks to execute several other signs—EYES, NEVER, FORGET, EYES-BROWN—after which it resumes the C handshape and meets the left hand at eye level to convey a sign different from MEMORY in location feature only, “vision,” a “recollection” (note that the sequence of these signs has changed in translation); finally, the left hand again perseveres while the right hand executes BOY, after which it rejoins the left hand to surround the eyes tightly, suggesting a pair of field glasses. In this last position, coupled with a pronominal shift of the body, the sign refers literally to “sight” and designates the boy’s act of looking up at his father in line 11. Valli emphasizes this looking upward to indicate the boy’s deference and trust (which turn out, disconcertingly, to have been misplaced) and at the same time to underscore with irony that the child cannot hear the questions being directed at him (lines 15
and 22), that he inhabits a world of vision and must see them instead.

Vision plays a key role in the poem because visual language is in fact its medium and its subject, even though signing is never mentioned or used within the context of the narrative. The motif thus unifies the poem thematically and linguistically, with Valli’s own artistic “vision” having wrought the text, a hopeful exemplum for the germination of literature in visual language.

The image of the sun that appears in the final stanza is the second feature of the poem cementing the intricate relationship of the poet, his artistic vision, and the visual language of his poem. Like the moon in “Frost at Midnight,” the sun in “Snowflake” represents the creative imagination, and it appears from behind the clouds in the final stanza to preside, like Coleridge’s moon, over the completion of the poem. Structurally, SUN resonates with MEMORY and VISION from Valli’s second stanza: the sign SUN is, effectively, MEMORY made with one hand instead of two. The final appearance of the sun is thus prefigured in the passage discussed above (lines 8-10), where a single hand of MEMORY preserves its linguistic structure while the other hand continues to sign. The preserved C hand develops cohesion between the MEMORY from which the poem is manufactured and the emblem for the creative intelligence that has manufactured it. In this way Valli manipulates the linguistic structure of the poem to forge a self-reflective commentary on his relationship to the act of composition and the language through which this act is fulfilled.

To conclude this analysis I would like to look at a second symbol Valli uses to distill the thematic and linguistic coherence of the poem. The snowflake, for which the poem is titled, appears at the first stanza break (line 7) and heralds a developmental pivot in the narrative. The bleak and monotonous landscape is broken by the flake’s fall—“From nowhere a white snowflake falls, / Beautifully, and my heart beats” (lines 7-8); and the memory, introduced in the next line, becomes identified with the snowflake on that account (note that later the MEMORY MELTS in line 27). Reappearing in the last lines of the third stanza, the snowflake escorts the poem to closure: “The sun slips from behind the clouds — / Its rays warm the earth. One snowflake / Falls, lands,
and passes into snow” (lines 32-34). Emphasized here is the concept of synthesis, of the single snowflake, with its traditional connotation of individuality, being assimilated into a unified bank of snow. The snowflake represents a single memory, a Joycean epiphany, the memory from stanza two that forms the centerpiece of the poem, and the bank of snow is the totality of experience that defines the narrator as a person. The passing of the snowflake into snow parallels the lyric process, by which the poet assimilates a distressing incident from his past to his psyche to create a stronger and more complete sense of self, a fully integrated consciousness. Valli’s two key symbols are rhetorical complements because it is the sun (line 32), poetic imagination, that empowers the act of fusion by melting the snowflake into snow.

The rift between narrator and landscape is finally healed—no longer is nature portrayed as alien and forbidding, and no longer does the image of enclosure from stanza one separate the narrator from the natural world. The memory that has disturbed the narrator’s sense of self and occasioned the poem is amalgamated back into his heart (lines 27-28), like a snowflake passing into snow, and the emotional crux on which the poem turns is thereby resolved. Like Coleridge in “Frost at Midnight,” Valli uses the lyric process to affirm the relationship that language negotiates between self and other. For the narrator of “Snowflake,” the memory of this linguistic incident from childhood becomes an antidote to communicative isolation, and its cathartic effect is represented through the almost magical transformation of the landscape from stanza one to stanza three. At the same time, the poem renegotiates the non-fiction world of the poet. In using ASL to compose “Snowflake,” Valli has fulfilled an alternative existence for the boy in the poem, an existence that changes and enriches the identity of the deaf community by affirming the literary status of its language.
Frost at Midnight

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before,
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By Its own moods interprets, everywhere
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.

But O! how oft,
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
To watch that fluttering stranger! and as oft
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birthplace, and the old church tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!
And so I brooded all the following morn,
Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up
For still I hoped to see the stranger's face
Townsmen, or aunt, or sister more beloved
My playmate when we both were clothed alike!

Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
Fill up the interspersed vacancies
And momentary pauses of the thought!
My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
And in far other scenes! For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But thou my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! he shall mold
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee
Whether the summer clothes the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Bettwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple tree, while the night thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.
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