

## The Hidden Iconic Pattern of a Poem: An Analysis of Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*

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**Abstract:** Iconicity is the overt or covert similarity between form and meaning, present in different modalities of expression including language, music and the visual media. For example, onomatopoeia overtly represents natural sounds, while photography overtly represents the world. On the other hand, music covertly evokes mood through universal melodic patternings of sound. As argued by Masako Hiraga (2005), the medium of poetry is a modality which heightens verbal iconicity. Like a piece of music, a poem has a hidden structure which is achieved through a patterning of sound. This patterning works on many levels, including both overt and covert sound patterning, and visual imagery. While the presence of such structure is well known (e.g., rhyme, meter, alliteration, assonance, simile and metaphor), the specific correlation between the form and meaning characteristic of each individual poem is less well studied. This paper argues that such a correlation exists, and constitutes a hidden iconic pattern or fingerprint of each individual poem, which is present inside it as a trace of the act of its creation. This hidden iconicity is what makes a poem memorable and difficult to translate. The poem *The Road Not Taken*, by Robert Frost (see the Appendix), evokes a strong visual metaphor of a fork in the road representing a choice of direction in the journey of life. This metaphor is not unique to Frost but has been identified in the framework of the theory of cognitive metaphor (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Turner, 1987; Turner, 1991; Turner, 1996) as the cross-culturally ubiquitous metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. The meaning of the poem, which emerges from a detailed analysis of this metaphor, is iconically reinforced on every level of the language system – phonetic, lexical and syntactic.

**Keywords:** Cognitive metaphor, iconic pattern, iconicity, poetic translation, Robert Frost

### 1. Introduction: The Form of the Poem

To appreciate the hidden iconic pattern of the poem, i.e., how the form of the poem embodies its meaning, we should first analyze the form of the poem, and then see how the meaning fits the form, based on a close reading. The initial analysis of the form of the poem can be done with the help of the tools of traditional poetics.

#### 1.1 Meter

The basic meter of the poem is iambic tetrameter, which, however, is slightly irregular, similarly to the breath groups of ordinary conversation. The lines range from eight to ten syllables, with the majority consisting of nine syllables. One of the regular lines which illustrates the basic tetrameter is “In leaves no step had trodden black” (line 12).

#### 1.2 Stanza Form and Rhyme Scheme

The poem has four rhyming stanzas of five lines each, with the rhyme scheme *abaab*, which creates the possibility of a hidden couplet. This possibility is syntactically exploited in the last stanza (in lines 18-20), where the hidden couplet expresses a complete thought (which could be a single sentence), to which, however, a coda is added in the last line (after the comma):

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

The rhymes are masculine rhymes, i.e., stressed on the last syllable, but two words subtly half-rhyme – “undergrowth” (line 5) and “difference” (line 20). Ordinarily, the stress pattern on these words would not be on the last syllable, with the primary stress on the first syllable and the possibility of a secondary stress on the last syllable. These words slightly disrupt the regularity of the rhyme scheme.

### 1.3 Repetition, Alliteration and Assonance

The use of repetition in the poem includes alliteration and assonance, and lexical repetition. There are several instances of alliteration and assonance, i.e., the repetition of syllable-initial and syllable-internal sounds in adjacent or closely succeeding words:

|  |                     |
|--|---------------------|
| “ <u>w</u> anted <u>w</u> ear... <u>w</u> orn”                         | (line 8; line 10)   |
| “ <u>l</u> ay in <u>l</u> eaves ... <u>bl</u> ack”                     | (lines 11-12)       |
| “ <u>g</u> rassy ... <u>p</u> assing”                                  | (lines 8-9)         |
| “ <u>st</u> ood/ and <u>l</u> ooked... <u>c</u> ould ... <u>t</u> ook” | (lines 3-4; line 6) |
| “ <u>l</u> eaves... <u>l</u> eads”                                     | (line 12; line 14)  |
| “ <u>s</u> igh/ <u>s</u> omewhere”                                     | (lines 16-17)       |
| “ <u>d</u> iverged ... <u>I</u> - / <u>I</u> ”                         | (lines 18-19)       |

The presence of the last assonance depends on the pronunciation of “diverged”. An alternative, less common pronunciation results in alliteration and assonance with “difference”.

There are also several instances of lexical repetition, i.e., repetition of a word or a phrase:

|                                       |               |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| “way leads on to way”                 | (line 14)     |
| “ages and ages hence”                 | (line 17)     |
| “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood” | (line 1)      |
| “Two roads diverged in a wood”        | (line 18)     |
| “and I - / I”                         | (lines 18-19) |

The partial repetition of line 1 in line 18 is especially striking, and serves as a sort of frame for the poem.

### 1.4 Imagery

Traditional poetics also includes the analysis of imagery and figures of speech, and an exegesis of their meaning.

At first glance, there is no obvious simile or metaphor in the poem, i.e., no figure of speech having the syntactic form *X is like Y* or *X is Y*. There is, however, a rich visual description of a physical moment in the past, coupled with the speaker's feelings and reflections about that moment.

### 1.5 The Speaker's Feelings and Reflections

The poem might remain a literal visual description were it not for the last line, "And that has made all the difference". The basic iambic tetrameter of the line invites stress on the word "that", which is a deictic expression pointing back to the previous couplet and to the whole description in the poem. It also sounds like an answer to the question, "What has made all the difference?", but the question has not explicitly been asked. Thus, an implied metaphorical equation is set up, which is not a syntactically explicit equation of the form *X is Y*, but an equation between the deictic "that" and the implied "What?"

The statement "And that has made all the difference", being an answer to an implied question, opens up a world of implied meaning to the reader. The reader sympathizes with the speaker and wonders what kind of difference he is talking about. What has made all the difference, and a difference in what?

## 2. The Implied Meaning of the Poem

Wondering about the deeper meaning, we enter into the world of the poem, a world which is verbally constructed.

Deciphering the metaphorical mapping in the last line is key to understanding the meaning of the poem. The mapping (the implied *X is Y*) is between "that" (i.e., something which) "has made all the difference" and taking the "other" (line 6) road, which was "less traveled by" (line 19). How is this mapping constructed, and what is its meaning?

Physically, taking a road is part of travel, a journey, a spatial displacement with a direction or destination, as well as a lapse in time. However, compared to a typical physical journey, the time line of the poem is more extensive; the speaker anticipates retelling his journey "somewhere ages and ages hence" (line 17), i.e., in another place, a long time later, in an indeterminate time and place in the future. From this perspective of the as yet unknown future, the choice of direction at the divergence of the two roads will have "made all the difference", and this importance of the choice is already known to the speaker at the present, at the moment of speaking. However, by using the present perfect tense "has made all the difference", the speaker is projecting his vision into the future, making it closer in his consciousness to the present. It is the present and future, coupled together in this projection that stands in contrast to the past, when the choice was made.

This manipulation of time and of the subjective realization of the importance of the moment in the past is an abstract counterpoint to the very physical description of the scene in the wood. Moreover, the time span of the poem clearly extends beyond the scene in the wood; somehow, it is the journey and its direction that are important.

It is this mapping of a long time-span, full of reflection on its future significance, with what would ordinarily be just a relatively short walk in the wood, that gives the poem its metaphorical tension and generates a mapping which evokes the cognitive metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. The mapping is that of the concrete instance of a choice of a particular road in the wood (in the cognitive metaphor, the

SOURCE domain) onto the abstract meaning of the importance of a choice at a certain point in time (in the cognitive metaphor, the TARGET domain). Then, the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY is extended and sustained throughout the poem, although at first reading, we may not become aware of it until the last stanza.

### 3. The Poem's Hidden Iconic Pattern

Once we become aware of the meaning of the poem, we can see how this meaning is iconically enhanced on every level of the language – in the sound structure, word choice, and grammar. Let's explore this hidden iconic pattern by following the clues of the meaning and the poetic devices as they build up throughout the poem. In the iconic pattern, the choice of each word and structure becomes important. In addition, sometimes alternative choices and ambiguities are also important, as can be predicted from Roman Jakobson's (1961) insight that word choice always involves "the axis of selection" among a number of related possibilities of morphologically, semantically or phonologically related words (available to the speaker in the speaker's mental lexicon at the time of selection). The juxtaposition of choice/non-choice and selection/non-selection also fits in with the theme of the poem.

#### 3.1 Why the Title? – Reality and Possibility

The first such juxtaposition can be found in the title of the poem: *The Road Not Taken*, which actually refers to the opposite of that which is described. The road not taken is the one that disappeared "in the undergrowth" (line 5), not the one chosen by the speaker. In the overarching meaning of LIFE IS A JOURNEY, the road not taken is what might have been but did not in fact happen; with the implication that had it happened, the speaker would have regretted it (with a different kind of sigh than the one at the beginning of the last stanza, a sigh of regret/disappointment rather than wistfulness/relief) – provided, of course, that in that alternative might-have-been reality he had the consciousness to realize the difference (a consciousness he might not have developed, as it belonged to the world of the "road less traveled", which he had taken). Moreover, a hidden possible meaning of the word "undergrowth" suggests the possible result of what might have been if he had taken "the road not taken": namely, "undergrowth" could mean "underdevelopment", failing to realize one's dream or one's potential. This meaning is covert rather than overt, since it is the physical meaning (the "undergrowth" of plants covering the forest floor), i.e., the SOURCE domain meaning, which is overt in the poem.

#### 3.2 Are the Roads Physical or Metaphorical?

If we look at the lexical choice of words in the description of the road(s) and the choice of road, we can see that they all enhance the physical dimension while at the same time evoking the abstract dimension. Two words are used: "roads" (line 1, 18) and "way" (line 16); other synonyms, like "street" or "path", are not selected. Also, all the phrasal verbs used in the poem refer to the roads / way(s) and the choice between them: "looked down" (line 4), "come back" (line 15), "leads on to" (line 14) and "traveled by" (line 19). The choice of these words may also subliminally evoke (i.e., bring to mind, or bring close to the threshold of consciousness) the related words "roadway" and "byway" (which were not selected). The word "road" usually has physical reference, while "way" has a more conceptual reference. "Roadways" and "byways" are physical. The subtle evocation of "roadways" and "byways" (a feature

of the landscape of the countryside) may serve to enhance the physical quality of the imagery, distracting the reader at first from the metaphorical interpretation.

### 3.3 What is a “Grassy Road” and Why Does it “Want Wear”?

Another word which enhances the physical quality of the imagery is “grassy” (line 8), which is an unusual collocation with “road”, since roads are usually paved (and thus not at all grassy, unless the pavement has cracked and is in disrepair), or if unpaved, lined with gravel or sand to make them more passable (easier to travel by). The description thus becomes a little mysterious, since we would expect a road to have been deliberately made passable (by someone whose responsibility it is/was to construct and maintain the road). Another unusual collocation is “wanted wear” (line 8); the word “wear” is not usually used in association with a “road”. We wear clothes, another choice we make in our daily life, although the SOURCE domain of wearing clothes does not seem to lend itself as easily to contemplation of the TARGET domain of the meaning of choices in life. However, the word “wear” does collocate with one of the synonyms for “road” / “way” suggested above, in the expression “a well-worn path”. The word “path” can have a non-physical, spiritual meaning, the path we follow in life, which is indirectly being evoked here. Moreover, in terms of the physical description, “path” is a better fit than “road” – paths are often grassy, whereas roads are not. Thus, the physical evocation of “path” (a grassy, less traveled road, made by human footsteps rather than with artificial material) subliminally evokes the spiritual meaning of our “path” or direction in life.

### 3.4 What is the Meaning of the Divergence? – The Way of Life

I have argued that in this poem, “life” is the implied TARGET of an extended metaphor (LIFE IS A JOURNEY), although the metaphor is not overtly stated. A crucial image in the poem is that of divergence; it is through this image that the meaning of life as a journey is explored. The significance of this image is iconically reinforced through the poetic devices of assonance, alliteration and repetition.

The divergence happens at a crucial moment in the speaker’s travel, a moment reinforced in the poem through assonance of the sound /u/: “...long I stood / And looked down one as long as I could” (lines 3-4)), which emphasizes the prolongation of the moment. The description of the moment is dynamic, with the speaker stopping to look, then moving on. In physical travel, this would not perhaps have been a very long moment; but in the journey of life, it could have been much longer than a moment of reflection.

In the descriptive world of the poem, the SOURCE world of the metaphor, the roads diverge. But in the TARGET world of the metaphor, in what it says about the speaker’s life, the divergence is not literal – it is a divergence of ways of life, of possible paths in life. The speaker says that he knew that he could not “travel both/ And be one traveler” (lines 2-3). In a sense, the divergence is of the speaker himself, between what he might have been (the “road not taken”) and what/who he actually became (the “road less traveled by”). In the TARGET world, the speaker changed his way of living, or chose a particular (less common) way of life, when life presented him with a choice. In the TARGET world, this choice would have been more than a matter of a single moment (“long I stood”, line 3). The time frame of the TARGET world of life, as suggested by the phrase “ages and ages hence” (line 17), the imaginary moment (in the projected future) of looking back on one’s life and realizing the

consequences of one's decision, is much longer than the dynamic time frame of the physical description of the SOURCE world.

The speaker's life is the implied TARGET world in the poem's meaning, but the word "life", the target of the metaphor, is not overtly mentioned; there is no overt *X is Y* metaphorical equation. However, the hidden iconic pattern of the poem reinforces the theme of life, and also of death, the counterpoint or end point of life, the time of judgement/ reckoning, the "ages and ages hence". Indeed the "ages and ages hence", in a Christian worldview (again, not explicitly stated), could even be a time after death, of looking back on one's life in judgement (or at the moment of death, of spiritual confrontation with God and the accounting of one's life at the gate of heaven); the choice of a way of life could even be the choice of the Way, the optimal way that one could have lived, in accordance with God's plan for one's life (cf. Jesus' saying, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life"). I believe that these themes are present in the poem, but masterfully understated. In part, they can be discovered by an inspection of the way in which the form of the language, including the sound pattern of the poem, fits in with its meaning.

In terms of sounds, what iconic elements evoke the word "life"? The word "life" is composed of three phonemes, / l aɪ f /, with the possibility of morphophonemic alternations in the plural and in the verb with / l aɪ v z / and / l ɪ v z /. These possible morphophonemic alternations are echoed in the word "leaves" (line 12), in which only the vowel is different from / l aɪ v z / and / l ɪ v z /. The word "leaves", of course, has the singular form "leaf" (the singular is not used in the poem), which has the same consonants as "life". The missing vowel, / aɪ / (the phonetic difference between "leaf" and "life"), is conspicuously repeated in the poem through the repetition of the speaker's "I" toward the end of the poem. The initial consonant of "leaves", / l /, is emphasized through alliteration, and the vowel of "leaves", / i: /, is reinforced through assonance: "I ay in leaves ... leads".

What is the cognitive mechanism through which this collective effect of repetition, alliteration and assonance might evoke the word "life" subconsciously in the mind of the reader of the poem? In Jakobson's poetics, this was termed the "axis of selection", with reference to Saussure's term "*rappports associatifs*" and Kruszewski's term "association by similarity". The 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish linguist Mikołaj Kruszewski, who influenced Roman Jakobson (Williams, 1993), argued that words are associated in the mind through their similarity with each other, where that similarity would be characteristic of different word forms in a single grammatical paradigm, or characteristic of form and/or meaning in semantically or morphologically related word families. Thus, considering the word choices of the poem, the English word "life" is phonetically similar to the English word "leaf", although they are not related to each other in meaning. The plural nouns, "lives" and "leaves", have a similar morphophonemic alternation of / f / and / v /, thus forming a similar grammatical paradigm. In Jakobson's conception, these associative possibilities would then form a possible set of word choices, and the poet, in writing the poem, selects from among word choices which are in his mind. Since the paradigmatic and phonetic sets are similar, they could subliminally evoke each other, and thus, in this case, the word "life" could continue in a kind of virtual presence in the iconic pattern of the poem, even if it were not explicitly selected by the poet (the explicitly selected word was "leaves").

In addition to the subliminal presence of "life" in the poem, the opposite, i.e., death, and especially, the verb "die", is also subliminally present. There may be a hint of death in the homophonous meaning of the word "leaves", a meaning not overtly selected, that is, the verb "leaves", in the euphemistic sense ("he left us" = "he died"). The evocation is a bit stronger in the color "black" in the same line (the color of "mourning" – another word not overtly present but homophonous with "morning", line 11), and even stronger in the mysterious word choice of "the passing", instead of "passers-by" (a euphemism for

“to die” is “to pass away”). However, if iconicity – being a subtle affair – can hit a reader over the head, then surely it does in the culminating lines of the hidden couplet at the end of the poem “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - / I took the one less travelled by”. The word “diverged” is usually pronounced with the vowel / aɪ/, although / ɪ/ is also possible; the repetition of “and I - / I” strongly reinforces the vowel / aɪ/, and hence the pronunciation of the word starting with / daɪ-/, homophonous to the verb “die”. Moreover, the word “I” is repeated, echoing the choice the speaker stated at the beginning of the poem, that he could only be “one traveler” (line 3), could not follow two roads at once. This entire culmination of the poem recapitulates the divergence, or the choice in the way of life made by the speaker, through a repetition of both the words and the image of the moment of choice, projected into a hypothetical future – or perhaps a heaven beyond – from the vantage point of which the moment of choice is recalled and its significance evaluated.

### 3.5 Why Is the Wood Yellow? – The Yellow Leaf

In the pattern of repetition in the culminating couplet of the poem (lines 18-19), the first line of the couplet almost repeats the first line of the poem, except for the omission of the word “yellow” and the addition of the phrase, and dash, “and I – .” Thus, in addition to the crucial image of divergence, another powerful image in the poem is the color “yellow”, prominently introduced in the first line of the poem: “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.” The only other color explicitly mentioned in the poem is “black”, although this mention refers to the absence rather than presence of “black”: “In leaves no step had trodden black” (line 12), the physical reality of the description still being yellow (the untrodden leaves would in fact still have been yellow in color). The color scheme of the poem, and how the colors are explicitly or implicitly referred to, reinforces the underlying theme of life and death.

Yellow leaves appear in the season of autumn, which in the natural cycle of a year is the beginning of the decline towards death. At the same time, autumn is the season of maturity and harvest, when the fruits of the earth and of human labor become apparent, as in Keats’ *Ode to Autumn* (lines 1-6):

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun,  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run,  
To bend with apples the moss’d cottage trees  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core [...]

Both themes, of maturity and of closeness to death, are present in Frost’s poem. The evocation of death by the color yellow echoes the symbolism of this color in Shakespeare. Macbeth bemoans that his life “has fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf”, in his case without fruitfulness (Act V, Scene 3):

I have lived long enough: my way of life  
Is fall’n into the sear, the yellow leaf;  
And that which should accompany old age,  
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have [...]

Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 uses the same color scheme as Frost's poem – yellow and black – in a *carpe diem* appreciation of what is left of life and love:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
 Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.  
 In me thou seest the twilight of such day  
 As after sunset fadeth in the west  
 Which by and by black night doth take away,  
 Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.  
 In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire  
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
 As the deathbed whereon it must expire,  
 Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.  
 This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,  
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

In Frost's poem, in the first stanza, the color "yellow" is present (line 1). In the second stanza, the road is "grassy" (line 8), suggestive of green, although the explicit statement of the color green is suppressed. In the third stanza, the leaves (which would have been yellow) on the trees, are not quite yet "trodden black" when they have fallen down on the road. This color scheme suggests autumn, or by metaphorical analogy with life, a time past the middle of life, while the evocation of green suggests life itself. The color yellow, being a bright color, could also evoke life rather than death, as the color of sunshine; sunlight is not overtly mentioned, but at the beginning of the poem, the scene is in the morning, a brighter time of day, rather than in the evening, as in Shakespeare's sonnet.

In the last stanza of Frost's poem, no color is left. The last stanza points to a time "ages and ages hence", relative to the time of the divergence, and also, relative to the point in time at which the words are spoken, which is after the divergence but before the "ages and ages hence". Thus, the time of death is suggested, but it is still in the future (farther off than in Shakespeare's sonnet, where we are invited to "behold", line 1, a time close to death in the speaker, a time "ere long", line 14). No color, subliminally, could suggest the word "blank" (derived from the French for "white", as in the white of winter, analogically close to death). The rhyme scheme of the third stanza could invite this hidden evocation, since the words "black"... "back" have a similar phonetic form to "blank". The rhyme scheme also supplies "day" (as opposed to "night"); in Frost's poem, it is not yet night (in the time of life).

Blankness / whiteness, as opposed to the blackness associated with death in western culture, is also used by Frost as suggestive of death (a hidden meaning evoked by the extended metaphor of snow) in another poem, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (lines 13-16):

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
 But I have promises to keep,  
 And miles to go before I sleep,  
 And miles to go before I sleep.

Significantly, in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, “white” is not mentioned, although it is the color of snow; rather, the scene takes place on “the darkest evening of the year” (line 8). The color of snow is suppressed, just as the color of grass is in *The Road Not Taken*, because whiteness is not usually associated with death in Western culture; however, blankness/nothingness/darkness can be associated with death.

### 3.6 Where Are the Other People?

Just as the color green is evoked but suppressed in the poem, so is the presence of other people. The scene is in the “morning” (line 11) and there are no other travelers, nor any overt traces of them. This suppression of the presence of other people draws attention to itself, because it is rather syntactically anomalous:

Though as for that the passing there (line 9)

Usually, we would say “passers-by”, rather than “the passing”. Implicitly, the word “people” is elided: “the (people) passing there”. Since the word “passing” evokes death (anticipated by the speaker at the end of his life, corresponding to the end of the poem), this grammatical erasure of the presence of other people in the poem also ultimately evokes death, or rather, the singularity of the human soul, in its travel through life and its confrontation with death and with the judgement of the Creator who (invisibly) made the roads (ways of life) and the wood.

In the imagery of the poem, the trace of other people in the wood are the “steps” which had trodden on the leaves and made them black. Again, syntactically the presence of many people is suppressed; the idea of people stepping on the leaves is contained in the negative construction “no step”:

In leaves no step had trodden black (line 12)

In fact, “that morning” people had not yet passed by; the speaker knew that if they had, the leaves would have been trodden black, but they hadn’t (yet) been. The word “black” is explicitly stated, but the leaves which had fallen from the trees in the “yellow wood” (line 1) would (still) have been yellow (the roads “equally lay/ In leaves”, lines 11-12). Moreover, on the road “less traveled” (line 19), i.e. “the other” road (line 6), underneath the leaves there was (green) grass. This is the middle of the poem, like the middle of life; death is hovering but absent (“black” is mentioned in word but physically the scene is green, although the word “green” is not mentioned).

Let us look at the syntactically anomalous line from which the overt presence of other people has been erased. The line

Though as for that the passing there

contains two deictic expressions: “that” and “there”. The second, “there”, points to the place where the divergence of the roads occurred (“both that morning equally lay”, line 11), but the reference of “that” is less obvious and needs to be extracted from the text. “That” refers to how this place looked to the speaker, at the time of the divergence, i.e., of the speaker’s choice of which road to take; the choice was not obvious (“equally lay”). The speaker stood and looked for a long time before inferring that the grassy road was less traveled by, and deciding to take that road, because it “wanted wear” (line 8). The

word “want”, in one of the two possible meanings here, gives a personification of the grassy road, as if it were entering into a dialogue with the speaker. The other possible meaning of “wanted” is “lacked”, implying that fewer people had actually trodden on that road.

The image of grass is unusual when collocating with “road”. A paved road would be black (asphalt), or perhaps gray (stone, concrete). An unpaved road usually has a surface of gravel or sand. A “grassy” road evokes the image of a path, trodden through the fields or the woods, rather than a regularly frequented (constructed) road. But on this path, “no step” (line 12) had trodden, at least that particular morning. If carefully visualized, this imagery becomes a little mysterious: the two roads seemed equal, yet the one “less traveled by” was much less of a road than what we would, in that scene, probably call a path. The word “path”, like “way”, has a double meaning; the metaphorical meaning of a path in life is frequent. This metaphorical meaning is evoked although not explicitly stated. Physically, a path is usually created by people choosing to go a particular way (often, as a short-cut bypassing a regular road), and treading down the grass; but here, “no step had trodden”, at least recently, although in the past, someone must have created the path, and it was still sufficiently present to be perceived as “equal” to the (more) traveled road. However, their equality “that morning” was in the absence rather than in the presence of people traveling on them, so we don’t in fact know if anybody had ever traveled on the less traveled road. In the physical world, this would be an inference, based on our background knowledge that paths are created by people. However, linguistically, in the TARGET world of the poem, it is possible that the path chosen by the speaker had been created by another Creator (not by people), a Creator who wanted the speaker to choose it. The Creator is invisible, but the road “wants”, wants “wear” (line 8), in both meanings of “wear” (the second meaning evoked subliminally) – wants walking on, or wants trying on, to be tried on, because it may fit the speaker.

The speaker – the only human being overtly present in the poem – is alone in the wood of life and makes his own choice in life. But that choice is the reflective moment of a soul contemplating the best way in life; and the choice itself, the presence of the “less traveled” path, is part of the created world, has been put there for the speaker by the Creator, who may want the speaker to make the choice that he makes. Of course, the presence of the Creator in the world is a hidden one. Another reading might point out His absence.

If we accept the reading that the Creator is invisibly present, not absent, yet another reading arises, as it were recursively. In the world of the poem, the Creator is God; but the poem itself was created by the poet. The poet is the ultimate creator of the path which he himself (or his persona as the speaker) reports having taken. And finally, the poet-creator is not incompatible with God-Creator: we create our own destiny by the choices we make, whether or not that destiny is guided by divine Providence, in the form of a destination or direction, the path in the wood, which is provided for us, not entirely of our own making.

#### **4. Implications for Literary Appreciation and Translation**

Besides focusing on the solitude of the speaker, the absence in the poem of any overt mention of people other than the speaker also serves the function of inviting the reader into the world of the poem. The reader becomes the other human being in the world of the poem. The reader identifies with the speaker’s perspective, the speaker’s “I”, or homophonously, the speaker’s eye, and together with the speaker, looks “back” (line 15), from the perspective indefinitely in the future, into the moment “that has made all the difference” (line 20). Just as the landscape of the poem is blended into the speaker’s reflection on his own life, the reader is invited to look back into the choices in his/her life. In fact, this

poem has been read as spiritual advice for the journey of life and the choices that we make, as attested by the title of a popular book on spiritual psychology, *The Road Less Traveled* (Peck 2003). Thus, the cognitive metaphor embodied in this poem by Robert Frost, as well as in other metaphoric worlds in his poems, such as *Mending Wall* (for a cognitive analysis, see Freeman 2007a) and *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, is projected outward into the world of the reader and comes alive with relevance for our own lives.

This paper has deliberately not relied on existing literary criticism of the poem, and the readers are invited to enter the world of the poem for themselves. Through the discovery of the iconic pattern of the individual poem, the readers gain not only a rich appreciation of the meaning of the poem, but also an intimate experience of the creative mind of the artist.

In conclusion, the question may be asked, to what extent is the artist – Robert Frost when writing this poem, or any poet for that matter – aware of the many layers of iconicity of a poem? An adequate answer, I believe, was given by Roman Jakobson (1987c) in his insight that “verbal patterning” is “subliminal”, i.e., just beyond the threshold of consciousness. By analogy, a musical composer may study musical theory, and rehearse musical scales, but ultimately the process of composition involves a creative confrontation between the form of music and the emotional meaning it evokes. Similarly, the mental preparation involved in a poet’s craft may require much conscious study, and yet the process of composition itself is a creative confrontation with the unconscious, one that is often much too swift for all of the subtle choices of patterning to have been consciously considered or intellectually analyzed. I tend to believe Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s story of the spontaneous composition of his poem *Kubla Khan* in his sleep, together with its marvelous musical cadences, such as the cascades of the consonant /m/ in the description of the “sacred river” (lines 25-28):

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion  
 Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,  
 Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
 And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean [...]

In her studies of iconicity, Margaret Freeman (1995, 1997, 2000, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c) mentions that not all poems tend to be equally successfully iconic. This insight can be understood with the help of the analogy to music: for reasons which are difficult for non-musicians to fathom, and yet which all of us to some extent intuit, not all musical compositions are equally successful. All have an evocative patterning of some sort, yet not all are as soulful and profound as the compositions of Mozart, Beethoven or Chopin. The study of iconicity as the coupling of form and meaning may perhaps eventually unlock the mysteries of how a spiritually evocative meaning comes to be embedded in poetry and in music itself. As an analytic tool, the procedure of discovering an iconic pattern may be of help to translators, who are plagued by the eternal truism that “the translator is a traitor” (according to the Italian saying, “*traduttore traditore*”) to the original. The task of transposing the music of the language of a poem into a foreign medium, another language with a completely different form, is inherently treacherous, perhaps much more so than the task of musical transposition from one key to another or from one instrument to another. In music, transposition preserves the harmonic equivalences, the overall musical iconicity of the composition, but in translating a poem into a foreign language, the subtle iconic equivalences have to be recreated or reinvented. This explains the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of faithful poetic translation.

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## Appendix

### The Road Not Taken

*Robert Frost*

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.