

The Cerniera: A Concrete Form

cerniera (Italian, “hinge”) : takes the form of a pair of themed elements arrayed symmetrically on either side of a central hinge, a word or short line that belongs to both the first half and the second. A hinge is that by which a passage is opened or shut; likewise the tone in each of the halves of the *cerniera* should not stand only in contrast to each other, but should be heterogeneous and mutable so that the tonal development may proceed from the first to the second or from the second to the first. The various meanings contained in the two halves should vary in prominence as the reader’s attention shifts from one to the other. There are three obvious methods of relating the two halves; the same subject is considered with differing attitudes; the same attitude is directed toward two subjects; or the likeness of two usually unrelated subjects is observed. Typically, the line length will be organized in such a way as to highlight the change occurring across the hinge.

The symmetry of the *cerniera* is not just concrete. The surface presentation must conform, as in a concrete poem, but also the thematic content. For being restrictive, this requirement is also productive. Consider the poet that balances the mention of “love” in the second line with a blank penultimate line. In a concrete poem, this would disrupt the symmetry of the form, but the multiple aspects of symmetry in a *cerniera* accommodate such techniques. Provided, however, that formal and thematic symmetry throughout is so unavoidable as to foreground these subtle departures as meaningful.

In Roman mythology, Cardea was the goddess of health, thresholds and door hinges and handles, also associated with the wind. Her name comes from *cardo*, meaning door-pivot. She protected children against vampires and witches, and was also the benefactress of craftsmen. Her cult was important in ancient Rome, and was worshipped at the Beltane festival and during June, both of which were seen as a metaphorical “hinge” for the year. Masks, balls and figurines (*oscilla*) were hung from doorways or trees to encourage crop growth in reverence to her. The hawthorn tree was sacred to her. Ovid said of Cardea, in what is apparently a religious formula, “Her power is to open what is shut; to shut what is open.”

She was originally the nymph Carna until Janus gave her power over door handles and hinges and status as the protectress of children.

Comments from Nora Delaney:

“Interesting how symmetry in art might be linked to our natural inclination towards symmetry in general. Human bodies are symmetrical; if they are not, this is a sign of bad health (hunchbacks, asymmetrical melanomas on the skin etc.) and results in undesirability. So we use the concept of symmetry in sexual selection. Enough digression, back to your discussion. I like the idea of mutability. I was thinking of an hourglass image, but this is not quite accurate since hourglasses imply a one-way – rather than reciprocal – flow. I also thought about a seesaw balanced on an axis, but this isn't quite it either. I think your analysis of the 3 ways of relating the 2 halves is right on target as well! Anyway, your formal explication of the form makes me want to try my hand at writing one of these *cernieras* some time.”

Fig. 1. Note the wasp-waist of the form.

