

Annotations

Under the Supervision of Thomas Lux

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The Study of Failures

This series of annotations is directed toward studying failures in published poetry—not for the purpose of criticizing particular poets or making fun of them, but to determine whether there is a systematic way to locate weak places in our own poems and thereby to be able to repair them.

In these annotations, we will be looking at poems by first-rate poets, writing, in many cases, at the height of their powers, and what I'll be calling "failures" really will be flaws, weaknesses, slip-ups, and only rarely out and out failures. But because a poem has a fault does not mean it is not good or even great, because perfection is difficult.

To understand why studying failures makes sense, we can look at the process of writing poetry. I'll not claim that there is a single process or methodology for writing poetry, but it turns out that essentially every poet shares some steps regardless of the process that's followed. The realm of processes that can be followed to create or make something which has not been made before has two extreme points: The first is to thoroughly plan what to build first, then build it; the other is to plunge in and just start building, repairing problems until the thing is complete. If we look at people who claim to do the first process (plan first, build later), we see that there is always an evaluation and repair stage—and this is true simply because it is humanly impossible to plan thoroughly without errors. And if the plan is perfect, it is because it followed a process in which evaluation and repair played a role. The essential point is that there is always a time at which what has been accomplished thus far is evaluated, weaknesses or insufficient strengths identified, and repairs are made or further work is performed.

In the realm of writing poetry we see this clearly in that part of the process we call the workshop. We submit our work to a group of readers and observe them commenting upon it. When we see their reaction, we judge whether it is what we had hoped and, if it is not, we revise our work. This part of the process corresponds to the evaluation and repair steps I've been talking about.

Process

To make this more concrete in terms of understanding process, let's look at the fundamental design process as envisioned by Christopher Alexander, an architect very well known for his work on design process. Christopher Alexander's work has had a profound influence on a number of different fields, and his buildings are well-known for their degrees of wholeness and life. Here is his process:

1. *At every step of the process—whether conceiving, designing, making, maintaining, or repairing—we must always be concerned with the whole within which we are making anything. We look at this wholeness, absorb it, try to feel its deep structure.*
2. *We ask which kind of thing we can do next that will do the most to give this wholeness the most positive increase of life.*
3. *As we ask this question, we necessarily direct ourselves to centers, the units of energy within the whole, and ask which one center could be created (or extended or intensified or even pruned) that will most increase the life of the whole.*
4. *As we work to enhance this new living center, we do it in such a way as also to create or intensify (by the same action) the life of some larger center.*
5. *Simultaneously we also make at least one center of the same size (next to the one we are concentrating on), and one or more smaller centers—increasing their life too.*

6. *We check to see if what we have done has truly increased the life and feeling of the whole. If the feeling of the whole has not been deepened by the step we have just taken, we wipe it out. Otherwise we go on.*
7. *We then repeat the entire process, starting at step 1 again, with the newly modified whole.*
8. *We stop altogether when there is no further step we can take that intensifies the feeling of the whole.*

In the world of architecture, a center is place that draws attention and acts as a source of feeling and connectedness. I will look at the theory of centers in more detail in the next annotation. For now, I'll try to keep the concept simple. Alexander says:

<Centers> are those particular identified sets, or systems, which appear within the larger whole as distinct and noticeable parts. They appear because they have noticeable distinctness, which makes them separate out from their surroundings and makes them cohere, and it is from the arrangements of these coherent parts that other coherent parts appear.

For example, a window is a center. Alexander says of a window:

The wholeness of a window is the coherence which binds the window together—its sill, glass, the sloping reveals, its mullions, the landscape outside, the light coming in, the soft light on the wall next to the window, the chair drawn up toward the window's light—and the arrangement of the larger entities which makes them one: the space of the window seat which binds reveals, seat, sill, and window plane; the view which combines chair, outdoor landscape, and the glazing bars into a single entity; the light falling on the window reveal and on the floor. In each case the wholeness is defined by the major wholes and the way these wholes are arranged to form still larger wholes.

In poetry, a center is a line, a rhymed word, a stress, a repeated word, an enjambment, voice, sense, a gesture, the closing—in fact, every craft technique we study is the study of building a particular sort of center. But these potential centers are not such unless they demonstrate life and wholeness which arises from the nature and substance of the poem itself in such a way that their strengths enhance the strengths of other centers and contribute to the strength of the largest center, the poem itself, which exists in a field of wholes which are the other poems in the collection and the poet, the reader, and life itself. A tall order.

A stress in an anapestic foot is, usually, a weak center and a spondee is a strong center—the strength of the center which is the stress in the anapest depends on the centers around it and how strongly the centers which are the unstressed syllables around it support the stress, but in general it is weak. As in the built world (Alexander's world), centers are made of other smaller centers and are reinforced by others. Thus the spondee is a strong center made of two weaker centers, the individual stressed syllables. This complex of three centers is reinforced by each of its component centers, and the whole reinforces the individual centers. When a spondee is made of two monosyllabic words, those words take on more significance than they would by themselves. Similarly, the words at the end and start of a line get more attention, and in Alexander's words, these (word) centers are strengthened by their additional centeredness of the start and end positions in a line. The subject, the images, the metaphors, the individual sounds of words and phrases, the cadence, the meter, voice, focus and every other thing that goes into a poem are centers, and the strength of the poem is the strength of these centers and how they fit into the world. When Lux talks about onomatopoeia being the way the sounds of the poem reinforce what it is saying so that the sounds themselves are telling the body how to understand the poem, he is talking about how the centers of the sounds are reinforcing the other centers in the poem to create a stronger whole. The correspondences between Alexander's architectural theories and poetry are remarkable. In fact, while discussing these ideas with Alexander in rela-

tion to poetry, he was struck by the correspondence and how the degree of compression found in poetry (unlike in many other written forms) really highlight that correspondence.

But here I want only to think about evaluation. Steps 3 and 4 in Alexander's process correspond to looking at the poem we have in front of us and locating those places where the most good can be done to increase the life and wholeness of the poem. What Alexander says is that we need to find centers that are weak and either remove them or increase their strength, perhaps by modifying or by adding.

How to find those weak centers is what this series of annotations is about. When we look at our own work we are trying to find those places that are weak and we try to repair them. As with Alexander's process, this can mean editing, adding, or replacing, and this can apply to the whole poem, so that a step we can take is to abandon or throw away the poem.

Therefore, to be good poets, we not only need to be able to find something to say, something so compelling that not saying it is not an option, but we must also be able to find those places where our expression is lacking, where the poem in its current form goes wrong or where there are weaknesses. Alexander, in the built world, identifies 15 types of centers and through positive and negative examples teaches how to evaluate a building in the process of being built in his iterative process that combines design and building. We know the centers that are important in poetry because we have been studying them all along: line, rhyme, rhythm, stresses, lines, stanzas, gestures, voice, tone, enjambments, metaphors, images, cinematographic presentations, deep imagery, vision, etc.

What makes what we do hard is that it is difficult to recognize in our own work where these weak places are—normally once they are pointed out we can repair them. And when we work with our supervisors, they are most useful when they point out those places of weakness.

Our work with annotations normally prepares us only for half of the task: We look at strong work or distinctive uses of craft elements so we can see how they work when they work well, but we rarely look at poor or weak use of craft elements to see where we could improve the poem. And this seems to me at least to be in part due to our assumption that work published by well-known poets is all very good. In fact, all that can be accurately stated is that each poem published by a poet is publishable, but this statement is admired only by the fiercest tautologists.

For me it was useful to see how Alexander critiqued a building built by James Stirling: The science library in Berlin. Stirling is known as a postmodern architect, and so the criticisms leveled at Stirling could (and do) apply to postmodern poets. As you read it, think not only about what Alexander is saying about the building as a building, but what he would be saying of a postmodern poem where you take his concept of "center" to be the things we've mentioned:

Failure of Centers in Postmodern Architecture

In order to understand the process of making centers better, it may be helpful to examine a case which looks as if it has many living centers in it— but actually doesn't. For an example I take the science library in Berlin, built by James Stirling. When we look at the plan of this building, especially, it seems on the surface, to have several rather good centers. The half circle, the hexagon, the long arcade all stand out. Is there anything wrong with them, or are they indeed good centers.

It is important to stress the fact that this architect obviously was trying to make centers. Yet, the level of understanding which exists among postmodern architects is drastically limited. This limitation, which exists on the surface in some strange, perhaps unnatural feeling, that exists in the building—and which is done intentionally by the architect in order to be clever—can be an-

alyzed and understood very exactly in terms of the field of centers, and the architect's failure to produce it.

When we look at the plan very roughly, we may be impressed by a general feeling of strangeness, by some kind of separateness that exists among the parts. They do not flow naturally into one another, they do not form a whole. Still, this intuitive assessment is very hard to substantiate. Once again, on the surface it seems as though the centers are good, and strong, and intentionally formed. It is an excellent piece of work.

But under the surface, the thing has profound defects structurally. The centers which seem so strong and center-like, are very, very weak centers.

There are four defects which can be most easily identified.

- *Smaller centers*

If we look inside the centers, we find that the thing is subdivided into rooms and spaces which do not form strong centers in themselves. This shows the brittleness of the form. The half circle is an empty shell, which is not made up of smaller centers. By comparison, a true center is itself made of smaller centers which are centers too. The rooms are centers: passages, entrance, odd corners by the stairs—are all centers.

- *Image-like copies of other centers*

If we look at the ground plan, it is noticeable that the centers which exist are very dissimilar—they do not form a family, but seems isolated, distinct. This happens because they are, quite literally, cut and pasted from history books. One is the stoat. Stirling calls it the stoat. The half circle is like a Greek theater or arena. Stirling calls it the arena. The cross-formed plan is an almost perfect replica of an Armenian or byzantine church.

This is typical of postmodern architecture—which gains its forms and plans, by making copies of historical plans and images—and literally cutting and pasting them onto the plans. Again, one asks oneself, how this may be criticized. What is really wrong with it. What goes wrong at a deep level. And what is it that prevents these so-called centers from being real centers, when they are made like this.

- *Centers do not emerge from the surrounding wholeness*

Because these forms have been cut or pasted into the plan, they do not have the capacity to emerge naturally from what is there. Thus, they are isolated, in a realistic and literal sense. They do not emerge by transformations of the surrounding structure. Instead, they are cut and transplanted. Thus, they appear context-less, and cut-off. They do not extend the surrounding structure. And for this reason they fail to create the seamless structure which is typical in a real field of centers.

From a structural point of view the essential point is this. A real center starts many diameters outside its skin or boundary—the structure beyond contributes to the centeredness. This is an essential attribute of any real center. But these centers, because they are cut and transplanted, do not have this feature. They are very weak centers, because they do not extend outward far enough.

- *Centers do not help form any larger centers*

The centers also do not cooperate to form a larger centers. For example, the space between these buildings could be a center. It is not. This is not because of its irregular shape. A similar courtyard, with a more irregular shape, might be beautiful. Certainly, it is not necessary for the courtyard to be regular rectangle.

But the key thing is that the different and separate centers remain separate. They do not cooperate to form anything. So they remain silly, trivial in feeling—above all because structurally they do not have the proper character.

On first analysis it looks as though the Stirling library is faulty because the details are too crude.

And they are crude. The pure cylinder columns, the triangular wedges of roof and slab— they are unsubtle and academic in their geometry.

But the real problem, is that successful large wholes do not appear in the building, it has not made larger wholes. The smaller centers—already weak—do not succeed in forming larger centers, or in making the larger centers live.



What we cannot easily spot in our own work should be easier to spot in others' if we train ourselves to do it. And it probably doesn't hurt to see that published poets are human too. We must accept that there are plenty of failures of one sort or another in published work or else we're forced to accept that all published work is perfect. What we might concede is that most published work is acceptable and whatever failures there are are minor.

In this series of annotations—my final series—I want to start to gain the ability to look for failures so I can find them in my own work. Alexander says that to be able to design good buildings one has to be able to know how one feels about the wholeness of a partially designed or constructed building. He says we have to be able to spot where we can work on centers. This requires being able to spot weaknesses, and that's what I'm calling a failure.

Mr Cogito and the Movement of Thoughts

Thoughts cross the mind
says the popular expression

the popular expression
overestimates the movement of thoughts

most of them
stand motionless
in the middle of a dull landscape
of ashy hills
parched trees

sometimes they come
to the bursting river of another's thoughts
they stand on the shore
on one leg
like hungry herons

with sadness
they remember the dried-up springs

they turn in a circle
searching for grain

they don't cross
because they will never arrive
they don't cross
because there is nowhere to go

they sit on stones
wring their hands

under the cloudy
low
sky
of the skull

In the software world, of course, every day is a day of finding failures (bugs) and removing them (debugging). In programming it is possible to set up a set of diagnostics to find problems, and general programming principles can be turned around from construction to diagnosis. That's what I'm hoping will happen in these annotations: We'll discover that finding weaknesses is a matter of looking at the poems through craft lenses and seeing where the craft is weak or inconsistent or incomplete, and that will hint at where the understanding of the subject matter is weak and hence the poem fails to be whole and create a complete center in itself.

An Example

Zbigniew Herbert is a very well-known poet writing in Polish and whose works have been translated extensively into English. Among the best known of Herbert's work is the Mr Cogito series (**Mr Cogito**, The Ecco Press, 1993).

Herbert is known for his humor or at least sarcastic take on various ages and cultures, and many of the Cogito poems address with dry humor the missteps of Mr Cogito. The poem at the left is one of the first poems I looked at with an eye toward identifying failures, and as you read it now you are perhaps hard-pressed to find anything I would call a failure. The failure here is subtle and perhaps not worth noting except that it might illustrate the point that even the best poetry can have its own weak moments.

Here the craft lens to look through is metaphor. The title and first 2 stanzas clue us in that movement is the key metaphor and in particular the movement of thoughts. We right away get the image of thoughts crossing the mind. It is typical of Herbert humor to try to dissect that statement literally by moving figuratively into Mr Cogito's mind.

We indeed get the metaphor played out throughout the poem: *stand motionless*, *stand on the shore*, *they don't cross* (twice), *will never arrive*, *nowhere to go*, *sit on stones*. But the metaphor is polluted a bit by the image (and metaphor) of water: *ashy hills*, *parched trees*, *bursting river*, *on the shore*, *cloudy low sky*, and *skull* (dryness). Though there is little or no movement throughout the poem, the image of water and its absence attains a significance as strong as motion.

It is possible to reconcile the two and argue that the two images reinforce each other, but it seems likely that this poem needs only one strong image (and metaphor). Certainly the title and first 2 stanzas lead us to believe that we will be seeing only one image.

I feel that these two centers—to use Alexander's term—are weakened by each other rather than strengthened, because they do not sufficiently arise from each other the way Alexander says they should. That is, they do not combine to create a sufficient third center, and it is therefore a minor failure.

Looking at the collection I noticed that the poem on the next page (**Mr Cogito and Pure Thought**) appears 2 poems ahead of the one we're looking at. In this poem we see a clear use of the water image

Mr Cogito and Pure Thought

Mr Cogito tries
to attain pure thought
at least before sleep

but the attempt
carries the seeds of its own defeat

as he arrives
at the state when thought is like water
vast and pure water
at an indifferent shore

the water suddenly ruffles over
and a wave brings
tin cans
driftwood
a tuft of hair

to tell the truth Mr Cogito
is not completely without fault
he was unable to detach
his inner eye
from the mailbox
the smell of the sea was in his nostrils
crickets tickled his ear
and he felt her absent fingers under his ribs

he was ordinary like everyone else
with furnished thoughts
the hand's skin on the back of a chair
a furrow of tenderness
on a cheek

sometime
sometime later
when he grows cold
he will reach the state of satori

and be as the masters recommend
empty and
amazing

(water, water's edge, a wave, driftwood) filling the first half of the poem. The second moves on to whether Mr Cogito's mind is empty (it is not) and the water image returns in a natural way (*the smell of the sea*). This poem also has two imagistic centers, but they reinforce one another.

More importantly, the water image here appears to be what's carried over to **Mr Cogito and the Movement of Thoughts**. It is as if **Pure Thought** was not complete or thoroughly worked out in Herbert's mind and he wrote a second poem on the same essential subject where only one—perhaps a longer one—was needed.

We would not have seen the failure of **Movement of Thoughts** had Herbert not set up the image of movement of thoughts so strongly early in the second poem. After the initial "joke" about overestimating the movement of thoughts, it is all downhill. This center is so strong perhaps it should be the end.

Nevertheless, one oughtn't get caught up in finding the fix to the failures we find. This exercise is simply to find them and to use craft elements as much as we can to do it. The craft element here is the image and attached metaphor, and we see that combining two strong images does not always yield a third strong one.

The remainder of these annotations are aimed at extending this line of inquiry, which I hope is not taken as merely a criticism of great poets but a start at understanding the process of repair.

Theory of Centers

When we read definitions of poetry we read about heightened observation, verse, and some of the other characteristics of texts that are obviously poems. Here is the definition in the **Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetic Terms**:

A poem is an instance of verbal art, a text set in verse, bound speech. More generally, a poem conveys heightened forms of perception, experience, meaning, and consciousness in heightened language, i.e. a heightened mode of discourse.

There is nothing wrong with this definition, but I think it misses an important point about poetry, perhaps its defining point. This point is hinted at by the term “heightened” in the above definition. It seems impossible to distinguish poetry from other forms of writing based on content, intent, or subject matter. Similarly, length and other form-based distinctions can all be broken down with naturally occurring examples that straddle such boundaries or even poems that seem to stand squarely on the non-poetry side.

While reading about architecture as expounded by Christopher Alexander, I’ve come to see that architecture (or at least good architecture) shares the same definitional problem, though it’s easy to say that architecture is an “art form” aimed at constructing buildings useful to people. But finding the difference between good architecture and ordinary or bad architecture is aiming at the same distinction that poetry has with prose.

During his career, Alexander has concentrated on defining “beauty” or rather characterizing it—he believes beauty is an objective quality and therefore it should be possible to come up with something like a precise definition of it. I think beauty is the difference between prose and poetry, and so here is my definition of a poem:

A poem is a beautiful text.

This definition works only if we can come up with a definition of beauty which accurately characterizes the distinct properties of poems versus prose and which can be applied reasonably well. Alexander has begun to define beauty in the geometrical world as a system of **centers** which support each other to create a wholeness or a larger center. Repeating from the first annotation (**The Study of Failures**), here is Alexander’s definition of a center:

<Centers> are those particular identified sets, or systems, which appear within the larger whole as distinct and noticeable parts. They appear because they have noticeable distinctness, which makes them separate out from their surroundings and makes them cohere, and it is from the arrangements of these coherent parts that other coherent parts appear.

For us, a center is any place in a poem that attracts attention. A rhyme attracts attention, and each word in a rhyming pair is a center, and the pair of words that rhyme taken together form a larger center. A stress is a center as is an unstressed syllable. So are images, pieces of syntax, lines, the title, the stanzas, sounds, logical connections, and just about any craft technique we study.

Further, Alexander has begun to categorize centers which demonstrate wholeness and life. The following is my translation to poetry of Alexander’s desirable properties of geometrical centers; when an object has a number of strong centers with these properties, Alexander would say that the object is whole, it has life, it is beautiful.

Levels of Scale

A beautiful text contains centers at all levels of scale. This means that there are centers at the size of a syllable or a basic sound all the way up to the entire poem. A great poem has centers of all possible sizes. If I were to take a short, good poem and mark all of its centers, the poem would be covered with marks—each stress and unstress, each similar sound, each image, each line, each start- and end-word in a line, each image, each repetition, the title, each stanza, each caesura, etc. If I were to mark strong centers, the number or percentage would depend on how well the poem was constructed. More significantly, if I did a similar exercise with a piece of prose (that did not cross the boundary into poetry) there would be a lot of centers, but they would not support one another, nor would the strength of the centers nor the strength of the center which was the entire piece be very strong. There is nothing wrong with that just as there is nothing wrong with a very utilitarian piece of furniture which does not have the special quality of life and wholeness that Alexander is striving for.

Strong Centers

A great poem has a number of **strong** centers. Centers are at the heart of this theory, but it is still important to note that strong centers are required, not just centers. A poem needs not only centers, but several strong centers. Strong music, strong lines, strong images, strong rhyming, strong rhythmic interest are all examples. This is the difference between a very good poem and one that is adequate. We remember the strong centers even if we are unable to point to them—because there are strong centers supporting it, the entire poem is then itself a strong center and is, therefore, memorable or at least will have an effect on the reader.

Boundaries

A boundary is that which separates a center from its surroundings. The place just at the end of a line is a boundary. If the line break boundary is there and nothing else, it is a weak boundary and really not much of a boundary at all. We will see in some of the Dobyns poems that the line break sometimes seems to be based on where on the horizontal axis the other lines happens to be—sort of a ragged-right effect. There is indeed a boundary at the line break, but without other centers contributing to that boundary (a rhymed word, a stress, a rhythmic fulfillment, an image, a syntactic boundary), it is a weak boundary and hence contributes less to the strength of other nearby centers.

This concept is why poetry is frequently in verse: It adds a specific type of boundary that does not really occur in prose. Although lines wrap in prose, the boundary there is so weak that we don't even notice it. In poems with weak lines, the line-break boundary seems weak and almost an afterthought.

Repetition

Repetition is the key for poetry—we expect to see some sort of recurrence, either of sound, image, sense, rhythm, or syntax. Repetition makes a poem appear as a uniform field or cohesive pattern. It echoes our sense of rhythm even when the repetition isn't specifically of rhythm. Not only in poetry but everywhere in the world we see repetition as patterns of visual objects, and even at the atomic level repetition is crucial (for crystalline structure, for example). Repetition is the basis for symmetry. Some connect song and poetry. The shared characteristic is a density of centers with a strong measure of repetition, especially rhythmic repetition. Even though not all music is rhythmically regular, it is still music, and similarly a poem without regular rhythm is still a poem.

Positive Space

Positive space is the characteristic of a center that moves outward from itself, seemingly oozing life rather than collapsing on itself. An image that resonates is showing positive space. A word that has many connotations that fit the other centers in the poem is showing positive space. It is an expansion outward rather than a contraction inward, and it shows that the poem is unfolding in front of us and not dying. A good example of positive space is a stress, which teems with energy. But, a stress requires a lack of stress to be recognized—that is, positive space requires negative space. This is why a poem with very high stress content (many spondees or Hopkinsian sprung rhythm) can be an assault rather than a poem. There is no variation, and the strength of the stress is reduced from lack of contrast. Similarly, a poem with a preponderance of unstressed syllables simply doesn't have enough stress-centers to satisfy us as a poem.

Good Shape

Good shape is the characteristic of a center that it is somehow beautiful by itself. One of a pair of words that rhyme has good shape if it is also a beautiful word by itself. This means, of course, that the centers in the word—its sounds, its rhythms—are also good centers by themselves. The shape of the poem should suit its centers and its subject. The form should support the structure: the argument, the movement of images, the development of a narrative (change over time), the unfolding of a moment (lyric). The form is the shape of the poem; it can be a sonnet, couplets, single stanza, a particular rhyme scheme, etc.

Local Symmetries

Every center should have a center nearby in the poem which is somehow an echo. Another word that rhymes, another end-word, an image that complements. Envelope poems have this characteristic. All the characteristics that make up so-called traditional form are forms of local symmetries. When a line has a number of feet of similar stress patterns, we have local symmetries. Symmetries make us feel there is a recurring pattern in the poem, and a pattern is an indication of universality. And so a poem with local symmetries seems like it represents a class of occurrences that we should pay attention to.

Deep Interlock and Ambiguity

Deep interlock means that it is hard to pull centers apart in a well-made poem. It seems difficult to extract a part of the poem which stands as well on its own as it does within the poem. Another way of saying this is that each center derives a lot of its power from surrounding centers. Similarly, when a poem has deep interlock, you really cannot remove any part of it without deeply diminishing it. When a poem is “too big,” that means that the centers are weak and some centers are not contributing enough. These centers are not (and cannot be) interlocked deeply enough, and therefore the poem is strengthened by removing them.

On a smaller level, paired stress and unstress form deep interlock, as do enjambed lines. Images that cannot be pulled apart are deeply interlocked. The fact that a poem is so deeply interlocked makes it seem more of a whole center, something that somehow must exist. Prose, on the other hand, is much more malleable, and a variety of revisions, additions, and deletions can be made to it without altering it very much as a whole. The center that is an entire prose piece seems less inevitable.

Ambiguity is related because when a center is deeply interlocked with another, it is difficult to see which center is supporting the other (that is, which is the primary center and which the secondary, which is positive space and which negative). Resolving such an ambiguity or at least considering it is one of the great pleasures of reading poetry. Sometimes an ambiguity can seem like an obscurity, but it is often best to not let such feelings dominate our reaction to a poem. In many cases an obscurity arises from the use of an image rather than from simple imprecision or unclarity. Later we will look specifically at how to determine whether an image is effective and not merely an obscure detail.

Contrast

Many good poems have strong contrasts in them. A strong enough contrast could be looked at as a contradiction. A poem full of life and good noise will also have moments of deep stillness. One place will be approached closely and another merely hinted at. There will be places of strong rhyme and then loose rhyme. A strong rhythmic pattern will be established and a strongly varied passage will contrast it. Stress/unstress is a basic contrast. Images, words, or phrases that go against the grain are contrasts. Without contrast there is nothing: The pure blue of a small patch of sky seen in isolation (however you might do it) doesn't hold our interest at all—it's just a color sample.

Gradients

Almost no good poem, not even a lyric, stays in one place. Even if the poem is trying to reveal a lyric moment it will do it by approaching it, shading it, building on it, taking away from a wrong characterization. In other words, there will be a gradient which the reader follows to get to the point where the poet already has been (or would like to know or experience). Without gradient, there is no contrast and hence the poem is literally nothing. But more than that, without gradient, the reader is left to either leap from one place to another—which does not feel like a natural progression—or is plunked in one place, stuck observing a bland landscape.

Roughness

Often a successful poem will seem like it could have been spoken on the spot. It will resemble ordinary speech. In doing so it is not perfect, its rhythms are not exact, its rhymes are not sing-song. It is rough even though it contains very many, well-made centers. Limericks and doggerel are often very well made, almost mechanical in their perfection.

Roughness might seem like a form of imperfection and hence not something we should celebrate in a poem. But I think this misses the mark. The following quote about the famous "Tile House" in Mexico City from an essay by Alexander says it well:

We have become used to almost fanatical precision in the construction of buildings. Tile work, for instance, must be perfectly aligned, perfectly square, every tile perfectly cut, and the whole thing accurate on a grid to a tolerance of a sixteenth of an inch. But our tilework is dead and ugly, without soul.

In this Mexican house the tiles are roughly cut, the wall is not perfectly plumb, and the tiles don't even line up properly. Sometimes one tile is as much as half an inch behind the next one in the vertical plane.

And why? Is it because these Mexican craftsmen didn't know how to do precise work? I don't think so. I believe they simply knew what is important and what is not, and they took good care to pay attention only to what is important: to the color, the design, the feeling of one tile and its

relationship to the next—the important things that create the harmony and feeling of the wall. The plumb and the alignment can be quite rough without making any difference, so they didn't bother to spend too much effort on these things. They spent their effort in the way that made the most difference. And so they produced this wonderful quality, this harmony. . . simply because that is what they paid attention to, and what they tried to produce. [“The Perfection of Imperfection.” In *Roots and Branches: Contemporary Essays by West Coast Writers*, ed. Howard Junker. San Francisco: ZYZZVA]

Echoes

Echoes are like repetitions, except echoes have more to do with family resemblance than exact replication. What this means is that the centers of the poem seem to go together, are made from the same mind apprehending the same sorts of things. When this fails, a part of a poem will feel stuck on, obscure, random, or pasted in. This is the common failure of postmodern poetry and even some surreal poetry. Loose rhyme is an echo, images that hang together form echoes. Marvin Bell calls it “fishing back,” referring to the way a good poem will cast a fishing line back to an earlier part of the poem and catch hold of it, figuratively.

One of the most crucial things to a good poem is for its parts to feel integrated—and of course, this means they indeed do need to be parts of the same thing. This means there has to be a thing, which is the center which is the poem, and its parts need to be family members.

The Void

The void is the quiet center of a poem. Sometimes it is stillness or literally a quiet point someplace—frequently the end—of a poem. Sometimes it is the space between stanzas or lines, sometimes it is the place of quiet resonance just after a poem ends. Regardless, a good center with this characteristic is at the heart of the poem and not at the fringes. All the other centers support a center representing the void very strongly.

Simplicity and Inner Calm

All irrelevant parts are gone. The poem is as simple and spare as it can be and still retain its life. Nothing more can be removed. Each part seems simple and simply made. There is no ostentation for ostentation's sake alone. Here is a list of characteristics Alexander has for Shaker furniture, which he says exemplifies this sort of characteristic. Notice that only by leaving out specific references to furniture, I've shown how well it applies quite well to poetry:

- it uses simple parts
- the ornament is very sparse, but does occasionally exist
- the proportions are unusual
- many of the pieces are strange in some specific way which marks them as indeed unusual
- the pieces have a recognizable function, but are nonetheless severe
- finally, everything is still, silent

Inner calm is meant to qualify simplicity in its most simple form. One might think that only naïvely simple poems can demonstrate the right kind of simplicity. But inner calm means that the parts that are there are essential, and therefore very complex poems can be simple and demonstrate inner calm.

Several of Whitman's best known poems have a simplicity and inner calm even though they are boisterous and lengthy, seemingly full of extraneous material. Yet, little of it can be cut and still leave the same or an equally successful poem.

Again, a quote from Alexander is illustrative:

*The problem is complicated because the word simplicity completely fails to cover it; at another moment it might be exactly the opposite. Take the example of the columns. If you have the opportunity to put a capital or a foot on it, it is certainly better to do those two things than not—which is different from what the modern architectural tradition tells you to do. Now, in a peculiar sense, the reasons for it being better that way are the same as the reasons for being very simple and direct in the spacing of those same columns around the courtyard. I'm saying that, wherever the source of that judgment is coming from, it is the same in both cases. . . . The word simplicity is obviously not the relevant word. There is something which in one instance tells you to be simple and which in another tells you to be more complicated. It's the same thing which is telling you those two things. [from an interview in **Christopher Alexander: The Search for a New Paradigm in Architecture**, Stephen Grabow, Stocksfield, UK: Oriel Press]*

Not-Separateness

This one is very important. It means that the poem seems part of the world and part of life. Once we've read the poem we cannot imagine the world without it and in fact feel that we knew the poem all along. Postmodern poetry fails in this way (and in most others as well). Each center should demonstrate this as well. It should be part of the fabric of the poem and of the world. It is hard to pin this one down, but it is a definite feeling. Part of it has to do with the choice of the word "center" to refer to the places of interest in a poem.

Alexander toyed with using "whole" instead, but concluded, correctly, that the world "whole" tended to focus on the boundaries of the phenomenon, what made it separate from its surroundings and hence a separable whole. For example, where does a pond end? Does it include the air just above the water, does it include the shore and the trees and bushes on it, does it include the stream supplying it? And if it does include these near surroundings, how far does the pond extend? Different people may answer these difficult questions differently, but that avoids the point that a pond is a thing that people can recognize and react to even though they probably cannot place a precise boundary around it.

The word "center" implies that there is a central, noticeable, recognizable thing which is the center even when there is no clear boundary between the center and its surroundings. In a poem, this characteristic is not only useful but necessary: A **strong** center does not usually and should not usually have a definite boundary because to be strong it must interact with and relate to other centers. Therefore, the center which is the poem should not, in general, have a strong boundary because it needs to interact with and relate to not only the centers within it but those around it, which are in the real world and the world of other poems.



The centers in a poem all lead us toward the life and wholeness of a poem, the thing that, as we'll see, makes it part of life and humanity. This thing is the center that the poem is. This center is not a theme or a meaning. It isn't even, necessarily, a sharing of an experience with the poet. The poet had a compelling reason to write the poem, to create the center we see, and that center is as alive and human for us as for the poet, but the surface argument, story, theme may have little or nothing to do with it.

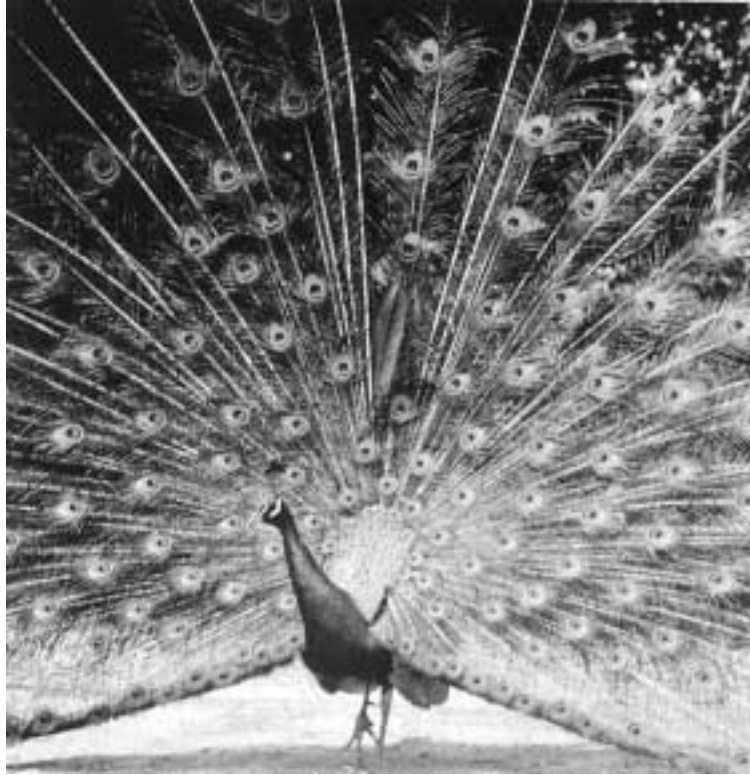
The way a poem works is the same way that a peacock works. Look at the picture on the next page. The peacock's tail and body contains a set of centers each supporting the other centers and also focusing attention downward and toward the bottom, rear part of the bird's body. Even the peacock's head and neck are pointing down and back toward the hidden back half of the bird. The tail is the primary field of centers. Notice that the eyespots of the tail are all looking toward the body of the bird and diminish in size closer to the body where they overlap forming a scale-like pattern. The overall set of eyespots are formed into arcs, so that no matter where the observer starts, the observer's eyes are drawn toward the center. The long white shafts also radiate outward from the central body. When the bird shakes and dips, the effect is a shimmering that directs attention of the field of centers. The surface of the tail feathers is iridescent so every eyespot has a faint reflection of the peacock in it. The eyespots and the whole display are in a posture of observing the peacock while the real eyes are hidden by yellow stripes.

The centers in the peacock's tail all direct attention to the central focal point—a center—which is the back half of the bird—the genitals, if you will. All the centers support each other and this particular center, and the whole bird itself forms a strong center—even though rational people hate peacocks. In short, the centers in the peacock all contribute to the center which is the peacock and direct us toward the simplicity and inner calm of the bird. And this is how a poem works.



Alexander believes that beauty is objective and we've simply forgotten how to see it because the rationalist tradition started by Descartes has made default a mechanistic view of the world. Looked at this way, postmodernism in poetry (and in any other art) is the ultimate display of this mechanistic view. Because the rational view has led to a world devoid of beauty, the rationalist world seems chaotic and pasted together from parts, and postmodernism displays this exact sort of chaos and the dismay that comes with it. Like Alexander, I believe that beauty is objective, and that everything that is alive in Alexander's sense, including poetry, demonstrates life the same way—through strong, mutually supporting centers.

Therefore, what distinguishes poetry from other texts is that a poem is beautiful (in the precise way I've outlined above) and therefore is objectively defined.



This sort of way of looking at poetry has a nice side effect: It explains why prose-poems are poems and why we can recognize them (almost) right away as poems. A prose-poem has all of the characteristics of centers described above but does not exhibit one particular way of demonstrating boundaries, positive space, strong centers, deep interlock, and echoes—namely, it lacks lines. But the density of centers, the impossibility of removing one, the difficulty of improving one, the way the centers relate and strengthen each other is exactly the kind of beauty a verse poem demonstrates.

This also explains why free verse can succeed so well, even though to those writing more traditional forms of poetry when free verse began to be successful felt it lacked an essential ingredient of poetry. But the real essential ingredient is beauty, which is life and wholeness.

This is an important point. Beauty is not prettiness, not for Alexander nor for us. For Alexander, for example, slums in South America are more beautiful than almost all the buildings built in the West since the early 1900's. Beauty is wholeness and life, and it is objective because all live things are constructed the same way, whether by self-generation or by artists.



In one of Alexander's books he poses a test of the objective quality of beauty. He presents pictures of two Turkish carpets (one of his passions) and asks the reader to choose which is the more beautiful. Except, he doesn't ask it that way. He asks a different question (which I'll quote shortly). In my experience, a great many people select the carpet he predicts, which he explains is the one more alive, more whole. I think we can use his question to understand poetry more deeply.

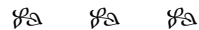
In thinking about the problem of seeing the quality of a poem and finding weaknesses, I've discovered that one of the particular difficulties lies in seeing that a deep image really is that and not a piece of randomness or obscurity. What makes Wright's poems work while some of Tate's or Ashberry's

don't? This theory, to be useful, has to address that problem. Alexander's question gets to the heart of wholeness and life for a complete poem, and I think we can use it to determine when a deep image resonates, is right for a poem, and represents something more than a random obscurity or simply a surreal picture. It might seem that deciding whether we are facing a deep image or an obscurity would somehow be subjective, but I don't think it is. The question Alexander asks is unusual, even odd. But I've seen it work many times, and I think it unifies the 15 qualities we've looked at. Here is what he asks:

If you had to choose one of these two carpets, as a picture of your own self, then which one of the two carpets would you choose? . . .

*In case you find it hard to ask the question, let me clarify by asking you to choose the one which seems better able to represent your whole being, the essence of yourself, good and bad, all that is human in you. [A **Foreshadowing of 21st Century Art: The Color and Geometry of Very Early Turkish Carpets**, Christopher Alexander, New York: Oxford University Press.]*

This question surely separates what's bad about Tate and many of the postmoderns from good poetry (even good postmodern poetry). We can ask of an image: Is it a picture of yourself, does it represent your whole being, the essence of yourself, good and bad, all that is human in you?



The key to this definition of poetry is that beauty has at least a hint of objectivity to it, if we are to believe Alexander—and I do. The definition also enables us to see the difference between statements made about the *form* of a text and those made about the *nature* of the text. We can easily see that a text written as verse might not be a poem under our definition while in more traditional ones, bad verse might be considered poetry while a wonderful prose-poem might not be.

In some ways my attempts at a rigorous definition of poetry harks back to Ellen Bryant Voigt's attempts to classify poetry by its function rather than its form (c.f. her lectures in January and July 1997). The sorts of ways we've tried to understand what poetry in the past aims at easily seen characteristics (e.g., verse) or by what the text is trying to accomplish (**heightened forms of perception, experience, meaning, and consciousness**). Every time we try to pin down definitions like this, poetry slips out. The definition I've proposed is attractive, I feel, because it is simple, seems like a definition we would want to have for poetry, and is based on a theory of beauty that at least has some objective approaches. Further, it collects within its boundaries difficult-to-define "forms" such as prose-poems.

A poem is a beautiful text.

Stephen Dobyns and the Failure of a Single Center

In July 1997's residency, Ellen Bryant Voigt used a Stephen Dobyns poem as an example of a poem where there appears to be a particular form—in this case a sort of sonnet-like bivalve argument or perhaps a simple narrative—and it turns out to be a lyric because a lyric is how the parts function to make this poem work. We can use this same poem, "Fragments" (from **Heat Death in Velocities**, Penguin, 1994), reproduced below, because it exemplifies very well the theory of centers—it is wonderfully full of very strong and mutually supporting centers and also because it has a simple, single failure. The failure is that the center which is the last sentence is very weak and, I believe, collapses the poem from perhaps an extremely strong one to merely a good one. In this annotation I want to look fairly carefully at the centers in the poem to see how they work, identifying which of the 15 characteristics some of the more important centers demonstrate, and then I want to look at this weak center and show why it is weak.

As Ellen pointed out, the poem is in 4 quatrains, each with lines of roughly equivalent length. The first two quatrains recount a speaker telling how some third person first tries to prevent a disaster, then tries to repair it—in both cases failing. The fourth quatrain switches to the speaker addressing the third person and tells him of the inevitability of the *cracks* in his fundament. The speaker mentions the woeful tools of the poet to help the situation (*fragments of language* is what he has to offer for words and *fragments of blue sky*—the object of the third person's woe—for an image), and ends with an explanation of the reason for the situation: One of the three daughters of the person addressed (the *he* in the poem) has died.

I'll proceed by looking at a variety of different types of centers and describing their strengths as outlined in the previous annotation (**The Theory of Centers**). With this in hand we'll look at the center which poses a problem.

Stresses

First I'll start with the stresses. On the next page I have a copy of the poem with the stresses marked along with a summary of the number of stresses and the number of syllables for each line. The first 2 lines start out with a high percentage of stresses and spondees—in fact, the last 4 syllables of the second line and the first of the third are an unbroken string of stresses. From there on it settles into

Fragments

Now there is a slit in the blue fabric of air.
His house spins faster. He holds down books,
chairs; his life and its objects fly upward:
vanishing black specks in the indifferent sky.

The sky is a torn piece of blue paper.
He tries to repair it, but the memory
of death is like paste on his fingers
and certain days stick like dead flies.

Say the sky goes back to being the sky
and the sun continues as always. Now,
knowing what you know, how can you not see
thin cracks in the fragile blue vaults of air.

My friend, what can I give you or darkness
lift from you but fragments of language,
fragments of blue sky. You had three
beautiful daughters and one has died.

for Donald Murray

about 1 stress for every other syllable or a rough iambic. Also, given the number of syllables per line, we have a rough pentameter too. The spondees are interesting: *blue fabric, spins faster, holds down books/chairs, black specks, blue paper, like paste, days stick, dead flies, sky goes back, know how, not see/thin cracks, blue vaults, blue sky*. This list forms a pretty good summary of the emotional high-energy trajectory of the poem. As we'll see with other charts, the stresses also line up with other centers quite well. Thus, they are examples of **Strong Centers**. There are, in addition, patches of unstressed syllables, such as *it but the* and *from you but*. These are not notable phrases, and the lack of stresses there reinforces that point. We have **Deep Interlock**, **Contrast**, and **Local Symmetries** here. Because some spondee strings are quite long, we also have **Levels of Scale**.

Fragments

Now there is a slit in the blue fabric of air. 5/9
His house spins faster. He holds down books, 6/9
chairs; his life and its objects fly upward: 5/10
vanishing black specks in the indifferent sky. 5/11

The sky is a torn piece of blue paper. 5/10
He tries to repair it, but the memory 3/11
of death is like paste on his fingers 4/9
and certain days stick like dead flies. 5/8

Say the sky goes back to being the sky 6/10
and the sun continues as always. Now, 4/10
knowing what you know, how can you not see 6/10
thin cracks in the fragile blue vaults of air. 6/10

My friend, what can I give you or darkness 4/10
lift from you but fragments of language, 3/9
fragments of blue sky. You had three 4/8
beautiful daughters and one has died. 4/9

Stresses

Fragments

Now there is a slit in the blue fabric of air
His house spins faster. He holds down books,
chairs; his life and its objects fly upward:
vanishing black specks in the indifferent sky.

The sky is a torn piece of blue paper.
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thin cracks in the fragile blue vaults of air.

My friend, what can I give you or darkness
lift from you but fragments of language,
fragments of blue sky. You had three
beautiful daughters and one has died.

Sound Echoes

The very strong stress patterns demonstrate **Positive Space**, as does the overall form of the poem, which is regular and moves from trying to avoid the past to trying to fight the past to accepting it even though the tools of poetry, as mentioned in the poem, cannot do much to help.

The numbers of stresses per stanza are 21, 17, 26, and 15, indicating an overall **Gradient** along with two intermediate gradients; this is also **Contrast**.

The density of spondees greatly diminishes in the last stanza, with the last 1½ lines having none. Lines 6 and 14 are particularly weak in stresses.

Sound Echoes

Next I'll look at sound echoes. The poem with these centers marked is at the bottom of this page. There are several sound echoes identified: **ih**, **eye**, **ay**, and **oo**, indicated by different shapes and shadings. Again, the last stanza is weakest, having 10 such centers while the previous three have 19, 17, and 17 respectively. We see **Repetition**, **Echoes**, and **Deep Interlock** (because some of the different sound echoes are right next to each other). We also see some stress centers and sound echo centers overlapping: *books/chairs*, *blue paper*, *like paste*, *know how*, and *blue sky*.

We can also see **Repetition** and **Local Symmetry** in the lines that mention *sky* and *know* twice (lines 9 and 11).

Fragment Images

The poem contains a number of fragment images or references, which I've marked in another copy of the poem, at the top of the next page.

I've included *books*, *chairs*, and *objects* in this group because of the role they play on the images they're in: They are the things which are spun outward to indicate the distress of the father.

Here we see the centers a little bigger than before (**Levels of Scale**). There are lines with no fragment images (lines 6, 7, 9, 10, and 13), and several lines with only one. These represent places of **The Void**.

We can see some reinforcement of centers by looking at the centers shared so far; the strongest ones are: *torn piece of blue paper*, *fragile blue vaults of air*, and *fragments*

Fragments

Now there is a **slit** in the blue fabric of air.
His house spins faster. He holds down **books,**
chairs; his life and its **objects** fly upward:
vanishing black **specks** in the indifferent sky.

The sky is a **torn piece of blue paper.**
He tries to repair it, but the memory
of death is like paste on his fingers
and certain days stick like **dead flies.**

Say the sky goes back to being the sky
and the sun continues as always. Now,
knowing what you know, how can you not see
thin **cracks** in the **fragile blue vaults of air.**

My friend, what can I give you or darkness
lift from you but **fragments of language,**
fragments of blue sky. You had three
beautiful daughters and **one** has died.

Fragment Images

Fragments

Now there is a slit in the blue fabric of **air.**
His **house** spins faster. He holds down **books,**
chairs; his **life** and its objects fly upward:
vanishing black specks in the indifferent **sky.**

The **sky** is a torn piece of blue **paper.**
He tries to repair it, but the memory
of **death** is like paste on his **fingers**
and certain **days** stick like dead flies.

Say the **sky** goes back to being the **sky**
and the **sun** continues as always. Now,
knowing what you know, how can you not see
thin cracks in the fragile blue **vaults** of **air.**

My friend, what can I give you or **darkness**
lift from you but fragments of **language,**
fragments of blue **sky.** You had three
beautiful **daughters** and one has died.

Encompassing Images

of *blue sky*, which all have strong stresses, sound echoes, and each is a fragment reference. These are **Strong Centers**.

Encompassing Images

In contrast to the fragment images are the encompassing images—images or references to things which embrace or contain other things or all things, at least all things in the father's shattered world. There are about 5 such images in each stanza, so they are uniformly spread out. Oddly, these images or references are smaller (in area) than the fragment images, indicating that for the father and for the poem, fragments are the larger issue.

Of particular interest are the centers that intersect those for fragment images: *book*, *torn piece of blue paper*, *fragile blue vaults of air*, *fragments of language*, and *fragments of blue sky*. In some ways this is not surprising because the form of all but one of these expressions is <fragment> of <encompassing whole>. Nevertheless, they are on top of one another and each except *fragments of language* have significant stress centers and sound echoes. That is, we are seeing very reinforced centers and **Ambiguity**.

Because the encompassing image centers are evenly distributed and span one word each, we could say they have **Good Shape**.

Line Ends

The next set of centers is the line ends (on the top of the next page).

Each of the lines except the middle two of the last stanza are strong line ends, though the middle two of stanza 3 need to be justified as strong.

The group of line ends, *air*, *books*, *upward*, *sky*, *sky*, and *air*, form a center that refers to upwardly moving or existing things. They also contribute to the flying outward and balancing pulling inward that Ellen noticed in her lecture (“... the centrifugal and centripetal forces . . .”). The group consisting of *paper*, *memory*, and *fingers* are all things that grasp or hold (onto) things, and it forms a good center as well. *Dead flies*, *darkness*, and *died* are the strong center in the last stanza. These are united in the obvious way of being about the surrender the father must face, things that no longer can fly. The problematic center is *now* and *see*. I maintain that these are things in the present, while the father's tendency is to try to reverse time to prevent his

Fragments

Now there is a slit in the blue fabric of air.
 His house spins faster. He holds down books,
 chairs; his life and its objects fly upward:
 vanishing black specks in the indifferent sky.

The sky is a torn piece of blue paper.
 He tries to repair it, but the memory
 of death is like paste on his fingers
 and certain days stick like dead flies.

Say the sky goes back to being the sky
 and the sun continues as always. Now,
 knowing what you know, how can you not see
 thin cracks in the fragile blue vaults of air.

My friend, what can I give you or darkness
 lift from you but fragments of language,
 fragments of blue sky. You had three
 beautiful daughters and one has died.

Line Ends

daughter's death. This center forms a **Contrast** with the ones that focus on darkness and death, which are anchored in the past.

The centers that are gaining strength are *torn piece of blue paper* and *fragile blue vaults of air*, being or having centers of each of the types so far.

The line end centers are good **Boundaries**, particularly the two centers just mentioned, which frame the middle two stanzas, which are arguably the heart of the poem. The lines between these two lines (lines 5 and 12) could very well be **The Void** in the poem, its deepest center.

Light and Dark

These centers are images or references to light/dark and life/death. The poem with the centers marked is to the below left. The centers are spread evenly through the poem, but only the third stanza has only light/life references, and this is the stanza where the speaker addresses the father and not us. We can see right away the existing centers that are strengthened (*torn piece of blue paper*, *fragile blue vaults of air*, in particular). These centers clearly demonstrate **Repetition**, **Echoes**, and **Contrast**.

Fragments

Now there is a slit in the blue fabric of air.
 His house spins faster. He holds down books,
 chairs; his life and its objects fly upward:
 vanishing black specks in the indifferent sky.

The sky is a torn piece of blue paper.
 He tries to repair it, but the memory
 of death is like paste on his fingers
 and certain days stick like dead flies.

Say the sky goes back to being the sky
 and the sun continues as always. Now,
 knowing what you know, how can you not see
 thin cracks in the fragile blue vaults of air.

My friend, what can I give you or darkness
 lift from you but fragments of language,
 fragments of blue sky. You had three
 beautiful daughters and one has died.

Light and Dark Images

The second and fourth stanzas split the light/life and dark/death images evenly and sandwich the stanza which has only light/life, forming a small **Local Symmetry**.

Boundaries

The poem demonstrates a lot of boundaries, but the strongest ones are the odd-shaped centers shown on the top of the next page. These centers are determined by a sort of interlocking envelope repetition of end words, and are therefore examples of **Repetition**, **Deep Interlock**, **Strong Centers**, **Echoes**, and of course, **Boundaries**. These centers demonstrate **Good Shape** and form **The Void** in the second stanza. They reinforce the very strong center *fragile blue vaults of air*.

Other Centers

There are a number of other centers I haven't diagrammed, such as the stanzas themselves, which demonstrate **Good Shape**, and the progression of sentences from talking about what the father is trying to do using simple declaratives to talking directly to the father per-

Fragments

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chairs; his life and its objects fly upward:

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He tries to repair it, but the memory
of death is like paste on his fingers
and certain days stick like dead flies.

Say the sky goes back to being the sky

and the sun continues as always. Now,

knowing what you know, how can you not see

thin cracks in the fragile blue vaults of air.

My friend, what can I give you or darkness
lift from you but fragments of language,
fragments of blue sky. You had three
beautiful daughters and one has died.

Boundaries

haps in anger with imperatives to addressing the father as *My friend*. These sentence centers show **Gradient** and **Echoes** (by their family resemblances).

The last major centers are the two stanzas addressed to the reader (the first two) and the ones addressed to the father (the last two). These centers demonstrate **Gradient** and **Positive Space**.

The Poem as a Whole

The entire poem is, of course, the ultimate center. We've seen many things about the poem in terms of centers, but here I can point out that the poem sounds very much like spontaneous speech except in one place—the place where the center is weakest, which I'll talk about last. The poem is clearly in a form, but the stress counts and line lengths show a loose iambic pentameter only as a tendency, because we see very strong spondees and anapests. There are several envelopes (*air/sky, sky/air*). The direct speech to the father, *My friend*, is very informal and it is safe to say the entire poem demonstrates **Roughness** in the sense of appearing as spontaneous speech along with just enough formal structure to indicate a heightened moment of speech.

Fragments

Now there is a slit in the blue fabric of air.

His house spins faster. He holds down books,
chairs; his life and its objects fly upward:

vanishing black specks in the indifferent sky.

The sky is a torn piece of blue paper.

He tries to repair it, but the memory
of death is like paste on his fingers
and certain days stick like dead flies.

Say the sky goes back to being the sky

and the sun continues as always. Now,

knowing what you know, how can you not see

thin cracks in the fragile blue vaults of air.

My friend, what can I give you or darkness

lift from you but fragments of language,

fragments of blue sky. You had three

beautiful daughters and one has died.

All Centers

Simplicity and Inner Calm

This is the only one of the 15 properties not mentioned so far. I believe the poem lacks this quality because the center which is the last sentence is weak and hence a small failure. That sentence is *You had three beautiful daughters and one has died*. This sentence occupies the last 1½ lines, which should be a very strong center. Very unfortunately, it is not.

The only center in that sentence that has multiple nonstress centers on top of it is the word *died*, the very last word. If we compute the number of centers per line in the lines before the lines comprising the last sentence, we get about 13 centers per line before this last sentence and about 8½ in it. The only strong center is *died*, and it is weak compared to many of the others earlier in the poem.

The diction of this last sentence is not rough the way the lines before it are. It is not something a speaker, even a poet, would say to the father, especially after the touch of anger or irritation we can see in the third stanza. The word *beautiful* is lightly stressed, breaks up the overall rhythm of the last sentence, and contributes only weakly to surrounding centers. It is hard to figure out to whom, really, those words are directed so out of place do they seem. Ignoring their being out of place, they are not strong except in a sense I believe is not useful to the poem. The words and its placement are there for surprise.

Here I think this sentence breaks the spell of the poem and adds a mere surprise to the end which explains why the father is in the state he's in and why the poet is speaking to us and to him. The information that explains all is at the end, and I believe there is no real good reason for it to be there. I can imagine the information being presented in a lot of different places without changing the power of the poem from what it is now, except for one place: If the information were in the title or very early on, I think the poem would be strengthened because the phrase *fragments of blue sky* is a relatively strong center and would either become the end or be near to it. Moreover, the phrase *fragments of blue sky* is the end of the place where the impotence of the poet is revealed, which is a more powerful place to end than to surprise the reader with "shocking" information.

Ellen pointed out that the matter-of-fact manner of the revelation and its flatness is part of the plan of the lyric, to make the shock of the death of a daughter to the father what it really is: A banal part of life that one must get through should it happen. Well, maybe, but that doesn't do much to argue against the striking weakness this last sentence has instead of its desired strength.

When I read this poem, I am thoroughly ready to have my head knocked off by the end, and instead it is simply slapped. I believe the ultimate **Simplicity and Inner Calm** of the poem is greatly reduced by the surprise ending, and a poem that would otherwise seem inevitable is now forgettable to a degree.

Conclusion

To see graphically the point about the accumulation of centers, the poem with almost all the centers we talked about (the ones shown graphically) is shown on the bottom of the previous page.

This annotation is an attempt to look at the theory of centers as a possible way to locate weaknesses and failures in a poem. When I started the annotation, I did not know how the calculation of center strength would come out, and an intermediate computation hinted at no difference between the last sentence and the norm for the rest of the poem. And I had no real idea that where I felt the weakness would be would be as thoroughly revealed by the analysis of centers as it was. I take this as suggestive evidence that poetry is the art of beautiful text.

Robinson Jeffers and Failure of Voice and Focus

Robinson Jeffers is of the same generation as Eliot and Pound yet he rejected modernism and its leap into imagism, imagery, and artful indirection. While embracing long narratives and direct lyrics, Jeffers still managed to write some very beautiful and musical poems. **The Purse-Seine** (from "Such Counsels You Gave Me," **The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers**, Stanford, 1989), which is reproduced below in its intended full width, is an example of one of Jeffers' best poems (it appears in the **Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry**), yet it demonstrates however faintly Jeffers' primary failure, which is to mix a very musical nature-oriented lyric with prosaic direct statement. This was no accident: Jeffers said that the poetry Mallarmé and his followers was "thoroughly defeatist, as if poetry were in terror of prose, and desperately trying to save its soul from the victor by giving up its body. It was becoming slight and fantastic, abstract, unreal eccentric. . . ."

When Steve Orlen presented this poem in his July 1997 class on line breaks, he chose to reproduce only the first two stanzas. I was surprised because those two stanzas were so wonderful and I wanted to see the rest of the poem. Even though Steve probably was simply saving space because the lineation of the first stanzas adequately demonstrated his point, his sense that the poem went downhill in the third stanza seems right on.

The first two stanzas paints a painstakingly beautiful picture of commercial fishermen catching sardines in a purse-seine net (which surrounds the fish and closes upon them); the fish glow phosphorescently in their fear and frantic attempts to escape. In the second stanza he makes a directly stated metaphor between the sardines and the population of a large city which he views from a mountain-top. The poem goes slightly wrong with the first words of the third stanza (*lately I was looking from*) which seems somehow at the wrong diction level for the poem, and the feeling of wrongness is rein-

The Purse-Seine

Our sardine fishermen work at night in the dark of the moon; daylight or moonlight
They could not tell where to spread the net, unable to see the phosphorescence of the shoals of fish.
They work northward from Monterey, coasting Santa Cruz; off New Year's Point or off Pigeon Point
The look-out man will see some lakes of milk-color light on the sea's night-purple; he points, and the helmsman
Turns the dark prow, the motor-boat circles the gleaming shoal and drifts out her seine-net. They close the circle
And purse the bottom of the net, then with great labor haul it in.

I cannot tell you
How beautiful the scene is, and a little terrible, then, when the crowded fish
Know they are caught, and wildly beat from one wall to the other of their closing destiny the phosphorescent
Water to a pool of flame, each beautiful slender body sheeted with flame, like a live rocket
A comet's-tail wake of clear yellow flame; while outside the narrowing
Floats and cordage of the net great sea-lions come up to watch, sighing in the dark; the vast walls of night
Stand erect to the stars.

Lately I was looking from a night mountain-top
On a wide city, the colored splendor, galaxies of light how could I help but recall the seine-net
Gathering the luminous fish? I cannot tell you how beautiful the city appeared, and a little terrible.
I thought. We have geared machines and locked all together into interdependence; we have built the great cities; now
There is no escape. we have gathered vast populations incapable of free survival, insulated
From the strong earth, each person in himself helpless, on all dependent. The circle is closed, and the net
Is being hauled in. They hardly feel the cords drawing, yet they shine already. The inevitable mass-disasters
Will not come in our time nor in our children's, but we and our children
Must watch the net draw narrower, government take all powers,—or revolution, and the new government
Take more than all, add to kept bodies kept souls,—or anarchy, the mass-disasters.

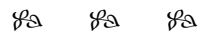
These things are Progress;
Do you marvel our verse is troubled or frowning, while it keeps its reason?
Or it lets go, lets the mood flow
In the manner of the recent young men into mere hysteria, splintered gleams, crackled laughter. But they are quite wrong.
There is no reason for amazement: surely one always knew that cultures decay, and life's end is death.

forced by the phrase *how could I help but recall*; this phrase falls flat and prosaic after the pyrotechnics of the previous stanzas and some of the forthcoming lines in the third stanza. Line 4 of the second stanza goes even further wrong with we *have geared machines and locked all together in interdependence...each person in himself helpless, on all dependent*. *Interdependent* is an abstract, intellectual word used in arguments, and *on all dependent* is a phrasing the reinforces the word *dependent*, the second half of the intellectual argument. At this point, the beautiful music and the voice I am willing to follow in the first two stanzas has lost its hold on me.

The last stanza seems to turn the argument onto itself by commenting on the state of then-contemporary poetry. Despite its pleasantly purple prose quality, after the first two stanzas of unsurpassed beauty it falls flat and seems almost a nonsequitur.

The clues to the falling apart of this poem are the word choices and flattening of tone, which I have included in what I call the overall voice of the poem. The voice begins to veer in the third stanza as Jeffers turns from what he sees (metaphorically and concretely) in the world to lecture us. The final decline into rhetoric begins with *The inevitable mass-disasters* and continues to the end of the poem.

It seems as if Jeffers' intention to not yield victory to prose has led him to make some parts of his poetry too prosey. His voice seems to fall into two categories: a nicely understated but concretely musical voice for describing nature (the hawk and rock of Point Sur) and a flat plain but abstract voice for making arguments about the fate of man and his relation to God, about which he seems to have a pessimism, at least as far as how civilization is handling itself.



The second type of failure I've noticed in Jeffers' work is a failure of focus. To a degree we saw that in **The Purse-Seine** in which the argument moves from catching sardines to the city and its inhabitants being like sardines to the collapse of poetry.

The Silent Shepherds, reproduced below, is from a section in the **Collected Poetry** called "Last Poems," and so it certainly does not represent Jeffers at his height, yet in most ways it is a good poem—one of the best in that section. The failure in this poem is, like the one we looked at earlier, minor but distracting. The idea of the poem is that shepherds are more adept at knowing God than sculptors, painters, playwrights, novelists, poets, philosophers, clergymen, and mathematicians. Glancing at the poem we see it seems it ought to be a short lyric, and so we expect it to be focussed on one image, metaphor, or, as it turns out, argument.

The first 3½ lines are about the scope of 2 of the arts: sculpture and painting, with sculpture having the narrower scope and painting a larger one. With a poem so small we expect the argument to be one of scope and are surprised when the next sentence talks about the *enormous talent* of playwrights and novelists in ancient times.

The Silent Shepherds

Except the occasional auxiliary horse or hound
 A sculptor has nothing to say but "Man, man, man." A painter has more choice,
 Marine and landscape, mankind and the other animals, and all the wild rhetoric
 Of light and shadow. As to the playwrights and novelists—
 There were enormous talents in the ancient time. As to the poets:
 It is really extraordinary that the time's poets
 Have so little to say—little, false and juvenile.
 In this thunder-packed time
 Whom shall I choose then? Philosophers?
 I will have shepherds for my philosophers,
 Tall sullen men who lie on the hills all night
 Watching the stars, let their dogs watch the flock,
 I hope they know much more about God and the universe
 Than all the clergymen and mathematicians.

The argument moves on to criticize then-contemporary poets before moving on to philosophers and finally with a backhand stab at clergymen and mathematicians.

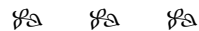
Though the poem is clear, it has ranged in focus from scope of art, the talent of ancients, the banality of then-current poetry, who can make good

philosophers, the lazy star-gazing of shepherds, and finally to the faults of clergy and mathematicians. The first few lines so strongly point the way for an argument based solely on scope of inquiry that the result is confusing—when we ask what compelled Jeffers to write this poem (as Dobyns would ask) we are reducing to saying it's either Jeffers' dislike of then-contemporary poetry or his fascination with knowing God. But neither of these answers comes from the poem—it comes from knowing his work. The problems show up in these lines:

*Of light and shadow. As to the playwrights and novelists—
There were enormous talents in the ancient time. As to the poets:
It is really extraordinary that the time's poets
Have so little to say—little, false and juvenile.
In this thunder-packed time
Whom shall I choose then? Philosophers?*

The underlined phrases are the problematic ones. The first is plain flat and the word *enormous* stands out as clumsy. *It is really extraordinary* is extraordinarily flat and tries to make passion by adding the word *really*. Finally the question *whom shall I choose then?* makes us wonder: Choose for what? It isn't clear up to this point that there is a choice going on. The phrase on this first line of this fragment, *as to the playwrights and novelists*, should have been a clue to Jeffers that he was falling into the flat voice that signals an argument or intellectual statement imbued with passion only through explicit wording designed to underline (*enormous, really*, for example).

The inclusion of clergymen at the end seems out of character to some degree from the other people mentioned: We think of clergymen more as advocates/salesmen or savers than inquirers after God, so the overall plan of the argument seems a little off.



An annotation like this can easily read like a criticism of Jeffers who really has enormous talent and frequently demonstrates it: This first two stanzas of *The Purse-Seine* are extraordinary in their music and use of long lines to set up a contemplative situation, particularly the way the sense of the sentences plays across the line breaks. Masterful. But Jeffers' faults are there and noticeable. In terms of centers, it seems like Jeffers has developed two types of centers: the lyrical nature-type center of the rock and hawk, and the rhetoric argument-type center of his civilization questioning. And Jeffers insists on pasting these two types of centers in the same poem over and over, and it fails because rarely does the one center arise from the other, the same way we see in failed postmodern poetry.

We've used two craft lenses to get at these failures: Voice and focus. And even in the second example, voice provided the clue where focus went off base.

Stephen Dobyns and the Failure of Music, Line, Form, and Focus

In **Common Carnage** (Penguin, 1996), Stephen Dobyns continues his work with plain, sometimes sarcastic diction, essay-like poems, and form. In some ways, Dobyns seems to be experimenting with a Dream-Songs-like approach to presenting the opinions of one (perhaps fictional) man in this book. I say this because the voice is so consistent and there are a number of poems that tend toward a particular form in this collection (and because Dobyns is a Berryman fan). The form Dobyns tends toward in this collection is the sonnet, which appears naked in most places and embellished in others.

Street Racket

I imagine a soul that returns to earth
must have a body. But is it necessary?
Hearing the motorcycles on the next street,

the growl of a dump truck, my neighbor's
cracked muffler, I think of the souls
of the scornful. Must they have shape?

Can't the scornful persist as traffic's
harsh vibrato, a motor's flatulence?
And what of the object of their protest?

One assumes the insult came first and scorn
rose up to fight it, but perhaps the object
came second. Perhaps scorn came first

and went in search of a victim. Jews or jazz
or short people—each person or thing has someone
to despise its being. The victims don't matter,

the victims come after. What the scornful
possess is a certain stance, a ready response
that defines them—the curled lip, arched

eyebrow—that existed before it found out
what it needed to be scornful about.
Where does it come from, this hunger

to measure and compare, this itch to divide,
to demand a special place? Could they be
born like this? I don't believe it. What

touched them as children? To deny one thing
is to affirm another. Isn't their scorn
an attempt to assert the truth of whatever

philosophy propels them? Aren't they trying
to affirm their own self-worth but failing?
Perhaps they think themselves unlovable

and so attack what seems less lovable than they—
tall people or blacks or rock and roll.
They work to persuade themselves it is okay

to love themselves. What happened to them
as children? What was withheld? Listen to them
on the street. How hoarse their voices have grown,

all language reduced to automotive racket.
These are the ones who felt poorly loved
and so found scorn. When they say hate that,

aren't they saying love this? At the curb,
our ears are filled with their complaint.
Can we imagine the lives they led and left behind?

How hard to love the world; we must love the world.

For example, **Artistic Matters** is a 14-stanza poem (3 lines per stanza) whose argument is in a classical sonnet form, and I classify that as an embellished sonnet. A number of the poems employ a rhyme scheme—sometimes loose—with off- or slant rhymes. Dobyns seems to have continued the trend toward essay-like poems he demonstrated in his earlier work with **Common Carnage** being the extreme point thus far.

Dobyns seems not to care much for deep imagery or music in poetry (he seems to like jazz, though), and it is easy to follow what's happening in his poems. The voice he uses in this collection is like the dialectic voice that Robinson Jeffers uses when his poems go flat. Unlike Jeffers, Dobyns' voice is consistent across a poem, and there is generally very little music to be had in Dobyns' work.

"Street Racket," reproduced to the left, is perhaps the centerpiece of the collection, ending as it does with the book's lesson: **How hard to love the world; we must love the world.** Nevertheless, it suffers from some of the failures mentioned above.

Notice that the form could be an embellished sonnet plus an isolated line. Fourteen stanzas seem too long for this poem, and that is evident when you look at the way the metaphor of the covering of the soul being the sound of traffic plays out.

One of the first things that hits a reader of Dobyns' poetry is that the lines are of uniform length. In this poem most lines have 4 or 5 stresses, but the length of the line seems to be set by the length of a particular line, such as the first or the last, probably, in this poem. This leads to many lines that lack any sort of sense as lines—such lines as are completely forgettable and serve merely to graft the subsequent to the previous. For example, the following is a weak line:

born like this? I don't believe it. What

In fact, looking at this poem as an example, 14 of the 43 lines are very weak, and that assessment is generous (weak lines are marked with a center dot [·] at the end of the line). Only 20 of the lines end on a one-syllable word, and the list of such words is boring: *earth, street, souls, shape, scorn, first, jazz, out, be, what, thing, scorn, they, roll, them, them, grown, that, curb, world.*

The flat language doesn't help these weak lines, and the result seems like prose broken into lines. Take a look at the poem set as a paragraph—has much been lost except the *visual* experience of reading a poem?:

I imagine a soul that returns to earth must have a body. But is it necessary? Hearing the motorcycles on the next street, the growl of a dump truck, my neighbor's cracked muffler, I think of the souls of the scornful. Must they have shape? Can't the scornful persist as traffic's harsh vibrato, a motor's flatulence? And what of the object of their protest? One assumes the insult came first and scorn rose up to fight it, but perhaps the object came second. Perhaps scorn came first and went in search of a victim. Jews or jazz or short people—each person or thing has someone to despise its being. The victims don't matter, the victims come after. What the scornful possess is a certain stance, a ready response that defines them—the curled lip, arched eyebrow—that existed before it found out what it needed to be scornful about. Where does it come from, this hunger to measure and compare, this itch to divide, to demand a special place? Could they be born like this? I don't believe it. What touched them as children? To deny one thing is to affirm another. Isn't their scorn an attempt to assert the truth of whatever philosophy propels them? Aren't they trying to affirm their own self-worth but failing? Perhaps they think themselves unlovable and so attack what seems less lovable than they—tall people or blacks or rock and roll. They work to persuade themselves it is okay to love themselves. What happened to them as children? What was withheld? Listen to them on the street. How hoarse their voices have grown, all language reduced to automotive racket. These are the ones who felt poorly loved and so found scorn. When they say hate that, aren't they saying love this? At the curb, our ears are filled with their complaint. Can we imagine the lives they led and left behind? How hard to love the world; we must love the world.

The argument of the poem seems slightly disjointed and bloated. In terms of centers, which I discussed in the first annotation, the points in the argument form centers. Let's look at the organization of these centers. On the next page I've charted the centers, which represent parts of Dobyns' argument—which is the expansion of the metaphor he is making. The centers are shaded areas (numbered for reference) but there is no significance to the shades of gray except to distinguish the centers.

Center 1 establishes the context for the argument: souls returning to earth. Center 2 introduces the idea that the soul of a scornful person could as easily inhabit traffic noise as well as any other sort of object. Center 3 makes the argument that though the object of scorn logically comes first, in actuality scorn precedes its object. This center is interesting because it is a large center which simply makes the statement and then presents some examples. Center 4 argues that the scornful possess a stance that looks for a victim—a sort of reinforcement of the argument in Center 3 which makes a slight change in direction. Center 5 asks the question where this stance or attitude might come from, speculates it is innate, and then rejects the idea—a quick reprise of the nature/nurture argument. Center 6 begins the crux of the argument, which is that scornful people are trying to affirm their worth by denying the worth of others. Center 7 elaborates on this argument. Center 8 is a tie-back to the traffic noise metaphor. Center 9 is a restatement of the argument of Center 7. Center 10 is another tie-back to the traffic noise metaphor.

I've put arrows between centers that are closely related in the argument. Further, I've struck out words, phrases, and sentences within centers that seem to contain redundant information. If we conclude that Centers 8, 9, and 10 serve little useful purpose, and we take the rough measure of struck-out words as indicative of redundancy, the bulk of important material in the poem seems to dwindle

Street Racket

I imagine a soul that returns to earth
must have a body. But is it necessary? 1

Hearing the motorcycles on the next street,
the growl of a dump truck, ~~my neighbor's
cracked muffler~~, I think of the souls
of the scornful. Must they have shape? 2

Can't the scornful persist as traffic's
harsh vibrato, a ~~motor's flatulence~~?
And what of the object of their protest?

One assumes the insult came first and scorn
rose up to fight it, but perhaps the object
came second. ~~Perhaps scorn came first~~ 3

and went in search of a victim. Jews or jazz
or short people—~~each person or thing has someone
to despise its being. The victims don't matter,
the victims come after.~~ What the scornful
possess is a certain stance, a ~~ready response
that defines them~~—the curled lip, arched 4

eyebrow—that existed before it found out
what it needed to be scornful about.

Where does it come from, this hunger 5

to measure and compare, ~~this itch to divide,
to demand a special place? Could they be
born like this? I don't believe it.~~ What
touched them as children? ~~To deny one thing
is to affirm another. Isn't their scorn
an attempt to assert the truth of whatever~~ 6

~~philosophy propels them?~~ Aren't they trying
to affirm their own self-worth but failing?
Perhaps they think themselves unlovable

and so attack what seems less lovable than they—
~~tall people or blacks or rock and roll.~~ 7

They work to persuade themselves it is okay
to love themselves. ~~What happened to them
as children? What was withheld?~~ Listen to them
on the street. How hoarse their voices have grown, 8

all language reduced to automotive racket.

~~These are the ones who felt poorly loved
and so found scorn.~~ When they say hate that, 9

aren't they saying love this? ~~At the curb,
our ears are filled with their complaint.
Can we imagine the lives they led and left behind?~~ 10

How hard to love the world; we must love the world.

significantly, perhaps to 25 lines instead of the 43 that Dobyns wrote. The look of the centers seems to me to be the look of the centers in a typical essay in which the argument sways back and forth with the pluses and minuses, the considerations for and against. The argument here is not a straightforward one, nor is it a simple expansion of the metaphor of scornful souls returning as noise—in fact, aside from the oddness of this metaphor cum image, what purpose does it serve? The poem seems, on reflection, bloated in a way that perhaps does not suite the poem form well (is it proper to take the compressive nature of poems as defining?).

Furthermore, Dobyns is playing around with the sonnet form throughout the collection, and the embellished sonnet form here seems deliberate. Yet, the argument structure of the sonnet is not very well enforced, and all that seems borrowed successfully from the sonnet form is the count and the fact that it is an argument. (Perhaps this is Dobyns' goal with many of these poems, to reduce the sonnet to its most essential parts: count and the fact of argument.)

This poem fails at least three ways, as I see it: It fails to have a music that sets it apart as a special kind of noise—a concept Dobyns supports; it fails to present lines that stand out in their statement, image, and rhythm (because the language is so flat); and it fails to focus well on a single argument or expansion of a metaphor—another Dobyns precept.

In fact, the poem fails even more profoundly because it fails to take advantage of the only interesting thing presented in it: The image of souls as noise. Although Dobyns returns to this image at points in the poem,

it is not explored, and neither is it expanded. Once presented in Center 2, the poem proceeds to a very boring argument which is that people scorn in order to build themselves up, to compensate for love missed.

Dobyns perhaps is the most reflective poets around—he knows exactly why he does certain things in his poems—so finding so many failures that contradict his own stated precepts seems to hint at a deliberate purpose (hence the comment connecting the programme of this collection to that of Berryman in the Dream Songs). Nevertheless, I feel the poem has a few failures.

One last comment. The last line in the poem was not labeled as a center. It certainly is one, but it stands off from the rest of the poem in such a way that its connection as a summary statement of the result of the argument requires some amount of additional thought. It simply is not obviously a summary.

The way to spot these failures is to look carefully at the language and its lack of music, the weak lines, and the distorted, unfocused argument. When unnecessary information is presented, that is a sure give-away that things are amiss or, at least, that you are writing an essay and not a poem. Of particular importance is when the unnecessary information is provided to fill out a form, as it was here.



In “Street Racket” we saw a failure that could be recognized by observing information provided for the purpose only of filling out a form. In

Uninvited
Whose house calls cause you to crap on the floor?
Who makes you pee your pants? The Rude One.
For years you struggled to succeed, you combed
your hair and prayed at night. The Rude One doesn't care.
Your wish to buy a big TV, to summer in Nantucket—
the Rude One overturns your plans, upsets your spouse,
even the dog feels a loss. You were off to purchase
a new beret. Silly, no one wears a hat in a casket.

Think of it as a party. You have chosen the guests
except this boney one. But isn't he the loudest?
Isn't his dance the wildest? He brings his own jazz,
brings his own booze. The other guests are aghast,
but you must be entranced, seduced, enthused, because when
you bid adieu who has you on his arm? The Rude One.

“Uninvited” (reproduced to the left) we can see this failure simply. The poem is clearly in the form of a sonnet, loosely rhymed ABBA CDDC EEEFFGG. The argument lines up pretty well with the first octet talking about the Rude One (death) in general terms, and the sextet speaks of the specifics of an encounter with him.

Look at some of the detail: *overturns your plans* is vague, *upsets your spouse* is almost cliché, *the dog feels a loss* seems uninteresting, and *off to purchase a new beret* is odd for no purpose; *Silly, no one wears a hat in a casket* is

the only bit of information that moves the poem forward (it tells us the Rude One is death), and it requires the funny rhyme and statement about Nantucket—the dreaded apocryphal limerick revisited (*there once was a girl from Nantucket. . .*). In the sextet, even, the information is not informative or even interesting: *the loudest, the wildest, brings his own jazz, his own booze, guests are aghast*, etc.

Ok, ok, so this is supposed to be funny, and the details outrageous. Except, they aren't funny and they are outrageous only as they serve to fill out the outlandish rhymes and the traditional form. The redundancy seems wearing, such as *Whose house calls cause you to crap on the floor?/Who makes you pee your pants?* All that seems novel about this poem is the name *The Rude One* and the way *you* saunter off with him on his arm.

I believe the poem would have succeeded better had the sonnet form been given up and more interesting, less mundane detail provided. If it's to be funny, make it funny with some freshness and punch. This is too predictable and the reason for it is that the form is being filled with fat and not frolic.

Dean Young and the Failure of Nonsense

Dean Young is a surrealist poet who relies heavily on odd images and a very strong and quirky voice. When he succeeds it is quite spectacular, and the strength of the voice and its occasional lyric soaring is what wins us over. There is a kind of smartness and very understated sarcasm to it. When one has read most of his work, a picture emerges of the life and events Young is trying to present. That is,

The Yeah, Yeah, Yeah Imperative

I'm worried how Y carries his money,
dispersed and nondenominational. Worried
that D & L can't stay together, that C & C
can't, that L can't, that J doesn't answer.
So I've come to this place no one goes to
anymore and all the tables are full—the one
N reached across, the one where I hit my head,
the one where B didn't have the keys and
the fact that no one recognizes me clings
like plastic wrap. Dead bugs in each corner
like some previous future: how I dreamed
things might work out: the house with steps
down to the water, the dog retrieving as I fill
my mouth with stones, learning to talk to congress.

And to you. Around my face in the bar-length mirror,
the bottles shine orange and cleansed as seraphim,
those attending spirits with no bodies left. Once
in front of The Annunciation, I sobbed like a bride
sailing down the sewer with split fruit, hitched
to a god, a dog, swan, rumor, whoknowswhat. Sometimes
there's no end to sinking, even surrounded
by those clunky wings no human back could flap
and flap is a terrible thing to be left with.
Botticelli cared nothing for musculature.
Botticelli cared nothing for how a fellow
gets out of bed in the morning. I hate
when it feels like we're just stuck

on an elevator or on some island wrecked,
becoming abstractions of some inner state,
upbringing, some occupation as if our thought
was no longer rain but irrigation for a single crop
of artichokes, tobacco or soybeans. Sometimes
I might as well be talking to that sculpture
you made in college and abandoned to the heap,
the one your teacher said showed promise,
the one you always thought of as The Tooth.
I hate that we lose so much, not just each other
but of ourselves so that our parts could be played
by gears with missing cogs, bent nails, bandages.

For instance lately K's been unable to start his day
without "She Loves You," more or less the blasting
yeah, yeah, yeah imperative. For instance what
I did to M. Molecularly, it's the same old thing:
attraction, repulsion, a few mad leaps, a dive or two
to lower orbits emitting a hash mark of spectrum
at a time. Some days you burn all purple,
or worse, puce, a color invented out of
desperation like espionage. So it's like
looking through half-drawn blinds all the time,
trying to understand each other, trying
to pick the brown seven out of the whorls
of red eights. Each twilight an interrogation,
each doll in the doll hospital blinked out,
dumbfounded foundling which is how we love
each other, the lady who runs the place saying,
No, the eyes aren't for sale separately.

through consistent references the odd images seem to combine to become a picture that, up close, looks disjointed the way a collage of snapshots can be used for color and texture only in a much larger work of art. When he fails, it is because the nature of the images and the impractical directions they take distract from the poem and the voice is not able to recover from it.

A technique Young uses is to talk about the negative and thus carve around what he's trying to say. He'll talk about what he hates, and he'll use an idiomatic way of putting it: "I hate x, how it. . ." or "I hate x, the way it. . ." These linguistic markers serve as a clue that Young is defining through negative space.

"The Yeah, Yeah, Yeah Imperative" (**Beloved Infidel**, Wesleyan, 1992), reproduced at the left, is one of Young's weaker poems. Its failure is that the images are odd enough and the voice weak enough that the effect doesn't quite work. The failure is, to my mind, subtle, and the strongest evidence we're left with is a sense that not much happened in the poem and that there seemed to be only a weakly compelling reason to write it.

As a side remark, notice that we can see examples of Young's idiomatic style in the lines:

*. . . Dead bugs in each corner
like some previous future: how I dreamed
things might work out: . . .*

and then later in these:

*. . . I hate
when it feels like we're just stuck*

and

I hate that we lose so much, not just each other

We can approach the failure more rigorously by looking at the work that goes on in each stanza and then considering what remains and what its effect is.

The first stanza sets up the situation with *I'm worried how. . .*. This construction is typical Young, as is his going on to catalog some specific things he's worried about. A key place in the stanza is the statement: *Dead bugs in each corner/like some previous future: how I dreamed /things might work out.*

The second stanza turns to address his partner (apparently): *And to you.* The key places in this stanza are *in front of the Annunciation, I sobbed like a bride, Sometimes/there's no end to sinking,* and *I hate/when it feels like we're just stuck.*

The third stanza fills out the situation, and the key places are *becoming abstractions of some inner state, Sometimes/I might as well be talking to that sculpture,* and *I hate that we lose so much, not just each other.*

The last stanza is odd: There seems to be not much point to it, being a sort of explanation of what concrete things those *abstractions of some inner state* could be. Key places seem to be *more or less the blasting/yeah, yeah, yeah imperative, it's the same old thing, a color invented out of desperation, So it's like/looking through half-drawn blinds all the time,* and *which is how we love each other.*

Notice how many of the places where stuff is happening are phrased in Young's characteristic phrasing: *I'm worried how. . . , how I dreamed, I hate/when, I hate that,* and *how we love each other.*

Now let's look at what remains in each stanza aside from the key places.

In the first stanza, a background of dispersal and confusion is set up: *dispersed and nondenominational,* the bar that's untypically full, the people who don't recognize him, the once hopeful dreams. The initials standing for unnamed people—another characteristic move of Young—sets up the idea of abstraction appearing as specificity: We think we are hearing about specific people (and perhaps we are), but we have only their initials (as if knowing first names would mean any more), which distances us from any particular story and sets it up as an abstract story or allegory.

The detail in this stanza is, to me, confusing because I don't have a basis for knowing what's significant and what's not. I am attracted to strange details like the plastic wrap, the dead bugs, the dog, and learning to speak clearly by placing stones in one's mouth. The last of these distracting details is of a type that Young uses frequently and several times in this poem: referring obliquely to a fact that really has no direct bearing on the poem. When he does that, it feels like the poem has been at least partly cut-and-pasted together, though with a stretch one could argue that this establishes a common cultural background—things we've all seen or heard about while growing up, perhaps referring to a shared curriculum.

The second stanza contains more distracting material: sailing down the sewer, the Botticelli painting, Botticelli himself, the flapping wings of angels and how they make little sense on people (especially as they were envisioned by Botticelli). These details add little to the poem except to fill out a slightly religious undertone and to refer to things we all know in a collage-like way.

The third stanza is more of the same: the artichokes, tobacco, and soybeans, the tooth sculpture, and missing cogs, bent nails, and bandages. The sculpture seems particularly out of place, and it feels to me less like a statement or reference to shared culture and experiences and more like randomness.

The last stanza returns to stones-in-the-mouth type reference in which a sideways reference is made we need to guess a little at: the effects of quantum mechanics (shifting energy levels and finding compatible levels within an atom) and the test for color blindness. One could argue that this stanza is less abstract, less oblique in a certain way that the others are—that is, the references are less obscure somehow, and that that's the trick Young is playing. He could be trying to set up a pattern of really oddball references and trying to be more direct in this stanza, but I wouldn't buy that argument because the references could be just as obscure or more so to certain readers.

What is apparent is that Young always approaches the heart of the matter indirectly, and his characteristic linguistic moves of saying “I hate. . .” and “how. . .” signal the key points of the poem while apparently moving away from them, a sort of distraction technique the way a bird will move away from its young when a predator arrives but we can thereby find the nest by seeing where the bird avoids most or where she move away from.

A good example of this is the statement *a color invented out of/desperation like espionage*. *A color invented out of desperation* says a lot about the state of mind of the addressed and of the people in the quantum-fluxing relationship. But tagging on *like espionage* is a misdirection that makes us wonder whether espionage is a desperate move or one of precaution, a question ultimately that doesn't make any difference at all to the poem, yet it is there in this slight move made, probably, for strangeness.

In this poem, though, the matter between these key points serves not enough function as far as I'm concerned because they throw up details that look important and they, in fact, serve a small role (that of setting up context, mood, or shared experience). Perhaps the idea is that the most far-out images serve the purpose of highlighting through contrast the played-down ones (the ones that start “I hate it how. . .”) and thereby are a kind of inverse pointing device or a hypermodern move. But the real effect is that the extraneous details don't do enough and so they are essentially nonsense.

For example, I could explain the cleverness of the last line (*No, the eyes aren't for sale separately*) as a statement that even a doll's eye would be able to see better than the speakers, and that's what the poem is about: seeing. But the line seems like sheer nuttiness instead.

The way to look for this failure is to see that the images you use are toward some purpose in the poem and that the purpose is not to make a clever intellectual move that the reader needs to decipher rather than absorb. You can get away with this failure when the voice is compelling, which in this poem it is not. Of course, Young's voice is so compelling elsewhere that it is not a flaw of stupidity to rely on it to carry this poem. It just happened not to work.



It's easy to see the failures in “Instructions for Living” (*Strike Anywhere*, University Press of Colorado, 1995). Even if you assume it's supposed to be just a funny poem, it is still packed with non sequiturs and just plain silly images and references. The poem is reproduced at the bottom of the next page. I've underlined the phrases that I think contribute little to the poem except for weirdness. (Note, there is an unmatched closing quote (") in the poem which I've left since I cannot determine from the poem nor the collection whether this is a typesetting error or an intentional mistake. It occurs right before the statement *Whatever that means*. That I cannot determine whether this is a typo is symptomatic of the problems with this poem.)

It is possible to read this poem as a humorous expansion of the title: It is the instructions for living. But since living is chaotic and crazy, the instructions are nonsensical. In fact, in the first third of the poem Young says *Do not/be afraid of being ridiculous*, and the poem could be taken as demonstrating that statement.

Nevertheless, let's look at the underlined statements. These statements were selected because they brought me out of the poem. For each of them I wondered whether there was some hidden significance or whether they are there simply for weirdness. I recall the advice I got from Brenda Hillman (and, not coincidentally from Sandra McPherson): Revise toward strangeness. But there is the question of whether a particular strangeness has a resonance with the poem or the human condition. How to tell resonant strangeness from disconnected strangeness is the key problem. I've found that strangeness or obscurity seems appropriate if somehow it feels familiar or like something having to do with humanity or life. It feels like a center rather than just an oddity aimed at attracting attention.

James Wright was particularly good at seeing the difference, and he produced some of the best deep imagery poetry in the US.

But here the strangeness seems simply strange: Who cares about someone named Myrtle, a translucent squawling thing in the yellow tub, Peru and especially Peru, Indiana, that today is Friday and yesterday it rained, that someone's name is Diego (when he probably is being cute answering *where do you live?*), that grapes wither in the fridge, and Khlebnikov wrote only numbers at the end, and the people on the ridge asking *which way to the bridge?* I left out the pink hats and umbrellas, the diamonds and coal, the aster in disaster, the ophthalmologist, the fool on the boat, and a lot of the other nonsense in the poem. I cannot see that these images hang together or form a pattern that makes some sense within the framework of the poem, even though the poem's framework is craziness.

The poem appears well made, as we can judge by the occasional rhyming couplets (*coal: old, ridge:bridge, more:door*) and a variety of other, perhaps accidental off-rhymed couplets (*word:flood, for*

Instructions for Living

You will never know enough.
You will never know when to stop.
One day you'll wake mid-afternoon
distant from yourself as if some
switch has occurred in the nouns
of the summer novel of your life. You've become
a log hauled from the brawling surf,
no, someone named Myrtle, no, a needy
translucent thing squawling
in the yellow tub. You must be patient
even though within you is a launching,
a propulsion like some favorite song
played in a waiting room to drown out
the drill. At some point everything will
be danced to. Violins rush forward
seeming to recognize you. Music and limping,
disruption and joy, it's best to alternate
although there is also sweetness
in saying a name over and over again
when you're alone and miserable in Peru.
Peru, Indiana that is. Do not
be afraid of being ridiculous.
The pharaohs were ridiculous yet
they managed to live almost forever,
their servants stuffed beside them
to assure their every pleasure. But pleasure
is just a way of residing in the temporary
body, changing the water in bright vases,
snipping snapdragon stems. There are two
kinds of people but you may be neither
athwart with yearning like a broken window,
I mean how the wind comes in ransacking,
not excluding or deciding, the written-
down things crumbling into structures.
Ice would be nice. To each a grinchy
world of piazzas. Rope-skipping
pickpockets. Foam. Today is Friday,
yesterday it rained. Where do you live?
My name is Diego. Half the time
there will be no equivalent
in any language you know.
Do not despair overly.
Let the mouth shape the omnivorous Oh.
It is always raining inside the sea.
Love without reason. Grapes
wither in the fridge, curtains
riffle behind some fleeing,
the never-actually-there banging.
It is always raining inside me.

The children are not children anymore
yet it seems only yesterday we were they
yielding the irrational at our desks
our bodies producing red berries and thorns
the operations conveyed by squiggly lines.
There is an aster in disaster which is
the eye of God. Even God gropes along,
blinded each spring, blossoms of rain
forming in front of your nose while
you wait on the platform, all the women
suddenly wearing pink hats. Who
are you there to meet? Yourself, of course,
who is always late, never has an umbrella.
Often you'll feel about to glimpse
what it's all about,
some truth beyond the scrolling of fact:
diamonds made from compressed coal, coal
compressed herbaceous mass eons old.
A great lens fits over the head
like that contraption of the ophthalmologist
who asks after each adjustment, Better? Better?
until, alas, you haven't a clue,
what you focused on never became a word
and that sentence that looked about to flood
with meaning just shifts like dust, rift dirt,
the *I am Here* some fool wrote on the side of his boat
to fix where he caught the fish that seemed
the body of a god, that actually spoke,
"Each must sigh for accessible bliss,"
know nothing and conceal." Whatever
that means. All is urging, an augury
we no longer possess the skill or
flimflammy to read. Things just
spill their guts into the galvanized tray
and die, occasionally revealing some marvel
in what they swallowed. Whod a thunk it?
Khlebnikov got to the point where
he was writing only numbers. Often
as you near the end of what you're saying,
you'll find you're saying something else
to the frowns of those on the ridge
asking which way to the bridge.
The cold bothers you more and more.
You're struggling with a door.
It is the end of summer, the storm
the radio vowed never materializes,
a hammock swings between trees.
One wakes crying from a dream
of her father come back, another hears
not knowing what. One names few stars
and those uncertainly.

example) and *axa* triplets (*word:flood:dirt*). This makes me think that the obscure and distracting nonsensical images and statements might be part of a larger scheme. But, I don't think so.

The way to spot this sort of failure is to see whether the obscure image resonates with the rest of the poem, somehow sums up the feeling, mood, or argument of the poem. See whether the poem is diminished by removing the image.

Jorie Graham and the Failure of Weak Centers

Jorie Graham won the Pulitzer prize for **The Dream of the Unified Field** (The Ecco Press, New York, 1995). Nevertheless, her early poems in this selection demonstrate several weaknesses related to our theory of centers. Recall that a center is a place that draws attention and exhibits life and wholeness. In general, concrete images and references are stronger centers than abstract ones, and many of her early poems are heavily laden with abstractions. Also, many of the early poems are in a sawtooth 6-line stanza which in Graham's treatment make for a number of weak lines that take away the strength of the poem. Sometimes, this structural weakness leads to other, more serious ones. An example of this latter is the poem "San Sepolcro," reproduced just below (it is from her collection,

San Sepolcro

In this blue light
 I can take you there,
 snow having made me
 a world of bone
seen through to. This
is my house,
 my section of Etruscan
wall, my neighbor's
 lemon trees, and, just below
 the lower church,
 the airplane factory.
 A rooster
 crows all day from mist
outside the walls,
 There's milk on the air,
ice on the oily
 lemonskins. How clean
 the mind is,
 holy grave. It is this girl
by Piero
 della Francesca, unbuttoning
 her blue dress,
 her mantle of weather,
to go into
 labor. Come we can go in.
It is before
 the birth of god. No one
has risen yet
 to the museums, to the assembly
 line—bodies
 and wings—to the open air
market. This is
 what the living do: go in.
It's a long way.
 And the dress keeps opening
from eternity
 to privacy, quickening.
 Inside, at the heart,
 is tragedy, the present moment
 forever stillborn,
 but going in, each breath
is a button
 coming undone, something terribly
 nimble-fingered
 finding all of the stops.

Erosion). There are a number of apparent image centers in this poem: the blue light, the world of bone, her house, the Etruscan wall, the lemon trees, the church, the airplane factory, a rooster, milk on the air, the clean mind like a holy grave, the girl in the painting, unbuttoning her blue dress, her labor, the birth of god, the museums, assembly lines, the open-air market, the heart, the present moment, breath, buttons, *something terribly/nimble-fingered* and the stops. As centers, these ought to somehow reinforce each other and the center which is the entire poem. **Repetitions** and **Echoes** are the primary ways to reinforce image centers. We can see a few echoes and repetitions: the blueness in the light and the dress of the girl in the painting; the skeletal image of *a world of bone*, and the emptiness in the description of the town which pervades several of the images; the unbuttoning or opening up; and the going in. The first part of the poem tells of the speaker and her home and surroundings. The surroundings are repeated later, and the amount of the detail appears as an important part of the message but is actually only a carrier for repetition and echo later on as a landscape devoid of people. Other images seem mostly unconnected though they might be repeated: the rooster, the milk, the airplane factory, the lemon trees/lemonskins, the wall, and the house. These centers are therefore weak and can strike the reader as mere detail or padding.

The shape of the poem as 6-line stanzas, each line alternately indented, appears to be in pursuit of **Good Shape**, but in fact the shape of the poem as such stanzas serves mostly to dilute the language as very weak lines are used to fill out the shape. Weak lines are underlined to the left. Some of the other lines are diluted by weakness, such as *lemon trees, and, just below* and *coming undone, something terribly*. Many of these weak lines seem like transitions from one stronger center to another where the transition line has been given up on and left very weak as a way to fill out the form. Notice that almost all (all but one) of the weak lines are indented lines, which gives the impression that the indented lines are trampolines from one strong center to another. However, the centers in the alternate lines are not all that strong. It would seem better to use the off-lines as a counter beat or to carry counter images and thus produce **Deep Interlocking** centers, but Graham does not choose to do that.

San Sepolcro

In this blue light
I can take you there,
snow having made me
a world of bone
seen through to. This
is my house,

my section of Etruscan
wall, my neighbor's
lemon trees, and, just below
the lower church,
the airplane factory.
A rooster

crowds all day from mist
outside the walls,
There's milk on the air,
ice on the oily
lemonskins. How clean
the mind is,




holy grave. It is this girl
by Piero
della Francesca, unbuttoning
her blue dress,
her mantle of weather,
to go into

labor. Come we can go in.
It is before
the birth of god. No one
has risen yet
to the museums, to the assembly
line—bodies

and wings to the open air
market. This is
what the living do: go in.
It's a long way.
And the dress keeps opening
from eternity

to privacy, quickening.
Inside, at the heart,
is tragedy, the present moment
forever stillborn,
but going in, each breath
is a button

coming undone, something terribly
nimble-fingered
finding all of the stops.

If we look at the strongest images—the ones that seem to carry the most importance to the poem—we see 3: the blue light/snow/desolation of the setting, birth/death/rising, and going-in/funneling. The first (blue light, snow, etc.) is echoed at the start, in the desolation of the town, in the blue dress, in the mantle of weather, and in the stillborn moment; the sequence of these centers is shown like this  to the left. The second (birth/death) is echoed at the start with the *world of bone* and snow, the ice, the holy grave, the going into labor, the birth of god, no one rising, *what the living do*, stillborn, and breath; these centers are shown like this . And the third (funneling) is echoed at the start (*a world of bone/seen through to*), the phrases *go into*, *go in*, *what the living do: go in*, and the dress *opening from eternity to privacy*; these centers are shown like this . The three images start at the same place and intertwine (**Deep Interlock and Ambiguity**), but the last image in the poem—*something terribly/nimble-fingered/finding all the stops*—seems only weakly related to the funneling images. This last image would seem, from its position, to be one of exceptional strength but two things keep it from being as strong as it could be: first is the bit of disconnection from the other primary image threads (each of which is fairly well-supported by **Echoes, Repetition, Levels of Scale, and Gradients**), and the second is that a key word—*nimble-fingered*—is placed in a place of weakness in the stanza, in an indented line. It would be OK to have put it in such a place had such a place been already established as a keeper of strong centers, perhaps as a **Contrast** center or a center of **Deep Interlock**, but we have not seen it used as such, and so its introduction as such a place now is too much to ask of the poem.

Though these three sequences of centers start in the first stanza, they don't intersect all that much in later stanzas—only in stanzas 4, 5, and 6 (and some of these centers are represented by images or phrases that are a stretch to link—e.g., *open air* for desolation) and not at all in the last stanza.

Looking at the line endings where we'd expect to see **Boundaries**, the line endings are not particularly strong, nor are end-stresses prevalent—only 22 of the 45 lines have a heavy end stress.

Of the remaining characteristics of centers (**Strong Centers, Positive Space, Local Symmetries, Roughness, The Void, Simplicity and Inner Calm, and Not-Separateness**), only **Roughness** and **The Void**—through the image of funneling—are strongly exhibited. Of note is the lack of center support for the center which is the last image of *something terribly/nimble-fingered/finding all of the stops*. The *stops* are the buttons which keep the opening outward or inward—the funneling—from smoothly taking place, but the phrase also includes a hint of a musical instrument being played, which contrasts (but not in the right way) with the other images—it's a contrast more akin to a non sequitur.

The important characteristics, **Simplicity and Inner Calm** and **Not-Separateness**, seem to me to be weakly exhibited because the overall thrust of the poem doesn't feel solid. I am thrown off by the *snow having made me/a world of bone/seen through to*. I see this as a death image, but who is really

speaking? The transition to speaking of the painting (I presume that's what it is) seems odd as well—the clean mind appears likened to the painting. And into what does the speaker propose we go (**Come we can go in**)? Into the painting? Into the desolate world? As ghosts? As spirits? And the girl's dress as a *mantle of weather*—I find this image not useful at all in strengthening the others, only of adding oddness. The dress *opening from eternity to privacy* seems reversed and perhaps a clue, but it is too hard to get.

In the end the centers are too diluted to make, for me, a totally successful poem, a totally successful center. I believe it is because there are too many weak centers and there is too much dead space between them—they are not dense and highly compressed. The form Graham has chosen—the 6-line sawtooth stanzas—does not work well to support this poem, and her choice of using such a form seems to be automatic, just as is my choice to use Adobe Jenson as a font for my poems, because she uses it for many of her early poems. In this poem we can see this choice of choosing a form to fill out results in a less than fully alive poem. It is debatable whether the poem succeeds well enough, but it seems too much the product of an arbitrary choice of form rather than letting the form emerge from piecemeal growth and the natural tendencies of the forces at work among developing centers.

Early Eliot and the Failure of Unformed Centers

Some of the early notebooks of T. S. Eliot were published recently (**Inventions of the March Hare**, edited by Christopher Ricks, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1996). Among the previously unpublished poems in this collection is a series of drafts of **Whispers of Immortality**, which was published in 1920. This series of poems is interesting because it demonstrates Eliot wrestling with the centers in the poem, though it is almost certain he had no such concept at the time. What we'll see is that, in general, Eliot removes weak centers, adds stronger ones, and strengthens weak ones. In the end he adds a particularly weak center, possibly as a Boundary between others, and we can appreciate the need for the Boundary but can fault the Boundary as especially weak and perhaps counterproductive.

The analysis of this series will not be thorough, though it could serve as an excellent example in the study of centers. In general, the number, density, and strength of the centers in any version of this poem are considerably less than in **The Second Coming** by Yeats, but **Whispers of Immortality** is a minor poem in comparison.

The versions are labeled A–F. We'll go through them one by one. For the first we will look at the major centers and for the rest we will examine the revisions. In all cases, we will look at the important centers and not all of them. Recall that a center is something that stands out, catches our attention. A center is not simply an instance of a craft element, though such an instance might be a center. Further, the strength and even existence of a center depends on the strengths and existences of other centers. Hence, we are really looking at a field of centers.

Let's look at version A. The first two stanzas form centers of reasonable strength, though neither is particularly strong. They establish the primary Contrast of the poem: the body versus the soul, which is also metaphorically treated by the Contrast of the skeleton with flesh. Contrast is one of the key characteristics a field of strong centers exhibits, and so it is good to see Contrast early in the poem.

A

[Whispers of Immortality]

Webster was much possessed by death;
He saw the skull beneath the skin;
And (breastless) creatures under ground
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

Daffodil bulbs instead of (balls)
Stared from the sockets of the eyes!
He knew that thought clings round dead limbs
Tightening its lusts and luxuries.

I think John Donne was such another
With passions chiselled out of stone;
He found no substitute for death
But toothed the sweetness of the bone.

Grishkin is nice; her Russian eye
Is underlined for emphasis;
Uncorseted, her friendly bust
Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.

And some abstracter entities
Have not disused a certain charm.
But I must crawl between dry ribs
To keep my metaphysics warm.

As long as Pipit is alive
One can be mischievous and brave;
But where there is no more misbehaviour
I would like my bones flung into her grave.

these are satisfactory centers which primarily set up the Contrast for the poem

Echoes

Local Symmetries

weak

weak center: not much information, first line is weak, especially the word *another*

good center, Echoes, Contrast

not a center

weak center

a center: Echoes to *breastless*, sex, fleshiness

a little obscure: not full of air

contrast, good center

good center, good Contrast, good Echoes, Roughness

obscure, not a center

ok center

Alternating Repetition and Local Symmetries in the form

Notice that the poem exhibits Alternating Repetition and Local Symmetries by virtue of using a form. This is not a coincidence: Historically, poets realized intuitively that these characteristics were essential to making good poetry and gravitated toward what is to us an obvious way of achieving them—rhyme, rhythm, and form. When there was a shift to free verse, the challenge was how to exhibit Alternating Repetition and Local Symmetries. The challenge was met by a stronger use of Echoes and by richer, more elaborate imagery.

One of the Echoes in the first two stanzas is between

breastless and *balls*. By reading some of the other unpublished poems in **Inventions**, it is obvious that Eliot had a healthy interest in sex and bodily functions. This Echo makes the reader, possibly just below the explicit level, think about sex as part of the Contrast between the bodily and spiritual aspects of living.

Another strong aspect of the centers in the first two stanzas is the use of monosyllables, which provide Positive Space, Good Shape, and Strong Centers.

Eliot runs into some trouble in the third stanza. The first line of the stanza starts out with *I think*. Eliot is trying to speak offhandedly, but this weak start with the line-ending *another* makes for a poor start. The first three lines of the stanza forms a weak center despite some strong smaller centers: *passions chiselled*, *stone*, and *substitute for death* all demonstrate Echoes and Contrast. The center is weak, though, because even though the image and thought conveyed are good, the information conveyed has already been conveyed—there is nothing new, only a reiteration. The last line is a good center because it gives a new image, a sort of weird lusting after death.

The fourth stanza presents problems, too. The overall effect of the stanza is to reinforce the Contrast between life and death, the body and spirit, by introducing a particular character who is not an icon from the past (though perhaps Grishkin was well-known at the time, I have no idea who she is). The first line of the stanza is not a center because there is nothing but uninteresting detail in it. The next line is a weak center, but still a center. *Friendly bust* echoes *breastless* and this line and the last one in the stanza reinforce the sexual aspects of the image. The last line, though, is obscure and hence weak because there is nothing particularly air-filled about breasts, though they might have a light, airy feel to them. One gets the impression that Eliot is imprecise possibly to fill out the form and get the rhyme.

The fifth stanza is a good center, made of pretty good centers. *Abstracter entities*, though a bit strained sounding, is a good center because it moves to a place in the spectrum of body and spirit we haven't seen: the mind and the world of ideas. This is echoed later in the stanza with *keep my metaphysics warm*, which identifies a mental activity with a physical one, making the apparent dichotomy of mind/body a Gradient instead. The second line of the stanza is good but not well-formed. It connects this stanza to the one about Grishkin and points to one of her (supposedly previously unmentioned) charms. There are Contrasts within this stanza and also Echoes back to earlier ones. In all a good center with some internal weaknesses.

The sixth stanza is a bust. The first three lines seem obscure and not connected well to anything else in the poem. It is vaguely stated, has no good noise to it, and contains a reference that is not necessary—to Pipit, who is a character in **A Cooking Egg**. The last line is an OK center with good Echoes, good noise; it forms the main connection between this stanza and the rest of the poem.

In all we see a number of weak and a couple of strong centers. Nevertheless, overall we see that the poem has potential:

- The centers demonstrate Levels of Scale because the poem divides into halves with the first more concerned with death and the second more concerned with life and lust. Each stanza has smaller centers as well, though they are not uniformly strong.
- There are Contrast, Gradients, Echoes, Alternating Repetition, Local Symmetries, and Roughness throughout.
- There are some Strong Centers, some Positive Space (centers pushing outwards) and some Good Shape (centers well supported).
- The form supplies Deep Interlock and there are some Ambiguous Boundaries.

- The poem doesn't demonstrate Simplicity and Inner Calm because there are too many things that could be changed or removed.
- It is unclear whether the poem itself demonstrates Not Separateness.

⌘ ⌘ ⌘

In version B, Eliot has left the first, second, and fourth stanzas the same—they are satisfactory centers—tinkered with the third and fifth, and added 2 new stanzas at the end, replacing the original sixth stanza. The revisions are in general weak and not an improvement.

The noise of *cracked the marrow* is good, and perhaps therefore it is a step up from the more imaginative *with passion chiselled out of stone*, but it is not a decisive trade up. The last two lines of that stanza are definitely less strong as centers, with the last line of the stanza being truly terrible. Eliot echoes these last two lines in the first two lines of the sixth stanza, but the echo is not enough to make these intended centers work.

Eliot seems to have tried to bring in a more spiritual/religious echo with *sacerdotal*, *sanctified amen*, *Female Souls*, *Sons of God*, and *Sons of Men*. This new ending, I think, is pretty bad, its best feature is that it is weird. Nevertheless, it represents a pretty jagged left turn in the poem, though one can see the original signposts from the earlier draft about where the poem is leading.

There is a nice geometric effect which is that *God* appear right above one another in the last stanza, which serves to unify the two.

This version is, to my mind, decidedly worse because the new centers are very weak or not centers at all, the alterations to existing centers don't go anywhere and in general is a degradation of their

strength. The new ending is not a very strong center at all and is so odd as to detract from the poem, I think, with any likelihood of Inner Calm and Simplicity and The Void destroyed.

⌘ ⌘ ⌘

In version C, Eliot has repaired the very bad new centers introduced in Version B, repaired the weak third stanza to some extent, and taken a new tack in the ending, introducing another entirely new center, which at least has strangeness going for it.

Donne, I suppose is a better way to get across the sort of feeling of uncertainty he is looking for. (Eliot seems to be striving in many of his early poems, both published and unpublished, for a kind of unstable grounding, perhaps based on his experiences with urban landscapes after a youth so near more open land, in an region not that re-

Whispers of Immortality B

Webster was much possessed by death;
He saw the skull beneath the skin;
And breastless creatures under ground
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

Daffodil bulbs instead of balls
Stared from the sockets of the eyes!
He knew that thought clings round dead limbs
Tightening its lusts and luxuries.

I think John Donne was such another
Who cracked the marrow now and then.

Our sighs pursue th' elusive shade
But these were really serious men.

Grishkin is nice; her Russian eye
Is underlined for emphasis;
Uncorseted, her friendly bust
Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.

And some abstracter entities
Preserve a sacerdotal charm,
But I must crawl between dry ribs
To keep my metaphysics warm.

Our sighs pursue the vanished shade
And breathe a sanctified amen.
And yet the Sons of God descend
To entertain the wives of men.

And when the Female Soul departs
The Sons of Men turn up their eyes.
The Sons of God embrace the Grave—
The Sons of God are very wise.

good noise

weak

very weak line

weaker than before

these are individually weak and gain little from the echo

just weird

moved from the old west. In many poems we see him toying with the certain/uncertain spectrum.)

Pursuing sense within sense has a good feel to it in that the two senses of “sense” are used (in keeping with his notion of uncertainty), but in the end it really is too obscure or vague in a way that isn’t serving the center. It has also lost some of the good noise (Good Shape, Positive Space) that *cracked the marrow* had.

To seize and clutch and penetrate has switched Donne’s interest from a vaguely stated one about *tooth-ing* the bone to a definite and clearly stated interest in sexual congress.

Expert beyond experience is not only a comment on Donne’s prowess in such matters, but it exhibits good Local Symmetry and Echoes.

In general, the center which is this third stanza has gained strength, not the least of which through some clarity.

The fourth stanza is new, and is a well-formed center. Its main strengths are its Local Symmetries, Echoes, and Alternating Repetition. The series *marrow*, *skeleton*, *flesh*, and *bone* form Local Symmetries and Alternating Repetition by alternating images for life and the body (*marrow* and *flesh*) with those for death (*skeleton* and *bone*). Notice also the Roughness of the abandonment of a strong rhyme in the second and fourth lines (*skeleton/bone*). We also see Echoes in *anguish* and *ague* and in *ague* and *fever*. *Contact* also Echoes Donne’s sexual embrace. This is a good center.

However, we lose the good centers of *abstracter entities* and *to keep my metaphysics warm*. But at least we lost the odd *Sons of God* and *Female Souls*. In their place we get the curious *Brazilian jaguar*. This is definitely a center because it attracts our attention through its weirdness, but it’s a weirdness that it

more appropriate, somehow, to the poem. With Webster, Donne, and Grishkin we get a very Euro-centric view of the world, and mixing lust, flesh, sex, and death, we get a spectrum that is earthy at one end and intellectual on the other, but all within a narrow dimension that seems Victorian or Old Worldish. The introduction of the jaguar brings us to South America, which undoubtedly was considered very exotic and wild at that time to those who live in Cambridge or London. And this new center throws us right into, presumably, the Amazon with strong smells that are linked directly to the entirely sexual Grishkin. And Grishkin in this juxtaposition with the jaguar in a drawing room really ties the ends of the spectrum together very directly and with all possible extremes. Hence, we are seeing excellent contrast, an expanded Gradient, strong Echoes, Good Shape, and Positive Space.

The last stanza is OK. The first two lines are acceptable as a center, the line *and crawled at last between dry ribs* is still

Try This on Your Piano
Whispers of Immortality

Webster was much possessed by death,
Seeing the skull beneath the skin;
And breastless creatures under ground
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

Daffodil bulbs instead of balls
Stared from the sockets of the eyes!
He knew that thought clings round dead limbs
Tightening its lusts and luxuries. — better center

Donne, I suppose, was such another
(Pursuing sense within the sense) — better than previous, but a bit obscure with the two senses of *sense*
To seize and clutch and penetrate. — good center, implying sex
(Expert) beyond (experience) — good Local Symmetry

He knew the anguish of the marrow, — good Alternating Repetition and Local Symmetries
The ague of the skeleton;
No contact possible to flesh
Allayed the fever of the bone. — echoes

Grishkin is nice; her Russian eye
Is underlined for emphasis;
Uncorseted, her friendly bust
Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.

The sleek Brazilian jaguar — weird
Does not, in his arboreal gloom,
Distil the strong rank feline smell
Of Grishkin in a drawing room. — strong, weird echo

But Donne and Webster passed beyond — ok center
The text-book rudiments of lust,
And crawled at last between dry ribs, — still good
Having their Ethics of the Dust. — worse than first end

good, but the last line is weak and worse than the original. What is missing is the arc from something highly charged to the **abstracter entities** and crawling between **dry ribs** to **keep my metaphysics warm**. The jaguar is sufficiently highly charged but doesn't have anything to Echo and Contrast off. Here is how Pound put it in a note to Eliot:

*If at A [the line **Expert beyond experience**], you shift to "my" i.e. your experience you would conceivably reach Grishkin's Dunlap tyre boozum by the line of greatest directness.*

If at B [the last stanza], you should then leap from the bloody, boozy and Barzeelyan Jag-U-ARRR to the Abstracter entities who would not have resisted either the boozum or the "smell of baked meats", you could thence entauthenexelaunai to the earlier terminer

But I must crawl, etc. metaphysics warm

having in the lines precedent used your extant rhyme in "charm", applying same to either boozum, odour, or enticement of the toutensemble

Omitting fourth stanza of present Nth. variant wash the whole with virol and leave in hypo.

At any rate, I think this would bring us nearer the desired epithalamium of force, clearness and bewtie.

As best as I can make this out, Pound is also suggesting that the nice center we saw already which includes the abstracter entities and the warming metaphysics should return, but that the fourth stanza of this version should be removed. Eliot removes this stanza, but I think it is a mistake, and our analysis of the center there indicates it is quite strong.

Finally, the last stanza is weak as a last center in the poem, and has, really, little going for it.



In version D, Eliot has taken Pound's suggestions. In doing so he has made an important improvement over the previous draft, but the

<p>Webster was much possessed by death And saw the skull beneath the skin; And breastless creatures under ground Leaned backward with a lipless grin.</p>	D
<p>Daffodil bulbs instead of balls Stared from the sockets of the eyes! He knew that thought clings round dead limbs Tightening its lusts and luxuries.</p>	
<p>Donne, I suppose, was such another Pursuing sense within the sense To seize and clutch and penetrate: This passes my experience.</p>	<p>very much worse: loses Local Symmetries, Echoes, and all centeredness.</p>
<p>Grishkin is nice; her Russian eye Is underlined for emphasis; Uncorseted, her friendly bust Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.</p>	
<p>The sleek Brazilian jaguar Does not, in his arboreal gloom Distil the strong rank feline smell Of Grishkin in a drawing room.</p>	
<p>There are abstracter entities Which still maintain a certain charm. But I must crawl between dry ribs To keep my metaphysics warm.</p>	<p>this is worse than the original stanza, which was a good center</p>

other suggestions were bad. The improvement is the restoration of the last stanza, though the second line became a tad weaker and so the overall strength of the center is less than in version A.

Eliot also replaced **expert beyond experience** with **this passes my experience**, which was Pound's first suggestion. This is a disastrous revision which removes all the strength of the center which is the last line of that stanza and it jeopardizes the entire stanza with a profound structural weakness in the centers.

The other suggestion was to eliminate the fourth stanza of version C. This was a strong center, perhaps the best constructed one in the poem.

So much for Pound's advice, well-stated as it is.



In version E, Eliot mostly undoes the mistakes suggested by Pound. He restores *expert beyond experience*, which is really worth giving up making the experience Eliot's. In addition, Eliot changes the second line of the stanza to *who found no substitute for sense*. This change, which seems pedestrian, actually creates a good center at the end of the line: *sense* now forms a Deep Interlock and Ambiguity by now completely housing two meanings of "sense" in one word place. Thus we also have a wonderful Boundary between the earlier part of the poem and the later with *sense* being an Ambiguous part of each. This simple thing is a stroke of genius.

Eliot restores the strong stanza 4.

He also restores the last stanza with a small revision, which is to change the second line to *circumambulate her charm*. This is also a good change, because it forms a Contrast between the very proper *circumambulate* and the earthy *charm*. Further, it forms an Echo to Grishkin and forms a good Contrast and Alternating Repetition (of abstraction/death and concretion/life), and Local Symmetries. Notice how the second line also reflects the Contrast in the entire stanza and poem to create a strong Levels of Scale.

The artificial Boundary of the asterisks seems to neither hurt nor help. There is a leap from the previous stanza to the next, and so the asterisks probably help the reader feel he or she has not made a mistake in thinking so.

<p>Whispers of Immortality E</p> <p>Webster was much possessed by death And saw the skull beneath the skin; And breastless creatures under ground Leaned backward with a lipless grin.</p> <p>Daffodil bulbs instead of balls Stared from the sockets of the eyes! He knew that thought clings round dead limbs Tightening its lusts and luxuries.</p> <p><u>Donne, I suppose, was such another</u> <u>Who found no substitute for sense</u> To seize and clutch and penetrate, Expert beyond experience</p> <p>He knew the anguish of the marrow The ague of the skeleton; No contact possible to flesh Allayed the fever of the bone.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">* * * * *</p> <p>Grishkin is nice: her Russian eye Is underlined for emphasis; Uncorseted, her friendly bust Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.</p> <p>The sleek Brazilian jaguar Does not in his arboreal gloom Distil so rank a feline smell As Grishkin in a drawing-room.</p> <p>And even the Abstract Entities <u>Circumambulate her charm:</u> But our lot crawl between dry ribs To keep our metaphysics warm.</p>	<p>good center; Deep Interlock and Ambiguity in <i>sense</i>, Boundary to next 2 lines</p> <p>good center returned</p> <p>good improvement</p> <p>Alternating Repetition and Local Symmetries</p>
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For my money, the poem is complete, though I would say that it still demonstrates some weaknesses. The weaknesses I see are with the first two stanzas, which were never particularly strong centers and never got any better. Grishkin remains a mystery. In all there is no great place of The Void, though the last two lines of the last stanza come close. In all there is not enough Simplicity and Inner Calm because there are things that could be removed and improved. Not Separateness is an issue since the world seems like it could survive not having this poem.

But, this is not the version Eliot published. That version, version F, is on the next page exactly as it was published except for some slightly different indentation.



In Version F, Eliot adds a stanza, stanza 6. This stanza is quite odd and it isn't clear what role it plays in the poem.

Whispers of Immortality

F

Webster was much possessed by death
And saw the skull beneath the skin;
And breastless creatures under ground
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

Daffodil bulbs instead of balls
Stared from the sockets of the eyes!
He knew that thought clings round dead limbs
Tightening its lusts and luxuries.

Donne, I suppose, was such another
Who found no substitute for sense,
To seize and clutch and penetrate;
Expert beyond experience,

He knew the anguish of the marrow
The ague of the skeleton;
No contact possible to flesh
Allayed the fever of the bone.

* * * * *

Grishkin is nice: her Russian eye
Is underlined for emphasis;
Uncorseted, her friendly bust
Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.

The couched Brazilian jaguar
Compels the scampering marmoset
With subtle effluence of cat;
Grishkin has a maisonnette;

The sleek Brazilian jaguar
Does not in its arboreal gloom
Distil so rank a feline smell
As Grishkin in a drawing-room.

And even the Abstract Entities
Circumambulate her charm;
But our lot crawls between dry ribs
To keep our metaphysics warm.

The poem without this stanza has a strong break between fifth and sixth stanzas. Stanza 5 is about Grishkin and stanza 6 is about a jaguar and Grishkin. Perhaps Eliot thought the break was too strong or there wasn't enough about the jaguar in the poem, that the jaguar's sudden appearance in the poem was too odd. The added stanza can be seen as a trampoline from the original fifth stanza to the original sixth stanza.

The break is eased by the jaguar being *couched*, which is more in line with the scene just before of Grishkin's pneumatic bliss. Because earthiness is important to this part of the poem, the concept of feline smell is reinforced. Moreover, *couched* echoes *crouched*, which is not stated but is something we imagine jaguars to do while awaiting prey. Thus, *couched* is a good Boundary, and it Echoes both wildness and civilization by Echoing both the jaguar and Grishkin.

But there are some real problems here. First, why introduce a marmoset? Second, of what possible use is the fact that Grishkin has a maisonnette? And the rhyme between *marmoset* and *maisonnette* is simply funny not informative at all. Is humor what Eliot is after? It is in concert with the line *Donne, I suppose, was such another*, which is offhand (and humorous when considered alone).

The repetition of the effects of the odor of the jaguar and its strength relative to Grishkin's is perhaps the point, but the point seems not worth making.

We can also try to make sense of this stanza by thinking about the centers it tries to create and the centers it tries to strengthen. Obviously, *marmoset* and *maisonnette* are potential centers, because the combination of them is so weird. *Marmoset* is associated with the jaguar both through locale—not only where it lives but where it's located in the poem—and through impetus. Similarly, *maisonnette* is associated with Grishkin. Moreover, *marmoset* is associated with wildness, wilderness, and the Americas, while *maisonnette* is associated with civilization, society, and Europe. This is a reinforcement of the Contrasts in the poem, and these centers Echo the Contrasts they enhance. The *jaguar/marmoset/cat/maisonnette* sequence is Alternating Repetition.

The 15 characteristics taken as a whole can help us here. We should observe hints of all of them in any particular center. We don't see Simplicity and Inner Calm and The Void; there is not much stillness here.

The most important characteristic is Not Separateness. Here is what Christopher Alexander says about it:

What Not Separateness means, quite simply, is that we experience a living whole as being at one with the world, and not separate from it—according to its degree of wholeness.

This is, finally, perhaps the most important property of all. In my experiments with shapes and buildings, I have discovered that the other fourteen ways in which centers come to life, will make a center which is compact, beautiful, determined, subtle—but, without this fifteenth property, are still often somehow strangely separate, cut off from what lies around it, lonely, awkward in its loneliness, too brittle, too sharp, perhaps too well delineated—above all too egocentric, because it shouts “Look at me, look at me, look how beautiful I am.”

This stanza stands out, is too lonely, strangely separate, awkward in its loneliness. It does not demonstrate Not Separateness, and therefore this new stanza is simply an unformed center which dilutes the entire poem. It is less than weak and, I think, detracts from the poem.



This poem is not particularly strong, and we can see that by looking at the centers, which are relatively sparse and relatively weak. Most of the characteristics we look for in centers—the 15 properties—are present, though Inner Calm and Simplicity and Not Separateness are absent. There are plenty of Echoes, Local Symmetries, and Levels of Scale.

With the poem we have seen how the theory of centers can account for the revisions of a poem. We saw in this example, also, that other supposedly good poets (Pound, in this case) can be led astray or, more properly, can lead astray. Pound's comments had good and bad aspects, and Eliot was a good enough poet to see the flaws in the advice and not only undo them but strengthen what was originally there.