

# The Nature of Poetic Order

and its application to the problem of

## Locating Failures in Poems

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# The Problem

- What distinguishes poems from other texts?
- What is the nature of that which makes a poem successful?
- Is there a component of beauty orthogonal to aesthetics?
- More particularly, how can we find any weaknesses and failures in our own work?
- How can we identify its strengths?
- What is a failure?
  - that which makes a poem less whole, less fully alive than it could be
  - that which causes the reader to put the poem aside or to experience it on fewer than all the levels on which it was intended to be experienced

# Current Approaches

## What is a poem?:

- Literary theory—normally aimed at understanding the linguistic act (of poetry), meaning, significance, speech acts, etc
- Fall back on the contingency of beauty and aesthetics

## On finding failures:

- Traditional process-based approaches (what you do):
  - ask a friend to read it—find a fresh reader
  - workshop it—find several fresh readers
  - put the poem aside and read it later—make yourself a fresh reader
- Traditional theory-based approaches (what you think about when you do it):
  - use your intuition as you read it—*poetry is a subjective art*
  - examine craft elements
  - do a “close reading” (a combination of the two)
  - use an aesthetics, a literary theory, or a political, cultural, or historical approach

## My Approach

- Define *poetry* rigorously and precisely
  - characterize what makes poetry stand out as a text
  - rigorous and precise but not (yet) mechanizable
- Use the details of that definition to analyze the poem

# Plan

- Define *poetry* rigorously and precisely
  - ❖ characterize what makes poetry stand out as a text by decomposing beauty into two orthogonal components, one subjective and the other objective
  - ❖ rigorous and precise but not (yet) mechanizable
- Use the details of the objective part of that definition to analyze the success/failure of a poem

## Disclaimer

- Aesthetics and subjectivity are left in tact, though an objective dimension of beauty is revealed
- This approach is only one of many ways to approach the problem of looking objectively at our own work
  - it is one diagnostic tool among many
  - it is not an attempt to define or prescribe aesthetics (more on this later)
- The definition of poetry I propose, while provocative, is not intended as the final word on the problem
  - it is not a literary theory and says nothing about the status of an utterance (more later)
  - it does not define or elucidate the “meaning” of a poem
  - it does not let a privileged aesthetics in by the back door
- The exercise of looking for failures and weaknesses in published work is not intended to belittle or humiliate those writers but to serve as a set of examples for the points in the theory and approach
- The word “failure” is inflammatory; I use it to cultivate creative, exuberant self-criticism—“weakness” is more accurate
- The method just as accurately locates strengths

# Requirements for a Definition of Poetry

From **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.*

Problems with this definition:

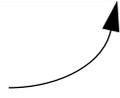
- What does “heightened” mean?
- It seems impossible to distinguish poetry from other forms of writing based on content, intent, subject matter, or degree of perception, experience, and consciousness (*perception, experience, meaning, and consciousness*)
- Any definition based on form-based distinctions can be broken down (*a text set in verse*)

**A definition of poetry should focus on what distinguishes poems from other sorts of texts**

## Requirements for a Definition of Poetry

- The definition should “feel good”
- The definition should capture the intangibles we associate with poetry
- The definition should help us examine a text and determine whether it is a poem
- The definition should provide a means to assess the poem as a poem
- The definition should provide a means to help us locate weaknesses and failures

rigorous and precise



## A Definition of Poetry

A poem is a beautiful<sup>\*</sup> text

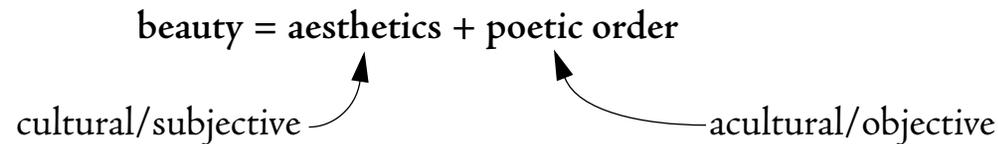
## A Definition of Beauty

- The success of this definition depends on characterizing an objective component of beauty
- We will use the term *aesthetics* for the subjective component of beauty and *wholeness and life* or *poetic order* for the objective part
- Based on work by Christopher Alexander:
  - an architect
  - studied “beauty” and order for 35 years in the context of architecture, carpets, and nature
  - studied beauty in terms of geometry
  - process for creating wholeness and life
  - precise and rigorous definition in terms of wholeness and life in terms of “centers”
- There are two views on objectivity:
  - a scientifically verifiable, measurable phenomenon
  - a universal perception

# Aesthetics and Poetic Order

**Poetic Order** reveals why a poem is experienced as whole and alive, why a poem is experienced as a *poem* and not as doggerel

- Aesthetics is cultural, social, personal, or political, and is experienced separately from Poetic Order



- Poetic Order determines whether the poem is whole and alive
  - a poem of any aesthetics can be beautiful
  - a poem without poetic order cannot be beautiful—poetic order is necessary to beauty
  - a poem of the “wrong” aesthetics *with* poetic order might be perceived not as beautiful but as well-written, well-constructed, etc—in short, as a poem, but as an ugly or unappealing one

A More Precise—but less dramatic—Definition of Poetry

**A poem is a text with strong poetic order**

## Centers

*<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.*

—Christopher Alexander

## Centers

*. . . the strength of any given center is not merely a function of the <element> that creates that center in itself, but comes about as a result of the way that the configuration is working as a whole—that is, as a result of the influence of many other factors which extend outward in the given region of <text>—always as a result of the configuration as a whole.*

*Thus the centers which make up any given wholeness do not exist independently from the configuration as a whole. They appear as elements which are generated by the configuration as a whole. It is the large scale features of the configuration which produce the local centers and allow the local centers to settle out.*

—Christopher Alexander

## Centers

1. *Centers arise in <text>.*
2. *Each center is created by configurations of other centers.*
3. *Each center has a certain life or intensity . . . . This life or intensity is not inherent in the center by itself, but is a function of the whole configuration in which the center occurs.*
4. *The life or intensity of one center gets increased or decreased according to the position and intensity of other nearby centers. Above all, centers become most intense when the centers which they are made of help each other.*
5. *The centers are the fundamental elements of the wholeness, and the degree of wholeness or life, of any given part of <the poem> depends entirely on the presence and structure of the centers there.*

—Christopher Alexander

# Centers

*A center is a kind of entity which can be defined in terms of other centers. Centers are—and can only be—made of other centers.*

—Christopher Alexander

- The term “center” makes us think of a place of focus
- “Center” does not require a specified boundary and hence implies an open-endedness and precludes a necessary closure (where does a pond end?)
- It is thus better than the word “whole”, which is a viable alternative
- The definition of a center makes us think in terms of the relationships between centers generating life, intensity, and wholeness

## Process for Creating Wholeness and Life

For geometry:

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.*

—Christopher Alexander

# Centers

A center is any place in a poem that attracts attention. Centers can arise from the action/interaction of these craft elements:

- stress/unstress
- sound
- unit of syntax
- rhyme
- repeated words and sounds
- line
- first word in a line
- last word in a line
- stanza
- image
- metaphor and other figures
- title
- the poem itself
- historical or political elements, revealed metaphysics
- meaning
- ...

# Centers

But, a center is not simply an instance of one of these craft elements

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

this line is not a center

this one might be

**San Sepolcro**, Jorie Graham

## Example of Centers

### **The Second Coming**

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.  
Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight; somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

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In this familiar poem by W. B. Yeats we'll look at some of the centers and some of their relationships

## Example of Centers

### The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
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And what rough beast its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Initially apparent centers—mostly images, sounds, and phrases

## Example of Centers

### The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
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And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
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Another layer of centers—interesting stresses

## Example of Centers

### The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
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And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Strong centers  
reinforce each other

Centers do not exist  
outside a field of  
centers: the word  
*sleep* is not inherently  
a center but is in this  
poem because of the  
following:

- interesting image  
(*stony sleep*)
- stress
- end-of-line  
position
- connections to  
*nightmare* and  
*cradle*

More centers based on reinforced sounds, senses, and images

# Example of Centers

## The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
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Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi

Troubles my sight; somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Larger centers based on what could be called topics, emphasis, or sense.

Note how these centers refer back to earlier ones based on sound and sense.

Larger centers

## Characteristics of a Field of Strong Centers

- Levels of Scale
- Strong Centers
- Boundaries
- Alternating Repetition
- Positive Space
- Good Shape
- Local Symmetries
- Deep Interlock and Ambiguity
- Contrast
- Gradients
- Roughness
- Echoes
- The Void
- Simplicity and Inner Calm
- Not-Separateness

## Levels of Scale

- A beautiful text contains centers at all levels of scale
- There are centers at the size of a syllable or a basic sound all the way up to the entire poem
  - ❧ good sounds
  - ❧ good stresses
  - ❧ good words
  - ❧ good lines
  - ❧ good syntax
  - ❧ good images
  - ❧ good stanzas
  - ❧ good poem
- The centers support one another

## Example of Levels of Scale

- strong sounds underlined
- strong stresses
- strong images in rounded boxes
- strong support shown with arrows
- strong lines in boxes
- strong first words in circles
- strong end words in circles

Image of outwardly  
circling falcon in the  
pitiless sun conjures  
up *reel* (*real*) *shadows*

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer  
...  
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

# Strong Centers

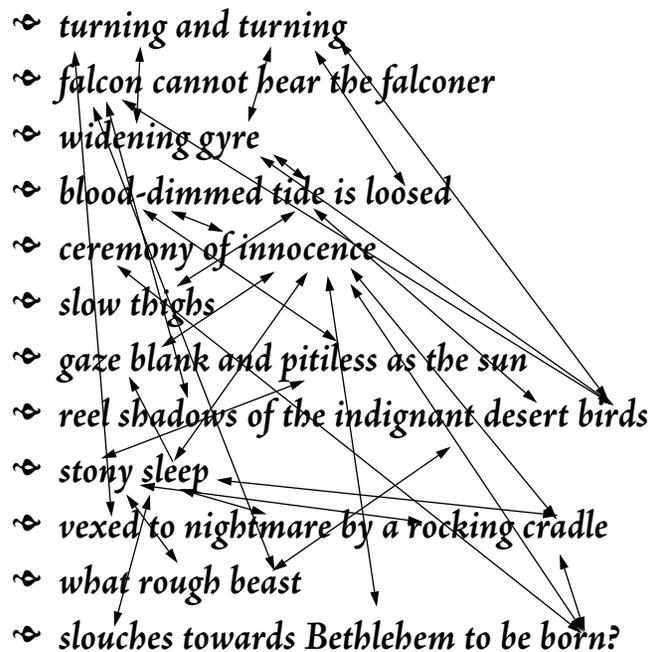
- Not just centers but strong centers
- A strong center is one toward which other centers point

*. . . the eye rests on it, one keeps coming back to it, going away from it, coming back to it. In short, the entire design sets up a vector field so that every point has the property that from that point the center is in a certain direction . . . .*

—Christopher Alexander

## Example of Strong Centers

• *turning and turning*  
• *falcon cannot hear the falconer*  
• *widening gyre*  
• *blood-dimmed tide is loosed*  
• *ceremony of innocence*  
• *slow thighs*  
• *gaze blank and pitiless as the sun*  
• *reel shadows of the indignant desert birds*  
• *stony sleep*  
• *vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle*  
• *what rough beast*  
• *slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

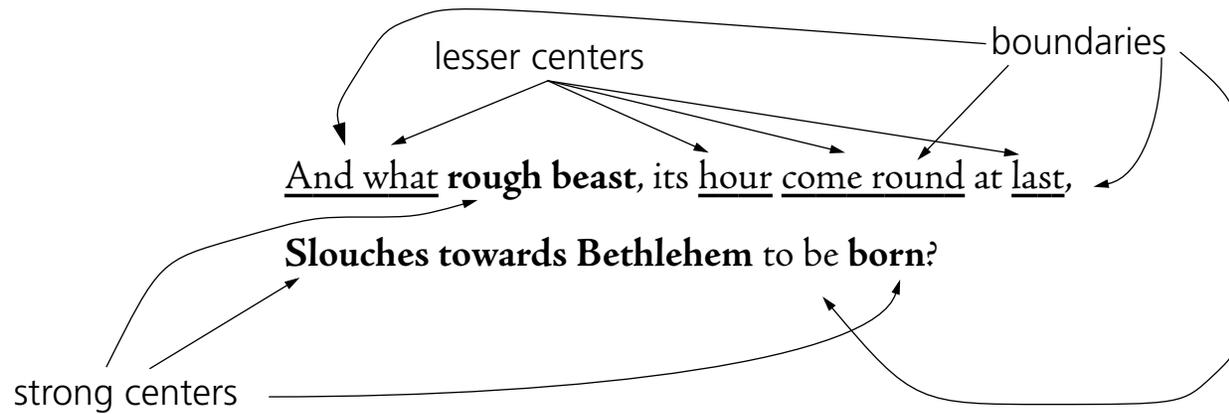


- sounds
- sense
- rhyme
- contrast
- image
- a center does not exist on its own: Neither *slow* nor *thighs* is a center, and *slow thighs* grows as a center in the presence of *stony sleep*, *rough beast*, *slouches*, and knowledge of the Sphinx

# Boundaries

- A boundary separates a center from other centers
- A boundary focuses attention on the center
- A boundary is itself made of centers
- Line breaks
- Stanza breaks
- Syntactic bridges
- Unstresses
- Image-connecting material
- Boundaries can be found in canonical places:
  - beginning of lines
  - end of lines
  - first line of stanza
  - last line of stanza
- Boundaries can be found anywhere

# Example of Boundaries

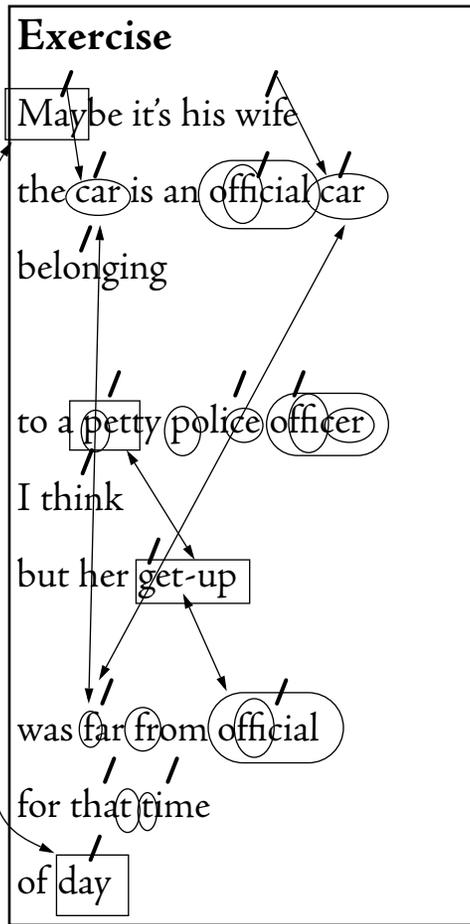


## Alternating Repetition

- Strong centers repeated with alternating centers
- Not simple repeating
- Pattern with variation
- Underlying metrical pattern with surface variations—e.g. iambic pentameter with substitutions etc
- Rhyme patterns
- Lines
- Image repetition
- Alternating repetition is supplied by form and metrical verse—but form and metrical verse are not required, and alternating repetition can appear using various elements

## Examples of Alternating Repetition

- the second line repeats in words (*car*) the stresses of the first
- the second line repeats in reverse the initial stress pattern of the first line
- the third line repeats the middle stress pattern of the start of the second line
- *car* sound repeated (-*cer*)
- *official/officer/official*
- alliterations (*p, c, f, t*)



William Carlos Williams

- the 3-line stanzas
- sound/rhyme repetitions: *Maybe/day, car/far, petty/get-up, belonging/get-up, wife/officer/official/far*
- most lines start without a stress, placing it toward the middle

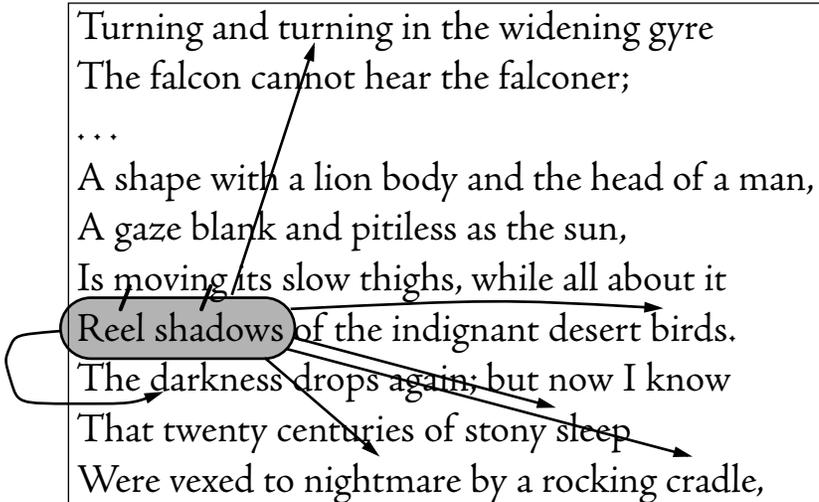
## Positive Space

- 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 with 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

## Example of Positive Space

The phrase *reel shadows* pushes outward to reinforce other centers in the poem and therefore shows Positive Space. This center is surrounded by other centers as well (*indignant desert birds*, *slow thighs*, and *darkness drops*)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
...  
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
**Reel shadows** of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

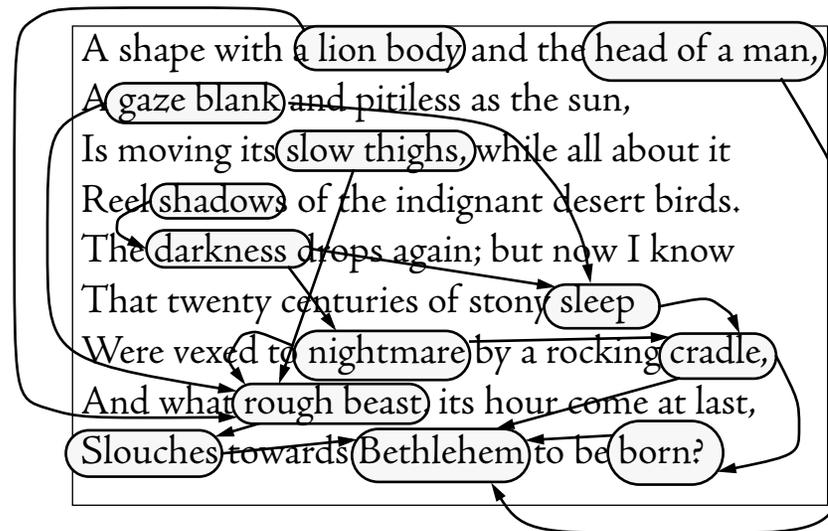


# Good Shape

- 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 that the centers in the word—its sounds, its rhythms—are also good centers by themselves
- A center has good shape when it is reinforced by other centers of good shape
- A center has good shape when it is made of centers of good shape

## Example of Good Shape

The center *Bethlehem* is constructed from its own good shape—good noise and the pleasing rhythm *Béthlehém*—along with the way it is multiply and recursively reinforced and created by other centers:



## Local Symmetries

- Every center should have a center nearby in the poem which is somehow an echo
- Internal rhymes, end-rhymes, an image that complements
- Envelope poems have this characteristic
- Prosody is largely the study 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
- Local symmetries are supplied by some form and metrical verse—but form and metrical verse are not required

## Example of Local Symmetries

- repeated words
- same stress pattern
- same line shape
- local symmetry makes us “equate” *revelation* and *Second Coming*

Surely some révelation is at hánd;  
Surely the Secong Cóming is at hánd.

# Deep Interlock and Ambiguity

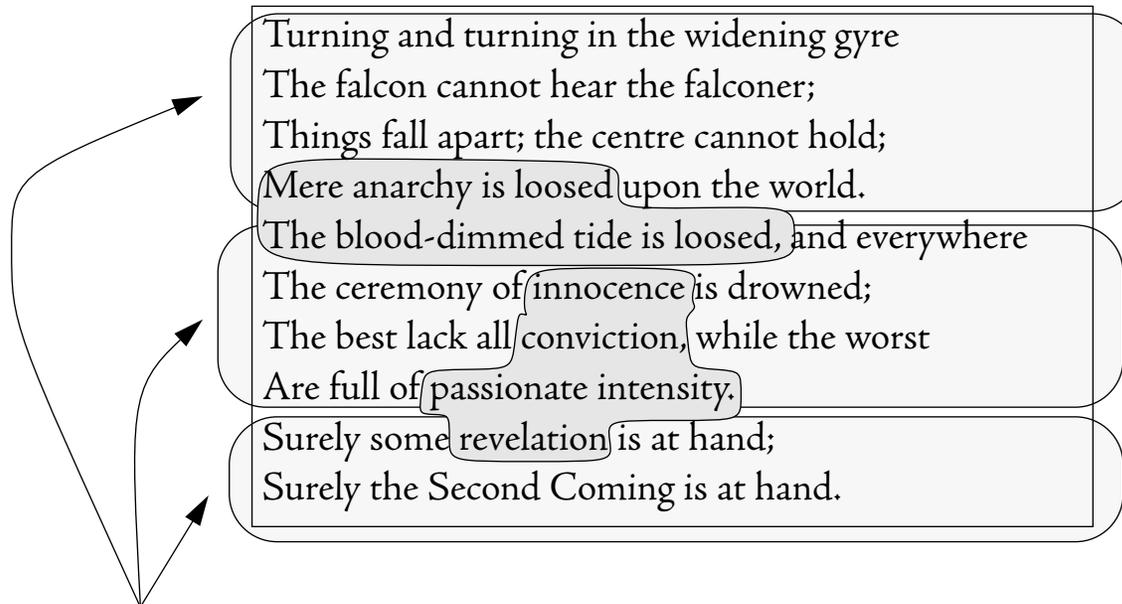
## Deep Interlock

- It is hard to pull centers apart
- Each center derives power from surrounding centers
- You cannot remove any part of a poem without diminishing it
- When a poem is “too big,” that can mean 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 scale, deep interlock is paired stress and unstress, enjambed lines
- On a larger scale, deep interlock is images that cannot be pulled apart
- The fact that a poem is so deeply interlocked makes it seem more of a whole center, something that somehow must exist
- It is sometimes difficult to disentangle a center from its surroundings
  - ... through actual interlock
  - ... through an ambiguous zone which belongs both to the center and to its surroundings

## Ambiguity

- Each center is part of several others
- Force into a center becomes force out of a center

## Example of Deep Interlock and Ambiguity



- three main centers
- interlock through images (*mere anarchy* and *blood-dimmed tide*)
- interlock through syntax (. . . *is loosed*)
- interlock through images (*innocence, conviction, passionate intensity, revelation*)

## Contrast

- 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

## Example of Contrast

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere **anarchy** is loosed upon the world.  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The **ceremony of innocence** is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.  
Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight; somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the **sun**.  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel **shadows** of the indignant desert birds.  
The **darkness** drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of **stony sleep**  
Were vexed to nightmare by a **rocking cradle**,  
And what **rough beast**, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards **Bethlehem** to be born?

# 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
- Without gradient, there could be no contrast and hence the poem is literally nothing
- Without gradient, the reader is left to either leap from one place to another or is plunked in one place, stuck observing a bland landscape

## Example of Gradients

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
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The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

- There are four gradients based on image centers
- Each builds to a crescendo
- The last line of the poem represents a stillness
- “Movement” and “gesture” can sometimes be examples of a gradient
- Lines 10–14 build in syllable length from 10 to 14 (surely not a coincidence): ***Surely the Second Coming is at hand—A shape with a lion body and the head of a man***

## 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
- The patterns are varied, not left all the same

*In our time, many of us have been taught to strive for an insane perfection that means nothing. To get wholeness, you must try instead to strive for this kind of perfection, where things that don't matter are left rough and unimportant, and the things that really matter are given deep attention. This is a perfection that seems imperfect. But it is a far deeper thing.*

—Christopher Alexander

## Example of Roughness

### The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre	4/10
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;	5/10
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;	6/10
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.	5/10
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere	6/10
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;	3/11
The best lack all conviction, while the worst	5/10
Are full of passionate intensity.	5/10
Surely some revelation is at hand;	5/10
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.	4/10
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out	5/11
When a vast image out of <i>Spiritus Mundi</i>	5/12
Troubles my sight; somewhere in the sands of the desert	5/13
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,	5/14
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,	4/10
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it	5/11
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.	5/11
The darkness drops again; but now I know	5/10
That twenty centuries of stony sleep	4/10
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,	4/11
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,	7/10
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?	4/10

- 
- Rhythm is roughly iambic
  - Syllables roughly 10 per line
  - Physical line length is rough
  - Only occasional rhyme
  - Only slightly elevated diction
- The exceptions are interesting (*gyre/falconer, hold/world, at hand/at hand*, the sequence: 4/10-5/11-5/12-5/13-5/14, 7/10)

# Echoes

- Like repetition, but family resemblance not exact replication
- Centers that go together, are made from the same mind apprehending the same sorts of things
- Without echoes, each part of a poem will feel stuck on, obscure, random, or pasted in
- Loose rhyme is an echo, images that hang together form echoes
- Marvin Bell calls it “fishing back”

# Example of Echoes

## The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre }  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer; } couplet  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; }  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. } couplet  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.  
Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight; somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

- 
- Image echoes
  - Rhymes are echoes (near rhymes)
  - The 2 rhymed couplets display an order which falls apart, echoing the statements of the first 4 lines

## The Void

- The void is the quiet center of a poem
- Sometimes it is stillness or literally a quiet point someplace in a poem—frequently at the end
- Sometimes it is the space between stanzas or lines, sometimes it is the place of quiet resonance just after a poem ends
- 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

## Example of The Void

- *Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born*
  - ❖ it follows a line with 7 stresses (7/10)
  - ❖ it follows such images as *rough beast, vexed to nightmare, darkness drops, reel shadows, gaze blank and pitiless . . .*
  - ❖ *slouches* is quiet
  - ❖ *Bethlehem* is peaceful
  - ❖ *born* is hopeful
  - ❖ the nativity image in our culture is one of stillness

## Example of the Void

... somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

- sits near the center of the poem
- combines a stillness with frantic motion and imminent danger
- slow and fast at the same time
- builds up syllabic length then drops it
- it is the central image

## 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
- It is not naïvely simple—complex poems can exhibit simplicity and inner calm

## Simplicity and Inner Calm

Here is a list of characteristics Alexander lists for Shaker furniture which exemplifies this characteristic:

- *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*

—Christopher Alexander

## Simplicity and Inner Calm

*It has to do with a certain slowness, majesty, quietness, which I think of as inner calm.*

*This quality comes about when everything unnecessary is removed. All centers that are not actively supporting other centers are stripped out, cut out, excised. What is left, when boiled away, is the structure in a state of inner calm.*

*It is essential that the great beauty and intricacy of ornament go only just far enough to bring this calm into being, and not so far that it destroys it.*

—Christopher Alexander

## Example of Simplicity and Inner Calm

... somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

- This passage sits near the center of the poem, and is a place of simplicity despite its ominous image
- *somewhere*
  - ❖ rhythmically necessary
  - ❖ uncertain certainty which permeates the poem
- *A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun*
  - ❖ makes the *vast image* an intelligence
  - ❖ otherworldliness
- *slow thighs*
  - ❖ extreme power under control
  - ❖ getting ready for something
  - ❖ confidence
  - ❖ sensuality
- *indignant desert birds*
  - ❖ important link to first images in poem
  - ❖ good hard sounds
  - ❖ establishes with the sun, the shadows, and the beast a verticality
  - ❖ the birds' movements and *slow thighs* form a contrast

## Not Separateness

*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.”*

—Christopher Alexander

- This is the primary characteristic of a poem: If it has this characteristic, it succeeds
- Each center should be measured by this characteristic

## Example of Not Separateness

- Every center in **The Second Coming** is connected to other centers within it
- The references in the poem are to the natural, spiritual, mental, and sensual world
- Its language is part of ordinary language
- It is part of the world and otherworldly at the same time
- It is, in short, a center in the world of anyone who reads it

## A Poem is a Beautiful\* Text

- Beauty is not prettiness
- Beauty is aesthetics + poetic order
- A poem with strong poetic order can take on any form
- Centers unify our familiar but disjoint craft elements
- Centers help us focus on relationships between elements within a poem
- Centers capture the elusive qualities we are so fond of
- A poem is a text with strong poetic order

## Poetic Order versus Structuralism

- Structuralism is a literary theory of how utterances operate
- Structuralism is posterior to phenomenology which sought to expose what is given by a process of bracketing off that which is not directly given (Husserl) or given in the experience of life and its breakdown (Heidegger)
  - referents are separate from signs (sign=signifier+signified), no 1-1 correspondence between signs and referents—a signifier is defined by its set of differences (what it isn't)
  - actual utterances (*parole*) are too chaotic and problematic, so structuralists look only at the system of signs and the code of reference for interpreting them (*langue*)
  - a text (poem) is a system of signs—signs plus relations
  - in such a system there are patterns—things in parallel, in opposition, etc—and these are central—for some structuralists, describing the system of oppositions is enough
- For Structuralism, the system of signs is the text
- For Poetic Order, the center of centers emerges from the text and our reading of it
- Poetic Order looks at the utterance (the text of the poem) as a 2-dimensional visual text with an additional dimension of aural information
- Poetic Order operates at reading-time and causes an experience of wholeness and life in the reader
- Structuralist interpretation is posterior to Poetic Order
- Any literary theory of meaning, history, political importance can occur before or after an experience of Poetic Order

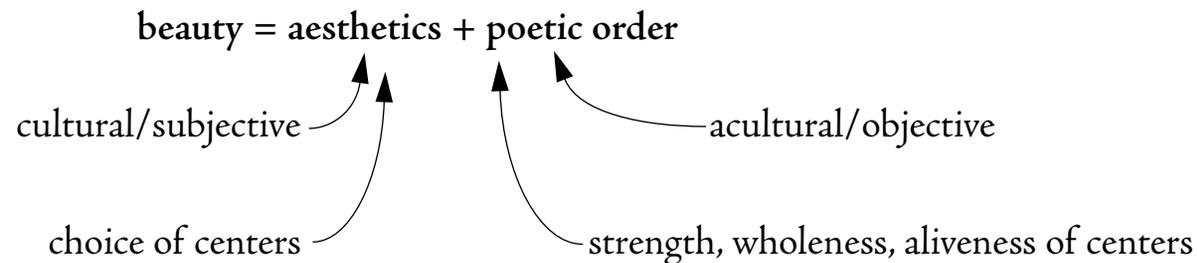
## Post-Structuralism

- Post-structuralism rejects any 1-1 correspondence between signifier and signified, and hence looks at the text of the poem (the signifiers) and not an underlying system of signs
- Post-structuralism suspects as unhealthy those texts in which words and/or form appear “natural” though the content is radical; in such texts, there is (usually, always) an underlying metaphysics that accepts and imposes its (political) power on the reader—hence the technique of deconstruction to reveal these constructions
- Poetic Order is orthogonal to such analyses because it is part of the signifier experience
- Poetic Order can be deconstructed to reveal the inherent Other in the text (or not), but this is a posterior analysis (and perhaps deconstruction is after all simply nonsensical)

# Aesthetics

**Poetic Order** reveals why a poem is experienced as whole and alive, why a poem is experienced as a *poem* and not as doggerel

- Aesthetics is cultural, social, personal, or political and is experienced separate from Poetic Order



- Aesthetics and culture determine the choice of centers and where they are placed; for example, the choice of formal verse supplies centers through metrical and rhyme schemes
- Poetic order determines whether the poem which is a center of centers is whole and alive:
  - ❖ a poem of any aesthetics can be beautiful
  - ❖ a poem without poetic order cannot be beautiful—poetic order is necessary to beauty
  - ❖ a poem of the “wrong” aesthetics *with* poetic order might be perceived as not beautiful but well-written, well-constructed, etc—in short, as a poem, but as an ugly, unappealing one
- A strong center—a poem—can be made from many centers or from only a few strong ones
  - ❖ formal verse tends to have more centers than free verse, but not necessarily stronger ones
  - ❖ free verse needs to compensate for fewer metrical- and rhyme-based centers, so imagery and metaphor are more important or at least more prevalent

## Alexander's Comparative Test for Beauty

- *Which of the two seems to generate a greater feeling of life in me?*
- *Which of the two makes me more aware of my own life?*
- *Which of the two makes me feel a greater wholesomeness in myself?*
- *Which of the two is more like my best self, or which of the two seems more like a picture of the self?*
- *Which of the two makes me feel devotion, or inspires devotion in me?*
- *Which of the two makes me more aware of God, or makes me feel close to God?*
- *How do I observe the rising and falling of my humanity: Which of the two causes a greater rising of my humanity?*
- *Which of the two has more feeling in it or, more accurately: Which of the two makes me experience a deeper feeling of unity in myself?*

—Christopher Alexander

## Finding Failures

- Find centers
- Map their relationships
- Evaluate their strength
- Reflect:
  - ❖ is there a place in the poem devoid of (strong) centers?
  - ❖ is there a center that is weak?
  - ❖ is there a center you could add that would strengthen existing centers?
  - ❖ is there a center you could remove that would strengthen the other existing centers?
  - ❖ does the entire poem seem like a (strong) center?
  - ❖ are any of the 15 characteristics missing?
  - ❖ is the entire poem Not Separate?

# The Second Coming

## The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.  
Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight; somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

## Some Weak Centers

- darker shading means weaker center
- boxes are weak stress
- some of the weak centers seem to be filling out syllable count
- but, not too many weak centers

## San Sepolcro<sup>†</sup>

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.

---

<sup>†</sup>Jorie Graham, *Erosion*

# 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.  
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 the birth of god. No one  
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 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.

-  inside/outside
-  blue
-  desolation
- weak centers underlined

-  birth/death
-  snow/mist
-  wings/flight
- dashed shapes are weaker than solid

## Levels of Scale

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  
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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.

- Relatively few nested centers
- None are particularly strong
- Compare this to the Levels of Scale in **The Second Coming**

## Strong Centers

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  
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nimble-fingered  
finding all of the stops.

- 
- Four strong centers
  - Compare this to the Strong Centers in **The Second Coming**

# Boundaries

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.

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crows all day from mist  
outside the walls,  
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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.

- 
- Just one major Boundary center
  - Enjambments (sometimes across stanza breaks) try to form boundaries, but there are no real centers there

## Alternating Repetition

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,

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her blue dress,

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labor. Come we can go in.

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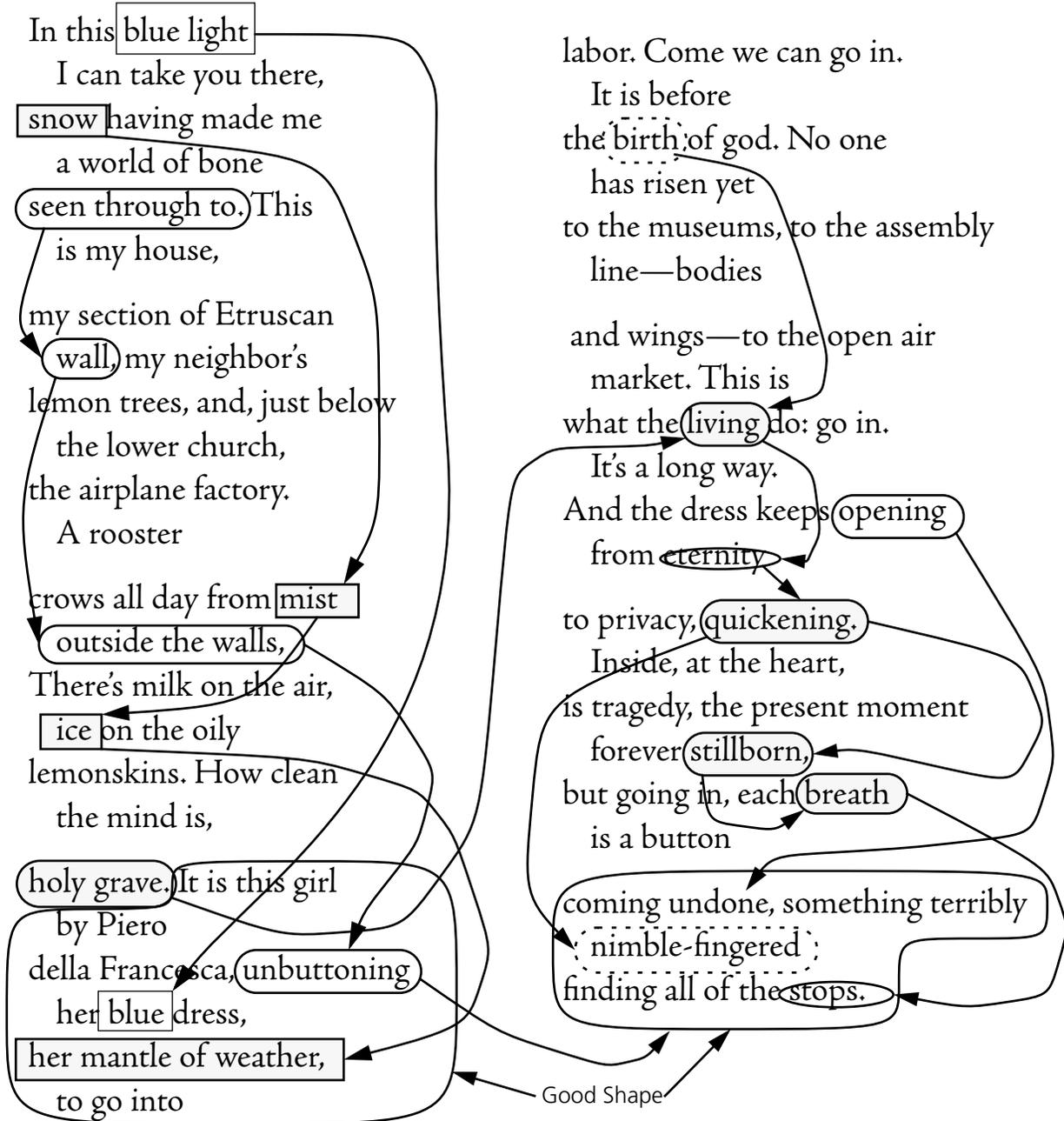
- 
- Mostly simple Repetition of words and phrases intertwined
  - Repetition of images not shown, but they complete the alternation

# Positive Space



- Several Positive Space chains, including two long ones
- None of the centers here is brimming with forces directed to other centers

# Good Shape



- Really only 2 centers with Good Shape, the stronger being the last stanza
- The overall (geometric) shape of the poem is a potential instance of Good Shape, but in this poem the stanza shape seems not to support many centers

## Local Symmetries

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.  
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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.

- 
- Only the shape of the poem demonstrates Local Symmetries
  - The shape of the poem creates a number of weak lines when lines ought to be strong centers

## Deep Interlock and Ambiguity

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

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It is before  
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to the museums, to the assembly  
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and wings—to the open air  
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what the living do: go in.

It's a long way.  
And the dress keeps opening  
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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.

- 
- The large center forms a boundary between images that speak of inside/outside and birth/death

## Contrast

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.

- 
- Inside/outside
  - Birth/death

## Gradients

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  
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to the museums, to the assembly  
line—bodies

and wings—to the open air  
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It's a long way.  
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Inside, at the heart,  
is tragedy, the present moment  
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but going in, each breath  
is a button

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

- 
- First 7 centers show a cinematic expansion of the scene from the most inner and private to the entire world (*outside the walls*)
  - The last 3 show another opening from a point in time to eternity

# Roughness

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.

- 
- Within the context of a strict visual form:
    - plain language
    - irregular rhythm

# Echoes

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.  
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labor. Come we can go in.

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to privacy, quickenings.  
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.

- 
- Echoes abound
  - *mist/ice*, both sound and sense

# The Void

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  
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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.

- 
- This is, to me, the only place of deep stillness in the poem

## Simplicity and Inner Calm

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  
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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.

- 
- There are a number of weak centers—removing them might strengthen the larger whole
  - The form itself—a center—is particularly weak

# Not Separateness

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, **quicken**ing.  
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.

- 
- Many of the centers are not interlocked with others
  - The form of the poem is not a strong center
  - The last center is supported by 4 other centers, but only one of them is very strong (representing The Void)
  - Weak Not Separateness

## Strengths of San Sepolcro

- Good **Contrast** with a number of interwoven contrasts
- Good **Roughness** marred by the unproductive form
- Excellent use of **Echoes**, very interwoven and ringing off each other
- A pretty good **Void**, but not supported as well as it could be

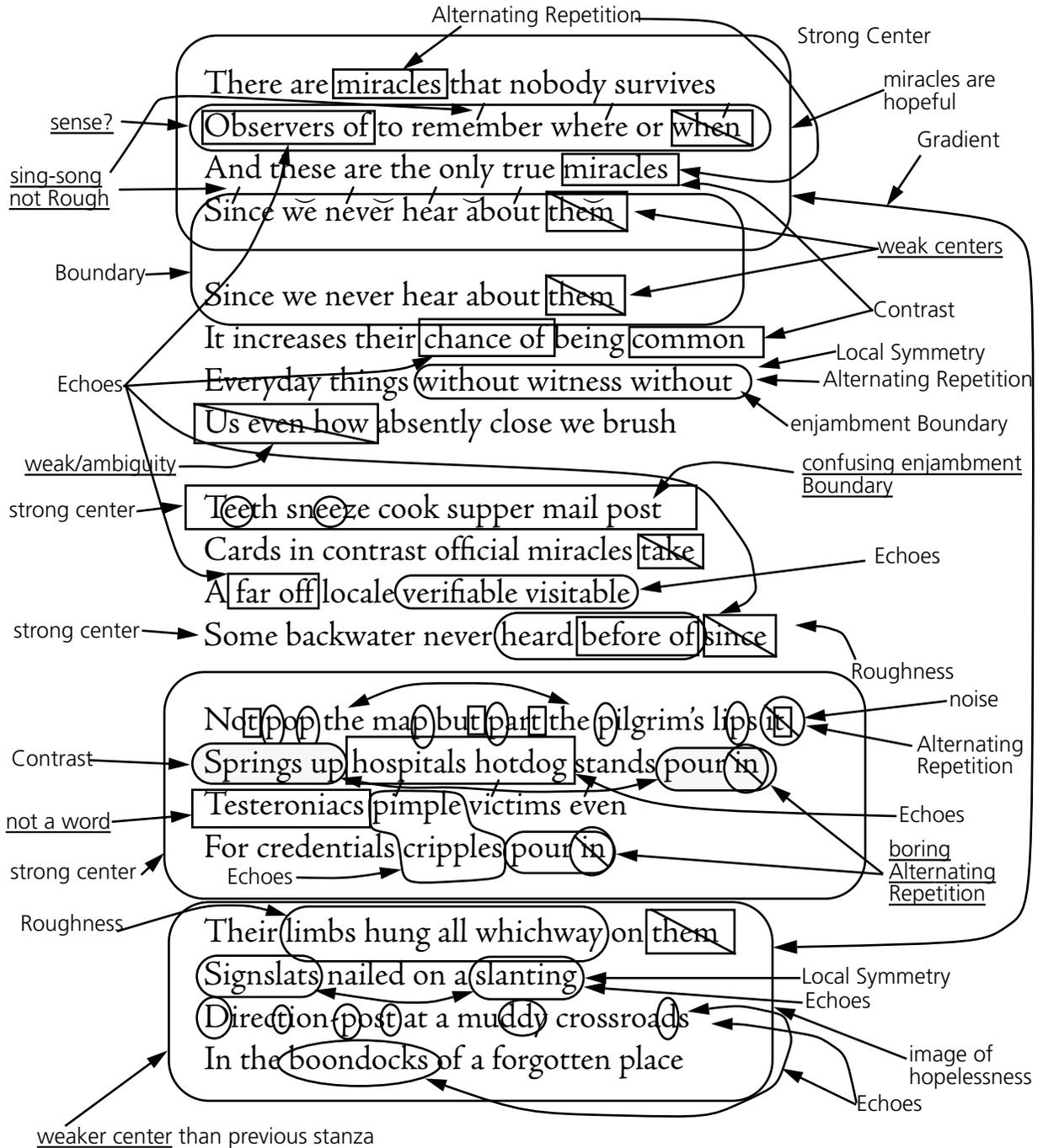
## Failures of San Sepolcro

- Poor **Levels of Scale**: The poem is a string of weak centers with few nested centers
- There are not many **Strong Centers**: really only 4
- **Boundaries** are weak, emphasizing that the poem is a string of centers
- Simple **Repetition** of words and phrases and some images could be a weakness
- No centers have strong **Positive Space**: The centers are spread out and strung together in long chains
- Only two strong centers have **Good Shape**—the last stanza and stanza 4, which is a little weaker than the last stanza
- **Local Symmetries** only in the form of the poem, and the form creates a number of weak lines and missed opportunities for strong centers
- Not much **Deep Interlock and Ambiguity**, which indicates a diluted set of centers
- Good **Gradients** at the start of the poem with a near-total drop-off afterward
- Too much of the poem seems removable, and a number of weak lines—poor **Simplicity and Inner Calm**
- Weak **Not Separateness** because of weak, strung-together centers, unsupported **Void**, unproductive form

## Some Comments

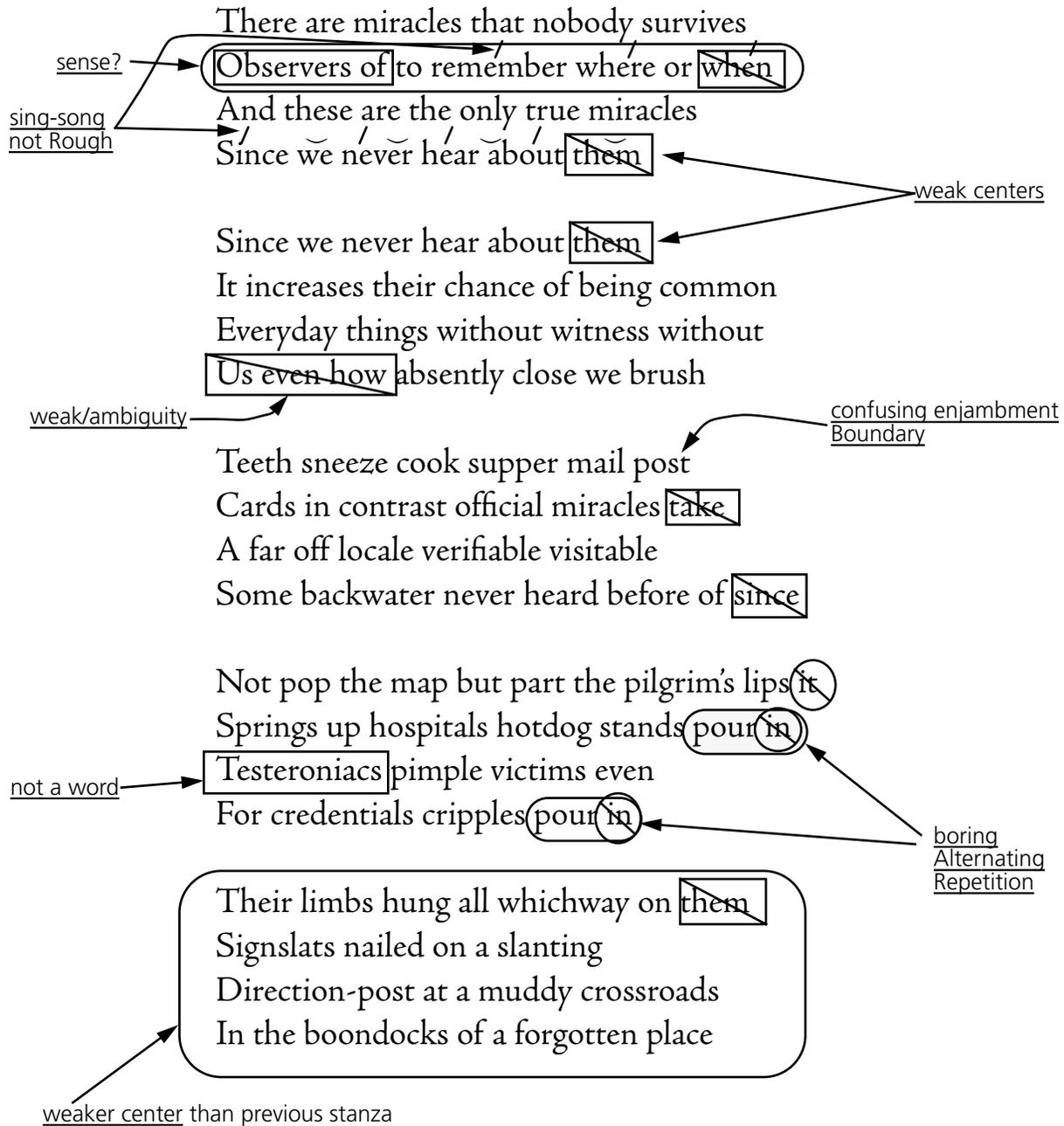
- The more I examined **San Sepolcro** the more I found to like about it
- If the form were abandoned, I feel a stronger poem would have emerged
- I initially felt that the last center was weak (the last stanza), but analysis yielded more support for it than I thought (though it is weaker than most of the centers in **The Second Coming**)
- This is an example of a radically different aesthetics from **The Second Coming** generating poetic order

# Lourdes<sub>1</sub><sup>†</sup>

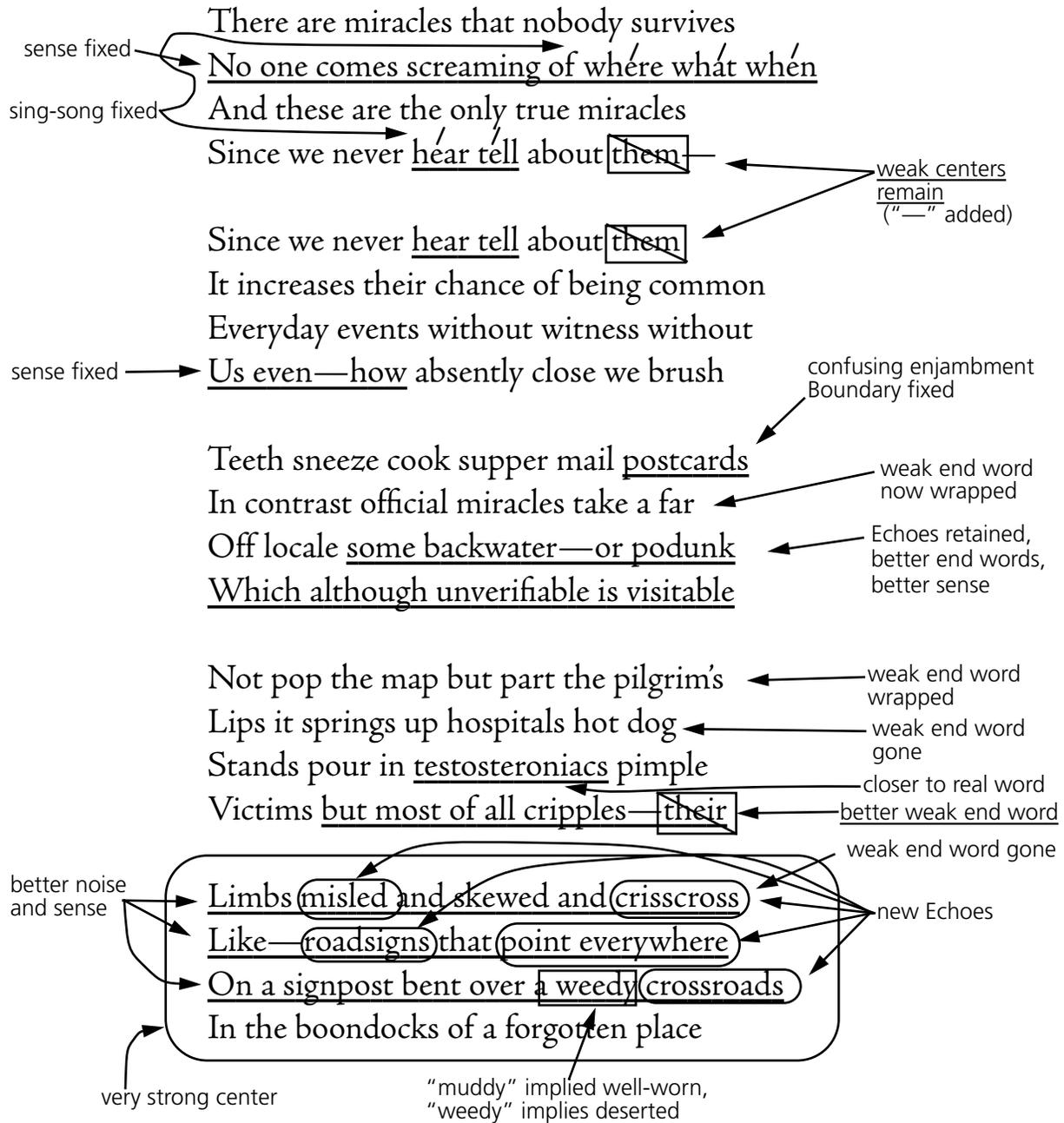


<sup>†</sup>Bill Knott, **Rome in Rome** (Release Press, 1976), and **Becos** (Random House, 1983)

# Lourdes<sub>1</sub>



# Lourdes<sub>2</sub>



## Lourdes

- All but two weak centers repaired (and one of them was strengthened)
- Better end words in general strengthen existing centers
- Even when sentences and phrases remain the same, different lineation strengthens centers
- Subtle rhythm changes improve centers
- Last stanza—a major center—is greatly improved in terms of
  - ❖ noise
  - ❖ sense
  - ❖ internal **Echoes** and **Echoes** back to earlier centers
- The last stanza is beginning to exhibit **The Void**
- Overall poem displays **Inner Calm and Simplicity**, almost precisely the way Alexander describes it with respect to Shaker furniture
- **Not Separateness?** Probably

# 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.

Alternating Repetition and Local Symmetries in the form

these are satisfactory centers which primarily set up the Contrast for the poem: life/death, bone/flesh, corporeal/spiritual

Echoes

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.

Local Symmetries

weak

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

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.

good center, Echoes, Contrast

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

not a center

weak center

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

a little obscure: not full of air

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

Contrast, good center

weak center

good center, good Contrast, good Echoes, Roughness

mind/body Contrast is made a Gradient

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.

obscure, not a center; *Pipit* refers to a character in *A Cooking Egg*

ok center

last stanza a disaster

†T.S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare*

## Whispers of Immortality

- 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**.

# 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 liplless 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.

good noise

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

weak

very weak line

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.

weaker than before; *sacerdotal*  
add religious/spiritual Echo

these are individually weak and gain  
little from the Echo

Our sighs pursue the vanished shade  
And breathe a sanctified amen,

And yet the Sons of God descend  
To entertain the wives of men.

interesting geometrical grouping

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.

just plain weird

# Whispers of Immortality

This version is 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 with any likelihood of **Simplicity and Inner Calm** and **The Void** destroyed

# 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.

Donne, I suppose, was such another  
Pursuing sense within the sense  
To seize and clutch and penetrate.  
Expert beyond experience

better center; more effectively conveys  
Eliot's interest in certainty/uncertainty

better than previous, but a bit obscure with  
the two senses of *sense*; it has lost some of  
the Good Shape and Positive Space that  
*cracked the marrow* had

good center, providing Echo of sex/life/body

good Local Symmetry

Echoes

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

good Alternating Repetition and  
Local Symmetries

well-formed center

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

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

weird, but moves away from European,  
Old World feel of the rest of the poem

another sense

strong, weird Echoes

But Donne and Webster passed beyond  
The text-book rudiments of lust,  
And crawled at last between dry ribs,  
Having their Ethics of the Dust.

ok center

still good

worse than original

# Whispers of Immortality

Ezra Pound suggested:

*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.*

That is:

- ✓ restore the **abstracter entities** stanza
- ✗ delete the **ague/anguish** stanza
- ✗ make it “my” experience.

# Whispers of Immortality

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  
Pursuing sense within the sense  
To seize and clutch and penetrate:

This passes my experience.

very much worse: loses Local  
Symmetries, Echoes, and all  
centeredness for the line and  
jeopardizes the stanza

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

good center removed

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

There are abstracter entities  
Which still maintain a certain charm.  
But I must crawl between dry ribs  
To keep my metaphysics warm.

this is worse than in the original;  
nothing about it works as a center

# Whispers of Immortality

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

good center: *sense* here combines both meanings for the word, forms a good Boundary between the halves of the main Contrast and between the previous part of the poem and the next two lines; creates Deep Interlock and Ambiguity

Donne, I suppose, was such another

Who found no substitute for sense

To seize and clutch and penetrate,

Expert beyond experience

sense=thinking

sense=the senses

good centers restored

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

there is a jump between these two stanzas, and these asterisks reassure us

\* \* \* \* \*

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

The sleek Brazilian jaguar  
Does not in his 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 crawl between dry ribs

To keep our metaphysics warm.

good improvement, Contrast between cerebral *circumambulate* and fleshy *charm*, odd image, Alternating Repetition between latinate *circumambulate* / anglo-saxon *charm* and latinate *metaphysics* / anglo-saxon *warm*

This poem is just about done

# Whispers of Immortality†

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

*couched* Echoes an unsaid *crouched*.  
*Couched* also seems more appropriate to  
 Grishkin than to the jaguar, so it forms a  
 Boundary. Therefore, *couched* forms an Echo  
 both of Grishkin and the jaguar, both wildness  
 and civilization.

odd addition: why *marmoset*? The funny  
 rhyme with *maisonnette*?  
 Maybe it's supposed to be a Boundary,  
 linking the previous and next stanzas?

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.

*Marmoset* is associated with the jaguar, wildness,  
 life, and the body; *maisonnette* is associated with  
 Grishkin, civilization, society, the mind.

Thus they form a Contrast and Echoes.

The stanza is Alternating Repetition:  
*jaguar/marmoset/cat/maisonnette*.

The stanza stands out, is awkwardly lonely,  
 strangely separate. It does not demonstrate Not  
 Separateness

† published version

## Conclusion

- The theory of poetic order appears to be a real step toward understanding how poems work
- The theory links writing with the geometric arts—painting and architecture
- Centers abstract the particular craft techniques we already know
- The theory reveals where the Structuralists went wrong
- The theory provides a systematic way to evaluate poems
- The theory of poetic order is a useful tool for locating weaknesses in poems
- The theory is strong enough to help us with our own work
- The definition of poetry based on centers and poetic order ...
  - ... accounts for the role of aesthetics
  - ... accounts for form and metrical verse
  - ... accounts for the increased use of imagery in free verse
  - ... encompasses prose poems
  - ... is orthogonal (possibly posterior) to literary theory
  - ... is satisfying