

THE SILENCES OF POETRY

by John Ciardi

A poem, by the very fact of its existence in time rather than in space, has *duration* and *pace*. Since it does not move through-out at exactly the same pace (there must be some acceleration or impedance, no matter how slight), the poem must also have *change of pace*; one part moves more rapidly or more slowly than another. All such changes of pace, it must be noted, are relative to one another: an anapest introduced into an iambic line accelerates that part of the line; an anapest in an anapestic line sustains the already established pace, but does not accelerate it. All the rhythms of poetry achieve their effect by the way they play against one another. They exist in counter-motion.

Similarly, *all* the elements of a poem are engaged in a series of countermotions. Meter and rhythm are only two of the elements that may be involved. Diction, imagery, rhyme, line length, vowel quantities, consonant sequences, and grammatical structure are some of the other principal elements. From these elements the poem builds complexes of poetic structures, each related to all the others. The motion of these poetic structures, each against the others, is what ultimately determines the poem's performance. One simple rule seems to apply to the play of all such countermotions: *Whenever in the course of a poem the poet changes either his tone or his attitude, some change will occur in the handling of the technical elements.* That change in the technical handling of the poem may be slight or it may be marked, but some change must occur. Conversely, any change in the handling of the technical elements in the course of the poem will indicate that a change has taken

place in the author's tone or attitude. Attitude, in Robert Frost's phrase, may be taken to signify "the way the poet takes his subject"; tone, "the way he takes himself."

The following little poem ("The Span of Life," by Robert Frost) will serve as a convenient first illustration:

The old dog barks backward without getting up.
I can remember when he was a pup.

Note that neither line is a poem by itself. It is not a poem to say "The old dog barks backward without getting up." That much is only a statement. Nor is it a poem to say "I can remember when he was a pup." That much is only a comment. Yet it is clear that a poem does happen when the two lines are said one after the other. It must follow that the poem exists in the counter-motion of the two lines, in the way the second line (in this case the comment) makes something of what has been established in the first line (in this case the statement). Nor do the two lines simply run together; there is some point of balance between the end of the first line and the beginning of the second, a pause, a meditative silence like a rest in music. The poem enters that pause with one attitude (in this case relatively detached specific observation of the old dog) and after a moment of meditation it comes out of the pause with a different attitude (in this case a double change involving, first, a fonder, a sadder, a more general recollection of the dog, and, second, a metaphoric implication, as reinforced by the title, that the comment is not only about the old dog but about all of life).

For convenience such points of balance (and silence) may be called fulcrums and may be indicated by the symbol <, thus:

The old dog barks backward without getting up.
<
I can remember when he was a pup.

Such counter-motion is inseparable from "what the poem is" and "what the poem means"; it is in fact "how the poem means." In briefest form, a poem is one part against another across a silence. To understand this characteristic of the poem is to understand the theory of poetic form. To be able to respond to it in a poem is to understand the practice of poetry.¹

The Frost poem is as simple an example of poetic counter-motion as one may well find. The following poem ("O Western Wind") will illustrate the same sort of counter-motion with rather more marked changes occurring across the fulcrum. The poem is

¹ I claimed earlier that every shift in tone or attitude is accompanied by some shift in the handling of the technical elements. That shift is relatively difficult to establish in so brief a poem since it involves the metrical differences between two lines, each of which is unusual. The norm is, of course, anapestic, and one will do well to note at least some of the ways in which these lines vary in their play against that norm. The first line may be scanned:

Thē olḍ dōg / barks back / wārd wī thout / gē tting up.

Yet certainly there is good reason for wishing to distribute the stress of the first foot over both "old" and "dog," thus:

Thē olḍ dōg / barks back / wārd wī thout / gē tting up.

The fact that one must pause after saying "old" in order to form the "d" sound of dog, tends to force a heavy stress on both words. The similarity of the vowels tends to make the words equal. And the repetition of "b" and "k" sounds around a similar (not identical) vowel sound in "barks back" once more heightens the pattern. Thus one is tempted to cluster four heavy accents on "old dog barks back."

The second line, on the other hand, has only one complication and that in the first (monosyllabic) foot. After the first foot the line progresses to the close in flawless anapests (the norm):

I / cān rē mēm / bē whēn hē / wās ā pup.

One will do well to note the unusually heavy accent at the beginning of the second line (in this case a monosyllabic foot). Though it is not an invariable rule, there is a strong tendency in English and American poetry for the line after a fulcrum to begin with an unusually heavy stress, a monosyllabic foot, a spondee, a reversed foot, or some combination of these accents that produces a cluster of heavy stresses. The line can, of course, be scanned with the first two feet rendered as trochee and iamb, but it certainly seems wiser to emphasize the dominant anapestic pattern. Either rendering will indicate almost the same voice emphases.

one of the most memorable of the anonymous ballad snatches surviving from the early sixteenth century or perhaps earlier. Like most folk balladry, it survives in variant forms. The following is a modernized version.

O Western wind, when wilt thou blow
That the small rain down may rain?

<

Christ, that my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again.

As indicated by the fulcrum, the poem, like "The Span of Life," consists of two parts. The first two lines are a cry of anguish to the western wind (in England, the wind of Spring). The lament issues without any statement of cause for the speaker's anguish. The second two lines snap off that generalized lament and utter an angry and specific protest. The poet's tone has undergone an emphatic change.

As in "The Span of Life," one may note at once that neither of the halves is a poem. Whatever is being experienced is not complete in either the first two or the last two lines, but achieves its completion only in their countermotion across the silence of the fulcrum. Now if one will study the differences in technical handling on either side of the fulcrum, and if he will then relate them to the emotional force of the poem, he will be approaching the poem as its own performance, as its own act of itself, without resort to the confusion by paraphrase.

For though paraphrase may be useful in helping to explain a specific difficulty in the phrasing of a poem, it is unfailingly a destructive method of discussion if one permits the illusion that the paraphrase is more than a momentary crutch, or that it is in any sense the poem itself. No poem "means" anything that any paraphrase is capable of saying. For, as noted, the poem exists in time and it exists in balance and countermotion across a silence. That timing and that counterthrust are inseparable from the emotional force of the poem, and it is exactly that timing and counterthrust that paraphrase cannot repro-

duce. The question to put to the poem is not "What does it mean?" but "How does it mean?" "What does it mean?" inevitably invites paraphrase and inevitably leads away from the poem. "How does it mean?" is best asked by absorbing the poetic structure as a poetic structure, i.e., as a countermotion across a silence, and thus leads the analysis to the poem itself.

In "O Western Wind" the two most notable differences between the lines before and after the fulcrum are (1) the pace, as determined by the metrics, by the consonant-vowel sequences, and by the rhetorical structure; and (2) the diction, which changes from formal-hortatory in the first two lines, to colloquial in the second two.

The shift in the quality of the diction is clear enough. The first two lines are a generalized hortatory question phrased in terms that might do for an invocation to some minor deity of the wind; the second two lines are a specific and bitter exclamation phrased in the simplest language of common speech.

It is the metric pattern accompanying that shift of diction that is worth special attention:

O Wes / tern wind, / / when wilt / thou blow
That the small / rain down / may rain?
Christ / / that my love / were in / my arms
And I / in my bed / again.

The first two lines make use of three spondees in seven feet, and of two series of three heavy stresses in a row. The second two lines make use of no spondees, there is no point in them where even two heavy stresses fall together, and there are two anapests in them as opposed to one in the first line, and there is a pyrrhic to add two more unstressed syllables between accents. The only unusual emphasis in the second two lines occurs in the monosyllabic foot at the beginning of line three (compare Frost's use of the same device after the fulcrum in "The Span of Life" and see the note on the passage). After that initial emphasis the meter becomes not only smooth but

accelerated. It is as if that initial stress had consumed all the force of despair and passion, after which the voice can only slide forward into its grief.

Thus, one has located a first difference in the technical handling: the first two lines are metrically impeded and the second two lines are not only smooth but slightly accelerated. Having located that difference, one who wishes to experience poetry rather than simply to talk around it, will do well to consider that a fast passage in music is not the equivalent of a slow one, nor of the same passage repeated slowly. In the same way, a good poem does not change its pace without meaning something by that change. The rhythm is one part of the performance of the poem's "meaning."

The first two lines of the present poem, moreover, are impeded not only by the meter but by the four lingering "w" sounds followed by the open vowels of "thou blow" (which pick up the open vowel of the vocative at the beginning of the line), thus:

O WEHstern WInd HWEn WIlT thOU bLOW.

With this much observed, one may identify the essence of the poem's performance of itself. It begins with a heavily impeded generalized invocation to the western wind of Spring. The poet draws out his cry as if tortured by the thought, carrying it on a rising inflection throughout the first two lines and leaving it suspended. The cry ends and the poet pauses, silent. Suddenly, within that silence, the terms of his grief change inside him. A second voice of his despair surges in him and lashes forth with a cry to Heaven. The voice resumes with a hammer-beat of anguish on the first syllable. Then, as if that first hammered syllable had drained the last strength of the speaker's anger, the voice slides off into a numb personal statement of the poet's exact grief, that grief now simply stated, no longer volatile and angry but defeated, and the metric line accordingly runs smooth and even accelerates in response to

the fact that the poet no longer struggles against the truth, but closes on a dying fall.

Note that the foregoing paragraph is not a paraphrase of the poem, but rather a simplified description of the details of the poetic performance. The function of such description is not to replace the poem but to direct the attention to it by pointing out the emotional sequences of the poem in time and the accompanying shifts in technical management. The question to be addressed is always "How"—not "What"—does a poem mean?

In both "The Span of Life" and "O Western Wind" the poetic structure is built across a single fulcrum and the units on either side of the fulcrum are equal in length. The following poem ("The Fury of Aerial Bombardment," by Richard Eberhart) will illustrate a different case. Before one reads it, he needs to know that the poet served as an Instructor in Aerial Gunnery during World War II and that an essential part of such gunnery training consisted of memorizing the nomenclature of the many parts of a Browning .50 caliber machine gun. Obviously a gunner must be able to order repair parts from rear-area depots, and if he is to receive the right part he must be able to give its exact technical name, no matter how complicated. The "belt-feed-lever" and the "belt-holding-pawl" of the last line are two of the many items of nomenclature that student-gunners were required to study. Obviously the poet is bemused by the resemblance of such vocabulary exercises from the school-for-death to the exercises all children are assigned in the school-of-innocence.

You would think the fury of aerial bombardment
Would rouse God to relent; the infinite spaces
Are still silent. He looks on shock-pried faces.
History, even, does not know what is meant.

< 3

You would feel that after so many centuries

God would give man to repent; yet he can kill
 As Cain could, but with multitudinous will,
 No farther advanced than in his ancient furies.

< 2

Was man made stupid to see his own stupidity?
 Is God by definition indifferent, beyond us all?
 Is the eternal truth man's fighting soul
 Wherein the beast ravens in his own avidity?

< 1

Of Van Wattering I speak, and Averill,
 Names on a list whose faces I do not recall.
 But they are gone to early death, who late in school
 Distinguished the belt-feed-lever from the belt-
 holding-pawl.

The principal fulcrum of this poem quite clearly occurs, as marked, between the third and the fourth stanzas. There are lesser fulcrums within the first three stanzas, but they are better left for later discussion. The point to note is that there is no reason for two statements to be of the same length in order to have the same emotional weight. In many poems the fulcrum occurs just before the last line, the single line thrusting itself into balance with all that comes before.

The first three stanzas of "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment" are made up of enormous rhetorical statements and questions addressed to no less a subject than man's fate upon the planet. In stanza four the address suddenly changes from a rhetoric for abstract-man to an understated elegy for two boys named Van Wattering and Averill, boys who sought no universal meaning but simply distinguished the belt-feed-lever from the belt-holding-pawl, and died of their schooling into the anonymities of fate. They are not even faces; they are names on a list. The only point at which they touch larger significance is that they are gone to early death. Thus, they are unknowing heirs to all human waste; their death is their one real illustration of

the universal questions the poem begins with. Yet the implication is clear that their death is both man's tragedy and failure. The boys are the least of men in one sense, faceless and forgotten; yet their deaths accuse all of mankind, the more so in that these who die are so insignificant.²

There can be no mistaking that the author has changed both his attitude toward the subject and his personal tone in going from one side of the fulcrum to the other. The opening attitude is one of the most intense moral indignation; the opening tone is rhetorical and resonant enough for the loftiest pulpit. The closing attitude drops the high moral indignation in favor of the simplest sort of sorrow, and the tone changes from high rhetoric to a conversational understatement. Inevitably the whole quality of the language changes from the Latinate diction of moral abstraction, to the colloquial and less Latinate diction of simple statement.

The change in the pace and the rhythm is as marked as the change in diction. Each of the first three stanzas divides between masculine and feminine rhymes, the effect of the feminine rhymes being to leave the voice suspended on a rising inflection. The fourth stanza uses no such feminine rhymes, each line closing on a firm masculine word. The voice is brought down firm to the falling inflection.

The change in the quality of the metrics from one side of the fulcrum to the other is even more emphatically marked. Eberhart's meter is unusual for the number of light syllables allowed into a single foot. One should sense at once that the poem is written in pentameters. And despite great variation, that the norm is iambic. (The next to the last line, though lengthened to a hexameter, is made up entirely of iambs, and may be taken as the rest-line of the poem, the line in which the norm is most clearly asserted. When in doubt it is wise to look for such rest-lines.) Against that norm, however, the voice must swallow many accelerated syllables. So in the opening line:

² cf. Spender's handling of the same theme in *Ultima Ratio Regum*.

Yōū wōūld think / thē fū rī / ōf ae / rī āl /
bōm bārd mēnt

Line nine can be scanned only by allowing a double feminine foot at the end:

Wās mān / māde stū / pīd tō sēe / hīs own / stū pīd īt y.

And line ten runs to seven light accents in the second and third feet:

Is Gōd / bī dē fīnī tīon / īn dīf fē rēnt, // bēyōnd /
ūs āll?

The characteristic of Eberhart's metric in the first three stanzas is extraordinary acceleration checked by relatively heavy caesura. The voice is thus required to lash out and stop, lash out and stop. The metric effect, when combined with the voice-thrust suggested by the vastness of the concepts being declared, is clearly oratorical. The rhythm thrusts like the voice of a man delivering a powerful, outraged sermon, and being carried away by it. Note, also, that the sermon concludes with the voice rising on a double feminine, appropriately in a question:

Where īn / thē Bēast / rā vēns / īn hīs own /
ā vī dī tīy?³

Across the fulcrum, on the other hand, there is only one case in which three light syllables fall together. The extraordinary accelerations have disappeared, the metric is much smoother, and the pace is further slowed by the fact that the last two lines have become hexameters. The extra foot of the hexameter in English seems almost invariably to slow the pace by drawing out the line.

³ The first foot may with equal reason be taken as a pyrrhic. The syllables are equal whether taken as stressed or unstressed.

Ōf Vān / Wē ttēr īng / I speak, / ānd Ā / vēr ill,
Nāmes / ōn ā list, // whōse fā cēs / I dō not /
rē cāll.

Būt thēy / āre gōne / tō ear / lī death, // whō
lāte / īn school
Dīs tīn / guīshed the bēlt / feed lē vēr // frōm
thē / bēlt hold / īng pāwl.⁴

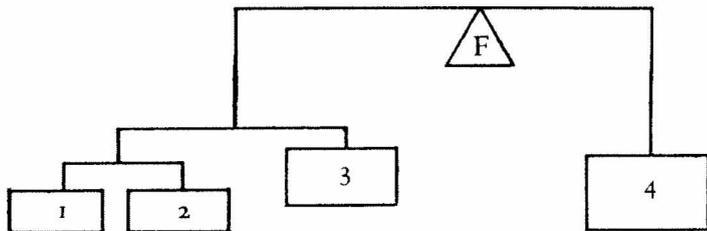
Were the discussion of the poem to stop here, it would still be apparent that such changes in pace are not only relevant to the "meaning" of the poem, but so inseparably involved in the meaning that there can be no communication of the poem's essential experience until the voice has responded to the changes. Many sensitive readers are able to make such a response without being able to analyze why they have so responded; such attunement is the happy result of extensive and sensitive reading. It is possible, that is to say, to receive a poem without this sort of analysis. It is not possible, however, to *discuss* the poetic structure meaningfully without recognizing the countermoving balance of that structure across the fulcrum, and the attendant change in the handling of the poetic elements. It is precisely because paraphrase is incapable of taking these elements and their counterweights into account that one must go the long way round to the discussion if he truly wishes to know what the poem is doing with itself.

There still remains to be considered the matter of the lesser fulcrums in the structure of Eberhart's poem, the fulcrums numbered 2 and 3 as distinct from the major fulcrum numbered 1. Thus far the discussion has all been of central fulcrum points, of the poem divided in two. The suggested image of the poetic structure has been that of a scale-arm balanced across a single fulcrum. That image needs now to

⁴ The beginning of line two may be scanned more regularly as a trochee followed by an iamb. There can be no doubt however that the normal speech rhythm of English makes "on a list" an anapest.

be expanded into something more like a piece of mobile sculpture, a structure possessing, to be sure, a single main point of balance, but containing further lesser balances within the parts.

Those lesser balances can become so intricate that to pursue all of them would lead to more confusion than clarity. Certainly, however, one may readily note that the first three stanzas of the Eberhart poem, though they constitute a single side of the central balance, are themselves divided into two units, one of which is divided once again. Represented as a diagrammatic mobile sculpture, with the numbers on the weights corresponding to the stanza numbers and F labeling the main fulcrum, the poem might be imagined thus:



One has only to observe the carefully repeated pattern of stanzas one and two to recognize their close relationship. The first line of each stanza is a run-on and in each the voice continues without pause to a caesura after the third foot of the second line. After that caesura, the second lines of each stanza are again run-on, the voice in both cases coming to rest after the second foot of the third line. In both cases the voice once more moves forward for three feet and comes to rest again. And though the fourth line of the first stanza differs from the fourth line of the second by a small caesural effect around "even," the two lines are still more than sufficiently close to keep the pattern firm. Leaving that small caesural ripple around "even" out of consideration, one may diagram the pattern thus:

.....	m	f
..... //	f	m
..... //	f	m
..... //	m	f

The rhyme, as indicated in the diagram by *m* for masculine and *f* for feminine, changes position from the first stanza (first column) to the second (second column) in a perfect reversed pattern.

And as if to leave no possible doubt that the stanzas are exactly related, the poet has added an unmissable and unusual internal rhyme—"relent-repent"—just before the first caesura in each stanza.

Such patterning of pauses and effects may again be recognized as characteristic of the rhetorician. The very parallel construction of the sentences—"You would think" in the first stanza, "You would feel" in the second, and again "Would rouse God" in the first, and "God would give" in the second are devices of the same rhetorical impulse.

Then, having established his pattern with such care, the poet breaks from it. The third stanza has a much more definite tendency to run the line straight to a full end-stop without internal pause, and thus the whole pattern of the pauses changes. A principal point of the present discussion, to repeat once again, is that such changes can only happen in response to a change in the poet's tone or attitude or both. He may realize exactly what change he is making, or he may simply follow the dictates of his feelings without analysis or need for analysis, but the changes themselves do not occur without cause. One can, of course, see at a glance that the voice has changed from making statements to asking questions. What one must also realize is that were he given no more than the scansion of the poem and its pattern of pauses, without a word of the text, he would still be able to tell that the voice had undergone some change in response to a change in the poet's tone and attitude.

If every poem is constructed on such countermotions across a fulcrum, and if the handling of the technical elements always changes from one unit of the poetic structure to another, the method of analysis here suggested must inevitably lead to a fuller understanding of that poetic structure. One need only locate the principal fulcrum, locate further the lesser fulcrums within the main units of the structure, and then analyze the differences in the handling of the poetic elements within each unit and sub-unit. To do that much, however, is not to have achieved the poem, but rather to have prepared oneself to achieve it. Any method of analysis is designed only to assure one that he is giving his human attention to the poem itself rather than to some nonpoetic paraphrase of its unenacted "meaning." In every good poem there is some final echo of nuance and feeling that lies beyond explanation and analysis.

Before this method can be aptly used, however, one must recognize that not all poems make their countermotions immediately apparent. It will be useful, therefore, to distinguish between *simple* and *complex* poems. Complex poems are of the order already discussed: they exist in countermotion across clearly perceivable fulcrums. Simple poems, on the other hand, travel in a straight line outward from the opening statement and seem to lack the counterthrust of an opposing idea or theme. The following ("My Papa's Waltz," by Theodore Roethke) is an example of a simple poem:

The whiskey on your breath
 Could make a small boy dizzy;
 But I held on like death:
 Such waltzing is not easy.

We romped until the pans
 Slid from the kitchen shelf;
 My mother's countenance
 Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
 Was battered on one knuckle;
 At every step I missed
 My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
 With a palm caked hard by dirt,
 Then waltzed me off to bed
 Still clinging to your shirt.

Despite its seeming lightness, "My Papa's Waltz" is a poem of terror, all the more terrible because the boy is frightened and hurt by the father even in play. "We romped," the poet says, but the romp is a dizzying succession of painful glimpses: the house is shaking, the mother is frowning, the father's hand is scarred by violence, every misstep in the dance scrapes the father's belt-buckle painfully across the boy's ear, and his head is being pounded by that huge, hard palm. It is a romp, but the boy must cling like death until he is finally dumped into bed.

The terror, however, mounts in a straight line, detail upon detail, with no countermotion across a fulcrum *because there is no change either in tone or in attitude*. The poem clearly breaks into four parts, as indicated by the stanza breaks, but the parts follow one another with no sense that one stanza break is more important than another. And as one might suspect in such a case, there is no marked difference in the handling of the poetic elements from stanza to stanza. Metrics, pace, diction, imagery, grammatical structure—all are very nearly constant throughout. Even the pattern of pauses is the same from stanza to stanza with only one variation in the extra pause at the end of the third line of stanza one; with that exception all the stanzas move without pause to the end of the second line, and then move forward again without pause to the end of the fourth line. And though there are two feminine rhymes in the first and third stanzas, even they fall into a neatly repeated

pattern. The whole, disregarding the extra pause in stanza one, may be diagrammed thus:

.....	m	m	m	m
..... //	f	m	f	m
.....	m	m	m	m
..... //	f	m	f	m

The poem is simple, not because it lacks subtlety, but because it seems to lack a fulcrum. The fact is that the poem does indeed work against a fulcrum, but that *the fulcrum occurs after the last line*. Imagine, as a horrible example, that the poet had written an additional summarizing stanza in his first draft, and imagine that it had run to some such sad stuff as the following:

Ah, that was long ago.
Now, his first terrors shed,
This dancer turns to go
Calm, to the fearless dead.

Miserable and cliché-ridden poeticizing to be sure, but had such a stanza existed one would have had no hesitation in placing the fulcrum between it and the preceding poem, or in identifying the metric shift wherein three of the last four lines begin with monosyllabic feet.

The poet may very well have been tempted at first writing to add some such summarizing stanza. If so, he wisely put by the temptation in the secure sense that nothing could be said in such an addition that was not already better said by silence worked upon by the implications of the preceding lines. For silence, too, is a communication when placed in context. Thus *the fulcrum exists outside the poem, between the enacted experience and the silence that follows it*.

The following poem, on the other hand, is a fair example of a poem that over-ran its silence into six lines of "tacked-on moral," all the more painful in view of the extraordinary sharp-

ness and economy of most of the poem up to those last six lines:

Evening traffic homeward burns,
Swift and even on the turns,
Drifting weight in triple rows,
Fixed relation and repose.
This one edges out and by,
Inch by inch with steady eye.
But should error be increased,
Mass and moment are released;
Matter loosens, flooding blind,
Levels driver to its kind.

Ranks of nations thus descend,
Watchful to a stormy end.
By a moment's calm beguiled,
I have got a wife and child.
Fool and scoundrel guide the State.
Peace is whore to Greed and Hate.
Nowhere may I turn to flee:
Action is security.
Treading change with savage heel,
We must live or die by steel.

A metric note is necessary before the discussion of the countermotions of this poem. The pattern of scansion for all lines is the same and may be represented thus:

| - | - | - |

Each line, that is, begins and ends with a heavy stress and each consists of four such heavy stresses enclosing three unstressed syllables. In such a case one may be uncertain

whether to take the line as iambic or trochaic. The fact is that many English poets who have written in tetrameters have welcomed this effect as pleasing. The voice begins and ends each line on a stressed syllable and proceeds through each line without internal pause, the metronomic quality of such metrics producing an especially incantatory effect. It is relevant that this stress-to-stress pattern of the tetrameter line rarely, if ever, occurs when caesuras are used.

Despite any first uncertainty, however, the line is iambic, but with a truncated first foot. One has only to add a light syllable at the beginning of each line to see that iambic pattern:

A[̄] ē[̄]ve / nī[̄]g trā / fī[̄]c hō[̄]me / wā[̄]rd b[̄]urns
 S[̄]ō swift / ā[̄]nd ē / v[̄]en on / th[̄]e t[̄]urns

Obviously, however, such light syllables are not only metric excess baggage, but they interfere with the particular emphasis of the stress-to-stress pattern, loosening the incantatory effect. With something like the tolerance of the English ear to feminines before any full pause, the ear welcomes the dropping of these initial light syllables. Most precisely scanned, therefore, this tetrameter line might be represented as follows, with the comma indicating the truncated light syllable:

, | / - | / - | / - |

In such a special case of metronomic meter, it is unlikely that one will find any significant metric variation across the fulcrums of the poem. The only marked technical differences one may find between the poem and the last six lines are in the quality of the diction. With the last six lines omitted, however, the poem comes to a triumphant major balance (fulcrum) against its own following silence, and may be divided thus:

Evening traffic homeward burns,
 Swift and even on the turns,

Drifting weight in triple rows,
 Fixed relation and repose.
 This one edges out and by,
 Inch by inch with steady eye.
 But should error be increased,
 Mass and moment are released;
 Matter loosens, flooding blind,
 Levels driver to its kind.

< 2

Ranks of nations thus descend,
 Watchful to a sudden end.

< 2

By a moment's calm beguiled,
 I have got a wife and child.

< 1

The large fulcrum after the last couplet is labeled 1 to indicate that it is the major point of balance. The lesser fulcrums are both labeled 2 to indicate that they are equal to one another.

The first unit of the poem (up to the first fulcrum) is a dispassionate description of evening traffic seen primarily as a problem in physics: the tone of the passage is set by the implicit image of physical particles (detached from all human feeling) in motion. Rank on rank the particles move forward in their dangerous precision.

Across the first of the lesser fulcrums, the poet suddenly strikes a balance against his first image, amplifying the idea from literal description of traffic to an image-related idea of the condition of nations. "Nations" must certainly receive an unusually heavy stress by the logic of the implicit parallel construction. "Ranks of particles move toward collision and ranks of *nations* do exactly the same thing." The first shift then is from description to comment.

Having made a first comment on the largest scale, the poet pauses, and suddenly strikes a further balance with his material by applying it wryly to himself in the most personal terms. "By the moment's calm (fixed relation and repose) and

like *nations*," the poet says, "I have also been beguiled." The three operative emphases are *physical particles*, *nations*, and *I*.

A triumphant poem thus far, a poetic structure lodging itself in a powerfully suggestive way against its following silence.

But at the end the moralist triumphs over the poet and the poem is blurred by six empty lines of abstract moralizing. "Fool, scoundrel, State, Peace, Greed, Hate" (and capitalized for emphasis) are terms that might have tempted such a pompous moralizer as Henley. There can certainly be no doubt that they constitute a change in the quality of the diction, but they are unfortunately a change for the worse.

For a poem must finally be seen as a formal structure in which the counteractions of the units *release into the silences they create a force of contained emotional perception beyond the power of statement*. The key terms are *release into silence*, *contained emotional perception*, and *statement*. The poetic structure *releases* its "meaning"; it does not *say* it.