

A painting of a man in a red coat and white wig, likely a scholar or writer, sitting and reading a book. The man is shown in profile, looking down at the book. The background is dark and textured.

Ten Approaches
to
Literary Criticism

colin john holcombe

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by

Colin John Holcombe

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Contents

Introduction	1
Traditional	19
New Criticism	30
Rhetoric	42
Stylistics	55
Metaphor	71
Poststructuralist	86
Myth	103
Freudian	114
Jungian	124
Fractal	132
Concluding Remarks	147

LITERARY CRITICISM

Though many of those consulting this little guide will be students wanting material for college essays, the intended audience is more properly the fledgling poet. I hope these notes will provide some insight into the different forms of literary criticism, their approaches, strengths and limitations, and the ways they may help writers improve their work. By understanding the different schools of literary criticism, poets may also begin to grasp the various things, not always obvious or mutually reinforcing, that poems set out to do. The emphasis throughout is on the practical, employing the same worked example, but for each school or approach I have provided different references in book and Internet form.

Literary critics have many skills, acquired, as everything else in literature, by practice and experience, {1} but those the practising poet needs most to acquire are close reading, explication and evaluation. The last is predicated on the first two skills because poems generally fail through lack of care. The originating emotion still clots the lines or, in striving for originality, the work becomes muddled, pretentious or incoherent. The incomprehensible can always be taken for the profound of course, and no doubt much get published for that reason, but only the beginner will see publication as the sole purpose of writing. Poems take too much of the writer's time and emotional lifeblood not to be made as good as possible, and dishonesty will spoil even the best talents. Poems grow through evaluation, the dialogue between what has been written and what was originally hoped for, between what the poems say now and what they might with further work. Self-appraisal is inescapable.

But the critic's eye is a rare gift, rarer than sainthood, Housman thought, and matters have lately become more problematic. Criticism is not fashionable, and has been replaced by literary theory in many university departments. {2} The criticism that continues to be written naturally

concentrates on established figures. The remainder, the reviewing/criticism appraising the great torrent that pours off the small presses, is often partisan, shallow and/or doggedly optimistic. {3} Even the aims of criticism seem somewhat doubtful. {4} No single critical approach seems invariably successful, {5} and insights from differing approaches do not necessarily cohere. Nothing brings finality of judgement, moreover, and one critic's findings can be undone by another's ingenuity. Much more damaging, the premises even of literary theory have been uprooted by radical theory. {6}

Purposes of Theory

What does literary criticism hope to achieve? There are many schools of thought, {7} but all take as their starting point the analysis of the reader's or listener's response. Poems may be complex, requiring a good deal of explanation or even correction of corrupt scripts, but there has to be an immediate impact of some sort: not very strong, and not blatantly emotional necessarily, but something that allows the critic to ask: how is this obtained? how significant is it? how does it compare with similar works? No impact and there is nothing to analyse. The work has failed, at least where that particular reader is concerned, and no amount of critical cleverness, literary allusions and information will bully him into responding to what he cannot feel.

But who is the reader? Each and everyone, as Stanley Fish might claim {8}, or Milton's "select audience though few"? Poets may not make money but they still have outlets to consider. Whom are they writing for — the editors of leading magazines, friends, society at large, or themselves? And to say something significant about the world around them, to resolve personal quandaries, to gain a literary reputation with those who count? In an ideal world all aims might be served by the one work, but the world is not ideal, and aims

needed to be sorted out.

It is the original intention or purpose of writing that much historical and sociological analysis attempts to understand. In Shakespeare or Chaucer, and much more so in the poetry of ancient Greece or China, there are different conventions to appreciate, and many words cannot be fully translated. {9} The difficulties afflict more than the professional translator or literary scholar, as modern poetry very much uses *recherché* imagery and far-flung allusion. A simple word like "faith" would be very differently appreciated in the church-going communities of small-town America and the Nietzsche-reading intelligentsia of London's Hampstead. The meaning, the literal meaning of the poem, might be the same but not the insights that gave the poem its real subject matter.

With conventions come the expectations of the audience. Sidney wrote for the great country house, Shakespeare for the public stage; Middleton for the City. Their work is different in rhetoric, diction and imagery, and had to be. Social distinctions may be much less marked today, but the intellectual traditions continue. Poets are very choosy about their venues. Writers who live in California will keep a Manhattan address. {10} Poems that work well on the page may not rise to a public performance. All this is obvious, what professional prose writers think about before accepting a commission, {11} but is commonly overlooked by the beginning poet.

Is Objectivity Possible?

Since poets love their creations, and must do to continue writing at all, how objective can they be? Again, there is much disagreement. {12}

Some poets, outraged by yet another wrong-headed review, come to believe that they alone, or at least a small circle of like-minded poets, have any real critical ability. Only they

really know what is good and not so good in their own work. And anyone attending workshops regularly may well agree.

But few academic critics will accept that poets make the sounder judgements. {13} Not a demarcation dispute, they say, but simple experience and logic. Artists are notoriously partisan, and look at colleagues' work to learn and borrow. Consider a Beethoven sonata. We can all distinguish between the beginner and the accomplished pianist even though possessing no piano-playing skills of our own. True, but the analogy is not exact. Poems are written in a language we all read and speak. Even to use language correctly calls on enormously complex skills, so that poetry may be but a small addition, a thin specialization. On that scale the differences between good and bad in poetry may be analogous to deciding between two almost equally good pieces of piano-playing. That exceeds the competence of most of us, and we hand over to the usual competition panel of musicians and conductors.

Certainly we can accept that critics and poets intend different things, namely articles and poems. There is nothing to stop the poet becoming an excellent critic (many have {14}), or academic critics from the learning the difficult art of writing poetry. {15} The experience may well be enriching for both, but the question is more insidious. What exactly is it that the critic produces in his article, and how does it shape the reader's response? An earlier generation (much earlier, that encountered by I. A. Richards in his pioneering reading experiments at Cambridge {16}, though contemporary poetry reviews have revived the earlier practice) sought to make poems out of their responses. Artists do influence each other, and borrowing their clothes is no doubt the sincerest form of flattery. But Richard's examinees, and perhaps inevitably, without the time and skills to do a decent job, turned in very juvenile work; Richards could dismiss the

approach as entirely wrong-headed. Analysis was what was wanted — not adroit phrases but method, the careful reductive method of the sciences. By all means write up the exercise engagingly afterwards, but first read with great attention, asking the right questions. So was born the New Criticism, and few doubt that this was a large step forward. {17}

But that does not invalidate the question. The New Critics were now doing what every good poet does or should do — examining and re-examining the work from every conceivable angle: diction, imagery, meaning, shaping, etc. Previous critics had rushed to judgement without putting in the fundamental spade-work. But what the New Critics produced, the journal article or book, had none of the attraction of the original poem, and indeed became increasingly technical, employing a jargon that only fellow specialists could enjoy. The general reader was not catered for, any more than were poets, most of whom were writing in different styles anyway, with different problems to address. Criticism retreated to academia, and eventually bred a poetry that largely had academia for its readership. {18}

More than that, criticism became an end in itself. {19} The intellectual gymnastics recently performed by the great names of American criticism are not grounded in the poem being analysed, but in the tenets of radical theory. The poem may serve as the original impetus, as something about which to parade their skills, {20} but the criticism has detached itself and become somewhat like a Modernist poem. It draws inspiration from literary theories, and these can be nebulous or plainly wrong. Speculative theory — self-referencing, and as enclosed as medieval scholasticism — will not help poets working in other traditions, but does underline an earlier question: what is the status, the ontological status, of the critical article?

Schools of Criticism

Suppose we bear that question in mind in surveying the various schools of criticism. There are many of them, often fused or mixed in practice, but could perhaps be grouped as:

Traditional

Though perhaps Edwardian in style, this approach — essentially one of trying to broaden understanding and appreciation — is still used in general surveys of English literature. There is usually some information on the writer and his times, and a little illustration, but no close analysis of the individual work or its aims.

New Criticism

The poem (the approach works best for poetry, and especially the lyric) is detached from its biographical or historical context, and analysed thoroughly: diction, imagery, meanings, particularly complexities of meaning. Some explanation of unfamiliar words and/or uses may be allowed, but the poem is otherwise expected to stand on its own feet, as though it were a contemporary production.

Rhetorical

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and the rhetorical approach attempts to understand how the content of the poem, which is more than intellectual meaning, is put across. How arguments are presented, attitudes struck, evidence marshalled, various appeals made to the reader — all are relevant.

Stylistic

Style is the manner in which something is presented, and this approach concentrates on the peculiarities of diction and imagery employed, sometimes relating them to literary and social theory.

Metaphorical

Metaphor enters into consideration in most approaches, but here the emphasis is deeper and more exclusive, attention focusing on the ways that metaphors actually work: metaphors are not regarded as supporting or decorative devices, but actually constituting the meaning.

Structuralist

Here the writing is related to underlying patterns of symmetry held to be common to all societies. Evidence is drawn from sociology and anthropology, and the approach attempts to place the work in larger context rather than assess its quality.

Poststructuralist

In contrast to the New Critics approach, which stresses interdependence and organic unity, the Poststructuralist will point to the dissonances and the non-sequiturs, and suggest how the poem works by evading or confronting traditional expectations.

Myth Theory

The approach derives from Northrop Frye and attempts to place poems into categories or subcategories into which all literature is divided by archetypal themes — e.g. the myth of the hero, his subjugation of enemies, his fall. The approach somewhat anticipated structuralism, draws on various psychologies, and is less concerned with isolating what is special than showing what it has in common with works in a similar category.

Freudian

Not only is the diction examined for sexual imagery, but the whole work is seen through Freudian concepts: struggles of the superego, the Oedipus complex, with the repressed contents of consciousness, etc. The aim is illumination of psychic conflicts, not aesthetic ranking.

Jungian

Jungians search for recurring poetic images, symbols and situations in poems, but their aim is not to categorize poems as Northrop Frye does but to relate them to larger patterns in society, whether native peoples or high civilizations.

Historical

Poems are placed in their historical context — to explain not only their allusions and particular use of words, but the conventions and expectations of the times. The approach may be evaluative (i.e. the critic may suggest ways of responding to the poem once the perspective is corrected), or may simply use it as historical data.

Biographical

As with the historical approach, a poem may be used to illuminate the writer's psychology, or as biographic data. No less than the correspondence, remembered conversations, choice of reading matter, the poem is analysed for relevance to its author's life.

Sociological

Here the focus is on society as a whole, and critics assess the social factors at work in a poem, which may be everything from the attitudes a writer inherits from his social background to the markets supporting his literary efforts.

Political

It may be the political movements the poet espoused which interest the critic, but more commonly the poem is assessed on political lines: how fairly or effectively it promoted political action and attitudes.

Marxist

The poem may be assessed on its political correctness — on its support for workers against capitalist exploitation — but most Marxists praise work that analyses or describes the

injustices which Marxist societies aim to overcome.

Moralist

Many poets have strong ethical or religious convictions, but the moralist critic usually has a broader interest. Literature has a humanizing or civilizing mission, and the critic values work which furthers that end: promotes tolerance, social justice, sensitivity to individual wishes and talents, etc.

Cognitive Scientific

In contrast to others, which generally possess a humanities orientation, the literary criticism of cognitive science attempts to relate poems to patterns of brain functioning. The approach is in its infancy, but holds some promise in the fractal self-similarity exhibited by works of art.

Testing the Approaches

Which approach is best? That which proves the most illuminating is the usual answer. The various approaches are not entirely distinct, and one can aim for a wise eclecticism {21}, incorporating several approaches in the one article. Certainly this adds length and multiple perspectives to the critical article, but are the individual approaches sound in themselves? They may provide more matter to ponder, but that is surely no proof of value.

Suppose that the critical approach employed was not only shaky but fatuously offensive. An extreme example might be a Nazi appraisal of German writers, which graded them crudely on their genetic makeup, from blonde Aryans (good) to eastern Jews (atrocious). Would we add this approach to the others? If we say emphatically not, then we must accept that critical approaches need independent support from wider viewpoints. And this innocuous request raises the ominous problems of truth and meaning.

These are real and important. If literature had no truths to

convey, there would be nothing to distinguish it from recreation or entertainment. Governments might support the arts to keep a restless society off the streets, but truth would remain the province of science, to which bureaucrats went for information to back policy decisions. But in fact art, logic and science all have truths, different and no doubt wary of each other, but not fundamentally at loggerheads. Art aims at fullness and fidelity to human experience, and therefore includes the wider social spectrum.

No doubt, to return to Germany, we could argue that our example would not happen in practice. The Nazi article would not in any way clarify our responses to German writers. But suppose it did? A critic appealing to nationalist sentiments might very well have been plausible to his contemporary audience. We ourselves might even find some merit in the judgements. It might be a fearfulness or hopelessness in the outlook or actions of the main protagonists in Jewish novels, for example, and we'd have to ask ourselves whether the work presented a true view of humanity, or was simply an historical aberration. Wider issues always obtrude, and we have either an ethos to defend, or to find a theory independent of time and context.

The latter was one hope of radical theory, which undercut the varied and apparently successful criticism of the nineteen fifties and sixties by adopting the approaches of philosophy and science. Not only cutbacks in university tenure, or the end of the publishing boom, {22} but an unexamined belief in its right to exist, led to the downfall of traditional literary study. It is certainly possible to argue for a liberal, pluralist, democratic approach, as many did, but the argument leads through to philosophical, political and sociological matters, and here the radical critics seized the armoury. The New Critics had dismissed the larger context of literary criticism, and the moralists carried little weight.

The radicals demanded that poetry represent its age, and that age they viewed through the spectacles of left-wing and continental philosophic concerns.

Their arguments, though perhaps not the tactics, were certainly needed. Approaches do matter, and they must justify themselves before a wider tribunal if art is to be more than entertaining make-believe. And while the descriptive critic may simply note the characteristics of the new poetry capturing academic interest, {23} even its declining readership, the practising poet needs to examine the theories underlying and supporting new work. If simply faddish and incoherent, then the poems are unlikely to possess any lasting value.

Is Criticism a Sham?

But does criticism really work? Do we analyse carefully and consult our books on theory before responding to a work? Not usually. Impressions come first. But we then have to think why and how we are responding in a certain way. Is the theme strained, hackneyed, overworked, etc.? And if so, by what criteria? In setting out thoughts on paper, and then attempting to substantiate them, we are honing essential skills.

Perhaps a good deal of academic criticism is suspect. The goal is already known: certain authors are to be esteemed, and criticism has simply to find additional support. Often the canon intervenes. Literature is divided into essential writers (which all students must read, and other works be compared to), the acceptable (enjoyable but not to be taken too seriously) and the bad (which no one will confess to liking). The canon is consulted, and reasons found for praising or condemning the writer concerned. Literary guides are replete with examples, and argument is often puerile — the dismissive sneer, the appeal to the knowledgeable, right-

thinking majority, the comparison of a poor poem by the despised author with a good one by the favoured. But the inanities only underline the need for sharper and independent reading skills. Background and temperament ensure that there will be some writers we shall never like, but we do not have to concoct false reasons for our own tastes.

Practical Critiquing

Suppose we look at criticism in practice, at what a young poet might be told, who's pleased with his poem, and doesn't need analysis to know it's good. Tactfully and more modestly than in these notes, we might have to say:

But have you checked — got a colleague to read it through, asked a tutor, presented the piece at a poetry workshop? Readers are perverse creatures, and will cavil in strange ways. Anticipate. Criticize the piece yourself, in your own time, from all angles, before the wounding remarks bring you up short. Remember that evaluation is not a handing down of judgments, but a slow acquisition of essential writing skills.

Appraisal needs honesty and independent judgment, plus a whole battery of techniques that literary critics have developed over the centuries. The better libraries will have long shelves devoted to literary criticism, which you must read and absorb. Indeed you must put pen to paper yourself, and write your own notes and essays. As in everything literary, perception develops with your ability to express and reflect on that perception.

What are the techniques of poetry analysis, and which are worth acquiring? Even a simple poem will draw a wide range of comments, many of them perplexing if not downright daft. Which critics can be trusted for sensible and enlightening comment?

You must make your own judgments. That is the nature of

literary criticism. Moreover, until you can appraise the various critical attitudes, weighing up the strengths and shortcomings of each approach, you are not evaluating but just borrowing undigested material for the student essay. That may win you good grades, but it won't help with unfamiliar work, or develop the skills needed to rescue your own productions.

Writers and critics develop at their own pace, and the more precocious are not always the more lasting. Talented authors commonly write from something buried deep within, from something that is ungraspable but troubling, and which seems not to fit any of the established criteria. Progress in such cases is bound to be slow, and perhaps should be slow if the issues are being properly addressed. But you're not working against a stopwatch: you have a lifetime to appreciate the great writers, and to understand what you are attempting yourself.

Some Suggestions

1. Start with the literary criticism of poems you know and love. You will be more engaged by the arguments, and start to understand how criticism can open unsuspected levels of meaning and significance.
2. Read literary criticism of contemporary work and, if at all possible, of poems similar to your own, which will at least help you anticipate the reception likely from editors and workshop attendees.
3. Research has moved from literary criticism to literary theory, which is not written for ready comprehension. Nonetheless, you will need to know where critics are coming from, and therefore the theoretical bases of their remarks.
4. Don't despise the elementary grounding provided by schoolbooks. University texts have much to do with academic reputations and tenure, but those for younger

students aim more to help and encourage.

5. Be severe but not over-severe with your creations. You enjoyed writing them, and that pleasure must still be on the page to enthuse, challenge and enchant your readers. The merely correct has little to commend it.

6. Use a checklist. For example:

Title — appropriate to subject, tone and genre? Does it generate interest, and hint at what your poem is about?

Subject — what's the basic situation? Who is talking, and under what circumstances? Try writing a paraphrase to identify any gaps or confusions.

Shape — what are you appealing to: intellect or emotions of the reader? What structure(s) have you used — progressions, comparisons, analogies, bald assertions, etc.? Are these aspects satisfyingly integrated? Does structure support content?

Tone — what's your attitude to the subject? Is it appropriate to content and audience: assured, flexible, sensitive, etc.?

Word choice — appropriate and un-contrived, economical, varied and energizing? Do you understand each word properly, its common uses and associations? See if listing the verbs truly pushes the poem along. Are words repeated? Do they set mood, emotional rapport, aesthetic distance?

Personification — striking but persuasive, adds to unity and power?

Metaphor and simile — fresh and convincing, combining on many levels?

Rhythm and metre — natural, inevitable, integrate poem's structure?

Rhyme (if employed) — fresh, pleasurable, unassuming but supportive?

Overall impression — original, honest, coherent, expressive,

significant?

Conclusions

Why practise criticism at all? Because it is interesting, and opens the door to a wider appreciation of poetry, particularly that of other languages.

It's also unavoidable. Good writing needs continual appraisal and improvement, and both are better done by the author, before the work is set in print. Most academics write articles rather than poems, but there seems no reason why their skills should not be deployed in creating things which by their own submission are among the most demanding and worthwhile of human creations. Nor should poets despise professional literary criticism. In short, literary criticism should give poets some of the tools needed to assess their work, and to learn from the successful creations of others.

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TRADITIONAL LITERARY CRITICISM

There is no traditional school of literary criticism as such: criticism has been much too various to join under one roof, as a glance at any history of the subject will show. {1} But for the purposes of this guide, we can call traditional that criticism which is above all concerned about the *content* of poetry. It is not overtly or rigidly moralistic. It does not paraphrase a poem to extract its "message" and then grade the poem on how well the truth or significance of that message is expressed. But it does see art as holding up *some* mirror to nature. A poem is valued for its ability to provide a heightened intellectual/emotional experience like no other, and for its literary skills in achieving that end. There is also the tacit understanding that the writing and reading of poetry will be a civilizing experience, making us a little more perceptive, tolerant and thoughtful. {2}

Is that realistic? All notions of civilization have taken a battering in the last hundred years — in world wars, genocide, totalitarian repression — and examples are not wanting of individuals who combined exquisite literary sensibilities with unspeakable cruelty. Nor do writers exactly display in their private lives the qualities of their creations, especially the more driven and ambitious writers.

But perhaps the discrepancies shouldn't be exaggerated. Though Du Fu wrote against the horrors of the An Lu-shan rebellion, and Shakespeare's England was a police state, both poets wrote with a steady eye, acknowledging the worst while not denying the best. Good and bad is no doubt mixed in all of us, and only cynics deny goals and standards because humanity consistently falls short of them. Man is the measure of his world, acutely aware of his nature, and poetry that excludes the less attractive we feel is sanitized and sentimental.

But humanism is not at heart a belief in man's perfectibility, but an attempt to give our lives significance by extending the great commonplaces of existence: the brevity of human existence, the joy of love and comradeship, the pain of separation and bereavement, and so forth. Ceaselessly these great themes are repeated in more subtle and telling ways. {3} The commonplaces are myths, compelling and self-reinforcing structures of understanding that give our lives purpose and coherence, but they seem also to reflect structures biologists recognize in neural physiology. {4} Even in the very different traditions of Indian and Chinese poetry something of the same themes appear, though expressed (in Chinese poetry) with a good deal more acquiescence and abnegation. {5}

Such a view clearly brings a respect for tradition, its themes and skills. Traditionalist poetry builds on the past. Perhaps only in this century, with Modernism with all its strains, has there been such esteem for inverting the process, of basing the larger world view on individual perceptions. Even the Romantics were well read in the classical languages, though the better poetry, or what we today regard as the better poetry, gradually separated itself from society and earlier literature as the century progressed. A hundred years later, and not only is much contemporary art unreal and solipsist, but its consumption requires blatant merchandising. British auction sales of art increased from £31 million in 1970/71 to £2.8 billion in 1989/90: a tenfold increase in lots and ninety-fold in prices. {6} Unfortunately, profits have not gone to artists but to middlemen. Serious writers and painters still find it very hard to make a living, and must follow a whirligig of fashion that is largely indifferent to quality. As prices rise, and works of art soar beyond the means of the average investor, so new areas of collecting are opened up — not all with aesthetic merit, and not usually contemporary work, or

the best of contemporary work. Informed, perceptive judgement is rare in any field, and since only the really outré will provide the story line a reviewer needs, the ambitious artist may have to cultivate what he inwardly despises: the outrageous, the flashy, the up-to-the-moment scam. The jobbing writer knows the value of topicality, and the poetry world is not without its specious promotions.

Be that as it may, a good deal of criticism — proper criticism, not reviewing — is still broadly traditional. Many who criticized the animality of Ted Hughes's poetry, or praised U.A. Fanthorpe's insight into the draughty corners of the welfare state, were signed-up members of Modernism but reverting to the older view that content is important, that poetry should reveal and extend something significant about ourselves. Our gaze goes through the poem to the world beyond. If not, we have to say: audaciously original, and compellingly written, but can we really accept the poem's outlook? Do we come away from the poem with a larger view of humanity, more clearly grasped, with a greater range of perceptions, sensibilities and thoughts coherently integrated? If not, then we mark the poem down.

Published Examples

John Press's *The Fire and the Fountain: Essays on Poetry* (1955)

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Worked Example: What's it Saying?

What is the poem saying, or trying to say? Remarks on other matters — organization, rhythmic energy, imagery, emotional appeal, etc. — are secondary to at least a rough paraphrase. Here is the poem — my own, so that I can be more forthright than is customary in literary criticism.

The Architects

But, as you'd expect, they are very
Impatient, the buildings, having much in them
Of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying
The grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them
With a hoarse roar against the aggregate

They are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,
More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days overcast
And glinting, obdurate, part of the
Silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate

As the whirring bureaucrats let in
And settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,
Awaiting the post and the department meeting —
Except that these do not know it, at least do not
Seem to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost
Vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier
Of concrete like rib-bones packed above them,
And they light-headed with the blue airiness
Spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia

Calling at random like frail relations, a phone
Ringing in a distant office they cannot get to,
That they become attentive, or we do — these
Divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about,
We, constructing these webs of buildings which,

Caulked like great whales about us, are always
Aware that some trick of the light or weather
Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing —

And fill with placid but unbearable melodies
Us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass.

Our first response is probably bewilderment. The subject appears to be buildings, which are invested with echoes of the natural processes that created their constituents. But in the third stanza the focus shifts to the buildings' occupants, and then in the fifth stanza — possibly, the referents are very unclear — the voice comes from those who designed or constructed the buildings, which is indeed what the title suggests. Along the way, and introduced obliquely, without clear connection to the main theme of the poem, are various images: aggregate, North Sea, stormy days, hard lives, bureaucrats, light-headedness, frail relations, whales, hinterlands of incurved glass. The links by free association are obvious enough, but what precisely is the poem saying? That we, the architects, are imprisoned by our own creations? Possibly, but why then the strong evocation of the sea, the burden of hard days, the bureaucrats who remain unaware of these matters? And who is the "they" in line 19 — the bureaucrats, architects, ourselves?

Until recently such a poem would be returned to its author with instructions to sort out, clarify, explain what is meant by. . . . But before we dismiss the thing as hopelessly inept, we should acknowledge that some of the images are striking, that the rhythm variously evokes the subject matter, and that a discreet tone of melancholy pervades the piece and gives it a strange coherence. Since none of these can be achieved randomly, without a vestige of skill, there may be something beyond first appearances.

Suppose we fasten on the melancholy and question its source — contextual source, not the falling rhythms and somewhat shifting focus. Perhaps we could assume that one of the great commonplaces is being evoked, that of the brevity of human life in the unchanging face of nature. But

nature is not unchanging in this poem, but seems an urgent and overwhelming force. The urgency appears in the North Sea sections, floats off into the blue yonder in the middle of the poem, and then returns subterraneously (or subaqueously) at its conclusion, where the speaker is tormented by the homesick voices of the very materials with which the very buildings constructed. This is a very odd view. Rilke, that most lonely and rootless of men, saw the poet's task as giving inanimate nature a fuller existence through artistic creation, but no such ambition is manifest here. The speaker, like a fly in amber (though alive and acutely conscious), is held in the *deep hinterlands of incurved glass* — glass being silica, the main constituent of the harder rock-forming minerals.

But what about the opening line? What are the buildings impatient about, and why should we expect them to be? Because we are also part of their inanimate nature, just so much calcium, carbon, phosphorus and the lighter elements? Perhaps so: our complicity with nature is inescapable. But why does the impatience continue throughout the poem — in the bureaucrats waiting for post and meetings, the blue airiness spinning about, the frail relations calling at random, the phone ringing, the "we" constructing great webs of buildings, the whales pleading for something?

Because it's in the nature of such things. There is no further reason. Only "pointless, witless nature" as Housman called it. We are hurried on, as all nature is hurried on, to ends we cannot foresee and cannot understand. Certainly this is an ancient commonplace, though it's not one of humanism.

How Effective is the Language?

No doubt other interpretations are possible, but the poem does make some sense when viewed in this light. Or could

be construed so. For what is strikingly absent is a connecting argument, something open to paraphrase. Interpretation has not been used to extract or summarize, but more to fill out the poem's hollow centre. Nothing is very clearly connected, and we do not know precisely who the speakers are, or why they're responding in this way.

Should we? Poetry is usually a compressed language, a code that avoids specifics so as to expand into a wider range of different readers' consciousness. But this poem is more tenuous than compressed, and its vacancies seem part of its effect. An emptiness lies at the heart of all things, and such an emptiness is the scene of intense affections that implicate us but lead to no ultimate purpose.

Suppose we accept that, at least for the moment, and look at the techniques employed to render impatience, emptiness and complicity with nature. First is the rhythm: compelling in the first stanza, becoming disjointed in the second, then fining out until gathering into smooth fullness in the last few lines. The metre is not regular — though generally possessing five stresses to the line — so much as modulated with the content. And within this overall movement there appear shorter intervals of generally falling rhythm, so that on both scales the rhythm seems redolent of waves breaking endlessly on a beach: a fairly traditional stage prop. Not only the imagery, moreover, but the very texture of the lines reinforces the overall shape of the rhythm: the wetness of pebbles in *aggregate*, the splintery alliteration of lines 9 and 10, the open assonance of lines 16-17, the back-of-the-throat vowels of the concluding lines. And so on. The rhythm would benefit from a detailed analysis, (which is indeed conducted under Stylistic Literary Criticism, and so not repeated here).

How is the emptiness conveyed? By displacement. The first line is perfectly idiomatic, but *the buildings* follows after the

two striking phrases, which therefore hang unexplained. Then there is *flurrying* which refers to *surf* of course, but by its position seems to attach itself to the buildings. *Cliffs* refers back to aggregate, but less securely, and thereafter the connections become very tenuous indeed. *Burdensome, underwritten, part of the silicate, intricate as the whirring bureaucrats* — to these and many others a referent can be found, but they are far from obvious at first reading, so that the images are vivid without obvious shaping. Then comes *So perhaps it is only. . .*, which is baffling if not downright insulting. The previous stanza trailed away into a vagueness, from which nothing follows very certainly. The poem began as though half way through a discussion, and this *So* also refers to something undisclosed. A similar disconnectedness pertains to *they* and *we*. The last line has a solid, concluding fullness to it, the *S*'s rounding off stressed phrases — *Us, hinterlands and glass* — but the *Us* is not simply the person being filled with melodies in the previous line, but the speaker implied throughout most of the poem. The technique used to open the poem also brings it to a close. The syntax is not incorrect, but does seem very stretched and thin.

But there is nothing tenuous about the complicity of the speaker with nature. It is boldly assumed: *As you'd expect... Silicate of tough lives. . So perhaps... Will dress them as friends...* The tone is confiding, and the confidence rests on nothing. But because there is never pause for reflection, the impatient rhythm and sinuous syntax carry us on until we — with *webs, Caulked, dress, fill and deep* — are immured in the facticity (as Heidegger might have put it) of inanimate things. Uncomfortably immured, we should add, having been rough-handled by the syntax, and our reference frames removed.

How Significant is the Poem?

A good deal of craft is evident — consult other critical

approaches for further evidence — but the question traditional criticism always asks is: has it been worthwhile? Is the outlook sufficiently generous and persuasive? Have the boundaries of the sayable been extended in any way, or traditional territory retraced with greater depth or clarity?

It is hard to think so. The poem is certainly intriguing, and no doubt a welcome change from so many contemporary offerings that dress up hackneyed thoughts in lumpen everyday speech, but the outlook is very unpersuasive. Poets with their paper-thin sensibilities may indeed possess an extra level of consciousness that attunes them to the siren songs of inanimate nature, but such intimations are foreign to most readers. An interesting novelty, we might say, but not significant.

Suggested Improvements

Here traditional criticism stops. Much could and should be investigated in detail, but the poem will remain an oddity, something beyond most readers' interest. A certain amount of clarification would not hurt — we should like to know who the "they" and "we" are, and have some of the shifting imagery of the central sections tied down — but the poem could not be made into the traditionally acceptable without major surgery or recasting. Being neither traditional (nor entirely Postmodernist, as other pages will show) the poem will not easily find a home in the small presses. To the aspiring author we would probably say: either produce a considerable body of such work so that we can see where the approach is going, or return to the common interests of human beings.

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THE NEW LITERARY CRITICISM

The name is misleading, since the New Criticism is now anything but new, having been "overtaken" by a plethora of approaches under the umbrella of critical theory. But for some thirty years, from the nineteen thirties to sixties, New Criticism was the dominant activity of university literature departments on both sides of the Atlantic. The approach was unhistorical, dismissed authors' intentions and biographical matters as unknowable and/or irrelevant, and brought an armoury of sharp analytical tools to bear on what the poem was saying to contemporary readers.

If its presiding genius (though hardly devotee: he practised very little close reading himself) was T.S. Eliot, the founding fathers were I.A. Richards and William Empson. Richards had no time for the Edwardian prose-poetry in which contemporary literary criticism was couched, and argued for analysis in the cool, strictly-defined and well-supported language of the sciences. Empson looked into the complexity of literary language, and suggested that poems were often successful by deploying meanings at different levels. Behind lines and phrases lurked many ambiguities and paradoxes, which held the poem together in creative tensions. Further developed by K. Burke, J.C. Ransom, R.P. Warren and Cleanth Brooks, the approach looked for three characteristics from poetry. First was self-sufficiency: the poem should be independent of biography, historical content or effect on the reader, which were called the intentional, historical and affective fallacies. Second was unity: the poem should be a coherent whole: a very traditional view. Third was complexity: which was sometimes, though not always, held to be the central element of poetry. {1}

The New Criticism did not go uncontested. The Marxist critics felt that literary criticism ought to be a history of man's

ideas and imaginings in the (economic) setting which shaped them. {2} The Christian apologists felt that the arts had a civilizing mission, and deprecated the subversive attitudes of many Modernist writers. {3} And the historicists sought a continuity between western industrial societies and the medieval past. {4} Divisions between the schools were not clear-cut, and there was little of the acrimony and technical elaboration that now characterizes literary criticism, but academic criticism did become more specialized and remote, when, to cater for a self-educating middle class, there sprang up literary journalism, which continues, somewhat attenuated, to the present day.

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Independence

First we look for unity, the ability of a poem to stand on its own feet, without any scaffolding of theory, social or historical context, author's intentions or preoccupations. And here we meet the first obstacle.

The Architects

But, as you'd expect, they are very
Impatient, the buildings, having much in them
Of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying
The grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them
With a hoarse roar against the aggregate
They are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,

More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days overcast
And glinting, obdurate, part of the
Silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate
As the whirring bureaucrats let in
And settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,
Awaiting the post and the department meeting —
Except that these do not know it, at least do not
Seem to, being busy, generally.
So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost
Vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier
Of concrete like rib-bones packed above them,
And they light-headed with the blue airiness
Spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia
Calling at random like frail relations, a phone
Ringing in a distant office they cannot get to,
That they become attentive, or we do — these
Divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about,
We, constructing these webs of buildings which,
Caulked like great whales about us, are always
Aware that some trick of the light or weather
Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing —
And fill with placid but unbearable melodies
Us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass.

The poem doesn't stand on its own feet. We are missing the first half, that part which precedes and explains the *But as you'd expect*, and seems to be continued in the *So perhaps it is only...* Then we have the difficulty of knowing what the poem is about. The images do not illustrate a centralizing conception, or develop an argument, but seem to float as thoughts only tangentially associated. Nor perhaps do the worlds evoked by the images have any obvious association, either natural, literary or logical.

Does the poem fall at the first hurdle, lacking autonomy and distance from the practical world? It seems to, which is a

serious failure. But, however baffling — and the poem is very perplexing first off — we could perhaps regard the missing sections as the foregoing genesis of the poem, i.e. treat them as the personal and social context of the poem, which New Criticism deems irrelevant. A poem, as Empson said once, has to show its readers in what way it intends to be a poem, and we can evaluate only what is given us. Put aside literary forebears, therefore, and the technical knowledge that is perhaps called for, and ask the most obvious question: could the piece be mistaken for anything other than a poem? Is it perhaps prose?

But, as you'd expect, they are very impatient, the buildings, having much in them of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying the grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them with a hoarse roar against the aggregate they are composed of - the cliffs higher of course, more burdensome, underwritten as it were with past days overcast and glinting, obdurate, part of the silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate as the whirring bureaucrats let in and settled with coffee in the concrete pallets, awaiting the post and the department meeting - except that these do not know it, at least do not seem to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier of concrete like rib-bones packed above them, and they light-headed with the blue airiness spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia calling at random like frail relations, a phone ringing in a distant office they cannot get to, that they become attentive, or we do — these divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about, we, constructing these webs of buildings which, caulked like great whales about us, are always aware that some trick of the light or weather will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing — and fill with placid but unbearable melodies us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass.

Does that make it different? Perhaps, but no clearer. The two sentences seem to outdo Proust in their labyrinthine sinuousness, and we miss the structure and balance that would be accorded by a periodic sentence. One thought simply follows another, tailing away into obscurity and personal reflection. The poem reads better as verse, with approximately five beats to the line. Whatever else it might be, this is not (to repeat the usual jibe against modern poetry) simply chopped up prose. We feel that there is something more, though perhaps struggling to get out.

Unity

Much has been said about free verse {5}, and confusions multiply. But, at least until recently, lines were expected to have some internal consistency and autonomy, to be the better for their expression in one way than another. If the line breaks could be differently employed, or the words rearranged on the line without significant loss, then the writing was not good verse. What's the verdict here?

Many of the lines have no real autonomy. Not until line 10 is there something which looks more than a segment taken at random from a prose narrative.

- / x x x / - / - / x x / x x

Silicate of tough lives distant and intricate

Or possibly:-

- // x x x // - / - // x x // x x

Here the metre slows, the predominantly four-stress line is buttressed by the alliteration in *k* and *t*'s, and the repetition of *l* and *i* ties the line together.

Some of this autonomy is seen in lines 12 and 13, rather less so in lines 16 -15, and then returns in some strength in

the final stanza. But even here the line endings do not coincide with what is suggested by the stress pattern, or the texture of vowel and consonant:-

caulked like great whales about us are

aw l A A e ou u a(r)

k kd l k gr t w lz b t s -

always aware that some trick of the light or weather will dress them as friends

aw A e (A)r a u i o e l awe e(r) i e e a e

lw z w th ts m tr k v th l t - w th w l dr s th mz fr ndz

pleading and flailing

E i a A i

pl d ng nd fl l ng

will fill with placid but unbearable melodies

i i i a i u u A(r) a ee O E

f l w th PL s db t n b r b l m l d z

us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass

u i E i e a o i er a(r)

s n d p h nt l ndzv nc vd gl s

Complexity

Whatever complexities may exist in the poem, they are not really those of sense. We do not feel an interlocking or underpinning of meaning that reinforces any paraphrase we can make, but rather the opposite, that the images are yoked together simply by association of properties. Consider:

past days overcast

And glinting, obdurate, part of the

Silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate

As the whirring bureaucrats let in

And settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,

Except for *whirring*, both the connotations and the consonant structure suggest the hard, self-enclosed world of rocks and buildings. The verse is very tactile, without colour beyond perhaps a dull grey. The arid, repetitious and essentially pointless activities of bureaucrats are carried over from the lines preceding. But the connection is not one of meaning. The work of bureaucrats may be dull, but it's not pointless, or more repetitious than most jobs. Is it fair to argue in such a way or — since there is no argument as such — are we persuaded to accept the poem's viewpoint? Do human beings think in this sort of way?

In fact they do, although thinking is too precise a word. Our brain does not work in strictly logical fashion, but calls upon many other functions, both physical and abstract, poetry being a powerful language to the extent it recognizes and employs these mechanisms. Nonetheless, such subsidiary functions are not what the New Criticism made its province, or not essentially so. How a word had been deployed in the past, its literary history, was also important. Likewise its deployment in everyday speech. And New Critics were often sensitive to metrical phrasing, alliteration, assonance and other weapons in the poet's armoury. In all this, meaning was the go-between. By their lights, the connections were not to be made (as it seems largely to be attempted by this poem) by raw physical associations, which might interest the psychologist but elude the fine discriminations that poems should make.

So have we reached an answer? Not quite. Consider the urgent rhythm and imagery of the first stanza, the sense of a wave rearing — first in water, then as aggregates forming cliffs that seem to involve stormy weather, becoming detached and then collecting *whales* to end in the *hinterlands of incurved glass*. Hinterland: is it fanciful to see the poem as a movement from sea to land, from the open

turbulence of the changing shore to settled permanence beyond, a notion supported by the echoes of the splintery nature in *hinterlands* which remind us of the consonance of lines 9 and 10? And isn't there more than geography implied? *Hinter*, from the German, means behind, some buttress perhaps that is solid and enduring. Glass is a super-cooled liquid of silica, the main constituent of beach sands. So, in some odd way, the speaker has become more than enclosed and preoccupied by buildings — he's become immersed in their very constituents, drowned by the facticity of their world.

With these conflicting notions we can begin to unpick some of the threads of the poem. Its imagery seems not so arbitrary. Progression appears: from shore to land, from ground to air to water, from threat to imprisonment. Nature is an intruding presence, its implacable qualities entering into and building up our own lives: *the aggregate they are composed of ... underwritten as it were with past days ... part of the silicate of tough lives. . .* Notice the sly *underwritten*, employed not only as a commercial guarantee but in a physical sense. As the aggregate is constituted, so are our lives with past days. Notice also the *settled with coffee* of line 12, which seems to mischievously regard the bureaucrats as flighty creatures to be compressed between concrete pallets. Also the *neuralgia*, an inflammation of the sinus cavities, the human skeleton being compared with the structure of buildings — emphasized by *rib-bones* and continued with *Divisions* and then *Caulked* There are many punning associations: *bureaucrats . . busy, generally, the Vacuumed afternoons, the Caulked . . . dress them*. Notice also how reference is passed — from *past days* to *tough lives*, from *light-headed* to *neuralgia*, from *pleading* to *unbearable melodies*.

Suggested Improvements

The New Criticism grew out of the Modernist movement, being an attempt to read traditional poetry in ways useful to the practising contemporary poet. Its forté was the short lyric in the humanist tradition, and its achievements were always vulnerable to the charge of intellectual ingenuity. This poem is not a lyric, and appeals not to the intellect but a subconscious visceral sense of words. A meaning can be teased out, but the poem does not work by images or intellectual gymnastics. It represents some barely articulated fear of the raw purposes of nature, purposes not accommodated by humanism, and not fully grasped. At the rational level the poem is preposterous, but it is also unsettling. New Criticism techniques can analyse some of the strategies employed, but the full picture eludes them.

But New Criticism can still say something. What the poem clearly lacks is an inherent rightness or inevitability of phrase. The diction is heavy, over-elaborated *hoarse roar, burdensome...overcast.. obdurate, the Spinning around and muzzy*. Cut these and the poem breathe may breathe a little more, perhaps resonate with meanings more finely drawn. The metre is not regular, but shambling: indeed seems to be neither verse, free-verse or prose. A rhythm is discernible in detail, and in the overall shape, but many sections trail into metrical incoherence.

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RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

Rhetoric is now neglected. Originally it meant the effective use of language, not only to sway the ignorant mob, but to persuade one's intellectual peers. And by governing such matters as laying out an argument, presenting the evidence, employing the appropriate syntax and diction, rhetoric was unavoidable — in law, politics, literature and everyday life. {1} But today rhetoric conjures up the specious promises of politicians, the showy ornament of discarded literary styles, and the empty pretences of admen and spin-doctors. Rhetoric even disallows thought, predetermining what our public ideologues must say. Perhaps for this reason contemporary poetry has become rather prosaic, even pedestrian, taking for granted that plainness bespeaks sincerity.

But it was not always the case. {2} Even the prodigiously-gifted Shakespeare, the most supremely original and creative of writers, in practice followed the rules of Renaissance rhetoric very closely, depending on it for his most striking effects. {3} His classical education was not wasted, any more than the stories he borrowed and adapted. Rhetoric is not extinct in popular literature. Anyone attending courses on article or feature writing will be taken through the standard devices, which themselves derive from rhetoric. The public expects articles to conform to certain specifications, and something departing too much from the usual is simply not read. Equally, there are conventions for the short story, for novels, and for poetry. Rhetoric has always entered into very fabric of literature — not only to persuade, but to inform, move, entertain, distract and amuse.

The structure of *taxis* — the overall shape of a successful appeal to an audience — was usually simple. Attract the

attention by producing something of immediate personal interest. Make an argument with a few more instances, but not too many, and keep them relevant. Lead to agreement with personal assurances, guarantees, claims on authority. Conclude by complimenting the audience on their humanity and common sense.

Equally obvious and necessary is finding the appropriate words, tone and gestures: *lexis*. This meant not only avoiding the pompous, the uncouth and insincere, but making some correlation to larger themes, to precisely the tabloid issues mentioned above. No link with the fundamental issues of human existence, and the appeal only ruffles the surface, as is the case with TV adverts, however well made.

The Architects

But, as you'd expect, they are very
Impatient, the buildings, having much in them
Of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying
The grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them
With a hoarse roar against the aggregate

They are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,
More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days overcast
And glinting, obdurate, part of the
Silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate

As the whirring bureaucrats let in
And settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,
Awaiting the post and the department meeting —
Except that these do not know it, at least do not
Seem to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost
Vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier
Of concrete like rib-bones packed above them,
And they light-headed with the blue airiness
Spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia
Calling at random like frail relations, a phone

Ringed in a distant office they cannot get to,
That they become attentive, or we do — these
Divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about,
We, constructing these webs of buildings which,
Caulked like great whales about us, are always
Aware that some trick of the light or weather
Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing —
And fill with placid but unbearable melodies
Us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass.

Taxis: Structure of Argument

How is the taxis developed in the poem under consideration? The opening is striking: hyperbole. We should not at all expect buildings to be impatient, and cannot initially understand what is meant. Something to do with their constituents we realize in a line or two, but are then taken off on a roller-coaster of associations. Is there an argument, and how would it appear if set out by the laws of classical rhetoric?

exordium (introduction: appeal to the audience)

They are very impatient, the buildings
(please consider the buildings)

narratio (outline of case)

having much in them Of the heavy surf of the North Sea
(they have the character of their constituents)

confirmatio (supporting examples, precedents, etc.)

the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying
The grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them
With a hoarse roar against the aggregate
They are composed of
(grit and pebbles, for example) the cliffs higher of course,
More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days
(which mounts up)
overcast
And glinting, obdurate, part of the

Silicate of tough lives,
(and takes on the rough weather they were conceived in)
distant and intricate
As the whirring bureaucrats let in
And settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,
Awaiting the post and the department meeting —
(and extends into the lives of those who occupy the
buildings)
Except that these do not know it, at least do not
Seem to, being busy, generally.
(though they don't know it, or wish to know it)
So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost
Vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier
Of concrete like rib-bones packed above them,
And they light-headed with the blue airiness
Spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia
Calling at random like frail relations, a phone
Ringing in a distant office they cannot get to,
(indeed consciously block it out)
That they become attentive, or we do —
(as we do)
these
Divisions persisting,
We, constructing these webs of buildings
(even as architects, working with the properties of materials)
which,
Caulked like great whales about us, are always
Aware that some trick of the light or weather
Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing —
(though seeing our constructions as huge, friendly creatures
that ask to be allowed to express themselves)
And fill with placid but unbearable melodies
(and ask so plaintively)
Us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass.
(that we are won over and are lost in their world.)
refutatio (anticipating objections)
the cliffs higher, of course,

(which are not docile constituents entirely, already
accumulating themselves into cliffs)
underwritten as it were
(if you would extend your imaginations a little)
these do not know it
(I'm not saying it's conscious)
at least do not seem to
(agreed, we can't see into people's minds)
So perhaps
(I'm only suggesting it)
they become attentive, or we do
(or even if they aren't aware of it, we are)
what we talk about, we, constructing
(because of course it's part of our job)
will dress them as friends
(they only appear so)

peroratio (graceful withdrawal)

Fill... Us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass
(and with this unpleasant claustrophobic feeling I will leave
you.)

So what do we conclude? That there is an argument, which
is logically laid out, but not very clear? Yes, but there is a
more crucial point. To powerfully move an audience the
speaker must bear in mind certain maxims:

1. Subject matter must be broadly empathetic..
2. Stance should be direct and uncomplicated.
3. Argument should be compulsively developed.
4. Emphasis should focus on one or two images or
correlates.

Rhetorical Types

Are these maxims obeyed here? Terminology is difficult, a
forest of forbidding names, but as a simple introduction we
group as follows: All aspects of rhetoric, everything that
gives point and controlling shape to thoughts and

observations, we call *figure*, subdividing figure into *scheme* where word order and syntax is involved, and *trope* for plays on the sense or meaning of words. Tropes we further subdivide into those that involve word meaning (e.g. metaphor), and those that more involve the sense of the passage (e.g. irony).

Amongst schemes — for the record, without illustration or explanation for the moment — are anaphora, epistrophe, anadiplosis, climax, symploce, parison, isocolon, chiasmus, hendiadys, oxymoron, zeugma, epizeuxis, epanorthesis, epanalepsis, antanaclasis, polyptoton. Among the word meaning tropes are simile, metaphor, metonymy, sinecdoche, paronomasia and personification. Among the passage tropes are irony, paradox, hyperbole, litotes, aporia, anacoenosis, comprobatio and epitropis. {4}

Taking the *schemes* in turn:

anaphora (first word or phrase repeated)

we do
what we talk about
We, constructing...

parison (parallel constructions, often in twos or threes)

they are very impatient, the buildings,
having much in them of the North Sea
flurrying the grit
lifting the pebbles
flinging them with a hoarse roar... the cliffs higher, of course,
More burdensome,
underwritten as it were with past days overcast
And glinting, obdurate,
part of the silicate of tough lives, And they light-headed,
with the blue airiness spinning around,
and muzzy,
a neuralgia calling at random like frail relations we do (become
attentive)
what we talk about

constructing these webs of buildings

hendiadys (two nouns or adjectives of similar or contingent meaning)

More burdensome

overcast obdurate

Silicate of past lives

cloudless

almost vacuumed light-headed

with a blue airiness spinning about and muzzy,

a neuralgia

oxymoron (juxtaposition of words with contrasted meanings)

underwritten.. by .. days overcast

distant and intricate

concrete packed above them, and they light-headed

placid but unbearable

epanorthesis (recall of a word to suggest more appropriate expression)

calling at random... a phone they cannot get to

these divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about

antanaclasis (repetition of a word in an altered sense)

Caulked like great whales.. dress them

And now the *word-meaning tropes*:

simile

concrete like rib-bones

calling at random like frail relations

Caulked like great whales

Will dress them as friends

metaphor

they are very impatient, the buildings

having much in them of the heavy surf of the North Sea

the cliffs... more burdensome

the cliffs... underwritten.. with past days

days..glinting, obdurate

days part of the silicate of tough lives
almost vacuumed afternoons
a neuralgia calling at random
webs of buildings.. are always aware
buildings... dress them as friends, pleading and flailing

synecdoche (substitution of part for whole)

the concrete pallets
hinterlands of incurved glass

personification

buildings with the impatience of their constituents.
days part of the silicate of tough lives
lives tough, distant and intricate as whirring bureaucrats.

Finally, the *passage tropes*:

hyperbole (overstatement)

as you'd expect, they are impatient, the buildings
whirring bureaucrats
unbearable melodies

aporia (affectation of perplexity)

do not know it, at least do not seem to, being busy, generally
become attentive, or we do...indeed what we talk about... we,
constructing

Discussion: Emotive Appeal

Armed with this skeleton of the poem, which is very different from the surface grouping as six stanzas, let's begin the diagnosis. It is the extensive use of parison — parallel constructions that pick up a word and extend its associations before drifting on — that seems responsible for the surreal, rather baffling effect. The images appear free-floating and arbitrary, just flat collages of widely disparate elements, and they are not well anchored, either to an underlying content or to each other. Exactly what does *flurrying the grit...* refer to: the North Sea or the buildings? And *More burdensome, underwritten...*? Do these describe the cliffs, the North Sea

or the buildings? Similarly for other examples of parison: *days, lives, bureaucrats, afternoons, light-headedness, architects, webs, whales, hinterlands of glass*. The other tropes only spread the confusion: there is as much oxymoron and aporia as hendiadys. It is very difficult to find a central meaning, and it may be that the rhetoric obscures any such meaning. Is this a fault?

By traditional rules it must certainly appear so. Rhetoric organizes language to evoke emotion, persuade by argument, or to distract. And often very subtly. Actors learn to display emotion, but they do so by wholly identifying with the character they're acting. They do not say to themselves, "here comes my big weepy scene, and I must remember to screw up my face and stare tearfully into the camera". They do these things instinctively because they have learnt by year after year of varied practice how to sink their identity into such a part. Emotion has become an integral part of acting, and is no longer a mask donned as required. Even TV presenters, con-men and salesmen must believe in their script to be convincing. No doubt poets seem at a disadvantage. With their greater compass of time, scenes and characters, the playwright or novelist has no need to hit the target squarely with the first shot. But in compensation the poet is allowed greater resources of language.

Nothing very much in the arts is a raw slice of life. Dialogue in plays and novels seems natural, but is very far from a transcription of a live performance, which indeed the radio listener notes immediately. Even in the most realistic novel the dialogue is contrived — inevitably, as it has to move the plot along, display the speaker's character and motivations, and keep the reader on the edge of his seat. And if doesn't appear contrived, which it certainly must not, it is because it very subtly uses various understandings and conventions; it becomes an art that hides art. For the same reason, the

diction of good contemporary poetry appears unpretentious, deft and inevitable, but this happy facility comes from a good deal of talent, a training of the ear and endless practice. Clearly the facility is not spontaneous or we'd find it more widely displayed, even in everyday speech.

The issue is one of conventions, what an audience will accept as convincing, and it is this matter that commonly lies behind the proselytising for naturalness in poetic language. Their practitioners are seeking to widen the acceptance of the own conventions, since it is through such new conventions that their work comes across.

Be that as it may, how does the poem fare? Does it tap the well-pools of emotion, and obey the orator's maxims. Not at all. The subject matter is remote from everyday concerns. The stance is not direct. The argument floats vaguely on through associations, and employs far too many images. Is that the end of the matter: the poem fails by the standards of classical rhetoric, and can only be one of these intriguing but ultimately unsatisfying Postmodernist creations? Perhaps so, but there is still one aspect of rhetoric that may prove enlightening: rhetoric as distraction.

Rhetoric as Entertainment and Distraction

Rhetoric was an art, and was often enjoyed as such: a sophisticated audience saw through the devices but nonetheless applauded the display of such skills. Nor was this an admission of defeat, even for poetry. New Criticism focused on the literary devices employed. Postmodernism denies that anything exists beyond such devices, poetry being a self-conscious and superior form of entertainment. And in such entertainment the illustration — *exemplum* in rhetoric — sometimes became more important than the argument. The correlate was seen as vivid and engrossing in its own right, which enabled the speaker or writer to smuggle

in matter that had little to do with his theme. Instead of the argument proceeding step by step, with each step illustrated, the illustrations themselves linked to develop subsidiary themes, or distract from weaknesses in the central argument. Something similar is used in TV adverts: we enjoy the visual display without believing or even remembering the message.

Poetry employing this technique became very oblique, if not somewhat rambling, but produced surprising effects: Milton's extended similes that add grandeur to *Paradise Lost*, Byron's irrepressible digressions in *Don Juan*. If the images have no connection with the theme, then of course they are simply decoration (which a less austere age was quite happy to accept) but in this modest poem the images do add to the total effect. Indeed they are vital. Baldly stated, without these beguiling illustrations, the argument of the poem is very unconvincing, even preposterous. Show me! says the sceptical reader, and it is these images, coloured by moods and associations, that do duty for reason.

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Walter Nash's *Tennysonian Topography* (1987)

Elder Olson's *Rhetoric and the Appreciation of Pope* (1939-40)

H.P. Sucksmith's *The Narrative Art of Charles Dickens: The Rhetoric of Sympathy and Irony in his Novels* (1970)

Conclusions: What Needs to be Done

Does the poem operate by the rules of classical rhetoric? A little. And perhaps it's unreasonable to expect more. Contemporary poems do not use rhetoric explicitly, and Postmodernist poems — of which this is arguably an example — generally dislike its organizing powers. Changes involve radical rewriting, and would affect the whole nature of the piece. But if the poem is to be more directly

understood, and achieve a stronger emotional, then the following should be attempted:

1. Sharpen the argument. The taxis section above indicates the digressions that should be curbed.
2. Show more clearly how the images are related.
3. Cut some of the refutatio.

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<http://www.towson.edu/~tinkler/reader/cicero.html> NNA. Excerpts from key texts.

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<http://bradley.bradley.edu/~ell/noteslinks.html>. Excellent: notes and links to all aspects, from classical world to present.

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STYLISTICS

Stylistics applies linguistics to literature in the hope of arriving at analyses that are more broadly based, rigorous and objective. {1} The pioneers were the Prague and Russian schools, but their approaches have been appropriated and extended in recent years by radical theory. Stylistics can be evaluative (i.e. judge the literary worth on stylistic criteria), but more commonly attempts to simply analyse and describe the workings of texts which have already been selected as noteworthy on other grounds.

Analyses can appear objective, detailed and technical, even requiring computer assistance, but some caution is needed. Linguistics is currently a battlefield of contending theories, with no settlement in sight. Many critics have no formal training in linguistics, or even proper reading, and are apt to build on theories (commonly those of Saussure or Jakobson) that are inappropriate and/or no longer accepted. Some of the commonest terms, e.g. deep structure, foregrounding, have little or no experimental support. {2} Linguistics has rather different objectives, moreover: to study languages in their entirety and generality, not simply their use in art forms. Stylistic excellence — intelligence, originality, density and variety of verbal devices — play their part in literature, but aesthetics has long recognized that other aspects are equally important: fidelity to experience, emotional shaping, significant content. Stylistics may well be popular because it regards literature as simply part of language and therefore (neglecting the aesthetic dimension) without a privileged status, which allows the literary canon to be replaced by one more politically or sociologically acceptable. {3}

Why then employ stylistics at all? Because form is important in poetry, and stylistics has the largest armoury of analytical weapons. Stylistics need not be reductive and simplistic,

moreover. There is no need to embrace Jacobson's theory that poetry is characterized by the projection of the paradigmatic axis onto the syntagmatic one. {4} Nor accept Bradford's theory of a double spiral: {5} literature has too richly varied a history to be fitted into such a straitjacket. Stylistics suggests why certain devices are effective, but does not offer recipes, any more than theories of musical harmony explains away the gifts of individual composers.

Some stylistic analysis is to be found in most types of literary criticism, and differences between the traditional, New Criticism and stylistics approaches are often matters of emphasis. Style is a term of approbation in everyday use ("that woman has style", etc.), and may be so for traditional and New Criticism. But where the first would judge a poem by reference to typical work of the period (Jacobean, Romantic, Modernist, etc.), or according to genre, the New Criticism would probably simply note the conventions, explain what was unclear to a modern audience, and then pass on to a detailed analysis in terms of verbal density, complexity, ambiguity, etc. To the stylistic critic, however, style means simply how something is expressed, which can be studied in all language, aesthetic and non-aesthetic. {6}

Stylistics is a very technical subject, which hardly makes for engrossing, or indeed uncontentious, {7} reading. The treatment here is very simple: just the bare bones, with some references cited. Under various categories the poem is analysed in a dry manner, the more salient indications noted, and some recommendations made in Conclusions.

Published Examples of Stylistic Literary Criticism

G.N. Leech's *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (1969)

Laura Brown's *Alexander Pope* (1985)

Roy Lewis's *On Reading French Verse: A Study in Poetic Form* (1982)

George Wright's *Shakespeare's Metrical Art*. (1988)

Richard Bradford's *A Linguistic History of English Poetry* (1993)

The Architects

But, as you'd expect, they are very
Impatient, the buildings, having much in them
Of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying
The grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them
With a hoarse roar against the aggregate
They are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,
More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days overcast
And glinting, obdurate, part of the
Silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate
As the whirring bureaucrats let in
And settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,
Awaiting the post and the department meeting —
Except that these do not know it, at least do not
Seem to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost
Vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier
Of concrete like rib-bones packed above them,
And they light-headed with the blue airiness
Spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia
Calling at random like frail relations, a phone
Ringing in a distant office they cannot get to,
That they become attentive, or we do — these
Divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about,
We, constructing these webs of buildings which,
Caulked like great whales about us, are always
Aware that some trick of the light or weather
Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing —
And fill with placid but unbearable melodies
Us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass.

Metre

Though apparently iambic, with five stresses to the line, the metre shows many reversals and substitutions. Put at its

simplest, with:

/ representing a strong stress

\ representing a weak stress

x representing no stress, and

trying to fit lines into a pentameters, we have

- / x x x / - \ x / x
But as you'd ex pect they are ve ry

x / x x / x / x \ x x
Im pat ient the build ings, hav ing much in them

x x \ x / x x \ / / x x
Of the heav y surf of the North Sea, flurr ying

x / - / x x / x / x \
The grit, lift ing the pebbl es, fling ing them

\ x / - / x \ x / x \
With a hoarse roar a gainst the agg re gate

x \ x / \ x / / x x /
They are com posed of, the cliffs high er of course

\ / x \ - / x / x \
More burd en some, un der writ ten as

x / x / - / - / x /
It were with past days o ver cast

x / x \ / x \ - / x x
And glit ter ing, ob du rate, part of the

- / x x x / - / - / x x / x x
Sil icate of tough lives dist ant and in tricate

- \ x / x / x \ - / x
As the whir ring bu reau crats let in

x / x x / x \ x / x / x
And set tled with cof fee in the con crete pal lets

x / x x / x \ x / x / x
A wait ing the post and the de part ment meet ing

x \ x / \ x / x x \ / x
Ex cept that these do not know it, at least do not

- / x / x / x / x \ x
Seem to be ing bus y gen ER all y

\ x / x x / x \ x / x / x
So per haps it is on ly on those cloud less al most

- / x / x \ x / x x \ / x
Vac uumed af ter noons with ti ER u pon ti ER

x / x \ / / - / x / x
Of con Crete like rib bones packed a bove them

x / \ / x \ x / / x \
And they light head ed, with the blue air i ness

- / x x / x / x \ x / x x
 Spin ning a round and muz zy, a neu ral gia
 - / x x / x x / x / x x /
 Cal ling at ran dom like frail re lat ions a phone
 - / x x x / x / x x / x / x
 Ring ing in a dist ant of fice they can not get to
 x / x / x / x x / /- \
 That they be come at ten tive, or we do these
 x / x x / x x / \ x / x /
 Di vis ions per sist ing, in deed what we talk a bout
 - / x / x x / x / x \
 We, con struct ing these webs of build ings which
 - / x / \ / x / x x / x
 Caulk Ed like great whales a bout us are al ways
 x / x x / x x / x / x
 A ware that some trick of the light or weath ER
 \ / x x / - / x x / x
 Will dress them as friends plead ing and flail ing
 x / x / x \ x / x x / x x
 And fill with plac id but UN bear able mel odies
 - / x \ - / x x x / \ /
 Us in deep hint erlands of in curved glass

Poets learn to trust their senses, but even to the experienced writer these (tedious) exercises can pinpoint what the ear suspects is faulty, suggest where improvements lie, and show how the metre is making for variety, broad consistency, shaping of the argument and emotive appeal. Though other scansiones are certainly possible in the lines above, the most striking feature will remain their irregularity. Many lines can only roughly be called pentameters; Lines 16 and 17 are strictly hexameters; and lines 27 and 28 are tetrameters. In fact, the lines do not read like blank verse. The rhythm is not iambic in many areas, but trochaic, and indeed insistentlly dactylic in lines 9 and 10, 21 and 22 and 28. Line 27 is predominantly anapaestic, and line 3 could (just) be scanned:

x x / x / x x \
 Of the heavy surf of the North Sea flurr ying

Reflective or meditative verse is generally written in the iambic pentameter, and for good reason — the benefit of past examples, readers' expectations, and because the iambic is the closest to everyday speech: flexible, unemphatic, expressing a wide range of social registers. Blank verse for the stage may be very irregular but this, predominantly, is a quiet poem, with the falling rhythms inducing a mood of reflection if not melancholy. What is being attempted?

Suppose we set out the argument (refer to rhetorical and other analyses), tabbing and reverse tabbing as the reflections as they seem more or less private: {8}

1. But, as you'd expect,
2. they are very impatient, the buildings,
 3. having much in them of the heavy surf of the North Sea,
 4. flurrying the grit,
 5. lifting the pebbles,
 6. flinging them with a hoarse roar against the aggregate
- they are composed of — the
7. cliffs higher of course, more
8. burdensome,
9. underwritten as it were with past days
10. overcast and glinting,
11. obdurate,
 12. part of the silicate of tough lives,
 13. distant and intricate as
 14. the whirring bureaucrats
 15. let in and settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,
- awaiting the post and the department meeting —
16. except that these do not know it,
17. at least do not seem to, being busy,
18. generally.

19. So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost vacuumed
 afternoons with tier upon tier of concrete like rib — bones
 packed above them, and
20. they light-headed
 21. with the blue airiness spinning around, and
 22. muzzy, a
 23. neuralgia calling at random like
 24. frail relations, a
 25. phone ringing in a distant office they cannot get to, that
 26. They become attentive,
 27. or we do —
28. these divisions persisting,
 29. indeed what we talk about,
30. we, constructing these webs of buildings which
 31. caulked like great whales about us, are
 32. always aware that some trick of the light or weather
 will dress them as friends,
 33. pleading and flailing — and
34. fill with placid but unbearable melodies
 35. us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass.

The structure should now be clear. Where Eliot created new forms by reorganising unremarkable pentameters, {8} this poem attempts the reverse: to recast an irregular ode-like structure as pentameters. And not over-successfully: many of the rhythms seemed unduly confined. But once returned to the form of an eighteenth century Pindaric ode, however unfashionable today, the lines regain a structure and integrity. Each starts with a marked stress and then tails away, a feature emphasized by the sound patterns. {9}

Sound Patterning

1. But as you'd expect
 u a U e e
 b t z y d ksp kt
2. They are very impatient the buildings

A a(r) e E i A e e i i
th - v r mp sh nt th b ld ngz

3. Having much in them of the heavy surf of the North Sea
a i u i e o e e e(r) o e aw E
h v ng m ch n th m v th h v s f v th n th s

4. flurrying the grit
u E i e i
fl r ng th gr t

5. the pebbles
lifting

i i e e
l ft ng th p b lz

6. them with a hoarse roar against the aggregate they are composed of
flinging

i i e i e aw aw e A e a E A A a(r) o O o
fl ng ng th m w th - h s r g nst th gr g t th - k MP zd v

7. the cliffs higher of course more

e i l e o aw aw
th kl fs h v s m

8.
burdensome

u(r) e e
b d ns m b d ns m b d ns m b d ns m

9. as it were with past days
underwritten

u e i e a i (e)r i a(r) A
nd r t n z t w w p st d z

10. overcast and glinting

O e(r) a(r) a i i
v k St nd gl NT ng

11. obdurate

o U A
bd r t

12. part of the silicate of tough lives

(a)r o e i i A o u l
p t f th s l k v t f l vz
t

13. distant and intricate

i a a i i e
d St NT nd NT r k t

14. as the whirring bureaucrats

a e e(r) i U O a

z th w r ng b r kr ts

15. let in and settled with coffee in the concrete pallets
e i a e ie i o E i e o E a e
l t n nd s tl d w th k f n th k Kr t p l Ts
awaiting the post and the department meeting
e A i e O a e E e E i
w t ng th p St nd th d p tm NT m t ng

16. except that these do not know it
e e a E U o O i
ks pt th th z d n t n t

17. at least do not seem to being busy
a E U o E U E i i E
t l St d n t s m t b ng b z

18.
generally

e e a E

j nr l

19. so perhaps it is only on those cloudless almost vacuumed afternoons
O e(r) a i i O o O ou e aw O a U a(r) e oo
s p h ps t z nl n th z kl dl s lm St v k md ft n nz

with tier upon tier of concrete like rib bones packed above them and
i E e o E o o E l i O a e u e a
e(r) e(r)
w th t p n t v k nkr t l k r b b nz p Kt b v th m nd

20. light
they

A l

th l t

21. the blue airiness spinning around and
with

i e U (A)r i e i i e ou a
w th th bl r n s sp n ng r nd nd

22. a
muzzy

u E e

m z -

23. neuralgia calling at random like

U a E a aw i a a o l
n r lj k l ng t r nd m l k

24. frail relations a

A e A e e

fr l r l zh nz -

25. ringing in a distant office they cannot get to that phone

O i i i e i a o i A a o e oo a
f n r ng ng n - d St NT f s th k n t g t t th

26. they become attentive

A E u a e i
th b k m t NT v

27. or we do

aw E oo
- w d

28. these divisions persisting

E i i e e(r) i i
th z d v zh nz p s St ng

29. indeed what we talk about

i E o E aw e ou
in d wh t w t k b t

30. we constructing these webs of buildings which 30. we

E o u i E e o i i i E
w k nz str Kt ng th z w bs v b ld ngz wh Ch w

31. caulked like great whales about us are

aw l A A e ou u a(r)
k kd l k gr t w lz b t s -

31. caulked like great whales about us are

aw l A A e ou u a(r)
k kd l k gr t w lz b t s -

are 31. caulked like great
u a(r) aw l A
s - k kd l k gr t

33. pleading and flailing

E i a A i
pl d ng nd fl l ng

34. will fill with placid but unbearable melodies

i i i a i u u A(r) a e e O E
f l w th PL s d b t n b r b l m l d z f l

35. in deep hinterlands of incurved glass

u i E i e a o i e(r) a(r)
s n d p h NT l v nk v d GL
ndz s

Sound in poetry is an immensely complicated and contentious subject. Of the seventeen different employments

listed by Masson {10} we consider six:

1. Structural emphasis

All sections are structurally emphasized to some extent, but note the use (in decreasing hardness) of

plosive consonants in sections 1, 5, 6, 7, 10-13, 19, 28-50; 31 and 35.

fricative and aspirate consonants in sections 2, 3, 6, 7, 12, 19, 25, 28, 32, 35.

liquid and nasal consonants in sections 3, 4, 12, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 31-35.

Also:

predominance of front vowels — in all sections but 6, 7, 11, 16, 17, 19 and 31.

predominance of vowels in intermediate positions — only sections 16 and 17 having several high vowels and section 3 low vowels.

2. Tagging of sections

Note sections 1, 7, 13 and 15.

3. Indirect support of argument by related echoes

Widely used, most obviously in sections 3-7, 12-13, and 15.

4. Illustrative mime: mouth movements apes expression

Sections 2, 6, 11-13, 19, 31 and 35.

5. Illustrative painting

Sections 3-6, 10-13, 15, 19 and 33.

Most sections are closely patterned in consonants. Those which aren't (and therefore need attention if consistency is to be maintained) are perhaps 8, 9, 14, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26 and 27.

6. Patterning

Originally the poem was cast in the form of irregular pentameters. But if this is set aside in favour of the 35 sections listed above, how are these sections to be linked in a self-evident and pleasing form? A little is accomplished by

alliteration:

f in sections 3 to 7.

s and t in sections 12 to 15

w in sections 29 to 32

And also by the predominance of front and intermediate level vowels, but these do not amount to much. Certainly we do not find that the overall shaping of the poem emphasizes the argument or content.

Sociolinguistics

Language is not a neutral medium but comes with the contexts, ideologies and social intentions of its speakers written in. Words are living entities, things which are constantly being employed and only half taken over: carrying opinions, assertions, beliefs, information, emotions and intentions of others, which we partially accept and modify. In this sense speech is dialogic, has an internal polemic, and Bakhtin's insights into the multi-layered nature of language (heteroglossia) can be extended to poetry. {11} Much of Postmodernist writing tries to be very unliterary, incorporating the raw material of everyday speech and writing into its creations. This poem seems rather different, a somewhat remote tone and elevated diction applying throughout. Let us see what's achieved by grouping under the various inflections of the speaking voice.

urgently confidential

But, as you'd expect,
cliffs higher, of course,
that they become attentive
or we do

obsessively repetitious

flurrying the grit,
lifting the pebbles,
flinging them...

burdensome,
underwritten...
overcast and glinting,
obdurate

over-clever

silicate of tough lives
distant and intricate
constructing these webs of buildings
distracted and/or light-headed
except that these do not know it
at least do not seem to
with the blue airiness spinning around
calling at random like frail relations

melancholic and/or reflective

some trick of the light or weather will dress them as friends
pleading and flailing
and fill with placid but unbearable melodies

The exercise hardly provides revelation. Heteroglossia is an interweaving of voices, moreover, not shifts of tone or reference. And yet there is something very odd about the opening line. Why should we expect the buildings to be very impatient? This is more than the orator's trick of attracting attention, since the animate nature of buildings and their constituents is referred to throughout the poem. To be more exact, the attitude of the inhabitants — observers, bureaucrats, architects — to the buildings is developed by the poem, and is paralleled by the tone. But why the confidential and repetitious attitude at the beginning? Why should we be buttonholed in this manner? Why the *But*, which seems to point to an earlier conversation, and the urgency with which that earlier conversation is being refuted or covered up?

Because the blame for something is being shifted to the buildings. What error has been committed we do not know, but in mitigation we are shown the effect of the buildings on

other inhabitants. Or perhaps we are. In fact the whirring bureaucrats seem to grow out of the fabric of buildings, and we do not really know if the *we, constructing these webs of buildings* is meant literally or metaphorically. The poem's title suggests literally, but perhaps these constructions are only of the mind: sections 17, 20-29, 32 and 34 refer to attitudes rather than actions, and there is an ethereal or otherworldly atmosphere to the later section of the poem.

So we return to heteroglossia, which is not simply borrowed voices, but involves an internal polemic, {12} that private dialogue we conduct between our private thoughts and their acceptable public expression. The dialogue is surely here between the brute physicality of a nature made overpoweringly real and the frail brevity of human lives. That physicality is threatening and unnerving. If the *we* of the later section of the poem is indeed architects then that physicality is harnessed to practical ends. If the *constructing* is purely mental then the treatment is through attitudes, mindsets and philosophies. But in neither case does it emasculate the energy of the physical world. Architects may leave monuments behind them, but they are also imprisoned in those monuments (*us in deep hinterlands*) and hearing all the time the homesick voice of their constituents.

Conclusions: Suggested Improvements

The greatest difficulty lies in the poem's structure. An pentameter form has been used to give a superficial unity, but this wrenches the rhythm, obscures the sound patterns and does nothing for the argument. If recast in sections defined by rhythm and sound pattern the form is too irregular to have artistic autonomy. A return could be made to the eighteenth century Pindaric ode in strict metre and rhyme, but would require extensive and skilful rewriting, and probably appear artificial. A prose poem might be the answer, but the rhythms would need to be more fluid and

subtly syncopated. Otherwise, blank verse should be attempted, and the metre adjusted accordingly.

The internal polemic is a valuable dimension of the poem, but more could be done to make the voices distinct.

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METAPHOR APPROACHES

Metaphor theory has only begun to analyse poetry. Literary critics have abundantly discussed the roles of metaphor in individual poems, and often made general observations about metaphor as trope, {1} but metaphor in such studies is given a supporting role, and not regarded as something actually *constituting* meaning. Yet such is the suggestion of Lakoff and Johnson. {2} Metaphors reflect schemas, which are constructions of reality using the assimilation and association of sensorimotor processes to anticipate actions in the world. Schemas are plural, interconnecting in our minds to represent how we perceive, act, react and consider. Far from being mere matters of style, metaphors organize our experience, creating realities which guide our futures and reinforce interpretations. Truth is therefore truth relative to some understanding, and that understanding involves categories that emerge from our interaction with experience. Schemas are neither fixed nor uniform, but cognitive models of bodily activities prior to producing language. The cognitive models proposed by the later work of Lakoff and Johnson are tentative but very varied, the most complex being radial with multiple schema linked to a common centre. Language is characterized by symbolic models (with generative grammar an overlying, subsequent addition) and operates through propositional, image schematic, metaphoric and metonymic models. Properties are matters of relationships and prototypes. Meaning arises through embodiment in schemas. Schemas can also be regarded as containers-part-whole, link, centre-periphery, source-path-goal, up-down, front-back.

Schemas recognize the different styles of human expression. Linguistic functions are propositional and symbolic. Propositional logic uses basic-level concepts only (entities, actions, states, properties) and meaning is built

with link schemas. Complex propositions are built from simple propositions by modification, quantification, conjunction, negation, etc. Scenarios are constructed of an initial state, sequence of events, and a final state structured by source-path-goal. Syntax is simply idealized cognitive models (part-whole, centre-periphery, link, container schemas). Knowledge and truth, however, are radial concepts depending on basic-level concepts and social context, these indeed being the only grounds for certainty. Objectivity is never absolute, and we can only look at a problem from as many aspects as possible.

Such a view questions much of academic study. It contests the claims of philosophy or mathematics to pre-eminence, and places knowledge in a wider context. Meaning lies in body physiology and social activity as well as cerebral functioning. Our temperaments and experiences colour our thoughts, and the philosopher's search for contextless and indisputable truth is an impossible dream. How human beings act in practice is the crucial test, and in practice humans paraphrase according to context and need. Comprehension can never be complete, and specializations that would base truth on logic, mathematics, invariant relationships in the physical world or in social generalities make that comprehension even less attainable. Indeed the approach is entirely misconceived. Multiplicity is what makes us human, and we live variously in conceptions that arise from the totality of our experiences — physiological and mental, private and social. Twentieth-century theories imitating science, and looking for invariant underlying rules to art, have neglected its one essential feature. Art is a representation of the completeness of our experience (though shaped according to conventions and individual understanding) whereas science is the very opposite: abstract thought refined into (often inconceivable) entities.

But all are valid outlooks. The popular singer and the logician may be poles apart in temperament and skills, but there exists a spectrum of activities bringing them into the human fold. We do not have to accept either the intellectual snobbery of academia, or the caricature of academics as out of touch with life. The important point is surely this: science and the arts are slowly, very slowly, converging to give us a fuller and more comprehensive view of the world, and that view is anticipated by schema that draw no sharp line between rationality and irrationality, between thought and emotion, between the world out there and our private universes, between our mental and our bodily activities. Yes, the distinctions can be made — and indeed have to be made for practical purposes — but the distinctions represent a narrowing of conception and possibility. And though we necessarily shut off other considerations to focus on a task in hand, those considerations remain potent in memory and language. The multiplicities of our existence are represented by the ways we express ourselves, and can therefore be re-enacted by artists. Nothing is very original in this observation, but by recognizing that truth lies as much in width as penetrating narrowness the way is open to a more sensible, generous and indeed scientific view of literature and the arts in general.

Science itself recognizes the shortcomings in the old attitudes. The descriptive sciences never fitted the formula well, and the social sciences failed altogether. Chaos theory destroys determinism in many areas, emphasizing the importance of the contingent and unforeseen. {3} Concepts are not necessarily the more accurate or convincing by being more precisely definable, and indeed the new object languages of computing (Java, C++, etc.) do not define classes by outside reference but by the methods and arguments they contain. {4}

And the importance of this long preamble? Metaphor theory in its various forms — and there are many forms, each contested in detail {5} — resolves some of the conflicts between humanism and Modernism. The first may be uplifting but depends on a world-view that is possibly medieval and in some parts superseded. The second is inhibitory, bleak and bogus: the bitter residue of hopes marginalized by science. The long war between the humanities and science, as between academia and commerce, has been to the detriment of both, and a good deal of art is now neither exciting or accomplished. In short, whether they provide the *means* to accomplish good writing or not, the new conceptions of metaphor theory, complexity and brain functioning do at least point to a *ground* that is more varied and all-encompassing than before.

Published Examples

There is little metaphor criticism as such. The following are introductory works on metaphor and related matters:

George Whalley's *Poetic Processes* (1953).

Nelson Goodman's *The Languages of Art* (1968).

Mary Gerhart and Allan Russel's *Metaphoric Processes: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (1984).

George Lakoff and Mark Turner's *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*. (1989).

David Leary's (Ed.) *Metaphors in the History of Psychology* (1990).

Mark Turner's *The Literary Mind: The origins of Thought and Language* (1996).

John Briggs and Richard Monaco's *Metaphor: The Logic of Poetry, A Handbook* (1990)

Metaphor and Simile Analysis

We start by noting the ***similes*** and metaphors:

The Architects

But, as you'd expect, they are very

Impatient, the buildings, having much in them
Of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying
The grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them
With a hoarse roar against the aggregate

They are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,
More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days overcast
And glinting, obdurate, part of the
Silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate

As the whirring bureaucrats let in
And settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,
Awaiting the post and the department meeting —
Except that these do not know it, at least do not
Seem to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost
Vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier
Of concrete **like rib-bones** packed above them,
And they light-headed with the blue airiness
Spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia

Calling at random **like frail relations, a phone
Ringling in a distant office** they cannot get to,
That they become attentive, or we do — these
Divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about,
We, constructing these webs of buildings which,

Caulked like great whales about us, are always
Aware that some trick of the light or weather
Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing —
And fill with placid but unbearable melodies
Us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass.

The metaphors and similes are obvious enough, and traditional or New Criticism would examine the ways they are effective — in supporting argument, setting mood, adding freshness or distinction to the poem. But the claim of metaphor theory is larger: that these tropes *constitute* the meaning. Let us take them in turn, not distinguishing between metaphor and simile.

Impatient

The very word, heavily stressed and re-stressed with *buildings*, sets the poem in motion. Buildings have something to convey, something they can hardly contain,

perhaps even larger than themselves. What? we wonder, because the poem pushes off with the colloquial remark — *as you'd expect* — a journalistic device — and is later referred to with *So perhaps...* But the question is never answered. Clearly it has something to do with the North Sea as the building materials — concrete aggregate, silica sands — originate there. But the poem does not say that the buildings constituents give the buildings their impatience (and in what way could the constituents be Impatient?) but uses the colourless gerund *having*. Perhaps the constituents are indeed the reason, or perhaps that is only by the way. We don't know, and are not given time to ponder: the poem moves on to consider the physical nature of the grit and pebbles.

burdensome

Burdensome is deployed very curiously. Ostensibly it refers to cliffs, but the associations are carried forward in *overcast* and *obdurate* to human lives. We appear in some way to be oppressed by the physicality of nature. The cliffs are higher, and this perception is burdensome, as though we were beneath them, were actually carrying them. Or the associations of the cliffs — the weight of the pebbles, the raw energy of the sea — bear down on us, a thought developed in *past days overcast* where the heavy stress and assonance repeat the connotations.

underwritten

Underwritten means to agree to finance or support, to accept liability for something. In what way can overcast days support or be held liable for the cliffs? Because stormy weather created the shingle and piled up the cliffs in the first place? But underwritten is a guarantee against future actions or difficulties. Here the poem oddly seems to be saying that the cliffs and their burdensome nature will be made good by past days, and by past lives that have the grittiness of the

natural world: *part of the silicate of tough lives*. Grit has the connotation of toughness and determination. It also suggest the word *knit*, which is brought to consciousness by the continual repetition of *n*, *i*, and *t* sounds, and by the word *silicate*, as we shall see. But there is something unexpected about *underwritten*. We could stress the physical aspects of the word and possibly regard the seashore and cliffs as supporting the overcast days. But the poem inverts the relationship. For a moment the world is turned upside down, and we are as though bowled over, caught up in the tidal energy of the first stanza. Again, and by an innocuous commercial term, we are threatened by the physicality of natural things.

glinting

Wet pebbles glint, and that reference is supported by the immediately following *obdurate*. But in fact the word refers to *past days*. In some way the past days poke through, but (as these days also underwrite the cliffs) that activity continues into the future. Indeed *glinting* is later (at the end of poem) picked up the sharp clutch of *incurved* glass. And since *glinting* implies movement, the uncomfortable physicality of nature seems ever present like a watch mechanism quietly whirring away beneath the passing of the hours.

obdurate

As *obdurate* refers to *past days*, we should perhaps recall that the word carries overtones of impenitence, of stiffening against some moral influence. The word links the hardness of past days with the unrepentant nature of lives (*part of the silicate of tough lives*) as they are in fact lived. But if memory — the only way that past days live on — is rooted in or buttressed by natural processes, those processes are not placid or secure. If the *lives* are our lives — and we are not quite sure as the poem moves obliquely on to *bureaucrats* — they are fastened to things which are in motion, and very

uncomfortably so.

silicate

Silicates are structures, often complex structures, that silicon constructs with oxygen, calcium, iron, magnesium etc. to make the rock-forming minerals. What is the *silicate of tough lives*, then: the structure, the basic constituents, or both? Whatever the answer, lives are again being represented in — or even transposed to — elemental and uncomfortable things. But a larger point is being made. Living creatures are constructed of carbon chains; the rocks have silicon chains. We do not ordinarily see rocks as alive as they have no metabolism to speak of, and do not reproduce. But they do have toughness, and hold themselves together strongly until worn down by the elements and refashioned by igneous, metamorphic or sedimentary processes into new rock. Is that what *Impatient* refers to — the North Sea hurrying them on to fulfill their own cycles of existence, relentlessly, oblivious of human needs?

distant and intricate

If so, note the part *distant and intricate* plays. At one level it refers to silicate lives, distant from human purposes but intricate in their own way. Then it links silicate lives — and by extension the whole natural world — with the remote and fussy lives of bureaucrats. The adjectives apply to both worlds, but in radically different ways. Which is the more literal application? That to the natural world, we might be tempted to say. But human lives are not more abstract or metaphoric than those arising from our study of the natural world, so that these three small words are setting aside a comfortable distinction between animate and inanimate nature. For a moment they seem a pivotal point in the poem, until we realize that *distant* is mapping the far edge of our consciousness: physical processes are not distant for most

the poem, but things very much with us.

whirring

Whirring is an ambiguous word — a humming or softly clicking sounds associated with cogwheels and birds' wings. Given the physicality of the preceding lines, we would think of machinery, perhaps of the natural world going about its business behind the scenes. But *whirring* applies to bureaucrats, and these are *let in and settled with coffee in the concrete pallets*, so that the word now seems to evoke the ineffectual flutter of a profession only pushing paper about, a view developed in the fourth stanza.

settled

We talk quite normally of settling someone with coffee, i.e. of putting them in one place and of making them comfortable. But *settle* also implies levelling the score, or of making an end of things, and both these implications are heavily underscored by *concrete pallets*. The fluttering bureaucrats are not quieted in the concrete tower-blocks but hemmed in, imprisoned, flattened. Indeed their very life seems to be squeezed out so that they can become disembodied spirits (*these do not know it, at least do not seem to*) and the fourth stanza take a curiously detached view.

vacuumed

After the raw vigour of stanza one, and the louring nature of stanza two, stanzas four and five seem of another world altogether. At first glance *vacuumed* suggests no more than vacuumed-cleaned: spotlessly cloudless skies. And perhaps something of domesticity in these high-rise offices. But in fact there is no "vacuum-cleaned", or "vacuumed away". The word is vacuumed — i.e. the afternoons have been made completely empty by matters predating the poem (*So perhaps...*) By what? We're not told, but the effect is unsettling. We have the North Sea imagery, then a vignette

of bureaucrats' lives, and now nothing at all.

rib-bones

Even the *with tier upon tier of concrete like rib-bones packed above them*, which would surely be an oppressive thought, seems in this context only inconsequential, sandwiched between *cloudless, almost vacuumed and light-headed with a blue airiness spinning around*. And the rib-bones are *above* so that once again the normal order of things has been inverted.

frail relations

The disorientating continues. We have frail and presumably querulous relatives calling randomly through the day, without any pattern though still needing our help. The sense of importuning with which the poem ends is first struck here — unless the *So perhaps...* introduces the theme: certainly the rhythm changes and becomes more fluid.

phone

Disorientation applies also to space. Ringing phones are notoriously difficult to source in a crowded office, but here the *cannot get to* suggests that continual thwarting of simple actions characteristic of nightmares, a theme emphasized in the increased concentration of the lines which follow. The *they* presumably refers to bureaucrats, and the *we* to the speakers of the poem, possibly architects. But note what the switch in reference is doing. When left, the *they* are still becoming attentive. And *we* are becoming so too, so that the *attentive* and *constructing* are paralleled by a pincer motion of two sets of individuals concentrating and trying to make sense of matters.

caulked

And the result? Somewhat incongruous. The webs of buildings are likened to whales, which have nothing to do with the earlier part of the poem (unless they simply further

the North Sea imagery) but imply a total immersion in an aqueous environment. Is this acceptable? The first two stanzas were harsh and urgent; stanzas four and five became ethereal; and the sixth views buildings as great whales sealed (*caulked*) about us — i.e. we too are surrounded by water. But we are not drowning so much as viewing from some chamber or bathyscope. The environment is not our natural one, though, and indeed "caulk" comes from the old French "cauquer", meaning to tread or press together by force, which again asserts the previous sense of imprisonment.

dress

Ostensibly, *dress as* means simply to give the appearance of. But the nature of caulking, and the dark grey coloration of whales, provides *dress* with something formalizing, making the buildings appear ordinary by the light of common day where in fact they (presumably) are very different.

pleading and flailing

Indeed the *pleading and flailing* seems to be that we shall accept them as friends, though without much confidence (*flailing*).

fill

The object of *fill* is *us*, but the inversion of the usual syntax seems to extend to whales the *placid but unbearable melodies*, which is how their sonic signalling sounds to our human ears. The *Us* starting so abruptly therefore has the odd if momentary effect of giving us (the architects) kinship with the whales. Where they are contained by water, and cannot escape by becoming our friends, we are also immured in hinterlands of what is harsh and enclosing (*incurved*). And so the orotund, almost stilted *fill with...Us* conjures up the notion of forced-feeding, that we are held in *deep hinterlands* and obliged to hear calls for freedom from

buildings that we have constructed. And since glass is a super-cooled liquid form of silica (pure beach-sands) we grasp that the ethereal nature of the middle stanzas were only a feint. Nature which seemed urgent and threatening in the first two stanzas has returned to entirely surround and subdue us.

Schemas: A Digression

Schemas are not metaphors, and there is enough argument over their existence, let alone their exact nature, to make schema-hunting in poems a very doubtful business. But suppose we make a little digression. Science tries to persuade us that it describes a reality independent of linguistic formulation, that a hard core of knowledge survives paraphrase. Aristotle and Plato's systems were a search for certainty, a way of distinguishing knowledge from rhetoric. Gross {6} argues that science changed in the seventeenth century, however: truth became only the most successful argument and has today lapsed into rhetoric again. Scientific truth is no more than a coherent consensus of utterances. Few would perhaps go that far, but it has proved very difficult to know what science and scientific theories really consist of. Quine {7}, for example, believes that science is under-determined by experience, that the edges square with perception and measurement but the interconnecting theories are self-adjusting systems of internal coherence. Vico long ago remarked that much of reasoning is vacuous — it transferred meaning from intimate, domestic surroundings to unknowns. {8} Paul Friedrich supposes that metaphor is only one of many tropes, and that these are entangled with worlds external and independent of language. {9} And so on. Lakoff and Johnson's are far from being the only models, when the whole matter becomes fascinating but very contentious.

What is this poem doing? It is certainly a very odd creation.

Paraphrased — i.e. transposed to everyday concepts — its notions are preposterous, unbelievable. They might be viewed as objective correlates to vague thoughts or moods, but we should be very reluctant to attribute truth or reality to them. But is the transposition valid? The poem, after all, employs some very devious and unusual strategies in trying *not* to make sense in any literal way. It says, in effect: follow these associations and comparisons (metaphors and similes) and you will be led to a very troubling view of the world, unusual but perhaps also compelling. You judge an Elizabethan sonnet by its accordance with a Tudor view of the world, and you must judge this from its own view too — one that feels a kinship with the natural world, and sees differences in degree rather than kind between animate and inanimate matter.

Conclusions: Suggested Improvements

Two questions need to be asked. Does the poem work in its own terms? And do we accept those terms as a valid and convincing view of the world?

Respecting the first, we should probably ask the following: — Is *Impatient* the right word to describe nature's restless energy?

What does *flurrying the grit....the aggregate* contribute to the poem, beyond adding some local colour?

What exactly of past days is *glinting* through?

Do we wish the bureaucrats to seem mechanical with *whirring*?

Would not "evacuated" be better than *vacuumed* in this context?

Are the *they* and *we* sufficiently emphasized to concentrate attention?

Webs suggests buildings being constructed or cleaned. Is

this wanted?

The second question is much more difficult to answer. Outlooks are not to be judged by originality (or schizophrenics would write better poetry) but by largeness and coherence of view. Until we saw many poems on this and similar themes we would probably suspend judgement.

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POSTSTRUCTURALIST

Postmodernist poems have moved on from their Modernist forebears. They are wholly immersed in language, and make no reference to a world beyond. Crafting and evaluation is accordingly very different. Five aspects are touched on here: 1. estrangement, or the defamiliarisation of the everyday, 2. arbitrary choice of words, teased out by deconstructive techniques, 3. absence of a final interpretation, i.e. avoidance of closure and artistic autonomy, 4. repressions implicit in language, whether sexist, social or political, and 5. a wider subject matter, beyond the ennobling virtues championed by humanism.

Introduction

Poststructuralist theories come in many embodiments, but share a preoccupation with language. Reality is not *mediated* by what we read or write, but is *entirely constituted* by those actions. We don't therefore look at the world *through* a poem, and ask how whether the representation is true or adequate or appropriate, but focus on the devices and strategies *within* the text itself. New Criticism urged us to overlook the irrelevancies of author's intention, historical conventions and social context to assess the aesthetic unity of the poem. Poststructuralist criticism discounts any such unity, and urges us to accept a looser view of art, one that accords more with everyday realities and shows how language suppresses alternative views, particularly those of the socially or politically disadvantaged.

Tenets of Poststructuralism

Derrida's attack is on the overblown claims of traditional philosophy and what he sees as its logocentrism. His deconstruction is therefore only a means to an end, to show that even the most stringently argued philosophy is

composed of words that subtly undermine their surface meanings. There is no final interpretation, and philosophy does not produce understanding but only more words. Words, in short, depend on other words: on an endless chain of signifiers, pointing to nothing beyond themselves, resting on no fundamental ground of logic, science or society. But though signifiers continually defer to each other (*différance*), they may leave a trace of their deferments, discernible through Derrida's deconstruction, where the author of the text in question has suppressed meaning by choosing one word in preference to another. Whence comes the author's authority to make this choice? Not from any conception of "what he meant" as this has no existence outside words. Nor from any unvoiced, inner intention, as this is again nothing without words, an endless web of them, all with repeated suppressions of other meanings. The double bind is complete. There is no end to interpretation, and no escaping it, says Derrida. All we can do is point to its workings. {1}

All texts are grist to Derrida's mill, but Poststructuralist schools of literary criticism are commonly concerned with five matters. {2} The first is the concept of literature. What is literature, and how can it be distinguished from other forms of writing? Literature, say the traditionalists, is fiction rather than fact, employs metaphoric rather than literal language, and is not accurate in the way expected of history or philosophy. Radical critics attack such a view, arguing that even the most factual writing has elements of performance and persuasion, and employs literary devices through and through, even if very crude ones. Literature is not a fundamentally distinct entity, nor one privileged, but simply something with different strategies and emphases. Philosophers think they are writing the plain truth only because they are unaware of the conventions they employ. And the same is true of historians, scientists and journalists.

Is this correct, or acceptable? Certainly there are playful elements in all good writing: words and phrases given their head to create new thoughts, opportunities, entertainments. Continually this ludic tendency jostles against the conventions in writing, just as our desires dispute the social proprieties. But that such ground rules exist, and are followed, does not imprison us in language, but simply tells us how to use the text to find whatever we are looking for: facts, insight, aesthetic pleasure. Words are not the end of things, not even in poetry, as even here we expect the refashioning of language to give us a better view of the verbal landscape, and so a better view of the world itself. Moreover, though facts must be largely reported in language, facts are not wholly encompassed by words. The "world out there exists", or we should not find broad agreement between the descriptions of different viewers, even by speakers of isolated and very different tongues. Literary devices can subtly influence us — well known to advertisers and politicians — but we still make our own judgements. Language may not rest simply on one-to-one relationships of words to sense perceptions as the logical positivists once imagined, but then the great importance of language is its social dimension, the very fact that words always refer us to a larger community of beliefs and activities. There are many ways to "truth", and poetry, philosophy and perhaps academia itself needs to have a wider appreciation of adjoining territories.

Secondly, Postmodernism also questions an important feature of art, at least as traditionally conceived, that of autonomy. Since words endlessly call on other words, a poem cannot effect "closure", i.e. cannot become a self-sufficient entity, an organic whole where the parts are firmly interrelated within the verbal skeleton.

Perhaps so, but only New Criticism supposed that the

poems were things in themselves, independent of any authorial or social context. Words may indeed take their meaning from the poem as a whole, which leads to paradoxes of self-reference {3} or meta-languages. But that is their strength, their ability to employ in life-enhancing exactness what language does generally in a more confused and stereotyped fashion. Poems do not aim at plain philosophic truth and, were they misguided enough to do so, then the logics of Tarski and Davidson could be adopted to prevent unlimited self-reference.

Whereas traditional criticism examined the preponderant themes in a literary piece, deconstructive critics, thirdly, seize on something oblique or minimal, using this as a wedge into very different understandings. The criticisms expand into a sexist or political analysis of the social setting, or into disclosure of the warring forces than can be teased out of the text. From here the search moves to meanings suppressed — the *traces* — the author must leave in arbitrarily promoting one view to another, whether these be complicities with ruling authority or small acts of individual defiance. Whatever the strategy, deconstructive criticism is likely to be against the grain, and pride itself on unusual outcomes.

Fourthly comes what Barthes called the "death of the author", the notion that how a text — poem, novel, historical treatise — is interpreted depends not on the author's intentions, but on the readers' actions, and ultimately on the properties of language itself. New Critics downplayed intentions. We couldn't generally know the intentions to begin with; the writing often wandered far from any original plan; all that mattered was the final, finished piece of work. The Postmodernists go much further. The author is not in control of his writing, and the work is never finished. There is no idea, however vague, that is then clothed with words,

since that idea has no existence outside words. Writing, moreover, is a very different activity altogether. We are all entangled in the web of language, and we merely build some local habitation from portions of this web, as is convenient, as we know how. Writers have a wider reach, and should be more aware of what they're doing. If they follow everyone else and ignore the social issues, inequalities and political repressions inherent in language, then they are literary hacks, toadying to their paymasters. If they overlook the sources of language, the babble of individual voices that give a tongue its life and currency, then their work is also inauthentic. Better to avoid such temptations and markedly emphasize these aspects of writing. Bring out the polyphony of individual accents, iterate the limited powers of the author, emphasize how arbitrary the selection must be by foregrounding, estrangement and by jolting the reader out of easy expectations.

There is much to consider in Postmodernism. Professional writers know very well that writing and thought come together, that they sit down at their desks and watch the words spill out onto their VDU screens — endless streams of them which must direct, curb and shape. They understand their audience, and balance what they'd like to write against what is acceptable. They are familiar not only the etymologies of words, their associations and past employments, but the voices, outlooks and intentions of those utterances. Nonetheless, they are not the passive servants of language. They do know roughly what to say, and they very much resent rewriting a piece that was not sufficiently planned in advance. True, poems may sometimes be produced in a trance-like state, but then there is the labour afterwards of pruning the lines, fitting the pieces together, polishing the final product. Many writers would no doubt be surprised, if not appalled, at the clever things said

about their work by later critics, but the piece satisfied them at the time and answered many pressing matters, both private and social. As usual, Postmodernism is being provocative, following its own teachings, but the case is overstated.

Finally, there is humanism, the belief that man is the centre of his world, and understands it through his own creations. Postmodernism disagrees. Indeed, it finds the very notion repellent, and cannot understand how literature that espouses love, nobility, honesty, loyalty, etc. continues blithely on in a world so bleakly devoid of them. If man has become all powerful and replaced God — aided by a science once hailed as the liberator of mankind — how can he have presided over a century of tyrannies and blood-soaked wars, over the despoliation of the Third World, and even now encourages the widening gap between the haves and have-nots in the very people he passes each day in the streets? Such optimism cannot be shallow thinking, or an inadvertent hypocrisy, but a deliberate, wholesale imposition of falsities. Man is not as humanism supposes, and these beguiling masks should be removed.

Who would not sympathize? The given facts of existence are neither facts nor given. Economics seems not a growing if still blundering science, but more the special pleadings of class interest. Science has not been used solely to better man's lot, but to extend the control of one society over another. People are born with different needs and capabilities, but it cannot be beyond our abilities to fashion a society that more fairly accommodated both. However much influenced by Hegel, and wrong in his prophecies, Marx was surely correct to see that man's outlook is a product of his conditions, that what he does largely determines his nature.

Why then not paint man as he really is: a biological mechanism, a product of socio-economic forces, a

treacherous, grasping animal whose few acts of altruism are only devised to ensure species survival? Why not shift man from the centre of things and replace appeals to human affections by a broader, truer picture of the world? Why not leave man out altogether, and create an art that dealt with other things in this fascinating planet — with brute nature, wild animals, natural processes, the findings of philosophy, history and social studies? The opportunities are immense, and academic humanism has rightly felt threatened.

But the counter argument is just as strong. Economics is not ethically neutral, but asks how resources shall be optimally deployed, questions which eventually ask for moral judgements. Science is conducted by human beings and in even the most sterile environment there are codes of practice: not to plagiarize, bear false witness, concoct false experiments or observations. To overlook the human element altogether is to create work with unrecognizable perspectives, mere collations of fact, and therefore not art at all. Yes, contemporary writing may well be in a bad way. In the great mass of fiction published — poetry as well as novels and biographies — the readers are not seeking to widen their minds and sympathies, but to be confirmed in their shallow and self-satisfying prejudices. But art was not so different in the past, and present writers should not throw in the towel and simply make a feature of what cannot be changed. Lies eventually have their consequences. Neoliberal economics has not only impoverished the third world, but brought bankruptcies to the western nations and middle class stagnation. The cynical, all-knowing, refuse-to-be-kidded attitude that Postmodernism sometimes wears is no more salutary than the empty hypocrisies it seeks to replace. Humanism is not wrong, but incomplete. The human animal is much more feral, various and fascinating than academics sometimes wish to allow, and the arts should

reflect that.

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Estrangement

Looked at clearly, the world is a strange place, and Postmodernist poems often jolt the reader beyond stereotypes of response by enlarging that strangeness. In this poem, the attack starts immediately. The buildings are personified, and made alive with the memories of their constituent parts:

The Architects

But, as you'd expect, they are very
Impatient, the buildings, having much in them
Of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying
The grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them
With a hoarse roar against the aggregate

They are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,
More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days overcast
And glinting, obdurate, part of the
Silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate

As the whirring bureaucrats let in
And settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,
Awaiting the post and the department meeting —
Except that these do not know it, at least do not
Seem to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost
Vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier
Of concrete like rib-bones packed above them,
And they light-headed with the blue airiness

Spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia
Calling at random like frail relations, a phone
Ringing in a distant office they cannot get to,
That they become attentive, or we do — these
Divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about,
We, constructing these webs of buildings which,
Caulked like great whales about us, are always
Aware that some trick of the light or weather
Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing —
And fill with placid but unbearable melodies
Us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass.

Indeed the estrangements continue throughout the poem:

the cliffs ...

More burdensome, underwritten ...

... with past days

days ...

... part of the

Silicate of tough lives

lives... intricate

As the whirring bureaucrats

a neuralgia

Calling at random like frail relations, a phone

Ringing in a distant office they cannot get to

some trick of the light or weather

Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing

fill

Us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass

The disorientation is not achieved by the poem's structure — the diction is normal, and the syntax unexceptional, if somewhat tortuous — but by the boldness of the images and their lack of connecting explanation. The baffled reader is simply shunted from one image to another, emerging as a disconsolate prisoner of modernist architecture. A jibe at Modernism? A plea for the environment, whales included? Some attempt at hyper-realism, opening us up to the

heartbeats of inanimate matter? The poem doesn't say.

Silence on deeper matters is not unusual for Postmodernist work, which aims to unsettle and provoke enquiry, but has no message beyond its effects. But perhaps there is a message to hide: *if* the poem has no reference beyond itself then why should we care about its content, or even feel confused? Why not luxuriate in the playfulness of language, and applaud its audacities? But we do not take a mental holiday in this case: the urgency and melancholy suggest some experience or thought beyond the words.

Deconstruction

Are we to see such difficulties as just another of the self-refutations that run through Postmodernism, or is there something more, perhaps words and phrases which prove, on close analysis, to undermine their ostensible meanings? Are there places where the natural playfulness of words has been constrained to displace other words, equally plausible in the context and equally unjustified?

Consider the following:

... as you'd expect, they are very
Impatient, the buildings...

It is not the buildings which are impatient, surely, but the sea — to devour the land again and wipe out man's puny constructions?

... the aggregate
They are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,
More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days

What has *aggregate* to do with *days*, but to smuggle in some reference to the passing of time, the brevity of human existence?

days...
... part of the

Silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate
As the whirring bureaucrats ...

In what way are lives distant or intricate? The metaphor is far-fetched and serves to avoid saying more about the materials making up the building — evading illustration or justification to eventually link from materials to bureaucrats to architects immured in their own creations. An intriguing thought it may be, even pleasing, but why are we hurried to this strange conception?

a phone
... they cannot get to,
That they become attentive, or we do...
.... what we talk about,
We...

In this abrupt transition between they (presumably bureaucrats) and we (the speakers, possibly architects) the mindless industry of the inhabitants of the buildings is passed to their creators. But then the inheritors become not so much mindless as attuned to the plight of the buildings, ending as prisoners of a distress they do not fully understand. Is this the real content of the poem, that its very confusions and opacities mimic those of the architects, a criticism being made of Modernism by its natural successor, Postmodernism? Possibly so, but then the poem, by a further twist of irony, is not Postmodernist but Traditional, having something important to say.

Lack of Closure

While Traditional and Modernist poems exhibit an autonomy, completeness and organic unity, Postmodernist work delights in breaking these rules, deferring reference and meaning until summary is impossible. The strategies are most entertainingly exhibited by Derrida's essays, but are seen — more exasperatingly and tiresomely to traditional academics — in work issuing from the newer universities,

which are largely the home of Postmodernist poetry. Where does this poem lie?

Betwixt and between might be the answer. There is nothing difficult about the language *per se* — none of the usual non sequiturs, opacities, extended puns and irreverences. Indeed the tone is not at all playful, but rather solemn and introverted. Nonetheless, it is unclear *what* the poem is really about. A narrative can be constructed, certainly, but the loosely related images seem to imply a good deal more, to float off and embrace matters that give the poem its tone but not a message. Many of the images are very fissile:

as you'd expect
past days overcast and glinting
lives distant and intricate
vacuumed afternoons
a neuralgia calling at random
friends pleading and flailing
us in deep hinterlands

The meaning of poems is always larger than the prose meaning of their words, but even from Modernists works we expect an explanation of the individual phrases to emerge from the interrelation of words and images within the poem. But no such interrelation holds here: one image follows another as in a dream sequence, and the order seems arbitrary, perhaps as light-headed as the office workers themselves in the poem. Is that the essence of the piece? It is recursive, calling on itself not to generate explanations but more computer code of a similar, free-floating nature. If so, then the poem certainly is Postmodernist, but of a rather unusual sort.

Authenticity

Challenging the poem may be, but does it expose the

complicities of language with the status quo? There is a reference to whales, and the suggestion that the architects themselves are the prisoners of their changing environment, but no one could make social or political capital from such vagaries. Buildings may be sad about their condition, but how that sadness arises is not stated, nor what could be done about it.

Indeed the poem seems not only agnostic to such matters, but wholly indifferent to them. The tone is somewhat elevated, the syntax sinuously academic, and the diction even mandarin. The poem is certainly not urging action, but is rather quiet and essay-like, more the private reflections of a priestly class. Postmodernists are also an exclusive club, but they mix populist images with abstruse theory, which is very different from these musings. If anything, these are the reflections of an elevated social class of the establishment, and therefore not at all Postmodernist.

Anti-Humanism Stance

Is there what journalists call a "human interest angle" in this poem? Does it call on feelings evoked by the verities of human existence? The subject matter seems remote from everyday concerns — buildings, sea, concrete — but does gradually invoke the human element: bureaucrats, frail relations, architects. What is the purpose in this progression? Are the human elements there to serve as reflections on inanimate objects — when the poem is Postmodernist, after a fashion — or are the animate objects provided to induce profound reflections on the human condition — when the poem will be traditional? Or are we to look *through* the poem to a wider world and to demand that view be made convincing by the architecture of the poem: the Modernist view? Or perhaps it is none of these, but is making some extended play on the ability of architecture to question the traditional, Modernist, Postmodernist

terminology? It is difficult to know. Poets and editors are themselves ambivalent about the terms, if not wholly confused about the differences on occasion, but a poem that positions itself between schools is in danger of being rejected by both.

Conclusions: Suggested Improvements

Postmodernism does not prize unity, cohesion, surface polish or traditional content, so that what might appear failings to other approaches may here be positive attractions. The poem is currently rather odd, disjointed and hard to follow, but it may also come over as original, intriguing, thought-provoking. What's the verdict?

The poet must decide which school he represents. Postmodernist poetry is very different from Modernist, and Modernist is far removed from the traditional. The aims and excellencies of these schools are not merely academic, and judgements cannot be made within the narrow realms of current literary theory.

At present the poem seems somewhat ambivalent in its leanings. But if it opts for Postmodernism, then a more populist style is called for. The diction should be made more contemporary, and the syntax less involved — i.e. more broken, direct and immediate. A much stronger sense of a voice speaking would be preferable, and that voice should spring off the page, i.e. read like a good radio script.

If the poem is not Postmodernist, then the suggestions of other critical approaches obviously carry more weight.

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MYTH CRITICISM

Far from being primitive fictions — about the natural world, some supposed ancestor, or tribal practice — myths are reflections of a profound reality. They dramatically represent our instinctive understandings. Moreover, unlike Freud's concepts, myths are collective and communal, and so bring a sense of wholeness and togetherness to social life. Native peoples, and indeed whole civilizations, have their own mythologies, but there appear to be common images, themes and motives {1} which Jung called "archetypes". {2}

The mythology of the classical world provided themes for some of the world's greatest drama, {3} and similar themes can be traced in Renaissance literature {4} through to modern poetry. {5} Hamlet, for example, is often seen as the reluctant hero who must sacrifice himself to purify a Denmark made diseased by the foul and unnatural murder of its king. {6} Yeats, Pound and Eliot employ the myths of history, rebirth and fulfilment through sacrifice {7}, as do other poets. {8}

Myth criticism continues to draw freely on the psychology of Jung, on social anthropology, on the study of religions {9}, on metaphor and depth psychology, but the archetypal criticism of Northrop Frye has attempted to redefine what criticism is, and what it can be expected to do. {10}

Frye attempted a general theory of literature, which he approached from four perspectives. Rather than justify what were little more than matters of preference (i.e. squabble over the relative merits of authors and their works) scholars should derive principles, structures and laws from the study of literature itself. His first essay in *Anatomy of Criticism* recognized various levels of realism in literature, an articulation he termed a theory of modes. The second essay put forward a theory of symbols, recognizing five levels

ranging from the mundane to the anagogic (the last represented in work of a religious or spiritual nature).

The theory of myths that forms the third essay has possibly been Frye's most influential contribution. He starts by identifying the four seasons — spring, summer, autumn and winter — with the four main plots or 'mythoi' of romance, comedy, tragedy, and irony/satire. These are further broken down into phases. The mythos of winter consists of six phases, the last representing human life in terms of unrelieved bondage: prisons, madhouses, lynching mobs and places of execution. The human figures of this phase are the dispossessed, the destitute and mad-ogres, witches, Baudelaire's black giantess and Pope's Dullness. Frye distinguishes between signs (which point outward to things beyond themselves) and motifs (which are understood inwardly as parts of a verbal structure). Literature is pre-eminently an autonomous verbal structure where the sign-values are subordinate to the interconnectedness of motifs. The fourth essay proposes a theory of genres, where Frye outlined the differences between the lyric, epic, dramatic work, etc.

Frye's approach was invigorating, but has not been broadly accepted. His categories seem arbitrary, and many works of art do not fit neatly into any category. For all his learning, Frye's focus was on western literature and its classification. So general a view does not help the practising poet with rewriting, or the critic explaining *how* one piece of literature is better than another, beyond of course understanding the larger picture. Finally, though Frye's own criticism was subtle and illuminating, the approach too easily degenerated into "hunt the symbol" exercises. {11}

But important matters lie behind symbolism. Literature employs words, and the reality behind words has been the central preoccupation of twentieth century philosophy.

Linguistic philosophy attempted to explain away the great philosophical dilemmas of existence as the improper use of words. Structuralism described literature as the surface expression of deep anthropological (and often) binary codes. Poststructuralism denied that words could be anything but part of an endless web of yet more words, without final referent or meaning. Postmodernism uses words as flat, media images, without deeper reference.

None of these has been very convincing. Words do have great emotional and intellectual power if employed in certain ways, and these ways draw on matters of deep and lasting interest to the human psyche. Mythic criticism (indeed all criticism: Frye makes this point) is subsequent to literature, as history is to action. We cannot clothe with plot and character the skeletal requirements of criticism and expect literature to result. Works of art follow their own devices and grow out of the artist's imagination, only submitting to criticism if they still seem incomplete or unsatisfactory.

But mythic criticism can show the writer where his imagery is coming from, and suggest reasons for its power. Subsequent work — deep thought, reading and endless toying with possibilities — may then turn up further material. Whether that material is useful can only be found by testing it in the poem, a trial and error process of continual adaptation and refinement that may eventually achieve the strengths of the coherence theory of truth: transforming power, internal consistency, simplicity, elegance and fertility.

Published Examples of Myth Criticism

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Caroline Spurgeon. *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*. 1935.

Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism*. 1957.

Time

We start by taking in turn the archetypal themes represented: time, sea, land and sky, control, creation, illness and regeneration. The poem:

The Architects

But, as you'd expect, they are very
Impatient, the buildings, having much in them
Of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying
The grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them
With a hoarse roar against the aggregate
They are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,
More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days overcast
And glinting, obdurate, part of the
Silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate

As the whirring bureaucrats let in
And settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,
Awaiting the post and the department meeting —
Except that these do not know it, at least do not
Seem to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost
Vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier
Of concrete like rib- bones packed above them,
And they light-headed with the blue airiness
Spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia

Calling at random like frail relations, a phone
Ringing in a distant office they cannot get to,
That they become attentive, or we do — these
Divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about,
We, constructing these webs of buildings which,
Caulked like great whales about us, are always
Aware that some trick of the light or weather
Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing —
And fill with placid but unbearable melodies
Us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass.

Time is introduced immediately — *expect* and *impatient* — continues with *past days* and is then maintained by tense changes (present in stanza 3, past in stanza 4, present in stanza 5, present and future in stanza 6). Time is one of the most fundamental archetypes, and here it appears in typical form, a mystical immersion into cyclical time. But the subject isn't man directly, but the buildings he inhabits. More exactly, it is their constituents. Buildings are largely constructed of glass (sand), brick (baked clay) and concrete (aggregate, steel and burnt limestone), all of which are dug out of the earth. In time the buildings will decay, be knocked down, and the rubble dumped to make new fill. Even the land is not everlasting but is ceaselessly worn away by water, which may grind the hardest materials to pebbles but also deposit the pebbles in sea-cliffs or river terraces, where they become sources of aggregate again. Man can only mimic on a small scale what geological processes are doing constantly: eroding the land and remaking it by deposition, metamorphism, and orogenic uplift.

Human life is fleeting, and man's usual victory over mortality is only through reproduction and the achievements of the societies which outlive him. But here the immortality considered is buildings, which are constructed like termite mounds on the land he occupies, and so brought into the ceaseless cycle of geological creation. But the emphasis on "silicate", of which sand is the most familiar example, also suggests deserts, death, spiritual aridity and nihilism. The constituents of the building were created by the pounding of the North Sea, and indeed carry echoes of that creation within them (*having much in them / Of the North Sea*), but now they are inert, immobilized, can only be released when the buildings are reconstructed.

Sea

Equally a symbol of death and regeneration is the sea, which

appears in stanza 1 as *the heavy surf of the North Sea* and again in the last stanza with *the great whales that fill with placid but unbearable melodies / Us in the deep hinterlands of incurved glass*. What are these hinterlands but a sea of glass that seems to draw us in (*deep*) and drown us in its impenetrable reflection? The poem, which starts and ends with aspects of the sea, is again cyclical, and in this incarnation the sense of imprisonment in man's own creations is even stronger (*pleading and flailing, unbearable and deep hinterlands*)

Land and Sky

Generally, at least in Aryan mythology, the earth is a mother goddess and the sky a paternal figure. {12} It is therefore striking that the fourth stanza, where the sky (*cloudless...afternoons, blue airiness / Spinning around*) is clearly evoked, is marked by a change of thought (*So perhaps...*). We are still with the bureaucrats, but have joined them in their high office block, where they seem out of their element (*light-headed with the blue airiness / Spinning around, and muzzy*) and barely able to cope (*frail relations and a distant office they cannot get to*). The sky theme is not continued, and indeed the bureaucrats themselves are abruptly replaced by the architects (*they become attentive, or we do*), who introduce the whales and the submarine imagery.

Control

Bureaucrats are unimaginative officials who administer by rule and regulation. Their lives are described here as *tough ... distant and intricate*. Silicates are complex molecules but do not make up living structures. The bureaucrats are not creating anything (*awaiting the post and the department meeting* and are indeed *settled ... in concrete pallets*, appearing like so much paper stock in warehouses.

We are in the world of the dead — Frye's winter myth — and the sense of imprisonment is again strong, although not realized by its inhabitants (*Except that these do not know it ... being busy, generally.*)

Creators

Since architects are creative people, and start their training in art colleges, the title no doubt has some bearing on imaginative processes, with creating something not existing before. But architects are not identified by name, only appearing by default in the "we" of line 23, where they occupy the focus of attention as the bureaucrats fade out. The switch is conscious (*they become attentive*), for both parties (*or we do*), but the responsibilities are not seized upon with any confidence. Indeed, the buildings are likened to whales, gentle but doomed creatures, whose plight is all too vivid to their creators (*fill with placid but unbearable melodies*). What is being indicated?

Mythologies have much to say on creation (since the existence of a world at all requires explanation) but creation is usually seen as only part of the endless cycle of birth and death, building and destruction, appearance and disappearance. As was noted before, there are suggestions of spiritual aridity in the buildings' constituents, and this affliction is extended to the bureaucrats, who perform meaningless, self-centred tasks. The architects are very different, and from the arid world of silicates immediately plunge us into the sea with their talk of whales. But note *Aware that some trick of the light or weather / Will dress them as friends*, which emphasizes the separateness of whales, their difference from humans. In some undisclosed way we have the suggestion that the architects, and thus the creative process itself, are being dragged into depths where they cannot function. They can hear the *placid but unbearable melodies* but are powerless to help, being

fastened in the *deep hinterlands of incurved glass*.

Illness

Spiritual aridity brings sickness, and almost on cue the light-headedness of stanza 4 brings not elation but neuralgia. And even that complaint is not accessible to treatment, but appears inconsequential (*Calling at random like frail relations*) and at some remove (*a phone / Ringing in a distant office they cannot get to*). Indeed the content of lines 18 to 22 seems to vapourise into the ether, perhaps emphasized by the word *ringing*. Subsequently, the imagery becomes more tactile (*Divisions, great whales, trick, dress*), but no more certain. Something is wrong, but exactly what remains unclear. Awareness has an element of chicanery and dressing up (*Aware that some trick of the light or weather / Will dress them as friends*) Perhaps it is the very illness itself that creates such a troubling view of the world.

Regeneration

The cyclic nature of building is clear enough in the first half of the poem, but where is the complementary response to decay and destruction? Mythologies emphasize that life grows from death, that lives, societies, artistic creations all have their growth, flowering, seeding, winter and rebirth. Where do we find this in the poem? It seems not to exist, which may account for the melancholy of the last stanza, and the uncomfortable imprisonment of the last line.

Conclusions: Suggestions

How do we pull all this together? The indications are intriguing but not going in one direction, or anywhere at all. Can that be the subject of the poem — a perplexing sense of otherness, a vague feeling that much is wrong with modern life, that neither the bureaucrats or the architects have either control over their lives in any meaningful way, or belong to a

larger process of life-enhancement and renewal? The poem is a sort of modern *Waste Land*, much less ambitious than Eliot's and limited to an aspect of the natural world.

If that is so, then a good deal needs to be resolved if the piece is to work as a traditional poem, notably:

The storm imagery of stanza 2: where does this fit in?

The office situation of stanza 5: should this remain so nebulous?

The identity of the reader referred to by "you", "we" and "us". Who is being buttonholed in this way? If they are different, should this not be made clearer?

The status of the *deep hinterlands* with which the poem concludes. In what sense is the reader imprisoned in this *incurved glass*?

The incompleteness of the cycle. Where is the regeneration?

Of course, if the poem is not traditional but Postmodernist in intention, then none of these recommendations apply. Its arbitrary and fragmented nature may very well be an apt copy of modern life itself.

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FREUDIAN CRITICISM

Freud was a cultivated man and, while not entirely approving of artists, did take a close interest in artistic production and appreciation. Psychic energy (libido) was sexual at base, but was not channelled wholly into sexual activity. Amongst its expressions were dreams, fantasies and the personality disorders that arose when instinctual drives were constrained by exterior reality: the pleasure principle versus the reality principle. Desire was the motivating force of the artist — an inordinate desire to win honour, power, wealth, fame and the love of women with a corresponding lack of means of doing so. Notoriously, the artist was an introvert, and not far removed from a neurotic. Nonetheless, Freud did not confuse daydreams and artistic creation, did not reduce aesthetics to wish fulfilment, and admitted that psychoanalysis could not say how the artist achieved his successes. Dreams and art both employed strategies to transform primitive desires into the culturally acceptable, and indeed the artist masked and sweetened his daydreams with aesthetic form. Even Freud's much-criticized essay *Leonardo and a memory of his childhood* is more a psycho-biography than art criticism. {1}

Freudian literary analysis comes in various degrees of subtlety. At its most elementary, the novel or poem may be analysed simply in terms of phallic symbols: the assertive male organ or receptive female organ. More usually there is some attempt to see these as the secret embodiment of the author's unconscious desires.

More penetrating is the psycho-biographic approach, which seeks to explain an artist's life and work through childhood events, the Oedipus conflict and repression. Sometimes the psychic energy is regarded as the life-force, as in D.H. Lawrence's study of American nineteenth century literature,

where a lust for power is attributed to a repressed Puritan conscience. {2} Different again is ego-analysis, which attempts to show that the pleasure of artistic creation and performance lies in the *controlled* play with primitive material, both artist and audience entering into the process. Art for Kleinians continues the encounter between infant and mother, contentment at the breast and separation, harmony and rebellion: the unconscious creates the form of the artwork through the interaction of artist with medium. {3} Anton Ehrenzweig saw the work of art as a womb which received fragmented projections of the artist's self. {4} Julia Kristeva talks of a "potential space" leading to language acquisition. {5} André Green extended analysis to reader and writer, so involving two sets of conscious and unconscious minds. {6} There are many schools, of varying plausibility, which lead to or become involved in Structuralism or Poststructuralism. {7}

The straightforward psychological approach is unpopular. The New Critics concentrated on textural analysis, and declared biography to be irrelevant. The Poststructuralists believe that authors have less control over their writing (or at least the import of their writing) than is supposed: all that authors can do is manipulate a language fraught with ethnic and political repressions, with indeterminacy and cultural imperialism. Even among traditional critics, psychology has earned itself a bad name by crudely fitting the novel or poem into some straight-jacket of psychoanalysis. The terminology of psychoanalysis is abstruse and/or repugnant. Too many of the psychoanalytic critics have no literary sensibility. {8} More damaging still is the plethora of psychoanalytic theories: all wildly different and all claiming the truth. Perhaps none is acceptable, as psychoanalysis evades scientific testing and has an indifferent therapeutic record.

Examples of Freudian Literary Criticism

Sigmund Freud's *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood* (1910)

Edmund Wilson's *The Turn of the Screw* (1948)

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Analysis: Sexual Symbols

Readers may wish to analyse themselves, or their whole body of work, dwelling in particular on obsessions and any favourite or repetitive imagery. But for the limited purposes of this exercise, it may be best to adopt something basic to Freud and start with a crude stocktaking. Suppose we identify (or hazard a guess at, these matters being somewhat conjectural) the **imagery of sexual congress** and the sexual organs — male and *female*:

The Architects

But, as you'd expect, they are very
Impatient, the buildings, having much in them
Of the heavy surf of the North Sea, **flurrying**
The grit, lifting the pebbles, **flinging** them
With a hoarse roar against the aggregate

They are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,
More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days overcast
And glinting, obdurate, part of the
Silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate

As the whirring bureaucrats let in
And settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,
Awaiting the post and the department meeting —
Except that these do not know it, at least do not

Seems to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost
Vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier
Of concrete like rib-bones packed above them,
And they light-headed with the blue airiness
Spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia

Calling at random like frail relations, a phone
Ringing in a distant office they cannot get to,
That they become attentive, or we do — these
Divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about,
We, constructing these webs of buildings which,

Caulked like great whales about us, are always
Aware that some trick of the light or weather
Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing —
And fill with placid but unbearable melodies
Us in **deep** hinterlands of incurved glass.

In themselves, the identifications tell us very little. But keeping them in mind, we now adopt Freud's approach to dreams and fantasies, employing his four processes of condensation, displacement, representation and secondary revision.

Application: Condensation

In condensation, two or more elements combine in a composite image. The first such image here is buildings. They seem unusually important, indeed the whole poem on one level is about buildings. We learn they have much of the North Sea in them, being composed of aggregates that derive from the land they occupy. That North Sea is somehow oppressive. When the aggregate is heaped up in cliffs, those cliffs become burdensome, underwritten by past days. Not created, note — which is literally true — but in some way guaranteed by past, stormy days. That past, moreover, spreads into and colours the present. It is glinting, obdurate and part of the stony lives of bureaucrats who

occupy the levels of our modern buildings, described here as concrete pallets.

The word "silicates" is another composite image. Silicates are minerals making up all rocks except limestones, and thereby enter into the great mass of buildings, even those of glass, which is of course silica. But silicates, which have a complex crystal structure, are also used as an image for the rigid and unfeeling lives (tough, distant and intricate) of the bureaucrats who inhabit the buildings. Not just their inhabitants, moreover, but the buildings themselves are also seen as dead (with tier on tier / Of concrete like rib bones).

Finally, the buildings are regarded as whales, not only large and isolated (Caulked like great whales about us) but taking on their behaviour — their attitudes (pleading and flailing) and their sonic signalling to each other (placid but unbearable melodies).

There are many other condensations, but let us concentrate on those above and ask: what psychological purposes do they serve, i.e. why were they written? The author will initially say that he does not really know: they seemed intriguing at the time, and even now, after extensive analysis, they continue to carry some emotional charge. Attempts to make them more rational and explanatory led to what seemed to be a weakening of the poem.

Perhaps the reason is inaccessible to us. But note the preoccupation with sea and death. The buildings have something of the sea in them, but it is of past days. The bureaucrats' activities are likened to inert minerals. The buildings are described as concrete pallets or as possessing bare rib-bones. Even the whales are doomed animals, pleading and flailing (close to failing). The death instinct seems very strong.

Now look at the sexual symbols. The male symbols

(buildings, grit, pebbles, obdurate) all carry something of the detrital, of a resistance to being worn down. They are not permanent or life-enhancing. The female symbols (surf, sea, burdensome, vacuumed, webs, deep, incurved) are again heavy and unregenerative. The images of sexual congress (impatient, flurrying, fill) are certainly not lusty and confident. In all there seems an air of sadness, even dejection, about the poem's symbolism. Only "impatient" runs against this trend, and that impatience, if buildings to reassumed the restless past of their constituents, would end in the buildings shaking themselves to pieces.

Application: Displacement

Why is this? The second of Freud's processes was displacement, whereby an image is replaced by a psychologically more significant one. We have one in the bureaucrats' lives, which are replaced by a silicate frigidity. We have another in vacuumed — the afternoons being not merely clear but evacuated, vacuum-cleaned. And the buildings that metamorphose into whales is perhaps another displacement. Indeed, in some ways, the whole process noted above is an extended displacement — of the useful (buildings), orderly (bureaucrats), structurally necessary (rib-bones) and purposeful (constructing these webs of buildings) by the defeated, the inert, the wearing away to nothing.

Is this symbolism maintained? It seems to be. The bureaucrats are time-wasters (awaiting the post and the department meeting). They are not aware either of the past history of the materials making up their building, or that their own lives are intricate but life-denying. Even the light-headedness of living in high buildings (the bureaucrat's, presumably, or just possibly the personified afternoon's: the syntax is confused) is not exhilarating, but brings on a neuralgia described either as troublesome and inconvenient (Calling at random like frail relations) or pointless (a phone /

Ringling in a distant office they cannot get to).

Application: Representation

Now Freud's representation, in which thoughts take the form of images. We have seen that the poem views the world as inert, cyclic and pointless, so that we need to investigate the images employed. Why were they chosen? Are they apt? What deeper psychological need is served by them?

As to the first, the author replies that he cannot remember. The work is unusual for him, but was no doubt an attempt at making the worlds of rocks, natural processes and construction into a poem. There are no early drafts to hand, so that he cannot now see how the work progressed. But very probably it was from the first line, which then lead him into thinking about the constituents of buildings — natural for someone who spent many years as a professional geologist. But that is not a very full answer. The natural world is not necessarily sad. Indeed, for most who study it, even geology is immensely fascinating and invigorating. The trail again ends in matters not understood — unless the author was writing of his dissatisfactions with geology and reasons for leaving it, which is possible.

Are the images apt? If the poem intended was a sort of Arnold's *Dover Beach*, but without the sustaining power of love, then the answer is surely no. There is imagery much closer to home than this — more vital, better grasped, impinging more directly on lives. If the poem is an oblique criticism of the stultifying way geology is addressed, then the answer is again no. The approach is very obscure indeed. But if the poem is an attempt to extend the content of poetry and see the world as the product of forces that carry meaning and emotional significance, then analysis moves to another sphere, to the subject of poetry, where

psychoanalysis does not pretend to arbitrate.

Application: Secondary Revision

Freud's fourth process was secondary revision, where the disparate elements are combined into an intelligible, coherent whole. Freud's terminology of course applied to dreams rather than literature, but it is noteworthy that the poem does have a dreamlike quality. The content appears by image association, and there are sudden shifts: from "they" to "we", and from buildings to whales. More pertinently, the need for an intelligible, coherent whole is the old demand for artistic autonomy and form. This fourth requirement is better examined under other approaches: traditional, textural or stylistic criticism. All we need do here is to summarize those findings and note that the poem is unbalanced, unnecessarily dreamlike and requires more suspense in plot and argument.

Conclusions: Suggested Corrections

Psychoanalysis does not have an aesthetic remit. Its claims are for a psychological truth; if a poem seems significant and carries a strong emotional charge, then the poem is operating on the hidden drives of the unconscious. The writer created the work in answer to some deep personal instincts, and the work appeals because it finds similar or equivalent instincts in the reader. There are no corrections indicated by psychoanalysis, only the proviso that the writer must ensure that in correcting along other lines that his corrections do not weaken that appeal. Further than that, of course, he has an obligation to examine what psychoanalytical criticism is suggesting, about his work, and about his fundamental nature.

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JUNGIAN CRITICISM

Jung saw the mind as a battlefield of conflicting psychic forces, personal and collective. Such forces were not necessarily sexual, but did emerge as archetypes: predispositions of beliefs, activities and symbols in which the unconsciousness becomes articulate and conscious to us. Archetypes of the collective unconscious are the recurring images to be found in any culture, and the artist, like all human beings, is simply their midwife. Archetypes of the personal unconscious, however (particularly the shadow, and those masculine or feminine aspects of personality known as animus or anima) are dispositions we each need to recognize and accommodate if we are to mature as persons and take our place in society. Both come into Jungian analysis.

While myths of the collective unconscious may occur in poetry at all levels, it is fiction of some length (novels, plays, narrative poems in which the protagonist faces painful adjustments in growing up and/or coming to terms with life) that benefit from analysis of the personal unconscious. Elements may have been repressed into the shadow side, or personalities unbalanced by denial of the animus or anima elements.

Jung himself was more concerned with the creative process than Freud, and shielded artworks from psychoanalysis. Art was not neurosis, and individual productions must be judged by the methods appropriate to that art form. Similarly, the nature of art was a matter for aesthetics. Psychiatry could not adjudicate on literature, any more than should science.

Jung's followers have taken different routes. Stress on the midwife role of artist leads to the Structuralist view of the writer, who is not the originator of his writings but merely the mouthpiece of more general forces. The myth criticism of

Northrop Frye accepts that psychiatry cannot judge the aesthetic value of literature, but does claim to categorize objectively and universally. {1}

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Analysis: Symbols of the Collective Unconscious

Many of the collective myths employed in this poem are obvious. There is the restless, fecund and accommodating nature of the sea. And there is the land, and buildings constructed on and with that land. A contrast emerges between the changing and the permanent, the fluid and the rule-constructed, the feminine and the masculine. But this is too obvious to be worth dwelling on, and the poem emphasizes the constant interplay between the two. The sea erodes the land, grinding the rock to sand and pebbles, and by doing so provides materials by which the land may be built upon and preserved.

By the second stanza, the poem is moving on to consider the detritus of erosion, the aggregate containing something of the stormy North Sea in its make-up (*past days, overcast and glinting*) and something of the land, most notably the metal silicates that compose most rock. Lines 9-10 transfer the toughness and intricate skeleton of rock minerals to the sterile activities of bureaucrats in faceless office blocks. Is this acceptable, this intellectual conceit (*part of the silicate of tough lives...*)? Jungians would see it as a projection of the repressed and troublesome contents of the unconscious to a supposed exterior reality. It's hardly a fair picture of bureaucrats, who do more than wait for the post and departmental meetings. Moreover, whose unconscious are

we now considering — the sea's, the land's, the architects' or the "you" referred to in the first line (*As you'd expect*)? The poem is very unclear. Traditional criticism and textural analysis (which would be consulted at this point) do not help much. The poem's simple remarks that the bureaucrats seem lost in their busy routines (*Except that these do not know it, at least / Do not seem to, being busy, generally.*) The conceit is not developed, but left hanging in the air.

Perhaps that is only natural. The conceit is a tenuous one. But the matter returns to press us for an answer in stanzas three and four. A long, floating, rather tenuous description of the light-headedness caused by occupying these high office blocks is anchored to a "they" or "we" in line 23 (*That they become attentive, or we do*) The "they" must relate to the bureaucrats, who are becoming aware, or at least attentive. But aware of or attentive to what — their surroundings, the aggregate make-up of the buildings, their tough, intricate lives? Before the matter is resolved the "they" switches to "we", and this "we" is involved in the construction business: probably as architects, to judge from the poem's title.

And these architects have nothing to say on the earlier intellectual conceit, but develop another. They talk of *constructing these webs of buildings*, compare these buildings to whales (*Caulked like great whales about us*), and then view the buildings as endangered creatures whose sonic calls to each other (*placid but unbearable melodies*) reach out to fill the architects' thoughts. The *deep hinterlands of incurved glass* (presumably the office complexes) are now plunged into a submarine environment, or possibly we are so plunged if we recall the poem's first line. What does this mean?

Again it seems a transference, an acting out of the contents of the unconscious as though they were objective reality. Why consider the office blocks as whales? Because they are

constructed of marine elements? Because they hide their inner structures to all but the architects? Because they are beautiful, inoffensive and doomed to extinction? These and other interpretations are possible, but the poem gives nothing away, ending only in a melancholy strangeness. What is being escaped from (*unbearable melodies*)?

Perhaps we should return to the beginning of the poem. The buildings are *impatient*, we are told, and are composed of materials that as cliffs are *burdensome, underwritten as / It were with past days*. They are heavy with a past that is cyclic: tides, storms, a continual grinding away of the rock into pebbles, erosion of the land and then a building of these pebbles into shingle and cliffed extensions of the land. But there is no sense of continuity in this, no joy in the endless fecundity of the natural world. On the contrary, both here (*hoarse roar, burdensome, obdurate*) and at the end of the poem (*pleading and flailing, unbearable*) the tone is subdued and stoical. What is being escaped from is human mortality: this is *Dover Beach* without the sustaining fidelity of love.

So we see the point of the first conceit. One aspect of the land, its tough silicate minerals, is projected onto bureaucrats to give them (and by extension all humankind) a durability and structure they would not otherwise possess. And the conceit is not continued because it is not believed in. The architects see further (*on those cloudless, almost vacuumed afternoons*) and realize that their creations are alien (though dressed as *friends*) and alienating (*hinterlands of incurved glass*), so that permanence is not desirable. It would be better (the second conceit) if buildings were as inoffensive and appealing as whales, which follow their hidden courses through the world. But of course the architects don't believe that, and have already realized that human affections are something different (*these / Divisions persisting*), though often ineffective (*Calling at random like*

frail relations). The second conceit fades out into sonic music because it has already been discounted (*indeed what we talk about*).

Analysis: Symbols of the Personal Unconscious

The poem is certainly very convoluted, perhaps unnecessarily so, but suppose the above were indeed what we'd been trying to say. How well does the vocabulary support the conception? We distinguish symbols representing the *animus* from those of the *anima*: —

The Architects

But, as you'd expect, they are very
Impatient, **the buildings**, having much in them
Of the heavy **surf** of the North Sea, flurrying
The grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them
With a hoarse roar against the aggregate
They are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,
More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days overcast
And glinting, *obdurate*, **part of the**
Silicate of *tough lives*, *distant* and intricate
As the whirring bureaucrats let in
And settled with coffee in the *concrete pallets*,
Awaiting the post and the department meeting —
Except that these do not know it, at least do not
Seems to, being busy, generally.
So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost
Vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier
Of *concrete like rib-bones* packed above them,
And they light-headed with the blue airiness
Spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia
Calling at random like *frail relations*, a phone
Ringing in a distant office they cannot get to,
That they become attentive, or we do — these
Divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about,
We, constructing these **webs** of *buildings* which,
Caulked like great whales about us, are always
Aware that some trick of the light or weather
Will dress them as friends, **pleading and flailing** —
And fill with placid but unbearable melodies

Us in deep hinterlands of **incurved** glass.

The first thing we note is the preponderance of animus, male symbols. Only *surf*, *webs*, *pleading and flailing*, *incurved* and possibly *vacuumed* are feminine — the latter more on Freudian terms. And that, in a poem dealing so much with the sea, the cyclic nature of life, and with balance of land and sea, seems a fault. Certainly *these webs of buildings* is an unfortunate mixture of anima and animus, and indeed makes little sense on other grounds.

But what is important in Jungian theory is not the symbols as such, but the extent they are faced, understood and accommodated by the individual. To complicate matters, the poem has two individuals and a convoluted line of reasoning. Let's start with the reader addressed in the opening line. He is told about the buildings, the aggregates they are composed of, and the actions of the North Sea. Almost throughout, the imagery is drivingly energetic and aggressive. Where is the anima side? It hardly exists until the last stanza, where the reader is perhaps reintroduced with "Us".

Take the architects, who appear with the "we" in line 23. Their imagery is predominantly feminine. Does this answer the overwhelming masculine imagery before? Only if we merge the reader and the architects into one, the same persona, which makes little sense.

Analysis suggests that the personae of the poem need looking at — the reader, the bureaucrats and the architects, particularly the jump from "they" to "we" in line 23. But a larger question is the balance between the energetic masculine first three stanzas and the melancholic final stanza. There is a sense of compression, of the aggressive objectivity not being faced and absorbed by its shadow.

Conclusions: Suggested Corrections

Correct the imbalance between the objective stanzas 1-3 and the reflective stanza 6.

Resolve ambiguities with personae.

Make the argument less convoluted.

Make matters clearer in stanza 5, particularly the "they" and "we" of line 23.

Replace "webs" in line 25 and rewrite line 30 to make the imagery more consistent and intelligible.

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FRACTAL CRITICISM

Study of brain functioning has yet to properly account for language itself, let alone aesthetic language. But we know that cerebral processes are interlinked, employ multiple feedback, and that consciousness (and so art) could be an emergent property of its complex operations. Not all of our thinking apparatus is located in the brain, and a good deal of human activity is unconscious, not readily imparted by book-learning or encompassed by logic. Synaesthesia has a biological explanation, and rhythm — speech rhythm and metre — is instinctive to us. More than that it is hardly possible to go, except in two areas: metaphor theory and the fractal self-similarity of art.

Fractals are geometric shapes whose parts are themselves reduced copies of the whole. They show self-similarity. A fractal may appear as an innocuous zigzag line {1} but zoom in with a magnifying glass and each straight section dissolves into a finer zigzag line. That finer zigzag line may show a yet finer structure, and so on. The process can end at some level of magnification, or the fragmentation go on forever, when the zigzag line would have a dimension neither that of a line nor an area but something perplexingly between the two. Yes, such lines exist, and are indeed very common in nature.

Fractals occur in complex or non-linear systems. Such systems characteristically have feedback, and each successive state depends on the previous state. We can model a linear system with a simple equation, say $Y=AX(X+B)$, where A and B are constants, which gives us a simple curve with Y steeply increasing as X increases. But non-linear systems are very different. Because each value of X depends on the previous value of X (and we will represent these two values, present and previous, as X and x , likewise

Y and y) we have to write equations linking X and x and Y and y . One example would be: $X=x^2 + y^2 + A$. And $Y=2xy + B$. This is the famous Mandelbrot set, with very remarkable properties. For short distances the plot of X against Y indeed produces a simple curve. But then all changes. For the smallest increase of X , the value of Y is wildly different. Thereafter, for a range of X values, Y plots all over the place — i.e. apparently randomly, chaotically. Then, quite suddenly, when a certain value of X has been reached, the randomness disappears and a simple curve takes over. And in every direction the process repeats in stunning complexity.

And there is a good deal more. Zoom in on the plots (i.e. examine in smaller steps, or increments of X), and each area dissolves into further areas of curves and chaos. Model in even smaller increments, and an even finer structure appears. Or does not appear. With computers we can model the fineness of the increments needed to reach stability and show this fineness by colours on the VDU screen. And the result is a fractal geometry of self-similarity. The blobs and swirls of the whole Mandelbrot structure are repeated at every level of detail. Continue the zooming and the characteristic patterns of linear and non-linear behaviour constantly appear, shift, dissolve and reappear.

But these patterns are not precisely repeated. There are the subtle variations which are characteristic of complex, non-linear systems. The X and Y plots proceed smoothly for a while, and then suddenly bifurcate, dissolve into areas of random behaviour, or cycle about points known as "strange attractors". Mechanical bodies (pendulums, weights on springs, etc.) commonly show oscillation or circular motion, but complex motions are not circular repetitions but patterns never exactly repeating themselves. And when these patterns are examined, they very often show a finer

structure, indicating that the behaviour of quite simple mathematical expressions can be very complex indeed. {2}

Feedback is endemic to living creatures, and complex systems have been recognized in human beings at every level, from brain functioning to social behaviour. {3} Fractals have also appeared in art theory, not simply as applications in computer art, but in attempts to understand our creative and aesthetic responses. Instinctive human preferences may have an origin in complex mathematical relationships. {4} In poetry we notice that a particular phrase or line appears particularly striking, and it may be that, just as a tuning fork feeds on the vibrations at its characteristic frequency, the particular phrase or line draws its power from its surroundings. Poems often need shaping so that they can resonate all of a piece, and this may explain why a small, finely-crafted piece is often more effective than one longer, richer but more unwieldy.

But is this resonance more than a figure of speech? We don't know. Painters do not paint what they see, but build something from their visual responses using an inherited craft: compositional devices, subtle mixtures of complementary and analogous colours, modification of hue, value and intensity, and so forth. Poets also have their craft, their "rules" of diction, content, imagery, prosody, rhyming, and stanza-shaping being no more than traditional methods of getting a poem to work properly. A poem may expire under too heavy a burden of rules, or individual rules may conflict, requiring some choice, balance and commonsense. But whatever the rules may be, they survive because they are useful, and are useful because they continually relate the part to the whole, accommodate the individual word etc. to the reader's overall expectations. Among these expectations is sense, patterning, a phrasing that seems apt and vivid in its particular context.

How is that patterning achieved but by some features of complex systems? The self-similarity of fractals, the regularity that suddenly appears out of and draws on the chaos that surrounds the poem on every side, and the resonance of individual lines and phrases that echo through the structural matrix of the work can all be applied to the poem under consideration.

There is one further matter. Beginning artists are continually instructed to simplify: to seize on essentials and render those as directly as possible. Sparseness is equally a virtue of writing, not least in poetry. Simplicity also underlies the fractal world. For all the astonishing fecundity of its fractal plot, the equations of the Mandelbrot set are very straightforward, and other fractal patterns may have an even simpler mathematical expression. But each single plot on the VDU screen, each Y intersection with X , is a single representation of the underlying equation, and therefore retains the power to generate the total picture. It resembles the hologram where even a small part of the image has information on the whole, or the virus which takes over the DNA of the cell and starts issuing instructions for its multiple replication. The relevance to poetry? Poems commonly start with an odd phrase or line, which subsequently generates the whole poem — even if sometimes rejected at last, so that the originating words remain unaltered, like a catalyst at the end of a chemical reaction. What gives these words such power that every sensible poet carries a notebook to catch them as they occur?

Consider an analogy. If a tree in a forest is struck by lightning and bursts into flame, what is the probability of the fire spreading? It depends on several things — on the fractal pattern of trees in the forest, on the probability that the tree concerned is a member of the largest cluster, and on the probability that the cluster connects to other clusters. Exact

solutions are difficult, but computer simulation indicates that the forest fire burns longest when the tree concerned has a 59.3% probability of belonging to a larger cluster. {5} And this is counter-intuitive, not to be expected. But the suggestion (to the extent that the power of words is anything like comparable) is that key words are most effective when not too thickly surrounded by synonyms — i.e. neither predictable nor obscure. Samuel Johnson's remark "Words too familiar, or too remote, defeat the purpose of a poet." comes to mind. {6} Analogies prove nothing, but it is nonetheless remarkable that questions of literary practice and sensibility may have a mathematical basis — i.e. be less imposed and arbitrary than Postmodernists sometimes suppose.

Harold McWinnie and others have related fractal dimensions to the aesthetically pleasing golden section, {7} which can of course be derived by other mathematical routes. George Birkoff (1884-1944) suggested an aesthetic measure equal to *Complexity / Order*, which can indeed be applied to music. The calculations indicate that listeners should enjoy compositions where the succession of notes is neither too predictable nor too surprising, which seems to be the case. {8} But can fractal measurement be extended to poetry? Linguistics is currently a battlefield of contending theories. Brain physiology is known only in broad outline. Experimental aesthetics has not enjoyed the success once expected. And the mathematics of chaos, even with computer iteration, is hard going. But interesting papers are now beginning to appear on the Internet, and prospects may be clearer in a few years' time. {9}

Self Similarity: Themes

The Architects

But, as you'd expect, they are very
Impatient, the buildings, having much in them

Of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying
The grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them
With a hoarse roar against the aggregate
They are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,
More burdensome, underwritten as
It were with past days overcast
And glinting, obdurate, part of the
Silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate

As the whirring bureaucrats let in
And settled with coffee in the concrete pallets,
Awaiting the post and the department meeting —
Except that these do not know it, at least do not
Seem to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those cloudless, almost
Vacuumed afternoons with tier upon tier
Of concrete like rib-bones packed above them,
And they light-headed with the blue airiness
Spinning around, and muzzy, a neuralgia

Calling at random like frail relations, a phone
Ringing in a distant office they cannot get to,
That they become attentive, or we do — these
Divisions persisting, indeed what we talk about,
We, constructing these webs of buildings which,
Caulked like great whales about us, are always
Aware that some trick of the light or weather
Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing —
And fill with placid but unbearable melodies
Us in deep hinterlands of incurved glass.

We start by arranging lines and phrases under themes: —

Time

impatient

past days

Sea the heavy surf of the North Sea

great whales

Land and Sky

hoarse roar

the aggregate / They are composed of

the silicate / Of tough lines

the cloudless almost / Vacuumed afternoons

light-headed with a blue airiness

the light or weather

Control

obdurate

whirring bureaucrats

settled with coffee in the concrete pallets

Of concrete like rib-bones packed above them

These / Divisions persisting

Caulked like great whales

Us in the deep hinterlands of incurved glass

Creation

constructing these webs of buildings Illness light-headed

muzzy

a neuralgia

like frail relations

pleading and flailing

Whereas mythic criticism examines the imagery and its power, fractal criticism is simply concerned with self similarity of themes. We want to know what themes arise, and how each is developed. In each appearance we would hope to see a variation in miniature of the poem as a whole. Let's start with the most obvious: control.

Though heavy, oppressive and consistently invoking the natural world, in what way does *control* repeat the overall theme of the poem? The title is "The Architects" and, although these use concrete and other obdurate building materials, and may even "caulk" damp-courses etc., control

is not the usual image of the profession. Architecture is one of the creative arts, and foundation courses start in art colleges. Is the title a misnomer? Possibly. It may have been chosen to emphasize the "we" that appears so abruptly in line 23, or in default of something more abstruse. A more exact but materialistic title could have been "The Uses of Silica".

But perhaps the theme really is architects, the way their imaginations are curbed, not only by the practicalities of building but the constraints of cost and client preferences? The imagery of the third stanza would support that interpretation — a busy architects' office closely resembling the usual bureaucrats' — and the final stanza indeed suggests that their original conceptions have been imprisoned in some friendly but uncomfortable appearance, or lost in the "hinterlands of incurved glass." But if this is so, then the first two stanzas lead awkwardly into the theme, and need attention.

Also preponderant are the themes of "land" and "sky". Weather, the tough silicates of rocks and the vertigo of high buildings on clear afternoons make their appearance. These clearly are not the theme of the poem announced by the title, and the observation that we are all imprisoned /controlled by the constant features of the landscape is too obvious to be worth elaborating. But suppose the poem was indeed about control, only the control was self-exerted? Bureaucrats follow the time-wasting and sterile procedures of office-dwellers where architects yearn for more freedom, though knowing the constraints of their profession; the elements of the natural world follow their ineluctable cycles of geological creation, erosion and re-deposition.

Suppose we leave that as a possibility, and look at the other themes. That of "creation" belongs to the architects, and appears only once. That of "time" appears in the aberrant

opening stanzas. And that of "illness" applies to the architects only: the bureaucrats are self-absorbed and content with their routines. Is that the essence? The poem is called "The Architects" because they alone are aware of the domination by the inherent nature of things? Again, if decided upon, the poem needs tidying up, with the themes more clearly established.

Self Similarity: Imagery

Matters are more straightforward with imagery. All is drawn from the natural world, and appears hard, inescapable and indifferent to human interests. The sea is invoked with the action of surf on grit and pebbles. The sea cliffs are burdensome, and the silicate nature of the aggregates — hard and polished — has entered the lives of bureaucrats. The afternoons are empty (vacuum-cleaned) and seem oppressed by the weight of floors packed like rib-bones above them. The submarine haunts of the whale are continued in the glass hinterlands, and neither whales nor architects are happy with their surroundings. The only matters that need attention — since the imagery of the poem is consistent, both as a whole and in the individual phrases — is the "impatient" of line 1, the "whirring" of line 11 and the "webs" of line 25.

Risk Taking: Closeness to Chaos

Complex systems develop areas of stability, or quasi-stability, on the very edge of chaos. {10} That is one of their characteristics, what makes them interesting. The Modernists championed the new, and the Postmodernists focus on the socially antagonistic and iconoclastic. But the suggestion from complex systems is that art is important for the patterning it creates from chaos. It is not the order nor the chaos *per se* that are themselves important, but their arrangement in a particular artwork. That order or regularity

grows out of the chaos. It feeds on it, and cannot be meaningful otherwise. For this reason blueprints do not exist for artworks: there are no moulds into which content or technique may be simply poured. The greatest art is that which takes the largest risks, and is the more encompassing, but the need is still for patterning, balance, variety in order. Anyone can petulantly tear up the beliefs of the previous generation, but only a great artist can embody them in new ways and make that conception more detailed and far-reaching. The west's passion for novelty, and the east's deep respect for tradition may not be antagonistic, though the balance and expression differ with the cultures concerned.

Poems therefore have to be fought for, and are continually asserting themselves against the obscure, the incoherent, the dark forces of our instinctive natures. The greatest poems are not necessarily made from the most obviously felt emotions — often the reverse since a poem can be overwhelmed by the originating experience, and so stay incoherent and uncommunicated — but they are made from deep strands of intellectual and emotional instability. Their appearance is often a wonder, and their completion a revelation. "I have no idea how I wrote that," is a common response.

If that is so, we should be able to feel the poem organizing itself, pulling phrase after phrase into order and coherence. And the craft and devices used should be appropriate, mediating with the surrounding incoherence, but not smothering it. The trouble with "greeting card verse" is not that the themes are trite, or the style hackneyed, but that the material is predictable, pre-digested, in no way vital or threatening. What is said may be "true", and charmingly expressed, but the piece remains verse: innocuous, without intellectual or emotional charge.

What incoherence is being struggled with in this poem? Quite a lot, though not always successfully. Something of the elements which created the concrete aggregate apparently lingers on in the buildings, but "impatient" is not the word to describe their continuing influence. Indeed the energy of the North Sea is too strong for the buildings, which are not sufficiently stressed. The first stanza should be rewritten, or entirely rethought. The energy of the natural world contrasts with the mechanical actions of the bureaucrats and the constrained lives of architects and whales, but why is that contrast important? Why is nature antagonistic to man? What is missing between the savagery of the North Sea with which the poem opens and the gentle melancholy with which it ends? Something is started with the word "underwritten" of line 7, but thought remains incomplete. Similarly the jump in line 23 from "they" to "we" — presumably from bureaucrats to architects — is arbitrary as it stands, and weakens whatever it is that "attentive" refers to.

Is the poem organizing itself? Sometimes. But look again at lines 7 to 10. Are the words drawing order out of chaos or simply following a train of association? Certainly they don't sink intellectual claws into the scene. And in lines 14 to 15, if the bureaucrats are turning away from outside experience, what is the troubling "generally" attempting to achieve? The thought here becomes very thin, no doubt introducing the light-headedness that comes with high-rise offices, but weakening the overall tenor of the poem. The bureaucrats are muzzy-headed, the architects are talking about divisions, and the whales are pleading and flailing: in what ways can any of these be said to have created insight and order from the confused indifference of the natural world? Some clarification is needed.

Resonance: Drawing on the Whole

Engineers are familiar with resonance. All systems have a

frequency at which they naturally vibrate (or build up rapidly in amplitude if electrical). At some distance from the natural frequency the effect of inducing a vibration is very small, but this builds dramatically as the natural frequency is approached. For that reason, troops break step when marching across bridges, in case their rhythm should coincide with that of the bridge, and so bring the whole structure down. And for that reason as well, to extend the analogy, the exact word is unusually effective in literature, hanging in the mind long after we have finished reading.

But perhaps literary resonance is not mere analogy. By their intellectual cohesion, their emotive build-ups, their use of metre and a host of other devices, poems may in fact operate like complex systems, with various nodes and points of maximum activity. Complex systems are indeed complex, with a behaviour not easily explained by their constituent parts. Often the mathematics is so difficult that solutions are more readily obtained by experimentation on models rather than by solving the equations concerned, even supposing that the equations can be adequately derived. Exactly the same applies to poetry. Much of it is built by experiment, by trial and error. It is well known — indeed is a feature of a well-constructed poem — that a word must fit neatly as though predestined into a particular line, and that this one word will have repercussions throughout the whole poem. The words all then appear inevitable, drawing on each other for their intellectual content and emotional support. And those which fail, do so spectacularly. What do we think of *whirring*, *webs of buildings*, and *deep hinterlands of incurved glass*?

Whirring suggests something hidden, mechanical, perhaps ineffectual, and so not inappropriate. Yet the word seems wrong, perhaps because it is unsupported by the associations of the words around. All are tough, obdurate, heavy,

inert, whereas *whirring* seems lightweight and fretful. There is no alliteration or onomatopoeia to settle the word, or indeed other devices to fasten it into the taxis (structure) of the poem.

Similar objections can be levelled against *these webs of buildings*. The intent is obvious enough — to link buildings with architect and inhabitants — but the link simply states what should emerge from the context: it is applied, imposed, manhandles the meaning too brutally.

And finally there is *deep hinterlands of incurved glass*. Of course *deep* is acting as a bridging mechanism, linking the submarine world of whales and the supercooled liquid that is glass with psychological (*incurved*) constraints on our lives, but should so far-reaching or contentious a suggestion be introduced in the final line without prior development or warning?

Conclusions: Suggested Improvements

The following seem necessary:

Rewrite the first stanza.

Reshape the second stanza to lead into the third better.

Clarify who is who in fourth and fifth stanzas.

Replace *whirring*, *these webs of buildings* and *deep hinterlands of incurved glass*.

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 6. Samuel Johnson's *Life of Dryden* in *Lives of the Poets* (1781).
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Internet Resources

Few of these sites relate to literary criticism, but they do give some idea of the importance and potential applications of complex systems.

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5. Fractal Visual Poetry. 3 Apr. 2006.
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6. WWW Resources on Nonlinear Dynamics and Complex Systems.

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[NCSLdirectory.htm](http://www.ceptualinstitute.com/genre/NCSLdirectory.htm). Listings at NCSL, Pohang, Korea.

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<http://www2.eng.cam.ac.uk/~tpl/texts/quotes.html>. Extensive listing: includes note on Birkoff's aesthetic formula.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

Looking over the recommendations of the ten approaches, summarised below, we find conflicting advice:

Traditional

The poem is an oddity: either produce a considerable body of such work so that we can see where the approach is going, or return to the common interests of human beings.

New Criticism

The poem is over-elaborated and lacks an inherent rightness of phrase or rhythm.

Rhetorical

The argument should be sharpened, the images more clearly related, and some of the refutatio cut.

Stylistic

Other styles (Pindaric ode, blank verse, prose poem) might be more successful, and more could be done to make the voices distinct.

Metaphorical

Several metaphors should be improved upon, and we'd want to look at more poems in this métier to see if the theme were valid.

Poststructuralist

The poem is somewhat ambivalent in its leanings, hovering uncomfortably between modernism and postmodernism.

Myth Theory

The poem is not coherent, but simply gives a perplexing sense of otherness, a vague feeling that much is wrong with modern life.

Freudian

There are no corrections indicated by psychoanalysis, only the proviso that the writer must ensure that in correcting along other lines that his corrections do not weaken that appeal.

Jungian

Analysis suggests several corrections to make the poem more balanced, the argument less convoluted and ambiguities with

ambiguities with personae better resolved.

Cognitive Scientific

The first stanza should be rewritten, the lead into the second stanza made smoother, who is who in fourth and fifth stanzas clearer, and the following replaced: 'whirring', 'these webs of buildings' and 'deep hinterlands of incurved glass'.

Redrafted Poem: Office Workers

Yet the redrafted poem below has accepted very few recommendations. Why? Perhaps, being temperamentally opposed to Postmodernism I did want to write one of its typical creations. Perhaps I was wary of adopting the varied recommendations and ending up with a composite poem, the 'a camel is a horse designed by a committee' sort of thing. Or perhaps, finally, in some strange sort of way, the poem did seem to work, or its failures did not entirely outweigh its successes. For me the poem remains an oddity, an approach not continued with, but one I hope readers have also found useful in illuminating the many ways we can view our work.

Redrafted Poem: Office Workers

But, as you'd expect, they are very
impatient, the buildings, having much in them
of the heavy surf of the North Sea, flurrying
the grit, lifting the pebbles, flinging them
with a hoarse roar against the aggregate
they are composed of — the cliffs higher of course,
more burdensome, underwritten as it were
with past days, overcast and glinting, obdurate,
part of the silicate of tough lives, distant and intricate

As the fretful bureaucrats let in
and settled with coffee in their concrete pallets,
awaiting the post and the department meeting —

except that these do not know it, at least do not seem to, being busy, generally.

So perhaps it is only on those spun out to nothing and airless afternoons, with tier upon tier of concrete like rib-bones arrayed above them, and they light-headed with the blue airiness always whirling about, and muzzy, a neuralgia calling at random like frail relations, a phone ringing at some office they can never get to, that they become attentive — the planners, the architects, the constructions themselves, and we living ourselves in these webs of buildings, which, caulked like great whales about us, are always aware that some trick of the light or weather Will dress them as friends, pleading and flailing — and fill us with placid but unbearable melodies as the lift drops us down smoothly through the plates of glass.