

# Analysis of the Revision of a Poem by Bill Knott

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Alexander believes—and this is pretty clear from his recent book, in 4 volumes collectively called *The Nature of Order* [11]—that “life”—which is both a literal term as well as a term that refers to that quality of built objects that makes them whole, lively, wonderful, comfortable, bittersweet, and generally where people want to live their lives—emerges from the geometric characteristics of the features that make up (things in) space. He defines a concept he calls “centers” and 15 characteristics of them—alone and in combination—and he argues that if something has a sufficiently strong set of centers as measured by the number and richness of the characteristics, then it is whole or alive. In earlier work on patterns and pattern languages, he called this quality the *quality without a name*.

A few years ago I used this theory to construct a hypothesis to explain what poetry is—namely, how poetic writing differs from ordinary writing—and a method for revising poems by identifying weaknesses in them. In essence, the method worked by finding places to revise and suggesting avenues for revision. To start to see what we think of this hypothesis, let’s take a quick look at the concept of centers and the 15 characteristics, and see how they apply to the process of writing poetry.

I’ve put all the material on centers in a box in the next column; you can skim it or skip it and use just the gestalt of my poetry example to get the idea.

For Alexander, the process of design and building is an iterative process. The first two steps, in their original simplified form, are as follows:

1. At every step of the process—whether conceiving, designing, making, maintaining, or repairing—we must always be concerned with the whole within which we are making anything. We look at this wholeness, absorb it, try to feel its deep structure.
2. We ask which kind of thing we can do next that will do the most to give this wholeness the most positive increase of life.

The remaining steps ask us to make the change and assess its effectiveness—continuing or undoing, depending. The kinds of things that can be done to increase life are to add centers (where there are only latent centers), strengthen centers, or apply (struc-

**Center:** A center is any place in a poem that attracts attention. Centers can arise from the action/interaction of these craft elements: stress/unstress; sound; unit of syntax; rhyme; repeated words and sounds; line; first word in a line; last word in a line; stanza; image; metaphor and other figures; title; the poem itself; historical or political elements; revealed metaphysics; meaning.

**Levels of Scale:** centers at all levels of scale

**Strong Centers:** center toward which other centers point

**Boundaries:** separates a center from other centers, focuses attention on the center, is itself made of centers

**Alternating Repetition:** strong centers repeated with alternating centers; not simple repeating; pattern with variation

**Positive Space:** a center that moves outward from itself, seemingly oozing life rather than collapsing on itself

**Good Shape:** a center that is beautiful by itself

**Local Symmetries:** a center with another nearby which is somehow an echo

**Deep Interlock and Ambiguity:** centers that are hard to pull apart; centers derive power from surrounding centers; centers cannot be removed without diminishment; centers that are part of several others

**Contrast:** differentiation, distinctness, discernible opposites

**Gradients:** softness; qualities vary subtly, gradually, and slowly

**Roughness:** a certain ease

**Echoes:** family resemblance not exact replication

**The Void:** stillness or literally a quiet point

**Simplicity and Inner Calm:** all irrelevant parts are gone; it is as simple and spare as it can be and still retain its life; nothing more can be removed; each part seems simple and simply made

**Not-Separateness:** at one with the world, and not separate from it



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ture-preserving) transformations that introduce or strengthen the characteristics listed above right.

To see how looking at centers might direct revision, I've pulled out an example from my MFA studies. Bill Knott is an important but ultimately minor poet who was a friend of one of my teachers. That teacher believed I needed to get away from being so rational as a writer, and to him Knott was just the poet to study. Knott is an odd one—he uses his shirt pocket as an ashtray, for example. He writes funny poems that in many cases have their own brand of rationality. Knott's poems are short, which suits my purpose, and—absolutely most importantly—he has a pair of poems in his published work where one is a revision of the other. The poem is called "Lourdes," and it first appeared in his 1976 collection called *Rome in Rome* [2]. A revision appeared in another collection, *Be-cos* [3], in 1983. On the next page is the first of these, marked up with an analysis of its centers and their relationships. Before you try to read it, some advice. First, poems are not necessarily for making total sense of—and Knott's poetry is often very nonsensical. Second, for the purposes of our exploration, it's not required that you understand the poem or even the deep meaning of centers and the characteristics as they relate to poetry—all that's needed is to see how the inherent strengths and weaknesses of this poem directed its revision (maybe).

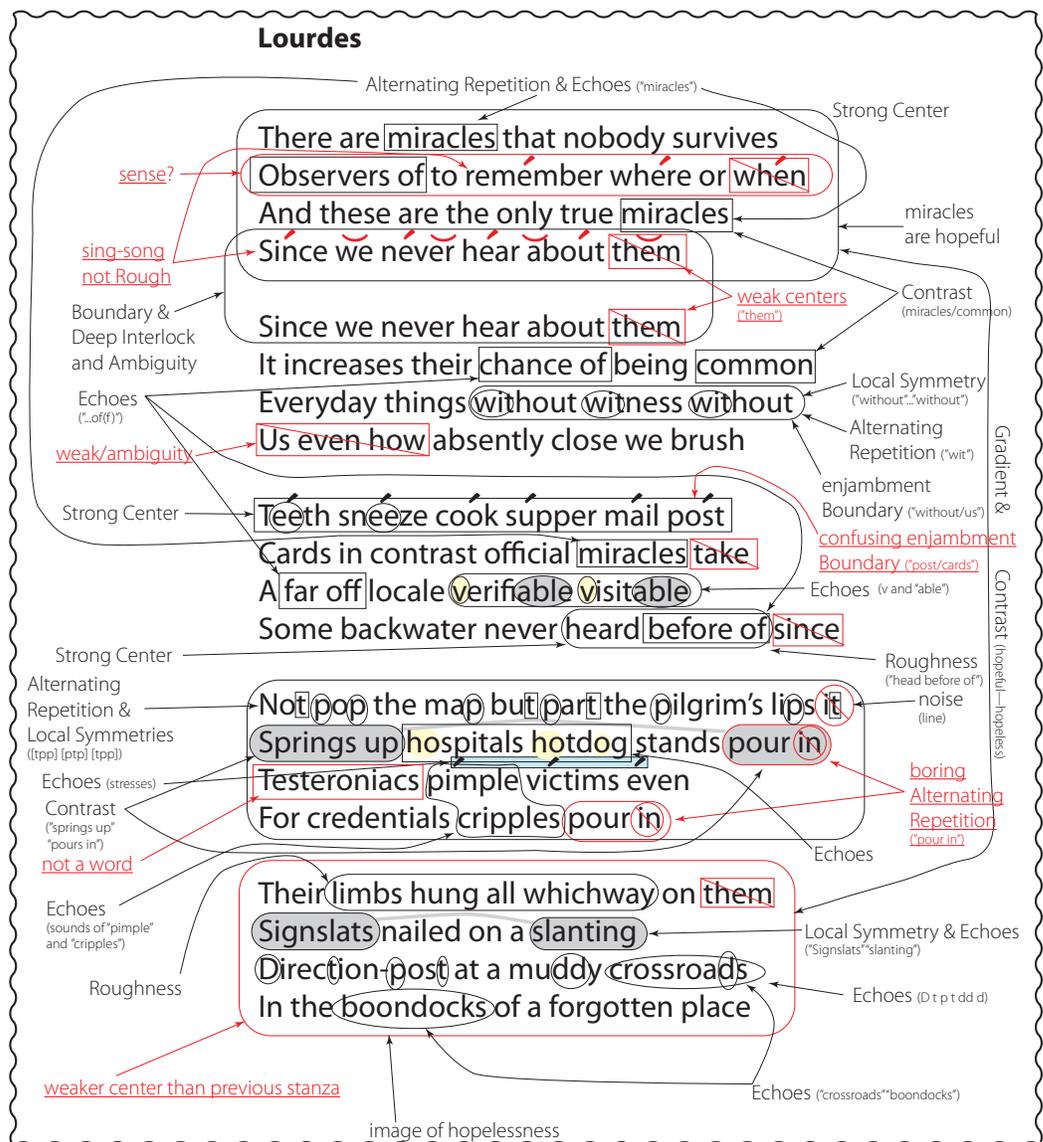
The poem is about miracles, and how real ones are private while the "official" ones have something not so wonderful about them, or at least where they take place are either "leveraged" or are not so easily found—both in the sense of not easy to locate and not easy on the soul and senses to do so. That's a not ridiculous way to read the poem, but that's not important.

First let's look at some of the strong centers and configurations of them. The first stanza has connections to two others via "miracles," which is repeated, either as an Echo or a sort of Alternating Repetition. It forms a Gradient and Contrast with the last stanza, the former being about hope while the last is about hopelessness—and what's in between is in between hopefulness and hopelessness. "Miracles" in the first stanza Contrasts with "common" in the second. There are Echoes in the phrases "Observers of,"

"chance of," "before of," and "far off," which link the first stanza to the next two. Centers are things that we notice, are drawn to over and over as we read a poem. We notice these Echoes, partly because some of them are so unusual, and once we've noticed the unusual ones, similar-sounding phrases are lumped into the group. The Boundary between the first and second stanzas is clear cut because the lines are repeated; the repeated lines are also Deep Interlock (because it locks the two stanzas together) and Ambiguity (because it isn't clear whether the line belongs in the first or second stanza—Knott solves that by putting it in both).

There is a very strong center in the second stanza—"without witness without." This is a Local Symmetry (x y x) and also Alternating Repetition ("wit"... "wit"... "wit"). More than that, there is a strong enjambment (line break splitting the sense—in this case it's "without / Us"), and this creates a Boundary.

The first line of the third stanza is also a Strong Center. It contains the Echo of the ee sound, and has 6 strong beats out of 7 syllables. There is a nice Echo of noise ("noise" in poetry speak is the sound the words make totally divorced from the sense of the



words—as if an animal were making the sounds) in “verifiable visitable,” which Echo “v” and “able.” The last line of the stanza is interesting—an example of Knott compressing language so that it still retains sense or seems to. “Some backwater never heard before of since” is perhaps a little dyslexic turn or a funny sort of compression for “Some backwater never heard of before or since.” Its strangeness (important in post-19<sup>th</sup> century poetry), its containment of the center “before of” mentioned earlier, and its Roughness make it a Strong Center. One could argue that Knott wrote this phrase to make “before of” a center that would link it to the earlier “- of” centers.

The fourth stanza has lots of strong centers. The first line contains the Alternating Repetition of the “t”s and “p”s; it’s also Local Symmetries because of the pattern of them ([tpp] [ptp] [tpp]). The line also has lots of good noise—try reading it out loud. “Springs up” and “pour in” form a Contrast in two ways: *up* versus *in* (which in the case of pouring is actually *down*) and something that can spring is solid while something you can pour is liquid. And you could say also that something that springs up acts on its own while something that is poured is acted upon. “Hospitals hotdog” contains Echoes of “ho” and “o.” “pimple” and “cripples” on adjacent lines form a sonic Echo and also can be considered a Deep Interlock and Ambiguity of the two lines—linking them / locking them together. “pimple,” “victim,” and “even” are also Echoes because they share a stress pattern.

The last stanza has some good centers, but not as many as the previous two. “limbs hung all whichway” is Roughness. “Signslats” and “slanting” are Echoes because of their sounds (**ess** and **sla**), and “Local Symmetries” because they occur at the start and end of a line. “Directionpost at a muddy crossroads” contains Echoes of “d” and “p”. “crossroads” and “boondocks” Echo.

This leaves a number of weak centers or just plain not many of them. Compared to the others, the last stanza forms a weak center.

Let’s look at the rest of the weak centers in the poem.

The first stanza starts with a sentence that’s hard to make sense of: “There are miracles that nobody survives / observers of to remember where or when.” The enjambment makes this extra-jarring. The

first line alone makes perfect sense, but the second line alone makes no sense at all. The phrase “remember where or when” is a bit sing-songy, as is the last line “Since we never hear about them,” and this makes those parts weak. Ending the second line with “when” is weak, especially since there is a stress on it. (Usually the first and last words are the places in a line that attract the most attention, and therefore should be strong words or at least important ones.)

The second stanza has the peculiar fallout from enjambment from the previous line: “Us even how absently close we brush.” Though some could argue the line as it stands has its charm, the phrase “Us even how” is weak.

The third stanza has a confusing Boundary with the enjambment “post / Cards,” and the end words, “take” and “since” are weak fillers of important slots in the poem.

The fourth stanza has the boring Alternating Repetition of “pour in,” and the non-word “Testeroniacs.”

The fifth stanza, in addition to just not having a lot of centers, has a weak end word, “them.”



Let's look at the revision. (Parts not revised are in grey text.) All but two weak centers have been repaired (and one of them was strengthened). Better end words in general strengthen existing centers, and even when sentences and phrases remain the same, different lineation strengthens the centers. Subtle rhythm changes improve the centers—for example changing “hear” to “hear tell” adds a spondee (two stresses or beats in a row), which is a strong center, and also makes it so the first stanza has this beat pattern: 4, 5, 4, 5 (number of stresses per line).

The real news is the last stanza, which is now packed with centers—the intertwining and reinforcing of them within the stanza would take too long to describe completely here. Notice how “misled,” “skewed,” and “point everywhere” bounce off each other and also off of “crisscross,” which bounces off of “crossroads,” which links to “roadsigns,” which links to “signpost,” which links to “postcards.” etc. The noise is much better, it's clearer, and this stanza is now the Strongest Center in the poem. Even small things like changing “muddy” to “weedy” both improve the sound and also make the image cleaner: a muddy crossroads is actually busy, while a weedy one is abandoned. And its image—of a quiet, confused, and confusing nowhere with a Jesus-miracle-like quality—gives it a hint of The Void.

Finally, it could be argued that the result displays Simplicity and Inner Calm. When describing this characteristic, Alexander compares it to Shaker furniture, which he describes with these phrases: *it uses simple parts, the ornament is very sparse, but does occasionally exist, the proportions are unusual, many of the pieces are strange in some specific way which marks them as*

*indeed unusual, the pieces have a recognizable function, but are nonetheless severe, finally, everything is still, silent.*

## References

- [1] Alexander, C., *The Phenomenon of Life: The Nature of Order, Book 1 An Essay of the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe; The Process of Creating Life: The Nature of Order, Book 2 An Essay of the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe; A Vision of a Living World: The Nature of Order, Book 3; The Luminous Ground: The Nature of Order, Book 4*; Center for Environmental Structure, 2003–2006.
- [2] Knott, W., *Rome in Rome*, Release Press, Brooklyn, 1976.
- [3] Knott, W., *Becos*, Random House, New York, 1983.