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“From Peopled Earth To Th’ Trackless Deep Of Space”

The Role Of Poetic Rhythm In The Journey Of Mind By Barbauld

In Anna Barbauld’s *A Summer Evening’s Meditation*, we are taken on a dazzling journey of mind, traveling through the boundless space, during the time of a day when the Eye of Heaven in our planetary system retires and when “ten thousand more eyes” in the vast of space, “restless and dazzled”, awake. Ascending from the Earth where the Cycle of Day and Night unfailingly repeats itself, our thoughts, enabled by Barbauld’s “wild and roving wing of fancy”, freely travel to Earth’s “duteous fair” satellite, to the various planets, and to the “dread confines of eternal light”, before eventually returning to their “known accustomed spot.” However, equally important to her “wing of fancy” and of imagination that made this *Evening’s Meditation* a sensation is Barbauld’s superior gift that grants her the wings of the Pegasus and blessing of Muse - her amazing ability to bring us on this daring journey of mind with the beauty of the verse. In this essay, I will analyze the poem from the perspective of its form and argue that through thoughtful choices and variations in the poem’s rhythm, combined with proper word choices, Barbauld is able to add to the continuity of the poem and highlight key ideas through the flow of the poem.

Before spotting any rhythmic variations within the poem, we notice that this poem is very much conformant, perhaps even more so than many other famous pieces, to the familiar iambic pentameter, with a flow so natural that even the mere regularity in the lines calls for our appreciation for her skillfulness. Assured of the effortlessness of Barbauld’s poetic

aptitude to produce this comforting normality of verse, and largely because of it, we can better appreciate the moments where she intentionally breaks from the normality to bring our attention to key points she must have deemed essential to the expression of herself.

The first eye-catching characteristic of Barbauld's composition is her heavy use of enjambments and caesuras. Indeed, it's even uncommon to see a sentence or idea end or start with a line of verse in *A Summer Evening's Meditation*, as is usually the case in other poems. Constantly breaking the sentence around, sometimes even within, the third foot of a line, it can almost seem that the lines are shifted half a phase from its usual cycle that a casual listener may mistake the middle of the lines for the start and the end. A regular phenomenon throughout the poem, we can spot this pattern right from the beginning of the poem:

'TIS past! The sultry tyrant of the south
 Has spent his short-lived rage; more grateful hours
 Move silent on; the skies no more repel
 The dazzled sight, but with mild maiden beams
 Of temper'd light, invite the cherish'd eye
 To wander o'er their sphere; where hung aloft
 DIAN's bright crescent, like a silver bow
 New strung in heaven, lifts high its beamy horns
 Impatient for the night, and seems to push
 Her brother down the sky. (1-10)

Easily read as "... Tyrant of th' south has spent his short-lived rage; / More grateful hours move silent on; / The skies no more repel the dazzled sight, / but with mild maiden beams of temper'd light, / invite the cherish'd eye to wander o'er their sphere", these lines provide the readers with such an appealing sense of continuity that we are subject to the desire to read on and on. While we are inclined to stop at the end of a sentence, such as in "move silent on" (3), our eyes tell us that it is only the middle of the line and we should continue on to finish the line. Conversely, while we tend to pause at the end of a line to reflect and regain the power to continue, an enjambment will urge us to go on directly to the next line, such as

when we see that there's something "hung aloft" on the "eye-inviting sphere", we naturally cannot wait to learn what is it that hangs that should please my "cherished eyes" "dazzled" by the "sultry tyrant". Through this special technique, Barbauld is able to better connect different parts in the flow of the poem, interweaving metrical and grammatical lines in the verse to provide an uninterrupted progression. Seeing this in light of the content of the poem, in the beginning phase of the poem the continuation is on the axis of time - from the dusk to the midnight; in the later phase the continuation is on the axis of space when the author's thoughts travel from the Earth to the deep of the space. Thus, this effect is highly desired to inform the readers of both how "impatient"ly the "dead of midnight and the noon of thought" comes and how swiftly the author's winged imagination is able to travel through the vast of space past various planets and systems.

In such a concise form as the poetry, the occasional absence of the above characteristic when its presence is abundant can be just as telling. While the above mentioned continuation is preserved through the most of the poem to keep the perspective moving along either axis, moments when the end of a sentence and the end of a line "coincide" and when sentences fit perfectly into iambic pentameter lines will claim heavy attention because they disturb this continuity and invite a good pause with thoughts. In fact, we do discover that such standalone lines of pauses are almost entirely around the transition phase of the poem centered on line 51-2 "This dead of midnight is the noon of thought, / And wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars." After the prolonged gaze at the night sky whose "spacious field" has been intensely studied, the author has become increasingly enthralled by the stars, the "friendly lamps" that emits "milky light" so pure "to point our path and light us to our home"(37-9). Thus, the author takes more frequent pauses here, reflecting on the praise-

worthy wonders of the “citadels of light, and seats of Gods” and gathering her mental energy for her subsequent travel to the ethereal nation and the “hallowed circle of their courts”.

For example, the author exclaims: “How soft they slide along their lucid spheres!” (40) and “How deep the silence yet how loud the praise!” (47) in the aforementioned transitional phase when she temporarily brings her focus from the sky back to her surroundings and before she goes all out to travel through the space with her thoughts. Taking a break from the pattern of the continuous flow identified earlier, Barbauld, in a perfect line of blank verse, marvels at the soft motion of the stars “sliding along the lucid sphere” (40). Expressing heartfelt appreciation for the beauty in the motion of the stars, Barbauld concludes her initial observation of the night sky, yet leaves a trace of immense admiration for the stars important to the later development of the poem.

Reluctant to draw away from the sky her “courted eyes invited to wander o’er the sphere”, she conveniently shifts her attention to another sense - her hearing - to notice her surrounding, where her humanly body is located. In the “dead of midnight” when “Nature’s self is hushed”, other than the quiet rustling of leaves, all she can hear is silence (41-7). Concluding what might confuse the readers as a seemingly insignificant digression focusing not on the sight in the sky but on the sound on Earth is line 47: “How deep the silence yet how loud the praise!” Again, in this perfect line of iambic pentameter, the stressed syllables: “DEEP”, “SILence”, “YET”, “LOUD”, “PRAISE” are significantly more expressive than their neighboring syllables. Pivoting on the word - “yet” - which carries a great sense of contrast, “deep silence” and “loud praise”, phrases opposite to each other, come together to describe this time of the day when the world is silent enough for one to think out loud. In the subsequent lines, Barbauld gives the explanation of such a digression starting with the rhetorical question on line 48: “But are they silent all?” Answering this question, Barbauld

invokes an auditory visual synesthesia as she again questions “is there not / A tongue in every star that talks with man[?]” (48-9) In the dead of night even when “Nature’s self” is silent, one can yet hear the praise from every star. It is through this synesthetic experience that Barbauld establishes a deeper connection to the stars which we will see how she develops further as she travels among and beyond them.

With an idea similar to my vulgar wit above about “thinking out loud in silence” is a superior presentation by Barbauld herself - “This dead of midnight is the noon of thought, / And wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars.” (51-2) This time in a couplet, the lines nonetheless remain grammatically separate from the adjacent lines. Very naturally, this couplet pushes further the the poet’s desire to approach the night sky of eternal light, tactfully associating her midnight thoughts to the stars as she borrows astronomical terms “mount” and “zenith” to describe her “wisdom” and clearly stating that it mounts “with the stars”. Coming closely behind, of course, is the second part of the poem when the author sets out her imagination to travel the space that she now sees and “hears”.

After analyzing the poem’s pattern of what I call the “shifted lines” realized with enjambments and caesuras that create a continuous flow proper for both the first phase of the poem where the change occurs in time and the second phase where the change occurs in space, I will pay closer attention to the variations to the beats throughout the poem, give specific examples where the normal flow of iambs gets disrupted, and identify the effects of such variations. Again, in an artistically crafted piece like this that rarely deviates from its accustomed form, any such breach deserves heavy attention because we can almost be certain that such a breach is intentional which a gifted poet like Barbauld would have easily been able to replace with a metrical substitute.

Barring the common variations such as the initial inversions, feminine endings, and consecutive stresses, which I will analyze later, the only two places that I noticed where the rhythm is drastically broken are on line 82 and 103. In the first case, Barbauld has started her imaginary journey to the space, ascending with “fancy’s wild and roving wing”, from our “peopled earth”, past the “pale moon”, Jupiter, and Saturn. Line 82, in turn, is when she decides to continue and sail away from our solar system, though ethereal, but “launch into the trackless deeps of space”. This move requires such a great resolution as what beyond the system which we are familiar with and which we may still call home is the home to “ten thousand suns of elder beams” (83-4) which we know not the names of. Let’s take a look at this complete line:

... fearless thence
I launch into the trackless deeps of space, (81-2)

A sudden inversion of the second beat, the word “into” significantly disturbs the normal rhythm. Thanks to the broken rhythm, this preposition right after the verb “launch” which is rightfully on its beat claims even more attention, thus receiving an heavier emphasis.

Stressing the manner in which “I launch” and matching perfectly with the noun “deeps”, “into” helps establish the “fearlessness” of the subject when she headlong launches into the field unknown. The second major breach to the rhythm happens near line 103:

But oh thou mighty mind! whose powerful word
Said, thus let all things be, and thus they were,
Where shall I seek thy presence? how unblam'd
Invoke thy dread perfection?
Have the broad eye-lids of the morn beheld thee?
Or does the beamy shoulder of Orion
Support thy throne? ... (99-105)

With a series of intensifying questions addressed to the “mighty mind” (100), the author is no longer able to control her mood as her verse is almost breaking down to prose. First, we

notice the caesura after the first word on line 100. According to *Poetic Rhythm* by Professor Picciotto, “a caesura earlier or later in the line causes significant rhythmic disruption. By competing with the line division itself, it threatens the line’s integrity as a rhythmic unit.” Exactly the case here, while still metrical, this line with merely five feet is split into three parts, signifying her curious yet disturbed mood as Barbauld reflects on how arbitrarily powerful the mind can be that things will just “be” when the mind “lets” them be (which thought, of course, is also generated by her mind, adding to the confusion). Carrying on with this inquisitive mood, Barbauld barely keeps her verse together as line 103 isn’t even in pentameter. After asking the second question, the line of verse ends in the middle and so does a reader’s flow. Because of the abrupt absence of the accustomed rhythmic track that Barbauld skillfully constructs that the reader faithfully follows, the reader is suddenly deserted, all on their own, and has to pause to recover from this calamity. After a considerable pause, however, comfort does not come yet on the very next line: “Have the broad eye-lids of the morn beheld thee?” (104) A line that doesn’t scan at all, it nonetheless asks yet another agitated question to the “mighty mind”. With these continuous and barely recoverable disturbances to the rhythm, Barbauld successfully conveys to the reader her confusion as she interrogates her incomprehensible mind. Slowly calming down, her speech addressed to her mind becomes metrical again, before her soul, tired, would “drop her weary wing” and return to Earth.

After analyzing the two abrupt rhythmic violations in the poem (remarkably few for such a poem, indeed), let’s take a look at other more common rhythmic variations and their effects in the poem. First, Barbauld sparingly uses feminine endings and feminine caesuras throughout the poem. As analyzed earlier, caesuras in abundance are characteristic to this poem. Oftentimes, one foot can be split in two parts, as in “As temper’d lustre, court the

cherish'd eye" (5), "DIAN's bright crescent, like a silver bow" (7), and "Her cheek yet warm with blushes, slow retires" (15). (We have already analyzed above how this can add to the continuity of the poem.) However, there are also cases where Barbauld employs a feminine caesura instead, disregarding the offbeat in the sentence before the caesura and starting the new sentence anew with an iamb. For example, right after the line "DIAN's bright crescent, like a silver bow" is "New strung in heaven, lifts high its beamy horns" (7-8). Here, "heaven" provides the feminine caesura, as in the case of line 25, "Where, one by one, the living eyes of heaven", where it forms a feminine ending. Borrowing from Professor Picciotto's analysis of the example of another feminine ending on line 111: "AbASH'd, yet LONGing TO beHOLD her MAker", "the line's unemphatic conclusion registers the modesty appropriate to the contemplation of God". The same argument perfectly applies to these two cases of "heaven" as we can clearly see the association of the word "heaven" with the Christian religion. In another case, a feminine ending is realized with the word "attendant" on line 74: "And the pale moon, her duteous fair attendant". While this line doesn't have a religious intonation, this feminine ending is properly used to amplify the so-perceived feminine nature of the Moon, who, supposedly submissive, duteously attends Earth. Similarly, when Barbauld's mind is tired of her travel and desires to return to Earth, a feminine ending is tactfully placed: "But now my soul unus'd to stretch her powers / In flight so daring, drops her weary wing". Constituting a feminine ending, the word "powers" doesn't sound "powerful" at all, but are rather "stretched" to an extent that the soul is "unused to". Thus, this feminine ending conveys the weariness of the mind and actually its lack of power.

Second, we also see plenty of consecutive stresses. However, unlike the sparse distribution of the feminine endings, the spondees are very concentrated and are used in abundance in the phase after Barbauld is "seized in thoughts" and sailing with imagination.

Specifically, the “di di DUM DUM” pattern is often used as in “di di ADJECTIVE NOUN”. Sailing past various astronomical objects, Barbauld conveniently uses this pattern to highlight the different qualities of these objects. “From the GREEN BORDers” of the earth where Barbauld is physically located, she starts her journey. In the poem, the image of greenery has been used to characterize Nature’s influence on Earth. As both the start and the end of her journey, the borders of Earth are accurately attributed with the adjective “green”. Similarly, we see more of this “Pyrrhic Spondee” pattern in the following lines: “And the PALE MOON”, “from the VAST ORB”, “To the DIM VERGE”, “From the PROUD REgent” (74-86 passim). Describing astronomical objects/phenomena, these spondees each contains a monosyllable adjective that captures the essential quality of the following object. The Moon, “Earth’s fair duteous attendant”, is “pale”, an idiomatic saying we are familiar with. In this context, this image of the Moon also, to a certain extent, reminds us of its association with lunacy (a truism from the etymological point of view). While never explicitly invoked in this poem, this idea of lunacy naturally occurs to most readers as Barbauld brings them on such a daring journey of thoughts across the vast of space. Readers cannot help but conjure the image of a meditating Eve sitting under the pale Moon, likely under its influence. Oppositely, the Sun is referred to as the “proud regent” on line 86. Referred to as the “sultry tyrant” even on the first line of the poem, the image of the Sun apparently hasn’t been a positive one in this poem. Juxtaposing the “proud regent” to, what he provides, only a “scanty day”, Barbauld reinforces the unfavorable image of the Sun. Thus, as “proud” as the Sun in our system might be, the “ten thousand suns of elder beam” far remote from our solar system cannot receive nor emit light from or to the Sun and the Earth because of the distance. Ultimately, it’s the author’s mind that has been perceived as the

most powerful, because it is able to travel such a long distance that even the light cannot travel fast enough.

Last but not least, we see a considerable amount of initial inversions throughout the poem. More often stressing a verb than a noun as the first beat, these initial inversions usually exist to emphasize an action. For example, in the same lines analyzed above where Barbauld sails beyond the various astronomical objects, we see how “[Jupiter’s] huge gigantic bulk / DANces in ETHer” (76-7), how “chearless Saturn” “/SITS like an EXil’d monarch” (79-81), and how “embryo systems and unkindled suns / SLEEP in the WOMB of chaos” (96-7). Drawing from the astronomical knowledge available at that time, Barbauld was able to relatively accurately describe her adventure across the solar system and to the outer space. Each with its unique characteristics, the cosmic bodies, identified or not, take vivid actions as they “dance”, “sit”, or “sleep” in the emptiness (or ether, as was believed so) of the space. By personifying the cosmic objects and highlighting their humanly actions with the initial inversions, Barbauld preserves and develops this theme of conscious astronomical bodies, enriching their descriptions and granting them unique personalities that add to the enjoyability of the poem.

In this paper, we analyzed *A Summer Evening’s Meditation*’s rhythmic continuity realized with enjambments and caesuras and saw how such a continuity is proper for both phases of the poem. We have also seen how the lack of this pattern during the transitional phase is proper to its purpose as well. Then, we spotted the two cases where a line doesn’t scan at all and analyzed their effects before discussing the more common rhythmic variations such as the feminine endings, spondees, and initial inversions, analyzing their indispensable roles in this masterfully crafted poem by Barbauld.