Meet Me in the Middle: Inverse Patterns and the Honest Self in the Poetry of Anne Finch

Lauren Marie Assaf

At the level of the individual line, Anne Finch uses both iambic feet and substitutions to adjust the aural impact of a word or phrase and cue the reader into the nature of subjects in use. An iamb, in Finch’s work, is not just an iamb. Its purpose is not to fulfill a metrical requirement. Finch uses just enough perfectly iambic lines to qualify either poem for such classification. Instead, the iambic establishes its content as the natural or heavenly established way of things to which any substitutions in her work are meant to contrast. Both “On Myself” and “To Death” use the iamb to insinuate their subject matter as a matter of course. Spondaic and pyrrhic substitutions seek to offset their words from this normalcy. Spondees specifically highlight the importance of a subject matter; in contrast, the pyrrhic illustrates the depths to which power can penetrate or the humility of the narrator. Her most common substitution—the trochee—often exaggerates the height of power or the commanding tone of a word. Anne Finch, however, does not write for the individual line.

The occurrence of a perfectly iambic or substituted line is not meaningful to that line alone. Each kind occurs at a particular moment and is repeated later in the poem. If a substitution occurs in line two, for instance, it will also appear in the second to last line. Working in this fashion, the structure of Finch’s poems operates on patterns of perfectly iambic and substituted lines that inversely mirror one another and climax at the center of the poem. This construction subtly draws the reader’s attention to the content in that middle. In “On Myself” and “To Death,” the central lines of each poem reveal something about the narrator, be it her opinions or true feelings on the overall subject of the work. It is here that she ceases to analyze things as they are
or could be. She shows the reader her inner self and uses prosody to guide her there. The prosodic elements of the individual line, then, are greater purposed to the poem’s overall inverted structure and grant Finch’s work more meaning at both the minute and overarching levels.

“To Death,” written in 1713, explores in sixteen lines the narrator’s understanding of the nature of death, its relationship to her, and her own preferred method of departure. The first four lines call to death and acknowledge its hold over all that live. In the opening line, death is made the subject and point of reference of the poem by the use of iambics in the first two feet. Finch inserts a pyrrhic substitution already in the third foot, placing it on either side of the comma indicating a caesura. It is a break in the line and the meter. This substitution is not meant to change or alter the place of death; instead, it aurally recreates the sway that is mentioned in the final word of the line. The series of three unstressed syllables—“ors” of terrors, “whose,” and “un”—progressively decrease in strength and draw attention to the sudden height of the strongly stressed “bound” (1). Such a considerable leap from low to high stress implies a kind of limitlessness to death’s power. It touches the lowest and highest of stresses and people. “Whose” could be read as a strong stress to make the line iambic; however, an iambic pattern here would imply that death is, in fact, bound, creating a kind of sarcastic tension between the meter and content. Overall, this poem does not encourage that kind of secret undermining of Death’s power and thus, not that meter. Line two stretches this meaning with a trochee in the first foot. Such strong stress emphasizes that all are subject to death and reminds the reader that whatever they believe their immunity to be, they are not exempt from death’s reach. The iambic rhythm of the words “must certainly obey” indicates the naturalness of death’s expansive hold (2). This iambic rhythm is perfectly maintained in the third line where the narrator addresses those whom are divinely invested with power, yet are not exempt from death. When the list of subjects reaches
the truly divine, Jesus as he walked on Earth, the fourth line again makes use of a substituted trochee in the first foot of the line to draw attention to its subject. The spondee occurring at “ev’n God” further strengthens this (4). The poem has reached the highest point thus far, a double stress, and still death is able to reach the subject. While that phrase could be interpreted as a double iamb, the lines up to this point have worked in conjunction with their metrical readings to enforce the breadth of death’s reach. To preface the introduction of God, the supposed highest point in the universe, with a weekly stressed “nor” dissolves the drama and impact of this point: “God himself cannot escape Death!” This fact demands incredulity and emphasis, and thus a strongly stressed “nor” (4). In the first quarter of the poem, Finch has already established the power of death while using substitutions to highlight its height, depth, and victims. At large, its pattern of iambic and substituted lines perfectly mirrors the final four lines and reflects the same matter-of-fact tone of the poem’s beginning and end.

The subject matter jumps from the divine to the narrator in lines five through eight. The subject of his or her reflections shifts from death as it applies to others to death’s relationship to his or herself. The meter for the next several lines is perfectly iambic, indicating the narrator’s understanding of her position within death’s grasp as fixed and inevitable. The tone shifts in a more minute, but very important way at lines seven and eight. While denying that her understanding of the inevitability of death is unnerving, she does exhibit vulnerability in the latter line regarding her fear of the means by which death can claim its victims. It is not death itself, but the ways in which death strikes that unnerve her soul. It is important to note here that there are no changes in the iambic pattern to highlight her momentary emotional openness. This is done in the grander scheme by being the lines at which the two inversely mirroring patterns of
perfectly iambic and substituted lines meet. They are the internal lines of the poem’s body, creating the best position for the narrator to reveal his or her deepest, internal self.

At line nine, the only imperfect line of the overall mirrored pattern indicates the distancing from this emotion for the remainder of the poem. Instead of being perfectly iambic to mirror its opposing line eight, the meter is disrupted. This disruption shows the changeover of the poem from one direction, logic to feeling, to its inverse, feeling towards logic. It also draws attention to death’s fevers, which distract the sense. In this case, its fires literally distract the minds of its victims and the meter of the line with a substitution of a pyrrhic foot in the third foot. Reading nine as iambic, though possible, would prevent this richer meaning and introduce an inappropriate tension between the content—the loss of sense—and its meter. Lines ten, eleven, and twelve return to the perfectly iambic, rendering the disturbing and varied means of death described there into matters of normalcy. The content also inverts the personal nature of its contra lines, five, six, and seven, by focusing on the general means at death’s disposal. Not only is the narrator no longer addressing his or her own relationship with and feelings toward death, but also withdraws the topic further to the general human populace.

The final four lines inversely repeat the pattern of lines one through four and contrast the all-powerful reach of death with his or her own requests as to its behavior. That is, while the narrator acknowledges death’s hold, he or she is nevertheless going to ask for a specific kind of treatment of his or herself and friends. Death reaches all, then, but is not itself unreachable. A spondee appears for the second time in the first foot of line thirteen. In this instance, the spondee draws attention to a command made of death by the narrator. This request is not for the sparing of the narrator’s life, but for those of the narrator’s friends. This refers back to lines eleven and twelve where the typical grief or suffering of friends is described. The narrator wishes to change,
or substitute, these reactions by making a request to Death. It is thus more important that those friends do not suffer than the narrator live. This substitution both strengthens the narrator’s command and places importance on the lives of her friends. Where the spondee earlier elevated the status of kings, prophets, and priests, it now does the same to common persons. Fourteen is perfectly iambic, reflecting the clear logical thought of the narrator regarding the purpose of her life (to die) and of death (to take her life). The first foot of line fifteen is again substituted with a trochee, emphasizing the narrator’s request of low-intensity at the moment of death. This reading provides an interesting contrast to the word itself. Gently means softly or without strength or pain; yet it receives a kind of stress that breaks it from the regular or iambic. In this way, the word is shown to be an exemption to death’s normal *modus operandi*. The narrator requests a special regard in the taking of his or her life and draws attention to the request and its irregularity through the substitution.

Line sixteen is important for a number of prosodic reasons. First, it could be the only line containing a double iamb, located at feet two and three. This prosodic interpretation, however, does not need to be the only or absolute reading as iambic or otherwise, the meaning of this particular phrase would not be dramatically changed. The metric difference, when made a double iamb, is that if read as a singular foot, the pentameter is maintained. If, however, the line is split into a pyrrhic and a spondaic foot, the line expands to six feet, the only one of its kind in the poem. This brings a finality and extension to the ending. In combination with the double iamb, the extra foot strengthens the use of the word “insensibly,” which is meant to specifically describe the actions of death (16). This word refers to the manner in which the narrator requests Death take him or her; gently, contrarily to its normal methods. In recalling its mirror, the first line and Death’s ‘unbounded sway,’ the meaning expands from Death’s reach to include the
flexibility of its approach. The larger mirroring of this line also emphasizes the narrator’s prolonged and more permanent approach to death through reason. This line is physically as distant as possible from the narrator’s emotional flash. They are eight lines apart. The additional foot increases this distance, drawing the reader’s attention to this greater disruption to the poem’s overall meter. This more obvious draw is meant to detract from the poem’s central and vulnerable meaning. Finch undermines her efforts in this poem for the more discerning reader, however, by drawing them inward through the two inverted line patterns and to the narrator’s true feelings on death.

“On Myself” again displays Finch’s repeated use of inversely mirrored lines to emphasize the center of a poem. Composed of twelve lines, the work is evenly split between perfectly iambic and substituted lines. This even divide represents the poem’s overarching theme: the split between the narrator’s physical body and her internal activities. In lines one through four, the narrator thanks her maker for giving her a woman’s body without the typical, pithy interests of the gender. The height and grace of heaven is emphasized in the first foot of line one when read with a spondee and creates an aural distance between its location and that of the narrator. This reading, however, could be iambic and make the whole line so, indicating moderate reverence for the holy instead of this more exalted one. The naturalness of her created position is set up by a return to the iambic, emphasizing her status as pre-defined for her. That the content of the following three lines portray the narrator as living an internal life separate from that of her body’s gender does not mean the meter matches such an irregularity. Those lines remain perfectly iambic, arguing through regularity that that is the way she was meant to be. It is normal for her to be a woman externally yet operate internally on a different level. With so few substitutions, the content of this section is made the norm to the greater structure of the poem. It
is the ideas presented therein that will be reinterpreted or adjusted in the middle section and readdressed in the final set of four lines.

Finch inserts substitutes in all four of the middle lines, marking this section as different from the two mostly iambic sections that surround it in both content and meter. This prosodic action aurally indicates what the lines literally dictate. The narrator is different from other women, from her body superficially, as well as from the other lines. At line five, the first foot is replaced with a trochee, calling attention to the list of qualities the narrator establishes as most natural to women. That the rest of the line is iambic gives the words the same meaning as the iambic does in all of Finch’s poetry; this is the natural state of the subject—in this case, most women. Line six interrupts this natural order in the first foot: “But their” could be read as a trochee or an iamb. A trochee strongly indicates a difference in her attitude toward the listed qualities of pleasure, praise, and plenty versus other women’s estimation of these things. She values them no more than they are worth. Understanding this phrase as an iamb shifts emphasis from the narrator’s estimation to the value of the items. The important content to note is the true value of the items, not her opinion of that value. The trochaic reading better supports and draws attention to the poem’s overall efforts to distinguish the narrator as an outsider to her gender. A spondee on “just value” equates its stress level with that of “Good Heav’n” in line one (6). This emphasis accomplishes two things. One, it argues that her estimation of the qualities listed earlier is the same as the true value given them by God; and two, it draws attention to the internal struggle of the narrator.

In true Finch style, this inner disorder occurs at the middle line. She equates her responses as natural, yet possibly contradictory to the natural internal state of women. While she is externally a woman, she does not experience life as other women do. She gives experiences no
extra emotion or emphasis than what they naturally elicit. Yet God created her to feel as she does even though it is contrary to how he makes other women. This struggle is reflected not only in the content, but in the struggle to metrically identify both phrases as spondees or iambs. Pairing them in this way, however, deepens the narrator’s struggle. This deeper revelation is brief, however, and dissipates as the poem moves beyond the middle line and the narrator’s thoughts into hypothesizing.

The pyrrhic substitution comes at the third foot of line six, but exists on either side of a caesura in the form of a period. This placement weakens the strength of the following sentence where Finch begins to describe a scenario in which her opinion is the model. Though the first and second syllable of the line are not joined together to make a foot, both are unstressed. This makes the insertion of her own opinion the lower, or opposite of the doubly-stressed “Good Heav’n” or the “just value” of earlier (1, 6). While the narrator may not be doing this to indicate a complete inferiority to the Lord, it indicates the proper amount of reverence when comparing her opinion to that of her Lord. The trochee occurring in the first foot of line seven and the pyrrhic substitution in the third foot disrupt the iambic stress to illustrate how differently the narrator’s own thoughts stand in comparison to her fellow women. Her responses are not bound as theirs are, yet follow the regular iambic meter of reason and religion in the rest of line seven and eight. This signals the end of the central portion of the poem and closes off the reader’s glimpse into the narrator’s true perspective of the world. Just as the first four discussed how heaven normally creates a woman’s perspective, so will the last four address an alternative to her views.

Lines nine through twelve explore the narrator’s determination that if she were not to experience a response to pleasures, praise, and plenty at all, she would be just as capable of
living. Her attitude toward such responses would engender the same dislike as they actually do, but to a greater degree. The reader is inclined to believe this, given that perfectly iambic meter. Instead of establishing the content as the way things are, it creates a matter-of-fact and believable tone. Such assurance continues into line eleven, where the iambics assert that when in the open, her truest self can be displayed. This creates an interesting contextual contrast to its inverse, line two, where she is framed in a weaker body. In line eleven her body is expansive through her “wings” or intellectual prowess. These distinctions return attention to the mirroring of content and meter in the beginning and end of the poem, something the final line clearly emphasizes.

As seen in “On Death,” Finch typically adds to the normal meter of the poem in the final line. In “On Myself,” this additional meter should be moved up to six; however, there is a truncated strong stress in the initial foot, leaving only the unstressed half of a trochee to begin the line. This makes the line deceptively iambic-looking and attempts to persuade the reader that her retirement is a peaceful one. The line makes an almost defiant assertion that when she is removed from the normal society or other women, she will be able to look back on her isolated position within it and elevate it to the realm of the holy. The irony is that she is already doing so within her poem. She has taken a presumably awkward position and glorified it as something God made. Despite this, her alterations to stress undermine the words’ literal meanings and grant her work a much deeper meaning at the prosodic level. Again, this kind of ending attempts to detract from the honesty in the middle, but the inverse lines still place the climax of narrative transparency within the middle.

Addressing the individual substitutions and perfectly iambic lines in “On Myself” and “To Death” is necessary to understand how, at a more distant level, the truest feelings of Anne Finch’s poems exist in their center lines. The inversion of a pattern at the beginning and end give
the works an almost three-dimensional shape where the center is a crater of the inner workings of
the narrator’s mind. The individual lines both draw attention to and distract from this honesty by
placing emphasis on individual subjects or ideas, leaving the impression of the poet as someone
who can be emotionally honest and declare her own thoughts, but who does so only to the most
attentive. Her feelings are not as transparent as those of other women, nor are they shaken at the
presence of death. They are available to those who find them within the reflective meter of her
poetry.
Works Cited
