Cryptic Structures in Farjeon and Stallings
by Duncan Gillies MacLaurin

I

In the last four years of his life, Edward Thomas (1878-1917) became very friendly with a poet who helped him find his way to writing poetry, Eleanor Farjeon (1881-1965). There was romantic interest on her side, and perhaps on his too, but she did not want to come between him and his wife, Helen. Thomas was killed in action on Easter Monday 1917, and Farjeon's blank verse elegy for him is the final poem in her collection of sonnets, *First & Second Love* (1947):

> XLIV
>
> Easter Monday
> *(In Memoriam E.T.)*
>
> In the last letter that I had from France
> You thanked me for the silver Easter egg
> Which I had hidden in the box of apples
> You liked to munch beyond all other fruit.
> You found the egg the Monday before Easter,
> And said, 'I will praise Easter Monday now –
> It was such a lovely morning.' Then you spoke
> Of the coming battle and said, 'This is the eve.
> Good-bye. And may I have a letter soon.'
>
> That Easter Monday was a day for praise,
> It was such a lovely morning. In our garden
> We sowed our earliest seeds, and in the orchard
> The apple-bud was ripe. It was the eve.
> There are three letters that you will not get.
>
> April 9th, 1917

As Helena Nelson notes:

> In this final poem, Farjeon uses no 'poetic' diction. Her language is simple, artless and heart-breaking. She deliberately fractures the sonnet form. She uses no rhyme. No other piece in the collection is like this. And the octave/sestet form, which has been rigidly observed throughout the other 43 poems, is suddenly gone. She uses a stanza of nine lines, followed by one of five.
> *The Dark Horse*, #12-13, Winter 2001-2002

The most obvious line of analysis is to focus on the clear themes of shared experience vs. unshared experience and closeness vs. distance, as expressed by the two stanzas that call out to each other yet cannot meet. The very setting of this sonnet, however, signals something hidden. Just as Farjeon hid an Easter egg for Thomas to find, so perhaps we may expect to find some kind of 'Easter egg' hidden in the sonnet. This notion is strongly supported by the fact that the "you" in, for example, "You found the egg…" (l.5), can be

applied both to the addressee and to the reader. These two can never be one and the same, and this is what provides the main tension in the poem. Farjeon would like to speak to Edward Thomas, but is unable to.

One element that asks to be looked at is the threefold repetition of the word, 'letter', in its singular form in the first and ninth lines, and in its plural form in the last line.

Farjeon concludes: "There are three letters that you will not get." Apart from the three letters she has sent, there are three other 'letters' he will not get either, *viz.* the three instances of the word, 'letter', in the poem. Thus she is stealthily bemoaning the fact that Thomas will never read the poem she has just written. Such stealth is apt as it is hardly her main concern. She wouldn't have written the poem if he were still alive.

Likewise, we should consider how the word, 'letter', can be understood differently. If we look at the first line – "In the last letter that I had from France" – we might then look at the last 'letter' of the word "France", which is an 'e'. This letter is very significant as it is the first letter of both the writer's and the addressee's Christian names. In line two, we then see: "You thanked me for the silver Easter egg". The phrase, "Easter egg", can thus be seen as corroboration of this cryptic message, what with the capital 'e' in "Easter" and the double 'e' of "Easter egg". So we are apparently being asked to look for some kind of hidden Easter egg.

There is a striking correspondence between the names, 'Edward Thomas' and 'Easter Monday'; in fact, they are a matching pair. Not only do they have the same number of words, syllables and letters, but they also have their stresses in identical places (*viz.* ED-ward THO-mas; EA-ster MON-day). Thus we are given an alternative title to the poem – i.e. "Edward Thomas" – that is a more true representation of the essence of the poem. The addressee is (thinly) disguised behind initials (E.T.), so it is fitting that there is this corroboration of the addressee's true identity.

Line five tells us rather directly where "the egg" is to be found: "You found the egg the Monday before Easter". Cryptically, "the Monday before Easter" can be read as the word, "before", being applied to "Easter" – i.e. 'Easter Monday' – but we should also note that 'Thomas, Edward' is a valid variant of 'Edward Thomas', and one which can be seen as a reference to his status as an established writer. So the identity of "the egg" is Edward Thomas himself, both as a writer and as a man. The hunt is apparently over. And we should note that to be equated with an egg is no bad thing, as we have the expression, 'a good egg', but not its counterpart.

But before we call off the search, we should consider the cryptic implications of the other two instances of 'letter' in the sonnet. The final line runs: "There are three letters that you will not get." Which 'letters' are these? If "you" will not get three letters, then there is no "you" any more, which is true in the case of Thomas. The word "There", however, asks us to look to the three letters prior to this line, i.e. "eve". This could mean that Thomas will not get "Eve", i.e. his woman. (Note too the resemblance of this name to both the first three letters of 'Eleanor' as well as the middle three letters of 'Helen'.) In the context, 'get' can be taken as meaning 'read'. But "eve" can also be read as 'Edward versus Eleanor', which can be construed as a reference to the structure of the poem, with Edward's experience being recorded in the first stanza and Eleanor's in the second. Note too that 'v.' is an abbreviation for 'verse' in poetry, so in this context 'Edward versus Eleanor' can be tweaked to 'Eleanor *verses* Edward', i.e. 'Farjeon writes a poem about Thomas'. All three of these readings are, again, a stealthy way of saying that Thomas will never read this sonnet.

There are, however, several other possibilities when it comes to: "There are three letters that you will not get." Which letters are these? They are the *last* three letters. Which last three 'letters' might these be?

Lines 1 & 14 are very strong echoes of each other due to both the parallel content and the identical yet very unusual metre, the first four feet of each comprising a double double iamb:

In the/ last let/ter that/ I had/ from France

There are/ three let/ters that/ you will/ not get.

So we might look again at line one, where the final 'e' in "France" was "the last letter". Now we have "-nce", which has a hidden meaning: 'note: see E.' Then, too, the final three-letter word of the poem, "get", is what "you will not". The last two letters of the poem are Edward Thomas's initials. And 'g' stands for 'God', a three-letter word. Is God, perhaps, what Thomas will not get? But, also, as he is the addressee, then we might suppose that the "three letters that you will not get" are three letters missing after "get", inasmuch as the "-et" can be equated with "you". The word before "get" is "not", which can be seen as a cryptic reference to the word, 'to', inasmuch as the letter, 'n', is an abbreviation for 'new', and a new version of '-ot' is the word 'to'. Thus we have "to get" with three letters missing. These can only be the letters that form both the phrase 'to get her' and the word 'together'. And again, it is a woman that Thomas will not "get". This reading is corroborated by the number of letters in each foot of line 14: 8, 8, 8, 7, 6. The last two feet are three letters short of matching the eight letters in each of the first three feet. There are 37 letters in this final line. Thomas was 37 when he joined up in 1915. He died at the age of 39. In other words, he would never reach the age of 37 + 3 = 40. Likewise, the 33 letters in line 1, where Eleanor is the subject, can be seen to represent one more year than Eleanor's age when she first met Thomas in December 1912, and the line asks, cryptically, that the last letter (or year) be removed. Thus the first and final lines mirror the trajectory of their relationship: from when Eleanor was 32 to when Thomas wasn't 40. The double double double iamb is a way of underlining that the couple belong together.

Another place to look for the "three letters that *you* will not get" is in the name of the addressee. The last three letters of 'Edward Thomas' are '-mas', which, as in the name, 'Christmas', is an abbreviation of 'Mass'. 'Holy communion' is the name used in the Anglican Church, but it is a ritual that has its origins in mass. So Farjeon would seem to be saying that Thomas 'will not get mass'. We might therefore conclude that Farjeon was worried that Thomas would not receive proper funeral rites. She, at least, would not be present at his funeral. By association, 'Easter Monday' is another candidate, the last three letters of which are '-day'. And, right enough, Edward Thomas would not 'get another day'.

We have now also found truer matches for the "Easter egg" in the poem since the phrase, 'Easter egg', matches the truncated 'Edward Tho-', the last part of which can be read as "Th' 'o'", i.e. the 'egg'. Likewise, there is an 'egg' at the end of the truncated 'Easter Mon-' since 'Mon' is an abbreviation of 'Moon', i.e. an 'egg'. We are now being asked to look at two new words: one comprised of 'Moon-' and '-mass', the other of 'Tho-' and '-day', i.e. 'Moon-mass today'. Thus we can see that Farjeon's poem acts both as her own personal burial service for Thomas under the auspices of the moon as well as a public one. Based as it is upon Sun and Moon worship, Easter has pagan roots, and the egg, the moon, the apples, and even "eve", are all symbols of a pagan matriarchal religion.

Line nine runs: "'...Good-bye. And may I have a letter soon.'" The letter in question is surely not an 'e', which was merely the answer to the initial puzzle that led us to the Easter egg, but an 'o', the 'Easter-egg' letter. So now we have: "And may I have an 'o' soon." This is a cryptic clue for Io, a Greek name meaning 'moon'. The presence of a word that rhymes with 'moon' immediately afterwards ("soon") is corroboration of this reading. Further confirmation of this is to be found in line two, where the speaker tells us she had hidden "the *silver* Easter egg". Thus we have found another, more deeply hidden Easter egg, the treasure that is the moon, a blessing in difficult times.

In Greek mythology, Io was a priestess of the moon. Robert Graves notes that she "invented the five vowels of the first alphabet, and the consonants B and T". He also found evidence "that before the introduction of the modified Phoenician alphabet into Greece, an alphabet had existed there as a religious secret held by the priestesses of the Moon – Io, or the Three Fates; that it was closely linked with the calendar, and that its letters were represented not by written characters, but by twigs cut from different trees typical of the year's

sequent months". He later adds: "Each vowel represented a quarterly station of the year: O (gorse) the Spring Equinox; U (heather) the Summer Solstice; E (poplar) the Autumn Equinox. A (fir, or palm) the birth-tree, and I (yew) the death-tree, shared the Winter Solstice between them." (*The Greek Myths*, Folio Edition, 1996, pp.175-177) The letter, 'o', represents spring then, and that was the time this sonnet was composed.

Thus the moon becomes very significant as an underlying motif, and numerous interpretations may be made on the basis of this, e.g. the moon as mother and/or muse. Another characteristic of the moon that becomes relevant in the context here is its mirror-like quality. This sonnet is riddled with pair motifs, what with the double Easter egg, the matching names of Easter Monday and Edward Thomas, and the mirrored experiences described in the two stanzas. The poet's name, Eleanor Farjeon, is interesting, as it is composed of two words of seven letters, which, adding up to 14, make the number of lines in a sonnet. Her collection contains 44 sonnets, which shows us that she was attracted to pairs.

The sonnet now offers up further instances of analysis and interpretation. For example, the phrase, "a lovely morning", in lines seven and eleven – note the presence of 'eve' in these two numbers – resembles the writer's name, Eleanor Farjeon, both with regard to the number of letters and the weight and sound of the five syllables (the second syllable of "Farjeon" being pronounced like "dungeon"). It is also a homophone for "a lovely mourning", i.e. "a mourning for love". Likewise, "coming battle" (l.8) is a match for Edward Thomas with regard to the number of letters, the number of consonants, and the intonation. This phrase, and hence Edward Thomas himself, is notably absent in the second stanza when so much of the rest is more or less repeated. We might also be inclined to see and hear the word "apple-bud" (l.13) transforming itself into "alphabet".

There is one more way of understanding the line, "There are three letters that you will not get." The two names, 'Edward Thomas' and 'Easter Monday', have nine letters in common. The three letters that 'Edward Thomas' has that 'Easter Monday' does not are: 'd w h', in that order. And the three letters that 'Easter Monday' has that 'Edward Thomas' does not are: 'e n y', in that order. Together they read: 'd w h e n y', which can be understood as "died, when, why". The word, 'why', also occurs within the series, and reading the other three letters backwards gives the word, 'Ned', i.e. "Why, Ned?" Thus we find a concealed allusion to the whole issue of why Edward Thomas joined up, discussed at length in *Now All Roads Lead to France* by Matthew Hollis (Faber, 2011). The nine letters that the two names have in common – 'e, d, a, r, t, o, m, a, s' – form the words, 'road mates'. This gains additional resonance when we see that the initials of the two poets form the word 'feet' – with Farjeon as the established writer this time. The two shared a passion for both walking and metrical poetry.

One question that emerges here is whether Farjeon herself was aware of the cryptic messages in her sonnet. Often such a question carries the insinuation that we are guilty of over-interpretation if the effect was not deliberate. However, in psychoanalytic criticism, the author's biography and unconscious state are seen as part of the text, and the author's intent can be revived from a literary text even though the intent is an unconscious one.

Writing poetry is close to the art of translation; there is one concrete reality that has to be transformed into another. Just as with poetry, the idea is to share a common experience. The translator combines his/her personal experience and universal experience in order to transform another writer's universe into a different medium, which makes it very akin to writing poetry. Translating from one language to another is a kind of contradiction, just as expressing yourself in poetry is, and this contradiction can only be resolved by employing the subconscious. During the composition of poetry, many subliminal decisions are made because something *feels* right, and this subconscious dimension is especially active when powerful feelings are invoked.

In practice too, it would also seem rather unlikely that Farjeon deliberately and consciously planted all the cryptic messages in her poem.

II

It was while studying Douglas Dunn's poetry that I first discovered cryptic messages in elegiac poetry. These were initially numerical patterns. I corresponded with the poet on the matter, and he expressed a great deal of astonishment, not least because, as he wrote: "I was duff at maths at school". (14/7/1995) I would later also discover many instances of paronomastics (the art of 'hiding' one's name within one's work) as well as both lexigrams and pictograms.

Another poet who willingly confesses to being inept at maths is Alicia Stallings, who is published under the name A.E. Stallings. Born in 1968, she studied Classics in Athens, Georgia and then, in 1999, moved to Athens, Greece. She is married to a journalist, John Psaropoulos, and they have a son, Jason, and a daughter, Atalanta. She has had three books of her verse published: *Archaic Smile* (1999), which won the Richard Wilbur Award, *Hapax* (2000), and *Olives* (2012), as well as a verse translation of Lucretius (in rhyming fourteeners – i.e. iambic heptameter), *The Nature of Things* (2007), published by Penguin Classics.

Here is the title-poem of the final section of *Olives*, "Fairy-tale Logic", as it first appeared:

Fairy-tale Logic

Fairy tales are full of impossible tasks:
Gather the chin hairs of a man-eating goat,
Or cross a sulphuric lake in a leaky boat,
Select the prince from a row of identical masks,
Tiptoe up to a dragon where it basks
And snatch its bone; count dust specks, mote by mote,
Or learn the phone directory by rote.
Always it's impossible what someone asks—

You have to fight magic with magic. You have to believe
That you have something impossible up your sleeve,
The language of snakes, perhaps, an invisible cloak,
An army of ants at your beck, or a lethal joke,
The will to do whatever must be done:
Marry a monster. Hand over your firstborn son.

Poetry, March 2010 http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/238826

In the metrical analysis below a stressed syllable is shown by red type. Substitutions (i.e. metrical variations of iambic metre) are noted in the right-hand margin along with other features (i.e. rhythmic effects) in brackets. The latter include the idea of the combination of a light iamb and a heavy iamb as recommended by Timothy Steele in *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification* (Ohio U.P., 1999). Steele proposes that the strength of syllables be measured on a scale of one to four, i.e. weak (1), semiweak (2), semistrong (3), and strong (4). Thus a gradual increase of stress (1, 2, 3, 4) can be analyzed as a combination of a light iamb and a heavy iamb instead of as a double iamb or as an iamb followed by a spondee.

Fair**y** / **tales** are / **full** of / im**poss** / ible **tasks**: /	1st, 2nd & 3rd: trochees 5th: anapaest
Gather / the **chin** / **hairs** of / a **man** / -eating **goat**, /	1st & 3rd: trochees 5th: anapaest
Or **cross** / a sul**phur** / ic **lake** / in a **lea** / ky **boat**, /	2nd & 4th: anapaests
Se**lect** / the **prince** / from a **row** / of i**den** / tical **masks**, /	3rd, 4th & 5th: anapaests
Tiptoe / **up** to / a **dra** / gon **where** / it **basks** /	1st & 2nd: trochees
And **snatch** / its **bone**; / count **dust** / specks, **mote** / by **mote**, /	(3rd: light; 4th: heavy)
Or **learn** / the **phone** / di**rec** / tory/ by **rote**. /	(4th: light; 5th: heavy)
Always / it's im**poss** / ib**le** / what **some** / one **asks**— /	1st: spondee 2nd: anapaest
You **have** / to fight **ma** / gic with **ma** / gic. You **have** / to be**lieve** /	2nd, 3rd, 4th & 5th: anapaests
That you / have **some** / thing im**poss** / ible **up** / your **sleeve**, /	1st: trochee 3rd & 4th: anapaests
The **lan** / guage of **snakes**, / per**haps**, / an in**vis** / ible **cloak**, /	2nd, 4th & 5th: anapaests
An **ar** / my of **ants** / at your **beck**, / or a **leth** / al **joke**, /	2nd, 3rd & 4th: anapaests
The **will** / to **do** / whate**v** / er **must**/ be **done**: /	(2nd: light; 3rd: heavy)
Marry / a **mon** / ster. Hand **o** / ver your **first** / born **son**. /	1st: trochee 3rd & 4th: anapaests

So what can we call the metre here? Is it very loose iambic pentameter? Anapaests, used sparingly, are acceptable in IP, and such verse is referred to as 'loose iambics'. However, twenty-two anapaests in fourteen lines of IP hardly constitute spare usage. Additionally, trochees (as well as other substitutions) should not normally outnumber the iambs within a line. This means that at least three of the feet in an iambic pentameter should be iambs. In this sonnet, half the lines break this stricture. So Stallings is not complying with the norms of IP here. An abundance of anapaests is typical of much light verse as they provide a skipping rhythm, but is this light verse? Tetrameter is better suited to light verse than pentameter. Perhaps, then, she has a good reason for breaking the rules.

Stallings breaks the rules of IP at the very outset with three trochees, which is also a comic rebuttal of the purist's idea that an iambic rhythm ought to be established initially. It should be noted, however, that there are poets – Richard Wilbur, for example – who prefer to start poems with metrical ambiguity, the form only coming into focus with the second and third lines. If we look at what Stallings is saying, we may see that there is a reason for her defiance: "Fairy tales are full of impossible tasks…" If this line does turn out to be IP, it can be seen as the accomplishment of an impossible task seeing as it starts with three trochees. Perhaps the sonnet will turn out to be IP despite all those anapaests.

One important feature of the Petrarchan sonnet is the *volte*, the turn, around line 9, what Don Paterson sees as the Golden Rule or Golden Section at work in poetry. Here the octet describes the tasks that might be set, while the sestet lists various paths to success. There are "only" eight anapaests in the octet, which can therefore be called normal, loose IP; it is only in the sestet that the number of anapaests is extraordinary. Line 9 is a pure anapaestic pentameter (with an initial iamb), and there are fourteen anapaests in the sestet in all. Thus the *volte* is expressed by both a turn in subject matter and a metrical turn. It is in the sestet that magical and impossible solutions are suggested, so the exaggerated use of anapaests in the sestet would seem to be justified as being a necessary piece of magic.

That there are *three* trochees initially is also significant in view of the number three being a magic, fairy-tale number. The magic, fairy-tale number seven is also present in the seven imperatives in the octet – "Gather" (l.2), "cross" (l.3), "Select" (l.4), "Tiptoe" (l.5), "snatch" & "count" (l.6), and "learn" (l.7) – and the seven solutions in the last four lines. The first word in the sestet is "You"; where it was only implicit in the imperatives in the octet, the second person now becomes explicit. There are only three instances of the word,

'you', all in lines 9-10, and in all three instances "you" is followed by "have". In the first two instances "You have" is followed by "to", but the third instance sees a variation: here we see "something impossible".

There are also three instances of "impossible" in the course of the sonnet (lines 1, 8 & 10), which might well make it a magic formula. We should note that "impossible" can be transformed into "I'm possible", and that on the third, magical occasion, in the sestet, the word is being used to mean something positive as opposed to its meaning in the octet. If we add up the line numbers in which "impossible" appears we arrive at 19 (1 + 8 + 10). This adding up of line numbers might seem far-fetched, but it becomes less so when we consider the *three* lines (that magic number again) that – in dramatic contrast to all the substitutions elsewhere – each consist of just five iambs: *viz.* lines 6, 7 & 13. These three lines are further connected by an internal rhyme of "bone" (line 6)/"phone" (line 7) and their eye-rhyme, "done" (line 13), which is a very clever way of inviting us to add the numbers 6 and 7 to get the number 13, another magic number. The number seven is also a magic number in itself, and adding the other two numbers, 6 + 13, again makes 19. Furthermore, in all three instances of "impossible" there is a word or a group of words preceding it that amounts to nine letters, which, combined with the ten letters in "impossible", makes 19. There are three words in the first instance ("are full of impossible"), two in the second one ("Always it's impossible"), and one in the third one ("something impossible"), i.e. a countdown: 3, 2, 1... We might also note that the number of letters in the three special words repeated – "impossible", "mote" and "magic" – also add up to 19, and that the letters in the three words that follow the three instances of "your" in the sestet – "sleeve" (l.10), "beck" (l.12), and "firstborn" (l.14) – add up to 19 too.

The double 13 of lines 6 & 7 combined and line 13 is a matching pair, just like "mote by mote" (l.6), and "magic with magic" (l.9), which are also doubly matching pairs inasmuch as the two pairs match each other; this is further underlined by them appearing in lines 6 & 9, as those two numbers are a matching pair. Double 13 makes 26, which is the number of letters in the alphabet, and the letter, 'm', comes 13th in the alphabet. So here we have three instances of double 13, and it would seem that we are being encouraged to match numbers with letters in the alphabet.

The 19th letter in the alphabet is the letter, 's', and that this is a magical letter for the poet is hardly surprising: it is both the first and the last letter in her surname, and in her husband's too if we disregard the initial, silent 'p'. This line of analysis is also confirmed when we look at the first strategy for success that is suggested, in line 11: "The language of snakes". Not only does this phrase have 19 letters, but it would also seem probable that the only letter in the snakes' alphabet is the letter, 's', i.e. the number 19.

This play with letters and numbers is overtly signalled by the 14 letters of the title matching the number of lines in the sonnet. It is here we find the central pair, the oxymoron of the title, "Fairy-tale Logic", which announces both the clash and the attraction of magic and logic, i.e. letters and numbers.

Closer analysis reveals several more matching pairs. In line 7, there are seven words – "Or learn the phone directory by rote" – where both the first four words and the last three words add up to 15 letters. The 19 letters of "Always it's impossible" in line 8 are also followed by 15 letters, i.e. "what someone asks", with a chiastic 4/7/4 pattern, while in line 1 there are also 15 letters more than the 19 letters in "are full of impossible", i.e. "Fairy tales... tasks", three words of five letters each. Note too that the first five words of line 1 amount to 19 letters and the last two to 15 letters. And we should also note that the line numbers of the two matching pairs mentioned above – "mote by mote" (l.6), and "magic with magic" (l.9) – add up to 15. The number 15 is interesting in this central role as there are 15 letters in both the poet's name (Alicia Stallings) and that of her husband (John Psaropoulos). The 15th letter in the alphabet is 'o', which is a magic symbol: the ring, love.

Another striking, magical effect is that in the octet the average number of words per line is eight (7, 8, 9, 9, 8, 10, 7, 6 = 64), while in the sestet the average number of words per line is nine (11, 8, 8, 11, 8, 8 = 54). The total number of words then is 118. If we add the two words of the title we get 120, and if we see the title as one of the lines and divide 120 by 15 we get an average of 8 throughout.

The pattern of the words-per-line count in the sestet has remarkable symmetry too (11, 8, 8, 11, 8, 8). Is there perhaps also some symmetrical pattern in the octet? Well, by moving line six two lines up we find the pattern of 7, 8, 9, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6. Thus attention has been drawn to line 6, which is an interesting line in the context since it is systematic counting that has led us here: "And snatch its bone; count dust specks, mote by mote". This "mote by mote" asks us to count not just the words in the line, but the letters too; thus: 3, 6, 3, 4 (= 16); 5, 4, 6, 4, 2, 4 (= 25). Note that we have ten words made up of 16 letters (= the poet's husband, J. P., i.e. 10, 16), then 25 letters (= the poet, A.E.S., i.e. 1, 5, 19). The sum of 16 and 25 is 41, and Stallings was 41 when this sonnet was published in *Poetry*, in March 2010, born as she was in July 1968.

That 41 is also a magic number in itself can be seen by relating it to the magic numbers we have already found, as well as a couple more. The 22 anapaests in the sonnet can be seen as a code for Stallings herself, as it is the number of letters in Stallings' full name, Alicia Elsbeth Stallings, while 11 is the number of letters in the name she is published under, A.E. Stallings. So we have 15 + 26 = 41 (where both 13 + 13 and 7 + 19 = 26); 19 + 22 = 41 (where both 7 + 15 and 11 + 11 = 22); 11 + 30 = 41 (where both 15 + 15 and 11 + 19 = 30). The number 41 is, of course, also the number 14 in reverse. And not only is the number of words in the octet a matching pair (8 x 8), but the number of words in the sestet (54) is the sum of the two magic numbers 13 and 41.

Another series of P. & A.E.S. (i.e. Psaropoulos & Alicia Elsbeth Stallings) is now evident inasmuch as "an army of ants at your beck" (l.12) can be read as: "an army of anapaests at your beck", as the letters,"-apaes-" (i.e. "a P & A.E.S."), in the word, 'anapaests', have been disguised by "an invisible cloak" (l.11) leaving behind just "ants". In the previous line the word, "snakes", in "The language of snakes" corresponds to "Stallings" by virtue of both the initial and final 's' in both words and the 6/9-letter correspondence. The 19 letters in "The language of snakes" become the 22 letters in "The language of Stallings", which is, of course, English, but also anapaests, by virtue of the 22 instances of them. Thus the magic number three turns 19 into 22, i.e. it turns the language of snakes into English. In line 12 the 22 letters in "an army of ants at your beck" are transformed back into the 19 letters of "anapaests at your beck", i.e. English is turned into "the language of snakes". The normal US spelling of 'anapaests' is 'anapests', but the poet has used the British spelling of 'sulphuric' rather than the US 'sulfuric' in line 3, which validates the British spelling, "anapaests".

There would seem to be an extra dimension to all the strategies for success listed in the sestet. I will wait with an explanation of "a lethal joke" (l.12) until last. Line 13 – "The will to do whatever must be done" – can be seen as being self-referential, i.e. it can refer to the poet's own efforts in this poem and, more specifically in this line, to adhering to regular iambic pentameter. The final line runs: "Marry a monster. Hand over your firstborn son." The first word, "Marry", is a typical cryptic call to join subsequent letters together. Then we have: "a monster. H-" (i.e. a capital 'h'); "-and over" (i.e. not a capital 'h' after all, but a capital 'j'); "your firstborn" (i.e. the first letter of the English alphabet, the letter, 'a'); "son". Thus the final line is a cryptic reference to the poet's own (firstborn) son, Jason.

Stallings had a passion for fairy-tales as a child, and this passion was reawakened upon introducing her son to them. Later on in the same, final section of *Olives*, one poem is dedicated to her son ("Dinosaur Fever"), while the title of another is "Listening to *Peter and the Wolf* with Jason, Aged Three".

This surprising cryptic message in the last line of the poem puts me in mind of the last line of Douglas Dunn's elegy for Philip Larkin, "December's Door" (1986, and collected in *Northlight*, Faber, 1988). The poem describes Larkin's funeral, and the last line runs: "Remote, unswept oblivions." Its cryptic message is: "Remote 'uns (i.e. ones) wept. O, believe, eons!", i.e. "Strangers were in tears, it's the truth!" Notice the deft touch of the comma after "Remote" being transformed into the apostrophe at the outset of "'uns", thus matching the nature of the leaves he is describing.

But what about an actual prize for the hero at the end? There is no mention of that in "Fairy-tale Logic". The 22nd letter in the alphabet is "v", a symbol of victory. Perhaps the satisfaction of composing a good sonnet is sufficient reward. Nevertheless, the year after this sonnet was published, Stallings was awarded fellowships

from both the Guggenheim Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation (which, at 500K, is definitely the big one). For Stallings this must have been a dream come true. Fairy-tale logic perhaps. Note that the letters in the names of the two foundations (Guggenheim & MacArthur) add up to 19. A coincidence no doubt.

I sent my observations to Stallings, and she expressed delight in the fact that I'd given her sonnet such close attention. In response to my initial efforts, she wrote: "The Fairy-tale Logic discussion is fascinating, though I don't know that I can take credit for doing much of it consciously." (e-mail to the author, 9/01/2015) Later, however, when I began to find patterns in both the number of words/letters per line and in the numerical equivalents of the letters in the alphabet, she was more inclined to play things down: "The numerology is beyond me, and I think coincidental, but intriguing nonetheless." (e-mail to the author, 13/01/2015)

There are, however, too many patterns here for them to be passed off as "coincidental". The subconscious mind is crying out for recognition of its ingenious workings. It is rather ironic that Stallings calls on magical powers in her poem and then shies away from the notion that she might actually have access to some.

It is not as if Stallings is afraid to defer to her subconscious mind. In an interview from 2002 she said:

> Rhyme and meter make things memorable. And that's a physical thing—they work differently upon the brain, I'm sure of it. Form opens up all kinds of possibilities. Rhyme often leads you to write things that surprise you. A meter may help you tap into a forgotten emotion. With form, certain decisions have already been, arbitrarily, made for you—a certain number of lines, a designated meter with a particular pattern of rhymes. That frees you up to think about other, more interesting choices in the poem.

And later:
> The nice thing about form and especially about rhyme... is that rhyme schemes often tap into the subconscious because a word will suggest itself, in fact a whole line will suggest itself in a rhyme scheme that you would not have thought of, and you wouldn't have expected that's where the poem was headed. The word or line was suggested because it rhymes, yes, but looking for that rhyme, you tapped into a different level of your thoughts, and when that happens, you write something quite surprising.
>
> *The Cortland Review*, #19, February 2002

When it comes to her subconscious designing brilliant mathematical structures, however, Stallings draws the line. We can only speculate as to the reason. Natural modesty springs to mind. But perhaps she also feels uncomfortable about the extent and/or the slant of the subconscious mind's influence. Most likely it is a combination of these factors.

  At first Douglas Dunn was reluctant to take responsibility for the numerological patterns in his *Elegies*, but finally he conceded:

> Perhaps I'll have to think it possible that as I wrote the poems I was programmed unconsciously to replicate the numerological patterns you've revealed. There are too many of them not to. ... What I must now think of all this is practically unsayable. I wish you'd kept it to yourself.

> (Letter to the author, 13/7/1995)

The following day he wrote:

I find this whole business disturbingly eerie. It means that either I was 'inspired' in a way I find it hard to believe, or, even harder to believe accursed. By inspired I mean Valéry's definition: "There was and remains the mystery of *inspiration*, which is the name given to the spontaneous way speech or ideas are formed in a man and appear to him to be marvels that, of and by himself, he feels incapable of forming. He has, then, been *aided*." (*Paul Valéry: An Anthology*, ed. J.R. Lawler, London, 1977, p. 166)

(Letter to the author, 14/7/1995)

There are several features of the matching/clashing pairs here that Stallings *has* worked on consciously, and conscientiously. Note, for example, how the rhyming words match each other visually in the octet – with the A-rhymes of "tasks"/"masks"/"basks"/"asks" and the B-rhymes of "goat"/"boat", and "mote"/"rote" – and how they then clash with each other visually in the sestet – "believe"/"sleeve", "cloak"/"joke", and "done"/"son". Complementing this is the wonderful wit of the internal rhyme of "bone" (line 6)/"phone" (line 7) matching "done" (line 13) visually, but not sonically. There are also the interesting internal envelope rhymes of "dust" (line 6)/"must" (line 13) and "direc-" (line 7)/ "beck" (line 12) that replicate the chiastic or envelope rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan octet (i.e. ABBA). Nor should we overlook the internal rhyme of "imposs-" (l.1)/"cross" (l.3) that forms an envelope around the two different end-rhymes that come in between it. If we then look to where there would be a corresponding, mirror rhyme, at the end of the sonnet, we find that the 'le-' in "lethal joke" (l.12) does actually rhyme with the '-y' in "Marry" (l.14), the "lethal joke" being that this '-y' is the unstressed syllable of a trochee. Perhaps the skilled sonneteer can add such features instinctively.

These points of metre and rhyme are subtle effects compared to such sonic ones as the crackerjack alliteration of k, l and t sounds in "lake… leak-…/ …-lect… identical…/ Tiptoe up to…" (ll. 3-5). But, for the formal poet, the subtleties of metre and rhyme act as talismans; these are the keys to composition. And, as my analysis here would seem to have shown, other numerological structures can come into effect too.

The sonnet is a form that would appear to be particularly rewarding with regard to finding such structures. Sonnet writing is generally accompanied by a heightened degree of self-awareness in the poet; quite often there is an element of the metapoem, i.e. the sonnet is partly about how the poet is writing the sonnet. To make this the central conceit of a sonnet, however, is quite another matter; it is notoriously difficult to do well. However, in this instance Stallings has succeeded with panache.

* * *

When "Fairy-tale Logic" was later collected in *Olives* (TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern U.P., 2012) there were five minor amendments: "of" became "from" (l.2); the US spelling "sulfuric" was preferred (l.3); "the" became "a" (l.7); an em dash was used instead of a comma (l.10); and a semi-colon replaced the comma after "perhaps" (l.11).