

The primary rule for thinking about diction is that words in a poem always exist in relation, never in isolation: “there are no bad words or good words; there are only words in bad or good places” (Nowottny). Otherwise, classifying diction can be a barren exercise, just as concentrating on isolated words can be barren for a beginning poet. Consistency within the chosen area of diction is necessary for a well-made poem, and consistency is not always easy to achieve. Listening for a poem’s range of diction enables the reader to hear moves outside that range. Great skill in diction implies that a poet knows words as he or she knows people (Hollander 1988), knows how “words have a stubborn life of their own” (Elton), and knows that words need to be “at home” (Eliot, *Little Gidding*, the best mod. poetic description of diction “that is right”).

Some useful categories for studying diction may be drawn from the *OED*’s introductory matter (now also online), where vocabulary may be examined as follows: (1) *identification*, incl. usual spelling, pronunciation, grammatical part of speech, whether specialized, and status (e.g., rare, obsolete, archaic, colloquial, dialectal); (2) *etymology*, incl. subsequent word formation and cognates in other langs.; (3) *signification*, which builds on other dictionaries and on quotations; and (4) *illustrative quotations*, which show forms and uses, particular senses, earliest use (or, for obsolete words, latest use), and connotations. Studies of diction might test these categories for any given poem. In common usage, *meaning* refers to definition under category (3), but *meaning* as defined by the *OED* incl. all four categories. And *meaning* in poetry, fully defined, includes all functions of a word.

Diction includes all parts of speech, not simply nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Emphasis on what is striking tends to isolate main parts of speech and imposes a dubious standard of vividness (though see ENARGEIA). Even articles matter (cf. Walt Whitman and E. M. Forster on passages to India). Verb forms matter (see Merrill, 21, on first-person present active indicative). Prepositions can have metaphorical force or double possibilities (e.g., “of,” a favorite device of Wallace Stevens; see Hollander 1997). The grammatical structures of different langs. offer other possibilities for plurisignation and ambiguity (see SYNTAX, POETIC).

Discussions of diction often pull more toward polemics than poetics. It may be impossible to separate the two, but the effort is essential (Nowottny is exemplary). S. T. Coleridge’s dictum should be remembered: every great and original author “has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed” (cited by Wordsworth 1815), a task that perforce includes polemics. Thus, T. S. Eliot’s attacks on the Keats–Tennyson line of diction, esp. as developed by A. C. Swinburne, are better read generically in terms of *charm and *riddle, as Frye does (1976). Similarly, it is important not to read mod. assumptions about diction back into older poetry. (See Strang, on reading Edmund Spenser’s work in Spenser’s lang., not “as if he were writing mod. Eng. with intermittent lapses into strange expressions.”) Critics need to pay attention to historical scholarship

DICTION. Diction signifies the words or phrases chosen for a piece of writing. It is the Latinate equivalent of Gr. *lexis*, which was accepted as Eng. usage by the *OED* in the second ed. (first citations in 1950 [citing *MP*]; Frye [1957]). *Lexis* is a more useful term than *diction* because more neutral, but it is still chiefly used in ling. (*OED*, sense 1.2), not in poetics. It is important to distinguish “the diction of poetry” from “poetic diction” (esp. in the 18th-c. sense). “Poetic diction” or even just “diction” may elicit only the question of unusual lang. rather than questions concerning all the lang. of poetry.

on the contemporaneity or *archaism of words—often difficult to assess.

There are only a few general questions concerning diction, and they have remained for centuries. The most fruitful may be the more particular ones. One long-standing general issue is whether a special diction for poetry exists or should exist. This, in turn, depends on how poetry is defined or what type of poetry is in question. Of discussions in antiquity, those by Aristotle, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Horace, and Longinus are the most important. Aristotle's few remarks remain pertinent: poetic diction should be both clear and striking: "ordinary words" give clarity; "strange words, metaphors" should be judiciously used to give surprising effects, to make diction shine and to avoid diction that is inappropriately "mean." In the Middle Ages and early Ren., the issue of diction became important as med. Lat. gave way to the vernaculars. Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* (*On Vernacular Eloquence*, ca. 1304) is the central text in the *questione della lingua*. Dante classifies diction according to various contexts. E.g., in DVE 2.7, he gives detailed criteria for words suitable for "the highest style." Some are as specific as in Paul Valéry's well-known search for "a word that is feminine, disyllabic, includes P or F, ends in a mute syllable, and is a synonym for break or disintegration, and not learned, not rare. Six conditions—at least!" (Nowotny). Dante sees that the main question, as so often, is appropriateness or *decorum. He also stresses appropriateness for the person using a given lexis (e.g., sufficient natural talent, art, and learning), a criterion largely unfamiliar today.

The term *poetic diction* is strongly associated with 18th-c. poetry, largely because of William Wordsworth's attacks on it in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth notes that *Lyrical Ballads* includes "little of what is usually called poetic diction," by which he means the *epithets, *periphrases, *personifications, archaisms, and other conventionalized phrases too often used unthinkingly in Augustan poetry. As against Thomas Gray, e.g., who wrote that "the language of the age is never the language of poetry" (letter to R. West, April 1742), Wordsworth advocated using the "real language of men," esp. those in humble circumstances and rustic life. But Wordsworth laid down many conditions governing such "real language" in poetry (e.g., men "in a state of vivid sensation," the lang. adapted and purified, a selection only).

Coleridge (1817), with his superior critical mind, saw that "the language of real life" was an "equivocal expression" applying only to some poetry, and there in ways never denied (chaps. 14–22). He rejected the argument of rusticity, asserting that the lang. of Wordsworth's rustics derives from a strong grounding in the lang. of the Eng. Bible (authorized version, 1611) and the liturgy or hymn-book. In any case, the best part of lang., says Coleridge, is derived not from objects but from "reflection on the acts of the mind itself." By "real," Wordsworth actually means "ordinary" lang., the *lingua communis* (cf. *OED*, Pref., 2d ed.), and even this needs cultivation to become truly *communis* (Coleridge cites Dante). Wordsworth's real object, Coleridge saw,

was to attack assumptions about a supposedly necessary poetic diction. The debate is of great importance for diction. It marks the shift from what Frye calls a high mimetic mode to a low mimetic one, a shift still governing the diction of poetry today. (In Fr. poetry, the shift comes a little later and is associated with Victor Hugo [Preface to *Cromwell*, 1827].)

Coleridge disagreed with Wordsworth's contention that "there neither is, nor can be any *essential* difference between the lang. of prose and metrical composition." Though there is a "neutral style" common to prose and poetry, Coleridge finds it notable that such a theory "should have proceeded from a poet, whose diction, next to that of Shakespeare and Milton, appears to me of all others the most *individualized* and characteristic." Some words in a poem may well be in everyday use; but "are those words *in those places* commonly employed in real life to express the same thought or outward thing? . . . No! nor are the modes of connections; and still less the breaks and transitions" (chap. 20). In Coleridge's modification of Wordsworth's well-intentioned arguments, readers may still find essential principles applicable to questions of poetic diction.

The 20th c., in one sense, took up Wordsworth's argument, steadily removing virtually every restriction on diction. The 21st c. now generally bars no word whatever from the diction of poetry, at least in the Germanic and Romance langs. Struggles over appropriate diction in the 19th c. included attacks on the romantics, Robert Browning, and Whitman. Attempts by Robert Bridges and others to domesticate G. M. Hopkins's extraordinary diction are well known. In the early 20th c., Edwardian critics with genteel notions of poetry objected to Rupert Brooke's writing about seasickness and to Wilfred Owen's disgust at the horrors of World War I (Stead). Wordsworth's "real language of men" was twisted by some into attacks on any unusual diction whatsoever—difficult, local, learned—a problem to this day, though now less from genteel notions than egalitarian ones inappropriately extended to the diction of all poetry. Yet the diction of poetry may still be associated with the lang. of a certain class—see Tony Harrison's poems playing standard Eng. against working-class Eng. But if poetry now generally admits all types of diction, it remains true that the diction of poetry—of the Bible, Shakespeare, and the ballads, e.g.—needs to be learned. Otherwise, most older poetry, as well as much contemp., cannot be well read at all (Vendler). The diction of the authorized version of the Bible and of the Gr. and Lat. classics has influenced Eng. poetry for centuries. Virgil's diction in *eclogue, *georgic, and *epic was admired and imitated well past the Ren. (see IMITATION, INFLUENCE). The strategies and effects of *allusion should not be overlooked.

Historical changes in the lang. make the use of good dictionaries mandatory. In Eng., the *OED* is the most generous and its quotations invaluable, but other dictionaries are also needed (e.g., of U.S. Eng., for etymology). The elementary philological categories of widening and narrowing and raising and lowering in meaning are useful. (Cf. *wanton*, where solely mod.

senses must not be applied to John Milton's use, or even as late as Bridges's "Wanton with long delay the gay spring leaping cometh" ["April, 1885"]; *gay* is well known.) Hidden semantic and connotative changes must be esp. watched, along with favorite words in a given time (Miles). The diction of some mod. poets pays attention to historical ling., while that of others is largely synchronic; readers should test.

Etymologies are stories of origins. The etymologist cares whether they are true or false, but a poet need not (Ruthven); mythologies are for the poet as useful as hists. Philology may include certain assumptions about poetic diction (see Barfield against Max Müller). Etymologies may include hists. of war and struggle (for nationalism involves lang. just as class does). Poets may exploit the riches of etymology (see Geoffrey Hill's *Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* on Eng. and Fr. diction). Etymology may function as a "mode of thought" (Curtius) or as a specific "frame for trope" (see Hollander 1988, on Hopkins) or both. Invented or implied etymologies can also be useful (*silva* through Dante's well-known *selva* links by sound and sense with *salveo*, *salvatio*, etc.). Milton plays earlier etymological meaning against later meaning, such play functioning as a trope for the fallen state of lang. (Cook). Eng. is unusually accommodating, combining as it does both Latinate and Germanic words. Other important word roots should also be noted (cf. the etymological appropriateness of *sherbet* in Eliot's "Journey of the Magi").

Diction may be considered along an axis of old to new, with archaism at one end and innovation (incl. neologism) at the other. Archaism may be introduced to enlarge the diction of poetry, sometimes through native terms (Spenser, Hopkins). Or it may be used for certain genres (e.g., literary imitations of oral ballads) or for specific effects, ironic, allusive, or other. Innovation may remain peculiar to one poet or may enlarge the poetic lexicon. Neologisms (new-coined words) tend now to be associated with novelty more than freshness and sometimes with strained effects. The very word indicates they are not common currency. Some periods are conducive to expanding diction in general (the mid-14th c., the late 16th c.) or to expanding diction in some areas (the lang. of digital technology, nowadays, though not yet in general poetic diction). Where poets do not invent or resuscitate terms, they draw on vocabulary from different contemporaneous sources (see the *OED* categories). Foreign, local, and dialectal words, as well as slang, are noted below. The precision of terms drawn from such areas as theology, philosophy, or the Bible must not be underestimated, for controversy can center on one word. Studies working outward from single words (e.g. Empson; Lewis; Barfield on *ruin*) are valuable reminders of historical and conceptual significance in diction.

Shakespeare has contributed most to the enlargement of our stock of words; critics regularly note how often he provides the first example of a given word in the *OED*. He adapts words from the stock of both

Eng. (e.g., *lonely*, presumably from Sidney's *loneliness*) and other langs. (*monumental*, from Lat.); he apparently invents words (*bump*); he shifts their grammatical function (*control* as a verb rather than a noun), and more. He possesses the largest known vocabulary of any poet, but it is his extraordinary *use* of so large a word hoard (as against ordinary recognition) that is so remarkable.

Most new words are now generally drawn from scientific or technical sources, though poetry makes comparatively little use of them. In the 18th c., poets could say that "Newton demands the Muse" (see M. H. Nicholson's title), but poets today do not generally say that "Einstein demands the Muse." A. R. Ammons is one of the few mod. poets exploiting the possibilities of new scientific diction: e.g., *zygote* (1891, *OED*) rhymed with *goat*; *white dwarf* (1924, *OED* 2d ed.); and *black hole* (1969). Of the large stock of colloquial and slang expressions, many are evanescent or inert, though special uses may be effective. Shakespeare's gift for introducing colloquial diction is a salutary reminder not to reject colloquialisms per se. Or see Stevens (*Shucks*, *Pfft* in "Add This to Rhetoric") or Merrill (*slush* [funds] in "Snow Jobs"). The same may be said of slang, a vernacular speech below colloquial on a three-part scale of (1) standard or formal Eng., (2) colloquial Eng., and (3) slang. (See *The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, 8th ed. rev. [2006].) Slang may come from the lingo of specialized trades or professions, schools, sports, etc., and may move up through colloquial to standard Eng. It appears more often in prose than in poetry. But poetry can make effective use of it from François Villon's underworld slang of the 15th c. to T. S. Eliot's *demobbed* in *The Waste Land*. For a brief telling discussion of the question, see George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, chap. 11.

Along the axis of old to new, the most interesting question is why and how some diction begins to sound dated. Archaisms and innovations alike are easy to hear. So also is the diction we designate as, say, 18th-c. or Tennysonian or Whitmanian. But what is it that distinguishes the poetic diction of a generation ago, and why do amateur poets tend to use the diction of their poetic grandparents? The aging of words or the passing of their claim on our allegiance is of continuing interest to poets as part of the diachronic aspect of their art.

Different types of poetry require different lexical practice, though such requirements vary according to time and place. *Oral poetry makes use of stock phrases or epithets cast into formulas (see FORMULA). Some of Homer's epithets became renowned, e.g., *poluphlois-bos* (loud-roaring) for the sea (see Amy Clampitt's echo of this). Compound epithets in OE poetry are known by the ON term **kenning* and sometimes take the form of a riddle. Different genres also require different practice (Fowler), a requirement much relaxed today. Epic required a high-style diction, as did the *sublime (see Monk). Genres of the middle and low style drew from a different register. *Satire usually works in the middle style but allows much leeway, esp. in Juvenalian as against Horatian satire. Any diction

may become banal—e.g., that of the 16th-c. sonnet-teers or that of some *pastoral writers (cf. Coleridge, *Letters*, 9 Oct. 1794: “The word ‘swain’ . . . conveys too much of the Cant of Pastoral”). *Connotation or association is governed partly by genre and is all-important for diction.

Diction also depends partly on place. The largest division in Eng. is between Great Britain and the U.S., but poetry from elsewhere (Africa, Asia, Australasia, Canada, the Caribbean, Ireland) also shows important differences. Establishing a distinctive poetic style in a new country with an old lang. presents peculiar problems that novelty in itself will not solve. Within a country, diction will vary locally, and poets can make memorable uses of local terms (Yeats of *perne* in “Sailing to Byzantium,” Eliot of *rote* in *The Dry Salvages*; Whitman uses native Amerindian terms). The question of dialect shades into this. Robert Burns and Thomas Hardy draw on local and dialectal words. Hopkins’s remarkable diction derives from current lang., dialectal and other, as well as older words; some (e.g., *pitch*) have specific usage for Hopkins (see Milroy). The use of Af. Am. vernacular Eng. is familiar (Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson; see AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY); Derek Walcott includes the Creole of St. Lucia. Foreign diction or *xenoglossia, a special case, works along a scale of assimilation, for standard diction includes many words originally considered foreign. Considerable use of foreign diction (apart from novelties like *macaronic verse) implies a special contract with the reader, at least in societies unaccustomed to hearing more than one lang. Diction may also vary according to class (see above). It is doubtful if it varies in a general way according to gender.

Interpretive categories are numerous, and readers should be aware of them as such; even taxonomies are interpretive. Beyond the categories already mentioned, diction may be judged according to the degree of “smoothness” (Tennyson as against Browning is a standard example; see Frye 1957), centering on the large and important question of sound in lexis (cf. Seamus Heaney on W. H. Auden: “the gnomic clunk of Anglo-Saxon phrasing . . .” [*The Government of the Tongue* (1989), 124]). Or diction may be judged by the degree of difficulty (Browning, Hopkins, Eliot, Stevens), though once-difficult diction can become familiar. Strangeness in diction can contribute to the strangeness sometimes thought necessary for aesthetic effect (Barfield) or for poetry itself (Genette, arguing with Jean Cohen, also compares the *ostranenie* [*defamiliarization] of the Rus. formalists and the lang. of a state of dreaming). Some poets are known for difficult or strange diction (e.g., Spenser, the metaphysical poets, Whitman, Browning), but readers should also note consummate skill in quieter effects of diction (e.g., Robert Frost, Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Bishop).

Distinctive diction is part of what makes a poet familiar, and the diction of a poet may be studied in itself (see Fowler). The discipline of the art of diction is still best understood by studying the comments and revisions of good poets.

■ **General Studies:** W. Wordsworth, “Preface, *Lyrical Ballads*, 3d ed. (1802), incl. “Appendix on . . . Poetic Diction”; and Wordsworth, “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” (1815); S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817); Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. I. Bywater (1909); O. Elton, “The Poet’s Dictionary,” *E&S* 14 (1929); W. Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951); D. Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (1952); Curtius; Frye; C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (1960); W. Nowottny, *The Language Poets Use* (1962)—essential reading; J. Miles, *Eras and Modes in English Poetry*, 2d ed. (1964); K. K. Ruthven, “The Poet as Etymologist,” *CQ* 11 (1969); O. Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 3d ed. (1973)—important reading; F. W. Bateson, *English Poetry and the English Language*, 3d ed. (1973); A. Sherbo, *English Poetic Diction from Chaucer to Wordsworth* (1975); N. Frye, “Charms and Riddles,” *Spiritus Mundi* (1976); Fowler—excellent on diction and genre; G. Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse* (trans. 1982), esp. 75–102; J. Merrill, *Recitative: Prose* (1986); J. Boase-Beier, *Poetic Compounds* (1987); C. Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (1987); A. Ferry, *The Art of Naming* (1988); J. Hollander, *Melodious Guile* (1988); H. Vendler, *The Music of What Happens* (1988); S. Adamson, “Literary Language,” *CHEL* (1992), v. 3, 539–653; v. 4, 589–692; J. Hollander, *The Work of Poetry* (1997).

■ **Specialized Studies:** S. H. Monk, *The Sublime* (1935); V. L. Rubel, *Poetic Diction in the English Renaissance* (1941); J. Arthos, *The Language of Natural Description in 18th-Century Poetry* (1949); M. M. Mahood, *Shakespeare’s Wordplay* (1957); Wimsatt and Brooks, ch. 16; A. Ewert, “Dante’s Theory of Diction,” *MHRA* 31 (1959); C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic* (1964); G. Tillotson, *Augustan Poetic Diction* (1964); W.J.B. Owen, *Wordsworth as Critic* (1969); H. Kerner, *The Pound Era* (1971), esp. 94–191; D. Alighieri, *Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri*, ed. and trans. R. S. Haller (1973); J. Milroy, *The Language of G. M. Hopkins* (1977); N. Hilton, *Literal Imagination: Blake’s Vision of Words* (1983); M. H. Abrams, “Wordsworth and Coleridge on Diction and Figures,” *The Correspondent Breeze* (1984); R.W.V. Elliott, *Thomas Hardy’s English* (1984); C. Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (1988); R.O.A.M. Lyne, *Words and the Poet* (1989)—Virgil; B.M.H. Strang, “Language,” *Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton et al. (1990); E. Cook, *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play* (1998); C. Miller, *The Invention of Evening* (2006).

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