Individual Words 1

Poetry can be many things. Poetry can be philosophical, or emotional, or sentimental. It can paint pictures, in a descriptive mode, or tell stories, in a narrative one. Poetry can also be satirical, or funny, or political, or just informative. Yet none of these activities is specific to poetry, or reveals how poetry differs from other kinds of writing or speaking.

A definition that underscores what makes poetry distinctive might be: poetry is language in which every component element—word and word order, sound and pause, image and echo—is significant, significant in that every element points toward or stands for further relationships among and beyond themselves. Poetry is language that always means more. Its elements are figures, and poetry itself is a language of figures, in which each component can potentially open toward new meanings, levels, dimensions, connections, or resonances. Poetry does this through its careful, intricate pattern of words. It offers language as highly organized as language can be. It is language so highly patterned that there is, ideally, a reason or purpose (or rather, many) for each and every word put into a poem. No word is idle or accidental. Each word has a specific place within an overarching pattern. Together they create meaningful and beautiful designs.

Learning to read poetry is, then, learning the functions of each word within its specific placement in the poem: why each particular word is put into each particular position. Why that word? What is it doing there? How does it fit into the poem, and into what the poem is doing? In poetry there are multiple reasons for choosing and placing words. There is not one single pattern in a poem, but rather a multiplicity of patterns, all of which ideally interlock in wider and larger designs. There are in fact many designs on many levels, where each meaningful word and element points to the next

one, in an endless process of imaginative possibility. These intricate patternings of poetry are what generate the essential nature of poetry: its intense figurative power, to always point beyond one meaning or possibility to further ones. This book will identify and explore these figural possibilities and their patterns. It will work from smaller to larger units of organization until the poem stands complete, a building you can enter (and note: stanza means "room" in Italian) and understand in terms of the architecture of its diverse parts, as each contributes to the whole.

Individual words stand as the first, elemental units of poetic patterning (although words themselves are made up of sound units). On this first level, poetry is an art of word choice, made up of chosen words. This art of selecting words is called *diction*. There are in fact various reasons for choosing and including particular words in a poem, each of which will be considered in turn. Words in poetry are chosen partly for their sound: a poem's high organization of language certainly also takes the sounds of the words into account, as part of the pattern of the poem. This will include sounds of consonants and of vowels, and the even tighter sound repetitions of rhyme, which themselves work through a range of relationships: half-rhymes and full-rhymes, with unrhymed or thorn words variously mixed in, in rhyming patterns that also can vary widely.

Besides the sound patterns of poetic words there are metrical patterns: the rhythm of the words, so that the poem has a melody or beat, like music. English poetry relies very much on patterns of rhythm, which may even be said to have a foundational role in the history and development of English verse. Yet, in another sense, metric seems the driest, most mechanical aspect of poetry. To appreciate more fully metrical function, grasping other systems of patterning is essential. Only within the complex construction of the poem as a whole can it become clearer how patterns of rhythm contribute to building the poem's overall design, and the ways in which poets can use rhythm for emphasis, or delay, or for pure musical affect.

Sounds and rhythms in turn take their immediate place within another fundamental pattern of a poem's words: the pattern of syntax. Diction has to do with word choice, selecting the individual words that make up the poem. Syntax has to do with the basic grammar that organizes the words into phrases or sentences. A poem, like any piece of language, must of course put its words into gram-

matical order. Yet a poem has particular freedom in the way it constructs its grammar, related to the fact that a poem can give to grammar, as to everything it handles, a special meaning in the patterns and design of the poem.

The first chapters of this book will be concerned with elemental levels of design in poetry: diction, that is, individual word selection, and syntax, the word order as it makes poetic use of grammar. Only later will sound and rhythm be examined, in that they are, perhaps surprisingly given their sensuous material, in certain ways the most difficult poetic patterns to grasp. We will also consider larger organizational units of the poem: images, and how they together build poetic structure; verse forms such as the sonnet, as conventional modes of organization; other poetic conventions and their uses; rhetorical patterns, including special games poets play with word order; point of view, or the question of who is seeing and who is speaking in the poem, which can in fact control diction, imagery, and rhetoric; and the question of address—who the poem is speaking to, or ways in which it involves the reader. In the end, all of these patterns intersect and build upon each other, making a whole design in which every word has its place.

The first element of poetry we will examine, then, is diction: the basic unit of the word and how it is selected. In fact, in the history of poetry, diction has played, again and again, a revolutionary role. Almost every revolution in poetry makes diction a rallying cry. Understanding why this should be the case requires a backward look at poetic tradition. In its history from Greek times and in the codification of classical literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, poetry (and indeed literature in general) was defined in part by conventions governing kinds of texts or genres and the materials considered "suitable" to them. There was, accordingly, a high literature, such as epic and tragedy. In high literature, the subject was kings, nobility, or great heroes, those who were engaged in great, public, momentous events, such as wars (events in which only great personages served as central actors). Corresponding to such elevated subjects was an elevated language: beautiful, lofty sounding words, words formal and polite, or stately words only to be heard in a king's court or in literature dealing with it. In contrast, there was a low literature that could feature lowly characters, such as servants or common people. And it could treat events that were not of great significance but had instead to do with everyday life,

without great and grand implications, events that could even be funny. Indeed, this was a literature of comedy. In this literature, you could use everyday language, colloquialisms, vulgarities, and slang: words so informal that today they might not even be admitted to some dictionaries.

Diction, then, is the selection of individual words in terms not only of a word's meaning but of its level or type. Is it a polite, formal, elevated word, grand sounding, which would be used only in the society of kings? Or is it an everyday word, simple, informal; or even a low, rude word? The range can be seen in, for example, the difference between: "Gimme that," "May I please have," and "Would you be so kind as to pass the."

Formal contexts (and their social-historical situation) therefore are one arena for establishing word levels through diction. But there are many other "contexts" for words as well. Words have what might be called an address, a place where they ordinarily live. When you hear a word, or see it in a poem, you are aware of the ordinary context in which this word would be encountered. When used in a poem, it carries into the text its implicit context, which then can be put alongside other contexts brought in by other words. "Plié" is a word that belongs to ballet class; "quarterback" belongs to football. "Have a nice day" is a phrase of everyday American politeness. "Checkbook" evokes banking; "docent," museums. The disparities between different words' associations may be comic, or perhaps ironic. *Irony* is defined as a disparity between different levels or terms within a text. This can mean a disparity between points of view, levels of understanding, or, as here, of decorum. Generally speaking, classical irony involves a disparity between degrees of *knowledge*. One figure—say the reader or another character—knows more than another figure does, say a character in a play. Romantic irony differently involves a disparity between levels of *consciousness*. In this case, some signal is given in a text that it *is* a text, a work of art. This does not involve knowing, for example, that Oedipus is a murderer before he does. Instead, it involves the text signaling the fact that all its action is taking place in a play, rather than really happening. This is often the effect of a "mousetrap" play within a play, where the viewer becomes more conscious of the power of theater itself to frame and represent how we understand things. There is also what I would call linguistic irony, where the uses of language make the reader aware of how

language itself formulates and influences our understanding and experience. This could be the effect of a poem that mixes diction, where the different language levels play off each other, making us aware of their different social contexts, or their different purposes or functions or claims.

Or, a poet may carefully select words that all belong to one particular context, or level of language. Eighteenth-century poetry tried to do this. At certain times, poetry has been thought to be poetry only if it used very formal, elevated, grand language. Then along would come some young poet who would decide that this was too limiting and that it kept out of poetry too many things that he (or she) wanted to include. If you cannot use everyday words, then you cannot introduce everyday experience into your poem. So the poet would decide to break the rules and start putting everyday words of common life into poems. In that case, more than the words in the poem would change. The whole scene of the poem—the very material of the poem, what the poem could be about and how the poem could be about it—would also shift. That is why diction has been, again and again, a revolutionary force in poetry. Thus, William Wordsworth announced his Romanticist revolution in his "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads" as "a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation." Ezra Pound launched his Modernist experiments by denouncing the nineteenth century as a "rather blurry, messy sort of period" and calling for a poetic idiom that would "be harder and saner."

Appreciating kinds of diction of course requires some sense of language-levels. You would have to be able to distinguish between a formal word and an informal one. One can watch for and identify the sudden introduction into a poem of a scientific word, a word whose context is the world of science; or of a slang word, a word whose context is the street; or of a city word, rather than the gentle words of nature; or of a mechanical word, or a technological one (can a screwdriver really fit into a poem? it depends on what you think poems can properly include); or a military word, which traditionally set a level of high diction but in modern times has become, as we will see in our first poem, a language of low diction instead—with all that this implies about changing attitudes toward experience as well. Each of these words belongs to a specific context. Each introduces a specific level of elegance or high language, or of deflationary or low language.

It may be helpful to think of a jigsaw puzzle, or a collage, where each piece is made out of a specific material—stone and wood and plastic and paper. When they are pieced together, the textures of these materials remain quite recognizable set into the completed collage and contrasting among the other pieces.

To see how diction can work in a poem we must turn to examples. Only then can it become clear how in some poems, word choice from different contexts, "levels" of speech, plays a dramatic role, as it does in "Today We Have Naming of Parts" by Henry Reed (1914–1968).

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
  And today we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see of,
When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens, their silent, eloquent gestures,
  Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
  Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
  They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy
If you have any strength in your thumb: Like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of
    balance,
Which in our case we have not got, and the almond-blossom

Silent in all of the gardens, the bees going backwards and
forwards,
For today we have naming of parts.

This is a poem constructed around, and in a sense even about, diction. Of course it is also about the scenes it describes: the contrast between the world of the army camp and the world of nature. Each stanza of the poem contrasts the instructions of an implied army officer against some activity in a garden. In the first part of each stanza we are instructed, as becomes gradually clear through the course of the poem, how to assemble and fire a gun. The end of each stanza switches abruptly into the garden world, opposing its beauty to the grim tedium of the camp.

This opposition works on many levels. The army-camp world of the gun is piecemeal—as is dramatized in the act itself of naming parts. Each part makes its appearance in a choppy sequence that reflects the task of putting together a machine. It also implies how the world of the machine is a world itself in parts, mechanically composed and controlled. The very experience of time and of life is divided into separate units that don't flow together into any kind of wholeness: A "Today," a "Yesterday," a "tomorrow"—or, most ominously, "after firing." Here we already see how the syntax of the poem contributes to this dramatization of parts (all the patterns of the poem are at work at once). Sequences of short, choppy, phrases or sentences recount the naming of the parts of the gun, followed by longer, flowing sentences about the garden. This is a world not of parts but of continuous, life-giving processes. Each stanza then concludes with a short, choppy repetition that returns to the gun.

Syntactic contrast thus contributes to the oppositions this poem represents and explores. Nevertheless, the art and strength of this poem, through which the contrast between the worlds of the army and the garden is dramatically felt, is centered in its diction. The world of the army camp is presented to us through the language of an army instruction manual, but the world of the garden is a world of exotic, lustrous language, in striking contrast to the dry, abortive words naming the parts of the gun. Thus, in the first stanza, against the almost blank "naming of parts," the phrase: "Japonica glistens like coral" leaps out in its specificity (Japonica is a tropical flower), its sensuous color, it shining imagery.

This pattern of contrasts in diction repeats from stanza to stanza. "The lower sling swivel," the "upper sling swivel" hang there, pieces unconnected to whatever they are part of, unconnected even to their uses ("whose use you will see of, when you are given your slings"). Again the syntax reinforces this sense of truncation, of disconnection, leaving its prepositions incomplete ("whose use you will see of"). But again, the most striking feature is the very words used—the techanical words of swivels and slings. And then, from a different language-world, come "branches" in their "silent, eloquent gestures." These are all words of high diction. They are formal words, lyrical words, words we would expect to find in a poem—as are the phrases "glistens like coral" or "blossoms fragile and motionless;" but unlike "safety-catch," and "bolt," and "breech," words we would expect to find in an army manual, but not in a poem.

Other things happen in this poem, too. Eventually we are naming not only parts of the gun, but parts of ourselves, our own bodies—yet always and only in parts: thumb and finger, but without a hand or arm or person attached to it (this naming by part is called *synecdoche*). And there are parts we do not name, at least not directly. Yet they, too, intrude into the poem—ultimately through plays with diction. When the second to last stanza talks about the bees "assaulting and fumbling the flowers," a new kind of language enters the poem: the language of sexuality. The poem develops this through the pun on "Easing the Spring"—at once part of a gun and the moment in nature of reproductive energy. The last stanza powerfully confronts these two usages. They are now no longer separate from each other, but rather are doubles (or inversions) of each other. The spring of the gun doubles the Spring of bees and flowers; but so do the bolt and "cocking-piece" of the gun, and the "breech" that goes "backwards and forwards," all words that pick up the sexual implications of the fertility of the garden. In the gun, however, they are worse than sterile. They are deadly. Against it stands only the fragile, eloquent, exotic word "Almond-blossom."

In the end it does not matter whether this poem's syntax, or imagery, or diction is most striking. In any case the poem's word choices serve an important role in contrasting the worlds it examines. And a poem called "Naming of Parts" is certainly aware of the importance of how we name things, what names we give them, what words we choose.

Another poem that uses artful diction to accomplish its design is "Design" by Robert Frost (1874–1963):

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witch's broth—
A snow-drop spider, a flower like froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.

Again, many things go on at once in this poem. For now, we will focus on the kind of language Frost includes in it. On the one hand, there is the title, "Design." This is a title of quite high diction. It is a philosophical word, a word that recalls what is known in philosophy as the "argument from design," one of the traditional proofs of God's existence which claims that, given the wonderful design of the creation, it must have had a creator. It is also an aesthetic word, evoking the very notion of pattern, of design, in the work of art.

Yet, the poem's diction is taken from very different spheres than the high philosophical or high aesthetic. Just to mention a few: "Dimpled" is a word associated with children. "Assorted characters . . . mixed ready to begin the morning right" is a whole phrase that could be drawn from a recipe book, or, even more, from an advertisement for breakfast cereal. "Paper kite" is again a child's phrase. All of these, that is, suggest the world of childlike play or everyday experience. And we must ask: what are these words of low diction doing in a poem that announces itself in its title as a text of high seriousness, a poem not about childlike play but rather about divine or artistic design?

But of course that is what the poem also is about, as its final couplet (the last two rhyming lines) emphasizes. "What but design of

darkness to appall" is a line of high dignity and diction, one of formal elevated language and syntax (this line would not be spoken in ordinary conversation). Its dignity extends as well into the image pattern. Darkness/appall is a sophisticated word play of contradiction. It puts together darkness and light—appall means to make pale, to whiten—in a contradictory figure that is called an *oxymoron*. But the last line returns to the world of ordinary language and small things, challenging both the high discourse and grand claims of design: "If design govern in a thing so small."

I have so far chosen my examples from more recent poets, since I think it is easiest to hear the registers of diction that are close to our own speech usage; while it is difficult to recognize what may be mixed or contrived diction in language very removed from our own. We can hear, even today, some of John Donne's innovation in diction and natural speech phrasing in his remarkably complex verse forms. When in "The Sunne Rising" he calls the sun "Busy old foole" and "saucy pedantic wretch," even we notice the disparity and strain between his level of language and the elevated heavenly planet. However, even if we grant that Wordsworth launched a revolution in diction by returning poetry to ordinary language, to our ear the language of his poetry is, I think, rather elegant and poetic. But with modern poetry we can rely on our own sense of ordinary and extraordinary language to feel the orchestrations of diction. Therefore, modern poems are especially useful for exercises in diction—noting that the move into Modernism, rather like the Romantism against which the Modernists were rebelling, was also defined in part in terms of diction. The Modernists, as Ezra Pound (1885–1972) put it, wanted to write in a language that was hard and clear and direct, as opposed to what they saw as blurry, vague, and sentimental Romantic language. Pound's poem "The Lake Isle" is specifically written in parody of an (early) poem by William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) called "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." In this phase of his writing, Yeats dreams of escape to a lake isle in language that is gorgeous and evocative:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

But Pound's poem goes:

> O God, O Venus, O Mercury, patron of thieves,
> Give me in due time, I beseech you, a little tobacco-shop,
> With the little bright boxes
> piled up neatly upon the shelves
>
> And the loose fragrant cavendish
> and the shag,
> And the bright Virginia
> loose under the bright glass cases,
> And a pair of scales not too greasy,
> And the whores dropping in for a word or two in passing,
> For a flip word, and to tidy their hair a bit.
>
> O God, O Venus, O Mercury, patron of thieves,
> Lend me a little tobacco-shop,
> or install me in any profession
> Save this damn'd profession of writing,
> where one needs one's brains all the time.

This poem stages a scene of Modernism in many ways. It insists on an everyday, urban setting as the proper place for poetry, and on everyday and even sordid matters as poetic. But one way it realizes this insistence is by introducing the low diction of an everyday, unelevated world. The poem does so in a particularly pointed way, since it opens in a grand style of invocation to the Gods, including the very formal *vocative* address, "O." The poet even offers a kind of catalogue, something routinely found in epics. But this is a catalogue naming specific kinds of tobacco. And the milieu of the poem is far from the gods of ancient Greece. Into its language the words of the corner shop find their way, the "little bright boxes," the neatly piled shelves, the glass cases, and "a pair of scales not too greasy." The poem even opens its diction to the socially marginal "whores" passing "for a flip word" in the (poetically) marginal language of slang.

Just how seriously to take this elevated frame of addressing the gods followed by such deflating linguistic gestures is of course a question the poem itself is asking. But the power of the poem, as a poem, has to do with the distances its language is willing to travel between high and low, remote and near. This is true as well of T. S.

Eliot (1888–1965), whose talent resides not least in his command of diction levels. In his late, meditative poem "East Coker" in *Four Quartets*, for example, he writes:

> Our only health is the disease
> If we obey the dying nurse
> Whose constant care is not to please
> But to remind of our, and Adam's curse,
> And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.
>
> The whole earth is our hospital
> Endowed by the ruined millionaire,
> Wherein, if we do well, we shall
> Die of the absolute paternal care
> That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.
>
> (East Coker)

This text reviews in its own way the dogma of Good Friday, the day of Christ's Passion, in which suffering is shown to be the path of redemption as long as it is accepted in true humility as penitential and purifying. But Eliot has transposed the terms of this basic Christian pattern into the most modern language. The Church is a "dying nurse," Adam is a "ruined millionaire," and the earth on which we suffer is "our hospital." While these transpositions may seem strained, they offer one example of Eliot's commitment to modern terms for even ancient and sacred matters. This command of diction is equally present in his earlier, more secular texts, such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

> And indeed there will be time
> For the yellow smoke that slides along the street
> Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
> There will be time, there will be time
> To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
> There will be time to murder and create,
> And time for all the works and days of hands
> That lift and drop a question on your plate;
> Time for you and time for me,
> And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
> And for a hundred visions and revisions
> Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

This verse mixes diction levels to great effect. There is on the one hand the high, intoning speech level of: "There will be time to murder and create / And time for all the works and days of hands." Murder and creation are momentous events; and the construction "works and days of hands" is prophetic, biblical in its word choice and phrasing—works here meaning the great works of creation or destruction. The repetition of "there will be time" has a similarly elevating, incantatory effect. But this elevated language is set alongside diction that is not only ordinary, but trivial: "That lift and drop a question on your plate." We are not in the world of prophesy, but of "the taking of a toast and tea," whose very terms introduce us into a salon, at tea-time, with all its trivial formality. We are not considering great acts of creation and destruction, but the wavering insecurity of "a hundred indecisions." The very terms are taken from social psychology. What then, is the relation between great deeds and trivial, even sordid conditions? That is what the poem is asking, not least in the famous concluding couplet, where trivial "women come and go" but talk, in the elevated language of culture, of art, of "Michelangelo."

Part of Eliot's greatness as a poet is his mastery of contemporary and ordinary diction, which he sets into his verse lines with great naturalness. The fact that this quoted verse, set into the larger free-verse text of "Prufrock," recalls the sonnet form in its fourteen lines and concluding couplet, as well as weaving an intricate rhyme pattern (time/time; street/meet; panes/hands; create/plate; me/tea; indecisions/revisions; go/Michelangelo), shows Eliot's modernity to extend not only to diction but to other poetic elements, whose high elegance he also naturalizes in new contexts. And it begins to suggest how poetry works through many connected patterns.