

Poetic Diction

Poetic diction is the language, including word choice and syntax that sets poetry apart from more utilitarian forms of writing. It refers to the operating language of poetry, language employed in a manner that sets poetry apart from other kinds of speech or writing. It involves the vocabulary, the phrasing, and the grammar considered appropriate and inappropriate to poetry at different times. In *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (1928), Owen Barfield writes, “When words are selected and arranged in such a way that their meaning either arouses, or is obviously intended to arouse, aesthetic imagination, the result may be described as poetic diction.”

Aristotle established poetic diction as a subject in the *Poetics* (350 BCE). “Every word is either current, or strange, or metaphorical, or ornamental, or newly-coined, or lengthened, or contracted, or altered,” he declared, and he then considered each type of word in turn. His overall concern was “how poetry combines elevation of language with perspicuity.” Changes in poetic fashion, reforms in poetry, often have to do with the effectiveness of poetic diction, the magic of language. How, if at all, is poetic speech marked differently than ordinary speech? “The weightiest theoretical legacy which antiquity and the Renaissance passed on to neoclassicism was the ornamental conception of poetic style,” Emerson Marks writes. “Till the dawn of Romanticism, writers continued to regard the characteristics of verse as raiment adorning the ‘body’ of a poet’s thought.” In *The Life of Dryden* (1779–1781), Samuel Johnson argued that before the time of Dryden, there was simply no poetical diction: no system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts. Words too familiar, or too remote, defeat the purposes of a poet.

In the Preface to **Lyrical Ballads** (1802), William Wordsworth argued against the ornate effects of his predecessors and insisted on the essential identity of poetic and non-poetic language. He argued that poetry should employ “the real language of men in any situation.” Wordsworth revolutionized the idea of poetic diction by connecting it to speech. Poetry is linked to speech, to the way that people actually talk at any given time, but it is also framed and marked differently.

The earliest critical reference to poetic diction is Aristotle’s remark in the *Poetics* that it should be clear without being “mean.” But subsequent generations of poets were more scrupulous in avoiding meanness than in cultivating clarity. Depending heavily on expressions used by previous poets, they evolved in time a language sprinkled with such archaic terms as festoons, pritheo, oft, and ere. It was this “inane phraseology” that William Wordsworth rebelled against in his preface to **the Lyrical Ballads** (1800), in which he advocated a poetry written in the “language really used by men.” Subsequent critics, notably Samuel Taylor Coleridge in **Biographia Literaria** (1817), felt that Wordsworth overstated the case, that his own best work contradicted his theory, and that some of his work written in “the language really used by men” did not achieve the level of poetry.

Modern critics take the position that there is no diction peculiar to poetry, though there may be a diction peculiar to an individual poem. Thus, Shakespeare’s sonnet “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments,” beginning with such images of stately dignity, continues with words evocative of public pomp and temporal power.

The term diction refers to the kind of words, phrases, sentences, and sometimes figurative language that constitute any work of literature. When it comes to poetry writing, the question related to the diction always arises. The question of

diction is considered as primary because the feelings of the poet must be easily conceived by the readers. The poets of all ages have used distinctive poetic diction.

The Neo-classical poetic diction was mainly derived from the classical poets such as Virgil, Spenser, and Milton. These poets used to write poetry by using embellished language and particular decorum. Other prominent features of that period were the extensive use of difficult words, allusions, the personification of abstracts, and avoidance of things considered as low or base. The poetry of that time was treated as something sacred. It was only subjected to the people with high intellect and of high status in the society.

Wordsworth's prime concern was to denounce such superficial and over-embellished language. Wordsworth's aim was to write poetry which symbolizes the life in its simple and rustic state. The poetry, for Wordsworth, must be like the part of daily life speech. It should be written in such language that anyone who wants to read it could comprehend it easily. Wordsworth believes that all such ornamented poetry clouds the genuine and passionate feelings of the poets. He only justifies the use of an embellished language of poetry when it is naturally suggested by the feelings or the subject matter of the poetry. The poetry, for Wordsworth, is the expression of natural feelings and these feelings cannot be communicated with the help of fake and version of upper-class speech but with the actual speech of "humble and rustic life".

He defines poetic diction as a language of common men. It is not the language of the poet as a class but the language of mankind. It is the simple expression of pure passions by men living close to nature. The poetic language is the natural language; therefore, it must be spontaneous and instinctive. The real poetic diction, in the view of the Wordsworth, is the natural overflow of the feelings; therefore, it is immune to the deliberate decoration of the language.

Wordsworth also attributes the quality of giving pleasure to the natural poetic diction. It must not contain any vulgarity and disgusting element. The poet must, through his language, elevate the nature and human feelings.