

THE LONGMAN
DICTIONARY
OF
POETIC TERMS

Jack Myers
Michael Simms
Southern Methodist University


Longman
New York & London

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The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms

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PREFACE

The authors of this book are poets and teachers. Our interest in compiling this dictionary began with questions that arose out of our own writing, our being moved by poems we had read, and our efforts to organize and articulate to our students the techniques, terms, and theories we have learned through these endeavors. Over the years, the countless times we were stalled at certain points in our own writing forced us to produce a repertoire of techniques or “moves” in order to transcend the problems. The stock of wonderful models of poetry we had memorized by loving them came to serve as standards of excellence. And the simplest question from a student—Is a title important?—forced us to confront and develop ideas about composition and the creative writing process itself that inevitably linked up ancient ideas with modern assumptions. We mention the background of the book in order to stress both the focus of our attention and our faith in the poet’s essential job, learning the names of things.

So, this dictionary attempts to define a critical vocabulary for the poet and the student of poetry. The work is extensive, the most comprehensive list of poetic terms that has yet been compiled. Its domain includes (1) traditional, familiar terms that are often bandied about in lecture courses without knowledge of the terms’ limitations and history (*persona, sonnet, allegory*), (2) contemporary workshop terms (*voice, deep image, leap*), (3) terms borrowed from other arts and disciplines (*crosscut, gestalt, archetechtonics*), and (4) archaic or specialized jargon (*bdelygmia, epanorthosis, periergia*). Perhaps even more important is the fact that this book contains original material on topics such as *line endings, titles, cinematic techniques, defects in control, rhythm, thematic structures, juxtapositions, clichés, the prose poem, myth, and translation*, as well as contemporary strategies of development (*cut-and-shuffle, fill-in-the-blanks, definition and list poem, sandwich construction*). While we make no claims that this book will directly create better poets, our contention is that it will help to educate and stimulate the poet so that he or she can better articulate critical opinions and can have at hand more technical options and aesthetic directions. In this spirit we begin to answer the charge that contemporary poetry lacks a coherent body of poetics, and (in a somewhat defensive posture of aesthetic patriotism) to think that, despite the annoying and sometimes petty busyness of the current poetry scene, the last quarter of the 20th century may just be that Golden Age that Ezra Pound prophesied would make the fertile 1920s seem like “a tempest in a teapot.”

At first glance, the principles behind the selection of concepts in this dictionary may seem unclear. The book synthesizes many different disciplines—aesthetics, linguistics, lexicography, psychology, anthropology, history, and science, as well as the fields of theoretical and practical criticism. But the reader may find it helpful to think of the book as being three books between two covers: (1) a

catalogue of definitions, (2) a companion-reader to traditional and contemporary poetry, and (3) a catalyst to the reader's own critical or creative writing. The reader will note that a major portion of the headwords in this dictionary were coined by Classical and Renaissance theorists to describe their understanding of the nature of language in reference to the imagination. We have intentionally restored these terms to modern usage because recent theorists (with the notable exceptions of I. A. Richards and Northrop Frye) have added little to poetics other than new understanding of old ideas. For example, the Chicago Critics' ideas are based almost entirely on the theories of Aristotle. Furthermore, American poets, on the whole, know less about the aesthetic and persuasive powers of language than did their counterparts in Renaissance Europe; and they, in turn, probably knew less than did their Classical counterparts. One of this book's aims, then, is to enlighten the contemporary poet by igniting his or her interest in ancient and modern ideas about poetry. As a companion-reader to poetry of the last 50 years, the book requires that we define some terms in an innovative way, and that we allow ourselves the freedom to expand these entries into analytical essays. In other instances, such as that of *organic composition*, we were surprised to find that a term that we thought was promulgated in the modern era actually has its roots in Romantic and pre-Romantic conceptions. In regard to the third and most elusive aim of this book, as a catalyst to writing, it is our hope that the reader will go beyond the facts presented here into the realm of memory and imagination and emerge with the treasure upon which this book is based, innovations in human expression.

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JACK MYERS
MICHAEL SIMMS

A NOTE ON THE ESSAYS AND APPENDIXES

Aside from being a comprehensive dictionary of poetry, this book also features essays, which collectively form a handbook. These entries consider ideas on contemporary technique, as well as traditional ideas on the theory, history, movements, and practice of poetry. The major essays include:

cinematic techniques	myth
cliché	rhythm
fractured narrative	sound system
juxtaposition	Surrealism
line ending	titles
metaphor	translation
meter	

Another feature worthy of mention is the inclusion of rhetorical and logical devices rescued from Renaissance texts. For a complete guide to these and other terms, see the appendixes.

PRONUNCIATION KEY

SYM-BOLS	KEY WORDS	SYM-BOLS	KEY WORDS	SYM-BOLS	KEY WORDS
/a/	hat	/oi/	boy	/ng/	sing, drink
/ä/	father	/öö/	book	/ngg/	finger
/ã/	fate	/oo/	move	/s/	sell
/e/	flesh	/ou/	sound	/sh/	shoe, lotion
/ë/	he	/u/	cup	/th/	thin
/er/	air	/ur/	fur	/th/	than
/i/	sit	/ə/	ago, focus	/v/	very
/ī/	eye	/ər/	murder	/w/	work
/o/	proper	/ch/	much	/y/	yes
/ô/	saw	/g/	good	/z/	zeal
/ô/	nose	/j/	gem	/zh/	azure, vision

No key words are needed for /b/, /d/, /f/, /h/, /k/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /p/, /r/, and /t/.

FOREIGN SOUNDS

/kh/	/Y/
Scottish: loch /lokh'/; German: doch /dôkh'/, Johann Sebastian Bach /bäkh'/	French: tu /tY'/, déjà vu /dāzhä vY'/; German: grün /grYn'/, Walküre /välkY'rä/
/kh/	/N/
German: ich /ikh'/, nichts /nikhts'/	This symbol is not a sound but indicates that the preceding symbol is a nasal. French: /aN/ and /än/ in vin blanc /vaN' blän'/ and ancien /äNsyaN' räzhēm'/, /ôN/ in bon /bôn/ and fait accompli /fa'täkôNplē'/
/œ/	
French: feu /fœ'/, peu /pœ'/; German: schön / shœn'/, Goethe /gœt'ə/	

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A

abecedarius (from Medieval Latin for “alphabetical”) a type of ACROSTIC in which each line or stanza begins with the letters of the alphabet in their normal order. For example, Chaucer’s *An ABC* begins its first stanza with the word “Almighty,” its second with “Bountee,” and its third with “Comfort.” A more difficult, line-by-line form, incorporating ALLITERATION, can be seen in Alaric Watts’ lines:

An Austrian army awfully array’d,
Boldly by battery besieged Belgrade,
Cossack Commanders cannonading come
Dealing destruction’s devastating doom.

Greek writers of the Alexandrian period, as well as Latin writers (e.g., Plautus), put the titles of their plays in the a.verses of the arguments. Ben Jonson imitated this device in *The Alchemist*. See *light verse* in APPENDIX I.

absolutist criticism a type of criticism that interprets works according to an external, standard set of principles. See CRITICISM. See also *criticism* in APPENDIX I.

abstract poetry a term originated by Dame Edith Sitwell to describe poetry that uses sound, rhyme, and rhythm to communicate a feeling, rather than depending, as most poetry does, on the denotative or connotative meanings of the words. This type of poetry is called “abstract” because it uses sound in much the same way that abstract painting uses color, texture, and shape. Sitwell’s poem *Hornpipe* is an example of a.p. For related terms, see AMPHIGORY, NONSENSE VERSE, and TRANS-SENSE VERSE. See also *diction* in APPENDIX I.

abstract terms and concrete terms *abstract terms*: terms that represent ideas or concepts and that are usually taken from *concrete terms*, which represent the sensuous and the particularity of things experienced or known. Abstract terms are usually broader and more general than concrete terms and tend to describe a domain of thought. For example:

<i>abstract</i>	<i>general</i>	<i>concrete</i>
beauty	woman	Helen of Troy

Abstract terms are informative and nonsensory, though they might carry strong connotations (“liberty, freedom, brotherhood”). Although abstract terms are most often found in the more abstract realms of literature, such as philosophy, it is generally thought that some of the greatest effects in poetry can be brought about by mixing a.t.a. c.t., as in this example from

Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "How light and portable my pain seems now, / When that which makes me bend makes the King bow"

Over the years, different ages have favored one or the other of these forms of word choice. The 18th century expressed many of its images as abstractions, intellectualizations of concrete phenomena (fish, a finny tribe), whereas the 16th century heard Sidney in his *Defense of Poetry* (1583) hold the power of the concrete above abstraction. Generally speaking, Romantics have touted the specificity and immediacy of the concrete to express emotions and experience, and poetic rhetoricians and philosophers have found the uses of abstraction germane to their efforts.

In the 20th century, according to Northrop Frye, it is very common to find the phrasal formula of "the adjective noun of noun," e.g., "the cold hand of death," in which the first noun is concrete and the second is abstract. See *DICTION*. See also *diction* in APPENDIX I.

academic (derived from the olive grove of *Academe*, where Plato met with his students in the fourth century B.C., Athens) indicating a nonvocational school such as a university or college. As applied to poetry, the term is used pejoratively to refer to verse that is too formal, mannered, or tame. Modern academies (the Académie Française, the Royal Academy of Arts in England, the Real Academia Española in Spain, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters) propose to keep their respective languages accurate, to foster literature, and to recognize great writing. The famous "Platonic Academy" led by Marsilio Ficino in Florence, Italy, was modeled after Plato's and generated the neo-Platonism doctrines in the late 15th century which affected much Renaissance English literature. See *WORKSHOP*.

acatalectic /-lek'-/ (from negative form of Greek "leaving off") indicating a metrically complete line of verse. For example, an a. iambic tetrameter line is

The girl who bróke mý heárt ín two.

The noun *acatalexis* indicates the use of an a. line. When an excess of syllables is employed in a conventional metrical pattern, the line is hypermetric (commonly found in trochaic verse). If a line is metrically incomplete, it is called *catalectic* and is a form of *TRUNCATION*. See also *CATALEXIS*.

accent (from Greek for "song added to speech") the amount of emphasis placed on a syllable as it is pronounced. Although a. and *STRESS* are often used interchangeably, prosodists prefer to use a. to refer to language usage, and stress to refer to metrical qualities (see *METER*). In other words, a. refers to a combination of pitch, force, loudness, and duration, while stress refers solely to force.

Four levels of accent are usually distinguished. A heavily accented syllable is called a *primary a.* (·); a lighter or medium-accented syllable is

called a *secondary a.* (·); a very lightly accented syllable is called a *tertiary a.* (·); and an *unaccented syllable* is denoted by -. The word “*èncýclòpédiã*” shows a combination of all four levels of accent. When two syllables are stressed equally, the occurrence is called *even a.* or *level stress*, as in the spondee “*mánkind.*”

In traditional Latin terminology, *ICTUS* is the name of the stress itself; *arsis* is the name of the unstressed syllable. In earlier Greek terminology, the terms were *thesis*, unstressed, and *arsis*, stressed.

Though there is disagreement among prosodists on the essential nature of *a.* (e.g., whether *DURATION*, or *QUANTITY*, is an element of *a.*), three basic types of *a.* are usually described: (1) *Etymological a.* (sometimes called *grammatical*, *lexical*, or *word a.*) is an emphasis given to a syllable or syllables in a word because of the word’s traditional pronunciation, derivation, or relationship of prefix and suffix to root. (2) *Rhetorical a.* (sometimes called *logical* or *sense a.*) is an emphasis that occurs because of the relative importance of the word in the context of the line. A rhetorical *a.* may vary depending upon the intended meaning:

Did you bring the key?
Did you bring the *kéy*?
Did *yóu* bring the key?

(3) *Metrical a.* (sometimes called *stress*) is an element in an abstract pattern of recurring emphasis in a conventional line of verse. If the metrical *a.* forces itself over the etymological *a.*, it is called a *wrenched a.*, a device often found in *folk ballads* and poems that imitate the style and manner of folk ballads, e.g., Coleridge’s “He loves to take to *marinéés* / That come from a far *countreé.*”

In general, metrical *a.* yields to rhetorical and etymological *a.* except in intentionally *wrenched a.* It should be noted, however, that some 18th- and 19th-century conservative prosodists held that rhetorical *a.* yields to metrical *a.* See *PROSODY*, *RHYTHM*, and *SCANSION*. See also *ARSIS* AND *THESIS* and *FOLK BALLAD*; also *meter* in *APPENDIX 1*.

accentual-syllabic verse (also called “*syllabic-stress meter*”) a type of poetry in which the metrical scansion takes into account both the number of stressed and the number of unstressed syllables in a line. It is the most commonly used system of measurement in English metrics. *A.-s.v.* groups syllables into units, each of which is called a *FOOT*. There can commonly be from one to eight feet in a typical line, though there are lines that contain up to twelve feet.

A.-s.v. tends to vary the patterns of the strict forms listed above. The process of adding or subtracting syllables is called *SUBSTITUTION*. See also *ACCENT*, *ACCENTUAL VERSE*, *BLANK VERSE*, *METER*, *PROSODY*, *SCANSION*, and *STRESS*.

accentual verse poetry in which the metrical scansion takes into account only the stressed syllables. A line of *a.v.* may have any number of syllables because only the stressed syllables are counted. There are usually four

stresses and seven to nine syllables in a line, although Auden uses a three-stress line with six to eight syllables in *September 1, 1939*, and even in poems using a four-stress line there is much variation. Most Germanic and Anglo-Saxon poetry is a.v., and it remains one of the most widely used meters in English. The loose iambs of many modern poems, such as Yeats' *Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?*, could be described as a.v. In addition, a.v. is the basis for Hopkins' SPRUNG RHYTHM. The system of using stresses to regulate a line is called *stress prosody*. See also ACCENTUAL-SYLLABIC VERSE, ANGLO-SAXON VERSE, METER, and STRONG-STRESS METER.

accidence (from Latin for "chance") grammatically, the morphological INFLECTION of a word; also, any book setting down the basic principles of grammar.

acephalous line /əsef-/ (*acephalous*, Greek for "headless"; also known as "initial truncation") a line of verse in conventional meter, usually iambic, in which the first unstressed syllable of the line is left out. (The term TRUNCATION refers usually to the omission of the last syllable.)

Acmeism /ak'mé-/ (from Greek for "utmost, a pinnacle of") a school of modern Russian poetry which strove for clarity, precision, and texture. It opposed specifically the unworldliness and vagueness of Symbolism which was the dominant mode of writing in Russian poetry at the turn of the 20th century. The *Acmeists* included notable poets such as Akhmatova, Gorodetsky, Gummilyov, Kuzmin, and Mandelstam—all of whom were closely associated with the magazine *Apollon*. They were craftpersons who concentrated on the technical aspects of a poem rather than its prophetic vision. Their aesthetic aloofness from social problems, which earned them the enmity of both Soviet critics and the avant-garde, may have helped to make the movement short-lived.

acoustic scansion (see SCANSION) the use of a machine, such as the oscillograph or kymograph, to record voice patterns.

acronym a form of abbreviation in which the initial (or other) letters of words are pronounced as a word, such as "AWOL" (absent without leave). See ACROSTIC. See also *forms* in APPENDIX 1.

acrostic (from Greek for "topmost" plus "line of verse") a puzzle poem whose variations of initial, medial, and terminal letters in each line form a hidden word or phrase when read vertically and/or horizontally. The genre was derived from early Greek and Latin texts whose authors, it is thought, meant to devise verses that could easily be memorized and accurately passed on through the oral tradition. During the Middle Ages, the form was often used to spell out names or messages with religious significance. The common type of a. is the *true a.*, which employs a vertical reading of the initial letters of words:

Man
Is
Never
Dead