



The Pleasure of Poetry

☞ READING AND ENJOYING BRITISH POETRY
FROM DONNE TO BURNS

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To
Eveline
With love and gratitude
And
To
The memory of my parents

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Preface

This is a book for the general reader, or anyone who has an interest in poetry. It is meant to be an introduction to some of the finest poems written in England and Scotland in the two centuries between 1600 and 1800. Some of these can be difficult for modern readers, but, perhaps surprisingly, most are not. With a little help in understanding unfamiliar words and some distant events, these poems can live again for us today.

I have written this book, then, in the hope that readers may discover here some new delights in an older poetic tradition. I have chosen what I believe to be some of the most accessible and appealing poems from John Donne to Robert Burns, a period that is central to the growth and development of British poetry. I discuss them in some detail but without entering into the problems in the texts, the many allusions, or the often complicated sources. I have provided glosses in the margins for some of the words (underlined) that may be difficult for readers today. My goal is to convey something of the beauty and significance in the poems, along with pointing out various techniques the poets have adopted in composing them, without getting distracted by the issues in them. My hope is that readers will then proceed to read further in the poets of this period with increased confidence, pleasure, and understanding. The “Further Reading” section contains lists of other poems to sample by these poets, as well as books about them and the period in which they wrote. Exploring more deeply in poet or period can be continually rewarding.

My readings of these poems are meant as general guides and broadly suggestive explanations rather than as definitive or exhaustive accounts.

Readers will, of course, form their own interpretation of these poems and have their own favorites. This is as it should be. Poetry is much too personal to pronounce absolute determinations of worth or meaning. My goal is to remind those who have already read some poetry in the past of pleasures they may have experienced before but forgotten, or to introduce others who did not have such experience to some things they have missed. It is never too late to take up something new and discover enjoyment and satisfaction in it.

I take pleasure here in thanking all those teachers, authors, and students who have taught me along my way. I wish to cite especially Professors Phillip Harth and Howard Weinbrot of the University of Wisconsin for their exceptional scholarly and critical guidance. I also remember with gratitude the books, essays, lectures, and editions by such scholars as Cleanth Brooks and Maynard Mack, who join wisdom with insight, learning, and eloquence. And I must not neglect to mention some of the great teachers I had many years ago, from Frank O'Connor, the Irish short story writer whose classes in modern literature were a human delight, to Alvin Whitley, one of the great university lecturers in the Johnsonian tradition.

I wish also to thank Kathy Wendland, a wonderful editor and dear friend, for her careful reading of my manuscript and her many excellent suggestions. Without her help and encouragement, this book would not have been possible. Any errors that remain are, of course, wholly my own responsibility.

My greatest debt is in the dedication.

A Note on Sources

The primary source of the poems cited in this book is the two-volume anthology edited by M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed. (New York: Norton, 2000). For Milton's *Samson Agonistes* I have used Merritt Y. Hughes's edition, *John Milton: The Complete Poems and Major Prose* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill/Odyssey, 1957). For Dryden's *Religio Laici* I have used Keith Walker's edition, *John Dryden* (The Oxford Authors) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). For Swift's poetry (except for "A Description of a City Shower" and "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift," which are in the *Norton Anthology*), I have relied on Pat Rogers's edition, *Jonathan Swift: The Complete Poems* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983). For Burns's "John Anderson My Jo" I have used Carol McGuirk's edition, *Robert Burns: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1993).

Introduction to Reading Poetry

Poetry is something for everyone to enjoy, not just a select few. Anyone who reads at a high school level should be able to take pleasure in it with a minimum of aid. As surprising as it may seem to modern readers, given the difficulty of much poetry since the early twentieth century, most poets throughout history have actually been interested in communicating with their readers, not in baffling them or putting them off. Occasionally, of course, a poet will write primarily for a limited audience, a few insiders or an educated elite, but overall, poets wish to be understood and appreciated, if for nothing more than to sell their books.

In the poetry that follows, readers will find much to interest them, from a surprising variety of ideas to a wide range of emotion, sharp wit, verbal music, and an abundance of imaginative delight. In addition, the lives and times of the poets will be briefly considered in order to provide a useful context for the reader. Poems are not written in a vacuum, of course, but often refer to historical events or figures that may not be familiar to us today, as well as to personal concerns of the poet. Such topical references that occur will be briefly described and their relevance to the poetry explained, so the reader may readily understand and appreciate the poet's point. The pleasure of reading this poetry should not be lost for lack of a few pertinent historical or biographical facts.

The broad subject of this book is the major poetry written in English from 1600 to 1800. This period is not as well known as some others, such as the Renaissance with Shakespeare or the Romantic period in the early nineteenth century. Still, there is much to enjoy in the poetry of this era, much even that

is surprisingly contemporary in its concerns. Some of the greatest poets in English, like John Milton and Alexander Pope, wrote during this time but are practically unknown today. Yet they are brilliant handlers of the language with a wonderful variety of poems, many of which are quite accessible to modern readers. The first part of this period, to the middle of the seventeenth century, is usually characterized as one dominated by the so-called Metaphysical Poets, a name that suggests they reveal a strong philosophical interest in their poetry. The most important Metaphysical Poets we will consider are John Donne and Andrew Marvell, but we will see that, despite the name, they are not always very serious or interested only in philosophical themes. Moreover, there are other poets at this time, like Ben Jonson and Robert Herrick, who do not fully share their concerns. The later period, once called the Neoclassical Age but now more accurately termed the Restoration (roughly from 1660 to 1700) and the eighteenth century, was dominated first by satire and later by themes of sympathy and sensibility. Still, as we shall see, other themes and kinds of poetry than these were written and enjoyed. Diversity is clearly one of this poetry's main features.

These two hundred years or so in England were often turbulent and occasionally marred by violent conflict. In the seventeenth century the country was moving from a largely feudal society to a freer, more capitalistic economy and a somewhat more constitutional form of monarchy. It was sharply divided in the middle of the century by a civil war that pitted the king (Charles I) against the Parliament, Puritan against Anglican, community against community, and brother against brother. The issues were serious and of continuing relevance: among these were such problems as the nature and scope of the freedoms of worship and speech, the rights of citizens versus the royal prerogative, the powers of Parliament, and the relation of church and state. The repercussions of these conflicts and changes lasted into the next century, though, after a brief interruption when Oliver Cromwell ruled, England reestablished its monarchy on a firm constitutional basis with Parliament taking on a more prominent role than it had before. In the eighteenth century the English expanded their trading activities, enriching themselves, but also bringing them into conflict with other countries, as well as with some of their own colonies, most notably the one that became the United States. The industrial revolution began later in this century, a movement that was to transform England and later the world. The poetry written during these years does not usually deal specifically with these events, but the poet may allude to them or incorporate them indirectly into the poem. These references will be explained as needed, either in the margin of the text or in the discussion itself.

Today, it seems, few people read poems for pleasure, especially the older sort, in part because they have never had much exposure to poetry and in part because they do not see its relevance. Yet the basic principles for reading poetry are few and well known. In fact, they are not much different from those for reading prose. Poetry is not a mystery, though it may deal with the mysterious and the haunting, or the ambiguous and the elusive as well as the beautiful and the ugly. All of life is its province. What follows here is a brief review, for those who feel the need for it, of some of the basic principles intended to help in reading this poetry with greater understanding and pleasure.

The first principle in reading poetry is to realize that it is generally indirect. That is, poetry often makes its point or introduces its subject not by stating it directly but through figures of speech, which are nonliteral expressions meant to evoke the subject in a certain way or for a particular response. A poet, for example, may employ comparisons to unexpected objects or unusual things that do not at first seem relevant. Such comparisons (called metaphors or similes) characterize the subject in ways that enhance our understanding or appreciation of it. Poets rarely call a spade a spade, because they want to dig deeper than the literal object can go. When Robert Burns writes, “O my Love’s like a red, red rose / That’s newly sprung in June,” he wants us to see how beautiful his beloved is and to sense how deep his feeling is for her. The word “like” makes the comparison between love and a rose explicit; this is called a simile. The rose, everyone knows, is a traditional symbol for love as red is a symbol for passion. The repetition of “red” underscores the depth of the color as well as of the poet’s affection, while the second line, with its associations of spring and new life, furthers the idea of his beloved’s freshness, vitality, and beauty. In just a few words the poet evokes a powerful feeling of love that we might otherwise think is indescribable. The lilting rhythm and songlike sounds of his lines reinforce this effect as well.

Sometimes poets will not signal the comparison being made, but create a kind of equation between two things to suggest that this one equals, or is identical to, that one, or they may let the equation remain implicit. This metaphorical comparison is less obvious than with a simile, but nevertheless is usually clear enough, especially as the poem develops. When John Donne writes in one of his Holy Sonnets (No. 6), “This is my play’s last scene,” we know that he means his life is drawing to a close. It is not just “like” a drama, it is one. Comparing one’s life to a play was commonplace in the Renaissance, as in Shakespeare’s “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (Jaques in *As You Like It*, 2.7.139–140). Donne continues in his sonnet with other metaphors for his life, comparing it to a

pilgrimage as well as to a race, both again in the final moments before reaching their goal. Donne uses these metaphors to convey his sense of his own life as an active and dynamic experience coming to a climax: poets often dramatize their lives in highly expressive terms that convey more to a reader than a flat statement of fact would do. We feel, not just think, that their lives are about to end.

Another common figure of speech used by poets is personification, that is, when an object or an idea is given human attributes. Thus Ben Jonson, in his “Epitaph on S. P.” (a young actor he knew who had recently died), says that “Heaven and Nature seemed to strive / Which owned the creature” (lines 7–8), as if these two abstract concepts were able to struggle like people over possession of the young boy, who had been favored by both. It is a way of exalting S. P.’s value if God and Nature appear to desire to retain him for their own realms. In the same poem, Jonson refers to Death and the Fates as if they were human and capable of specific intentions, motives, and feelings. “Death’s self,” he says, “is sorry” for causing S. P.’s death, and the “Fates turned cruel” to bring about this tragic end. For the reader, personification makes such concepts come alive to act with energy, purpose, and impact in the world, even though we may not believe in the literal reality of these forces.

Exaggeration or hyperbole, another common figure of speech, occurs when a poet makes his point by inflating it beyond a reasonable or literal possibility. Andrew Marvell does this in “The Garden” to suggest the abundance of food in his rural retreat, a kind of Garden of Eden, where the fruit seems to seek to be eaten: “The nectarine and curious peach / Into my hands themselves do reach” (lines 37–38). The poet does not even have to go pick them for himself. Personification also plays an implicit role in these lines, which treat the fruit as if they have human motives. The two figures of speech clearly work together to create a more forceful expression. In Jonathan Swift’s “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift,” a poem in which he imagines his own death and the reaction to it among his friends and acquaintances, the poet suggests that he is very jealous of Pope’s power as a poet: “In Pope I cannot read a line, / But with a sigh I wish it mine” (lines 47–48). We know that Swift admired Pope’s poetry, but we need not take this literally to see his point. Surely not every line by Pope makes him sigh with envy, but the statement makes us smile at the absurd exaggeration without detracting from its compliment to Pope’s great powers as a poet. Humor often adds to our pleasure in these figures of speech.

A further technique for the poet to convey meaning and feeling indirectly is through allusion, the reference to events or people outside the subject that help in some way to characterize it. Classical myths provide a fund of allusions for poets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, since they

were an integral part of the education of the time. Among the more familiar mythological figures are Apollo, the god of poetry; Bacchus, the god of wine and inspiration; Aurora, the goddess of the dawn; Jove (or Jupiter or Zeus), the king of the gods; the nine Muses, the daughters of Jove who inspire the various arts on earth; and many more. In “His Farewell to Sack,” Robert Herrick says that even Apollo and the nine Muses could not find inspiration without the benefit of sack, a sherry wine from Spain:

’Tis not Apollo can, or those thrice three
Castalian sisters sing, if wanting [lacking] thee. *their sacred spring on*
 Mt. Parnassus
 (29–30)

Herrick, of course, uses such an allusion to these divine figures in the Greek pantheon for humorous exaggeration. Classical writers and their works (e.g., Homer, *The Iliad*), and major historical events (the Trojan War or the Spanish Inquisition) furnish more sources for allusions. Clearly, one needs to know some mythology, as well as some classical literature and history, in order to comprehend these references. But one can usually catch the drift of a passage even if the specific references are not clear. A good encyclopedia or an edition with annotations will provide the basic information needed to understand such references. It is, of course, also true that the more one reads, the more one will begin to recognize such allusions.

A second concept important to reading poetry is the voice or persona in the poem. Who is supposedly writing and speaking in the poem, the poet himself or herself, or someone else? Today we tend to see poetry as self-expression, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that was not usually the case. In fact, most of the time poets would have been scorned if they had written directly about their own feelings. Poets, like other writers, were expected to write about subjects of general concern, such as aspects of human nature or life in their society. Occasionally, though, even in the era under consideration a poet will dramatize the plight of a historical person by adopting his or her voice to speak about a specific situation. Pope’s “Eloisa to Abelard” (1717) is a poem depicting the love of a twelfth-century nun for her teacher, a well-known philosopher who returned her love. The poet becomes the tortured Heloise (the more common spelling of her name today), who writes about her continuing passion for Abelard despite their years of separation and her confinement in a convent. Her passion has been reignited after a letter he wrote to a friend explaining their love came into her hands. The poem begins:

In these deep solitudes and awful cells,
 Where heavenly-pensive contemplation dwells,
 And ever-musing melancholy reigns;
 What means this tumult in a vestal's veins?
 Why rove my thoughts beyond this last retreat?
 Why feels my heart its long-forgotten heat?
 Yet, yet I love!—From Abelard it came,
 And Eloisa yet must kiss the name.

the letter
 (1–8)

In the rest of the poem Pope depicts Eloisa's mind trying to come to grips with her feelings as she struggles to reconcile her passionate earthly love with her love for God. Such a point of view was about as far from Pope, an eighteenth-century gentleman and poet, as one can imagine. Yet the woman's fate clearly fascinated Pope, prompting him to write a powerful poem about her internal struggle from the inside, as if he were she. Eloisa's reaction to the letter is tumultuous as she recalls the details of their affair and realizes that she still loves Abelard as passionately as before.

Using such a specific voice will sometimes imply a certain situation that involves more than one character, as Eloisa evokes Abelard, their exchange of letters, and the whole of their love affair. Her rediscovery of her continuing passion is a moment of great power with a long history behind it, a confusing and melancholy present, and an uncertain future. She describes all this in her long letter to Abelard that recalls the highlights of their love, the opposition of her father, and their resulting separation and retirement into different monasteries. Eloisa concludes her letter by imagining their being reunited in death and being mourned not only by other loving couples, but also by a later poet (or bard) who can understand their terrible fate because he, too, loves one from whom he is irretrievably separated:

And sure if fate some future bard shall join
 In sad similitude of griefs to mine,
 Condemned whole years in absence to deplore,
 And image charms he must behold no more,
 Such if there be, who loves so long, so well,
 Let him our sad, our tender story tell;
 The well-sung woes will sooth my pensive ghost;
 He best can paint 'em, who shall feel 'em most.

pronounced "jine"

(359–366)

In these lines Pope clearly suggests that he, too, may have been suffering similar pangs of frustrated love (a point much debated by scholars), but

whether true or not this is only a minor complication of the whole history of Eloisa's love as evoked by the poet in this poem. Pope's poem is no doubt more elaborate than most poems using a first-person narrator (it runs to 366 lines), but it shows us clearly what poets can do in adopting someone else's voice.

Readers of poetry naturally need to be especially attentive to the kind of language employed by the author. Poets will normally adapt their diction to their subject, unless they wish to mark a contrast or juxtapose the language to the context. For example, Milton, in composing his epic, *Paradise Lost*, generally employs an elevated, formal language for his profoundly serious work. In describing what God did to Satan after the archangel rebelled against Him, Milton says:

Him the Almighty Power
Hurled headlong flaming from th'ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire,
Who durst defy th'Omnipotent to arms.

(1: 44–49)

With such formal, polysyllabic words as *ethereal*, *combustion*, *perdition*, and *adamantine*, Milton suggests this is no common event that he is describing, but something huge and momentous. He begins his sentence with the object instead of the subject (an inversion of normal syntax), which adds to its formality and unusual emphasis, and focuses our attention on Satan as the target of God's wrath. On the other hand, poets will occasionally employ slang or “low” words to characterize the subject they are attacking or mocking. John Dryden, in his satire on a fellow dramatist called “Mac Flecknoe,” slips in a few such words when he describes the area around a training school for actors, which also harbors brothels:

Where their vast courts the mother-strumpets keep,
And, undisturbed by watch, in silence sleep.

police
(72–73)

Nearby is the building, a “Nursery” (training school)

Where unfledged actors learn to laugh and cry,
Where infant punks their tender voices try . . .

prostitutes
(76–77)

Dryden's picture of this area is clearly derogatory, especially since much of his description uses more formal diction and elegant language: the association of "mother-strumpets" with courts, which are usually linked rather with royalty, undercuts any dignity the school may have had. Here the poet plays on the sharp contrast between high and low language, contributing to the ridicule of his target and to his mock-epic form. The connotations of the poet's words are often more important than their denotation, so that historical notes on the language may be necessary to alert readers to any nuances or shades of meaning in the poem.

Another important part of the language poets employ are the images (i.e., concrete references to the things of this world) to evoke their subject. The images they select and the way they treat them help determine the effect they produce in the poem. For example, Pope in "Eloisa to Abelard" focuses on the gloomy, solitary situation of the convent, with its "Relentless walls" and "rugged rocks" (lines 17, 19), its surrounding "grots and caverns shagged with horrid thorn" (line 20), to suggest the feelings of isolation and imprisonment that Eloisa has in her convent. It is not just description for its own sake, but a vivid projection of her mental state and her perception of her situation. In George Herbert's poem "Time," the focus is on the Grim Reaper's scythe, which the speaker says is not as keen as it should be, that Time should sharpen it so that people can die more readily and thus go to Heaven to rejoin God. Perhaps long ago, the speaker thinks, people did not want it to be sharp:

"Perhaps some such of old did pass,
Who above all things loved this life;
To whom thy scythe a hatchet was,
Which now is but a pruning knife.
Christ's coming hath made man thy debtor,
Since by thy cutting he grows better."(7–12)

The speaker calls it a "pruning knife" instead of a "hatchet" because it improves man's growth in holiness and leads to salvation. The hatchet is merely brutal and inefficient. At the end of the poem, Time concludes, ironically, that the speaker wants more time in life rather than less. Herbert raises the specter of death to debate the idea of wanting to leave this life in order to escape its suffering and sins to find eternal rest and peace and joy with God. As in several of his poems (e.g., "The Altar," "The Pulley," and "The Collar") Herbert wittily plays with a single object or image around which to focus our attention.

Poets occasionally use a special kind of image, a symbol, to concentrate or enhance their meaning. A symbol is generally an object that stands for something else, like a flag for a country or the swastika for Nazi Germany. Often, it is enough just to mention the object to convey the significance or feeling one intends. Thus, John Donne uses directions for important symbolic meanings in “Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward.” Here he describes how he is “carried towards the West / This day, when my soul’s form bends toward the East” (lines 9–10), to suggest how his body is moving toward the setting sun, or death, as he rides toward a friend’s house, while his soul goes in the opposite direction, toward the rising sun (the Son, Christ, a common pun) and eternal life. The contrasting movement of body and soul, of physical deterioration versus spiritual yearning and growth, is suggested by these directions and embodies one of the central themes of this poem.

Conversely, in the eighteenth century Thomas Gray invokes specific historical figures from the previous century in the following stanza from his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751) to stand for certain achievements:

Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast
 The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
 Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
 Some Cromwell guiltless of his country’s blood. (57–60)

These were all famous people from the seventeenth century in England who were prominent during the conflict between the king and Parliament. John Hampden was a Parliamentary leader who led the political fight against the arbitrary rule of Charles I; Milton was not only a great poet, but an eloquent voice who argued forcefully for freedom and republicanism in many prose writings; and Oliver Cromwell was an outstanding military leader for Parliament in the English Civil War, who eventually became England’s ruler. They all emerged from relative obscurity to become significant historical figures during this time. Simply by naming them they become symbols for the kind of achievement no longer possible for those in the cemetery Gray laments, who have died without reaching their full potential. Symbols can embody certain values and emotional associations that enable poets to concentrate their significance into a single word, always a useful feature.

Symbols may also be put together into a coherent narrative or extended description to form an allegory. This becomes a complex action in which characters and events represent certain ideas or values, as well as their own reality. Dryden’s *Absalom and Achitophel*, as we will see, is a kind of historical

assonance, and consonance, which are the repetition of consonant or vowel sounds within a line (or in successive lines) of verse. A few lines from John Dryden's "Alexander's Feast" (1697) in which Alexander the Great's musician, Timotheus, proves he can evoke practically any emotion he wants in his audience through his flute playing, will illustrate how intensely musical verse can be:

The <u>mighty master</u> smiled to see	<i>Alexander the Great</i>
That love was in the next degree;	
'Twas but a kindred sound to move,	
For pity melts the mind to love.	
Softly sweet, in <u>Lydian</u> measures,	<i>sad, plaintive music</i>
Soon he soothed his soul to pleasures.	(93–98)

Here we see (and hear) the prominent end rhyme, the alliteration and consonance of the *m* sound and the assonance of the long *i* in the first line, the continuing alliteration of *ms* and *ss*, and the assonance of the *oo* sound in the later lines. This passage is a melodious feast meant to underscore music's power over our hearts and minds. Poetry and music have long enjoyed a close association, and Dryden here displays it subtly but abundantly.

Another part of the appeal of any poem is in its rhythm, which has to do with the movement of its sounds. The rhythm of a poem is partly a function of its basic meter (or lack thereof) and all the variations from the norm in the line. All the poets in this book compose metrical verse. This means that they employ a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables (the natural pattern in English but not in all languages) to give a certain rhythm to their poems. The most common pattern is a unit composed of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (called iambic), with the lines usually having eight or ten syllables in all. Thus there are generally four or five stressed syllables in each line (called tetrameter and pentameter respectively). Although each poem will have a dominant metrical pattern, most of the lines in each will have some sort of variation on it, usually for emphasis. Here are a couple of examples with the stresses marked. The first is from Andrew Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" (1681), where he describes the estate of Sir Thomas Fairfax, who was a prominent parliamentary general during England's Civil War:

Within this sòber fràme expèct	
Wòrk of no fòreign Àrchitèct,	
That ùnto càves the qùarries drèw,	
And fòrests did to pàstures hèw.	(1–4)

Marvell is praising the simple construction of the buildings on the estate, which had been part of an ancient monastery and blended readily into the surrounding landscape. The stresses in the first line are regularly iambic as indicated, but in the second line the first word is clearly stressed, not the short and unimportant “of.” The word “foreign” then has somewhat greater stress on its first syllable, perhaps to underscore the fact that the estate has its foundation in native design. Any change in the metrical pattern usually means that the poet wishes to emphasize the word receiving the stress. The rest of the line continues the regular iambic pattern, as do the two lines that follow. With the eight syllable lines and their four stressed syllables the poem is in iambic tetrameter. It also is made up of couplets (two successive lines that rhyme) in mainly end-stopped lines (where the sense of the phrase or clause is completed at the end of each line). Like the architecture of Fairfax’s estate, the poem is calm, regular, and orderly. It should be noted, however, that different readers will sometimes find somewhat different stress patterns in any given poetic line, though they will usually agree on the overall meter in the poem.

In a skilled poet’s hands, the tetrameter line is a highly flexible medium and may be used for various purposes. Dialogue might seem to be difficult to fit into this relatively short line that is further crimped by end rhyme, but Jonathan Swift shows what can be done with it in the following passage from his “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift” (1739). Here he imagines some of his friends talking just at the point of his passing away (he had been dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin for many years):

Behold the fatal day arrive!
 “How is the Dean?”—“He’s just alive.”
 Now the departing prayer is read.
 “He hardly breathes”—“The Dean is dead.”
 Before the passing bell begun,
 The news through half the town has run.
 “Oh! may we all for death prepare!
 What has he left? And who’s his heir?”

(147–154)

The brief sentences in this passage suggest a breathless and not so pious suspense in the attitudes of those who are supposed to be his friends. Needless to say, it is a satiric portrait of the mock concern among these people who are anything but devastated by his death. Their real interest is brought out in the last line of the passage. The fragmented rhythm represents the events as they happen and as the people react in often breathless and urgent fashion.

Here the iambic tetrameter line clearly serves quite a different function than in the passage from Marvell.

The iambic pentameter line with its normal pattern of five stressed syllables allows the poet to develop his thought more fully. This is the line commonly used in more serious verse, at least in the two centuries we are surveying in this book. Few poets can match Samuel Johnson's use of this line in the "Vanity of Human Wishes" (1749) to sound the organ tones of doom as he surveys the social scene in contemporary England, but his criticism of the values dominant in the society around him should not seem unfamiliar to us today:

For gold his sword the hireling ruffian draws,
 For gold the hireling judge distorts the laws;
 Wealth heaped on wealth, nor truth nor safety buys,
 The dangers gather as the treasures rise. (25–28)

Through repetition, the inversion of normal word order, and an accumulation of examples, Johnson evokes the disastrous effects of greed joined with prosperity. The first two lines of the passage are regular iambic pentameter, while the last two lines contain variations that help suggest his dark vision of England. The metrical stresses on both "wealths" as well as on "heaped" provide special emphasis on the corruptive power of riches being piled up for their own sake. Johnson's tone and focus are much different from Swift, though both are effective satirists.

One special example of the pentameter line is worth mentioning. John Milton uses it in *Paradise Lost* (1674), but without the end rhyme. This is called blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, the kind of verse Shakespeare uses in most of his plays because of the greater freedom it gave him to develop his dialogue. Milton employs it for everything in his great epic, from dialogue to narrative, from description to prophetic laments, satiric portraits, and lyric celebration. In the following passage Milton describes Satan's inner turmoil as he prepares to seduce human beings away from obedience to God's commands. Satan, the fallen angel, cannot help but reflect on his glorious past and his sad present as he goes to spoil God's most recent creation. Thus, as he muses,

horror and doubt distract
 His troubled thoughts, and from the bottom stir
 The Hell within him, for within him Hell
 He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell

One step no more than from himself can fly
 By change of place: now conscience wakes despair
 That slumbered, wakes the bitter memory
 Of what he was, what is, and what must be
 Worse; of worse deeds worse sufferings must ensue. (4: 18–26)

Note how Milton uses run-on lines (where the sense moves on to the next line without stopping) to mirror the chain of torturing thoughts that cascade through Satan's mind as he contemplates what he is about to do and feels the Hell within him. Milton's complex psychological portrait of this once magnificent being, a former archangel who cannot escape what he once was and is still subject to the call of conscience and even despair, is remarkable. The lines are less regular metrically than Johnson's, though the iambic pattern is still dominant. Because of its flexibility, blank verse is one of the most important poetic forms in English, used by practically all our great poets as well as by many lesser ones.

Two other important aspects of rhythm may be noted: the caesura, or pause in the movement, and the end-stopped or run-on lines. These may seem like trivial details, but poets consciously work with them to enhance their meaning. The pause may be a full stop, as with a period, or a slight slowing down, as with a comma. Some lines from Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock* may be considered to illustrate both the pause and the end-stopping. Near the beginning of the poem the poet describes the scene as Belinda, a beautiful society girl and "heroine" of the story, awakes from sleep on the fateful day:

Sol through white curtains shot a timorous ray,
 And oped those eyes that must eclipse the day.
 Now lapdogs give themselves the rousing shake,
 And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake. (13–16)

The sun seems only to dare a timid ray to intrude on the sleeping beauty since it presumably knows that it will soon be outshone by her brilliant eyes. Note that the sense continues to the end of each of the first three lines without a pause. These are firmly end-stopped. In the fourth line, however, there are two slight pauses with the commas around a short phrase. Why does Pope make this interjection stand out? Probably because he wants the reader to note that the lovers are waking up at twelve noon, which is obviously very late, and perhaps will make us realize that the lovers are really sleeping very well, not "sleepless." He underscores this because the world he is describing

is one of late-night parties and late awakenings, not one of many significant responsibilities or regular daily obligations. This is Belinda's world, and she fits right in, to her eventual detriment. Pope wishes to satirize this world, though not harshly, because he wants the reader to see the moral consequences of living such a life. There is much more of this as the poem proceeds, but we can see him beginning to set the tone early on.

On the other hand, some poets like to slow down the movement of the verse for other effects. Ben Jonson is notable for using a much slower paced line, as he does in the following passage from "Inviting a Friend to Supper," where he describes some of the food he will serve if his friend will only join him. The poet pulls out all the stops to entice him:

Yet shall you have, to rectify your palate,	
An olive, capers, or some better salad	
Ushering the mutton; with a short-legged hen,	
If we can get her, full of eggs, and then	
Lemons and wine for sauce; to these, a <u>coney</u>	<i>rabbit</i>
Is not to be despaired of for our money;	
And though fowl now be scarce, yet there are <u>clerks</u> ,	<i>scholars</i>
The sky not falling, think we may have larks.	
I'll tell you of more, and lie, so you will come . . .	(9–17)

Only one line is not interrupted by a caesura, and several have two. Three lines are run-on (10, 12, and 13), stopping not at the end of the line but in the middle. All these give a somewhat choppy rhythm to his lines, in contrast to the smooth flow of Pope's. Jonson, here, does this to emphasize the different types of food he will serve and to sound more colloquial, like a real human voice that is describing a special banquet. There is definitely humor in the exaggerated delicacies he suggests are possible, but they reflect the strong desire on the poet's part to have his friend with him this evening, as does the fact that he will go to any length, including lying, to lure him. Jonson goes on to tempt him further with the promise of an intellectual feast, with readings from classical authors and a free discussion of ideas to go along with the food. They will pursue their conversation with moderation, innocence, and delight, he urges, and thus will not have to worry about the consequences tomorrow. This is the humanist ideal of shared pleasure in the discussion and exchange of ideas over a meal, which Jonson evokes in part through the slow and thoughtful movement of the lines.

Most readers are probably aware that poems are often classified according to their overall form or genre. Thus, a poem is called an ode if it celebrates

a public (or sometimes special private) event, either with a formal, elaborate structure (like the odes of Pindar, an ancient Greek poet) or with a relatively simple, straightforward structure (like those of Horace, an ancient Latin poet). Occasionally, poets will themselves identify their poem with a certain type, as Gray does with his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” The elegy was a common type of poem, often formal and elaborate like the ode and reflecting about life, generally written to commemorate someone who had recently died. One of the most popular poetic forms in the late Elizabethan period was the sonnet. It was a fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter usually about love, and came in two main types. The first was the English (or Shakespearean) with its three quatrains (rhyming *abab cdcd efef*) and a couplet (*gg*). The other was the Italian (or Petrarchan) with its division into two parts, the octave (rhyming *abba abba*) and the sestet (rhyming *cdecde* or *cdcdcd*). We will see in sonnets by Donne and Milton how the poet adapts the structure of his form to the sense and the development of the imagery, the rhythm, and other poetic features. There are, of course, many other kinds of poems, like the epic, the ballad, and the epigram, along with a number of variants and subgenres (like the pastoral elegy), which may be found defined and illustrated in collections of literary terms (e.g., M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* and, more comprehensively, William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*). These forms provide structure and discipline to the poets in developing their subjects, challenging them to see if they can compose something meaningful and worthwhile within their confines.

Finally, a few practical suggestions for reading poetry are in order. A poem should always be read at least three times before you make a definite judgment about it. The first time through you discover its subject and something of the poet’s attitude toward it. The second time you begin to understand what the poet has done to organize and develop the subject. The third time you should be able to assess the whole in the light of what you have discovered about it, to see it clearly and accurately, even though some of the details may remain obscure. An annotated edition or a reference book may help with the obscurities. Reading a few poems carefully is generally more satisfying than reading many that you only partially, if at all, understand. Worthwhile poems will amply repay and reward such patient attention.

Figures of speech, poetic voice and situation, language, imagery and symbols, and rhythm and rhyme are just a few of the elements of poetry that will help you understand and appreciate it more fully. They are not difficult concepts and should enable practically anyone to read all poetry, old or new, with pleasure and insight. As we consider various poets and a few of their poems from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we will discuss these