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ON ORIGINALITY IN POETIC DICTION AND THE LINGUISTICS OF “NATIVELIKE SPEECH”

PAUL MAGEE

For Jo Franklin

1. COLERIDGE ON THE PYRAMIDS

The gamble of this paper is that we can usefully approach “the long continued controversy concerning the true nature of poetic diction” (Coleridge 1975, 1) through recent work in the field of linguistics. The characterization of that controversy as “long continued” is Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s, and one of my reasons for citing his 204-year-old phrase is to point to the inexhaustibility of the problem. But it is also the case that recent linguists’ attempts to place statistical habit at the core of our relation to the language around us open interesting links to the solutions Coleridge floated in his *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, back in 1817. I am referring to work on “nativelike speech” (Pawley and Syder 1983), which is to say, to work on the kinds of expressions speakers of a given language tend to regard as natural, as opposed to jarring, stilted, or even just plain wrong. That work will help us to make sense of something intuitively correct but hitherto rather

hard to explicate in Coleridge's work, his theory of poetic diction. I will argue that such diction has a touch of the foreign and the wrong about it. On the other hand, by brushing some of the theology from Coleridge's theory of imagination, I will seek to illuminate those linguists' work in turn, providing a clarifying figure for the interplay of habitual response and in-the-moment decision, neither entirely separable from the other, through which the subjects of a statistically normative diction come to speak the world anew.

The *Biographia Literaria* approaches "the true nature of poetic diction" from two directions (Coleridge 1975, 1). The first concerns the characteristic effects such diction has on a reader. The second concerns the kinds of compositional actions that generate it. Coleridge's "two criteria of poetic style" address the first of these matters. We might term these criteria *iterability* and *irreplaceability*. On the one hand, it is "not the poem which we have *read*" but only "that to which we *return*, with the greatest pleasure" which "possesses the genuine power, and claims the name of *essential poetry*." Such is its iterability. On the other hand, any aspect of a poet's phrasing that can "be translated into other words of the same language, without diminution of their significance, either in sense, or association, or in any worthy feeling, are so far vicious in their diction" (11). I underline the mysterious, attractive power these twin criteria of iterability and irreplaceability attribute to poetic diction. Coleridge is pinpointing the almost fated quality that the words in a line of poetry at times evince. The mythic dimensions he is tapping into are even more apparent in the analogy he reports resorting to during youthful discussions on the topic: "I was wont boldly to affirm, that it would be scarcely more difficult to push a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand, than to alter a word, or the position of a word, in Milton or Shakespeare (in their most important works at least) without making the author say something else, or something worse, than he does say" (12). All of this will prove relevant to the linguistic work I shall table shortly, for we are only so far here from the idea of words that feel natural. The words in Milton and Shakespeare's "most important works" feel as given as stone, natural in that sense, yet at the same time we seem to be straying into the enigmatic and foreign—the stones of the pyramids, no less.¹

Coleridge's ideas as to how such diction is generated have received rather more notice in recent studies of creativity. The fact that such notice is often of a dismissive sort is only so surprising. It is William Wordsworth's exercise of the faculty of the imagination that allows

him, Coleridge claims in chapter 4, “to contemplate the ANCIENT of days and all his works with feelings as fresh, as if all had then sprang forth at the first creative fiat” (1975, 49). This reference to “the first creative fiat” will remind readers of that famous description, nine chapters on from here, of “the primary IMAGINATION,” there characterized as “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (167). One might also, if rather less elevatedly, detect in Coleridge’s reference to Wordsworth’s world-creating powers elements of the voluntarism that took increasing hold of the addict’s thinking, the more he “struggled with opium and with life” (Christie 2007, 163). But we can detect other things here as well. For a start, this description of Wordsworth’s oeuvre provides a further illustration of the qualities Coleridge attributes to “true poetic diction,” the phenomenon I am claiming linguistic work on natively and non-natively language can help us to elucidate. True poetic diction, Coleridge reminds us through this reference to the “first creative fiat,” has the fated feeling of what has been with us since the very distant past, and yet comes across as ever new. A second point to make about chapter 4’s encomium of Wordsworth is that it concerns the latter’s exercise of the imagination. The theological aspects of the comment are considerably attenuated, the more you take on board the fact that for Coleridge, the imagination is a creature of habit, habit being something rather hard to attribute divine power to. True, this appraisal of Wordsworth’s poetry in chapter 4 references the Creator, and it is also true that Coleridge follows up the above-cited description of the primary imagination (“I AM”) in chapter 13 with a statement on the secondary imagination he believes poets wield, describing it there as “an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation.” Imagination is then contrasted with “the Fancy,” on the grounds that the former “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to *re-create*,” while fancy—the ordinary run of thought—“must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (Coleridge 1975, 167; emphasis added). But we also need to note that Coleridge prefaces those two, much-cited paragraphs with the claim that they represent the conclusions of a more detailed argument he will publish at another time (and never did). As it is, their exalted and summary style can easily obscure the chief point Coleridge has to make about the imagination throughout the *Biographia Literaria*. We see just a hint of it in the word “re-create,”

which I emphasize above. All of the secondary imagination's acts of dissolving, diffusing, and dissipating are "in order to re-create" what has already been given to us by the associative chains binding language and thought. The poet's imagination works with "the law of association," just like fancy itself (167).

Beyond the fact that he chooses that little but highly significant word "re-create" to characterize its operations, it is hard to see from that *locus classicus* of contemporary citation in chapter 13 that, for Coleridge, the poet's imagination is, as I put it above, a creature of habit. Where he stood on the matter is much clearer, if more difficult to access, elsewhere in the *Biographia Literaria*. Buried in those somewhat torturous-to-now-read pages between the praise of Wordsworth in chapter 4 and the resonant—but easily misread—formulations of chapter 13, amid those lengthy and digressive discussions of Hartley, Leibniz, Aristotle, Hartley again, Descartes, et al., we find the operations of the imagination analogized, not to God, but to the struggles and successes of a rather humbler creature. In chapter 7, Coleridge asks us to watch what our minds do when we compose verse or even, "to take a still more common case," when we try to recall a name (1975, 72). Here is one of the images he offers for the acts of re-creative thought such processes involve:

Most of my readers will have observed a small water-insect on the surface of rivulets, which throws a cinque-spotted shadow fringed with prismatic colors on the sunny bottom of the brook; and will have noticed, how the little animal *wins* its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to it in order to gather strength and a momentary *fulcrum* for a further propulsion. This is no unapt emblem of the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking. There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive. . . . In philosophical language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the IMAGINATION. (Coleridge 1975, 72)

The imagination works with habits, its own, and those of the very stream of associations in which it finds itself. Coleridge might have added that those associations can rapidly enter into the realm of the strange and not-usually said. In a further discussion, he will compare the exercise of the imagination to what we ourselves do when we leap. He will suggest that leaping is itself working with habit,

inasmuch as it involves bucking and then giving way to the habitual forces of gravity itself. But more of that below. Two hundred years have passed. The word science has acquired its restricted sense. Our science in this case is linguistics. We come to the study of nativelike, or natural-sounding, diction and will start with how that phenomenon manifests in the composition of live speech.

2. THE RIDDLE OF NATIVELIKE FLUENCY

The speaker of the following words is “F, a draughtsman in his mid-20s.” Andrew Pawley and Frances Hodgetts Syder recorded F “discussing evangelical Christianity with several hostel mates” in New Zealand in the 1970s (2000, 169). We will see that F does not have the words ready to do his bidding, but has to find them in the moment, something almost painful to recreate in one’s head as one reads the transcript.

- 1 Yeah – I think – y’know, –
 - 2 Ah – I’ve found – in um – y’know, – um – not in religion at the beginning of this year, y’know, –
 - 3 ah – ah – the experiences I had on – ah – on Queen’s Birthday weekend, y’know. –
 - 4 The peace that I found. –
 - 5 Simply being able to throw my –
 - 6 or – not – not to throw myself
 - 7 just to – sort of – just to – y’know – ah just hold on to another person – y’know,
 - 8 let – just – just – y’know ah
- (F quoted in Pawley and Syder 2000, 169)

Pawley and Syder, transcribing this monologue, give each substantive clause a separate line. This is not entirely straightforward, considering the lack of consensus among linguists as to just what a clause is (174–77). Breaking F’s discourse into clauses does, however, clarify its movement somewhat. But even when given in clausal chunks, the chaos is still notable. Witness the thirty-one dashes, each of which stand in Pawley and Syder’s notation for a detectable pause. F is clearly struggling to convey his experience of the divine.

The act of transcribing such a text, Pawley and Syder observe:

leads readily to three unsurprising conclusions about the planning of spontaneous speech: (i) it is not easy to think and talk at the same time; (ii) speech itself bears some observable marks of the planning process; (iii) speakers often embark on constructions without having

formulated their full lexical content. Extract 2 [*F's discourse*] reminds us that it is no mean feat to keep talking fluently and coherently even for ten seconds. (Pawley and Syder 2000, 169–70)

The sheer complexity of speaking is stunning the moment you ponder it. For surely, speakers of any stripe will be dealing with the same problems as F. They will be flummoxed, in any given act of speaking, between trying to work out the right words to convey their meaning, trying to hold their listeners' attention, which will include trying to imagine what one's emergent contribution might sound like from the latter's point of view, and simultaneously ignoring—or even feeling cause to negate and then repair—whatever wayward thoughts slip through their lips. For F's discourse has a hint of leaping about it as well:

- 5 Simply being able to throw my –
 6 or – not – not to throw myself
 (F quoted in Pawley and Syder 2000, 169)

Pawley and Syder's considerations on these matters remind us that, however commonplace it has become in recent years to deride "romantic notions of creativity," and in particular Wordsworth's equation between composition and "spontaneous overflow" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1968, 22), coming up with the words one needs for everyday conversation is a compositional act in its own right, one we perform in real time, and with great dexterity at times.

Yet the act of speaking often feels quite straightforward too, and even at times banal. Pawley and Syder offer two solutions to the riddle of how we ever manage to speak with fluency, given the heavy cognitive burden any act of real-time speech production imposes. The first concerns the fact that speakers will often put what they have to say into a succession of "clauses which show little structural integration with earlier or later constructions," thereby obviating the kinds of cognitive overload evident in the transcript above (Pawley and Syder 1983, 202). Such clauses regularly start with an "And":

- (a) A—and and you look at them,
 (b) and and they see him,
 (c) and they come up,
 (d) a—and without saying anything,
 (e) there's no speech in the whole movie.
 (f) Without saying anything,
 (g) they . um—. . help him. . put the pears back in the basket.
 (Speaker 1 quoted in Chafe 1980, 35; timings removed)

It transpires from Pawley's later work that speaking in short, syntactically discrete, clausal blocks has afforded fluency to a range of high-pace, real-time discourses including the auctioning of houses and livestock, the improvisation of Ancient Greek oral epic (Pawley 2007, 15–16, 5), and live radio commentary on sporting matches (1991, 348). More broadly, it has been argued that poetic metrication itself emerged, or rather continues to emerge, from this widespread solution (aka “parataxis”) to the problem of how to speak with fluency (Bakker 1997, 125–55; Evans 2015, 65–69).

But it is Pawley and Syder's second solution to the puzzle of how we ever manage to speak with fluency that has most direct bearing on Coleridge's reflections on “the true nature of poetic diction.” For the other thing speakers do to minimize the mid-clause pausing that listeners so rapidly find irritating and indeed exhausting is to rely upon our stores of “memorized complete clauses and sentences” (Pawley and Syder 1983, 205). The fact is that F's discourse would sound even more chaotic, were it not for the prefabricated elements smattered through it. Note the absence of mid-phrase pauses in “at the beginning of this year” (line 2), “on Queen's Birthday weekend” (line 3), “The peace that I found” (line 4) and “Simply being able to” (line 5), all of which are clearly formulaic. Commenting that there are perhaps thousands of completely fixed expressions like *simply being able to* and *the fact that* in the language, Pawley and Syder proceed to argue that these pale in comparison to the vastly more numerous set of only partially fixed ones. Consider the expression “We had a fantastic time,” used by a speaker in another of the transcripts Pawley and Syder cite (G quoted in Pawley and Syder 2000, 182). The phrase will sound just as fixed as the ones cited above. A few seconds' reflection reveals that it is actually only partially-fixed. One could equally well hear a speaker say *I had a fantastic time*; *They are having a fantastic time*; or *We will have a fantastic time*. Pawley and Syder refer to such variable expressions as “lexicalized sentence stems.” They further define them as expressions which “contain a nucleus of fixed lexical items . . . with one or more variable elements” (1983, 205). The example they proceed to give is: “I'm sorry to keep you waiting,” which can also be uttered as “I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting,” “Mr. X is sorry to keep you waiting all this time,” and so on. Pawley and Syder comment that such “lexicalized sentence stems” are repeatedly on our lips (210). (Or should that be “in”? Keats: “And all the dead whose names are in our lips” [1915, 444]). They need to be because speakers often want to utter longer strings, more akin to those one finds in

prose, than the relatively short and discrete segments characteristic of the paratactic styles discussed above.

The point for Pawley and Syder is that “lexicalized sentence stems” facilitate fluency in real-time speaking by affording conversationalists a literally formulaic sense of where their utterance is heading over the words immediately to follow. I am referring to the pair’s observation that, even though we do not seem able in any instance to encode the exact words we want to say more than one clause at a time, that cognitive constraint “does not apply to the planning of syntactic frames, only to their lexical content. It appears that grammatical frames in which two or more clauses are joined can be planned independently of their lexical realizations” (Pawley and Syder 2000, 164). For instance, a phrase like *On the one hand*, clearly serves in the lecturer’s mind as a “construction frame” (166) for an *On the other hand* contrast shortly thereafter. It may be that the contents of the second term of that contrast are only hazily present to our minds, as we advance into our articulation of the first term. But we know a contrastive frame is in place and have had enough experience of contouring familiar ideas into the distinct shape the construction offers. The upshot is that we can advance into our spoken sentence with reasonable faith in our capacity to get the words to land right. When people say they are “used to giving lectures,” much of what they mean is that they are familiar, and comfortable, with taking this sort of risk live before an audience. In sum, fixed and partially fixed constructions provide a second, key way for speakers to minimize the objectionable dysfluency evidenced by F, above.

But for all the gains that formulaic speaking provides, it does come at a price. I do not mean that formulaic speaking condemns the speaker to unoriginality. As Homerists have long argued, there are all sorts of ways in which a discourse heavily comprised of pre-fabricated elements can still ripple with life, not to mention the unexpected (Minchin 2001, 48; Foley 1999, 19–33). The disadvantage of formulaic speech is that it is so easy to get the formulas wrong, particularly those with open slots. Foreigners to a language find again and again that there does not seem to be any good reason why one should not say “The novel holds water,” or “The talk holds water.” After all, “The theory holds water” (Pawley 2007, 29–30). What is more, even after one has learnt that only the last of these three formulations is acceptably “nativelike,” there are further “rules” to learn, each as apparently arbitrary as the next: “It turns out you can say *the theory doesn’t/didn’t hold water*, but it is not quite idiomatic to

say *the theory isn't holding much water any more, or the theory will hold some water tomorrow*" (30). Our theme of original poetic diction will emerge at this juncture. My point will be that by placing such severe restrictions on what can be said *in a natural way*, these omnipresent, fixed and partially fixed expressions hint at the much greater potential of the language housing them.

3. THE HOST TO NATIVE AND FOREIGN ALIKE

There is something of a history to the idea that we use far less of a language than is available to us. It was not long after Noam Chomsky launched the generationally compelling principle that language use centers upon speakers' creative processing of vocabulary through an innate set of grammatical rules that contrary voices started to emerge. What Chomsky did in his scathing 1959 review of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* was to show that without some such generative principle we have little way to account for creativity, in his specific sense of the word, that is, little way to account for the fact that even a child will have the ability to "construct and understand utterances which are quite new, and are, at the same time, acceptable sentences in his [*sic*] language" (Chomsky 1959, 5). As Alison Wray concedes, we need some way to allow for the individual's capacity to generate new strings of language from established patterns, if we are to make sense of our ability not only to produce, but even just to understand, those novel moments in poetic texts "when, for instance, word classes are changed (e.g., *he sang his didn't he danced his did*), or unaccustomed morphological relations are created (e.g., *and you and I, light-tender-boldly, ached together in bliss-me body*)" (2002, 12). Yet while the Chomskyan revolution proceeded apace through the 1960s, Dwight L. Bolinger was already in the early years of that decade querying whether a sentence as commonplace as "I went home" is really generated anew from its component parts each time. It might be that the entire phrase *I went home* comes to mind and tongue as "the result of repetition, countless speakers before us having said it and transmitted it to us in toto. Is grammar something where speakers produce (i.e., originate) constructions, or where they 'reach' for them, from a pre-established inventory, when the occasion presents itself?" (Bolinger 1961, 381).

Further challengers to the idea that we have free use of all the lexical and syntactic resources available to us included Wallace L. Chafe, who in the late 1960s pointed to the difficulty idiomatic

language posed to Chomsky's position (1968). The diffusion of cheap mechanical recording devices from the late 1950s on was meanwhile making developments like Pawley and Syder's three-hundred-thousand-word corpus of New Zealand and Australian speakers possible, with the evidence it provided for the notion that formulaic phrasing is a key element of fluent speech. Paul Hopper added his own force to such arguments in the course of his 1987 attack on the notion that language-use relies upon "an abstract, mentally represented rule system which is somehow implemented when we speak" (1987, 140). Close reading of conversational transcripts shows that language in use is "a kind of pastiche, pasted together in an improvised way out of ready-made elements" (145). Often, Hopper added, with echoes of Bolinger, it is not even clear where "to draw the line between a formulaic and a non-formulaic expression" (146). Actually, this kind of "gradience" between prefabricated and improvised expressions is also evident in the Homeric epics, as the latest work in that field is starting to show (Bozzone 2014). But it was the growth of computing power, Wray observes, that has done most to sway linguists to the idea that wholly and partially fixed expressions radically contour the linguistic space speakers and writers inhabit. Wray mentions a 1998 study which found that the phrase "a large number" appeared five times more often than "a great number" in a 2.7 million word corpus of academic prose (2002, 7). The statistic reinforces the likelihood that a string like *a large number* comes to the scholarly writer as a single, oft-repeated unit.

Michael Hoey's 2004 work *Lexical Priming: A New Theory of Words and Language* continued this trajectory, with a powerful demonstration that we work with genre- and context-specific, formulaic blocks to compose our writing, and by extension our speech, avoiding vast reaches of potential language in the process. Basing his analysis on a corpus of ninety-five million words of news and features from *The Guardian* newspaper, Hoey demonstrated that the second of the following two sentences is far, far less likely to occur in such a context, even though it appears to be as "grammatically correct" as the first:

1. In winter Hammerfest is a thirty-hour ride by bus from Oslo, though why anyone would want to go there in winter is a question worth considering.
 2. Through winter, rides between Oslo and Hammerfest use thirty hours up in a bus, though why travelers would select to ride there then might be pondered.
- (Bryson quoted in Hoey 2004, 5)

Hoey proceeds to demonstrate that *in winter*, the first phrase in sentence (1), appears 507 times in that corpus of *Guardian* copy, whereas *through winter*, its “equivalent” in sentence (2), appears only seven times. Likewise, the *by bus* phrase in sentence (1) appears 116 times, while *rides between* in sentence (2) occurs just once and *in a bus*, also in (2), a mere sixteen times. Similarly, the *would want* in (1) occurs 573 times in the corpus, but (2)’s *would select* only twenty-one times. On the other hand, the phrase *use x hours up* (“use thirty hours up in a bus”) is not attested to at all (6–7). It is worth adding that similar comparisons apply to numerous other elements of these two sentences. Hoey assays the pair from different angles through each successive chapter of *Lexical Priming*, and the conclusion in each case is clear: the idea that the first of the sentences above “is natural; the second is clumsy” is not a simple judgement of taste but a statistical fact (6).

Hoey adds that according to the dominant ways we have thought about language over the last two hundred years, “there is no reason to regard the naturalness or clumsiness of the sentences as being of any importance” (2004, 9). He argues that to the contrary “naturalness” is a selective factor in every sound we utter, and with that a determinative force upon grammar itself, the very existence of which it might even be said to undermine (6). Hoey sees recent work on corpora like his as “reversing the traditional relationship between grammar as systematic and lexis as loosely organized, amounting to an argument for lexis as systematic and grammar as more loosely organized” (9). For, in any given case, only a restricted number of the many possible ways we can say something ever tend to get said, the ones that strike us as “natural.” There are rhythmic drivers here, in that we display a clear bias when speaking a strongly stress-timed language like English for the stressed syllables to come at regular intervals, in line with our muscles’ general preference for contracting and relaxing in steady alteration. It is for this same physiological reason, Derek Attridge comments, that we walk, saw, and dig rhythmically (1995, 3–4). That preference for duple rhythms clearly exerts a selective pressure on the type of phrasing that gets fixed (39). But the phenomenon is otherwise profoundly arbitrary. And it is pervasive, extending, by Hoey’s account, well beyond the idioms and “lexicalised sentence stems” Pawley and Syder investigated, to the point that all our vocabulary would seem to have something fixed or partially fixed about its patterns of permissible usage.

We are closing in on Coleridge and “the true nature of poetic diction.” For to take this ever-mounting linguistic evidence on board is

to realize that most of the infinite number of generable strings in any given language are foreign. They cannot be said without sounding unnatural. Yet they can be said, as Hoey's capacity to produce a second, odd-speaking but intelligible version of the first sentence of Bill Bryson's 1991 travel book, *Neither Here, Nor There* (the example cited above) demonstrates. Pawley and Syder head us in a similar direction, albeit with a smaller range of language-use in mind. Claiming that "one of the main attractions" of the Chomskyan tradition has been its "focus on the creative power of syntactic rules," they argue that it is nonetheless the case that "native speakers do not exercise the creative potential of syntactic rules to anything like their full extent" (1983, 193). Yet one might. Actually we hear such non-native uses every day. For instance, among second language speakers. It is, Pawley and Syder write, a "characteristic error of the language learner" to assume, in relation to any partially fixed expression, "that an element in the expression may be varied according to a phrase structure or transformational rule of some generality," when in fact the expression is "transformationally 'defective': there are only so many ways to generate those strings without starting to sound childish, foreign, or strange (215). They give the following as examples of such erroneous but nonetheless sayable and, what is more, intelligible reaches of the English language: "*You are pulling my legs* (in the sense of deceiving me). *John has a thigh-ache*, and *I intend to teach that rascal some good lessons he will never forget*" (215). Expressions for telling the time are no less arbitrarily restricted. It's 5:40 pm. Why not:

- (a) It's six less twenty.
 - (b) It's two thirds past five.
 - (c) It's forty past five.
 - (d) It exceeds five by forty.
 - (e) It's a third to six.
 - (f) It's ten minutes after half-past five.
- (Pawley and Syder 1983, 197–98)

I find something zany in these demonstrations of Pawley and Syder's, and, in fact, the pair remark in a footnote that native speakers often generate non-nativelike strings for humorous purposes. What is more, it seems clear that a speaker who "gets on a roll" can produce them at pace. It strikes me that there are philosophic resonances to this list as well. Witness the curious bending of time in *It's forty past five*. I think Wittgenstein. (Or should that be, I think of Wittgenstein?) The dishabituating of time is a subversive's theme as well.

The 1789 revolution brought about a whole new calendar, while the 1830 overthrow of the Bourbons began with bullets fired at public clocks, as the revolutionary Walter Benjamin reminds us (1973, 253). In short, there is something deeply poetic in Pawley and Syder's statement that "only a small proportion of the total set of grammatical sentences are natively like in form" (1983, 193). (Shouldn't that have been "is natively like in form"?)

Our capacity to generate and understand what can't quite be "naturally" said is surely there in New Zealand poet James Baxter's arresting lines as well:

One kind of love, a Tourist Bureau print
Of the Alps reflected in Lake Matheson

(Turned upside down it would look the same)
Smiles in the dining room, a lovely mirror

For any middle-aged Narcissus to drown in—
I'm peculiar; I don't want to fall upwards

into the sky! Now, as the red-eyed tough
West Coast beer-drinkers climb into their trucks

And roar off between colonnades
Of mossed rimu. . . .
(Baxter 1973, 35)

And if the highly formulaic language of Homeric epic poets is to be thought of as a "special language" within the body of the larger language that hosted it, as Albert Bates Lord suggests (1960, 22), might we not conclude that the potential language which Baxter taps into here ("fall upwards") is *itself* host to the much smaller body of expressions we actually tend to utter? It is the host, to native and foreign alike.

By the same principle our thoughts must exist within manifold unthoughts, our patterns of behavior implicitly reference that whole field of unbehaviors thereby implied.

Five forty, but also *It's a third to six*. I note the strange patina to the latter. It feels fresh, as well as odd, and yet clearly not new. For all its oddness, it seems to bring the deeply Germanic roots of our number words to the fore.

Wordsworth writes "with feelings as fresh, as if all had then sprang forth at the first creative fiat" (Coleridge 1975, 49). Wordsworth's language is fresh and ancient all at once. I return to Coleridge's pyramid metaphor with its implication that a whole culture, mysterious to us but nonetheless historical, produced Shakespeare and Milton's

phrasing, so much more than the “I AM” of any individual author. It is language itself that casts up this diversity: particularly when you are forging clauses and larger coherences at the coalface of what you feel but cannot yet understand, particularly when in the sway of a rhythm and under the epochal imperative to find the unsaid in what is about to be said.

But inasmuch as this is the case, poetic speech would seem to buck some of the trends Pawley and Syder associate with extemporaneous speaking. They hold that even though a speaker will usually proceed with ease in conversation, especially once a rhythm and some clause-chaining sets in, that speaker will rapidly become aware of the “skill and work” required by the mere act of stringing phrases together “when he [*sic*] is required to express his thoughts on an unfamiliar subject, or to deliver an unrehearsed monologue to a silent audience” (1983, 199–200). Compare Rae Armantrout’s comment, when I interviewed her as part of an investigation into compositional thinking on November 11, 2014: “I do not know where I am going. I don’t even know if a poem will happen. I just hope.” I spoke to Maxine Chernoff about the same time. “I am writing into the tension of things changing all the time” (interview by author, November 17, 2014). Kevin Young told me, “There is a way in which, even in the poem, you are wrestling with that silence, that inability to speak, or the difficulty of doing so” (interview by author, November 20, 2014). All of these situations seem likely, by Pawley and Syder’s analysis, to induce maximum dysfluency. Doubtless it does. Yet I have also heard numerous references by the thirty poets I have interviewed since 2007 to getting into a flow while composing (Magee 2009; 2016). None of these amounted to the poet attributing their creativity to an external agency, such as a muse. Nor, clearly, were any of the poets describing anything like the incredible speed and accuracy documented among historic and present-day epic poets practicing oral improvisation (Lord 1960; Foley 1999; Pawley 2007). But there were frequent references, all the same, to the rhythmic flow of the line driving the selection of words (“The lines float up. . . . They’re usually triggered by some kind of rhythm”) and also expressions of surprise at what emerged (“There are times . . . when I look back at a poem and think, did I really write that?” [A. Croggon, interview by author, April 24, 2007]). In the terms Pawley and Syder rehearse, one would expect a public discourse that departs so constitutively from everyday topics and phrasings to be far less fluently produced than these poets’

comments on rhythmic flow and sudden arrival suggest. After all, fixed and partially fixed expressions are apparently there to save on processing time, and so facilitate fluency.

But, as noted earlier, the pair also refer to the way “native speakers sometimes deliberately make an unusual substitution, expansion or transformation to a lexicalized phrase in order to add an element of freshness, humor, surprise etc. to their talk. Oscar Wilde is one wit who exploited this procedure to considerable effect” (Pawley and Syder 1983, 224n19). The point emerges from Ronald Carter’s corpus-based research on creativity in everyday conversations as well (2004). There is no indication that such acts of wit require considerable pausing to be achieved. As for poetic utterance, is there not a ready resource for those rhythmic drives to choose from, in all the things the language might—but we by convention do not—say, each and every time we speak?

In short, is it not simply a matter of trusting to habit, while taking a leap?

4. EXPLAIN ME THIS

I have followed Pawley and Syder’s forty-year-old but still widely-cited contribution to the topic of natively speaking to this point because of its rare focus on the relationship between the composition of live speech and formulaic diction, a matter of keen relevance to Coleridge’s attempt to theorize how the “component faculties of the human mind” work with habitual associations to generate poetic diction (1975, 11). Drawing on the clues in Pawley and Syder’s work, and then in the work of their colleagues, I have claimed that the potential language a poet taps into at such times is host to that much smaller range of expressions we actually utter when speaking in a “natively” manner. From such a perspective, poetic diction is not the opposite to habit but rather implied by it. But that was just a first approximation. What the works cited to this point cannot help us with is the fact that *not all* unconventional utterances are alike. Compare “She kissed him unconscious” (Goldberg 2019, 37) and “She filled the water into the cup” (Robenalt and Goldberg 2016, 66), both unusual phrasings. Why does the one feel fresh, and the other come across as awkward? Likewise, compare “Four days after the military coup, they had disappeared her husband” (Goldberg 2019, 142) and “He vanished the rabbit” (3). Why does the employment of the verb *disappear* in the first feel so grimly apt, to the point that the usage

has now taken on journalistic currency, while the seemingly similar use of *vanish* in the latter feels at best cute, but more likely awkward, and even somehow wrong?

In asking “How is it that native speakers know to avoid certain expressions while nonetheless using language in creative ways?”, Adele E. Goldberg points to an issue that has so far eluded us (2019, 3). In addition to our contrast between the nativelylike and the non-nativelylike, there is a further distinction to be made. As the expressions I have just cited suggest, not all unconventional utterances are the same. Pursuing this further distinction will get us much closer to what our poetry aims at, so as to achieve those curiously fresh but also long historied expressions, whose iterability, and air of fatedness, Coleridge remarks.

To open the terrain, consider the phrase that provides the title to Goldberg’s 2019 book, *Explain Me This: Creativity, Competition, and the Partial Productivity of Constructions*, a work which continues and expands the trends in non-Chomskyan linguistics exegeted above. Goldberg is interested in the phrase *Explain me this* because it constitutes one of those utterances “that are perfectly understandable, but which nonetheless tend to be avoided by native speakers of English. If asked, speakers will agree that there is something mildly ‘off’ about them, even though they may have difficulty articulating exactly why” (2019, 1). After all, *Tell me this* is perfectly fine. It transpires that the English double-object construction (verb of transfer + object + object, e.g., *Tell me this; I asked him the question; Give me that watch*) is confined (largely) to “Germanic (sounding) verbs.” “Linate (sounding)” verbs like *request, transfer* and *explain*, on the other hand, have a strong tendency to use a prepositional phrase to indicate the party affected by their action: *Can you request permission from him?; I transferred the money to the bank; Explain this to me*. The equally Linate verb, *guarantee*, constitutes an exception to these trends (*Can you guarantee me this loan?*), while *purchase* is a partial one. Native speakers somehow master all such wayward tendencies, which in this case are actually quite recent—the fact that Linate verbs are found in the double-object construction as late as the eighteenth century underlines how arbitrary and historically given the “rules” of the matter are (41). We have, of course, seen a number of examples of a similar arbitrariness in our discussion of partially fixed expressions above. What that earlier analysis did not address, however, was how a speaker can at times use constructions like the double-object clause to create expressions outside the range

of normative usage, *without* producing any *Explain me this* effect at all. For instance, *Text me the photo*.

The fact that the word *text* is from the Latinate wing of the language, with its above-mentioned dispreference for the double-object construction, underlines that it is not at all clear what served to distinguish *Text me the photo* from “mildly ‘off’” usages like *Explain me this* (Goldberg 2019, 1). To put resistance to the latter down to sheer racism gets at something, but it leaves unclear why *Text me the photo* attracted no such prejudice. How, to put the issue from another angle, could its anonymous coiner have known that the newly minted verb *text* would work with a double-object, when so many other closely related verbs do not? One might likewise ask how anyone could have known in advance that the employment in the “transitive causative” construction of the hitherto exclusively intransitive verb *disappear* would serve to give *They disappeared her husband* its characteristically disturbing bite (142)? The coinage is counterintuitive enough for Goldberg to describe it as a case of “coercion” (31), which is to say, a situation where context modifies meaning, though we might, even more specifically, label it “coercion by override,” Jenny Audring and Geert Booij’s term for situations where the overarching meaning of a construction forces a whole new meaning upon a word (2016, 628). Nor does there seem to have been any precedent in the transitive causative construction to justify the appearance of “Blog him out of jail” (Goldberg 2019, 62) and “I coughed a moth out of my mouth” (76) in the web-based corpuses Goldberg works with, when so many other intransitives would fall flat there, for example, “Reflect the idea into sense.” Yet both of those two phrases sound natural enough, in fact fine. What, to put the matter back in the terms of Goldberg’s title, explains the “partial productivity of constructions”?

“Construction” is Goldberg’s word for the prefabricated template expressions we have seen Pawley and Syder refer to as “lexicalised sentence stems,” though “construction” has much wider diffusion among contemporary linguists, and greater remit, as we are starting to see. A construction, as Joan L. Bybee puts it, is “a form/meaning pairing that has sequential structure and may include positions that are fixed as well as positions that are open” (2010, 9). The term allows thinkers like Goldberg and Bybee to draw parallels between highly specific formulations like Pawley and Syder’s *The theory holds water*, with its more or less arbitrary (or, at least, historically given) restrictions on what can fill the various slots in the template, and seemingly more grammatical entities like the double-object clause,

which, as we have just seen, comes freighted with a range of more or less arbitrary restrictions as well. The rise over the last thirty years of construction grammars, which ignore distinctions like vocabulary and grammar to focus instead on conventional and unconventional employments of the kinds of templates just mentioned, has gone hand in hand with studies of grammaticalization. The term refers to “the process by which a lexical item or sequence of items becomes a grammatical morpheme” (Bybee 2010, 106), the point being that inflections and other such seemingly fixed markers of syntactic function do not arise from some sort of logical fiat, to become the binding rules of the language, but rather emerge through the same historical processes of routinization that cause regularly repeated chunks like “x-hour ride by bus” (Hoey 2004, 5) to settle into template expressions with open slots. For instance, our “weak verb” past tense ending in *-ed* seems to derive from the repeated compounding, way back in proto-Germanic, of present tense verbs with the then equivalent of our word *did* (perhaps **dedō* or **dedē*), to give forms along the lines of *walk-did*, *laugh-did* or *groan-did*. Bybee comments that the “use of a verb (or verbal noun) plus ‘did’ was probably meaningful at first, but later it became a way of forming the past tense of new verbs from nouns or from borrowed words” (Bybee 2015, 98). These shifts in thinking about the relation between grammar and vocabular have been accompanied by the increasing realization that traditional grammatical categories like noun, verb, and adjective simply do not survive the attempt to identify core properties across languages. As Anna Siewerska remarks, “The analysis of the various constructions referred to in the literature as PASSIVE leads to the conclusion that there is not even one single property which all these constructions have in common” (quoted in Croft 2020, 147). “It is even difficult,” Goldberg comments, “to come up with criteria that hold of all members of a grammatical category *within* a language” (2019, 39). At the level of the specific language, what we find is “not a monolithic system, but a massive collection of heterogenous *constructions*,” each the product of “local storage and real time processing” (Bybee and Hopper 2001, 2), as a multitude of speakers engage in the same basic task of “reusing words and constructions that you’ve used in prior utterances to describe some other experience, not the one you are describing right now” (Croft 2020, 157).

This brings us back to Goldberg’s question as to “the partial productivity of constructions,” though now we have followed her and her colleagues’ extension of the term “construction” to exclude any

sense of innate grammatical rules or processes other than historically compacted habit itself, there seems even less for the analyst to go on. How do we explain native speakers' capacity to find that third, innovative space, in between the natively like and the recognizably wrong? Why is the one innovation—"Hey man, bust me some fries" (Goldberg 2019, 2)—fine, and another—"She considered to say something" (3)—the cause for quizzical looks, teasing, and even in the worst cases outright racism? How are such distinctions among unconventional usages made, given that all we have to go on in any case is prior usage itself?

An initial plank in Goldberg's response is provided by the concept of "coverage." Coverage is a measure for predicting the acceptability of any new coinage. The concept unites the number of different words "witnessed in a given construction (a construction's type frequency), the semantic and phonological variability of witnessed types, and the similarity of the coinage to attested types" (Goldberg 2019, 63). The first of these factors refers to the number of different words that have been to date employed in whatever construction we are focused upon, while the second refers to the degree of semantic and phonological variability within those differences. The upshot of these first two factors is that the more diversity a construction currently allows, the more open it will likely be to new members. One might think in this regard of the *-ed* construction mentioned above, in relation to its likely grammaticalization out of an earlier form of *did*. The *-ed* construction works with the vast majority of English present tense verbs to form a past tense. There are only some 180 or so "irregulars" (e.g., *eat/ate*, *think/thought*, *drink/drank*), though they in truth follow patterns of their own and are even at times open to new members being formed along similar lines (e.g., *sneak/snuck*), which facts put the concept of irregularity itself rather in doubt (Bybee 2015, 97; Goldberg 2019, 135). As for the *-ed* past tense construction, it not only applies to a vast field of current words, but it also seems unproblematically open to new ones: *I blogged*, *I emailed*, *I texted*, *I SMSed*. This "weak verb" past tense construction has, we might therefore say, extremely high type frequency, and extremely high variability. By comparison, the *-gate* construction (e.g., *Watergate*, *Squidgygate*, *Pizzagate*, *Nipplegate*) contains 272 types (according, at least, to Wikipedia Contributors, 2021), and its variability is restricted to words connoting scandals that have leaked. The ease with which one can nonetheless generate yet more of these humorous headline items is a reminder of the role which Goldberg's third factor, "similarity of the

coinage to existing types,” plays in new coinages. Obviously those novel *-ed* usages (not to mention seeming “irregulars” like *snuck*) partake of it as well.

The interesting thing about “similarity of the coinage to existing types” as a criterion for coverage is that it characterizes innovations that fail to hit the mark, as much as those that do. Our *Explain me this* phrase arises, after all, because of the similarity *explain* seems to bear on *tell, ask, give, email, text*, and all the other verbs that appear in the double-object construction. When small children, in cute but erroneous fashion, use “ball” for “moon,” “dog” for all animals, and “sweeped” for “swept” (Goldberg 2019, 24; Bybee 2015, 113), they are clearly relying on their sense of the “similarity of the coinage to existing types,” too. To turn, on the other hand, to successful cases, judgements of similarity have long been recognized as a—and even the—force behind language change. A case in point would be the derivation of the various future tense markers in English from prior constructions involving movement (*I am going to*), volition (*I will*), and obligation (*I shall*), all of which “analogies” (I cite Bybee’s term for the process [2010, 130]) for future action have worked to the extent of becoming part and parcel of the English verb. One might turn to numerous histories of individual word-formation at this point too. A “guy,” for instance, was once the word for an effigy of Guy Fawkes created for public burning on the 5th of November in the years after the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, and by tradition garishly costumed. By the nineteenth century the word had begun to be used, by analogy, for a “person of grotesque appearance” and/or a depraved type of man. This led to its further transformation, later that century, into its use as a word for working men generally, a coinage initially taking root in the US. That general sense allowed the word, by a further play of analogy, to be used colloquially for any men (*guys, the guy who*), and that sense of generality has now, in one more twist, been transformed to include women, via the ongoing grammaticalization of *you guys*, which, in spite of considerable resistance to its still strong masculinist connotations, is increasingly serving to supply English conversation with a useful second-person plural-only marker (Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “guy, n.2”; Metcalf 2019). In sum, we clearly draw on judgements of similarity to generate new linguistic usages, plus get things wrong.

Yet even though “coverage,” assessed in terms of type frequency, variability, and similarity to existing coinages, has real pertinence to the issues under discussion, Goldberg argues that the concept is not

in itself sufficient to explain why *Explain me this* feels wrong, and formulations like *Can we vulture your table?* feels fresh (2019, 2). After all, both of these expressions are rather poorly covered, in terms of the types of words their respective constructions have hitherto allowed. This is so much the case for the second of them, that it too can be described as a case of “coercion by override,” the kind of contextual forcing of meaning mentioned in relation to *They had disappeared her husband* (Audring and Booij 2016, 628). It seems thus even less precedented, and yet, of these two, poorly covered expressions, *Explain me this* and *Can we vulture your table?*, it is the latter that feels fine, and even edgy, not to mention redolent with prior uses of the word “vulture,” the sensuality of which—that is, the feel of the word on the tongue—is brought out in the process. You could imagine it in a poem. On the other hand, we find cases where all of the above criteria for coverage to do with type frequency, variability, and similarity seem satisfied, and the coinage still feels wrong, as, for instance, when a second language speaker uses “cooker” to refer to someone who cooks (Goldberg 2019, 97). That same speaker might proceed to refer to a “spier” like James Bond. Clearly, neither usage amounts to a felicitous instance of the highly frequent and highly variable *-er* agentive noun construction, for all the similarity *cooker* and *spier* bear to felicitous *-er* forms like *plumber, teacher, dancer* (74).

Goldberg’s solution to the conundrums rehearsed to this point is simple, and it throws all the cards on the table in the process. The reason innovations like *you guys, influencer, and They disappeared her husband* were found acceptable, and *Explain me this, cooker, and She considered to say something* are not, is because, in the former cases, there was no competing way to say it.

As Goldberg and her colleague, Clarice Robenalt, explain, “When speakers already have a conventional way to express a particular meaning, they judge novel reformations of that meaning to be less acceptable. However, when no competitor exists, speakers display a willingness to extend a verb to a construction in which it does not normally appear” (Robenalt and Goldberg 2016, 69). Evidence for the first of these propositions can be found in the fact that all languages have a strong tendency to eliminate synonymy. Words that appear to be synonyms will in fact tend to differ in key ways: “they may differ, for example, in terms of formality (*dog* vs *pooch*), perspective (*ceiling* vs *roof*), or attitude (*skinny* vs *slim*)” (Goldberg 2019, 23). Likewise, “*She broke the vase*” is subtly different from “*She made the vase break*” (86–87). As for usages that truly do seem synonymous—these last two are

verging upon it—one will over time tend to prevail. Darwinian metaphors seem appropriate here. Repeated expressions compete for a “distributional niche,” and the stronger drives out the weaker (26). Goldberg calls the phenomenon “statistical pre-emption,” adding that the “more frequent the competing alternative is, the more confident speakers will be that the novel sentence is unacceptable” (91). She uses actual statistics to back up her case: a 2009 study of the then 520 million word Corpus of Contemporary American English found that in 99% of cases *explain* took a prepositional phrase, rather than a double-object (86). *Tell* was found just as frequently taking the latter (41). But this kind of knowledge is not simply confined to professional statisticians, Goldberg adds. The fact that all but the most neophyte English speakers have a clear awareness that “elephant” is more common than “pachyderm” is an indice to the fact that we are very much adept at registering linguistic frequencies in our own right (17). We use our sense of them to preempt non-nativelike uses from passing our lips. Statistical preemption is thus the reason *Explain me this* sounds wrong, however clear the meaning. There is too much competition from *Explain this to me*. On the other hand, it is hard to think of any competing and statistically preponderant way to say *Can we vulture your table?*

The fact that fluent second language speakers still find it difficult, even after many years in a language, to avoid infelicitous phrases like *Explain me this* leads Goldberg to argue that such speakers have a reduced capacity to generate expectations about the words they are hearing. She has in mind the extensive evidence that listeners regularly draw on context to anticipate the words their interlocutors are about to utter, to the point at times of even finishing their sentences for them (2019, 91). His mother’s infuriating habit of doing so is the subject of one of C. K. Williams’s most powerful poems, and his reaction against that experience the impetus, according to that poem, for the poet’s life spent writing verse (2006, 160–61). The point, as far as Goldberg is concerned, is that whenever native speakers get those predictions wrong, a process of “error-driven learning” sets in. That is to say, “when a listener anticipates hearing a particular construction, mismatches between the input from the speaker and what had been anticipated by the listener provide an error signal that is used to improve future predictions” (2019, 91). Correct predictions are, on the other hand, strengthened by dint of having succeeded. In both cases the experience has an impact upon the listener’s own speech, the nativelike quality of which is reinforced in the process.

Error-driven learning is the mechanism by which children come in time to speak their native languages so well. But it would seem that those who come to a second language as adults have a reduced capacity for generating the predictions leading to this kind of phonological and phraseological homogenization. The reason their capacity is reduced, Goldberg believes, is that such speakers are simultaneously engaged in inhibiting competition from the highly routinized ways to say the same thing in their own tongues (110–17): *explícame esto, объясни мне это, jelaskan ini padauk*.

But the key thing that concerns us here is Goldberg’s startling thesis as to why the innovations that work, do work, for it is effectively a theory of poetry in its own right. Coinages like *Can we vulture your table?* arise and flourish in the language because there is no competing way to say it—or at least to say it so succinctly. Likewise, *influencer, you guys. She kissed him unconscious*. We might equally place under this head some lines from Medbh McGuckian’s 2016 poem “White Cortina Outside Stardust Ballroom”:

... the sky slowly
sipped away to willow ashes.

It seemed to have, I would like to say,
hands, though they were not seen,
those breathless ghosts of mine.
All cherries had taken their farewell
of their perfect cherry colour.
I could feel everyone praying for me

like a little forest bird,
the otherest.
(McGuckian 2016, 30–31)

Is there any obvious and competing way to get at the things McGuckian evokes with this strange superlative, “the otherest”?

Of course, this is more or less what Coleridge has told us, in insisting that any aspects of a poet’s phrasing that can “be translated into other words of the same language, without diminution of their significance, either in sense or association, or in any worthy feeling” are to that extent “vicious in their diction” (1975, 11). But what Coleridge does not seem to have realized is that his criterion applies to all forms of linguistic innovation, not just in poetry (and among speakers of all classes, one might add, *pace* Coleridge’s more Tory moments [e.g., 197]). For what Goldberg’s explication of the *Explain me this* phenomenon points to is the existence, within everyday

language, of an inbuilt mechanism for generating and by the same token judging new ways of speaking, as neither native nor foreign, fresh nor ancient, but all of these things at once.

5. A WILL TO DIFFERENCE

What Coleridge can add to this picture is a sense of how one comes up with such things. In Coleridgean terms, it is a matter of the imagination. For while fancy “must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (Coleridge 1975, 167), spending its day saying things like *I went home*, *We had a fantastic time*, and *it was five forty*, the imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create” (50) by way of those same laws, binding words and constructions into novel formulations: “I don’t want to fall upwards / into the sky!” (Baxter 1973, 35); “the otherest” (McGuckian 2016, 31). The imagination acts to communicate—or is it just trustingly gesture toward?—something we did not previously have words for. But we have not sufficiently grasped what Coleridge means by the imagination until we realize that for him the phenomenon is crucially dependent upon what he calls “the will” (1975, 73).

Citing an animal image from chapter 7 of the *Biographia Literaria* at the start of this paper served to clarify how untheological Coleridge’s ideas on composition actually are. There we saw Coleridge compare the imagination’s workings to the now-active, now-passive motions of a “small water-insect on the surface of rivulets.” So the mind foments new associations from old, “now resisting the current, and now yielding to it” (1975, 72). Here are the sentences which precede that water-insect image, and serve to offer an even more practically geared account of how one gives new life to the habit-run act of speaking in one’s head (which is what writing, of course, involves):

In every voluntary movement we first counteract gravitation, in order to avail ourselves of it. It must exist, that there may be a something to be counteracted, and which, by its reaction, may aid the force that is exerted to resist it. Let us consider what we do when we leap. We first resist the gravitating power by an act purely voluntary, and then by another act, voluntary in part, we yield to it in order to light on the spot, which we had previously proposed to ourselves. Now let a man [*sic*] watch his mind while he is composing; or, to take a still more common case, while he is trying to recollect a name; and he will find the process completely analogous. (Coleridge 1975, 71–72)

One intends to recall a name, launches one's mind upon that project, and then "by another act, voluntary in part," yields to the various names the mind suggests in response to that effort.

On the following page, Coleridge hones in on "the will." As far as our faculty for generating run-of-the-mill language, "the Fancy," is concerned, the "general law of association" is enough (1975, 73). That "law" determines that "whatever makes certain parts of a total impression more vivid or distinct than the rest, will determine the mind to recall these in preference to others equally linked." The will, on the other hand, is a very different creature, for "the will itself by confining and *intensifying* the attention may arbitrarily give vividness or distinctness to any object whatsoever" (73; emphasis added). You will your mind to find another angle on those associations, and then render yourself passive wherever that leap takes you. That is how the imagination works. The process is almost athletic. It involves "confining and intensifying the attention."

That very word "intensifying" would seem to be a case in point. In a footnote, Coleridge indicates that he coined the word—though it "occurs neither in Johnson's dictionary or in any classical writer"—because "intend" had lost its earlier connotations (1975, 73n1). "As when a Bow is successively Intended and Remitted" runs the illustrative quotation in the OED (Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "intend, v."). So one intended in 1678. Coleridge seems to be suggesting that the transformation which *intend* had by his time undergone toward its current, chief meaning—"To have in the mind as a fixed purpose; to purpose, design" ("intend")—meant that the word was already too de-physicalized to do service for the force one directs into one's attentional apparatus at such times.

One might presume that, in this very case, Coleridge focused as much as he could on what the language wanted a word for, launched his mind into that space and yielded to it as this novel use of the *-ify* construction came to mind, on the model of *clarify* (first attested circa 1398 [Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "clarify, v."]), *beautify* (1425 [s.v. "beautify, v."]) and *transmogrify* (1656 [s.v. "transmogrify, v."]), in an act of creative thinking we might regard (to borrow Chafe's theory of imagining) as "not wholly different in kind from remembering" (1994, 33). What Coleridge found through that leap lacked a competitor and so could win its way into the OED, where the poet is now listed as its coiner (Oxford English Dictionary 2020, s.v. "intensify, v.").

The fact that *intend* and *intensify* were at Coleridge's point in time still so suggestively linked raises another possibility here, though I

doubt we could still call it Coleridgean. Could it be that the decision to speak on a topic in a way others do not, but that the language makes available—the decision to intensify one’s faculties to that end, simply leaping foreignly, without any exact idea of what one has to say—is itself enough to bring new words and concepts about, provided no competitor formulation exists for what one finds there when one does? *The otherest*.

NOTES

¹ The approach I am taking here is not, of course, the only one way to tackle Coleridge’s comments on the iterability and irreplaceability of genuine poetic diction. One might, for instance, point out that Coleridge’s admittedly youthful pyramid metaphor presupposes that we actually know what Shakespeare, Milton, or any other canonical author did “say,” that is, just what words they used, in what order. In fact, there is no scholarly consensus on Shakespeare’s exact words (quarto or folio?), and there is no conceivable way there ever will be. The same can be said of any other author’s texts (Eggert 2009, 135–56). See further Paul Magee (2017), who makes the case, but also positively evaluates Coleridge’s criteria, and his accompanying pyramid metaphor, in the light of Kant’s, and subsequently Heidegger’s, argument that “perfection” is irrelevant to art objects: what matters is the mysterious sense of unclassifiable thingness they evoke, as registered by the way they set our minds reeling at each successive approach. It is hardly surprising to see thinkers like Coleridge, and indeed Heidegger (1971, 19), disavowing the instability of canonical textual traditions, given the sheer haecceity they found in the specific editions of Milton, Shakespeare, Ludwig van Beethoven, Friedrich Hölderlin, et al. that happened to fall into their hands.

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