Poetics Exercise 1: Diction

Part One Due Thursday, 9/5 by start of class. Submit via [google classroom](https://classroom.google.com/w/NzAxMTMyNDMzMTI3/t/all).

This Exercise has two components. We will also return to the topic in DHL3: Diction (Part 2). Please *do not* use generative AI for this exercise until instructed to do so.

**First Part:** Analysis

**Instructions**: The PEPP entry on Diction is one of its longest, noting the many cultural, historical, and linguistic pressures on choosing “the right word.” It cites, for example, the poet Paul Valéry’s search for “a word that is feminine, disyllabic, includes P or F, ends in a mute syllable, and is a synonym for break or disintegration, and not learned, not rare. Six conditions, at least!” Imagine if we had such pressure on word selection in common speech! Even Wordsworth’s desire for “language really used by men” is a pressure. And this is before we even consider figurative language (what is a good metaphor, etc).

1. From any of the poems we have read thus far, choose just *one* word that you think is “right” in the context of the poem.
   1. Make a list of all the reasons it feels “right” in the context of the poem. A sentence each is fine. Aim for 4-6 reasons. Bonus for citations from any of our critical readings (PEPP, Wordsworth, Empson)!
   2. Look up the word in the [Oxford English Dictionary](https://yale.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.oed.com). Report two aspects of the word that feel significant (surprising?) and in some way change your reading. Perhaps they further establish the “rightness” of the word, or reflect how the poet allows the word’s “stubborn life of its own” to enter the poem. Perhaps one of the etymological examples (quotes) resonates?

*Example: “Wound” in Natalie Diaz’s “My Brother My Wound”*

*Rightness:*

* *Ambiguity whether it is literal or figurative. And whether the brother is wounded, or the speaker*
* *Shape of mouth (open, round) while pronouncing. Wound and mouth are both words in the poem, and share a spelling but not a rhyme (unless they do rhyme?)*
* *Homonym of “wound” as in “wound up” / “winding”. Could be importing.*
* *Direct allusion to Jesus’s “side wound” brings in a whole range of religious meaning, seemingly at odds with the animistic elements of the poem?*
* *Wound feels like a very non-scientific word, something in very common use, compared to “injury,” but certainly not as childish as “ouwie” or “cut” or “I’m hurt.”*

*OED:*

1. *Apparently the Christian connotations are very strong. Many of the quotes relate to the stigmata of “Five Wounds” of Christ, and up to about the 19th century it was a common oath. Also as in “zounds” or “God’s wounds.” This helps me see that the later reference to Jesus in the poem is already a subtext.*
2. *It’s interesting that it can refer to the “incision” made in surgery. There is something intentional, almost surgical about the brother’s wounding of the speaker:*

*“He said, Lift up your shirt. And I did. // He slid his fork beneath my ribs….”*

*But a surgical wound should “stop bleeding” and this wound doesn’t. So the poem kind of mixes up intentional, useful, or necessary wounds with injury.*

**Second Part:** Synonymy

1. Find a synonym for your chosen word. If you picked a word that does not really have a synonym (prepositions, articles, proper nouns), you may choose another word for this part. To find a synonym, begin with the OED’s definitions. List some reasons why this new word *could* work, but also why it might not fit as well.
2. Next, try asking a **chatbot** for a synonym without giving any context. Then input some or all of the poem and ask again. Describe how the set of synonyms changes, if at all, and note anything interesting in how the AI responded to your two prompts.
3. **Optional** (we’ll discuss *prompt engineering* later): can you redesign your prompt to in some way enhance or focus the AI’s treatment of diction?

*Example (just part (a))*

*For “wound” above, the OED suggests “a hurt caused by laceration… an external injury”.   
“Hurt” has a similar feeling of commonness / universality might be good but doesn’t seem to work well as a noun. It lacks the religious connotations. It also feels more bluntly psychological / emotional. Its sound doesn’t do anything special for me either, though maybe the “h” sound would link up with the words hoof, horns, hummed, hole.*