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## Poetic Syntax

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In Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" (5.47; p. 619), there is a line few native speakers of English can grasp on first reading: "'Gainst Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes arms." What do we make of such a line, which is punctuated as a self-contained unit of thought? And why does it occur in the work of a poet renowned for his elegance and clarity of expression? The answer, or at least one answer, is that Pope is using *poetic syntax* to mimic the hurried confusion that soldiers experience in battle. Describing a moment when two pairs of Greek gods are arming themselves to fight each other, as related in Homer's *Iliad*, Pope adapts a classic syntactic pattern with a Greek name—*zeugma*—for his own poetic purposes. *Zeugma* occurs when a single verb governs several parallel words or clauses (verbal units, discussed below on p. 2056). Using a pattern that some but not all of his English-speaking readers would have recognized, Pope makes a densely compressed line that slows any reader down, impeding easy comprehension. But perhaps that is part of Pope's aim, as he constructs a linguistic analogue for certain aspects of the imagined battle scene. In so doing, Pope uses syntax not only to communicate ideas but also to create certain dramatic and meaningful effects by the very structure of his lines.

### What Is Syntax?

Syntax has been defined in many ways; we can begin our own inquiry into the theory and various historical practices of poetic syntax by saying that it concerns transactions between poets and their audiences—readers and listeners—about the meanings of certain sequences of words. The meanings emerge as words unroll in time and also—if we are reading the poem—in space. But meaning is also a function of how words and groups of words hark back to earlier ones, sometimes with the effect of suspending or even contesting time's forward motion.

The word *syntax*, from the Greek words *syn* (together) and *tax* (to arrange), denotes the "orderly or systematic arrangements of parts or elements." At the most general level, these elements involve symbols, including mathematical ones, that are arranged to create propositions or statements. The symbols that matter most for poetic syntax are words and groups of words; but punctuation marks, line shapes, stanza forms, metrical schemes, and rhyme patterns are also important for understanding poetic syntax as an arrangement of words that generates meaningful statements.

When we are discussing poetry, syntax may refer either to actual arrangements of words or to the rules of grammar and conventions of word order that are reflected—but also sometimes challenged—in such arrangements. We usually think of rules as governing behavior, and syntactic rules do govern the behavior of statements in various languages. In the domain of poetry, however, notions about governance, obedience, and order often exist in counterpoint to notions about the aesthetic as well as the social values of certain kinds of unruliness—those traditionally discussed under the rubric *poetic license*. Poetic syntax, therefore, is a slippery and even in some ways a contradictory topic, for while we are thinking about syntax as an orderly arrangement of verbal elements according to the conventions of a particular language, we also need to be thinking about poetic syntax as the making of significant disorder within a language—and often with allusions to other languages and their rules or practices of syntax. We can highlight a paradox inherent in any attempt to define poetic syntax by comparing poetic syntax to a game with complex rules that include—under certain circumstances—the option to break the rules.

Poets have played the syntactic game for a long time, often in competition with each other as well as with real and imagined audiences. In this game, some syntactic rules have changed; but many retain signs of the close historical links between English and Latin, two very different languages that nonetheless share many words as well as many ways of defining what constitutes syntactical “correctness.” For students of poetic syntax, the most important difference between English and Latin is that in English, meaning depends on certain words being neighbors to one another, whereas in Latin, proximity and distance between words matters little for understanding most written statements. In Latin, a highly inflected language, endings of words (suffixes) tell us a great deal about which words in a given statement go with which other words; the endings of nouns, adjectives, and verbs change (are “inflected”) according to their function in a given statement. English is a much less inflected language, although certain words need to “agree” with each other, as is true in Latin and many other languages too: singular nouns take singular verbs, for instance. In English, however, the most important determinant of meaning is the order of words, individually or in groups. The contrast can be summed up this way: in Latin you can tell your friend that she has hit the nail on the head by saying “*rem acu tetigisti*” or “*tetigisti acu rem*.” But in English, you cannot perform the same linguistic operation without severe semantic consequences: there is a considerable difference between saying that *you hit the nail* and saying that *the nail hit you*.

Poets in English play incessantly with normal patterns of word order, thus creating a multitude of interesting, witty, logically subtle, and often surprising effects requiring us to ponder parallels between words and groups of words sometimes more widely separated from each other than they would be in an ordinary prose statement. Some poets in English use syntactic arrangements in ways that challenge the reader's expectations about word order; alternatively or additionally, some poets build sentences with multiple parts more complexly related to each other than they would be in most modern English speech or writing. To participate in the syntactic games poets typically play, we need some shared terms for describing the elements that poets arrange in orderly—but also apparently disorderly—fashion.

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## Parts of Syntax

### Sentences and Words

The first rule of the poetic game of syntax as it is represented in an anthology like this one, which includes a wide range of poems written at many times in many forms of English, is that most poets use the grammatical unit called the *sentence* as a major unit of meaning, along with—but often in counterpoint to—the unit of the *poetic line* or the unit of the *stanza* (see “Versification,” p. 2040). The *sentence* is the largest meaning-bearing unit of syntax, while the *word* is the smallest. Neither unit can be easily defined. This is so because both sentences and words can be compounded and divided in various ways that become more complex the more closely we look at them across the arc of history. (Because English has changed so much over time, in other words, we can’t safely assume that modern rules apply in centuries-old texts; as best we can, we need to bring history into our readings.)

Sentences are sometimes defined as units that have **subjects** and **predicates**—in the simplest cases, a noun-subject and a predicate consisting only of a verb (*Jill runs*). In the most common type of English sentence, a noun working as a subject is followed by a verb, which leads to (and conceptually affects, acts on) a noun, which may or may not be modified and which is called a **direct object**: *the bird eats the worm* or, more elaborately, Edwin Muir’s “The grasses threw straight shadows far away” (“Childhood”; p. 1337).

In a second very common sentence type, the subject is followed by a predicate that **complements** (refers back to) the subject. In this kind of sentence, the verb is usually a form of *to be* (or *to seem*) and there is no direct object; instead, a predicate complement tells us something about the subject, as in the first line of Dryden’s “Mac Flecknoe” (p. 517): “All human beings are subject to decay”; another example is T. S. Eliot’s line “I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be” (“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”; p. 1343); yet another is A. R. Ammons’s wonderful opening to “Pet Panther” (p. 1700): “My attention is a wild / animal.” This type of sentence lends itself to reflections about identity and to metaphor-making.

In yet a third type of sentence, the subject is followed by a verb that takes neither a direct object nor a predicate complement. Because they neither act on a direct object nor reflect back on the subject, such verbs are called **intransitive**: *Money talks*, for example, or *Jill faints*. A more elaborate example comes again from Eliot: “The winter evening settles down / With smell of steaks in passageways” (“Preludes”). Some verbs are always intransitive, while others can be either intransitive or transitive. If *a duck flies overhead*, the verb is intransitive; if *I fly my plane to Reno*, the verb is transitive. (When in doubt, check the dictionary.)

Some modern poets and philosophers prefer sentences with transitive verbs to all others. Indeed, early in the last century, a philosopher named Ernest Fenellosa, who was a student of Chinese poetry and a major influence on Ezra Pound, urged poets writing in English to strive for concreteness by avoiding the verb *to be* and intransitive verbs. Arguing that the “transfer of power” is a basic truth of nature, Fenellosa maintained that the proper work of poetic syntax is to show an agent (subject) performing an act (transitive verb) on an object, as in *Farmer pounds rice* (Davie, *Articulate Energy*, 36).

Fenellosa's theory can be contested on many counts, but it has the virtue of helping us understand why even those modern English-language poets who seem to wage war on the rules of grammar and punctuation nonetheless rely on the traditional subject/verb/direct object sentence as a basic building block of their poems. This is so, paradoxically, even in cases where the poem does *not* seem to include full sentences (see "Nominal Syntax" below, p. 2060). Because poets know that competent readers of English expect sentences, poets can assume that readers will work to create a sentence even when none seems to exist at first glance. Such work (which can also be seen as play) occurs when we reread the line by Pope quoted at the beginning of this essay: "Against Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes arms." Why do we eventually decide that "arms" is a verb and not a noun in this poetic sentence, which is chock-full of inert proper names and which doesn't give us a verb where we would normally expect it to be? The answer, or one answer, is that Pope expects us to resolve the "confusion" of his fighting gods into a kind of peace: the sense offered by the sentence. Aided by a knowledge of syntax, we can see not only that "arms" in this line functions as a verb, but also that it functions retroactively, as it were, serving as the intransitive verb for both parts of the statement. We can translate it into prose as *Mars [arms] against Pallas; Hermes arms against Latona*. Armed with a knowledge of syntax, and willing to expend time on translating or paraphrasing Pope's impacted statement, we can win meaning from his odd arrangement of words.

Although some poets (and English teachers) share Fenellosa's preference for sentences with a subject, an active verb, and a direct object, many poets vary their sentence structures to capture different shades of thought about action and passion—and to create subtly varied rhythms. Consider, for example, the opening stanza of Kenneth Koch's "Permanently" (p. 1691), which illustrates all three basic types of English sentence structure and concludes with special praise for one of them. Can you identify each type?

One day the Nouns were clustered in the street.  
An Adjective walked by, with her dark beauty.  
The Nouns were struck, moved, changed.  
The next day a Verb drove up, and created the Sentence.\*

As Koch's lines remind us, many sentences are little narratives; in them, something happens, a story is told, time passes in a consequential way. At the end, we pause, and that pause has been signaled, in writing since the late Middle Ages, with a period. This mark is the graphic equivalent of a drop in the voice or a time for breathing between thoughts. The word *period* has many historical meanings. One denotes the sentence itself; another denotes a particular kind of sentence, in which several *subordinate clauses* build toward a *main clause*.

### Clauses

A clause is a verbal unit that may look like, may even be, a sentence because both contain subjects and predicates. *Jill runs home* is both a clause

\*Line 1: subject + predicate complement (Nouns / were clustered).

Line 2: subject + intransitive verb (Adjective walked by).

Line 3: subject + predicate complement (Nouns

were struck, moved, changed).

Line 4: subject + intransitive verb (Verb / drove up) and subject + transitive verb + direct object (Verb / created the Sentence).

and a sentence. But we taining" unit and a clause because a sentence may contain a subordinate clause, mentioned above, number of subordinate clauses, although loses some of its connective and therefore, independent clauses are used. A colon often connects related. Alternatively, conjunctions such as *and*, in Denise Levertov's poem

The  
and  
but

A subordinate clause alone in (or as) a sentence. Some sentences—some embedded in main clauses—distinction between independent and subordinate clauses. In many English sentences, the reader to look for double take, in order to identify the parts.

Subordinate clauses are parts of speech: the names of grammar will give you. To produce the different kinds of instance, usually followed by *as*, *as if*, *because*, *when*, with such an adverbial description of the fact or pronoun, are typical (*whom*, *whose*) or by relative clause in its section "which alters when it and explains the context, by the way, of the thought poets should

The lines illustrate a complex relation that can be read Shakespeare's comments to place the hanging), clause between complement, which

and a sentence. But we understand the sentence to be the larger or "containing" unit and a clause to be the smaller or "component" unit. This is because a sentence may contain more than one clause. The "periodic" sentence, mentioned above, has one **main** (or **independent**) clause and any number of subordinate clauses (*When she remembered the time, which she did when the bell rang, Jill ran home*). Some sentences have two (or more) main clauses, although in such cases, the term *main* (again, or *independent*) loses some of its conventional meaning. Clauses in such sentences are **coordinate** and therefore, in truth, only semi-independent. They are sometimes connected by certain punctuation marks other than the period; today, independent clauses are usually yoked by the semicolon, but in older writing, the colon often connects clauses that are independent but nonetheless closely related. Alternatively, such clauses may be connected by **coordinating conjunctions** such as *and*, *but*, *so*, *for*. An example of such a conjunction occurs in Denise Levertov's poem "The Closed World":

The house-snake dwells here still  
under the threshold  
but for months I have not seen it. . . .

A **subordinate clause** has a subject and a predicate, but cannot stand alone in (or as) a sentence. Such clauses appear in various positions in complex sentences—some precede, others follow, a main clause, and some are embedded in main clauses in ways that blur the grammatical and conceptual distinction between independence and dependence. Subordinate clauses often elaborate, qualify, or even undermine an idea or image in the main clause. In many English poems, clauses are building blocks of thought that invite the reader to look back at the beginning of the sentence, to do a mental double take, in order to grasp the logical relations among a sentence's multiple parts.

Subordinate clauses play syntactic roles similar to those played by three parts of speech: the noun, the adverb, and the adjective. Modern handbooks of grammar will give you full lists of the "joining words" that typically introduce the different kinds of subordinate clauses; adverbial clauses, for instance, usually follow subordinating conjunctions such as *after*, *although*, *as*, *as if*, *because*, *whether*, *while*. Shakespeare's Sonnet 106 (p. 265) begins with such an adverbial clause: "When in the chronicle of wasted time / I see descriptions of the fairest wights. . . ." Adjectival clauses, modifying a noun or pronoun, are typically introduced by **relative pronouns** (*that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, *whose*) or by **relative adverbs** (*when*, *where*, *why*). Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds"; p. 266) uses an adjectival clause in its second main clause: "Love is not love," Shakespeare writes, "which alters when it alteration finds." Here, the subordinate clause follows and explains the contradictory proposition of the main clause (a good example, by the way, of the kind of predicate complement clause that Fenellosa thought poets should avoid).

The lines illustrate not only an adjectival clause at work but also the complex relation that can exist between main and subordinate clauses. When we read Shakespeare's lines carefully, we mentally reorder the syntactic elements to place the subordinate, or "dependent" (from the Latin *pendere*, hanging), clause between, rather than after, the subject and its predicate complement, which is of course also "love": the same word but different in

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syntactic function. If we visualize this main clause and its dependent one (only part of a much longer sentence in the sonnet), we could diagram the relationship this way:

Love  
 which alters when it alteration finds  
 is not love

Such diagramming, which reminds us that in Latin, *sub* means "beneath," can often be a useful tool for sorting out relations among syntactic parts of poems. (For a fine example of such diagramming, see James Winn's rendering of the opening sentence of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which Linda Gregerson reproduces and trenchantly discusses in "Anatomizing Death," 105.)

Adjectival and adverbial clauses are fairly easy to discern because they modify a noun, pronoun, or verb in the main clause and can be diagrammed as hanging from (depending on) a word in the main clause. Noun clauses are harder to spot. They can be introduced by relative pronouns and also by other pronouns such as *whoever*, *whomever*, *what*, *whatever*, *whichever*. Moreover, noun clauses can follow many of the same subordinating conjunctions that signal adverbial clauses. The key to identifying noun clauses is to understand their syntactic functions in the poetic sentences with which we are working. Noun clauses may be subjects, direct objects, objects of prepositions, or predicate complements; but they always appear in statements that cannot stand alone. Sometimes, however, we have to excavate these clauses because the poet has omitted the joining or articulating words that would help us see the poem's syntactic skeleton clearly. If we know how the clauses are working syntactically, however, we can catch them; there are many rewards to doing so.

Let's consider Shakespeare's Sonnet 106 (p. 265) as an illustration of how a poet uses interplay among clauses to make meaning. In the version below, to clarify the poem's structure, we have put the beginnings of main clauses (introductory words followed by subjects and verbs) in **bold**; we have put the beginnings of subordinate clauses in *italic*.

When in the chronicle of wasted time  
**I see** descriptions of the fairest wights,  
 And beauty making beautiful old rhyme  
 In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights,  
 5 **Then**, in the blazon of sweet beauty's best,  
 Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,  
**I see** *their antique pen would have expressed*  
 Even such a beauty *as you master now*.  
 So all their praises are but prophecies  
 10 **Of** this our time, all you prefiguring;  
**And**, *for they looked but with divining eyes*,  
**They had not** skill enough your worth to sing;  
**For** we, *which now behold these present days*,  
 Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise.

Finding the main clause or clauses is the first step in analyzing this or any poem. Having found the poem's head and torso, as it were, we can proceed

to finding the sublimbs. Whether the reading it, how. In to appear ("I see," i its thought as well the initial dependen ies a careful balance clause is the main c completed, and it is elaborates and quali

We've found the direct object too. A But the syntax soon followed by a verb pl "I see [that] their beauty . . ." Experier automatically, but ex reversing the usual I text in English).

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In line 8, we need make sense of the sor serving as the direct words to line 8 to m master now." This si describe the "beauty" as a direct object of tival and noun claus and subordinate clau themes of mastery, e past and present, love seeing.

In the last six lines, they come more rapid by coordinating conj skeleton of the poet embedded subordinat clause ("for," after all close analysis, howev first "for" works adver

to finding the subordinate clauses, which can be compared to the poem's limbs. Whether the body arises into (new) life depends in part on who is reading it, how. In this sonnet, we have to wait patiently for a main clause to appear ("I see," in line 7); and when it does, we may not recognize it, for its thought as well as its syntax seem, paradoxically, to depend on those of the initial dependent clause. Although the "when . . . then" structure embodies a careful balance of ideas (each clause gets exactly four lines), the second clause is the main clause: "When" sets up expectations for the thought to be completed, and it is completed, albeit in a way that the rest of the sonnet elaborates and qualifies.

We've found the main subject and verb, and we may well expect to find a direct object too. We do, momentarily, in the phrase "their antique pen." But the syntax soon asks us to correct that idea, for the image of the pen is followed by a verb phrase that makes the pen the subject of a new little story: "I see [that] their antique pen would have expressed / Even such a beauty . . ." Experienced readers will add *that* (the missing relative pronoun) automatically, but even they will have to engage in some subliminal revision, reversing the usual forward motion of reading (left to right, on the page of a text in English).

What advantage is there to recognizing the first main clause's direct object as a subordinate (noun) clause? Doing so helps us see that the "object" the poet finally sees in his main clause is not really an object, a thing, at all; instead, what the Shakespearean speaker sees (here and elsewhere in his sonnets) is an amazing blending of past and present, of certainty and supposition: a constructed object rather than a natural one. The main clause and its exfoliating direct object thus work to tell us something about the speaker's way of seeing as well as about what he sees. This may interest us as readers, because what the speaker is seeing arises from his interpretation of meanings located in old books (they are to him as he is to us) considered in relation to his present and, by implication, his future.

In line 8, we need to excavate or cocreate another subordinate clause to make sense of the sonnet. As we needed to supply *that* to see the noun clause serving as the direct object of "I see," so we also need to supply missing words to line 8 to make it work: "Even such a beauty as [the one that] you master now." This subordinate clause, functioning both to rename and to describe the "beauty" that is the direct object of the noun clause functioning as a direct object of "I see," blurs the traditional distinction between adjectival and noun clause. Thus the syntax, particularly the interplay of main and subordinate clauses, contributes to the poem's larger meditation on themes of mastery, competition, and relations of interdependence between past and present, lover and beloved, writer and reader, subject and object of seeing.

In the last six lines, we have more main clauses than in the first eight, and they come more rapidly (and briefly) in the final couplet. They are introduced by coordinating conjunctions that, when singled out, help us see the logical skeleton of the poet's thought: "So," "And," "For." Note, finally, that the embedded subordinate clause in line 11 may fool us into thinking it a main clause ("for," after all, introduces a main clause just two lines later). Upon close analysis, however, we see that the group of words introduced by the first "for" works adverbially, to modify the verb phrase that comes in the next

line. "For" is therefore glossed (translated as) "because" by this anthology's editors, not because they have access to some mysterious dictionary unavailable to readers but rather because they have decoded the poem's syntax and come to the conclusion—as you can too—that line 11, after "And," both interrupts and helps explain the poet's claim that his predecessors lacked the skill to praise the speaker's beloved because they could see him or her only by "divining," or imagining, him or her.

Distinguishing between main and subordinate clauses is not always easy; but it is an important skill for players of the syntax game. Equipped with terms for describing syntactic elements precisely, we turn now to other moves poets make with sentences—and with readers' expectations about them.

### Moves in the Game

Syntax operates as a kind of promise or contract of expectation between poet and reader, so the use of subordinate clauses to delay a main verb can function as a kind of tease. Milton, for instance, at the opening of *Paradise Lost* (p. 421), and William Collins, at the opening of "Ode to Evening" (p. 675), give us many lines of complexly interrelated subordinate clauses to ponder—and remember—before we reach the main verb of the first poetic sentence. In Milton's epic, the imperative verb "sing" arrives after five lines; in Collins's ode, the imperative verb phrase "now teach me" arrives only in line 15, after a many-stranded subordinate clause (beginning "If aught . . .") in which the poet seems to attempt to prove to his addressee—the "Evening" personified as "Eve"—that his own "pastoral song" has the power "to soothe thy modest ear."

Poets' relations to their readers are often figured in terms of pleas and commands addressed to a *muse*, a source of inspiration traditionally gendered female and often addressed as *thou*. In both Milton's and Collins's poems, the exquisitely delayed arrival of the main verb challenges the reader to participate in the poet's game of call-and-response over a space of time epitomized by the sentence's prolonged unfolding. Milton's opening sentence points back to Genesis and forward to Christ's Second Coming; Collins's opening sentence points back to Milton while also mimicking the gradual coming of evening in a northern, English latitude. The Romantic poet Hannah More, meanwhile, provides an interesting variant on the syntactic pattern of the Miltonic *invocation* (the poem's opening address to a muse) by addressing an ungendered and plural set of muses ("Airy spirits") in line 1 of her "Inscription in a Beautiful Retreat Called Fairy Bower" (p. 707) while delaying her main verb ("come") to line 7. In other poems, the verb doesn't come at all.

### Nominal Syntax

Consider, for example, this very short poem by Ezra Pound:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

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asks the  
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Giving us two noun phrases but no verb, Pound's poem illustrates what some critics have called *nominal syntax*: the use of noun phrases in a way that asks the reader to make a conceptual or emotional connection between the poem's syntactic parts (Cureton, 322). "In a Station of the Metro" derives from Pound's appropriation of the ancient Japanese haiku for the modern Imagist movement. But if we read these three lines carefully, and with some knowledge of syntactic traditions in English-language poetry, we see that Pound not only provides us with striking images but also plays creatively with the poetic tradition of the delayed opening verb, which is itself related to the oratorical tradition of periodic sentences aimed at keeping the audience in a state of suspense. Pound's poem figuratively has us wait—in a French subway station—for a verb that never arrives. If, however, we play the poet's syntactic game by supplying some conceptual or emotional link between the poems' two major images, which seem to come from two very different worlds—on the one hand that of the bustling city, on the other hand that of nature, or (perhaps) of nature as represented in Japanese art—we will have played a role traditionally ascribed to the poet's muse: that of setting the poet's train of thoughts in motion.

As Pound's poem suggests, even modern poets who use various techniques of sentence fragmentation to challenge poetic tradition as well as conventions of ordinary language-use presuppose that the reader knows sentence rules well enough to appreciate meanings created when expectations are not fulfilled. Such poets dramatize the notion mentioned above: of syntax as a kind of contract between poet and reader. Their shared knowledge of rules, like soccer players' knowledge of the moves of their game, is often barely conscious until it is analyzed (as in a slow-speed replay). And for readers as for athletes, new knowledge often comes when we feel that rules have been bent or broken, and we stop to ask what's wrong.

In the opening stanza of "since feeling is first" (p. 1394), E. E. Cummings seems to justify the breaking of syntactic and other language-use rules:

since feeling is first  
who pays any attention  
to the syntax of things  
will never wholly kiss you;

But what is Cummings really saying here about paying (or not paying) attention to "the syntax of things"? He is using an old and important poetic technique—what the critic William Empson calls *double syntax*—to make two quite different statements in this four-line unit ending with a semicolon, a punctuation mark that, as we've seen, typically signals the end of a main clause.

### *Double Syntax*

This occurs when a phrase, line, or group of lines can be read in two different ways in relation to the syntax that precedes and/or follows the unit. In many examples of double syntax, the poet gives us an apparently complete thought—in a syntactic unit that appears to be an independent clause—but then goes on to revise the thought, often in a witty or paradoxical way, by showing us that the unit we thought was complete is part of a larger

(and usually more conceptually challenging) syntactic structure, often a sentence.

In Cummings's "since feeling is first," the first three lines can be interpreted as a complex sentence, with a subordinate adverbial clause followed by a main one. The statement emphasizes with a rhetorical question a consequence of an apparently logical opening premise. We can make sense of the first three lines by adding a question mark after line 3 and paraphrasing them thus: *Because feeling comes first, that is, is most important in a scale of values, who in her or his right mind would pay any attention to the syntax (orderly or logical arrangement) of things?* The question is rhetorical because it assumes a simple answer that everyone agrees on; such questions are often used to imply that everyone consents to an idea that might well merit questioning and even dissent.

Cummings undermines his own poem's rhetorical question (and also the coercive logic of its initial clause) when, in line 4, he offers a phrase that seems, at first, a sentence fragment jarringly unrelated to the first three lines. If, however, we pay attention to Cummings's syntax, we will go back and reread the first three lines in the light of the new thought given in line 4. We can then paraphrase the unit as a whole this way: *Since feeling comes first (logically and, in this poem, temporally too), he or she who pays attention to the syntax of things will never kiss you fully or totally.* The second, fuller reading requires us to supply a pronoun subject before the word "who"; that word thus becomes a relative pronoun as the opening lines change from asking a simple (and arguably simplistic) rhetorical question into making a more syntactically complex statement.

### Word Order Inversions

Many poetic ambiguities, including many of those in examples of double syntax, arise from inversions of the basic transitive sentence, subject/verb/object. The most common of these changes places the direct object before the subject and verb: "A curious knot God made in paradise," Edward Taylor writes, for example, at the beginning of his "Upon Wedlock, and Death of Children" (p. 537). Had Taylor used normal word order for this opening clause—"God made a curious knot in paradise"—he would have lost the opportunity to establish a meaningful and visually striking parallel between his title's first noun, "wedlock," and the word "knot" in his opening line. By putting "wedding" and "knot" into parallel positions, Taylor sets the stage for the conceptual definition of "knot" as "marriage"; but by inverting normal word order to achieve the parallelism, he also subtly introduces another meaning of "knot" developed in the poem: knot as a puzzle, as something that challenges reason and even faith in God's providential plan (note the pun on "knot" and "not"). Here, as in many poems, word order inversion allows the poet to emphasize a certain idea or image by giving it pride of place. The inversion, often accompanied by interesting rhythms and rhymes, works to provoke thought.

In many of the older poems in this anthology, lines that may seem completely obscure at first become clear, even witty, when we unscramble a word order inversion. John Donne's famous poem commanding his mistress to undress and make love to him begins, for instance, with the following inde-

pendent clause: "Come, my love, / try to read this as a sentence / subject/verb/direct object, / 'defy' one's 'powers'?" If the verb form offers a clue ("agrees") with a plural subject ("defy my dog"). Alenta clause that is both grammar poem's bawdy, boasting he out to be the direct object terms of grammar but also says, "defy" or resist "rest," poem goes on to develop a man's sexual powers and

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pendent clause: "Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defy . . ." If we try to read this as a sentence that uses the most common English pattern, subject/verb/direct object, we will be perplexed, for how can one's "rest" "defy" one's "powers"? If we work at the syntax, however, we will see that the verb form offers a clue that an "inversion" is occurring here. "Defy" goes ("agrees") with a plural subject, not a singular one (you wouldn't say, "My cat defy my dog"). Mentally rearranging Donne's word order, we arrive at a clause that is both grammatically correct and a brilliant introduction to the poem's bawdy, boasting humor: *my powers defy all rest*. "Rest," we see, turns out to be the direct object, not the subject, of the statement. The subject (in terms of grammar but also of theme) is the speaker's "powers," which, he says, "defy" or resist "rest," either as "sleep" or as masculine "slackness." The poem goes on to develop an intricate association (a curious knot?) between a man's sexual powers and his verbal powers of persuasion.

Edmund Spenser also uses word order inversion to create witty effects that have serious metaphysical implications. Early in his epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1.1.8-9; p. 167), he describes his young, inexperienced hero this way:

Full jolly knight he seemd, and faire did sitt,  
As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fit.

The first clause, we see, is a sentence of the type we've classified as a predicate complement; using normal English word order to make the same point, we could say that *he seemed a very jolly [i.e., gallant or cheerful] knight*. Putting the sentence this way—performing the operation known as "paraphrasing"—is critical to understanding not only Spenser's syntax but also some of the larger themes of his Protestant epic. Indeed, syntax—which in this case requires us to think twice about our first impression of how the hero looks as a soldier—is one of Spenser's main tools for warning the reader not to take appearances as the truth.

In Spenser's Protestant poem, syntax often works to dramatize the value of faith in an "invisible" reality; such faith is accompanied by, indeed grows from, a distrust of sensory impressions in general and of visual images in particular. Advancing his lesson in iconoclasm or distrust of images, Spenser crafts a sentence in which we first see (the words for) "jolly knight"; then we get the sentence's grammatical subject, "he"; and then we get a verb that creates irony at the hero's expense by retroactively questioning the "fit" between the hero's appearance and his inward state of readiness for religious battle. In the narrative that follows, the hero will repeatedly fall into error by believing first impressions.

In Spenser's poem as in many others in this anthology, syntactic inversion acquires resonance when considered along with historical, philosophical, religious, and other determinants of meaning. In his elegy "Adonais" (31-34; p. 880), for example, Percy Bysshe Shelley uses word order inversion in the course of raising some broad questions about theology, history, and politics—questions that require us to move from text to context to interpret syntactically difficult lines. In them, Shelley describes the poet John Milton as

Blind, old, and lonely, when his country's pride,  
 The priest, the slave, and the liberticide,  
 Trampled and mocked with many a loathed rite . . .

Which of the nouns preceding the transitive verbs is the subject of the subordinate clause beginning with "when," and which is the object? Two patterns of poetic inversion—subject/object/verb or object/subject/verb—are most common in metrical English poetry. Is the pride of the country performing the actions of trampling and mocking the priest, the slave, and the "liberticide," that is, the killer of liberty? Or are the three figures mentioned in the passage's second line trampling and mocking the kind of pride in his country that Milton felt?

We can't solve this puzzle unless we go beyond the syntax just of these lines to learn something about Milton and about Shelley's views of his precursor, who was finally on the losing side of the English Civil War and who was denounced as a *regicide* (king killer) by some of his enemies. Once we know that Shelley shared Milton's love of liberty and his scorn for the "rites" of the established English Church and state, we can see that the second paraphrase given above is distinctly preferable to the first: the priest, slave, and liberticide trampled and mocked Milton's pride in his country. We can also now see another possible reading of the lines: the phrase "when his country's pride" can describe Milton, a meaning that shifts our understanding of what is a subordinate, what a main clause here. We can, that is, also paraphrase these lines as saying that *the priest, the slave, and the liberticide trampled and mocked Milton when [he was] his country's pride, and they did so with many a loathed rite.*

Shelley's syntax is famously fluid. Indeed, some have denounced it as incoherent. Others have defended it by arguing that Shelley's poetry creates "the vocabulary and syntax" of a new vision of reality (Simpson, 82). For both philosophical and political reasons, Shelley wanted to blur traditional distinctions between subjects and objects; his syntax reflects that interest. In the case we have just examined, the syntactic obstacles to (immediate) comprehension dramatize the ongoing competition between different political views of liberty in England and challenge the reader to resolve the competition in a way that rejects one possible reading to respect others more consonant with what we can glean from many sources about Shelley's—and Milton's—views of liberty.

Because the significant ambiguities in a poem's syntax may be historically motivated, they often send us to other poems by the same author, other poems by authors we know or suspect that our poet read, and even to the larger texts of history, which include ongoing political, theological, and literary debates. Ambiguities of poetic syntax also invite us to consider other meaningful aspects of poems such as rhythm, stanza forms, line breaks, and punctuation. These phenomena are no less important to poems we hear read aloud, or sung, than they are to poems we encounter primarily through the eye. But when we read poems on the page, we necessarily confront the myriad ways in which printers and editors, in tandem with the poems' original authors, shape what we see. Our very perception of some poetic ambiguities depends on the presence or absence of judgments by other readers about, for instance, punctuation marks and spelling. With older poems in particular,

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punctuation marks may represent a printer's or an editor's interpretation of a line. Conventions of punctuation have changed over time, and the meaning of punctuation is always open to interpretation whether or not we possess a material text thought to represent an author's intent—which, in any case, may have changed in his or her own lifetime as a reader of his or her own poems. In any case, it is appropriate to end this introduction to poetic syntax with some brief examples of syntactic analysis linked to questions about punctuation, about the poem's mode of being as a (reproducible) material object, and about acts of interpretation—including those of editors and other readers—as moves in a game without closure.

## The Game of Interpretation

*Emily Dickinson*

When poems exist in multiple manuscript versions, editors necessarily make interpretive decisions about syntax simply by deciding which version to print. This is strikingly the case for editors of Emily Dickinson, since Dickinson published few of her poems during her life and left almost two thousand poems—in various groupings (including more than forty hand-bound booklets called “fascicles”) and in various kinds of drafts (including scrawls on the backs of envelopes)—at her death. Many poems exist in several different forms (available at [www.emilydickinson.org](http://www.emilydickinson.org) and in the variorum edition by R. H. Franklin). In some Dickinson poems, the presence or absence of a certain punctuation mark contributes to rich opportunities for interpretive debate. Compare, for example, two versions of her poem “A Bird, came down the Walk” (no. 359 [328]; p. 1116). In one version, printed in R. H. Franklin’s reading edition of Dickinson’s poems and in this anthology, the complex relation between the bird and the poem’s speaker—an “I”/eye looking at the bird as the bird is looking at the speaker—is rendered as follows in the third stanza and the beginning of the fourth:

He glanced with rapid eyes,  
That hurried all abroad -  
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought,  
He stirred his Velvet Head. -

Like one in danger, Cautious,  
I offered him a Crumb . . .

In another version of this poem, however—a version printed in many modern anthologies—the transition between the third and fourth stanzas occurs without any punctuation. This editorial choice changes the poem’s syntax and, in so doing, invites debate about how we perceive the relation between two creatures, the bird and the human speaker, caught in the act of looking at each other:

He stirred his Velvet Head

Like one in danger, Cautious,  
I offered him a Crumb

The absence of punctuation between the stanzas in this version of the poem allows us initially to read the new stanza as part of the preceding clause, in which the subject is "he," the bird. Reading on, however, we see that the new stanza's opening line can also be understood as belonging to a new clause, one with "I," the speaker, as its subject. This ambiguity creates an unsettling effect, making the reader go back and forth between syntactic alternatives in a conceptual movement subtly likened—through the poet's craft—to the bird's head movements or to the dizzying exchanges of gazes, and of fears, between human and bird. Like the earlier example from Cummings's "since feeling is first," this version of Dickinson's poem gives us two readings that are equally plausible in syntactic terms; the second reading, however, which necessarily encompasses our consideration of the first, is more complex, in part because the idea of a human in danger when offering a crumb to a bird is less commonsensical than the idea of a bird feeling in danger when approaching a human. This bird, however, has been described earlier in the poem as biting a worm "in halves" and as eating "the fellow, raw," while not knowing he is being watched by the speaker. The poem as a whole creates a coolly terrifying atmosphere in which the possibility arises that the speaker is in no less danger from an unknown "watcher" than the bird is. Double syntax works to slow us down and make us aware of an unfamiliar world where some "hidden purpose," as the poet Thom Gunn calls it, causes such creatures as birds to look, by the poem's end, like butterflies leaping "off Banks of Noon" and landing without splashes in an alien element where they may live or die "as they swim."

In another poem by Dickinson, "On a Columnar Self" (no. 740 [789]; p. 1121), we have to intervene more actively to make the double syntax work; here, as is often the case in poetic interpretation, we must supply either a missing word or a punctuation mark to make sense of the lines:

On a Columnar Self  
How ample to rely  
In Tumult -or Extremity—  
How good the Certainty  
  
That I ever cannot pry —  
And Wedge cannot divide  
Conviction — That Granitic Base —  
Though none be on our side —

We can read the first stanza as an independent syntactic unit if we mentally supply a period after "Certainty"; then we take "That I ever" as the subject of a new sentence. Alternatively (and, as is typical for double syntax, in addition), we may take the absence of a period after "Certainty" as license to interpret "That I ever" as a relative clause modifying "Certainty": in this case, we supply the word *which* after "Certainty," conceptually bridging the stanza break and thus making the poem's first two stanzas into building blocks, it seems, for a "columnar" self that consists of yoked pieces. Read as a whole, however, the poem resists giving us a simple answer to the implied question of whether the self is divided or undivided, singular or plural. (Read on— see what you can make of the syntactic options created by the absence of a punctuation mark after "divide." Does the poem's third stanza resolve the

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question of what kind of "column" the "self" is? As you reread, note that the poem's variable metrical pattern of trimeter and tetrameter lines contributes to its questions about the shape and nature of a "columnar self.")

### John Keats

Consider the famous opening line of John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (p. 938): "Thou still unravished bride of quietness. . . ." Does the word "still" function as an adjective or an adverb? In other words, is the urn, here addressed as "thou" and thus given qualities of personhood, "still" in the sense of *unmoving* (the adjectival meaning), or is the urn "still unravished," with "still" in the adverbial sense of *as yet*, which, in connection with "unmoving," shades into *not yet ravished*?

To appreciate Keats's use of "still," we will need not only to recognize that ambiguous part of speech in the ode's first line but also to ponder it in relation to the rest of this ode, which goes on to explore the idea of "ravished" in two different senses: as ecstatically delighted; and as violated, raped. The poem is about an apparently timeless and inanimate painted object, which is personified as a bride and hence likened to the "maidens loath," struggling to escape pursuers, in one of the scenes painted on the urn; the urn is also likened to the heifer painted on the urn and described as "lowing," though the poet cannot hear her voice and cannot be sure whether or not she is being led to death as a victim of sacrifice. Keats's ode, like Shakespeare's Sonnet 106, uses syntactic ambiguity to slow us down as we ponder a poem about time's passing and the art that succeeds—but only partially and paradoxically—in escaping death.

### Thomas Gray

Thomas Gray, who died some twenty years before Keats was born, also wrote an ode about a painted vase; and his poem too uses syntactic ambiguity to enrich a meditation on the relation between visual (unmoving) artifacts and poetry, an inherently temporal mode of art. In some versions, the "Ode (On the Death of a Favorite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Goldfishes)" (p. 668) begins with the following lines:

'Twas on a lofty vase's side,  
Where China's gayest art had dyed  
The azure flowers that blow;  
Demurest of the tabby kind,  
The pensive Selima reclined,  
Gazed on the lake below.

Upon first reading these lines, we probably take "reclined" as an intransitive verb telling us what the cat did. As we go on to read line 6, however, we encounter a line instance of double syntax enabled by punctuation, for we must revise our understanding of the initial five lines to comprehend the syntax of line 6. Either we mentally supply *and*, taking "reclined" and "gazed" as a compound verb phrase; or we retroactively interpret "reclined" as a *past participle*—a verb used as an adjective—describing the cat's position and thus creating a witty but melancholy joke: the cat that will, we know from

the title, fall into that "lofty" painted vase and drown is here caught, through the two possible interpretations of "reclined," between life and death. A cat that can recline is alive; a cat "reclined" is perhaps already dead. In yet a third alternative, suggested by poem as a whole, the cat may exist in that strange state of suspension between life and death that is created by art. This paradoxical state, implied by the pun on "dyed" and *died*, is neatly captured in the name of a certain genre of paintings: *still life*.

The ambiguity of "reclined" adds further shades of meaning to the poem's opening description of the cat *on* the side of a vase. What does that preposition mean? We might read it as suggesting that the cat is *painted on* the vase. We may firmly reject that possibility when we get to "gazed," in line 6, and stanza 2's description of the cat's tail "declaring" her "conscious joy"; this is (or was) evidently a real, moving cat, not a painted one—and hence her *reclining* can be pictured as a lively, comic, even wildly acrobat act of being at rest. And yet this poem is an ode that the title declares is "on the death" of a favorite cat; how does that "on" relate to the "on" of the opening line? The poem as a whole re-creates, reanimates, something long dead and still, exploring paradoxes of stillness and incipient movement similar to those in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." There, as we've seen, a scene painted on an old vase prompts the poet to reflect on the ways in which an artwork arrests time's passage while also testifying to time's power. Gray's ode also invites us to ponder the relations between artistic representations (verbal and visual), and (what counts) as reality, or life.

The tiny bit of double syntax at the end of Gray's opening stanza, which invites us to do a double take, to revise our understanding of the relation between verbs and adjectives, terms of motion and of stasis, disappears when modern editors add a comma to line 5, as many have done when reprinting Gray's poem for busy twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers. Consider the difference:

Demurest of the tabby kind,  
The pensive Selima[,] reclined,  
Gazed on the lake below.

Does this difference matter? Many readers have chosen not to pause on this comma, or its absence, because interpretations based on the presence or absence of one mark of punctuation lead into territories where it's famously hard to be sure one is right. In many historical examples of double syntax, including, notoriously, Shakespeare's sonnets, we can never be certain whether a given punctuation mark—or the absence thereof—reflects the writer's original intention or a printer's interpretation (or error). Uncertainty about authorial intention need not bother us if we accept the idea that meanings are culturally conditioned and the game of interpretation often requires us to make informed guesses.

#### John Dryden

Like Gray, John Dryden exploits the syntactic ambiguities lurking in past participles. Verbs arrested to modify nouns, participles often help poets explore the relations between ideas of stillness and ideas of motion; when participles are used in such a way that they may also be interpreted as verbs

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in the past tense, they can help raise questions about bondage, freedom, and human agency. In lines 939–41 of his long poem *Absalom and Achitophel*, Dryden's character King David breaks a long silence with the following lines about how he plans to punish his rebellious son Absalom:

Thus long have I by native mercy swayed  
My wrongs *dissembled*, my revenge *delayed*;  
So willing to forgive the offending age,  
So much the father did the king assuage. (my emphasis)

Modern editors—including those of this anthology (see p. 515)—often simplify this statement by adding explanatory commas around the phrase “by native mercy swayed,” which makes it definitively into an adjectival modifier; the punctuation erases the possibility that David is saying that he has ruled for a long time in a merciful way while at the same time pretending not to see the wrongs done to him—or, in another reading allowed by the syntax, ruling in an apparently merciful way while dissembling the wrongs he does to others. In the form in which they were originally printed in 1681, the lines allow for several very different interpretations (the critic William Empson counts seven!), depending on whether the reader takes “swayed,” “dissembled,” or “delayed” as the main verb of the first clause. If we reread the clause aloud, trying out each possible main verb with the other two then becoming past participles, we see how subtly our perceptions of David's character change, along with our estimates of the harshness with which he is likely now to undertake the punishment of the rebel. Since Dryden's poem uses the biblical story to figure a contemporary drama of political power (David represents King Charles II of England, Absalom his illegitimate son Monmouth), syntactic ambiguity is a potentially important protective shield for the poet attempting to analyze the relations between what a ruler “shows” and what he “dissembles” as he contemplates “revenge.” In removing syntactic ambiguities in some political poems of the past such as Dryden's, modern editors may, ironically, be blunting one of the weapons poets have traditionally used to avoid censorship.

#### William Blake

For a final example of interpretation enriched by attention to syntax and to punctuation, let's look at William Blake's “The Lamb.” One of a series called *Songs of Innocence*, which Blake eventually combined with the *Songs of Experience*, this poem was originally published in an illuminated book, a form Blake devised; writing in 1793, he described his illuminated books as the result of a “method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet” (Prospectus, cited in Viscomi). Much has been written about Blake's beautiful books, which exist in multiple copies made during his lifetime from his etchings. For our purposes, one of these books' most interesting features is what they show about the interplay of punctuation and syntax in creating ambiguities of meaning. An illustrated poem like the one reproduced on p. 2071 allows us some access to Blake's thoughts about punctuation. The access is only partial, however, because eighteenth-century understandings of punctuation differ from modern ones and because Blake, as his great editor David Erdman observes, often uses punctuation for “rhetorical” pur-

poses rather than to clarify syntax (787). In addition, different marks appear slightly differently in different copies of the illustrated poems: indeed, as Erdman also remarks, it is "impossible to copy Blake exactly" in print because the marks in the illuminated books sometimes "grade into each other" so that, for instance, a comma will be compounded with a question mark, or the difference between a comma and a period will be impossible to determine. Even trained scholars may therefore disagree about how to transcribe (rewrite, copy) a given Blake poem. Moreover, recognizing the gaps between eighteenth-century conventions of punctuation and modern ones, many modern editors feel that an attempt to follow Blake's punctuation exactly will distract readers rather than helping them appreciate the poems. One practical solution to this conundrum is to compare a "modernized" version of a poem by Blake (or by Dickinson or Shakespeare or other poets in this anthology) with a reproduction of a manuscript or early printed version of the text. Such a comparative practice, now much easier than it used to be because old versions of poems are readily viewable on the Web, allows us to see that editing, and even translating a text among different media, generates interpretations we can play with, and against which we can test our own understanding of a poem. A fascinating historical set of transcriptions and illustrations of Blake's poems is available for study at the innovative Web site of the Blake Archives ([www.blakearchive.org](http://www.blakearchive.org)).

In the case of "The Lamb," there are some interesting differences in punctuation among the more than twenty copies of the combined *Songs* made before Blake's death: the poem's penultimate line in Blake's version, for instance—"Little Lamb God bless thee"—is followed by a period in some transcriptions, a comma in others, and nothing—perhaps because the illustration's colors extended farther into the text—in still others. All of the illuminated copies, however, are very lightly punctuated, at least by today's standards and in striking contrast to most modern teaching editions of the poem, including the one in this anthology (p. 734). The difference is underscored by the absence of punctuation marks in the poem's opening lines as Blake printed them: "Little Lamb who made thee / Dost thou know who made thee" (see etching). Why is this significant? The presence or absence of punctuation marks in this poem gives us a glimpse into the ongoing history of reading as a process of trying to make sense of challenging poetic statements. The effort of making sense of syntax is, as we've seen, a key move in the game of interpretation. But so is the move of resisting premature submission to common sense. Blake invites us to tolerate, even relish, an experience of syntactic ambiguity abetted by the absence of punctuation and not unlike what John Keats called "negative capability," or "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

When modern editors add question marks and commas to the opening of Blake's poem, they make sense of it by making it fit the type of English sentence we have so often discussed in this essay. Punctuating Blake's first line with a question mark at the end and (as is usually the case) a comma after the opening words, editors help us grasp the line as an independent (interrogative) clause beginning with an address (an apostrophe) to the lamb: "Little lamb, who made thee?" In this version, the speaker apostrophizes the lamb, and then the speaker poses a grammatically self-contained and immediately comprehensible question: "who" (subject) "made" (verb) "thee" (direct object, referring back to the lamb as initially addressed)?



"The Lamb"  
(copy A), c.  
Blake (1757)  
bridge, U.K.

The absence of punctuation, as it were, is easily legible than it is possible interpretation whole. In Blake's version, the line "Little Lamb" followed by "who made thee" is the one who made "thee" in a new light but rather the lamb "thee" and "thou." The comma after the first



"The Lamb": plate 8 from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (copy AA), ca. 1815–26 (etching, ink, and watercolor), William Blake (1757–1827) / Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, U.K. / [www.bridgeman.co.uk](http://www.bridgeman.co.uk)

The absence of punctuation marks in Blake's first two lines—an absence echoed, as it were, in the stanza's last two lines—makes the poem much less easily legible than it is in modern editions. Blake's etching leaves open several possible interpretations of the first lines, the first stanza, and the poem as a whole. In Blake's versions, the first line need not be read as a full interrogative sentence. It can also (or instead) be read as having a subject ("little lamb") followed by a subordinate (adjectival) clause describing the lamb as the one who made "thee." Reading the line thus, as part of a larger syntactic unit in which the main verb has yet to appear, we suddenly see the word "thee" in a new light: it could now refer to an addressee who is not the lamb but rather the lamb's creation, the child or adult reader being addressed as "thee" and "thou." But even as we consider this alternative reading, which is an alternative syntax for the poem, supported by different punctuation (a comma after the first line instead of a question mark, for instance), we can-

not consider the traditional interpretation of the line or the poem *wrong*. Nor can we reject yet a third possible reading of the opening line or lines: as a prayerful address to Christ in his guise of lamb. In this reading, the referent for "thou" in the second line would be Christ, and the question the speaker is posing would shift back and forth from one about who made God's human and animal creatures to one about who made the Son of God. Thus the apparently "elementary" little poem opens toward sophisticated theological debates about the relation among God's different "persons": the Christian trinity, like the three pronouns in the poem ("thee," "He," and "I"), is three-in-one, one-in-three.

Our willingness to grant theological complexity to the poem goes hand in hand with a willingness to see its multiple syntactic possibilities as mutually illuminating rather than in competition with each other. The poem's final lines, which ring an echoing change on the opening ones, leave the theological and human questions of identity and origin teasingly open even as Blake chooses (for the first time) to end two lines with periods: one after "name," the other after the final "thee." If we join in this process of cocreating poetic meaning, we could imaginatively punctuate many lines in the poem in several different ways, none of which would conflict with the light punctuation Blake left for us. The poem quietly suggests that the reader is always cocreating the poem: our choices about syntax are choices about meaning. Fortunately, with this poem, making one syntactic choice at one time does not prevent us from making another later—and from attempting to hold all the possibilities in mind at once. The poem remains circular, fluid, teasing, and the final lines continue to solicit different interpretations, signaled here by the added commas:

Little lamb[,] God bless thee,  
Little lamb God[,] bless thee.

### Scorn Not Syntax

In the nineteenth century, one meaning of *syntax* was "a class in certain English Roman Catholic schools . . . below that called *poetry*" and often just above a class devoted to the subject of "grammar" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2.c.). For modern students and their teachers, the relations among grammar, syntax, and poetry are rarely so orderly as such a curricular sequence suggests. Indeed, for many of us, the words *syntax* and *grammar*, like *versification*, conjure up associations with dryness and discipline: with the acts of scientific analysis that William Wordsworth, in "The Tables Turned" (p. 764), denounced as the work of a "meddling intellect" that "murder[s] to dissect." In this famous poem, part of a dialogue in which Wordsworth adopts different attitudes toward the old question of the relation between reason and emotion in poetry, the speaker seems to praise nature and the mind that is open to nature's gifts as superior to all things that the mind actively produces through science or through art. By allying mental labor with some kind of dissection practiced on the corpses of naturally lovely things, Wordsworth's speaker articulates a feeling many have had at the moment when the

work of analyzing a poem is something simple, vital.

But there is another, ticular, their syntactic poem—"Scorn Not Syntax"—Taylor's phrase "the syntactic knots as an our own relation to ourselves as murderers, and can think of ourselves and test our cocreation includes, of course, p

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work of analyzing a poem (or a picture or a feeling of love) seems to destroy something simple, vital, and whole.

But there is another way to see the work of analyzing poems and, in particular, their syntactic bones. Playing on Wordsworth's title for another poem—"Scorn Not the Sonnet" (p. 804)—and harking back to Edward Taylor's phrase "the curious knot," we could argue for the value of untying syntactic knots as an intellectual exercise that teaches us something about our own relation to language. Analyzing poems, we need not think of ourselves as murderers, or even as surgeons performing an autopsy. Instead, we can think of ourselves as readers with the power to animate poetic meanings and test our cocreations in conversations with other readers. That group includes, of course, poets themselves, both the dead and the living.

MARGARET FERGUSON

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## Bio

Fleur Adcock (b. 1934), pp. 60–61. Fleur Adcock was born in New Zealand and lived in England until 1947. She studied at Victoria University, New Zealand, and at Otago University. In 1948 she moved to London to become a Fellow of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In 1979, she has been a freelance writer in London, though she has spent much of her life in the north of England. She has translated work from Persian, Russian, and from medieval Latin. *Faber Book of Twentieth Century Poetry*. She was awarded an OBE in the New Year Honours 1960–2000 was po

Conrad Aiken (1889–1973). Conrad Aiken was born in Savannah, Georgia, and raised there until age 10. His father shot Aiken's mother and Aiken was sent to live with his grandparents in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was educated at Harvard University, where he met T. S. Eliot and began a lifelong friendship. After traveling extensively in Europe, he entered into a career as a writer. During the 1930s, he lived in New York. He spent much of his time abroad, mostly in Europe. For many years, he lived in Savannah, Georgia, and Massachusetts. An exception to this was his time in England, where he published some thirty-five novels, dozens of short stories, and many essays and reviews, and an autobiography, *Sentinel* (1918) employs what Aiken called "phonetic" form, where each sentence functions like a musical note.

Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001). Agha Shahid Ali was born in 1949 in Jammu and Kashmir.

Agha Shahid Ali was born in Jammu and Kashmir. He was educated at the University of Kashmir, the University of Delhi, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Arizona. He has held posts at various institutions, including the University of Toronto and the University of Amherst. In addition to his own poetry, he has translated the work of T. S. Eliot and translated the Urdu poetry of Ahmed Faiz from Urdu. One