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Poems Aware of History

"I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is, prose = words in their best order; poetry = the best words in their best order," wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1827. What are the best words? For example, the Anglo-Saxon word *woods* suggests something different from the Latinate *forest*. Like French, German, and Italian, the English language has Indo-European roots, but English diction is less pure—and more interesting—not only because its synonyms have roots in both the Anglo-Saxon and the Latinate/Greek, but also because it has also absorbed so many "new world" and "foreign" words. English was further enriched by Native American words (such as "canoe" and "moccasin") and borrowings fueled by British colonialism (such as "dinghy" and "pajamas" from Hindi).

The history of words provides access to changes in thinking. For example, the word *silly* meant "worthy of sympathy" four hundred years ago; the change from a positive to a largely negative meaning today might serve as a prompt for a poem. Perhaps George Eliot knew that history when she complained about "silly novels by lady novelists." Conversely, the word *pride* has changed from negative to positive. It referred to the "first sin" during Milton's era but today connotes a badge of honor, as in "gay pride." A change in context appears to have risen from a change in thinking about individual power.

The exercise below makes us aware that word histories complicate choice. Most universities and public libraries offer online access to the Oxford English Dictionary. Or use any dictionary that provides etymologies of words.

1. Make a list of five words that interest you or that you might want to use in a poem. Some might be very ordinary words such as *table* while others might be words you rarely use or whose definition you do not know.

2. Read the full entries for the words and jot down the etymologies (dates, images, languages) that seem interesting. You may have to try several words before you find one whose history interests you.

3. Read (in the OED) the list of chronological instances of the word's use. Make note of the first time the word appeared in print in English—create a scene around this first use. Who uttered it? Where and why? Note changes in connotation in the word's uses.

4. Once you have a page or two of notes, connect the dots by asking questions. You may speculate or you may do research and arrive at an answer. For instance, the root of the word *peculiar* (*pecu*) means *cattle*, a reminder of the time when owning livestock was a primary form of wealth. When did owning cattle become an unusual situation? This investigative process should be playful and open-ended.

Conversely:

Write a poem creating a false etymology for a word, one that makes logical or sound sense, even if it is not historically accurate. For instance, *turkey* is a bird named after the country it was mistakenly thought to come from. *Peccadillo* sounds like an animal, perhaps related to *armadillo*. For examples, see Elizabeth Alexander's poem "Affirmative Action Blues" (which explores the false etymology of the word *niggardly*) or Allen Grossman's "Sentinel Yellowwoods" (which makes a false connection between *lute* (the musical instrument) and *lutea* (yellow).