

# On Two Intractable English Poetic Elements\*

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**Abstract**—Besides such readily acquired poetic techniques as meter, rhyme, syntactic inversion, imagery, tone etc., which are essential poetic features, a sound comprehension and appreciation of a large number of English poems also entails the proficient knowledge of screening of part of speech and semantic rejuvenation with regard to certain outwardly simple, actually capricious words residing in poems. While some flexibility is expected to exhibit in the process of deciding upon the correct part of speech of some elusive lexis shrouded in particular poetic milieu, an acquaintance with English etymology sometimes not only helps us arrive at the reasonable lexical sense, but also emanates for us a quaint and dainty poetic essence.

**Index Terms**—transfer of part of speech, semantic rejuvenation, poetic comprehension and appreciation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Two particular cases need to be accorded special attention to in the comprehension and appreciation of English poems. i: rational transfer often occurs concerning the common part of speech of some lexis in the unusual poetic context. ii: the deciphering of some key words in poems has to trace back to their etymological senses.

## II. SCREENING OF PART OF SPEECH

When trying to apprehend verses, due to their thin English proficiency and deficient knowledge of the multiple parts of speech characterized by some English words, some English novice tend to stick to the common parts of speech of some specific words and demonstrate little flexibility in determining the correct part of speech. More often than not, they fail to identify justifiably the right part of speech that plays a critical role in understanding poems.

### A. Examples Cited from Matthew Arnold's and John Milton's Poems

"The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled" (Matthew Arnold, 1853, p67)

In the verse above, the usual roles played by "full" and "round" are modifying nouns as adjectives. Obviously, "at the full" is a prepositional phrase, so "full" here actually is a noun instead of an adjective, signifying: the maximum or complete size or amount; the highest degree or state. Likewise, it can be explicitly decided that "round" here acts as a preposition instead of an adjective.

e.g. "Me though just right, and the fixed laws of heaven,

Did first create your leader, next free choice....." (John Milton, 1667, p115)

In the two verses above, "just right" is liable to be mistaken as adverb modifying adjective. According to the concrete context, "just" should be understood as "righteous" (adjective) modifying "right"(power, noun).

### B. Examples Cited from Several Keynote Metaphysical Poets' Poems

In "Air and Angels" (2002, p10) by John Donne, the most influential metaphysical poet, we read

"With wares which would sink admiration,

I saw, I had love's pinnace overfraught,

Every thy hair for love to work upon

Is much too much, some fitter must be sought;"(ibid.)

Here in "Is much too much", the first "much" is actually a noun, whereas the second "much" is an adverb modified by "too". Moreover, in "some fitter must be sought", "some" here is a pronoun instead of a determiner, which is equal to "something". Meanwhile, in this same poem, we read the following lines:

"Then as an angel, face and wings

Of air, not pure as it, yet pure doth wear,

So thy love may be my love's sphere;"(ibid.)

In the third line, the second "pure" is not an adjective as the first, it can best be understood as a noun, on a par with "purity".

Also, in "The Anniversary" (2002, p11) by John Donne, we have

"Two graves must hide thine and my corse,

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If one might, death were no divorce.

Alas, as well as other princes, we  
(Who prince enough in one another be)" (ibid.)

Here "prince" in the parenthesis should be rightfully regarded as a verb, signifying "possessing the air, deportment and all the characteristics peculiar to a prince, to be princely."

In "Damon the Mower" (2002, p60) by Andrew Marvell, another keynote metaphysical poet,

"And, if at noon my toil me heat,  
The sun himself licks off my sweat."(2002, p61)

Here "heat" might at first sight be mistaken as a noun. However, if restored to its normal order, the first line reads "And, if at noon my toil heat me", where "heat" should have been replaced by "heats", since grammatically, as a verb, it needs to correspond to its 3rd person singular subject "my toil". But the required rhyming scheme (Heat has to rhyme with sweat) precludes this grammatical regularity and reinforces this perceptive obscurity regarding the decision of the part of speech of "heat".

In "The Gallery"(2002, p65) also by Andrew Marvell,

"Divining thence, with horrid care,  
How long thou shalt continue fair;  
And (when inform'd) them throw'st away,  
To be the greedy vulture's prey." (ibid.)

"Fair" here ceases to be an adjective,; instead, it functions as an infinitive, i.e. "to be fair".

Also in this poem, we have  
"For thou alone to people me,  
Art grown a num'rous colony;  
And a collection choicer far  
Than or Whitehall's, or Mantua's were."(ibid.)

"People" here apparently is not a plural noun as it used to be; rather, it is equivalent to the verb "accommodate" or "house".

In the poem "Mourning" (2002, p67) by Andrew Marvell,

"How wide they dream! The Indian slaves  
That sink for pearl through seas profound,  
Would find her tears yet deeper waves  
And not of one the bottom sound."(2002, p68)

Instead of functioning as a noun, which may be unwarily mistaken to be, "sound" in the last line above actually represents itself as a verb, signifying "to present a particular impression".

In the poem "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Fawn"(ibid.) by Andrew Marvell,

"This waxed tame, while he grew wild,  
And quite regardless of my smart,  
Left me his fawn, but took his heart."(2002, p69)

Instead of the usual adjectival role it plays, "tame" here should most appropriately be taken as a noun, which is equivalent to "a docile being"; likewise, "smart" here rarely functions as a noun, meaning "sharp mental or physical pain".

In Andrew Marvell's poem "Young Love",(2002, p75)

"So we win of doubtful fate;  
And, if good she to us meant,  
We that good shall antedate,  
Or, if ill, that ill prevent."(ibid.)

"Good" and "ill" here are nouns instead of adjectives. They respectively signify "propitiousness; auspiciousness" and "ill and malicious omen".

In "A Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure"(2002, p80) by Andrew Marvell,

"What friends, if to my self untrue?  
What slaves, unless I captive you?"(2002, p82)

Here "captive", normally a noun or an adjective, is equivalent in function to "capture(a verb)".

In Andrew Marvell's "On a Drop of Dew",(2002, p85) we have

"How loose and easy hence to go:  
How girt and ready to ascend." (ibid.)

Here the adjectives "loose", "easy" and "ready" all function as adverbs. "Loose" means "in a loose manner". "Easy" denotes "without haste or agitation", while "ready" equals to "readily".

In "Eyes and Tears" (ibid.) by Andrew Marvell,

"That, having view'd the object vain,  
They might be ready to complain." (ibid.)

Here the adjective "vain" obviously functions as the adverb "vainly".

Also in this poem, we have

“But finds the essence only showers,  
Which straight in pity back he powers.”(ibid.)

Apparently “powers” here denotes “empowers”.

In “The British Church” by George Herbert, still another accomplished Metaphysical poet,

“I joy, dear mother, when I view

Thy perfect lineaments, and hue

Both sweet and bright.”(2002, p112)

“Joy” here functions as a verb, meaning “take great pleasure, rejoice”.

In George Herbert’s “Lent”,(2002, p115) we have

“True Christians should be glad of an occasion

To use their temperance, seeking no evasion

When good is seasonable;”(ibid.)

Here “good” is a noun, meaning “goodwill or good intentions”.

In “The Odor”(2002, p131) by George Herbert,

“That I might find

What cordials make this curious broth,

This broth of smells, that feeds and fats my mind.” (ibid.)

The word “cordial”, generally behaving as an adjective, is here used as a noun, meaning “a stimulant or a liqueur”; likewise, the usual adjective or noun “fat”, is here used as a verb, meaning “to make or become fat”.

Also in this poem, we have

“This breathing would with gains by sweet’ning me,

As sweet things traffic when they meet,

Return to thee;”(ibid.)

Normally functioning as a noun, here “traffic” transforms itself into a verb, meaning “exchange commercially, trade”.

In George Herbert’s poem “The Collar” (2002, p133), we have

“I struck the board and cried, No more!

I will abroad

What? Shall I ever sigh and pine?” (ibid.)

The seeming adverb “abroad” actually functions as a verb here, it means “not strike on target, strike in error”.

Also in this poem,

“Have I no harvest but a thorn,

To let me blood, and not restore.” (ibid.)

Here the noun “blood” equals to the verb “bleed”.

In “The Flower”(2002, 134) by George Herbert,

“How fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean

Are thy returns! Ev’n as the flowers in spring,

To which, besides their own demean,” (2002, p134)

Here the verb “demean” actually functions as a noun, it is equivalent to the noun “demeanour(department)”.

Among the most influential Metaphysical poets, we also have Richard Crashaw.

In his poem “Wishes to His Supposed Mistress”(2002, p150), we have the following lines:

“Joys that confess

Virtue their mistress,

And have no other head to dress;”(2002, p152)

Here the part of speech of “virtue”, normally a noun, is emphatically transformed into a verb, denoting “possess their mistress with virtues”.

In the next stanza, we have

“Fears, fond and flight

As the coy bride’s when night

First does the longing lover right.”(ibid.)

Here the adjective “fond”, as its context commands, should here be taken in its noun form: fondness.

Henry Vaughan, still another well-famed Metaphysical poet, wrote in his poem “The Search”, (2002, p167)

“He heaven’d their walks, and with his eyes

Made those wild shades a paradise,

Thus was the desert sanctified

To be he refuge of his bride;

I’ll thither then; see, it is day,

The sun’s broke through to guide my way.”(2002, p168)

In the first line of the verse above, “heaven”, a permanent noun concerning its part of speech, was here improvised by the poet to function as a verb, which means “to make their walks heavenly or sacred or holy; to sanctify their walks.”

Moreover, in the last line but one, “thither”, normally an adj. or adv., plays here the role of a makeshift, i.e. a verb, hence, “go thither”.

In the “Regeneration”(2002, p169) by Henry Vaughan, we have

“It was high spring, and all the way  
Primrosed and hung with shade;”(2002, p170)

Grammatically, “Primrosed”, is a past participle (Primrose should here be conveniently comprehended as a verb), functioning as a predicative, modifying its subject “all the way”, with the predicate verb---“was” omitted.

In the second stanza of this poem,  
“Stormed thus, I straight perceived my spring  
Mere stage and show,  
My walk a monstrous and mountained thing,  
Rough—cast with rocks and snow;” *ibid.*)

Likewise, “mountained” is also a pp., used as an adj., modifying “thing”. Here “mountain” is offhand perceived as a verb, whereas this line could be paraphrased as “My walk is just like a hard, painstaking and dangerous mountain—climbing, a veritable ordeal.”

In Henry Vaughan’s “They are All Gone into the World of Light” (2002, p180), we have

“What mysteries do lie beyond thy dust,  
Could man outlook that mark!” *ibid.*)

Here “outlook” should be regarded as a verb, meaning “transcend,; look beyond”.

In “Peace” *ibid.*) by Henry Vaughan,

“My soul, there is a country  
Far beyond the stars,  
Where stands a winged sentry  
A skillful in the wars;” *ibid.*)

Here in the 4th line above there is a void noun “armyman” which is modified by the adjective “skillful”, therefore the incomplete expression “a skillful” actually stands for “a skillful armyman” who is proficient about the expertise of warfares.

In “Wonder”(2002, p181) by Thomas Traherne, who is considered the last of the metaphysical Poets, we have

“For property itself was mine,  
And hedges, ornaments,  
Walls, houses, coffers, and their rich contents,  
To make me rich combine.” 2002, p183)

Here the verb “combine” is transformed into a noun: combination.

In order to shed more light on this poetic feature, we might as well interpret it as FUNCTIONAL SHIFT, which is very frequently employed in modern English. Words such as garden, fear, paper, salt, price, smoke, dawn, wash, contact, and base, to mention only a few, are shifted about freely in ordinary usage from noun to verb to adjective and vice versa, merely by changing the grammatical devices. The three “gardens” in the following sentence illustrate this kind of shift:

We shall garden with garden tools in the garden.

### III. SEMANTIC REJUVENATION

Veteran poets often compel their readers to engage themselves in the etymological task as part of the aesthetic experience. It may be said, in fact, that etymology is one of the devices by which readers are now called upon to share in the creative art. The enormous influence of English metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century on modern writers--notably the influence of Donne, has accentuate this etymological awareness. The etymological genesis of a word induces a new lexical experience on a conscientious reader. Sometimes only the archaic literal sense is intended, or it may be that both the physical and the metaphorical are to be caught simultaneously.

It’s often the case that when a practitioner encounters a seemingly familiar word in his poetic exploration, he may feel at a loss if he takes it for granted that the word’s most current and frequent meaning should be aimed at and exploited, because such a lexical decoding leads him nowhere so far as the reasonable comprehension of the related verse is concerned.

#### A. *Examples Cited from Several American Poets’ Poems*

To illustrate the point, an exemplary etymological use of “express” will be found in Emily Dickinson:

“Essential oils are wrung;  
The attar from the rose  
Is not expressed by suns alone,  
It is the gift of screws.”(1924, p87)

On close examination we perceive that “express” can by no means be interpreted as “to make known or set forth in words”. Its very context instantaneously restores its etymological meaning, “to press out”.

In “The love song of J. Alfred Pruffrock” by T.S. Eliot (1920, p114), we read

“Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent  
To lead you to an overwhelming question....” (ibid.)

The poet wishes you to remember that “intent” means a thing that is taut and stretched for action, and that “insidious”(“ sitting or lurking within”) means “ambushed” against an enemy. At the same time the literal metaphor of warfare is merged in the image of a verbal argument. In “preludes”there is another figure of the many he evokes from the streets of a city:

“The conscience of a blackened street  
Impatient to assume the world.”(ibid.)  
Here it is necessary to remember that “assume” means “to take on” and hence “to play the part of”.  
In Hart Crane’s poem  
“Remember, Falcon-Ace  
Thou hast there in thy wrist a Sanskrit charge  
To conjugate infinity’s dim marge  
Anew...!”(1920, p62)

Here “conjugate” is to be understood in its root meaning “to put a yoke on” rather than “to inflect a verb”, thus, the general sense of the verse is the paranormal power of dominating the horizons of infinity.

In “Garden Abstract”(Hart Crane, 1924, p54) the opening lines are

“The apple on its bough is her desire,--  
Shining suspension, mimic of the sun.”(ibid.)  
Here the abstract word “suspension” is to be interpreted as “the thing which is hung.”

#### B. *Examples Cited from Several Important Metaphysical Poets’ Poems*

In “The sun rising” by John Donne(2002, p4), we read

“Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide  
Late schoolboys, and sour prentices,  
Go tell court-huntsmen, that the King will ride,  
Call country ants to harvest offices;”(ibid.)

The above several lines are where a concentration of semantic rejuvenation reside.

The adjective “saucy” here is not to be understood in its current colloquial sense: “sexually suggestive” or “impudent”, rather, to capture its nuance in sense in this particular context, its archaic meaning has to be restored, i.e. “causing hurt pride or feelings, stinging”. In the same vein, “wretch” here does not mean “a miserable or contemptible person”, situated in this milieu, it represents “an unhappy person”. Thus, we can visualize such that a learned schoolteacher is scolding angrily a group of naughty pupils who are late for class, who might burst into tears out of grievances or humiliation by their teacher’s relentless reproaches. Again in this verse, “sour prentices” poses a dilemma in interpretation. “Sour”, which signifies “bitter, sharp, off or bad in taste, flavor or smell”, constitutes a seemingly awkward collocation with “prentices”. “Sour prentices”? it sounds unimaginably queer, doesn’t it? In order to rationalize this absurdity, why not audaciously and justifiably invoke its original meaning “young, raw and inexperienced” to decipher “sour”?

In John Donne’s poem “A valediction: of weeping” (2002, p14)

“A globe, yea world by that impression grow,  
Till thy tears mixed with mine do overflow.” (2002, p15)

“Impression” here traces back to its etymological meaning: the effect, mark or imprint made on a surface by pressure. The information provided by the few lines above is rather concise and limited, nonetheless, they evoke a lively and valid train of associative thoughts in the readers’ mind: a pair of intimate schoolmates, upon their graduation from school, are immersed both in the sweet retrospection of their past schooldays and apprehensive anticipation of their future embarking on the outside world. The globe, symbolically and tangibly artificial, which is employed in the geographical course, epitomizes their tower of ivory time; whereas in anticipation of their future, they are not without some misgivings. With one step outside the nest--like campus and into the actual sophisticated world that abounds in hard-edged competitions, the professional career they envisage is filled with ups and downs, uncertainties and adversities, tribulations and frustrations, just like the concaves and convexes, reliefs and depressions on a man--made globe. Therefore, their overflowing tears occasioned by these contemplations and meditations are mingled with happiness and sadness.

In “The flea” also by John Donne,(2002, P15)

“Yet this enjoys before it woo,  
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,  
And this, alas, is more than we would do.” (ibid.)

Here the poet intends you to understand “pampered” in its root archaic meaning “to indulge with rich food; glut.”

In “The mower to the glowworms” by Andrew Marvell, (2002, p59)

“Ye glowworms, whose officious flame

To wand'ring mowers shows the way,"(ibid.)

Here "officious" goes back to its archaic meaning: eager to render services or help others.

In "The unfortunate lover" also by Andrew Marvell, (2002, p63)

"A numerous fleet of corm'rants black,

That sail'd insulting o'er the wrack,

Receiv'd into their cruel care

Th' unfortunate and abject heir:

Guardians most fit to entertain

The orphan of the hurricane." (2002, p64)

Here "insulting" does not mean "speaking or treating in an insolent or contemptuously way." Instead, it adopts its obsolete sense: making an attack upon.

In Andrew Marvell's poem "The nymph complaining for the death of her fawn", (2002, p68) we have

"Though they should wash their guilty hands

In his warm life-blood, which doth part

From thine, and wound me to the heart,

Yet could they not be clean: their stain

Is dy'd in such a purple grain."(2002, p69)

"Grain" here adopts its archaic meaning: color, or tint.

In Andrew Marvell's poem "Daphnis and Chloe", (2002, p71) we have

"But with this sad news surpris'd,

Soon she let that niceness fall;" (2002, p72)

"Niceness" here restores its obsolete meaning: affected modesty; coyness.

Apparently the verse quoted signifies that some negative information was revealed to "her" and she was bewildered by it; consequently, being disillusioned, she shook off her unnecessary coyness and exhibited her real nature.

In "The picture of little T.C. in a prospect of flowers" by Andrew Marvell, (2002, p76)

"Prospect" in the title above exhibits its old-fashioned sense: sth. presented to the eye; a scene. Moreover, within the poem, we have

"In the green grass she loves to lie,

And there with her fair aspect tames

The wilder flow'rs, and gives them names;" (ibid.)

"Aspect" in "her fair aspect" also brings back its ancient meaning, hence "her fair complexion; her overall charming appearance".

The verse above indicates that, possessed with the unrivaled beauty, she (the heroine in the poem) is the queen who dominates the nature.

Furthermore in the same poem, we have

"O then let me in time compound,

And parley with those conquering eyes"; (ibid.)

"Compound", together with and the same as its old-fashioned counterpart "parley", meaning: to discuss sth. with sb. in order to solve a disagreement.

In "A dialogue between the resolved soul and created pleasure" by Andrew Marvell (2002, p80),

"Chorus

Earth cannot show so brave a sight

As when a single soul does fence

The batteries of alluring sense,

And Heaven views it with delight."(2002, p82)

Here the verb "fence" assumes its archaic sense: to defend or ward off. Thus, these lines present us with a spectacularly valiant scene: a single person, with eloquent oration and sound and impeccable reasoning, successfully resists the wave—after—wave storming of his opponents' verbal arguments, in spite of all the pomp and pageantry of their offensives. Consequently, his insurmountable courage even wins the favors from the Heaven.

In Andrew Marvell's "The coronet",(2002, p87)

"But thou who only couldst the serpent tame,

Either his slipp'ry knots at once untie,

And disentangle all his winding snare,

Or shatter too with him my curious frame;" (ibid.)

Here "curious" restores its obsolete sense: accomplished with skill or ingenuity.

Thus, the readers are aware of the fact that since the serpent--tamer has been located and the serpent has been made docile and no more harmful, all the traps to capture the serpent are disarmed, including an advanced implement ingeniously engineered by me.

In "An Horatian ode upon Cromwell's return from Ireland" by Andrew Marvell, (2002, p87)

“Where, when he first does lure,  
The falc’ner has her sure.”(2002, p90)

Here the adjective “sure” actually equals to “surety” or “sureness”.

In this eulogy, strongman Cromwell’s confidence and determination are highly prized.

In Andrew Marvell’s “Upon Appleton house”, (ibid.) we have

“Whose columns should so high be rais’d,  
To arch the bows that on them gaz’d.” (ibid.)

Here “arch” is used as a verb, meaning: to cause to form an arch or similar curve.

In “Upon Appleton house” by Andrew Marvell,(ibid.) we furthermore have

“More by his magnitude distress’d,  
Than he is by its straitness press’d”(ibid.)

Here “distressed” assumes its archaic meaning: to constrain by harassment. Quite apparently, a dramatic irony resides in these two lines: instead of being comfortable with his spacious house, he is constrained by it, more so than by its hypothesized narrowness.

In George Herbert’s “Easter wings”, (2002, p114) we have

“For if I imp my wing on thine,  
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.” (ibid.)

Here “imp” is used as a verb and adopt its archaic meaning: to furnish with wings. The implication conveyed by the two lines makes this manifest: even if one’s superiority is lost or removed for whatever reason, the adversity or suffering incurred will all the more motivate him to strive for more success.

In “Man” by George Herbert, (2002, p119)

“Since then, my God, thou hast  
So brave a palace built, O dwell in it,  
That it may dwell with thee at last!” (2002, p120)

Here “brave” represents its archaic meaning: excellent.

In George Herbert’s “Affliction”,(ibid.) we have

“Thus thin and lean, without a fence or friend,  
I was blown through with ev’ry storm and wind.” (2002, p21)

Here “fence” rejuvenates its archaic sense: a means of defense; protection.

In “The Windows” by George Herbert, (2002, p130)

“Doctrine and life, colors and light in one,  
When they combine and mingle, bring  
A strong regard and awe; but speech alone  
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,  
And in the ear, not conscience, ring.”(ibid.)

Here “regard” assumes its obsolete sense: appearance or aspect.

In “Wishes to his supposed mistress” by Richard Crashaw, (2002, p150)

“Sidneian showers  
Of sweet discourse, whose powers  
Can crown old winter’s head with flowers;”(2002, p152)

Here “discourse” adopts its archaic meaning: the process or power of reasoning.

From these forceful lines we can imagine that the well-known showers that frequent Sidney are descending fully and delightfully whose quasi—preternatural might and rhythmical sound are so overwhelming and sensuous respectively that they can even transform a dreary winter into a flower—blooming spring.

In Richard Crashaw’s “Music’s duel”,(2002, p153) we have

“Close in the covert of the leaves there stood  
A nightingale, come from the neighboring wood,  
The sweet inhabitant of each glad tree,  
Their muse, their siren, harmless siren she;” (2002, p154)

Here “glad” assumes its archaic meaning: of a cheerful disposition. The vivid description in this stanza brings forth a joyful happy scene. We naturally visualize that the carefree nightingale is enjoying itself with abandon amid the dense clusters of leaves by alighting and perching from one twig personified to another while warbling charmingly and alluringly.

In “Music’s duel” by Richard Crashaw, (ibid.)

“Heaves her soft bosom, wanders round about,  
And makes a pretty earthquake in her breast.” (2002, p155)

Here “pretty” assumes its archaic meaning: elegant; fine. Thus, we envisage a consummately round female breast that bounces rhythmically and elastically and temptingly.

In Henry Vaughan’s “Peace”, (2002, p180) we have

“Leave then thy foolish ranges,

For none can thee secure  
 But one who never changes,  
 Thy god, thy life, thy cure.” (2002, p181)  
 Here “foolish” restores its archaic sense: insignificant, worthless.  
 In “Poverty” by Thomas Traherne, (2002, p188)  
 “A painted cloth there was,  
 Wherein some ancient story wrought  
 A little entertained my thought,  
 Which light discovered through the glass.” (ibid.)  
 Here “entertained” assumes its archaic meaning: continued with; maintained.

From the lines above we envision such an image: the sunrays shone through the window of an obscure tavern inside which hung a worn-out curtain where some literary quotation was finely written; I, who patronized the pub, chanced to view these exquisitely—written lines, which aroused some mental associations in my lackadaisical mind drowsed in the sunlight.

The instances illustrated above have evidenced how readily an acquired skill in etymological rejuvenation will transform into an enabling prowess for us to interpret poems.

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