CHAPTER 5

POETIC LICENSE

Poetic license is the liberty taken by poets to use the language in unconventional ways, to liberate their work from standard language in matters such as grammar, meaning, word order, the use of archaic or new - coined words, conventional rules, diction, meter, rhyme or pronunciation in order to meet the requirements of their metrical pattern, to establish or achieve a desired, special poetic effect.

Many of the difficulties readers may encounter in reading and understanding poetry are in poetic license which can be grouped under these headings: **inversion of order, ellipsis, archaic words, old forms not used in modem English, conventional abbreviations, grammar and punctuation.** (Murphy, 1980, p.58)

Inversion of order

In speech we often invert the usual grammatical order of a sentence, clause or phrase for emphasis. The emphatic place in the English sentence is the beginning, so that if we wish to place particular emphasis on something we bring it to the beginning of the sentence.

For instance, a person might say, 'Out of the door he came running like a madman. The usual order of words would be : 'He came running out of the door like a madman' By placing the phrase 'out of the door' at the beginning of the sentence he is emphasizing the person's exit from the door. Another person in answer to question might answer : Jim it was who

spoke to me', instead of the more usual: 'It was Jim who spoke to me. 'These two examples involve verbs: the first, inversion of verb and adverbial phrase; and the second, of verb and complement. Other types of inversion : of verb and object, e.g. Him I accuse.

Sometimes the rhythm of a line, or the rhyme needed at the end of it, is the reason for inversion. For example, one of Lear's nonsense poems begins:

> On top of the Crumpetty Tree
> The Quangle Wangle sat,
> But his face you could not see,
> On account of his Beaver Hat.

Here inversion occurs in the third line in order to make 'see' rhyme with 'Tree'. The normal order would be: 'But you could not see his face'.

In the following lines inversion is used not only to get a rhyme between 'he' and 'be' but also to give the required rhythm to the lines.

> Then up spoke the captain of our gallant ship,
> And a well-spoken man was he,
> 'I have married a wife in Salem town;
> And tonight she a widow will be:'

The normal order of these two lines would be:

'And he was a well-spoken man' and 'And tonight she will be a widow.

A.H. Clough in his "Commandments for modern times" says;

> Do not adultery commit:
> Advantage rarely comes of it.

The normal order would be: 'Do not commit adultery.

Another example:

> Last night the moon had a golden ring,
> And tonight no moon we see:

The normal order in the second line would be:

> And tonight we see no moon

Or.　　　On either side of the river lie
> Long fields of barley and of rye.

The normal order would be:

> Long fields of barley and of rye lie on either side of the river.

From Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Eagle"

> The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
> He watches from his mountain walls,
> And like a thunderbolt he falls

The normal order would be:

> The wrinkled sea crawls beneath him;
> And he falls like a thunderbolt.

## Ellipsis

Ellipsis is the omission of certain words that are needed to complete a grammatical construction. (Murphy, 1980, p.62) For example, in ordinary speech a person might say, "What a situation we were in; he there and I here." We can see that the last part of the sentence is not a complete grammatical construction. It should be : 'he was there and I was here.'

The main use of this device in poetry is to contract the sense, to give pithiness to the expression and to avoid the use of unnecessary words.

For example:

>  John Donne, arguing that death is not something to be dreaded, writes:

>  From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
>  Much pleasure; then from thee, much more must flow.

A full statement of the first part of this argument would go something like this:

>  "*From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,*
>
>  (We derive)   *Much pleasure…………*"

'By using only the two words 'much pleasure', the poet has padded his thought in much more tightly.

John Milton, thinking of how his life has sped by, writes:

>  When I consider how my light is spent
>  Ere half my days in this dark world and wide….

A complete construction would be: 'Ere half my days have passed in this dark world and wide'.

>  W.H. Davies, regretting the falseness of love, says:

>  I loved a maid
>  Time has proved false to be;
>  Would death had come
>  When true that maid to me.

Here an added difficulty is that, besides elliptical constructions, there are also inversions. In everyday English this would be: 'I loved a maid whom time has proved to be false. Would death had come when that maid was true to me.

Another example from **Thomas Hardy' s "The Man He Killed"** :

> I shot at him as he at me,
> And killed him in his place

A final line expressed in full would be:

> I shot at him as he **shot** at me.

Ellipsis can cause some difficulties to those who are not native speakers of English. However, careful readers will resolve these difficulties.

**Archaic words - old forms not used in modern English**

The following points may present difficulties to some readers of English studying English poetry. (Murphy, 1980, pp.70-71)

**'Thou' and the Old Second-person Verb Form**

The forms of this pronoun are:

Thou (subject), e.g. Thou art sick.

Thee (object), e.g. I love thee.

Thine (possessive), e.g. My heart is thine.

Thy / thine (possessive adjective), e.g. I am thy father.

'Thou' in modern English speech both singular and plural is 'you'. The use of 'thou' will be found, in a great deal of English poetry. 'Thou' was the usual form of address for the second person singular.

Some older forms of the verbs used with 'thou' were:

To be: thou art; thou wast ; thou be'st; thou wert.

To have: thou hast; thou had'st.

To do: thou dost; thou did'st

Others: thou shalt; thou wilt; thou should'st;  Thou  would'st;  thou  canst; thou mayst;  thou might'st.

With other verbs the usual form ended in '_est' , e.g. thou makest, thou lovest, thou criest. These are sometimes written as: mak'st, lov'st, etc.

**Examples**:

1. Death, be not proud, though some have called **thee**
   Mighty and dreadful, for **thou art** not so:
   For those whom **thou  think'st thou dost** overthrow
   Die not, poor Death: nor yet **canst thou** kill me.

2. Full fathom five **thy** father lies;

3.  Drink to me only with **thine** eyes.

4.  Milton, **thou should'st** be living at this hour

5.  If **thou be'st** born to strange sights ……

6.  Sweet Echo Sweetest nymph that **liv'st** unseen……

7.  Now if **thou would'st**, when all have given him over,

8.  From death to life **thou might'st** him yet recover.

Old Third - Person Verb Form

The old forms of some verbs are : he maketh; he doeth / doth; he hath; he loveth; he liveth; etc. Their modern equivalents are: he makes; he does; he has; he loves; he lives; etc. (Murphy, 1980, p.72)

**Examples;**

…….the bee with honeyed thigh
That at her flowery work **doth** sing.
See, brother, see! how graciously
She **looketh** down on him!

He **prayeth** best who **loveth** best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who **loveth** us,
He made and **loveth** all.

See the chariot at hand here of Love,
Wherein my lady **rideth**!
Each that draws is a swan or a dove,
And well the car Love **guideth**.

**Other Old Forms**

Of the following three sets of adverbs, only the first is widely used in modern English:

1.  here; where; there (adverb of place / position)

2.  hither = to here; whither = to where; thither = to there (adverbs of movement towards a place)

3.  hence = from here; whence = from where; thence = from there (adverbs of movement away from a place)

The second and third sets, however, will often be found in older poetry.

**Examples :**

1. Hither my love!

2. Here I am, here!

   (hither = to  here, come to here)

3. Hence, vain deluding joys…..…..

   (hence = from here, away from here)…..…..

4. Whither, O splendid ship, thy white sails crowding…..…..
   (whither = to where, to where are you going)

5. Men must endure their going hence

6. Even as their coming hither……….

7. Come hither, come hither, come hither!

8. Here shall we see

9. No enemy

10. But winter and rough weather.

Other old forms that may be met with are; methinks = it seems to me; methought = it seemed to me.

**Examples;**

1. Methought I stood where trees of every clime, ……

2. made a screen;

   (clime = climate)

3. O sweet shepherd, hie thee,

4. For methinks thou stay'st too long

   (hie = hurry)

Others are ye = you (plural); ere = before; oft = often; yon = yonder; yea = yes; nay = no; morn = morning

**Examples :**

1. O Nightingale that on yon.; bloomy spray

   Warblest at eve……

   (bloomy spray = flower - covered branch)

2. Gather **ye** rosebuds while **ye** may……..

3. O come **ye** in peace or come **ye** in war?

4. And wilt thou leave me thus?

   Say nay! Say nay!

5. **Nay** I have done, you get no more of me;
   And I am glad, **yea** glad with all my heart,
   That thus so cleanly I myself can free.

6. Off in the stilly night

7. **Ere** slumber' s chain has bound me…….

Another old form met with is the participial form with **'a'** added, e.g. **'a-weeping'; 'a-flying'**. It is sometimes used with the verb 'fall' and its modern equivalent then would be 'to begin to…….'.

Examples:

1. Poor Jenny fell a - weeping, a-weeping, a-weeping,

2. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,

   Old time is still **a - flying**;

3. But ev' n as babes in dreams do smile,
   And sometimes fall a - weeping,
   So I awaked, as wise this while
   As when I fell a - sleeping……

4. Froggie would a - wooing go.


Conventional Abbreviations

There are a few conventional abbreviations which are used in English poetry. Most of them are for rhythm. (Murphy, 1980, pp.72-73)

One has already been mentioned, viz. the abbreviation of verbs like 'returnest' and 'lovest' to 'return 'st' and 'love' st'. Other common ones are: e' en (= even); ne' er (= never); e' er (= ever) and words compounded with

'e' er', viz. where' er (= wherever), howe' er (= however), whate' er (= whatever), whoe' er (= whoever), etc.; o'er (= over) and words compounded with 'o'er ', viz, o'erhang (= overhang), o'erwhelm (=overwhelm), o' ercome (=overcome), etc.; ta' en (= taken); ' gainst (= against); ' gins (= begins); 'tis (= it is); 'twas (= it was); etc.

Examples:

1.  Hark, hark! The lark at heaven 's gate sings,

2.  And Phoebus' **gins** arise……..

3.  What is lave?' Tis not hereafter……

4.  …….like to the pearls of morning dew.

5.  Ne' er to be found again.'

6.  ……**'twas** a colour he never liked

7.  Home art gone and **ta' en** thy wages.

8.  And I'll give thee a silver pound

9.  To row us **o' er** the ferry!

Grammar

If you think you have the knowledge to solve all the difficulties of the poet's use of words, the meanings of words and so on and you still have difficulty in understanding the poem or part of it, then have a closer look at the grammar of the poem. Remember that poetry written in English follows the usages of English grammar. Here are a few grammatical points which readers may encounter: (Murphy, 1980, pp.82-85)

a)  **Pronouns**. Are they subjective or are they objective? What noun do they refer to? Ask the same thing of relative pronouns and demonstrative pronouns.

Notice the pronoun 'him' again in these lines by Milton:

> ……….Him the Almight Power
> Hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky...…

Readers could mistakenly think that **'Him'** referred to **'Almighty Power'**, 'Him' however is objective and is the object of the verb 'hurled'. So the grammar is: subject + verb  + object, viz. 'the Almighty Power hurled him'.

Read these lines from **Yeats**:

> All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
> The first time on this shore
> The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
> Trod with a lighter tread.

On first reading this appears difficult.. But if we realize that the pronoun 'I' is the subject, the pattern of the sentence becomes clear. We ask ourselves: 'Since I-did what? ' and the answer is 'trod with a lighter tread'. Careful attention to the punctuation here is also a help.

Here the poet sees his loved one:

> O moon of my delight that know'st no wane
> The moon of heaven is rising once again
> How oft hereafter rising shall she look'
> Through this same garden after me, in vain.

The first two lines are addressed to the poet's sweetheart. But the second two lines do not refer to this person at all. A careful look at the pronoun 'she'

will show us this. If the last two lines referred to the same person the pronoun would be 'you' or 'thou'. The pronoun' she' refers to 'the moon of heaven'..

**b) Different functions of words**. In English one word can often have two or more functions. For example, the word 'head' can function as: a noun, e.g. He hurt his head; an adjective, e.g. He is the head waiter, a verb, e.g. The centre - forward tried to head the ball.

Even Shakespeare could write:

> For as you were when first your eye I eyed
> Such seems your beauty still.

Here we see the word 'eye' used both as a noun and a verb.

Likewise, **Louis MacNeice** in his **Prayer Before Birth** imagines the unborn person saying:

> I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me.

Alexander Pope, excusing the subject matter of some of his poetry, says:

> Whether the charmer sinner it or saint it,
> It folly grow romantic I must paint it.

Here the poet makes the two words 'sinner' and 'saint' act as verbs, though this is not one of their usual functions.

Readers must be on the lookout for this. Sometimes when the meaning of the line just seems to elude you, have another look to see that you are taking the words in their right functions. The following lines, for instance, when read quickly, seem just a little strange and don't make complete sense:

> Ride ten thousand days and nights
> Till age snow white hairs on thee

This sense of strangeness may result from our taking the word 'snow' in its wrong function. It is here not an adjective as in the phrase 'snow' white hairs', but a verb as in 'I think it will snow.'

Note the different functions of the word 'blind' in these two lines:

> Those souls which vice's woody mists most blind,
> Blind Fortune, blindly, most their friend doth prove….

The first use of 'blind' is as a verb, viz. 'vice' s moody mists blind souls', the second is as an adjective, viz. 'blind fortune'.

Note the past tense from Coleridge's **'The Ancient Mariner'**

> Water, water, every where
> And all the boards did shrink:

Notice the expletive use of 'did' for the simple

c)  **Punctuation**. Always take particular note of the punctuation of a poem. The poet does not put commas and semi - colons in his / or her poems just for decoration. They mean something.

Remember that there is not always a pause at the end of every line in a poem or even at the end of a verse or stanza. Sometimes the sense runs on for some time. In these lines from **Milton's 'On His Blindness'**, for instance, some of the main pauses fall within the line:

> ……God doth not need
> Either man's works, or His own gifts: who best
> Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best: His state
> Is Kingly; thousands at His bidding speed
> Add post o' er land and ocean without rest:
> They also serve who only stand and wait.

If the readers were to pause after 'need', 'best', 'state' and 'speed', he would be making nonsense of these lines. The voice must run on at these points until it reaches the resting places at the commas, semicolons or stops.

Read these lines from **Ralph Hodgson's poem "Eve"**, paying particular attention to the punctuation. (Murphy, 1980, p.85)

Eve, with her basket, was
Deep in the bells and grass
Wading in bells and grass
Up to her knees,
Picking a dish of sweet
Berries and plums to eat,
Down in the bells and grass
Under the trees.
Mute as a mouse in a
Corner the cobra lay,
Curled round a bough of the
Cinammon tall……..
Now to get even and
Humble proud heaven and
Now is the moment or
Never at all.

(bells = flowers; cinammon = a tree)

The first full - stop in these lines comes after 'trees'. We can see from these lines how important the punctuation is as a key to the meaning and to the rhythm of the lines.

## Conclusion

Poetic license is the liberty of the poets to abandon usual or conventional rules about grammar, meaning, pronunciation, old form, conventional abbreviations etc in order to achieve special effects; it is a common feature of poetry.