Indubitably the greatest poem in the English Language is Milton's Paradise Lost, but to a modern poetic layman in a secular age when Christian hagiography and classical mythology are little known, it is perhaps also the most difficult poem. Fortunately modern scholarship has provided an edition which can rectify the reader's deficits in Alastair Fowler's edition for the Longman Annotated English Poets. Here the 10,565 lines of the poem are spread out in excellent typography across 606 pages — about 17 lines per page. The rest of each page is packed with detailed notes which allow full appreciation of the breadth and depth of the work. A poem like Paradise Lost, and indeed a poet like Milton, cannot be appreciated in isolation by the study of a single work. One of the most important, scholarly and readable biographies of Milton is that of the Marxist historian, Christopher Hill, whose Milton and the English Revolution provides the perfect antidote to many traditional misconceptions of the role of the poet, whilst avoiding many of the puerile generalisations of which "The Left" is easily capable. Milton is shown to be both more of a realist and less of a puritan than is generally recognised; the antithesis is clearly shown in his libertarian tract on divorce where he could write that "to grind in the mill of an unlighted and servile copulation must be the only forced work of a Christian marriage".

The less leisurely pace of twentieth century life has produced few really long poems. Two of the best, by a poet (and former Lecturer at Bedford College) who seems to be continually under-rated, are Louis MacNeice's Autumn Journal and Autumn Sequel, whose writing spans the Second World War, and reflects the profound change in world view between 1938 and 1953, both in one man and in a whole society. Portions of the poems are reprinted in anthologies, but reading the entire works justifies sufficiently the outlay on the Collected Poems.

As an introduction to more recent poetry, D. J. Enright's Oxford Book of Contemorary Verse. 1945-1980 is clearly a key volume. Enright is also the author of one of the most admired of the recent volumes of poems, A Faust Book, which is a re-telling of the Faust legend with multiple allusions to Goethe and Marlowe, and sidelines swipes at many of our current obsessions, including the much-discussed structuralism.

My most exciting recent acquisition is the Oxford Book of English Verse in Translation, a sensitively chosen birthday present which has opened up vast new vistas. In this book all the translations are of the great poets of other languages by the great poets of the English language. The task of translation is fraught with difficulty — Shelley likened it to putting a violet into a crucible and hoping to distill a thing of equal beauty — a task that has been surveyed with characteristic thoroughness, and equally characteristic heaviness and opacity of prose, by the multilingual George Steiner in his After Babel. The Oxford Anthology, by means of multiple cross-referencing between different versions of the same poem (for instance Chapman, Dryden, Pope and Thomson's versions of a portion of the Iliad) leaving the reader to appreciate the problems and the genius of the solutions. The book also reveals neglected areas of English verse. The translations of Ovid by Christopher Marlowe, and of Theocritus' account of Daphnis and Chloe by Dryden reveal an explicit eroticism which is totally unsuspected in such a dry-looking volume. The poems from the American Indian languages of Navajo, Chippewa and Pawnee reveal some of the briefest of fragments which have finely wrought elegance, as does the poetry of the orient — (in Frances Penimore's translation) of a Japanese "haiku":

"Whenever I pause —
The Noise
Of the village."

Poetry need not only be exhilarating and beautiful, it can also be hateful. The discovery in a second-hand book shop of The Sonnets of Lord Alfred Douglas (the associate of Oscar Wilde) revealed that beneath the veneer of high culture and beautiful artistic form, can lurk overt anti-semitism (in the sonnet sequence In Excelsis, Written in
Wormwood Scrubs Prison, 1924') and explicit Fascism (in The Old Soldier of 1941 and 1942).

Poetry may also be witty, particularly when it is parodying other poets. T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land, probably the single greatest twentieth century poem, used extensive quotation, allusion and parody of earlier poets. In passing, I cannot fail to mention the pleasure to be gained from a close study of Valerie Eliot's relatively recent publication of a facsimile and transcription of the manuscript of this poem. For thus may one appreciate the tremendous influence of Ezra Pound in trimming and editing the poem, tempering Eliot's excesses, and shaping the final work, at a fraction of its original length. Recently a parody of the opening lines of the poem The Burial of the Dead appeared anonymously on a philosophy department noticeboard in Bedford College. Within a day or two it had been removed, the barbs presumably having produced an irritation in the overly sensitive skin of a fellow member of staff. Fortunately I had taken a copy, and the piece seems worth repeating in full, with grateful thanks to the anonymous academic graffitist, whosoever it may be.

The Burial of the Living

These are the cruellest months, breeding
Essays out of dead lands. mixing
Memory and desire, quoting
Dull books with little aim.
Ignorance's huge hand covering
Earth in footnotes, feeding
the small minds of idle lives.
Exams' results will surprise us coming over the
Regentzparkssee
With a shower of pain; we'll faint in the colonnade
While others go with public funds
Smoking dope in the park.
Bin gar keine Frau, Stamm' aus Chelsea (Sieg Heil).
And when we were undergraduates
My tutor. he took me to bed.
And I was frightened. He said
"Mmm . . . mmm. hold on tight, my child . . . " And
down he went.
In college. there you enjoy real life:
We drink most of the night, and
Go to parties and lectures the rest of the time.