What is Poetry?

Poetry, defined as language divided into lines, is found in most known human cultures. This masterful survey of poetry and its constituent components demonstrates the functions performed by metre, rhyme, alliteration and parallelism, arguing that each line of a poem fits as a whole unit into the limited capacity of human working memory. Using examples from around the world, Fabb surveys the wide varieties of poetry and the ways they are performed, including those in songs and signed literatures. Focusing on language, form and memory, he argues, helps us understand why poetry is a particularly valued way of using language. A fresh exploration of poetry, the book will be welcomed by students and researchers of literature, linguistics and psychology, as well as anyone interested in poetry.

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What is Poetry?

Language and Memory in the Poems of the World

Nigel Fabb
For my mum and in memory of my dad
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Note on the text

This book takes texts from diverse sources, which differ in their transcription and spelling conventions. I have sometimes changed symbols to more generally understandable forms, modernized spelling, corrected errors (based on expert advice), transliterated and modernized language names, all without explicitly noting that I have done so. Translations usually come from the source publications, unless otherwise indicated.
Symbols

/    line boundary (end of line)
|    boundary between line-internal sections (feet, hemistichs, etc.)
:    caesura
σ    syllable
σ́    stressed syllable
-    heavy syllable (occasionally also symbolized by H)
-    light syllable (occasionally also symbolized by L)
Σ    stressed heavy syllable
Σ    stressed light syllable
x    syllable, which can be light or heavy (anceps)
μ    mora