1   Literary form

1.1   What is literary form?

A text has literary form if certain statements are true of the text. Consider, for example, the following statements about a text:

> It is a sonnet.
> It is divided into lines.
> The lines are grouped by rhyme into a group of eight lines and a group
>   of six lines.
> It is in iambic pentameter.

These statements are all true of the following text:

> Say over again, and yet once over again,
> That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated
> Should seem 'a cuckoo-song', as thou dost treat it.
> Remember, never to the hill or plain,
> Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain
> Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.
> Belovèd, I, amid the darkness greeted
> By a doubtful spirit-voice in that doubt's pain
> Cry, 'Speak once more – thou lovest!' Who can fear
> Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,
> Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?
> Say thou dost love me, love me, love me – toll
> The silver iterance! – only minding, Dear,
> To love me also in silence with thy soul.

<div style="text-align: right">

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from*
the Portuguese, XXI, 1847–50
(Browning 1889:IV, 55)

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In this book I ask what it means for these statements to be true of this text. More generally, how does literary form hold of a text? I will propose two different but compatible answers, which distinguish the variable from the invariant aspects of literary form. Both answers come from linguistics but from two different kinds of linguistics: generative metrics will explain the invariant aspects of form and linguistic pragmatics will explain the variable aspects of form.

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The fact that there are two fundamentally different kinds of literary form, both of which can hold of a text, is a kind of formal multiplicity. This is just one among many kinds of formal multiplicity which we find wherever we find literary form. In this text another kind of formal multiplicity can be seen in the grouping of lines. The rhyme scheme of ABBAABBA+CDCDCD tells us that the text is grouped as 8+6 but punctuation and meaning tell us that the text is grouped as 6+8. The two divisions are incompatible and yet both hold to some extent of the text; this is possible because both groupings hold as interpretations of the text rather than as observer-independent facts about the text. In this way, literary form is seen to be a kind of meaning, a description of itself which the text communicates to its reader, and has all the complex characteristics associated with meaning: uncertainties, ambiguities and contradictions.

I suggest that we experience the inherent complexities and multiplicities of literary form as aesthetic. In this I follow Shklovsky . . .

The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. (Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', 1917 (Lemon and Reis 1965: 12))

. . . and Gascoigne:

the verse that is to easie is like a tale of a rosted horse (George Gasgoigne (1575:53))

Implied form, explicit form and generated metrical form

One kind of literary form which holds of this poem is 'being a sonnet' or sonnethood. In chapter 3 I show that sonnethood holds of a text with a certain degree of strength; in Browning's poem, sonnethood holds strongly. I propose that sonnethood is a kind of form which holds of a text by implicature; the text implies that it is a sonnet and hence the reader infers that it is a sonnet. This is the only sense in which it is a sonnet: the reader 'holds the text to be a sonnet' and as a result 'sonnethood holds of this text'. This is a kind of *implied form*. I will argue that many kinds of literary form are kinds of implied form. The notion of 'strength' is fundamental to this approach: all thoughts are held with a degree of strength corresponding to the thinker's commitment to their truth; the more strong the thinker's commitment, the more strongly the form holds of the text.

Another kind of form which holds of this text is 'being in lines' or lineation. Instances of this kind of form include 'there are fourteen lines in this text' and 'the first line ends on the word "again"'. These might seem to be facts about the text which exist independently of a reader, but in chapter 5 I will argue that

they are all kinds of implied form which hold only by virtue of being inferred. The closest we can get to an observer-independent fact about the text is 'there are fourteen printed words which have no words to the right of them' and 'the word "again" has no words to the right of it'. Like the thoughts which are of implied form, I suggest that these also hold as thoughts about the text rather than just being determinate facts, but I acknowledge their relatively unmediated status by classifying them as *explicit form*.

'Rhyme' is a kind of form which holds of this poem and specifically the rhyme pattern ABBAABBACDCDCD. Is rhyme a kind of implied form or a kind of explicit form? Rhyme holds between syllables which are alike but need not be identical; here there is a rhyme between 'repeated' and 'treat it' which is based on the similarity between the sound sequence [i t ɪ d] and [i t ɪ t]. The fact that similarity is involved rather than identity means that rhyme has to be judged to be present, which suggests that it is a kind of implied form rather than a kind of explicit form. On the basis of inferring rhyme we can also infer that the poem falls into two groups, an eight-line group followed by a six-line group, each with separate rhyme patterns. The grouping of lines is another kind of implied form, the topic of chapter 6. There I show that even where lines are grouped by layout, grouping is still a kind of implied form, based on the explicit evidence drawn from the page. For all these kinds of implied form, one of the reasons for thinking that they are implied is that they can hold weakly of a text, and kinds of implied form can contradict one another. In this poem, the rhyme implies a division of the text into an eight-line unit and a six-line group, but the organisation of meaning, sentence structure and punctuation does not support this division of the text into parts; indeed, a division into a six-line unit followed by an eight-line unit is supported by these kinds of form. Complexities of this kind are found wherever we find literary form. They arise because literary form is implied. They are, I suggest, one source of aesthetic experience; as Thomas Hardy says, 'dissonances, and other irregularities can be produced advisedly, as art, and worked as to give more charm than strict conformities' (Taylor 1988:63).

Kinds of explicit form are all facts about a particular instance of the text, whether spoken or printed, and the kinds of explicit form vary according to whether the text is spoken or printed. I will refer to particular instances of a text as *performances* of it in any medium; the printed text given earlier is a performance of this text. A text can be realised by any number of different performances but if it is made of language then it also has an underlying linguistic representation. The linguistic representation of the text is the abstract representation of the sounds which comprise it (its phonological structure), the words from which it is made (its lexical structure), and the relations between those words (its syntactic structure). While a text may have any number of performances, it will

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normally have just a single underlying linguistic representation with discrete and determinate characteristics. In some kinds of literary text – most obviously, metrical verse – the underlying linguistic representation of the text seems to be the basis of another kind of literary form, which is the metrical form of the text. Metrical form is built by a set of rules and conditions, based on the underlying form of the text, and it fixes certain aspects of the text, most importantly the number of syllables in the line. In this book I assume generative linguistics (Chomsky 1957, Chomsky and Halle 1968) as a theory of linguistic form, and generative metrics (Halle and Keyser 1971, Halle 2001) as a theory of metrical form. This kind of metrical form of a text is a type of *generated form*; I usually call it the *generated metrical form* of the text, and describe it in the rest of this chapter.

Metricality

Metricality is a complex characteristic, a mixture of explicit, implied and generated form. To examine the explicit and implied metrical forms of a line from the poem, consider a performance in speech of the ninth line.

> Cry, 'Speak once more – thou lovest!' Who can fear

There are many possible ways of saying the line; one way of saying the line can be abstractly represented as a pattern of relatively unstressed syllables marked x, and relatively stressed syllables marked / as follows:

> /   /   x   /   x   / x   / x   /
> Cry, 'Speak once more – thou lovest!' Who can fear

This is an abstract representation of an observable fact of a performance of the text. It is an example of what I call explicit form. Form is inherently abstract and general but this is as close to concrete and unique as form gets, expressing a specific characteristic of a specific instance of the text. The text can be spoken in other ways and when it is, it will have different explicit forms. Explicit form holds of a particular performance of the text, not of the text in the abstract.

   This explicit form resembles a much more abstract and general version of the rhythm of a line, which could be represented like this:

> x / x / x / x / x /

This is a representation of a conventional metre called 'iambic pentameter', where there are ten syllables, with unstressed syllables in odd positions and stressed syllables in even positions. As a kind of form it is not tied to any specific text or performance (unlike the explicit form), but instead it holds as a

kind of ideal or norm, a generalisation over many texts, and one of the things
that we might know if we know about English poetry. The above representation
is a metrical template for iambic pentameter. The explicit rhythm (a) resembles
the metrical template (b); they have the same number of elements and differ in
just one.

(a) / / x / x / x / x / explicit rhythm
(b) x / x / x / x / x / metrical template

We say that the performed line is 'in iambic pentameter' because the explicit
rhythm (a) approximates fairly closely to the metrical template (b). This relation
of resemblance or approximation can be understood as a relation of implication.
The explicit form implies the metrical template by resembling it, and because
the line implies the form, the form therefore holds of the text. Because the
resemblance is not exact, the implicature is correspondingly weak, so that the
rhythm of the line implies fairly strongly but not with full strength that it is
in iambic pentameter. The relation between the explicit rhythm and the metri-
cal template is tendential or approximate, which fits with the fact that iambic
pentameter (as a normative rhythm) holds by being implied.

But there are also some facts about this line which are not tendencies or
approximations but are rigid facts of the matter, true of this line and of every
iambic pentameter line. The two facts are as follows.

Fact A.
A line has ten projected syllables.

Fact B.
A stressed syllable within a polysyllabic word must be projected syllable 2, 4, 6, 8 or
10 or is the first syllable in the line.

In the rest of this chapter I explain what these facts are (e.g. what a 'projected
syllable' is) and show that they are true of Browning's poem. Together they
constitute 'iambic pentameter' as a kind of generated metrical form. Thus the
poem is 'in iambic pentameter' twice, in two different ways; 'iambic pentame-
ter' holds of the text both as a kind of implied form and as a kind of generated
metrical form. This is a kind of formal multiplicity, one of the many kinds of
complexity which are characteristic of literary form, and which arise because
literary form is a matter of the text's psychological reception and not inherent
to the text itself.

1.2   Invariant facts about the iambic pentameter line

Facts A and B are not facts about a performance of the text, and may not hold true
of any specific performance. The first line of Browning's text can be performed

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with ten, eleven or twelve syllables, which goes against fact A. This is because the word 'over' can be pronounced as one or two syllables (I symbolise the one-syllable pronunciation here as 'ov'r'):

Say over again, and yet once over again,	12
Say ov'r again, and yet once over again,	11
Say over again, and yet once ov'r again,	11
Say ov'r again, and yet once ov'r again,	10

Similarly, 'without' is a polysyllabic word, and while its natural stress is on the second syllable, we can pronounce it any way we like so that nothing prevents us pronouncing it with the first syllable given greatest stress:

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 / x x    /    / x   x / x    /
Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain
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If we perform the line like this, then it will have a stressed syllable within a polysyllabic word as its fifth syllable. This goes against fact B. Any text can be performed in a variety of ways, some of which might fit with facts A and B and some of which will not. More generally the fact that there is variation in performance means that if there are fixed facts about iambic pentameter lines, then these must be facts about something other than a performance of the line.

    Performances of texts correspond to underlying abstract linguistic forms. The parts of the utterance, or performance, correspond to representations of sound (its phonological representations), of words (its lexical and morphological representations), and of phrases and sentences (its syntactic representations). Linguistic representations are more abstract than their instantiations as actual bits of speech or writing, and can also be less fully specified. This is true of both syllabification and stress. In an utterance, the word 'over' can be pronounced as one or two syllables, but there is an abstract level of representation for the word (its lexical entry, where the word is stored in memory) where the word always has two syllables. A syllable may be present or absent in performance but it is always present in the lexical entry. This means that for a given line of poetry we can construct a completely stable and invariant representation of the line which has a specific number of syllables; whether these syllables are all pronounced or not is irrelevant (if we see the linguistic representation as prior to performance then the pronunciation 'hasn't happened yet'). Only once we have a stable number of syllables can we begin to say how many syllables there are in the line of text.

    The same applies to stress. Stress is a relational characteristic: rather than being an isolated phonetic fact of the syllable, the stress of a syllable is relative to the syllables which surround it. If we look just at words in isolation, then syllables within a polysyllable will have stress, and one syllable will have

greatest stress. But monosyllables will not have stress at all in isolation, be-
cause there is nothing for the stress to be relative to. It is only once we put
monosyllables into sequence that some are more stressed than others. This dif-
ference between polysyllables and monosyllables means that we can construct
a representation of the sentence in which syllables in polysyllables have stress
but syllables in monosyllables do not. There is a second difference between
polysyllables and monosyllables, which is that how monosyllables are stressed
is to a much greater degree a matter of performance than the stressing of specific
syllables in polysyllables (which tend to be invariant). Here are four different
ways of performing one of the lines from the poem, which illustrates that stress
on monosyllables varies from performance to performance:

```
 /      x  /     / x /   x    /   x   / x
Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.

 /      x  x    / x x   x   /   x   / x
Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.

 /      x  x    / x /   x   /   x   / x
Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.

 x    /  x   /  x /   x   /   x   / x
Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.
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The fact that monosyllables are not fixed in their relative stress has long been
recognised, along with its significance for metrical form. Thus King James VI
of Scotland says of monosyllables that 'the maist pairt of thame are indifferent,
and may be in short or lang place, as ye like' (1584:215). Similarly John Rice
says that '*Accent*, properly speaking, and considered as distinct from *Emphasis*,
hath nothing to do with *Monosyllables*' (1765:89).

   Thus we can only begin to state invariant facts about the iambic pentameter
line if we state them in terms of an abstract linguistic representation of the line,
rather than by reference to any of the actual performances of the line.

1.3   There are ten metrified syllables in the iambic pentameter line

An abstract linguistic representation of all the lines in Browning's poem gives
a count of between ten and twelve syllables in the line. I indicate each syllable
with an x below the line, and put the count in the left-hand margin.

```
        Say over again, and yet once over again,            1
     12    x  x x x x x    x x    x x    x x

        That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated    2
     11    x   x   x   x    x   x     x  x   x x x
```

Should seem 'a cuckoo song', as thou dost treat it.   3
11   x   x   x x x x   x   x   x   x   x

Remember, never to the hill or plain,   4
10   x x   x   x x x   x x x   x

Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain   5
10   x x x   x   x x   x x   x   x

Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.   6
11   x   x x   x x x   x   x   x x

Belovèd, I, amid the darkness greeted   7
11   x x x x x x   x x   x   x x

By a doubtful spirit-voice in that doubt's pain   8
11   x x x   x   x x x   x x   x   x

Cry, 'Speak once more – thou lovest!' Who can fear   9
10   x   x   x   x   x   x x   x x x

Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,   10
11   x   x x x   x   x   x x x   x   x

Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?   11
11   x   x x x x   x   x   x   x   x x

Say thou dost love me, love me, love me – toll   12
10   x   x x x   x x   x x   x   x

The silver iterance! – only minding, Dear,   13
11   x x x x x x   x x   x x   x

To love me also in silence with thy soul.   14
11   x x   x x x x x x   x   x x

In this representation of the lines, the syllables vary in number from ten to
twelve. I will now present a set of rules which when applied are able to transform
this into a metrical representation in which there are exactly ten syllables in
every line. These are the projection and non-projection rules.

    This is the projection rule (the non-projection rules state limited exceptions
to it):

Projection rule
Project a syllable as an asterisk.

This means writing an asterisk beneath each syllable. For line 4, it has the
following result:

Remember, never to the hill or plain,
  *   *   *   * * *   * * *   *

The asterisks are counted. Here there are ten asterisks.

The first non-projection rule (which is sometimes called 'extrametricality') is:

Non-projection rule (a)
Do not project a syllable at the (right-hand) end of the line which is unstressed or weak
in stress and which comes after a strongly stressed syllable.

If we apply this to the poem then lines 2, 3, 6 and 7 will each have their
rightmost syllable not projected and hence not counted, which will bring them
to ten syllables each. Here for example is the metrical representation of line 2.
Syllables which are projected have ∗ beneath them, and syllables which are not
projected are marked for convenience by putting Δ beneath them.

            That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated   2
(a)   10   ∗   ∗   ∗   ∗   ∗   ∗   ∗ ∗   ∗ ∗ Δ

The number of syllables is now 10, indicated in the left margin, where I have
also indicated that non-projection rule (a) has applied to the line.
    We can apply another non-projection rule (which is sometimes called
'synaloepha').

Non-projection rule (b)
Optionally: do not project a syllable which ends on a vowel, when that syllable precedes
a syllable which begins on a vowel.

This rule looks for certain sequences of syllables and whenever it finds such a
sequence it can choose not to project the first syllable. Consider for example
line 8.

            By a doubtful spirit-voice in that doubt's pain   8
   11   x x x   x   x x x   x x   x   x

Here there is a syllable ending in a vowel ('by') which precedes a syllable
beginning in a vowel ('a'). If the rule chooses not to project the first syllable,
this will be the metrical representation, with ten projected syllables.

              By a doubtful spirit-voice in that doubt's pain   8
(b)   10   Δ ∗ ∗   ∗   ∗ ∗ ∗   ∗   ∗   ∗   ∗

If the rule does choose to project the first syllable, this will be the metrical
representation, with eleven projected syllables.

            By a doubtful spirit-voice in that doubt's pain   8
   11   ∗ ∗ ∗   ∗   ∗ ∗ ∗   ∗   ∗   ∗   ∗

I suggest that optional rules like (b) apply where necessary in order to bring the
number of syllables to the right number, here applying to bring the number of
syllables to ten.

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We also need a third rule which applies to syllables based on certain sounds (i.e. sonorants) which they contain:

Non-projection rule (c)
Optionally: do not project a syllable which has as its nucleus one of the following sonorant consonants: [l], [r], [m] or [n], or which has as its nucleus the weak vowel [ə] followed by one of these sounds.

This rule applies in line 1 to 'over' [oʊvər] which has its second syllable twice omitted from the count. It applies in line 10 to 'heaven' [hɛvən] which has its second syllable omitted from the count. It applies in line 11 to 'flowers' [flaʊwəɹz] which has its second syllable omitted from the count. It applies in line 13 to 'iterance' [ɪtəɹəns] which has its second syllable omitted from the count. In all cases, these applications bring the number of syllables to ten. This is the first line:

$$\text{Say over again, and yet once over again,} \quad 1$$
$$\text{c,c} \quad 10 \quad * \; * \; \Delta \; * \; * \quad * \quad * \; * \quad * \; \Delta \quad * \; *$$

Again, the rule applies optionally. In principle it could apply also in line 4, to 'remember' and to 'never'. If it did, it would bring the number of syllables to eight:

$$\text{Remember, never to the hill or plain,} \quad 4$$
$$\text{c,c} \quad 8 \quad * \; * \quad \Delta \quad * \; \Delta \; * \; * \; * \; * \quad *$$

This shows that the non-projection rule must be allowed to apply optionally. In line 4 we do not want it to apply; if it fails to apply there will be the required ten syllables.

We now have three rules, of which (b) and (c) apply optionally. These rules can be applied to the text to derive the following metrical representation of the text in which all lines have ten syllables. The left-hand margin indicates which rule has applied.

$$\text{Say over again, and yet once over again,} \quad 1$$
$$\text{c,c} \quad 10 \quad * \; * \; \Delta \; * \; * \quad * \quad * \; * \quad * \; \Delta \quad * \; *$$

$$\text{That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated} \quad 2$$
$$\text{a} \quad 10 \quad * \; * \; * \; * \quad * \quad * \quad * \; * \quad * \; * \; \Delta$$

$$\text{Should seem 'a cuckoo song', as thou dost treat it.} \quad 3$$
$$\text{a} \quad 10 \quad * \quad * \quad * \; * \; * \; * \quad * \; * \quad * \quad \Delta$$

$$\text{Remember, never to the hill or plain,} \quad 4$$
$$10 \quad * \; * \; * \quad * \; * \; * \quad * \; * \; * \quad *$$

$$\text{Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain} \quad 5$$
$$10 \quad * \; * \; * \quad * \quad * \; * \quad * \; * \quad *$$