1 Poetry

This chapter exemplifies the distinctive formal properties of poetry, which I define in purely formal terms. I suggest that a poem can be defined as a text divided into sections (such as lines), which are not determined by linguistic structure. I will conclude the book by suggesting that these sections are held as whole units in working memory.

The realms of gold

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been,
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies,
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific – and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise –
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

'On first looking into Chapman's Homer', John Keats

This is recognizable as a poem because it has formal characteristics not found in ordinary language. For example, it is divided into lines. The lines loosely resemble the constituents of ordinary language, including syntactic constituents such as sentences, and sections of speech that form prosodic constituents. But these lines have properties not found in the constituents of ordinary language: the lines are metrical, and every line ends on a word that rhymes. The fact that these lines are in a metre, called iambic pentameter, means that each line has ten syllables and a fairly regular rhythm in which the second, fourth, sixth, eighth and tenth syllables tend to be stressed. The lines can be grouped into larger sections, which are also not like the sections of ordinary language. The rhyme

scheme implies that the first eight lines form a section rhyming ABBAABBA, and the last six lines another section rhyming CDCDCD.

In its first year of publication (1988), the Italian journal *Poesia* began each issue by publishing a different response to the question, *Che cos'è la poesia*? ('What is poetry?'). This is a question that, in the absence of a context, has no right answer. In this book, I make it a question that can be asked about any of the literatures of the world, whether written, spoken and sung, or signed. At this level of generality, it proves impossible to answer the question by saying that poetry is always more valued than prose, or that it expresses distinctive kinds of meanings or performs distinctive functions. Nor can poetry be defined in terms of performance; it is externalized in many different ways, but some of its basic features are independent of how it is externalized. Instead, my answer involves just language, form and memory. Keats's text is a poem because it is divided into lines, which are not the same as ordinary linguistic constituents. It has two kinds of added form, neither found in ordinary language, which are metre and rhyme. This book asks why these and similar forms are found in all the poetries of the world, and can be found as deep into the past as records allow. In answering this question, I will propose a key role for the type of human memory called working memory, which can hold the equivalent of about fifteen English words (Baddeley 2012: 16). The lines of poetry are always small enough to fit into working memory; indeed, most couplets are also short enough to fit as well, though longer sections such as four-line stanzas will usually not fit. I will suggest that added forms such as metre and rhyme are processed for each line at the moment when the line is held as a whole sequence of words in working memory.

Keats wrote his sonnet immediately after first encountering George Chapman's English translation of Homer, which had been published two hundred years earlier. Here are the first nine lines of Chapman's translation of Homer's *Odyssey*:

> The man (O Muse) inform, that many a way,
> Wound with his wisdom to his wished stay.
> That wandered wondrous far, when, he, the town
> Of sacred Troy, had sacked, and shivered down.
> The cities of a world of natiöns,
> With all their manners, minds, and fashiöns,
> He saw and knew. At sea felt many woes;
> Much care sustained, to save from overthrows
> Himself, and friends, in their retreat for home.
>
> Homer's *Odyssey*, translated by George Chapman (1616)

As in Keats's poem, the lines are metrical. Most of the lines are in the same meter as Keats's poem, iambic pentameter (ten syllable lines). As in Keats's

poem, each line ends on a word that rhymes with another word, but this time the rhymes are in adjacent lines, in couplets. There are two layers of section in this extract: the line and the couplet.

One of the noticeable features of the beginning of Chapman's translation is its alliterations, which are patterns of syllable-initial consonants. Thus the first line alliterates 'man', 'muse' and 'many'. The second line alliterates 'wound', 'with', 'wisdom' and 'wished' in a pattern that is then continued in the third line. The fourth line alliterates 'sacred' and 'sacked'. However, though alliteration is found here, and relates to the line as a unit of structure, it is not consistent throughout the poem, and indeed is not a systematic characteristic of any modern English poetic tradition. This makes it a decorative use of alliteration of the kind found sometimes in prose, and not the kind of strict added form seen in this poem's metre and rhyme.

To illustrate systematic alliteration as a strict added form, we can look to Icelandic poetry in which systematic alliteration has always been fundamental. In a thirteenth century mention of Odysseus (called Ulixes), Snorri Sturluson in his *Gylfaginning* suggested that Odysseus was the real-life source of the invented Norse god Loki. Around a hundred years ago, the Icelandic poet Jóhann Sigurjónsson wrote a poem about Odysseus, of which this is a stanza:

Svikult er seiðblátt hafið
og siglingin afarlöng.
Einn hlustar Ódysseifur
á óminnisgyðjunnar söng.

The blue sea is treacherous
the sailing is very long.
Odysseus listens by himself
to the song of the goddess of forgetting.

From 'Ódysseifur hinn nýi' by Jóhann Sigurjónsson, translated by Ragnar Ingi Aðalsteinsson (1980: 96)

The poem is metrical; there are seven syllables and three stressed syllables in each line. The second and fourth lines rhyme. The particular relevance of this text is its pattern of alliteration. The first line in each couplet has two alliterating words and the second line has one, all on stressed syllables. In the first couplet, alliteration is on [s], and in the second couplet, alliteration is on the vowels [e], [o] and [o] (any vowel is allowed to alliterate with any other). Alliteration is fully regular here, and it is located relative both to the line and to the couplet. This text shows also that sometimes the strict added forms of poetry depend on two distinct layers of section. When it is systematic, alliteration always depends on a relatively small section of the poetic text – here, a couplet of short lines, making it similar in this way to systematic rhyme and metre.

Keats's poem is about Chapman's English translation of Homer's Greek text of the *Odyssey*, which was composed over two thousand years earlier. It begins with these lines:

> Andra moi ennepe, mousa, polutropon, hos mala polla
> plagchthee, epei Troiees hieron ptoliethron epersen.
>
> *Sing me the man, O Muse, of many turns, who wandered much indeed,*
> *once he had sacked the holy city of Troy.*
> *Odyssey* Book 1, lines 1–2, Homer (transliterated from Greek script)

Homer's poem is divided into metrical lines, like the English lines of Keats and Chapman. The *Odyssey* was probably composed orally, which means that unlike the poems by Keats or Chapman, it would not have originally been written as lines on a page. Why then, if it exists only in speech, do we say that it is in lines? The answer is that being in lines is a formal characteristic of a text, and is not dependent on any of the linguistic modalities of speech, writing or gesture. This text is 'in lines' if lines are presupposed by the forms which hold of the text, irrespective of how the text is expressed. Homer's text, even if it originally existed only in speech and memory, has a metrical form that presupposes its division into lines.

The metre is dactylic hexameter, which organizes the syllables of each line into six groups called 'feet', based on whether syllables are classified as heavy or light. Light syllables contain a short vowel, and heavy syllables contain a long vowel, or a vowel followed by two consonants; syllables at the end of the line are always counted as heavy. A foot either consists of three syllables with a heavy–light–light pattern, or the foot consists of two syllables with a heavy–heavy pattern, as shown here. Under the lines, the light syllables are indicated with curves called breves; the heavy syllables by dashes called macrons; and the bars show the foot boundaries. This is the rhythm of the lines.

```
 Andra  moi  ennepe, mousa,    polutropon, hos   mala polla
|-    ˘    ˘  |-   ˘ ˘|   -   ˘ :    ˘|-   ˘ ˘|    -      ˘ ˘| -   -|
 plagchthee, epei  Troiees  hieron    ptoliethron epersen:
| -      ˘      ˘|-    -|-   :  ˘˘|-        ˘ ˘|-   ˘   ˘| -   -|
```

This is a metre that loosely controls the length of the line (which varies between thirteen and seventeen syllables) and the rhythm. Length and rhythm are both based on the line, which must therefore exist as a distinct section of text. Further, though the rhythm of the first part of the line can vary, almost all the lines in the poem end on a heavy–light–light–heavy–heavy sequence, which is called a 'cadence'. There is another regularity inside each line, indicated by the colon mark in the example above. The colon indicates where there is a 'caesura', which is a rule that a word must end at this point. In every line of the *Odyssey*, a word must end either just before or just after the middle of the line.

Though our poems differ in form, what they all have in common is that they are divided into sections not determined by linguistic constituent structure: these sections are lines. The lines do not consistently correspond to sentences, though often a sentence ends at the end of a line; that is, the sentence boundary coincides with the line boundary. This independence of the line from linguistic form is important. The line is not a linguistic form; instead, the line is a non-linguistic way of manipulating language.

The four texts are all metrical, and this means that they have a kind of form that presupposes the line. In addition, in the two English poems, the rhyming word is always located at the end of a line, so this rule is also sensitive to the line as a form. In the Icelandic poem, rhyme is located specifically at the end of the couplet (not the individual line) and alliteration is also defined in terms of the couplet. Metre, rhyme and alliteration are types of 'added form', forms which are 'added' to poetry, in the sense that they are not found in ordinary language. The added forms prove the existence of the line (or other small section) as a unit of text, irrespective of how the text is laid out on the page or performed. Lineation and the added forms are in this sense modality-independent.

However, the modality – whether writing, speech, song or sign – can be exploited to indicate where the line boundaries fall. The Keats, Chapman and Sigurjónsson poems were composed and presented on the page as in lines. When they are performed aloud, the speaker can mark out the lineation in some way specific to speech – for example, by pausing, lengthening a final syllable or changing the pitch contour of the voice. Perhaps the original performers of the *Odyssey*, when it was a text that existed only in speech and memory, marked the end of the line in this way, too, by pausing. In some traditions, these markers are used fairly systematically as a way of demonstrating line boundaries. But it is also possible for performance to break up the text in ways that do not respect line boundaries. Few performers of the Keats poem are likely to pause at the boundaries of the final lines, where the punctuation implies a different pausing. So performance need not be determined by the basic forms of poetry.

We have seen three types of added form: metre, rhyme and alliteration. The final major type of added form is parallelism. Parallelism can be very systematic – for example, where every line is parallel to an adjacent line – but it can also be intermittent while still referring to the line. Our next poem has intermittent parallelism, which nevertheless depends on lineation.

Keats's poem ended by referring to the Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortés, who in the sixteenth century sought his own realm of gold in Central America. Keats puts Cortés on a peak in Darién, now a part of Panama. Darién was and is part of the home of the Kuna, who are now one of the largest indigenous groups in the South American tropics. Some of the oral poetry of the Kuna has been gathered in Sherzer (2003), and can be heard on the website

for the Archive for the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA). In one of the Kuna oral myths, a prophet is taken on a visit to the afterworld, which begins in another realm of gold, a level of the afterworld into which things are swept from the streets by women in our world and in which those sweepings come to life. Part of the orally narrated myth is presented below, first in English translation and then the transcribed (originally spoken) Kuna text. The text is co-performed, with a main speaker and a respondent.

1.

Thus truly 'well one level down [I] descended then' see I utter.
(RESPONSE:) So it is.

2.

Thus '"This is the level of the golden sweepings then."
The man said to me' I utter.
(RESPONSE:) So it is.

3.

'And Father placed the sweepings' mother here then.
Father placed the sweepings' father here.
(response:) So it is.

4.

At the level of the golden sweepings then' it is said.
'The sweepings people come to life' I utter.
(response:) So it is.

5.

'In the place of the golden sweepings Father created a place of many golden flags then Father
Created a place of many golden bells.
(response:) So it is.

6.

The golden streets of the place of the golden sweepings shine brilliantly then they are all like gold' I utter.
(response:) So it is.

1.

al inso sunna 'teki pillikwense aytettee' takku l ipitikuyen oparye.
(response:) tekii.

2.

al inso '"weti oloturwakkapillitee."
tule l anka sokeen' oparye.
(response:) tekii.

3.

‘papati weki turwa nana mesistee.
papa weki turwa papa mesisyee.
(response:) tekii.

4.

oloturwakkapillisetee’ soke.
‘turwatulekana turkupukkwayeen’ oparye.
(response:) tekii.

5.

‘oloturwakkaki papa olopanter pukkipnekatee papa.
olokappan pukkipnekkuyee.
(response:) tekii.

6.

oloturwakka olonekinpa tarmakkemaite l olopikuyen’ oparyee.
(response:) tekii.

‘Myth of the white prophet’, beginning of the first episode; chanted by the chief Olowitinappi on 9 April 1970 (Sherzer 1990: 54)

This orally performed text is divided into sections that are not determined by syntactic or prosodic structure. This means that it is poetry, even though the Kuna would not describe it as such because they have no specific word for poetry. Nevertheless, Sherzer (1990: 25) notes that the performers must conceive of the texts as in lines because they teach them to others line by line. Sherzer’s transcription makes it clear that the text is poetry by writing out the text in distinct sections on the page, forming lines and groups of lines which he calls verses. (Here, there are six verses, comprised of one to three lines, each verse followed by a response from another speaker.) Sherzer (1987: 103) describes the line in this poetry as ‘a unit independent of and yet related to conventionally recognized grammatical units such as phonemes, morphemes and sentences’, a definition on which I partially based my own definition.

A poem can be divided into sections without having any added forms. For example, free verse is poetry that has no added forms. Kuna poems do not have fully systematic added forms like the metre and rhyme of the poems discussed earlier, but they do tend to have parallelism as a somewhat intermittent added form. (Parallelism is very systematic in some other poetries, as we will see in Chapter 6.) Inspection of the Kuna text reveals that there are parallel terms that are sometimes in adjacent lines and sometimes more widely separated, as is reflected in the repetitive language of the translation. The third verse is the clearest example of parallelism, where the two lines are identical except for the replacement of ‘mother’ with ‘father’. These lines illustrate parallelism, which is a kind of form found in many poetries, and when it is, it is a form which is dependent, as here, on the line. The strict dependency on the line makes this an added form.

There are other distinctive forms in the performance of this text. One type of form is a word or phrase added at the beginning or end of a section. The first line within a verse may end with a phrase meaning 'see–say–listen'. Some words or phrases begin a verse, such as *al inso sunna* 'thus in truth' (verse 1), *al inso* 'thus' (verse 2), and there are verse-final terms such as *oparye* 'utter' (ends of verses 2 and 4). The first line of a verse often ends in the suffix *-te*, and *soke* is also a characteristic line-final word. Additional words of this kind do not contribute to the basic meanings (propositions) expressed by the text. I suggest that rather than treating these as added forms that are dependent on the line (like parallelism, metre, rhyme or alliteration), we see them as ways of indicating where line and other section boundaries fall; they are signals to the hearer. Kuna poetry also has distinctive ways of being spoken, with patterns of stress, placement of pauses, variations in loudness and softness, and variations in high and low pitch. These distinctive spoken forms can be sensitive to the division into lines and verses. Each line has a distinctive intonation pattern, getting lower in pitch, quieter and slower, and ending with a lengthened final vowel followed by a pause. The pause after a verse may be longer than after a line. In some genres, the performer may add a cough-like noise at the end of the verse. Interaction with other speakers can also draw upon the division of the text into sections; in the text quoted above, the second chief responds *tekii* after each verse. I suggest that these are all signals to the hearer of the structuring of the text into lines and verses.

The markers of formal boundaries need not be deployed strictly, relative to specific sections. This is one of the reasons for thinking that they are not added forms, which are strictly attached to the line or other section of text. This means that the markers of formal boundaries can be deployed to produce complex effects of sectioning. For example, the intonation and pausing suggest that the first verse consists of one line only, but in some ways it resembles a two-line verse because it has a lengthened vowel and the word *takku* midway through the sequence, both of which normally appear at the end of a line, thus suggesting that the sequence is divided into two lines. This is one of the ways in which complexity and variety is created in the poem. Another involves putting words into the mouths of other speakers, which is common in lowland South American narrative (Sherzer 1990: 39). Here, variety is produced by breaking up the attributed material by the division into lines and verses, as can be seen from the translation.

Five poems and their forms

In the first part of this chapter, I looked at five poems. All of them were divided into lines, and some also into larger sections. They all had added forms that depended on the division into lines. This was clearest for metre, which is defined over the sequence of syllables from beginning to end of the line, and

which fixes the number of syllables while often also controlling or partially controlling their rhythm. We saw two poems which rhymed, and in which rhyme was always at the end of the line. In some traditions, added forms refer to a level above the line, forming a section that is still relatively short. We see this in the Icelandic poem. While the metre refers to the line, rhyme is located relative to the couplet (it is couplet-final), and alliteration is also located relative to the couplet.

We have seen systematic examples of metre, rhyme and alliteration, and we also saw a small example of parallelism in part of the Kuna text, where two adjacent lines were parallel. In this way, we have seen the four basic kinds of added form, which are discussed in Chapters 4 (metre), 5 (rhyme and alliteration) and 6 (parallelism). We also saw that lines and other sections have other properties, including words added at their boundaries, and distinctive ways of being spoken or laid out on the page.

Texts with metre, rhyme, alliteration and parallelism are found in all the world's literatures. I will show that the sections – usually lines, sometimes couplets – over which the added forms are defined are always relatively short. More precisely, they are short enough to fit as wholes into the limited capacity of working memory, which can hold the equivalent of about fifteen words of connected English prose. I conclude the book by discussing working memory and adding some further thoughts about the psychology of poetry.

What is poetry?

I propose the following definition of a poem, which defines poetry by its difference from ordinary language:

> A poem is a text made of language, divided into sections that are not determined by syntactic or prosodic structure.

The sections are lines, couplets, stanzas and so on. The definition does not distinguish between poems that are written, spoken or sung, or in sign language. I make no requirement that the sections be overtly perceivable, and I make the big assumption that a hearer may unconsciously divide the text into sections, just as she can unconsciously form linguistic constituents from the text.

In many poetic traditions, the division into sections enables added forms to be attached to these sections, which include metre, rhyme, alliteration and parallelism. Metre can only be defined in terms of sections such as lines, while rhyme, alliteration and parallelism can only be systematically organized in a text if the text is divided into regular sections such as lines. When a poem is sung, the division of the text into lines can be determined by the need to set the text to music, as has, for example, been demonstrated in much work on Australian aboriginal songs (Strehlow 1971; Hale 1984). These songs are still

poetry by my definition, if the lines are not determined by syntactic structure or the prosodic structure of ordinary speech.

A poem is a text divided into a sequence of sections, but so is spoken, written or signed prose. Prose is divided into sections by punctuation, or by how the prose is spoken or (in a sign language) gestured. Unlike poetry, prose is divided into sections determined by syntactic or prosodic structure, usually with the purpose of communicating meaning. My definition of poetry is complemented by the following definition of prose, which includes all texts that are not poetry:

Prose is text made of language that is divided into sections on the basis of syntactic or prosodic structure.

The lines of poetry may coincide with sentences or prosodic phrases of ordinary speech, but they are never determined by them; instead, lines are an autonomous division of the text.

Definitions and categorizations have many functions, and which definition one uses depends on context and goals. In this book, I distinguish between what I call 'poetry' and what I call 'prose' on the basis of purely formal features, and in part because I suggest the distinction is psychologically realistic. I propose that the non-linguistic sections into which poems are divided are held as whole sequences of words in working memory. This need not be true of the linguistic sections into which prose is divided. The terms 'poetry' and 'prose' here need not sort texts in the same way as under other possible definitions.

A text can be a poem but be laid out as written prose. Division into sections is a fact about the text, independent of modality, and which need not be indicated on the page or in speech.

The poetries I have chosen to discuss in this book all have added forms, such as metre, rhyme, alliteration or parallelism, but it is possible for a text to fit the definition of poetry while having none of these added forms. Poetry of this kind is often called free verse (Hartman 1980; Holden 1988). In some free verse, the lineation is a division of the text into sections not determined by the syntax or the prosody of ordinary speech. Instead, the lineation may be arbitrary, or it may be influenced by other factors, and this makes such free verse 'poetry' by my definition. Here, for example, is a stanza from a poem that is partially in free verse, by Robert Louis Stevenson:

As the steady lenses circle	1
With a frosty gleam of glass;	2
And the clear bell chimes,	3
And the oil brims over the lip of the burner,	4
Quiet and still at his desk,	5
The lonely Light-Keeper	6
Holds his vigil;	7

From 'The Light-Keeper' by Robert Louis Stevenson