CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This book is intended for readers who care about poetry, or who need to study it in university courses, but who know little about linguistics, and would like to know what, if anything, linguistics has to say about it. I hope the book also appeals to linguists who have paid little attention to poetry, but it is the first group that I have kept in mind. It arose out of lecture notes and class handouts for a course that drew mainly students of literature but also a few students of linguistics, as I was unable to find a textbook that covered even half the topics I wanted to deal with. Not surprisingly, it was the literature students who had the steeper learning curve, at least at first. Nonetheless, I will begin by talking about what poetry is, not what linguistics is. As it turned out, neither group of students found poetry easy to define.

What is poetry? What is a poem? To find agreement on brief and useful definitions of these words today, and of their kindred words "poet," "poetic," and the old-fashioned "poesy," is a difficult task, and maybe impossible, because these terms have been applied to widely different kinds of writing or oral speech in recent years, and even to things that are not composed of words at all; they have been applied by those who make such things, by publishers who put labels on them, and by consumers who read, hear, or contemplate them. If someone calls something a poem these days, it's a poem.

It's not just these days: the confusions and ambiguities are not new. People have been casually tossing these terms around for centuries, as well as the equivalent terms in other languages. "Poem," "poetry," and their kin were sometimes applied to prose, the kind of writing usually thought to be their opposite, as early as the sixteenth century, and to the other arts since at least the nineteenth – earlier than that in French – mainly as honorific terms, used to praise a work of whatever kind. John Denham in 1662, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) tells us, spoke of "Poems in prose," two centuries before Baudelaire's influential example of *Petits poèmes en prose*

(1869). John Dryden in 1664 described dancing as "the Poetry of the Foot" (*Rival Ladies* 3.1.32), perhaps punning on "foot" as the unit of meter. The French writer Denis Diderot in the eighteenth century called certain paintings "poétique." The English painter John Constable wrote that an artist's purpose is "to make something out of nothing, in attempting which he must almost of necessity become poetical."[1] A German critic in 1804 called Beethoven's *Eroica* a "symphony-poem" (*Simphonie-Dichtung*).[2] Franz Liszt in the mid nineteenth century composed twelve "symphonic poems." And so it went: by the nineteenth century, it seemed almost any work of art could in all seriousness be called a poem.

Even when they confined "poem" and "poetry" to things made of words, some of the Romantics – and it was the Romantics who particularly went in for this – extended the terms to refer to language itself, at least in its creative or generative aspect. Language, A. W. Schlegel wrote, is "the most miraculous creation of the human poetic power," the "great, never accomplished poem in which human nature represents itself."[3] In his essay "The Poet," Emerson wrote: "Every word was once a poem" and "Language is fossil poetry." These writers might say that this book's subject, poetry and language, is redundant, for to study one is to study the other.

Sometimes Romantic writers used the words to refer to something as basic as the creative power residing not only in human beings but in all living things, even in all of nature. The German philosopher Friedrich Schelling used "Poesie" this way. His friend Friedrich Schlegel wrote about "the unconscious poetry" that "moves in the plant, that streams forth in light, that laughs out in the child, that shimmers in the bud of youth, that glows in the loving breasts of women."[4] Wordsworth, describing the growth of a baby's creative power, concludes, "Such, verily, is the first / Poetic spirit of our human life" (1805 *Prelude* 2.260–61).

Such expansive applications as these, evocative though they are, take us well beyond the scope of this book, which must keep in mind a more down-to-earth concept of poetry if it is to be useful to those who want to understand how "poetry," as we usually understand it, works. That so many poets, artists, composers, and philosophers have given such grand definitions of it nonetheless testifies to the prestige of poetry in this narrower sense, and to the charm or rapture it has induced in its audience for as far back as we have record. Later, as we look at the sometimes technical details of sound-effects, meter, syntax, and figurative language, we should remember this strange power that poetry seems to have – or once had – in all cultures.

Figure 1.1 The six factors of a speech event

Can linguistics help us define poetry? One of the most influential linguists of the twentieth century, Roman Jakobson, made a famous attempt at it.[5] He identified six "constitutive factors in any speech event, in any act of verbal communication," and arranged them in a simple diagram (see Figure 1.1).

"The ADDRESSER," he writes, "sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to," which might also be called the "referent"; "a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee"; and "a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee."

Each of these factors defines a different "function" of language, and in different kinds of communicative acts one or another function will be dominant. An emphasis on the context is the REFERENTIAL function, "the leading task of numerous messages"; it is perhaps the normative or default function of language and the main purpose of communication, but the other functions are tacitly in play. The EMOTIVE or "expressive" function focuses on the addresser; at its simplest it might be embodied in just an interjection that expresses his or her feelings. The function that Jakobson obscurely calls the CONATIVE (from a Latin verb meaning "endeavor" or "strive") focuses on the addressee, and might consist of imperatives ("Drink!") or other modes of direct address. The function that focuses on the contact is the PHATIC (from Greek *phatis*, meaning "speech" or "saying"); it consists of speech-acts that try to keep the channel open, or reassure the addresser, as when we say "uh-huh" periodically to let the speaker know we are still listening, or when we exchange remarks about the weather with someone we meet on the street. Small talk and gossip are mainly phatic. The METALINGUAL function deals with the code, the language the message is in, as when we say "I don't understand that" or ask what a word means. Finally, when we focus on the message for its own sake, and not for what it tells us about the world, the speaker, or the hearer, we activate the POETIC function.

When the message is foregrounded in this way, the other functions of a speech-act are suspended, and such features as its sound patterns, balance of clauses, and figurative language emerge as objects of interest in their own right. To restate and elaborate on Jakobson's brief account, we might say that, by a kind of psychic withdrawal or distancing, we can take any utterance or text as a thing in itself and contemplate it apart from the information it conveys, its demands on us, and however else it is embedded in the "real" world. Coleridge came near to describing this attitude with his famous phrase "the willing suspension of disbelief," for in this mode we are not concerned with the truth of a statement or with its practical bearing. But there is more to it than that. Under this suspension, texts seem to "thicken" or grow opaque; they are no longer transparent windows onto the world or the intentions of the speaker. There was once, allegedly, a notice posted in railroad passenger cars that read: "Passengers will please refrain from flushing toilets while the train is standing in the station." With its rhymed trochaic tetrameter opening and its alliteration throughout, the sign delighted many passengers, and soon it was set to Dvořák's seventh *Humoresque* and performed on stage.[6] In a similar spirit, W. K. Wimsatt has written, "Of a garden image . . . we ask: What is it? Of a road sign giving the name of a town, we ask: What does it tell us? A poem is a road sign which through the complexity and fullness of its told message approximates the status of the garden image."[7] Texts that we call "literary," then, would be those which lend themselves best to this distancing process; they are meant to be withdrawn from the real world and experienced aesthetically.

Jakobson admits that the "poetic" function, despite its name, is too broad to distinguish poetry from other kinds of literary texts, and even from non-literary texts such as railroad signs that afford a "poetic" perspective, so he adds another clause, baffling at first sight: "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination." A statement like this, so unpoetic itself, is enough to drive poetry readers to the exits, but it can be unpacked fairly readily. The "axis of combination," which we might take as horizontal, is the chain or string of words in a sentence or phrase, one after the other, and ordered by the combinatory rules of syntax. So "the young child is sleeping" combines a singular noun phrase ("the young child") with a singular verb phrase ("is sleeping"); the verb phrase must agree with the noun phrase in number (singular here), so it is "is sleeping" and not "are sleeping." Within the noun phrase, the definite article must precede the adjective, and they must both precede the noun. These are a few of the

English syntactic (or grammatical) rules that combine words into phrases, clauses, and sentences.

The "axis of selection," which we might imagine as vertical, is the way into the storehouse of "equivalences" for each word. The speaker might have chosen "kid" for "child," for example, and "is napping" for "is sleeping." (When we take up metaphor later in this book we will return to these two axes.) The "principle of equivalence," I think, means the *concept* or *category* of equivalence, and to "project" it from the vertical selective axis into the horizontal combinatory axis is to organize the chain of words in an utterance into equivalent units of some kind. The examples Jakobson gives for this projection all have to do with sounds, however, not words and their meanings; it is hard to imagine what a string of equivalent words would be like – perhaps a list of nouns or adjectives from the same semantic realm – but in any case it would not resemble a poem, or any sentence. So he discusses sound patterns, and we are back to familiar ground: "In poetry one syllable is equalized with any other syllable of the same sequence; word stress is assumed to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress; prosodic long is matched with long, and short with short," and so on. ("Prosodic" here, as we will see in the next chapter, refers to metrical patterns.) In fact, Jakobson is defining *verse*, which is based on a binary pattern of stresses or lengths or some other salient sound-feature; these features recur or repeat in regular patterns we call meters. Elsewhere, he includes other patterns of sound-equivalences, such as rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and consonance as characteristic of the poetic.

We should add that Jakobson's "poetic function," and Wimsatt's road sign taken as a garden image, are products of modern cultural practices that seem not to have been shared, or fully shared, by earlier cultures, even in the west. While there is evidence that the Greeks felt the "charm" or "enchantment" of Homer, they also took his epics seriously as history and as compendia of useful knowledge. Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Virgil's *Georgics* are versified advice on farming and beekeeping, while Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* explains Epicurean physics in dactylic hexameters. It is not obvious that the poetic function was dominant in the minds of those who first heard or read these didactic works; their referential function may have been uppermost. Today, we (or those of us with the leisure) are used to taking a detached stance toward poetry, like the attitude we assume when we enter an art gallery or concert hall, but that is a habit people have widely cultivated only in recent centuries.

The other problem with Jakobson's formula is that, while it defines metrical verse in an interesting way, it does not include everything that has

been called poetry, such as so-called "free verse," at least when it abandons meter.

There may be no formula or brief definition that can capture our intuition into what poetry is. Nothing else, at any rate, has come forth from theoretical linguistics, as far as I know. The best they can do is to define "verse." So we might turn to another branch of linguistics for help.

Throughout the nineteenth century, most serious linguistic research was historical: dedicated mainly to reconstructing the ancestor of most of the languages of Europe and India, and secondarily to the ancestors of other families such as Semitic. Various laws of sound-change were derived from regular patterns, such as Grimm's Law, which describes a regular correspondence between certain consonants in the Germanic languages (German, English, Danish, and so on) and others in the larger family. The sound [p] in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, and Slavic, for example, corresponds to [f] in Germanic: Greek *pous*, Latin *pes*, Sanskrit *pada*, Russian *pod*, as opposed to English *foot*, German *fuß* (= *fuss*), Danish *fot*. More and more laws were discovered and now, nearly two centuries later, the development of the Indo-European family into its many branches is pretty well understood, and the ancestor, spoken about 5,000 years ago, has been reconstructed in rich detail – entirely by inference, since its speakers had no writing.

When a word is hard to define, as "poem" is, it is worth the effort to find out its etymology, and make use of the labors of the historical linguists. The etymology of a word is the history of its form or sound, which changes gradually over the centuries, and the history of its meaning, which may also change, sometimes abruptly. "Etymology" itself, of course, has an etymology. It was taken into English from French during the Middle Ages, and perhaps at the same time from Latin *etymologia*, which in turn was taken unchanged from Greek ἐτυμολογία, which is an abstract compound of ἔτυμος (*etymos*), which meant "true" – and, in particular, the "true" or "literal" sense of a word according to its origin – and of λόγος (*logos*), which meant "word" or "speech." The assumption among ancient Greek scholars who studied their own language was that the "original" meaning of a word is the true one, and later deviations from it are false or errant. Some major thinkers have held this belief even in recent years, such as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who traced everything back to the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, but linguists do not. Linguists maintain that, while we may deplore a change in a meaning of a word (such as "awesome," which until about 1980 meant "awe-inspiring" but now means "good"), the new

meaning is not less "true" than the old. There is no such thing, too, as an "original" meaning of a word, only its first attested (or recorded) meaning, or, farther back, an unattested one that we can infer from its various descendants. As we trace "poem" and its family back to Greek and even earlier, then, we will not claim that the earliest meanings are truer or better than the later ones. But they are interesting to know about, and they might help us understand what the word has come to mean in English.

"Poet," "poem," "poetry," "poetic," and "poesy" (or "poesie") all passed from Greek through Latin and then through Old French into English, though English writers sometimes absorbed the forms directly from Greek. The Greek words were based on the root *poi-*, which meant "make": a ποίημα (*poiēma*) or πόημα (*poēma*) is "something made" or a "made thing," and a *poiētēs* or *poētēs* is a "maker." The root *poi-* comes from the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root **kwoi-*, the o-variant of the root **kwei-*, which meant "pile up, build up, make." A poem is a made thing, then, made by a maker: not a very exciting etymology, and not very specific, but there you are.

We had better stop here for a moment. "Proto-Indo-European" is the name given by English-speaking linguists (German linguists call it *Indogermanisch*, of course) to the ancestral language we have been speaking of, with descendants from Ireland in the west to northern India in the east and, since the age of discovery, also in the Americas, Australia, the Philippines, Oceania, and many other places. There is some dispute as to where to locate the homeland of the Proto-Indo-Europeans, which may have been unstable, as we think the people who spoke it were semi-nomadic pastoralists, but most historical linguists and archeologists place them somewhere north of the Black Sea and east toward the Caspian. They were illiterate: there are no written texts of this language. Besides Greek, Latin, Sanskrit (in India), Slavic, and Germanic, the daughter subfamilies include Celtic (Irish, Welsh), Baltic (Lithuanian, Latvian), Armenian, and several extinct groups, such as Anatolian (which probably included the language spoken by Homer's Trojans). These all go back to this language, once spoken by perhaps a few thousand people. Some clans that spoke it moved away at various times from about 5000 to 2000 BCE, so the time-depth of the reconstructed language is quite long, but we know a great deal about it. We even have some idea of what PIE poetry was like. Sometime around 3000 BCE, these people seem to have mastered horseback riding, and figured out how to attach a workable chariot to horses; soon they invaded Europe, Iran, and India, and prevailed virtually

everywhere they went. Or at least their language prevailed: in western Europe, for example, only Basque remains of the old languages spoken before the invasions.

Proto-Indo-European, then, refers to this hypothetical language, and when they cite a word or root from this language linguists put an asterisk in front of it to indicate that it is indeed hypothetical. They say the Greek root *poi-* descends from PIE root **kwoi-*. How do they know this? And what happened to the kw- sound to yield p- in Greek 2 or 3,000 years later? We mentioned Grimm's Law. All the "laws" are assumed to be exceptionless: an apparent exception will be governed by another law. If an s- sound at the beginning of one word changes to an h- sound, for instance, then all words that begin with s- will change to h-, unless there is a feature in some words that interferes, but then that feature will also induce a different pattern common to all words that have it. The differences among daughter languages will then appear systematic. The Latin word for "six" is *sex*, while the Greek word is ἕξ (*hex*). If we didn't know the Greek word for "seven" but knew that the Latin word for it is *septem*, we could predict that the Greek word must be something like **heptem*; it is in fact ἑπτά (*hepta*).

One of the patterns linguists have discovered has to do with a peculiar PIE consonant, called the labio-velar stop, the contact of the back of the tongue with the velum, in the back of the throat (which we bring about when we make the k- sound), at the same time as a semi-closure of the lips (as with English w). We could write it kw- but it is better to write it k^w-, with a superscript w, to indicate that it is one double sound and not a succession of sounds. This k^w- sound shows up in many Latin words beginning with *qu-*, not much changed from PIE, such as *quis, qua, quod*, and other interrogative and relative pronouns or adverbs (meaning "who," "what," "where," "whether," and so on), but in Greek we find words with similar meanings beginning with p-, such as *pou* ("where"), *poios* ("of what sort"), *posos* ("how much"), and *poteros* ("whether"), all of them with a back vowel (o or ou) after the initial p-. That pattern alone suggests a common ancestor for those initial consonants. Then there is the Latin word *equus* ("horse"), earlier *equos*, corresponding to Greek *hippos*. In the earliest recorded Greek, called Mycenaean (found in the Linear B script), the Greek spoken at about 1400 BCE, the word for "horse" is transliterated into syllabic symbols equivalent to *i-qo*, where the q was probably pronounced like k^w. And there are other examples; they add up to a law: before a rear vowel, k^w- became p- in most dialects of ancient Greek. In the Germanic branch of the family, the PIE k^w- became a fricative or voiceless gurgle, like the sound in German *ach*, but still with the labial w (linguists

write it χ^{w}-), and then it weakened to h^{w}-, which in Old English is spelled hw- (as in *hwæt*, the first word of *Beowulf*) and in modern English is spelled wh-; thus PIE $*k^{w}od$ became *quod* in Latin and "what" in English. In other languages, such as Sanskrit and Old Church Slavonic, we find verbs that mean "make" or "pile up" that begin with a sound that is traceable back to initial k^{w}- in PIE, and in particular to the hypothetical root $*k^{w}ei$-.

Another feature of PIE, now well established with abundant examples, is that the roots of verbs usually came in three forms, depending on the vowel, a pattern English inherits from PIE with its sets of irregular verbs like "sing, sang, sung" or "drink, drank, drunk." The o-form of $*k^{w}ei$- was $*k^{w}oi$-, and that seems to be the source of Greek *poi*-, which meant "make." And there you have it.

In Homer, the oldest recorded Greek poet, the verb ποιεῖν (*poiein*) meant "to make, form, bring about, do," and the adjective ποιητός (*poiētos*) meant "made" or "well-made"; neither of them bore any suggestion of "poetry" as verse or song. The word for "poet" or "bard" in Homer was ἀοιδός (*aoidos*, "singer"); the related word for "song," *aoidē*, was inherited by English as "ode." By Plato's time, however, several centuries later, ποιητής (*poiētēs*, "poet") had already narrowed to its modern sense, but Plato is, of course, aware of the older and broader meaning. In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima tells Socrates:

> you know, for example, that "poetry" (ποίησις, *poiēsis*) has a very wide range. After all, everything that is responsible for creating something out of nothing is a kind of poetry, and so all the creations of all the crafts are themselves a kind of poetry and the practitioners of these are all poets . . . Nevertheless, as you also know, these craftsmen are not called "poets." We have other words for them, and out of the whole of poetry [in the broad sense] we have marked off one part, the part the Muses gave us with melody and rhythm, and we refer to this by the word that means the whole. For this alone is called "poetry," and those who practice this part of poetry are called "poets" (ποιηταί). (205b–c; trans. Nehamas and Woodruff, modified)

Aristotle's *Poetics* (*Peri poiētikēs*) has the word *poiēma* (plural *poiēmata*) several times in more or less its English sense. Once, it has the phrase *poiēmata pepoiēkasin* ("they made poems"), as if to signal the etymology of "poem" through a kind of pun: they "poemized" poems (1451a21).

In English from the fourteenth century, poets were sometimes called "makers," as in the Scottish poet William Dunbar's *Lament for the Makars* (*c.* 1505). Sir Phillip Sidney, in *A Defence of Poetry* (1595), writes, "The Greeks called him a 'poet,' which name hath, as the most excellent, gone through other languages. It cometh of this word ποιεῖν, which is, to make:

wherein, I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him a maker."

As for "poem," the *OED* tells us it was apparently not in use in English until the sixteenth century; before then, "poesy" was sometimes used for an individual poem, as *poésie* still is in French, as well as for poetry in general.

If "maker" and "made thing" seem disappointing as the oldest known meanings of these words, we should ask what we might have expected. "Heavenly harmony"? "Spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"? These might have been more satisfying to us if we love poetry, but they are very unlikely meanings of ancient verbal roots. Besides, "to make" carries considerable dignity. Poets themselves, even now, often lay weight on the skill at "making" that the craft of poetry requires. Sidney, a master of the craft, called the Greek word "most excellent," after all. The Greek poet Pindar likened himself to an archer, a carpenter, and a weaver, among other skilled workers. When Dante meets the poet Guido Guinizzelli in Purgatory, the latter refers to another poet, Arnaut Daniel, as *miglior fabbro* ("a better craftsman"; *Purgatorio* 26.117); T. S. Eliot quoted the phrase to pay a compliment to a poet who had taught him a great deal, Ezra Pound. (Italian *fabbro*, by the way, comes from Latin *faber* ["worker, craftsman"], from a root meaning "fit together," as in our word "fabricate.") And some poets noticed that they share something with God: they both make worlds. Shelley, who ends his *Defence of Poetry* with the claim that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, also quotes a line in Italian that he attributes to the poet Tasso: *Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta* ("None deserves the name of creator except God and the Poet"). The French poet Lammenais wrote, "the universe is a great poem, God's poem, which we endeavor to reproduce in ours."[8]

"Poet" entered the vernacular languages in the Middle Ages, and for some time it referred only to classical (Greek and Latin) poets. Dante uses *poeta* twenty-five times in *The Divine Comedy*: twenty-one times of the great Roman poet Virgil, his guide through Hell and Purgatory; once of Homer; once of the Roman poet Statius; once of a generic poet; and finally once of himself, as he imagines returning to Florence from his exile and receiving the laurel crown (*Paradiso* 25.8–9). That may be the first time a writer in the vernacular language (here Italian, as opposed to Latin) used the word "poet" for himself or for any other vernacular writer.

My patient reader will have noticed that one thing leads to another in the pursuit of etymologies, and it is time to cut off this particular thread. We will look at quite a few more etymologies in this book, though not at such length, and we will do so for three good reasons. Certain terms used in