Symmetric and asymmetric relations, and the aesthetics of form in poetic language.

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When linguists work on literature, we look at the formal characteristics of texts, and in particular explore the relation between literary language and ordinary language, which is characterized both by difference (literary language is not the same as ordinary) and by dependence (almost all aspects of literary language are dependent on some characteristic of ordinary language). This can be pursued autonomously, independent of more general concerns of literary scholars, but a more ambitious goal is to explore how the difference/dependence relations between literary and ordinary language relate to the fact that literary texts are 'aesthetic', experienced in particular ways. In this article, I ask how a feature (or pair of features, symmetry and asymmetry) which is associated with aesthetic objects is particularly enabled by literary language. In other current work I separately consider complexity (Fabb 2008b) and surprise (Fabb 2010) as characteristics of texts which may relate to the specific characteristics of literary language. In the present paper I ask how the properties of symmetry and asymmetry, as aesthetic properties, are realized in literary language. I will argue that language makes available many kinds of asymmetry, and that the asymmetry often holds between two elements which are at the same time in a symmetric relation. This coincidence of an asymmetric and a symmetric relation between the same linguistic elements may be one source of the aesthetics of literary language.

The projection of the principle of equivalence.

> But wild Ambition loves to slide, not stand,
> And Fortune's ice prefers to Virtue's land.

This extract from Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* manifests five of the common kinds of poetic form: it is in lines, the lines are metrical, it has rhyme, alliteration, and parallelism. But why does poetry have poetic form?   I look for one answer to this question by returning to Roman Jakobson's foundational article in literary linguistics (Jakobson 1960), and rework his suggestions about equivalence, selection and combination, to propose that poetry organizes elements of language into relations which are simultaneously symmetric and asymmetric, and that this is experienced in a specific aesthetic way.

Jakobson's account of poetic language starts from an account of language which operates by two procedures: selection and combination. A slot appears into which any member of a set of words (or other elements) might be inserted; a word is chosen, and a new slot appears after that word into which a new member is inserted.   In this way, each word is combined with the next word to

make up the sequence of the sentence. For each slot, a particular set of words exists; a word is selected from that set. The words which make up the set are equivalent in the sense that any of them could be chosen at that point, and furthermore they usually share subcomponent parts (they are all nouns, or they have related meanings, etc.). A set of such words might for example be the set of equivalent words [child, kid, youngster...], and one word 'child' might be selected from that set and combined with a preceding word 'the' and a following 'plays' (each of which is chosen from its own equivalence set). In ordinary language, the relations of equivalence (holding between the items in the set, only one of which is chosen) and the relation of combination (holding between the items chosen from distinct sets) are distinct from one another, with no expectation that there will be any interaction between equivalence and combination. But Jakobson argues that "[t]he poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination" (1960: 358). In poetry (language in which the poetic function is dominant) we expect to choose one item from a set, and then shortly afterwards choose another item from the same set, so that we would say first 'child' and then shortly after 'kid'.

Equivalence can be seen as a pre-existing relation between items, so that the sets exist in advance of composition: for example, 'land' and 'stand' are equivalent independently of any text in the sense that as a structural fact they end in the same sequence of sounds. But also (and this seems to be more Jakobson's intention) equivalence is 'emergent', something we seek out in poetic texts, so that we interpret items which have been combined as actually equivalent: in Dryden's text, we interpret 'land' and 'ice' as equivalent (i.e., as belonging to a set of related words, here as antonyms) because we expect to find equivalence in poetry.

Symmetric and asymmetric relations.

I propose to replace Jakobson's notion of 'equivalence' between items with the notion that they are in a 'symmetric relation'. The relation that A has to B is symmetric if B has the same relation to A. Thus instead of saying that the words 'kid' and 'child' are equivalent, we could instead say that they have a symmetric relation: the relation of 'kid' to 'child' is the same as the relation of 'child' to 'kid'. But one word always precedes another in a text. The relation of precedence (i.e., on the axis of combination) is an asymmetric relation; in an asymmetric relation, if A has a certain relation to B then B does not have the same relation to A. In the quoted text, 'stand' precedes 'land' but 'land' does not precede 'stand'.
In a poetic text, items which are in a symmetric relation are also in a relation of precedence, one preceding another. This is Jakobson's projection of equivalence into the 'axis of combination'. So, the axis of selection is characterized by symmetric relations and the axis of combination by asymmetric relations, and *in poetic texts, the same elements are simultaneously both in a symmetric relation and in an asymmetric relation*. Each kind of poetic form combines symmetry and asymmetry: the relation of rhyme which holds between 'stand' and 'land' (in the quoted text) is on the one hand a symmetric relation of 'ending in the same sounds', and is on the other hand an asymmetric relation of 'precedence'. Other kinds of poetic form combine asymmetry and symmetry in the same way. For example the relation of parallelism holds between 'ice' and 'land'; this is both a

symmetric relation of 'having a similar meaning to' and an asymmetric relation of 'precedence'.   Alliteration, isometricality, lineation: all these kinds of form can also be understood as combining symmetry and asymmetry. The symmetry which the various kinds of poetic form share is a kind of resemblance, while the shared asymmetry is precedence.

Rhyme and the other poetic forms are all symmetric relations, but they are inseparably also asymmetric relations because they all involve precedence. This is another way of thinking about the central aspect of poetic language which Jakobson identifies: it increases and so complicates the relations between the parts of the language.   Jakobson says that the projection of equivalence draws the reader's attention to the text's materiality (in his terms, an *Einstellung* towards the message, a particular way in which the reader positions him/herself with respect to the text). I suggest an alternative way of deriving aesthetic experience from poetic form: the mental representation of two verbal elements as simultaneously in a symmetric and an asymmetric relation correlates with a specific type of experience, which we call 'aesthetic'. That is, the mental representation of a certain kind of irresolvable contradiction (or the orientation of the reader to seek out such a contradiction) stimulates aesthetic experience. If applied to Dryden's lines, my claim is specifically that by writing 'slide' and 'stand' into the text, a pair of words exists which are both in a symmetric (parallel) and an asymmetric (sequence) relation. The reader mentally represents this pair of words as being both in a symmetric and an asymmetric relation, and this is experienced as aesthetic. Perhaps this arises in the context of many such relations; in poetry, there are many simultaneously symmetric/asymmetric relations which hold between many pairs of words in the text; perhaps the text's aesthetic comes from this mass of contradictions, not from any individual contradiction. Some of the other such relations here include simultaneously symmetric/asymmetric relations between [slide, stand] (alliteration), [fortune's, prefers, virtues] (alliteration), [fortune, virtue] (parallelism), [loves, prefers] (parallelism), [stand, land] (rhyme). Note that in some cases, the same pair of words is in several distinct symmetric/asymmetric relations, which may further contribute to the mass demonstration of symmetry/asymmetry.

Jakobson suggested that the various kinds of poetic form project 'the principle of equivalence' into the linguistic sequence. I have reinterpreted this by saying that the various kinds of poetic form combine two incompatible types of relation: a symmetric relation combined with an asymmetric relation. One consequence of this is to produce 'contradiction' as an inescapable part of poetic form, though this is not part of Jakobson's original formulation. A second consequence leads into the remainder of this paper, where I argue for other kinds of symmetric-asymmetric combinations in poetic language.

Form as 'relation between' and form as 'structure of'.

The word 'form' has many meanings. All the kinds of form I have considered so far are relations between two overt textual elements, and are transitive, extendable to more than two elements. However, many aspects of linguistic form, and some kinds of form which are specific to poetry, such as 'being a line' and 'being metrical', are better understood as structures which hold of part of the text (rather than relations between two parts of the text). For example,

lineation can be thought of as relational (a text is in lines only if it is in a sequence of lines), but being a line is also a characteristic of a specific section of text. In this sense 'being a line' is the *structure of* something, such as the sequence of words 'But wild Ambition loves to slide, not stand'. Similarly 'being in iambic pentameter' is the metrical structure of each line of Dryden's text. Many kinds of linguistic form are structures in this sense: 'Ambition' is a noun, and 'wild Ambition' is a noun phrase; 'am' is a syllable; 'p' is a bilabial voiceless plosive, and so on. These are 'structures of' elements of the text and not 'relations between' elements of the text.

The difference between form as 'structure of' and form as 'relation between' correlates to some extent with the distinction I make in Fabb (2002) between generated form and communicated form. 'Generated form' is form which is built-in to the linguistic system (e.g., the fact that a word is a noun, or that a sound is a plosive), or is produced by deterministic rules such as the rules of syntax, phonology or (possibly) metrics. Generated form is covert, determinate, and must be discovered by analysis (driven by theoretical considerations). In contrast, communicated form is a (self-)description of a text, implied by the text, and derived by interpretation. It is overt, because we recognize it explicitly and often name it. It is indeterminate in that we can disagree about its presence (is this a sonnet or isn't it?). And this kind of form is derived by general principles of inference, in the context of overt knowledge of literature, which is why it can be called communicated form.

Most kinds of poetic relation are 'communicated form', in the sense that we decide that the form holds of the text rather than this being a determinate fact about the text. For example, in the second line of Dryden's text, the words 'fortune's' and 'virtue's' begin with sounds which, systemically, share certain subcomponent parts (as a structural fact): [f] and [v] are both labiodental and both fricative (they differ only in voicing), and this is an aspect of their generated form, a determinate covert fact about the elements. On the other hand, the decision that the two sounds alliterate and hence are in a specific symmetric relation is an interpretation of the text, and hence a kind of communicated form, contextually strengthened by the fact of another alliteration on [f] in this line, in the syllable of the word 'prefers', and by the alliteration in the previous line. Thus on the one hand the phonetic identity of the sounds is a fact about the text's form irrespective of whether we recognize this, but on the other hand the alliteration between the sounds is something the text tells us about itself, which we can decide to accept as legitimate (or not). This alignment of poetic form with communicated form follows the general direction of Jakobson's argument: that form based on equivalence is discovered in poetic texts because we are looking for it (i.e., the text communicates it to us), rather than existing prior to the text as a systemic (generated) characteristic of the language.

The component parts of a linguistic structure are related to one another; for example the subject is related to the verb in a sentence structure. Syntactic structures are characterised by asymmetric relations between the parts, in almost all respects. For example the various relations between a verb and its subject are asymmetric because the subject is higher in the structure than the verb, and also because the verb takes the subject as its argument. Most relations within a sentence are asymmetric, but there are some relations which appear not to be asymmetric. One potential example of symmetry in syntax might be

conjunction: in the conjunction 'John and Mary', each item is conjoined to the other, which is a symmetric relation (though Kayne (1994: 57) and others have argued that conjunction is in fact asymmetric).

Another, and for our purposes more relevant, example of a symmetric relation between parts of a sentence is concatenation, of the kind that we see in elements in a list (and possibly also parentheticals, interruptions, and so on). Though elements which are concatenated are part of the same sentence, they have no syntactic relation to one another, or to the larger sentence which contains them. Concatenation is a non-linguistic process, even when linguistic items such as words are the items which are concatenated. It is of particular interest that in poetry, there is a tendency towards concatenation as a combinatorial practice: that is, poems often partially resemble lists. The greater amount of concatenation makes the poem structurally more symmetrical than ordinary texts, and correspondingly the weakening of syntactic relations between the parts of the poem deprives the poem of some of the asymmetry which is otherwise very pervasive in ordinary language.

If we now return to the asymmetries in a syntactic structure, those between for example a verb and subject, or verb and object, or modifier and modified element, we might note that these asymmetries do not appear to combine in any significant way with the symmetries of poetic form. Here apparently there is little to say about any aesthetic 'contradiction' between the asymmetry of language and the symmetry of form. There are two reasons for this. The first is that some kinds of poetic form, such as the kind of rhyme we see in Dryden's text, hold between any two words and there is neither a requirement nor a prohibition on the two words being linguistically related: for example, it seems that rules for rhyme never stipulate that two words must be in the same sentence. The second reason is that other kinds of poetic form, such as lexical and syntactic parallelism, actually work by discouraging hierarchical asymmetry. Verse itself first does this this by replacing fully syntactic relations with either conjunction or just concatenation (listing, juxtaposition). Then the poetic forms produce symmetries between elements inside these concatenated elements, in effect extending the symmetry. Thus in the Dryden lines, 'slide' and 'stand' are related in meaning as words, and embedded in larger structures which have similar syntactic structures and are conjoined.

In fact I will now argue that the general principle of symmetry encourages poetic language to be synthesized by non-linguistic means, so that poetic language may be a copy of ordinary language, and is not a variant of ordinary language. This goes against Jakobson's original intentions.

The (attenuated) linguistic structure of poetic texts

The argument in the present section depends on the standard linguistic-theoretical assumption that ordinary language is generated from a mental database (including a lexicon) by applying rules or conditions or constraints, to produce structured outputs (tree structures), and finally to produce utterances or written texts. Ordinary language is characterized not by its output alone (the set of grammatical sentences) but by how that output is produced. I refer to this type of text as a 'generated' text. Without this standard assumption, the distinction which I make in this section between poetic language and ordinary language cannot be made. On the other hand, given this standard assumption, I

think it is very difficult *not* to make a distinction between poetic language and ordinary language.

In Fabb (2004) and Fabb (2008a), I explored the possibility that the language of at least some literary texts resembles but is not the same as ordinary language. I suggested that in poetic language, the text might be produced by concatenating 'fragments', which might themselves be words or pieces of generated text (recycled) such as phrases or whole sentences. Poetic language thus has some linguistic structure, but is not fully linguistic: it has attenuated linguistic structure, lacking some of the syntactic structure which would be found in ordinary language. The items are concatenated to produce a poetic text which must have certain formal characteristics (such as rhyme or metre). Another important condition on the concatenated text is that even though it is not an ordinary language utterance, it should consist of a sequence of words which resembles a sequence of words which might have been generated as an ordinary language utterance. The resemblance need not be exact: for example, words and phrases might be reordered in the line in ways which are not possible in the syntax. This could be achieved by producing the line by two parallel processes, both of which take as building blocks similar sets of elements (e.g., similar words): the line is produced by concatenation, and (separately) text is produced by generation. The former is licensed as poetic language by its similarity to the latter (ordinary language). The generated ordinary language text is not spoken or written out, but instead, unspoken, serves two purposes. One purpose is to give the line its shape, by making the line mimic the generated text. The second purpose is to give the line its interpretation. When words are combined by syntactic rules, their semantic relations are thereby determined: syntax feeds interpretation. To the extent that items in the line are combined by non-syntactic concatenation, they have no semantic relation, so the overall interpretation of the line should be much less determinate. But in fact, lines have fairly clear interpretations. To solve this problem, we say that the interpretation of the concatenated line is derived by comparing it with a (fully interpretable) generated sequence of words, which does have an interpretation, and by copying that interpretation.

One significant advantage of this approach is that it explains where lines come from. Lines are found in many poetic traditions, both metrical and non-metrical, oral and literate; in fact lines may be a poetic universal. The oldest written texts are written in lines: Sumerian cuneiform nonmetrical poems have left-justification and indenting of long lines, just like contemporary poetry (Black 1998: 5). But lines present a problem because though they are made from ordinary language, they are not themselves elements of ordinary language (not constituents like sentences or phrases or intonation units), and so cannot be directly generated. Lines can therefore have one of two origins. Either they are formed directly as lines, but by some non-linguistic process; or they are formed as prose by ordinary linguistic processes and then edited into lines by some non-linguistic process. In the approach to poetic composition which I outlined in the previous paragraph, lines are composed directly by a non-linguistic process of concatenation. Recall also that lists and juxtapositions – kinds of concatenation – are in any case common in poetic language.

This might explain why poetic form is rarely sensitive to syntactic structure. Metrical rules refer to word boundaries (in caesura and bridge rules)

but not to syntactic phrase or sentence boundaries. Rules of rhyme and alliteration seem to ignore syntactic structure completely. Only parallelism seems to be sensitive to syntactic structure, in the sense that parallelism can hold between phrases or sentence structures, but here too the structures are sometimes reordered or involve ellipses which do not conform to generated syntax, and so parallelism might just be an asyntactic copying of sequences of discrete units (Fabb 1997: 145--8).

In summary, I have suggested that one route by which poetry might be composed is by extra-linguistic means, taking as input linguistic material but concatenating it to produce the line.   The process may be shaped by the need to produce an output which resembles an ordinary language output sufficiently to give the text a faked appearance of approximate linguistic normality, and to give it an interpretation.   While this may not be the only route by which poetry is produced (perhaps sometimes it *is* edited down from ordinary language rather than produced as a copy), it is not implausible as one possible route. We know that ordinary language can be mimicked by texts which are produced non-linguistically. Avian mimics (such as parrots) can do this; games such as the Surrealists' 'exquisite corpse' produce sentences by nonlinguistic means; when we learn a language, our first sentences are concatenations of words which mimic a sentence of the language.   We also know that a common practice in poetic composition is to write in a partially invented language, mixing ordinary language material with archaisms or borrowed terms. Some of the earliest written texts are written in partially artificial languages, including parts of the Gilgamesh story (in a "contrived, nonspoken dialect of the first millennium [BC] which was based on archaic Old Babylonian features": Huehnergard and Woods 2004: 219). And there are familiar examples of this throughout literary history: Spenser, MacDiarmid, Joyce, for example. Poetry draws on language, but is not necessarily composed by linguistic means.

Poetic forms – such as rhyme, or parallelism – introduce symmetric relations into language, which is otherwise pervasively asymmetric, both in the sequence of words, and in the hierarchical relations between syntactic elements. Further, the arguments of the last few paragraphs imply that poetic language may be more symmetrically organized than it at first appears to be, if concatenation (which produces symmetric relations) is one of the fundamental principles by which literary texts are synthesized.   To make this concrete, consider the second line of Dryden's text, "And Fortune's ice prefers to Virtue's land". The element 'fortune's ice' is interpreted as the object of 'prefers' but I propose that it is not structurally its object: instead, the two elements have no syntactic relation to eachother but are just put one after another (concatenated). The interpretation of one as the object of the other comes when we compare this text with an independently generated (but unspoken or unwritten) text 'and prefers fortune's ice to virtue's land'. In this latter text, 'fortune's ice' is generated as the object of the verb 'prefers'; they have a syntactic relation and an interpretation can thus be produced. The interpretation is now copied over to the concatenated sequence. Thus in Dryden's counterfeit, 'fortune's ice' is interpreted as the object of the verb 'prefers' even though there is no structural basis for this in the text itself.

In this section I have suggested that in poetic language, symmetric relations are demonstrated not only by the various kinds of poetic form, such as

rhyme and parallelism, but also by the large amount of concatenation involved in the production of poetic language itself. These symmetric relations hold between elements which are at the same time in the asymmetric relation of precedence.

Metricality

In this section I look at a kind of structure which is specific to poetic language: metricality. Metricality has two faces. In many metrical texts, the metre of one line is the same as the metre of another line, which is either adjacent or in some predictable position (e.g., English quatrains in which odd numbered lines are iambic tetrameter and even lines iambic trimeter). This similarity between metrical lines is an aspect of metricality which we might call 'isometricality'; it is a symmetric relation between lines, and thus participates straightforwardly in the usual contrast of a symmetric relation based on similarity put into an asymmetric relation of precedence.

Metricality is also a kind of structure. 'Being in iambic pentameter' is like 'being a sentence' or 'being a morpheme' in that it is a structural characteristic of the sequence of syllables which form a line of verse. Most accounts of metricality propose a structure which is internally asymmetric. In this section I offer one such account of poetic metre, based on Fabb and Halle (2008): all of the comments which follow are relative to this theory (there are no theory-independent ways of talking about poetic metre), and most of my examples are discussed in detail in that book, where we suggest that the various different kinds of metre can be understood in the same basic terms. We show this for selected metres of English, French, Spanish (and other Southern Romance metres, in a chapter by Carlos Piera), Greek, Classical and Vedic Sanskrit, Classical and some Vernacular Arabic, Latvian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Old English. Metricality is manifested most fundamentally by the fact that a line consists of a certain number of metrical elements (usually syllables), either a fixed number or a limited range of possible numbers. In many metres, a predictable rhythm depends on the counting of syllables: for example, every third syllable is liable to be stressed in an English anapestic line. In some cases the metre controls only a few syllables in the line: in the French *alexandrin*, only the sixth and twelfth syllables are subject to the special requirement that they must be stressed and word final.

Dryden's lines are in the metre called 'iambic pentameter'. Most approaches present a metre as a template or pattern to which the line is matched. Halle and I take a different approach. We think of a metre not as a template but as a set of ordered rules and conditions, which begin with the line of verse and produce from this line a representation of its metrical structure. This is a generative approach to metre (following the tradition of Halle and Keyser 1971). For example, iambic pentameter is a set of rules stated in (1) below, which when applied to the first line of Dryden's text produces from it a representation as in (2).

(1)

        (a) Project each syllable as an asterisk on gridline 0.
        (b) gridline 0: starting at the Right edge, insert a Right parenthesis, form binary groups, heads Right.

(c) gridline 1: starting at the Right edge, insert a Right parenthesis, form ternary groups, (final binary), heads Right.
(d) gridline 2: starting at the Left edge, insert a Left parenthesis, form binary groups, heads Left.

(2)
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      But wild Ambition loves to slide, not stand,
      )*   *) *  *) *   *)   *   *)   *    *)    0
           *    *)    *        *        *)    1
                (*                      *(    2
                *                             3
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In (2) we see a bracketed grid, a two-dimensional representation of the metrical structure of the line, which has been produced by the rules in (1), which project syllables as asterisks, group them by adding parentheses, and further project until a grid is formed with a single asterisk on the final line. Right parentheses group the asterisks to their left, left parentheses group the asterisks to their right; the counting procedure which fixes the length of the line in essence counts groups. Thus there is one group of two asterisks on gridline 2, two groups of three asterisks (one short, consisting of two) on gridline 1, and hence five asterisks overall on gridline 1, and each of these asterisks projects from group on gridline 0, where the asterisks are in pairs: hence ten asterisks on gridline 0. This method of counting by grouping fixes at ten the syllables of the iambic pentameter line. The syllables are organized by the rules for an iambic metre such that even-numbered syllables are also the syllables which project to gridline 1, and this generates the rhythm of the line if we associate being stressed with projecting to gridline 1. Thus counting and rhythm are associated by the bracketed grid. All lines of metrical verse in all metrical traditions are scanned in the same basic way: one of a large number of possible grids is generated from the line (the grid depends on the rules) and the grid is used to determine the rhythm or other characteristics of the line.

The metrical grid shown above is a model of a mental representation produced by the producer or hearer as part of their judgment that the line is metrical. It is asymmetrical; each of the groups has one element more prominent than the others, the element called its head which projects to the next gridline. On gridline 0 and 1 the groups are all right-headed, on gridline 2 the group is left-headed. Because the prominent element is always the leftmost or rightmost within its group, the grid inevitably has an asymmetrical shape. Further, every asterisk is always either more or less prominent than at least one of its neighbours, and this produces an asymmetric relation between these pairs of asterisks. Though this is specific to our account of metre, it is true of most accounts of metre that the scansions are divided into two sub-parts which are internally asymmetrical.

There is also another kind of asymmetric relation which is characteristic of the metrical line, which is that the beginning and ends of the lines may have different characteristics, and more generally there are progressively changing characteristics from beginning to end. For example, Kiparsky (1970: 168) describes a generalization for the Finnish *Kalevala* line that "other things being equal, the words of a line are arranged in order of increasing length" (and this generalization holds beyond this text). In English poetry, some words, such as

'evil' can be treated as having one or two metrical syllables; earlier in the line, the word is more likely to be treated as one, and later in the line as two (Fabb 2002: 46, quoting Milton's 'Created evil for evil only good', where the first 'evil' counts as one sylalble and the second as two). Similarly, Golston (2009) argues that the two verses comprising the *Beowulf* line are always mutually asymmetric, with the two verses always having different patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Most types of poetic form – rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, versification and isometricality – are symmetric relations (which are put into the asymmetric relation of precedence).   I have suggested that poetic form produces an aesthetic effect because it relates two elements both symmetrically and asymmetrically at the same time. Metricality, however, is fundamentally asymmetric as a structure; it would seem just to be a way of bringing more asymmetry into the already asymmetric relations found in language, and thus to be doing something rather different from other kinds of form such as rhyme or parallelism. This can be incorporated into the present account of contradictory symmetry/asymmetry by noting that metricality is a characteristic specifically of verse. There is no 'metrical prose': the regular rhythms of poetry are found only when the text is divided into lines (cf. Fabb 2002, chapter 5 on lines). In this, incidentally, language differs from music, where regular rhythms can be continued indefinitely without splitting the musical sequence into sub-sequences analogous to lines.

Metricality is thus introduced into verse, and verse is a kind of text which as we have seen is particularly characterized by symmetric relations. The splitting into lines produces a symmetric relation (between lines), metrical verse is often characterised by rhyme and other types of formal symmetry, and perhaps most significantly in verse the asymmetries of syntax are replaced with symmetric relations of concatenation. Thus verse is more symmetric in general than language generally is. Perhaps the function of metre is to introduce asymmetry into the symmetries introduced by the other kinds of form. To recapitulate: ordinary language is extensively asymmetric; verse introduces various symmetries into language; metricality reasserts asymmetry.   In poetry we see a struggle between symmetry and asymmetry played out between the same textual elements.

Conclusion

Symmetry and, to a slightly lesser extent, asymmetry, are terms often invoked in discussions of aesthetics. In this paper I have emphasized the extent to which verbal art combines symmetry with asymmetry, such that the same words can be both in symmetric and asymmetric relations at the same time. I have proposed that the density of symmetric/asymmetric relations in poetry may be one cognitive foundation on which poetic form produces its aesthetic effect.   Though symmetry and asymmetry are found in all the arts, language offers some rather specific kinds of symmetry and asymmetry and some rather specific ways of combining these.   Most of the symmetries which characterize poetic form, in rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, isometricality and versification, depend on the articulated and compositional nature of language. Rhyme is possible because words are made from syllables, which have subcomponent parts (the rhyme targets the nucleus and rime of the syllable), which in turn are made from

subcomponent sounds, and sounds in turn are made from component features. A rhyme can hold between two words which share only some of the component features of its final sounds; this is the basis of the symmetric relation between the words. Thus language offers a very rich variety of ways in which elements can be in symmetric relations to one another. On the other hand, most kinds of poetic form exploit another aspect of the articulated nature of language, so that the two elements in a symmetric relation are not identical but only share some subcomponent part: exact repetition is rare (but see Paton 2009). So symmetric relations in language and hence in poetry are very complex, perhaps more complex than symmetric relations in other arts. Language also offers kinds of asymmetry which are more varied than the asymmetry provided by the material base of the other arts. On the one hand, because externalized language is linear it has precedence as a basic asymmetry (shared with music and dance, but not so clearly with photography or painting or sculpture). On the other hand, language is characterized by many kinds of structure, syntactic, phonological, and metrical, which by virtue of how they are cognized are inherently asymmetric in complex ways. Thus verbal art is a particularly rich source of ways in which symmetry can combine with asymmetry.

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