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Aesthetic Qualities as Structural Resemblance

Divergence and Perceptual Forces in Poetry
(abstract)

This paper discusses aesthetic qualities of poetry. When we say "The music is sad", we report that we have detected some resemblance between the structure of the music and the structure of an emotion. In this sense, "sad" refers to an *aesthetic quality* of the music. "Aesthetic qualities" are perceptual qualities of aesthetic wholes. In poetry, "sad" may refer *either* to the mere contents of the poem, *or* to an aesthetic quality arising from an interplay of divergent structure, low energy level, slow motion, sad contents.

The paper explores such questions as "How do systems of music-sounds and verbal signs assume perceptual qualities endemic to other systems, such as human emotions or animal calls?" "What may a critic mean when asserting that a certain metric configuration is 'more dignified' than some other; that is, what may 'dignified' mean in a context of metric configurations?"

This paper is focused on two structural phenomena that may be pointed out both in a poem and an emotion: "divergence" and "perceptual forces". As to "divergence", I have adopted Guilford's terms "convergent thinking" and "divergent thinking" abilities, underlying logical and creative thinking, respectively. Emotional processes are said to be more divergent than creative-thinking processes; thus we receive a continuum: LOGICAL THINKING ⟶► CREATIVE THINKING ⟶► EMOTIONAL PROCESSES. There is no point on this continuum where "logical thinking" suddenly turns into "creative thinking", or "creative thinking" into an emotional process. In poetic structures, the sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables may converge with or diverge from the sequence of strong and weak metric positions; syntactic units may coincide with verse lines, or may run on from one line to another; alliteration may work in conjunction with, or against, meter; and so forth.

Convergent and divergent structures (strong and weak gestalts) generate some general psychological atmosphere that can be individuated by contents on a lower level in a wide variety of sometimes incompatible specific attitudes (such as, e.g., irony vs emotion, or wit vs simplified mastery of reality, as in nursery

rhymes). This is because the poem exploits different potentials of the same general psychological atmosphere. A special combination of convergent and divergent structures, the irruption of the irrational, plus high energy level may yield "hypnotic poetry". Sometimes it is the contents that tilts the effect of divergent structures in favor of an emotional or ironic quality.

James Whaler discovered that many passages in Milton can be rearranged in new iambic pentameter lines such that run-on lines become end-stopped, and end-stopped lines are run on. He doesn't know what to do with this discovery; but it gives us an excellent opportunity to observe how divergence affects the emotional or ironic quality of a poetic passage, where all other things are equal, in fact literally identical.

As to "perceptual forces", Gestalt psychologists have pointed out that when an event intrudes upon a perceptual whole at the middle, it enhances balance and stability. When the intruding event occurs between the middle and the boundary, a "perceptual force" is observed, "pulling" toward the middle, or the boundary— as the case may be with respect to the intruding event's distance from the middle or the boundary of the perceptual unit. Rudolf Arnheim demonstrated this phenomenon in visual perception. Fodor et al. demonstrated with reference to syntactic structures that a perceptual unit tends "to preserve its integrity by resisting interruptions", "pushing" the intruding event outwards (they, however, overlooked one crucial point: if the intrusion occurs in the middle of a perceptual unit, it induces balance and stability rather than "movement", "pressure", or "restlessness"; it is only when it occurs between the middle and the boundary that it induces perceptual forces). In versification, I argue, when a major syntactic boundary coincides with the caesura or the line boundary, it induces stability; when it occurs between the caesura and the boundary, it exerts "pressure" for balance or completion. In Milton's "On his Blindness", divergence and perceptual forces generated in the aforesaid manner induce an impetuous emotive quality upon the theological argument.

Recently I have observed a similar dynamics on the subphonemic level too, in the rhythmical performance of poetry. Normally, the highest peak of an intonation contour hits the string of words at the most strongly stressed syllable of the most strongly stressed word, at the middle of the syllable crest (vowel). Late peaking occurs when the intonation peak intrudes upon the vowel

after the middle, sometimes even at the vowel boundary, or even after it, on an ensuing sonorant. In everyday speech, late peaking is a rare and little-understood phenomenon. Gerry Knowles notes that in ordinary speech "the latest peaks follow pauses *within* a major tone group". According to Robert Ladd, "peak delay is said to signal that the utterance is in some way very significant or non-routine". In the artistic recitation of metered verse, peak delay is surprisingly more frequent, and does not necessarily occur after pauses, to emphasize some non-routine meaning, but where a forward thrust is called for, for rhythmic reasons. In a single Shakespeare line, two leading British actors have recourse to three instances of peak delay (a third actor only to two), at the same implausible places, to solve the same rhythmic problems. Indeed, in such places, sensitive listeners tend to perceive some "mysterious", elusive forward drive.

Notice that I don't embrace here the notion of an iconic relationship between form and content. The form-and-content approach allows the critic to handle only those instances in which the similarity between form and content exists, or else compels him to read the similarity into them. I have adopted, instead, from Wellek and Warren, the materials-and-structures dichotomy, which cuts right across the form-and-content dichotomy. It is tailor-made for dealing with unforeseen combinations. Components of both form and content are aesthetically neutral elements that can be combined into aesthetically significant structures, displaying unforeseen perceptual qualities. Such perceptual qualities, in turn, *may* display a structural resemblance to some human emotion, or animal cry, or natural noises.

There are no rules to infer the aesthetic qualities displayed by configurations of aesthetically neutral elements. According to Frank Sibley, we decide that a piece of music is sad by listening or that a piece of poetry is dignified by reading, just as we decide that the book is red by looking or that the tea is sweet by tasting. According to the present conception, disagreement whether a piece of convergent poetry is hypnotic, witty, playful, monotonous, or suggests simplified mastery of reality may be due to different mental organizations of the same aesthetically neutral elements.