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American Sign Language Poetry: Literature in Motion

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Literatures in English

by

Jessica Cole

Committee in charge:

      Professor Michael Davidson, Chair
      Professor Carol Padden
      Professor Margaret Loose

2009

The Thesis of Jessica Cole is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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University of California, San Diego

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

American Sign Language Poetry: Literature in Motion

by

Jessica Cole

Master of Arts in Literatures in English

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Professor Michael Davidson, Chair

ASL poems should be acknowledged as literary objects with the potential to reveal something new about the human experience. This paper reviews the history of ASL Literature, then analyzes two of Valli's poems, "Hands," and "Tears of Life," with a focus on their possible literary interpretations. This leads to a discussion of several facets of ASL Poetry, including morphing, sign sets and lines, poetic patterns built from linguistic elements, and the possibility of unique forms developing in signed poetry.

Introduction

The word "poetry" traditionally conjures images of Shakespeare, thick Norton Anthologies, journals kept through adolescence, coffee shops, poetry slams. There's a writer and a reader, a speaker and a listener, some ink, some paper. Sign language poetry interrupts these associations. It is not written, or held in a book. Poems exist on the body and are shared in person, sometimes on video. Hands and faces do the work of lines on a page, and the audience doesn't read or listen; they watch; they experience. The medium and physical tools are different, but it is still poetry, which "conveys heightened forms of perception, experience, meaning, or consciousness in heightened language" (Preminger and Brogan, 940). It captures the ordinary and the extraordinary by manipulating language, playing with it, stretching and challenging it, breaking its rules and experimenting with new ones. Poets are renowned for their mastery of the language, their ability to use it to entertain, evoke, clarify, or surprise. Written on a page, or signed on someone's body, poetry does all these things.

The American Sign Language (ASL) poetry that is most widely available and studied today has only been around for about forty years, but it springs from a literary tradition that spans many generations and genres. The literary history of ASL begins with a folkloric tradition that is difficult to date. Presumably as long as there have been deaf people there has been sign language, and with it various forms of language play. Susan Rutherford has documented many of the traditions associated with this part of Deaf[1] history in her book, <u>A Study of American Deaf Folklore</u>. She recognizes

jokes, sign play, group narrative, and ABC stories as folklore that has served vital

cultural purposes for the Deaf Community for many generations, including serving "as

an educating tool for the learning of cultural rules, values, and specific competencies"

(71). One of these is linguistic competence. Folklore includes specialized uses of

language, and through its face-to-face transmission, members of the community build

linguistic skill, the sort of skill that enables them to retell a story with their own flare,

to create one of their own, or perhaps to compose a poem.

The earliest recorded visual evidence of literary use of ASL can be found in a

series of films made by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) between 1910

and 1920. One signer on those films, John B. Hotchkiss, shares stories of his days at

the American School for the Deaf (ASD) in the1860s. In his essay, "Face-to-Face

Tradition in the American Deaf Community," Ben Bahan refers to Hotchkiss, and

concludes,

> In any case, we know that since Hotchkiss's time Deaf storytellers have
> been passing on their stories, culture, and identity through a tradition
> that has been kept alive through face-to-face events. We don't know
> exactly which ASL literature genres existed in the early days but we
> know from the NAD films that at least the following genres go back to
> the turn of the twentieth century: narratives of personal experience,
> lectures, and translated songs, poems, and stories. (23-24)

ASL translations of poetry in English have been part of the Deaf community for nearly

a century, and a tradition of face-to-face storytelling can be traced back even further.

Hotchkiss was a student at ASD in the 1860s, and he was presumably not the only one

to share stories there, so it is possible the tradition extends as far back as 1817, when

the school was founded. The place of poetry in this history seems to be limited to

translations, but some of the genres Bahan and Rutherford describe, in particular the ABC and number stories, share significant characteristics with the ASL poetry published in recent decades.[2] These folkloric traditions are precursors to contemporary ASL poetry.

Recognition of this history, however, is a rather recent phenomenon because before the 1960s, sign language was not considered a real language. From 1880 until the 1960s, the use of sign language was discouraged in schools; it was seen as animalistic, inferior to English, and associated with idiocy. Instead, speech was emphasized and students caught signing were reprimanded, sometimes physically (Bauman, Nelson, and Rose 242; Baynton 41-43).[3] Although these attitudes were perpetuated in educational institutions, they permeated the entire American culture and many Deaf people internalized the negative messages about their language, and themselves. But even in the face of such powerful institutionalized pressure and derision, they continued to use sign language in their own communities. They told stories and jokes, and experimented with wordplay and rhythm, but no one considered it part of a literary tradition. This attitude began to change gradually in the 1960s, thanks in part to the work of William Stokoe, a linguist and professor at Gallaudet University. In his book, Sign Language Structure, he maintained that "a symbol system by means of which persons carry on all the activities of their ordinary lives is, and ought to be treated as, a language" (10). Stokoe carefully documented the grammatical features of sign language to prove his assertion, and later published the

first sign language dictionary and founded the academic journal, <u>Sign Language Studies</u>.

Stokoe's research was not immediately accepted by linguists or by the signing community. Negative attitudes about sign language had prevailed for so long, that even Deaf people themselves did not readily accept the idea that the hand movements they used to communicate with each other might actually be a system linguistically equivalent to English, but a curiosity had been awakened about ASL and its capabilities. If it was a real language, like French or English or Russian, then perhaps it had all the accoutrements too -- a developmental history, a role in culture, a literature. Deaf people began to experiment with the creative possibilities of ASL, and scholars began more research.

Bernard Bragg founded the National Theater for the Deaf (NTD) in 1967. Although their primary focus was theater, NTD became the nexus of literary ASL for many years. Initially, the company was focused on translating English work into ASL, but in 1971, it produced *My Third Eye*, the first play composed originally in sign language. NTD provided a fertile environment for experimentation and sign play.[4] In 1976, one of its members, Dorothy Miles, published the first videotape collection of poetry in sign language, titled <u>Gestures</u>. Miles lost her hearing at the age of 8, and she later studied at Gallaudet and joined NTD. Miles composed and performed her poetry simultaneously in English and in sign language (sometimes ASL, sometimes British Sign Language) but neither was a translation of the other. (Klima and Bellugi 350).

Slowly, ASL poetry found its way to published videotapes and live performances. A video compilation of stories, anecdotes, jokes, and sign play that had long been a part of the Deaf folkloric tradition was published in 1980 under the title Tales from the Green Books. In 1984, a public dialog between Allen Ginsberg and Deaf poet, Robert Panera, resulted in the founding of The Bird's Brain Society at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in Rochester, New York. The group met monthly for performance and discussion of ASL poetry (Cohn 28). One of the members, Peter Cook, later teamed up with a hearing interpreter, Kenny Lerner, to form The Flying Words Project, an ASL performance duo who have been performing and self-publishing videos since 1986. In 1990, Sign Media Inc. published the Poetry in Motion series which included three videotapes, each featuring the poems of a different ASL poet: Patrick Graybill, Debbie Rennie, or Clayton Valli. Valli went on to publish another collection, ASL Poetry, Selected Works of Clayton Valli in 1995, the same year Ella Mae Lentz published her video collection, The Treasure. Slope Magazine published an online issue of ASL poetry in 2004, and a handful of original poems can be found on DVDs which accompany linguistics texts, or scholarly anthologies such as Linguistics of American Sign Language: An Introduction, and Signing the Body Poetic. Cumulatively, these publications provide less than 100 published poems for scholars to study.

ASL poetry has come to exist in two realms. There is the recorded and published realm, with which this paper is concerned, and there is the realm of live performance. The latter is of course rooted in the tradition of face-to-face cultural

events in the Deaf community, but the live performance of literary ASL became more common at the same time ASL poetry was being published on video. The Bird's Brain Society is just one example of an ASL performance series. Since then, live performances of ASL poetry, stories, theater, and comedy have been popular, and can be found at residential schools, Deaf festivals, and the like. Published work is slightly more accessible to scholars, but both are integral to the Deaf community and warrant continued study.

Almost concurrently with the publication of videotapes of ASL poetry, came the publication of scholarly work investigating it. Edward Klima and Ursula Bellugi were the first to study the delineation between everyday signing, and an elevated use of sign which they dubbed "art sign." Their book, Signs of Language was published in 1979 and includes a chapter devoted to poetry and song in sign language. They ask Bernard Bragg to translate a line of poetry from English, first to literal ASL, then to artistic ASL, and compare his two interpretations. Lou Fant and Dorothy Miles also provide samples of art sign for analysis. In art sign, Klima and Bellugi find an increased use of similar handshapes, and notice that the two hands are often used more equally, that movement paths are smoother and simpler, and that signs are often manipulated to cut down on the transitional movement between them. They also notice an overall change in the style of signing, a larger shape and rhythm imposed upon the entire utterance that gives it a different feel than common signing. They liken this last feature to the melody of a song and call it, "superstructure." They call choice of signs with similar handshape and configuration, "internal structure," and the

balance between hands and the manipulation of movement paths, they call "external structure" (340-372).

Klima and Bellugi collect data from a very small sample -- just one line of poetry from an e.e. cummings poem, and a short poem by Dorothy Miles modeled after the Haiku form, but their conclusions have withstood further study. The three levels of structure they identify are not as clearly defined as one may have wanted (something that will be discussed in a later chapter), but they offer a simple way to organize the linguistic features of ASL poems.

When it comes to internal structure, Klima and Bellugi's primary focus is on shared handshape, but they recognize that any shared parameters between signs can be used to build patterns of internal structure.[5] Valli elaborates on Klima's and Bellugi's findings, and identifies examples of repeated movement, location, and facial expression. He also argues for the existence of visual equivalents to rhyme, line, and meter. Valli draws a formal, almost mathematical picture of how ASL poems are constructed, using the terminology invented for written and spoken poetry. His attention to detail and rigorous scientific approach offer one useful method for dissecting the linguistic parts of a poem, but the comparisons between written and signed poetry are sometimes strained. His argument for meter in ASL poetry centers on the movement-hold patterns of signs which he argues exhibit stress patterns just as syllables do in spoken language (Valli 1993). This is a limited way to see the rhythms of ASL poetry, and confines the research unnecessarily. The basic idea of the Movement-Hold Model, developed by Lidell and Johnson, is that signs are produced

sequentially in segments of "movement," in which articulatory features are in transition, and "hold," in which such features are steady (Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney 34). Signs may indeed have a sequentiality, but their simultanaeity is fundamental to their production. The parameters from which signs are built are not produced one after another; they are produced in unison. Valli does explore more holistic ways of analyzing poetry as well though. He recognizes that a poem has an "overall design in space" (what Klima and Bellugi would have called superstructure,) and he was one of the first to shift focus from linguistics to poetics by studying symbolism and metaphor (Valli 1993).

Until recently, the scholarly work on ASL poetry centered on the linguistic features which distinguish poetic signing from everyday signing, but as research has proven that ASL is linguistically capable of poetry, researchers are investigating the nature of that poetry, and the implications ASL Literature may have for other disciplines. Anthologies relating to Deaf Culture, such as The Deaf Way II Reader, and Signs and Voices, now commonly include a section for ASL Literature. Taub and Perrin-Wilcox have each recently published books exploring the use of metaphor in ASL, and the first scholarly anthology devoted solely to ASL Literature, Signing The Body Poetic, was published in 2006. Additionally, articles by Bauman, Davidson, Rose, and others have injected ASL Literature into the discourse of Cultural Theory and Disability Studies.

One scholar who is working specifically on the nature of ASL poetry is Rachel Sutton-Spence, who has made an effort to design a comprehensive methodology for

interpreting poems in her book, <u>Analysing Sign Language Poetry</u>. Although she

doesn't make the distinction explicit, her work is notable because it includes a

traditional review of linguistic features of sign language poetry, but also looks at

purely poetic elements. Sutton-Spence uses the umbrella term "repetition" to refer to

a wide range of features. According to her, repetition can be used with handshape,

movement, location, timing, grammatical structure, individual signs, or any pattern

made up of those elements. She nods to the idea of visual rhyme and stanza by

drawing a clear analogy between the way syllables operate in rhyme in spoken

languages and the way parameters operate in rhyme in signed languages, and by

acknowledging that grammatical structures can be combined to form something that

looks much like a stanza, but she does not see poetic features primarily through a

linguistic lens. She goes on to group handedness, the increased use of two-handed

signs, and morphing (all of which Klima and Bellugi termed external structure) as

"Symmetry and Balance," and to point out in a third category, "Neologism," that there

is an increased use of productive signs rather than frozen signs in poetic sign

language.[6] This cataloging of poetic features is valuable, but the most important thing

about Sutton-Spence's work is the time she spends on poetic aspects of sign language

poetry such as metaphor, allusion, ambiguity, themes, and performance. Sutton-

Spence is one of the first sign language poetry scholars to do more than just delineate

between poetic and non-poetic use of the language, but to recognize that the sign

language poems also have features of meaning. The logical next step is to explore the

connections between these two components of ASL poetry -- the linguistic features, and the poetic features.

In the study of ASL Poetry, scholars should note that there is a tension between including ASL Poetry under the more general umbrella of "poetry," and treating it as a unique, separate field of study. Poetry has been dominated by written and spoken languages for a very long time. The theories and methodologies developed in the field have come from those languages, from hearing culture, and we must be careful not to allow that to bias our study of ASL Poetry. Isolating ASL Poetry as its own field, may protect it from the bias inherent in hearing methodologies, but it would also separate the field from valuable resources and discount the contributions it has to make to the general field. The answer of course is not either/or. We must allow methodologies to emerge naturally from the study of sign language poetry, and then to merge with the methodologies already in place so that they may be applied to all poetry. We cannot just bring ASL Poetry under the more general umbrella of poetry; we must expect the shape of the umbrella to change.

The habit of comparing ASL techniques to those used in written and spoken poetry, and of offering analogies and equivalents in written poetry for aspects of ASL Poetry is part of this tension. Such comparisons are often apt and very useful for clarifying unfamiliar concepts, but they also cause a tendency to define ASL Poetry by its relationship to written and spoken poetry, and to search and stretch for equivalents when perhaps there are none. ASL Poetry was developed within the mainstream

hearing culture and was certainly influenced by the conventions already in place for composing and studying poetry in written languages, but it should not be interpreted simply as a reaction to or mimicry of that body of work. ASL poetry, like Deaf Culture, is amalgam of interconnected, cultural influences, and the relationship between Deaf and hearing culture is complex. It may be impossible to completely alleviate this tension, but any scholar of ASL poetry must keep it in mind. Defining ASL by its differences from and similarities to written poetry is problematic in the same way defining any minority culture by the dominant culture is problematic -- it artificially positions one as superior to the other, and limits our understanding of both.

Relying heavily on linguistic analysis to study ASL Poetry may have originally been an attempt to prove its legitimacy, its right to be included in the "more general" field of poetry, but it has the danger of achieving the opposite effect by obscuring the qualities which make ASL Poetry unique and which can have the most refreshing influence on existing thought. The most interesting commonalities between poetry in ASL and poetry in written and spoken languages are not linguistic, they are poetic. It is the broad definitions of poetry that link the two. Both make use of metaphor and symbolism, of imagery and rhythm. Both often aim to evoke an emotion, to cause reflection, or to capture a single image or moment, but each uses a different set of linguistic tools to do so. Through different methods, they each accomplish similar goals; each has something to offer the other.

In the following two chapters I will analyze two of Valli's poems, "Hands" and "Tears of Life." Of the poets who have published work in ASL, Clayton Valli is one

of the more prolific, having published two video collections of poetry and a significant collection of books and articles on linguistics and ASL Poetry. He identified himself as a linguist and as a poet, and he devoted much of his life to creating ASL Poetry, studying it, and encouraging and teaching others to create their own. Valli's body of work, both creative and academic, is substantial and influential. I have chosen to analyze two of his poems in part because of the reputation he earned for himself, but also for the specific features the poems illustrate and for their relationship to each other. "Hands" is accessible even to non-signers, because it is short and has clear visual symmetry independent of its content. The poem is dense with linguistic features, however, and they are inextricable from the multiple meanings and possible interpretations of the poem. "Tears of Life" also demonstrates many classic linguistic features of ASL Poetry, but its visual form and actual content are not as entwined. This serves to highlight the inherent layers of ASL Poetry. There is a visual effect which is independent from content, a meaning independent from visual effect, and the combination of the two, all existing simultaneously in every ASL poem.

I attempt to analyze both poems, not just for the linguistic features they demonstrate, but for the way those features add to the overall meaning of the poem. I have taken Klima and Bellugi's levels of structure as an organizational tool and folded the linguistic features Valli and Sutton-Spence identify, and some I've noticed, into each level with an eye to how each influences both the aesthetic effect and the meaning of the poem. In part because there are so many linguistic elements at work in every individual sign, transcription and interpretation of ASL Poetry into a written

form is very difficult. In addition to the traditional methods of transcribing and

translating, I use tables to illustrate the patterns at work in each poem. In this way I

aim to treat the poems not just as linguistic specimens that tell us something about

sign language, but as poems that tell us something about ourselves.

Chapter four is an exploration of some of the tensions in the study of ASL

poetry, and an analysis of what I find to be its most interesting features. Chapter Five

is a summary of points and a reflection on the current events in the field, and the

possibilities for the future.

Notes

1. In keeping with what has become convention in the field, 'deaf' with a lowercase 'd' will be used to refer physiological deafness, and 'Deaf' with a capital 'D' will be used to refer to cultural Deafness.

2. ABC stories are composed using the handshapes of the manual alphabet. Each sign is produced with a different letter handshape, and those handshapes appear in alphabetical order. Number stories are similar, though the numerical handshapes do not always appear strictly in sequence; they may be used patterns. Valli identifies both as types of poems and describes other types with similar structures. Further discussion of these forms is undertaken in chapter four.

3. It is important to note that the attitude that speech is superior to persists. Although 1960 marks the introduction of a new way to think about signed languages, it did not eradicate oralism. There are still many programs which forbid students from using sign.

4. For more on the history of NTD, see Baldwin.

5. Parameters are the phonological features of a sign that distinguish it from another sign. Handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and non-manual markers are considered the five basic parameters of any sign. For more information see Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney.

6. The "frozen form" of a sign might also be referred to as its "standard form" or "citation form." These terms refer to the standardized way a sign is produced, irrespective of the variations that might occur among individual signers. A "productive sign" will be discussed in more depth in chapter four, but it is generally a sign that relies on context for its meaning. Classifiers, which are used to describe whole classes of objects based on their size and shape, are one type of productive sign.

Chapter One
An Analysis of "Hands" by Clayton Valli

Translation

Hands
by Clayton Valli
translated by Jessica Cole

What are hands?
snow falling
flowers in bloom
wheat swaying
leaves floating down
They are all this, poetry, and expression

Transcription

<u>br up</u>	<u>br dn head tilt</u>
HANDS	WHAT

<u>br. up</u>	<u>br dn, lips pursed</u>
2hCL:5 (snow)	2hCL:5 (fall)

<u>br. up</u>	<u>br dn, lips pursed</u>
FLOWER	2hCL:O-5 (bloom)

<u>br up</u>	<u>br dn, lips pursed</u>
2hCL:5 (a tall stalk-like plant)	2hCL:5 (wind blows)

<u>br up</u>	<u>br dn, lips pursed</u>
TREE	CL:5 (leaves fall)

<u>br up</u>	<u>br dn head nod</u>
2hCL:5 (all of this)	ASL-POETRY/EXPRESS

"Hands," by Clayton Valli and performed by Claudia Jimenez on <u>ASL Poetry:</u> <u>Selected Works of Clayton Valli</u>, opens with the question, "what are hands?" then continues with a visual description (and representation) of snow falling, flowers blooming, grasses swaying, and leaves falling from a tree. The poem answers its own question with the last two signs: "all this, poetry, expression." It is deceptively simple, just twelve signs, eight of them devoted to creating a clear, almost imagist, picture of the four seasons. It could merely be a visually pleasant description of nature, but the title and the first and last pairs of signs give the poem a much more complicated meaning. In this poem, hands both physically embody and figuratively represent winter, spring, summer, and fall. They become snowflakes or leaves fluttering to the ground. Fingers become petals of flowers or stalks of grass. Hands can even represent abstract ideas like the question "what?" and the concept of poetry. Taken in the context of Deaf Culture, hands must also be understood as a metaphor for ASL and the communication, freedom, pride, and power that go with it. To Deaf people, hands make it possible for the members of their community to be connected -- to each other, to their history, to the hearing world -- and they are tools that allow for artistic expression and personal development. Hands are truly precious. To convey this, Valli conflates hands with nature, tapping the reverence and awe which it has long been accorded, and transfers that reverence to hands and, by extension to ASL and Deaf Culture. He also nudges the viewer to see that ASL is itself a natural language, part of the world and just as unchanging as the four seasons.

The poem illustrates other facets of Deaf culture too. Each description of a season is completely visual. "Hands" describes the Deaf experience of winter, spring, summer, and fall. The sounds of each season are never mentioned; the hearing viewer likely doesn't even notice their absence at first. This poem shows an experience of the seasons that is rich and beautiful, and missing nothing. This perspective that there is "no lack, no void, nothing missing," from the Deaf experience is indicative of the way culturally Deaf people view themselves and contrasts with the common hearing perspective that to be deaf is to lack hearing.

Superstructure

The mechanics of "Hands" carry as much of the meaning as do the signs. The particular way each sign is produced, the pattern in which Valli arranges them, and the use of space are all very symmetrical. These features serve to please the eye, but they also enhance the message. Although it never explicitly attributes symmetry, balance, and beauty to nature (or to ASL), the implication is present at every structural level, beginning with its superstructure.

The whole poem occurs in a circular (one might even argue spherical) shape. The poem comprises six sign sets (in this case pairs), and each is produced in a different spatial location. The first is produced in central, neutral space, the second in high, central space with downward movement toward the center. The third is produced to the signer's left with movement up toward the center. The fourth is produced at a low central position, the fifth to the signer's right with downward

movement toward the center, and finally the sixth pair is produced in two locations: the first sign is literally a circle drawn in the air around all the space that has just been used, and the second is a sign beginning in contact with the center of the body that then arcs up slightly into central space. The movement path of the last pair almost creates the shape of a circular target. Altogether, the locations of each sign set (and the movements within each,) make a circle, each acting as a bracket around the central space in which the first and last pairs of signs are made.

This shape becomes a central facet of the poem. The circle is traditionally a natural shape, heavy with symbolism. Planets, flowers, storms, fruits, and countless other examples of it can be found in nature, earning it a strong association with the natural world. Many of those natural examples are celestial bodies, giving the circle an additional association with the heavens and divinity; it has been used as a religious symbol in many cultures. It is a perfectly symmetrical shape with no beginning or end, and has come to symbolize balance, harmony, and eternity. It is associated with the notion of completeness and is used as a metaphor for any repeating cycle -- the life cycle, the seasons, the pattern of the sun and moon rising and setting. This connection to cycles also brings up the idea of time, a notion Valli takes advantage of not just by designing the poem as a circle, but as a clockwise circle. By spatially arranging the poem as he does, Valli is able to borrow all of this symbolism for ASL. He uses the shape to underline the idea that ASL and all that it represents is (like nature) balanced, beautiful, eternal, natural, divine, complete. The final sign set, used to refer to the

signing space, and which literally draws the shape of a circle in the air, decisively ends the poem with one more iteration of that point.

External Structure

In the poem's external structure, symmetry is most obvious in the arrangement of sign sets, which exhibits a metaphorical and a physically visible circularity. There are six pairs of signs, the first and last part of one thematic unit and the middle four part of another. The first and last are concerned with the abstract question of the poem, "what are hands?" The middle four sets are, at least on the surface, concerned with the concrete meaning of the poem; they describe the four seasons. The first and last sign sets make an abstract suggestion of a circle by creating a closed system between them -- one asks a question that the other answers -- but the visible circles the poem draws in the air are even more striking. The second through fifth sign sets are positioned to make a round frame around the first pair. The last pair is also taken into this frame, but its two-sign structure allows it to create another frame around the whole poem. The two signs in the last sign set end and begin at nearly the same point. The movement from the end of ALL-THIS to the beginning of ASL-POETRY/EXPRESS is slight, allowing them to appear almost as one. ALL-THIS frames the poem, and ASL-POETRY/EXPRESS arcs out from the body into the center of all the circles the movement paths have created. In this way, the final set is both the frame and the framed. It is no accident that the first and last sign sets are produced in central space; they carry the central meaning.

It is difficult to say whether these frames are really part of external structure. They are created by the relationships between sign sets, but they build into a whole that is part of the poem's "overall design in space," or superstructure. When sign sets create patterns which are consistent through the whole poem, they become part of both external structure and superstructure. However, when sign sets interact in a meaningful way, but not necessarily throughout the whole poem, those relationships remain only in the category of external structure.

For example, FLOWER BLOOM and TREE LEAVES-FALL are produced symmetrically and contain complementary movement. As sets, they are symmetrical simply because of location -- one is signed to the signer's left, the other to her right. The movement paths within each set are complementary, which creates more symmetry. FLOWER BLOOM is produced to the signer's left beginning at the signer's nose; the hands move down, then make a sweeping upward movement that represents blooming. TREE LEAVES-FALL is produced to the signer's right but demonstrates opposite movement. The sign starts with a static shape where the point of contact between hands is low (at the elbow), then one hand moves up, then flutters down. FLOWER BLOOM has a high-low-high movement path, and TREE LEAF-FALL has a low-high-low path. This is complementary movement, and it is visible between individual signs as well, which will be apparent in the discussion of internal structure. This opposition does not disturb the symmetry though; it increases it. The pairs produced at the top and bottom of the circle, SNOW FALL and GRASSES SWAY, use repeated movement rather than complementary movement to create

symmetry. Both have a zigzag motion in their second sign, though one moves downward in a zigzag (FALL) and the other stays on the same plane (SWAY). This zigzag movement is part of the poem's internal structure and will also be discussed in more depth later.

The sign sets in "Hands" share structural elements. The middle four pairs clearly share a noun-verb structure. The first and last sets also conform to that structure, though it takes a little more probing to see how. The last pair, ALL-THIS ASL-POETRY/EXPRESS is made of signs with multiple meanings. ALL-THIS refers to the poem, to the space the poem has occupied, to the meaning the preceding movements conveyed, to everything the poem can be said to represent. ALL-THIS refers to the poem as an object, an idea, a thing, so it is fair to consider it a noun.

ASL-POETRY/EXPRESS is also ambiguous. I've translated it as a noun, because as a verb it doesn't make sense in English, but the context of the poem allows for multiple interpretations. The final sign is usually glossed as the verb EXPRESS, but if it were signed with one hand instead of two, it would be glossed as the noun, ASL-POETRY.[1] The similarity between the signs for these two ideas cannot be ignored because both fit with the theme of the "Hands," and in fact, ASL-POETRY is a derivation of EXPRESS, but only one maintains the handshape integrity of the poem. Most signs in "Hands" are two-handed, symmetrical and the sign EXPRESS maintains that unity. However, since it is common in poetic use of ASL to alter a sign slightly to make it more visually pleasing or fit with a prevailing pattern in the poem, it is also reasonable to interpret that sign as a modified version ASL-POETRY.

Additionally, the poem could be interpreted more specifically than I have chosen; the opening question could be the performer herself asking "what are these hands for?" and the answer could be "for all of this, for me to express." The ambiguity allows the sign to satisfy all the structural requirements of the poem. It can simultaneously be contradictory things. It is both ASL-POETRY and EXPRESS, a noun and a verb; it carries multiple meanings.

The first sign set embodies similar ambiguity. HANDS is clearly a noun, but the second sign, WHAT might be confusing. Identifying parts of speech in sign language can be problematic (perhaps in part because the terminology privileges speech.) In English, "what" is not typically a verb. The translated phrase, "what are hands?" employs the word as a noun, inviting the viewer to replace "what" with an answer, but in ASL it can also function like a verb. The sign is used to imply the action of considering the question, to invite the audience to join in this contemplation. The action of posing a question, considering its answer, and arriving at a conclusion are what drive the poem, and it is the sign WHAT that is the catalyst for those actions. Technically, WHAT is not a verb, but it prompts cognitive action and so functions like one.

There is one part of Klima's and Bellugi's definition of external structure that we have not yet analyzed. They noted that poetic ASL tends to keep both hands equally active even if it means adjusting some parameters of a sign. "Hands" supports this claim because all but one of its signs are produced with two hands. Valli doesn't use the one-handed frozen sign for grass, or the common sign for snow which is

partially one-handed. Instead, Valli creates two-handed classifiers to represent those concepts and maintains equal activity between both hands (a technique which further reinforces the symmetry of the poem.)

Table 1.1 "Hands" Linguistic Element Chart

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
1	sign	handshape	type of handshape	handedness	movement	point of contact	location	eye gaze	internal rhythm	part of speech	mouth morph.	eyebrows	head
2													
3	HANDS	5	open, unmarked	2h, symm.	alternating circles	none	center	audience	2 sec.	noun	neutral	up	raised
4	WHAT	5	open, unmarked	2h, symm.	zigzag	none	center	audience	2 sec.	pronoun/verb	pursed	down	nod
5													
6	SNOW	5	open, unmarked	2h, symm.	zigzag	none	high center	hands	1 sec.	noun	neutral	up	raised
7	FALL	5	open, unmarked	2h, symm.	zigzag	none	high center	hands	2 sec.	verb	pursed	down	nod
8													
9	FLOWER	flattened O	open, marked	1h	small arc	face	left center	hands	1 sec.	noun	neutral	up	raised
10	BLOOM	flattened O --> 5	open,marked --> open/unmarked	2h, symm.	large arc up	none	left center	hands	2 sec.	verb	pursed	down	nod
11													
12	GRASS	5	open, unmarked	2h, symm.	line	none	low center	hands	1 sec.	noun	neutral	up	raised
13	SWAY	5	open, unmarked	2h, symm.	zigzag	none	low center	hands	2 sec.	verb	pursed	down	nod
14													
15	TREE	5	open, unmarked	2h	internal	elbow to hand	right center	hands	1 sec.	noun	neutral	up	raised
16	LEAF-FALL	5	open, unmarked	2h	zigzag down	elbow to hand	right center	hands	2 sec.	verb	pursed	down	nod
17													
18	ALL-THIS	5	open, unmarked	2h, symm.	circle	none	center	audience	2 sec.	noun	neutral	up	raised
19	ASL-POETRY/	s --> 5	closed/unmarked --> open unmarked	2h, symm.	arc	cntr. chest --> none	center	audience	2 sec.	noun/verb	pursed	down	nod
20	EXPRESS												

Internal Structure

The signs in this poem have many parameters and linguistic elements in common; some repeated randomly throughout the poem, others used in a way that creates a clear pattern. Table 1.1 attempts to make these patterns visible on a two-dimensional page. The signs are divided into pairs, just as they are in the poem, with the elements which are merely repeated presented in the first five columns (B-F), and those which are patterned in the next seven (G-M). The linguistic elements listed are not exhaustive; only those relevant to this particular poem were included.

Of the elements used in repetition, handshape is particularly visible; all twelve signs are produced with the "5" handshape. There are only three signs which might be exceptions: FLOWER, BLOOM, and ASL-POETRY/EXPRESS. The sign FLOWER, which is produced as a flattened "O", has an exposed palm and is very similar to an open handshape. The sign that follows it, BLOOM, acts as a bridge, also beginning with a flattened "O" and ending with the open handshape that matches the rest of the poem. The last sign of the poem, ASL-POETRY/EXPRESS is similar to BLOOM; it begins with a closed fist, but ends in an open handshape. Valli himself considered these three signs to be acceptable variations on the open handshape (Valli 1995)[2]. FLOWER, while not as open as a flat palm, is still a type of open handshape, and BLOOM and ASL-POETRY/EXPRESS end in the open handshape, thus all three are still closely connected to the dominant handshape of the poem and do not disrupt its unity.

Eleven of the twelve signs in "Hands" are produced with two hands, and nine of those are also symmetrical, in accordance with a grammatical rule in ASL. Any sign that is produced with two hands can either have the non-dominant hand still while the dominant hand is active, or both hands can be active. If both hands are active however, they must have the same handshape, and make symmetrical movements (Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney 25; Tennant and Brown 12). Only FLOWER is signed with one hand. It is also one of the asymmetrical signs, along with TREE and LEAVES-FALL. The signs within the pairs FLOWER BLOOM and TREE LEAVES-FALL may deviate from the rest of the poem on handedness and symmetry, but they provide balance and symmetry in their external structure. These are the pairs which have complementary movement, and are produced on exactly opposite sides of the circle.

Movement path is also used in repetition in "Hands." While it doesn't build to make a consistent pattern, there is a zigzag motion repeated throughout the poem that contributes to unity. WHAT, SNOW, FALL, SWAY, and LEAVES-FALL all use a zigzag movement path. WHAT, SNOW, and SWAY move back and forth on the same plane, and the others pair the zigzag with a downward movement, but they all share a rhythm and movement. These repetitions may seem trivial on their own, but it is their combined effect that is impressive.

Valli uses alternating facial expressions throughout the poem to further link signs together. He refers to this technique as non-manual signal rhyme (Valli 1995).[3] The first sign of every set is accompanied by raised eyebrows, and the second sign is

produced with lowered eyebrows, and pursed lips. This also follows a common grammatical structure in ASL known as topic-comment, in which a topic is introduced with raised eyebrows and a head-tilt, and the relating comment immediately follows and is produced with the appropriate non-manual signals, usually lowered eyebrows, and a slight nod. The result of using this structure is an alternating pattern visible on the lips and eyebrows and in the movement of the head. Finally, Valli creates an alternating rhythm in each of the middle four sign sets. The signs in the first and last pairs take about two beats per sign to execute; their timing is every so slightly drawn out. In the middle four sign sets, however, only the second sign is drawn-out; the first is a shorter movement. The result is a gentle cadence that draws everything together.

Most of the signs in "Hands" share several linguistic elements in common -- handshape, two-handedness, symmetry, and movement paths are all repeated in some or all of the signs that comprise this poem. Eyebrows, mouth shape, head tilt, and internal rhythm are repeated in an alternating pattern throughout the poem, and eye gaze and location are used to create more complex patterns. Despite having so much in common, each sign still maintains a unique meaning and place in the whole, but the similarity between signs, in particular the open handshape, creates an overall effect of unity and balance. Just as written language poets sometimes choose words for their pleasant sound, ASL poets may choose signs for their visual beauty. The symmetry of the poem is visually pleasing, and the complexity of the multiple and simultaneous patterns makes it clear that this is a heightened use of language, but more importantly it contributes to the meaning of the poem. Valli draws a connection between hands

and nature by asking what hands are, using them to describe nature, then answering

that hands are all of that, but the fact that the poem itself also physically exhibits the

characteristics Valli is summoning strengthens that connection. The versatility of

ASL is highlighted, and the beauty of nature and of ASL is physically represented.

      The fact that "Hands" is made from a single handshape is significant for more

than the symmetry and visual beauty it adds to the poem. It also means that much of

the poem is made from classifiers rather than frozen signs.[4] HANDS, WHAT,

FLOWER, TREE, and POETRY/EXPRESS are the only frozen signs in the poem.

The others are classifiers which derive their meaning from the context of the poem,

not the parameters of the sign. For example, the frozen sign for SNOW in ASL is a

compound of WHITE and a two-handed, open handshape classifier that seems to

simulate the gentle, slow movement of falling snow. "Hands" does not use that frozen

sign for SNOW, but instead uses classifiers alone to represent the concept. In

conversational ASL, classifiers are almost always paired with a noun specifier when

first used in a discourse. For example when the vehicle classifier (a 3-handshape,

fingers pointed away from the body and the palm facing sideways) is preceded by the

sign CAR, the classifier can immediately be identified as a car. If it were paired with

the sign HORSE or the fingerspelled word S-U-B-M-A-R-I-N-E, it would be

recognized accordingly.   In poetic ASL, classifiers may remain unspecified, as they

do in "Hands." By using so many classifiers in the poem, Valli gives it more

ambiguity. He releases the viewer from the more fixed connections frozen signs have

with the concepts they represent.

Notes

1. For further information about the sign used for ASL-POETRY, see Lon Kuntze's introduction to Valli's DVD, <u>ASL Poetry: Selected Works by Clayton Valli</u>. San Diego: Dawn Pictures, 1995.

2. The commentary on "Hands" included on Valli's DVD, discusses these handshape variations.

3. The commentary on "Hands" included on Valli's DVD, discusses this device.

4. Classifiers are a complex topic in the field of ASL Linguistics. They are a type of sign that can be used to represent any number of objects by representing the physical characteristics of that object. Their specific meaning depends on the signs with which are used. For example, the frozen sign for PERSON is produced with two hands in the "B" handshape, palms facing. The hands begin away from the body in neutral space, then move straight down several inches. After this sign has been used, the "1" handshape could be used as a classifier which represents a person. The way a signer moves the classifier can then be used to describe the way the person moved. For more information about classifiers see Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney.

Chapter Two
An Analysis of "Tears of Life" by Clayton Valli

Translation

Tears of Life
by Clayton Valli
translated by Jessica Cole

A baby arrives
tears of joy
Laughs and crawls
tears of discovery
Wants but can't have
tears of disappointment
Doesn't always understand
tears of frustration
Feels hurt
tears of rejection
Falls in love
tears of jubilation
Relishes the joy of companionship
tears of contentment
Becomes a parent
tears of amazement
Feels pride as her child grows
tears of love
And grows old herself
tears of resignation
Death brings sadness
tears of grief
But the generations continue, and remember
tears of nostalgia

Transcription

      I have chosen to use two columns to transcribe this poem. It is a convenient

structure for the transcription because I can use each column to represent one hand,

but this format also mirrors the overall shape of the poem in the air. The left column

represents the dominant hand and the right column the non-dominant hand. Since the signs on each hand do not occur completely simultaneously, the lines are staggered on the page. Facial expressions are printed in the same size font as the rest of the transcription because they carry just as much, if not more, meaning than the signs themselves. The descriptions of facial expressions are centered over each line not only because they are physically produced between the signer's two hands, but also because they provide a link between the two sets of signs in the poem.

<u>brows down, slight smile, with excitement amazement and fear</u>
BABY   ARRIVE
CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

<u>brows down, bigger smile, clenched face and body (cute!) closed eyes</u>
LAUGH   CRAWL
CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

<u>brows up, eyes gaze up, mouth open, anticipation, mouth "no", brows down, pout</u>
WANT   NO
CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

<u>brows knitted, head shake, gaze upward</u>
DON'T-UNDERSTAND   FRUSTRATED
CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

<u>brows still knitted, eye gaze shift to center, eyes close, head tilts down, near tears</u>
INSULT   DEFLATED-EGO
CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

<u>brows neutral, eye gaze follows CL:1, smile begins to break out, head tilts left</u>
CL:1 (person approaches)   INSPIRE
CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

brows up, body bounces slightly, big smile, closed eyes with smaller smile
CL:2 (walk together)   HAPPY
                              CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

 brows up in surprise and awe, mouth movement "pre-!", smile, slight single head nod
PREGNANT   BABY
                              CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

              eye gaze down and center, close-lipped smile, proud
GROW-UP   PROUD
                              CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

 breath, brows neutral, pursed lips, eye gaze shift to side following deterioration, sad
OLD   DETERIORATE
                              CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

 head turns, eye gaze shifts to sign, eye gaze comes center, slight head nod, pursed lips
DIE   SAD
                              CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

 eye gaze & head follow 1st sign, raised chin, gaze up → center, head tilt & smile
GENERATIONS   LOOK-BACK
                              CL:X (tear streaming down cheek)

The events described in the poem are pretty universal on their own, but Valli utilizes ASL's capacity for ambiguity to increase that feeling. There is no character set up as the specific person who experiences the events in "Tears of Life." The cycle is described in general terms as something apart from the one who lives it, allowing the cycle of life to appear as a collective experience, or one onto which the viewer can project her own specific memories. It allows a viewer of any age, race, sex, etc. to insert herself into the poem and attach each life event to her own specific memory of something similar. Every event causes a feeling that shows up on the signer's face. When she meets someone who inspires her, it makes her happy. The details of each event and what causes the feeling that follows are left out. We know that the narrator feels hurt in the fifth set, but who caused that feeling is ambiguous. The same can be said for each event described in the poem. This ambiguity allows the viewer to associate her own details with the story and experience it as her own.

While it is not as full of abstract and subtle meanings as "Hands," "Tears of Life," still creates layers of meaning. It is most obviously a poem that artfully reminds viewers of the events and emotions of their own lives and encourages them to see that we are all connected by similar experiences, but because it is composed and performed by a Deaf person, presumably for a Deaf audience and in the language of Deaf Culture, there is another interpretation as well. Just as viewers see the four seasons in "Hands" without any sound and do not notice a void, they see the stages of life in "Tears of Life" without sound, and find them familiar. They see a set of experiences that is not auditory. There is laughter, but certainly laughter is more of an activity and

a feeling than a sound. There is no lack in this experience of life, no void created by the absence of sound, in fact no absence. This description of life is just as recognizable to a hearing person as to a Deaf person, which softens the historical divide between hearing and Deaf. The events, which are uniquely Deaf because they do not revolve around sound, are also uniquely human.

Superstructure

There is an invisible vertical line in "Tears of Life" that runs from head to toe along the signer's body. Neither hand crosses over this vertical axis; every sign in the poem is produced entirely on one side or the other. The non-dominant hand repeats a vertical movement from the signer's eye to her chin, and always stays on the signer's left. The dominant hand produces signs with diverse movement paths, and sometimes pushes against that invisible line, but the few signs that use a side-to-side movement path are truncated to ensure that there is minimal crossover. The dominant hand stays in central space or to the signer's right. This clear separation combined with the repetition of vertical movement paths throughout the poem creates two vertical columns of signing space. These columns are not completely separate however; they are linked by common facial expressions produced high and center over both. The resulting shape of two columns connected at the top serves the poem well. The cycle described in "Tears of Life" repeats reliably, and represents an unwavering process. The cycle, like two vertical pillars, is steadfast.

The movement of the two columns works together to create a whole as well. The non-dominant hand acts like a drumbeat, giving the dominant hand a cadence to follow and support, and together the two hands create an interdependent visual rhythm. Klima and Bellugi compared superstructure to a melody, and "Tears of Life" is a good example of why that analogy is apt. It's also a good illustration of how superstructure and external structure overlap. The columns are made of sign sets that should be classified as external structure, but those sets work together to form the superstructure -- a shape and rhythm that can only be seen by looking at the whole poem.

External Structure

The two columns of signing space provide physical and visible balance to the poem. There are twelve sign sets in each column. The column signed by the non-dominant hand has twelve sets of one sign each, and the other has twelve sets of two signs each. This two-to-one ratio does not make the poem lopsided however, because the timing of each set is roughly equal. The sign TEAR is inflected to match the time it takes for the other hand to produce its pair of signs. This creates the handedness Klima and Bellugi identified in art sign. Both hands are equally active and carry a significant portion of the poem's meaning. The balance of the poem is further strengthened by the use of non-manual markers. The signer's facial expressions convey the emotion attached to each life event, and show what kind of tear is being shed. For example, as she signs WANT NO with her dominant hand, and CL:X

TEAR with her non-dominant hand, the performer raises her eyebrows to show anticipation with WANT, then furrows them to show disappointment at the answer of NO. The two hands are signing different words, but the non-manual parts of all three signs are unified.

The signs within each pair are linked to each other either by shared or complementary elements. Most are linked by several, but a few by just one. For example, the signs in the first set, BABY and ARRIVE, are linked by five linguistic elements; they share the same general location and an internal location, internal rhythm, handshape, and palm orientation. They are both signed in central space, and the end location of BABY serves as the starting location of ARRIVE. Both take two beats to complete, and are made with an open hand and an upturned palm. Pairs of signs might also be linked by a complementary relationship like the ones in the fourth and seventh sign sets. Both pairs contain complementary palm orientation; the first sign in the fourth pair, DON'T-UNDERSTAND faces toward the body, and the second sign, FRUSTRATE faces outward, a relationship that is reversed in the seventh set and strengthened by another complementary relationship. The first sign, a classifier for "two people walking" moves directly out from the signer's chest into neutral signing space. To begin the second sign, HAPPY, the signer's hand follows the same path in the opposite direction -- from neutral signing space back to the signer's chest. The result is a smooth movement that makes the two signs appear almost as one. The signs in each pair are linked similarly. If read from left to right,

Table 2.1 shows which elements the signs of each set have in common. When read

from top to bottom, the table shows the element patterns in the whole poem.

Table 2.1 "Tears of Life" Linguistic Element Chart

	handshape	type of handshape	palm orientation	movement	internal movement	type of movement	location	point of contact	internal rhythm	part of speech
BABY	open B	open, unmarked	up	zigzag	none	straight	low center	none	2 sec.	noun
ARRIVE	open B	open, unmarked	up	arc	none	arc	low center	none	2 sec.	verb
LAUGH	L --> bent L	closed, marked	in	none	bent -->straight	stationary	mouth	mouth	2 sec.	verb
CRAWL	V --> bent V	closed, marked	up	center -->right	bent -->straight	straight	low center	none	2 sec.	verb
WANT	5 --> bent 5	open, unmarked	up	toward body	none	straight	high right	none	1 sec.	verb
NO	3 --> flattened O	closed, marked	in	toward body	none	stationary	high right	none	1 sec.	exclamation
DON'T UNDERSTAND	S --> 1	closed, unmarked	in	none	none	stationary	right forehead	forehead	1 sec.	verb
FRUSTRATED	B	open, unmarked	out	arc	none	straight	mouth	mouth	1 sec.	adjective
INSULT	1	closed, unmarked	in	arc up	none	arc	center at body	chest	1 sec.	verb
DEFLATED-EGO	open B --> flattened O	open, unmarked	down	internal down	none	stationary	center at body	chest	1 sec.	adjective
CL:1 (person approaches)	1	closed, unmarked	in	straight up	none	straight	center at body	none	1 sec.	noun, verb
INSPIRE	flattened O --> 5	open, unmarked	in	straight up	none	straight	center at body	chest	1 sec.	adjective
CL:2 (walk together)	V	closed, marked	out	zigzag away from body	none	straight	center at body	none	2 sec.	verb
HAPPY	open B	open, unmarked	in	repeated arc toward body	none	arc	center at body	chest	2 sec.	adjective
PREGNANT	open B	open, unmarked	in	straight away from body	none	straight	low center	none	1 sec.	adjective
BABY	open B	open, unmarked	down	zigzag	none	straight	low center	none	2 sec.	noun
GROW-UP	open B	open, unmarked	down	straight up	none	straight	right low --> high	none	1 sec.	verb
PROUD	open A	closed, unmarked	down	straight up	none	straight	center body, low --> high	torso	1 sec.	adjective
OLD	S	closed, unmarked	in	straight down	none	straight	chin --> low right	chin	1 sec.	adjective
DETERIORATE	open A	closed, marked	in	straight down	none	straight	right -->low right	none	1 sec.	verb
DIE	open B	open, unmarked	down --> up	arc horizontal	none	arc	low right	none	2 sec.	verb
SAD	open B	open, unmarked	in	straight down	none	straight	high right	none	2 sec.	adjective

By bonding the sign pairs so solidly, Valli ensures that the structure of the poem is visible and clear. The columns, pairs, and constant rhythm provide a poetic consistency to underline the consistency of the life cycle. The structure also reinforces the overlapping qualities of that cycle. There are two births in the poem, that of the narrator and that of the narrator's child. The process Valli describes doesn't begin and end in the same place; the child's life begins in the middle of the narrator's. It is not a single loop on repeat as the seasons are in "Hands," but is several loops repeating and overlapping. The columns and sign sets are clearly separate in space, but they are held together by the overlapping emotion and facial expression, and the way the columns function makes the poem feel almost like two poems, occurring simultaneously. That simultaneity is mirrored by the lives described in the poem.

Internal Structure

There are thirty-six signs in "Tears of Life." Of those, thirty-one are one-handed in their frozen form. Only the five signs, WANT, DIE, GENERATIONS, and BABY (which is produced twice), are usually two-handed. A two-handed sign would require that the signer cross the vertical axis that separates the columns of signing space, disrupting the poem's overall design in space and the rhythm imposed by the repeating sign on the non-dominant hand, but Valli modifies these five signs to be one-handed, thus maintaining the structural integrity and steady rhythm of the poem. The repetition of a vertical movement path also bolsters its structure. Thirteen of the twenty-four signs on the dominant hand have a vertical movement path, and all of the

signs on the non-dominant hand move vertically. These repetitions are obviously related to structure, but their aesthetic contributions should also be noted. Internal structure supports the other levels of structure, but often its most important function in the poem is to provide the visual beauty that comes with signs that are similar, complementary, or smoothly connected.

This poem uses handshape repetition to create visual beauty as well. Of the twenty-four signs produced on the dominant hand, twelve of them are an open handshape. This means that two thirds of the poem is made up of just two handshapes: the open hand, and the "X" classifier. Most of the remaining twelve signs use either a "1," "10," or "2," handshape. (NO and DEFLATED-SELF-ESTEEM are the only exceptions, but they could be loosely categorized as a "2" handshape and an open handshape respectively.) These repetitions are visible throughout the poem, but do not occur in an identifiable pattern, making them part of internal, but not external structure

Chapter Three
Features of ASL Poetry

The Line and the Relationship between ASL and Linguistics

Linguistics as a field of study sprang from research on spoken and written languages. Until the 1960s, visual-spatial languages were not a part of that research. Linguistic concepts and methodologies, including those related to poetics, were developed in the absence of sign languages, and while this certainly doesn't render them irrelevant to ASL poetry, it does render them incomplete. The relationship between sign language and linguistics can be better understood using Padden's and Humphries' concept of "a hearing center" (39-55). The field of linguistics was developed with a narrow frame, one that was missing the d/Deaf perspective, and the result is skewed because it was developed from a hearing center. As research into signed languages continues and deepens, this will change, but for now scholars must still acknowledge the situation and strive to effect that change.

Terms like stanza, line, rhyme, and meter, are all good examples of how the study of poetics developed from a hearing center. Each of these terms is heavily dependent on the aural and orthographic aspects of written and spoken languages and to adapt them to the study of a visual-spatial language requires a fair amount of definition-stretching. Often, it is a good idea to broaden the definition of a word that was previously too narrow, but sometimes a definition cannot be stretched enough. The concept of a line is a good example of this conundrum. Valli was invested in using existing linguistic concepts to describe ASL poetry. He made a strong argument

for the existence of a line in his essay "The Nature of a Line in ASL Poetry," and his dissertation was devoted primarily to proving the existence of rhyme and meter, but he was starting out with a methodology created from a hearing center, and he studied and composed poetry using that system (Valli 1990; 1993). Both his method, and his sample were influenced by existing methodologies. In the interest of reshaping the umbrella rather than forcing ASL to fit beneath it, the shortfalls of linguistic terms must be acknowledged. In the case of the line, although convenient and familiar, it is inaccurate and confining when applied to ASL poetry.

Lines at their most basic are simply groups of words, put together for poetic effect. The reasons a written language poet chooses to group words vary, but the representation of that grouping is always the same -- text, printed sequentially in two-dimensions on a page; in other words, a line. It is the nature of written languages to be represented in lines because they are fundamentally sequential. Written poetry is bound by the limitations of a two-dimensional page, and English by a left-right, up-down sequentiality. Written poems don't generally appear as squares of text, or even as lines in the shape of circles and triangles, but even when they do, they are still bound by those limitations and appear as a line of text. The eye must perceive them sequentially, and to do so must follow a linear path. Furthermore, if a poet chooses to group words in one way, but writes them down in another, it is the physical representation that will win out. The physical, visual existence is essential to the term "line." No matter what the abstract reasons for it to appear as such, a line of written

poetry is a line because of the way it looks on a page. It cannot be divorced from that literal meaning, and in fact the literal meaning is dominant over the abstract.

How words are divided into groups, or lines, varies. Written language poets might group words based on the natural rate of breath when those words are spoken, on a particular rhyme scheme, on how many syllables are in each word, or on the stress patterns created when those syllables are spoken (known as meter). These criteria depend on the aural qualities of a spoken language; the grouping is determined by the *sound* of the words. Poets might also rely on the orthographic aspects of a written language to determine where to make a line. Many critics have noticed that each couplet in William Carlos Williams' famous poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow" is physically shaped like a wheelbarrow. Visual poets experimented with this technique as well. When deciding where to break and begin lines, a written language poet might consider the psychological impact of the shape of a line or whole poem, and of the white space present or absent on the page. Words could also be grouped for cumulative meaning, shared theme, or to create a repeating pattern, and since these reasons are unrelated to sound or orthography they might also be applied to poetry in sign language.

The situation is more complex in ASL, in part because there is less research, but also because the simultaneity of ASL means that the reasons for grouping signs together and the ways to represent the resulting group cannot be separated. A poet working in a written language decides how to group words together, then as a representation of those choices, writes those words in a line. A poet working in sign

language decides how to group signs together, then as a representation of those choices, produces those signs in the same location, or with similar handshapes, or with a movement path that connects them all, or with raised eyebrows, or at a staccato rate of signing. There are many linguistic elements in ASL which can be used in any combination to create similarity and/or cohesion between groups of otherwise unlike and unconnected signs.

The pairs of signs in "Hands," are a good example. FLOWER and BLOOM are obviously a sign set. The two signs share handshape, general location, and theme (they both describe spring.) Together they complete a topic-comment structure, and repeat the noun-verb construction and the rhythm of other sign sets in the poem. Their combined movement is complementary to that of the sign set which describes fall and appears on the opposite side of the poem's signing space. These factors indicate to the viewer that FLOWER and BLOOM are a pair, but they could also be the reason the poet chose to place them together. Groups of signs can be decided *or* represented by shared, complementary or patterned parameters, by common theme or rhythm. The reasons behind such groupings and the manifestation of them are inextricable.

Dirksen Bauman suggests a couple of other strategies scholars (and presumably poets themselves) might use to determine a "line" in ASL Poetry. Since it is a visual form, he reasons that other visual forms may offer useful methodologies; thus he turns to film and the rules used to define a scene. (2006 109-114). The idea makes sense. Debbie Rennie's poem "Missing Children," is so visual that even non-signers might recognize scenes by changes of setting and characters. Valli's poem

"Sit and Smile" also shows clear scenes through the change of setting. But what about poems with only one scene, like Rennie's poem, "Big Dog, Little Dog," which occurs entirely in a Paris cafe? How do scholars divide the poem into chunks small enough to study? There may be only one setting in "Big Dog, Little Dog," but there are changes in signing that look much like a change in camera angle. In fact, Rennie states explicitly in her introduction to this poem that she was attempting to play with cinematic techniques (Rennie 1995.) She uses establishing shots, close-ups, and quick cuts. Perhaps some poems could be divided into linguistic chunks by changes in "camera angle."

Film certainly offers an intriguing frame through which to see ASL poetry, but it too is incomplete. Describing a poem in terms of scenes only works when the poem is actively creating concrete images. How does one apply the concept of a scene to the first and last sign sets of "Hands?" There is a visible movement path in the air as the performer's hands sign HANDS WHAT, but is there an image that could be considered a scene? It seems that the more abstract a poem, the less applicable concepts of scenes and camera angles would be. Iconic signs like TREE and SNOW lend themselves well to a film-centered methodology, but arbitrary signs like WHAT and LIGHT do not.[1] Another of Bauman's suggestions offers a possible solution. Rather than thinking of a line in the context of written poetry, he imagines the lines made in a drawing, or in the case of ASL, made with the hands in the air (2006 104-109). This kind of line is made by the movement path of every sign, and by the movement of the hands between signs. This kind of line would serve to create the

"overall design in space" that Valli identifies, and that Klima and Bellugi would call superstructure. In the context of ASL Poetry, the term "line" may have nothing to do with how to group signs together. The lines made in three-dimensional space by the signer's hands could be analyzed for the picture they create, for the continuity and strength of the lines, much as one would look at brush strokes in a painting.

No matter what strategy a poet uses to group words together, or which definition of line scholars use, it is clear that the issue is complex. ASL Literature did not spring magically from an isolated Deaf community; it was influenced by hearing culture. Just as fingerspelling developed as a result of contact between English and ASL, the idea of a line in ASL Poetry has developed as a result of contact between a field focused on the analysis of poetry in written and spoken languages and a newborn field focused on the analysis of poetry in signed languages. To this day, it is rare that a Deaf student receives significant instruction in the literature of ASL. For decades, Deaf students were taught that written poetry was the standard, and their role models were hearing poets who composed in languages that could be spoken and written. ASL poetry is still evolving, but it is a hybrid of spoken/written and signed languages.

Signs and Sign-Sets

Despite Bauman's suggestion that we think of lines in their aesthetic sense, in the context of poetry, the term "line" still implies a horizontal printing of sequential text. For this reason, when individual signs are grouped together by one or more of the strategies discussed above, I refer to them as sign sets. Like individual signs, sign

sets are enclosed poetic units. A single sign has a unique set of parameters, but a sign set has a unique combination of parameters; the signs within it interact to create characteristics that are true of the sign set as a whole, but not necessarily of each sign. In "Hands," the second pair begins with the sign SNOW. It is symmetrical, produced with two hands in high central space, and made with a soft, open handshape; these are qualities of the individual sign. When it is combined with FALL, it creates a sign set with a noun-verb structure, a high, central location, and a downward movement path; these are qualities of the sign set. In the case of "Hands," signs are grouped into pairs, and the way the pairs interact with each other to create poetic effect is just as important as the way single signs interact with each other. The sign sets, SNOW FALL and GRASS SWAY, are linked to each other not just by the repeated handshape of each sign, but also by characteristics fundamental to the whole set. Each set ends with a sign that has a slightly drawn out zigzag movement, and they are each produced in complementary locations -- one high and center, the other low and center. These positions are the building blocks of the poem's overall circular shape; it is the interactions between sets that make that shape possible.

The interaction within each sign set is also significant. In "Tears of Life" the pairs are a repeating structure throughout the poem, but it is the unity created within each that gives the poem a feeling of fluidity. The signs in every pair are linked by multiple linguistic elements, and several of them also have complementary movement paths that are so smooth, the pair seems almost like a single sign. The fifth sign set is one example. The first sign, INSULT, moves quickly inwards and upwards to the

chest, where DEFLATED-EGO is produced -- a static sign with a downward internal movement. The effect of the two motions combined looks like a single movement path that spans two signs. The seventh set accomplishes the same thing by utilizing the movement between signs. CL:2 (walk together) moves out from the chest and the signer must move her hand backwards along the same path to begin the next sign, HAPPY. Combined, the pair creates a smooth motion in the shape of a loop. The pairs in "Tears of Life" are particularly strong because of interactions like this that happen inside the poetic unit of a sign set.

It is easy to associate these poetic units with Klima's and Bellugi's levels of structure -- individual signs with internal structure, sign sets with external, and the whole with superstructure. The distinctions between them are not so clear though. The relationship between individual signs would normally be classified as internal structure, but if those relationships make sign sets that then have characteristics of their own and can interact with other sign sets, then the individual signs have become part of external structure too. When either single signs or sign sets combine to form patterns that are consistent throughout the entire poem, they become part of superstructure. The fact is that the three levels of structure identified by Klima and Bellugi are not distinct, and rather than thinking of them as levels, they should be thought of as three overlapping parts, like a Venn diagram. Some signs are a part of all three structures; others are part of just one or two.

The Complex Web of Linguistic Elements

Phonemes, the tiny aural units that make up words, are sometimes considered analogous to parameters, the tiny manual units that make up signs, but there is a fundamental difference between the two. Phonemes combine sequentially to form words, while parameters combine simultaneously to form signs. This simultaneity is an integral part of ASL, and it is something written/spoken languages cannot replicate. A person cannot produce or perceive two words at once. Languages that are spoken and written are strictly sequential, both in their production and processing. ASL however, because it is a visual-spatial language, is capable of producing two units of meaning at the same time, and the viewer is able to perceive and process them both, provided they occur within one frame of vision. Signs are made up of five basic parameters (handshape, location, palm orientation, movement, and non-manual markers), but there are a multitude of other linguistic elements involved in the production of a sign. All of these elements are produced simultaneously and can be used to form scaffolding patterns, giving ASL a sort of visual geometry. ASL poetry exploits this facet of the language.

I've compiled a list of parameters and linguistic elements which can be used for poetic patterning in ASL. It is meant as a quick reference rather than a comprehensive glossary.

Quick Reference Guide to Linguistic Elements in ASL

handshape -- the shape(s) of each hand

> *type of handshape* -- Handshapes can be "marked" or "unmarked," and "open"
>
> or "closed." There are seven marked handshapes in ASL, which are so labeled
>
> because they contain the maximum amount of articulatory difference between
>
> them (Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney 201). Open handshapes have an exposed
>
> palm, and closed handshapes do not.

palm orientation -- the direction(s) in which the palm faces

movement path -- the shape of the movement the hand or arm makes

> *type of movement path* -- arc, straight, or seven contour. A single movement
>
> path may contain one or more iterations of one of these.

location -- the placement(s) of the hand or arm. Location may also refer to the general

area of signing space in which a sign is produced.

> *point of contact* -- the point(s) at which the hand(s) or arm(s) come into contact
>
> with each other or with the body

facial expression -- there are specific facial markers which contain grammatical

meaning, but the face can also be used to convey general emotion

> *mouth morpheme* -- the shape(s) of the mouth and tongue
>
> *eyebrows* -- i.e. raised, lowered, or neutral
>
> *eye gaze* -- the direction in which the eyes are focused
>
> *eye shape* -- i.e. widened, squinting, neutral

internal rhythm/movement hold pattern -- the rhythm of a single sign, independent of the surrounding signs. This might be measured by time or with the movement-hold model.

internal movement -- the movement of the fingers within a sign

rate of signing -- the general tempo of an utterance. This can be applied to a single sign, or a group of signs.

signing window -- generally signs are produced within an imaginary window that extends a few inches past each side of the torso, but this can be adjusted to be smaller or bigger.

head tilt -- position of the head

body shift -- position of the torso and shoulders. i.e. slouching, thrust forward, laid back, or pointed to one side or another

type of sign -- signs might be one-handed or two-handed, symmetrical or asymmetrical, static or active, frozen or modified, a classifier, or a neologism

part of speech -- noun, verb, adjective, pronoun, adverb, etc.

Most of these elements can be used in three ways -- they can be used in complement, repeated, or patterned. There is overlap between these three methods; repetition and complement are sometimes also a pattern, sometimes not. As has already been discussed, the movement paths within several sign sets in "Tears of Life," including INSULT DEFLATED-EGO and CL:2 (people walking) HAPPY are complementary. In "Hands," the movements in the sign set TREE LEAF-FALL are complementary to those in the set FLOWER BLOOM (these sets also have complementary locations.) Each of these pairs begins with sign that moves in one direction and follows with one that moves in the exact opposite direction, creating balance and symmetry. In CL:2 (people walking) HAPPY, the complementary movement is created not just with the movement paths of the frozen version of each sign, but also by utilizing the incidental movement between the two signs. Movement appears to be particularly well-suited to complementary use, but theoretically any element could be used in this way. Valli uses complementary palm orientation in "At the Park," when he alternates between signs in which the palm faces up and signs in which it faces down. In "Hands," he uses complementary facial expression, (as well as repetition and pattern) -- by repeating an alternating pattern of raised and lowered eyebrows, and pursed and neutral lips.

Repetition has been well-documented and is a fairly straightforward technique in ASL Poetry. The elements Sutton-Spence identifies -- handshape, movement, location, timing, grammatical structure, individual signs, or any pattern of those -- can certainly be repeated, and so can any of the elements listed above. Repetition can

create balance and unity in sign sets and whole poems, whether it forms a clear pattern or not. The zigzag movement path used so often in "Hands" is repeated, but it is done randomly throughout the poem. (It appears in the second, third, fourth, eighth, and tenth signs). Thus the zigzag path is an example of repeated movement, but not of patterned movement. Location, in contrast, is a patterned element in the poem because every other sign marks a new general location.

Simple repetition can influence the overall tone of a poem and affect its register or the mood it conveys, but it is not a part of its overall structure. When repetition builds a pattern, it becomes integral to the form of a poem. Pattern is a consistent, organized use of repetition, and it can be as simple or as complex as the poet's skill and imagination allow. Most of the patterns in "Hands" and "Tears of Life" are individually simple, but there are so many that they become an impressive display of linguistic complexity. Since any given sign could embody as many as twenty linguistic elements, this allows for a massive number of possible combinations, all existing simultaneously. "Hands" repeats an alternating pattern with eyebrows, mouth movement, head tilt, and grammatical structure. At the same time, it creates a more complex pattern with location, eye gaze, and rhythm. Handshape, type of handshape, type of sign, and movement path aren't patterned throughout the poem, but they are repeated or used in complement at various points. (The pattern charts included in the previous chapters show this layering of simultaneous patterns in both "Hands" and "Tears of Life.")

The Possibility of Form

ASL poetry has proven to have an array of poetic devices, and it may also have unique poetic forms. In written/spoken poetry form is determined by syllable count, number of lines, and type of rhyme, among other structural factors. Identifying such features, or equivalents of them in ASL is problematic, but that does not mean there are no poetic forms in ASL. Just as the sonnet and haiku developed in their respective cultures and languages, so might a poetic form develop from Deaf Culture. The youth of the field and the limited number of published ASL poems makes it impossible to say definitively that a given pattern constitutes a distinct form, but there are indications that such forms are developing.

According to Valli, there are four types of poems, or "frozen poetic patterns" which are popular in the Deaf community. Each of them abides by a specific "handshape constraint" -- numerical, alphabetical, initialized, or worded. The first must use only signs with a numeral handshape. The second is also known as an A to Z story; each sign is produced with a letter handshape in sequence from A to Z. The third uses signs like FAMILY or LAZY, which are produced "using the handshape that reflects the first written letter of an English word," to spell out "a sentence that tells you something about the poem itself." This is similar to the last type of poem, which uses handshape to spell out just one word rather than a whole sentence (Valli and Dawn Sign Press). These four types might be considered a class of forms; they are all "handshape constraint poems," and there are other constraints which Valli does not list. Patrick Graybill's "Friends" demonstrates what could be called a "single

handshape constraint." Using only the "1" handshape, he tells the story of two people who argue, but resolve their differences and become friends.[2] Another common constraint is to use only open handshapes like "5" and "B." This type of poem is potentially a unique form. There are examples of it from three different poets and a set of rules has begun to emerge.

"Liberation" and "Distant Call" by Patrick Graybill, "Hands" by Clayton Valli, and "H_2O" by Jeremy Quiroga all rely almost entirely on open handshapes. Dorothy Miles also has two poems, "Invocation," and "Seasons" that rely heavily on open handshapes, but her frequent use English-based signs like IS and ARE break the rules which seem to govern the other examples.[3]

An "open handshape poem" is composed of signs produced with "B" and "5" handshapes. The fingers may be flat, or the slightly bent, or even curved into a "C," but the palm is always exposed. Also acceptable are the flattened "O" handshape and signs that have two shapes within them, but begin or end with one of the open handshapes. These variations must be used sparingly however, so that the bulk of the signs in the poem are fully open. Valli uses both a flattened "O" and a two-handshape sign in "Hands," and discusses the choice on his DVD, saying simply that all the handshapes in the poem are open, except FLOWER, BLOOM, and POETRY, but as he demonstrates the open qualities of each of those signs, he asserts that they are acceptable variations (Valli 1995). "Distant Call" and "H_2O" deviate slightly from these standards. In "Distant Call," the final sign is a "1" handshape that is used specifically for its contrast with the rest of the signs in the poem. The open signs

describe a grand, abstract call that the narrator feels he is getting from God, but the final sign, ALONE, personalizes that call and the narrator's certainty that he must follow it. In "H_2O," Quiroga uses a loose "E" to show water has frozen into a block, and "1" handshape to show that block melting drop by drop until it gathers into a stronger flow. The rest of the poem, which describes the water cycle, is made with the "5" handshape. It seems then, that there is some room in these kinds of poems for deviations, but they must be limited and purposeful.

There are some features in common between these poems which are unrelated to handshape. They tend to have an increased number of two-handed signs, which results in an extremely high level of symmetry, and a high number of classifiers over frozen signs. "Hands" and "H_2O" share circular superstructures, and both describe a natural, repeating cycle. All this is not enough to determine the solidity of the proposed rules of open handshape poems, but the similarities between them give future poets a foundation that can be copied and adjusted, perhaps eventually allowing the rules to evolve and settle into a clear and established form.

Handshape rules are not the only way to categorize poems, however. In addition to satisfying the criteria for an open handshape poem, "Hands," also adheres to a set of structural constraints -- one to which "Tears of Life" also conforms. Conceptually, "Hands" revolves around the description of a repeating cycle: that of the four seasons. The bulk of the poem is spent describing the four stages of that repeating cycle, using just two signs to describe each. The first and last sign sets do not describe stages of the cycle, but they do adhere to the two sign structure. "Tears of

Life" demonstrates a startlingly similar structure – both conceptually and mechanically. It also describes a repeating cycle and uses the same structure to describe its stages: two signs per stage. Again, there is not enough evidence to call this sort of "cyclic poem" a particular poetic form in ASL, but it does bolster the hypothesis that ASL is capable of producing such forms.

The problem of establishing form in ASL poetry is not only one of sample size, it is also one of definition. Traditionally, form in written poetry refers to the structural components of a poem -- how many syllables or lines make up the poem and in what pattern they appear. By this definition, the two cyclic poems are better examples of a form than the six open handshape poems. The sign pairs are identifiable linguistic units that can be counted like syllables and lines, but ASL poems are not necessarily built from pieces equivalent to syllables and lines, so using such measurements to define form is not always precise. Furthermore, the use of morphing (a technique that will be explored in the next section) can make dividing a work into separate linguistic pieces not just difficult but actually detrimental to an understanding of the poem. To complicate the issue more, there are multiple levels of structure in an ASL poem, with varying levels of visibility. The sign pairs of "Hands" and "Tears of Life" are easy to label as structural elements, perhaps because they most closely resemble the pre-existing notions of poetic structure because they are easily transcribed into lines and couplets. The use of handshape, however, can be applied to poems of any length, with any type of external or super structure, making it seem like the equivalent of alliteration or careful diction. Under Klima's and Bellugi's understanding of ASL

poetry though, the choice of handshape is part of a poem's internal structure and is integral to the other levels. In this way, establishing forms in ASL poetry challenges our traditional understanding of both form and structure.

The Nature of Morphing

There is a phenomenon in ASL poetry that many scholars have recognized but which has yet to be clearly defined or labeled. Klima and Bellugi showed art sign has less movement between signs, giving it an overall flow that is different from everyday signing (348). Valli describes the modification of signs and argues that they can sometimes be blended together through a process he refers to as "assimilation" (Valli and Dawn Sign Press). Peter Cook calls attention to "transformations," a process by which one sign transforms almost seamlessly into another (Wolter 155). Sutton-Spence points to the way a poet might choose signs with "formational similarity" so that there is less transitional movement in the poem (95). Regardless of the label, each of these observations has one thing in common -- they have something to do with the transition from one sign to the next. Sutton-Spence describes it well:

> In everyday signing, the end location and handshape of one sign are likely to be different from the start location and handshape of the next sign. Thus in everyday signing, there is considerable change of handshape between the signs and considerable 'meaningless' transition movement between signs as the hands move to the next location. (95)

But in poetic ASL, as all of these scholars have noticed, there is often very little "meaningless transition movement." Poets tend to reduce it, or even eliminate it completely, but how exactly they do so is not yet clear.

Klima and Bellugi analyze an ASL translation by Bernard Bragg. He translates one line from an e.e. cumming's poem, "since feeling is first," into both literal ASL and art sign. He begins his poetic translation with BECAUSE and holds its ending shape and location until he has finished producing FEELING with his other hand, which he also holds in its ending shape and location. The next sign is ITSELF which begins (and ends) with the ending handshape of BECAUSE, then moves downwards into contact with the other hand. Again, he holds the ending handshape and location, then slightly changes the handshape of the sign for FEELING so that he can use the index finger of that hand to point to the thumb of the other for the final sign, FIRST (Klima and Bellugi 344-345). There is very little transitional movement in this example. To accomplish this, Bragg switches between his right and left hands, and chooses signs that share their beginning and ending handshapes and locations.

Sutton-Spence describes much the same thing, but she calls it morphing:

Another poetic device that relies on the formational similarity of two signs is the idea of 'morphing' or blending. Two signs that have very similar forms are used next to each other, so that they appear to blend. As the two signs blend, so the two meanings of the signs are brought closer together. Morphing is part of a particularly important device in sign language poems, namely the reduction of movements of transition between signs. Although minimal transitions between signs may be achieved with signs with varying degrees of formational similarity, morphing allows the minimum of transition between two signs because the two signs are so similar as to be almost identical. (95)

It is important to note that Sutton-Spence makes no mention of modifying signs so that they are similar. She is only pointing out that by selecting signs "that have very similar forms," a poet can create an effect of blending. Klima's and Bellugi's example

might be used to illustrate this type of sign choice as well, though the production of

the similar signs, BECAUSE and ITSELF, is interrupted by the production of a

dissimilar sign on the other hand. The sign set in "Tears of Life," INSULT

DEFLATED-EGO is also an example. In their standard forms, the end location of the

first sign is the same as the start location of the second sign, so the two naturally flow

into each other. This keeps transitional movement to a minimum, but it does not

exactly *reduce* movement. If the two signs were used in casual conversation, they

would have precisely the same transitional movement between them as they do in the

poem. The only poetic license taken is the choice to place the signs next to each other.

Sign choice then, can affect meaningless movement so that the overall amount of it in

a poem is less than that found in a conversation, but it does not change the transitional

movement that naturally exists between two signs.

Of course, signs do not always morph into each other naturally. One example

Sutton-Spence offers comes from a Dorothy Miles poem in which Miles signs GOD,

then turns her hand ninety degrees and shifts the focus of her eyes to sign MIRROR

(94-96). The two signs have a very high degree of formational similarity, and the

slight change in palm orientation and eye gaze does suffice to change meaning, but

Miles modifies the second sign slightly from its citation form. This is not a morph

accomplished entirely by sign choice. MIRROR is usually signed with a repeated

pivot in the wrist, but Miles omits that movement. Without this very slight

modification, GOD would still flow easily into MIRROR, but the modification

suggests that Sutton-Spence recognizes that morphing is not simply a matter of sign

choice. One way of morphing may be to place two signs together that *are* similar, but another way, which Valli also recognizes, may be to manipulate signs so that they *become* similar.

Valli takes an example from his poem, "Pawns," in which two of the last few signs are modified versions of FLAG and DEATH. In their citation forms, these two signs would have some meaningless movement between them, but in the poem, they blend smoothly because Valli slightly modifies each. In its standard form, FLAG is signed with two hands, one acting as a base on which the elbow of the other rests so that the forearm can represent a flagpole and the open, waving, hand can represent a flag. In this poem, that sign is modified so that neither hand acts as a base, allowing each to represent a separate pole and flag. It should be noted that this is not merely an aesthetic adjustment, the modified sign gains new meaning. It becomes a new sign: TWO-FLAGS-WAVING. The ensuing sign, DEATH is also modified. Instead of the frozen form in which both hands are placed flat in central space, one palm up, one palm down, and then flipped, DEATH is signed as a long fall, with both hands beginning high from the location of the flags in the last sign, then moving with a smooth, round flourish down to central space, and ending decisively with both palms facing up. This also becomes a new sign with additional meaning. It still means "death," but also includes a sense of finality and suddenness, and implies the metaphorical death of a country. In this case, Valli has not just kept transitional movement to a minimum by choosing signs which have similar forms, he has reduced

the movement which would usually be present between the two signs by modifying each of them.

Valli borrows the linguistic term, assimilation, to identify another method of reducing transitional movement between signs. According to him, assimilation takes place "when several signs are blended into one sign... The meanings of these signs are kept, but form or production of the sign changes" (Valli and Dawn Sign Press). In theory, this method doesn't just reduce transitional movement, it eliminates it completely by replacing two or more signs with one. This is also an example of what Sutton-Spence calls "neologism" (69-86). By eliminating the transitional movement between signs, and collapsing two or more signs into one, a new sign has been created, one that is not part of standard, conversational ASL, but still abides by the linguistic rules of the language and has a recognizable meaning. Not all morphing yields new meaning, but when it does, it is both morphing *and* neologism, indicating that there is a connection between the two phenomena.

In "Pawns," the signs in question are visibly separate. For TWO-FLAGS-WAVING, the hands must move back and forth from the wrist in a waving motion, but for DEATH, a quick loop in the air that ends with a long straight movement down through space is used. Thus, there is a moment when the waving motion for the first sign must stop to begin the movement for DEATH. That moment separates the signs from each other. Additionally, the two signs share only handshape; the rest of their parameters are different. Valli offers a contrasting example from his poem "Dew on Spiderweb," in which he claims three signs are combined into just one. The narrator

of the poem sees a beautiful spiderweb, which she attempts to capture by taking

pictures, but by the end of the poem she realizes that the memory she has of the

spiderweb is more important and meaningful than the photos she might take of it. To

show this final revelation, the signs for WHOLE, TOGETHER, and a classifier

meaning 'bring to my mind and memory,' are combined into a single sign that Valli

glosses as WHOLE-TOGETHER-BRING-INTO-MY-MIND (Valli and Dawn Sign

Press). To produce the sign, the signer uses two hands in a B handshape to draw a

circle in the air, then shifts the handshape slightly into a flattened "O" as she brings

both hands up to her forehead. The movement path is smooth and uninterrupted as it

passes through the locations of the frozen signs being combined, and there is a single,

identifiable set of parameters that fits within the grammatical rules of ASL. In the

absence of any obvious distinctions between them, the three signs do appear to be one.

Developing a comprehensive definition of morphing is beyond the scope of

this paper, but these examples do shed some light on the concept. Morphing is not a

single technique, but an array of techniques poets may use to reduce the meaningless

movement that separates signs. The preceding examples show at least three methods

of accomplishing this. A poet might choose signs which share formational qualities

and thus flow into each other without any modifications, a technique which might be

called "natural morphing." If signs do not have similar forms, a poet might blend

several signs together, or modify existing signs to smooth the transition between them.

This might be called, "manipulated morphing,'" because the poet has manipulated

signs which would not otherwise morph into one another. This category of morphing would include the example from "Pawns," and also the process of assimilation Valli demonstrates in "Dew on Spiderweb." These two categories are helpful for classifying instances of morphing in which both signs have frozen forms, but they are not sufficient. The examples discussed so far are straightforward attempts to bring two clearly separate signs closer together, but many signs in ASL are not so clearly separate.

Cook demonstrates a student-generated transformation in which a classifier produced with one hand in an open "O" handshape is used to represent a bubble floating through the air. It then falls and appears to land on something. The next sign is a pantomime for pulling back a pool cue and hitting the ball, which makes it clear that the bubble has fallen onto a pool table and that the classifier now represents a cue ball. In another example Cook uses classifiers and pantomime to represent hands brushing hair, which then transform into hands playing a violin, then drums, and finally tying a bow (Cook 2006). In these examples, the signs which are morphed are classifiers rather than frozen signs. They do not have a baseline, or "natural" amount of transition space and time between them, and they have not been modified from a standard form, but the transformations do seem to be a type of morphing. There is an obvious smoothness to the whole utterance and very little transition from one sign to the next.

This fluidity is perhaps most visible -- and most pronounced -- in Cook's own work. The blending of one sign into the next could arguably be his trademark.

"Poetry" and "The United States of ASL Poetry," are particularly vivid examples of the way Cook uses the technique of morphing, and any serious study of the phenomenon should include a detailed investigation of both.[4] "Poetry" has a feeling of singularity, as if no part of the piece could be separated from the others. This is not to say that there are no pauses, or other evidence of linguistic chunks, but there is an overall effect that is unique to this poem, and to much of Cook's work, that makes the piece appear to be a continuous utterance. Cook sees morphing, or transformations, as a way to help artists (in his case, students in his workshops) limit their tendency to babble, as a particularly efficient way to convey information, and as a way to push the boundaries of ASL, forcing its vocabulary and its capabilities to expand (Wolter 155; Cook 2006.) It is no wonder morphing has become one of his signatures; it raises a multitude of questions.

If morphing reduces the transitional movement between signs, there must be a measure of movement that exists before and after its application. How could that measure be determined? The easy answer is to point to the transitional movement that exists between two signs in their unmodified, citation form, but if the signs in question are classifiers or neologisms without clear citation forms, that answer is inadequate. When frozen signs are involved, morphing can be said to have a direct effect on the transitional movement between those particular signs, but when classifiers are involved, perhaps the effect of morphing must be considered more generally, as something that applies to the whole poetic utterance, not just the relationship between two signs. However, if the flow between productive signs is particularly smooth, has

the poet exerted any influence over the transition between them? It could be argued that creating signs which are formationally similar is another way of strategically placing signs so that they morph naturally. Is that different from modifying existing signs to do the same?

Yet instinct insists that there is a similarity between the classifiers which Cook's students strings together, the mixture of signs he blends in his own work, the frozen signs which flow so naturally from one to the next which Sutton-Spence points to in Miles' poetry, and the modified signs which Valli connects. All have what Sutton-Spence calls "a more fluid flow of signing," and each of them raises the question of what exactly distinguishes one sign from another (95). Can two signs become one if they share just one movement path like WHOLE-TOGETHER-BRING-INTO-MY-MIND? What is it that makes that example appear to the eye as one sign, but INSULT DEFLATE-EGO appears as two? Each pair exhibits just one movement path. Is the latter pair separated by the existence of two sets of parameters, or by the two-sign structure that surrounds it? Morphing does not just reduce transitional movement, it actually blurs the distinctions between signs.

By extension, it also blurs meaning. Sutton-Spence agrees with Cook's point that morphing makes a poem more efficient when she writes that "it makes for a denser text," and in her initial description of morphing when she says, "as the two signs blend, so the two meanings of the signs are brought closer together" (95). With this, Sutton-Spence identifies one of the crucial facets of morphing.   Reducing the transition between signs is what it does mechanically, but poetically, morphing is a

way to make the piece do more work, a way to manipulate meaning, to bring the meanings of signs closer together not just conceptually, but physically. It can easily connect two disparate ideas, like bubbles and cue balls, or encourage the viewer to see a metaphor between God and one's own image. With linguistic, aesthetic and poetic implications for a poem, morphing may be one of the most powerful techniques available to an ASL poet.

Notes

1. Signs exist on a spectrum from arbitrary to iconic. TREE is signed with one hand stationary and held horizontal in front of the body. The elbow of the other hand rests on this stationary arm with an open 5 handshape, while the wrist pivots quickly in a repetitive wiggling movement. It is considered an iconic sign because it is visually similar to the real object it represents: the forearm is like the trunk of a tree and the fluttering hand is like branches and leaves. LIGHT is signed with one hand, palm facing inwards with the middle finger flicking the chin. This is a more arbitrary than it is iconic because it is not physically similar to a real light.

2. This poem is featured on the VHS <u>Tales from the Green Books</u>.

3. Graybill's poems are included on Sign Media Inc.'s <u>Poetry in Motion</u> series. Valli's is on his Dawn Sign Press DVD. Quiroga's poem is available online in the ASL issue of <u>Slope Magazine</u>, and Miles' poems are included on her VHS, <u>Gestures</u>.

4. "Poetry" is available on the DVD included with <u>Signing the Body Poetic</u>, and on Cook's own VHS tapes, "The Year of Walking Dogs: Early Poems (1984-1990)" and ""The Can't Touch Tours: Current Works (1990-2003)"

Conclusion

Deaf history, particularly the prohibition against sign language, gives ASL Literature particular significance. ASL Poetry, and all literary use of ASL is a rebellion. To use a language once called inferior and animalistic, once suppressed by teachers who bound students' hands behind their backs, is an act of defiance. Using it at all is defiant, but using it artistically is defiant *and* triumphant. It is a rejection of all the negative beliefs thrust upon Deaf people about themselves and their language; it is a celebration of ASL and an assertion of cultural pride.

ASL can convey multiple units of information simultaneously, forming intricate patterns of linguistic elements. It creates a visual duality with the image it evokes in the mind, and the one it literally embodies as a poet's hands move through space. ASL Poetry mixes parts of many artistic disciplines and shows indications that it is developing unique poetic forms. Through morphing, it can connect two ideas linguistically, aesthetically, and physically. Some of these features may have no equivalents in written languages; the fundamental differences between two-dimensional aural languages and a three-dimensional visual one, may preclude the possibility, but such features offer a challenge, a new starting point for experimentation. These distinctions represent just a small fraction of the knowledge that has already been gleaned from the study of ASL, and that has yet to be discovered.

Academia's increased interest in ASL Poetry and literature over the last decade has added to the fields of Deaf studies, but also to the fields of literature, linguistics, cultural theory, and disability studies. Despite this, there is a relative paucity of published ASL poems compared to those available in other languages. A generous count of published ASL Poetry DVDs and videos yields a single digit number, and the individual poems available there or on the internet number less than 100. The fact that it is even reasonable to try to count ASL poems is testament to their scarcity. Most published work is decades old, and those who produced it are no longer publishing new material. While some poems that are self-published or found elsewhere on the internet are clear and carefully composed, many are of a low video quality that makes them difficult to view.

Live performance of ASL literature is not nearly so stagnant, though storytelling tends to be more popular than poetry. Northeastern University's annual ASL Festival is in its twelfth year. It features prominent Deaf storytellers and includes a competition that showcases poems and stories by Deaf students in the area. In New York, Deaf students have been participating in the spoken word scene, and are the subject of a forthcoming documentary, "DeafJam," a film which in turn inspired the development of a monthly ASL Poetry and storytelling series at The Bowery Poetry Club. Gallaudet hosts a channel for ASL storytelling on Bison TV. When Deaf and ASL-related organizations like the National Association for the Deaf (NAD) or the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) hold conferences, it is now common to feature ASL performers in the evening activities. Peter Cook helps run poetry

workshops at some residential schools, and many schools and mainstreaming programs regularly hold small, student performances of ASL stories, skits, and poems.

This tradition of live, face-to-face performance has a long history in Deaf Culture, and its continued growth is valuable to the community, but recordings of ASL Poetry are also important, because they serve a different purpose. A video or DVD can be slowed down, paused, and watched repeatedly without variation, allowing for a level of literary analysis that live performance does not. Published forms of ASL Poetry also allow for wider distribution, which is increasingly important as technology and improved accommodations make more places and institutions accessible to the Deaf population. If published poetry were more available, it might add something to the already lively world of ASL live performance. It is possible for new artists to emerge and develop spontaneously and independently, but more often potential poets discover their passion and aptitude by being exposed to a wide variety of work -- some of which inspires them to experiment and create. The larger, more diverse, and more accessible a body of work is, the more likely it is to awaken something in an individual and turn them into a poet themselves, or into part of an enthusiastic audience. Furthermore, greater diversity in the field can only aid scholars in its study.

The value of published ASL Poetry is evident, so it is curious that it is so rare. The causes for that are open to speculation and could range from practical reasons like production costs and profit margins, to grand cultural trends that value art forms which blend easily into pop culture over those that do not. Perhaps poetry is so idealized that amateurs are discouraged from trying their hand at it, or perhaps it merely lacks the

right venue to thrive. Whatever the cause, the personal and intellectual impact of ASL

Poetry, its rich complexity, unique mode of expression, and the potential it holds to

influence entire fields of study as profoundly as it might move the members of its

audience, make it worthy of continued attention. ASL Poetry is a powerful art form,

and it deserves to be nurtured.

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