SEMIOTICS
OF
Poetry

MICHAEL RIFFATERRE

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Preface

The theory of poetic semiotics put forward here was first sketched out in a 1971 paper of mine on what makes a literary sentence literary. My previous work had concentrated upon the surface structures of poetic discourse, upon what the reader recognizes and identifies as style. In the 1971 paper I began focussing on the poem as a whole, since it appeared to me that the unit of meaning peculiar to poetry is the finite, closed entity of the text, and that the most profitable approach to an understanding of poetic discourse was semiotic rather than linguistic.

The theoretical aims of this book make it applicable, I believe, to all Western literature, and in all likelihood some of the rules I propose reflect universals of literary language. But I have used only French examples, primarily from nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers (my specialization, aside from poetics). Much space is given to detailed discussion of texts. Nowadays so many literary studies are systems of interpretation wherein symbols, formulas, and the trappings of theory ignore or obfuscate or fall short of the reality of texts. I am more than ever convinced that no theory is worth consideration unless it is solidly grounded upon the phenomena it claims to elucidate. Because my conclusions are generally applicable, I have provided translations of all texts. French specialists may sometimes find these translations awkward or unnecessary; my sole aim is to enable all readers to follow the demonstrations based on texts, and to pass their own judgments. Nowhere do I attempt to "emulate" the original. In addition to pointing up my own shortcomings, any awkwardness will remind readers again that poetry does not translate—not because of certain intangible, quintessential elements usually invoked, but because of a semiotic displacement quite accessible to description.

Most of the text has been tried and tested on various audiences, especially during Visiting Professorships at the University of Toronto (University College), the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and New York University. Some of it also formed part of a series of lectures I delivered at the University of Pennsylvania and at Princeton. This

study has greatly benefited from the discussions following such lectures, none more fruitful than those with my students at Columbia.

To no one do I owe more in this endeavor, as indeed in everything, than to Hermine Riffaterre: as a scholar, she was my first and has remained my strictest and soundest critic; as my wife, she is a never-failing source of strength.

CONTENTS

THE POEM'S SIGNIFICANCE

The language of poetry differs from common linguistic usage—this much the most unsophisticated reader senses instinctively. Yet, while it is true that poetry often employs words excluded from common usage and has its own special grammar, even a grammar not valid beyond the narrow compass of a given poem, it may also happen that poetry uses the same words and the same grammar as everyday language. In all literatures with a long enough history, we observe that poetry keeps swinging back and forth, tending first one way, then the other. The choice between alternatives is dictated by the evolution of taste and by continually changing esthetic concepts. But whichever of the two trends prevails, one factor remains constant: poetry expresses concepts and things by indirection. To put it simply, a poem says one thing and means another.

I therefore submit that the difference we perceive empirically between poetry and nonpoetry is fully explained by the way a poetic text carries meaning. It is my purpose here to propose a coherent and relatively simple description of the structure of meaning in a poem.

I am aware that many such descriptions, often founded upon rhetoric, have already been put forward, and I do not deny the usefulness of notions like figure and trope. But whether these categories are well defined, like metaphor or metonymy, or are catchalls, like symbol (in the loose sense critics give it—not in the semiotic acceptation), they can be arrived at independently of a theory of reading or the concept of text.

The literary phenomenon, however, is a dialectic between text and reader.[1] If we are to formulate rules governing this dialectic, we shall have to know that what we are describing is actually perceived by the

reader; we shall have to know whether he is always obliged to see what he sees, or if he retains a certain freedom; and we shall have to know how perception takes place. Within the wider realm of literature it seems to me that poetry is peculiarly inseparable from the concept of text: if we do not regard the poem as a closed entity, we cannot always differentiate poetic discourse from literary language.

My basic principle will therefore be to take into account only such facts as are accessible to the reader and are perceived in relation to the poem as a special finite context.

Under this twofold restriction, there are three possible ways for semantic indirection to occur. Indirection is produced by displacing, distorting, or creating meaning. Displacing, when the sign shifts from one meaning to another, when one word "stands for" another, as happens with metaphor and metonymy. Distorting, when there is ambiguity, contradiction, or nonsense. Creating, when textual space serves as a principle of organization for making signs out of linguistic items that may not be meaningful otherwise (for instance, symmetry, rhyme, or semantic equivalences between positional homologues in a stanza).

Among these three kinds of indirection signs, one factor recurs: all of them *threaten the literary representation of reality, or mimesis*.[2] Representation may simply be altered visibly and persistently in a manner inconsistent with verisimilitude or with what the context leads the reader to expect. Or it may be distorted by a deviant grammar or lexicon (for instance, contradictory details), which I shall call *ungrammaticality*. Or else it may be cancelled altogether (for instance, nonsense).

Now the basic characteristic of mimesis is that it produces a continuously changing semantic sequence, for representation is founded upon the referentiality of language, that is, upon a direct relationship of words to things. It is immaterial whether or not this relationship is a delusion of those who speak the language or of readers. What matters is that the text multiplies details and continually shifts its focus to achieve an acceptable likeness to reality, since reality is normally complex. Mimesis is thus variation and multiplicity.

Whereas the characteristic feature of the poem is its unity: a unity both formal and semantic. Any component of the poem that points to that "something else" it means will therefore be a constant, and as such it will be sharply distinguishable from the mimesis. This formal and semantic unity, which includes all the indices of indirection, I shall call the *significance*.[3] I shall reserve the term *meaning* for the

information conveyed by the text at the mimetic level. From the standpoint of meaning the text is a string of successive information units. From the standpoint of significance the text is one semantic unit.

Any sign[4] within that text will therefore be relevant to its poetic quality, which expresses or reflects a continuing modification of the mimesis. Only thus can unity be discerned behind the multiplicity of representations.[5]

The relevant sign need not be repeated. It suffices that it be perceived as a variant in a paradigm, a variation on an invariant. In either case the perception of the sign follows from its ungrammaticality.

These two lines from a poem by Paul Eluard:

> De tout ce que j'ai dit de moi que reste-t-il
> J'ai conservé de faux trésors dans des armoires vides[6]

Of all I have said about myself, what is left? I have been keeping false treasures in empty wardrobes

owe their unity to the one word left unspoken—a disillusioned "nothing," the answer to the question, an answer that the speaker cannot bring himself to give in its literal form. The distich is built of images that flow logically from the question: "what is left" implies "something that has been saved"; a meliorative or positive version might be "something that was worth saving." In fact the images translate into figurative language a hypothetical and tautological sentence: "keep what's worth keeping [figuratively: *trésors*] in the place where things are kept that are worth keeping [figuratively: *armoires*]." You might expect this tautology to yield "strongbox" rather than "wardrobe," but *armoire* is much more than just another piece of bedroom furniture. The French sociolect makes it *the* place for hoarding within the privacy of the home. It is the secret glory of the traditional household mistress—linens scented with lavender, lace undies never seen—a metonym for the secrets of the heart. Popular etymology makes the symbolism explicit: Père Goriot mispronounces it *ormoire,* the place for *or,* for *gold,* for treasure. The distressed version we have in Eluard's second line negativizes the predicate, changing not only *trésors* into *faux trésors,* but also *armoires* into *armoires vides.* We are faced with a contradiction, for, in reality, "treasures" of illusory value would fill a closet just as well as genuine ones—witness the table drawers in any home, full of shoddy souvenirs. But of course the text is not referential: the contradiction exists only in the mimesis. The phrases in question

are variants of the answer's key word—they repeat "nothing." They are the constant of a periphrastic statement of disillusionment (all these things amount to zero), and as the constant element they convey the significance of the distich.

A lesser case of ungrammaticality—compensated for by a more conspicuous kind of repetition, a more visible paradigm of synonyms—is the mimesis devoid of contradictions but obviously spurious; such are these lines from Baudelaire's "Mort des amants":

> Nos deux cœurs seront deux vastes flambeaux,
> Qui réfléchiront leurs doubles lumières
> Dans nos deux esprits, ces miroirs jumeaux

Our two hearts will be two great torches that reflect their double lights in our two minds, twin mirrors

The context of furniture reinforces the concreteness of the image: these are real mantelpiece candlesticks. The image metaphorizes a torrid love scene, quite obviously, but the significance lies in the insistent variation on *two*. This makes it even more obvious that the description aims only to unfold the duality paradigm, until the duality is resolved in the next stanza by the oneness of sex ("nous échangerons un éclair unique" [we shall exchange a lightning like no other]).[7] The mimesis is only a ghost description, and through the ghost's transparency the lovers are visible.

The ungrammaticalities spotted at the mimetic level are eventually integrated into another system. As the reader perceives what they have in common, as he becomes aware that this common trait forms them into a paradigm, and that this paradigm alters the meaning of the poem, the new function of the ungrammaticalities changes their nature, and now they signify as components of a different network of relationships.[8] This transfer of a sign from one level of discourse to another, this metamorphosis of what was a signifying complex at a lower level of the text into a signifying unit, now a member of a more developed system, at a higher level of the text, this functional shift is the proper domain of semiotics.[9] Everything related to this integration of signs from the mimesis level into the higher level of significance is a manifestation of *semiosis*.[10]

The semiotic process really takes place in the reader's mind, and it results from a second reading. If we are to understand the semiotics of poetry, we must carefully distinguish *two levels or stages of reading,*

since before reaching the significance the reader has to hurdle the mimesis. Decoding the poem starts with a first reading stage that goes on from beginning to end of the text, from top to bottom of the page, and follows the syntagmatic unfolding. This first, *heuristic reading* is also where the first interpretation takes place, since it is during this reading that *meaning* is apprehended. The reader's input is his linguistic competence, which includes an assumption that language is referential—and at this stage words do indeed seem to relate first of all to things. It also includes the reader's ability to perceive incompatibilities between words: for instance, to identify tropes and figures, that is, to recognize that a word or phrase does not make literal sense, that it makes sense only if he (and he is the only one around to do it) performs a semantic transfer, only if he reads that word or phrase as a metaphor, for example, or as a metonymy. Again, the reader's perception (or rather production) of irony or humor consists in his double or bilinear deciphering of the single, linear text. But this reader input occurs only because the text is ungrammatical. To put it otherwise, his linguistic competence enables him to perceive ungrammaticalities; but he is not free to bypass them, for it is precisely this perception over which the text's control is absolute. The ungrammaticalities stem from the physical fact that a phrase has been generated by a word that should have excluded it, from the fact that the poetic verbal sequence is characterized by contradictions between a word's presuppositions and its entailments. Nor is linguistic competence the sole factor. Literary competence[11] is also involved: this is the reader's familiarity with the descriptive systems,[12] with themes, with his society's mythologies, and above all with other texts. Wherever there are gaps or compressions in the text—such as incomplete descriptions, or allusions, or quotations —it is this literary competence alone that will enable the reader to respond properly and to complete or fill in according to the hypogrammatic model. It is at this first stage of reading that mimesis is fully apprehended, or rather, as I said before, is hurdled: there is no reason to believe that text perception during the second stage necessarily involves a realization that the mimesis is based upon the referential fallacy.

The second stage is that of *retroactive reading*. This is the time for a second interpretation, for the truly *hermeneutic* reading. As he progresses through the text, the reader remembers what he has just read and modifies his understanding of it in the light of what he is now decoding. As he works forward from start to finish, he is reviewing,

revising, comparing backwards. He is in effect performing a structural decoding:[13] as he moves through the text he comes to recognize, by dint of comparisons or simply because he is now able to put them together, that successive and differing statements, first noticed as mere ungrammaticalities, are in fact equivalent, for they now appear as variants of the same structural matrix. The text is in effect a variation or modulation of one structure—thematic, symbolic, or whatever— and this sustained relation to one structure constitutes the significance. The maximal effect of retroactive reading, the climax of its function as generator of significance, naturally comes at the end of the poem; poeticalness is thus a function coextensive with the text, linked to a limited realization of discourse, bounded by clausula *and* beginning (which in retrospect we perceive as related). This is why, whereas units of meaning may be words or phrases or sentences, *the unit of significance is the text.* To discover the significance at last, the reader must surmount the mimesis hurdle: in fact this hurdle is essential to the reader's change of mind. The reader's acceptance of the mimesis[14] sets up the grammar as the background from which the ungrammaticalities will thrust themselves forward as stumbling blocks, to be understood eventually on a second level. I cannot emphasize strongly enough that the obstacle that threatens meaning when seen in isolation at first reading is also the guideline to semiosis, the key to significance in the higher system, where the reader perceives it as part of a complex network.

A tendency toward polarization (more of this anon) makes the guidelines for reader interpretation more obvious: it is when the description is most precise that the departures from acceptable representation induced by structures make the shift toward symbolism more conspicuous. Where the reader most expects words to toe the line of nonverbal reality, things are made to serve as signs, and the text proclaims the dominion of semiosis. It would be hard to find French descriptive poetry more representative than Théophile Gautier's *España* (1845), a collection of poems written after a journey through Spain. The traveler translated his trip into prose reports for the newspaper financing the adventure, and into verse vignettes, like the poem "In Deserto," composed after he had crossed Spain's lonely, arid *sierras*. A village with a demonstrably exotic name is given as the place of composition: this must refer to actual experience and is thus a way of labeling the poem "descriptive." In fact the learned editor of the one and only critical edition that we have finds nothing better to do than compare the verse with the prose version, and the prose with other travelers'

accounts of the sierra. He comes to the conclusion that Gautier is fairly accurate, although he does seem to have made the sierra more of a desert than it really is.[15]

This is puzzling. However verifiable the text's mimetic accuracy by comparison with other writers' observations, it also consistently distorts facts or at least shows a bias in favor of details able to converge metonymically on a single concept: pessimism. Gautier makes this unmistakable with bold statements of equivalence; first when he actually speaks of despair as a landscape: "Ce grand jour frappant sur ce grand désespoir" [line 14: daylight striking upon this vast expanse of despair]. Just before this the desert was used as an illustration of the traveler's own lonely life, but the simile structure necessarily kept the setting separate from the character, the one reflecting the other. Now this separateness is cancelled, and the metaphor mingles the traveler's inner with the world's outer barrenness. In spite of this, our scholar, a seasoned student of literature, pursues his habit of checking language against reality. He seems little concerned about what language does *to* reality. This is proof at least that no matter what the poem ultimately tells us that may be quite different from ordinary ideas about the real, the message has been so constructed that the reader has to leap the hurdle of reality. He is first sent off in the wrong direction, he gets lost in his surroundings, so to speak, before he finds out that the landscape here, or the description in general, is a stage set for special effects.

In the Gautier poem the desert is there, of course, but only as long as it can be used as a realistic code for representing loneliness and its attendant aridity of heart—as opposed to the generous overflowing that comes of love. The first, naturally enough, is represented by a plain, direct, almost simplistic comparison with the desert itself; the second by a hypothetical description of what an oasis would be like, combined with a variation on the theme of Moses striking the rock. Thus we have an opposition, but still within natural climatic and geographic circumstances, or within the logic or verisimilitude of desert discourse.

The first pole of the opposition appears to rest upon straightforward mimesis:

IN DESERTO

Les pitons des sierras, les dunes du désert,
Où ne pousse jamais un seul brin d'herbe vert;

Les monts aux flancs zébrés de tuf, d'ocre et de marne,
Et que l'éboulement de jour en jour décharne;
5 Le grès plein de micas papillotant aux yeux,
Le sable sans profit buvant les pleurs des cieux,
Le rocher refrogné dans sa barbe de ronce,
L'ardente solfatare avec la pierre-ponce,
Sont moins secs et moins morts aux végétations
10 Que le roc de mon cœur ne l'est aux passions.

The pitons of the sierras, the desert dunes, where never a single blade of green grass grows; the mountainsides striped with tufa, ochre, and marl [literally: with chalky, rusty, and yellowish stripes; but the code is entirely geological], daily stripped of flesh by landslides; sandstone studded with mica glittering before your eyes; sand vainly drinking in the tears of heaven; rock scowling into its bramble beard; sulphur spring and pumice stone; these are less dry, less dead to vegetation than the rock of my heart is to passion.

But two factors transform this step-by-step scanning of a landscape into an iterative paradigm of synonyms that points insistently to barrenness (both figurative and physical). The transformation is especially obvious when this part of the text is looked at in retrospect, from the vantage point of the opposition's second pole—the last section of the poem. The first factor is the selection of visual details with disagreeable connotations not necessarily typical of the sierra (in any case readers may not recognize their aptness unless they know Spain). They make up a catalogue of hostile connotations: the sulphur spring, for instance, more "fire and brimstone" in landscape lexicon than a clear, apt, or visualizable depiction for most readers, even if it happens to be an accurate detail; or the earth's skeleton, a traditional literary motif in descriptions of rock formation; or the three specialists' words (*tuf, ocre, marne*), doubly technical as names of painter's colors and of soil types, but above all three words any French speaker will find cacophonic; or *zébré*, which does describe stripes and is presumably correct for strata, but also—and perhaps better—fits the stripes left by a whiplash.

The second factor of semiosis that slants representation toward another, symbolic meaning is the way the text is built: we do not know this is all a simile until the last two lines, when everything suddenly changes its function and calls for a moral, human interpretation. The suspense and the semantic overturn are space- or sequence-induced phenomena, inseparable from the physical substance of the text or

from its paradoxical retroversion—the end regulating the reader's grasp of the beginning.

The second pole of the opposition is where the semiosis takes over (lines 29–44). In between there are eighteen entirely descriptive, seemingly objective lines, resuming the enumeration of the physical features of aridity. But of course this objectivity, unchallengeable as it may be within its own domain (lines 11–28), is now cancelled or made subservient to another representation, because the reader now knows that the whole sequence is not an independent description allegiant only to the truth of the outside world, but is the constituent of a trope. All the realism depends grammatically upon an unreality and develops not the desert we were initially invited to think real (before we discovered it was the first leg of a simile), but a desert conjured up to confirm contextually the metaphor prepared by the simile: *le roc de mon coeur* [the rock of my heart]. Everything is now ostensibly derived from an exclusively verbal given, the cliché *a heart of stone*. In line 29 an explicit allusion is made to the latent verbal association that has overdetermined, in desert context, the rock-of-the-heart image: a simile brings the rock Moses struck to the surface of the text, and this simile now triggers the unfolding of a new code for reverie about what love could do for this parched heart, and how it could make this desert bloom:

> Tel était le rocher que Moïse, au désert,
> 30 Toucha de sa baguette, et dont le flanc ouvert,
> Tressaillant tout à coup, fit jaillir en arcade
> Sur les lèvres du peuple une fraîche cascade.
> Ah! s'il venait à moi, dans mon aridité,
> Quelque reine des cœurs, quelque divinité,
> 35 Une magicienne, un Moïse femelle,
> Traînant dans le désert les peuples après elle,
> Qui frappât le rocher dans mon cœur endurci,
> Comme de l'autre roche, on en verrait aussi
> Sortir en jets d'argent des eaux étincelantes,
> 40 Où viendraient s'abreuver les racines des plantes;
> Où les pâtres errants conduiraient leurs troupeaux,
> Pour se coucher à l'ombre et prendre le repos;
> Où, comme en un vivier, les cigognes fidèles
> Plongeraient leurs grands becs et laveraient leurs ailes.

Such was the rock that Moses touched in the desert with his rod. And the rock's open flank shuddered all at once and sent an arc of water gushing to the people's lips in a cool cascade. If only some queen of

hearts would come to me in my aridness, some divinity, a sorceress, a
female Moses, dragging the peoples through the desert after her; if she
would only strike the rock in my hardened heart, you would see leaping
up, as from that other rock, silver jets of sparkling water; there the
roots of plants would come to slake their thirst; there wandering shep-
herds would lead their flocks, to lie down in the shade and take their
rest; there, as in a fishpond, the faithful storks would plunge their long
beaks and wash their wings.

Now the semiosis triumphs completely over mimesis, for the text is
no longer attempting to establish the credibility of a description. Any
allusion to the desert landscape, or to the oasis born of the miraculous
fountain, is derived entirely from the name *Moïse*, taken less as an
actual wanderer who crossed the Sinai than as a literary theme, or de-
rived from the female variant of *Moïse*, which is of course a metaphor
in desert code for *Woman as a fountain of life*. The code itself is not a
metaphor: we cannot assign a literal tenor to the *fountain* vehicle;
even less can we find a term-for-term relationship between the descrip-
tive vignettes about the drinkers at that spring (roots, shepherds,
storks) and certain tenors that would be metonymic of the revived
and transfigured speaker.

We must therefore see the code of the poem as symbolic. It definitely
represents something that is not the desert to which the description is
still referring. Everything points to a hidden meaning, one evidently
derived from a key word—*fecundity*—which is the exact opposite of the
first key word, *barrenness*. But there is no similarity, even partial,
between fecundity, even in the moral sense, and the speaker as the text
enables us to imagine him. If the reader simply assumes (since this is
the chief rationalization in any reading experience) that the first-person
narrator, so long as he remains unnamed, must be the poet himself,
fecundity will refer to poetic inspiration, indeed often associated with
love at last requited. But the description of the oasis still does not
match any of the traits, real or imaginary, of a creative writer.

All we can say, then, is that the text's final passage symbolizes the
miraculous effects of love on life. The selection of *fertility* as the key
to that symbol is determined by the reversal of the symbol used to
describe life before the miracle. The last part of the poem is a reverse
version of the forms actualized in the first part. The positive "conver-
sion" that accomplishes this affects every textual component regard-
less of its previous marking or meaning. This is why contradictions or
incompatibilities or nonsense abound in the description: such details

as *flanc ouvert* or *flanc . . . tressaillant* (lines 30–31), phrases properly applied only to a pregnant woman who feels the child move in her womb for the first time, bring to the fore the repressed sexual implications of the Moses-rod story, as do the storks (43), flown out of nowhere (out of the implied womb, that is)—for, without this displaced determination, why not just any bird, so long as it is a positive sign? These details do not fit the male character who has now slipped into the metaphoric rock. Yet they are contradictory only as descriptions, only if we keep trying to interpret them as mimesis; they cease to be unacceptable when we see them as the logical and cogent consequences of the positivization of desert code.

Other ungrammaticalities are simply the mimetic face of the semiotic grammaticality; the astonishing *Moïse femelle,* the nonsense of vegetable roots endowed with animal mobility, the *Et in Arcadia ego* connotations of the scene around the spring, after the manner of Poussin—all these conform to the conversion according to an indirect, implicit, but continuously present love code. The amplification of *Moïse femelle* as a sexual pied piper—"Traînant dans le désert les peuples après elle"—is intertextually determined by a line from Racine, Phèdre's amorous description of her lover's seductive power: "Traînant tous les cœurs après soi" [dragging all hearts after him]. It translates into a phrase an essential seme of love—its irresistible magnetism—and the same applies to the miracle of the roots, this time overdetermined by another association intersecting the first chain: the hyperbolic positive fountain also involves the cliché of the spot that irresistibly draws every living creature. Upon the oasis oxymorically derived from "aridity," love symbolism superimposes its own theme of the *locus amoenus.*

We cannot, however, understand the semiosis until we have ascertained the place of the text now perceived as one sign within a system (a sign formally complex but monosemic), for by definition a sign cannot be isolated. A sign is only a relationship to something else. It will not make sense without a continuous translatability from component to component of a network. A consequence of the system's latent existence is that every signifying feature of the poem must be relatable to that system. Here everything the text says must be fitted back into the initial code, into the *desert* code, even though it is represented in the end only conversely. Failing this we cannot relate the end and the beginning, we cannot recognize that text and significance are coextensive, we cannot discover that the clausula dovetails with the title.