

Literature, Criticism,  
and the  
Theory of Signs

*Victorino Tejera*

**SEMOTIC** **CROSSROADS**  
SC  
05

LITERATURE,  
CRITICISM,  
AND  
THE THEORY OF SIGNS

VICTORINO TEJERA

JOHN BENJAMINS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
AMSTERDAM/PHILADELPHIA





The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences — Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Tejera, V. (Victorino)

Literature, criticism, and the theory of signs / Victorino Tejera.

p. cm. -- (Semiotic crossroads : ISSN 0922-5072; v. 7)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Criticism. 2. Deconstruction. 3. Poetics. 4. Dialogue analysis. 5. Semiotics and literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PN98.D43T45 1995

801'.95--dc20

ISBN 90 272 1948 6 (Eur.) / 1-55619-341-6 (US) (alk. paper)

95-5028

CIP

© Copyright 1995 - John Benjamins B.V.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, photoprint, microfilm, or any other means, without written permission from the publisher.

John Benjamins Publishing Co. • P.O.Box 75577 • 1070 AN Amsterdam • The Netherlands  
John Benjamins North America • P.O.Box 27519 • Philadelphia, PA 19118 • USA

# LITERATURE, CRITICISM, AND THE THEORY OF SIGNS

# SEMIOTIC CROSSROADS

*General Editor*

Paul Perron  
*University of Toronto*

*Associate Editors*

Paolo Fabbri  
*Università di Bologna*

Eric Landowski  
*CNRS, Paris*

Herman Parret  
*Universities of Louvain and Antwerpen*

*Editorial Board*

Alain J.-J. Cohen; Bernard S. Jackson  
Fredric Jameson; Bennetta Jules-Rosette  
Dean MacCannell; Hans-George Ruprecht

Volume 7

Victorino Tejera

*Literature, Criticism, and the Theory of Signs*

To

Patrick Heelan

Scientist, Scholar, Sensibility

## PREFACE

The findings and formulations of this book flow from a passion for literature, from a response to Plato's dialogues as literature and as dialogues, from agreement with Bakhtin's appreciation of the dialogical nature of Dostoyevsky's novels, and from the fruitfulness of Peirce's approach to semeiosis and semiotics. Reconceptualization of the creative process and categorization of it in semiotic terms, namely, as sign-activity empowers the extension of poetics into an aesthetics of reader-participation as crucial to the literary enterprise.

Now, the nature and limits of literary criticism have been in need of redemarcation for some time. So this book marks and clarifies in semiotic terms the differences between the modes of judgment in which theory, critical practice, and literature proper each operate. It is hoped that both the theorist and the lover of literature will appreciate the indications on how to avoid reductionism in the study of literature and the practice of criticism. Cardinal among the sins of misreading against which this book warns is that of deliberately or unnoticedly denaturing a work by misidentification of its constructed literary integrity. For, it is just here that, in order to take effect, the artistry of the author and the configurations of the text will most depend upon the reader's literary competence. The focus and openness of the fully poetic response are presupposed, and argued for, throughout this book as a norm for and model of valid reading.

The intellectual historian will not fail to notice, finally, that it is out of the confluence of two traditions that the terms and solutions of this book arise. One is that of Aristotle, understood as the Greek naturalist, functionalist and humanist that he was. The other is that of Peirce's

synechistic relationism and pragmatism. Peirce's humanist spirituality and antipositivism, moreover, are most intelligible when seen to be aspects of his coordinative functionalism. Thus, it would seem to be the functionalism of the two traditions that makes them so compatible and that sustains and subtends their ordering and analyses of human responsiveness and the phenomena of signification.

Social scientists will also find in this book the Meadian emphasis on the dialogical nature of discourse and the social nature of the individual characteristic of the classic American tradition in philosophy. An implicit aim of the book, finally, has been to make more intelligible the relation between literary studies and the other human (social) sciences.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b>	ix
<b>Introduction: A Guide to the Project</b>	1
<b>Chapter 1. Bakhtin, Dialogism, and Plato's Dialogues</b>	11
1 The Dialogical nature of Dostoyevsky's Narratives	11
2 The Dialogical Nature of Speech and Thought	16
3 Dialogical Poetics in Dostoyevsky and Plato	18
4 Problems in Bakhtin's Poetics	21
5 The Voices That We Hear in Plato's Dialogues	24
<b>Chapter 2. The Text, the Work, and the Reader</b>	30
1 The Need for Text-Reception History and an Aesthetics of Reading	30
2 Peirce's Account of Interpretants and their Signs	33
3 The Generic Identity of the Literary Work, and Its Design	39
4 The Mode of Judgment of the Work, and of Its Responsive Articulation	45
<b>Chapter 3. Deconstruction as Poetics</b>	54
1 Deconstruction and the Sense of Structure	54
2 Deconstructive Attitudes toward Writing	57
3 Dialogism and Sophism, Logicism and Creative Rationality	61
4 The Aesthetics of Non-Graphicist Deconstruction	67
<b>Chapter 4. The Modes of Judgment and the Nature of Criticism</b>	74
1 Reprise on the Semiotic Approach to Literary Significance	74
2 The Poetics of Aristotle and Buchler	78
3 Poetic Responsiveness as the Model of Valid Reading	81

4	<i>Mimesis</i> as Re-enactment and Expression	84
5	Assertive, Active, and Exhibitive Judgment	88
6	Reading as a Communicative Interaction	91
7	Testing Peirce's Semeiotic: The Problem of Metaphor	96
<b>Chapter 5. The Contexts of Reading</b>		104
1	Flawed Texts, Flawed Readings	104
2	The Transactional Nature of Critical Reading	108
3	Poststructural Criticism, Modernism and Postmodernism	112
4	Context-Determined Misreadings	116
<b>Chapter 6. The Semiotics of Reading</b>		122
1	The Reader	122
2	The Critic	126
3	On the Dependency and Autonomy of Criticism	130
<b>Appendix: Ten Classes of Signs</b>		136
<b>Bibliography</b>		140
<b>Index</b>		150

## INTRODUCTION

### A Guide to the Project Undertaken by this Book

The enterprise of using an undiluted Peircean semiotics to improve our understanding of what happens in literature, criticism, and literary theory has only just begun. Umberto Eco's *Limits of Interpretation* does not go far before lapsing into Cartesian, neopositivist, or dualistic terminology and conceptualizations when, in fact, it is only the terms of Peirce's semiotics and pragmatism that will dissolve the misformulations and misconceived questions that shackle non-functionalist approaches to literary art. Julia Kristeva's "*sémanalyse*" is a joint application of psychoanalysis, linguistics, and her interest in subjectivity to works of art. It is semiological, or binarist, not Peircean or triadically semiotic. So that, when she gives other than linguistic *semes* or effects their due importance, she has to do it in terms of psychoanalysis rather than semiotics. Because her *sémanalyse* puts "the subject" in the place of *the interpretant* what she throws light on is the transformations of subjectivity in its drive to expression, and Kristeva's discussions find themselves in the space between *formal* (subjectless) *linguistics* and (Freudian-Lacanian-feminist) psychoanalysis. John Sheriff's half of a book on Peirce, in his work on structuralism and literature, makes a good beginning, and should be continued; but in so far as he "feel[s] compelled to adapt Peirce's theory to the[ir] terms as much as possible in order to appreciate...the[ir]...positions," his rescissory methodology - while it may clarify Heidegger's, Gadamer's, and Hirsch's texts - will not advance the semiotic understanding of literary art: the more so since he seems to agree with Wittgenstein that about that "which is not translatable into propositions," namely, the aesthetic experience, "we must be silent" (FM 99,

102).<sup>1</sup>

The educated or academic reader who has looked at the table of contents will want to be told what it is that brings together Plato and Dostoyevsky, Aristotle and Peirce, Bakhtin and Buchler with regard to literature and in the context of literary aesthetics. The first two connote *dialogism* in action, while the last four represent, respectively (i) a functionalist poetics, (ii) a comprehensive semiotic that knows itself to be a branch of aesthetics, (iii) an interactional poetics of social intercourse or discourse, and (iv) a synoptic and coordinative categorization of the modes of judgment which clarifies the relations among action (or conduct), production (or contrivance), and inquiry (or the claims of the special sciences). As critics and theorists, the last four give us the perspectives and terms needed for an understanding that is adequate to the formative virtuosity and the deep understanding of human discourse of the first two. Plato and Dostoyevsky have been chosen as arch-examples of powerfully brilliant authors who have been unrelentingly misread in the histories of their reception, because they demand the utmost from the theorist and historian in the effort to understand the aesthetic and socio-intellectual *determinants of misreading*. They call for a fine responsive sensibility not just in their readers but also in the theorists and thinkers who would explain them as well as enjoy them. They call for literary competence on top of logical acumen, for dialogical sensitivity on top of dialectical ability, for a knowledge of intellectual history in its socio-existential relations as well as for skill in aesthetic, or poetic, analysis.

Of the contributions to literary aesthetics which this book seeks to make, that which marks and clarifies in *semiotic* terms the differences between the modes of judgment in which theory, critical practice, and literature proper each operate, calls for a more adequate understanding of *judgment and its modes* than can be found in literary theory to date. It also calls for a more generalized theory of the human *product*, what Buchler calls *utterance*, than

<sup>1</sup> U. Eco *The Limits of Interpretation* (Indiana U.P. 1990); J. Kristeva *Revolution in Poetic Language* 1974, tr. M. Waller (Columbia U.P. 1984), *Polylogue* (Paris: Editions du Seuil 1977), *Semiotike Recherche pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil 1979), *Desire in Language* ed. L. Roudiez (New York: Columbia U.P. 1980), *The Kristeva Reader* Ed. by Toril Moi (Columbia U.P. 1986); J. Sheriff *The Fate of Meaning* Charles Peirce, Structuralism, and Literature (Princeton U.P. 1989). My "Eco, Peirce and Interpretationism," is a Review-Essay of Eco's book, in *The American Journal of Semiotics* 8, 1/2 (1991).

is currently available. And, while Bakhtin's work has raised the consciousness of students and lovers of literature with regard to the completely dialogical nature of some literary utterance and the dialogical ingredient in all literary work, we have not yet sufficiently put together Empson's insight into the polysemy and structure of complex words with Bakhtin's insight into their interactional and dialogical nature. - A sign, in Peirce's definition (2.228), "stands TO somebody FOR something in some respect...It addresses somebody," namely, it is inherently dialogical. - In connection with the theory of judgment, the reader will find the help he needs in Chapters Two and Four. But while the aesthetics and history of dialogism are analytically discussed in Chapter One and throughout the rest of the work, the full-length *application* of dialogism to Plato (the author who most begs for it) will be found in two other books, *Plato's Dialogues One By One*<sup>2</sup> and *Plato's Dialogues: the Dialogical Approach*.

But the emphasis of Empson and the New Critics was not only on the *textural* qualities of the verbal medium of literary art.<sup>3</sup> It was also and preeminently an emphasis on the *constitutive* form of the *work-as-a-whole*: as Aristotle would say, on the way in which the *individual* work was *put together*; it was an emphasis, in their own words, on *structure* in resonance with and distinction from *texture*. The micro-texture of a work will of course always be verbal, a matter of imagery and pace, of assonance and consonance, of allusiveness and connotation, of rhythm and flow, of parallelism and contrast. This lesson, as we will see in the sequel in connection with deconstructionism, seems to have been easier to learn than that of attending to the *architectonic* shape of the whole work and the way it

<sup>2</sup> (New York: Irvington 1984), hereafter PDOBO; it is looking to be reprinted. PDDA is awaiting publication.

<sup>3</sup> *The Seven Types of Ambiguity* (N.Y. New Directions 1947), *The Structure of Complex Words* (N.Y. New Directions n.d.); *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto & Windus 1935). It has always astonished me that the "philosophers" (as distinguished from literary theorists), who have loudly proclaimed an interest in "linguistic analysis" since the Forties, never extended that interest to Empson's close scrutiny or theorizing of the complexity and uses of words. This may be due to a categorical confusion. Just as Kristeva's interesting work seems unable to distinguish between semiotics and linguistics, so the so-called linguistic analysts identify the *logical* analysis of the formal-deductive dimension of discourse with the analysis of all its dimensions - in effect suppressing its other semeiotic dimensions, as well as blocking the perception that discourse is not only an instrument but also a *medium*.

also simultaneously fails to perceive the dialogical structure of the *Phaedrus*, Plato's dialogue on reason, love and rhetoric. But to perceive the constitutive form of a work is to perceive the tensions that generate its involvements and their unfolding. In the case of this dialogue, these tensions cannot have been perceived if the *irony* in the erotic and didactic relation between Socrates and Phaedrus is not appreciated. But Derrida quite fails to locate the irony in the places where it is operatively formative of Socrates' discourse, namely, where it radically affects *the meaning* of what he is saying. We see that Derrida's *interpretants* of Plato's beautifully constructed, complex sign - the *Phaedrus* - have not been generated by the *sign itself* in its wholeness, but by some interests of the critic external to, *not germane*, to Plato's work or the interests *it* articulates. It is just when interpretants alien to the sign block or supersede its natural or proper interpretants that the object gets misapprehended: externalist, exogenic interpretants, or collateral information that denatures the proper interpretants or introduces false ones, are indeed *main determinants of misreading*. This is why I prefer to speak of "the work" rather than "the text". Derrida notoriously takes less than the work as the sign to be interpreted, he extracts (like the Academic pythagorizers) partial "texts" from the work as a whole and comments upon them, paroling them from their verbal environment - the structure housing them and the speaker speaking them - and then abusing their parole. What he actually deconstructs is other interpretations of the work, not the work itself!<sup>4</sup> A work-of-art in its literary integrity cannot, in fact, be deconstructed. It can only be re-interpreted, subject as it ever is to new interpretations, to being criticized in one respect or another, to being neglected even or spoken against as unreadable or unworthy of credence; and it is these interpretations that are deconstructible. It is the interpretations that can be deconstructed, not the literary work, because, to have perceived and responded to the work in its integrity is, in the nature of the case, to be engaged in a *valid reconstruction* or reading of it. So, true to form (as we shall see) what Derrida deconstructs in the case of the *Phaedrus* is not the

---

<sup>4</sup> For readings of the *Phaedrus* that treat it as a dialogical whole, see R. Burger, C. Griswold, and V. Tejera, respectively: *Plato's Phaedrus: a Defense of a Philosophic Art of Writing* (U. of Alabama Press 1980), *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (Yale U.P. 1986), and "Irony and Rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* Vol.8, No.2 (1975).



dialogue - which he does not perceive to be such - but the pythagorizing (or "platonist") interpretation of it. His deconstruction of it turns out to be just another (mis)interpretation of it, but an antiplatonist, anti-intellectual one; it is also anti-literary in its suggestion that the criticism of the work is more important than the work itself, and in its failure to perceive the *literary* dynamics or effectiveness of the work.

It should by now be obvious that Bakhtin's analysis and theorizing of the misreading of Dostoyevsky, and mine of the misreading of Plato's dialogues, are foundational both to the theses of this book and the project of stating them, as contributions to literary studies, in Peirce's semiotic terms. However, given that Peirce himself never undertook the subject of literary aesthetics, except fragmentarily in a few of his notes, we have had to fill in the outline of his perspective and protract the outline itself with the equally basic contributions of his commentator Justus Buchler, the latest worker in the classic American tradition of philosophy. Both Peirce and Buchler of course have deep continuities with Aristotle, the functionalist, naturalist, and lover of poetic drama. Buchler, in particular and from the first of his contributions to the theory of judgment, has shown a ready understanding of the dialogical nature and poetic aspect of Plato's works.<sup>5</sup>

The Aristotle of this project is neither the Aristotle of the Hellenistic commentators nor the Latin Scholastics, nor yet of the Roman, French or Spanish neo-classicists. Neo-classicist, and imitationist, interpretations of the *Poetics* have, in fact been a great impediment to good poetics in the history of the subject. Mimêsis did not mean imitation (in the sense of "copying") either in Archaic and classical times or in Aristotle's technical usage in the *Poetics*: it meant "re-enactment." Also, and as a matter of observation, imitation is not the most basic process at work in signification

<sup>5</sup> Charles Peirce's *Empiricism* (N.Y. Harcourt 1939), *Selected Writings of C.S. Peirce* (N.Y. Dover 1939), *Toward a General Theory of Human Judgment* 1951, 2 rev.ed. (N.Y. Dover 1979), *Nature and Judgment* 1955, 3 impr. (Lanham: U.P.A. 1985), *The Concept of Method* 1961, 2 impr. (Lanham: U.P.A. 1985), *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* 1966, expanded ed. (Albany: SUNY Press 1990), *The Main of Light* (Oxford U.P. 1974). Cf. also B. Singer *Ordinal Naturalism* The Philosophy of Justus Buchler (Bucknell U.P. 1983), and *Nature's Perspectives* ed. Corrington, Marsoobian, & Wallace (Albany: SUNY Press 1991), and *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XIV, 1: Special Issue on the Philosophy of Justus Buchler.

or representation, except on realist or copy-theories<sup>6</sup> of signification. Imitation, is, rather, only one species of abstraction. But I have sufficiently discussed this point already in *Art and Human Intelligence* and *Modes of Greek Thought*.<sup>7</sup>

There is a stronger sense in which Aristotle's *Poetics* is not an imitationist analysis of poetic drama, and this is the sense in which - when read in the Greek without preconception and in the context of the transition of Greece from an oral-aural to a visual-graphic culture - it turns out to be an aesthetics of expression. *Poietike*, for Aristotle, is the art-and-science of making (*Poetics*, 1447a1ff.): poetics is a productive know-how, an art or ability (*dúnamis*), as well as the study of productive know-hows. Aristotle is also going to discuss how the plots (*mutoi*) should be ordered (*synistasthai*), if the poetic construction is to be a success, and whatever else is relevant to such construction. And, in doing this, he is going to follow the natural order (*katà phúsin*). The making of epics, tragedies, comedies, dithyrambs, fluting and harping can all be said to be mimeses (*mimêseis*). They are each a kind of making or *poiêsis*; what kind? The answer is "a kind of mimetic making": *mimêtikê poiêsis*, namely, suggestive, or miming, or expressive makings! These mimetic makings, Aristotle continues, will differ in the means which they use, namely, in their *media* as we now say. They will differ in the manner of their making; for example, the manner or method of epic is narrative (in the voice of a third person), while that of drama is dialogical (in first person voices). These mimetic makings will, thirdly, be different in their results, the thing made or suggested (*poiema*).

Ancient Greece, down to the early fourth century B.C., was an oral-aural culture; its accumulating values and knowledges were preserved and transmitted orally. In these circumstances mimesis was a process of

<sup>6</sup> Because copy-theories of art are often called "representationist," confusion arises about "representational" or signifying processes. The terminological similarity causes signifying or "representing" to be taken in an imitationist sense when, actually, representations - Peirce calls them *representamens* - are only sometimes imitations or iconic. But, since imitation is, nonetheless, one among the connotations of *mimêsis*, Peirce wisely coined the term *hypoiconic* to cover this circumstance; he probably also did so because anything can be found to be like anything else *in some respect*.

<sup>7</sup> (N.Y.: Appleton-Century 1965), Chapter 4, "Making and Experiencing," and (N.Y. Appleton-Century 1971), Chapter 6, "Aristotle: Knowledge, Art, and Happiness."

identification with the tribal exemplars. It was a re-enactment, a re-doing or rehearsal in a verbal medium, by the bard or rhapsode of the ways and deeds of noteworthy or excellent ancestors, the mimesis of *some* (not always heroic) *doings*. As Eric Havelock pointed out, mimesis was therefore a relation between either reciter and the subjects rehearsed, or between listener and reciter, or between auditor and the subjects sung.<sup>8</sup>

In the Archaic age in connection with the dance and musical accompaniment of choral or dramatic song, the term *mimesis* had the undisputed connotation of re-enactment. By extension, it easily covered the use of costume, voice, and gesture in classical fifth century drama. The difficulty with the term arose with the pythagorist interpretation of Plato's texts which began to intervene between its earlier acceptations and Aristotle's dramatic usage - but which did not affect Aristotle's own understanding of the matter. The derogatory sense of mimesis allowed by Plato's Socrates in Book X of *Republic*, also came to disturb the understanding of what Aristotle meant by it.

In that book Plato's Socrates proposes to exclude from the ideal state which he is satirizing all the forms of making that are "mimetic," for the reason that they are a corruption (*lôbê*) of the auditors' minds (*diánoias*). And they are a corruption to the pythagorizing idealist because, within the theory of ideas which Socrates has put on exhibit, crafted works (the famous couch of his example) are imitations of imitations, namely, of a given material couch which itself is an imitation of the idea of couch laid up in the realm of ideas. Thus, on the assumption that the ideas are "the reality," the cabinet-maker's crafted couch is at a third remove from "reality": to the pythagorean intellectualist, it was *only* a copy of a copy.

One of the continuities between Aristotle and Buchler is made explicit, in classic American philosophy, by Dewey's distinction between "statement" and "expression." If poetry, as Wallace Stevens somewhere said, is about "what does not exist without the words," then "expression" is very different from "statement." Where statement is about things and processes that are already objects of knowledge, expression is constitutive of new objects of knowledge and enjoyment. Antecedent to an expression only given

8

*Preface to Plato* (Harvard U.P. 1963), p.57f.