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. 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 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.

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

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 armoire, the place for or, for gold, for treasure. The distressed etymology makes it the place for hoarding within the privacy of the 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 consistent 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]). 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. 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. Everything related to this integration of signs from the mimesis level into the higher level of significance is a manifestation of semiosis.

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 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 is also involved: this is the reader's familiarity with the descriptive systems, 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: 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—the poetic, 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; poeticness is thus a function coextensive with the text, linked to a limited realization of discourse, bounded by clauses 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 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 non-verbal 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.

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 versimilitude of desert discourse.

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

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

Ou n'enousse iamais un seul brill d'herbe vert;

The Poem's Significance
Les monts aux flancs zébrés de tuf, d’ocre et de marne,
Et que l’éboulement de jour en jour décharne;
Le gres 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
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 dear, 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 cacophonous; 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 cœur [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,
Touche de sa baguette, et dont le flanc ouvert,
Tressaillant tout à coup, fit jaillir en arcade
Sur les lèvres du peuple une fraîche cascade.
Ahl s’il venait à moi, dans mon aridité,
Que quelque reine des cœurs, quelque divinité,
35 Une magicienne, un Moïse éternelle,
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 aridity, 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 shepherds 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 derived 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 descriptive 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 required. 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 "conversion" that accomplishes this affects every textual component regardless 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—"Trainant 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: "Trainant tous les cœurs après soi" [dragging all hearts after him]. It translates into a phrase an essential sense 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.
The one feature pervading the whole clausula (from line 33 on) is grammatical: every verb is in the conditional mood; that is, it expresses an action or state of things not yet realized, a wish unfulfilled, a hope frustrated, a dream dreamt in vain—in short, life still the desert of life, a familiar theme. But this verbal mood's being the grammatical icon of unfulfillment raises the question of the speaker's voice. For the poem is spoken in the first person, and we do not know where from. Then suddenly the puzzle is solved, everything falls into place, indeed the whole poem ceases to be descriptive, ceases to be a sequence of mimetic signs, and becomes but a single sign, perceived from the end back to its given as a harmonious whole, wherein nothing is loose, wherein every word refers to one symbolic focus.

This epiphany of the semiosis occurs when the lost voice is found again, thanks to the hint signalled by the title, misunderstood until the end: this signal is the title's language. In French, Dans le désert would be a self-sufficient title and perfectly appropriate for a mere travelogue. The Latin In deserto does not make sense unless read, as it must be, as an incomplete quotation. In deserto is only the second half of the familiar phrase for words shouted in vain, the voice crying in the wilderness: vox clamans in deserto. From this repressed, despairing voice the whole poem is derived; from this bereft speaker issues the dream's unreality. This one conventional symbol, erased from the title, founds a whole new symbolism defining only this work of art; and the text, raised from the ashes of familiar description, is made into a novel and unique significance.

Significance, and let me insist on this, now appears to be more than or something other than the total meaning deducible from a comparison between variants of the given. That would only bring us back to the given, and it would be a reductionist procedure. Significance is, rather, the reader's praxis of the transformation, a realization that it is akin to playing, to acting out the liturgy of a ritual—the experience of a circuitous sequence, a way of speaking that keeps revolving around a key word or matrix reduced to a marker (the negative orientation whose semiotic index is the frustration implied by vox clamans in deserto). It is a hierarchy of representations imposed upon the reader, despite his personal preferences, by the greater or lesser expansion of the matrix's components, an orientation imposed upon the reader despite his linguistic habits, a bouncing from reference to reference that keeps on pushing the meaning over to a text not present in the linearity, to a paragram or hypogram—a dead landscape that refers to a live character, a desert traveled through that represents the traveler rather than itself, an oasis that is the monument of a negated or non-existent future. The significance is shaped like a doughnut, the hole being either the matrix of the hypogram or the hypogram as matrix.

The effect of this disappearing act is that the reader feels he is in the presence of true originality, or of what he believes to be a feature of poetic language, a typical case of obscurity. This is when he starts rationalizing, finds himself unable to bridge the semantic gap inside the text's linearity, and so tries to bridge it outside of the text by completing the verbal sequence. He resorts to nonverbal items, such as details from the author's life, or to verbal items, such as preset emblems or lore that is well established but not pertinent to the poem. All this just misguides the reader and compounds his difficulties. Thus, what makes the poem, what constitutes its message, has little to do with what it tells us or with the language it employs. It has everything to do with the way the given twists the mimetic codes out of shape by substituting its own structure for their structures.

The structure of the given (from now on I shall refer to it as the matrix), like all structures, is an abstract concept never actualized per se: it becomes visible only in its variants, the ungrammaticalities. The greater the distance between the inherently simple matrix and the inherently complex mimesis, the greater the incompatibility between ungrammaticalities and mimesis. This was already obvious, I think, in the discrepancy between "nothing" and Eluard's thesaurization sequence, between "couple" or "lovers" and Baudelaire's furniture sequence. In all these cases the discrepancy is made graphic by the fact that the mimesis occupies a lot of space while the matrix structure can be summed up in a single word.

This basic conflict, the locus of literariness (at least as literariness manifests itself in poetry) may reach a point where the poem is a form totally empty of "message" in the usual sense, that is, without content—emotional, moral, or philosophical. At this point the poem is a construct that does nothing more than experiment, as it were, with the grammar of the text, or, perhaps a better image, a construct that is nothing more than a calisthenics of words, a verbal setting-up exercise. The mimesis is now quite spurious and illusory, realized only for the sake of the semiosis; and conversely, the semiosis is a reference to the word nothing (the word, since the concept "nothingness" would be heavy metaphysical stuffing indeed).

This is an extreme case but exemplary, for it may tell us much about
poetry's being more of a game than anything else. I shall use three short texts as illustrations, all of them about paintings or scenes, all three pictorial descriptions, all three reading like picture plaques in a parodic museum. The first is supposedly a "Combat de Sénégalais la nuit dans un tunnel" [Night combat of Senegalese tribesmen inside a tunnel]. The second: "Récolte de la tomate par des cardinaux apoplectiques au bord de la Mer Rouge" [Apoplectic cardinals picking tomatoes on the shores of the Red Sea]. The third: "Perdu dans une exposition de blanc encadrée de momies" [Lost at a white sale surrounded by Egyptian mummies]. The first one is a joke familiar in relatively intellectual French circles; it is usually rationalized as a satire on certain monochromatic modern paintings. Every character, every scenic detail being black, you see nothing. The second is from a humorous piece by Alphonse Allais, a minor writer not unlike Alfred Jarry, his contemporary, but without Jarry's genius. Allais is generally credited with being one of the creators of humor as a genre in French literature. Here again: red-faced, red-robed princes of the church, their red harvest, the red locale—redness cancels all the shape, line, and contrast that must set the cardinals off from their surroundings, if they are to be seen. There is nothing here but a one-color continuum.

True, the red of the Red Sea is only a convention, not a real color mimesis; still, it purports to refer to a geographical reality, so that the principle of mimesis, the differentiation, is at work, and it is indeed cancelled here. In the third quotation, from a poem by the surrealist Benjamin Péret, the white sale again is more metaphorically than literally white; yet once more the effect is to blend all representation into a uniform whiteness.

One may wonder why I have chosen these three examples to prove a point about poetic discourse. I reply that these and others like them are commonplaces; that the durability of even the oral joke, the first, unsigned text, reminds us that a mere joke is an elementary form of literature, since it is as lasting, and as protected against tampering when quoted, as a more highbrow text. The fact that these lines are intended, or perceived, as jokes reflects only their obviousness of purpose (they are so obviously a game); and the cancellation of mimetic features leads to a pointless semiosis: we do not see where generalized blackness, redness, or whiteness can possibly be taking us. But of course the significance really lies in the gratuitousness of the transformation: it exemplifies that process itself, the artifact per se. It also demonstrates the essential conflict that makes a literary text: no variation-cancelling conversion, no direct decoding of the invariant (here the color) can take place until the representing, mimetic variants to be cancelled have first been stated. No breaking of the rule without a rule.

I am quite sure that even if they agree these jokes may in fact possess the features of literariness, most readers will be unable to resist the temptation to jump from a negative value judgment (these are examples of lowbrow literature or bad literature) to a complete denial that they are literature at all. But other texts evidence the very same "weakenesses" and no doubt is cast on their poetic status, so long as our attention is diverted from circularity, so long as we are able to spot in the text something we recognize as a commonly accepted literary feature—be it a stylistic form, or a form of content like, say, a theme. The text then "passes" unscathed, and yet the formal alteration of the mimesis is no less drastic than that of our jokes, and the semiosis is just as pointless. Take for example this blackness sequence in a Robert Desnos poem, the cause of much emotional upset among critics. It is a portrait of the speaker, head, heart, thoughts, waking moments, and now sleep:

Un bon sommeil de boue
Né du café et de la nuit et du charbon et du crêpe des veuves
Et de cent millions de negres
Et de l'etreinte de deux negres dans une ombre de sapins
Et de l'ébène et des multitudes de corbeaux sur les carnages

A good muddy sleep born of coffee and night and coal and ink and widow's weeds and of a hundred million negroes and of two negroes embracing in the shade of fir trees, and of ebony and multitudes of ravens hovering over fields of carnage

Or again (since I have no "redness" example at hand, and for officially poetic "whiteness" Gautier's "Symphonie en blanc majeur" would be too long to quote), let us take this "transparency" text, a passage from André Breton's Revolver:

On vient de mourir mais je suis vivant et cependant je n'ai plus d'âme.
Je n'ai plus qu'un corps transparent à l'intérieur duquel des colombes transparentes se jettent sur un poignard transparent tenu par une main transparente.
There has just been a death, but I am alive, and yet I no longer have a soul. All I have left is a transparent body with transparent doves inside throwing themselves on a transparent dagger held by a transparent hand.

Here we are ready to pass over the representational nonsense because death is eminently literary. We have no trouble rationalizing that this disembodiment is a legitimate way of representing the afterlife. And of course the question of genuine literariness will not be raised with Mallarmé: for instance the sonnet beginning “Ses purs ongles très haut dédié leur onyx.” The question does not arise, first, because the challenge to mimesis is not so complete that the reader has no chance at all to read the poem as a representation. The lofty language makes up for the circularity. And the obscurity makes less glaring the absence of the symbolism that should compensate us for accepting such detours from straightforward referentiality. Or better, the obscurity hides the fact that the text’s implications are just as short range, just as slight, as in a joke. The tone, the style make the difference. But that difference lies in the reader’s attitude, in his greater willingness to accept a suspension of mimesis when he thinks no one is trying to pull his leg. Actually there is no difference in the text, for the structure of Mallarmé’s sonnet is the same conversion found in all three jokes and in Breton and Desnos.

In the joke subgenre there is no way for the reader to get beyond the laugh, once it has been laughed, any more than he can get beyond the solution once he has solved a riddle. Such forms self-destruct immediately after consumption. The sonnet, on the contrary, leaves the reader free to keep on building, so long as his constructs are not wholly incompatible with the text. The first stanza, “L’angoisse, ce minuit” [anguish at midnight], seems to adumbrate a meditation upon the problems of life or upon artistic creation. This looks so serious that the reader expects the poem to be about reality, physical or conceptual, especially when the second quatrain presents the familiar livingroom interior:

Sur les créduces, au salon vide: nul ptyx,
Aboli bibelot d’innimité sonore,
(Car le Maître est allé puiser des pleurs au Styx
Avec ce seul objet dont le Néant s’honore.)

On the sideboards, in the empty livingroom: no ptyx, abolished bibelot of sonorous inanity (for the Master has gone to draw tears from the Styx, bearing with him this only curio ‘that Nothingness takes pride in).
is insured the first time by nul ptyx. Not only because nul annuls ptyx, but because ptyx is a nonobject, a word unknown in any language, as Mallarmé himself boasted, a pure ad hoc product of the sonnet's rhyming constraints. Having imposed upon himself a difficult rhyme, /iks/, the poet patently runs out of words. With its outlandish spelling and its boldly non-French initial consonantal cluster, ptyx, like everything else in the sonnet, combines high visibility, an almost obtrusive physical presence as a form, and an equally obtrusive absence as meaning. The second equivalence of presence and absence is aboli bibelot, as meaning, like the French variant of the semi-Greek nul ptyx, and as paronomasia, making bibelot an approximate phonetic mirror image of aboli, thus a reflection of absence. The third equivalence: insanité sonore, a phrase made the more effective by being a cliché or literary quotation about empty words going back to Latin: inania verba. The fourth equivalence: the semiotic nonexistence of the object whose existence is asserted by description is translated into a mimesis of philosophical Nothingness itself (dont le Neant s'honore), with a pun to top it off, since Neant s'honore sounds like neant sonore, "sonorous nothingness." Finally, this emptiness, these nonobjects, are paralleled by the graphic symbolism of the rhyme, since y and x are the signs of conventional abstractness and of algebraic unknowns.

Such is the force of habit, such the power of the everyday context of cognitive language, that commentators have unanimously endeavored to connect the quatrain with actual representation. Even though it should be impossible to miss the meaning—an exercise in verbal exercise—we find at work here a nostalgia for referentiality that promises us no reader will ever get used to nonlanguage. The efforts of scholars to palliate it only enflame the outrage of words cancelling themselves. The vase dont le Neant s'honore has been interpreted as a vial of poison, thus a vial of death, or a vessel of Nothingness as a tangible, physical cause of death. And ptyx, despite Mallarmé's own statement, has been forcibly twisted into a full-fledged representation, by way of a Greek word meaning, supposedly, a "fold" or "shell shaped like a fold." The trouble is that the word ptyx itself is a hypothesis of lexicographers, deduced from a rare Greek word found only in the plural or in oblique-declension cases, ptykhes; Mallarmé could not have known of this. His ptyx does have a model: a word Hugo had used a few years earlier for the sake of strangeness per se, since in his poem it is supposed to be the name of an actual mountain translated into

the language of the Gods—neat proof that ptyx has no meaning in any human language. Turn where we may, the picture of reality is erased, so that these varied but repetitious cancellations add up to the one significance so ringingly proclaimed by the title of the sonnet's first version: "Sonnet allégorique de soi-même" [Sonnet allegoric of itself], a text referring to its own shape, absolute form. It takes the whole sonnet to unroll the description and to annul it, point by point. The destruction of the mimesis, or its obverse, the creation of the semiosis, is thus exactly coextensive with the text: it is the text.

An extreme example, obviously, and most poems are closer to the model of Eluard's dictich, but the principle is, I believe, the same in all cases. From this principle I shall now try to deduce the fundamentals of my interpretation of poetry's semiotic system.

Postulates and Definitions

Poetic discourse is the equivalence established between a word and a text, or a text and another text.

The poem results from the transformation of the matrix, a minimal and literal sentence, into a longer, complex, and nonliteral periphrasis. The matrix is hypothetical, being only the grammatical and lexical actualization of a structure. The matrix may be epitomized in one word, in which case the word will not appear in the text. It is always actualized in successive variants; the form of these variants is governed by the first or primary actualization, the model. Matrix, model, and text are variants of the same structure.

The poem's significance, both as a principle of unity and as the agent of semantic indirection, is produced by the detour the text makes as it runs the gauntlet of mimesis, moving from representation to representation (for example, from metonym to metonym within a descriptive system), with the aim of exhausting the paradigm of all possible variations on the matrix. The harder it is to force the reader to notice the indirection and to lead him step by step through distortion, away from mimesis, the longer the detour must be and the more developed the text. The text functions something like a neurosis: as the matrix is repressed, the displacement produces variants all through the text, just as suppressed symptoms break out somewhere else in the body.

To clarify matrix and model further, I shall use an example of limited relevance to poetry; its very limitations, however, make its me-
The Poem's Significance

The matrix alone would not suffice to explain textual derivation, nor would the model taken separately, since only the two in combination create the special language wherein everything the believer does that is pertinent to what defines him as a believer is expressed in love code. Hence the text as a whole is indeed a variant of the verb for the activity typical of the faithful (to give thanks). The text in its complexity does no more than modulate the matrix. The matrix is thus the motor, the generator of the textual derivation, while the model determines the manner of that derivation.

The Kircher example is of course highly exceptional, since the paronomasia, like an extended pun, might be said to extract the significant variation from the mimesis itself: the ungrammaticality consists in the dispersion of one descriptive word, in the building of the paradigm out of the pieces of that one lexeme drawn and quartered. Paronomasia, when it does occur, is rarely so pervasive. The usual detour around the repressed matrix, being made of separate, distinct ungrammaticalities, looks like a series of inappropriate, twisted wordings, so that the poem may be regarded as a generalized, all-encompassing, all-contaminating catachresis.

This catachresis has overdetermination as its corollary. It is a fact that no matter how strange a departure from usage a poem may seem to be, its deviant phraseology keeps its hold on the reader and appears not gratuitous but in fact strongly motivated; discourse seems to have its own imperative truth; the arbitrariness of language conventions seems to diminish as the text becomes more deviant and ungrammatical, rather than the other way around. This overdetermination is the other face of the text's derivation from one matrix: the relationship between generator and transforms adds its own powerful connection to the normal links between words—grammar and lexical distribution. The functions of overdetermination are three: to make mimesis possible; to make literary discourse exemplary by lending it the authority of multiple motivations for each word used; and to compensate for the catachresis. The first two functions are observable in literature in general, the last only in poetic discourse. The three together confer upon the literary text its monumentality: it is so well built and rests upon so many intricate relationships that it is relatively impervious to change and deterioration of the linguistic code. Because of the complexity of its structures and the multiple motivations of its words, the text's hold on the reader's attention is so strong that even his absent-mindedness or, in later eras, his estrangement from the esthetic re-
fleeted in the poem or its genre, cannot quite obliterate the poem's features or their power to control his decoding.

I shall distinguish between two different semiotic operations: the transformation of mimetic signs into words or phrases relevant to significance, and the transformation from matrix to text. The rules governing these operations may work together or separately in overdetermining the verbal sequences from the incipit to the clausula of the poem.

For describing the verbal mechanisms of sign integration from mimesis to significance level, I shall propose a single hypogrammatic rule telling us under what conditions the lexical actualization of semic features, stereotypes, or descriptive systems produces poetic words or phrases whose poeticity is either limited to one poem or is conventional and therefore a literary marker in any context.

Two rules apply to production of the text: conversion and expansion (chapter 3). The texts overdetermined according to these rules may be integrated into larger ones by embedding. The components of the significance-bearing paradigm may therefore be such embedded texts. The signs of specialized poetic usage (conventional poetic words) and perhaps others as well may be said to stand for texts: their significance issues from this vicarious textuality.

In all cases the concept of poeticity is inseparable from that of the text. And the reader's perception of what is poetic is based wholly upon reference to texts.
I should like to conclude by returning to the reader, the only one who makes the connections between text, interpretant, and intertext, the one in whose mind the semiotic transfer from sign to sign takes place. Indeed, if the poem—as I have tried to show it does—results from the transformation of a word or sentence into a text, or the transformation of texts into a larger whole, then its form is felt to be a detour or circuitous path around what it means, and this feeling must have two consequences. First, the form or shape of the detour is interpreted as an artifact, with visible joints and props. Hence a constant component of poetic significance is that the poem’s language looks as much like a ritual or a game (in many cases the poem is akin to a generalized pun), or pure artifice, as it does like a means of conveying sense. Second, the poem’s content, that is, what the detour turns about, is perceived or rather rationalized as an equivalent form at its before-detour, pretransformation stage. The reader more or less explicitly subsumes this content as a colloquial or ordinary-language version of what he is reading. The paradox is that while the poetic text is interpreted as a departure from a norm, that imaginary nonliterary norm is in effect deduced, or even retroactively fantasized, from the text perceived as departure. But no matter what the reader may think, there is no norm that is language as grammars and dictionaries may represent it: the poem is made up of texts, of fragments of texts, integrated with or without conversion into a new system. This material (rather than norm) is not the raw stuff of language; it is already a stylistic structure, hot with intensified connotations, overloaded discourse.

Something else I have had to underscore repeatedly is that any ungrammaticality within the poem is a sign of grammaticality elsewhere, that is, of belonging in another system. The systemic relationship confers significance. The poetic sign has two faces: textually ungrammatical, intertextually grammatical; displaced and distorted in the mimesis system, but in the semiotic grid appropriate and rightly placed. This coincidence of catachresis and propriety influences the hermeneutic process by making reading at once restrictive and unstable.

Far from freeing the imagination, far from giving the reader greater leeway as it invites him to greater participation, reading is actually restrictive: retroactive reading is comparative and sets up equivalences despite the reader’s instinctive feeling that the elements equated should not be. In particular, the embedding in the poem of textual borrowings from the hypogram (or the inclusion of textual signs) creates a new hierarchy of words, a new grammar whose very novelty or strangeness makes it harder to ignore or bypass. All the harder because such factors usually occur repeatedly in the poem. The reader’s freedom of interpretation is further limited because of the poem’s saturation by the semantic and formal features of its matrix: in other words, continuity and unity, that is, the fact that the semiotic unit is the text itself, forbid the attention to wander, deny the opportunities for hermeneutic deviance that the multiple facets of mimesis offer. Finally, the hypograms, whether in intertextual conflict or not, are always incomplete in the poem: they are either pointed to by textual signs or are fragmentarily actualized. Even the dual signs, however equivocal or ambiguous they may appear, do not refer to n texts, but to two specific texts. The original architecture of these “other texts,” their grammar, the distribution of their lexicon, the sequence of their components, are nonetheless obvious to the reader, since they are part of his linguistic competence; he is therefore under strict guidance and control as he fills the gaps and solves the puzzle. Since reading is restricted, the reader’s interpretation is a scanning of the sociolect’s commonplaces, the practice of a lore of well-tested exempla, the recognition of forms and hallowed symbols through a scrambled transmission.

But reading is also unstable, and interpretation is never final, because the text cannot be corrected or amended, and the ungrammaticalities, however revealing they may be, however hermeneutically indicative, are still an obstacle (whether the obstacle blocks understanding or just looks like an abnormality, an error, a violation of the code rules). Because these ungrammaticalities threaten language as representation, the reader continually seeks relief by getting away from the dubious words, back to safe reality (or to a social consensus as to reality). Which
is possible, however illusorily, only when the reader works from discrete components of the poem considered separately, only when the retroactive reading process is ignored. But the reader is reconverted to proper reading when the structural equivalences become apparent all at once, in a blaze of revelation. This revelation is always chancy, must always begin anew, since each rereading, or even the instinctive re-checking of a difficult passage, forces the reader to undergo again the experience or temptation of a decoding obedient to mimesis, hence to relive the block of the distortion. The reader’s manufacture of meaning is thus not so much a progress through the poem and a half-random accretion of verbal associations, as it is a seesaw scanning of the text, compelled by the very duality of the signs—ungrammatical as mimesis, grammatical within the significance network. This seesawing from one sign value to the other, this alternating appearance and disappearance of significance, both in spite and because of unacceptable features on the plane of mimetic meaning, is a kind of semiotic circularity characterizing the practice of signification known as poetry. In the reader’s mind it means a continual recommencing, an indecisiveness resolved one moment and lost the next with each reliving of revealed significance, and this it is that makes the poem endlessly rereadable and fascinating.

Notes

CHAPTER 1: THE POEM’S SIGNIFICANCE

1. On the role of text-reader dialectics, see Fish 1970; Riffaterre 1971a, 1971c.

2. Or at least challenge its premises, such as the establishment of a verisimilitude level (like the effet de réel of French critical terminology, see Barthes 1970), which becomes the norm for a given text and by opposition to which we can perceive departures—e.g., the fantastic or the supernatural.

3. Significance, to put it simply, is what the poem is really about: it arises through retroactive reading when the discovery is made that representation (or mimesis) actually points to a content that would demand a different representation in nonliterary language. Yet my use of significance, however specialized, does not contradict Webster: “the subtle, hidden implications of something, as distinguished from its openly expressed meaning.”

4. For an exact definition of sign, especially the differences between index, icon, and symbol, see C. S. Peirce 3.561–62; also Greenlee 1973, and Sebeok 1975. Strictly speaking, Eco 1976, p.16 (“everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else”) would exclude poetic signs valid only within the idiolect of a text: they are then only context-established (of course Eco deepens his definition considerably, and his whole book, especially the “Theory of Codes” chapter, is essential in this connection). I rather like Peirce’s pithy definition in his letter to Lady Welby of 12 October 1904: a sign is something knowing which we know something more.

5. The last class, idiolectic signs and space-oriented signs, may provide an answer. But that would still leave unexplained the relationship between the other two categories (by far the more numerous signs) and the poem as a whole. Also, the very definition of the third-class signs seems to demand preliminary knowledge of what makes a text a closed, structured unit—hence the serious risk of circularity.


7. Lightning is a Second Empire euphemism for orgasm: Michelet, for example, in his treatise on love published seven years after the sonnet, alludes to the sexual act as a ténébreux éclair [dark lightning] (L’Amour, p.201); and later on, prompted by the Baudelaire intertext, Charles Cros will write:
"La mort pépétuea l'éclair d' amour vainqueur" [Death will make eternal the lightning flash of love triumphant].
8. Cf. Eco 1976, p.126: "every item in the code maintains a double set of relations, a systematic one with all the items of its own plane (content or expression) and a signifying one with one or more items of the correlated plane."
10. As defined by Peirce 5.484. Cf. Eco 1976, pp.71-72, 121-29.
11. On literary competence, see also Ihwe 1970.
13. Since the text is a multilevelled discourse, the perception of sign-functions (in Hjelmslev's sense, 1943, p.58) necessarily changes, the correlation of functives being transitory: it depends upon the reader's gradual discovery of new coding rules, that is, upon his working his way back to the structures that generate the text (the reader is performing an abduction, in Peirce's sense: Peirce 2.633).
14. Which should not be confused with adherence to the referential fallacy. This is a matter of effect. Whether the reader believes the mimesis is grounded in a genuine reference of words to things, or realizes the mimesis is illusory and is in truth built upon an entirely verbal, self-sufficient system, the impact of the representation of reality upon his imagination is the same. It has to be a norm before the well-formedness of any of its components can appear questionable.
15. Maurice Jasinski, ed., Gautier, España (Paris: Vuibert, 1979), pp.142-45. 16. I prefer hypogram to paragram, since the latter is identified with Saussure's forgotten concept, brought back to life in Starobinski 1971. In Saussure, the matrix of the paragram (his locus princeps) is lexical or graphemic, and the paragram is made out of fragments of the key words scattered along the sentence, each embedded in the body of a word. (My hypogram, on the contrary, appears quite visibly in the shape of words embedded in sentences whose organization reflects the presuppositions of the matrix's nuclear word.) Saussure was never able to prove that the key word's role implies "une plus grande somme de coincidences que celles du premier mot venu" (Starobinski 1971, p.142). Such proof must be looked for, and the question asked is hard to reconcile with the reader's natural experience of a literary text, namely, his greater awareness of the way things are said than of exactly what is meant. The fact that the saturation of the text by a phonic paraphrase of a key word is more assumed than perceived is hard to reconcile with the poetic function as defined by Mukafovsky, and followed by Jakobson, as a focussing of the language system on the form of the message. These problems, it seems to me, can be avoided if the analyst starts from what the surface features of the text, that is, its style, force him to perceive. These features can be defined as variants of a semantic structure that need not be realized in a key word present intact or as membra disiecta in the text, so long as decoding emphases and other formal distortions sensitize the reader to their recurrences and hence to their equivalences, and thus make him perceive them not just as forms but as variants of an invariant. This natural decoding procedure should obviate the difficulty of proving the existence of a key word, because the structure's complex network of relations is self-defining outside of and above any word that may implement it.
17. Cf. the American joke—a polar bear in a snow storm. Alphonse Allais, Album Primo-Aurésque (1897), in Œuvres posthumes, vol. 2 (Paris: La Table ronde, 1966), pp.371-79; Benjamin Péret, "Alió," in Je sublime (Paris: Editions surrealistes, 1936). Allais's piece is in the parodic catalog of an imaginary Salon of paintings, in which every exhibit is monochromatic. He offers his own version of the first of our three jokes. The plaques on five other "paintings" function similarly to the one I commented on here, but raise problems irrelevant to my point.
18. Robert Desnos, "Apparition," in Fortunes (Poesie) (Paris: NRF, 1948), p.62. Thus a Desnos exegete: "strange, violent, fascinating poem, modulating one long shouit," etc., etc. (Rosa Bucholle, L'évolution poetique de R. Desnos [Brussels: Académie royale de langue et littérature françaises, 1956], p.156.) The de boue repeats both the beginning ("born of dirt," i.e., clay, a new Adam), and a hypogram: dormir debout [to be sleepy enough to sleep standing up, fast asleep on his feet]. The raven details, for instance, cannot be mimetic; they are not even apt in context, they are simply a periphrastic hyperbole of the ideal raven (and, indirectly, exemplary blackness).
20. Mallarmé, Œuvres complètes, Bibl. de la Pléiade, p.1489. There is a thicket of studies that try vainly to make sense of the sonnet at the mimetic level. Only a few have arrived at the perception of the rhen significance (M.-J. Lefebve, "La Mise en abyme mallarméenne," Synthèses 258 [1967]: 81-85; Roger Dragonetti, "La Littérature et la lettre," Lingua e Stile 4 [1969]: 205-22; Ellen Burt, "Mallarmé's Sonnet en -yx," Yale French Studies 54 [1977]: 55-82). But they still leave much latitude to the reader's interpretation and concede too much to ambiguity. Both latitude and ambiguity, I believe, are avoided by the concept of the poem as derivative by expansion—conversion from a matrix.
21. On conversion, see pp.63-80.
22. Ben in a way nothing more than a transform of the formula that cancels the function of the home as symbol of social intercourse—the servant's response to a filler: "Monseir n'y est pas" [Monseur is not at home].
24. The rhyme is difficult because /iks/ is an infrequent ending in French, but above all because the required alternation of feminine and masculine rhymes in a sonnet makes it necessary to find variants of /iks/ that do not end with a mute -e. The only possibility is -ix or -yx with the x voiced, and that narrows the choice down to learned words of Greek origin and spelling: 25. A model for another image of nothing: the empty mirror of the second tercet, empty of the reflection of a dead, therefore absent character.
26. A prose version entitled Ignor contains its own commentary in relatively straightforward French. Mallarmé himself (letter to Cazalis, Pléiade, pp.1489-90) discusses what he meant to say. But the only relevance of poetics
is to the text itself, not to the author’s intention: good method demands that arguments be based on the poem alone, and this sonnet is quite self-sufficient. The sestet unfolds a description whose every detail cancels itself out: an open window, but described as *vacante*, “empty”; a light, but dying *(un or agonise)*; a setting, but modified by *peut-être*, “maybe”; allegorical pictures, but on non-existent myths; a mirror described as “framed forgetfulness.” The only presence not cancelled is the *septuor* of *scintillations*, the Big Dipper; the musical term suggests that the constellation is also that of the sonnet’s seven rhyme pairs: the only reality of the poem is its rhyming pattern.

27. For a very incomplete account of the tempest *ptyx* stirred up in scholarly teapots, see the Mondor and Jean-Aubry edition, Pléiade, pp.1490-91. Hugo’s poem is the illustrious “Satyre,” published eight years before our sonnet (line 19: an enumeration of sylvan gods leads to *Chrysis/Sylvain du Ptyx que l’homme appelle Janicule*). Hugo himself knew not of the alleged *ptyx*, “shell”; he first tried *phtyx* as an ad hoc coinage, to sound like ancient Greek with a vengeance (see *Légende des Siècles*, ed. Paul Berret [Paris: Hachette, 1928], vol. 2, pp.573, 576).


**Chapter 2: Sign Production**

1. See Eco 1976, pp.112 ff.


3. Conventional poetic forms can be interpreted conventionally so long as the corresponding esthetics survives. But a reader perceiving them from within another system uses a different hermeneutic metalanguage; in so doing he still reacts “correctly” to the same language as the original reader did: the text's unchanged language.


6. Father Daire’s *Epithètes françaises* (Lyon: 1759). Most of these dictionaries are called *Gradus ad Parnassum*.

7. Benveniste posits a “distinction entre mots autonomes, fonctionnant comme constituants de phrase . . . , et mots synnomes qui ne peuvent entrer dans la phrase que joints à d’autres mots” (Benveniste 1966, p.124). Pursuing Benveniste's distinctions, we could say that the epithet (as meaningful, thus at the mimetic level) is autosemantic, but that in its poetic function (as significant, thus at the semiotic level) it is synsemantic.

8. Doric columns, Ionian, etc. The reference to Greek architecture is in itself a positive marker. On this theme, see Hermine B. Riffaterre, “L’Imagina-
I. It is therefore the form of unlimited semiosis peculiar to poetry, first brought to light by C. S. Peirce. The final interpretant is not a habit (his term, 4.536), but the stylistically guaranteed physical permanence, the "monumentality" of the poem in which a given idiolect is encoded.