# Working Papers

*and pre-publications*

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## The practice of literary semiotics: a theoretical proposal

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## working paper

1. That general theory in the human sciences is virtually non-existent, and what there is is of little use — this much I will not try to demonstrate, but beg leave to take for granted. That there can ever be a general theory of the human sciences in the sense in which this concept is used in other sciences — this is a moot point which would require a detailed analysis. In any case, this problem is not particularly relevant to the present discussion. I will confine myself to noting that, if it turns out that no such general theory is possible, this would not be a limitation or a weakness of the human sciences, but rather a reflection of their peculiar nature.

In this situation only a concrete, empirical research has any claim to significance. The examples should be the substance of every discussion of semiotics, while the theoretical digressions should be clearly subordinated to them. The only serious way, it seems, in which theoretical activity can take place in the human science is in the form of a reflection developed alongside *practice* (cf. Althusser 1976: 131) — that is, in the case of literary semiotics, detailed and sustained analysis of specific texts and of their contexts. Any other kind of theoretical discussion in the human sciences is, I submit, an ideological mystification, *especially* if is conducted under the aegis of Marxism.

It is clear, then, that my title is not meant to be paradoxical. But, when I speak of «praxis» or «practice» I do not, of course, mean some kind of blind activism. In the case of literary semiotics (which is what is at issue here) the praxis which alone can validate the whole enterprise is none other than the crucial praxis for any literary study: philology. Literary semiotics can be something more than a name only insofar as it realizes itself as an extension of philological analysis — as a reflection which accompanies empirical work. In any other form, literary semiotics is only a form of ideology where the traditional ideological notion of

literary criticism is substituted by another, equally ideological, catchword.

In a dramatically vivid epistemological allegory, which still continues to teach an important lesson, Hermes is represented as marrying Philology. But today the dilemma is a complicated one: will Hermes (the spirit of method and discovery, inquiry and system) marry Philology or will he marry Ideology instead? The fruitful choice is the first one, and only as a mediator between philosophy and philology will the semiotician become something more than a technician — that is, a critic in the full sense of this term.

The concrete cases to which space obliges one only to hint here are not casual examples: they are the root of the whole plant («Red at the rent core and dark with the rain») which is displayed here.

2. Many different doors open (better, close — this is why one needs to indicate what is it that they give access to) on the corridors on the several floors of the library at a big Eastern university. Arrows are painted on the walls, pointing out the accesses to the stacks.

I want to speak about the arrow; that is, I want to say something about a sign. What has semiotics to say about the sign *qua* sign? Well, semiotics might instruct us that, insofar as it is a sign, this image of an arrow belongs to the sub-class of signs called *indexes* (or *indices*) — an *index* being that type of sign which bears a factual relationship to its object. Furthermore, semiotics might have recourse to the by-now classic notions of *signifiant* and *signifié* — pointing out that in this arrow sign the form or *signifiant* (signifier), is its arrow-like shape, whereas its *signifié* (signified), or meaning, is 'arrow', and its referent is an arrow.

But all of these notions raise more problems than they can solve. First of all, this case is as good as any to remind us that the traditional tripartition of different types of signs cannot be rigorously enforced. For this arrow is also an *icon*, since most of the features of the painted image reproduce features of its referent (although *not all* of the painted traits have this reproductive role, *nor* are *all* the features of the referent so reproduced). And it is also a *symbol*, since the painted arrow functions as it does only by virtue of a set of conventional and culture-bound rules which specify that such a sign has the function of a spatial designation and not, for instance, that of a hostile indication or a magical curse.

In the second place, this case is as good as any also to recall the vagueness and limited usefulness of the Saussurean and Peircean definitions of sign. In a Saussurean approach, we could be tempted to consider that our task is exhausted by some characterization of the *signifiant*, the

*signifié* and the referent. But this kind of semiotic description does not identify any specific epistemological object of its own: it is merely an extrapolation of linguistic taxonomies.

Essentially, what we are faced with is the difference between a linguistic sign and a sign in general — and only if we can show that this second kind of sign exists can we talk of semiotics. The real dilemma or tension is not between verbal and non-verbal signs, but between a linguistic definition of sign and a different kind of definition.

When I describe, along what can be visualize as a vertical axis (from physical structure to ontological nucleus), the *signifiant-signifié*-referent trajectory I am describing a linguistic kind of sign, no matter whether the sign is *stricto sensu* linguistic or, as in the present case, a non-verbal sign. The problem we face is that the non-linguistic sign contains the linguistic sign (to think of a box with a smaller box inside it would not be too trivial for our subject).

Consider our case. Linguistic sign: the lexeme *arrow* in the code of the English language. Its structure: the *signifiant* /'arrow'/ (or equivalent allomorph), the *signifié* 'arrow', and the referent ʹarrowʹ. Broader sign, including what has just been described: the *signifiant* «painted shape of an arrow», the *signifié* «the lexeme *arrow*», and the referent. In other words: the linguistic sign as a whole becomes the *signifié* or meaning of the generalized, inclusive sign — and this includes the referent of the word *arrow*, as an object out there in the world.

All this — as noted — is an enlargement of linguistic structure. We do not need a discipline called semiotics to describe all this: if this were all, semiotics could not be considered as an autonomous discipline. But, there is still a large area open. What we have been describing has nothing to do with *why* this shape has been painted (although it has to do with *how* of it), and it has essentially nothing to do with its function. People using this shape on the wall do not think of its inner structure: they think of what it points to. Which means: they think of its *referent* — and now we come to see what the referent of this structure as a non-linguistic sign is. The referent of the sign is whatever the sign signals — what other terminologies (cf. the survey in Hawkes 1977) call the *object* (a less felicitous term, for reasons which we will see presently).

Thus, re-adjusting somewhat the terms of a long philosophical discussion on the sign: the generalized sign (the sign which is relevant to semiotics) means, signifies, and signals; the linguistic sign means and signifies, but it does not signal. Precisely: the painting on the wall *means* the lexeme *arrow* in English (or any equivalent lexeme in any equivalent natural

language), *signifies* an arrow-entity of some sort in the world, and *signals* another structure of equal complexity (in this case, a certain room in a building).

Linguistic reference is a way of signifying, semiotic reference a way of signalling. Does this description identify an object or field of study which is specific of semiotics? Not yet, actually; but before pursuing this matter of signalling as the essential semiotic reference, one must at least hint at another possible way of doing semiotic research. This is to study the ground and context of what, in each given case, is foregrounded as a sign. (The rough distinction I propose is between *ground* as the complex of material structures surrounding the object selected as sign, and *context* as the more specific cultural implementation of this structure; the difference is relative, not absolute, and in any case both ground and context are in their turn *complexes of signs*).

Can I perform an empirically useful semiotic analysis of a sign without giving some information about its material ground and cultural context? No; what is at issue here is empiricism as a theoretical necessity — theory being a gloss on a praxis. Connotations are here as important as denotations (but they are not the same thing — and to claim that they are is one among the features of abstract nihilism which mar semiotic analyses like those by Baudrillard 1972).

The arrows from which this discussion started are painted in black on brick walls whose color is a faintly sicklish yellow: regularly repeated floor after floor, bathed in a pale light. The connotation of these signs, then, is a studious and slightly ascetic one, within an atmosphere which qualifies the library environment with hints of the hospital and the church. On the other hand, their indications are clear and linear: each one of them points to a door, through which one enters the stacks on that floor.

But in the indoor jogging track of the university gymnasium the situation is the reverse: the ground out of which the sign is foregrounded is sunny and clear, while its indication is dizzyingly vague. And precisely: the arrow sign is a bright red, the gallery is well lit, but the arrow itself does not point to another concrete structure — it does not point to anything in particular, or rather it points to itself (since it marks, in the circular gallery, the clockwise movement in which the joggers are instructed to run). This spare and lean symbol of modernity, then, turns out to evoke at the same time a quite different, and darker, image: that of the ouroboros, the mythical serpent which swallows its own tail in a continually recurring cycle. In other terms: the peculiar ground and

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context of this sign generates a set combining connotations of lucid rationality with connotations of whirling irrationality.

Consider yet another arrow sign: the double arrow — with a common trunk and two points darting off in opposite directions — painted white and blue, that the visitor to New York may see when he passes through one of the gates which lead from the tracks section to the main hall, in Grand Central Station. These arrows show the locations of the two branches of a local bank. This is the denotative aspect, but what counts here is the connotation, which emphasizes, more vividly than in the preceding cases, the metaphorical role of the sign. It is a connotation of dynamic availability, whose message is: this bank is everywhere, it is all around you.

And so on and so forth: as noted, only a detailed empirical phenomenology (collating these with other descriptions, considering the broadest possible spectrum of implementations of the arrow shape) can lead to advances in the general reflection, or theory. A detailed phenomenology always leads to new insights. For instance, the extent to which every arrow image as such carries with it a connotation of spareness and modern stylization becomes clear only when we consider a sort of semiotic minimal pair, comparing the aesthetic connotations of the arrow with those of a pointing hand — a sign, this latter, which, if I am not mistaken, is now very rare, at least in the semiotic environment of spatial indicators in the United States. But, for instance, it is still the painting of a hand which directs travelers to the train tracks in the railroad station in Hartford, Connecticut; and this is sufficient to give to the whole space around a connotation of nineteenth century solidity, with a touch of naiveté.

This arrow/hand contrast deserves to be studied not only synchronically but also diachronically. In an ancient Classic tradition, the hand bundled up in a fist symbolizes the closely-knit, tight discourse of logic whereas the open and spread hand is the emblem of its rival — the free-flowing strategy of rhetoric. In this connection, the hand pointing with the index finger could be the best symbol of semiotics. The study, then, of its competition with the arrow can be interesting for the history of ideas: is the arrow sign a straightforward development of the image of an arrow, or is it a stylization of the pointed finger in the hand sign, or is it a combination of the two?

I indicated these concrete possibilities, sketching a typology of the various shapes of the arrow sign, in order to stress the importance of the empirical study of the ground and context of signs, and also to emphasize

that these problems should also be approached in a genetic and historical perspective. But I did not mean to indicate all this as the central answer to the question: How to do semiotics?

More generally, the question underlying the discussion up to now has been: What is semiotic in semiotics? And, up to now, I have kept pointing out all the notions and procedures which are *not* semiotic; that is, that do not identify a specific epistemological object for which the term «semiotics» (or «science of signs» or other equivalent expression) does not prove to be an unnecessary terminological addition. What follows presents a sketch of what is semiotic in semiotics. Specifically, what is here submitted is meant as the foundation of a theory of literary semiotics; which means, in the terms of this research, an extended gloss along a praxis of reading literary texts.

3. I simply *have* to go back to the arrow sign: but this time, what matters is the relationship between the arrow and the door it signals. We have seen that the door can be said to be the referent of the arrow, and that this characterizes a logic of the sign which goes beyond the linguistic logic. I noted also that to call the door the «object» of the sign «arrow» is not a felicitous terminological choice. We can now see why: because the door which the arrow sign signals is itself a sign (whereas to speak of an «object» may give the impression of something unstructured).

Thus: the *signifié* or meaning of the semiotic sign «arrow» is in its turn a sign — specifically, as we saw, the linguistic sign *arrow; and,* the referent of the semiotic sign «arrow» is another sign — and precisely, the semiotic sign «door» (containing within itself as its meaning the linguistic sign *door).* At this point, we can see better the insufficiency of the traditionally-quoted Peircian definition of sign — «something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity». It is not so much that it is too vague, but that the supposedly simple elements of this definition (the «things») are themselves signs (cf. Eco 1976). Its defect, then, is that of being, in a certain sense, an epistemological *petitio principii.*

The approach proposed here avoids this danger, I hope; and the way in which it avoids the danger clarifies certain apparent paradoxes, like: why it is true that linguistics is indispensable to semiotics, and it is also true that semiotics follows a different «logic»; why it is true that semiotics is as old as descriptions of culture, but at the same time why it is not false that semiotics is a modern discipline.

The key to all this is the linguistic sign, in its standard definition as

*signifiant/signifié* nexus. Insofar as the notion of linguistic sign must be presupposed in order to define sign in general, linguistics is indispensable to semiotics; but since the linguistic sign is included in the broader embrace of the sign at large, semiotics is not simply an extrapolation of linguistics. Also: sophisticated descriptions of sign system have always existed (in fact, modern semiotics is very often flat and disappointing with respect to the ancient descriptions); but, a satisfactory definition of sign in general is possible only when the concept of linguistic sign has become clear — which explains why semiotics must be considered as a modern discipline. That is, semiotics appears when the technology and epistemology of the human sciences make it possible — not as the result of a sudden spurt of brilliant ideas on the part of some isolated thinkers.

The definition I submit is the following (yes, the phrasing is still rough, and it will have to be refined):

*A sign is any structure whose meaning is a linguistic sign and whose referent is a structure of the same nature as the former structure.*

(This indirectly answers the question which is often asked: How to distinguish signs from non-signs). My proposal for semiotics flows directly from this definition. That is: semiotics does *not* study signs (a task which is best left to linguistics), nor does it study the relationships obtaining between signs and their objects (for, essentially, no such simple relationship exists, as I have just argued).

The proper field of semiotics is the space between the signs, or (if a more dynamic image is wanted) the trajectory going from one sign to the other. Yes, I am aware that this proposal can be treated with some irony: for it could be said that — in this theory — semiotics is either the study of nothing, or the study of everything. The study of nothing, if we insist on the fact (undeniable) that signs are everywhere; the study of everything, if we focus instead our attention on social and psychological realities insofar as they are not shaped up, filtered, stylized into signs.

In all this, I see nothing to smile about: it is the challenge of semiotics today. For, it is true — semiotics does study the nothing which lies between signs; and this is neither a witticism nor a nihilistic statement. The reflex of capitalist technology in culture is the rapid wear-and-tear of methodologies, usually according to a double movement whose result is destructive: first, indiscriminate praise and inflated expectations; then, scorn and rejection — apparently an expression of radicalism, but in most cases simply a way of making room for a new product.

Semiotics has entered the second phase. But this process of commercialized nihilism should be opposed.

This, then, is the challenge of semiotics: to realize itself as empirical analysis while at the same time making felt the tension between the signs. The constant dangers are the fall into nothing on the one side, the ascent into a plenitude which drowns any analysis, on the other side. What follows is a brief presentation of the main points of the approach to semiotics which derives from what has just been proposed.

The ambiguity of the sign, its centrale duplicity, is the one between *the material and the spiritual* — better still (if we want to emphasize the ideological ossifications of these trends) the materialistic and the spiritualistic. Even this very general statement can seem to commit itself to too much, in its revisionism: not only does it use a term like «spiritual» rather than the more tough-sounding «mental», but — by qualifying «spiritualistic» as in a sense a degeneration of «spiritual» — this statement implies a relatively autonomous, and equally respectable, spiritual element side by side with the material one. Actually all this is freely admitted here: nothing less than this revisionism is called for today in order to do semiotics — which is the same thing as developing a theory of semiotics. (Hermes as bridegroom of Philology carries a dowry which contains a good deal of theology).

This tension between the material and the spiritual is not only an indirect confrontation but also a fruitful balance: by concentrating on the material phenomenology of sign relationships we demystify as ideological the abstractness of philosophical systems — which trick us into accepting them in term of thought contents, rather than of concrete, material, sensuous (Santayana's word) signs. To note that ideas are bodied forth in signs is trivial; but to study material signs as something which (to different extents, in different ways) *affects* ideas — this is not a usual approach, this is not devoid of importance, this qualifies semiotics as a human science. At the same time: by concentrating on the signaling process as a process of trascendence (a movement beyond the signs which, in any given case, are being connected) we demystify materialism, showing its ideological limitations.

Thus situated, semiotics appears as the crucible where the human sciences are tested in their broader implications. For, while it is impossible to completely go out of culture and society in order to criticize them (this awareness being the advantage of any dialectic criticism), yet a step can (and must) be taken without which any critique would be too weak. This step is the semiotic decision to study ideas not *qua* ideas (there

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lies the path of apologetics or of purely ideological disputations), but insofar as they are (as noted above) realized in material signs.

At the same time, one of the crucial facts reminding us that such a critique cannot be fully materialistic without becoming by and large acritical, is that signs are significant (or, in the terminology adopted above, signs signal) only then they transcend themselves, and that the only appropriate way to study them is to concentrate on the no-man's land through which the signals travel.

Thus, the first and foremost feature in this approach to semiotics in general, and to literary semiotics in particular, is the material/spiritual tension within the sign. All other features, even when they do not depend from this one, function on a smaller scale — but, just because of this, their relevance to the empirical analysis of texts is more direct.

A feature which in a sense derives from the broad one just discussed is the *transcendence of the sign*. The sign, as noted, can never be fully defined in itself, and it is never fully resolved and explained in the other sign it is pointing to. Man, captured in the dizzying spiral of the process by which he continually transcends himself and his situation, may think that he succeeds in breaking this spiral when he explains — and thus to a certain extent immobilizes — himself in signs. But when he realizes that the signs into which he thought he had fixed himself open up into a series of trajectories leading to other, and partially contradictory, signs — then it becomes clear that the spiral of transcendence is never going to be broken, and that no theory is adequate, if it is a theory of closure.

The emphasis on man a producer and creator of signs is welcome, *provided* it is made quite clear that man rationally controls only a part of the signs he actually produces; he is *produced by* signs at least as much as he produces them. Man is created as such by social signs and psychological signs largely outside of his control. More specifically, the fact that man can become *conscious* of the extent to which he is conditioned/created by social signs (Marxism being still the most powerful tool for acquiring this consciousness) and of the measure in which psychological signs condition and create him — this fact cannot guarantee that man can *control* these signs. (One of the crucial concepts here is that of the collective unconscious, in the line of Jung's thought). Any statement about culture as freedom which does not take this conditioning into account is, I submit, a trivalization of the idea of freedom; and it is in pointing this out that semiotics becomes a fruitful critique of the ideology of humanism [1].

But one must push further: in that general process of production and reproduction which makes up society (and consequently history), it is not the case that man *reproduces* himself physically and also *produces* signs. The interconnection is much deeper and more intimate (it is, as John Donne could have said, an interanimation): man is constantly *reproducing himself as a complex of signs,* and this semiotic activity provides the uneasy balance between a sense of individuality and the tendency to scatter oneself away in full dispersion, among heterogeneous and contradictory signs.

This describes another feature of this theory of semiotics — the one which provides a foundation for a general method of historical analysis (and literary analysis must be especially literary *history*: a non-historical analysis of literary texts is shallow and narrow, no matter how apparently sophisticated its semiotic *instrumentarium*). What can be called, then, *semiohistory* is an integral part of this theory of semiotics. Semiohistory describes men insofar as they construct themselves as historical figures: they do so mainly by treating themselves as signs (a feature which shows the closeness between politicians and statesmen, and writers and artists in general).

This means, among other things, that historical figures use their actions, their own life, as extended strings of citations (which are often, of course, contradictory); only, instead of finding a passage in a literary text constituting itself as the citation of another passage from another text, we find an action or form of behavior or event constituting itself as the citation of another event or form of behavior or action, no matter how large is the geographical and chronological distance.

For, these citations do not imply intentionality. To be sure, a historical body who mimes in his movements the movements of another historical body may do so by explicitly and consciously alluding to the latter (intentional citation). But he may have no intention of doing so, and the citation may simply reflect the fact that the two bodies in question construct themselves as signs within the same tradition, broadly defined (genetic citation). Or, it may even happen that the bodies-becoming-signs at issue belong to two completely different traditions (typological citation).

There can be several other complications — it is these complications, after all, that constitute the stuff of semiohistory. For example, one and the same body may become sign by producing a corpus of political signs through his acting in history (in a semiotic intertext with respect to the semiotically-stylized actions of his forefathers and contemporaries),

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*and* he may become a sign by producing a corpus of linguistic signs (as an author), *and* he may become a sign by becoming an element in somebody else's sign-productive process (his role, then, is passive — unlike what happens in the preceding two roles — but this certainly does not diminish its significance).

One example — better, an indication of the practice of research along which these reflexions have developed. Two of the dominant figures of the early Italian Renaissance express all three ways of structuring oneself as a sign in history, of signi-fying oneself (in the sense of making oneself into a sign: hence my dash in the spelling, to differentiate the usage of this term from the more current one). They are: Lorenzo de' Medici and Leon Battisti Alberti.

Both signify themselves as political actors (Lorenzo, of course, in a more intense way than Alberti — but this distinction is only marginally relevant to an analysis like this), and as literary authors. They are signs, moving (with a retinue of symbolic implications) throughout the courts of Italy, and at the same time each one of these political signs fathers several microcosms of signs (and thus, for each work he authors, he becomes the all-inclusive sign, or frame of all the other signs within the work; but see below, for the relation between language and metalanguage).

Finally, both of them become signs (literary characters) in other people's works. In fact they are — in the instance I have in mind — direct interlocutors, and as such they become the signs of opposite ideologies — active life versus contemplative life. (I refer to the *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, a philosophical dialogue written by Cristoforo Landino around 1475).

Another feature of this theory of semiotics is that it is the best (the least partisan) instrument for a critique of ideology. Ideology lies at the two extremes, with regard to texts: it is both what the text says (sometimes shouts) explicitly, *and* what the text carefully avoids even mentioning. Ideology, then, is the *discontinuity* between the too-loudly-said and the unsaid. In the midst of this discontinuity stands the text — where the strategic relationships among the sub-complexes of signs make up the real *politics*, thereby objectively demystifying the ideological poles (for this concept of politics of the text, which differs from the current sense of «politics», cf. Valesio 1976).

The semiotician's task is to make this objective contrast explicit. By saying the unsaid, first of all; and then by carefully analyzing the conflicts between this unsaid and what is loudly proclaimed on the

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surface; finally, by showing how the materially produced, concrete signs of the text manage, if closely studied, to demystify the loudly-said, and to hint at the unsaid. To do a critique of ideologies means then, essentially, to bring to the light of day the relationships between the semiotic trajectories which surface on the text and those which do not. Thus, semiotics in the view proposed here is the indispensable instrument for *a minimally ideological critique of ideologies.*

So, the semiotician is supposed to say what the text does not say? What a presumption! — somebody could object. But one must not hesitate in the response: the presumption actually lies in *not* doing what has just been advocated. It is the presumption of speaking of a text as if it were an isolated object; the critic's presumption that he can stay within the text, as if this were a privileged territory; the presumption of accepting a classic as such, and looking down on the works which surround it and explain it.

The semiotician, then, should refuse ideological hierarchies, and he should look at every literary text as part of a contexture of «average» texts, whose study is necessary in order to understand the text at issue in its status as a socially conditioned object of sign production. These appreciations have already introduced us to the last feature of the theoretical approach to semiotics sketched here. It is a way of answering the question: What does it imply to treat the components of the literary text as signs?

Actually, I already began answering this question, when I spoke of analyzing signs in the midst of the ideological dis-continuum; and also when I discussed the importance of the intertext and the general contexture of signs surrounding every text. Both points, of course, need further qualifications. As for the presence of ideology — and the necessity of employing this not as term of opprobrium but as a *descriptive* term — further elaboration would carry us too far. But I would like to add a few words on the importance of the signs surrounding the text (constituting the synchronic *and diachronic* contextualization or intertextuality of the text at issue).

Any analysis of a literary text which does not situate it historically (even when — rather, *especially* when — it is a contemporary text) is intrinsically an obfuscation of the text, no matter what ideology this analysis reflects, and whether it uses semiotics or not. To say «sign» when analyzing a literary text (or any other kind of text) means: to say «genealogy» and to *un*-say a flat and purely synchronic analysis; to say

«collective (and largely) unconscious code» and to *un*-say the ideological insistence on the unique individuality of the author.

But I still did not complete the answer to my own question: What does it mean to treat literary texts as complexes of signs? The feature needed to complete the answer — and at the same time to complete the list of features characterizing the main aspects of my theoretical proposal for the practice of literary semiotics — can be called *the text as metalanguage of itself*.

To clarify what I mean, let me recall what was said before: that semiotics goes beyond linguistics, but at the same time linguistic structuring is indispensable to semiotics. I must add now that the reverse is also true: in order to understand the functioning of particularly complicated linguistic structures (especially those implemented in literary texts), the linguistic concept of sign is not sufficient (as witnessed, for instance, by the impasse of stylistic criticism) and the semiotic concept of sign must enter the picture.

The basic feature of the semiotic sign is, as noted, its inclusiveness (the sign as a frame for another sign). This semiotic broadening is not confined to structures like the arrow sign — it is found also in linguistic signs. One of the features, in fact, that semiotics brings to light in literary texts (with more or less intensity, aesthetic success, etc., in the different texts) is that: in every such text there are signs which include other signs. That is: some of the signs are commented upon (glossed, criticized, emphasized, etc.) by other signs in the same text; so that the former can be said to constitute the meaning of the latter. This is what I meant when I spoke of the text as a metalanguage of itself. But how can I proceed in this vein, without having recourse to that empirical grounding whose necessity is strongly asserted at the beginning of this essay? The anchoring to praxis cannot be differed any longer. The *exempla* which follow can (must) of course be further discussed and qualified; but at least they are not tossed off casually — they reflect a sustained practice and ongoing research on certain texts and contexts, to which a circling attention comes back again and again (cf. for instance, Valesio 1977).

At one of the points of dizziness in *King Lear*, when Lear is still teetering on the abyss of his own rage, still trying to hold back the great wave, he exclaims:

Oh how this Mother swels vp toward my heart!
*Historica passio*, downe thou climing sorrow.
                    (2.4.53-4; cf. Kökeritz 1955 [p. 782]).

As a linguistic sign, the Latin or Latinate noun phrase *hysterica passio is* a translation of the preceding noun *mother*, this latter being the popular designation for certain attacks or seizures; whether the term reflects an etymological link with motherhood or whether — as some surmise — it is a phonological variant of *smother*, does not directly matter for the analysis here. (I quote these lexemes in an «edited» form, reserving for another occasion a discussion of the variants, and specifically of the contrast between the variant readings *historica* and *hysterica* in the different texts of the play).

But it does matter for an integrated semiotic analysis of the whole text. For this word is (to speak the language of the text itself) a «nimble lightning» which reveals in a flash an entangled psychological forest: Who could this *mother* be? (No, the questions of the «how-many-children-had-Lady-Macbeth» type are *not* otiose). This word could be the second and last mention of Lear's wife in the play. It is «symptomatic» that what is — if I am not mistaken — the first and only other mention of Lear's wife, which follows on the heels of this one in the same scene, also refers to her not directly but as his daughters' mother:

> ... if thou should'st not be glad,
> I would divorce me from thy Mother Tombe,
> Sepulchring an Adultresse.
>
> (2. 4. 131-3, *ed. cit.*)

But is not all this reduced to rubble, as a card-house, if we interpret *mother* as a reduction of *smother*? Certainly not (the house has deeper foundations), if we keep our ears open to the language of the unconscious: after the image of the adulterous wife, the image of the smothering mother who strangles, suffocates. (Yes, the adulteress image is painted only to be wiped off immediately afterwards by the sleeve around the same arm who painted it; and, yes, the *mother/smother* form does not literally designate an animate being; but we neglect these connections only at the price of flattening and impoverishing our interpretation).

Actually, what we just said is already relevant to a semiotic analysis; furthermore, already in this translation — or «horizontal» passage from one linguistic sign to another — something emerges which could be considered relevant to semiotic analysis (the passage from one sign to another has already been presented as the focus of this approach to semiotics). What emerges is the change in registers implicit in the contrast between an expression current in the local vernacular and its synonym in Latin — the badge of scientific and cosmopolitan prestige.

(Such an alternation is a traditional rhetorical move — as shown in some of the *incunabula* behind the Elizabethean literary language, namely, Italian prose of broad communication — especially in sermons — from the XVth century on. The dominant trend, however, is that of first citing the Latin form, then following up with its vernacular — in our case, Italian — equivalent; cf., for instance, this tactic used again and again in the sermons by Gerolamo Savonarola. This difference, by the way, suffices to distinguish two different rhetorics: the Latin form followed by the vernacular synonym bespeaks a rhetoric of clarification, of open communication, with an emphasis on explaining; the reverse order, on the other hand, is one of the aspects of a rhetoric whose emphasis is the contrary one: deepening the colors, making the linguistic expression more solemn and mysterious).

But in a stricter delimitation of semiotics (such as the one which is proposed here), the relationships just described are not specifically semiotic. We identify a semiotic relationship, let me recall, when we identify a compound or inclusive sign pointing to another sign (or group of signs). This is what happens with *hysterica passio;* which is not simply a translation, on a different register, of a current term — but is, above all, a metalinguistic element in the text. It descends from the preceding definitions (although it was not made explicit before) that every metalinguistic element in the text is *eo ipso* a semiotic sign; for, a metalinguistic sign is a linguistic sign (or complex of signs) which contains — as its meaning — another linguistic sign or sign complex (to repeat the definition of semiotic sign introduced above).

In saying *hysterica passio* Lear suddenly switches (in mid-sentence and without forewarning — thus with a dramatic effectiveness free of intellectualism) from the language he speaks as a character in the play (the language of emotions and projects geared to actions) to the kind of language with which an external observer (spectator, reader, critic) can paraphrase critically the language of the drama (which thus becomes its object language). By uttering this phrase, then, Lear steps outside of the action and objectifies his own language; through this specific sentence constituent he comments on the tone of the sentence to which this very constituent belongs.

Thus, at the linguistic level we have a noun phrase (adjective + noun), *hysterica passio*, whose meaning is 'hysterical seizure' (or some equivalent description), and whose referent is a certain psycho-physical condition. This linguistic sign is, as a whole, included in the semiotic sign. «Hysterica passio» is a semiotic sign (transcribed within quotes to distinguish it from *hysterica passio* — a linguistic sign). Its form is a graphemic

string in a text (a string of sounds in an oral performance of the text), its meaning is the linguistic sign *hysterica passio* in its entirety.

And its referent? Its immediate referent is the complex of those immediately-related signs (the very sentence which serves as context to this sign) *and* other signs at large in the text (like the disheveled attire — «unbonneted he runs» — and violently agitated behavior, as described in 3. 1. 4 ff., and the following scenes) which justify the use of this Latin phrase.

To sum up. *Hysterica passio* is one of the points in which the *King Lear* text comments itself, demoting (so to speak) the rest of the utterances in it to the rank of described objects. This phrase symbolizes the metalanguage of contemporary science (*sub specie* of medical science); it is, so to speak, a miniature (but efficient) naturalistic grid for the reading of play, a grid provided by the play itself.

Most of the linguistic signs in a literary text will do nothing more and nothing less than perform the functions normally performed by any linguistic sign: designate a referent through form/meaning combinations endowed with certain connotations. No matter how we deal with the various problems of referentiality and the several modes of expression (important problems, of course, but not relevant here), we can say that in general the signs in a text point to things, tell us things. But a small (and strategically crucial) part of the signs in a text, in addition to performing this function, *interpret* themselves and the other signs in the text; they constitute the internal metalanguage of the text, and their investigation is the proper task of literary semiotics.

The reader will have recognized already the kinship between this distinction and Benveniste's pioneering distinction between *système interprétant* and *système interprété*. My proposal here is a development of that distinction. But, having acknowledged the continuity of a certain type of research, I must also point out the differences. While Benveniste's distinction concerns different semiotic systems, for instance the semiotic system of language viewed as *interprétant* of the semiotic system of society (cf. Benveniste 1974: 54) — I believe that the dialectic at issue is a much more intimate one; it must be transferred into the heart itself of linguistic structure.

The crucial point here is analogous to the distinction between rhetorics and rhetoric (cf. the quoted Valesio 1977). What is *semiotic* pertains to the signs «out there», in the texts and in the world (but it is not only a baroque conceit to speak of the text of the world), just as *rhetoric*

is the objective structure of any discourse, *history* is a sequence of actions and events, *grammar* is the mechanism we have in our brain even if we cannot read and write. On the other hand: *semiotics* is metalanguage used to analyze semiotic structures, just as *rhetorics* is metalanguage employed to analyze rhetorical structures (which are ultimately, in my opinion, the same thing as semiotic structures), *history* in the second sense (or *historiography*) is the account of those actions and events, and *grammar* in the second sense is the formalized analysis of the grammar we have in our heads.

That the semiotics, then, of the critic's metalanguage is the *interprétant* of that *interprété* which is the literary text — this is clear, and does not tell anything that literary criticism did not know already. What is newer, and more specific in its claim, more open to controversy and qualification, and imposing an interestingly difficult task to empirical research — in short what is significant for the progress of knowledge in these matters, is the proposal that there is a part of each text which functions as the *interprétant* of the rest of the text.

What does this imply? For one thing, that the critical genealogy of a text begins with the text itself: it is in the text (as we saw) that we find the beginnings of the ideological layers (in part helpful and revealing, in part mystifying) which will be abundantly superimposed on the text through the years; and it is in the text itself that we find the beginning of a long list of critical assessments of that text.

Another document, taken from another dossier, will complete this illustration of my proposal. A youthful poem by one of the greatest Italian (and European) poets of the time, Gabriele D'Annunzio, begins:

> O Vivïana May de Penüele,
> gelida virgo prerafaëlita,
> O voi che compariste un dì, vestita
> di fino argento, a Dante Gabriele,
> tenendo un giglio ne le ceree dita,
> etc. [2]

This is a rather stilted and embarrassed poem which — by itself — does not adequately symbolize the achievements of the author. But this is irrelevant here; a method which depends for its application on the aesthetic value of the literary text as issue reveals by this very fact its ideological nature. Furthermore, it was already indicated above that one of the distinctive features of this approach to literary semiotics is the

crucial role attributed to the «average» signs which surround and contextualize the signs privileged by the literary tradition.

What is important for literary semiotics is the metalinguistic value of the adjective *prerafaëlita*, which reveals essentially the same general movement which we just saw in the case of *hysterica passio*. Once again, we note that even in such a short specimen several minute but significant linguistic details crowd around the reader, showing the complexity of the connotative network surrounding every sign in a literary text.

The first element perhaps to strike the reader is the profusion of diaereses. Their connotation of frail preciosity is in agreement with the connotation evoked by the very name of the heroine: *Viviana* is a rare first name even without diaeresis, and as for her family name (once again, even leaving the diaeresis on *Penuele* out of account), it has a triple connotation of preciosity. For, it is a noblewoman's name (cf. the *de*), it is a compound name, and it is foreign — more precisely it is a mixture of foreign language, combining English (*May*) and, probably, Spanish, in *Penuele*. (For a linguistic-semiotic study of proper names, cf. Valesio, 1973).

Finally, the Latinate *virgo* instead of Italian *vergine* is also precious, evoking the shadow and the shudder which surround one of the pivotal elements in the Decadent code: an erotic imagery couched in the language of Catholic lore. For of course, *gelida* coupled with *virgo* — and in the umbra of such a suggestive name — does not suggest frigidity (its direct referential value notwithstanding), but just the contrary — it gives an intimation of slightly perverse eroticity; its connotations, thus, are made to run counter to its denotations.

*Virgo*, after all, evokes such «classic» moves, in the genealogy of this and similar texts, as the language in which *Franciscae meae laudes* is written: a «silvery» Latin redolent of the church. Since we are on the subject of the Baudelairean genealogy, let us be a little more specific, and indicate that a noun like *virgo* hints at the atmosphere more fully evoked, in a fascinating balance between the sacred and (even more than the profane) the mundane, by verses like:

> Lecteur, as-tu quelquefois respiré
> Avec ivresse et lente gourmandise
> Ce grain d'encens qui remplit une église,
> Ou d'un sachet le musc invétéré?

(It it the opening of «Le parfum» in *Les fleurs du mal*, as edited by Starkie in 1942). Here is the peculiar *disinvoltura* which is one of the

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main features of the Decadent discourse: mixing registers with a fearless attitude toward the dangers of grotesque, the evocation moves — in the space of a couple of lines — from the atmosphere of the vestry to that of the bedroom closet.

Coming back to the Italian poem, the last feature to which one should draw attention is the adoption of the simple consonant rather than the geminate in cases where the latter is the normal pattern in Italian ortography (and pronunciation): *prerafaëlita* rather than *prerafaëllita*. This reinforces the connotation of preciosity present in all the other linguistic items which have been analyzed. Once again, this is true independently of the diaeresis; what happens is that the diaereses — which mark the required poetic scansion — underline a connotation of preciosity which however is already present in these lexemes even outside of the metrical code, as components of a possible prose discourse.

Now, all these elements are in the text, and none of them should be neglected, if we want a full critical reading. Yet, what I did is still not a semiotic analysis in the strict sense of the term. What precedes can be called semiotic only in the essentially tautological sense in which any analysis of a sign system is semiotic; whereas the preceding pages have argued that, as long as we perform this kind of analysis, we are in fact doing something necessary, but not something that justifies semiotics as an autonomous discipline.

We perform a semiotic analysis when we try to describe as precisely as we can the shift, within this fragment of the text, from language to metalanguage. In order to see this clearly, let us step back a moment and review the essentials. What has been described until now, apropos of this stanza? Signs telling things: the signs on the page tell us, in the mode of direct address, that there is a young woman with a certain air about her (virginal and cold) whose name (implying nobility) is Viviana May de Penuele. (That the mode is direct address rather than description is an important element for the rhetoric-semiotic analysis of the whole poem, but not directly relevant here). Of course, these signs tell us these things in a certain way — and I have just tried (by characterizing their connotations) to describe that certain way.

At this level, the present text is an object manufactured according to a certain taste — and of course the innocuous appearance of the term should not mislead us, after all that has been said. «Taste» always (but especially with regard to literary texts) is merely a euphemism for «ideology». To present the pleasure of the text as something whimsical and free is to be accomplices to the ideological trap that any text (in

different ways and to different extents) is trying to spring on us. The pleasure of the text is conditioned by patterns (sometimes, strongly conflicting patterns) of taste, and the taste of the text is — to repeat — its ideological frame.

This poem then, this verbal bibelot, is an object — in a certain sense, a victim — of the ideology which frames it. A victim, because this ideology seems to condemn it to the curiosity shop of literary historiography.

This text is — as all texts (again, in different ways and measures) are — framed, in two senses of this word. It is framed in the sense of being encased like a painting — and this frame is constituted by the explicit, overt component of the ideological dis-continuum. But the text is framed also in the sense of this verb which points to the action (in Webster's wording) 'to prearrange (as a contest or an incrimination) so that a particular outcome is assured'. This second sense, too, pertains to ideology: the explicit ideological signs direct everybody to a reading which seems fully sufficient.

But an adjective — *prerafaëlita* — is sufficient to change this too idyllic picture. For it is a semiotic, not merely a linguistic, sign; that is (as we saw) a metalinguistic element — as it becomes clear when we think that the sense in which a *virgo* can be said to be *gelida* is sharply different from the sense in which a *virgo* can be said to be *prerafaëlita*.

Let me run this sign through the by-now-familiar process — not as some sort of ostentation of technology (which would be laughable, in the absence of any mathematical type of formalism), but in order to constantly review and refine the critical language, which has a particularly delicate task in these interactions of language and metalanguage. *Gelida virgo* is a linguistic sign — a noun phrase whose meaning is something like 'cold maiden' (the Queen's phrase from *Hamlet* seems appropriate to render the literary tone of the original), and whose referent is a young woman, whose (so to speak) sociological reality has just been guaranteed by the indication of her full name. *Gelida virgo* is nothing else than this (including, of course, the already-described connotations); which means that this is only a linguistic sign, without a specific semiotic dimension. (This sign is semiotic — to repeat — only in the tautological sense by which every sign is, by definition, semiotic).

But the case of *virgo prerafaëlita* is different. It is, of course, a linguistic sign: a noun phrase whose meaning is 'pre-Raphaelite maiden' and whose referent is that same young woman. But this is also a semiotic sign. Thus, the meaning of «virgo prerafaëlita» (the quotation marks indicating,

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once again, that this is now treated as a semiotic sign) is the linguistic sign *virgo prerafaëlita* in its entirety. Its referent is, first of all, its immediate context, *gelida virgo;* that is, the other component of the same noun phrase. But the very analysis of the sign in these terms changes the concept of context relevant here.

Normally, the components of a syntactic context are on the same level (the differences being technical rather than ontological — concerning, that is, the relative positions of these components between «deep» and «surface» structures, in the grammatical systems which make use of these concepts). But a semiotic sign is always — to to speak — lifted above its context, and actually what on the surface appears to be its context is its referent. (This specification holds, of course, also for the phrase *hysterica passio* discussed above). Beyond this immediate referent, the integrated referent of this semiotic sign, are all the other linguistic signs in the text of the whole poem which clarify the application of the epithet *prerafaëlita*.

To sum up: while the referent of the other (linguistic) sings is a young woman, the referent of *prerafaëlita* is the complex of sings referring to the young woman within a *certain code of connotations*. The underlined qualification is important (and it was present, although only implicitly, also in the analysis of *hysterica passio*). Otherwise, *every lexeme* in the text which designates the young woman (say, pronouns like *vi* and *voi* which, in the non-quoted part of the poem, deictically indicate her) would have to be considered as referent of *prerafaëlita* — and this would obviously pre-empt the semiotic sign of any cognitive function. That «certain way» is implicit in the connotations of the adjective.

The adjective *prerafaëlita*, in fact, imposes what can be defined an historico-aesthetic grid on the text. The young woman is viewed and presented as a painting, and a painting belonging to a specific artistic school. Thus an ironic distance with respect to the referent of the text is generated — and this implies an ironic distantiation *from* the text which takes place *within* the text.

Thus the aesthetic ideology which otherwise, if left hidden, would have made of the text the victim (as noted above), now — being made explicit — is no longer a constraint on the text, but rather is the object of a detached critical appraisal; it is, in the sense clarified above, the text appraising itself. This epithet, then, is the first critical gesture in the genealogy of the text; and as a critical gesture is as valid and cognitively useful as, for instance, the whole of the essay on the pre-Raphaelite movement and symbolism written by a leading critic eight

years later (cf. Graf 1897). In fact, the discrete critical hint in this poem is more appropriate and effective than Graf's whole essay, with its rearguard attack on that aesthetic movement, based on an ideological fiction of what the literature of the time should have been like.

To conclude. A literary text lies twice; and the challenge facing semiotics is that of choosing between becoming a sophisticated accomplice to this double lie, or demystifying it. The text lies, first of all, because it presents itself as a unified whole; and it further lies because it pretends to be concerned with establishing a straightforward communication with its reader.

Literary semiotics has — by and large — proved itself to be merely a continuation of the least fruitful aspects of structuralism and stylistic criticism, because it has encouraged this double lie of the text, by giving it the blessing of a scientistic ideology. Literary criticism has constructed the ideological illusion of the text as an autonomous and unified object. The task of literary semiotics is that of showing the essentially arbitrary character of such a construction. (In doing this, literary semiotic takes its place in the general movement which — within bourgeois culture, and it is impossible at the present time to be anywhere else — develops a systematic critique of that culture).

As for the dominant features of the theory of literary semiotics which have been sketched here, they are related (to sum them up) to the following concepts: the tension between the spiritual and the material; the transcendence of the sign, or, the problem of the «nothig» between signs; a critique of ideology which is least ideological; semiohistory; full contextualization; and, the metalanguage within the text (or, the text as a critical statement about itself). The next step: empirical research.

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## FOOTNOTES

[1] It is in this critical spirit that we should consider statements like the following: «L'homme est pour lui-même et pour les autres un être signifiant puisqu'on ne peut jamais comprendre le moindre de ses gestes sans dépasser le présent pur et l'expliquer par l'avenir... L'homme construit des signes parce qu'il est signifiant dans sa réalité même et il est signifiant parce qu'il est dépassement dialectique de tout ce qui est simplement donné. Ce que nommons liberté, c'est l'irreducibilité de l'ordre culturel à l'ordre naturel». (Sartre 1960: 96, and cf. 63, *et passim*). If I am not mistaken, this is also part of Lacan's criticism of existential psychoanalysis (cf. «Le stade du miroir», and specifically p. 96 in Lacan 1966).

[2] From «Due Beatrici (II)» in *La Chimera* (1889); I quote the text as edited in Contini 1968: 327-8. Rough translation: 'O Viviana May de Penuele, / Cold pre-Raphaelite maiden, / O you who one day appeared, dressed / in pure silver, to Dante Gabriel, / holding a lily with your pale fingers'.

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