LITERATURE AND THE OTHER ARTS: THE POINT OF VIEW OF SEMIOTICS

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Summary

Literature is both oral and written and can therefore make use of both acoustic and visual signs in its various genres. Semiotics studies the relationships of literature with the other arts with respect to the common features, specific differences, and mutual influences between the verbal, nonverbal, acoustic, and visual signs. At the crossroads between literature and the visual arts, visual poetry has made use of the aesthetic potential of both verbal and visual signs. With the visual arts, literature shares the potential of representation whereas music is essentially nonrepresentational. Among the universal characteristics of the arts are symmetry and recurrence of forms. Aesthetic features which literature shares with music are rhythm, tempo, or recurrence, but rhythm is also visual rhythm, which is also a feature of the visual arts. Whereas the

visual arts are superior in the representation of the visual word, the verbal arts have the potential of representing the visible as well as the invisible world.

1. Introduction: The Semiotic Framework

Semiotics, the general study of signs and sign systems, provides a framework for the study of literature which aims at extending the scope from the restricted focus on verbal signs only to the broader scope of a creative locus of confluence of verbal signs with many other types and modalities of signs. The tendency towards a too narrow approach to literature has been encouraged by a tradition which designates the verbal arts as "literature," a term whose etymology in the Latin root *littera* ('letter') lays all emphasis on writing and reading to the neglect of the oral and auditory aspects of the verbal arts both as far as the acoustic form of written poems and the tradition of oral literature is concerned. The semiotic approach to literature emphasizes the plurimodality and multimediality of the verbal arts and widens the focus to include the various nonverbal acoustic and visual contexts with which literary texts are associated. Semiotics broadens the horizon of literary syntax and semantics to include literary pragmatics as the study of aesthetic sign processes (semiosis) in the verbal arts.

1.1. The Semiotic Framework of Verbal and the Other Arts

In correlation with the three classical branches of semiotics, there are three fundamental modes by which verbal signs are associated with nonverbal ones in literary semiosis: contiguity or juxtaposition (syntax), representation (semantics), and interpretation (pragmatics).

The study of the *syntactic* dimension of literature in the broader semiotic sense of *syntax* is the study of the verbal signs in contiguity with the nonverbal signs in its context.. The nonverbal arts with which the verbal arts are in contiguity are, above all music, the arts of the body, and the other visual arts. The verbal arts have always been closely connected with all other arts, although the degree to which this device has been made use of has varied in the course of the history of literature. It has been strongest in the literary genre of theater with its extensions from verbal to visual art, the body arts of acting, mime and dance, the visual arts of fashion (costumes), object design and sculpture (props), painting (scenery), and architecture (stage). To a lesser degree, the simultaneity of verbal and nonverbal signs have been a characteristic of the rhetorical arts of gesture, mime, and the art of body movement in the oratory genres such as encomium, eulogy, vituperation, funeral address, sermon, or homily. Ancient and medieval rhetoric had a special branch, called *actio*, to teach the appropriate forms of body movement in association with oratory speeches. Associations with instrumental and vocal music can be found in oral poetry and in poetical genres such as the ballad, e.g., in the art of the medieval bards and troubadours. The transition from literary to musical genres, such as *Lied*, the opera, or choral song is only a matter of the conventions of the canonical division of the arts and their genres.

In its *semantic* dimension, literature is associated with all other arts insofar as it *represents* these arts and their signs by means of verbal representations. Literary texts describe paintings, sculptures, or works of architecture, music, and dance; they express

or evoke the impressions made by such works of art on literary characters, and in theoretical treatises, such as Horace's *Ars poetica* (on music) or Lessing's *Laocoon* (on painting and sculpture), they reflect on the specific differences and common features of literature and the other arts. Without reference to any specific canonical art, literature evokes, describes, or reflects on visual, acoustic, gustatory, or olfactory signs by means of description, evocation, association, or synaesthesia, as in Rimbaud's poem "Vowels", which associates the vowels A, E, I, U, and O with the colors black, white, red, green, or blue, respectively. Among the literary devices or genres in which reflections on the literary and the other arts are central are *ekphrasis* and *paragone*. Ekphrasis is a verbal text describing a work of the visual arts, traditionally, a poetic praise of the beauty of a painting or a sculpture. A *paragone*, which can be a work of the verbal or the visual arts, aims at giving answers to the question of the supremacy of one of the sister arts in the competition of the visual, acoustic and the literary arts.

In its *pragmatic* dimension, literature is associated with the other arts in the processes of literary semiosis as a result of readings and interpretations of poetry and prose. Literature evokes feelings, (re)actions, mental images, or conventions, often not unlike those evoked by the other arts, and in intertextual and intermedial processes of aesthetic semiosis, literature influences and is thus a cause, the so-called pre-text, of other works of art, such as genre paintings of mythological scenes, operas, films, or multimedia works of art.

1.2. Three Semiotic Matrices of Literature and the Arts

Subjacent to the multiplicity of signs and sign processes of which the aesthetic and other languages are composed are three semiotic matrices, the matrix of the acoustic, the visual, and the verbal. Despite the great variety of media and channels and despite the considerable differences between media such as photography, cinema, television, video, newspaper, or radio, all sign processes and all aesthetic forms and genres, whether music, literature, theater, design, painting, engraving, sculpture, or architecture, can be subsumed under one of these three matrixes or they are the result of mixtures and combinations thereof.

In the domain of literature, the theory of the three matrices of language and thought finds corroboration in Ezra Pound's poetological treatise *ABC of Reading*. Pound postulates three fundamental categories to account for all poetic processes, melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia. Melopoeia, according to this poetics, refers to the acoustic dimension of the verbal arts, to its auditory dimension, its musicality, and rhythm. Phanopoeia accounts for their visual and imagetic dimension, the myriad of images which literature can evoke, whereas logopoeia accounts for the verbal, logical, and linguistic impact of literature, for the literary "dance of the intelligence among words and ideas," as Pound put it in 1917. In accordance with these three processes of literary poesis, Pound distinguishes three ways of reaching literary perfection, (1) by acoustic saturation through the melding words with sounds, (2) by the projection of an image onto the mental retina, and (3) by means of "the dance of the intellect among words."

A semiotic foundation of the three fundamental matrices of the arts can also be found in the three universal categories of *firstness*, *secondness*, and *thirdness* of C. S. Peirce's

semiotics. Firstness, according to Peirce, the category of suchness, of phenomena considered without relation to anything else, is evidently fundamental to Pound's melopoeia; the acoustic universe is the universe of firstness. Secondness the category of relations bringing a first into contact with a second, predominates in phanopoeia; it is the universe of the image, in particular, of pictures which represent or indicate the world they depict with an effect of perceptive insistence. Thirdness, the category of symbols and logical thought, corresponds most closely to Pound's category of logopoeia, the universe of the human mind, thought and intellect.

Like Peirce, who elaborated a semiotic theory of sign processes based on no more than three fundamental categories in a plurality of mixtures, Pound wrote about the mixtures of his three categories in works of literature, concluding, in his *ABC of Writing* that "great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree." Language replete with meaning is language with the lowest degree of definition and the highest meaning potential, which are the semiotic features by which Umberto Eco has characterized the aesthetic openness of the avant-garde works of art of the 20th century. Thus, whatever the modality might be, melopoeia, phanopoeia, or logopoeia, and from whatever the mixture of these modalities may be, a great work of art will always tend to the predominance of the category of pure qualitative possibility, which is a characteristic of Peirce's category of firstness. Great literature is always characterized by indeterminacy and by a high involvement of the senses in the interpretation of its imprecise meaning. Music is the prototype of an art that fulfils these characteristics, and for this reason Pound postulates that poetry should never distance itself from music, claiming that "poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music."

However, whereas music is nothing but sound and sheer sound combination, literature is meaning in its utmost density. "Music means nothing," Igor Stravinsky once argued, but by representing nothing, music can represent everything, and this accounts for the great suggestive power of music. Literature, on the other hand, works with words which, by their own nature, are units of representation. By charging words to the utmost degree of its possibilities with meaning, literature wants to represent everything, but in this totality, it is confronted with the abyss of silence and of the nothing, the navel of the dream world.

1.3. Literature as a Secondary Sign System *par excellence*

Literature is a complex system of aesthetic signs whose constituents are borrowed from another complex sign system, namely language. The elements of literature are elements of the sign system of language: phonemes, words, sentences, texts, etc. Music, by contrast, creates works of art whose elements have no or only a rather weak semiotic function outside the system of music: the sounds of a clarinet or of a piano mean little or nothing outside their musical contexts since the semiotic substratum of music is neither noise nor other sounds of nature and culture.

To a lesser degree, visual artists also create works of art in a semiotic system whose elements are not taken from another cultural sign system. A painter who paints in oil colors on canvas creates aesthetic signs from, and by means of, materials which can

hardly be found outside of the sign repertoire of painters: oil color, easel, paint brush, canvas, etc. The syntax and semantics of the "language" of painting is of no circulation outside the painters' studios and the frames of their paintings. Although there are natural, especially iconic, relationships between the figures, forms, and colors of a painting and the figures and forms which it represents, the sign repertoire of a painter cannot be said to be one that exists independently of the system of painting. It is not a semiotic system which is otherwise culturally used for any other purpose.

Only literature is thus a secondary semiotic system whereas music and the visual arts are essentially primary semiotic systems in the sense that their materials and constituents serve little or no other semiotic purpose than the one of being part of a work of art. However, for different reasons, the applied arts also come close to the notion of a secondary semiotic system since they shape elements and materials that have practical functions in a given culture and hence cultural meanings independent of the arts which shape them. Architecture and product design, e.g., are systems which transform nonaesthetic objects into aesthetic signs, but these objects, e.g., doors, ceilings, walls, rooms, roofs, cups, or vases, are signs in the system of everyday culture before they are transformed into aesthetic signs.

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