

From Poetics to Semiotics of Poetry

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This article is based on an approach to text and discourse analysis, titled *stratificational semiotics*, proposed in the author's recent book, *Applied Semiotics* (Sojoodi 2003). It seems that giving a very brief account of this approach is inevitable, thus the main points are presented in what follows:

- 1- In different terminology, from De Saussure to Barthes and others, this structuralist presupposition has been repeated, though sometimes adjusted, that there is a system, a system of signs, which is a system of possibilities, called langue or code in various traditions. It is evident that such systems or codes (linguistic or not) are a priori social entities, shared by the members of the society, and some believe that among these systems language is the most important one, and the other systems are informed by the system of language. However the actual communicative act, which apparently belongs to parole, is realized by a set of syntagmatic relations on syntagmatic axis, elements which come together in a sequential order or spatially set together. Without these syntagmatic frames or layers, communication does not realize. And this realization of communicative material seems to be text. Text is something physical, and time or space based, though we may say it is made possible by the social codes, which are systems with no sequential or spatial order. Codes are potential systems, and in themselves, and while they are not actualized in the form of texts, there is no communication. And because of this very fact, syntagmatic relations are of special importance in stratificational semiotics, and are considered to

be the very basis of human communication. On the basis of what said, now we can claim that the concept of sign is just a concept used in meta-language of semiotics and there would be no actual individual sign, since whenever you use even one supposedly single sign in real communication, what you have produced is a text, received and interpreted in a network of textual and contextual layers.

- 2- In my last sentence, I talked about textual and contextual layers. In stratificational semiotics, the concept of context is totally revised. Eco, on the issue of text, quotes Metz's view and writes: "Metz (1970) has advanced the hypothesis that in every case of communication (except maybe some rare cases of a very elementary and univocal type) we are not dealing with a message but with a *text*. A text represents the result of the coexistence of many codes (or, at least, or many subcodes). Metz gives the example of the expression */voulez vous tenir ceci, s'il vous plait?/* and recognizes that in this simple phrase there are at least two codes at work: the first being the plain denotative code of the French language and the other a French *courtoisie* code. Without the latter we are unable to understand the real meaning of */s'il vous plait/*: a purely denotative interpretation of the expression would give a rather odd result (Eco 1979, p. 57). I believe that if various codes are systems analogous to what Saussure has called *langue*, then text is not the "result of coexistence of many codes", but rather it is the result of coexistence of different layers, each of them formed on a syntagmatic relation on the basis of selection from the supposed codes and combination of the selected elements, a process which actualizes the text. We should be careful in differentiating the codes, which are potential systems, from the texts which are actualized, physical entities. In other words, any of the involved layers in production and reception of a text (some consciously and some unconsciously involved) are in fact *paroles* resulting from codes (or *langues*) which has made its meaningful production and reception possible. Thus in my opinion, first text has an **emergent** aspect, which means, in any actual act of communication (either in writing or in speech), it is informed by the constituent layers, some of which not being fixed and pre-determined, but

emergent in any given case of communication. Second, and for the same reason, text is not something closed and definite, and is rather open, dynamic and emergent. Thus in spite of the traditional dichotomy of text, context, we now have a continuant process of textuality which is dynamic, unfixed and emergent. If such an approach can be accepted, then we can say whenever any of the layers of the supposed context may intervene in the process of signification, in principle, it should be the actualized outcome of a signifying system and not just physical environment, and thus works in the same process as the other layers of text work. Now I suppose we are becoming closer to an open, dynamic and unfixed notion of text. Indeed, we may say that some layers of such an emergent text are more stable and probably have a more critical role in communication, but we can not once for ever decide which layers may play a more crucial role and which are always peripheral. Even in literature, which is supposed to be a purely linguistic text, and not time and space bound, you may face some examples in which other layers, para-linguistic and non-linguistic, but of course signifying, play some role (or even the main role) in reading and interpretation.

Having somehow clarified the basic concepts of stratificational semiotics, now we can start applying it on literary texts. Let us for the sake of our study stratify a literary text into three interwoven layers which are linguistic, para-linguistic and non-linguistic. It may be said that in this stratification of literary text, again language is in the center and other layers are defined on the basis of their relation to language, being para or non-linguistic. In the study of a literary text, such stratification may be defended, but it should not be taken for granted that in any other texts, including visual, filmic texts, it necessarily applies. Now, we will try to give a picture of signifying mechanisms in each stratum, and then show their interrelation.

Linguistic Stratum: One of the most comprehensive studies on the workings of language used in literary studies is the seminal paper of Roman Jakobson on metaphor

and metonymy. He writes, “One topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively” (Jakobson, 1988, p.58). Then he brings a psychological test and finally he points out that “In verbal art the interaction of these two elements is especially pronounced” (p.54). And this latter issue is of particular concern in this paper. It seems clear that metaphoric pole is somehow related to paradigmatic axis and the metonymic to syntagmatic axis. I would like to recall our earlier discussion on formation of text and the fact that no communication may happen without actualization of the possibilities of the ‘code’ in time bound, sequential order of syntagmatic axis. It is of course clear that as Jakobson has elucidated the metaphoric way of development of discourse is based on similarity and the metonymic way on contiguity; but I believe that the issue should be expanded particularly to the extent that metaphor is concerned, to show that at any case, the metaphoric is also dependent on contiguity and syntagmatic relations to be created and to be perceived as well. In other words while it is based on selection from the paradigmatic axis, its textual realization (is it possible to think of any other type of realization) is based on intratextual syntagmatic relations and bound to other layers of linguistic and non-linguistic strata. Indeed Jakobson in his another seminal paper on the issue, “Linguistics and poetics” makes it clear that “The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination” (Jakobson 1988, p.39), but in his further examples he shows that he is concerned with verse in this statement and not metaphor. Now let me bring some examples from literature.

(1) The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

(Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)

As it is seen clearly in the above piece from “To be or not to be”, *the slings an arrows ...*, may not be read and perceived as a metaphor if it end in a something like *of enemy*. It is the very fact of being in syntagmatic relation with *fortune* that has made a metaphoric reading of the phrase possible. On the other hand you may never metaphorically read *fortune*, as *enemy*, without being accompanied on a sequential syntagmatic order with *outrageous* and *the slings and arrows*, as well.

(2) Life the hound

Equivocal

Comes at a bound

Either to rend me

Or to befriend me.

(Robert Francis/Pennine, 1964, vl. 2, p. 611)

In this second example from Robert Francis, again the fact that *life* comes together with *hound* makes it possible to read the phrase in this way that “Life is like a hound”, otherwise the sentence *the hound, equivocal comes at a bound either to rend me or to befriend me*, may be read as an ordinary utterance, referring to the characterizations of a hound.

The conclusion up to here is that poetic imagery, even metaphor which is claimed to be associated with paradigmatic axis, is co text bound and dependent on a network of lintratextual clues from the linguistic stratum. Of course here we have been limited to the case of metaphor, which seems to be more complicated.

Paralinguistic Stratum: By paralinguistic stratum, I mean suprasegmental features in speech and also writing system which itself seems to be a paralinguistic stratum, not in its abstract reference to linguistic code and linguistic workings, but in its visual aspects. It seems evident that in reciting a piece of poetry or a fiction, there is a particular paralinguistic code at work, which is the code of declamation. From a semiotic point of view you can not ignore the significant effects of declamation code in the general effect

a piece of poetry may produce as a text. The same is true, and more evident in writing system, in the sense of a paralinguistic stratum, and its visual aspects, which I am going to give a more detailed account in what follows.

First let us consider what may be called geometry of writing in poetry. Consider the following piece of poetry by William Carlos Williams:

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

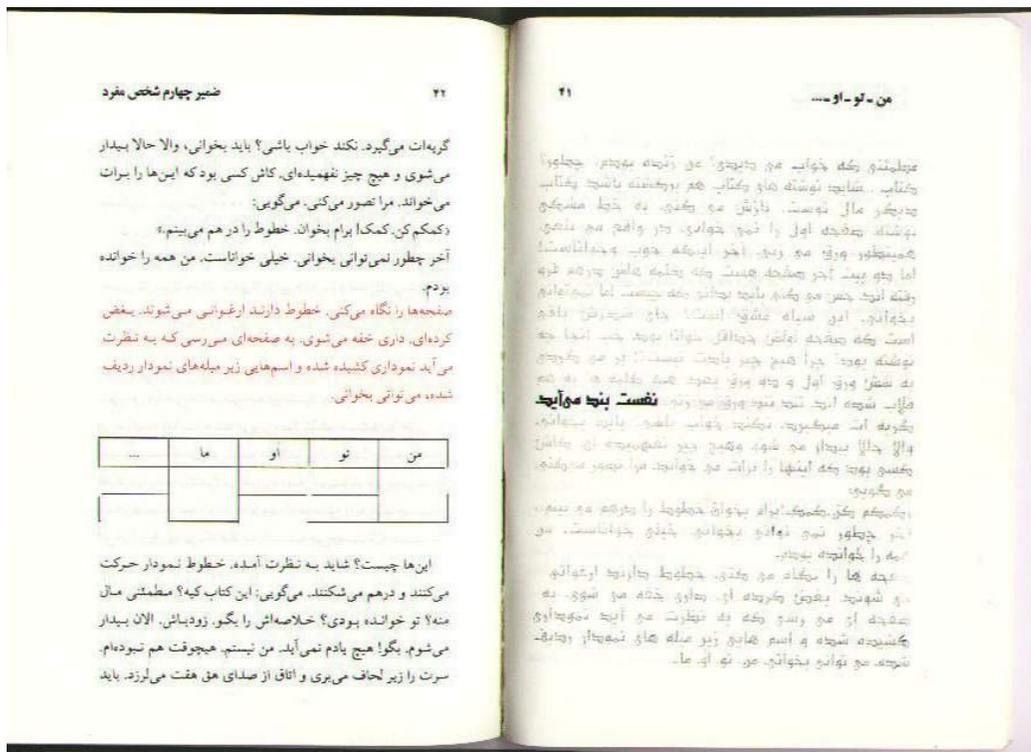
1934

One could write the above piece like this:

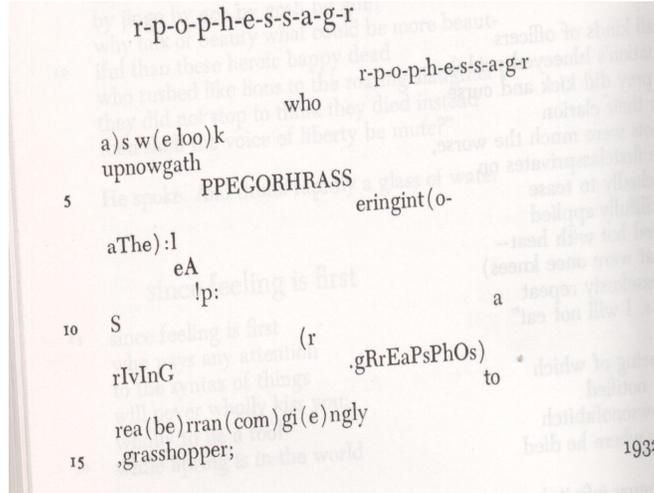
“This is just to say, I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast. Forgive me, they were delicious, so sweet, and so cold.”

No doubt selection of the above geometry in writing, in contrast to the ordinary way of writing the same piece, is significant. In fact it may be claimed that the very simple fact of the particular writing from, by reference to the general code of geometry of writing poetry, signifies the very fact that what is in front of our eyes is a piece of poetry, otherwise, it may be considered to be a note left on the kitchen table. We see that here, first, it is the paralinguistic stratum which signifies the fact that the text should be read as a piece of poetry. Then, having accepted that we are reading a poem, referring to the general code of poetic language, we may start analyzing and interpreting the text, in the way usually we analyze and interpret poetic language.

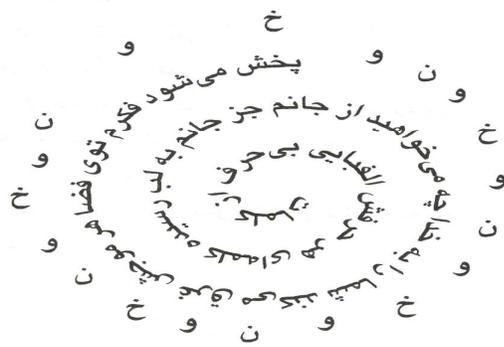
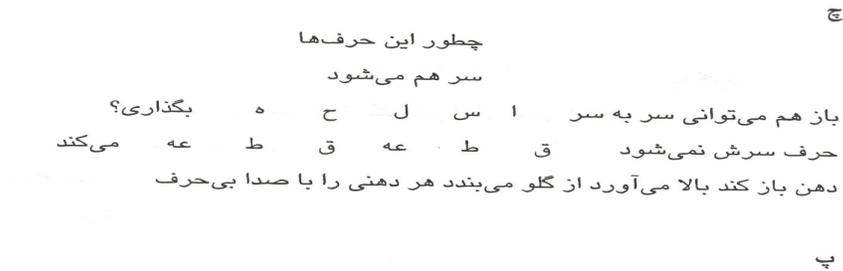
In the visual aspect of writing, in addition to the general geometry of writing, the followings also may be distinguished as potential semiotic possibilities: type of font, its size and its color, which may act as signifying elements. The following is an example from a contemporary Persian fiction, in which these semiotic aspects of writing are fully utilized.



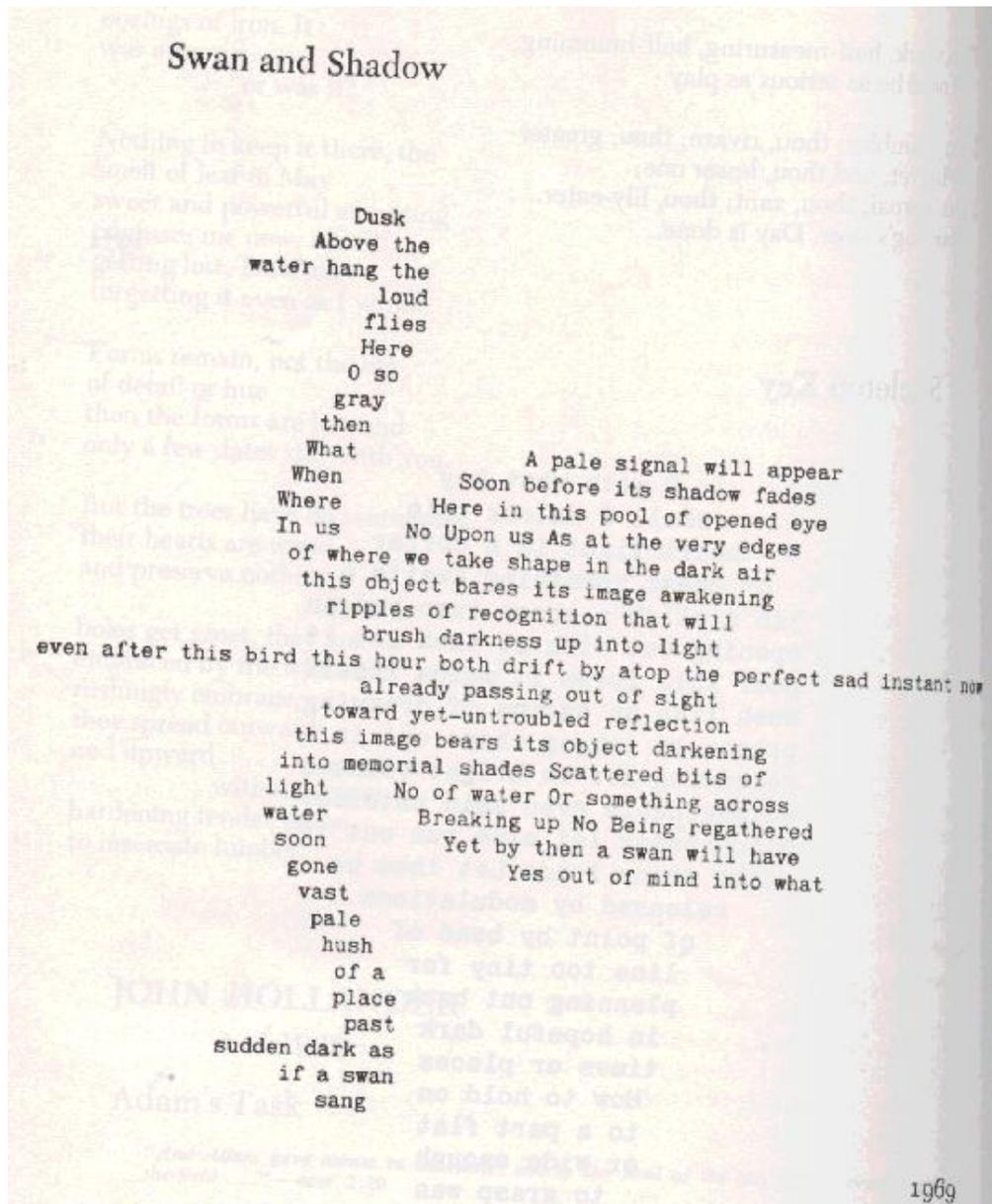
As a further example take the following poem by e. e. cummings, and suppose the situation in which this poem is going to be recited for a group of audiences. It is evident that in reciting the poem the signifying function of para-linguistic stratum will vanish.



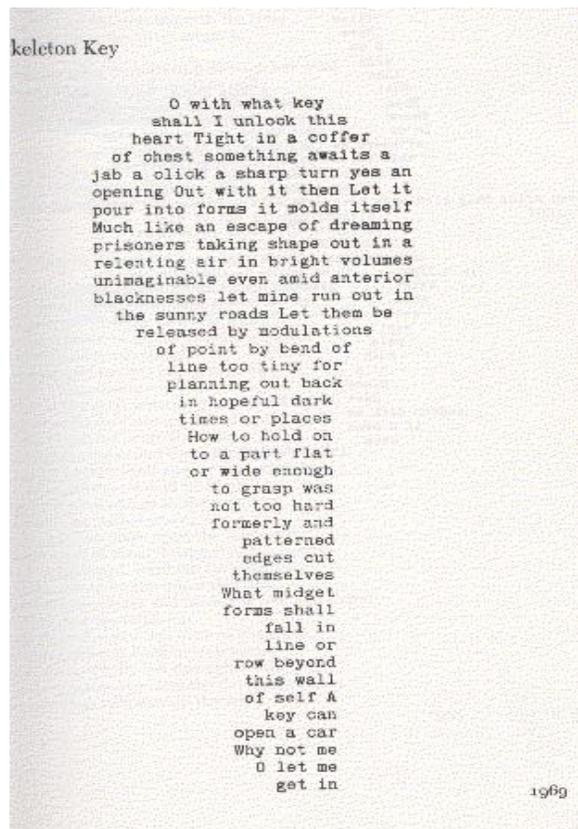
And the following is also an example from Persian contemporary poetry.



Non-linguistic Stratum: Non-linguistic codes may also be used as potential signifying systems in creation of a poetic text. In the very rare cases benefited from non-linguistic (by which I mean neither linguistic nor para-linguistic) stratum as a signifying system, we are mostly faced with the visual iconic signs. We may bring the followings as examples in which in addition to linguistic and para-linguistic codes, we see a pictorial sign coming into play in creation of poetry:



As it is clearly seen, here a layer of iconic mode of expression is at work in an interactional relation with linguistic and para-linguistic strata. To see the significance of this layer, it is enough to suppose that the poet or somebody else is going to recite this poem in a circle of lovers of poetry. In reciting this poem a very important signifying part of it which is working on a combinational relation with other strata would vanish totally. This is a piece of poetry which should be seen, to be fully realized, and this fact works in support of our claim that poetry may possibly use other non-linguistic modes of expression and signification.



As it is evident, in these two poems, “Swan and shadow” and “Skeleton Key” (both by John Hollander) which are brought here as examples of this type, linguistic material, while working through the linguistic code, as conventional signs of language, and while being realized in the visual para-linguistic medium of writing, which itself in addition to its other workings, signifies a literate culture, is used as the material of creating a

picture which belongs to the field of iconography, that is the field of visual iconic signs. The very fact that the same material is used in these three strata for various functions, is a witness of the network at work, which shows the co-ordination and interaction between the layers in creation of a text, a signifying whole.

In the above examples we saw the multifunction of writing system, as a visual medium of language and at the same time as the graphic material of iconography. Now there are some examples in contemporary literature in which icons are in a spatio-temporal relation with language in its visual form. By spatio-temporal relation I mean that while they are in spatial relationships with each other, they also form a combined sequential relationship with linguistic elements and create a multi-layered text which is based on multiple codes.

مرگ نویسنده = خواننده



Finally there are some other layers at work, which while being linguistic or non-linguistic, function as constituent layers of text and are decoded by referring to some cultural codes. Here I will just mention some of them. For example one may not deny the fact that the name of the author or more particularly the name of the poet is itself a signifying layer, which is the textual product of a culturally created and valued code of

“names of writers and poets”. The name of the literary journal, or the name of the publisher of the Anthology, are also signs which have signifying effect in reading any piece of poetry, and as signs they get their value and create value through a cultural code.

Conclusion:

One may say that the frequency of these examples (in contrast with for example advertising texts and multi-media texts) is very rare. All right, but here we are mostly concerned with theoretical ends of such a thesis. As we saw in our examples the possibility of a type of poetry making use of para-linguistic and non-linguistic (i.e. visual) modes of expression exists, and not only exists, but we are actually facing many examples of such poetry, from which just a few were brought as examples. Thus a fully flourished theory of poetics should move towards a type of semiotic theory, otherwise it may fail in explanation of textual workings of literature in general, and poetry in particular. Traditional poetics and rhetoric as we saw in the first part of this article, may not even act successfully in explanation of rhetoric figures, let alone the other signifying strata which might be used in creation of a poetic image. The fact that each text is the product of syntagmatic relations, or relations between the linguistic stratum and other strata, and the fact that any text may have intertextual relation with other textual layers, and also the fact that text is open to interpretation in an ever-changing emergent layers, and also this view that codes which are governing the various layers of textual realization are in interaction with each other in decoding the texts, are the theoretical foundations supplied by the theory that is what I called *stratificational semiotics*. As we saw the difference between the media used, speech or writing, is in itself very significant and should be considered in any textual explanation. We saw that some poetry is written (or better to say is created) to be read and seen as well, and in reciting such poetry some signifying parts of the text may vanish. Finally I want to make this point clear that *stratificational semiotics* is not merely a theory of literature, it is a theory in applied semiotics, and might as well, or even better used in giving an explanation for

workings of multimedia texts, advertisements, filmic and theatrical texts, and digital texts in internet.

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