

The Universal Deep Structure of Modern Poetry

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-4625-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4625-7

For Kaori

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In all literatures with a long enough history, we observe that poetry keeps swinging back and forth [between the use of so-called poetic language] and the same words and the same grammar as everyday language. [...] 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. (Riffaterre 1978: 1)

Preface

Traditional literary criticism tends to allow interpretations of a given poem to vary according to the critic involved. Despite the late 20th century semiotics-oriented work of Michael Riffaterre (Columbia Univ., 1955-2004, latterly emeritus) and his commentators, the contemporary iteration of “postmodernism”—particularly in the form that has recently been sweeping US university humanities departments—has produced a newer version of a more traditional permissive approach: the poem means what its reader thinks it means. In literary studies, this approach takes its cue from Derridean deconstructivism, which allowed the reader to take a literary work apart and reassemble it according to the whim of the moment. Such whims may be informed by personal political preferences, by currently fashionable sexual orientation, by personal levels of education—including any other languages beside his first one which the reader may have acquired. Where a modern poem is involved, the result may look as though the text had been attacked by a private wrecking-ball.

Of course in the case of critics with a solid educational and linguistic background, the case may be quite different. Such critics will have access to 20th century Anglo-American “New Criticism” and its offshoots, according to which the text should be respected as a signifying unit. It is therefore resistant to being “deconstructed”. As an example I am thinking of Seamus Perry’s charmingly-written—and illustrated—short guide to Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (Connell, 2014). Eliot’s masterpiece is treated in this essay, as poem no. 6. Perry begins the body of his text by stating that

“*The Waste Land* is a modernist poem and not a piece of narrative so it does not have a *plot* exactly” (Perry 2014: 6). Perry is somewhat equivocal about the way in which this poem replaces narrative with symbolism, but he clearly acknowledges that at least the negatively-marked set of images (the various “personages” representing a fallen society) are a “symbolic depiction” of a single social tendency (ibid.: 7). This symbolic stasis means that the poem does not move ahead, like narrative, in linear fashion, with a beginning, various stages of plot development, and an ending. Instead, its signifying units are individual symbols all “saying” the same thing. These symbols (some of them take up many lines) are arranged “vertically” in two *sets*—one morally negative and the other positive—, each set being generated by a common underlying proposition. In the case of this long poem, these two propositions are quite complex. They underlie the surface of the text, and can only be assembled, by the reader, by careful comparison of the individual symbolic images which reflect their structure, in a variety of different lexical settings. E.g., in the first image, April is unexpectedly labelled a “cruel” month, because of that particular image’s participation in the poem’s negative set. The unexpectedness of the expression concerned—its *catechresis*—is what signals the presence of a symbolic image forming part of a set. Any apparent reference of an individual image to extra-textual phenomena (in this first case the reader may wonder about the identity of Marie) is misleading, and must be set aside in the search for the unstated proposition that generates a whole set.

This is not the place to go any further into the theory of poetic structure I will use. An exposition of the theory will be reserved for Chapter Two. Suffice it to say at this point that my approach provides a clear-cut methodology leading any educated reader to reach a similar conclusion regarding a poem’s meaning—at least in the case of poetry which may be classified as “modern”. This methodology uses well-defined steps and a strict terminology, and applies the same analytical method to every text. Critics and readers have, for too long, relied on traditions stemming from classics like the *Odyssey*, in which what has been accepted as poetry is read according to the rules of ordinary discourse (which of course includes metaphor). It has not been sufficiently recognised that, beginning, at least in Europe, with the use of symbolism by French poets in the 1800s, poetry became a way of expressing propositions as an *alternative* to the syntagmatic arrangement of ordinary narrative prose.

Symbolism had of course been used before, at least as far back as Tang Dynasty China (AD 618-907), as had short poems structured paradigmatically in the same way as modern European poetry. (Japan was quick to adopt the new European symbolist trend, soon after the publication of Eliot’s

1922 masterpiece; the post-1923 examples in my own 1994 book are all Japanese.) It is important to distinguish between the kind of metaphor found in prose narrative (the Old Testament provides many examples), and the kind of symbol found in modern poetry, which functions as part of a “vertical” set which often extends throughout the text. Setting aside ancient religious symbolism (e.g. the Hebrew *Song of Songs*), and perhaps certain lyrical fragments of Sappho, more recent European-American literary criticism—with a few notable exceptions—has remained wedded to the syntagmatic rules of linear discourse, plus the consideration of prosodic features like rhyme and metre. Thus individual symbols tend to be interpreted via their apparent mimetic reference to the extra-textual world (including authorial biography), instead of via the propositional structure they share with other members of the same symbolic set—or *paradigm*.

The New Criticism (and of course many poets) had recognised that modern poetry arranges symbols in paradigms of images built on a common underlying proposition (or “matrix” to use Riffaterre’s term), regardless of their apparently disparate extra-textual references. But Riffaterre—in work beginning in 1966—was the first to combine this perception with a methodology based on semiotic principles. His theory remains incomplete, however, as it allows for only one paradigm per text, and also because it neglects to show how propositions made by the text can overturn sociolectic preconceptions brought to it by the reader (cf. Riffaterre 1978, and many more recent articles).

My theory both accounts for the binary propositional structure of the *whole* text (many critics, occasionally including Riffaterre, focusing on just part of a text), and shows how that structure reacts against its “sociolectic context”. I believe that this theory represents a considerable innovation, which could move the interpretation of poetry away from the postmodern preoccupation with “contingency”, and provide a much more empirical approach than is the norm.

Modernism

To judge from Michael Riffaterre’s example-texts, the quotation at the head of this section is concerned with *modern* poetry. I shall focus on proto-modern, modern, and postmodern poetry in this book, as the nearly two centuries between Victor Hugo (1802-1885) and the present provide so many examples of what I find to be essential mechanisms for generating meaning by *indirection*—(symbolically) *as poetry*—as opposed to mimetic meaning of various kinds, including the meaning of syntagmatic narrative (on Hugo’s role as a proto-modernist, cf. Righetti

2005). From additional examples outside this time frame, it seems that these mechanisms may hold good for much poetry over the period from certain of the English Romantics and the French pioneers of modernism, through modernism's French, English and Japanese-language icons, and on to the present day.

Regarding the frequent ambivalence—from an academic viewpoint—of the term “modern” in ordinary usage, I find Fredric Jameson's suggestion helpful: “Can we sort this out by observing that everything modern is necessarily new, while everything new is not necessarily modern?” (Jameson 2002: 18) This simple maxim helps to focus on *innovation* as the core element in any academic definition of modernism. I will adopt this focus for the purposes of this book, since my example texts—from the pioneers of modernism to very recent work—seem to underline the “innovation” requirement, as I hope the reader will discover (Cf. Jameson 2002: 154). I will make little distinction between the adjectives “modern” and “modernist”: both are characterised by innovation. The noun Modernism will be treated likewise. However, I will tend to prefer the term “modernist” to “modern”, as the latter term has a variety of uses in common parlance—many of them different from mine.

“Modernistic”, on the other hand, may be used to apply to some building or poem made “after the style of” the original moderns, without necessarily being innovative. For example, a certain amount of contemporary domestic architecture designed for wealthy clients may be modernistic without being innovative. Likewise, a poem may use the linguistic technique typical of modernism, but produce no propositional innovation. In the present essay, this terminology will be restricted to poetry and architecture.

Further, my use of the term “modern” will not simply differentiate between historical periods, as it does, for example, in the term “modern English” versus “middle English”. Some critics seem to retain the term “modernist” to mark characteristics of a certain historical period—without regard to innovative content. It would be less confusing to specify the period in question: thus, “early modern”, or “high modern”—or by using dates.

When discussing modern poetry, architecture may sometimes provide a useful reference-point. Poetry and architecture show parallels in terms relating to their historical development. Proto-modern, high-modern, late modern, postmodern, and reinstated modernist (i.e. modern in Jameson's sense) works exist in both. The 21 examples of poetry found in Chapters 3-7 include all stages. (It should be noted that modernist architecture is not strictly reflected by the “international style”, in its post-Miesian iteration in worldwide commercial building using an exterior glass curtain wall

concealing a ferro-concrete or steel structure.) Poetry and architecture may also show parallels in the internal signifying structure of the work, as we shall see from the example in the following chapter.

By way of contrast with Jameson's maxim regarding modernism, let us look at the more socio-historical view of art historian Jeanne Willette (Otis College, California), in a recent discussion of the relation between modernism and postmodernism in "art" (from website "Art History Unstuffed", 25 Oct. 2013). It should be added that postmodernism lingered on in literature far longer than in architecture, for example, its definition altering with time.

Willette emerges as something of a champion of modernism, which she says was "based upon Enlightenment models". I.e. it was situated in an anthropocentric world: man had gained the power to change and control society and nature. Postmodernism, by contrast, was a brief aberration between 1960 and 1980, which then fizzled out. One can agree broadly with this, although the more recent socio-cultural movement also called "postmodernism" is left out of the discussion—except for Willette's use of current US feminism to speak of early modernism as being the province of "white males". Exceptions to this abound in the early decades of modernism, such as the "frightening" Virginia Woolf (1882-1941, UK), not to mention the part-Indio poet César Vallejo (1892-1938, Paris), the pioneering Japanese modernist poet Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933, Tôhoku), and—if we may venture into the field of music—the innovative African-American jazz composer Duke Ellington (1899-1974). In graphic arts, we find Sonia Delaunay (Paris, 1885-1979), Marie Laurencin (1883-1956, Paris), and Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906, Travancore), considered the first of the Indian modernists, who became known in Europe when he won the first prize in the Vienna Art Exhibition in 1873. In architecture, below we will touch on Prince Hachijô-no-miya's ground-breaking design for *Katsura Rikyû*, in Kyôto. (In listing the above modernist examples, I am not suggesting that all art genres—with the possible exception of architecture—necessarily have a similar signifying process to that of modernist poetry.)

As an art historian, Willette is talking about "art" in general, by which is meant graphic art, "sculpture"/various kinds of installation, and interactive and performance art. It seems obvious enough that architecture provides the environment for all the graphic and plastic arts, as well as for music, but many art historians—with the notable exception of Robert Hughes (1980/1991)—do not touch on architecture.

This preoccupation impels us back a thousand years into Japanese history, where the domestic life of the Heian period aristocracy was a

completely designed environment, in which architecture provided the framework for literature—as it still did in the Japan of the mid-20th century, and does even today in certain contexts. (The Way of Tea, *Sadô*, still requires a tearoom-and-garden environment of artfully contrived rusticity.) It is worth noting that what may be the world's first modern novel—in the post-1600 European sense of an individually-authored work developing the psychological lives of a cast of original characters—was Lady Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*, c. 1000 AD, which is still generally regarded as the all-time masterpiece of Japanese literature). The life of Lady Murasaki's Heian aristocrats was definitely in the forefront of his mind when Prince Hachijō-no-miya spent over half of his life working on the highly novel design of *Katsura Rikyū* (Katsura Imperial Villa), in northwestern Kyōto, dating from the mid-1600s. The Villa includes beautiful tearooms. “Discovered” by German architect Bruno Taut in 1933, Katsura is arguably the first modern building anywhere, and remains one of the pinnacles of human artistic achievement. The elevation of the second floor on “*pilotis*”, the spare white surfaces of the ground floor, and the clean colour contrast between the plain white of shōji screens and the dark-shingled roofs of the second floors, all—apart from the gently pitched roofs—anticipate the modernism of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye by three centuries. Katsura might perhaps be considered an isolated example of excellence, but in fact Japanese traditions in residential architecture, while on a scale enforced by generally mountainous terrain and financial constraints, maintained that ethos of excellence at least up until the gradual adoption of European models. Plenty of examples of Japanese tradition remain today. If I am devoting some space to this subject, it is because most of my life has been spent in Japan, which is perhaps a unique case of domestic building where the dwellers have sacrificed comfort and convenience to high architectural ideals. Minimalism in furniture—and in winter heating—were inconveniences long accepted in recognition of those ideals.

Many commentators have proposed that Modernism, as a movement, “was” opposed to popular or bourgeois taste and espoused the avant-garde stance of the alienated artist. The present tense would be more appropriate, modernism being still very much with us. The artist can be said to be alienated only in relation to the sociolectic preconceptions surrounding him: these preconceptions are what the innovative work reacts against. Whereas the modernist work of art has been characterised as “self-referential”, in fact the work must be seen in relation to the sociolect, *which it has the power to change*. I.e, it questions the sociolectic preconceptions of the receiver. Cf. Rem Koolhaas' silver and pink aluminium and glass Villa

d'all'Ava (1991) standing on pilotis in its exclusive St-Cloud setting of gloomy pitched-roofed dinosaurs! Modernist works are not necessarily elitist, so much as innovative in a way which the average person finds it hard to accept. Perhaps it is ironic—though it is obvious enough—that, in Japan, Mr and Mrs Bourgeois choose to live in an average wood-framed house (in art history terms, deriving from the mid-19th century), even though they may go to work every day in a steel/concrete and glass modern building. It is likely, however, that even that building is simply a representative of that mass-producible version of modernism known as the abovementioned “international style”. Thus, even in the second decade of the 21st century, many people have still not come to terms with modernism. If they do so, it is more likely to be in the field of architecture than that of poetry. From the US to Japan to Australia—from the northern to southern ends of the planet—, beginning in the 1950s with what is now known as “midcentury modern”, quite a few people began to commission architects to design houses that were out of the ordinary: adventurous wooden designs, or concrete block and glass, even if not often actual reinforced concrete. (The latter has possibly been more widespread in Japan than anywhere else.)

Certainly, it would be a mistake to confine the term “modernist” to a period in the past, when in fact modernism is alive and well, as a glance in the direction of the architecture of the past few decades will show. In poetry also, despite a period of so-called “postmodernism”—which, as in architecture, was a temporary reaction (better termed “*para*-modernism”?) against perceived offences of modernism—, the modernist signifying process I am attempting to describe is still very much in use, as demonstrated by the example-texts in this book. The majority of my examples, in making innovative propositions, are properly modern in Jameson’s sense. So, the poetry of today is now revisiting the era of the unexpected, the perception-changing, the new.

Poetic “deep structure”

In transformational and generative grammar, deep structure [...] is the underlying syntactic structure—or level—of a sentence. In contrast to surface structure (the outward form of a sentence), deep structure is an abstract representation that identifies the ways a sentence can be analyzed and interpreted. Deep structures are generated by phrase-structure rules, and surface structures are derived from deep structures by a series of transformations.

(Richard Nordquist, <https://www.thoughtco.com/deep-structure-transformational-grammar-1690374>, April 09, 2018)

In the situation of modern poetry, “deep structure” consists in the dual underlying propositions of the primary text. These, as in ordinary mimetic language, are dependent on phrase-structure rules. But instead of being merely transformed into surface structures with analogous rules and lexicon, each is transformed into a set—or paradigm—of variants having the same basic propositional structure but very different lexical equipment. This is the generative force of modern poetry: the production of a paradigm of variant symbolic images (“vertical” alignment of images in Hutchinson’s phrase; cf. below, p. 13) is nothing less than an alternative means of literary expression to mimetic prose. We will revisit the types of transformation involved in our Conclusion—in the light of what occurs in certain of our 22 example-texts.

The creation of meaning via symbolism of course traces its European routes to French poets of the mid-1850s, such as Laforgue and Rimbaud—from whom Eliot took vital cues—to name just two poets who employed what he termed “indirect signification”.

To illustrate, in the first sixty or so lines of Eliot’s *Waste Land*, we have several images—which sometimes expand into veritable “vignettes”—, all generated by the deep-level matricial proposition (MP1) that *people living their lives without faith, being caught up in frivolous activities, are apt to be at best disappointed or depressed, at worst spiritually dead*. E.g., in the first “Marie”-centred variant of MP1, the subject is a typical bored aristocrat, and her activities are perfectly commonplace for her world: the concern with trivial activities and changes in the weather; then we have the hyacinth-girl disappointed in love (lines 37-41), and the prophetic Mme Sosostriis, who tells the negative fortunes of other people (“Here, said she, / Is your card, the drowned Phoenician sailor”); then there is a numerical expansion of subject, at line 60, to the mass of spiritually dead people passing over London Bridge, with eyes “fixed before [their] feet”. In the case of each image generated by the same underlying proposition (MP1), there is a variant of that proposition—formed by inserting different lexical items with common or analogous semic content—both in its subject and its predicate.

The concept of poetic deep structure helps to show—possibly for the first time—how each underlying proposition generates a set of symbolic textual images, the meaning of which becomes clearer as each image is compared by the reader with its fellow-members in the same set, throughout the text. It is important to note that the signifying structure of a poem is encoded within the text. I.e., the reader, by a careful comparison of all images comprising each of two sets, eventually arrives back at their generating propositions.

At the global level of the text as a whole, the text's object-sign is its *intertextual model*, which helps the reader to verify his suppositions regarding the dual generating propositions of the primary text. The textual semiotic triad is completed by the *interpretant* of primary text and intertext assembled by the reader. The conceptually innovative nature of this interpretant is thrown into relief by the contrast made with its sociolectic context (SC), which—while of similar lexical content to the interpretant—has a different internal relation. Thus we have an innovative textual signifier shown up against the background of its more banal context.

If followed closely, my approach would largely free the reading of modern poetry from the impressions of individual readers—particularly regarding the meaning of isolated parts of a poem. Literary critics only too often focus on such isolated parts. An example may be found in Keith Sagar's commentary on Ted Hughes's *The Hawk in the Rain*: "the eye [line 6] is the 'I', the window of the soul, the outward expression of the hawk's innermost being..." (Sagar 1978: 16). This sort of thing may appeal to the casual reader, but without being related to the global signification of the poem as a whole, it is rather hard to justify.

So this is a global approach, in which every image of the text must be taken into account as contributing to the total symbolism of the poem. Of course such an approach is not suitable for certain—basically narrative—texts produced under the aegis of the current iteration of "postmodernism". However, my theory is shown below to work well with seven poems published between 2015 and 2017, by writers of different ethnicities and sexes. This suggests that modernism is very much alive in poetry, as it is in architecture.

It is important to note that the three elements of textual deep propositional structure, and the semiotic triad of text-intertext-interpretant, and the SC, appear to be *universals of modern poetic signifying structure*, which are here identified for the first time.

Some traditional views on the nature of poetry— and some more recent views

The following excerpt may be found in Seamus Perry's Connell Guide to *The Waste Land* (2014: 27): "The gifted and witty critic Graham Hough, for instance, once denounced [Eliot's *indirect*] technique, rising to this fine crescendo":

To attempt to explain to an intelligent person who knows nothing about 20th-century poetry how *The Waste Land* works is to be overcome with embarrassment at having to justify principles so affected, so perverse, so deliberately removed from the ordinary modes of rational communication.

However Hough may have intended it, I would maintain that his comment is anachronistic and inappropriate. (Perry's attitude to it is certainly tongue-in-cheek.) In assuming that poetry must make sense as "ordinary" prose, it harks back in spirit to the prosaic rhymed iambs of Chaucer. And, surely, an "intelligent" (and also hopefully educated) person should not know *nothing* about 20th-century poetry to begin with. This would be to ignore well over a century of modern poetry in a variety of languages, which of course signifies—as Eliot would say—by *indirection*. (Cf. T. S. Eliot's important 1921 essay on "The Metaphysical Poets":

The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.

—*Selected Essays 1917-1932*: 287, 289; [Tôkyô, 1959: 164])

In other words, it uses symbolic language to express indirectly ideas which cannot easily be expressed by ordinary prose. At least this seems to be true of much modern poetry.

The latter does not signify like mimetic narrative—in other words like Hough's "ordinary modes of rational communication"—, solely by the syntagmatic arrangement of words in phrases and paragraphs. Instead, modern poetry signifies by arranging symbolic (i.e. *indirectly*-signifying) images *in two paradigms or sets, each generated by an underlying proposition; these propositions are found to be linked together by a syntagmatic relation*, once all the members in each set of images have been "mapped onto" each other by the reader. The mechanism involved will be demonstrated in the body of this book (cf. pp. 23-24 below for more on binarism). In order to describe this mechanism, we shall have recourse to semiotics. It is hoped that the reader will need no further knowledge of semiotics than the basics included in Chapter Two.

We hardly need to dwell on the sort of "nebulous, airy-fairy approach to poetry" that has occasionally surfaced since the 1970s—at least in the UK and US. Apparently, England's Poetry Society offered the world this definition of poetry during a dispute in 2009:

There is poetry in everything we say or do, and if something is presented to me as a poem by its creator, or by an observer, I accept that something as a poem. (<https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2013/05/12/on-a-definition-of-poetry/>)

This sort of “anything goes” approach needs to be put to sleep, once and for all.

Let me quote below two of the more modernism-oriented “definitions” I have found.

Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before. – Audre Lorde (1984)

A poet’s work is to name the unnameable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world, and stop it going to sleep. – Salman Rushdie ([1989] 2009)

These maxims—both from the 1980s—represent a significant advance on the Poetry Society approach. Neither of them approaches a linguistic definition. But both Lorde (an African-American poet known for her technical mastery) and Rushdie come close to what I take to be the *semantic intent* of modern poetry. Lorde’s “foundations for a future of change”, and Rushdie’s “[to] shape the world, and stop it going to sleep” are prescriptions for the kind of *perceptual change* at which modern poetry aims. The mechanism which accomplishes this aim is essential to the theory of poetic signification proposed in this book. This mechanism operates at the final stage in the poetic signification process. Earlier stages, and there are three of them, involve the linguistic mechanisms by which poetry orders images into two sets, each generated by a separate proposition. These are then joined by a single syntagmatic relation into a structure of dual propositions—a combination which is *innovative*, or, in Rushdie’s terms, *world-shaping*. So we have four stages in our interpretation process, the first three being textual, and the final one extra-textual; these are summarised on pp. 40-41 below.

More recent academic definitions of what constitutes a poem, although they may have a formal aspect, have not identified the propositional structures generating sets of images throughout the text. T. Eagleton, for example, proposes a definition based formally on the formatting of the text in discrete lines. By itself, this would not allow for prose poetry like that of Lautréamont and a host of other poets, in a variety of languages (in my experience, in French, English, and Japanese). The other component of his definition strays into the field of the “moral” content of the text: “a

fictional, verbally inventive moral statement” (Eagleton 2007: 25). “Verbally inventive” seems to refer to linguistic innovation in the individual image—as in G. M. Hopkins’s “As a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend” (l. 6 of poem no. 5 below). Evidently, Eagleton’s wording would not necessarily include the *innovative linked propositions* that form the basis of my model. His definition does not mention symbolism or indirect signification. It thus seems to open the field to the host of mimetic, referential statements that are found in classical epic verse, much Romantic and pre-Romantic verse, and some postmodern poetry.

Eagleton’s attempt at a definition of “poetry” is simply too inclusive. An epic or didactic poem which is based on linear narrative, and obeys the rules of sociolectic discourse, (like Homer and Hesiod) may nonetheless be versified (because of its dactylic metre), but apparently does not incorporate the signifying structures of modern poetry. We should perhaps classify such verse separately—along with all other narrative verse—from a definition of what constitutes modern poetry. In defining the latter, we must never forget the above-mentioned ability, pointed to so unforgettably by Rushdie, to “shape the world, and stop it going to sleep”.

Richard Ellmann, in his Introduction to the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, corroborates Rushdie in proposing that “the general framework within which modern poets have written is one in which the reality of the objective world is fundamentally called into question.” (Ellmann and O’Clair, eds., 1973: 2) Clearly, a good number of critics and writers hold a view of modernism’s role in poetry that underscores that of semioticians like Lotman and Eco, and philosophers like Jameson.

Nabokov on poetry

From his comments in *Strong Opinions* (the quotation below is from a discussion with Alvin Toffler which originally appeared in *Playboy*, Jan. 1964), Vladimir Nabokov—with little doubt one of the three or four most outstanding prose writers in English of the 20th century—evidently at least pretends to see poetry as no more than condensed prose, the “bridge” between the two ostensibly being metaphor.

I have never been able to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose. As a matter of fact, I would be inclined to define a good poem of any length as a concentrate of good prose, with or without the addition of recurrent rhythm and rhyme. [...] As in today’s scientific classifications, there’s a lot of overlapping in our concept of poetry and

prose today. The bamboo bridge between them is the metaphor. (Nabokov 1990 [1973]: 44)

Far from wishing to detract from Nabokov's stellar achievements in prose, the point of this quotation is to indicate just how tenacious is our attachment to prose writing, which is after all based on the structures of speech. (This certainly applies to *Pale Fire*, Nabokov's long poem in rhymed couplets [1962].) The influence of classical Greek epics and other traditional poetry also seems to underly the first sentence of the above passage. It has not often been realised—particularly in the English-speaking tradition—that poetry, from the early modernists on, has been structured quite differently from prose. One writer in English who did make this realisation was of course Eliot, whose symbolism Nabokov, in the same interview, seems not to have appreciated (Nabokov 1990 [1973]: 43).

Yet some of Nabokov's own short poetry, notably *The Poem* (*The New Yorker*, June 10, 1944: 30) clearly has a paradigmatic structure of two sets of images, each generated by a different underlying proposition. This fact suggests that certain poets may structure their work on lines characteristic of modernist poetry while remaining scarcely aware of the theory involved.

Ishion Hutchinson

Hutchinson, a fairly young poet of Carribean origin, quizzed by the BBC—like several other members of The Hull 18 Poets—on “What makes a memorable poem?” gives the following answer:

None but words. Words set in motion.

This movement of words is an action of lifting the vertical truth from the horizontal flatness of language. That effort to come upright, in lines, is extreme and difficult but it must be done – for the poem to be a poem. – BBC.co.uk (<Arts>) 1.10.18

This is potentially a rare and refreshing characterisation—found among few poet-commentators on poetry—of the linguistic mechanism unique to poetry, which Roman Jakobson may appear to summarise in his famous article, “Linguistics and poetics”:

The poetic function projects the principal of equivalence from the axis of selection [often called by linguists the “vertical” axis of language] into the axis of combination [the “horizontal” axis of syntactic ordering].

Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence. (*SW* III: 27)

In the simplest terms, Jakobson—taking a cue from the writings of G. M. Hopkins—intends this to mean that formal equivalence, in a “vertical” paradigm such as a rhyme-scheme, brings about semantic equivalence, on the “horizontal”, or syntagmatic, level of sentences (*Selected Writings* III: 28). This rather facile take on the semantic effect of formal parallels must be distinguished from Riffaterre’s approach: as already noted on pp. 5 and 6 above, poetic images are perceived by the reader according to their participation in the same semantic paradigm—or set—of images, all generated by the same underlying proposition.

When we check Hutchinson’s programmatic statement about poetry against one of his poems, it becomes evident that apparently obscure (or “ungrammatical”, as detailed in Ch. 2, sec.1) images on the textual surface are generated by underlying “matricial” propositions. The poem chosen is *Homage: Vallejo*, from the 2016 collection *House of Lords and Commons*. Here, a “bright, positive” matrix appears to contrast with a “dark, negative” matrix: the former (matricial proposition no. 1—MP1) generates images of new birth, while the latter (matricial proposition no. 2—MP2) generates images of death. MP2, for example, produces “gargoyles bearing down buildings”, “rain scowled down”—Vallejo’s name (= “valley”), repeated, becoming a figure for this oppressive, downward movement—the repeated “Thursday”, a reference to César Vallejo’s poem *Black Stone on a White Stone* (1938[?]) where the poet predicts that he will die on a Thursday—in particular “Thursdays falling at noon”, and “blackbirds falling quietly at Biddle Street”.

We shall leave Hutchinson at this point. His statement about poetic signification represents a kind of foreword to Chapter Two below.

Prosody

In this brief section on prosodic features, I should first reiterate the doubts expressed in the preceding section regarding the Jakobsonian notion that formal parallelism can automatically produce semantic parallelism. Of course it may do so in certain circumstances, but as a rule, syntactic parallelism, rhyme, alliteration/assonance, metre, and other prosodic features generally have two functions, neither of which is necessarily related to meaning. (This much is clear enough from the use of most of these prosodic features in Tang Dynasty Chinese verse—where tone patterns also confer a musical element.)

The first function of prosody is mnemonic. This is particularly apparent in doggerel, for example in the amusing British Second World War jingle (set to the Colonel Bogey march), which begins “Hitler ... has only got one ball”; this line is memorably followed by “Goering ... has two but they are small”. The second function is naturally phonic play by the poet, who may choose half-rhyme as an alternative to rhyme—among other possible choices. A modern example is Auden’s poem (our text no. 7), which rhymes almost every line.

Rhyme in the European tradition apparently goes back to its use in church Latin in the 4th and 5th centuries; in English poetry, it was used from the late 7th century (cf. McKie 1997). Chaucer is an obvious late-mediaeval example. Well before its use in Europe, rhyme was an essential part of the prosody of Han Dynasty poetry (206 BC-AD 220), and earlier. Tang Dynasty “regulated verse” (*lü-shi*) is known for its complex prosody. Rhyme has certainly been persistent in English poetry, from Shakespeare and his heirs, right down to present day hip-hop/rap. Lyrics of the latter are typically mimetic prose, with the addition of a metaphor or simile here and there; i.e., signification is not indirect. Rhythmic enunciation and rhyme are strongly foregrounded.

Regarding metre, it may be qualitative or quantitative. The latter (e.g. iambic pentametre) has been prevalent in English poetry, while some classical languages, in contrast, used quantitative metre, where patterns were based on syllable “weight” rather than stress. In classical Latin and classical Greek, for example, each of the six feet making up the line was either a dactyl (long-short-short) or a spondee (long-long). Although much pioneering modern poetry in French uses the 12-syllable “alexandrine” line in addition to rhyme, such prosodic features are usually not essential to the signifying process of the text.

Tang Dynasty verse also sometimes used syntactic parallelism with semantic effect. A similar effect may be seen in some of the lines of Macpherson’s *Ossian* (cf. Fragment VII), although the latter’s parallelism is less strict than that of the biblical *Song of Solomon*, to which it is often compared. There is a similar use of parallelism in the considerably older *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In the *Song*, at random we find, Ch. 5: 3-6 (King James vn.):

(3) I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet;
how shall I defile them?

We generally do not find matricial structure—generation of surface images by underlying propositions—in pre-modern European poetry. (This of course sets aside the occasionally proto-modern structure of Tang

Dynasty verse.) In fact, in the case of a wide range of European genres, it is tempting to dismiss much earlier poetry as rhymed and/or metred prose. This is especially true of classical Greek epic verse. Such narrative texts are unlikely to convey meaning in the same way as modernist poetry does: by *indirection*—or symbolic imagery. If we take about 150 lines from near the beginning of the *Odyssey*, where Telemachus is talking to the goddess Athene—who is in the guise of “Mentes”—, we find only the following non-symbolic descriptive elements (underlined):

a man [the missing Odysseus] whose white bones now are rotting in the rain, if lying on the land, or in the sea the waters roll them round.

sailing over the wine-dark sea

rocky Ithaca

Saying this, clear-eyed Athena passed away, even as a bird — a sea-hawk — takes its flight.

—*The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. G. H. Palmer, 1891

The first example is only mildly illustrative; the second, third and fourth are stock epithets of the epic; the fifth is just a nice simile.

It thus seems that, in the case of the Greek epics, their narrative intent—and their considerable length—overtake any “poetic” effect they may have on the level of localised sets of symbols. The identity of the epics as mimetic narratives is so strong that, in translation—and even in English-language summary form—they continue to be gripping stories.

In modernist poetry, an idea, or theme, is presented through a set of *symbolic* images, all generated by an underlying proposition. As I will demonstrate in repeated examples below, a modernist poem is in fact generated by *two* such underlying propositions.

It has been said (by the uninformed) that “prose poetry” is an oxymoron. But the term is a valid one, at the very least in French, English and Japanese. The important distinction to make is between symbolic poetry (as in Rimbaud’s prose-formatted *Illuminations*) on the one hand, and mimetic narrative verse (as in the *Ossian*, with its parallelism-based prosody) on the other. Too many approaches to poetry ignore what happens when prose is used poetically, without rhyme, metre, or syntactic parallelism. Just what this entails will be treated in my second chapter.

CHAPTER TWO (THEORY)

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFYING MECHANISM OF MODERN POETRY?

Introduction: Modern poetry and traditional prosody

This essay will attempt to define the linguistic mechanisms that distinguish poetic signification proper from mimetic narrative prose formatted in discrete lines. The latter may masquerade as poetry, but it generally does not convey meaning in the way I will describe. Such an approach may recall Jonathan Culler's recent focus on "the conventions that enable [the lyric] to have the sorts of meanings and effects it does"—in contrast to a more hermeneutic approach (cf. Racevskis 1998). But the two approaches will often be found to "blend", as Culler himself announces they will in his book (Culler 2015: 5-6). The importance of hermeneutics in this book reflects my debt to Michael Riffaterre, whose theory will be explored in following sections. However, rather than privileging hermeneutics over all else, my main purpose in this book will be to show how my theory of the propositional structure of modern poetry—and the methodology involved—operate across a range of poetry of great formal variety, in three languages, and over quite a long time-span.

In Chapter One we noted the tenacity of the focus on prosody among a good number of commentators, of various periods. Such approaches of course hark back to the Romantics, and early modernists of the mid-19th century, who still clung to a tightly controlled prosodic form. They are inadequate to define the signification process of the poetry we find throughout more than a century of modernism, and the "postmodernism" that followed (sometimes using properly modernist indirect signification). In Europe, as Riffaterre has perhaps unwittingly shown, modernism was pioneered by some mid-career poems of Victor Hugo, and certainly Charles Baudelaire (cf. Jameson 2002: 21: "the concept of *modernité* is born, and Baudelaire mints a usage that is presumably still with us").

Both these French poets were able to produce modernist poetry while retaining traditional prosodic verse form. Baudelaire's collection *Spleen de*

Paris (1869) marks a venture into prose form. When we come to Rimbaud (*Les Illuminations*, 1875) and Lautréamont (*Chants de Maldoror*, 1869), we find more poetry in prose, having no traditional prosody whatsoever. Yet this is still very much modernist poetry. So, what about it marks it as poetry, and not just simply narrative prose rich in metaphor? Traditional prosodic devices are evidently not the deciding factor. I will take Victor Hugo's poem *Ecrit sur la vitre d'une fenêtre flamande* (1840) as my first French example (poem no. 2) in Chapter Four below, as—despite its age and consummate prosodic structure—it provides an early example of the modernist mechanism in question.

It hardly needs repeating that it would be a mistake to restrict the term “modernist” to a period in the past, when in fact modernism is alive and kicking, as a glance in the direction of modern architecture will show. In poetry also, despite a period of so-called “postmodernism”—which, as in architecture, was a temporary reaction against perceived offences of modernism—the modernist signifying process I aim to describe is still in frequent use. On the rediscovery of modernity by the late postmodern, Fredric Jameson has this to say (Jameson 2002: 7):

What we have here is rather the reminting of the modern, its repackaging, its production in great quantities for renewed sales in the intellectual marketplace, from the biggest names in sociology to garden variety discussions in all the social sciences (and in some of the arts as well).

As for the signifying mechanism of modern poetry, my methodology will take as starting point Michael Riffaterre's semiotic theory of poetic signifying structure, as set out in *Semiotics of poetry* (1978), and over 130 articles spanning the period 1966-1996. Below, I shall outline the basics of his theory, which may well represent the greatest advance in poetics of the 20th century.

Despite its obvious merits, I will be obliged to expand the theory—first, in order to make it adequate to describe the binary structure of modern poetic texts—, and second, in order to show how the reader relates the propositional structure of the poem to the more familiar cultural background which he brings to it. (The notes below are based, with the permission of Sophia Univ. Press, on Hopkins 1994, which was subsequently condensed for a long article in *Semiotica* [H. 2007: “‘Superreader’: Riffaterre Revisited”].)

1. Riffatterrian theory

Matricial structure

According to the theory developed by Riffaterre in *Semiotics of Poetry* (R.1978) and elsewhere, the process of interpreting a poem entails a search for the single underlying theme that generates the whole text: a “matricial” concept, which may consist of a single word, but always has the structure of an at least potential proposition—or predication. It never appears on the textual surface. This structure is developed by a set of images, the catachresis—or “ungrammaticality” (deviance from standard grammar, including semantics)—of whose surface structure signals that they are generated by an underlying proposition that represents the matrix, and which may seem to refer, as individual images, to disparate sociolectic or literary phenomena. This illusion is what Riffaterre calls the “referential fallacy” (1978b). To read a poetic text as though each image referred to a separate mimetic object is to merely skim the surface of the text without really reading it *as a poem*. Many poems—apart from early- and high-modernist poetry—lend themselves to this sort of superficial reading (cf. Auden’s *Musée des Beaux Arts*, poem no. 7 below). Many poems that seem at first sight to be a mini-narrative will be susceptible to this kind of treatment. But Auden’s *Musée* is *not* about a “horse’s innocent behind”!

Whitman’s *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* (poem no. 4 below) is evidently not a narrative, any more than *The Waste Land* (poem no. 6) is a narrative. Individual images of Whitman’s poem can be read in any order: this is what Riffaterre terms “retro-reading”: an image that seems to represent a matrix fairly clearly may be the start of a reading in any order that strikes the reader as appropriate in the search for other variants of the matrix. It is important to note that not one single image is ignored in the process of comparing them in order to formulate a matricial proposition. In explaining how his theory avoids the criticism of reductionism, Riffaterre insists on the necessity of “the reader’s praxis of the transformation” of a matrix into a paradigm of images (cf. R.1978: 12, and Culler 1981: 92). This “praxis” involves considering any and all features of the textual surface (rhyme and other phonic devices, syntactic parallelism, apparent extra-textual references, etc.) which contribute to the symbolism of the individual image, and thereby represent the matrix generating that particular set of images. To reiterate, the fallacious mimetic reference of each image is first considered before rejecting it in favour of the image’s symbolic signification, which is generated by an underlying matricial proposition.

In seeking to reconstruct the matrix, the reader may appeal to the authority of an “intertext”, a model on the level of propositional structure that may be found in other—usually pre-existing—texts or works of art. (In Riffaterrian terminology, the term “structure” always has the sense of the semantic structure of an image or a matrix, which gives it its character as a poetic sign.) Riffaterre himself gives the example of two variants of a matrix common to a primary text and its intertextual model, the first involving a camel “crossing the trackless sands of the desert”, and the second involving a ship “furrowing the briny deep”: both variants are built on the matricial proposition that *a trusty conveyance bears human beings across a large and dangerous expanse* (Riffaterre 1984: 142).

Riffaterre considers the mechanisms of traditional prosody, among which he includes syntactic parallelism, as well as all categories of semantic catachresis, as *heuristic* signals suggesting the existence of underlying poetic “significance”. His emphasis on “ungrammaticality” (or catachresis) reflects the fact that he is concerned above all with the distinctively literary structures of the modern poetry of the twentieth century, and that of its precursors in the nineteenth, much of which—while it may lack formal prosody—contains innovative language and makes innovative propositions. Whatever the genre of poetry involved, this emphasis enables him to insist that it is neither the individual images—and the seeming nonsense of their catachresis—nor their apparent reference to extra-textual phenomena (mimetic meaning), which carry the text’s significance as a poem. Rather, the apparently contradictory references of the surface structures of poetry should alert us to the fact that poetry signifies *indirectly*.

Indirectness of signification is the defining feature of Riffaterre’s notion of “literariness”. Such a definition naturally excludes all genres that depend on direct reference to the extra-textual world—satire, for example. Less obviously, it would also seem to exclude certain examples of verse produced under the influence of postmodernism, which may also signify by direct reference to extra-textual phenomena such as actual events in the poet’s life.

Among the mechanisms of catachresis, metaphor is the most frequent. Apart from its heuristic function, Riffaterre shows how metaphor may be used to establish lexical codes: a text can develop a whole set of images whose vocabulary is based on the same sociolectic “descriptive system” (R.1978: 22, 39–40).

It is important to note that the semiotic structure of the text according to Riffaterrian theory is impervious to any influence brought to bear by the reader. The latter’s contribution to the interpretive process begins with the