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TYPE: Article CC:CCL

JOURNAL TITLE: American journal of semiotics

USER JOURNAL TITLE: The American Journal of Semiotics

ARTICLE TITLE: Rilke's Semiotic Potential: Iconicity and Performance

ARTICLE AUTHOR: William D. Melaney

VOLUME:

ISSUE: 18

MONTH:

YEAR: 2006

PAGES: 159-72

ISSN: 0277-7126

OCLC #:

Processed by RapidX: 3/12/2023 4:09:07 AM

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Rilke's Semiotic Potential: Iconicity and Performance

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ABSTRACT

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FULL TEXT

Headnote

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Rilke's poetry demonstrates both an iconic use of verbal signifiers and a sense of poetic language that enables the performative aspects of language use to be foregrounded in specific literary works. In this article, I am concerned with the interface between aesthetics and semiotics, but I will also argue that Rilke's poetry goes beyond the position of "classical" aesthetic theory as represented by one of its great Enlightenment representatives, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Lessing offers a useful basis for observing how analogies between the arts can clarify the function of verbal signifiers, which are assumed to approach the condition of natural signs. However, twentieth-century poets are often engaged in composing literary works that not only call attention to their own materiality but also surpass an unmediated response to experience that attempts to ground the verbal sign in natural presence. The example of Rilke is important to any theory of language that wishes to acknowledge the semiotic condition of the interpreter, whose relationship to the literary text can be investigated in hermeneutical terms.

My analysis, therefore, is concerned with three related themes. The first theme presents Lessing's Laocoon as a coherent attempt to "save" the natural sign within a modern framework, which ultimately rests on a non-material ideal of communicative transparency. The second and third themes explore, in contrast, how Rilke's poetry involves a new interface between literature and the visual arts that can be interpreted in terms of a more strictly semiotic concern for the "shape" of the verbal icon as well as the role of sign-production in the unending pursuit of human meaning. The conclusion of the paper will emphasize how Rilke's poetry can be interpreted as a semiotic performance that allows us to locate aesthetic experience in a material setting that constitutes a shared world,

instead of sustaining the condition of detachment that typifies modern aesthetics.

I. Representation and Iconicity in Lessing's Laocoön

The task of comparing literature and the visual arts in order to determine their respective strengths is an ancient one that did not need to await the rise of modern aesthetics before it could acquire legitimacy. However, Lessing's version of this task is uniquely indebted to a model of language that adopts representation as a basic frame of reference in clarifying the status of the verbal sign as either natural or arbitrary. A sign is said to be natural when its connection with the signified object derives from the properties of the signified itself. Signs are arbitrary, in contrast, when they have nothing in common with the object, but are nonetheless placed in an accepted relationship to it. For Lessing, this basic distinction between the visual arts and poetry stems from the different modes of representation that tend to predominate in the two types of art (Mitchell 1986: 100-101).1 In the case of poetry, however, the predominance of the arbitrary sign requires a grounding that limits poetic content in accordance with a subjective experience of sensate intuition. Lessing seems to imply that, apart from such an experience, literary apprehension itself would fall into an infinite regress, since it would lose even the minimal specificity that permits its contents to resemble physical things. At the same time, Lessing's entire argument is based on the imputed unity of the two arts, rather than on their dissimilar subject-matter.

It may seem surprising that Lessing's belief in unity, which emerges in the"Preface" to Laocoon, is inseparable from his emphasis on art's aesthetic effect, which necessitates the attempt to distinguish poetry and the visual arts according to strict criteria. In arguing that poetry and painting are mimetic arts, Lessing also specifies that the purpose of both arts is to awaken a sensuous apprehension of their objects. The importance of sensate intuition to the apprehension of the verbal object can only be conceived in aesthetic terms; it invokes the position of the beholder, who comes to possess an intuition of an object that is mentally present but existentially absent (Wellbery 1984: 180-181). Hence, while both poetry and painting may differ in their subject matter, they converge on promoting comparable effects and in constituting themselves in similar ways. The issue of whether or not the sign is arbitrary or natural becomes less crucial than the degree to which both arts exemplify a suitable, that is to say, iconic relation between medium and subject matter (Steiner 1982:200). For this reason, Lessing can be said to uphold the classical maxim, ut pictura poesis (poetry is as painting) that he often seems to reject.

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At the same time, the unity of the arts is based on the value of illusion to the reception of the object, which requires an imaginative projection in order to achieve aesthetic significance. The semiotic means is less fundamental than the role of the imagination in producing a satisfying aesthetic result. Lessing argues that Virgil was more likely to have inspired the sculpture of the Laocoön than to have imitated its physical appearance. But it is the importance of the imagination to both arts, rather than the superiority of poetry to visual representation, that commits him to this view: "Thus, just as the same image may be conjured up in our imagination by means of arbitrary or natural symbols, the same pleasure will be aroused, though not always to the same degree" (Lessing 1984:41). Works of art are constituted through the materially given but include a non-sensible component through which the aesthetic object becomes imaginatively present. Lessing conceives of the autonomy of the aesthetic object as essential to both verbal and graphic production. When the object remains outside the aesthetic process, art falls short of its highest possibilities. This is why he condemns Virgil's description of Aeneas's shield, which merely itemizes imperial accomplishments, instead of engaging the characters at hand in a narrative history (Lessing 1984: 96-97).

It might seem that the role of the imagination in Lessing's aesthetic theory seriously undermines the value of the natural sign in cultural experience. And yet, what the imagination allows the poet to achieve does not invalidate what the visual artist accomplishes in another realm. The dense syntax of the latter is structured in terms of material things that fill the same space, whereas the poet is less encumbered by the rigid quality of a purely visual content.2

The temporal syntax of poetry guarantees a kind of imaginative freedom that is consistent with the evanescent character of verbal utterances. Nevertheless, while painting may be less "advanced" than literature in a progressive semiosis toward reduced opacity, Lessing suggests that poetic language transforms arbitrary signs into natural ones. Poetry reintroduces a degree of natural immediacy that would not be present if it used language in merely arbitrary ways. Lessing can argue that Virgil did not need to copy the Laocoon statue because the verbal content of poetry is just as vivid as what is conveyed in natural signs (Lessing 1984: 42-43).

Lessing's conception of poetry, therefore, involves a semiotic reversal that cannot be understood unless the role of intuitive cognition is reconciled with the transformation of arbitrary signs into natural ones (Wellbery 1984:136). The task of the poet is to work out this transformation in language so that the tendency of the imagination to render the world absent does not prevent the aesthetic object from emerging in experience. In discussing a central feature of graphic production, Lessing emphasizes how the artist who selects the pregnant moment of a visual action enables the viewer to experience painting in terms of poetry. However, the poet who invokes the sensate quality though verbal expressions is inviting the literary reader to experience a manifold of visual images as immediate and instantaneous. Homer's description of Achilles' shield provides Lessing with the perfect instance of the semiotic role of imitation in poetry. In telling the story of how the shield was actually made. Homer transforms what is present into what is consecutive in time, imitating the form of perception that emerges through the reader's imaginative engagement (Lessing 1984: 95). This entire process contrasts, of course, with what Virgil offers in his description of the shield of Aeneas, which Lessing dislikes precisely because it is merely added on to a completed action (Lessing 1984: 96-97).3

What makes Homer's description superior is not only that it depends on actions that are consecutive in time, but that it exemplifies the autonomy of the poetic in terms of the formal arrangement of natural signs. The poem becomes, in semiotic terms, a metaphorical hypoicon (Peirce 1903: 274). It combines the naturalness of perception with freedom from the constraints of a material content. The reconciliation of what appear to be contradictory assumptions underlies Lessing's elevation of poetry to a unique place among the arts. However, Lessing's fear of what is arbitrary in a purely verbal order demonstrates a prejudice against'allegorical" modes of writing that depart too sharply from concrete experience. Is it possible that the allegorical can be appreciated as a reduced form of presence that both stands in for performativity and allows us to more clearly grasp the material features of language itself? This possibility would presuppose a departure from the Enlightenment paradigm of pure transparency upon which Lessing attempts to ground his aesthetic theory.

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2. Nature and Illusion in Rilke's Homage to Archaic Form

In emphasizing how poetry can reverse the tendency of language itself to assume 'allegorical' modes, Lessing not only shows how the theme of transformation distinguishes his approach to poetry from other mimetic approaches, but he also sustains the importance of aesthetics to the verbal apprehension of the natural sign. Hence we should not be surprised to discover this same theme re-emerging in another guise when the spiritual mission of poetry becomes a central issue in modern art. The poetry of Rilke, which marks the arrival of literary modernism in poetry as much as it provides the setting for a crisis in the relations among the arts themselves, is concerned with the semiotic use of language as a basis for altering customary modes of verbal representation.

However, Rilke's poetry provides the occasion for re-thinking the importance of transformation as a semiotic phenomenon that is only imperfectly understood in terms of Lessing's aesthetics. Rilke moves beyond the framework of modern aesthetics itself in the attempt to reclaim for poetry that iconic dimension that foregrounds the material side of verbal expression. His poetry is improperly read as a mere return to intuitive fullness, since its effects often depend on an ambiguous sense of presence that transcends the limitations of visual form. Rilke

situates his literary reader at the place of intersection between iconicity and the open "space" of poetic language, and, in calling attention to the importance of the signifier to the production of poetic meaning, he reminds us that the literary enterprise itself remains linked to temporal experience.

Rilke's famous lyric, "Archaic Torso of Apollo" (Archaïscher Torso Apollos) originally published in New Poems: The Other Part (Der neuen Gedichte anderer Tell, 1908), can be considered in terms of his interest in Rodin's sculpture and Cezanne's painting, but it would not be a convincing poem if it merely accompanied an extrinsic concern (Rilke 1987: 2-3). The poet adopts the sculptured object as the locus of a meditation that enables him to work with form and syntax as "materials" in shaping contours and tensions in both space and time. The poet deploys the fragmentary torso as a metaphor that brings together nature, humanity, and the presence of the god. In the use of this progressive metaphor, the poet does not "represent" something standing before him, but instead freely "imitates" a likeness that is difficult, if not impossible, to capture fully in stone. What the poet initially imitates is already an aspect of nature, since the stone does not constitute the basis for a self-contained human figure. Moreover, it could be argued that the poet ultimately seeks to imitate a likeness that transcends nature as an image of the deity. In presenting this movement, the poem itself begins in matter, embraces consciousness, and culminates in a sense of the numinous (Komar 1987: 11).

Nevertheless, the iconic vision of this figure is not the outward manifestation of some hidden meaning, since it does not presume a Platonic shape that subsists behind what presents itself to us in appearance (Komar 1987: 13). On the one hand, the poem refers to an archaic figure and therefore departs from the artistic convention of presenting Greek sculpture as "classical" or formally complete. As is now well-known, the archaic period was one in which subject and object poles were not yet distinct, since the logic of difference in matters of discourse, art, and conduct remained largely unknown until classical times. And yet, while Rilke's Apollo is archaic in its energy and indistinctness, it comes to us on the basis of a modern use of aesthetic illusion. Rilke reverses the Cartesian view of the physical world when he reintegrates the spectator in a natural setting, but the purpose of his poem is to transform the perceiving subject into the site of some future action: "You must change your life" (Du musst dein Leben andern), the poem reads. This conclusion presupposes an extended motion from the brilliance of an invisible gaze through the entire fragmented torso, just as it reaffirms the endurance of the stone whose light explodes into the present world of the reader.4

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What Rilke has done in this short poem is both affirm and deny the values of the archaic Apollo. He affirms the power of the archaic to transform by means of natural signs, which operate through the metaphor of the evocative landscape that places the sculpture itself in an imaginary setting. The use of active verbs in the description of the stone carving not only suggests how the body itself initiates the processes that underlie an external nature, but it also dematerializes those very processes in favor of an absent cause that places the viewer in a new relationship to the world. Hence the archaic is also denied through the skillful use of aesthetic illusion, and the final overcoming of the archaic perspective encourages the reader to take up a new life in the here and now. The full impact of the poem depends on an intuited difference between archaic and classical form, that is to say, on a specific cultural difference, just as it invokes the reader's capacity to place a series of iconic signs in a temporal continuum.

The shift in emphasis from the archaic perspective to the situation of the modern addressee demonstrates the inseparability of semiotics and aesthetics in Rilke s poem. While the importance of the archaic perspective should not be denied, the poem as a whole is indebted to an early modernist aesthetic that descends from Ruskin but entered Rilke's world through deep reflection on the sculpture of August Rodin. The aesthetic concerns of Rodin's sculpture are central to Rilke's New Poems, which explore the effects of light on tactile surfaces through a use of language that calls attention to the instability of visual perception through a semiotics of poetic form. Rilke's visits to the Louvre were, in part, what motivated him to write about an archaic torso, but his employment as Rodin's

personal secretary would have brought him into close contact with a new kind of art that was often intended to create the appearance of ancient sculpture (Ryan 1999: 82). From the standpoint of the Rodin dedication, the poem itself becomes less of an exhortation to abandon art for reality than an invitation to reject Romantic revery in favor of a more iconic conception of the literary work.

At the same time, Rilke presents this invitation in literary terms, particularly when he incorporates crucial allusions to French Symbolist poems that heighten the illusory quality of his verbal effects. Rilke's poem compares the god's torso to a gas candelabra, which alludes to the flame that illuminates the urban metropolis evoked in Stéphane Mallarmé's famous sonnet, "The Tomb of Charles Baudelaire" (Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire) (Ryan 1999: 84). Through the example of Baudelaire, Mallarmé's poem refers to the social situation of the modern poet, a streetwalker who confronts his own gaze in the objects that constitute his relationship to the external world.5 Rilke provides an alternative to aesthetic alienation in describing the stone as a blossoming tree, an artificial lamp, and finally as a star that explodes its borders. His transformation of the Symbolist intertext replaces an earlier emphasis on the allure of lived experience with a semiotic concern that speaks to the poet as a conscious being, engaged in the act of perfecting an ethos of creativity.

The poem bears an interesting relationship to Lessing's discussion of art and poetry in the Laocoon. Rilke is also concerned with how the boundaries between the arts introduce semiotic issues that enable poetry and painting to be brought in proximity but rigorously distinguished. Rilke presents the visual art object in relation to an action that emerges as a pregnant moment, inscribing the natural sign as verbal surface in a quasi-temporal narrative of indeterminate meaning. And yet, the conclusion to "Archaic Torso of Apollo" interrupts the discursive flow that takes us from the missing head to the surviving fragment. The words that according to Lessing's theory should evoke an experience of intuitive fullness become in Rilke's poem an opening toward some unknown future. How do we account for this significant divergence?

3. Semiotic Reversal in Rilke's Fifth Duino Elegy

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In answering this question, we must take up another of Rilke's works that is concerned with the boundaries between poetry and painting in demonstrating their semiotic relationship as sister arts. The Fifth Elegy in Rilke's Duino Elegies (Duineser Elegien) was composed in 1915 and may have been the last poem in the sequence to be completed (Rilke 1963: 46-53). This poem is largely based on Picasso's famous painting, "Les Saltimbanques" (The Travelling Acrobats), which it employs as an image of the human condition and as the basis for developing a metaphorical conception of an ideal relationship between two (non-appearing) lovers. While seeming to make use of the kinship between visual representation and poetic apprehension, the Fifth Elegy more strikingly compels us to rethink the relationship between poetry and painting in terms of both continuity and discontinuity. On the most obvious level, this poem expresses in language many of the same attitudes that are implicit in the painting itself. Furthermore, in turning the painting into a symbol of an ideal, if hidden, reality, the poem continues the metaphorical reading of the visual work in ways that are consistent with its earlier emphases. However, the Fifth Elegy also suggests that the visual work can only bear an oblique relationship to an invisible world that remains difficult to reconcile with the graphic analogy that it ironically displaces. Hence, instead of describing an actual painting, Rilke is often engaged in creating an alternative work by changing the positions of the figures and modifying their significance. For this reason, the elegy most concerned with reversal is actually based on reversals in the order of appearance itself (Ryan 1999: 188-189).

The Fifth Elegy begins with a question, which introduces a tone of uncertainty that pervades the entire poem. The question concerns the ontological "who" and refers to the acrobats in the painting as wandering vagrants, but it reduces the meaning of the question when it implies that the figures are actually the instruments of a higher will. It

would seem that the acrobats are like dolls or puppets, and therefore possess the material density of physical things. However, they are also in a perpetual mode of departure, despite the fact that the painting creates the illusion that they are frozen in time. Hence Rilke deploys several verbs that express violent movement in the early part of the poem, and this strategy both reinforces the physicality of the acrobats, just as it sustains the idea that they are thrown by some hidden power (Komar 1987: 92). The quality of "throwness", nonetheless, extends beyond the immediate world that the acrobats inhabit. The carpet on which they perform becomes threadbare and diminished, seemingly lost in the vast cosmos. Their movement is absorbed in a commonplace setting and its intrusive sky, until suddenly the acrobats are viewed as a whole, and, forming "the great initial/ letter of Thereness" (das Dastehns/grcβer Anfangshuchstab), they not only emerge as "standing there" (Dastehn) before us, but acquire existence (Dasein) itself.6 In suggesting the letter "D" through an arrangement of figures, the acrobats form an iconic signifier, imitating both the being of things and the limited stability of a human performance.

This human performance attracts spectators who imitate the process of watching itself, before ultimately withdrawing from the promise of integral perception. The spectators are compared to a rose whose petals unfold in the light of what can be seen by the naked eye. However, as soon as the flower no longer appears, it is identified with the "stamp" (Stempel) that produces the dust enabling it to grow. The dust is therefore both the pollen needed for fertilization and the element that the acrobats displace beneath themelves. Rilke allows this second meaning to predominate when he has the dust nourish a "spurious fruit" (Scheinfrucht) that reveals boredom and disgust in the acrobats' false smiles.

Conflicting impressions of the human condition are conveyed in Rilke's portrayal of the individual acrobats, who correspond only tenuously to the figures in the Picasso painting. The figure of the lifter, now withered and depleted of energy, contrasts to that of the muscular young man, described as "simple" and apparently lacking in self-awareness. The young boy, however, is identified with a perpetual state of motion; he is shown as if torn from the tree of life that the acrobats constitute as living bodies. The metaphor of the tree develops the concept of fluidity as a movement that compares to the flow of water as well as seasonal rotations, just as it leads on to a deeper sense of passing time. But the young boy is also placed next to his mother, who in Rilke's poem suggests the possibility of emotional union that could mitigate his separation from the group as whole. Amidst this episode, the boy smiles, in spite of his difficulties, and the reader is to imagine angels placing the smile on an urn inscribed with the words, Subrisio Saltat (Acrobat's Smile). His smile, also said to be an agent of healing, moves us from the human realm of the acrobats to the higher realm of the angels and its invisible order.

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Much that the boy suggests is set in contrast to the image of the little girl that emerges next in the poem. Compared to fruit that is placed in the marketplace, she is dependent on a system of exchange that exceeds her control. Her oneness with the physical world is deceptive, since it thrusts her back among inanimate objects. And yet, because the girl is small and almost weightless, the poet encourages us to envision her as a figure of poise, borne by the other acrobats at a moment of supreme tension. The possibility that the small girl might be moved to the top of the group in a display of coordinated activity evokes the motif of the pregnant moment, also implicit in the "rose of watching" (Rose des Zuschauns) that emerged before the description of the acrobatic troupe.

Nevertheless, this promised resolution does not quite materialize because the performance itself remains an ambiguous activity that is neither purely natural nor culturally unified. Rilke is concerned with that exact place where the acrobats might achieve grace and balance, but then suggests that they only resemble mating animals, incorrectly paired, or that "the ineffable spot" [die unsagliche Stelle] upon which they move suddenly changes from sheer limitation to an emptiness that is truly overwhelming. Time itself cancels the possibility of rest, annihilating the place of repose that seemed to offer an alternative to fleeting experience. Moreover, at just this moment, the modern urban environment reasserts itself in a winter landscape where the figure of death weaves hats and costumes. The

opposition between life and death cannot be stronger than in this passage, which almost forecloses the possibility of breaking out of the artificial setting and creates suspicion of the acrobats' entire performance.

However, the Fifth Elegy not only concludes in a way that restores a crucial element of transcendence to the poem itself, just as it shows how the imagination can ground poetic experience as a play between the painted image and the poet's verbal interpretation of it. In the final passage of the poem, Rilke refers to an"unsayable carpet" (unsäglichem Teppich) upon which two lovers gather in the presence of the dead, who toss coins to the "truthfully smiling pair" (wahrhaft lächelnde Paar) in the circle beyond them. The lovers bring to stillness the flights of fancy, visual delights and sublime aspirations that lack ground in the world of the living. What the acrobats had been unable to achieve in their time acquires a measure of stability in this imaginary future. It could be objected that, in this final passage, Rilke has achieved stability at too high a price, having transposed the lovers themselves into the realm of the dead. Moreover, we might argue that the analogy between the acrobats and the lovers is inappropriate, since it imports the idea of performance into love itself (Guardini 1961: 159). And yet, the hint of mortality is also what preserves the worldly quality of this final scene, and the mingling of life and death in this invisible metamorphosis is what provides iconicity with its imaginative potential.

The end of Rilke's poem offers a vivid example of what semiotic theory identifies as a metaphorical hypoicon. Peirce suggests that presentations are hypoicons, that is to say, embodied icons that present a quality of beauty allowing Thirdness to be interpreted as a First.7 His distinction between iconicity and hypoiconicity seems to support the view that beauty is primarily an artistic phenomenon (Parret 1994: 187). Moreover, the metaphorical hypoicon differs from the icon insofar as it is based on analogy, rather than similarity, and therefore enables us to comprehend two qualities in terms of a third. Thus, in Rilke's poem, the lovers compare to the acrobats, but also invoke a third term that transcends the mere appearance of similarity in relation to an internal ground. From the semiotic standpoint, the metaphorical hypoicon would not define itself as re-presentational, since its true purpose is not to represent an object that remains external to it. The ground of the aesthetic sign does not represent its object but presents the way in which the embodied icon comes into representation (Parret 1994: 188). Now it is less a question of understanding aesthetics in terms of intuitive fullness than in relation to a presence that opens up a common world.8

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Conclusion: A Hermeneutics of the Performing Self

Rilke's poetry is perhaps uniquely concerned with integrating the values of iconicity with a use of language that highlights the existential possibilities of the performing self. As a poet who worked between late Romanticism and early twentieth-century modernism, Rilke's poems reflect the movement from a diffuse and predominantly aesthetic conception of poetry to a more tightly structured, semiotic conception that serves ethical as well as specifically literary purposes. "Archaic Torso of Apollo" is not primarily about a vanished Hellenic culture, but depends instead on the reader's knowledge of the difference between archaic and classical art, just as it incorporates a French Symbolist intertext that disrupts an apparently rural poetic setting. The iconic use of verbal signifiers therefore serves two functions: first, it imparts a degree of materiality to the poetic object; but, second, it prompts an active movement in the mind of the reader, which culminates in the introduction of the performative injunction. In contrast to the motif of aesthetic reconciliation that emerges in Lessing's Laocoon, Rilke employs semiotic variables to modify the relationship between language and natural experience that classical' approaches to art tend to continually reinstate.

Rilke's Duino Elegies can be cited as a more consistently modernist literary work that carries the poet's semiotic concerns to a new level of awareness. Here the dialogue between poetry and painting parallels the central ambition of Lessing's major work in aesthetic theory. However, where Lessing envisions poetry and painting as approaching a shared condition of natural fullness, Rilke activates a performing self that interprets the work of art in the light of transcendent conditions that are irreducible to aesthetic considerations. Rilke's Fifth Elegy can be read semiotically

as a metaphorical hypoicon, but its less technical meaning derives from the unresolved tensions that are generated when the figure of the two lovers is set against the more limited version of performance that is inscribed in the activity of the acrobats. The sort of interpretation that pertains to the life of the acrobats does not involve the creation of new meaning, since it ultimately pays homage to artistic designs that are more enduring than any single performance. The painting that contains them, however, seems to exist in a world of its own and threatens to reduce our capacity to express in words what is understood as intuitively present. Nevertheless, Rilke's Fifth Elegy does not exhaust its semiotic potential in a mere return to sensuous immediacy, but allows us to grasp the importance of poetic language to hermeneutical meaning,

Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests that the work of art can function in relation to a kind of proto-language that actually exists prior to interpreting words. What this means is not that language is inadequate to expression, but that the universal character of linguistic expression constitutes artistic meaning: "Hermeneutical consciousness only participates in what constitutes the general relation between language and reason" (Gadamer 1991: 401). This general relation is suggested in Rilke's poem, which employs the metaphor of the two lovers as a poetic basis for suggesting the infinite capacity of language to transcend narrow alternatives. However, Rilke includes the broader meaning of performance in his Fifth Elegy in a manner that once again addresses the question of poetic language. The distance between the lovers and the acrobats is bridged to the extent that the poem itself can be said to unite interpretation and understanding. From the semiotic standpoint, the reader of the poem mediates between a verbal performance and an intuitive approximation. The act of reading that informs the dialogue between poetry and painting instigates the movement that suggests the conceptual nature of language, but also prevents us from defining language as an atemporal process.9 The role of material signifiers in the experience of poetic language therefore limits performativity, just as it also discourages us from considering language as form alone (Gadamer 1991: 404). The value of Rilke's poetry to semiotic theory resides in its potential to clarify the unique character of poetic language and to invoke the more general situation in which interpretation invariably occurs.10

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Footnote

Notes

1. W.J.T. Mitchell clams that Lessing's tendency to privilege poetry over the visual arts derives from a system of thought that resembles that of Kant, who subordinates space to time (Mitchell 1986:107-108). His interpretation of Lessing, however, prevents us from clearly ascertaining how poetry in the tradition of German classicism acquires validity only in assuming many of the values normally associated with painting.

2. Lessing's conception of the dense syntax of the visual arts should not be confused with a genuine interest in materiality as an aesthetic value. Wellbery acknowledges the role of materiality in artistic production: "Artistic accomplishment in the plastic arts consists in great part for Lessing in the masking of materiality and spatiality so that the imaginative aesthetic experience can unfold in time" (Wellbery 1984: 119).

3. Lessing contrasts the two shields in illuminating the difference between organic as opposed to decorative conceptions of the work of art. Hence the shield of Aeneas is "intended solely to flatter the national pride of the Romans; an alien stream turned by the poet into his own river in order to stir it up" (Lessing 1984: 96-97). The shield of Achilles, in contrast, springs from the creative process that engages the viewer in mimetic participation (97). It should be noted, however, that this decisive contrast is less concerned with a national difference than with an artistic and political difference that goes beyond national boundary lines.

4. Gadamer has emphasized how works of art communicate on the basis of contemporaneity, which enables the past to be transmitted in the mode of the present (Gadamer 1991:127-128). The classic is uniquely capable of communicating transhistorically, but all art possesses the capacity to appeal to a viewer (or reader) who is not originally present. It is significant that, although Rilke invokes an archaic work of sculpture in this lyric poem, he does not identify its inaccessibility as a cultural value.

5. Rilke's use of the French Symbolist intertext allows his poem on Apollo to be reinscribed with the artist's

subjectivity. Reinscription, however, does not assume a Romantic but a modernist guise by inviting us to identify with the poet in a familiar setting. Thus, instead of encouraging us to become absorbed in the vague and indefinite, Rilke's allusions to Baudelaire and Mallarmé encourage the reader to recognize himself in modern objects and settings, and to relate the poem to contemporary experience.

6. It might be possible to interpret Rilke's "Thereness" in terms of Heidegger's Dasein as originally discussed in Being and Time. Any attempt to interpret Heidegger's early work in terms of a theory of signs would be misleading if it assigned the notion of Thereness as purely linguistic meaning. However, from a Heideggerian standpoint, perhaps it could be said that the iconic meaning of the letter D possesses an ontological meaning that does not exhaust its existential significance.

7. In the subsection from the 1903 Syllabus, entitled, "Speculative Grammar", Peirce clearly explains an icon as representing an object by virtue of similarity, without respect to its mode of being, whereas an iconic representamen is a bypoicon if it lacks a substantive; moreover, hypoicons that represent the representative character of a represenramen in terms of a parallelism in something else are called metaphors (1998: 273-274). By viewing Rilke's poem as a metaphorical hypoicon, we are able to appreciate its iconic features without denying the importance of Firstness to aesthetic experience, which becomes, not a ground that subsumes, but the interpretive basis for rendering sensory transparency immediately present.

8. Peirce developed the rudiments of a non-cognitivist approach to aesthetics that enables him to criticize classical (Greek) and rationalist ideals of beauty (Parret 1994: 181). In assessing the sign in terms of the ground, the object and the interpretant, Peirce breaks with a narrowly cognitivist view of beauty. Hence, with respect to the issue of ground, Peirce maintains that the metaphorical hypoicon is the best example of the aesthetic sign. The view of beauty that he suggests is therefore "postmodern" in its basic concerns, but it is also consistent with a belief in the sensus communis, or common world of shared meanings (Parret 1994: 181-182).

9. Gadamer emphasizes the role of concept formation in everyday speech as well as the development of the human sciences. Concept formation is reflected to some degree in the history of philosophy, which argues against a purely instrumentalist view of language. Hermeneutics, like semiotics, allows us to consider language as a verbal system that unites interpretation and understanding in living practice (Gadamer 1991: 402-403).

10. An early version of this article was presented at the Third Symposium on Iconicity and Literature, which met at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany in March 2001. This conference, sponsored by the International Semiotic Society, was particularly concerned with the iconic features of French and German literary texts. I am especially grateful to Professors Wolfgang Miiller, Olga Fischer, and Max Nanny for their helpful comments on my paper.

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DETAILS

Subject:	Poetry; Linguistics; Literary criticism; Semiotics; Iconicity; Art; Valence; Metaphor
Literature indexing term:	Author: Rilke, Rainer Maria, 1875-1926
People:	Rilke, Rainer Maria von (1875-1926)
Publication title:	The American Journal of Semiotics; Kent
Volume:	18

Issue:	1-4
Pages:	159-172,291
Number of pages:	15
Publication year:	2002
Publication date:	2002
Publisher:	Semiotic Society of America
Place of publication:	Kent
Country of publication:	United States, Kent
Publication subject:	Social Sciences: Comprehensive Works, Humanities: Comprehensive Works
ISSN:	02777126
e-ISSN:	21532990
Source type:	Scholarly Journal
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Commentary
Document feature:	References
ProQuest document ID:	213748808
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/rilkes-semiotic-potential-iconicity-performance/docview/213748808/se-2?accountid=14484
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Last updated:	2019-12-17
Database:	ProQuest Central

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