http://www.diva-portal.org

Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Textual practice*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Bäckström, P. (2011)
(forgive us,o life!the sin of Death: A Critical Reading of Michael Riffaterre's Semiotics of Poetry.
Textual practice, 25(5): 913-939
https://doi.org/10.1080/09502361003687811

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:kau:diva-10550

Per Bäckström

(forgive us,o life!the sin of Death: a critical reading of Michael Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry*

The objectives of this article are two-fold: in part a presentation of Riffaterre's semiotic-based analysis of poetry, and in part an examination of its problems and predicaments, using modern experimental poetry by way of example. Due to the fact that *Semiotics of Poetry* was introduced to the Anglo-American world at the same moment as a second wave of deconstruction was building up, Riffaterre's theory was largely criticised for not adhering to new values, or ignored, despite the value of his semiotics of poetry as an analytical and pedagogical aid in the study of poetry. The problems that present themselves with respect to Riffaterre's semiotics of poetry are mainly linked to his formalistic dependence on textuality, which cause him to ignore any factors other than intertextuality in the production of lyric poetry. This would suggest an appreciable limitation in the practicability of this method of gaining an overall grasp of what poetry is. In addition, I shall discuss the problems raised as a result of Riffaterre's own hermeneutic practice of interpretation, thus offering a further illustration of the obstacles encountered in attempting to employ his semiotics of poetry. Finally, I shall endeavour to situate this method in a comprehensive poetic analysis, in order to demonstrate its primary practicability as a descriptive discipline.

Keywords

Michael Riffaterre; semiotics; interpretation; textuality; intertextuality; experimental poetry

It is now more than 30 years since Michael Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978) was published,[1] and, notwithstanding its age, one wonders what happened to a method of lyrical analysis esteemed by Geoffrey Hartman to be of '[considerable] significance for the study of poetry'.[2] In terms of its Anglo-American reception, it seems as though Riffaterre has been largely forgotten, and one might even doubt if he was really known at all.[3] What occurred was a matter of unusually bad timing, since *Semiotics of Poetry* arrived at the same time as a second deconstructive turn was building up in America. Following the introduction of post-structuralism in the (Anglo-American) world, with Jacques Derrida's famous speech at the Johns Hopkins University in 1966, its deconstruction was taken up and brought to public attention there by Paul de Man. His books *Blindness and Insight* (1971) and *Allegories of Reading* (1979) framed the work of Michael Riffaterre with what is perceived as *the abject* in his theory: rhetorical and figurative language.[4] Following the publication of *Semiotics of Poetry*, the disciples of de Man began to set the tone as well: Barbara Johnson, for example, published her *Défigurations du langage poétique* in France in 1979, and then fired up during a second wave of deconstruction with her new book *The Critical Difference* in 1980.[5] For a theory like Michael Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry*, which was built upon a belief in an over-arching analytical method and a hypostatised dichotomy between poetry and prose, this wave of deconstructive thinking became devastating: the general scholar did not really see the potential in *Semiotics of Poetry*, despite the fact that mainstream scholars and critics such as Paul de Man, Jonathan Culler and Geoffrey Hartman emphasised both its strength and its predicaments.

This article is an attempt to draw attention to the fact that Riffaterre's theory, despite its age, actually constitutes one of the fundamental methods of poetic analysis, in the same time as I shall point out its limitations and pitfalls, by this inserting it into a larger framework of poetry analysis.[6] In addition to Riffaterre's theory constituting a systematic method for poetry analysis, it has other qualities: amongst other things, it is the nearest poetic theory gets to structural analysis of a narratological nature. With the help of his semiotics of poetry it is therefore possible to break away from the usual perception that lyric poetry cannot be analysed structurally, a view dating back to the Romantic poetic myth that would rather speak of emotions and inspiration when it comes to an understanding of poetic production – exactly the same creative powers that Michael Riffaterre so effectively incorporates in his semiotic explanation of text production, *contra* the author-myth of Romanticism.

Michael Riffaterre has a background in French Structuralism, which constitutes the most important prerequisite in his semiotics of poetry and has determined his conception of poetry to a great extent. This

means that all reflections about the author are rejected as being, if not uninteresting, at any rate an impossible basis on which to build an understanding of poetry. As distinct from Structuralism in general, Riffaterre is, by contrast, interested in the relation between the text and the reader, thus stretching himself beyond a narrow textual study: 'The literary phenomenon [. . .] is a dialectic between text and reader' (SP 1). In spite of this, the text is what his theory focuses on, since he regards this as being what navigates the reading, reducing the reader to a function that realises the intentions of the text in the act of reading itself.

The impetus for Riffaterre's theoretical interest was Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss's reading of Charles Baudelaire's poem 'Le Chat' (1962) in which, in an exhaustive analysis using all manner of structural linguistics, they show how the poem has been constructed.[7] The problem, as Riffaterre sees it, is that in analysing everything in the text without differentiation, they fail to separate two layers of language, the everyday and the poetic; nor do they allocate any priority in the matter of what creates a poem's 'poeticity'. Riffaterre therefore supplies an alternative interpretation of the same poem in his responding article (1966). The following quotation serves to summarise the motivation behind the semiotic theory he would later develop:

> Far more important, however, is the question as to whether unmodified structural linguistics is relevant at all to the analysis of poetry. The authors' method is based on the assumption that any structural system they are able to define in the poem is necessarily a poetic structure. Can we not suppose, on the contrary, that the poem may contain certain structures that play no part in its function and effect as a literary work of art, and that there may be no way for structural linguistics to distinguish between these unmarked structures and those that are literarily active? Conversely, there may well be strictly poetic structures that cannot be recognized as such by an analysis not geared to the specificity of poetic language.[8]

It was not until *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978), however, that Riffaterre first formulated a full account of his theory; the title of the book itself indicates a simultaneous distancing from Structuralism and advance towards the semiotics of Charles Sander Peirce. The following year saw the publication of *La Production du texte* (1979), a collection of essays that thematises creation in poetry on a strictly intertextual basis.[9]

In *Semiotics of Poetry*, Riffaterre indicates the grounds for his poetic analysis: the explicit starting-point is that poetry is meaningful in a completely different way from everyday language, which he also reckons to include prose. He defines the difference between prose and poetry as follows:

> Now the basic characteristic of mimesis is that it produces a continuously changing semantic sequence, for representation is founded upon the referentiality of language, that is, upon a direct relationship of words to things. [. . .] What matters is that the text multiplies details and continually shifts its focus to achieve an acceptable likeness to reality, since reality is normally complex. Mimesis is thus variation and multiplicity.
>
> Whereas the characteristic feature of the poem is its unity: a unity both formal and semantic. Any component of the poem that points to that 'something else' it means will therefore be a constant, and as such it will be sharply distinguishable from the mimesis. This formal and semantic unity, which includes all the indices of indirection, I shall call the *significance*. I shall reserve the term *meaning* for the information conveyed by the text at the mimetic level. From the standpoint of meaning the text is a string of successive information units. From the standpoint of significance the text is one semantic unit.
>
> (SP 2)

Since poetry constitutes a formal and semantic unity, all reference must take place within the poem itself. In the process of discovering ungrammaticalities at a mimetic level, the reader realises that meaning must be sought on another plane: the significance of the poem. This transformation of sign from one level to another is a manifestation of *semiosis*. 'The semiotic process really takes place in the reader's mind, and it results from a second reading' (SP 4). The meaning is produced in the first, heuristic reading, while the second reading gradually modifies what has already been read, as information that was not earlier perceived is taken on board. This is a definition that has obvious similarities with the description of the hermeneutic circle, an implication to which I shall return.

What is it, then, that is being read when one analyses a poem? Here, Riffaterre is not particularly stringent in his response. Admittedly, he says that 'units of meaning may be words or phrases or sentences, *the unit of significance is the text*' (SP 6), and that the greatest 'analyzable corpus that we conceive in literature should be the text and not a collection of texts' (TP 5), but he does not provide a strict definition. Riffaterre's statement leads to a preliminary conclusion that the object of analysis should really be the poem as a whole, rather than parts of it, or several poems.

How, then, should the text be analysed, and which expressions are essential? One of Riffaterre's two most important expressions is 'matrix', which he defines as an absent structure operating throughout the poem: 'The structure of the given [. . .] like all structures, is an abstract concept never actualised per se: it becomes visible only in its variants, the ungrammaticalities' (SP 13). This structure determines the origin of the poem, at

the same time as being manifested by means of different variations in the finished poem. The matrix may be formulated as any given stereotype or cliché, as long as it encompasses the extra-textual structure that manifests itself in the poem:

> The poem results from the transformation of the *matrix*, a minimal and literal sentence, into a longer, complex, and nonliteral periphrasis. The matrix is hypothetical, being only the grammatical and lexical actualization of a structure. The matrix may be epitomized in one word, in which case the word will not appear in the text. It is always actualized in successive variants; the form of these variants is governed by the first or primary actualization, the *model*. Matrix, model, and text are variants of the same structure.
>
> (SP 19)

Thus, there is the first actualisation in the poem – the model – that determines the form taken by the rest of the poem since the matrix, in its expression here, subsequently varies throughout the text. The reader discovers these variations through their encoding, which indicates that something is being concealed; they form a disorder at a mimetic level, at the same time as this disorder, in itself, provides the key to the way in which the reader will comprehend the hidden message. Riffaterre calls the first function of this disorder 'the deictic feature' – the ungrammaticality in the text – and this in turn precipitates awareness of the need for an extra-textual element so that the meaning may be recreated. The second function – which he calls 'the hermeneutic feature – seems to lie in the nature of the mimesis distortion, in the type of distortion' (TP 12); this creates a structure that, by means of its similarity with other literary distortions, provides the key to interpretation. Hence, through the ungrammaticalities of the poetic text, the reader can comprehend the underlying structure, where the poeticity of the text is decided by a word or sentence that is congruent with the significance of the text, i.e. the matrix itself.[10]

The poeticity is thus defined by other texts or linguistic articulations. The poem is determined vertically, as it were, by variations of a matrix that is not visible in the text in itself, other than manifesting itself in its transformed state in the first line or sentence, which thus becomes the 'model' for the entire poem. This transformation can take place by means of either conversion or expansion. Conversion works by every part of the matrix being affected and every word altered by a paradigmatic exchange. Expansion, on the other hand, functions syntagmatically: from a minimal sequence, each component generates a more complex form.

In addition, words and sentences are determined horizontally, with reference to one or more 'hypograms' – Riffaterre's other significant

expression – which may be constituted from other texts, clichés or 'descriptive systems', the latter being an explanatory system centring on a key-word and a cluster of words associated with it:[11]

> In either case the production of the poetic sign is determined by hypogrammatic derivation: a word or phrase is poeticized when it refers to (and, if a phrase, patterns itself upon) a pre-existent word group. The hypogram is already a system of signs comprising at least a predication, and it may be as large as a text.
>
> (SP 23)

The matrix and the hypogram may be expressed in the text in many different ways, which leads to the poem's significance becoming redundant, since this is determined in every single instance by both the matrix variation and reference to the hypogram. According to Riffaterre, this transition from meaning to significance is necessitated by the 'interpretant', a notion that he borrows from Peirce.[12] Riffaterre's definition nevertheless distinguishes itself from that of Peirce by reserving the 'interpretant' for poeticity. The interpretant is the link between the two different language levels: the mimetic and the poetic. In other words, it is the interpretant that constitutes the ungrammaticality in a text and recreates both the deictic and the hermeneutic functions.

There are two different types of interpretant to be found, according to Riffaterre: the 'lexematic' and the 'textual' (SP 81). The textual is more or less equivalent to intertextuality, being constituted of citations from and allusions to other texts. Riffaterre also calls lexematic signs 'dual signs', since these can generate two sign systems at the same time. A typical example of this is the pun, which both functions as an ordinary word and signals another, underlying system. Hence, it is because of the interpretant that the reader understands that there is something beyond the mimetic level in the poetic text to be found. It is the ungrammaticality that causes the mimetic level to collapse, at the same time as making it possible for the poem to attain meaning at a level of significance.

*

Linguists have earlier sought to define the notion of 'literarity',[13] but, according to Riffaterre, they have been unable to encompass its textual nature in literary texts. Riffaterre takes the unique character of the literary text as his starting point, but instead of generalising the unique – as has earlier been done – he starts there, and provides an explanation for it.

> The text works like a computer program designed to make us experience the unique. This uniqueness is what we call style. It has long

> been confused with the hypothetical individual termed the author; but, in point of fact, *style is the text itself.*
>
> The difference between poetics and textual analysis is that poetics generalizes and dissolves a work's uniqueness into poetic language, but analysis, as I see it, attempts to explain the unique.
>
> (TP 2)

This literary phenomenon consists of both the text and the reader's reaction to the text,[14] which Riffaterre emphasises explicitly through his definition of the two primary factors in the relationship between the text and the reader:

> POINT ONE: The literary phenomenon is not only the text, but also its reader and all of the reader's possible reactions to the text – both énoncé and énonciation. [---]
> POINT TWO: The text is a limiting and prescriptive code.
>
> (TP 3, 6)

It is clear that the act of reading, according to Riffaterre, can only happen in one way, since the text already contains all that is needed to direct the reading. The reader is thus reduced to a passive realiser of the text's intrinsic markers. For an observant reader, therefore, there is only one possible way of reading the text: in other words, significance is produced through an act of reading that is determined by the text *per se*.

*

In order to illustrate Riffaterre's practical poetry analysis, a lengthy section from *Semiotics of Poetry* is reproduced here, in which he discusses the mirror as a structuring element of Michel Leiris' poem 'Les Veilleurs de Londres':

> Ils réclamaient les joies sans lendemain de la vigueur
> . . .
> Le soit en plein ciel illuminé d'ardeur
> Ils ne pouvaient hanter que d'étranges coulisses
> Où les baisers vendus par des lèvres sans tain
> Permettent d'entrevoir triste feu d'artifice
> Les miroirs éclatés au fond des spasmes feints
> Or nous étions dimanche
> Les plaisirs vrais ou faux dormaient dans les boutiques
> Et tous les cœurs étaient fermés

> They demanded vigor's lusty joys without tomorrow, coupling under an open sky alight with passion. They could do no more than haunt

> the backstage of strange theaters where kisses sold by lips *sans tain* permit a glimpse of dismal fireworks, the broken mirrors at the heart of pretended spasms. Now it was Sunday. Pleasures true or false were sleeping in the shops, and all hearts were closed.
>
> The text makes its sexual symbolism clear and explicit with *soït* at the beginning and *plaisirs* in the last stanza, so that there can be no argument as to what the middle, mirror stanza is about. [...] The last three lines make just as clear the rule for proper decoding: the text's idiolectic grammar first posits a semantic transfer – here words associated with the mimesis of an English Sunday are used to represent indirectly the availability (or unavailability) of love or sex. I prefer to speak of semantic transference or transcoding (from Sunday code to love language), rather than of metaphor, since there is no conceivable similitude that could make Sunday stand for coitus. The text's grammar posits that the words of the transferral code are scrambled to the detriment of representation, so that only their marker value is left. Sunday closing slides from *shops* to *hearts. Shops* retains only its *venality* seme and business closure only its *interdiction* seme, both playing the role of negative marker to the word *pleasure*. Following the same rule, the descriptive system of *miroir* is scrambled, but without losing the pertinent components: *miroir*, *sans tain*, and *entrevoir* – fitting verb for the dim perception of something beyond. Within the code it is obvious that *sans tain*, the visual indistinctness, and the splintered mirrors mean no more (and no less) than *étranges*, *vendus*, *triste*, and *feints*. They are negative markers for a spectral representation of unsatisfying or venal sex. Or rather, for a textual sign [...] for the mirrorlike deceitfulness of love/sex. [...] *Tain* comes to annex or absorb the adverse meaning of *sans*, this function being displaced from its carrier (the preposition) to the prop (*tain*) that makes it possible to insert *sans* into the sentence. As usual in poetic discourse, the abstract geometry of meaning is fleshed out, so to speak, with figurative words. (SP 35–36).

This quotation is a telling example of how Riffaterre, as *super-reader*, excels at rolling out the meaning in the text, thus providing it with an unambiguous and stable signification. The ungrammaticalities that are to be found in the poem are set out and translated to the poem's level of significance, but they simultaneously intersect what – according to many theorists – should form the essence of the poem, namely the fundamental ambivalence that prevents an unambiguous interpretation of the poem. This is evident, for example, in the way that Riffaterre denies that 'Sunday' could be a

metaphor for sex – 'there is no conceivable similitude that could make Sunday stand for coitus' – without realising that Sunday in many (Christian) cultures is in fact a day of rest as far as sexual intercourse is concerned, as well: Sunday can, in fact, through its explicit or implicit prohibition of *coitus*, represent precisely that absence of love that Leiri is describing, and therefore – indirectly – create a metaphor for sex.[15] The text quoted here illustrates, through Riffaterre's denial of the poem's fundamental ambivalence and heterogeneity, the debatable relationship between his practice and theory, an issue that the reader is asked to keep in mind during the discussion that follows.

The semiotics of modern poetry?

The status of Riffaterre's theory as a useful tool in poetry analysis is established beyond all doubt, if only through his own analyses. I shall not, therefore, provide any further examples of his poetic analysis, but will question instead whether it is fruitful to seek one matrix, and one matrix only, for a poem. In addition, I shall focus upon the method itself, by seeing whether it can be used in an understanding of experimental Modernistic and avant-garde poetry, rather than just more or less mimetically complete lyric poetry.[16]

As a starting-point for this problematisation of Riffaterre's emphasis of the existence of a sole matrix and the fact that matrices and hypograms are of a purely textual nature, I have chosen the poem 'XXVIII' from the Swedish Modernist Erik Lindegren's *mannen utan väg* (the man without a way).[17] Of course, it is not impossible to construct a sole matrix for this poem, but its complexity and the following examples I have chosen pose important and decisive questions about the usefulness of Riffaterre's theory. Lindegren's poem, despite the enumerating character of the verses, is actually an example of how Modernistic and avant-garde poetry employs a simultaneous rather than a mimetic structure.

to shoot an enemy and roll a cigarette
to burst into flame and die out like a beacon in a storm

to sit like a fly in the web of interested parties
to believe yourself born unlucky though you are merely born

to be a function of everything that does not function
to be something else or not to be at all

to be fitted into the wall of hatred like the gray stone
yet feel the unity of stones like the joy of heather in bloom

to feel that everything is neglected in the steaming rain

to enjoy the excitement by the smouldering pyre

to doubt that this must be the last time
to acknowledge everything as long as it is not repeated

to break your way through and reach a lookout
where bolts of lightning hunt to avenge humanity

The first verse's 'to shoot an enemy and roll a cigarette' comprises the first manifestation of the matrix, which can then be formulated either as 'hard-boiled' or, bearing in mind the emotional contrast expressed in this line, a 'devaluation of feeling'. At the same time, however, it is difficult to get such a matrix to tally with the total sense of abandonment in the third line, 'to sit like a fly in the web of interested parties': this requires a completely different formulation of the matrix, e.g. 'exposure' or 'alienation'. Thus, it is possible to formulate various propositions of a matrix, but at the same time, the idea of being limited to a single choice seems forced, given that the various verse lines are describing such essentially different circumstances. If an attempt is made to find the hypograms to which these lines refer, this becomes still more problematic, since many of the lines both create a picture and simultaneously function as an anchorage of its significance.[18] According to Riffaterre's assumption, the hypogram does not exist outside the text itself, but is an effective element within it.

'To sit like a fly in the web' is a stock phrase in the form of a simile, which with the elaboration of whom the net belongs to – 'interested parties' – is simultaneously made concrete. This illustrates the way in which transformation is achieved, but at the same time, the verse line becomes so literal that it cannot convey any 'ungrammaticality', in Riffaterre's sense of the word. Clearly, it is 'interested parties' that represent the deviation in this line, and hence it is this phrase that should lead the reader to the hypogram. In this instance, however, the cliché is written out, and 'interested parties' therefore render the line mimetic by functioning as an illustration. The process of interpretation thus proceeds intratextually, rather than on the intertextual basis assumed by Riffaterre.

In *Text Production*, Riffaterre discusses the Surrealist use of 'the extended metaphor', in which the initial incidence of a primary metaphor provides the formula for what follows, in an analogy with this model's guiding effect (TP 202–220). The problem with this is that the Surrealist poems provided as examples by Riffaterre have a mimetic level in any case, since the statements follow one another in some kind of logical meaning. It is this level that Lindegren consciously sought to break with in his poetry, by lining up a number of disparate statements. The difficulty nevertheless lies in the fact that Lindegren is working directly with the hypogram, i.e.

the extra-textual intertexts that Riffaterre makes use of in order to explain the poem's function. At the same time, each verse line in Lindegren's poem is in itself mimetic, which means that it should be possible to solve the matrix problem, in spite of everything.[19]

A similar relationship is to be found in Erik Lindegren's work based on the Halmstad Group's paintings, of 1946, in which, for example, his poem on Axel Olson's painting 'Förankring i verkligheten' (Anchored in Reality, 1935; Figure 1) contains, similarly, a mimetic level; at the same time, the typography provides an additional level that is crucial to its significance.

from your very regret
for ship become wreck
you built your leap of faith
in an alien element
believed it was built
under dreamlessness' deck
knew it was purposed
as an unseen monument

over a fairly happy flow'n ashore

and chain clasped chain in uneasy threat
against what here once and for all was gone
but up there among the clouds a dragged dream-net
fettered hands drove the ungraspable's span

these anchors have wandered, loosed from the depths[20]

Figure 1. Erik Lindegren's poem 'Förankring i verkligheten' 1935.

However, manuscript research that has been carried out shows that even here, problems may occur with a theory such as Riffaterre's, since the poem above was conceived from two disparate ideas that were, furthermore, written down on different occasions.[21] Another difficulty is presented by the considerable amount of 'refurbishing' that occurred, from preliminary notes and first draft to the completed poem, which also appears to be relevant to

the poem's significance. Lindegren has, to a great extent allowed himself to be guided by sound and rhythm in his working, which points rather to a pre-linguistic than a mimetic mechanism underlying his work. The biggest problem, though, is that the poem is inspired by a painting (Figure 2) and it is intended that both should be viewed together, so one might say that the significance is also dependent upon the recreation of this painting in the poem. A picture, however, as a work of art, is a visual object, and as such difficult to transform into a matrix, since the latter – according to Riffaterre – can only be of a textual nature.[22]

Aside from ekphrasis, the poem also functions as pattern poetry (*carmina figurata*), but the contribution to the significance that its purely typographical appearance provides cannot be explained by Riffaterre's theory, either.[23] The inference is that an analysis of such a poem cannot be undertaken with the sole aid of purely textual semiotics, given that the poem builds on non-textual elements to such an extent.

Another problematic aspect of Riffaterre's theory is that he shows little interest in the poem's paratexts, such as the significance of the title in a poem's overall meaning. Paul de Man has shown, for example, that Riffaterre ignores the title's capacity to focus meaning in his analysis of Victor Hugo's poem 'Ecrit sur la vitre d'une fenêtre flamande' (Written on a Flemish Window-Pane).[24] If one looks at modern poetry this becomes even more problematic, since the latter more often builds on metaphor than on mimesis, for example in Ezra Pound's poem 'In a Station of the

Figure 2. Axel Olson 'Förankring i verkligheten' (Anchored in Reality, 1935). © DACS 2009.

Metro' (1913), which bears a greater resemblance to a Japanese haiku than to mimetic poetry.[25] The interesting thing about Pound's poem is that it builds on and simultaneously forms a picture in itself; a picture that, without the title, might have been interpreted in many different ways, but the significance of which is now anchored in the context of a metro station:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Riffaterre would very likely have had a problem with this poem, since he does not normally discuss the title, and also since other interpretations have experienced difficulty in placing the poem from a literary-historical point of view. If, on the other hand, one views the title as part of the poem itself then this actually forms a haiku in its fullest sense, with not only the metric schema of five–seven–five syllables but also the essential criterion for a haiku: the unexpected turn in the third line, in the emergence of the metaphor itself and the poetic epiphany that has been striven for.[26]

Thus, as I have shown, Riffaterre builds much of his analysis on the mimetic and lexical levels of a poem. The poems that he interprets are semantically correct, even though they may contain a break with *mimesis*. But what happens if one wishes to interpret modern experimental poetry, such as this untitled poem from *The Dimensions of Being Human* by the Modernist E.E. Cummings?[27]

dying is fine)but Death

?o
baby
i

wouldn't like

Death if Death
were
good:for

when(instead of stopping to think)you

begin to feel of it, dying
's miraculous
why?be

cause dying is

perfectly natural;perfectly
putting
it mildly lively(but

Death

is strictly
scientific
& artificial &

evil & legal)
we thank thee
god
almighty for dying

(forgive us,o life!the sin of Death

Here there is no question of ungrammaticalities at a mimetic level: the entire poem is an ungrammaticality *per se*. The syntactical level is so corrupt that it becomes hard to distinguish any mimetic level, and it would be doing the poem a grave injustice to fill it out to its rightful syntax, since this collection of sentence fragments has a sustainable framework of keywords and repetition, and the lines are joined to one another by a tight and unbroken rhythm. Cummings, too, plays with the typography, and in doing so provides a visual dimension. It is not possible to discern sentences in the poem: it seems almost to be a torrent, making it hard to see what might have formed the model. Applying Riffaterre's theory therefore causes considerable problems.

This becomes even more difficult if one studies the purer experimental or text-sound poems of the avant-garde.[28] Concrete poetry is, on the whole, not within the reach of analysis unless visual typography is taken into consideration. The Swedish Concrete poet Åke Hodell has, for example, published a book consisting of the military command 'i gevär!' (present arms!), extracted in a sixteen-page poem, beginning with an enormous number of 'i's, followed by 'gev', an equivalent number of 'ä's and a solitary concluding 'r'.[29] This poem cannot be reproduced other than in facsimile (Figure 3); likewise, the first line (the model) forms the only content of the poem, which results in its plan of significance being located on an entirely different level to the mimetic presupposed by Riffaterre.

The poem has a semantic content, even though this is dispersed in its constituent parts, whereas many Concrete poems are entirely lacking in such significance.[30] Another example of Concrete poetry with semantic content is Edwin Morgan's 'Starryveldt' and here, too, Riffaterre's theory

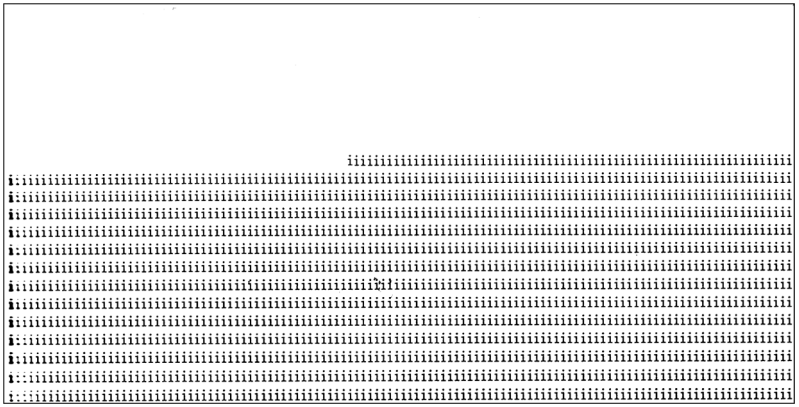

Figure 3. The introductory page to Åke Hodell's *igevär*.

encounters problems, since each line consists of a single word, and the intention behind the poem is 'to build up an atmosphere of pounding menace':[31]

starryveldt
slave
southvenus
serve
SHARPEVILLE
shove
shriekvolley
swerve
shootvillage
save
spoorvengeance
stave
spadevoice
starve
strikevault
strive
subvert
starve
smashverwoerd
strive
scattervoortrekker
starve

spadewow
strive
sunvast
starve
survive
strive
so: VAEVICTIS

This right-aligned poem, with its undulating left-hand margin and the sharpness of its alliteration, and assonant and consonant rhymes, builds inexorably to create an extremely threatening atmosphere. This is something that Riffaterre cannot account for, since the technique is building on repetition and rhythm. Modernism's experimental texts are thus also impossible to explain on the basis of a semiotics of poetry, such as, for example, an untitled poem by E.E. Cummings from *The Poetry of the Eye*:[32]

n
OthI
n
g can
s
urPas
s
the m
y
SteR
y
of
s
tilLnes
s

The visual impression of the poem is created by a row of letters that do not make any sense at first sight; only on closer examination can the meaning be discerned: in other words, the poem forms an ungrammaticality in its own right. Nor can the kind of word-stream that French author Henri Michaux expresses in the beginning of his poem 'glu et gli' be explained by Riffaterre's semiotics of poetry,[33] since the characteristic of this poem is that it is developed, with minimal vocabulary, through rewritings and

distortions of a phoneme (glo); that should, in that case, form the model for the poem – a conclusion that, in this instance, appears to be nonsense. The poem itself consists almost entirely of neologisms, thus, as ungrammaticalities, they cannot signal a break with *mimesis*. The poem is in fact not mimetic, other than consisting solely of a text-sound stream that is rich in connotations but lacking in denotations:

et glo
et glu
et déglutit sa bru
gli et glo
et déglutit son pied
glu et gli
et s'englugliglolera

These two last poems therefore form ungrammaticalities *in toto*, which means that they cannot be analysed in a satisfactory manner using Riffaterre's theory: in the case of Cummings' poem because it lacks semantic content, and in the case of Michaux's poem because it does not make use of neologisms as markers for a level of significance but employs them as a driving force.

*

So why does Riffaterre's theory not function with regard to experimental poetry? I have already touched upon part of the answer: his method of analysis demands a semantic content and a syntax that can be decoded. I have examined a number of poems that are constructed using the means employed by Riffaterre for his explanatory model (e.g. Lindegren's use of clichés, and Cummings' and Michaux' poems, in which the lines themselves form ungrammaticalities), which cannot thus be explained with reference to intertextual factors such as matrices and hypograms. Another major problem is that Riffaterre does not concern himself with a poem's visual appearance, or the significance of the title in the interpretation of a poem. Nor is he perceptibly interested in sound or rhythm, linguistic mechanisms that play a major role in the appreciation of poetry, and which sometimes form the only levels in experimental and text-sound poems.

Riffaterre's dependence on 'Textuality'

Riffaterre's neglect of these earlier-mentioned levels in lyric poetry apparently have their origin in a formalistic textual understanding.[34] That is to say, Riffaterre distinguishes between poetic and everyday language, but in doing so he thus ignores major parts of the text, in order to concentrate

instead on its 'technique', which is discussed as the only matter of significance for 'the literarity'. This implies that he ignores the kind of thing that shapes meaning in the poetic text, but which does not directly demand the reader's attention. In this sense, Riffaterre's readings are limited, as stated repeatedly by Stanley Fish in *Is There a Text in this Class?*:

> Deviation theories always narrow the range of meaningful response by excluding from consideration features or effects that are not poetic; and in Riffaterre's version [...] the range of poetic effects is disastrously narrow, because he restricts himself only to that which is called to a reader's attention in the most spectacular way.[35]

Riffaterre's concept of the text is, as I have indicated, not articulated to any great extent. A text, for Riffaterre, seems not to be as small as part of a poem – e.g. a line or a sentence – nor is it as large as a collection of texts. Riffaterre himself is not especially consistent in his use of 'text' as a term, which creates problems for his theory. In his analyses he more often makes use of sentences than entire poems. This raises the question of what his theory can be used for: are his poetry semiotics only functional with regard to shorter texts that are suitably sized, in order to be able to take in the whole picture? No concrete answer is forthcoming from Riffaterre.

Riffaterre provides his own analysis of Lautréamont's lengthy 'poem' *Chants de Maldoror* in his article ' Generating Lautréamont's Text'.[36] The book consists of six songs in total, each of them divided up into a number of stanzas of varying lengths; in the Pléiade edition these extend to more than 200 pages.[37] The length of each stanza varies, from half a page to ten pages or so. Consequently, one might expect the analysed text to consist of either the whole poem or the various stanzas but, here again, Riffaterre's analysis contains investigations at a sentence level.[38] His explicit aim in itself is simply to analyse the mechanism behind Lautréamont's way of using exaggeration and parody of language by examining the latter's use of clichés as a descriptive system (though one might have expected him, in spite of this, to utilise the concept of the text in a coherent fashion). In other words, his study provides no clue as to what size a text might assume, nor any method for analysing longer poems.

In Riffaterre's analysis of Lautréamont's cycle of poems, there is not only an ambivalence with regard to his earlier definition of a text but also an inconsistency in his use of the matrix term. Riffaterre here applies this term at the level of an individual sentence, instead of its denoting something that generates the entire text, at stanza level, for example.[39] It is an ongoing difficulty with Riffaterre that a term that has been defined is not used in a consistent fashion, something also commented on by Paul de Man: 'Riffaterre's terminology [...] is not entirely

consistent and it is not always easy to separate his use of hypogram, paragram, or even matrix rigorously from each other'.[40] These shifts in Riffaterre's use of terms give rise to considerable problems in the interpretation of his theory.

Jonathan Culler offers yet another explanation for this particular issue with Riffaterre in his essay 'Riffaterre and the Semiotics of Poetry':

> This detailed work on the reasons for the effects of poetic images and especially on the role of descriptive systems and commonplaces in poetic discourse is a valuable contribution to the semiotics of poetry, but Riffaterre's enterprise is continually deflected by the temptations of interpretation. At one moment he is explaining why a form or construction necessarily works in a certain way and produces a particular response; at the next moment he claims to be solving a puzzle that has always baffled readers and to have discovered the true but hitherto unknown meaning of a poem.[41]

The biggest stumbling-block in Riffaterre's account is the element of hermeneutic volition, which expresses itself in a desire to be the superior reader, something that must seriously threaten every theory of how the text itself determines a reading.[42] Paul de Man extends this criticism still further, not only explaining the ambivalence that Culler has remarked upon but also showing that this rests on two incompatible intentions on Riffaterre's part:[43]

> All formalistic theories of poetry sooner or later have to confront a similar problem: their adequation to the phenomenally realized aspects of their topic makes them highly effective as a descriptive discipline, but at the cost of understanding. A monument, per definition, is self-sufficient; it can at most be contemplated but it exists quite independently of its beholder, even and especially when it houses his mortal remains. Formalism, in other words, can only produce a stylistics (or a poetics) and not a hermeneutics of literature, and it remains deficient in trying to account for the relationship between these two approaches. Yet a formalist like Riffaterre feels compelled to integrate the hermeneutic activity of the reader within his enterprise. How can he hope to accomplish this without undoing the postulate of self-referentiality which defines and delimits for him the specificity of literature?[44]

Despite these observations about Riffaterre's project, de Man is positive about Riffaterre's theory as a whole, albeit as a 'descriptive discipline'. If this and the further criticisms levelled at Riffaterre are taken into

account, I would suggest that his theory – with certain modifications – can be used, for longer texts as well. This needs to be bound up with some kind of 'idea' or matrix as a unifying factor. I would not, however, limit this analysis to a rigorous use of a single matrix, since I believe that a modification of Riffaterre's theory is necessary in this instance. As far as shorter poems are concerned, it is entirely conceivable that these, as Riffaterre says, may be structured by a matrix that gives the poem its unity. As far as longer poems are concerned, on the other hand, I can see no obstacle to more than one matrix being applied to the entire poem. In that case, the various matrices will appear in the poem at various points and may co-operate with, or even oppose one another. It should be possible to deal with problems that might be caused by an analysis of this kind by starting with sections of the poem – e.g. stanzas – in order to grasp the overall picture. This can later be used in correcting the earlier partial analyses, according to current hermeneutic practice. By showing through such an analysis how two or more matrices may vary using, for example, Lindegren's poem from *mannen utan väg*, it should be possible to create an understanding of the strong contrasts that characterise the text.

*

Another and more troublesome problem is Riffaterre's insistence that both the hypogram and the matrix are textual. Maintaining that all poetry is generated by texts precipitates two kinds of criticism. The first and most serious is that this is a vicious circle of reasoning, and untenable as such. Secondly, this way of reasoning leads to reductionism, a charge against which Jonathan Culler, despite everything, defends Riffaterre: 'The meaning of the poem is not the matrix but the entire experience of moving from mimetic reading to the pursuit of hypograms to the discovery of semiotic unity'.[45] Thus, it is the whole process behind the appreciation of the poem's significance that is important, and not the individual parts of the apparatus of analysis.

Strangely enough, the problem of textuality in Riffaterre is not usually discussed with reference to his theory. Only the American semiotician Robert Scholes has commented on this point in Riffaterre:

> Riffaterre not only emphasizes the process whereby texts grow out of previous texts, he makes it the exclusive form of poetic genesis. There is something hyperbolical and, well, French about this that I admire and distrust.[46]

All attempts to find a matrix that, like his hypograms, is altered throughout the poem always runs the risk of degenerating into a mechanical search for its expression, especially since most readers are not 'super-readers' of Riffaterre's standing. There is a risk that what is brought about is simply

a paraphrasing or reductive rewriting of the poem as a well-established cliché, since a number of potentially conceivable matrices are always to be found for any poem, and it should be possible for every ungrammaticality to 'uncover' several hypograms. Riffaterre himself confirms this freedom of choice: 'Because matrices cannot be found in the text itself, I have tried to use established stereotypes for phrasing the matrices'.[47]

Linking back to Paul de Man's comments concerning Riffaterre's ambivalence, I think that the latter's semiotics of poetry function as a descriptive analysis of a poem and its structure. As a means of understanding the poem in its entirety, however, this type of rewriting cannot capture everything, since one ends up with the same type of general problems that apply to paraphrase. A paraphrase cannot actually capture the poeticity of a poem, since it does not let itself be reduced: there is always more to be found in the poem.[48] Hence it is necessary to find complementary models that explain how the poetic text is produced and read, over and above the one contributed by Riffaterre. Extending his theory to include not only intertextuality but the entire linguistic sphere brings one closer to a fruitful relationship; supplementing this with an analysis of typography and visuality would be even more advantageous.

Riffaterre enterré?

Riffaterre starts from an assumption that ungrammaticalities in lyric poetry differ from disturbances in other texts, and that the poem's deviations direct the reading by functioning as some sort of markers of another level of meaning. In the sphere of Germanic languages one needs to be aware that English contains stricter rules concerning the use of language than the other Germanic languages.[49] In Scandinavia, for example, it is not only possible to create new words by means of fusion: the process is *integrated* in everyday language. This feature has, amongst other things, been practised assiduously in Germanic languages' use of these type of neologisms in modern poetry. Riffaterre presents an extensive discussion about neologisms in *Text Production*, where he concludes that their primary task is precisely to be deviant, i.e. markers for another system of meaning: the significance. In the remaining Germanic language sphere, however, the utilisation of neologisms is not the sole preserve of lyric poetry, since these perform a general function in language. Thus, ungrammaticalities are not as conspicuous a feature of Germanic-language mimetic poetry as in the lyric poetry of the French and English literary tradition from which Riffaterre principally draws his examples.

Riffaterre's background in French Structuralism leads him to interpret ungrammaticalities in the text so that an underlying text may be realised.

Consequently, he is unable to clarify poetic creation that originates from purely linguistic mechanisms, something that forms the basis for experimental poetry and text-sound poems, for example. One therefore has to be aware that it is necessary to find a different way of indicating poeticity than that which is demonstrated by Riffaterre's semiotics of poetry. In order to attain a better understanding of such factors, theories need to be established that focus on more basic levels of language production.[50] Riffaterre's semiotics of poetry does, however, function as a purely 'descriptive' method, though it always runs the risk of assuming the character of a puzzle-solving (masculine) discourse unless the semiotic reading is subordinated, e.g. by a hermeneutic overall interpretation. The semiotics of poetry therefore has major pedagogic merits as an analytical route to a more comprehensive interpretation of semantically and syntactically 'correct' poetry, but it deserves to be buried when it is used in a fixed form, as an all-embracing explanatory model of what poetry actually is.

University of Tromsø, Norway

Acknowledgement

English translation by Mary Katherine Jones, funded by the Swedish Research Council.

Notes

1 Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1978); (hereafter 'SP').
2 Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'The Use and Abuse of Structural Analysis: Riffaterre's Interpretation of Wordsworth's "Yew-Trees"', *New Literary History* 7:1 (1975: Autumn), p. 166.
3 This is contrary to the reception in Sweden, which at the time was still in structuralist mode, and therefore welcomed the new theory – which after a while was even used as a defence *against* the wave of post-structuralism and deconstruction, a weapon to shield the attack from France and the US: In Sweden, Michael Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry* has been included in curricula of literary theory for a long time. I want to thank my anonymous peer-reviewer for making me aware that Michael Riffaterre's introduction into the Anglo-American world was even less successful than I had previously thought.
4 Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven &

London: Yale University Press, 1979). Paul de Man's insistence on the rhetorical and figurative strata of language actually reveals a serious predicament of Michael Riffaterre's, who notoriously disregards these levels in poetic language.

5 Barbara Johnson, *Défigurations du langage poétique: La Seconde révolution baudelairienne* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979); *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). Johnson's first book is dedicated to Paul de Man and the sub-title of *Blindness and Insight* is echoed in the sub-title of her second book, something that articulates the importance of de Man for the second wave of deconstruction in the US.

6 No critical reading exists of Riffaterre's semiotics of poetry in its entirety; studies that have been carried out are concerned with individual aspects of his theory. Antoine Compagnon's *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense* [*Le Démon de la théorie. Littérature et sens commun*], transl. Carol Cosman (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), provides the most detailed survey of Riffaterre to date, but here he is analysed as one of many theorists in a large-scale analytical overview and thus what is missing, even here, is the concentrated analysis of the whole of Riffaterre's semiotics of poetry that I am seeking. However, I make no claim to be presenting a full-scale *Wirkungsgeschichte*, since the direction of this article is more towards an overall theoretical study of experimental poetry, which has formed the disposition of this text.

7 Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Les Chats de Charles Baudelaire', *L'Homme* 2 (1962), pp. 5–21.

8 Michael Riffaterre, 'Describing Poetic Structures. Two Approaches to Baudelaire's "Les Chats"', *Yale French Studies* 36–37 (1966), pp. 200–242.

9 Michael Riffaterre, *La Production du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979). I have chosen to work with the American translation, revised by Riffaterre: Michael Riffaterre, *Text Production* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1983); (hereafter 'TP').

10 From here on I shall use the term 'sentence' for a closed unit of meaning in a poem, even though a line may also consist of just a clause, which nevertheless comprises a unit of meaning, regardless of its size.

11 The word 'house', for example, has a cluster of words associated with it, such as 'door', 'window', 'chimney', etc.

12 Peirce's signifying expression is not divided in two, like Ferdinand de Saussure's, but instead splits three ways, into 'representamen', 'object' and 'interpretant', which to a great extent imply expression, content and a subsequent concrete application.

13 'Literarity' (*literaturnost*) is a term coined by Russian Formalism, see e.g. Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. (London: Longmans, 1988), pp. 16–30.

14 The style is what is unique in the text; it is produced by each individual text itself, not by the author. This assumption makes it difficult to explain style lines that extend right through an author's entire output.

15 The entire plot in Jules Dassin's film *Never on Sunday* (1960), for example, is built round the fact that Sunday is a day of rest.
16 Riffaterre takes the majority of his examples from French Symbolist poetry, but even when he takes his examples from subsequent epochs they never completely lack a mimetic level.
17 Erik Lindegren, 'XXVIII', in *Seven Swedish Poets*, transl. Frederic Fleisher (Stockholm: Bo Cavefors bokförlag, 1963), p. 57. Erik Lindegren (1910–1968) was one of the leading Modernists in Sweden and his collection of poems, the 'sprängda sonetter' (literally, 'exploded sonnets') entitled *mannen utan väg* (the man without a way, 1942), marks the highlight of Swedish Modernism.
18 Text relating to a picture, for example, forms an anchorage (*ancrage*) of its significance, i.e. causes an interpretation to emerge from a number of possibilities, see: Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in Stephen Heath (ed. and trans.) *Image, Music, Text.* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 32–51.
19 According to Riffaterre, the matrix needs to be defined as a stereotype or cliché, which precludes formulations in terms of literary methods.
20 From Kristina Hallind, *Tavlor och deviser: Studier i Erik Lindegrens diktning till Halmstadgruppens måleri* (Paintings and Devices: Studies of Erik Lindegren's Poetic Works on the Halmstad Group's Paintings) (Lund: Liber läromedel, 1978), p. 189. Translation: Mary Katherine Jones.
21 Op.cit., pp. 30–40.
22 This problem is also encountered in Art History and Ekphrasis research, and the same question may be formulated regarding the paraphrasing of poetry as regards textual descriptions of visual images: what do they actually represent? Art historian Michael Baxandall's response is as follows: 'what one offers in a description is a representation of thinking about a picture more than a representation of a picture'. Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 5.
23 With a little imagination, it is possible to see this as a vessel with two sails. The line 'ship become wreck' should therefore be able to be compared to the work of art: what both the semantic and visual ship in the poem stem from is a pictorial wreck.
24 Paul de Man, 'Hypogram and Inscription', in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 27–53.
25 Ezra Pound, 'In a Station of the Metro', *Poetry* 2.1 (April 1913), p. 12.
26 See, for example, Ashton Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment* (Tuscaloosa & London: The University of Alabama Press, 1987).
27 E.E. Cummings, *The Dimensions of Being Human*, in Richard S. Kennedy (ed.), *Selected Poems.* (New York: Liveright, 1994), p. 105.
28 Text-sound poems obtain their full significance in their performance, and sometimes offer no meaning other than what is presented. I perceive the avant-garde as a parallel current to Modernism in modernity, see Per

Bäckström, 'One Earth, Four or Five Words. The Notion of "Avant-Garde" Problematized', *Action Yes* no. 7, 2008; [http://www.actionyes.org/issue7/backstrom/backstrom1.html]; see also the problematizing response by the Canadian researcher Robert Archambeau, 'The Avant-Garde in Babel: Two or Three Notes on Four or Five Words', *Action Yes* no. 8, 2008; http://www.actionyes.org/issue8/archambeau/archambeau1.html

29 Åke Hodell, *igevär* (Stockholm: kerberos förlag, 1966). Åke Hodell (1919–2000) was behind many exciting experiments in poetry, performance, theatre and text-sound compositions, and is internationally known in the field of Concrete poetry.

30 See, for example, two anthologies of Concrete poetry: *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, Emmett Williams (ed.) (New York/Villefranche/Frankfurt: Something Else Press, Inc., 1967); *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, Mary Ellen Solt (ed.) (Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, 1970).

31 Edwin Morgan, 'Starryveldt', in *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967), unpaginated.

32 E.E. Cummings, *The Poetry of the Eye*, in Richard S. Kennedy (ed.), *Selected Poems*. (New York: Liveright, 1994), p. 41. The poem can of course be understood as 'Nothing can surpass the mystery of stillness', but in that case it has only a single line, in which case Riffaterre's semiotics of poetry are not applicable, since the matrix must be found as a model in the first line to then be converted in the remaining lines of the poem.

33 Henri Michaux, *Qui je fus*, in Raymond Bellour and Ysé Tran (eds.), *Œuvres complètes* I (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1998), p. 110.

34 Antoine Compagnon highlights Riffaterre as an excellent example of how (French) theorists overlooked the referential value of reality ('l'illusion référentielle', according to Riffaterre) when Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on dialogicity were transferred to the notion of 'intertextuality': 'Riffaterre's system is exemplary in this regard: it illustrates perfectly how Bakhtin's dialogism has lost any roots in the real by becoming intertextuality. [. . .] Riffaterre concedes that in ordinary language, words refer to objects, only to add that in literature there is nothing of this kind'. Compagnon, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense* p. 81. This means that in other areas, too, from those on which I have focused in this article, Riffaterre actually ignores essential factors affecting the poetry's significance.

35 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 60. Regardless of the level of competence a reader is presumed to require in order to read a poetic text it is clear that Riffaterre, in his narrow emphasis on the ungrammaticalities of the text, overlooks factors in the production of lyric poetry that are not grounded in intertextuality (as he later preferred to call his 'hypograms'). Riffaterre makes a telling statement in his Baudelaire article: 'ténèbres is a conventional, meaningless plural; let us skip it, and also its rhyme companion funèbres'. Riffaterre, 'Describing Poetic Structures', p. 211. This quotation touches on the meaning of the substantive's plural form in the poem, but says even more about Riffaterre's view of 'poeticity' with

regard to the fact that, for many people, the word 'ténèbre' triggers an instinctive reflex in terms of poetic language.

36 Michael Riffaterre, 'Generating Lautréamont's Text', in Josué V. Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithaca: Methuen, 1979), pp. 404–420.

37 Lautréamont, 'Chants de Maldoror', in Lautréamont and Germain Nouveau, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1970), pp. 41–252.

38 His first example (from Song 3, Stanza 1) is in fact simply part of a sentence. Riffaterre, 'Generating Lautréamont's Text', p. 405.

39 Should one interpret this as Riffaterre is using his matrix term in its mathematical sense, where the matrix element is applied both horizontally, in each sentence, and vertically, throughout the poem? In such an interpretation, however, the term 'hypogram' falls down since different hypograms, according to Riffaterre, should be applied to each sentence, not through transformation but by means of reference.

40 de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, p. 52 note 11.

41 Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 98.

42 This is also noted by both Hans Robert Jauß and Stanley Fish: 'his model for the reception of a poem presupposes the ideal reader ('super-reader') who is not only equipped with the sum total of literary historical knowledge available today, but also is capable of consciously registering every aesthetic impression and referring it back to the text's structure of effect. Thus the interpreting competence overshadows the analysis of the perceptual understanding, even though Riffaterre interprets within the open horizon of the syntagmatic unfolding and correction of the system'. Hans Robert Jauß, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 144; respectively: 'In every way Riffaterre seems to be on the right side. [. . .] Once the [reading] process is described, however, Riffaterre does something very curious: he empties it of its content. That is, he discounts everything his readers tell him about what they were doing and retains only the points at which they were compelled to do it. That pattern that emerges [. . .] is then fleshed out by the interpretation he proceeds to educe'. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* pp. 86–87. Riffaterre's hermeneutic urge even led one reviewer to suggest a different title for *Semiotics of Poetry*: '*Towards a Hermeneutics of Poetry*', Reinhard Kuhn, 'Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*', *Comparative Literature* (December, 1979), p. 1202.

43 This is apparent not least from the two points cited earlier by Riffaterre, which are partially self-contradictory: 'POINT ONE: The literary phenomenon is not only the text, but also its reader and *all* of the reader's possible *reactions* to the text – both énoncé and énonciation. [—] POINT TWO: The text is a *limiting* and prescriptive code' (TP 3, 6, my italics). This literary phenomenon cannot include both the reader's reactions in their *entirety* and at the same time consist of a text that *limits* and *determines* the reading.

44 de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, pp. 30–31.

45 Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 92.
46 Robert Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 48.
47 Riffaterre, 'Generating Lautréamont's Text', p. 406.
48 The French literary scholar Jean Cohen has an alternative interpretation of what generates 'poeticity' in lyric poetry, where there are mechanisms in the language *per se* that form an explanatory model for the poem's ungrammaticalities. Poetry may be defined from the paradox that it is always comprehensible, but nevertheless untranslatable: 'la poésie n'est pas plus que la non-poésie: elle est autre, autre de part en part [. . .]. Du point de vue fonctionnel, d'abord la poésie peut se définir à partir d'un paradoxe. Car elle est tout à la fois intelligible et intraduisible. Intelligible, parce qu'elle est langage et en tant que telle constitutivement porteuse de sens. Intraduisible sous deux aspects, soit parce qu'elle est hermétique c'est-à-dire non-paraphrasable, soit parce que la paraphrase, lorsqu'elle est possible, n'est plus poétique par là-même'. Jean Cohen, 'La poésie comme langage autre', in Michel Collot and Jean-Claude Mathieu (eds.), *Poésie et altérité*. (Paris: Presses de l'École normale supérieure, 1990), pp. 117–118.
49 Anglo-Saxon language belongs linguistically in the Germanic language group, but has greater similarities with French with regard to limitations in the use of neologisms by means of e.g. word fusion.
50 See, for example, my article on phonemic reading: Per Bäckström, 'Suspicion in the Ear: The Space of Reading (Poems)', in Per Bäckström and Troels Degn Johansson (eds.), *Sense and Senses in Aesthetics*. (Göteborg: NSU Press, 2003), pp. 96–115.