

CHAPTER 4

Visual Signals in Poetry

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Every type of literary analysis isolates and then reassembles in various ways stylistic features that have a common ontological status: they all *exist* to the extent that particular readers perceive them as repeated signals that signify something. When we consider, for instance, a typical semiotic analysis done by, say, A.J. Greimas or Michael Riffaterre, we note how both critics proceed in their analyses by locating multiple lexical and phrasal instances in which a more or less stable meaning takes on a wide range of linguistic forms. These forms are said to be variants of an invariable unit of meaning, or what we might call syntagmatic extensions of a stable paradigm. Such textually-extensive features constitute iterative signals that impose themselves onto the consciousness of readers. These readers then have a critical responsibility to piece back together a preexistent locus from its traces.

Now, whether all readers assume this responsibility or not is, of course, quite another matter. In any case, the locus in question is essentially an intertextual commonplace, for were this not the case, nothing that meant anything to most readers could properly be attributed to these features. In terms of the rhetorical effect of such features, however, we can state with a great degree of confidence that iterative signals do not always impress or *please* every observer to the same extent. This idea of "pleasing" the reader is part of what the classical aesthete Horace (among others) would have had us all believe in regard to repeated signs. Yet, as Roland Barthes has indicated: "Je ne

sais si, comme dit le proverbe, les choses répétées plaisent,' mais je crois que du moins elles signifient."¹ Because iterative features are all functionally related to each other on this basis of perceived repetition, it might therefore be supposed that most any such feature, regardless of its aesthetic power or accepted visibility, can at least *signal* something to some people, as long as it is taken seriously.

This last statement presents one of the more challenging questions that confront modern readers of French poetry. The question I have in mind is that of the demarcation line between those linguistic features of a text that are "truly" significant, and those deemed instead to be "mere" coincidences. Here, one thinks of Riffaterre's now classic refutation (1966) of the linguistic analysis of Baudelaire's "Les Chats" done by Levi-Strauss and Jakobson.² Briefly summarized, Riffaterre's argument dismisses certain interpretations of stylistic aspects isolated by the latter two critics because, according to Riffaterre, a purely linguistic analysis of a text, such as they practice it, represents^ little more than its grammatical description. Jrammar, he goes on to say (195-202), is often stylistically irrelevant insofar as it is not *necessarily* perceived by all readers.

But the question of what is necessarily perceived in the act of reading a text is one which I would like to consider here further. In modern literary criticism, repeated sounds, words, phrases, images, and topoi have always enjoyed a certain privileged position. The present essay does not attempt to dispute this position; it seeks instead to expand the field of such privileged features. Given the role played by perceived repetition in the critical articulation of textual significance, it seems to me all the more crucial to ask again the question of whether more subtle elements of a text's material presence on the page—elements like letters, punctuation points, or in the case of French, accent marks—could not also have a similar semiotic potential in the overall formation of literary style. After all, to say that minute linguistic elements are not necessarily perceived by present-day readers is not to say that at some future stage of more advanced research such elements may not come to be necessarily perceived by others. Let us not forget that the advent of semiotics itself in this century, along with many other kinds of

new analytical approaches and critical methodologies, underscores the fact that there always were, and, indeed, probably always will be many more formal features of literary style than any one reader or school can ever hope to identify and describe. For this reason, it may be time to enlarge our conception of what one's readerly competence could or should be.

I would submit, therefore, that no repeated signal in a literary text should be dismissed a priori from any type of formal analysis on what are essentially ideological grounds. That no dictionaries, native-speaker responses, or other such sociolectic supports exist yet to verify a stylistic feature's relevance should not, in theory, undermine a critical reader's attempt to consider seriously any minute linguistic elements that might eventually justify critical commentary. For, once again, the ontological status of all stylistic features as perceived iterative signals forces us to come to grips with these less traditional, less visible, pertinent features. Thus, the relevance or irrelevance of all potential textual signals depends precisely on the reader's willingness to accept, and to learn about the possible semiotic function of, certain hitherto unrecognized formal features.

What I propose to do here, through the use of several examples from nineteenth- and twentieth-century French poetic texts, is to sketch out a sub-category of primarily visual, stylistic features in literature that includes every *meaningful* graphemic aspect of a poetic text, from letters to accent marks to punctuation points. When I say "meaningful" I understand that it will be precisely my readerly duty to demonstrate in persuasive fashion just how such textual aspects mean what I say they do. A study of this type demands many more examples than I can possibly give here, and therefore must be evaluated, at least, in terms of other iconic features that I and others have commented on elsewhere.³ But I would hope that the scriptural possibilities advanced herein will be regarded as the tip of a relatively unexplored semiotic iceberg, one that might lead to more detailed and extensive visual analyses of poetry and prose alike.

The larger, more general stylistic category into which these graphemic signals may be placed is one that we can call "iconic." Following Charles Sanders Peirce's definition, an "icon" is one of

three major types of signs. It can be anything whatsoever that denotes its object "mainly by its similarity."⁴ Using this definition, we shall consider any graphemic element of a text to be an iconic sign whenever it can be shown to recall something else about the text on the basis of its physical, i.e. visible or visual similarity, to it. Now, as Umberto Eco points out in his critique of iconism,⁵ this apparently simple definition is not without weaknesses. How is one to understand, for instance, that a continuous line tracing the profile of a horse is an icon for that horse if one has not yet trained one's eye to see it as such? Without trying to answer this question or going into the details of Eco's critique—all of which would lead us far away from the readings I wish to propose here—let me simply note the conclusion of Eco's critique: "Similarity is *produced* and must be *learned*" (200). In other words, what I plan to show presently represents what can only be described as a critical production of my own, a similarity between visual signs and other aspects of a given text. As such this produced similarity will have to be "learned" by others if they find enough merit in its production. As an interpretive gesture which aims to demonstrate iconic similarity between textual signifiers and signifieds, it will "take" only if it is disseminated and incorporated into the general arena of other critical readings, as has already happened elsewhere.

Eco's conclusion, based in part on James Gibson's work on perception, allows me then to make the following assertion. Just as we all have to learn how to recognize and identify various kinds of similarities or equivalences on what I could refer to as the "higher" stylistic levels of texts, e.g., on the level of a genre, of repeated images or syntactical patterns, so, too, must we accept the necessity to learn how to isolate finer stylistic features of literary works. Until readers of poetry are willing to accept the fact that all linguistic elements of texts, irrespective of their distinctive features, are submitted during the interpretive act to what Derrida suggests is a learned transformation of *literal* signifiers into *literary* signifiers,⁶ no one group of stylistic aspects should in theory, at least, either exclude or take precedence over any others.

Once we have established that the interpretation of icons in general, and graphemic stylistic traits in particular, depends

more on the reader's perception than on the author's intended or conscious manipulation of every linguistic element of his or her text, our examination can proceed without any further theoretical complications. We no longer need to ask ourselves whether the authors we shall study deliberately incorporated certain visual signals into their works in order to point to supplementary meanings it will be my task to articulate. My goal is simply to show how various letters, accent marks, and punctuation points, perceived as iconic phenomena, carry a semiotic "charge," so to speak, not unlike that of more conventional stylistic traits. By virtue of their specific shapes, we shall show how they can recall signs and supposed meanings from other parts of the text, thereby adding a kind of visual and semantic as well as stylistic density to it.

My first example is found in Leconte de Lisle's poem "Le Jaguar" which first appeared in 1855 in *La Revue contemporaine*, and which reappears in his well-known collection, *Les Poèmes barbares*, in 1862.⁷ As one of the major Parnassian poets, Leconte de Lisle is known for his extraordinary poetic portraits of animals, ancient heroes, and landscapes. In this particular piece, the reader finds an extremely vivid depiction of a jaguar in its natural surroundings about to pounce on its unfortunate prey, "un grand boeuf des pampas." He smells a subtle odor that is "égaré dans le vent" and begins to tense up, getting himself ready as the poet says for "son oeuvre de mort."

Suddenly he becomes absolutely still and stares ahead with deadly intent. The scene, spectacular in its cinematographic precision, reads as follows:

Mais voici qu'il se tait, et, tel qu'un bloc de pierre,
Immobile, s'affaisse au milieu des rameaux: Un grand
boeuf des pampas entre dans la clairière, Corne haute et
deux jets de fumées aux naseaux.

Celui-ci fait trois pas. La peur le cloue en place: Au
sommets d'un tronc noir qu'il effleure en passant, Plantés
droit dans sa chair où court un froid de glace, Flambent
deux yeux zébrés d'or, d'agate et de sang.

The picture of the ox and jaguar is fixed in the reader's mind just as these jungle beasts are fixed in the clearing, with everyone waiting anxiously to see what will transpire next.

As it happens, the poet's attention is especially drawn to the vision of the jaguar's eyes. The ambiguity of my characterization of this narrative situation is intentional, because what de Lisle stresses most is not only the incendiary nature of the jaguar's stare itself, but also the tangible effect of this stare on the skin of this ox. Indeed, the jaguar's "deux yeux zébrés d'or, d'agate et de sang" are said to burn with blood ("flambent") and, at the same time, to plant themselves ("Plantés"), so to speak, in the very skin of his imminent victim, who feels a sudden chill from these two eyes. It is a dual question, therefore, of seeing as well as of being seen by the jaguar's two eyes. I should like to insist on the pertinence of the number two here since most every other detail expressed in these quatrains seems to involve a precise number: either the number one as in "un bloc," "un grand boeuf," "un tronc noir," "un froid de glace"; the number two, as in "deux jets de fumées," "deux yeux"; or even the number three, found in the count of steps taken by the ox, "trois pas." Given this almost theatrical precision in setting the scene, it is clear then, that these two burning eyes are its focal point. Everything about to happen in the poem depends on them. Here is where our first visual signal comes into play. The reader of a poem's iconic dimension notes a curious feature about the punctuation in these two particular quatrains. They are the only ones out of thirteen in the whole poem that contain any *colons* (in French, "deux points," literally, two points). Considering how they each contain one colon apiece, I would contend that the ambiguity suggested above, concerning the jaguar's *seeing* and the ox's being *seen* by two eyes, is graphemically dramatized by the sudden, repeated use of a specific punctuation point that is otherwise completely absent from the rest of the poem. To put it simply, these two "points" re-present twice in visual or pictorial fashion the same eyes that have already taken center stage, thematically, at this very point in the poem: first, when the jaguar sees the ox and immobilizes himself; second, when the ox notices the jaguar and is in turn frozen by fear in his very tracks. The question we have to ask is whether or not the poet *meant* to

write such a fascinating, albeit subtle, feature into his poem. The answer is that we will probably never know. But one thing is nonetheless certain: these two visual signals are there for us to read, if we want to, and also, if we know how to.

As further supporting evidence of this stylistic feature of essentially Parnassian poetry, I cite Baudelaire's well-known early poem "La Beauté." This poem turns Beauty herself into a "rêve de pierre," i.e. an extremely *concrete* instance of aesthetic conceptualization. In that text Baudelaire describes how Beauty sits on a throne like a "Sphinx incompris." She does not budge in front of all the admiring poets who consume their days in "austères études" while contemplating her "grandes attitudes." Poets act this way in front of her because of her eyes, her large eyes. In Baudelaire's words, they waste away their lives in pursuit of Beauty because, as she says, she possesses

De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles: Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles! Just as in De Lisle's Parnassian masterpiece, Baudelaire's poem re-presents a set of eyes thematically important to the reader by means of a single, isolated usage of a colon, "deux points," two points that appear at no other place in this poem. The very fact that such a visual phenomenon thus seems to recur intertextually suggests that something significant may be behind it.

My next example comes from one of Mallarmé's prose poems entitled "Pauvre Enfant Pâle" (1866). Using two other texts as intertextual support, I should like to demonstrate how the use of the circumflex accent in Mallarmé repeats a key element of this anecdote about a young street singer in a big city. To summarize the story, the narrator in the poem describes a young boy in terms of the future criminal that he sees in him. This future criminal will eventually pay for his crime with his head. Although the narrator is initially sympathetic towards the boy, he gradually feels a certain guilt, both for himself and for his whole society with regard to his human fate.

What interests us particularly in this poem, however, is the narrator's obsession with the child's head ("tête"). The word "tête" appears no fewer than four times in the text, including in

the last line, "Oh, pauvre petite tête." One should also note that the original title for the piece was, in fact, "La Tête," and was changed only afterwards in its final form to "Pauvre Enfant Pâle." Irrespective of this historical fact, the final version is full of words which, thanks to their circumflex accents, recall the otherwise obvious narrative preoccupation with the boy's head. First, there is the way he hollers his insolent song in the street, "à tue-tête," which we read in the very first line. One might not agree initially that Mallarmé's use of this adverbial expression—beyond being just a pun—is derived in part from its graphemic similarity to the word "pâle" in the title, "Pauvre Enfant Pâle." Most readers not attuned to all repeated signals would probably not accept this connection as anything other than mere coincidence. They would refuse such a possibility, even though there are other adverbs that could have fit into the context without repeating the accent mark.

But, when compared to a similar iconic phenomenon in a so-called "automatic" text of André Breton (*Poisson Soluble*, #3, 1924), in which a wasp ("guêpe"), of all beings, is also said to be singing "à tue-tête," one begins to perceive a curious stylistic pattern emerging from different words. On some level of a French poet's psyche, circumflex accents often seem to generate other circumflex accents, as if a key word like "tête" or "guêpe" were determining other textual items, both semantically *and* graphemically. Indeed, in the prose poem "l'Huître" of Francis Ponge, the circumflex accent recurs in various adjectives throughout the text because the poet wished *consciously* to disseminate the oyster's physical presence into the very fabric of his poem.⁸

Returning to Mallarmé's own text, however, let us consider other attributes of the young singer that the narrator chooses to describe. It will be noted that all of these attributes have circumflex accents: his clothes ("vêtements"), his age ("âge"), his eating habits (being poor, he fasts, hence, "tu jeûnes"), even his color ("pâle"). Since the narrator is alluding constantly to the boy's future decapitation as a criminal, there is already a certain justification and foreshadowing involved in saying that his head looks pale. Significantly enough, though, the adjective "pâle" reappears in relation to another "poetic head,"

this time in José-Maria de Hérédia's much-anthologized poem entitled "Antoine et Cléopâtre" (1884). In the latter text, the nominal group "tête pâle" occurs in a line that is otherwise ambiguous, until one reads the next line of the sonnet. Yet, the only other occurrence of a circumflex accent in the entire text is in the title, in Cleopatra's name itself. In this case, too, her name seems to have generated a juxtaposition of "pâle" and "tête" just as we found in Mallarmé's prose poem. What makes this iconic feature particularly effective in Hérédia is that, as a result of textual ambiguity, it alone, *not* the poem's semantic dimension, tips off the reader as to whose head is being described. An iconic trace of Cleopatra herself thus finds its way into another part of the sonnet in this most subtle of fashions. And, as it turns out in the next line of Hérédia's poem, the head is, in fact, Cleopatra's, not Antony's.

Still another example comes from Hérédia's sonnet titled "la Naissance d'Aphrodite." This poem puts into play yet another type of accent mark, that is, a graphemic signal with certain phonemic as well as visual particularities. In this poem, an orthographic anomaly constitutes the initial signal to the reader that something more may be going on than he or she first suspects. I refer to the spelling of Aphrodite's name, which, in this case, ends with an acute accent mark. In other contemporary texts, both literary and nonliterary, Aphrodite does not have the accent mark in question. Indeed, the only place where one can find the accent in her name is in the original Greek.

Knowing what we do about Parnassian aesthetics, we should nevertheless not be surprised to see one of the great proponents of Le Parnasse engaging in what we might call classical erudite "local coloring" through the use of such spelling. As we continue our very close reading, we note a secondary reason for the accent mark, the rhyme scheme. The poet has chosen a typical sonnet rhyme scheme insofar as the verses follow the pattern *abba abba ccd ede*. Because the poem is about the emergence of Aphrodite from the waters, the last word "Aphrodite" must have an acute accent in order to rhyme properly. However, as is well known, every Parnassian poet, especially Hérédia, tends to favor rich rhyme (*rime riche*) over other types of rhyme for various aesthetic reasons. In fact, the

final two tercets of the poem do adhere to this accepted convention, except for one small detail. Parnassian rhymes should not, in theory, be so close in nature as to create confusion between different rhymes in different lines. In the present case though, one might very well read the final four lines as if they were instances of assonance. After all, they all end in the vowel sound [e].

Assuming that Hérédia knew better than to do this, one might therefore be tempted to ask whether the repetition of the sound [e] is not somehow significant vis-à-vis the overriding image that the poem develops. If we examine the internal rhymes in the poem, we begin to discover an interesting pattern. In the first quatrain (which concerns prehistorical chaos) only one acute accent appears, and in an unstressed position of the sonnet at that. However, the closer we get to the actual emergence of Aphrodite out of the waters, which occurs at the very end of the poem, we suddenly locate a very powerful internal rhyme in one of the poem's last verses—"émergeant de l'écume embrasée"—as well as in the final four rhymes—"rosée," "-dite," "embrasée," and "Aphrodite." It should be clear by now that what we are *seeing* (and even *hearing*) unfold, thanks to the accent mark, is, so to speak, the coming-forth of Aphrodite not only from the waters, but also from the page itself. I recognize, of course, that this is primarily a phonemic phenomenon, as I have presented it here. Yet, my contention is that without the latent graphemic power of the anomalous accent mark in the title, we would very likely not have perceived the stylistic value such a minute linguistic feature could have in our poem.

By the end of the nineteenth century the concrete value of such visual signals becomes more and more evident to poets writing in France. Mallarmé begins the conscious exploitation of them, of course, in his revolutionary text, "Un Coup de dés." Apollinaire furthers this essentially pictorialist experimentation with his collection of *Calligrammes* in the early twentieth century. As was previously noted, Francis Ponge, taking the "side of things" in *Le Parti pris des choses*, admits that his use of so many circumflex accents in his prose poem "L'huître" also resulted from the iconic similarity between the words he chose to describe the oyster and the French signifier for oyster itself. But

in other poems from this collection one finds many other visual signals that help cue the reader and round out his/her experience of the things themselves. In "Le Gymnaste," for instance, Ponge breaks up the title word into some of its individual letters and comments on both the [G] and the [Y] in the first two paragraphs.

Yet, even there, we are dealing with very obvious visual signals presented to us on a silver platter, as it were. An even more subtle and, to my mind, interesting example is found in the piece titled "Le Papillon." The butterfly, we know, has always been known by its colorful wings. Thanks to their incessant fluttering, they also cannot help but intrigue most any casual observer who happens upon them while they are in flight. The French word for butterfly itself ("papillon") is formed by two [p]s and two [l]s, with the latter two actually forming a cluster. Moreover, the secondary sense of "papillon" as the French word for a bow-tie only confirms the notion that what matters *visually* about a butterfly is its redoubled shape, its pair of connected and perfectly symmetrical wings.

As if to reinforce, then, this sense of a butterfly's *taking wing* within the very space produced by his choice of signifiers, Ponge multiplies, perhaps unconsciously, the number of words containing clusters of double letters that serve to describe the insect:

Lorsque le sucre élaboré dans les tiges surgit au fond des fleurs, *comme* des tasses mal lavées,—un grand effort se produit par terre d'où les papillons tout à coup prennent leur vol.

Mais *comme* chaque chenille eut la tête aveuglée et laissée noire, et le torse amaigri par la véritable explosion d'où les ailes symétriques flambèrent,

Dès lors le papillon erratique ne se pose plus qu'au hasard de sa course, ou tout *comme*.

Allumette volante, sa flamme n'est pas contagieuse. Et d'ailleurs, il arrive trop tard et ne peut que constater les fleurs écloses. N'importe: se conduisant en lampiste, il vérifie la provision d'huile de chacune. Il pose au *sommet* des fleurs la guenille atrophiée qu'il emporte et venge ainsi

la longue humiliation amorphe de chenille au pied des tiges.

One might even consider as secondarily significant to my reading the visual signals constituted by the much larger number of words in this prose poem that contain two of the same letters, e.g., élaboré, tête, chacune, écloses, etc. What all these signals do, therefore, is to signify over and over the wings of a butterfly whose very winged *materiality* forms most of the text's actual subject matter.

Another example of what I can now call "literary iconism" occurs in Colette's novel, *La Maison de Claudine* (1922). Like all the other instances examined thus far, it may or may not have been *intended*. Although this text is not poetic in the traditional sense of having a certain versified form, it does exhibit certain "poetic" features similar to those found in our three previous examples. As such I have no difficulty including it here, since one can understand the phenomenon in question as an example of the "poetic prose" of Colette. (This distinction between poetry and prose is precisely one of those historical dichotomies that might have to be re-interpreted when enough of these poetic, visual signals come to light in years to come.)

In any case, in a chapter where the narrator describes her mother's fondness for animals, there is a long passage on two swallows that used to answer a simple call of a single word, "Petî-î-î-tes." At first glance, nothing is amiss with the spelling of this word since the repeated circumflex accent could be read as a means to elongate the vowel sound [i], just as one would expect in a long-distance shout. But, strictly speaking, there should be no accent mark on the word "petites." Without needing to confirm my suspicion of an iconic relationship between these accents and swallows through the use of referentiality to the flight or physiology of actual swallows, I would like to suggest that what has happened instead is this. The description that immediately precedes the word "Petî-î-î-tes" in the text established a paradigm of sharpness and pointedness. It reads:

Quand la faux luisante de leurs ailes grandit et s'affûta, elles disparurent à toute heure dans le haut du ciel printanier, mais un seul appel aigu: "Petî-î-î-tes"! les

rabattait fendant le vent comme deux flèches [. . .] (my emphasis).

This textual insistence on swallows slicing the air like arrows (*flèches*) has somehow imposed itself onto the graphemic nature of that key word which is used, literally, to bring them back into the observer's field of vision. As such, it has increased the stylistic appropriateness and efficacy of the adjective "petites." No longer simply an endearing term of affection for the swallow, the irregular spelling of "Petî-î-î-tes" also permits the reader to see, for all intents and purposes, the return of these birds via their graphemically represented wing shape. The use of circumflex accents in this text is thus over-determined in two ways: phonemically and visually.

My final example comes from another, earlier novel, Pierre Loti's *Le Pêcheur d'Islande* (1886).¹⁰ As a second instance within a novel of the kind of poetic iconism examined throughout this essay, it completes my argument for the need to reassess this important element of style in prose as well as poetry. From the very first page, one of the main characters, Sylvestre, is presented in oppositional terms to every other sailor in the story. The reader learns immediately that Sylvestre is much younger, much less coarse, and much more innocent than his fellow shipmates. His innocence, in particular, makes him paradigmatically equivalent to one other figure in the opening scene, the Virgin Mary, whose earthenware statue ("en faïence") sits in a place of honor. Being the sailors' patroness, the Virgin watches over the men, and protects them from danger.

But the statue is said to be slightly old, and painted with "un art encore naïf." In this context of gruff, broad-shouldered men ("aux carrures terribles"), the Virgin appears just as incongruous as Sylvestre. The text points out that "les personnages en faïence se conservent beaucoup plus longtemps que les vrais hommes" (8). There would seem to be something about earthenware characters—their innocence and naïveté, perhaps—which sets them apart from "real men." What interests us here is not the precise explanation of this textual affirmation, but rather the supplementary graphemic signal it provides us. The signal in question (the repeated diaeresis in the words "faïence" and "naïf") links Sylvestre to the implicit category of

earthenware innocents represented by the Virgin. Both Sylvestre and the Virgin, being "naïf," thus lie at the other end of the human paradigm represented by the rough and experienced sailors. Indeed, as soon as we meet Sylvestre, in the beginning scene of the book, the graphic specificity of his characterization merely reinforces the metaphoric relationship already established between him and the Virgin. For the last and possibly most important physical detail which the text attributes to this boy, pertains to his eyes, which are "extrêmement doux et tout naïfs" (9, my emphasis). With one notable exception, the word "naïf" recurs only in contexts where we find either the Virgin or Sylvestre.

The exception itself, however, is quite telling. Throughout the novel, Sylvestre's best friend, Yann, figures prominently amongst this group of unmannered salty sailors, and never really has anything in common with his younger, simpler friend. When he finally resigns himself at the end to marrying Sylvestre's cousin, Gaud, a significant change occurs in his personality. At the time of their courtship, Yann suddenly acts like a gentleman, and tames his otherwise wild ways. At the same moment, our iconicjeature, the diaeresis, coincidentally reappears in the text, as if out of nowhere. In response to Gaud's question concerning the reasons for Yann's continual refusal of their marriage, Yann assures her that it was not for lack of money that he refused her hand until then. His simple response, "Oh! non, pas cela" (197), is immediately followed by this intervention on the part of the narrator: "Il fit cette réponse avec une si naïve sûreté de lui-même, que Gaud en fut amusée" (197, my emphasis). For one brief moment, Yann thus resembles his friend, Sylvestre, as well as the Virgin Mary, thanks to his self-transformation into an innocent and devoted lover.

To conclude, I must recall one final time that the iconic features brought to our attention by the visual signals analyzed here are nothing more (or less) than supplementary aspects of a text's style. In no case can they be said to be more "important" to a stylistic analysis than other traditional aspects. Yet it is equally true that on the epistemological ground of repetition, they are no less pertinent than those found in more conventional scholarship either. In essence, what they indicate to literary theorists in

particular, and readers of poetry in general, is the possible existence of a whole new level of reading, one for which a future computer-aided study might prove useful.¹¹ This whole new level of reading has already been explored in much concrete poetry of the twentieth century, where poets have deliberately used the pictorialist or visual dimension of their texts to draw images, as it were, right on the page.

What this essay indicates, however, is that before French poets began thinking consciously of such possibilities many earlier poets already seem to have exploited the purely graphemic side of literary style without necessarily realizing it themselves.¹² Perhaps the best way to close the present study is thus to invite the quasi-maniacal, neo-formalist readers within our critical ranks to begin searching for even more evidence of similar visual signals. I am convinced that there are far more of them in (French) poems than have readily met our eyes.

ENDNOTES

1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957), p. 10.
2. Michael Riffaterre, "Describing Poetic Structures: Two approaches to Baudelaire's 'Les chats'" in *Structuralism*, ed. Jacques Ehrmann (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), pp. 188-229.
3. See David Scott, *Pictorialist Poetics: Poetry and the Visual Arts in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), my *Repetition and Semiotics: Interpreting Prose Poems* (Birmingham: Summa Publications, 1986), especially chapter four, and my "Graphemic Gymnastics in Surrealist Literature," *Romanic Review* 81 (March 1990): 211-224 for many more examples.
4. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), Vol. 2., p. 274.
5. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 195-217.

6. Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), p. 339.
7. Leconte de Lisle, *Poèmes barbares* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 183.
8. Francis Ponge, Philippe Sollers, *Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), pp. 111-112.
9. Colette, *La Maison de Claudine* (Paris: Hachette, 1960), p. 53.
10. Pierre Loti, *Le Pêcheur d'Islande* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1984). All page references are to this edition and are included in my text.
11. An example of just such computer-assisted research is to be found in Carrol Coates's essay on Rimbaud contained in this volume.
12. In his *Pictorialist Poetics*, David Scott has done even more of the groundwork for an exploration of similar features found elsewhere in nineteenth-century French poetry. His book, published around the same time as I published some of the examples used in this essay, documents many analogous phenomena. It provides an indispensable historical survey of the whole issue of visual experiments in modern French poetry, and is the logical starting point for all further studies.