

РАЗДЕЛ IV. ЯЗЫКИ НАРОДОВ ЗАРУБЕЖНЫХ СТРАН

UDK 81

DOI: 10.18413/2313-8912-2017-3-1-62-70

Dr. Alberto Quero

“CAMBIA SOBRE EL MAR TU FULGOR”:  
LATIN AMERICAN CALLIGRAMS AND SEMIOTIC TRANSCODING

Semiotics Association of Venezuela, Calle 70 con Avenida 11, No.11-38, Sector Tierra Negra  
Maracaibo, Venezuela, ajquero175@gmail.com

**Abstract.** This paper deals with the works of José J. Tablada, Guillermo de Torre and Vicente Huidobro.

The method of analysis is textual interpretative, which renders an explicative hypothesis. Firstly, we use semiotics to explain that a calligram is a convergence zone for different types of meaning. And its importance transcends each of its modes: it becomes an artistic occurrence and a cultural phenomenon. Then, we find how those codes they convey information on multiple levels so they can be combined to create art.

The objective is interpreting how these poets used different methods to create art. They set an intermediate sense, different from the habitual one, which was articulated in multiple codes, where the graphic content was modelled by linguistic categories.

The conclusion is this. These works evidence a double codification. If a real-world object can become a sign, and vice versa, in a calligram there is a double interplay between the sign and the object. So, it can be the best example of pure *inventio*.

**Key words:** calligram; signifier; signified; code; intercedence.

“¿Qué es una palabra sino una serie de letras  
y qué es una letra sino una línea que forma un  
dibujo dado?”

Julio Cortázar

**Introduction: Does iconism exist?**

This paper deals with three remarkable Latin American poets: José Juan Tablada, from Mexico, Vicente Huidobro, from Chile and Guillermo De Torre, who was born in Spain but lived and worked a long time in Argentina.

After visiting the Far East in 1903, Tablada discovered the *haiku* genre and introduced it to Latin America. In 1916, Huidobro met Apollinaire, Breton, and Aragon. He became a major poet of his time. In 1919, Tablada published *Li-Po and other poems*, inspired by the works of Bashō, a Japanese poet from the XVIII century [cf. Perrone 1991, 7]. On his turn, *Hélices* was De Torre's only book of poems. He later became a literary critic in Spain and in Argentina. [Cfr. García Martín 2001, 11].

These men were pioneers in the creation of calligrams, defined as “a text, generally poetic, in which typographic disposition tries to represent the contents of the poem” [DRAE 2016, web]. The definition, though apparently simple, captures the essence of one of the most intricate literary genres. Such complexity results from the possibility of

alternation or simultaneous artistic expression in two different codes.

A calligram is a convergence zone for different types of semiosis. And its importance transcends each of its modes: it becomes a complete artistic occurrence, and a cultural phenomenon. It integrates different codes and conveys information on multiple levels. Semiosis consists not only in giving semiotic pertinence to certain visual conventions; that would be just mimesis. In order for semiosis to exist, at least two factors are required: (i) the selection of elements, and (ii) the transformation of those elements into meaning relations. It is true that a calligram must possess a certain degree of isomorphism with real-world objects, but it matters little if perfect visual resemblance is not achieved. Thus Eco [1976] is correct: talking about iconism is pure metaphor... but in the case of a calligram, that is exactly what we need.

**1. An approach to intercedence**

A calligram appears as an artistic macro-unit whose content is codified in two different –but potentially complementary– semiotic systems: the linguistic and the visual one, corresponding to the analytical features of the same substance. The context is a kind of sememe which can be expressed on several levels. The meaning can be completely motivated, and hence pure invention. It can be also unmotivated, which we can qualify as metaphoric.

By creating a calligram, rather than a codic interpenetration zone, the author creates an

intermediate sense which is different from the habitual one<sup>1</sup>. It will be articulated in a multiple code, in which the graphic content can be modelled by linguistic categories. To achieve this, a calligram would include three geometrical transformations (homotecia, projections, and topological transformations) and two analytical ones (discretization and filtering)<sup>2</sup>. We can still ask if calligrams are icons or not. It could be perhaps said they are doubly stimulated, and institute their own code through metalinguistic invention.

## 2. Two, three or four vertices? The problem of functives

The first problem is determining how many functives must be related. Saussure explained the combination of a "psychological entity", called the signified, which implies entirety, and a sound-image or "psychological imprint of the sound", called the signifier. The relation is arbitrary or unmotivated, as there is no natural bond between them [Saussure 1970, 67]. The Saussurean conception is functional in micro linguistics. But language has a bigger dimension, it transcends the phrasal level and expands into discourse. It is there that we find it possible to use language as something more than a tool of communication: it can become a piece of art.

Since Peirce [1994], modern semiotics knows that a third element is feasible. A sign is a mental representation or substitution, generally arbitrary, of something that renders another thing. From there on, a three-level relation is established. *Firstness* is a mere possibility and implies everything that can be thinkable, even if it is abstract. *Secondness* constitutes the sign's materialization. It is a possibility made real through a relation with *Firstness*. *Thirdness* is a correlate formed by the laws which govern the functioning and interconnection of phenomena and it is materialized through an *Interpretant*, which works as a logical bond.

We can make two remarks here. (i) A calligram is a sign: it is firstness. But it integrates two variants of secondness, for the work of art is concreted twice: this may happen through the codes which may be redundant or not. And (ii), as a calligram involves three elements, a bond between the two significant is not mandatory, but it is certainly possible and even probable.

So, Peirce's classification resists an automatic application to calligrams. When one tries to analyse calligrams in terms of the conventional systems,

some problems appear. The first is the status of the codes, as units of diverse origin integrate. According to Eco, iconic codes "establish either a correlation between a graphic sign-vehicle and already coded perceptual units, or between a pertinent unit of a graphic sign-system and a pertinent unit of a semantic system depending on a previous codification of perceptual experience" [Eco 1976, 208]. But this definition seems not to take into account the intersections. The graphic vehicle for coded perceptual experience is written language, whose own conduit is a graphemic continuum. In this way a new semantic system is created; it would not be prior to perceptual experience, but the opposite. When examining a calligram, it is not enough to consider the modes of its production. The modes of connection between the functives – of which there are not two, but three – must also be considered. This is no longer about producing one signal, but two, and they are related to a single meaning. It is true that word and image link differently with its contents; and calligrams try to exploit that ambiguity.

In iconic semiotics "it is hard to find an equivalent of the morpheme, the phrase and the text. Constituted units are of the same nature and one passes in a continuous manner from small units to very vast wholes" [Klinkenberg 2006, 371]. However, text structures, morphemes, and all the other linguistic elements may occur in a calligram. And, in its turn, the calligram may be an equivalent of a phrase within a metatext of a dual nature: in fact, it has a verbal discourse and a graphic content. Each of them has its own structure and syntax, yet they can be included in a double articulation.

This creates another problem: defining the distinctive types of syntax. Iconic toposyntax is based on a series of implicit marks, and therefore it lacks certain procedures which can only be proper of linguistic chronosyntax; that is the case of specialized morphemes [Klinkenberg 2006, 373]. But calligrams integrate both types of syntax. As shown by the works of Tablada and Huidobro, the relation between an idea and its verbal expression can be arbitrary. The relation between the poet's idea and the materialization he creates through words is optional: he chose it that way. The relation between the idea and the visual expression is also arbitrary. Now, if the linguistic value is "the property word has in order to represent an idea" [Saussure 1970, 194], then there must also be an aesthetic value; and it would be double. One cannot perhaps talk about dependence, for that implies hierarchy; but one can certainly talk about complementarity, which is diverse.

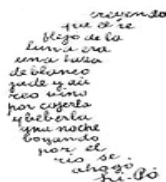
Klinkenberg proposes a fourth element; his tetradic system "bursts the binary relation between a signifier and a signified" [Klinkenberg 2006, 350].

<sup>1</sup> The alternativeness of sense does not imply there would be an *infracion* in meaning, as suggested by Greimas and Courtés [1979] and Ducrot and Todorov [1986].

<sup>2</sup> The only available technologies in the first quarter of the XX<sup>th</sup> century.

The four elements are: referent, stimulus, significant and type. This is perhaps the most sophisticated model so far proposed for iconic analysis. But it also seems to be needlessly detailed and exhaustive. There are at least two observations to be made here:

(a) There are functives which admit but a single type and a single referent. Let us consider the calligram below:



José Juan Tablada, "Untitled", from *Li Po and other poems* (1920)

We can see that sometimes type and referent seem to be the same thing: as planet Earth has only one satellite, the moon is simultaneously a specimen and a category. Besides, the previous representations are so schematic and stylized that the lack of redundancy is virtually impossible.

(b) On the other hand, when we read-observe a calligram, it becomes clear that there are two signifiers and two stimuli, for a calligram is not only a drawing, but also a text. In fact, there are two stimuli because we receive two kinds of information: verbal and visual.

To summarize, Klinkenberg's model is pluricodic. We propose to call it *intrafunctional*. He talks about the stimuli (shapes, color, textures, etc.) which will form a signifier related to the signified, and hence to the type. But all the logic of interpretation belongs to the graphic semiosphere, while calligrams integrate two semiospheres – the graphic and the verbal one. And that is precisely the key: we must integrate the meaning systems, not isolate them. If this is overlooked, any attempt to interpret a calligram will be impossible, or at best, imperfect. As Saussure prognosticated, visual signifiers can present concomitant complications in diverse dimensions. We can clearly see these complications in a calligram. Therefore, it seems that the best mode of approach here is syncretism.

### 3. A possible explanation

Tablada's and Huidobro's calligrams are certainly "cultural units" [cf. Eco 1976, 67]. Those

units would match the Saussurean *linguistic sign*, with a signified [i.e. the idea one wants to express, which constitutes a subjective unit] and a signifier [i.e. the materialization of the idea, in the form of a piece of art]. Saussure makes it clear that a sign integrates two natures: in writing, temporal succession is substituted by graphic spatiality [1970, 70], and that the signified can manifest itself through two signifiers encoded in two different ways: one visual, another verbal.

But, as Peirce intuits, semiosis is "an influence which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs" [Peirce, 1994 484]. This means that there could be three abstract entities and their internal dynamics is cooperative. Hence, triple influence appears to be unavoidable; it appears, too, that it is most operative to conceive the three functives as being in a reciprocal relation. The idea of an expanded sign seems adequate. If "the object of representation can be nothing but a representation" [Peirce 1994, 151], then a calligram can be an interpretant, for it is a complement or an equivalent of another sign, which belongs to a different code and to a different semiotic system. In this way, intersemiotic heterocodification is feasible.

### 3.1 The Signified

In order to understand the signified, let us assume that Saussure's concept is adequate. However, it should be made more precise. A cultural unit may have several content features: Eco points out that an iconic sign "may possess: (a) optic (visible), (b) ontological (supposed), and (c) conventional properties of the object" [Eco 1976, 207].

This is true of a calligram. Provided that it is synthetic and schematic, it can simultaneously integrate all the properties mentioned by Eco. It does this through a process that could be regarded as doubly metaphorical. Firstly, there are linguistic metaphors that may appear inside the text. Secondly, there are graphic-verbal metaphors which may result from the more or less evident relation between the verbal aspect (= the poem) and the visual aspect (= the figure originating from the spatial disposition of the poem).

#### 3.1.1 The verbal signifier (VeS)

According to Lotman, literary texts are "mechanisms which generate univocal comprehension", i.e. they become catalyzers. This quality is produced by fragments of those semiotic structures or even the whole texts, rather than by languages, for the latter constitute closed systems [Lotman 1982, 27]. Moreover, catalyzers have two main characteristics: (i) the border between different texts is a site of an intense creation of meaning, and

(ii) there is a close relation between the whole and the parts: even if it is isolated, every semiotic structure preserves the mechanism needed to reconstruct the whole system.

This reconstruction of a previously lost language, in whose system the given text would acquire the condition of having sense, always results practically in the creation of a new language, and not in the recreation of the old one, as it seems to originate in critical self-consciousness" [Lotman 1982, 28].

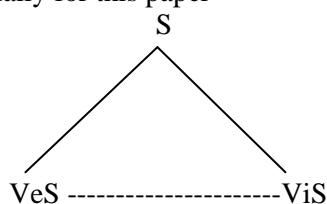
As a catalyst, the text does not necessarily function as a sign, but it would be one of the elements within the bigger artistic product. It helps to generate a double expressive correlation with respect to the contents it conveys. In the case of the calligrams, what matters most is not the efficiency of the mimesis –for there might be none– but that of a double metaphor: the creation of inedited senses on both levels: graphic and textual.

### 3.1.2 The visual signifier (ViS)

Peirce regards a sign as iconic "when it can represent its object chiefly by resemblance" [Peirce 1986: 76]. However, these calligrams show that the graphic signs do not necessarily have the properties of the objects they represent, but are rather "surrogate stimuli that, within the framework of a given representational convention, contribute to the signification" [Eco 1976, 194]. The problem seems to be this: if the ViS were isolated, and therefore autonomous, they would probably be only pure icons. But considering that they are in a contextual (and even oppositional) relation with other signifiers, they seem not to be.

### 3.2 An approach to functions

Klinkeberg's quadrivium thus seems less useful than expanding the Saussurean system through a Peircean trivium. The quadrivium functions effectively when it comes to strictly visual units, which are monomateric; but it seems insufficient in a calligram, where semiosis is coded in two variants. Calligrams let us employ a triadic mode of interpretation, which can be shown by means of the following diagram, which was created by us especially for this paper



The calligrams demonstrate that it is possible to employ elements from one or more different

semiotic systems in order to create a clearly recognizable functive.

### 3.3 Relations of determination

It must be emphasized that the most operative strategy seems to be creating a device whose mechanism would be analogical to Peirce's. But the background would not be exactly the same. Let us look more closely at the third problem: the relations between the units of meaning.

Klinkenberg writes that an isolated signifier might lead to no interpretation at all. On the plane of discourse, the relation between the units is called a relation of determination. Its function is to inscribe the units within isotopies; this allows them to make sense, and to identify the status of the sub- or super- unit:

Every unit identifies itself as such thanks to its neighbors, with no imposed order of identification. Evidently, this is possible due to the special character of the iconic syntax and to the simultaneous perception it permits (...) The simultaneous presence of relations increases the level of redundancy and therefore confirms the isotopy in which the units are inscribed [Klinkenberg 2006, 371].

This appears to be valid only for the pictorial calligrams, which have the highest redundancy rate. But some calligrams by Tablada and Huidobro do not employ a single code, and their opposition in that case may make it harder for the reader-observer to decode the work, devoid of any preset spatial direction. All this suggests that a visual icon might have some kind of syntax. Moreover, the syntax can be multiple. This element would undoubtedly have a decisive role in semiotic intercedence. In contrast, an abstract calligram may lack redundancy between the text and its spatial setting.

It is clear there are differences between the codes: in language, "distinctive units appear when we have reached the end of segmentation, arriving at the smallest meaningful units", but in a visual system "segmentation is not consecutive, instead it can be performed simultaneously" [Klinkenberg 2006, 274]. If this is true of the visual expression, another problem arises: it would be almost impossible to anticipate what the reader-observer of a calligram will perceive first: the verbal expression of the poem's content or the visual form derived from it. So, although the relations of determination can be hierarchical, the verbal part could be set to shape the visual part – or just the opposite. Therefore, a calligram can be thoroughly unmotivated in one or in both significant.

Eco claims that out of context, iconic signs lack status; they do not belong to any code and do not

resemble anything. They are visual forms which can be analyzed neither as signs nor as figures. Besides, an iconic sign does not then have a verbal equivalent, but, at best, only a reference [Eco 2000, 319]. But these calligrams are not solely graphic, so they question that principle. This happens because the graphic element may have an equivalence –or at least a very tightly codified solidarity correlation – with the textual element. Such solidarity can be so strong that the verbal part may even model the visual element, determining its shape and size. Eco also points out that

to iconically represent an object means to transcribe according to graphic (or other) conventions the cultural properties which are attributed to it. A culture defines its objects by referring to certain codes of recognition which select the pertinent and characteristic features of the content [Eco 2000, 306].

Reading-observing the calligrams of Tablada or Huidobro, we can see the noteworthy contribution they have made to literature, as they expand on earlier ideas. Western culture has employed conventional graphic means to represent content. Traditionally, they were only used to describe reality in a verbal mode, not to depict it. Thus, the iconic representation code was redefined. Moreover, the text could not even provide a code of recognition to semantically validate the relation between the verbal element and the visual one, or between those and the signified.

### 3.4 Redundancy rate

We must make allowances for the differences in the level of iconicity present in the works. Eco made a distinction between *ratio facilis* and *ratio difficilis* [1976]. Although it is accurate, this idea seems very ambitious. Klinkenberg's concept of redundancy [2006] becomes more operative for these cases, and it will be adopted here, with some comments.

#### 3.4.1 High redundancy rate

The first possibility is an obvious high redundancy rate. In the case of the calligram below, there are noticeable coincidences with Peirce's definition of an icon: the poem seeks to resemble some material objects as much as possible, and the text is set so as to achieve such likeness.

The iconic sign "is analogic and refers us mimetically to a real-world object" [Klinkenberg 2006, 347]. The calligram concurs with that definition, but Eco's analysis in terms of "surrogate stimuli" does not apply here; in this case, one does not deal with graphic signs, but rather with lexemes

coherently organized as a poem and as a picture. Therefore, it is difficult to separate the information conveyed by the text and by the visual aspect, formed by the typographic disposition of the poem.



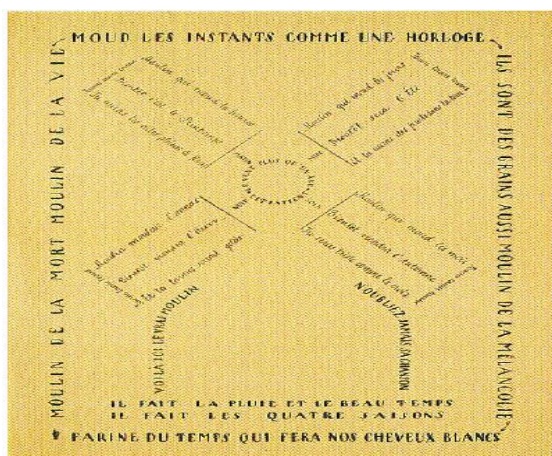
José Juan Tablada, "Impression of Havana" (1919)

If the redundancy level is high, the ViS depends of the VeS, which maintains semiotic autonomy only at the linguistic and rhetorical level, as the tropes and other poetic procedures which constitute the VeS subsist independently from the graphic disposition of the text. We can speak of a *solidarity* relation. In a high redundancy rate calligram, the author wants the iconic content to be of the same nature as the linguistic content, in order to establish a semiotic co-type. If it is true that one of the type's functions is to guarantee the redundancy between the referent and the signifier, in a calligram such function will be fulfilled by a co-implication between the text and the type. The aim is creating a coincidence between the nature of the encyclopaedias activated by the type and by the linguistic meaning.

The ViS is motivated in at least two ways: (i) by the graphic likeness which has to bring together the signifier and the type, and (ii) by the solidarity relation with the VeS. Hence the ViS is a heteromaterial object [Eco 1976], but it is completely motivated and modelled by the VeS, which functions as its cause. By communicating the content by verbal means and setting the latter as an inferred acknowledgement one produces a metasemiotic utterance. In fact,

in order to realize iconic equivalents for perception only certain pertinent aspects (of the portrayed objects) are selected (...) Iconic figurae do not correspond to linguistic phonemes for they do not have positional or oppositional value. (...) Their positional value varies according to the convention instituted by the context. [Eco 1976, 214-15].

Certainly, a calligram depends greatly on the graphic schematization process mentioned by Eco: only the more pertinent features are selected. Let us consider the following calligram:



Vicente Huidobro, "Moulin" (1921)

We could think of a symbol, i.e. "a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object" [Peirce 1994, 249]. The most emblematic feature of a windmill –the vanes – does appear. But others, equally necessary in a real windmill do not, like the door. Since the calligram includes an interplay of two codes, it is difficult to perceive the opposition suggested by Eco.

Although Huidobro did not think of giving his windmill a door, he did think of the lexical frame which surrounds the picture. D'Aspre thinks that the frame made of words is an irony, for it indicates that "poetry is art and it can be exposed just like framed paintings" [D'Aspre 2011, 100]

But whether it is affected by a set of graphemes or not, visual syntax is very different from linguistic syntax, which does not preclude the existence of bonds between them. As we can see, there are moments when the linguistic chronosyntax determines the graphic toposyntax: here, each blade is attached to the windmill through the lexemes which refer to the times of day: *matin*, *midi*, *nuît*, *soir*. But in the picture's peripheral ornament we see something exactly opposite: it is visual toposyntax that presets the linguistic chronosyntax of the poem's external verses. And we may suppose that the reader-viewer should begin on the verse which says: "Moulin les instants comme une horloge"

It is evident that a calligram combines the stability and tight codification of the verbal code with the openness of the visual code. In this sense, calligrams adapt and even create their own content. The opposition between icons and words has been replaced by the relations of solidarity or just

complementarity. The author wants his work to resemble something, even if in a very stylized manner: if not a real object, then at least some schematic representation of it.

Thus, a calligram is an artistic product which simultaneously uses two different –but potentially complementary – codes in order to articulate the same idea. By giving the content such double expression, the codes interact in an act of communication and semiotic intercoding becomes possible.

### 3.4.2 Moderate redundancy rate

There could be an intermediate possibility: a medium redundancy rate, where the concomitance relation between signifiers is less evident. We could think of an index as

a sign which refers to the object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that object ... It necessarily has some quality in common with the object and it is in respect to these that it refers to the object. It does, therefore, involve a sort of icon, although an icon of a peculiar kind; and it is not the mere resemblance to its object even in these respects, which makes it a sign, but it is the actual modification of it by the object [Peirce 1994, 248].

Peirce's definition is adequate; but other problems arise from the functioning of a work of art. Modern semiotics seems unable to deal with some aspects of this issue:

In cases of *ratio difficilis* what matters is not the relationship between an image and its object, but rather that between an image and its content. The content, in this case, is the result of a convention, as is the proportional correlation. The elements of motivation exist, but they can only work when they have been conventionally accepted and coded [Eco 1976, 199].

Eco is right in the first part of his postulate: what matters is the relation between image and content and also between them both and the poem. These three terms would be equivalent to what we have called ViS, VeS, and S, respectively. Thus, there can actually exist an intermediate degree of redundancy, although it may be ruled by what Eco calls "ratio difficilis". But there is more: in the case of Tablada's works, he creates his own convention in order to justify the codification he elaborates. One of Tablada's work talks about the moon, and the text is shaped as such. (We have already quoted it) This comes close to the notion of immediate interpretant [Peirce 1994, 473]. But the moon is represented in two ways. The first text, which treats about the death of Li-Po is a crescent shape, which evokes the

significant /half moon/ and may connote "sadness," as opposed to the following one. This comes close to a dynamic signified, for it involves a stream of repercussions produced by the presence of analogue ideas [Peirce 1994, 536].

The second text, which treats about celebration, is in the shape of a circle. It resembles the significant /full moon/, and can therefore connote the meaning of "plenitude". Jung [1997, 37] claims that a genuine symbol appears only when one needs to express what thought is unable to: intuitions. Jaffé [1997, 94] claims that the circle is a symbol of the psyche and therefore it always points to the fundamental aspect of life: its definitive completeness.

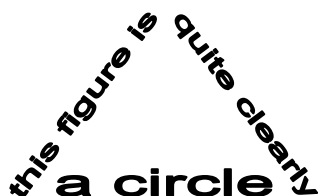
Tablada's text also reveals something more important than the possible meanings of a circle or a crescent: signs may have an oppositional syntax; however, oppositions can be only perceived in context, not in isolated signs.

### 3.4.3 Low redundancy rate

If the redundancy level is low, the relation is more abstract; that is why the possible relation between VeS and ViS is represented in the triangle by a dotted line. In this case, the relations of determination are not hierarchical but concomitant, which precludes preordination. Therefore, the relation must be considered only complementary, for it supplies a sense which is additional, but not necessarily dependent on the sense provided by the ViS, as it is not comparable to any other object previously codified: interpretation can only happen – if it exists at all – by inference and deduction. We might ask what happens when there is no apparent connection between VeS and ViS. If there is no equivalence between the significant and the referent, the situation requires a purely metaphorical interpretation.

### 3.5 The "Lennon-Magritte" hypothesis: inverse semiosis

The first thing we see in the video clip for John Lennon's *Imagine* are the words "This is not here". In René Magritte's painting, a pipe fills the entire canvas, but its title is "Ceci n'est pas une pipe". Let us imagine the following calligram (which we have created for the purpose of theoretical reflection):



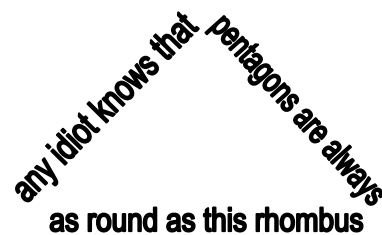
It is obvious that the information conveyed by the work does not coincide with the shape of the text. Violating the premise of congruence – assumed a

priori through cultural conventions installed in the reader-viewer – yields a form of contrasting opposition between the significant features of the utterance and those of its visual setting.

Let us call this phenomenon inverse semiosis, and it is an appropriate rhetorical strategy for conveying sarcastic – and even intentionally absurd – contents, for irony does not consist only in meaning oppositions, but also in the ironic speaker's wish to say several things at once [Viñas Piquer 468]. Thus, to be recognized by the audience, the irony must be "ostensibly poliphonic": the speaker creates a fictitious situation, which "stands in opposition to reality" [Reyes 1990, 142].

In classical rhetoric, an eloquent orator had to avoid total or partial *obscuritas*; the former is absolute, has no direction and hence impedes the understanding of the speech; the latter has an imprecise direction and is linked with ambiguity [Lausberg 1993, 57]. Irony has two strategies: (i) *dissimulatio*, concealing the speaker's opinion, and (ii) *simulatio*, deceiving the audience. Irony does not consist only in semantic and pragmatic contradictions. Sometimes even silence may have sarcastic contents and signify something exactly opposite [Lausberg 1986, 79].

We can imagine an extreme level of irony, involving not only a contradiction between the visual and the verbal aspects of the message; there may be also a contradiction within the verbal part itself. Let us consider this calligram, again our own:



Obviously, in this case we have not only changed the rate of redundancy, but we have also introduced a change at the pragmatic level, due to the deliberate discordance between and within the planes of meaning. The only thing that may save us from total *obscuritas* is understanding that we are witnessing the process of *dissimulatio* [Lausberg 1986, 94].

### 3.6 Pure metaphor

In these calligrams, the redundancy rate is either very abstract or so low that it approaches total absence. We thus arrive at pure poetry. The plastic sign has been defined as one involving "codes based in lines, colours and textures that are independent of

any mimetic reference" [Klinkenberg 2006, 347]. Therefore, we must consider two possibilities of correlation between VeS and ViS:

The first variant involves a complex plane of content, which however has no relation with the graphic shape of the text. Let us consider the calligram below:

Thesa  
La bella  
Gentil princesa  
Es una blanca estrella  
Es una estrella japonesa.  
Thesa es la más divina flor de Kioto  
Y cuando pasa triunfante en su palanquín  
Parece un tierno lirio, parece un pálido loto  
Arrancado una tarde de estío del imperial jardín.  
Todos la adoran como a una diosa, todos hasta el Mikado  
Pero ella cruza por entre todos indiferente  
De nadie se sabe que haya su amor logrado  
Y siempre está risueña, está sonriente.  
Es una Ofelea japonesa  
Que a las flores amante  
Loca y traviesa  
Triunfante  
Besa.

Vicente Huidobro, "Harmonic triangle", (1912)

We see a work of great verbal cohesion, but with virtually no relation between VeS and ViS. The only redundant relation holds between the title and the shape. The story about a Japanese princess does not seem to have any relation with the triangular shape. We wonder what it may represent. We understand there is no irony, for the text's intention and meaning do not conflict with the shape, they are just incompatible with it.

The second possibility is the total absence of relations, not only between the visual and the verbal part, but also within each of them.

In the case of the calligram below, the only signic precision may come from the suggested kinetic meaning which would be included in the neologism "girándula" from the title, a derivation from the verb *girar* ("to turn").

GIRÁNDULA

Una constelación pluricolor  
Un sal de neopélica anora  
El ventilador pirotécnico multicolor  
Los cohetes braman fícticos sobre la  
Civdad y el mar copulados  
plica sus aapas deshechadas.  
y efimera teñiza el cielo estígar.

Guillermo de Torre *Girándula* (1923)

The poem contains four verses with such degree of poetic metaphorization that finding syntactic relations between those verses is almost impossible. Lotman conceives literature as its own inherent modelling system, for it is explicit, limited and structured. This work includes signs and combination rules for those signs which allow for the construction of a unique message, not conveyable through other

means. In texts with these qualities, the signs of the text enter a relation of opposition with signs and systems that are foreign to literature, so they only acquire meaning when they relate to other systems [Lotman 1982, 34].

We only see four autonomous and concurrent surrealistic micropoems. Moreover, the graphic layout is so arbitrary that the reading-observation may start anywhere, and no toposyntactic relations can be imposed. And as the plane of content is so ambiguous, no interpretation can be attributed to it. Rather than talking of semiotic functions, we could view the micro-texts as open signals, for they "appear to invite the attribution of a content, thus issuing a sort of interpretative challenge to their addressee ... they can only 'wait' to be correlated to a content, each being susceptible of many different correlations" [Eco 1976, 243]. Nevertheless, all these possibilities are only interpretative premises, not definitive conclusions. In cases like these, semiotics seems to have reached its limit. Perhaps the only solution should be sought outside semiotics, according to the suggestion in the following excerpt:

A symbol is a term, a word or even a painting which can be known in daily life although it may have specific connotations other than its obvious and ordinary meaning ... It has a bigger, 'unconscious' aspect which is never exactly defined or completely explained. And one cannot hope to define it or explain it. When the mind explores a symbol, it is taken to ideas that lay beyond the reach of reason [Jung 1997, 17].

This quizzical calligram illustrates an extreme case: the total absence of motivation. Everything is due to the author's whim. The only thing to do is to determine whether the whimsical typography has any artistic value and is creative enough to be regarded as literature

## Conclusions

Such works as the calligrams of Tablada and Huidobro evidence double codification of reality. If it is true that a real-world object can become a sign, and vice versa [Eco 1976], in a calligram there is a double interplay between the sign and the object, for the ViS can be a referent to reality. On the other hand, if there is a high redundancy rate, the VeS –which is normally a sign– can become an object or a referent for another thing. A calligram can be the best example of pure *inventio*. If Eco is correct, it would be a mode of creation in which the creator of the semiotic function selects a new or not yet explored material for his objectives, and then suggest a new



way to transform the pertinent elements of its contents. In fact this represents the most exemplary "case of ratio difficilis realized within a heteromaterial expression; but since no previous convention exists to correlate the elements of the expression with the selected content, the sign producer must in some way posit this correlation so as to make it acceptable" [Eco 1976, 245]. Consequently, as a semantic structure within a macrostructure called a calligram, the VeS is not only a poem, but also a full semiotic feature, for it is spatial and could be articulated in a different syntax, that of the ViS.

This would solve a paradox. Eco, who openly criticizes the concept of iconicity, supplies the best theory to understand a calligram. Like Klinkenberg's, Eco's ideas remain within an intrafunctional scheme and do not provide for the links that may exist between diverse forms of semiosis. Yet if, instead of division, one goes for unification, the paradox is solved.

Tablada's and Huidobro's calligrams show that the evolution of modern art has perhaps been far too radical and fast for researchers to work out effective interpretative instruments. In fact, important scholars in the field of analytic psychology acknowledged that in the middle of the XXth century, when abstract painting had become the most frequent – and the most complicated – pictorial form. The evolution of modern art has been fascinating, for it has broken down the barriers between subjectivity and expression. Contemporary artists seem not to care about mimesis, but only about the expression of emotions [Jaffé 1997, 253]. Modern art has abandoned the sensory and the individual: it is collective and moves many; only the artist's style remains individual.

#### References\*

1. D'Aspre, Nuria: *La traducción como dispositivo 'creacionista' en la poética de Vicente Huidobro: el poema pintado Moulin y sus versiones*. Santiago: Anales de Literatura Chilena. Año 12, No. 16
2. De Torre, Guillermo: *Hélices*, Edición de José María Barrera López. Centro Cultural de la Generación del 27. Málaga, 2000. 130 p.

3. Eco, Umberto: *A theory of semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1976. 175 p.
4. *Tratado de semiótica general*. Lumen: Barcelona. 2000. 203 p.
5. García Martín, José Luis "Poetas del Novecientos. Entre el modernismo y la vanguardia (Antología) Tomo II: De Guillermo de Torre a Ramón Gaya" Fundación BSCH. Colección Obra Fundamental. [2001] 230 p.
6. Huidobro, Vicente: *Obra Poética*. Edited by Cedomil Goic: Colección Archivos, ALLCA XX, Madrid. 2003. 1820 p.
7. Jung, Carl et al. : *El hombre y sus símbolos*. Caralt. Barcelona, 1997. 289 p.
8. Jaffé, Aniela: *El simbolismo en las artes visuales* [in Jung et al, see above] 1997. 289 p.
9. Klinkenberg, Jean-Marie: *Manual de semiótica general*. Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano. Bogotá. 2006. 302 p.
10. Lausberg, Heinrich: *Manual de retórica literaria*. Gredos. Madrid. 1986. 150 p.
11. *Elementos de retórica literaria* Gredos. Madrid, 1993. 175 p.
12. Lotman, Iuri *Estructura del texto literario*. Istmo. Madrid. 1982. 279 p.
13. Peirce, Charles Sanders: *Collected Papers (1931-1954)*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge. 1994. 302 p.
14. *La ciencia de la semiótica*. Nueva Visión. Buenos Aires. 1986. 175 p.
15. Perrone, Alberto: *El poema como semiótica connotativa*. Revista "Estudios". Verano 1991. ITAM. México. 1991. 112 p.
16. Real Academia de la Lengua Española: *Diccionario*. Website. Accessed on February 3, 2016, 3:00 p.m.
17. Reyes, Graciela: *La pragmática lingüística*. Montesinos. Barcelona. 1990 85 p.
18. Saussure, Ferdinand de: *Curso de Lingüística General* Losada. Buenos Aires, 1970. 231 p.
19. Tablada, José Juan *Obras*. <http://www.tablada.unam.mx/> Website coordinated by Rodolfo Mata. National University of Mexico. Retrieved on December 15, 2016 at 3:00 p.m.
20. Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes. Mexico. 2005
21. Viñas Piquer, David: *Historia de la crítica literaria*. Ariel. Barcelona 2002. P. 375.

#### Dr. Alberto J. Quero

Associate researcher, Doctor in Humanities,  
Semiotics Association of Venezuela

\* All the translations from Spanish in the paper are done by the author.