

Figures of Sanctity

Semiotics, Sacred Texts and Theory of Culture¹

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Abstract

This study aims to show how the analysis of the figurative component of meaning can contribute to the study of the religious discourse and, in particular, to the study of the imaginary and the models of sanctity. To do this, we will first briefly present the semiotic concept of «figure», then we will see how the figurative analysis has been used in the study of biblical discourse by the scholars of the Centre pour l'Analyse du Discours Religieux (CADIR) of the Catholic University of Lyon. Finally, we will take a brief look at some studies that extended the figurative analysis to the more general study of the religious imagery, also suggesting possible topics to investigate.

Key Words

Figurativity; semiotics of religion; sanctity; CADIR; biblical text.

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1. Figurativity in generative semiotics

In the metalanguage of Algirdas J. Greimas' generative semiotics a textual element is considered figurative (i.e., it is a "figure") if it has a counterpart in the natural world. Greimas uses the expression "natural world" (taken, *mutatis mutandis*, from Merleau-Ponty) to refer to the world of sense experience, fully organized and culturalized, and therefore already significant and endowed with meaning. In fact, figures are not simply "objects" belonging to the world they refer to, originating from perception, but are also elements of a cultural nature that are already organized semiotically (Greimas 1973, 1983a; Greimas & Courtés 1979). When considering texts, the *figurative level* is part of the content plane; it is the "concrete" level of the variables, already identified by Vladimir Propp (1928), as opposed to the invariant (and abstract) level of narrative structures and the functions.

On a more abstract level, the figures can be grouped into themes: while the figurative can be defined as «the set of contents of a natural language or of a system of representation having a perceptible correspondent on the level of expression of the natural world» (Courtés 1986: 13), the thematic level instead «is characterized by an abstract semantic investment of a conceptual nature, without necessary links with the universe of the natural world» (Courtés 1986: 13). For example, the figure of the letter, observes Courtés, can refer to the theme of information. However, the relationship between thematic and figurative is not two-way: each theme can in fact be expressed through different figurative paths, and vice versa each figure can refer to different themes depending on the context. Thus, the theme of information can be expressed by including different figures such as those of the "announcement", the "newspaper" or the "e-mail", whereas the figure of the letter can also refer to themes such as "recommendation", "concession" etc. This means that figures can also be studied as constant elements semantically invested with ever variable meanings.

The figurative process is seldom punctual: a figure rarely appears isolated but recalls other figures that can be associated with it. The figures are not objects closed on themselves, they meet other related figures, constituting *discursive configurations* that have their own organization. Greimas' classic example is the figure "sun" that «organizes around itself a figural field that includes rays, light, heat, air, transparency, opacity, clouds, etc.» (Greimas 1973: Eng. trad. 115). Furthermore, each figure brings with it a series of characteristic actions linked to it; Courtés (1979-80) gives the example of the letter, a configuration which in addition to the object "letter" includes in a stable manner at least three pairs of action figures: "write"/"read", "close"/"open", "deliver"/"receive". Each figure is therefore always connected to some narrative virtuality; it makes certain courses of action possible and precludes others. According to Greimas (1973), the configurations are real autonomous micro-stories capable of inserting themselves syntagmatically within the different textual macro-stories.

Figures and configurations can migrate from one story to another, constituting a recognizable invariant within any text in which they appear (see

Perissinotto 1995). In this sense, the configurations are similar to the concept of *motif*, as it is understood in folklore studies and above all in the history of arts (Greimas and Courtés 1979, *ad vocem*). However, figurative semiotics is not a repositioning of the iconological analysis of the Warburgian and Panofskian tradition. What distinguishes the semiotic notion of “figure” is in fact its close connection, if not interdependence, with the narration: as we have seen a figure is in fact almost always inserted within configurations and figurative paths whose logic is definitely narrative, in the sense that the creation of a theme will inevitably bring with it not only a series of related figures, but also a series of related actions.

In any case, as for the motives, the figures, rather than simple textual elements, are autonomous entities of a historical, cultural and trans-textual nature that belong to the common competence of the subjects (sender and recipient) involved in the communicative exchange established through a text (Bertetti 2013). Figures have their own meaning, partially independent of the narrative text in which they are inserted. From this point of view, the study of the figurative goes beyond the textual sphere and is rather part of a semiotics of culture.

2. Figurativity and religious discourse

Since the mid-1970s the figurative component of texts has been one of the main interests of the CADIR (Centre pour l'Analyse du Discours Religieux), a group of biblical scholars and semiologists within the Catholic University of Lyon. The group, of which we recall at least Jean Delorme, Jean Calloud, Jean-Claude Giroud and Louis Panier, was interested in the semiotic study of the biblical accounts, with a particular focus on evangelical narration.² In their studies figurativity is closely linked to the thematic narrative models that organize and support it. In his synthesis of the Group's work, Jean-Jives Theriault (2006: 71) writes: «The particular figurativeness of the texts of the Bible produced a more precise elaboration of the figurative dimension, a testing of its relationship with the narrative component and a better recognition of its contribution in the signifying articulation because of its putting in discourse».

For the CADIR scholars, the figures have a dual nature: on the one hand they have an actual existence within the text, on the other hand they are cultural elements, which circulate in the semiosphere and have a virtual existence as inscribed in the common competence of enunciator and enunciatee: «The figures, or figurative sets, are certainly within the text. But we recognize them, or we resort to them as materials available for discourse, only to the extent that they are memorable or memorized as well» (Calloud 1985-86, III: 24).

It is what they call a «memory of figures», or a «discursive memory». Similarly, Joseph Courtés (1986) writes of a *figurative code*, made up of possible thematic contents recorded in culture and a series of selection rules, and Greimas (1973) hopes for a *discursive dictionary* able to describe and inventory these figures.

² The results of their studies are published in the journal *Sémiotique et Bible* and in several collective volumes, among which CADIR (1993), Delorme (1987), Delorme *et alii* (1995), Groupe d'Entrevernes (1977, 1979).

Figures are endowed with their own virtuality of meaning. When they are convoked within the text at the moment of the putting in discourse, this meaning can be actualized, in whole or in part, but also be emptied, and figures become available for other semantic investments resulting from the particular discourse that arranges them. In other words, the thematic – closely related, as Courtés (1986) also observes, to the narrative organization – becomes the way in which each figure is actualized within the single text, convoked to assume the deepest meanings. In this process the figure can undergo increases in meaning, desemanticisation and resemanticisation, and take charge of different thematizations, thus becoming a vehicle of new meanings.

As Louis Panier wrote:

Before being convened in a specific text, the figure of the tree, the table, the horse... corresponds to an immense virtual set of possible meanings, uses, and probable arrangements: we then speak of discursive configuration. Once put into discourse, in a singular text, the figure, because of the specific path in which the text inscribes it, is realized with a particular function (a thematic value), which it is precisely up to us to specify. (Panier 2009: 4)

If the figurative component – as indicated by Greimas (1973) – is descriptive and representative of the world, the thematic component not only identifies a conceptual and abstract level but assumes a classifying and categorizing function with respect to the figures of the natural world. Thematic and figurative are therefore articulated «according to the two constitutive forms of discourse: the descriptive or representative function (the discourse depicts, speaks of the world) and the predicative or interpretative function (the discourse categorizes, classifies)» (Panier 1986: 237). It is on the basis of this *thematic classification*, immanent to them, that the figures intervene in the discourse.

A characteristic of the figurative level is to be «observable», while the thematic one seems rather to be «interpretable». Following the CADIR scholars, the evangelical discourse and, in particular, the parables of Jesus operate a continuous reinterpretation, or more properly a *thematic recategorization*: a good example (also taken up by Greimas 1993) is that of the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which the thematic isotopy of the “foreigner”, related to the figure of the Samaritan, is neutralized and replaced in the course of the story by that of the “man”. In this case the parable overcomes the opposition thanks to a deeper category, common to the two isotopes. Unlike folklore tales, based on the restoration of an order corrupted by villainy, parables propose a new definition of values: «The parable of the Good Samaritan does not deny the Law which prescribes “love one’s neighbour”, but changes the relationship between the subject and the object of “loving”» (Delorme e Geoltrain 1982: 111).

As a whole, the parabolic discourse is governed by a particular organization of the relationships between thematic and figurative within the text. As shown by Geninasca (1987), a Swiss scholar who often collaborated with CADIR, in the parables the figurative dimension is developed and detaches itself from the

thematic contents it manifests in order to convey a discourse that is strongly argumentative; this gives rise to a true and own *figurative reasoning*.³

As Panier outlines:

the parable is a “figurative” discourse intended to transmit in a “figurative” way lessons or “abstract” notions or to reproduce, in a figurative way, in the manner of a “model”, the issues of the main story; but the analysis of the parables shows that the figurative level of the discourses is not “limited” in its relationship to the “realities” that it is supposed to “figure” but that it constitutes in itself a consistent semiotic plan. (Panier 2008: 7)

3. Figures in progress

For CADIR, figures – especially biblical figures – are always «figures in progress». Precisely because the figures are at the same time virtually inscribed in the competence of the enunciator and the enunciatee as cultural constructs, and are actualized in the text at the moment of their convocation in the discourse during the enunciation they do not exist except through their reiterations, repetitions and deformations in the intertextual concatenation, and in their interpretation in the act of reading.

This conception of figure leads the Lyon group to re-read the patristic conception of figural interpretation of scriptures in a semiotic way. This rereading is the result, once again, of collective work,⁴ and is expressed in particular in Calloud 1993, Panier 1995 and Delorme 1997.

The reading of the biblical text in the first centuries of Christianity seems to be subject to two apparently opposing principles: on the one hand the global unity of the biblical corpus, safeguarded by the uniqueness of the instance of the enunciation (God) and of the referent (Scripture is about Christ, «hidden treasure of the Scriptures»⁵); on the other its division into two Testaments, the Old and the New, of which the second presupposes the first but at the same time transforms its function. The semiotic hypothesis of CADIR is that the Old and New Testaments have a relationship similar to the “immanence/manifestation” one, where from the Christian perspective the Old Testament is a text, object of reading and rereading, of which the New Testament is both an elaboration of the immanent semantic universe and a key to rereading which validates its authenticity and reveals a level of immanent meaning. As Panier wrote:

The New Testament defines a reading position of the Old – that is to say an instance of enunciation – such that the Old Testament as a whole is truthfully established as a text and as a network or path of figures to be read: the New Testament establishes in the Old the order of the figure. (Panier 1995: 33)

³ On the figurative reasoning see also Greimas (1983b).

⁴ As Calloud himself notes (1993: 31).

⁵ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4, 26, 1.

In this regard there is a phrase that often returns, expressed in different formulations, in Augustine's work: «Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet; Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet» («The New Testament is hidden in the Old; The Old Testament is revealed [that is, it is manifested; *nda*] in the New»).

This conception of the relationship between the Old and New Testament originates a practice of reading and interpretation in which the figurative apparatus is of primary importance. This practice was already described by Auerbach (1938), who defined it as figural interpretation. As Auerbach explains «figural interpretation establishes a connection between two facts or persons in which one of them not only means itself, but also means the other, while the other understands or fulfils the first» (Auerbach 1938; Engl. tr. 59).

Following Panier, the Jewish Scriptures offer the New Testament writings a figurative «treasure» whose «paths and correspondences must be followed within the Old Testament itself [...], and in which one will find the correspondences, the harmonics, in the writings of the New Testament» (Panier 1995: 34). Thus, for example – as Calloud (1993: 46-47) tells us – the flight from Egypt is related to the return from the Babylonian exile in the book of Isaiah, and the death of Rachel at the birth of Benjamin (Genesis, 35) is referred to in connection with the deportation to Babylon in Jeremiah 31, a passage in turn quoted in Matthew 2:18 in relation to the massacre of the innocents. Each new occurrence of a figure is grafted onto past occurrences and at the same time illuminates it with a new light, bringing an increase in its meaning.

In the dialectic between the Old and New Testaments – it is the coming of Christ, i.e. of the Divine Word, which delimits the interpretative horizon, putting an end to the concatenation of figures and bringing it to its fulfilment.

4. Figures of Sanctity

CADIR's research is obviously much more complex and multifaceted than we can summarize here. With regard to generative semiotics, it deals in an original way with various often overlooked issues, such as the relationships between immanence and manifestation, enunciation and the act of reading – a taboo for Greimasian semiotics – and between figurative magnitudes and narrative organization. From the point of view of the semiotics of religions, figurative analysis lends itself to being generalized from the study of biblical texts to a broader study of religious imagery – including that related to sanctity – and its diachronic transformations. Examples in this sense are not lacking although they do not always explicitly mention the CADIR studies.

For example, Francesco Garofalo (2020) analysed the presence of botanical figures, such as flowers and gardens, in the sources of the Litany of Loreto, reconstructing how the function of these figures changes from the Old and New Testament through the acclamations of the Great Akhatist Hymn (626 B.C.) and the Aquileian version of the litany (8th century). In particular, he dwells on the development of the “mystical rose” *antonomasia* that, like other botanical isotopies, originates in the *Song of Songs* and is semantically reinterpreted in relation to the Virgin in line with a recurring source-outcome schema /Flower -> Fruit = Mother -> Son/. Garofalo also observes that, passing from the

Akathist hymn to the Litany to the Virgin, the botanical figures change from a mainly *cosmological* thematization to a *soteriological* thematization.

Remaining with botanical figures, Massimo Leone (2020) has examined the figure of the withered flower, whose transience opposes the durability of the divine word, studying it in its transformations and re-semanticisations in its migration across texts and discourses through Jewish and Christian culture. In the context of ERC project NeMoSanctI, Jenny Ponzio (2020) has investigated the construction of the figure of the Virgin Mary (common to Islam and Catholicism), the different themes and values it has taken on in Catholic and Muslim traditions and its usability from the perspective of ecumenical dialogue; she concludes that the dialogue on the respective figuration of Mary is limited and concerns especially the thematization of her as perfect pious and devout person.

However, the study of figures and their migrations through texts – even in different semiotic systems – can be useful in many different areas of the Semiotics of Religions. For example, we could study the way in which figures from the Old Testament or the Gospels are reused in the writings of certain mystics (such as those by Therese of Lisieux), characterized by a dense network of references to sacred writings.⁶

Or again, extending the more traditional iconographic analysis, we can figuratively approach the attributes of the Saints and the so-called signs of holiness. An interesting example in this regard is that of the stigmata, on which I am conducting a study. Some starting points are outlined here.

As is known, the stigmata are the five wounds in the hands, feet and side of Jesus Christ, caused by the traumas suffered during the Passion and reproduced on the bodies of some mystics, starting at least from Saint Francis of Assisi, who according to his biographers, received the stigmata on Mount La Verna in 1224. Muessing (2013) shows clearly how stigmatization phenomena had already occurred before Francis during the early Middle Ages; these took on various forms, often attributable to extreme practices of asceticism and bodily mortification sometimes pushed as far as self-harm. The thematic context – as we would define it semiotically – to which these phenomena refer was that of the imitation of Christ, driven to the point of participation in the pain of the Passion.

It is Francis' reception of the stigmata that redefines the concept in Christianity, attributing the stigmatization to a supernatural event and to a personal encounter with God: a hierophany (Klaniczky 2016). However, in the original testimonies and in the oldest pictorial representations the stigmata would still be understood as a visible bodily sign of an internal experience (Frugoni 1993), which indicate the mystic's participation in the suffering of Christ. It was Thomas of Celano who first attributed Francis' stigmata to a "miraculous" and supernatural gift, and their transformation into a sign of the Saint's identification with Christ. Later on Bonaventure of Bagnoregio explores the phenomenon in more detail in his *Legenda Maior* (1263), retelling the life of the saint and describing how Jesus himself imprinted the stigmata on the body

⁶ For a semiotic analysis of Teresa of Lisieux's writing (as well as that of Gemma Galgani), albeit not specifically in relation to figurativity, see Galofaro (2019).

of Francis as a direct consequence of the Vision. Following in Bonaventure's wake, Giotto consecrates this iconography in the pictorial representations of the Basilica of Assisi.

Following Frugoni (1993), behind this redefinition there would have been the intention of the Church to make Francis' holiness – and with it his revolutionary lifestyle – unique and at the same time in some way “inaccessible”, thus becoming an “admirable”, rather than “imitable”, holiness (Ricci 2021) in order to channel the Franciscan phenomenon towards more traditional forms of spirituality.

From a semiotic point of view, as regards the study of the figures and the relationship with their thematic basis, we can clearly see how these subsequent redefinitions of the stigmata correspond to a double thematic recategorization: from a physical sign which, in the Gospels, figurativises the theme of the “suffering” that Christ had to undergo during the Passion for the salvation of humanity, the stigmata first become a figure of the imitation of Christ which thematizes the “participation” of the mystic in this suffering, and finally the figurative representation of the “identification” of the Saint with Jesus Christ.

Conclusions

In the Greimasian conception, figures are the result of a close correlation between cultural elements and perceptive elements. They have a dual nature: on the one hand they have a perceptive origin, constituting the emergence of the sensitive within language, on the other they are always the result of a categorization work carried out on the natural world by a semiotic “reading grid”. (Greimas 1984: 199). This grid has an eminently cultural nature: as Lotman teaches⁷ – recalled in this regard by Greimas himself (1968: 21) – it is in fact through the organization of a culture that our experience of the world is interpreted, organised and endowed with meaning.

Recent semiotics, in the wake of *De l'imperfection* (Greimas 1987), have approached figurativity by privileging the aesthetic-perceptive component, trying to trace its sensorial and perceptive roots, going back to the sensitive act as a place of emergence of meaning. Conversely, the studies of the CADIR group – as well as those of Courtés and the others referred to in the fourth paragraph – focus on the cultural component of figures, investigating the way in which the figures are organised, sedimented and handed down within the cultural universe. In doing so, they provide us with an example which it is interesting today to take up again within the framework of the theory of culture.

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⁷ See for example Lotman (1975: 33-35).

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