

*On the Teaching of Literature, in Constant Reference to Michael Riffaterre and  
Dionysius of Halicarnassus*

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**Abstract**

This essay aims to establish a dialogical framework between Michael Riffaterre's *The Poem as Representation: A Reading of Hugo*, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus's *De Compositione Verborum*. Both Riffaterre and Dionysius agree that the criterion of correspondence with reality is not the best possible touchstone for evaluating a text. The difference is that Riffaterre arrives at this conclusion through a descriptive critical analysis and Dionysius from a rhetorical and prescriptive position. This essay will focus on a comparative exercise between these two approaches, focusing on canonical questions such as the relationship between theory and the teaching of literature, the adoption of specific methodologies to evaluate certain types of texts, and the existence, or non-existence, of boundaries that separate the literary field from others, such as rhetoric. The intention will be to showcase a type of stance when it comes to literary texts that does not necessarily succumb either to the specific uses of the reader or the "tyranny" of the authority of the author.

Keywords: Literature, Teaching, Theory, Method, Reading

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## 1. Introduction - Against Realistic Criteria

Michael Riffaterre begins *The Poem as Representation: A Reading of Hugo* by stating that one of the aesthetic criteria of a realist work is the “ability to create the illusion of truth”, a truth available to everyone and empirically verifiable (Riffaterre, 1983). This contrasts with poetic aesthetics, which are described as transmutative. The intention is to point out that if a change occurs in the referent that is easier to identify in poetry rather than prose, then poetic aesthetics does not benefit from the use of realistic criteria in its interpretation. This leads Riffaterre to condemn the impulse to “compare poems to reality”, as it leads to the tendency to argue about fidelity or infidelity, the similarity or vagueness of poetic description in constant comparison with reality. There is also incongruity in its value judgments about poetry, where at one moment they are celebrated for their fidelity and, at another, condemned for being a sterile copy (Riffaterre, 1983). However, Riffaterre agrees that this realistic approach is one of the “modalities of relationship between the text and the reader”; as such, this modality deserves scrutiny. In order to explain this literary phenomenon, Riffaterre resorts to a poem by Victor Hugo, *Écrit sur la vitre d'une fenêtre flamande*.

Riffaterre declares that all Victor Hugo specialists analyze the poem in relation to reality. They value “the art with which Hugo was able to turn auditory sensations into visual ones” and “the imagination to personify the hourly chimes” (Riffaterre, 1983). Riffaterre cites specifically the interpretation of a critic who argues that Hugo's poem is an exercise in “personification dictated by the poet's fancy, which seizes on a movement, attitude, or formal resemblance in order to create a myth around them” (Riffaterre, 1983). The problem is that all these interpretations take the reader out of the text, by evoking hypothetical events in the poem's genesis. The initial circumstances of the text's composition do not explain the reader's final reactions to the text in its final form. It is this reasoning that leads Riffaterre to conclude that “the poem is not a destination; it is a starting point” (Riffaterre, 1983).

Nothing in this type of realistic analysis informs the reader of the numerous functions present in the text, making it impossible to identify what makes the poem appealing. That is why for Riffaterre the solution involves the “decoding” of a poem. This means paying attention to the text, its words and combinations, and describing the verbal combinations that capture the reader's attention. Hence, the point that Riffaterre makes about the uniqueness of the poem: the lexical combinations are so complex that they are impossible to repeat, either in poems or in any other type of text.

Thus, Riffaterre seeks to invert the traditional direction of poetic analysis: instead of starting from the represented thing to the representation, it should start from the representation as something that creates the represented thing and makes it believable exclusively through the combination of verbal sequences (i.e. semiosis). This means that the reader does not need to evoke his experience of reality; it means that he needs only to refer the poem to “a linguistic code”.<sup>1</sup> This is how for Riffaterre the poem stipulates the conditions of its intelligibility. There is no need to appeal to reality, as the starting point is the words, their combinations, and how one word triggers another. The only extra-textual appeal comes from a set of stereotypes, clichés, and commonplaces that the reader already carries with him. This set, named by Riffaterre as “mythology”, makes it possible to dispense with empirical experience, or correspondence with reality, in the process of interpreting a poem. It also allows the

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<sup>1</sup> “His experience of that code is adequate by definition; if it were not, he would not be a reader” (Riffaterre, 1983).

exclusion of “the author”, “the circumstances of the composition”, “the order in which the poem was written” and any other modifications (Riffaterre, 1983).

## 2. The Riffaterian Method

Riffaterre's analysis proposal focuses on words, their possible placements, and how they “mutually triggered one after the other” in a text (Riffaterre, 1983). The idea is to analyze lexical sequentiality, where a word or combination of words justifies and relates to the subsequent word. The poetic representation is thus carried out by the pre-established relationship between these lexical structures and the mythological models that the reader carries with him. This means that both the author and the reader never start from scratch, either in terms of composing or interpreting a poem. Although the poem is a closed and tautological unit, this does not mean that other poems do not have to be appealed to. Despite Riffaterre's waiver of realistic criteria, the internal coherence of a poem depends on an external datum: the sociolect (the “mythology” referred to in the previous section). This means that his interpretive enterprise is based not on the discovery of a text, but on the *recognition* of the sociolect reproduced in the text in a complex and unique way.

According to Riffaterre, “carillon” is the word that in Victor Hugo's poem triggers the subsequent chain of words that constitute the text. Riffaterre associates “carillon” with the happy ringing of bells and describes the semantic opposition to “glas” and the melodic contrast between “carillon” and “glas”. He also describes the convergence between musicality, joy, and fantasy that the allegorical representation of “carillon” produces; the metonymic relationship between “carillon” and “heure”, and the transposition of the grammatical feminine into the mythological feminine (Riffaterre, 1983). Riffaterre concludes his analysis by declaring that “what is convincing about this image [...] is, quite simply, the irresistible nature of its verbal “logic”. It is nothing more than a sentence unfolding the semantic potentials of an initial word throughout the entire text” (Riffaterre, 1983). Therefore, the poem is a generative construction because from a word (carillon) a descriptive system of associated words was generated. In this way, the poem is reduced to a linked composition of related words and its interpretation to an exercise in recognizing associations, oppositions, contrasts, convergences, representations, relations, patterns, and transpositions between the lexicon of a poem and the sociolect. That is why, for Riffaterre, the analyst must replace the criterion of truth and similarity with the criterion of “overdetermination”. This criterion occurs when “any possible verbal sequence becomes restricted by the combined rules of three structures: the linguistic code, the thematic structure and the structure of the descriptive system” (Riffaterre, 1983), that is, respectively, the words, the theme, and the subsequent relationships between words narrow the creative and interpretive possibilities and give rise to a unique text. This means that Riffaterre does not necessarily reject the concept of *mimesis* when it comes to literary analysis; he only rejects the mimetic correspondence to reality. Riffaterre's *mimesis* does not fall back on referents, but on verbal forms, “words that we already find in texts” (Riffaterre, 1983) and that are updated and transmuted in the new poem. Each word has had previous uses and is associated with a network of meanings, making the reader appeal to those meanings, and not to reality.

## 3. The *De Compositione Verborum* and the Teaching of Theory

The *De Compositione Verborum* (dated roughly around the years 20 and 10 B.C.) was written as a birthday present from Dionysius, a professor of rhetoric in Rome, to one of his pupils. This work deals with the art of speech and aims to help young people who aspire to a public

(and political) career, where mastery of oratory is a necessary and fundamental criterion to excel. It also discusses the nature and modes of composition, as well as secrets of “composition not to be found in grammatical rules” (Halicarnassus, 1910). What stands out in this work is the careful interpretation of short passages of texts, resembling a proto-version of what is contemporarily described as *close reading*. Dionysus focuses on the singular and the particular over the general, paying close attention to individual words, their syntax, the order in which sentences unfold ideas, as well as their formal structures. This type of analysis resembles the type of analysis carried out by Riffaterre in his essay on Hugo’s poem since it is also possible to describe that analysis as an example of *close reading*. However, placing them under the same umbrella term does not solve the divergences between them concerning their objectives and results. While Dionysus's concerns are, above all, of an aesthetic nature (or what was considered aesthetic from the 18th century onwards) and have to do with the beauty and rhetorical strength of imitation from other authors, Riffaterre is interested, not in aesthetics, nor in the effect that poems produce in this domain, but in semiosis (the processes through which meaning is produced by the text). In other words, Dionysus is concerned with a *later stage*: with the aesthetic effects on the reader; while Riffaterre is concerned with what happens *before*: how meaning is produced in the text.

In the case of Dionysus, he intended to compose a work that would allow his pupils to learn the art of effective composition. In the case of Riffaterre, it is to expose and instruct the reader (and critic) to obtain a literary analysis that does not deviate from the text or goes beyond it, commenting on all the unique associations that the author produced between the lexicon and the sociolect. Dionysus' position in *De Compositione Verborum* is that readers will reap the rewards of reading it without the need to adopt any particular method of reading *a priori*. At any point in his work does he promote or demonstrate any structural system of closed analysis to justify his teachings or conclusions. Dionysus reads the works of major Greek authors, comparing the use of words and their placement in sentences and verses, to determine which authors should be imitated and what rules and principles govern the composition of those works. Dionysus' use of poems to strengthen his arguments does not presuppose any body of axioms that govern his approach. The conclusions of his *close reading* are not dependent on the application of any particular method. Dionysus is collecting examples of historical, poetic, and rhetorical works, and testing hypotheses in order to share the conclusions acquired with his pupils. The sharing and application of this knowledge is not dependent on the pupils having participated in the investigation itself, although it is dependent on the pupils’ amount of time and attention expended on the study and crafting of texts.

Concerning Riffaterre, there is a slight distinction, since he is not promoting a type of literary analysis *per se*, but *the* literary methodology to be applied to literary works. Paul De Man, in *Hypogram and Inscription: Michael Riffaterre's Poetics of Reading*, raises the issue of compatibility between teaching and theory by asking whether “didactic productivity [is] the reward, so to speak, for the accuracy of theory, or is it the compensation, or the excuse, for certain theoretical foreclosures” (De Man, 1981). Despite the didactic success that De Man recognizes in Riffaterre's method, he does not fail to question what are the criteria that justify the applicability of one theoretical method over another, or no theoretical method at all. Are the conclusions arising from the application of this theory reduced to its self-justification as a valid teaching method, or are they independent of the theory itself, attainable through other methods? De Man believes that Riffaterre solved this problem, stating that “theory and reading sustain each other and are made to dovetail with the skill of a master craftsman” in his work (De Man, 1981). However, this does not seem to be a sufficient answer to the

question posed earlier about didactic productivity, nor to the problem that De Man posed immediately before in his essay, that “it is not at all certain, for instance, that the practical results of the theory, the manner in which it allows one to carry out specific assignments and to read specific texts, can be detached from the theoretical investigation itself and thus made available to those who have not actually taken part in this investigation” (De Man, 1981). This inseparability between the results of a theory and the theoretical investigation itself seems to be one of the reasons that led Riffaterre to declare a distinction between literary and non-literary texts. This distinction also constitutes Riffaterre's response to De Man's main theoretical difficulty regarding the teaching of literature: “the delimitation of borderlines that circumscribe the literary field by setting it apart from other modes of discourse” (De Man, 1981). If the literary text is distinct from all others, then it requires a specific theory and method, such as Riffaterre's. If there are no borderlines between types of texts, then the application of a theory like Riffaterre's is optional, and Dionysus' approach in *De Compositione Verborum* comes closer to the way readers generally relate to texts (regardless of their concern for aesthetic effects in texts or how meaning is produced in them) - equipped without any kind of theoretical or methodological baggage, although equipped with some specific intention. That intention is what determines the requirements for its teaching: if the aim is rhetoric and aesthetic, it is not necessary any particular method to engage with any type of text; however, if the intent is to analyze the production of meaning, then a methodology and delimitation of borderlines between types of texts becomes a necessity.

#### **4. A Thing or Two About Agrammaticality**

In the second chapter, entitled *Composition Defined*, Dionysus declares that “persuasion, charm, or literary power depend” above all on the arrangement of words, as opposed to the choice of words (Halicarnassus, 1910). Unlike Riffaterre, who declares the literary work distinct from other language uses, Dionysus places it under the umbrella of rhetorical composition, both the ability to persuade and captivate and produce literariness. This distances the Riffaterian analysis from the didactic approach that Dionysus applies in his work. If the arrangement of words can be identical, for both persuasive and literary texts, where does Riffaterre's interpretative analysis stand, since it needs to declare the uniqueness of the literary work in order to justify its methodology? Is literariness only to be found in literary texts and persuasiveness only in rhetorical writings? Is it not possible to find persuasiveness in literary writings and literariness in rhetorical texts? Is one of the risks of Riffaterre's method the removal of several texts that may possess literariness but be not considered literary?

One way of solving the question would be to declare that composing texts of any kind, specifically literary texts, is a vastly different activity from analyzing them. That way, it would be possible to analyze, in a Riffaterian way, all kinds of texts; the delimitation would arise only in the type of text that that analysis would produce. That is the distinction that Paul De Man makes, when referring to Riffaterre's method as containing a “separation [that] extends to the language of literary analysis, which is self-effacing, scrupulous and restricted, and the invention of literary composition: the agrammaticality of the literary text is not tolerated in the commentary” (De Man, 1981). According to De Man, for Riffaterre, the concept of agrammaticality - a kind of potentially subversive lexical free game - is one of the necessary conditions for having literariness. It is also a concept that is not tolerated in any other types of texts, such as literary commentary (one example would be Riffaterre's reading of Victor Hugo's poem). As such, the analytical text produced automatically generates and implies a fundamental distinction between literary and non-literary texts.

This concept could intersect with Dionysus's teachings on composition, which uses *close reading* of poetic passages to extract rhetorical (and not exclusively literary) teachings, following a model similar to the Riffaterian analysis. They are similar in the sense that both exclude from their analysis any allusions to the “author”, to the “circumstances of composition”, to the “order in which the poem was written”, focusing only on the words, their placement and the relationship between them. Both are throwing away the same allusions, but Riffaterre believes that their removal allows for a particular method of analyzing particular texts and extracting particular knowledge, while Dionysus believes that their removal allows one to look at texts devoid of any theory or method and thus extract practical knowledge. One is striving for specificity, the other for practicality.

However, it is not clear that the concept of agrammaticality itself is a sufficient condition to distinguish a literary text from a non-literary one, since such a concept only arises in a textual analysis that, in order to highlight the agrammaticality of a literary text, needs to use language that is not in itself agrammatical. The circularity of the agrammaticality argument presupposes that there are texts that are distinct from one another, and as such, demand different and particular approaches (i.e. Riffaterre’s method); therefore, self-justifying through its circularity. The question then arises whether agrammaticality is attributed to the poem thanks to Riffaterre's methodology, whether it is an essential constituent of the text, and whether or not it is specific to the literary text and independent of the applied methodological approach.

Dionysus' *close reading* raises the question of whether this agrammaticality can be recognized in other types of non-literary texts and whether a specific analytical methodology is necessary to obtain it. Do we need Riffaterian analysis to recognize agrammaticality in literary texts, or do we need agrammaticality to justify Riffaterian analysis, as well as the subsequent distinction between literary and non-literary texts? The problem lies again with the idea that literary texts are unique and distinct to the point of needing specific methodologies. A possible answer (the Dionysus answer) would be that it depends on the uses the reader gives to the texts and the objectives of those who use them. But more is needed to solve the question of how to judge which methods (and uses) are appropriate to apply, or whether any methods are needed at all. Are the methods that serve the reader's purposes the most appropriate, or the methods most faithful to the work? Or the methods that focus exclusively on the formalist dimension of the work, or those that focus on its content, context, and relationship with other literary and non-literary works? Or the methods that compare literary, historical, and rhetorical texts, as Dionysus does, to teach readers and pupils extra-literary purposes (e.g., civil oratory), or those who focus exclusively on the literariness and have no ambition to go beyond the text? Is it enough to divide between rhetorical readings, aesthetic readings, and semiosis?

## **5. Grammar and Agrammaticality**

The separation between the language of poetry and the “linear language of cognition and mimetic discourse” represents the foundational distinction on which Riffaterre's analytical enterprise is based. He rejects the use of realistic criteria in the interpretation of a text, arguing that comparing poems to reality leads to the tendency to argue about criteria that go beyond the text. Dionysus also came to a similar conclusion but by a different route. When

investigating works by authors on composition and the art of speech, Dionysus, disappointed with the results obtained, decides to turn his attention to nature.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter V of *De Compositione Verborum*, entitled *No grammatical order prescribed by Nature*, Dionysus seeks to demonstrate why he abandoned the investigation line that treated nature as the origin of speech and the best example to imitate. Dionysus initially felt that he should follow “mother nature” to the maximum and link parts of speech according to her promptings: “he should put nouns before verbs, indicating the substance first and then the accident”, thus exemplifying the order existing in the nature of things, in which “substance takes precedence of its accidents” (Halicarnassus, 1910). After citing examples from Homer where such an order manifests itself, Dionysus admits that, despite it being an attractive principle, it is not solid enough to ground the teaching of composition on, as any reader would only need to find in Homer's works an equally beautiful sentence ordered in the opposite way to refute this principle. Dionysus also discusses the correct placement of adverbs, whether older things should be inserted in the sentence first, and whether nouns should come before adjectives (Halicarnassus, 1910). For all these cases, Dionysus always found equally beautiful and charming counterexamples in the works of the great authors he analyzed.

At first glance, Dionysus' conclusions bring him closer to Riffaterre's concept of agrammaticality, by showing that there is no fixed order of words and assuming a free game of word placement, with this game being subordinate, for Dionysus, to aesthetic criteria such as beauty. However, the divergence between both authors never fell on the non-identification of agrammaticality in literary texts, but if agrammaticality is strictly found in this type of text. Dionysus, by using poetic, historical, and rhetorical texts to demonstrate certain qualities of high composition, is involuntarily demonstrating that the lexical free play present in poetry is not exclusive to poetry. This means that for Dionysus, the range of influences for a good composition extends beyond literary authors, not dispensing with the criterion of *mimesis*, only directing it towards the imitation of authors considered worthy of such admiration, regardless of the type of composition. The rejection of a grammatical order prescribed by nature means that Dionysus goes beyond Riffaterre's distinction between the language of poetry and the "linear" language of cognition and mimetic discourse: all types of discourse, for Dionysus, involve a lexical game that can be identified, analyzed, learned and applied in different contexts. In Dionysus, there are no disciplinary boundaries as rigid as in Riffaterre: it is possible to identify and imitate ways of ordering words from literary texts and apply them in the composition of rhetorical texts, for example. This could mean that Dionysus' rhetorical approach to texts can be compatible with Riffaterre's method since he is focusing on prescribing ways of crafting texts, while Riffaterre's is focused on analyzing them. Even though its compatibility is not in question, the question regarding its utility and relevance in relation to one another remains.

When it comes to rhetoric teachings, it could be claimed there is little that can be gained from adding Riffaterre's analysis; the same could be said about adding Dionysus' rhetorical teachings to Riffaterre's analytical approach. However, when the teaching of literature is in

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<sup>2</sup> “So I desisted from this inquiry, and falling back upon my own resources proceeded to consider whether I could find some starting-point indicated by nature itself, since nature is generally accepted as the best first principle in every operation and every inquiry. So applying myself to certain lines of investigation, I was beginning to think that the plan was making fair progress, when I became aware that my path of progress was leading me in a quite different direction, and not towards the goal which I sought and which I felt I must attain; and so I gave up the attempt” (Halicarnassus, 1910).

question, and not its composition in specific or its analysis in particular, it could be argued that both approaches combined, but not necessarily mixed, could offer a richer understanding of the universals and particulars regarding literary texts. Reconciling both approaches suggests the possibility of cognitive gain, nonetheless, such an inclusive approach would never manage to dispel the chronic tendency to fall back on subjectivity as a possible criticism. Subjectivity remains a challenge to be overcome when it comes to teaching in the literary world, a result above all of the scientification of the humanities, whose approach requires a universal method for teaching, evaluating, and approaching the greatest number of texts, in the most objective way possible, regardless of the author, the work or even the teacher; the risk, however, is to overlook all the details a text could reveal in the methodless interaction one has with it. Even if the risk is to fall into an interpretation that is as subjective as it is erroneous, it can be argued that one of the purposes of teaching literature is not to necessarily teach a specific method, but to orient students' approaches so as not to fall into the temptation of extreme subjectivity or generic or underdeveloped interpretations.

## 6. Conclusion - Theory As Reading and Practice

At a certain point in his work, Dionysus rejects most of the existing manuals of rhetoric and dialectics for not having adequately dealt with the selection and order of words;<sup>3</sup> he rejects, too, all self-proclaimed teachers who fail to properly apply the prescriptions advanced in their manuals;<sup>4</sup> and dismisses those who defend the essentiality of what they write to the art of composition but are unable to see what makes composition attractive and beautiful.<sup>5</sup> Dionysus also adds that he invokes dialectic manuals to prevent anyone from considering that these manuals contain anything important, or relevant, to the study of composition.<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of his work, he declares that “no rules contained in rhetorical manuals can suffice to make experts of those who are determined to dispense with study and practice.” (Halicarnassus, 1910). This statement serves to reinforce his original proposition, that even though the ancients (poets, historians, philosophers, and rhetoricians of ancient Greece) had rules and principles governing their composition, for a student to become good at composition, it is not enough to acquire such rules and principles from manuals, but from the close study of the great works themselves. The question here lies in the prescriptive dimension. What makes textbooks on dialectics and rhetoric not worthy of prescription, but *certain* literary and rhetorical works by ancient Greek authors worthy of prescription? The answer seems to lie in the approach applied to the texts used.

When Dionysus claims that rhetoric and dialectic manuals are inadequate, he is arguing that there are no prescriptive shortcuts that can discard the act of careful reading of texts where the best examples of composition are found. The idea that it is enough to read rhetoric and

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<sup>3</sup> “The subject has occurred to but few of all the ancients who have composed manuals of rhetoric or dialectic, and by none has it been, to the best of my belief, accurately or adequately treated up to the present time” (Halicarnassus, 1910).

<sup>4</sup> “But why wonder at these, when even those who call themselves professors of philosophy and publish manuals of dialectic fail so wretchedly in the arrangement of their words that I shrink from even mentioning their names?” (Halicarnassus, 1910).

<sup>5</sup> “And yet some of them claimed to make a serious study of this department also, as being absolutely essential to good writing, and wrote some manuals on the grouping of the parts of speech. But they all went far astray from the truth and never even dreamt what it is that makes composition attractive and beautiful” (Halicarnassus, 1910).

<sup>6</sup> “I have cited those manuals on dialectic not because I think it necessary to have them, but in order to prevent anyone from supposing that they contain anything of real service for the present inquiry, and from regarding it as important to study them” (Halicarnassus, 1910).



dialectic manuals (as they contain all the necessary wisdom to know how to compose) is incorrect. If there is nothing in the manuals of rhetoric or dialectics that allows the student to be exempt from study and practice, this means that what is essential is not the prescriptive manuals, theories, and rigorous methodologies, but the kind of practice and study that Dionysus exemplifies in his work. If one follows his reasoning, no manuals of rhetoric or dialectics are necessary because the ancient authors had their own rules and principles manifested in their work: it is only necessary to prescribe to the students the reading and imitation of the ancient authors. This way, through “study and practice”, students will incorporate the rules and principles of composition of ancient authors. Rules and principles are not obtained *a priori*, but *a posteriori*, during reading and practice. Dionysus does not need to describe this practice in depth because it is inherent to anyone willing to learn any kind of skill or knowledge proficiently. This practice allows the reader to identify broad characteristics of successful and not-so-successful writers, plus the particulars of each author.

The reason that Dionysus identifies the rules and principles of authors that he considers worthy of imitation is so that other readers will abide by those same principles. However, to what extent does prescribing rules and principles applied by specific authors not constitute the perpetuation of a particular style of composition to the detriment of another equally legitimate imitation? To what extent does this prescription for composition not come close to Riffaterre's analytical prescription, which seeks to present the ideal (and specific) method of interpreting and analyzing a text? In both cases, the claim to universality is discarded: Dionysus presents an interpretation based on a limited number of ancient Greek authors, and Riffaterre a methodology that prioritizes certain dimensions of the text to the detriment of others (while also claiming a distinction between literary and non-literary texts). But while Riffaterre governs his analysis by a set of axioms, Dionysus is clear and explicit in declaring that he does not follow any axioms and only draws conclusions from experience:

And let not anyone be surprised at my assuming that there are two distinct objects in style, and at my separating beauty from charm; nor let him think it strange if I hold that a piece of composition may possess charm but not beauty, or beauty without charm. *Such is the verdict of actual experience; I am introducing no novel axiom.* (Halicarnassus, 1910)

While not claiming universality, Dionysus roots his results in the unfiltered reading experience. The grammar that Dionysus prescribes in *De Compositione Verborum* is supported by the weight of examples, as well as by the strength of direct analysis, not filtered by any particular methodology. By crossing the authors that he considers the best, Dionysus extracts the conclusions and presents them, without any intention of arguing in favor of any method of obtaining them. The task of carefully reading texts, comparing them, and pointing out conclusions can be described as a universal approach that anyone has *a priori* when relating to a set of texts. Dionysus does not need to be equipped with any methodological baggage to be able to analyze and treat texts in the way he did. This is one of the sharp contrasts with the Riffaterian analysis. Their close readings of poems are similar enough to pose the question of the need to apply any theory regarding the texts being analyzed since the main stance applied in analyzing them (*close reading*) is shared between an author that holds a theoretical approach (Riffaterre) and one who does not (Dionysus).

As much as theory and reading are aligned in Riffaterre, they cannot divert Paul De Man's suspicion that “theory is being controlled by this pragmatic aim rather than by the necessities inherent in its object” (De Man, 1981). It could be argued that Riffaterre is seeking a

theoretical approach that goes beyond close reading, therefore justifying its necessity and uniqueness by the results it generates. However, Rifaterre cannot, in practice, detach from close reading as a practice that spreads beyond the literary field. That is where Dionysus' *De Compositione Verborum* comes into play. Although in Dionysus the aim of his analysis is grammatical prescription, this purpose does not lead him to develop a specific methodology. His goals are the *unfiltered result of an unbiased reading and analysis* of those he considers worthy of imitation. He willingly makes his enterprise completely dependent on his findings, and not his findings dependent on the theoretical method decided to apply *a priori*. This weak approach to texts (weak in terms of *not* holding a predetermined theoretical framework) consists of attentive reading, comparing texts, testing hypotheses, coping with feedback, plus the handling of any setbacks and breakthroughs inherent in the act of interpretation and composition. This approach is methodologically free, requiring “only” as necessary conditions the attentive reading of works of art, the iterative practice of composition, and time.

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