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SEMIOTICS AND INTERPRETATION:  
BEFORE OR AFTER THE FACT?

Umberto Eco's *Semiotics  
and the Philosophy of Language*

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*Spanish and Comparative Literature, Iowa*

Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. Indiana University Press, 1984. 242 pp.

Umberto Eco's *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* engages readers in a discussion that is at once more and less ambitious than its title suggests. For many readers, the phrase "philosophy of language" will serve to designate those writings associated with Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Yet Eco devotes only eight and seven pages respectively to an examination of the work of Hilary Putnam and of Saul Kripke; only once or twice each does he mention an idea put forward by Carnap, Quine, Russell, Searle, or Wittgenstein. Parts of the book do facilitate a future encounter between semiotics and analytic philosophy, however, while the book as a whole contributes immediately to clarifying and developing some of the most fundamental areas of semiotic inquiry. Indeed, the most ambitious aspect of *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* surfaces as an attempt to wrest control of a series of key concepts from those who would wish to pursue semiotics exclusively as a formalist enterprise. I believe that the book generally succeeds in this endeavor because its arguments may be seen to accord methodological privilege to a semiotics of signification over a semiotics of communication: "A sign is not only something which stands for something else; it is also something that can and must be interpreted. The criterion of interpretability allows us to start from a given sign to cover, step by step, the whole universe of semiosis" (Eco 1984:46).

Eco never asserts explicitly in this book that he now considers that a semiotics of signification should be made to govern a semiotics

of communication. That he has finally come to enact this view in his most recent work, however, need provoke little surprise. Of course, in *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), even as he stresses the interdependence of a theory of codes and a theory of sign production, Eco exercises great care in attempting to establish the relationship between a semiotics of signification and a semiotics of communication on the basis of their relative autonomy and lack of hierarchy. Yet there occur several moments in *Theory* in which such happy relations verge upon collapse.

Only in a most unsatisfying manner, for example, does Eco attempt to resolve in his last chapter the tension created within *Theory* as a whole by the different notions of agency and subjectivity that inform the theory of codes and the theory of sign production. Despite the overall strength of Eco's treatment of the semiotic problem of reference, moreover, difficult and unanswered questions arise if the attempt is made fully to coordinate the inferentially open model of cultural reference that is postulated by a theory of codes, and the inferentially closed model of cultural reference that is necessitated by a theory of communicative mentions. Finally, within a theory of sign production, Eco claims that aesthetic textuality can be defined *essentially* on the basis of *inherent* properties of ambiguity and self-focus (1976:262–276). From the point of view of a theory of codes, however, this claim sits uncomfortably alongside Eco's notions that the identification and interpretation of texts results *culturally* from a *variable* interplay of coded and uncoded abductions (1976:129–142).

The impossibility of allowing a semiotics of signification and a semiotics of communication to enjoy equal status within a general theory of semiotics derives from the incompatibility of the concepts of language and subjectivity that each can usually be seen to embody. On the one hand, at least two assumptions seem integral to a semiotics of communication: "One is that language should be conceived as a more or less transparent 'medium' for communication. The other is that the subject, whether as 'addresser' or 'addressee,' should be assumed to be a self-sufficient 'individual,' given prior to language, standing outside language, and so able to intend and communicate a message *through* it" (Easthope 1983:10–11). Even when authorial intention is dismissed as the self-sufficient source of textual meaning, or even when subjects are considered as capable of manifesting themselves in discourse only as actantial roles or textual strategies, semiotic models of communication still tend to enforce the view that texts work through — but are not worked by — semiosis. Indeed, if the concept of "the author" as the source of meaning is rejected methodologically, semiotic models of communication usually install a peculiarly high-flown concept of "the text" in its place; so it is that "the text itself" is construed as its

own author and is empowered atavistically to intend its own meanings. On the other hand, a semiotics of signification may be seen to entail wholly opposite notions of language and subjectivity:

Text interpretation is possible because even linguistic signs are not ruled by sheer equivalence (synonymy and definition); they are not based upon the idea of identity but are governed by an inferential schema; they are, therefore, infinitely interpretable. Texts say more than one supposes, they can always say something new, precisely because signs are the starting point of a process interpretation which leads to an infinite series of progressive consequences. Signs are open devices, not stiff armors prescribing a bi-conditional identity (Eco 1981:44).

The most reliable grasp that semiotics can have on . . . subjective activity is the one provided by a theory of codes: *the subject of any semiotic inquiry being no more than the semiotic subject of semiosis, that is, the historical and social result of the segmentation of the world that a survey of the Semantic Space makes available*. This subject is a way of looking at the world and can only be known as a way of segmenting the universe and of coupling semantic units with expression-units. . . (Eco 1976:315).

It is precisely the failure to subordinate the semiotics of communication to the semiotics of signification, moreover, that explains in part the various methodological and theoretical aporiae that are encountered in Eco's *The Role of the Reader* (Eco 1979). Eco judges, for example, that a "closed" text is one which aims at "pulling the reader along a predetermined path" and so is "immoderately open to every possible interpretation" (1979:8); because it attempts to exclude potential readers from having any control over the textual process of producing meaning, a "closed" text is thus said to risk losing entirely its ability to guarantee that readers "correctly" interpret its encoded meanings. In contrast, Eco maintains that an "open" text outlines "a 'closed' project of its Model Reader as a component of its structural strategy" and so "cannot afford whatever interpretation" (1979:9); because it surrenders to potential readers some control over the textual process of producing meaning, an "open" text is thus said to retain much of its ability to guarantee that readers "correctly" interpret its encoded meanings.

If Eco must be seen in *Role* as having privileged either a theory of codes or a theory of sign production, surely it would seem that he has privileged a theory of sign production: "the reader is strictly defined by the lexical and the syntactical organization of the text: the text is nothing else but the semantic-pragmatic production of its own Model Reader" (1979:10). Yet it is perhaps fairer to hold that Eco has again attempted to give measured consideration to both semiotic perspectives, but that he has done so by isolating semantic and pragmatic concerns: "*first* the analysis of the text and its 'fixed code,' *then* the analysis of its various pragmatic functions" (Bennett 1983:10). Whether or not he has weighted equally a semiotics of

communication and a semiotics of signification, however, it remains clear that the formal distinction between "open" and "closed" texts, as well as the paradoxes of this typology, arise from Eco's having posited two different semiotics as governing the processes of the production and the interpretation of texts.

Indeed, a semiotics of communication, which assumes the self-identity of texts with their meanings, informs Eco's conception of textual production, while a semiotics of signification, which assumes the inferential generation of meanings on the basis of interactions between texts and readers in determinate contexts, informs his conception of textual interpretation. The necessary result in *Role* is that any text must be conceived of as embodying an *essential* code (whether "open" or "closed") which only later is said to be subject to *variable* interpretations by readers. This conclusion, however, goes mightily against the grain of Eco's attempt in *Theory* to overcome the traditional separation of semantics and pragmatics by developing an encyclopedic notion of the sememe and a revised semantic model that inserts "into the semantic representation all coded connotations depending on corresponding denotations as well as *contextual* and *circumstantial* markers" (1976:105).

Under the profile of Eco's revised semantic model in *Theory*, any text should appear as a potentially super sign function that depends for its meanings on the particular codes that are brought to bear upon it in determinate contexts of interpretation. These codes cannot be conceived of as existing *in* the text; for, on a given occasion, they rather provide the means by which the text may be constituted as a particular plane of expression and, as such, may be correlated to a particular set of cultural units and/or nebulae as a plane of content. It is this recognition among others that has led Tony Bennett (1983), for example, to prefer to speak, not of the "interpretation" of texts, but of the "productive activation" of texts. As semiotic entities, neither texts nor readers can be said to exist "in themselves"; rather, they acquire identities and capacities as a function of their inscription within various "reading formations" whose assembled discourses articulate the codes through which particular expressions can be correlated to particular contents. Of course, the shape of reading formations may change from context to context; the number of reading formations that may be available in specific contexts cannot be calculated in advance of concrete acts of reading; reading formations are heterogeneous constructions that can be seen to include contradictory discourses. Insofar as reading formations are defined as sets "of intersecting discourses that productively activate a given body of texts and the relations between them in a specific way" (Bennett 1983:5), however, the concept of "reading formations" enables critics to account for how it is that inferential possibilities may be delimited within specific contexts of

interpretation. Furthermore, the notion that "interpretation" consists of "the productive activation" of texts already suggests, as I shall claim later, that alleged differences between the foundations of a semiotics of communication and a semiotics of signification cannot withstand scrutiny.

Contrary to his own theoretical premises in *Role*, Eco's analysis of Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1979:125–143) manages to demonstrate the validity of these last formulations: "what is presented as the 'fixed code' turns out, on Eco's own admission, to be a *relational code* located, not in the text of *Les Mystères de Paris* itself, but in its relations to the 'cultivated' codes supposedly shared by the author and his contemporary critics" (Bennett 1983:10). If this is so, then Eco's analysis of *Les Mystères de Paris* may be said to encourage the view that possibilities for textual communication depend upon possibilities for textual interpretation. I am not suggesting here that communication should be considered as a process of governed semiosis while interpretation should be considered as a process of ungoverned semiosis. Rather, I am suggesting that both processes should be seen as governed precisely by the same semiotic means, that is, by the workings and effects of discursive formations. Just as possibilities for interpreting sign vehicles are circumscribed in particular contexts because the codes that constitute specific discursive formations functionally delimit the inferential potential for unlimited semiosis (Bennett), so also possibilities for communicating meanings are circumscribed in particular contexts because the codes that constitute specific discursive formations functionally delimit the inferential potential for unlimited semiosis. This statement is one way of affirming that, within a given context of semiosis, only those sign vehicles which can be interpreted *in some way* are capable of being seen as communicating meanings *at all*. Consistently to view the conditions of textual communication in this manner, however, demands from a general theory of semiotics something that is unavailable either in *Role* or in *Theory*, namely, the methodological subordination of a semiotics of communication to a semiotics of signification. So it is that Eco forfeits the opportunity to expound a crucial insight that his analysis of *Les Mystères de Paris* nevertheless permits: insofar as it is through the agency of a particular set of codes that a text "in fact" is constituted as communicating a particular set of meanings, it must be recognized that the semiotic activity of interpretation begins, not after "the fact," but before "the fact."

Hence, what is at stake in the decision to accord methodological privilege to a semiotics of signification over a semiotics of communication is the ability to consider inferential processes generally, and abductive processes particularly, as constitutive of every semiotic situation. The foundations of a semiotics of signifi-

cation in the notion of abductive inference are already well established in *Theory*. Eco has also provided in *Theory* an abductive component for a semiotics of communication by granting the concept of *ratio difficilis* a place within all the modes of sign production, and by making it especially important for a theory of text production (1976:218, 245–298). Yet semioticians frequently ignore the possibilities that are created by this concept for ascribing an inferential basis to the theory of sign production as a whole. For example, while the concept of *ratio difficilis* may belong strictly to a semiotics of communication because it describes the type/token ratio for certain kinds of sign vehicles, it maintains a deep affinity with a semiotics of signification because it registers an interpretive relationship between sign producers and something that is to be represented as much as it does an expressive relationship between sign producers and an eventual representation:

There is a case of *ratio difficilis* when an expression-token is directly accorded to its content, whether because the corresponding expression-type does not exist as yet or because the expression-type is identical to the content-type. In other words, there is a *ratio difficilis* when the *expression-type coincides with the sememe* conveyed by the expression-token. . . . One could say that in cases of *ratio difficilis* the nature of the expression is motivated by the nature of the content. . . . The sign producer has a fairly clear idea of *what* he would like to 'say', but he does not know *how* to say it; and he cannot know *how* to do so until he has discovered *precisely what* to say. The lack of a definite content-type makes it impossible to find an expression-type, while the lack of an appropriate expression device makes the content vague and inarticulable (1976:183, 188).

From this point of view, the position of sign producers who eventually produce signs according to a *ratio difficilis* is conceptualized by Eco initially as that of sign interpreters who must adapt or invent the codes that will enable them to "read" a continuum of experience which has so far been segmented or shaped insufficiently for representing a specific content in a specific situation. If *ratio difficilis* is an admittedly crucial concept for understanding the production of texts, therefore, it would seem that it is an equally crucial concept for understanding the interpretation of texts. It is in this light that it may ultimately be said to foster a reexamination of the place of inference within a theory of sign production.

No doubt the majority would agree that the concept of *ratio difficilis* contributes to an understanding of the process of interpreting texts if one thinks of the expression device that is *Finnegans Wake* not only as a set of meanings communicated by Joyce to his readers, but also as a discourse that represents the result of an attempt to interpret some strange new cultural content for which existing social codes are inadequate. One would probably agree that such is also the case if one thinks of the expression device that is a critical essay on *Finnegans Wake*, not only as a set of meanings

communicated by a Joycean scholar to his or her colleagues and students, but also as a discourse that represents the result of an attempt to interpret some strange new cultural content for which existing social codes are inadequate. I would argue, moreover, that such cases should be considered by a general theory of semiotics as demonstrating in principle the process by which all acts of textual interpretation are governed.

The interpretation of texts that can be more readily worked by existing social codes than *Finnegans Wake*, for example, may not always confront authors and readers with a "strange new cultural content," but, from a theoretical point of view, the process of interpreting such texts is not any less inferential than it is in the case of texts for which interpretation provisionally requires the invention of new social codes. The difference between situations in which texts are interpreted largely with or without the aid of existing social codes involves the familiarity and extent of the semiotic labor that must be performed in order to produce an interpretation. The possibility explored by Eco in *Role* that texts of popular culture (I would argue that all texts generally) may serve as the occasion for an unspecified number of interpretations at least makes it clear that, whenever interpretive codes abound, inferential labor is still necessary if for no other reason than that there exists a relative surplus of codes among which interpreters may and must make various selections.

Of course, I have not forgotten that a valid and useful concept of *ratio facilis* is available against which to contrast *ratio difficilis*: "there is a case of *ratio facilis* when an expression-token is accorded to an expression-type, duly recorded by an expression-system and, as such, foreseen by a given code" (1976:183). Yet codes were not created, along with rocks, trees, and bugs, as "givens" of the world in which humans live; because the codes that foresee cases of *ratio facilis* themselves have had to be invented through acts of *ratio difficilis*, cases of *ratio facilis* may be said to constitute culturally stabilized cases of *ratio difficilis*. Considerations of content, moreover, are by no means absent from cases of *ratio facilis*, despite Eco's failure to mention either content or content types in his definition. In *ratio facilis*, it is the ready-to-hand existence of a definite content type, one which has been established culturally through earlier processes of segmenting and shaping a content continuum, that makes an expression type so apparently quick to find, and the content itself so apparently easy to interpret and to articulate.

What sign producers and sign interpreters do in cases of *ratio facilis*, therefore, should not be considered as merely according expression tokens to expression types. If this were so, they would later have to be seen as relying upon *natural* relations of identity between expression types and content types in order to



communicate or productively to activate contents. Rather, in according expression tokens to expression types in *ratio facilis*, sign producers and sign interpreters are able to communicate and to activate contents by invoking already institutionalized, that is, *habitual*, relations of inference between expression types and content types. This affirmation may also serve as a reminder that discrimination between cases of *ratio facilis* and *ratio difficilis* does not depend on any inherent properties of signs; such discrimination depends instead on the contexts in which, and for which, sign functions are viewed as produced or as interpreted.

The pertinence of the concept of *ratio difficilis* for understanding the interpretation of texts and the relevance of content considerations for understanding the process of *ratio facilis* are among the reasons that make it necessary to recognize that inferential processes entirely inform, not only the semiotics of signification, but also the semiotics of communication. Such reasons also suggest precisely why it is necessary to subordinate a semiotics of communication to a semiotics of signification within a general theory of semiotics: while not discounting that communication can occur, the only view consistent with predication of the abductive nature of semiosis is that conditions of communication ultimately depend upon the various inferential possibilities for signifying meanings that are afforded by conditions of interpretation in determinate contexts. Obviously, among such inferential possibilities for signifying meanings conditions are to be found that permit the invention of new sign functions as well as conditions that permit the reproduction of already coded sign functions.

What often blocks recognition of the ability of such inferential concepts as *ratio difficilis* to resonate throughout the semiotics of communication is a single assumption: namely, that, once an expression device has been produced, it then maintains a relationship of equivalence and identity with its shaped or reshaped content such that its ability to communicate this content to potential interpreters is guaranteed. At best, this assumption exercises a tenacious hold on semiotic theory because it seems to enable semioticians to account for cases of "successful" communication. At worst, this assumption exercises such a hold, both because it derives authority from Saussure, and because it affords semioticians the convenience of disregarding the fact that the inferential foundation of a theory of sign production makes necessary rigorous analyses of social contexts in order to explain how it is that texts have communicated, or can communicate, particular meanings. The theoretical problem that must be solved in order to answer the question of the relationship between the semiotics of communication and the semiotics of signification, therefore, is indeed that of the antagonism between a notion of the apparent determinacy of the

sign function, as viewed from the standpoint of communication, and a notion of the apparent indeterminacy of the sign function, as viewed from the standpoint of interpretation.

So it is that Eco's stated purpose in writing *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* "is to show that these two notions are not incompatible":

If one thinks of the more trivial and current notion of linguistic sign, one cannot match a theory of semiosis as indefinite interpretation with a 'doctrine of signs'; in this case, one has to choose either a theory of the sign or a theory of semiosis (or of the significant practice, of the communicative processes, of textual and discursive activity). However, the main purpose of this book is to show that such an alternative is a misleading one: the sign is the origin of the semiotic processes, and there is no opposition between the 'nomadism' of semiosis (and of interpretive activity) and the alleged stiffness and immobility of the sign. The concept of sign must be disentangled from its trivial identification with the idea of coded equivalence and identity; the semiotic process of interpretation is present at the very core of the concept of sign (1984:1).

Eco seeks to validate these assertions throughout seven chapters that are individually devoted to the discussion of a concept or cluster of concepts for which, in Eco's view, the semiotic study of texts must still provide more rigorous formulation: signs, dictionaries and encyclopediae, metaphors, symbols, codes, isotopies, and mirrors. Eco pursues, moreover, a similar argumentative strategy in each chapter. After opening discussion by indicating at some length the stakes for semiotic theory in the contemporary debate that surrounds a given concept or set of concepts, he returns to one or more episodes in the history of the philosophy of language — regularly to the Greeks, the Schoolmen, and Peirce, and occasionally to the Rationalists, the Romantics, Saussure, and the analytic philosophers — in order to introduce new (old) considerations that bring the present debate into sharper focus. This sharpening of focus then facilitates the overturning of various conceptual constructions that assume that semiotic relations are based on "coded equivalence and identity." Each chapter ends with a set of reformulations and conclusions in which there can be detected a methodological privileging of a semiotics of signification over a semiotics of communication in the interest of presenting a general semiotic theory of the concept under consideration.

In chapter four, which asks "What is a symbol?" (1984:130), for example, Eco takes a cue from Firth's *Symbols Public and Private* (1973) in order to pose the problem of defining the term "symbol" as one of distinguishing between properly semiotic and properly symbolic activities. He proceeds to criticize such thinkers as Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Marx (by way of Goux), Todorov, Saussure, and Hjelmslev for their tendency to identify the symbolic with the semiotic. Here, it is claimed, this tendency results either in the

flattening of "the relation between expression and content by considering only the internal logic of signifiers" (p. 134), or in an attempt to distinguish between signs and symbols on the basis that only symbols elicit inferential responses (pp. 136–137). In both cases, the semiotic is wrongly forced to be seen as structured through relations of equivalence and identity. At the end of these criticisms, Eco introduces his thesis that, "the genuine instances of a symbolic mode seem to be those where neither the sender nor the addressee really wants or is able to outline a *definite interpretation*" (p. 137, my emphasis).

Eco then reviews various earlier attempts to define the symbolic mode in light of this thesis. While he grants that Freud is aware that dream symbols are not endowed with preestablished meaning, he judges that, "Freud is undoubtedly looking for 'correct' interpretations of dreams, and in this sense his oneiric symbols are not constitutively vague" (p. 140). Because Eco believes that the symbolic and the aesthetic are made to coincide by Romantic aestheticians, and that these terms are thus used to define each other in a circular fashion, he holds that, "Romantic aesthetics does not explain the semiotic strategy by which, in the poetic use of languages, particular meanings are conveyed; it only describes the effect that a work of art can produce" (p. 142). Hegel subsequently receives a more positive evaluation from Eco, precisely because the symbolic and the aesthetic are not conflated as terms in *The Philosophy of Fine Arts*: "Hegel's whole argument is extraordinarily lucid, at least in distinguishing the symbolic from the aesthetic at large as well as from the rhetoric. Hegel helps us in outlining a symbolic mode as a specific semiotic phenomenon in which a given expression is correlated to a *content nebula*" (p. 144).

Were Eco to have stopped his foraging in the history of the philosophy of language at this point, of course, it could not be argued that his discussion of the symbolic mode contributes to the elaboration of a theoretical perspective in which the semiotics of communication might be seen as governed by the semiotics of signification. Indeed, the position that a text might produce and guarantee its own sufficient relation to a content nebula, and that it might qualify on this basis alone as a text of the symbolic mode, would again require that the relation between textual expression and textual content be conceived of according to relations of equivalence and identity.

But Eco carries his argument a step further in this chapter by comparing medieval Christian and Kabalistic modes of interpreting biblical writings. The Christian theologian responds to such texts, Eco maintains, by eventually finding "a way of controlling (by an allegorical code) the free interpretation of the (symbolic and uncoded) nature of the Books" (p. 150). Eco considers that the Kabalist, however, foregoes the opportunity to privilege a single

code, and thus to reduce such texts to a single meaning, because, "For the Kabbalist, the fact that God expresses Himself, even though His utterances are beyond any human insight, is more important than any specific and coded meaning His words can convey" (p. 153). Eco's comparison here ultimately suggests that the instantiation of the symbolic mode is by no means guaranteed by the operations of an intrinsically "symbolic" text, but rather, that its instantiation depends heavily upon interpretive strategies that permit the correlation of textual expressions to content nebulae on the basis of areas of functionally tolerated vagueness within historically specific codes.

So it is that, when Eco enlists the "open" texts of French Symbolism and Joycean poetics to serve as paradigmatic examples, his subsequent attempt to describe the specific semiotic strategy through which the symbolic mode may be produced is able to avoid the assumption that a given textual expression inherently signifies a given content or content nebula by virtue of relations of equivalence and identity. Indeed, Eco holds that the symbolic mode arises, not as the result of certain signs or groups of signs that biconditionally represent "symbolic" meaning, but rather, as the result of certain cases of textual implicature that can only be recognized as such *within specific contexts of interpretation*:

The textual implicature signaling the appearance of the symbolic mode depends on the presentation of a sentence, of a word, of an object, of an action that, according to the precoded narrative or discursive frames, to the acknowledged rhetorical rules, to the most common linguistic usages, *should not* have the relevance it acquires within that context. . . . The interpreter feels a *surplus* of signification since he guesses that the maxims of relevance, manner, or quantity have not been violated by chance or by mistake (p. 158).

As a textual modality, therefore, the symbolic comes into existence in concrete situations in which culturally authorized interpretants are not provided by specific codes for specific expressions (p. 161).

This view permits two conclusions. As one might readily expect, it suggests that the ability to interpret sign vehicles in a symbolic mode depends wholly on the functional inability of specific codes to stabilize certain inferential possibilities for meaning within determinate contexts of interpretation. As one might perhaps less readily expect, it also suggests that the ability to communicate meanings in a symbolic mode depends wholly on the functional inability of specific codes to stabilize certain inferential possibilities for meaning within determinate contexts of interpretation. Precisely insofar as it is thus stipulated that the instantiation of a symbolic mode of sign production and the instantiation of a symbolic mode of sign interpretation depend equally on the inferential possibilities for meaning that are established by specific contexts of interpretation, Eco's view of the symbolic mode can be said to entail the subordi-

nation of a semiotics of communication to a semiotics of signification in the interest of a general semiotic theory of the symbolic mode.

Anyone who reads or rereads Eco's chapter on the symbol after reading my summary here will discover that Eco's methodological perspective is not quite so straightforward as I have just portrayed it. Indeed, the chapter is flawed by an occasional lack of clarity and rigor. For example, Eco falls back on a dualistic construction of the general field of semiotics, as elaborated in *Theory*, at a crucial moment in his argument: "According to a typology of sign production (see Eco 1976, 3.6) there is an actualization of the symbolic mode when, through a process of *invention*, a textual element which could be interpreted as a mere *imprint*, or a *replica*, or a *stylization* is produced. But it can also be identified, by a sudden process of recognition, as the *projection*, by *ratio difficilis*, of a content nebula" (p. 162). Furthermore, after telling readers at one point that "*not everything can be a symbol . . . [because] a symbol has to be textually produced . . . [by] a specific semiotic strategy*" (p. 157), Eco remarks that, "The symbolic is thus not only a mode of producing a text, but also a mode for interpreting *every* text — through a pragmatic decision: 'I want to interpret this text symbolically'" (p. 163, my emphasis). It is because of apparent contradictions such as this one that I have said that a call for the methodological subordination of a semiotics of communication to a semiotics of signification remains only an implicit call within *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*.

Nevertheless, the necessity and force of this implication can be legitimately felt throughout Eco's discussion of the symbolic mode. From a perspective in which the semiotics of signification governs the semiotics of communication, no contradiction need arise between the statement that not every sign or text can be a symbol and the statement that every sign or text can be interpreted symbolically. Indeed, according to this perspective, signs or texts should be judged as capable or incapable of establishing the symbolic mode, not on the basis of any inherent properties of such signs or texts, but rather, on the basis of the ability or inability of specific codes to circumscribe, with greater or lesser precision, the inferential possibilities for meaning that such signs or texts may be said to enjoy in and for determinate contexts.

Each of Eco's other chapters also contributes to a general view of semiotics in which the semiotics of communication is subordinated to the semiotics of signification; each does so, however, with a varying degree of success. For example, chapter six on isotopy largely succeeds in this respect because Eco shows that, in the constitution of textual isotopies, "everything depends on the topic hypothesis" (p. 198), which is "as such not expressed by the text"

(p. 189): "Indeed, isotopy refers almost always to constancy in going in a direction that a text exhibits *when submitted to rules of interpretive coherence*" (p. 201, my emphasis). Furthermore, the third chapter elaborates upon Eco's earlier attempt in *Role* to explain the concept of metaphor in terms of the concept of metonymy, and so is able to avoid basing a description of metaphoric processes on relations of substitution (equivalence) and identity: "The success of a metaphor is a function of the sociocultural format of the interpreting subjects' encyclopedia. In this perspective, metaphors are produced solely on the basis of a rich cultural framework, on the basis, that is, of a universe of content that is already organized into networks of interpretants, which decide (semiotically) the identities and differences of properties" (p. 127).

I consider, however, that Eco's discussions in chapters five and seven of the concepts of code and of mirrors respectively do not fulfill the promise that they might otherwise be said to embody for facilitating recognition of the need for allowing the semiotics of communication to be governed by the semiotics of signification. While he acknowledges in his chapter on codes that "we are in trouble when we try to distinguish correlation from instruction, s-codes from codes" (p. 184), Eco does not sufficiently develop the impulse within his own argument to discard the validity of the distinction between s-codes and codes from an epistemological point of view. Similarly, while the anti-Lacanian thrust of his discussion of mirrors should be applauded generally for its pinpointing of problems in the conceptualization of the "mirror stage," Eco nevertheless assumes an anti-Peircean (and anti-inferential) stance when he makes such statements as:

The mirror image (even when it is taken as an antecedent) is present in the presence of a *referent which cannot be absent*. It never refers to remote consequents. The relationship between object and image is the relationship between two presences, without any possible mediations. The consequent (by virtue of the prosthesis action of the mirror) comes into the radius of the interpreter's perceptibility (p. 216).

Peirce, of course, holds that there is no such thing as immediate perception; in his view, perception is itself governed by inference. In any case, even if it is granted that the mirror is a prosthetic device, it is possible eventually to show that some of the corollaries that Eco draws from this statement (for example, "the mirror image refers only to one content as it has a primary relationship with the referent," p. 216) cannot be sustained on various semiotic grounds.

Eco offers the general theoretical arguments that justify his reformulations of such semiotic concepts primarily in the first two chapters of his book. Chapter I, "Signs," undertakes to deconstruct the linguistic, or Saussurean, version of the notion of sign by recovering the inferential foundations of the general notion of sign.

Eco's discussion ranges from consideration of contemporary linguistics and semantics to consideration of ancient and medieval philosophy of language. Drawing heavily upon work that he has published previously in several forums beginning in 1980, he sketches the history of the wedding of a theory of sign to a theory of language as it develops out of the Stoic and post-Stoic traditions and as it is finally sealed in Augustine's *De Magistro*. Eco's obvious interest here is that of playing off earlier formulations regarding the sign against a number of such formulations that are derived from contemporary linguistics. As heralded in his introduction, moreover, his immediate concern remains that of undoing the notion that may be said to constitute the legacy of the marriage between a theory of sign and a theory of language: namely, the notion that signs are based on relations of coded equivalence and identity.

For example, as he has stated more economically on another occasion, Eco holds that Saussure's view of the arbitrariness and biconditionality of the sign requires signs to be conceived of as "bastions of identity, equivalence, and forced unification" (1981:38). That is to say, if Saussure duly considers that the relation between signs and the world is indeterminate from an epistemological point of view, he unduly considers that the relation between signifiers and signifieds is determinate from this same point of view. Here "the sign, ruled by the law of definition and synonymy, represents the ideological construct of a metaphysics of identity in which signifier and signified are biconditionally linked" (1981:38). Against this and similar views, Eco argues that, far from maintaining relations with their meanings that can be specified by a problematic of equivalence and identity, signs maintain relations to their meanings that can be specified through an abductive model of sign. The ability of abductive signs to convey meanings depends, of course, on the inferential possibilities for signification that are made available by specific codes in specific contexts of interpretation. So it is that, according to Eco in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, "Abduction is . . . the tentative and hazardous tracing of a system of signification rules which will allow the sign to *acquire its meaning*" (p. 40, my emphasis).

Eco's insistence on the inferential nature of signs in this first chapter thus leads again to three conclusions that may be said to warrant the methodological subordination of a semiotics of communication to a semiotics of signification. First, it establishes that the pragmatic selection of cotextual frames of reference is indispensable in order for expressions to acquire meanings (pp. 39–43) and, hence, that the "understanding of signs is not a mere matter of recognition (of a stable equivalence); it is a matter of *interpretation*" (p. 43). Secondly, it establishes for any sign function that the nonidentity of expression and content is a

necessary effect of the ability to constitute meanings in and only in specific contexts of interpretation: "By interpretation . . . we mean the concept elaborated by Peirce, according to which every *interpretant* . . . , besides translating the Immediate Object or the content of the sign, also increases our understanding of it" (p. 43). Thirdly, it establishes that recognition of the subjective ability to communicate meanings is insufficient as a foundation upon which to build a semiotic theory of the sign:

The notion of sign as expression of equality and identity could be legitimately claimed to support a sclerotic (and ideological) notion of the subject. The sign as the locus (constantly interrogated) for the semiotic process constitutes, on the other hand, the instrument through which the subject is continuously made and unmade. The subject enters a beneficial crisis because it shares in the historical (and constitutive) crisis of the sign. The subject is constantly reshaped by the endless resegmentation of content. In this way (even though the process of resegmentation must be activated by *someone*, who is probably the collectivity of subjects), the subject is spoken by language (verbal and nonverbal), by the dynamic of sign-functions rather than by the chain of signifiers. As subjects, we are what the shape of the world produced by signs makes us become (p. 45).

As might be expected by readers of *Theory*, Eco's discussion of signs culminates with an instructional rather than a correlational model for understanding signs. This view then informs Eco's discussion of dictionaries and encyclopediae in chapter two of *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. His discussion is concerned with assessing the validity of the Porphyrian tree and with revealing the radically different consequences of choosing to represent the semantic universe either in the format of a dictionary or in the format of an encyclopedia. Eco clearly opts for the encyclopedic format, which stands out as the choice that is clearly more consistent with an implicit methodological privileging of the semiotics of signification over the semiotics of communication. I shall not rehearse here, however, the arguments and examples that Eco puts forward in order to justify his choice; rather, I shall conclude my essay by suggesting how it is that this chapter may be said to facilitate an encounter between semiotics and analytic philosophy.

Recently, as has much of Quine's philosophy, the work of Saul Kripke has become required reading for those wishing to engage in the debate over the nature of representation that is going on among analytic philosophers, deconstructionists, and marxists. Offered as a radical alternative to the theory of definite descriptions that has been upheld by philosophers as different in many of their views as Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Strawson, and Searle, Kripke's theory of rigid designation explains the process of linguistic reference as the result of an initial naming, or "baptism," of an object that is then propagated causally among members of a given linguistic community through shared usage of the designating term (Kripke 1972). Kripke's



theory may be said to enjoy an immediate affinity with Saussure's linguistics because its notion of the origin of rigid designations implies the arbitrariness of the signifier and because its subsequent linking of reference with a notion of "necessary *a posteriori* truth" implies relations of biconditionality, or of equivalence and identity, for the sign.

Its anti-Fregean stance, therefore, also delivers a direct challenge to some of the most central doctrines of Peircean semiotics, especially that of the interpretant. While it is not the case that Frege's understanding of the relation between meaning ("sense" according to the original *sinn*) and reference ("meaning" according to the original *bedeutung*) can be said to match Peirce's understanding of the relation between the interpretant and either the immediate or the dynamic object, it is the case that Kripke's repudiation of Frege's thesis that "meaning determines reference" equally constitutes a repudiation of Peirce's thesis that the relation between a sign vehicle, or representamen, and its object is mediated by interpretants. In harmony with Peirce, and as Norris has pointed out, the effect of Frege's thesis is to assert that "referents can only be identified if language and logic between them provide the salient criteria for picking out the object referred to. There is no direct or one-to-one relation between work, concept, and referent" (Norris 1983:144).

Of course, Kripke's theory of rigid designation has been criticized from various quarters both within and without analytic philosophy. While seeming to hold to this theory in an earlier work (1975), Putnam has now taken his distance from it for compelling reasons:

To me, believing that some correspondence intrinsically just *is* reference (not as a result of our operational and theoretical constraints, or our intentions, but as an *ultimate* metaphysical fact) amounts to a magical theory of reference. Reference itself becomes what Locke called a 'substantial form' (an entity which *intrinsically* belongs with a certain name) on such a view. Even if one is willing to contemplate such unexplainable metaphysical facts, the epistemological problems that accompany such a metaphysical view seem insuperable (Putnam 1981:46).

Writing in defense of Lenin's realism, moreover, Callinicos has attacked the notion of essence that informs Kripke's theory by arguing that it presupposes "a satisfactory realist account of the corroboration of scientific hypotheses" (1983:119); indeed, "fixing the extension of a natural-kind term presupposes some independent means of corroborating or falsifying hypotheses concerning the internal structure of particulars of that kind" (1983:119). Finally, although he is primarily concerned to reveal the interest that Kripke's work holds for contemporary deconstructionists and marxists, Norris convincingly suggests both that Kripke does not assess the full implications of "an element of crucial undecidability

at the heart of [his] semantics" (1983:160) and that Kripke's repeated use of "metaphors of origin" significantly weakens the overall power of his argument (1983:161).

I readily concur with such objections. Nevertheless, it is important to remark that the symptomatic value of Kripke's theory resides in its attempt to formulate the discussion of linguistic reference, no longer in terms of inherent relations among such parts of the sign as sense and meaning or signifier and signified, but rather, in terms of the social uses of signs. It is true that Kripke cannot adequately explain how it is that signs can be made to stand in relation to the world; indeed, the reason that Kripke is forced to have recourse to the concept of "necessity" in his argument about the reference of natural-kind terms derives in large part from his lack of command of a well-founded theory of representation. Yet Kripke does demonstrate generally that, if signs can be made to stand in relation to the world, then it is by virtue of social convention. Hence, the most basic flaw in Kripke's theory — specifically, its impoverished, unexamined, and ultimately untenable notion of sign — may paradoxically be seen to give rise to the most intriguing feature of his theory. Against a dominant view that suggests that meaning and reference are inherent properties of signs, Kripke argues in favor of a general view that holds that the reference of signs is socially constructed and socially determined. Of course, this contribution cannot be said to permit Kripke's theory as a whole to overcome the fatal consequences of its implicitly anti-inferential notion of sign. Nor, from another perspective, can it be said to obviate the undesirable effects of its ahistorical and apolitical projection of societies and communities as homogeneous entities that are devoid of conflict and contradictions. It does allow an opening, however, for semiotics and analytic philosophy to begin to engage each other on a matter of inquiry that should be of common and urgent concern: namely, the social determination and concrete social effects of representational processes.

So it is that, when Eco addresses himself to Kripke's theory of rigid designation in chapter two of *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, he first attempts to articulate a meeting ground between his own semiotic discussion of the encyclopedic format of the semantic space and Kripke's discussion of linguistic reference:

If rigid designation is (as Kripke seems to suggest) a process of mentions leading backward to an initial and aboriginal baptismal ceremony (and therefore to a primeval act of ostension accompanied by the utterance of a name), then the chain of mediatory information that guarantees the link with the original christening is made up of an uninterrupted series of discourses, descriptions, stories told about other stories up to the initial event; and in this case, there is no difference between rigid designation and the encyclopedia, the sum of all these links representing the encyclopedic competence of a society in its very progress through time (p. 74).

Just as Eco is concerned throughout his book to reorient semiotic theories of various concepts so that rigorous attention can be paid to social contexts in the analysis of signifying processes, so also he strives here to press Kripkean semantics into similar service. Properly enough, however, he later finds that Kripke's views do not easily lend themselves to such redirection because of the extent to which Kripke's essentialism limits his vision only to a consideration of the world as it *is*. Following presentation of a hypothetical case involving genetic engineering in which, "in order to avoid future world wars, the United Nations decided to establish a Peace Corps of ISC (Inter-Species Clones)" (1984:76), Eco concludes:

It is evident that we use linguistic expressions or other semiotic means to name 'things' first met by our ancestors; but it is also evident that we frequently use linguistic expressions to describe and to call to life 'things' that will exist only after and because of the utterance of our expressions. In these cases, at least, we are making recourse more to stereotypes and encyclopedic representations than to rigid designators (p. 76).

In significant ways, therefore, the debate over Kripkean semantics within analytic philosophy may be said to resonate with the debate over conceptualization of the semantic space within semiotics. And the stakes are ultimately the same: the ability to understand and to affirm the principle of the social determination of representational processes. On the one hand, inquiry into this area should lead to theoretical and practical studies of the means by which significations are socially fixed and stabilized within specific cultural contexts. On the other hand, it should lead to theoretical and practical studies of the means by which significations can be unhinged and destabilized within specific cultural contexts in the interest of describing and calling to life "things" that still do not exist . . . such as egalitarian gender relations and classless societies.

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