

# The Sign and Its Alterity

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In this essay I refer to the following works of Augusto Ponzio: *Spostamenti: Percorsi e Discorsi sul Segno*, Bari: Adriatica, 1982; *Lo Spreco dei Significanti: l'Eros, la Morte, la Scrittura*, Bari: Adriatica, 1983; *Soggetto e Alterità a Levinas*, Bari: Adriatica, 1983; *Tra Linguaggio e Letteratura*, Bari: Adriatica, 1983; *Per Parlare dei Segni/Talking about Signs*, Bari: Adriatica, 1985; *Filosofia del Linguaggio*, Bari: Adriatica, 1985; "On the Methodics of Common Speech," *Differentia* 1, 1986, pp. 136-66; *Interpretazione e Scrittura*, Verona: Bertani, 1986; *Rossi-Landi e La Filosofia del Linguaggio*, Bari: Adriatica, 1988.

The notion of *sign*, particularly the "verbal sign," seems to be a theoretical problem which leads to different tendencies in a discipline such as semiotics. Signs are vehicles which establish the relationship between man and the world, conceived not only on a communicative level or by an exchange of data and meaning, but as a continual process of semiotization or interpretation (Peirce) as well. The interpretation intended as a *method* sometimes is revealed as an obstacle by the open process of interpretation itself. The human subject is himself a *texture of signs*, through which he interprets the world and renders the signs capable of signifying, or comprehending, the relationship between the "knowing subject" and "different objects"—known and unknown.

In Peircean terms, man is an open chain of signs and interpreters, or more precisely, man gives rise to thought. Thought itself is a sign, and life itself is "a train of thought"; consequently, man is a sign. Peirce establishes a very close link between language, man and thought. Thus we can argue that there is a very strong link between the concept of the human subject and that of the sign.

On the one hand we have a *sign*, which is conceived of as

the identity or correspondence between what it "represents" and the object itself (in a one-to-one relation). This is generally referred to as the semiotics of Saussurean derivation, in which the sign is composed of a *signifié* and a *signifiant*, and their relation is one of "equal exchange." On the other hand, Peirce's semiotics of interpretation implies an open-ended chain of interpretants. The dichotomy between signifier and signified is replaced by a relationship between object, sign and interpretant. From this concept of sign there emerges, at the different stages of interpretation (Iconicity, Indexicality and Symbolicity) an elaborate conception of the nature of hypothesis or "abduction," which gives further openness to the act of interpretation.

These dynamic acts are not related to a mere process of decoding a message, because this method implies that a pre-established reality or "apriori" data exist, and our role is relegated to discovering these presumed hidden data. This kind of discourse helps to establish and maintain a certain law or rule for the social reproduction of a values system by a given society without discussing them.

We must recall that Saussurean semiotics engenders certain mechanical devices which do not overcome a restricted notion of the sign and of the human subject. As Augusto Ponzio has argued in several studies on Peirce, Bachtin, Vailati and Rossi-Landi, those approaches cannot go beyond "decodification" and the reproduction of a pre-established symbolic universe. Furthermore, the semiotics of the code excludes, or does not consider, those aspects of the sign—such as plurivocality and semantic ambiguity—which aim at recovering the conception of alterity, within the constitution of the sign. This establishes an innovative aspect of the sign because it actually modifies the very model of the sign itself. Ponzio has stressed and analyzed this topic of the sign and its alterity in various studies, which belong not only to the fields of semiotics and philosophy of language, but to literary criticism as well.

Ponzio's work could be described as a crossroads between two separate but interrelated routes. One belongs to the field of philosophy of language, or more precisely of "languages" and semiotics, and the other recovers "l'espace littéraire" as the text *par excellence*, where the notion of *alterity* is highly represented. These two trajectories establish a dynamic act which inscribes itself into interpretive practice. A theoretical practice should enable the subject-interpretant to evaluate a text from different perspectives. This is part of what Ponzio describes as "*sposamenti*." "Spos-

tamenti" is in fact the title of one of Ponzio's books, which suggests the "displacement" of the self in the chain of semiosis from one interpretant to another. This becomes evident in other studies on the language of philosophy and in the book on Levinas.

In one of his more recent studies, *Rossi-Landi e la Filosofia del Linguaggio* (1988), Ponzio appropriates Rossi-Landi's concept of "extrasign residual"—a concept which relates to ideology and social reproduction, and which he brings to bear on the literary field. He recognizes the *letterarietà* ["literariness"] of a text, which constitutes the residue of the ideological interpretation of the literary text. That is to say that the critical interpretation of ideology does not fully explain or exhaust the *letterarietà* of particular texts.

Beyond this concept of *letterarietà*, what is crucial in Ponzio's research is, first, the notion of the sign and its alterity, and second, the pragmatic implications of that notion in the dynamics of interpretation. For Ponzio, the development of this line of research is important in such authors as Peirce, Victoria Welby, Giovanni Vailati, Bakhtin and Levinas. Ponzio's studies demonstrate how these authors place the conception of the sign within the context of a dialogical relationship.

Beginning with his theoretical perspective and developing it on the ground of semiosis, Ponzio has recently theorized what he calls "ethosemiotics" (in Welby 1985):

With specific reference to this nonsectorial conception of signs as inaugurated by Peirce, and by contrast with semiotics viewed solely as a theory of knowledge, it has been suggested that we use the term ethosemiotics.<sup>1</sup>

"Ethosemiotics" represents expresses the combination of the study of significance with its ethical and pragmatic implications. In addition to this, and on a broader level, we may say that ethosemiotics links dialogically two disciplines in a very subtle way—philosophy of language and semiotics.

Despite their differences, there is a very close link between Welby's *significs* and Ponzio's "ethosemiotics." Victoria Welby (1837-1912), in developing her theory of "significs," was also concerned with terminological exactitude. Significs is the term she used in order to designate the connection between the notions of sign, sense and meaning. "Significs" is a theory of significance, but also of "signifying," because it implies the mutable characteristic of the sign itself.

Such a framework, with its overt, interpretive practice, forms

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a theoretical grid for further studies, not only in the field of semiotics but in different realms of human thought. Literature, especially in its most innovative expressions, is certainly one of these. But literature can also represent the site where words collide, sometimes in what appears to be a random manner. If, echoing Wittgenstein, our world is the language we speak—one which is “a chaotic turmoil of events and accidents”—how can one sustain an idea of a language that mirrors the world? Unless, as in literature and the arts, there is a word which expresses in its very form this kind of discrepancy or “maladie” (e.g., Joyce, Kafka, Calvino).

At this point a problematic question arises: Can a theory of signs, with its overt and dynamical interpretation, fill the gap between language and the interrelated forms of knowledge? More precisely, I am referring to the fields of literature (and so to the knowledge of literature).

One of Ponzio's responses to this theoretical “knot” is contained in *Lo Spreco dei Significanti—l'Eros, la Morte, la Scrittura* (1983),<sup>2</sup> and since then in further studies such as *Tra Linguaggio e Letteratura* (1984) and *Interpretazione e Scrittura; Scienza dei Segni ed Eccedenza Letteraria* (1986). One of the main objectives of the first study is the absence of method, or of debate on that method, and its implications for the constitution of the signified. He takes up the notions of “depense” (Bataille) and the “excedent sense” (Barthes) within the literary word, which convey a sort of primacy of the signifier, or at least a primacy of the realm of “significance.”

This perspective commits the critic in a way which is different from a Peircean semiotics of interpretation. Ponzio, in fact, in describing the semiotics of *writing* or “significance,” considers literature a “field” or a universe of discourse completely *autonomous* from other kinds of *discourses*. The conception of *autonomy* is also used to overthrow the inner logic of the political discourse—where the aim of language is to convince someone of something. In *letterarietà* there is no end even when the language of everyday speech is employed. The *letterarietà* sometimes defines itself in the lack of “meaning” or a precise end. The history of literature gives us several exemplars of this perspective.

One of the projects developed in the critical discourse of Ponzio's *Lo Spreco dei Significanti* was the author's commitment to the practice of “writing” (*écriture*) aimed not only at clarifying or explaining the ambiguity of the analyzed texts, but also at establishing a relationship of “alterity” with them.

What does the term “alterity” imply in this context? First, one

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must recognize that the "interpretant subject" is not a kind of subject whose knowledge is situated beyond any given text. Rather, that subject inscribes himself within the text even as he differs from it. The former belongs to literature and the latter belongs to the field of criticism. Traditionally, literary critics have nevertheless restricted themselves to the understanding and systematization of texts which resist any tidy ordering principle (e.g., avant-garde texts).

At this point, another obstacle seems to appear on the interpretive scene. There is the danger of running two theoretical risks. First, such textual disorder may not be possible to comprehend fully. As a result, one could impose a "grammar of disorder" on it. This, however, is a contradiction in terms because it asserts a law of disorder. Second, if a "scientific" method (semiotics, etc.) requires a particular end, how can it be employed in interpreting a literary text without lying to itself or allowing the text to lie to itself? This seems to me an open question because of the irreducible alterity of literature with regard to the so-called exact science and rigorous sciences.

One of the problematic responses, which is not to be intended as a "solution" to the question, is, as Ponzio shows, that to maintain the category of alterity within the sign is to ascribe the notion of alterity to man himself (*pace* the Peircean idea that "man is a sign").

Ponzio in *Rossi-Landi e la Filosofia del Linguaggio* recalls Umberto Eco's observation (in "L'Ultima Soglia della Semiotica") that there is always a close link between the conception of the sign and the conception of the human subject. This very fragile and crucial relationship is inevitable and its precise trace is in the very act of writing [*écriture*]. It is an act which underscores the chaos, and in which both the critic and the writer are involved. Yet both employ *language* in such different ways that they try to give *shape* to the chaos of the world. Moreover, that very act of shaping *expresses* this disorder or absence of form. As Calvino once said, the "lack of substance is not to be found in images or in languages alone, but in the world itself."<sup>3</sup> The ongoing conflict for language is whether the word can capture exactly what evades the language itself and its rules. But this is a very old battle, and its solution has yet to be discovered.

I think that the supremacy of signifiers in the use of the discourse of literary criticism should not be maintained as the only tool in reading a text. One must not conceive of alterity as being external to the concept of sign and to the process of semiosis;

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it resides within the interpretive dynamics.

What is extremely important from a theoretical perspective, and with regard to the question of method as well, is what Ponzio has called the "self-sufficiency" [*autosufficienza*] of the abductive interpretant.<sup>4</sup> It is exactly this connotation of Peircean semiotics which presents a challenge and provocation to the fixed law of identity. In doing so, one undermines the logic of binarism, or dichotomy (true/false, identical/diverse), and recovers the notion of alterity, which enables us to overcome and to shift the preexisting object of analysis.

1. Susan Petrilli, *Significs, Semiotica, Significazione* (Bari: Adriatica, 1988), 130.

2. Which this author cowrote with him.

3. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987), 57.

4. In "Abduction and Alterity," *Versus* 34 (January-April 1983).