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INTRODUCTION: WHY CLASSICS AND SEMIOTICS?

NANCY FELSON RUBIN

Most classicists do not know what Semiotics is. And most semioticians are not aware of all of the possibilities that ancient texts offer them, both texts pertaining to signs and texts that might be dealt with semiotically; nor do they know how receptive many classicists are to influence from other disciplines. The Colloquium out of which this volume grew endeavored to change that situation by bringing together two groups that might be open to each other's thoughts and points of view. Those present will attest to the remarkable success of this effort, the mood of intense discovery we all felt. Faculty at the second International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies and a few visiting scholars served as discussants for papers by eight classicists. The discussion created a dialogue usually vigorous, never dull, occasionally passionate, even mildly acrimonious — and invariably incisive and fruitful for both parties. It is our wish that this volume, by reproducing all the talks followed by responses from theoretical perspectives, re-create that dialogue in form as well as substance.

The event itself suggested how much these two fields have to offer one another. And this volume should further establish the advantages to both sides of continued interaction. The papers and comments together will indicate the ways in which Semiotics can help Classics, and I need say nothing further here; but for those classicists unfamiliar with Semiotics, I shall include a glossary of frequently used technical terms. What this interaction can offer semioticians will be evident too from the contributions themselves, but I would like to add a few words.

Classics offers Semiotics, in the first place, a wealth of data that pertain to the production, communication and interpretation of signs, to semiosis. These include conventional and natural sign systems practiced in ancient times, and treatises interpreting, or simply describing them; poetic representations of semiosis; and philosophical investigations into the nature and structure of the sign. Ancient practices which invite semiotic interest include divination by birds and interpretation of dreams. Among treatises which analyze these practices are Cicero's "On Divination," Aristotle's "On Interpretation through Dreams," Artemidorus' "Interpretation of Dreams." In addition, Aratus, in his "Phenomena," examines such natural sign systems as weather-sign, and in the Hippocratic writings

and Galen medical symptoms are discussed. Hippocrates focuses on the patient and his complaint, illuminating the connection between symptoms, that category of signs which have no utterer, and diseases. Galen, another “father of Semiotics,” divides his “symptomatology” or “semeiology” into three parts: the semiosis of the here and now, or diagnostics; the semiosis of the anamnestic past, or case histories; and the semiosis of the prognostic future. Such treatises on natural as well as on conventional sign systems allow the modern semiotician to analyze not only the data itself, but also contemporary reflections upon it.

There are at least three points where ancient poetry touches semiosis. First, it depicts characters using signs: a seer gazing at birds and uttering omens, a sister inferring a long absent brother’s presence from his footprint, a wife acknowledging her sexual acceptance of her husband by giving him a brooch with a captive fawn. Second, it depicts items which the reader can take as signs: the seizure of the maiden Briseis signifies Agamemnon’s shattering of Achilles’ self-esteem; Persephone’s plucking of the narcissus proleptically stands for her loss of virginity, while her swallowing of the pomegranate seeds signifies her irretrievable loss of innocence. Third, the poetic text itself is a sign: we can learn this from a character, as when Helen says that her deeds will become a song for future hearers, or from the poet himself, as when Pindar makes his poem parallel to the prayer of a character in it.

Such self-conscious portions of a text permit us to reconstruct an author’s implied theory of signs. Explicit theories, meanwhile, are beginning to take shape. In addition to the medical writings mentioned above, Plato, especially in the *Cratylus*, exposes difficulties in seeing the relation between words and things as a natural one. The fascination he shares with the Sophists (often represented as characters within his Dialogues) with the interplay of *phusis* (nature) and *nomos* (culture, convention) directly anticipates modern discussions of natural signs (*indices* and *icons*) and arbitrary or conventional signs (*symbols*). And finally, the Stoics are the first to develop a systematic treatment of the sign (*sēmeion*), which they regard as an articulated whole made up of a signifier (*sēmainon*) which is perceptible (*aisthēton*) and a signified (*sēmainomenon*) which is intelligible (*noēton*). Indeed, the major contributors to semiotics, Saussure, Peirce, Jakobson, have drawn upon these explicit theories as they have on the medical treatises.

Besides offering all these data, classicists can bring to the application of semiotic methods their own traditional rigor. Both they and

semioticians tend to avoid theory for its own sake and to ask how any theory can be used to illuminate a text. Moreover, the two approaches share a fundamental principle. In C. S. Peirce's theory of the sign, which underlies modern Semiotics, the *sign aspect* determines the *interpretant* (see glossary). This means, in the case of a literary text, the text itself determines the ideas which yield its interpretation. In other words, Semiotics, like classical philology, will not allow data or concepts external to a text to take precedence over that text in the interpreting of that text. In the Peircean paradigm interpreters bring their collateral experience to the interpretation of the text, but it is textual elements which activate a portion of this prior knowledge — so as to determine the interpretant. The interpretant allows one to take a given text to stand for a specific meaning; but the interpretant is not independent of the text in Peirce's utterly relational theory of signs.

Turning now to a brief overview of the papers in this volume, I shall attempt, without duplicating the comments, to situate each within a semiotic framework:

Peradotto, modeling his conceptual archaeology of American classical philology on Foucault, asks how this discipline got left behind when the epistemic shift to modernity occurred in Western intellectual history. How can we define classical philology in terms of its cognitive system, its privileged methodologies and subjects, so as to explain why it has been so resistant to current methodological concerns?

Nagy's exploration of early Greek terminology for semiosis allows us, as Herzfeld puts it, "to disinter an implicit theory of meaning at an early stage in the development of the semiotic lexicon," to unravel an implicit semiotics of pre-classical Greece. Nagy shows how, frequently, action follows a character's perception and accurate interpretation of a sign in Homer; this results in a sequential pattern, *sema* > *noesis* > *praxis*. His study gives rise to the question: what *interpretant* does a given sign produce in the character interpreting it, and further, what is missing when characters, such as Penelope's suitors, misinterpret signs?

Bergren focuses on the duplicity male authors ascribe to female speech: it is capable of both truth and fiction, and this duality parallels the male characterization of the female in the Greek social code. This "idea of female semiotic monopoly" (Bal) provokes male authors, fictive characters, abductors to attempt to challenge that monopoly — at times by appropriating female speech, at times by incorporating the female herself.

Arthur continues an investigation begun in her earlier work¹ on the ways in which the female is displaced from positions of dominance in the *Theogony* as in Greek culture. She argues that Hesiod uses the metaphor of

representation to show how the male (bard) appropriates the female's (Muses') power of speech (*logos*), then establishes the agora as a realm which excludes the female. Her paper and Bergren's explore poetic representation of sign production, especially the influence of ideology, either that of a poet or his culture, on that representation.

Segal concentrates on how Greek myth, as a synchronic system, a 'megatext,' provides a rich background for ancient and modern interpreters of the literary uses of myth. In Peircean terms, his megatext is part of collateral experience, and the given text would act upon a portion of this prior knowledge so as to determine its interpretants. Segal explores the mechanism of this interaction between text and megatext for several ancient works, and hypothesizes a change in that interaction with Greek tragedy.

Rubin/Sale, using narrative structural analysis, sign analysis and historical philology, reconstruct a type of myth (hunting-maturation) from two of its examples. They then interpret the distinctive differences between these myths using the notions of *kairos*, *kosmos*, *hubris* as *logical interpretants*.

Rosenstock radically redefines Plato's notion of mimesis. He links two narrative modes, simple and mimetic diegesis, to two sorts of lives, the philosopher's and the tyrant's, and argues that Plato has Socrates ban the mimetic mode because it consists of unlimited desire and is never directed toward an endpoint. Thus Rosenstock focuses on *praxis* on the part of the character Socrates which results (as *dynamic interpretant*) from his taking mimesis and mimetic diegesis as standing for "tyranny and the tyranny of illusory pleasures."

Frischer examines the pragmatics of Epicurus' portrait art — i.e., he views it from the users' point of view. In relating the visual sign of Epicurus' portrait to the therapeutic philosophy of Epicureanism, he postulates and attempts to recover the 'psychological interpretant' that would have caused ancient viewers of the portraits to make certain associations with them (= *immediate interpretants*) and to react in predictable ways (*dynamic interpretants*).

While all eight contributors are classicists, the commentators are: a philosopher whose specialty is Peirce (David Savan); a literary theorist of narratology (Mieke Bal); a classicist trained in literary theory (Glenn Most); and an anthropologist who is also a semiotician (Michael Herzfeld).

I would like to thank all these participants for their contributions; I would also like to give thanks to the following discussants: Lynne Ballew, Paolo Fabbri, Manar Hammad, Sanda Golopentia-Eretescu, Charles

Scott, and Linda Waugh. For valuable discussions in preparation of this introduction and glossary, I should like to thank William Sale and David Savan.

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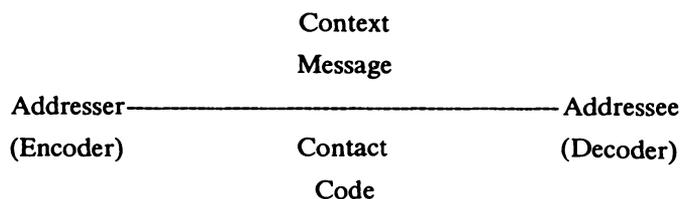
GLOSSARY OF SEMIOTIC TERMS²

Code — the system which underlies the message and enables it to be communicated (Jakobson); the rule which couples items from a system of expression with items from a system of content (Eco).

— more freely, the systems of expression (such as the alimentary, the geographical, the social codes) to be so coupled; Eco calls these ‘s-codes’; Bal (in this volume) terms them ‘isotopies.’

Communications model — a model depicting six linguistically relevant facets of the speech event (diagrammed below), facets linked to six functions which language performs in society (Jakobson). The Addresser-Addressee model underlies Semiotics; the encoded message would be Peirce’s sign or sign-aspect, and he would call the addresser, at least of a verbal sign, “utterer”; natural signs such as symptoms and weather-signs are without utterer. Peirce focuses on the interpreting or decoding side of the communication process, and less on the production or encoding of signs.

Jakobson’s model:



Diachrony — the evolutionary aspects of a system; e.g., in language,

diachronic linguistics describes properties as they change with time (Saussure).

Episteme — “Something like a world-view, a slice of history common to all branches of knowledge, which imposes on each one the same norms and postulates, a general stage of reason, a certain structure of thought.” (Foucault)

Icon — a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence (Peirce). More freely, a sign in which the relation between sign and object, or signifier and signified, is based on factual similarity.

Index — a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant (Peirce). More freely, a sign in which the relation between sign and object, or signifier and signified, is based on factual or natural contiguity, which would include temporal, logical, or spatial contiguity.

Interpretant — the effect which the sign produces or could produce in the mind of the interpreter; the interpretant, itself the sign of an object, interprets by indicating that some other sign is a sign of that same object. Like an interpreter, it explains what some more obscure sign says by restating it in a more readily intelligible way. Peirce goes on to define three subtypes:

Immediate or emotional interpretant — the immediate feeling of recognition of a sign, apart from the actual occasion(s) of its use or occurrence; “the total unanalyzed effect that the sign is calculated to produce . . . ; the effect the sign first produces upon a mind, without any reflection upon it.”

dynamical or energetic interpretant — a single event, mental or physical, actually produced by a sign’s effect upon an interpreter.

logical or final interpretant — a thought, concept, or change in a way of thinking which the sign and its dynamic interpretant produce upon the mind of an interpreter. The final interpretant, as a virtual, is that interpretant “which would finally be decided to be the true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached” (8.184).

Langue — “The social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions . . . permitting individuals to exercise that faculty”; an abstract language system which determines utterances (see *parole*) (Saussure).

Metaphoric function or relation — the relation between units in a system based on similarity (or contrast); the *paradigmatic relation* (Jakobson).

Metonymic function or relation — the relation between units in a system based on contiguity; the *syntagmatic relation* (Jakobson).

Object — what a sign stands for; its signatum (Peirce).

Paradigmatic relations — classification of units in a system by similarities and contrasts (Saussure); units in a paradigmatic set (or paradigm) are in a *metaphoric relation* to one another (Jakobson), and differ in ‘distinctive features’ (Jakobson, Trubetskoy).

Parole — individual utterances, manifestations of *langue* (Saussure).

Pragmaticism, Pragmatism (more freely, *Pragmatics*) — study of a system of signs from the point of view of its users; the semiotic effects of a sign (Morris, Peirce).

Semiosis — process of producing, communicating and interpreting signs.

Semiotics — the science of signs; it includes such subsystems as zoosemiotics, kinesics, proxemics, iconography, poetics, and even social practices. It “deals with those general principles which underlie the structure of all signs whatever, and with the character of their utilization within messages, as well as with the specifics of the various sign systems, and of the diverse messages using those different kinds of signs.” (Jakobson).

Founders include: Saussure, who anticipated a science of signs which would subsume and be modeled upon linguistics; Peirce, whose extensive writings include a systematic and formal theory of signs; and Jakobson, who forms a bridge between Structuralism and Semiotics and whose writings are influenced by Peirce’s theory of signs.

Sign — the combination of sound-image (signifier) and concept (signified), envisioned as two sides of a single sheet of paper; the conjunction is arbitrary or conventional for the linguistic sign, which like all signs receives its value by its relation to other signs of its system — i.e., by its relation to other sheets of paper in the system to which it belongs.

— “A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.” “A sign has, as such, three references: first, it is

a sign *to* some thought that interprets it [its *interpretant*]; second, it is a sign *for* some object to which in that thought it is equivalent [its object]; third, it is a sign *in* some respect or quality which brings it into connection with its object [its *ground*].” (Peirce, who often more appropriately designates the sign ‘representamen’ or ‘sign-aspect’ since it is “that aspect of what is present to an interpretant which may be interpreted as evidence for something more than itself, its *signatum*”). See also *interpretant*, *object*, *icon*, *index*, *symbol*, and the comments by Savan.

Structure — the relational network within a system; relations are *paradigmatic* or *syntagmatic* (Saussure, Jakobson). There are also usually hierarchic levels, with each level organizing the one beneath it, functioning as an invariant with respect to the variants which it organizes.

Symbol — “a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant.” (Peirce). More freely, a sign in which the relation between sign-aspect and object is based on imputed similarity or imputed contiguity. This includes the linguistic sign, where the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary (Saussure, Peirce). Interestingly, Jakobson confined the *symbol* to signs in which the relation is based on imputed contiguity, and isolated a fourth type of sign, provisionally termed ‘rhythm,’ in which it is based on imputed similarity.

Synchrony — the contemporaneity of all aspects within a system; e.g., in the language system, synchronic linguistics would describe the relations within a single language at a given time (Saussure).

Syntagmatic relations — combination of units drawn from different paradigmatic classes; their combination is usually spatial or sequential, as (in the food system) between meat, potatoes and vegetables as items of the main course (spatial) or between appetizer, main course and dessert as stages of a meal (sequential). The units (whether items or classes) are also said to be in a *metonymic relation* to one another (Jakobson).

System — a complex self-regulating entity which adapts to new conditions by transforming its features while retaining its structure (Trubetskoy, Jakobson).

* * * *

To illustrate Peirce’s terminology:

The French word “Dames” is a *symbol* of members of the female sex. If the word is printed and placed over the door to a room with toilets, it becomes an *indexical sign* for a ladies’ room. If instead of the word we

have a diagram of a stick figure wearing a skirt, it is an *iconic sign* for members of the female sex but still an *indexical sign* for the ladies' room. The *dynamical object* of the sign "Dames" placed over the ladies' room door is the ladies' room itself, with its specific furnishings. The *immediate object* is the portion of the actual object indicated in the sign as it is presented, excluding the specific furnishings. The *immediate interpretant* is what a sign of this *type* ("Dames" on a door) could be expected to convey to any competent member of our society. The *dynamic* (or *energetic*) *interpretant* is, for example, the action of a woman entering the room, or a man turning away. *Logical interpretants* would be the concept "this is indeed a ladies' room" and the awareness "men and women use different facilities." However, the ultimate and virtual *final interpretant*, the full interpretation of this sign, would include whatever sociologists, historians, even engineers and plumbers might contribute to completely understanding it.

NOTES

- ¹ "Cultural Strategies in Hesiod's *Theogony*: Law, Family, Society," *Arethusa* 15.1 and 2, 63-82 (in honor of Jean-Pierre Vernant).
- ² For an illustration of Peircean terms, see the example following the glossary. Names in parentheses indicate main exponents of a definition or idea or theory. The limited scope of this glossary has prohibited my giving full reference, even for quotations; but these are drawn from items listed in the bibliography.

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