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## ECO'S SEMIOTICS: A CLASSICIST'S PERSPECTIVE\*

According to Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics*,<sup>1</sup> "everything which can be used in order to lie" or "everything that can be taken as a sign" (i.e., as significantly substituting for something else) is the concern of semiotics. In this review I shall concentrate on the relevance of this book to the analysis of myth, the literary text, and culture.

Semiotics is an exceedingly broad area of study. Eco defines it first inductively, as a field, and then deductively, as an emerging discipline. In the inductive definition of the field as it has taken shape empirically, he perceives the present political (i.e., existing) boundaries as including such diverse areas as medical semiotics; plot structures; kinesics and proxemics; formalized languages; zoo-semiotics; semiotics of culture, of the aesthetic text, of music, of cinema, etc.<sup>2</sup> As to the possible or logical boundaries of semiotics as a discipline with its own precise object and methodology (under which various studies could then be included or not), Eco asserts that "the whole of culture should be studied as a communication phenomenon based on signification systems" in order that "certain of its fundamental mechanism can be clarified" (p. 23).

Eco's book addresses several issues of interest to classicists and comparatists. However, before listing and addressing these, it is necessary to introduce a minimum of semiotic vocabulary. Some basic terms necessary for a discussion of his book are: *communication*; *expression* and *content planes*; *sign-function*; *type* and *token*; *s-code* and *code*. Eco spends chapters 1 and 2 evolving these definitions, but the reader may wish to consult Hockett's more lucid and straight-forward introduction to information and communication theory, which provides the basis for Eco's semiotic model.<sup>3</sup>

Communication consists of the passage of a message from a source to a destination. According to the model developed by Shannon and Weaver<sup>4</sup>—designed to facilitate the quantification of transmission capacity, efficiency, and reliability in telephone lines—a message is the item, or group of items, that is correlated to a signal, or group of signals, on the basis of the conventions of a *code*. This code is a listing of signals that are conventionally associated with a specific signification. In the model developed for transmitting telephone/telegraph messages, energy changes caused by the transmitter

are signals caused if (and only if) they are exemplars of the set of items specified in the code. Further, a channel is any physical arrangement which allows for the propagation of energy changes from a transmitter to a receiver. Noise is any interference or disturbance that modifies the energy traveling in the channel. The code is always a closed set of signals and their corresponding significations. The encoded correspondence between message and signal can be referred to as a semantic connection or "meaning": it is a conventional but arbitrary connection, like that between words and their meanings.<sup>5</sup>

Eco views the signal in such a communication system as an element from the *expression plane* and the message as an element from the *content plane*;<sup>6</sup> he designates the correlation of expression and content planes as a code and each plane in isolation an s-code (or code as system). A code "establishes types, therefore producing the rule which generates concrete tokens" (p. 50). That is, each instance of an expression element would be a *token* or exemplar made possible by specified correlations between expression and content types. For such correlation Eco employs the term *sign-function*, replacing Saussure's term "sign."

However, to state, as Eco does (p. 49), that a sign-function is not a physical entity nor a fixed semiotic entity but rather "the meeting ground for independent elements (coming from two different systems of two different planes and meeting on the basis of a coding correlation)" is to restate Saussure's principle that a sign arises when a signifier and a signified are coordinated. Saussure explicitly states: "I call the combination of a concept and a sound-image a sign. . .".<sup>7</sup> Eco further stipulates that, for a sign-function to exist, an interpretant "which guarantees the validity of a sign, even in the absence of the interpreter" (p. 68) must be present. This notion of interpretant, derived from Peirce, is the basis for the notion of unlimited semiosis.<sup>8</sup>

To exemplify the type/token relationship put forth by Eco, consider the code of traffic signals: a prior correlation between red and "stop!", yellow and "caution!", and green and "go!" enables each instance (token, exemplar) of a red, yellow, or green traffic light to transmit the predesignated message. The coded correlation is between expression and content types, not tokens.

The relevance of a general communication model to literary and myth theory has long been appreciated. R. Jakobson based his communication model for the literary text<sup>9</sup> on the information theory model; R. Barthes assumes such a model when he "decodes" *Sarrasine*<sup>10</sup>; recently the Soviet semiotician J. Lotman, modifying the Jakobsonian model, has incorporated the notion that the very ambiguity and polysemy of the artistic (i.e. literary) text is one of its contents.<sup>11</sup> Psychoanalytic criticism, like Freudian (and post-Freudian) psychoanalytic theory, proceeds from the assumption that the analyst is decoding an encoded message.<sup>12</sup> The French structuralist C. Lévi-Strauss predicates his theory of myth on the assumption that cultures have encoded meaning into their myths, and that the mythographer's task is to decode it. He argues that, in a culture, several "systems" may reflect homologous structures which, taken together, reveal a latent and more abstract meaning.<sup>13</sup>

Eco's model of the literary text is based on Jakobson and Lotman; or, to put it differently, his general semiotic model incorporates their models designed for the aesthetic text. However, between Eco's model and Lévi-Strauss' some major differences exist. Eco views both the content and the expression planes as systems (s-codes), each having whatever structure a society or individual provides for it—not necessarily a bipolar one. Lévi-Strauss, in contrast, consistently sees the deepest content as bipolar or based on contradiction. Eco, moreover, is interested in all the relations among elements in each s-code comprising a code, and in the correlations that the code allows; Lévi-Strauss focuses primarily on the semantic "paradigms" (=Eco's "types") which subsume or order individual elements in each "system." The most abstract and hence "deepest" of these paradigms is then designated as the meaning of the myth and is formulated in terms of oppositions: nature/culture, death/life, matrilocality/patrilocality, etc. Lévi-Strauss' aim is clearly reductionist, whereas Eco's is not. It is, however, possible that a semiotic analysis of a given mythic text would lead to the same abstract categories that a Lévi-Straussian approach discloses, though in the latter the hierarchical relations between such categories remain problematic. In any case, the notion of a directional correlation between signifying systems and their signifieds—i.e., a signifier pointing to a signified—is shared by Eco and Lévi-Strauss, and the

latter's disclosure of various rules whereby "couples" (Eco's "correlations") are formed is certainly a contribution to the theory of codes as Eco conceives it.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Eco's belief in the unlimited nature of semiosis, and in the instability of codes over time, is more consonant with Derrida's poststructuralism than with French structuralism.

For classicists and comparatists the most important ideas which emerge from Eco's attempt to develop a deductive theory of semiotics are (1) the notion of meaning as a human construct and of uncoded or unmapped areas of semantic space; (2) the distinction between the facile and the laborious modes of creativity and the notion of the aesthetic text (created in the laborious mode) as over-coded; and (3) the function of rhetoric as aesthetically or ideologically motivated "code-switching" (the breakdown of old and the creation of new codes). I shall proceed to analyze each of these contributions:

*(1) meaning as a human construct; unmapped areas of semantic space*

Eco views content, and hence meaning itself, as culturally determined.<sup>15</sup> Thus in his view the code is not itself a natural condition of the "global semantic universe," nor a stable structure underlying every semiotic process. Instead, he argues, we humans impose structures ("social conventions") on the constituent elements available in the global semantic universe. Thus Eco rejects the notion of a structure of the human mind or an ontological system of essences: culture is responsible for ordering or systematizing the human experience, not a deep generative structure of the brain as postulated by Chomsky, Lévi-Strauss, and others. Moreover, since meaning is a cultural imposition, different cultures might be expected to structure their perceptual experiences in linguistically idiosyncratic ways, to divide continuous, or apparently continuous, phenomena into idiosyncratically segmented arrangements. This semiotic position contrasts markedly with the French structuralist view: in some profound sense Eco, in contrast to these structuralists, is attributing to humans the ultimate and unlimited<sup>16</sup> power to create and alter codes, and hence to create and alter meanings. This power to alter meaning continuously—which stems in part from the influence which communication about communication (metasemiosis) has on the universe of speaking, signifying and communicating—can lead to the rapid disintegration and reconstruction of semiotic codes and hence to an "indeterminacy principle" in semiosis, and to open semiosis.

In connection with man's freedom to establish and alter meaning, Eco illustrates one threshold of semiotics. The individual material subjects who "display labor in order to physically produce expressions, to correlate them to content, to segment content, and so on" are recognized by semiotics "only insofar as they manifest themselves through sign-functions, producing sign-functions" (p. 317). Hence, Eco excludes from semiotics any concern about the relationship between the acting subject and his message; this would fall under the domain of pragmatics.<sup>17</sup> Semiotics cannot, in his view, probe the mind of man the systematizer; it can only investigate man's systematization of what he perceives at a given time. Semiotics, in other words, can only define within its own theoretical framework "individual material subjects which, when communicating, obey, enrich, change and criticize signification systems." These subjects, in Eco's semiotics, only exist through what they create. What Eco sees as beyond the scope of semiotics resembles Derrida's ultimate "signified," which likewise can never be recovered absolutely. This signified, in Derrida's view, is subject to infinite regression, such that there always will be *differance* (differences, deferment).<sup>18</sup> Eco's theory addresses only that portion of the signified which *can* be recovered and expressed; it neither focuses upon nor laments the inexpressible and the inaccessible. Eco, following Peirce, recognizes the fundamental incompleteness of the sign. In Jonathan Culler's perceptive paraphrase of what Peirce calls "development," "the signified can be grasped only as the effect of an interpretive or productive process in which interpretants are adduced to delimit it."<sup>19</sup>

By acknowledging this indeterminacy principle and by accepting this threshold of semiotics, Eco purports to repudiate Idealism or Essentialism as espoused by philosophers from Plato to Chomsky. He rejects the view that the object of semiotic research resembles the surface of the sea, "where, independently of the continuous movement of water molecules and the interplay of submarine streams, there is a sort of average resulting form which is called the Sea" (p. 29). Instead, he likens this object to "a carefully ordered landscape, where human intervention continuously changes the form of settlements, dwellings, plantations, canals and so on" (p. 29). However, from this contrast it is impossible to tell precisely what aspect of which form of Idealism he is rejecting.<sup>20</sup>

Thus Eco's discussion of indeterminacy and open semiosis leaves many important questions unresolved. For example, does this constant subjection of the universe to human revision (yielding categories or forms of a relatively flexible, perhaps transient nature, probably not enduring to transcend time and space) necessarily negate the existence of any fixed or objective structure underlying the carefully ordered landscape? In other words, in Eco's view, are there no constants? If not, what accounts for similarities in the way that unconnected or noncontiguous cultures structure their diverse experiences? Is there an infinite number of semiotic coding possibilities? In short, where does this mysterious "culture" which determines meaning originate? Eco has delimited semiotics to be sure, but he has not resolved, or even addressed, these thorny epistemological issues.

Having established human convention as the source of meaning, Eco next asserts that there exist unmapped or uncoded areas of the content plane (or of semantic space). In part, this indeterminacy of the content plane results from the aforementioned influence of metasemiosis (communication about communication) on semiosis. In part, it arises because verbal language has no monopoly on semiosis: although verbal language is "the most powerful semiotic device that man has invented, . . . other devices exist covering portions of the semantic space that verbal language does not" (p. 174).<sup>21</sup>

Rather than viewing these indeterminacies as undercutting the whole endeavor of semiotics, as Ricoeur, and others have asserted,<sup>22</sup> Eco feels that semiotics must be able to accommodate these "legitimate" indeterminacies. Into the exuberant optimism of those semanticists who hope by subdividing the content plane to create a global semantic system where "content . . . is a universe which culture structures into sub-systems, fields, and axes" (p. 77), Eco interjects scepticisms. He demonstrates (p. 80) that, within a given culture, i) there can exist contradictory semantic fields, ii) the same cultural unit can itself become part of complementary semantic fields, and iii) a semantic field can disintegrate with extreme rapidity and restructure itself into a new field.

This last observation—the rapidity of disintegration and restructuring of a semantic field—dominates Eco's view of semantics.

Since "in natural language the cultural units are very seldom formally univocal entities, and are very frequently what logicians call 'fuzzy concepts,'" Eco asserts that the "format of a semantic system seems to lose that crystal-like structure which the most optimistic theories seek to attribute to it" (p. 83). In claiming that the components of meaning are not closed in number and frozen, but form an open series, Eco follows Peirce, whose notion of the interpretant entails unlimited semiosis.

(2) *facile vs. laborious modes of sign-production and overcoding of the aesthetic text*

Eco argues that two theoretically discrete modes of sign-production exist. Like his other ideas, this one rests on the splitting of the content and expression planes and evolves from his attention to modes of sign-production and to actual labor involved in sign-production. Eco discerns a "facile mode" and a "laborious mode" of creating sign-functions, i.e., facile and a laborious way of correlating expression and content planes to produce sign-functions. He awkwardly expresses these modes as *ratio facilis* and *ratio difficilis*. In the facile mode, which Eco illustrates in its purest form by the production of replicas (e.g., snapshots, forgeries), the expression type establishes some features as pertinent, others as variable and unessential, and all the expression tokens subsequently produced will retain the pertinent features of the expression type. In the laborious mode, the nature of the content plane motivates the nature of the expression plane, and there are no fixed expression types which establish pertinent features for expression tokens and are predesignated to signify a given content. Thus the two modes reflect two kinds of relations between type and token and between expression and content: in the former, type dictates token within the expression plane; in the latter, content (unspecified in terms of type or token) motivates choice of elements from the expression plane. In the former, a new but foreseeable content is mapped from the expression plane; in the latter, a "content-nebula"—by which I think Eco means an unspecified content—is mapped onto the expression plane. This difference, according to Eco, corresponds to that between rule-bound (facile) and rule-determining (laborious) sign-production. Innovative painters and writers would be engaged primarily in a laborious mode of creating sign-functions, since they



begin with a content-nebula and proceed to invent new correlations. Thus they invent or propose new ways of coding rather than following some pre-existing code (or expression/content correlation). For aesthetic creators, however, *some* pre-existing correlations or codes may govern choices of token expression items, depending on the extent to which the creator works within a cultural or social context or a genre tradition and creates within prescribed constraints.<sup>23</sup>

Thus Eco argues that the aesthetic text (literary, artistic, etc.)—a case of *invention* rather than replication—exemplifies the laborious mode of sign-production, in which manipulation of the expression continuum involves corresponding alterations in the content expressed. He asserts that the aesthetic text entails an *overcoding* of expression/content correlations, such that a content-nebula is mapped onto many elements from an expression plane; hence such a text is open to multiple “correct” interpretations. He even concedes that “it is indeed difficult to avoid the conclusion that a work of art communicates too much and therefore does not communicate at all, but simply exists as a magic spell that is radically impenetrable to all semiotic approach” (p. 270). However, in a section (pp. 261-76) of particular interest to classicists and comparatists, he proceeds to attempt to penetrate its structures through his semiotic approach.

Eco begins by using structuralist arguments<sup>24</sup> to assert that an aesthetic text has “contextual solidarity” and hence a systematic rule, and that, for a text, “there must be an underlying system of mutual correlations, and thus a semiotic design which cunningly gives the impression of non-semiosis” (p. 271). He then asserts that an aesthetic work as an overcoded system becomes a “super sign-function” signifying itself in its own complexity; this idea derives from J. Lotman, who views the self-focusing quality of the expression as one of the contents that it conveys.<sup>25</sup> This phenomenon of self-reflexivity results in the impression or illusion of non-semiosis, or in the spell-binding quality of the aesthetic text.

The creator of an aesthetic text, by diverging from pre-existing codes, invents new coding possibilities, which may or may not remain idiosyncratic. Eco introduces the term “idiolect” to describe codes idiosyncratic at any specific level of generality from an individual aesthetic work to a corpus or to an aesthetic movement or period. Idiolects at each level represent an underlying competence,

(or code) with each individual performance either following established codes or creating new ones. Criticism can thus elucidate precise idiolectal divergences and practices in a work, corpus, movement, and period.

Eco summarizes the act of communication between the sender of a message and the receiver or addressee:

The addressee 'senses' the surpluses of both expression and content, along with their correlating rule. This rule must exist, but to recognize it requires a complex process of abduction: hypotheses, confrontations, rejected and accepted correlations, judgements of appurtenance and extraneity. This process produces three . . . results: existing codes are focused and submitted to change or partial revision; the relation between accepted content-systems and states of the world is frequently challenged and a new type of 'conversational' interaction is established between the sender and his address. (p. 273)

In this new type of interaction the addressee (or receiver of the aesthetic message) tries to extrapolate the sender's rule, never wanting to betray (completely) the author's intentions. This results in

a dialectic between *fidelity* and inventive *freedom* . . . . On the one hand the addressee seeks to draw excitement from the ambiguity of the message and to fill out an ambiguous text with suitable codes; on the other, he is induced by contextual relationships to see the message exactly as it was intended, in an act of fidelity to the author and to the historical environment in which the message was emitted (p. 276; author's italics)

Thus, Eco concludes, "the semiotic definition of an aesthetic text gives the structural model for an unstructured process of communicative interplay," and the text becomes "a multiple source of unpredictable 'speech acts' whose real author remains underdetermined, sometimes being the sender of the message, sometimes the addressee who collaborates in its development" (p. 276). This depiction of the sender/addressee "conversational" interaction recalls the interesting distinction, with which Barthes begins *S/Z*, between the *scriptible* or "writerly" and the *lisible* or "readerly" text: in the former the sender's codes predominate and are largely binding on the "intransitive" reader/addressee, while in the latter the reader/addressee's codes predominate and he enjoys a certain measure of writerly freedom.<sup>26</sup>

Eco views aesthetic idiolects as modeled on the perceived world. It follows that the aesthetic text, by changing semantic systems, can alter the way in which culture "sees" the world. Thus aesthetic texts belong to the branch of semiotics that concerns the labor of connecting signs with states of the world (p. 275).

(3) *rhetorical labor and "code-switching"*

Eco examines the capacity of rhetoric—not only in the aesthetic text, but in advertising and political campaigns—to enable new couplings or correlations of expression/content elements. Using a diagram in which nodes and branches represent the interrelations between semantic items, he observes that when the sender of a message uses rhetorical devices to join up very distant points in this nodular diagram, he gives the appearances of "jumping." This causes the addressee to feel that the rhetorical invention resulted from the sender's intuitive perceptions and intuitive superiority, "whereas in fact the sender has simply caught a glimpse of the paths that the semantic organization entitled him to cross" (p. 284). Such jumps, which can be categorized by traditional rhetorical terminology (metaphor, metonymy), allow acquired knowledge to be upset. Whenever, in such a rhetorical process, token expression elements are shifted and substituted, old codes break down and new ones are created. Often one new correlation or sign-function will become the "patriarch" (p. 284) of a new sememe and lead to a whole new set of correlations.<sup>27</sup>

Eco sees this rhetorical code-switching (the breakdown of old and the creation of new codes) as either "straightforwardly persuasive" or "ideological." The aesthetic text typifies the former, advertising and campaigning the latter. Among advertising practices one finds the attribution of the marker "healthy" to sugar (which is not in fact healthy, but leads to obesity) by its opposition to cyclamates which have—through new information—acquired the marker "carcinogenic" and hence "unhealthy." This new correlation replaces a prior one between sugar as "fattening" and hence "unhealthy" and cyclamates as "slimming" and hence "healthy." For Eco, the creation and exploitation of this new coding possibility by advertisers of sugar is ideological in the sense that it represents a "partial and disconnected world vision" which "conceals the pragmatic reasons for which certain signs . . . were produced" (p. 297). If code-switching of this type occurs with sufficient frequency, a sort of

ideological imbalance results, and the semantic global universe may even explode, "the whole system of semantic units going up with it."<sup>28</sup>

Eco's argument that either persuasive or ideological interests could cause a breakdown of old and betrayed semantic codes returns him to the idea incorporated into his original definition of semiotics as "everything which can be used in order to lie" (p. 7).<sup>29</sup> Eco sees a social force in the capacity of sign-production to "respect or betray the complexity of . . . a cultural network." The aesthetic code-changer typically betrays existing codes in order to convey new meanings or content-nebulae about his perceived universe. The ideological code-changer, however, betrays existing codes in order to lie about that universe, and to distort it. Both behaviors can lead to semantic revolution or explosion. Should this occur, no coding would be possible, nor could any information at all be communicated. Eco's brief concluding chapter aims to persuade his readers to avert such a revolution in semiosis through a responsible use of codes.

In conclusion, I would like to comment on the general utility of *A Theory of Semiotics* for readers of *Helios*. The book is set up and written in such a way that even diligent readers, even readers familiar with all the fields which Eco traverses, will proceed laboriously. This results in part from Eco's misuse of the English idiom and in part from his selection of more difficult over simpler and more readily accessible terminology. Perhaps the earlier Italian version avoided such terms as "discretedness, conformal, monoplanar . . .," as well as awkward syntax. The use of foreign terms such as *ratio difficilis*, *ratio facilis*, *doleance*, etc., also detracts from a smooth reading. Some may claim that the complexity of the subject matter excuses Eco's stylistic inadequacies; however, while the ideas are complex, they could nevertheless be expressed in more conventional language. Lucidity is especially important since semiotics, as an emerging discipline, involves students from many already established fields, and this book, written in part as an introduction to semiotics, should be intelligible to them with only reasonable effort. Eco's book is a difficult one to read, and will hence appeal to a limited, and perhaps begrudging, audience.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, *A Theory of Semiotics* is probably worth reading for those interested in literary and myth theory because it contains many stimulating insights which are simply not available elsewhere,

surely not under one cover. For the persevering theorist looking toward semiotics to provide clear premises and methods of research (and already initiated into some form of semiotics, whether through Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Jakobson, or others), Eco's book is unmatched at the moment, having much greater scope than other books on the subject.<sup>30</sup> For this reviewer, the extended labor spent studying Eco seems to be paying off; so perhaps for others in a similar position, and feeling a similar need, Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics* may be a good place to begin.

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\* I would like to thank Paul H. Rubin, Harriet M. Deal, and the referees for helpful comments and suggestions.

1. (=Advance in Semiotics, No. 1) (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976). This book is a substantial revision of Eco's earlier *La struttura assente* (Milano; Bompiani, 1968).

2. Semiotics has been defined as "an ancient discipline, stemming from a pre-Socratic clinical tradition, which then led to the development of three fundamental semiotic traditions—the medical, the philosophical, and the linguistic." (Thomas A. Sebeok, "Final Report" to the National Endowment for the Humanities on the Pilot Program in Semiotics in the Humanities at Indiana University, [Bloomington: Indiana University Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, 1976]). As early as 1690 John Locke had defined such a field. Later (1931-1958) Charles Sanders Peirce elaborated its dimensions and contributed a theory of signs which included the important notion of the *interpretant* as guarantor of the meaning of a sign. Saussure's fruitful distinctions between signifier and signified (their conjunction or correlation constituting a sign), between synchronic and diachronic linguistics, and between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations among elements in any system enriched the theory of semiotics. In general, semiotics has a broader framework than linguistically-based structuralism, and current semioticians are detecting many differences between the structures of verbal language and of other communication systems.

3. Sol Saporta, *Psycholinguistics: A Book of Readings* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961).

4. C. E. Shannon and W. Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949). Eco develops his own semiotic model from an adaptation of the Shannon/Weaver one.

5. Ernst von Glasersfeld of the University of Georgia has kindly clarified these points for me.

6. Eco traces his distinction between expression and content planes to Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, rev. ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), esp. pp. 47-60, whence he also derives his definition of sign-function.

7. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin from 1916 orig. (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1959), esp. Part I,

"Nature of the Linguistic Sign." Eco claims to have discovered something new in viewing signs as neither fixed nor concrete physical entities, but in fact, by rechristening sign "sign-function," he is merely adding a new name for a well established insight.

8. See Eco, "Looking for a Logic of Culture" in Thomas A. Sebeok, *The Tell-Tale Sign: A Survey of Semiotics* (Lisse, Netherlands: Peter De Ridder Press, 1975), p. 12, where Eco quotes Peirce's definition of a sign as "anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*." In *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 70, Eco lists the different forms which the interpretant can take (such as a picture of the object to which a term refers or a translation of the name for an object into another language).

9. Roman Jakobson, "Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1960), p. 353, summarizes the factors "inalienably involved in communication" as follows:

The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to, seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication.

Jakobson diagrams these six factors as follows:

	CONTEXT	CONTACT
ADDRESSER . . . . .	MESSAGE . . .	ADDRESSEE. CODE

10. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller from 1970 orig. (N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1974).

11. Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, trans. Ronald Vroon from 1971 orig. (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1977), esp. ch. 1. This semanticizing of formal elements and of plurality itself means that one of the "messages" being communicated is the language in which the text is encoded; see Lotman, p. 24.

12. For a review of the considerable literature on semiotics and psychoanalytic theory, see Eugen Bär, *Semiotic Approaches to Psychotherapy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Publications, 1975), which includes essays on Jacques Lacan, Harley C. Shands, and others; for the relationship of this literature to classics, see Marilyn Arthur's annotated bibliography, *Classics and Psychology* (Urbana: American Philological Association, 1978).

13. For a full bibliography of the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, see Edmund Leach, *Claude Lévi-Strauss*, rev. ed. (N.Y.: The Viking Press, 1974), pp. 137-39.

14. Lévi-Strauss expresses this notion of "couples" in *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman from 1964 orig. (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 307.

30. For a comparable overview of semiotics, see Pierre Guiraud, *Semiology*, trans. George Gross from 1971 orig. (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1975); Thomas A. Sebeok, "Semiotics: A Survey of the State of the Art," in *Current Trends in Linguistics* 12 (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); and Roland Barthes, *Système de la Mode* (Paris: Seuil, 1967). For a lucid typology of signs, see Thomas A. Sebeok "Six Species of Signs: Some Propositions and Strictures," *Semiotica*, 13, 1975, pp. 233-60.

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## PESSIMISTIC PROMETHEUS: A COMPARISON OF AESCHYLUS AND ROBERT LOWELL

In his play *Prometheus Bound*, performed at Yale in 1967,<sup>1</sup> Robert Lowell presents a reworking of the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound* tinged with dark moralizing and sweeping pessimism. The Prometheus of Aeschylus, though cruelly punished by Zeus for his services to mankind, knew that Zeus would in time again seek his friendship. During the period of his sufferings he took comfort in the recollection of his gifts to mankind, of which he was justly and immensely proud. The considerably more optimistic Prometheus of Aeschylus, proud of his accomplishments and aware of his part in the future of the universe, becomes in Lowell a disillusioned and pessimistic observer of the universe in decline. This paper examines Lowell's use of imagery and of the persona of Prometheus to effect the profound thematic change that exists between his play and its Greek original.

The *Prometheus Bound*<sup>2</sup> forms an interesting case study of one of Lowell's characteristic techniques of rendering a foreign text into English, an understanding of which is essential to an appreciation of the thematic differences between Aeschylus and Lowell. On the title page of *Prometheus Bound*, Lowell describes his play as "derived from Aeschylus." He worked from a translation of his source, as he did in his version of nine poems of Pasternak included in *Imitations*. In the Author's Note to *Prometheus Bound*, Lowell writes, "I took one of the dullest I could find. Seldom was there any possibility or temptation to steal a whole phrase." Lowell's play, a prose version of the Greek original, reflects that technique which Lowell terms "imitation." He defines the term in the Introduction to *Imitations*, "I believe that poetic translation—I would call it an imitation—must be expert and inspired, and needs as much technique, luck and rightness of hand as an original poem."<sup>3</sup> Lowell explains in his Author's Note that he chose prose rather than verse in *Prometheus Bound* because it allowed him to insert any thought that occurred to him and seemed appropriate to the context. An "imitation" thus stands somewhere between a literal translation and an entirely new composition which borrows only characters and essential plot elements from its source story. Striking differences between Lowell's play and