

Susan Petrilli

ABOUT A MASTER OF SIGNS
STARTING FROM THE SIGN & ITS MASTERS

I remember...

When I first discovered Thomas A. Sebeok he was already internationally renown for his contribution to semiotics, and above all for having promoted research, editorial projects, encounters, seminars, and conferences relatively to semiotics worldwide. He was curator of several important collective volumes and had acted as Editor-in-chief of *Semiotica*, the journal of the International Society for Semiotic Studies, since it was founded, in 1969. Sebeok was committed to promoting people and their research and communicating his discoveries to the interested public, often acting as a talent scout as he brought to light the work of scholars whose relevancy to semiotic studies was unknown, as in the case of Jakob von Uexküll, or drew attention to young researchers whose work and curiosities he appreciated and encouraged. Based at the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies in Bloomington, USA, which he had directed since 1946, he continued all these activities and much more without interruption until his untimely death, in 2001.

At the time of contacting Sebeok I was familiar with two of his volumes, *Writings on the General Theory of Signs* (a collection of writings by Charles Morris, presented by Sebeok and published in 1971) and the collective volume *Perspectives in Zoosemiotics* (1972). I became aware of these volumes thanks to Ferruccio Rossi-Landi whose monograph, *Linguistics and Economics* (1975), Sebeok had promoted for publication with Mouton de Gruyter. Two monographs by Sebeok on semiotics were already available in Italian (translated by Massimo Pesaresi): *Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs* (1976) and *The Play of Musement* (1981). When I contacted Sebeok on advice from Augusto Ponzio, it was to propose the Italian edition of his book, *The Sign & Its Masters* (1979), which I was keen to translate myself. After this enterprise, I subsequently translated many of Sebeok's works in

semiotics published between 1986, with *I Think I Am a Verb*, and 2001, as he undisputably asserted himself as the greatest master of signs in semiotics of the Twentieth century. Currently I am in the process of translating the last book he published before his death, *Global Semiotics*, 2001.

My first telephone conversation with Sebeok was from Bari, in 1983, while he was in Milan. The reason I searched for him, as just met anticipated, was to inform him of my wish to translate his book on the sign and its masters into Italian for publication in a book series directed by Augusto Ponzio and Maria Solimini, entitled ‘Segni di Segni’.

Sebeok himself recounts our first telephone conversation in his Preface – dated Bloomington May 18, 1988 – to my first monograph *Significs, semiotica, significazione* (1988: 15-18). He had just arrived ‘at Malpensa in the early hours of a spring morning in 1983 after a tiring transoceanic flight’, and on his arrival at his ‘favorite hotel in Milan’, he heard his telephone ringing with insistence as the bell boy made way for him toward his room.

A lady in perfect English, even if with a ‘colonial’ accent, informed me that she was calling from the University of Bari on behalf of Professor Augusto Ponzio. (...) I then learnt that the lady whom I had exchanged for an English woman had in reality passed from one point to the other of the globe, that is, from Adelaide to Bari (p. 15). Susan Petrilli, this was the name of my interlocutor, was born in Australia of Italian parents and had established herself in Puglia (...). In brief, she seemed equipped to translate my book and eventually, I thought to myself, a second one as well (as effectively occurred with Sellerio publishers in Palermo). (...) Subsequently I also commissioned her the translation of a book by Giorgio Fano on *Origini e natura del linguaggio*.

We met for the first time in Alcabideche in Portugal.

I didn’t actually meet Susan Petrilli until 18 September 1983 when I first encountered her at a reception at Hotel Sinatra-Estoril in Alcabideche in Portugal. I had been invited there to participate at an Advanced Study Institute, organized by Nato, on ‘Semiotics and International Scholarship,’ which took place in that enchanting Portuguese meeting-place. For the occasion I delivered a series of lessons on semiotic anomalies, referred, that is, to empirical observations of ‘facts’ that could not be explained from any existing theoretical perspective. All my arguments had been drawn from fairly popular fields of everyday semiosis, such as magic practiced as a profession, particularly telepathic communication, a vulgar form of deception, conjuring tricks, illusionistic games, so-called parapsychic phenomena, and other divinatory practices of this type. Mrs. Petrilli followed the whole session, so we had ample opportunity to get to know each other, as we discussed problems concerning her work in progress on the translation of my book, and even more importantly problems connected with the themes of her research (p. 16).

Sebeok's narration of this initial phase of our relationship concludes as follows:

... given that Susan Petrilli and I both share an appreciation of Robert Graves's love poetry (...), she had discovered that his lyrical works offer an ideal terrain for excursions into the analysis of poetry, it is fitting that I should conclude my Preface with a citation from *The Boy of the Church*. Whomever already knows this poem will note that I have only modified seven letters in a sole word:

I do not love the Sabbath
The soapsuds and the starch
The troops of solemn people
Who to Semiotics march.

Nihil signi mihi alienum puto

Sebeok began his higher education studies during the second half of the thirties at Cambridge. As a young college student, the monograph authored by Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) caught his attention long before it became a classic in semiotics. Subsequently, he could also boast of benefiting from direct contact with two great masters of the sign who in different ways had also acted as his teachers: Charles Morris and Roman Jakobson (see the sections dedicated to these figures in Sebeok 1979, 1986, and 1991b). Another master of the sign for Sebeok (however indirect) who oriented his research decisively was obviously Charles Sanders Peirce.

While the expression *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, 'something that stands for something else,' describes the sign relation in dyadic terms, Peirce's definition evidences the irreducibly triadic structure of the sign relationship. As such it places the condition for theorizing the movement of *renvoi*, transferral/deferral, structural to semiosis. This particular aspect of Peirce's analysis of sign structures and relations is highlighted by Thomas Sebeok when he says:

Peirce's definition embodies the core concept of *renvoi*, or transfer, Jakobson's compressed coinage (*Coup d'œil sur le développement de la sémiotique* [1975]) for the celebrated antique formulation, *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, but it contains one very important further feature. Peirce asserts not only that *x* is a sign of *y*, but that 'somebody' – what he called 'a *Quasi-interpreter*' (4.551) – takes *x* to be a sign of *y*. (Sebeok 1979: viii)

Not only is a sign a sign of something else, but there is also a 'somebody,' a '*Quasi-interpreter*' (CP 4.551) that assumes something as a sign of something else. Peirce further

analyzes the implications of this description when he says: ‘It is of the nature of a sign, and in particular of a sign which is rendered significant by a character which lies in the fact that it will be interpreted as a sign. Of course, nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign’ (*CP* 2.308). And again: ‘A sign is only a sign *in actu* by virtue of its receiving an interpretation, that is, by virtue of its determining another sign of the same object’ (*CP* 5.569).

As an irreducibly triadic structure, the sign cannot be reduced to a question of ‘representation’ as use of this term for the relation between sign and object may, on the contrary, lead one to believe. In his famous definition reported in *CP* 2.228, Peirce does not specify the kind of relationship binding the sign to the object – which all the same is not limited to the logic of representation, of ‘standing for’ something. At the same time, however, specification of the type of relationship between sign and object and between sign and interpretant is determinant in his classification of signs. Two significant examples are his trichotomies: icon, index, symbol; and rheme, dicisign, argument (cf. *CP* 2.243).

We say that an important contribution to the development of Peircean semiotics comes from Charles Morris and, in fact, we may speak of a ‘Peircean-Morrisian sign model’. Two considerable aspects in Morris’s semiotics include: 1) the attribution of semiosis to living organisms – this aspect is subsequently developed by Sebeok and his biosemiotics; and 2) the focus on the relation of signs and values which Morris explicitly theorizes in his book of 1964, *Signification and Significance*. By contrast with an approach that reduces semiotics to anthroposemiotics conceiving the latter as a cognitive, descriptive and ideologically neutral science, the most promising trends in semiotics today are those which practice a global approach to the life of signs and to the signs of life – semiosis and life coincide, says Sebeok –, and that work at recovering the axiological dimension of semiosis. We have proposed the term ‘semioethics’ (cf. Ponzio and Petrilli 2003) for an approach to the study of semiosis that focuses on the relation of signs to values, and that from Sebeok’s global semiotic perspective is critical of separatism and false or illusory totalities.

Despite such a totalizing approach to semiotics it is noteworthy that Sebeok neither used the ennobling term ‘science’ nor the term ‘theory’ to name it. Instead, he repeatedly favored the expression ‘doctrine of signs,’ adapted from Locke who asserted that a doctrine is a body of principles and opinions that vaguely form a field of knowledge. Sebeok also used this expression as understood by Peirce (that is, with reference to instances of Kantian critique). This is to say that Sebeok invested semiotics not only with the task of observing and describing phenomena, in this case signs, but also of interrogating the conditions of possibility

that characterize and specify signs for what they are, as emerges from observation (necessarily limited and partial), and for what they must be (cf. his Preface to Sebeok 1976).

This humble and at once ambitious character of the ‘doctrine of signs’ led Sebeok to a critical interrogation *à la* Kant of its very conditions of possibility: the doctrine of signs is the science of signs that questions itself, attempts to answer for itself, and inquires into its very own foundations. As a doctrine of signs, semiotics also presents itself as an exercise in philosophy not because it deludes itself into believing that it can substitute philosophy, but simply because it *does not* delude itself into believing that the study of signs is possible without keeping account of philosophical questions that regard its conditions of possibility.

Sebeok has extended the boundaries of traditional sign studies, providing an approach to ‘semiotics’ that is far more comprehensive than that developed by ‘semiology’. The limit of ‘semiology’, the science of signs as projected by Ferdinand de Saussure, consists in the fact that it is based on the verbal paradigm and is vitiated by the mistake of *pars pro toto* – in other words, it mistakes the part (that is, human signs and in particular verbal signs) for the whole (that is, all possible signs, human and nonhuman). On the basis of such a mystification, semiology incorrectly claims to be the general science of signs. When instead the general science of signs chooses the term ‘semiotics’ for itself, it takes its distances from semiology and its errors. Sebeok dubs the semiological tradition in the study of signs the ‘minor tradition’, while, on the contrary, the tradition he promotes as represented by John Locke and Charles S. Peirce, as well as by the ancients, Hippocrates and Galen and their early studies on signs and symptoms, he dubs the ‘major tradition’.

Through his numerous publications, Sebeok propounded a wide-ranging vision of semiotics that converges with the study of the evolution of life. After Sebeok’s work (which is largely inspired by Peirce, Morris and Jakobson), both our conception of the semiotic field and the history of semiotics have unquestionably changed. Thanks to him semiotics at the beginning of the new millennium has developed broad horizons – far broader than envisaged by sign studies during the first half of the 1960s.

On the extension and depth of Sebeok’s semiotic research and the problems he dealt with, Claude Lévi-Strauss commented as follows:

A lire les ouvrages de Sebeok, on est confondu par sa familiarité avec les langues et les cultures du monde, par l’aisance avec laquelle il se meut à travers les travaux des psychologues, des spécialistes de neuro-physiologie cérébrale, de biologie cellulaire, ou ceux des éthologues portant sur des centaines d’espèces zoologiques allant des organismes unicellulaires aux mammifères supérieurs, en passant par les insectes, les

poissons et les oiseaux. Ce savoir plus qu'encyclopédique se mesure aussi aux milliers de noms d'auteurs, de langues, de peuples et d'espèces composant les index des ouvrages écrits ou dirigés par lui, et à leurs énormes bibliographie. (Lévi-Strauss, 'Avant-Propos', in Bouissac, Herzfeld, Posner, eds., 1986: 3)

Sebeok opens *The Sign & Its Masters* describing this book of 1979 as 'transitional'. In truth, this is a remark that may be extended to all his research if considered in the light of recent developments in philosophical-linguistic and semiotic debate, and applied therefore to the transition from 'code semiotics' which is centred on linguistics and consequently verbal signs, to 'interpretation semiotics' which unlike the former also accounts for the autonomy and arbitrariness of nonverbal signs, whether 'cultural' or 'natural'.

In his survey of the problems relevant to semiotics and the masters of signs, Sebeok discusses various aspects characterizing these two different modalities of practising semiotics, which may be very simply summarized with two names – de Saussure and Peirce. The study of signs is 'in transit' from 'code semiotics' to 'interpretation semiotics' as represented by these two emblematic figures, and in fact has now taken a decisive turn in the direction of the latter.

Sebeok's critique of anthropocentrism and glottocentrism orients the general direction of his semiotic discourse and may be extended to all those approaches to semiotics that look towards linguistics for their sign model. For that which concerns Sebeok, his interest in cultural processes at the intersection between nature and culture led to his rediscovery of such scholars as the biologist Jakob von Uexküll whom he christened a 'criptosemiotician,' one of those he studied most among others whom he had also identified as practitioners of semiotics even without necessarily knowing it.

To free oneself from the anthropocentric perspective as it has characterized semiotics generally implies to take into account other sign systems beyond those specific to mankind. These sign systems are not alien to the human world, however they do not specify it. They concern the encounter between human communication and the communicative behavior of nonhuman communities within the species and with the environment, as well as the sphere of endosemiotics, the study of sign systems inside the body on both an ontogenetic and phylogenetic level.

Sebeok succeeds in avoiding all forms of biologism which, instead, characterizes all those approaches that reduce human culture to communication systems traceable in other species. In the same way, he avoids the opposite fallacy of anthropomorphism, that is, of

reducing nonhuman animal communication to traits and models that characteristically specify human beings.

A fundamental point in Sebeok's doctrine of signs is that living converges with sign activity, therefore to maintain and to reproduce life and not only to interpret it in scientific terms are all activities that necessarily involve the use of signs. Sebeok theorizes a direct connection between the biological and the semiotic universes, therefore between biology and semiotics. His research is a development on Peirce's conviction that man is a sign with the addition that this sign is a verb: to interpret. And in Sebeok's particular conception of reality, the interpreting activity coincides with the activity of life, also in his own case with his whole life. If I am a sign, he seems to say through his life as a researcher, then nothing that is a sign is alien to me – *nihil signi mihi alienum puto*; and if the sign situated in the interminable chain of signs is necessarily an interpretant, then 'to interpret' is the verb that best helps me understand who I am.

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