

## The ongoing critique of dialogical response

Vincent Colapietro

Despite its length and ambition, there is little that is excessive in the pejorative sense about *Semiotics Unbounded*. If anything, it might have here and there been even more expansive. I say this though I am strongly disposed to think that such lengthy works are almost always crimes against readers. This book is however anything but such a crime. It almost entirely escapes being excessive in the bad sense (the elimination of occasional repetitions would have saved it completely from this defect through surfeit).

Even so, as part of their effort to make otherness central to their project, the authors celebrate excess and related values. The relationship to otherness is, they assert, “a relationship of excess, surplus, transcendence with respect to objectifying thought” (300). It releases one from “the relations between subject and object,” also from the closed relation of “equal exchange.” While itself a celebration of excess, *Semiotics Unbounded* thus succeeds in avoiding being too verbose or digressive, too excessive in one or another way. While also a celebration of ephemerality, it is likely to make a lasting contribution to the ongoing work of serious theorists in a number of fields. While critical of even the most sophisticated attempts to identify semiotics with a theory focusing on equal exchange, univocal significance, and even the merely rough equivalence between the diacritical signs in one code with those in another, the authors take great pains to define clearly their central terms, thereby in effect allowing readers unfamiliar with semiotics to break the code. But there is no contradiction here: establishing the meaning of words, expressions, and utterances is never simply a matter of decodification – it always involves interpretation of a potentially

open-ended nature. Preliminary definitions need not being anything more than inaugural placements making subsequent moves possible, the series of such moves being interpretant routes of indeterminate length and variable directionality. Defining key terms in this preliminary fashion merely places the pieces on the board; it does not yet involve *answering* one move with another in an open-ended sequence of strategic moves (each one obtaining its significance only in this series of moves). So it is with the definitions that are offered by Petrilli and Ponzio at the beginning of this work.

While a celebration of dialogue, this book offers a trenchant critique of dialogical reason. While a deliberate attempt to free semiotics from the too narrow boundaries within which all too many traditional theorists have circumscribed the theory of signs, this book imposes the severe discipline of hard thought (cf. Peirce), thereby binding the reader to the rigorous demands of systematic reflection. But such discipline is inherently emancipatory; only by meeting the demands of such reflection can inquirers hope effectively to twist free to some degree from the artificial, stultifying constraints of inherited theories. As much as anything else, *Semiotics Unbounded* (as the title suggests) concerns the process of twisting free from such constraints.

These preliminary observations are offered as a quick way to underscore at the outset some of the defining features of this singular contribution to contemporary semiotics. It is indeed a work undertaken, if only implicitly (more accurately, if only for the most part implicitly), in the name of such values as excess, ephemerality, interpretation, dialogue, and emancipation (Colapietro 2007). It celebrates these values as much as anything by interrogating them. Moreover, it celebrates the range of authors that it discusses as much by challenging as by explicating them. That is, it takes each of these thinkers seriously enough

to measure the adequacy of their views against the exigencies of inquiry, as these exigencies make themselves felt today. Its fidelity to these authors is nowhere more apparent than in its willingness on occasion to trace out the trajectories of their thought beyond the points where they themselves carried this thought. At every turn, the vitality of thought – including (in some respects, *especially*) that of authors no longer alive – can be felt. Indeed, need for an attunement to what is alive, not least of all the life of signs, is here both a thesis to be defended by these authors and a sensitivity to be observed in them. The solicitude for living things so eloquently defended in the concluding sections is of a piece with an understanding of signs as themselves inherently alive.

The capacity of signs to generate other signs prompted Peirce and, following him, Petrilli and Ponzio to ascribe life to signs. In brief, fecundity is a mark of vitality. In its own way, this is a defining trait of the intellectual vitality of these two authors, for they are individually and jointly prolific, remarkably so. Theirs is indeed a unique contribution, yielding not so much a “wild harvest” as a profuse one. The book under consideration reflects this, for it contains chapters written by Susan Petrilli, ones by Augusto Ponzio, and yet others by the two of them together (see xxv for a complete breakdown of their respective contributions). The bulk of their work, including earlier versions of many of the essays rewritten as chapters for this volume, has appeared in Italian. But an “Italian version of this book in its present form is not available” (xxv). While some of their writings have been published in English, nothing comparable to *Semiotics Unbounded* has appeared thus far. This suggests an unintended sense in which their distinctive contribution to contemporary debates has been emancipated: their work in a form indicative of its scope, power, and timeliness is no longer circumscribed within the boundaries of the community of those who

are fluent in Italian. This is, for those of us who either do not read this language or only read it with difficulty, a cause for celebration. Whether or not their work comes to be judged as equaling or even surpassing that of Umberto Eco (a compatriot of theirs whose main works have of course been translated into English and indeed other languages shortly after their appearance in Italian), their work unquestionably deserves as wide and careful a hearing as possible. This book makes this possible, especially since it is so clearly and engagingly written. That its quality can plausibly be taken as comparable to the quality of Eco's work helps drive home the significance of its publication.

My aim in this essay is primarily to convey something of the scope, shape, and texture of this book, also something of the character of its contribution, secondarily to question the extent to which several seemingly justifiable omissions might constitute more serious shortcomings than is readily apparent. It certainly must seem unfair to suggest that so inclusive a study should have been even more inclusive than the authors have deemed appropriate. After all, they could not include everything and everyone! But, the omission of a detailed, developed discussion of Jacques Derrida, precisely in reference to his critique of Levinas on absolute otherness, is arguably more serious than the authors realize. This is so, even if they do not (as I suspect they do not) find Derrida's critique convincing or telling. For the inclusion of Derrida as a counterpoint to Levinas seems virtually required by their commitment to dialogism in Bakhtin's sense (a sense that they so carefully articulate and, for the most part, so admirably exemplify). Analogously, the omission of a more focused, extended treatment of the novel, especially in light of such contemporary authors as Italo Calvino, Milan Kundera, David Lodge, or others (i.e., individuals who are both novelists and theorists of this genre), would have been apposite. This too might seem as though I am

requesting these authors to have written the book that I most wanted to read (or would have myself written were I the two of them), but this is actually not the case. Their own thought drives in this direction and, to some extent, goes a notable distance toward this desired goal. But in their discussion of the novel they fall back too exclusively on Bakhtin's theory, paying virtually no regard to other theorists and also no attention to specific works other than the focal objects of his theoretical investigation. Other voices than Bakhtin and other exemplifications of the novel would have helped these authors carry forward *their* dialogical project. Finally, by considering in Part Two views of language *other than* those in which distinctively human languages are conceived as modeling systems, the authors would have liberated semiotics from an excessively cognitivist orientation to human language. In addition to these omissions, I want to consider the portrayal of Hegel by Petrilli and Ponzio as problematic from the perspective of their own approach to texts. Even so, my task here is principally expository, only secondarily critical. So, I now turn in earnest to my main business, that of conveying something of the scope, shape, and character of this impressive work, also something of its multifaceted and distinctive contribution.

As a first step, let us imagine Charles Sanders Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby in their intellectual prime having the opportunity to engage for almost three decades (with the promise of future ones) in countless hours of focused conversation, not only the opportunity in their last years to exchange letters for less than a decade. Moreover, let us imagine that each of these interlocutors had an opportunity to read not only Mikhail Bakhtin and Emmanuel Levinas but also Charles Morris, Thomas Sebeok, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, and Umberto Eco, then to discuss in detail the various, complex ways in which these irreducibly different voices contribute to the articulation of a truly dialogical understanding of human

sign-use (anthroposemiosis). Finally, let us imagine these interlocutors animated by an abiding concern for peaceful coexistence, thus driven toward an ongoing critique of the multiple ways in which our historical institutions, practices, and discourses seem to render such coexistence a chimera. But there is, in truth, no need to imagine any of this, since the authors of *Semiotics Unbounded* actually exist and, in doing so, they provide the airy nothings of my imagination with names and local habitation.

On their interpretation of Peirce, “a sign is a sign insofar as it is other – that is to say, insofar as it leads outside and beyond itself” (46). This prompts them to suggest, insofar as a sign leads in this direction, “it is always in excess”: only that which is in the process of exceeding itself, of becoming other and more than itself, counts as a sign. In turn, this leads them to discern an affinity between Peirce’s conception of semiosis and Bakhtin’s notion of utterance. An utterance not only calls for a response but also comes to possess its meaning by virtue of its power to elicit an ongoing series of open-ended responses. In one of the few infelicities of this work, Petrilli and Ponzio designate this aspect of utterance “answering comprehension”. They connect such comprehension with Welby’s notion of “mother-sense” (see especially 71) as well as Peirce’s notion of the interpretant. They also use it to mark their distance from Eco (see, e.g., 325) as well as Hegel (e.g., 327). For the moment, however, I want to call attention to this dimension of utterance only as a way of foregrounding the character of the book under consideration. The utterances of these authors give every indication of having been dialogically shaped. Knowing these individuals, it is easy to imagine how their utterances took their distinctive shape in fluid exchanges wherein multiple perspectives and diverse voices are effortlessly brought into play with one another. But this no private conversation on which others are merely allowed to eavesdrop; it is rather

by design an inclusively conceived dialogue in which the responses of others are pivotal. That is, the reader's comprehension of the authors' claims and arguments is an integral part of their unfolding significance: the meanings of the words exchanged between these authors and then inscribed in their text are in excess of anything contained within the pages of even so expansive a volume. They are, no less than Peirce or Welby, Bakhtin or Levinas, "oriented by a logic of otherness" (71) in which the very meaning of their utterances is constituted by the responses of others. An understanding and appraisal of this work, accordingly, must be guided by an appreciation of the manner and degree to which such logic orients Petrilli and Ponzio in *Semiotics Unbounded*. Hence, it will crucially inform my own account and evaluation.

In a sense, Petrilli gets here the first word (she is responsible for Chapter 1), but this is misleading. Like the concluding pages of this book, the opening ones (those of the "Introduction" preceding Chapter 1) were jointly written. This is fitting for a work so deeply rooted in Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of dialogue and in Emmanuel Levinas's insistence upon openness to alterity (or otherness). In obvious and subtle respects, this book is a multi-level, multifaceted dialogue in which the very meaning of *dialogue* is subjected to intense interrogation, also one in which this process of interrogation itself exemplifies what this term principally means for these authors. The voices of Charles Peirce, Victoria Welby, Mikhail Bakhtin, Charles Morris, Thomas Sebeok, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, and Umberto Eco are, in Part One, amplified in such a way as to make clear their direct relevance to contemporary semiotics. This Part is more than three times longer than Part Two and more than twice as long as Part Three. This large work of unequal parts begins with a consideration of the views of others and, in the end, focuses on the responsibility that each one of us must assume for

other beings and indeed for the site of our coexistence (the Earth itself), not only other humans. In this regard as well, this is especially fitting for a work inspired by (among others) Bakhtin and Levinas.

As noted, this is a jointly written book in a twofold sense (it is a text woven together of essays written by each one of the authors as well as one encompassing essays collaboratively written by Petrilli and Ponzio). As also noted, it is a quite long work (exclusive of a brief Glossary but inclusive of a slightly longer Preface, the book is more than 550 pages). This large book is a momentous as well as monumental achievement, momentous above all because its significance is bound up with its timeliness (it speaks to our historical moment in a decisive manner), monumental because its comprehensive scope is most readily apparent in its intricate architecture no less than remarkable breadth. Indeed, its physical size and weight might justly be taken as apt metaphors for its intellectual range and weightiness. This book is, moreover, a multifaceted achievement. In *Semiotics Unbounded: Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs*, Ponzio and Petrilli make, at least, a historical, exegetical, philosophical, and heuristic contribution to the study of signs. In doing so, this is, at once, a work of immense erudition, nuanced criticism, theoretical imagination, and moral passion. Individuals familiar with this field no less than those who have little or even no acquaintance with semiotics stand to profit greatly from reading this book, either in whole or in part (for a number of the chapters might be read, albeit with some loss, simply as essays in their own right).

Though it embodies “a unitary research program” (xxii), its treatment of distinct topics is as valuable as its establishment of a synoptic perspective. This is especially true of its treatment of such topics as modeling, writing, and communication, also such topics as

literary discourse, absolute otherness, and ideological manipulation. Each of these topics is one to which the authors have given themselves fully; and the reader is richly rewarded for the sharply focused attention given to the differential features of these distinct topics. The demands of systematic integration are thus never allowed to deflect attention from salient details or singular cases. The unity here has emerged from a delicate process of careful shifting, subtle comparisons, and complex negotiations: markedly different thinkers are adeptly brought into constructive dialogue with one another, sharply divergent perspectives are finely brought into contrasting focus (thereby we are enabled to see the varying advantages of these different perspectives). That is, unity is not imposed from on high, but painstakingly shown to be intimated by the subject matter itself. The expanding subject matter of semiotic inquiry not only lends itself but also invites a systematic treatment wherein seemingly disparate fields are shown to have unsuspected affinities. The subject matter itself underwrites the legitimacy and, indeed, the fecundity of a semiotic approach.

The claims made by Ponzio and Petrilli for semiotics are both bold and chastened. As the title implies, semiotics is not bound to the forms of sign-use characteristic of, much less unique to, humans (though this is only part of the significance of the title). Semiosis (the principal object of semiotic inquiry) extends beyond anthroposemiosis. This suggests to these authors, following the example of Sebeok, that the boundaries of semiotics are at least coextensive with those of the biosphere. This bold affirmation is however counterbalanced by a chastening realization. The integrity of even those disciplines and discourses unquestionably linked together in their focus on semiosis of one form or another need, individually, to be respected. These disciplines and discourses cannot be simply annexed by an imperialistic discipline or master discourse. The model of a more or less loose

confederation of distinct polities, as much defined by their different lineages and contemporary preoccupations as their overlapping concerns, seems (to me, at least) the most appropriate one here.

As the authors are unhesitant to admit, *Semiotics Unbounded* opens as a primer (xxii). Indeed, they take great pains to offer precise definitions of highly contested terms (including the most basic and pivotal terms such as *sign* and *symbol*) and, then, supplement these definitions with a short “Glossary” of key terms (559-64) placed at the end of the book. It culminates in a moral stance toward global semiotics: the reflexive responsibility of the inquirer is, in the end, transfigured into the global responsibility of the cosmopolitan. While opening as a primer, *Semiotics Unbounded* is never condescending to its readers. It addresses with the utmost respect those who are uninitiated into the often arcane terminology of this highly contested field, showing the need for subtle distinctions and the roots, also other justifications, for unfamiliar terms. While concluding with a moral stance, it is never moralistic, even at its most passionate.

In the judgment of one of her expositors, a judgment with which Petrilli concurs, “it was with Life – Life more abundant here, Life unspeakable beyond the point where knowledge for the present ends – that Lady Welby was ultimately and always concerned, and only with Language as it was the means and attribute, the expression and the power of Life. (W. Macdonald 1912, in Cust 1931: 355). Though less evident and arguably not quite as central to him as to Welby, Peirce’s philosophy, from his evolutionary cosmology to his version of pragmatism, from his agapistic ethics to his theory of signs, is nonetheless animated and directed by a concern for life. Peirce unhesitantly asserts, “every symbol is a living thing, in a very strict sense that is no mere figure of speech” (*CP* 2.222). He adds

elsewhere: a symbol “may have a rudimentary life, so that it can have a history, and gradually undergo a great change of meaning, while preserving a certain self-identity” (MS 290). While the phenomena of life may not be fully intelligible apart from a semiotic perspective, the phenomena of signs are (at least according for Peirce and also for those such as Ponzio and Petrilli who have been influenced by him in this regard) adequately seen only from a biocentric perspective: the life and thus the dynamism and agency inherent in signs, evolving in complex ways in open, overlapping networks, demand theoretical recognition and analysis. To investigate signs responsibly demands responding sensitively and appreciatively to just this dimension of them. But it demands more than this, indeed nothing less than a relentless critique of our own semiotic practices. But to inhabit the Earth responsibly requires both an engagement in a relentless critique and the assumption of global responsibility: we as citizens of the world are obligated to take responsibility for nothing less than the Earth itself as the matrix of life. In a sense, this amounts to cosmic responsibility: we must assume responsibility for the world itself, not just our planet. The life of signs finds one of its most arresting and ennobling expressions in our solicitude for life, our cultivated attentiveness to the myriad, interwoven forms of vitality making up the biosphere. Our inability to discern the life inherent in signs might be symptomatic of a deeply rooted pathology, what might extend to an inability to discern life as such in any of its instantiations. Semiotics unbound twists free from the death grip of mechanistic materialism and other reductivist positions. This entails twisting free from the hegemonic dominance of the sovereign subject of the modern epoch, also the dispiriting vision of a dead universe in which life is but an anomaly if not an illusion.

As already noted, *Semiotics Unbounded* makes a multifaceted contribution to contemporary discourse. The historical, exegetical, philosophical, and heuristic aspects of this contribution are however not equally obvious. While Part One, “Semiotics and Semioticians,” is unmistakably a detailed history focusing on certain central figures, also an intricate tapestry of luminous exegeses, and finally a critical engagement with these central figures (i.e., a philosophical dialogue pivoting around their distinctive contributions to semiotic inquiry), it is, like the following parts, one with implications for how to investigate signs. In general, the least developed and most implicit of the contributions made by Ponzio and Petrilli is arguably the heuristic one. But, as much as anything else, this work in effect provides us with a set of instructions for how to take up and carry forward the investigation of signs. More accurately, this work offers an exemplary enactment of responsible inquiry, while appropriately stressing the impossibility of codifying in a precise set of formal instructions all of the necessary attributes of the responsible investigator. The responsible inquirer is, minimally, a responsive agent who takes seriously what others have uttered and also what the objects of inquiry (in effect) assert in opposition to the claims of that investigator (Colapietro 2005). Hence, this book is self-consciously structured as a dialogue (see, e.g., xxiii). The most fully elaborated, also the most straightforwardly historical and minutely exegetical, of these contributions to the study of signs is to be found in Part One (“Semiotics and Semioticians”). But the philosophical and heuristic facets are encountered here alongside the historical and exegetical ones. Thus, the distinct dimensions of the authors’ varied contribution to contemporary discourse are just that – distinct, not separable. In each of the parts of this book, they are identifiable strands woven together into a coherent tapestry.

One of the organizing metaphors of the authors is, however, that of a route or pathway, another is that of a network. For them, the life of signs is dramatically evident in the routes of interpretation blazed by these investigators and also in what we discover while traveling along these pathways. Indeed, the notion of a route of interpretation is central to their explication of meaning. In the beginning of this work the authors carefully guide us through the labyrinthine network resulting from the intersecting or parallel paths of past and contemporary explorers. In the end they take up the most pressing questions of contemporary life. In the middle of this study Ponzio and Petrilli address theoretical issues often of a highly technical character, though they never lose sight of the human significance of even the seemingly most abstruse issue. The issues taken up in Part Two, “Modelling, Writing, and Otherness,” have more than spatial centrality, appearing as they do in the middle of this work. They truly have a conceptual or theoretical centrality: these topics either flow from, or at least are informed by, the views of the thinkers examined in Part One and, in turn, they flow into the central concerns of Part Three (above all, that of the various possibilities for a global community today). Though less historically focused than Part One, the decisive influence of Sebeok, Levinas, and Bakhtin is dramatically evident in Part Two

Having touched upon the scope, shape, and character of this book, I want now to focus on what is possibly its most original and valuable contribution (given what I have stressed above, a contribution at once historical, exegetical, philosophical, and heuristic). This is a complex matter. There are three interlaced themes to which I especially want to turn. In these pages we encounter a critique of dialogical reason, the advocacy of absolute otherness, and nonetheless an expression for hope in the possibilities for a global community, continuously renewed through global communication, of a radically open character.

While the scope of their inquiry owes much to (above all else) Peirce and Sebeok, the depth of this work owes much to the creative appropriation of the central insights of Mikhail Bahktin and Emmanuel Levinas. The expansive scope of semiotics is exceeded by the unfathomable depth of the other. Excess itself, especially in reference to otherness (the other always surpassing our comprehension and assessment), is to which these authors

The phenomena of life fall within the boundaries of semiotics, but so too do our experiences of the other in its absolute otherness. Sebeok's emphatic identification with Peirce is here not allowed to preclude his – or Peirce's – surprising alliance with thinkers who in their training, preoccupations, and commitments seem so radically different from either Sebeok or Peirce. Semiotics makes not so much strange bedmates as captivating figures unexpectedly thrown together by the carnivalesque movements of an inclusive dance. At least, semiotics thrusts such figures into each others' arms when the music is partly composed and so exquisitely performed by such innovators as Ponzio and Petrilli. But the dancers themselves are partly responsible for the music by which they are carried toward each other, including those who appear to move not only in completely separate worlds but also in opposite directions (e.g., Peirce and Levinas).

This is most evident in the dialogical approach to human semiosis encountered in virtually each one of the theorists assembled by Ponzio and Petrilli. The authors have achieved nothing less than the facilitation of a dialogue among those thinkers, from Peirce to Eco, who have in diverse ways contributed to a radical critique of dialogical reason, though in the very articulation of this critique have effectively paid homage to the ideal of dialogue. In my judgment, what Jacques Derrida wrote of the classical ideal of human emancipation might with equal justice be written of dialogue: “Nothing seems to me less outdated than the

classical emancipatory ideal. We cannot attempt to disqualify it today, whether crudely or with sophistication, at least not without treating it too lightly and forming the worst complicities” (“Force of Law,” p. 28). I am disposed to say, as emphatically: Nothing seems less discredited than the classical dialogical ideal, so dramatically exemplified in the life of Socrates. Indeed, the emancipatory and the dialogical ideals might be inextricably intertwined: just as human emancipation can only be a dialogical achievement, so too human dialogue is an inherently emancipatory undertaking. Just as we must free ourselves from unduly constraining and stultifying features of the classical ideal of human emancipation, as this ideal has been actually articulated and indeed as it is actually embodied in our institutions, so we must free ourselves from the all too often undetected and unjustified exclusions and distortions authorized by the classical ideal of uncoerced dialogue. Part of the intended irony here is that the defining ideals of dialogical reason – above all, radical openness to absolute otherness – drive toward a truly radical critique of dialogical reason itself. The significance, force, and implications of any utterance, especially an utterance about dialogue, exceed what the utterer intends or the moment of utterance encompasses. From the perspective of those most deeply committed to dialogue, the word *dialogue* is a suspect sign. Like such words as *democracy*, *freedom*, and *emancipation*, this word has as often as not been used as an instrument by which alterity is effaced.

This brings us to the points of criticisms identified above. First, it is surprising, given the commitment of the authors to the logic of otherness, that they did not accord Jacques Derrida a more prominent place. He is noted parenthetically (!) in the Introduction (19) and touched upon several times thereafter (twice in conjunction with Eco and indeed twice in connection with Levinas, but not specifically in reference to the Derridean critique of

Levinasian otherness). No reasons are given for this exclusion. In particular, Derrida in his role as critique of Levinas seems to be a voice calling for inclusion in a radical critique of dialogical reason. The actual exchange between Levinas and Derrida on otherness is one in which not only the respective positions of these companionable antagonists become increasingly clarified but also in which our understanding of the issues themselves – also what is at stake here – become finely sharpened. The dialogue between the two precisely on otherness is an invaluable resource for understanding, in a truly dialogical manner, the logic of otherness, in the sense being advocated by Petrilli and Ponzio. For Derrida no less than for Levinas, “the other is the other only if his alterity is absolutely irreducible, that is, infinitely irreducible” (1978, 104). In Levinas’ judgment, Husserl “seeks to recognize the other as Other only in its form as ego, in its form of alterity, which cannot be that of things in the world” (125). In doing so, he (again from Levinas’s perspective) fails to acknowledge the other as other: he is only able to see the other in relation to the self (only able to see it as an alter ego, thus only as a relative other). In his defense of Husserl on this score, however, Derrida suggests: “The other as alter ego signifies the other as other, irreducibly to *my* ego, precisely because it is an ego, because it has the form of the ego.” Thus human stakes of this philosophical disagreement are explicitly identified by Derrida: “The movement of transcendence toward the other, as invoked by Levinas, would have no meaning if it did not bear within it, as one of its essential meanings, that in my ipseity I know myself to be other for the other.” Yet this would mean that there would be “violence without a victim.” Certainly, Derrida may be wrong in insisting that “the other ... would not be what he is ... if he were not alter ego,” but from the perspective of dialogism this response is actually part of the meaning of Levinas’ utterances regarding alterity. Of course, not any response,

especially not fundamentally uninformed or manifestly silly ones, are integral to the meaning of these utterances. Derrida's responses to Levinas' utterances are however minutely informed, deeply charitable, but nonetheless sharply critical.

It is doubtful that Ponzio and Petrilli are content simply to adopt the views of Levinas, though this might be the case. To situate Levinas' actual utterances in one of their most important dialogical contexts, to discern aspects of their meaning in the utterances they call forth from another who admires so deeply and agrees on some important questions so decisively with Levinas, also to absorb the force of their meaning in Levinas' responses to Derrida's interrogation, seems fundamentally in accord with the spirit of *Semiotics Unbounded*. On the one hand, it seems justifiably for Ponzio and Petrilli simply to plead finitude (to claim that, after all, there are limits, not least of all those of time, energy, and the space that a publisher is willing to give authors). On the other, however, the *dialogue* between Levinas and Derrida is of such a character, centrality, and abiding relevance (also unresolved status) that the exclusion of Derrida here borders on monologism. This is especially so since violence is pivotal not only to Levinas's critique of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger but also to Derrida's interrogation of Levinas.

Second, the novel as theorized by authors other than Bakhtin and as practiced by writers other than those on whom he focused is of such central importance to the distinctive approach to semiotic inquiry being defended by Petrilli and Ponzio that it deserves even more detailed, careful attention than they have given it. If anything, the significance of the novel for their understanding of writing and literature, language and art, cannot be exaggerated. Moreover, the value of Bakhtin's theory of the novel is arguably surpassed by that of any other theorist. But, just as the meaning of Levinas' assertions and arguments is only

discernible in the responses it calls forth from an interlocutor such as Derrida, the value of Bakhtin's theory, also its shortcomings and exclusions, are only evident if this theory is discussed in the company of other theorists. The accessibility, importance, and indeed relevance (direct relevance to the avowed project so admirably executed in most other respects in *Semiotics Unbounded*) of such theorists of the novel as Calvino, Kundera, and Lodge, theorists who are also novelists, Polyphony and mulivocality are (or ought to be) as much a feature of our theoretical discourse as our novelistic practice.

Third, the heavy reliance of the authors upon a conception of language and culture derived from the admittedly invaluable work of Yuri Lotman, Jakob von Uexküll, and Thomas Sebeok means that they too often, too uncritically take language to be first and foremost a system of modeling. The result is that they tend to approach language in an excessively cognitivist light. While they throw much light on this crucial feature of human language, they also throw into obscurity much that is distinctive about our use of language. For example, the modes of what Stanley Cavell, following Ludwig Wittgenstein, identifies as *acknowledgment* have no place in their account, though the whole of their thought drives toward acknowledging the other as other.

For example, I *invoke* the name of that to which you have just appealed, say, the logic of otherness and in my invocation I am using language in a distinctively human manner. The philosopher of language who strives to do just to the complexity and depth of our uses of language must certainly take into account the capacity of language to serve as a modeling system by which an infinite number of possible worlds might be identified. But this seemingly miraculous capacity must not be allowed to eclipse apparently more mundane

uses, such as invoking the name of a shared value or acknowledging the presence of an other who is, at once, immediately recognizable and infinitely distant.

One of the very few instances of demonstrable unfairness is their portrayal of Hegel as virtually *nothing but* an exemplar of the logic of identity (or sameness). In Hegelian dialectics (in contrast to, say, Peircean logic), the triadic structure of human dialogue “is abstracted from the constitutive dialogism of sign life and gives rise to metaphysical, abstract, and monological dialectics.” In explicating Bakhtin’s critique of Hegel’s form of dialectic, moreover giving every indication that they endorse this critique, the authors stress: “although it has its roots in a vital dialogical sign context, dialectics consists in extracting the voices (division of voices) from dialogue, eliminating any (personal/emotional) intonations, and thus transforming live words into abstract concepts and judgments, thereby obtaining a single abstract consciousness” (327). This hardly seems fair. Unquestionably, there is this tendency in Hegel’s writings. But there is also manifestly a countervailing tendency. Just as it is inadequate for us at this point to rely too heavily on Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, so too it is unfair to repeat too uncritically his critique of Hegel’s conception of dialectic. The voices of those who are defined by their relationship to worlds imploding due to the inherent, fateful inadequacy of these enveloping, definitive worlds are audible throughout a work such as Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In addition, the Hegelian ideal of immanent critique, so central to his phenomenological method, seems especially worthy of critical consideration by contemporary theorists committed to a radical dialogism. To criticize the other from one’s own point of view is as inappropriate as trying to understand the other exclusively in terms of one’s own categories or frameworks. My suggestion is then to re-read Hegel’s dialectic as a precursor of the logic of otherness, not simply as an

exemplification of the logic of sameness. The tragic failure to approximate more fully radical openness would, I imagine, thereby be disclosed in one of its most influential historical forms. Hegel's philosophy is one of the most heroic and ingenious efforts to confront the other as other. In the *Phenomenology* at least, reflection predominantly takes the form of recollection (cf. Verene) and, in turn, recollection is oriented toward a series of encounters or confrontations in which consciousness proves to itself to be inadequate to the demands of that which stands over against consciousness. If he fails in this undertaking (as I am inclined to think), that failure might be at least as instructive as the denunciations of his shortcomings. After all, he worked out in incredible detail the actual shapes of human experience in its fateful encounters with excessive otherness. The demands of intelligibility are not lightly tossed aside. The impulse to acknowledge the other as a self, as a being intelligible not only in its own right but in its own manner, might not compromise the logic of otherness as much as Levinas or, following him, as Petrilli and Ponzio claim. In any event, to read Hegel as simply a champion of identity is to miss what is most vital in him.

This is related to my point regarding Derrida. He explicitly makes the connection for us. As we have seen (though not in this particular formulation), he *in response to* Levinas insists: "The other, for me, is an ego which I know to be in relation to me as to an ego" (126). Immediately after offering this response, Derrida asks rhetorically: "Where have these movements been better described than in *The Phenomenology of Mind*?" My point is not that Derrida is unquestionably correct in this or his other claims, only that the logic of alterity drives us to consider with the utmost care the discourse of others, especially when there is the possibility of these others, by being identified with the logic of sameness, being themselves victims of violence (if only hermeneutic violence).

These criticisms need to be heard in conjunction with the praise expressed above, just as this praise needs to be heard in reference to these points of criticism. The comparative slightness of these criticisms would otherwise go undetected, as on the other side the full measure of this praise would all too likely be subjected to doubt. Such a significant work demands serious engagement and, in turn, one of the most respectful forms of serious engagement is honest criticism. But, as a critical response to two authors who are almost without exception such charitable interpreters and gracious critics, these points might not be completely fair; for I have underscored what they have failed to do, when they have accomplished so much, so well. But, in the name of dialogue, let this critique stand. For the meaning of their utterances is found above all in the routes of interpretation opened and extended by the energies of these utterances, perhaps not least of all by corrections of misinterpretations such as those possibly embodied in my critical responses. So I let these criticisms stand primarily for the purpose of inviting the clarification of these authors, not in any presumption that they would be at a loss for a response. Indeed, to suppose that especially Augusto Ponzio would be at such a loss in response to a criticism of Levinas or any other author with whom he in some measure identifies is simply unimaginable!

In sum, then, *Semiotics Unbounded* reminds me as much as anything of Bari, Italy, the city where the authors reside and work. There is an ancient, walled city with narrow, labyrinthine streets where it can occasionally be dangerous to walk. (One is certain to be robbed of one's theoretical innocence if one wanders for very long in narrow passages of the inner citadel of this expansive site of a book.) But the *città antica* is enveloped by a modern, polyglot city bordering on the sea. The university where the authors teach is itself a place apart and an integral part of a vibrant city abounding in liminal spaces. The theoretical

approach so engagingly, forcefully, and imaginatively articulated by Ponzio and Petrilli in *Semiotics Unbounded* exhibits far more the dynamic structure of their urban setting than the intricate architecture of a single edifice. This becomes even more evident when we recall that cities are interminably under construction. They are indeed open networks of staggering complexity, affording routes in countless directions. They are growing in diverse, complex, and often contradictory ways. Especially in places like Europe, the task of construction is undertaken amid ruins, just as the preservation of ruins is integral to the ongoing construction of the most contemporary places.

Hence, one network metaphorically maps onto another, that of the city onto this book, but it does so only imperfectly though quite suggestively. The suggestions intimate routes of interpretation, pathways of interrogation. The demand for exact equivalences is suspended, the logic of recurrent sameness is exposed, and the possibilities of irrepressible excess are, at least for a time, given a name and habitat. We are inhabitants of this metaphorical here and, in being so, already beyond it and beside our selves. The logic of otherness is itself irrepressible, though we spend incalculable effort and squandered ingenuity in trying to reduce it to the logic of identity, also to confine the theory of signs within narrow (often the narrowest) of confines. *Semiotics Unbounded* shows us how in detail to do otherwise, indeed, to be otherwise. The paradoxical character of human existence is nowhere more evident than in the intimate relationship between being otherwise (inclusive of thinking otherwise) and being *with* others as others. That is, the logic of absolute otherness and the ethics of peaceful coexistence are intertwined. Connected to this, the possibilities for global communication are bound up with the articulation of global semiotics, sensitivity to the life of signs with solicitude for the fate of life on this planet, and a thoroughgoing commitment to

dialogical reason with an ongoing critique of this distinctive form of human rationality. The authors of *Semiotics Unbounded* help us to see this but also much more.