

A SHORT CRITIQUE OF THE ROLE OF THE SIGN IN UMBERTO ECO'S "A THEORY OF SEMIOTICS"

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In the history which I require and design, special care is to be taken that it be of wide range and made to the measure of the universe. For the world is not to be narrowed till it will go into the understanding (which has been done hitherto), but the understanding to be expanded till it can take in the image of the world, as it is in fact.

Francis Bacon, Parasceve, Aphorism 4

A code is subject to, indeed demands, a single clear decoding or interpretation In hieroglyph the meaning is embodied in the figure itself. This is the struggle between the cipherer and the hieroglyphic poet in Bacon. He ascribes to myth a double function, but the two functions turn out to resemble one another, each depending on "This stands for that," which is cipher and not myth. Deliberately to encode knowledge so as to hide it from the vulgar is the task of the cipher but never of the myth or poetry.

Elizabeth Sewell, The Orphic Voice

Pre-critical naivete holds undivided rule. This is why modern thought has been unable to avoid--and precisely from the starting point of this naive discourse--searching for the locus of a discourse that would be neither of the order of reduction nor of the order of promise: a discourse whose tension would keep separate the empirical and the transcendental, while being directed at both; a discourse that would make it possible to analyse man as a subject, that is as a locus of knowledge which has been empirically acquired but referred back as closely as possible to what makes

it possible, as a pure form immediately present to those contents; a discourse, in short, which in relation to a quasi-aesthetics and quasi-dialectics would play the role of an analytic which would at the same time give them a foundation in a theory of the subject and perhaps enable them to articulate themselves in that third and intermediary term in which both the experience of the body and that of culture would be rooted.

Michel Foucault, The Order of Things

Introduction

. . . and I remember it was more than ten years ago so clearly moving so slowly to flush my face with cold water waking the night punchy from a long sleep looking into the mirror where an old friend was doing the same in a hurry looking into the mirror and seeing together in the same moment our eyes our eyes were the same eyes same rootbeer brown with flecks of gold and green identically poised kaleidoscopes looking into the mirror spellbound eyes our eyes looking from one to the other full of wonder the same mystery we had held since childhood without seeing our eyes a living sign unassailable bond a being a witness deep transparent matter dense colored wonder irises held in silent semiosis eyes that do not cipher held existence and imagination in silent love affair green waves swimming in green waves and this memory too a sign a brown jewel in our flesh

In Section 3.3.4 of A Theory of Semiotics, called "Ideas as Signs," Umberto Eco suggests research extending the limits of his own theory into "the idea of 'meaning' found in the phenomenology of perception." He suggests comparing that notion of meaning with his own notion of the "sememe." This excursus would presumably penetrate the lower threshold of semiotics separating conventional signs from natural signs and signs from things. Now both semiotics and phenomenology study cultural units, but whereas semiotics accepts them as data, phenomenology looks for the various conditions of their formation and so confronts the ambiguous dense texts from which the explicit messages studied by semiotics arise or descend from. These latter texts, from which messages seem to descend, can be transcultural in the manner of

aesthetic works, and they lie at the upper threshold of semiotics. The possibility of comparing semiotics and phenomenology at either lower or upper threshold is explained, in Eco's theory, by his presumption that "every object may potentially become a sign within the environment of a given culture," and that not only objects but also concepts or ideas can be taken as 'signs.' Eco's view is that there is a continuum from the perceptual experience of things to the abstract significations of ideas, and that his conception of the sememe enables semiotics to transverse this continuum quite systematically. For example, "both the word /cat/ and the token perceptum //cat// culturally stand for the same sememe" interpreted of course under different types of code. This is indeed a powerful claim. My question is whether or not Eco's conception of the sememe, and more importantly that of the 'sign' upon which it is based, can support a theory of codes and of sign production which purports to comprehend the kind of threshold events or objects that we have just been discussing.

Semiotics according to Eco deals with art, which lies at its upper threshold and also its lower, primarily as an "under-coding" that works to increase the segmentation of both the content and the expression continuum. The surplus of content and of expression which transcends current cultural codification is correlated by a complex rule, code, ideolect, or style, which can be abduced from the aesthetic text by the semiotician or other component addressee. For Eco, all this occurs on the basis of signification. Understanding a work of art means decoding it and exhibiting a calculus of its signs. Since works or art modify or destroy and replace the standard semantic-conceptual models of a culture, the truth-conditions applicable to a work of art are special. Truth, being for Eco a correspondence or at least a connection of some sort between signs and factual states of the world, is preeminently a function of signification. If uncoded facts intrude into a culture, then the truth-values relevant to those facts undergo mutations, as do the codes through which they are newly entertained. Here especially, at the upper threshold of semiotics which can influence its lower threshold, the question as to the capacity of the 'sign' as conceived by Eco to sustain the semiotic model without somehow debilitating what it attempts to comprehend--this question gains in urgency because it does claim to contribute a topography of art and truth based on a conception of the artistic sign.

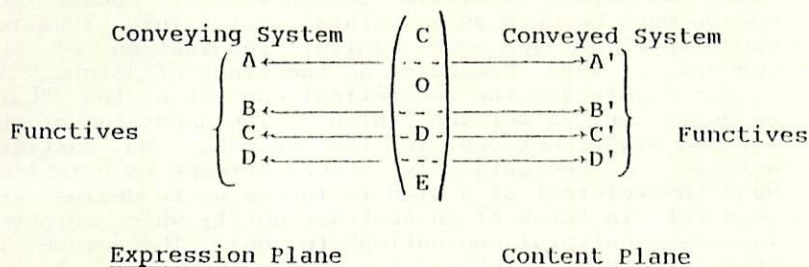
In light of these summary considerations, I will pose my question by (1) demarcating the features of Eco's theory most pertinent to the question; (2) drawing in a phenomenological perspective on these matters; (3) opening up a view of the sign, in terms of the artist's own conception, which would seem to radically challenge Eco's view; and (4) very briefly propose clarification, compromise or re-evaluation of the sign with respect to the conception that develops out of this discussion.

Eco's Theory

Eco's definition of 'sign' is simply this: "I propose to define as a sign everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else."¹ Already Eco has narrowed down the range of the 'sign' to apply to a relation between one 'thing' and another. Just what kinds of 'things' are to be considered in this sign relation is a question we will have to ask from the start. It is easily answered by noting the bare model of "signification" Eco proposes and also his description of the process of communication from which that model derives. Communication is essentially the passage of a 'signal' from some source to some destination. Signals can be sent from machine to machine, but in this instance the signal is not yet a sign and so there is no signification. Signification requires the destination to be a person, who not only receives the signal but interprets it by means of a code. The code systematizes the signal, so that it can be received in the absence of those entities which it re-presents or "stands for." The necessary requirement for signification is therefore the code, which can "foresee an established correspondence between that which 'stands for' and its correlate," the addressee being only contingent to the signification process (p. 8). This autonomy of the code, and of signification itself, is not surprising, given the derived status of the "sign." There can be no sign unless the relation between the signal and its correlate is explicitated for possible human cognition by means of the code. The definition of sign is derived from this model of communication which makes the systematic relation between signal and its correlate primitive with respect to signification.

By itself, the preeminence of the code begins to answer our question about what kinds of things are

related in signification. In a theory where the code assumes so much importance, the sign comes to be regarded as a "sign-function," which takes up a role within the following general model (abstracted from Eco's verbal text):



In this model a 'sign' is always a funtive "element of the expression plane conventionally correlated to one (or several) elements of a content plane" (p. 48). There is a sign-function only when such a correlation exists. Does this mean, then, that the expression funtives are signs for the content funtives? This is not quite right. The sign-function establishes "the correlation of an abstract element of the expression system with an abstract element of the content system" (my emphasis), (p. 50), and so we have not gotten to the level of the sign yet. By means of the sign-function model, it is possible for the code to bring us to the level of the sign. It is the code that for Eco establishes "general types," the funtive elements of the model, which are "abstract," and, furthermore, it is the code that on this basis can produce the rule or rules "which generate concrete tokens, i.e., signs such as usually occur in communicative processes" (pp. 50-51). The sign-function refers to the abstract level of the funtive, whereas it is the sign or token that refers to the concrete level. What we want to notice here is that, for theoretical purposes, the sign-function dislocates the sign as the focal concept of semiotics--due to the necessary requirement that expression and content be always mediated by codes. This displacement is entrenched when the relation between sign-function and code is more fully formalized in terms of meaning, the basic unit of which is the "sememe."

The description of the sign-function is incomplete without a way of ascribing meaning to it. Since for Eco the sign function is a relation or co-relation, meaning lies here, in the nexus transversed by the

correlata. This nexus is the sememe: the sememe serves as the pivot between a sign-functive of the expression plane and a sign-functive of the content plane. Its Janusian posture thus enables it to be the referent of the bivalent sign-function. Moreover, since the sememe is always conventionally coded, the sememe must be seen as a cultural unit. This situation constitutes an even more radical reevaluation of the concept of sign. Semiosis, as the study of "signs," in effect eliminates the theoretical concept of the "bare object," throws out the "thing." The denotatum of the various sign-functions is the sememe, and abstract entity. As Eco puts this, "Every attempt to establish what the referent of a sign is forces us to define the referent in terms of an abstract entity which moreover is only a cultural convention" (p. 66). The sememe is "the meaning to which the code makes the system of sign-vehicles correspond" (p. 67). The "things" themselves are known through the sememe which the communicative processes inserts into a culture "in place of things" (p. 66).

Eco's theory of the sign whose meaning is the sememe leads to a global feature of semiotics that I also want to call attention to. This feature has to do with the "interpretant." Interpretants are, so to speak, sign-mirrors which can themselves be regarded as signs: the sememe can be analyzed in terms of another sememe; signs and sememes can be treated as interpretants for other signs and sememes, including all their denotations and connotations. Eco says of interpretants that "they can be complex discourses which not only translate but even inferentially develop all the logical possibilities suggested by the sign" (p. 70). The sememe is part of a cultural system, of the "logic of culture" whose theoretization is the *raison d'être* of Eco's book (as he says in the first sentence of his Introduction: "The aim of this book is to explore the theoretical possibility and the social function of a unified approach to every phenomenon of signification and/or communication."). And there is even a global semantic universe encompassing each cultural system, so that the mirroring of sign by sign is virtually infinite in range at the same time that each sign can be fully meaningful. Taking these characteristics together, we get the global semiotic feature of "infinite semantic recursivity," and therefore a genuine semiotics working with an open system, an open series of signs, a semiosis that is self-explanatory. So it seems. But we must bear in mind the dominance of the sign-function in the theory,

its dominance over the sign as well as over 'things' themselves.

When Eco turns from the theory of codes to the theory of sign production, he addresses himself more directly to the work of art, under which he subsumes one of the four modes of sign production, namely that of invention. The artist is a sign producer who "posits" the correlation between the elements of an expression and a selected content because no previous convention exists to establish the correlation. At least this is how Eco depicts the artist at the beginning of section 3.6.7, "Invention." But within the first few pages of exploring this mode of sign production, the very concept of the sign-function is brought to a crisis, because at times in artistic invention--for example in the Gainsborough painting--it seems that "there is neither pre-established expression nor pre-established content, and thus no correlation between functives to permit signification" (p. 250). How can there be a sign-function when the functives between which a correlation could be posited do not even exist? Eco answers this by showing how an exploratory activity of code-making generates a sign-function by organizing a "raw" content-continuum preceptually and then gradually mapping the percepta into an expression-continuum. In this case the sign has some kind of grip in content. However, in cases of "radical" invention, the sign-function does not exist at all. It cannot exist because in this type of invention there is no perceptual model to work with: the expression emerges first and makes possible a perceptual model and finally the percepta. Until this sequence is fulfilled, there is no guarantee that a sign-function will be possible, and if it is, if a sign-function does emerge, it will be not a simple unit but a complex text with many points of contact with cultural conventions. In radical invention, too, the sign has a grip in something sold--the code. For even when code-making is radical enough to by-pass perception and translate the new code directly onto the expression plane, this activity relies on previous codes. (Semantic recursivity is diachronic.) The "sign" has roots far deeper than intimated in our initial exposure to the sign-function model.

Before demarcating any further those features of Eco's general theory pertinent to the question raised in my introduction, I should vectorialize the main aspects of the discussion so far, as economically as possible.

The work of art pushes semiotics to the thresholds of cognition and perception, to the thresholds of meaning on both expression and content planes simultaneously. The result is a dissolution of the sign-function but not of the sememe, since a "standing for" relation is upheld within a culture by means of codes. Because codes are historical-cultural functions, signification as such remains in an open system of meaning which is infinitely recursive or self-mirroring. As a culturally coded unit, the sememe-system is abstract and autonomous, and therefore it floats beneath the sign-function and its token instances as a generative matrix which makes possible the distinguishability of the expression and content planes of which the sign-function is a correlation. But a problem arises when in radical invention, the code itself, upon which all these aspects of signification depend, has to be created. Code invention operates at both thresholds: where things become perceptually meaningful and where new sememes are introduced into a culture. The question at this stage, then, is how is a radical code-making possible. So far Eco's answer is that "Man is continually making and re-making codes, but only insofar as other codes already exist."

Eco is finally forced to displace the fundamental notion of the 'sign' by the code. In fact, he actually says "there are no signs as such," and that often what we take to be signs are actually coded texts too dense to decipher. Somehow this is what we expected from the moment the sign was derived from the signal: the difference between the two was the intervention of the human being. This was a ruse, for the human being soon became an abstract representative of culture, like the code. Indeed, the code usurped the place of the person too. For Eco, man is a sign (p. 316). But what if it is the other way around?

If we follow Eco further, into the sections on the aesthetic text, these remarks and suspicions will be clarified. When we inquire about the passage from the "unshaped perceptual continuum" to a transformative realization of expression, to the perceptual model and then to a semantic model--this is the sequence for radical code invention--we are at a level where "the matter of the sign-vehicle becomes an aspect of the expression form" (p. 266). At this level it is the relation of the "token matter" of a sign-vehicle (note we are not speaking of sign-functions) to the expression-continuum that is pertinent to semiotic analysis. This relation has to do with the

signified, between the body and verbal expression, between the work of art and "super-existence," between "emblems" and Being, and where he recognizes that "What we mean is not before us, outside all speech, as sheer signification. It is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said"² (which is, perhaps, another way of describing "extracoding"). Merleau-Ponty gave careful attention to feeling his way through these issues until the end of his life, when he began to consolidate his insights into a novel solution of them. What he wrote in the last part of the working manuscript of The Visible and the Invisible represents his clearest formulation of this beginning, so rather than crystalizing a rigorously philosophical tete-a-tete between Eco and Merleau-Ponty on the ground of his earlier explorations, I want to go directly into that last formulation, from which we may emerge with a considerable loss of naivete with respect to the central question of this paper.

What Merleau-Ponty has to say bears on the problem of the sign without focusing on it. He is molding a new ontological category through which the question of the sign may come to be appropriated, both at the threshold of sensuality and at that of 'symbolic' expression. After laying out a map of this new category, we can go on to interpolate a conception of the sign into it.

The new category is what Merleau-Ponty calls "the flesh" (le chair). What he means by this surfaces in his analysis of vision, an analysis rooted in a solid "perceptual faith" which tells us that "we see the things themselves, the world is what we see."³ One principle underlies this analysis--the "reversibility" of the flesh.

Seeing is mysterious. The gaze somehow touches the things by settling on them, yet the gaze is also a "palpation" that is born within them. Take this red flower: Does the waving heat between the flower and the seer cheat him of a vision that could be better seen through a vacuity? Or does the warm air contribute to making his vision possible in the first place? Perhaps the heat-shimmering is a necessary medium and conveyance for this unique meeting between seer and seen, a medium which enables them to reach for one another? When we ask what this is, for which the waving heat is only a metaphor here, the discrimination between a "this" and a "that" fades into a single 'there is' of experience which precedes any separation: somehow "the look is itself incorporation of the seer

"culturalization of matter," which means coding it. Here two processes go on at the same time: the conventionalization of the material content and the conventionalization of the formal expression. Thus the relation has to do with the culturalization of expression also. It is certainly appropriate that the code-making has two hands, one molding each side of the double continuum, yet something seems peculiar about this in that what was previously treated as distinct continua--expression and content--now seems to have been melted by the heat of creation into a single cauldron of "hyposemiotic stuff" (p. 268). The code-making activity of the artist is possible because the "stuff" does not consist of bare things but of a fusion of expression-content: the stuff is coded. This is why Eco speaks of the aesthetic work as an overcoding in these sections and as an undercoding in other contexts (for example, in 2.14: "Thus overcoding proceeds from existing codes to more analytic sub-codes while undercoding proceeds from non-existent codes to potential codes Aesthetic judgements . . . are very deceptive cases of undercoding."). Thus the term "extra-coding" is preferred in difficult cases of aesthetic invention where the two modes of coding, like the two modes of signification, are intertwined and the type-token ration is dificilis (i.e., the expression-type coincides with the coding sememe conveyed by the expression-token directly accorded to its content (p. 183)).

Eco's description of radical aesthetic invention and extra-coding bring our investigation of his concept of the 'sign' to its puzzling limits. What is puzzling lies in the conclusion that the "standing for" relation embodied in the sign is finally squeezed down to the point where the relata virtually coincide, apparently nullifying the original concept of "standing for." This situation clears the path for that excursus into phenomenology suggested by Eco himself. The suggestion was perspicacious, even if perhaps self-destructive.

A Phenomenological Perspective: Merleau-Ponty

Several places in his work, Merleau-Ponty seems to start just where Eco leaves off, in order to dispense with intelligent but naive notions about signification and perception. Still, there are definite overlaps in the problems confronted by both thinkers. These overlaps are especially evident, from Merleau-Ponty's side, in Signs (listed in Eco's "References"), where he excavates the subtle relations between signifying and

into the visible, quest for itself, which is of it, within the visible" (p. 131n). The red of the flower has a surface quality (quale) that is there in its specific locale, yet the red is also but a lacquer on a vision that is bottomless. The quale red helps the seer to focus on the flower and to float above the depths into which it draws him. To see the flower is to "fix" it into a structure, to solder into a perspective its fluid visibility. And this is true of the color's relations with other colors and with other perceptual dimensions. The color is a "concretion, not an atom," of something more general than itself and which contains all dimensions. The eye is an "opening" upon a visible world, the hand an "opening" upon a tactile world: but the accessibility given in this openness must be symmetrical, there must be a kinship between the eye that sees and the flower that is seen. And since the same body can both see and touch, this kinship applies to the various senses too: hand and eye, flower and body--all belong to the same world.

The "perceptual faith" tells us we see the things themselves. But how is this possible if there seems to be this distance between them and us, a distance that contradicts their proximity to us when we see and touch them? Merleau-Ponty's analysis of vision answers this question by insisting that the experience of "depth," "dimension," "thickness," etc., be accounted for. The answer is to give a name to this same world which hand, eye, body, and flower all belong to. This new name summarizes a new ontology: "the flesh." With this new ontological "element" we begin to comprehend how, for example, distance complements proximity: "the thickness of the flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity It is the same reason that I am at the heart of the visible and that I am far from it: Because it has thickness and is therefore naturally destined to be seen by the body" (p. 131n). The thickness of the flesh is the body's "dimensionality" (p. 135). In one dimension it can see, in another it can be seen, and it lives in both dimensions. This dimensionality or double reference means that it is the body that gives us the things themselves and not flat idealizations, and the body can do this because it is, simply, of the same element. Thus the body can do this because it is, simply, of the same element. Thus the body as a "carnal being, as a being of depths . . . a being of latency, and a presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of Being, of which our body is a very remarkable variant" (p. 136). The visible, sensible thing is a being of

depth and of dimensionality which assembles into concretion (makes concrete) this mystery of the scattered visibility of the flesh. The body as concretely visible is "pregnant with texture, the surface of a depth, a cross section upon a massive being, a grain or corpuscle born by a wave of Being" (p. 136). It is this two-dimensional body that can go into the visible and be at home in it. Body and world are of the same flesh, and there can be no strict boundary between them.

The simile Merleau-Ponty uses to describe these relations within the flesh is that of two mirrors facing one another, in which the receding line of images in each mirror represents the interlocking reflections first from one and then from the other mirror. Here each image is only the rejoinder or reverberation of the other. The line of images "belong really to neither of the two surfaces" of one mirror or the other (p. 139). The seer and the visible belong to one another in this way, so that the seer feels as if he is being looked at by the things--an experience common to many painters. This reciprocity and reversibility, "this generality of the sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to myself," is what Merleau-Ponty means by "flesh" (p. 139). The flesh is an element of Being, just as air, earth, fire, and water were considered by the ancients to be elements. Flesh is what makes a fact be a fact, what makes the possibility and exigency for the fact. The flesh is an ultimate notion that can be used in describing any relation. The very unity of the body, its synergy, is instituted by its being flesh, and not, for example, by its being organized under a singular consciousness.

In a beautiful passage which could also be a description of love-making, Merleau-Ponty provides an impression of the body's insertion in the world as "the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life, of making itself the outside of its inside and the inside of its outside" (p. 144). Here, too, we are reminded of "Eye and Mind," where the artist is revealed lending his body to the world in order to transform the world into paintings. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that "henceforth movement, touch, vision, applying themselves to the Other and to themselves, return toward their source, and in the patient and silent labor of desire, begin the paradox of expression" (emphasis added, p. 144). The source of this "flesh," this ontological vibration that hears itself, sees itself, touches itself. The openness of the sentient and sensible body upon itself, upon the

bodies of others and the body of the world, begins that wondrous communication of which art is the most luminous example.

For Merleau-Ponty, the emergence of the flesh as expression points to the principle of reversibility operative within the flesh, a new kind of reversibility which exhibits the "power" of the flesh. This "power" of the flesh is its latent expressiveness, an aspect of which is cognition, or, in Merleau-Ponty's terms, "thought." Thought is not something different than the flesh; rather, it is merely the invisible side of the flesh. Merleau-Ponty begins his characterization of thought by recoiling upon his previous conception of the flesh, emphasizing once again its depth and dimensionality and associating thought with these. Whereas he has previously delved into the similarities between the seer and the seen, now he ruminates on the contrasts between them. On the one side, the visible displays a constant style of visibility. The facing mirrors of vision and the visible form a system, wherein the flesh returning to itself is not an exotic chaos but something basically stable. There is a constancy and self-containment about visibility which, from the other side, does not seem to apply to the seer. The visible body of the seer, in the act of seeing, somehow remains incomplete, "gaping open." As the medium of "subject" and "object," the flesh retains both the features of coherence and of incompleteness. The flesh is nothing like the union of "body" and "spirit" but is simply "a concrete emblem of a general manner of being" (p. 147). Further description of vision and touch reveals a manner of being in latency, wherein the reversibility of the flesh is always only imminent and never quite complete: "My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence . . . either my right hand really passes over to the rank of the touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted," or else the right hand keeps touching the world so that its reversibility is interrupted and the lefthand does not touch the right hand's touching back. This gap or "spread" within the experience of reversible flesh does not, however, indicate a vacuum there, in between; on the contrary, it indicates the dimensionality of the flesh just insofar as that "spread" is "spanned by the total being of my body and by that of the world" (p. 148). This other dimension is a clue to the invisible flesh that is thought, the flesh that is intelligible, the "clearing" that fills the gap and unites the touching and the touched, the seer and the seen. For Merleau-Ponty, thought is the interior horizon of the

flesh, a distancing of the flesh from itself that allows it to fold back on itself. Thoughts are the axes, the lines of force, of the flesh. Thus both exterior and interior horizons of the flesh are held together by the openness of the flesh that is based on its total reversibility and reciprocity.

From here on, in the last few pages of the text, Merleau-Ponty edges his way into what concerns us most--"the bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals" (p. 149). He is working toward a new notion of "ideality," one which can neither be severed from the sensible nor projected as a new 'element.' The power of the flesh resides in the transparency of ideas within the heart of the sensible. Ideas--thoughts, meanings--are strange absences circumscribed in our very flesh and thus able to "possess" us. The cohesion of ideas, for example, "the moments of the sonata," occur within an ideality that has the same kind of cohesion as that of the body with its parts or with the world, because it "streams along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of the sensible things" in "a type of surpassing that does not leave its field or origin" (p. 153). For Merleau-Ponty the field of the origin of ideas is the carnal body which they do not leave but which they surpass. Ideas are of the flesh, yet they surpass the flesh. In this surpassing, says Merleau-Ponty, lies the miracle of knowledge, of culture, and of language.

It is as though the visibility and sensibility of the sensible world were to "emigrate, not outside of every body, but into another less heavy, more transparent body . . . abandoning the flesh of the body for that of language" (p. 153). This emigration does not mean that the flesh is left behind but that a new horizon is opened up within it. Ideas, meaning, language and culture are still the radiations of the carnal dehiscence of "wild" Being and still the breedings of reversibility. And here Merleau-Ponty renews for us our contact with Eco. For we do not, with Eco, have to cut off our language from the things themselves, nor do we have to cling to a conception of signification that makes the "this stands for that" the fundamental relation between signifying and signified and which synthesizes them and cements their relation. No synthesis is necessary since language already embodies both the voices and meanings by means of that reversibility through which they are of the same flesh. If the signifying expression and the signified content

are intertwined in the sememe, it is not because they are coded. At least this is not the ultimate reason. They are intertwined because they are another aspect of the reversibility which was for Merleau-Ponty the ultimate truth. Furthermore, reversibility is openness, the key to the openness that makes sensing and sensibility possible. The reversibility of signification explains its openness in a way Eco's extracoding cannot. His conception of extracoding propels us toward the unity of signifying and signified, conveying and conveyed, expression and content, but also covers up that unity, veils it in the code of the sememic interpretation of meaning. The coded sememe seems to conceal the carnal texture revealed by Merleau-Ponty. Perhaps this is why Eco's theory of radical aesthetic invention founders. The coded sememe, founded on the sign as a relation to "this stands for that," does not reach the key to openness. His "sign" betrays the familial intimacy of "this" and "that," their common flesh, which, as in a false dialectic positing a third term to rejoin the other two, is usurped by the code.

This is as far as we need to go in this stage of the discussion. The phenomenological perspective to which we were directed by Eco's own suggestions, even if barely sketched, at least clarify our concern about the limitations of the role of the sign in his enterprise. Now we will see if these suspicions can be more deeply confirmed by turning what what an artist and man of letters has to say to the problem.

An Artist's Conception: Octavio Paz

Multiple vehement odor
 Many-Handed body
 On an invisible stem a single
 Whiteness

Speak listen answer me
 What the thunder-clap
 Says, the woods
 Understand

I enter by your eyes
 You come forth by my mouth
 You sleep in my blood
 I awaken in your head

I will speak to you in stone-language
 (Answer with a green syllable)
 I will speak to you in snow-language

(Answer with a fan of bees)
 I will speak to you in water-language
 (Answer with a canoe of lightning)
 I will speak to you in blood-language
 (Answer with a tower of birds)

This poem,⁴ written by one of the great poets and thinkers of our time, seems to have exploded from the very "flesh" of The Visible and Invisible. The first quatrain is an image of this flesh, a phantasm of its invisible and incandescent unity. The second appeals to the language of the body, which is a language of things and whose natural verbs are the axes and lines of force of speech that is an action as accessible as the sound of thunder. "Speak listen answer": there is one movement in language and in understanding, that of the thundering discharge of a dehiscent Being that folds, curls, invaginates upon itself, without pause or punctuation. In the third quatrain, vision and speech, kiss, birth and transcendence, dream and reality, mind and use all glide and spin in a common incarnation, the garden of the flesh. The last eight lines are a tour de force of poetic dialectic. Speaking and answering, ululation and undulation of living, flow into one another and undergo a catalysis. In the skein of opposition and equivalence which we ourselves are, in the network of openings, the messages lived between the grey-uttered opacity of stones and the green vitality of words burgeon for a single ear, for a single stereoscopic sensuality. The imagery of the poem arises from the invisible and ascends toward it by means of a vortex of fluidity, yet it remains concrete. The startling juxtaposition of images--"snow-language" and "a fan of bees," "canoe" and "lightning" and "water-language," and especially the images of the last two lines--stretch the carnal dimensionality of poetry at the same time the images inscribe their cohesive meanings into our imagination. The meanings are invisible, to be sure, but they are also there in the words, and even more are they in the things. The images are the meanings, the words, the things. Nature and artifice are mixed in this common ebullience and melding of lovers, in a common carnal texture.

For Octavio Paz, the image is the key to human existence. What he means by "image" is what Eco means by "sign" in the aesthetic sense. But, if we take Paz's own considered examination of just what the poetic image is, we will have in our hands an understanding of the "sign" that shakes the foundations of Eco's whole theory of semiotics. We have this examination in a section of The Bow and the Lyre called "The Image."

What Paz says about the image is quickly summarized, which is not to say easily understood. An image in a poem is first of all a kind of identity. The image "unites realities that are opposite, indifferent, or far apart," it "subjects the plurality of the real to unity."⁵ It approximates Aristotle's "likely possible," as Paz says. So far this is not incompatible with Eco. The poetic image rejects the Parmenidean distinction between what is and what is not, and in doing so makes room for possibility. In Eco's terms, the poetic utterance releases the possibilities for new conventions. But this is not what Paz means by possibility, which for him is more real than any possible convention. To await conventionalism is to await the "clear and distinct ideas" that are the death of poetry and which exile man "from the cosmic flux and from himself" (p. 87). To uphold the "this" against the 'that' is to suffer from the "horror of the 'other'." Paz's understanding of the poetic image denies the "standing for" relation and affirms precisely that the image is a case of "this is that." He aligns himself with the mystic traditions and even appeals to the Sventasvatara Upanishad, the most ancient: "Thou are woman. Thou are man. Thou are the youth and also the maiden. Thou, like an old man, leanst on a staff Thou are the dark blue bird and the green bird with red eyes Thou are the seasons and the seas" (p. 88). This is an affirmation of the identity of things; Paz maintains it is an experience of truth that cannot strictly speaking be communicated in language, as ordinarily understood. The identity of "this" and "that" is experienced by the body, which discourses in images. The images can communicate the ultimate identity of "this" and "that." This is the poetic enigma: "how the image can say that which language, by its very nature, seems incapable of saying?" (p. 91).

Part of the answer to the enigma is that the ordinary languages of 'this stands for that' describe and represent various versions of the "real," segregating certain aspects of things, "segmenting the continua," as Eco would say, in order to render them distinctly intelligible. The poet, in contrast, does not describe anything, does not re-present anything; rather, "he puts it before us" (Paz, p. 95). By means of the image, the poet tries to present things in their totality. The image is pregnancy. All semiotic communications systems "live in the world of references and of relative meanings" (p. 91). In contrast, the image is an absolute meaning. To use a paradoxical phrase, "the image explains itself" (p. 94). This is

not the same as infinite semantic recursivity concentrated in a word: "On the contrary, the meaning of the image is the image itself: it cannot be said with other words Meaning and image are the same thing. A poem has no meaning other than its images . . . its images do not lead us to something else, but brings us face to face with a concrete reality" (p. 94). Poetic meaning is not a nexus between a name and a thing nor a nexus between sign-functions. The image is not a code; it transcends the redundancy of relative meanings, outstrips the 'this stands for that' relation. The image returns to itself from the unknown, finds itself in the other. The image is an arrow toward the other and other is also the image. 'This is that.' The flesh is its own image.

Conclusion

In criticizing Eco, I have tried to present an alternative interpretation of the sign, using two complementary conceptions of meaning, one based on a philosophy of the flesh, the other based on the poetics of the image. The alternative interpretation led toward an absolutization of the aesthetic sign which seems to defy codification. If the image is in some sense an absolute, it cannot depend on a code to carry it to a shore of meaning. Now it is necessary to give a sober appraisal of the critique I have employed and to educe some of its more obvious and important effects on Eco's predicament. I will be as brief as possible.

Rebuttal by Eco against Merleau-Ponty and Paz could follow any number of tactics. He could retort that both Merleau-Ponty and Pax are merely developing metaphors that circumvent the existence of codes and of the cultural context without which there can be no metaphors. Because existence is temporal, the next moment supersedes the last and the new expression is a supersession of the old: each new moment and each new expression are substitutes for previous ones. The metaphor is a substitution of one sememe or system of sememes for another (p. 109, 280). A new metaphor is essentially a new paradigm for perceiving and expressing reality. The "flesh" may be an interesting literary description for the medium human history passes through and even a description of its substance. Nevertheless, that flesh is structured. It is coded. The interior armature of the flesh is always situated in a culture, a culture which acts as a filter or perhaps a prism in virtue of which human life takes on its shifting colorations. Existence conceived as

absolute would be colorless and lacking in the riotous diversity made possible by relationships and by the deflexivity of representation and mirror. Were we to be immediately in touch with the 'things themselves,' our imaginative function would be sterile. There would be no room for invention but only for inaccuracy and dream. The flesh and the image present us with a textual thematic so individualized it has to be decoded, and until it is we have only a paradigm that is held together by a potential code, temporarily diffused in expression-clusters and content-nebulae. The sign has to be a relative concept, representing a "this" standing for a "that," otherwise the ideologies which a sign distills would also have to be taken as absolutes. What could be the source of the corrigibility of signs other than their system of codification?

Another tactic of rebuttal would be to polemicize the nature of the transcendence imputed to flesh and image. For Merleau-Ponty transcendence is constituted by the flesh's openness upon Being, by its exterior and interior horizon structure. Yet a horizon is possible only on the basis of an "upon which" in relation to which a horizon can be contrasted. Similarly, the image presupposes a "this" upon which a "that" can be projected and in relation to which it can be recognized as same or different. Culture and code are necessary for the initial polarity that renders any subsequent identity intelligible as a possible identity of "this" and "that." The reversibility of the flesh and the self-explanatory nature of the image are merely metaphors for the double function of coding and explaining transcendence in a similar but not more fundamental way. This double function is the power to mediate between conveying system and conveyed system. And, after all, do not the flesh and the image play the same role? Are not perception and expression (thought or language) mediated by the flesh? Are not the old and the new understanding, this self and that other self, mediated by the image? Transcendence may be an arrow that shoots through the flesh or through the image, but this possibility arises from the fact that it is directed and directed systematically. That arrow passes through a code and transforms it. Some code was there at the start and some code remains, albeit a new one.

Furthermore (Eco could continue), the aesthetic sign is a component of the process of communication, from which I derive my definition of the sign. Communication requires explicitation of the message, and

this means there must be some means by which the expression and the content of the message, even if they coincide, can be abstracted and represented. A message goes to an addressee, who receives the message. The message cannot be absolutely concrete. The space traversed by the message must be interpersonal and public. That space is the coded space of semiotic meaning, which is both abstract and representational. Without it, communication is a transmission of chimeras, promises, dull and burly gropings.

On Eco's part, we could add to these defenses. But they would all be just as useless against the final response both Merleau-Ponty and Paz would insist on as of the essence of the question.

For their part, they would simply enunciate the empirical fact that has no place in Eco's discourse. At the heart of artistic creation, and at the heart of the image and of the flesh, glows a perennial mystery:

The word has its roots in a silence previous to speech--a pre-sentiment of language. Silence, after the word, is based on language, it is an encoded silence. The poem is a trajectory between these two silences, between the wish to speak and the silence that fuses the wishing and the speaking.⁶

Sometimes the poet calls it silence, sometimes, as we have seen, he has other names for it:

On an invisible stem a single
Whiteness

Merleau-Ponty prefers to call it a "clearing" or an "openness." But it is here, in this utter compression of desire, in this violent implosion that suddenly erupts and scatters into visibility and thunder, transformed into opaline flecks of color in the eye, it is here the sign, the hieroglyph, and not the cipher, a vision in truly free space, it is here the sign is born.

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NOTES

¹Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 16.

²Maruice Merleau-Ponty, Signs (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 83.

³Maruice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 3.

⁴Octavio Paz, Configurations, trans., Denise Levertov (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 65. I have quoted only stanzas III-VI of the poem, "Duration," omitting the first 11 lines.

⁵Octavio Paz, The Bow and the Lyre (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 85.

⁶Octavio Pax, Alternting Current (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), p. 69.

⁷This is not the whole story of course, I am underlining in this paper certain fundamentals of human creativity, but in a longer work in preparation I will incorporate these fundamentals into a larger social (in fact, Marxian) framework. There, in another context, the genuinely revolutionary role of the semiotic endeavor will be appreciated, that is, the role semiotics can play in decoding ideologies (see Eco, p. 150n, for his remarks on "semiotic 'guerilla warfare'").