

# American Signatures

## Semiotic Inquiry and Method

By Thomas A. Sebeok

Edited by Iris Smith

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Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory

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American Signatures  
Semiotic Inquiry and Method

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*For JAS*

. . . signify, I pray you . . .  
Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music  
Creep into our ears; soft stillness and the night  
Become the touches of sweet harmony.  
Sit, Jessica . . .  
But, whilst this muddy vesture of decay  
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

*The Merchant of Venice* 5.1. 5165

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*Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World.*

Walt Whitman, *"Starting from Paumanok"*

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## SERIES EDITORS' FOREWORD

When we began the Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory several years ago, one of our goals was to publish at some point a book devoted to contemporary semiotics. We wanted such a book because cultural studies, the primary commitment of the Oklahoma Project, began in the 1950s as an attempt to apply semiotic analysis to the study of culture. Stuart Hall, Richard Johnson, and others have written about the origins of cultural studies in the work of F. R. Leavis, Raymond Williams, and at the Birmingham center in England in conjunction with the semiotic enterprise of Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Semiotics is thus a key component of the Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory hence *American Signatures: Semiotic Inquiry and Method*, by Thomas A. Sebeok, one of the most respected and well known semioticians in the world.

Sebeok shows in this book, however, that semiotics which indeed inaugurated cultural theory also has a complex history as a body of specifically "semiotic" inquiry and methodology. That history, at least as expansive as that of cultural studies proper, is necessarily international in scope and ranges from Sebeok's own origins in Eastern Europe (Hungary) through the academic centers of Western Europe, North America, and beyond. But while the history and development of semiotics is global, one can gain a significant understanding of the field by looking intently at the American staging of semiotics. Issues relating to great American figures in the field, such as Charles A. Peirce, Roman Jakobson, and Thomas A. Sebeok himself, illuminate the advent of semiotics in American academic and intellectual life, that is, they show how semiotics developed as an "American" practice with ties to other areas of social, scientific, and humanistic inquiry as practiced in America. Sebeok's *American Signatures* is dedicated precisely to understanding the strand of American intellectual life that goes

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under the name *semiotics*.

The task at hand, however, is an ambitious one. American semiotics consists of a large assortment of specialties, and as Bruno Latour has shown recently from a theoretical perspective, and as other philosophers of science have argued as well, a semiotic analysis may be a privileged instrument of inquiry perhaps unique in contemporary discourse in its ability to move with great descriptive and analytic power through scientific, social science, and humanistic texts. Those within the field of semiotic study know that Sebeok has been demonstrating such power through his voluminous store of semiotic analysis for over forty years. He has done groundbreaking interdisciplinary research on analyses of social discourse, language, medicine, veterinary medicine, and zoosemiotics, and these categories only begin to suggest the almost boundless appetite of semiotics as Sebeok conceives and practices it, and as he has inspired many other prominent semioticians to practice it.

Thus, in its understanding of the history of American semiotics, in its critical inventory of semiotic methodology, and in its assessments of work still to be done, *American Signatures* is an authoritative engagement with the past, present, and future of semiotics in America, a critical engagement by the person most qualified to write the account.

*American Signatures* in its transdisciplinary expanse and critical formulations is evidence of the ongoing commitment to cultural criticism that underlies the Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory.

ROBERT CON DAVIS  
RONALD SCHLEIFER  
NORMAN, OKLAHOMA

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T. A. S.  
I.S.

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INTRODUCTION  
THOMAS A. SEBEOK: "THE SEMIOTIC SELF" IN AMERICA

by Iris Smith

"There is no 'American school' of semiotics." No one who knows Thomas A. Sebeok or his work would be surprised to hear him say this. The geographical boundaries of the United States or those of Canada, Brazil, France, or Sebeok's own Hungarian homeland certainly have not contained, and do not appear to have significantly shaped, the development of semiotics in the last hundred years. Sebeok's life is a case in point. Born in Budapest and raised in that region of Europe between the world wars, Sebeok followed his father to the United States in 1937, attending the University of Chicago shortly thereafter. His father, an economist, had arrived in 1936. In 1941, after beginning graduate work at Princeton, Sebeok visited New York City periodically to study with another international, the newly arrived Roman Jakobson. As Sebeok himself has commented, how could such a thing as an "American school" (or a Prague school, for that matter) account for the varied expanse of Jakobson's work? Indeed, where could Sebeok himself, who travels and corresponds incessantly, and whose writings are translated into many languages, be classified?

Besides the inadequacy of the notion of national schools, there is also the difficulty of the term *American*. In the title of this book Sebeok uses the term to mean "pertaining to the United States," as a convenience for drawing the limits of his study. It cannot be denied, though, that this word slops over rather messily (and usefully) into other realms. At roughly the same time that Sebeok came to the United States, the original edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defined *American* as "an aborigine of the American conti-

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ment; now, called an 'American Indian.'...A native of America of European descent; *esp.* a citizen of the United States" (1933: vol. 1, p. 279). The 1972 supplement to the *OED* updates its earlier definition to read, "Now simply, a native or inhabitant of North or South America," adding (with the confusion that earlier appeared) "a citizen of the United States" (p. 75). (We should note the implicit class and race assumptions of the earlier definition: only European Americans need apply. Perhaps, on the other hand, in limiting our definition to the latter phrase, "a citizen of the United States," we shall be accused of "Americanitis," which the original edition offers as "some characteristically American penchant [*esp. fig.*, overweening or blatant national conceit in American achievements]." It cannot be denied that the narrow use of the term *American* excludes semioticians working throughout the two American continents. Their signatures remain to be traced.)

Setting aside the ambiguities of *American* as an indication of nationality, we shall find that the word carries connotations central to the study of signs as we know it today. Perhaps in exploring these connotations we shall come to a better understanding of what Sebeok means by "American Signatures." He has long maintained that semiotics is best undertaken as a doctrine or teaching maneuver. In the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics (EDS)* John Deely reminds us that

"doctrine," in Latin or English, refers first of all to a "teaching" in the most general sense, i.e., to *what* some person or persons, even unknown, assert to be the case about something. Thus, *doctrina* may concern natural reality or social reality, or any web and admixture of the two. In the systematic context of Latin scholasticism, with a remarkable constancy spanning the later centuries of that epochas illustrated, for example, early in Aquinas (c. 1266 [1952]:Iq.1) or late in Poinsot (1637 [1931]: disp. 2)*doctrina* referred to a body of thought sensitive to its own implications and *striving* for consistency throughout, while achieving explanations (however provisional) at a level beyond what can be empirically circumscribed in unambiguous ways. Thus, the notion of *doctrina* is one of the avenues expressing the differing ways in which the sensory core of cognition is relied upon in dominant moods of thought which are typically "scientific" as contrasted with those that tend more to typically "philosophic" analysis. [Sebeok 1986c: vol. 1, p. 214]

For Sebeok as well, semiotics is best thought of as a teaching

maneuver or as this "body of thought sensitive to its own implication...striving for consistency throughout." Sebeok's publications, plentiful and multifaceted, have attempted such a doctrine, but have never pretended to be directed at a rigidly defined group of readers. In fact, Sebeok's "congeners" individuals of like mind are located in many parts of the world, individuals who often first encounter semiotics in their reading. More than once a researcher has thought himself or herself alone in ranging beyond his or her own academic discipline, whether it be literary criticism, the history of philosophy, genetics, or marketing, into questions of meaning as sign production, only to discover that this "solitary" activity is common ground for numerous intellectual communities. As an Australian visitor attending the 1984 meeting of the Semiotic Society of America remarked, "I had assumed that I would be the only self-taught semiotician at this meeting. In fact, I find we are all self-taught!" This gentleman and I were both discovering that semiotics usually is and by Sebeok's lights should be a doctrine engaged and furthered by inquisitive (although not isolated) individuals.

Perhaps for this reason more than any other, Sebeok has never claimed a "Bloomington school," although he has taught at Indiana University since 1943. He prefers instead to speak and write (as he does in this volume) of individuals of like mind free to disagree. Certainly Sebeok has put much time and effort throughout his career into drawing congeners together, making many dialogues possible. Thus, while it is misleading to talk of schools, it is appropriate to speak of a community or communities in the doctrine of semiotics, and to seek out the relation of an individual scholar-scientist such as Sebeok to that community. (Nor is it irrelevant that Sebeok himself has long been a "congenial" force in the expansion of semiotics as a subject for academic study in the United States, and indeed in many other countries as well.)

In an article on "Semiosis and Semiotics: What Lies in Their Future?" (1988c), Sebeok maintains that semiotics is "the universal propensity of the human mind for reverie focused specularly inwards upon its own long-term cognitive strategy and daily maneuverings." In this statement Sebeok seems to isolate the individual, but he certainly would not take as his model the situation of Charles Sanders Peirce, who spent many of his later years in the relative

isolation of his home at Milford, Pennsylvania, and the more complete isolation created by his inability to find a permanent university position. As Sebeok's own activities in the intellectual community of semiotics demonstrate, individual reflection must be measured against the reflections of others. Peirce himself, who with Charles Morris has been a key figure in Sebeok's efforts to redirect semiotic study toward John Locke's *doctrina signorum* (as Deely points out in Sebeok 1989b:x), often wrote of such a "community of inquirers." What is this community for Sebeok? As his readers already know, he divides semiotic inquiry into two traditions, the "minor" or language-based tradition inspired largely by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, and the "major," or non linguistic-based, tradition of Locke, Peirce, and Morris. Sebeok has long disparaged the former as a community (my term) that has insisted on putting the linguistic cart before the semiotic horse. Still, the two have much in common. In Sebeok's work on the nature of semiosis (particularly on the semiotic self), both communities will find useful ideas.

In my own area, literary and performance theory, semiotics is largely an enterprise with a Sausurrean genealogy whose primary figures include Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, A. J. Greimas, Roman Jakobson, Julia Kristeva, Umberto Eco, Paul de Man, and Jacques Derrida. The pantheon of what has come to be called "post-structuralism" is constantly in flux. While post-structuralism has dealt very little with the work of Morris or Sebeok, it has discovered the work of Peirce. Most interesting for the post-structuralists is the nature of the interpretant, a concept they have added to a glossary that draws more often on the phenomenology of Georg W. F. Hegel (Derrida, de Man) or psychoanalytic sign systems (Lacan, the French feminists, much film study of the 1970s and 80s). As Teresa de Lauretis says of the work of Eco in *Alice Doesn't* (a book that stands at the juncture of semiotics, feminism, and film study):

Eco's debt to Peirce is extensive. The latter's concepts of interpretant and unlimited semiosis are pivotal to *A Theory of Semiotics*, which turns on the notion of a dialectic interaction between codes and modes of sign production. They serve to bridge the gap between discourse and reality, between the sign and its referent (the empirical object to which the sign refers); and so they usher in a theory of meaning as a continual cultural production that is not only suscep-

tible of ideological transformation, but materially based in historical change. [de Lauretis 1984:172]

Critics of film, mass culture, and, to a lesser extent, literature and theatre have come to the work of Peirce through Eco (and others) and have found useful the pragmatism of Peirce's semiotics (I am not speaking here of Peirce's own "pragmatism"), in countering, for example, the idealist strictures of Freudian and Lacanian "subjects." At the same time, Peirce's schema of interpretants allows us to discuss material sign production in the realm of culture without forgetting the subject. As de Lauretis says, "The individual's habit as a semiotic production is both the result and the condition of the social production of meaning" (1984:179). Both subject and social reality are signs.

Peirce remarked long ago that by testing and retesting the individual's abductions, those abductions may approach the 'real': "The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality involves the notion of a COMMUNITY without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge" (5.311).\* Only the community can hope to approach the final interpretants of the "real"; the individual is limited by "ignorance and error" (5.317). In much the same manner, Sebeok sees the field or discipline of semiotics as one of scholar-scientists reaching for "a general unified perspective within...ecumenical semiotics" (Anderson et al. 1984:35). Like the expanding intellectual universe in which Sebeok sees himself, semiotics is "maturing" or "evolving," growing more complex (just as Peirce maintained the universe is moving from simplicity to complexity). Semiotics "provides the human sciences with a context for reconceptualizing foundations" (Anderson et al. 1984:35). As a doctrine it will edge toward (while not, in all probability, reaching) a "higher synthesis" that will illuminate numerous branches of the human sciences. (One such doctrine is the notion of Gaia.)

Drawing on Peirce's view of the community reaching for the

\* References to the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (1931/1966) are to volume and paragraph numbers according to the textual divisions established by the editors Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss.

"real," as well as on the work of Jakob von Uexküll and René Thom, Sebeok acknowledges that the members of the community participate variously in the creation of the "real." Here the "major" and "minor" traditions in semiotics find the most common ground. Saussurean "theorists" work from the premise that the arbitrary nature of language renders meaning something less than eternal truth. In literary theory, post-structuralists have expanded on this premise to the point that certain individuals have questioned our ability to determine meaning, or to distinguish fiction from nonfiction. The most significant contributions of the "major" tradition in semiotics are often defined in similar terms. As Roberta Kevelson notes, in both cases semiotics builds on paradigms, or referent beliefs, which are then put to the test in the context of free inquiry (Kevelson 1986:540).

In fact, this question of free inquiry brings together, in more definite terms, the relation of the individual semiotician to a community of inquirers. Sebeok has not written directly on the American contexts for such inquiry, but he has been remarkably consistent in treating the question of individuality, or, more broadly, "the semiotic self." In chapter 1 of this book, Sebeok explains that his friendship with the physician and writer Harley C. Shands sparked his interest in the semiotics of medicine. In recent years Sebeok has written extensively on the dual, immunologic and semiotic (or social), determinations of self. Drawing on Jakob von Uexküll's view of the overlapping *Umwelten* that constitute the self's interaction with another, he remarks:

The notion "semiotic self" registers and emphasizes the fact that an animate is capable of absorbing information from its environment if and only if it possesses the corresponding key, or code. There must exist an internalized system of signposts to provide a map to the actual configuration of events. Therefore, "self" can be adequately grasped only with the concepts and terminology of the doctrine of signs. Another way of formulating this fact is that while living entities are, in one commonly recognized sense, open systems, their permeable boundaries permitting certain sorts of energy-matter flow or information transmissions to penetrate them, they are at the same time closed systems, in the sense that they make choices and evaluate inputs, that is to say, in their semantic aspect. [Sebeok 1989b:viii]

Moreover, "the closest link of the self in nature as well as in culture is with memory, both as a feature of a physical repository and as a social construct....It is the *articulatio secunda*, or the syntactic aspect of language, which provides the machinery whereby memory organizes...and finally imposes a coherent and personal narrative schema upon each of us" (vi). We become the *dramatis personae* of our own theatres of consciousness (a term Sebeok borrows from Peirce). Thus, for Sebeok the self is not identical to consciousness; instead, by means of "specular semiotics," "man converts his Umwelt into a unitary system of signs, a configuration"and, no less, into the impression that in fact we are today the same engaging person we were yesterday.

There are a number of points to be made about the "semiotic self" in an "American" context. In the United States, popular sentiment has treated the individual as a measure of absolute value, and an absolute in itself. Because Peirce, Morris, Jakobson, Sebeok, and so many other semioticians have lived amidst this sentiment, we must wonder about the influence of these popular notions on their semiotics. Although the best known American Pragmatist, John Dewey, was more concerned with philosophy's place in community ethics than was Peirce, the latter addressed at least once the place for the individual in the political institutions of the United States. In 1871 he wrote:

The question whether the *genus homo* has any existence except as individuals, is the question whether there is anything of any more dignity, worth, and importance than individual happiness, individual aspirations, and individual life. Whether men really have anything in common, so that the *community* is to be considered as an end in itself, and if so, what the relative value of the two factors is, is the most fundamental practical question in regard to every public institution the constitution of which we have it in our power to influence. [8.38]

Peirce's final remark here "which we have it in our power to influence"rests on an assumption fundamental to the conduct of semiotic inquiry: that the individual has the political right to influence the community. Of course the role of the citizen in regard to his or her country differs from the role of the inquirer within the semiotic community. We have seen that for Sebeok the semiotic self must be understood in semiotic terms; it now remains to explore