

and Livingstone. Otherwise, the book is excellent at placing Orwell in his literary setting. If Orwell was a loner by instinct, he was well-connected in the literary world. He had gone to school with Cyril Connolly and Anthony Powell; found valuable support from editors like Sir Richard Rees and John Middleton Murry; contracted with a good agent very early in his career through a chance association; but above all, to paraphrase Woody Allen, Orwell showed up. He accepted hundreds of assignments. If that is 80% of success, he also supplied an enormous amount of hard work to the literary life.

Orwell loved the idea of being a man-of-letters, and he did more than play the part. He reviewed books by Graham Greene, Connolly, Liddell-Hart, Nevil Shute, Edith Sitwell, James Burnham, O'Casey, Wodehouse, Eliot, Muggeridge, and scores of other writers who must have been startled at the astute, if sometimes harsh, judgments of their work in *Adelphi*, *Time and Tide*, *Tribune*, and elsewhere. (He misses completely the point of C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* but seems to understand O'Casey's *Drums Under the Window* all too well.) This side of his career (the hack side, he would have called it) makes some of the most diverting reading found in his work. The great essays that he wrote for *Horizon* and other journals are Orwell for the ages; but these pieces have a lasting quality (some are fifty years old) that would probably have surprised him.

Conservatives and religious readers may be startled to re-read some typical Orwellian sentences. "Statements like *Marshall Petain was a true patriot*, *The Soviet Press is the freest in the world*, *The Catholic Church is opposed to persecution*, are almost always made with intent to deceive [Orwell's italics]." This statement in "Politics and the English Language" can be read over several times before one notices the equation of Ca-

tholicism and the Soviet Union. Orwell was schooled in the cant of twentieth-century socialism, and the fact that he became its greatest critic is more remarkable because he held so many of its ideas as truth. Sheldon makes no gloss on this and the dozens of other interesting comments about Catholicism in his work; nor does he pay enough attention to Orwell as a failed poet. These and the omission of the meeting with Waugh are the only weaknesses I can find in a remarkable book.

Hilton Kramer has criticized, in *The New Criterion*, Sheldon's focus on his schooldays as a way of examining the psychology of 1984—love as a forced substitute for hate, a pathological love. I think he misses Sheldon's subtle reflection on the intertwining of personal and political experience, especially when the work being discussed is an attempt at art, as *1984* is, a work intended to show a human being battered by inflated childish lies, told as things often are told to children, with force, from above, with no disagreement possible, indeed, with no disagreement *conceivable* as the goal of all the lies. Two plus two equals five. If only Winston Smith will re-learn this child's truth, he will be saved from fear and he only has to change a number.

## ***Semiotics vs. The Word***

BRYCE J. CHRISTENSEN

SEMIOTICS—generally called semiology among Europeans—has captured the attention of an increasing number of American scholars and writers in recent years. The foundations of the new discipline were laid by Swiss linguist Ferdinand Saussure and the American C. S. Peirce, with important later work

performed by Roland Barthes and Roman Jakobson. Today the Italian scholar and acclaimed novelist Umberto Eco stands as perhaps the most influential leader of a small cadre of semioticians who promise to give the world a more scientific and objective approach to the meaning of all "signs" and "signifiers," especially language.

Eco has written two major works in the field: *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) and *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (1979). Both are replete with the paraphernalia of science: diagrammatic charts, technical and specialized vocabulary, and quasi-mathematical formulae. When the reader is not puzzling over the distinctions between a "sign-vehicle" and a "content-vehicle," or between "*ratio facilis*" and "*ratio difficilis*," he may ponder the chart illustrating "mapping," "rules of similitude," or "chain of signifiers." Though some social scientists have adopted semiotics as a logical extension of the structuralism of Levi-Strauss, the new discipline has gained wider popularity among radical literary critics who use it as a tool for "de-constructing" traditional understandings of literature. "Semiotics rejects authoritarian hermeneutics through its critique of the notion of author," explains Robert Scholes, professor of English at Brown University. "The author is not a perfect ego but a mixture of public and private, conscious and unconscious elements, insufficiently unified for use as an interpretive base."<sup>1</sup> But when pressed too hard, "deconstruction" can also easily de-construct the notion of scientist as well by undermining the epistemological premises upon which semiotic theory itself rests.

For at the heart of semiotics we find a most unscientific and untenable doctrine which can be neither empirically substantiated nor logically defended. Eco defines "unlimited semiosis" as the "philosophical scaffolding" of his work,

and he discusses it at length in *The Role of the Reader*.

The process of unlimited semiosis shows us how signification, by means of continual shiftings which refer a sign back to another sign or string of signs, circumscribes CULTURAL UNITS. . . . Thus one is never obliged to replace a cultural unit by means of something which is not a semiotic entity, and no cultural unit has to be explained by some platonic, psychic, or objectal entity. Semiosis explains itself by itself: this continual circularity is the normal condition of signification.<sup>2</sup>

In an excellent review of *A Theory of Semiotics*, Michael McCandles identifies "unlimited semiosis" as "Eco's central notion" and argues that for Eco this doctrine replaces any "myth of origins." McCandles sees Eco's ultimate aim as the definition of "a theory of human sign production . . . wherein 'meaning' itself is wholly internal to the process itself." Within such a framework "there can be no ultimate code-of-codes" because "there is no code that does not require for its constitution and interpretation another code." McCandles concludes that "semiotics can exist as an intelligible science of signs only if it destroys the assumption that there exists some sort of *a priori* natural code motivated by analogy with the transhuman, natural world." McCandles expresses shrewd doubts about whether semiotics has in fact destroyed that assumption.<sup>3</sup>

For some linguistic questions, this doctrine of "unlimited semiosis" may be accepted as a way temporarily to sidestep or—to use a more popular term—to "bracket" many of the metaphysical questions about language that have vexed philosophers for centuries. But unfortunately semioticians use this doctrine for dubious purposes besides the sundering of nature and language, about which McCandles rightly complains. With the same hatred of the metaphysical that characterizes other apostles of scien-

tism, semioticians ask us to accept “unlimited semiosis” as the answer to questions it merely hides. For indeed, without this doctrine, the semiotic of language cannot even begin. “Semiosis,” writes Eco, “never rises EX NOVO and EX NIHILO. . . . man is continually making and remaking codes, but only insofar as other codes already exist.”<sup>4</sup>

Central as this doctrine is to semiotics, “unlimited semiosis” can hardly claim credence as objective science. First, the doctrine is empirical nonsense. Human signs and human language do not form an infinite chain of signification. Though anthropologists do not fully agree on precisely how long humankind has enjoyed the powers of language, all concede that human language—like the human species itself—may be traced to some beginning point. But the fact that language does not stretch infinitely backward in time poses profound difficulties for the semiotic doctrine of “unlimited semiosis.”

Plato, who found the origins of language in a transcendent world of never-changing Ideas, clearly anticipates the weakness of “unlimited semiosis” in *Cratylus*. In this profound and searching dialogue, Socrates takes up the question of whether “things have names by nature,” as Cratylus maintains, or whether names are merely “convention and habit,” as Hermogenes believes. While Socrates does insist that “the very truth” about things is “not to be derived from names” but must come from direct investigation, he rapidly demolishes Hermogenes’ view of language as merely a set of socially useful conventions. Socrates instead declares that “Cratylus is right in saying that things have names by nature.” Socrates sees unresolved difficulties in Cratylus’ view that “a power more than human gave things their first names,” since he finds it difficult to believe that the gods gave men both “names expressive of motion and others of rest.”

Yet Socrates does agree that “the gods must clearly be supposed to call things by their right names,” and he reasons that a true “maker of names,” the rarest of skilled artisans, should “give all names with a view to the ideal name.”

Much of *Cratylus* is devoted to etymological investigations of words, for Socrates knows very well that the chain of meaning that Eco calls “semiosis” is not “unlimited.” He knows that however long and convoluted the linguistic chain, present usage may finally be traced to some “original meaning.” Again and again Socrates tries to probe beneath the “secondary names” created by “people sticking on and stripping off letters [from older words] . . . and twisting and turning them in all sorts of ways.” For Socrates “the ancient form” of a word is important because it “shows the intention of the giver of the name” and therefore bears most clearly the stamp of “the mind of gods, or of men, or of both.” For Socrates any credible analysis of language must rest on “the truth of first names”:

Any sort of ignorance of first or primitive names involves an ignorance of secondary words; for they can only be explained by the primary. Clearly then the professor of languages should be able to give a very lucid explanation of first names, or let him be assured he will only talk nonsense about the rest.<sup>5</sup>

Before attending more carefully to the implications of Socrates’ (and, by inference, Plato’s) argument, let us finish off the empirical claims of the doctrine of “unlimited semiosis.” Just as anthropologists tell us that human language has a beginning, astrophysicists predict that it must have an end. Even if diplomats succeed in preventing nuclear holocaust, the inflexible Second Law of Thermodynamics requires the eventual “heat death” of not only our sun, but of all the stars. To judge by all empirical evidence and by all currently accepted sci-

entific models, even the universe must die.

“Creationists” have no scientific warrant for trying to turn the biblical book of Genesis into a textbook in paleontology, but virtually all physicists now concur with the Old Testament prophets who declared that “the heavens shall vanish away like smoke and the earth shall wax old like a garment” (Isa. 51:6). As the philosopher and physicist Stanley L. Jaki has observed, “A being like man, so sensitive to his limitations set by time, could not but be struck by the fact that the universe was no less time-conditioned. As in the case of man, in the case of the universe too, existence in time is a powerful reminder of transitoriness or contingency.”<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, human semiosis cannot be unlimited: human language had an origin and it will have an end, and all linguistic meaning finally hangs suspended between those two points. If those end points cannot be grounded in some religious, metaphysical, or transcendent reality, then the void at either end of the finite chain of language must act as paired semiotic vacuums, sucking the apparent meaning out of every word in every language.

On the other hand, we can accept the argument suggested in *Cratylus* that language partially reflects some divine pattern, and that all conversations, texts, and scripts provide us with only an incomplete and distorted re-presentation of that primal Word. The scientifically minded will recoil at such a metaphysical notion of language. But when it comes to the origins of language, science cannot yet offer any plausible alternatives. True, several evolutionary theories of language have been proposed. But the names of these theories—the “Yo-He-Ho” theory, the “Bow-Wow” theory, the “Pooh-Pooh” theory and especially the “Ding-Dong” theory—tell us just how seriously the scientific community takes

these formulations. Extant theories of language origin are so implausible and farfetched that the French Academy of Sciences once officially announced that it would accept no more papers on the subject. As the linguist Gary Jennings admits, “To this day we are no nearer knowing how language began than are the fundamentalist endorsers of an archetype tongue divine. For all the proof we have to the contrary, we might as well join them in believing that human speech was a direct and recent gift from the Almighty.”<sup>7</sup>

Besides, language always comes tied to another phenomenon—human consciousness—before which science must also stand mute. In *Fearful Symmetry*, the theoretical physicist Andrew Zee recently conceded that science’s inability to explain consciousness remains its greatest failing and most visible embarrassment. “That there is consciousness in the universe is undeniable,” Zee writes. “That science in general, and physics in particular, do not address this most striking of all observable phenomena is glaring. Consciousness, so central to our existence, remains a mystery.”<sup>8</sup> The philosopher Stephen R. L. Clark has argued compellingly against any evolutionary explanation of consciousness, on the grounds that such arguments always involve the fallacy of “emergent properties” that render them “incompatible with the scientific programme of understanding reality in terms of convertible and interconnected mathematical formulae.”<sup>9</sup>

Critic and literary scholar Kenneth Burke has likewise pointed out that “the negative is a peculiarly linguistic marvel, . . . [because] there are no negatives in nature, every natural condition being positively what it is.” By giving the speaker the power to say “No,” language lifts us above the world of nature.<sup>10</sup> Because no scientist, philosopher, or poet can conceive of language without consciousness or “the principle of the nega-