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# The Theory of Signs and the Role of the Reader

By Umberto Eco (University of Bologna)

## I

I ought to make clear that the title of my talk, and a disturbing title it is, was not my own. It strikes me as calling for one of those academic explorations Gramsci called "short remarks about the universe." Since, however, it frequently happens that upon consideration of the subject matter I have to deal with I come to suspect the operation of a mysterious and perverse power, let me then assume the role of a good reader and make the text of the title work by working it into a text.

To begin with, the title suggests that contemporary semiotics has gone through three stages of evolution in the last twenty years. *First stage*: during the sixties, semiotics was concerned with structures, systems, codes, paradigms, semantic fields, and abstract oppositions. Its concern was with the object which a millenary tradition assigned to it: the sign or the sign-function. Its central problematic consisted in the recognition and definition of the sign. *Second stage*: during the seventies, there occurred a violent shift from signs to texts, where texts were considered as syntactico-semantic structures generated by a text-grammar. The new problematic was the recognition and the generation of texts. *Third stage*: from the end of the seventies until now and onward (obviously, my chronological cuts are made with a sort of Viconian irresponsibility), text theories have shifted toward pragmatics, so that the newest problematic is not the generation of texts but their reading. Reading, however, no longer refers to problems of critical interpretation or more or less refined hermeneutics; rather, it is concerned with the more formidable question of the recognition of the reader's response as a possibility built into the textual strategy.

This last formulation requires emphasis. To state that texts (and literary texts especially) can be multifariously interpreted has nothing to do with a third stage of semiotics: it certainly is not necessary to have a semiotic theory to realize that texts can be more or less open to multiple interpretations. Again, to say with Paul Valéry, "Il n'y a pas de vrai sens d'un texte," or to assert that one can do anything one wants with a text, as long as a certain "jouissance" has been obtained or some insight into deeply unconscious drives has been gained, has nothing to do with third-stage semiotics. If we maintain a distinction between use and interpretation, as I like to do, then we

can concede that a text can be put to any use, as long as we live in a free country. Joyce's young artist considered quite a variety of uses for the Venus of Milo independently of any aesthetic interpretation. Similarly, Proust used the Ile-de-France train schedules to find echoes of the lost world of Gerard de Nerval. In the same vein, I see no reason to discourage a reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* purporting to demonstrate that its author was a polymorphous pervert and a latent homosexual, or that the idea of transcendental *a priori* forms conceals and disguises an unconscious necrophilia. (I am obviously inventing crazy forms of textual deconstruction but there are people doing similar things rather seriously.) To summarize: a text can be *used* as criminal or psychoanalytical evidence, as hallucinatory device, or as stimulus for free association. But all of this has nothing to do with the interpretation of text *qua* text. Now, this does not mean that a text is a crystal-clear structure interpretable in a single way; on the contrary, a text is a lazy machinery which forces its possible readers to do a part of its textual work, but the modalities of the interpretive operations—albeit multiple, and possibly infinite—are by no means indefinite and must be recognized as imposed by the semiotic strategies displayed by the text.

At this point my rather puzzling title shows a certain method in its voracious madness. In order to determine how and to what extent a text can direct its possible interpretations, a pre-textual theory of language, that is a theory of signs, is needed. This must be a theory in which the notion of the linguistic sign must be addressed in such a way that the textual destiny of the sign is recognized; a junction between a theory of signs and a theory of texts can then be achieved.

Is there, however, a theory of signs? Semiotics has been defined as a theory of signs by all the authors who have conceived of it, from the Stoics to Roger Bacon, from Francis Bacon to Locke, from Lambert to Husserl, not to speak of Saussure, Peirce, Morris, or Barthes. However, as we know, contemporary cultural discourse is pervaded with *toasts funèbres* of all kinds (Marx is dead; Freud is dead; Structuralism is dead; God...it goes without saying; and Nietzsche is in serious need of medical care). It has therefore become fashionable, in the last decade, to announce not only the death but also the absolute inexistence of signs. "La mort du cygne" is the song opening many semiotic soap operas.

The existence of signs can be challenged in many ways, some of which constitute reasonable critiques of the insufficiencies of classical definitions such as *aliquid stat pro aliquo*, or even the elementary Saussurean dichotomy of *signifiant/signifié*, and they must be taken seriously. Hjelmslev, e.g., demonstrated that the sign is a unit of economy not a unit of system: the plane of expression can be viewed as the result of multiple interrelations between *figurae* or elements of second articulation, while the plane of content is the

result of the interplay between content-*figurae*, semantic units, and semes or semantic properties. But, in destroying the clear-cut notion of the sign, Hjelmslev does not eliminate the notion of sign-function as the correlation between two functives. Writing from a totally different perspective, Buysens was the first to stress the fact that a sign in itself—be it a word or a visual item such as a directional arrow—becomes fully meaningful only when it is inserted within a larger context. Thus, when I see a street arrow outside its urban context I do not know whether it requires a turn to the right or to the left; nevertheless, I do know that it is destined to designate a given direction, and thus to create an obligation on my part. Again, when I locate in the dictionary the word “soup” I do not know whether it will contribute to the expression “the soup is good” or “give me some soup.” (For Buysens only such expressions are meaningful.) However, I do know that, with the exception of specific rhetorical environments, it will be possible to correctly say: “John is eating the soup” as opposed to “The soup is eating John.” This means that a simple word possesses in some way certain features which prescribe its contextual fate. To say that we communicate through sentences, speech acts, or textual strategies does not exclude that there are rules of signification affecting these elementary units which we combine in order to refer to actual or possible states of affairs. On the contrary, to say these things is to postulate such rules. A theory of communication is dialectically linked to a theory of signification, and a theory of signification should be first of all a theory of signs.

It is true that signs in themselves, e.g., the words of verbal language in their dictionary form, look like petrified conventions by comparison to the vitality and energy displayed by texts in their production of new sense, where they make signs interact with each other in the light of their previous intertextual history. Texts are the loci where sense is produced. When signs are isolated and removed from the living texture of a text, they do become spectral and lifeless conventions. A text casts into doubt all the previous signification systems and renews them; frequently it destroys them. It is not necessary to think here of texts such as *Finnegans Wake*, true textual *machines célibataires* conceived to destroy grammars and dictionaries. It suffices to recall that it is at the textual level that rhetorical figures operate by “killing” senses. Language, at its zero-degree, believes that a lion is an animal and that a king is a human being; the metaphor “the king of the forest” adds to ‘lion’ a human property and forces ‘king’ to accept an animal quality. But this “semantic fission,” to use Lévi-Strauss’ beautiful coinage, is made possible exactly because both ‘king’ and ‘lion’ pre-exist in the lexicon as the functives of two pre-coded sign functions. If signs were not endowed with a certain text-oriented meaning, metaphors would not work, and every metaphor would only say that a thing is a thing.

There is, however, a sense in which the notion of sign seems to be dangerous and somewhat of an embarrassment. If texts are loci of unheard-of connections, new semantic kinships, fruitful contradictions and ambiguities, then signs, by contrast, are the bastions of identity, equivalence, and forced unification. The ideology of the sign, Kristeva suggested, is coherent with the classical ideology of the knowing subject. The notion of sign presupposes a rigid mechanism which has, at its input, the subject in the guise of a transparent screen upon which reality designs, by means of reflection, its substances and accidents—the linkage between the two being assessed by an equivalence connective. ‘Man’ means rational animal and ‘rational animal’ means ‘man’ in the same way in which ‘man’ means ‘*homme*’ and vice-versa. From this perspective, the sign, ruled by the law of definition and of synonymy, represents the ideological construct of a metaphysics of identity in which signifier and signified are bi-conditionally linked.

By opposition, textual practice would consist in a challenge, a denial, a dissolution of such a rigid and misleading identity. Texts are the necessary liturgical ceremony where signs are sacrificed at the altar of significance, of *la pratique signifiante*. Such a view is rather persuasive, provided that signs are really ruled by the law of identity. Unfortunately (or happily) this is a false and corrupted notion of sign, due to certain historical reasons which I shall analyze later on. C. S. Peirce provided an exciting definition according to which a sign is something by knowing which we know something more (*Collected Papers*, 8, 332). This definition is obviously at complete odds with the traditional one of the sign as identity and as bi-conditional correlation. Perhaps we need go back to the earliest definitions of sign, to the time when signs were not identified with linguistic entities but were viewed as a more comprehensive and generalized phenomenon.

This is a story we know very well: natural language re-tells it every day, as when people use the term ‘sign’ for atmospheric or medical symptoms, images, diagrams, clouds foreboding rain, traces, imprints, clues, as well as flags, labels, emblems, alphabetic letters, archetypal symbols, etc. “A sign,” said a great early semiotician called Thomas Hobbes, “is the evident antecedent of the consequent, and contrarily the consequent of the antecedent, when the like consequences have been observed before; and the often they have been observed, the less uncertain is the sign.” (*Leviathan* I, 3). This is the kind of sign which, in antiquity, was the object of a doctrine of signs, or semiotics, whenever such a project was explicitly outlined or partially carried out.

In any case, it ought to be acknowledged that a strong objection can be raised against the idea of general semiotics. It could take the following form: the very fact that people call signs so many different communicational devices is due to the imperfection of natural language; it is a case of sheer homonymy. Language is naturally homonymic: we call ‘bachelor’ a young recipient of a

B.A., an adult unmarried male, the servant of a knight, and a seal that did not find a mate during the breeding season. Natural language is, of course, not stupid, and many homonyms conceal deeper semantic affinities. For instance, the four kinds of bachelor have something in common: from the point of view of their natural or social curriculum they are all *incomplete*, they still have something to do, a further goal to achieve (Jakobson). The objection, however, can continue this way: there is a difference between a *word*, which conveys a meaning, an *image*, which represents an object, and the *consequence* one can infer from a natural phenomenon. There is thus a difference between the word 'smoke,' the picture of a smoking pipe, and the inference "if there is smoke, there is fire." In other words, the objection questions the amalgam of the three different objects each pertaining to a different theory, namely, a theory of meaning, a theory of representation, and a theory of scientific or empirical inference. I think that there are two good reasons for such an amalgam. The first is historical: throughout the course of Western philosophical thought, many thinkers, from Plato to Husserl, have tried to devise a common solution to these three problems. The second is that in all three cases smoke is not considered insofar as it stands for something else. The only problem to be solved is then why the word 'smoke' seems to be correlated to its meaning by a sign of equivalence while the perceived smoke seems to be related to its possible cause by a sign of inference, and then, why the picture of a smoking pipe seems to be based upon both equivalence and inference models.

My motivated suspicion is that all these problems derive from the fact that contemporary theories of sign have been dominated by a linguistic model, and a wrong one at that. Among the strongest objections raised in opposition to a unified concept of sign is that it is no more than an excessive extension of a category belonging to linguistics (where signs are conceived of as being intentionally emitted and conventionally coded, linked by a bi-conditional bond to their definition, subject to analysis in terms of lesser articulatory components, and syntagmatically disposed according to a linear sequence). Should that be the case, then many phenomena labelled as signs do not share these properties. However, if one reconsiders the whole history of the concept of the sign, one discovers that it has followed a rather different evolutionary or phylogenetic pattern: it is only fairly lately that a general semiotic notion, posited in order to define many natural phenomena, has been used to designate *also* such linguistic phenomena as verbs and nouns. Thus we need to return to the history of the theory of signs in order to displace the presently overwhelming linguistic model, not in order to eliminate the notion of linguistic sign, but to rediscover it from a different, but by no means unreasonable, perspective.

## II

The couple *semeion* and *tekmerion*, often interchangeably translated as proof, sign, index, symptom, etc., appears in the *Corpus Hippocraticum* (fifth century B.C.) in reference to natural facts—the symptoms of modern medicine—which, by inference, lead to diagnostic conclusions. A sign, in this sense, is not in a relationship of equivalence ( $p \equiv q$ ) with its own meaning or with its own referent, but rather in a relationship of inference (if...then,  $p \supset q$ ). As a matter of fact, Hippocrates, challenging the view of medicine current in his day, does not think in terms of an elementary code, in which a given symptom stands for a given illness, but of a complex contextual interpretation of co-occurring data involving the whole body of the ill subject along with many aspects of his environment (air, water, weather). This inferential nature of signs is important for understanding the position of Parmenides who asserts that verbal language, with its words or names (*onomata*), provides us with a false knowledge based upon the illusion of experience, while true knowledge of Being is made possible by *semeia*, 'signs.' Words, then, are deceptive tags just like equally deceptive perceptions, while signs are the correct point of departure for true reasoning about the real nature of the One. Aristotle is equally reluctant to consider words as signs: in his *Rhetoric*, signs are natural facts capable of revealing a possible consequent. He also distinguishes two species of *semeia*: *tekmeria*, where the antecedent entertains a necessary relationship with the consequent ("if one is feverish, then one is ill"), and other weaker signs, where the relationship is not necessary ("if one pants, one is feverish," yet one could pant for other reasons). *Semeia* are thus inferences ( $p \supset q$ ) unless the *tekmeria* are sensitive both to the *modus ponens* and the *modus tollens*, while the weaker signs allow weaker inferences, to be used for the purposes of rhetorical persuasion; furthermore, in these signs, the negation of the *implicatum* is not sufficient to deny the truth of the *implicans*.

Words, on the other hand, do not appear to permit inferences but entertain a relationship of equivalence with their definition: "man  $\equiv$  rational animal." It is true that Aristotle does concede that alphabetical letters are the signs (*semeia*) of verbal sounds and these are the affects of the soul (*De Interpretatione* 16a), but the statement is rather parenthetical, and a few lines earlier the term 'symbolon' (token or work) is used. This oscillation or opposition between words and signs occurs even in the semiotic theory of the Stoics. The triangular relationship *semainon-semainomenon-tukhanon* always concerns verbal expressions,\* whereas when it is a question of a visible antecedent revealing a non-immediately apparent or otherwise unknowable consequent, the terms *semeion* and *lekton* are used. The *lekton* is one of the incorporeals (*asomata*) like void, time, and space; it is merely a *dicibile* or a *dictum* (it is a matter of some controversy whether to translate it as "what can be said" or as

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\*Editor's note: signifier, signified, and referent are the most common English terms used in this context.

“what is said”). It seems however that between the linguistic couple *semainon/semainomenon* (signifier/signified) and the *semeion* there is a relationship of connotation: linguistic expressions convey lexical contents (incomplete *lekta*) which are articulated into complete *lekta*, or, in modern terms, propositions. The relationship of significations the Stoics attribute to the *semeion* is the one which occurs between two complete *lekta* (if antecedent then consequent). In this sense the antecedent proposition is the sign of the consequent one. In other words, verbal language is the most appropriate vehicle for a “natural semiotics” which is experienced by inferential schemas. It is irrelevant whether for the Stoics the inference was from cause to effect, from effect to cause, or between causally unrelated events, since they follow the Philonian concept of material implication. The examples they give of “commemorative (*ypomnestikoi*) signs,” in which a detectable antecedent stands for a momentarily undetectable consequent (e.g., if there is smoke, there is fire), and of “indicative (*endeitikoi*) signs,” in which a detectable event stands for a definitely undetectable one (the alterations of the body which reveal the alterations of the soul, e.g.), seem to be based on an effect-to-cause inference. But when Quintilian elaborates upon both Aristotle’s and the Stoics’ notion of necessary signs (“when there is wind on the sea, then there must be waves”), he clearly appeals to a cause-to-effect inference. In fact Quintilian explicitly refers to signs whose consequent is a future event (cause-to-effect) in the *Institutio Oratoria* (V,9). Aquinas (*Sum. Th.* III, 62, 5 and even in I, 70, 2 ad 2) states that material causes can be the sign of their possible or actual effect. Since this is a version of the notion of sign largely exploited by rhetoric, the link of physical necessity between antecedent and consequent was overwhelmed by a more “sociological” idea, so to speak, of a connection asserted by current opinion, so that the inference  $p \supset q$  was frequently ratified on the grounds of a socially acceptable verisimilarity. The crucial point here is that it is the post-Stoic tradition, in particular Sextus Empiricus (*Adversus Mathematicos* 8, 11) which matched *semainomenon* with *lekton*, thus uniting the theory of language with the theory of signs, even though it was motivated by a desire to challenge both.

This unification was definitely achieved by Augustine (*De Magistro* and *De Doctrina Christiana*) who listed verbal terms as species of the more comprehensive genus “sign.” There remained however the problem of how to subsume in a single category inference and equivalence, and this problem continued to plague future semiotic thought. Our very own ordinary language suffers this uncertainty: the term ‘sign’ refers sometimes to conventional marks only (road signs, inscribed panels), sometimes to symptoms, sometimes to non-verbal devices (such as the so-called “sign language” of the deaf-mutes); rarely are words recognized as signs. So that when Saussure speaks of “le signe linguistique,” he is following an ancient tradition, and the



word 'sign' definitely means the *signans-signatum* relationship, that is, the correlational phenomenon which Hjelmslev called sign-function. At this point, the linguistic sign became paradigmatic of sign-function. But a problem remained: even if, in the Stoic perspective, one admits that words convey propositions acting as signs (antecedent-consequent), it still remains possible to conceive of the linguistic relation expression-content (*semainon-semainomenon*) as a correlation ruled by equivalence, reserving the inferential model for second level signification. This is what the linguistic tradition in fact did. Linguistics was able to impose a linguistic model upon semiotics because, already at the time of Augustine, it was the most advanced of the semiotic sciences, even more so than logic. But the linguistic model itself was dominated by the model of equivalence established by the Aristotelian theory of definition.

An attentive reading of Augustine's *De Magistro*, especially the discussion concerning the meaning of syncategoremic terms like 'ex,' provides a solution. Augustine considers the Virgilian line "si nihil ex tanta superis placet urbi relinqui" (if the Gods do not want to preserve anything of such a great city) and asks his interlocutor Adeodatus what the meaning of "ex" is. Augustine, in all likelihood, was following the Stoic principle according to which every linguistic principle has a semantic correlate, even connectives like 'and' or 'if...then.' Adeodatus attempts to answer on the bases of synonymy, saying that "ex" means "de," but Augustine rejects this solution, which is based on the equivalence model, since the next question would have to be: what is the meaning of "de"? Together then, they reach the conclusion that "ex" means "secretionem quandam." From Augustine's discussion it appears that the meaning of "ex" (even in isolation, out of context) represents a set of textual instructions: if you find "ex" in a given context, look for an entity from which something has been separated. The separation can take place in one of two ways: after the separation, either the source is destroyed (as in the case of Troy in Virgil's example) or the source remains unaffected by the separation (as when one says that one is coming *from* Rome).

The solution is a masterful one, so masterful in fact that, in so far as I know, it took some fourteen centuries for its rediscovery and further elaboration. We have had to wait for the development of structuralist approaches to witness attempts at working out an intensional semantics for syncategorematic terms: I am thinking of such efforts as those of Apresjan or Leech in their studies of the meaning of expressions 'up' and 'down,' or of the attempt, within the logical community, to elaborate a semantics for temporal adverbs. It was only in Peirce's logic of relatives that the idea of an instruction-like semantics has been applied to nouns and verbs. When Peirce says that an expression like 'father' must be interpreted as "- is father of +", thus foreseeing a componential analysis in terms of cases, or n-argument predicates, he is

saying that one cannot interpret 'father' without postulating in the immediate or remote textual environment of this expression, the past or future occurrence of the expression 'son.' In other words, if you find a father, look backward or forward for a son.

Let us consider several concrete contemporary versions of this issue. Consider case grammar which takes any given action as involving an Agent, a Counter-Agent, an Instrument, an Object, a Goal, and so on. Consider certain semantic representations of presuppositions such as: if *x cleans y*, it must be presupposed that *y* was dirty. Consider Greimas' analysis of the semantic unit "fisher": "le *pêcheur* porte en lui, évidemment, toutes les possibilités de son faire, tout ce que l'on peut attendre de lui en fait de comportement; sa mise en isotopie discursive en fait un rôle thématique utilisable pour le récit." Consider the semantic model I outlined in *Theory of Semiotics* by introducing, in the componential analysis, contextual and circumstantial selections. In all of these cases, we realize that a sememe must be analyzed and represented as a *set of instructions* for the correct co-textual insertion of a given term. A set of instructions is also a set of interpretants, and an interpretant is not only a sign which substitutes and translates an earlier sign; it *adds* something more—in some respect and capacity—to the sign it interprets. Through the process of interpretation, the content of the first sign grows.

### III

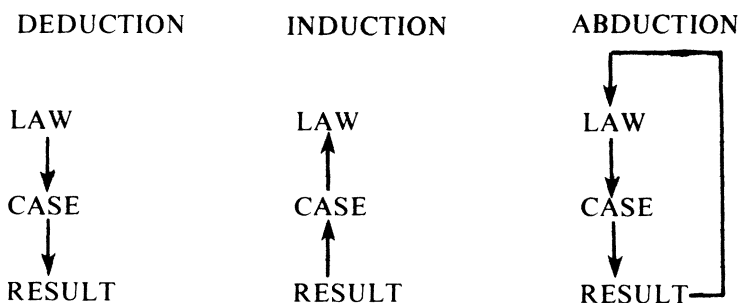
In order to understand, then, how a text can be not only generated but also interpreted, one needs a set of semantico-pragmatic rules, organized by an encyclopedia-like semantic representation, which establish how and under which conditions the addressee of a given text is entitled to collaborate in order to actualize what the text actually says. This is already postulated in the sememe, and the sememe is a virtual text; the text is the expansion of a sememe. It is in this sense that Peirce wrote that a term is a rudimentary proposition and that a proposition is a rudimentary argument. It is in this sense that unlimited semiosis, as a continuous interpretive process, can take place. It is also in this framework that researchers in Artificial Intelligence are attempting to devise a means of programming a computer with so-called world-knowledge (an encyclopedia-like set of information) so that, given a text involving few terms, the computer is capable of drawing further inferences and understanding presuppositions. It has even been proposed that *scripts* or *frames* be inserted into such an encyclopedic competence: they would consist of standard sequences of actions that an interpreter needs to presuppose in order to work out a text and to render explicit information which is not expressed, or at least not apparent at the level of manifestation.

To read a text means to maneuver coded and overcoded semantic information so as to decide whether *to blow up* or *to narcotize* given semes provided by the sememes in play, and how to make them mutually react and amalgamate. I should like to stress that such an instruction-like format is not limited to verbal texts but is rather typical of every sign system. A road signal meaning "stop," irrespective of its means of expression, whether alphabetical letters or some visual sign, should be interpreted as follows: if this expression is inserted into a road context  $x$ , then, if you are in a car, stop; if you have stopped, look carefully right and left, and then, if there is no danger, proceed. Or, if you do not stop and look, then face the possibility of a fine.

A theory of text generation and interpretation and a general theory of signs thus prove to be mutually consistent. The reader plays an active role in textual interpretation because signs are structured according to an inferential model ( $p \supset q$ , and not  $p \equiv q$ ). Text interpretation is possible because even linguistic signs are not ruled by sheer equivalence (synonymy and definition); they are not based upon the idea of identity but are governed by an inferential schema; they are, therefore, infinitely interpretable. Texts can say more than one supposes, they can always say something new, precisely because signs are the starting point of a process of interpretation which leads to an infinite series of progressive consequences. Signs are open devices, not stiff armors prescribing a bi-conditional identity.

In this sense, textual interpretation is ruled by the same principle which governs sign interpretation. Peirce called this logical movement *abduction*. Let me recall, for the sake of clarity, the distinction between deduction, induction, and abduction. Let us consider the following case: given a bag full of white beans, if I am in possession of this fact, i.e., I know the pertinent law, I make a deduction when I predict that in producing a case, namely drawing a handful of beans from the bag, I will get a necessary result, namely that the beans in my hand will be white. Similarly, cases of semantic entailment which govern the componential nature of words are also cases of deduction: if bachelor, then necessarily human adult. On the other hand, I have an induction when, given many cases (many handfuls of beans coming from the same bag) and many identical results (they are always white), I figure out a possible law: all the beans in that bag are probably white.

Abduction, or hypothesis, obtains in the following instance: I am given a result, let us say some white beans upon a table in proximity to a certain bag; I figure out a law such as, e.g., all beans in the bag are probably white, or, this bag probably contains only white beans, and from this I infer a case, namely that the beans on the table probably came from that bag. In schematic fashion, this gives the following:



The principal feature of a text is precisely its ability to elicit abductions. But abduction governs even the comprehension of an isolated word or indeed every other possible sign. Consider this final example: when I receive the expression “when John was a bachelor...”, I am compelled to guess what could be the further course of the textual swatch I am reacting to. It is probable that when John was a bachelor, he was looking for girls, if ‘bachelor’ is taken as unmarried male adult; but I face the equal probability that when John was bachelor (taken this time in the sense of holder of a B.A.), he was asking his wife to help him type his Ph.D. dissertation; or, even, since ‘bachelor’ also includes the young man serving under the standard of a knight, when John was a bachelor, he was totally illiterate. In other words, what I have to do is to look for possible contexts capable of making the initial expression intelligible and reasonable. The very nature of signs postulates an active role on the part of their interpreter.

Signs, then, are not dead. What is dead is the degenerate notion of linguistic sign as synonymy and definition. The caretakers of the sign in fact killed and buried the dead and fictive product of a defunct semiotics. Mallarmé, on the other hand, knew that it was sufficient to name a flower to arouse in the mind of any virtual reader, out of the forgetfulness where our voices banish any contour, many absent fragrances.

## Response by Teresa de Lauretis (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee)

There is a sense in which the title of Eco’s paper *is* appropriate, and its topic in fact a series of “short remarks about the universe.” There are several ways in which that is so: First, the paper telescopes the themes, the theoretical concerns, and the historical and textual research of all of Eco’s work from the recent *Role of the Reader* and *A Theory of Semiotics* back to his first books, *Opera aperta* and *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d’ Aquino*. Secondly, the paper confronts the central question of signification—central to semiotics as a discipline, to cultural processes in the real world, and to semiotics as a