The Semiotics of Culture and the Concept of a Text

Two tendencies are ascertainable in the development of semiotics over the past 15 years. One has been toward refinement of the initial concepts and definition of procedures of generation. The striving for precise modeling procedures has led to the creation of metasemiotics: the object of study becomes not texts as such, but models of texts, models of models, etc. The second tendency concentrates its attention on the semiotic functioning of a real text. Whereas in the first case contradiction, structural inconsistency, the accommodation of differently structured texts within single textual formation, and semantic indeterminacy are random and "nonfunctional" attributes that can be removed at the metalevel of text modeling, from the second standpoint they are the object of special attention. Using Saussurean terminology, we might say that in the first case it is langage that interests the investigator as a materialization of the structural laws of a langue; in the second case it is those semiotic aspects of a text that diverge from the linguistic structure that are the object of attention. Whereas the first tendency is materialized in metasemiotics, the second by nature gives birth to the semiotics of culture.

The emergence of the semiotics of culture, a discipline that examines the interaction of differently structured semiotic systems, internal unevenness in a semiotic space, and the necessity

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of cultural and semiotic polyglotism, has to a considerable extent displaced traditional semiotic notions. The concept of a text has undergone considerable transformation. The original concepts of a text, which stressed its unitary signal nature, the indivisible unity of its functions in any cultural context, or some other qualities, implicitly or explicitly assumed that a text was a statement in some one language. The first crack in this seemingly self-evident idea occurred when the concept of a text was examined at the level of the semiotics of culture. It was found that for a given message to be defined as a "text," it had to be coded at least twice. Thus, for example, a message defined as a "law" differs from a description of some criminal case in that it belongs to the natural and the legal language at the same time, in the first case constituting a sequence of signs with different meanings, and in the second, some complex sign with a single meaning. The same may be said about texts of the "prayer" type, etc.1

Here, as in many other cases, the course of development of scientific thought has repeated the logic of the historical development of the object itself. As may be assumed, historically a statement in a natural language was primary, after which followed its transformation into a ritualized formula coded in some second language, i.e., in a text. The next stage was the combination of formulas into a text of a second order. Cases in which texts in fundamentally different languages were combined, e.g., a verbal formula and a ritual gesture, acquired a special structural sense. The resulting second-order text included subtexts in languages that were not mutually derivable one from the other, but were situated on the same hierarchical level. The emergence of texts of the type "ritual," "ceremony," and "deed" led to the combination of fundamentally different types of semiosis and, as a result, to the emergence of complex problems of recoding, equivalence, changes in points of view, and the accommodation of different "voices" in a single, integral text. The next step, from a heuristic viewpoint, was the appearance of artistic texts. Multivocal material acquires additional unity when it is retold in the language of a particular art. Thus, the transformation of a ritual into a ballet is
accompanied by the translation of all differently structured subtexts into the language of the dance. The language of the dance is conveyed by gestures, actions, words and cries, and by the dancers themselves, who are thereby semiotically "replicated." The multistructured form is retained, although packed, so to speak, into the monostructural shell of a message in the language of that particular art. This is especially noticeable in the specific character of the novel as a genre: its shell, a message in a natural language, conceals the extremely complex and contradictory controversy of different semiotic worlds.

The further dynamic of literary texts is directed, on the one hand, toward augmenting their integrity and their immanent closed quality and emphasizing the significance of the boundaries of a text and, on the other, toward increasing the internal semiotic heterogeneity and contradictoriness of a work and developing in it structurally contrasting subtexts that tend toward increasing autonomy. Fluctuations within the field "semiotic homogeneity ←→ semiotic heterogeneity" is one of the formative factors in the historical evolution of literature. Other important aspects are the tension between the tendency toward integration—i.e., the transformation of a context into a text (texts such as a "lyrical cycle," "the creative activity of an entire lifetime seen as one work," etc., are formed)—and disintegration—the transformation of a text into a context (the novel breaks down into short stories, the parts become independent aesthetic units). The positions of reader and author in this process may not coincide: where an author sees an integral, unified text, the reader may see a collection of short stories and novels (see the works of Faulkner), and vice versa (thus, Nadezhdin interpreted "Graf Nulin" to a large extent as an ultraromantic work because the poem appeared in the same book as "The ball," by Baratynskii, and both poems were perceived by the critics as a single text). Cases are known in the history of literature in which readers' perceptions of some work were determined by the reputation of its publisher and others in which this factor had no importance for the reader at all.
Complex historical-cultural clashes activate one or another of these tendencies. However, both are potentially present, in a state of complex mutual tension, in every literary text.

The creation of a work of art marks a qualitatively new stage in the growing complexity of the structure of a text. A multilayered and semiotically heterogeneous text may be capable of entering into complex relations both with the surrounding cultural context and with its readers; it ceases to be an elementary message from sender to receiver. Revealing a capacity to condense information, it *acquires memory*. At the same time, it reveals a quality that Heraclitus defined as "self-growing logos." At this stage of growing structural complexity, a text displays the properties of an intellectual device: it not only conveys the information put into it from without but also transforms messages and develops new ones.

Under such conditions, the sociocommunicative function of a text becomes considerably more complicated. It may be reduced to the following processes:

1. Communication between addressant and addressee. A text fulfills the function of a message from the bearer of information to the audience.

2. Communication between the audience and the cultural tradition. A text fulfills the function of a collective cultural memory. In this capacity it discloses a capacity for continual replenishment and for retrieving some aspects of the information stored in it and temporarily or totally forgetting others.

3. Communication of the reader with himself. A text—this is especially important for traditional, ancient texts distinguished by their high degree of canonicity—retrieves certain aspects of the personality of the addressee himself. During this type of communication of the recipient of information with himself, a text plays the role of mediator, helping to reorganize the personality of the reader and change its structural self-orientation and the extent of its links with metacultural constructions.

4. Communication of the reader with the text. Manifesting intellectual properties, a highly organized text ceases to be merely
a mediator in the act of communication. It becomes an interlocutor on an equal footing, possessing a high degree of autonomy. For the both the author (addressant) and the reader (addressee), it may work as an independent intellectual structure, playing an active and independent role in dialogue. In this respect, the ancient metaphor of "conversing with a book" turns out to be fraught with profound meaning.

5. Communication between a text and the cultural context. In this case the text is not an agent of a communicative act, but a full-fledged participant in it, as a source or a receiver of information. The relations of a text to the cultural context may have a metaphorical character, as when the text is perceived as a substitute for the overall context to which it is, in a certain respect, equivalent, or as metonymic, as when a text represents the context as a part of the whole. Since the cultural context is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon, the same text may enter into different relations with its different structural levels. Finally, texts, as the more stable and demarcated structures, have a tendency to pass from one context to another, as usually occurs with relatively long-lived works of art: when they move into another cultural context, they function as an informant that has moved to a new communicative situation and bring out hitherto latent aspects of their own coding system. This "self-recoding" in accordance with a situation reveals an analogy between the symbolic behavior of a person and a text. Hence, a text, in likening itself to the cultural macrocosm, on the one hand becomes more significant than itself alone and acquires the features of a cultural model, while, on the other hand, it has a tendency to effect an independent behavior insofar as it likens itself to the autonomous individual.

A particular case will be the question of the communication between a text and a metatext. On the one hand, any particular text can fulfill the role of a descriptive mechanism in regard to the cultural context; but on the other, it can in turn enter into deciphering and structuring relations with some metalinguistic formation. Finally, a text may contain within it both textual and metatextual elements as particular substructures, as is character-
istic of Stern, or *Eugene Onegin*, texts marked by romantic irony, or a number of works in the 20th century. In this case the communicative currents move vertically.

In light of the above, a text presents itself not as a realization of a message in some one language, but as a complex system storing diverse codes capable of transforming messages received and generating new ones, a generator of information with the traits of an intelligent person. This modifies our notion of the relationship between the user and the text. In place of the formula "A user deciphers the text," we can be more precise: "A user communicates with the text." He enters into contact with it. The process of deciphering a text becomes extremely complicated and loses its one-time and definitive character, becoming more like acts, familiar to us, of semiotic communication of one person with another autonomous personality.

Notes

1. Reduction of first-order meanings (in a natural language) are possible—prayer, swearing, and ritual formulas may be in a forgotten language or gravitate toward glossolalia. This does not eliminate, but rather underscores, the necessity of a text's being cognized as a message in some, unknown or secret, primary language. This definition of a text at the level of the semiotics of culture only at first glance contradicts the definition adopted in linguistics, since even in linguistics a text is in fact coded twice: in the natural language, and in the metalanguage of grammatical description of the particular natural language. A message that satisfies only the first requirement will not be considered a text. Thus, for example, before verbal speech became a matter of independent linguistic attention and was regarded only as an "incomplete" or "incorrect" form of written language, inasmuch as it was an indisputable fact of some natural language, it was not regarded as a text. Paradoxically, the well-known formula of Elmslev, who defined a text as "everything that can be said in the Danish language," in fact was understood as "everything that can be written in correct Danish." The introduction of verbal speech into the ranks of linguistic texts implicitly presupposed the creation of a special metalinguistic suited for it. In this respect, in a linguistic-semiotic context, the concept of a text is comparable with the general scientific concept of a fact.


3. Analogous relations occur, for example, between a literary text and its heading. On the one hand, they may be regarded as two independent texts
situated at different levels in the text-metatext hierarchy. On the other, they may be regarded as two subtexts of a single text. The title can relate to the text it names as a metaphor or as metonymy. It can be realized with words in the primary language moved to the rank of a metatext, or with the words of a metalanguage, etc. As a result, complex semantic flows generating a new message arise between the title and the text it names.