

THE SEVENTH SEBEOK FELLOW: EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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Semioticians from the North American clime who know of Susan Petrilli's work mainly from her lectures delivered at the 2002 San Antonio¹ and 2003 Ottawa² meetings of the Semiotic Society of America are, with this first of what we may expect to be a continuing series of Sebeok Fellow Special Issues, in for a pleasant and enlightening surprise. Dr. Petrilli here reveals, both in her person and in the range of her thought, an extent and an originality that not many outside of Italy have heretofore had full occasion to glimpse. It is particularly fitting that this exposure should come about on the occasion of her being made the 7th SSA Sebeok Fellow, because it was Thomas Sebeok himself who first realized her genius for and commitment to semiotics, on the occasion of his first meeting her in person in the summer of 1983, in Portugal.

Let us hear from Sebeok himself on the point. His remarks, though written a full thirteen years before his death, and twenty years before the issuance of this volume, still suffice better than third party comments on why we are honoring Professor Susan Petrilli with this volume today as a Sebeok Fellow:³

I didn't actually meet Susan Petrilli until 18 September 1983, when I first encountered her at a reception at the Hotel Sinatra-Estoril in Alcabideche in

1. Susan Petrilli, "Crossing Out Boundaries with Global Communication: The Problem of the Subject", plenary lecture presented to the 27th Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America 18 October 2002 and published in *The American Journal of Semiotics* 20.1-4 (2004), 193-210.

2. Susan Petrilli, "Signs and Difference: National Identity and War in a Semiotic Key", in *Semiotics 2003: "Semiotics and National Identity" (Proceedings of the 28th Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America; Ottawa: Legas, 2005)*, 57-76.

3. From the "Preface", dated 18 May 1988, Sebeok wrote for Susan Petrilli, *Significs, semiotica, significazione* (Bari, Adriatica, 1988), pp. 15-18.

Portogallo, Portugal. I had been invited there to participate at an Advanced Study Institute organized by NATO on “Semiotics and International Scholarship”, which took place in that enchanting Portuguese retreat. ... Ms. Petrilli followed the whole [month-long] session, so we had ample opportunity to get to know each other, as we discussed problems concerning her work in progress on the translation of my book, and even more importantly problems connected with the themes of her research. ...

Chronologically, Petrilli’s work covers the period from the end of the last century to our own day, starting from the, as it were, Angloamerican bridge which, from 1903 to 1912, connected Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) to Victoria Lady Welby (1837–1912). ... Beyond Peirce, Petrilli wisely chose to turn her attention toward Eastern Europe as well as toward the West. She began exploring semiotic prefigurations in the works of the Russian intellectual Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), who had insisted on the fact that all artistic expression — indeed the organization of life itself — develops in terms of communication understood as the exchange of goal oriented signifying messages connected to value systems. In the opposite hemispheric direction, Petrilli researched the works of the American scholar Charles Morris (1901-1979), an author interested in a broad variety of subjects, but who should be studied above all for his pioneering seminars on semiotics at the University of Chicago, held for students a few of whom, including me, are still alive.

... On turning her attention to Bakhtin, Petrilli has followed the line of research begun in Italy by Augusto Ponzio, whose monograph on Bakhtin and the origins of soviet semiotics appeared in 1980. As to Morris, she continues the lifelong research of our common friend, recently deceased, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, author of the first monograph ever on Morris, which was published in 1953. ... Another research area Susan Petrilli is currently developing is connected with the sphere of conversational problematic, ... with solicitations in the direction of the complex labyrinths of signification and intentionality.

[Mention needs also to be made concerning] ... her studies on semiotics in Italy, in which respect she is working on a project for a detailed monograph. In fact, although other scholars have already begun research in this arena — Ponzio with his monograph of 1975; Segre in an article published in French in 1979; Mincu in his book on Italian literary semiotics, edited in 1972; Bettettini and Casetti with their overview in English of 1986 — this tradition in semiotic studies is so rich and inexhaustible that I hope Petrilli brings her interesting project to completion.

Now, in these later years, and looking back, the contemporary reader can only ask, “Which interesting project?”; for Susan Petrilli has brought to completion at least a baker’s dozen of projects, and shows no signs of fading into the night.

Since Sebeok's own *persona* only brings us up to the year 2001 in Dr. Petrilli's life, for purposes of the Introduction to this first Sebeok Fellow Special Issue of *TAJS*, I asked her for information concerning her current situation, as this issue goes to press. Having heard from Sebeok himself on the range and extent of her professional life, let us conclude having an "update" on the same from Petrilli herself:⁴

As to Italian aspects of my work you don't know: all the part concerning literature and literary writing — papers on the poetry of Robert Graves (24 July 1895–1985 December 7), which Tom appreciated; on John Cage (5 September 1912–1992 August 12) in a Peircean perspective; on cinema, with papers on Pasolini (Pier Paolo; 5 March 1922–1975 November 2), his literary writing, his cinema featuring women *sui generis*; on the fables of Italo Calvino (15 October 1923–1985 September 19); on African art; on the fables of Maeterlinck (29 August 1862–1949 May 6),⁵ whom again Tom appreciated; on storytelling, with particular reference to Africa and to the United States.

There are in fact lots of chapters by me in my own volumes that I do not list separately as essays. Then also writings on aboriginal dreamtime stories. I've translated some of those stories into Italian for *Athamor*. And I've written lots of papers on the problem of migration; on violence; on food (or lack of it) in a globalized world; a philosophical paper on the phenomenology of love; papers on war and globalization; and more recently I have introduced 'critical whiteness studies' to Italy, with the bilingual *Athamor* volume, *White Matters / Il bianco in questione*,⁶ as well as masculinity studies with translation of two small books on this other issue.

As you know, I also work a lot on translation theory. In fact, I have invented and introduced a subject into the Italian university system which does not exist anywhere else in Italy, namely, *Semiotica della traduzione*. I currently teach *Semiotica*, *Semiotica della traduzione*, *Semiotica dei media*. In the past, I also taught *Semiotica del testo*; and, of course, before that, *Philosophy of Language*, my main area of research within semiotics.

Of course. And there are also *many* volumes by others Petrilli translated into Italian.

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4. From an email dated 07/21/2008, sent 07:10 hours Bari time, received 13:18 hours Houston time.

5. I.e., Maurice Polydore Marie Bernard, Count Maeterlinck. See the Special Issue of *Semiotica* 123–1/4 (2001), Guest-Edited by Susan Petrilli, on the theme of "Signs and Light. Illuminating Paths in the Semiotic Web". Her own article from this issue, titled "Light and Symbol in Maurice Maeterlinck's *L'Oiseau bleu*", pp. 345–368, has since been reprinted in the volume co-edited with Augusto Ponzio, *Views in Literary Semiotics* (Ottawa, Canada: Legas, 2003).

6. Rome: Meltemi Editore, 2007. ISBN 978–88–8353–558–1.

