

Flux, Stasis, and The Sign

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Abstract

Language, either oral or written, is meant both to convey and to preserve meaning. Semiotics is the discipline which permits the extraction of a meaning from systems of linguistic signs. Written texts are static, while the world is about them is in flux. Meaning is thus intimately connected to this marriage of flux and stasis in texts.

Here, three views on semiotics are examined:

First, Plato's treatment of signs and flux in the dialogue *Kratylos* is dissected. The conventional and mimetic aspects of signs are contrasted, and a connection between inquiry and stasis is intimated.

Next, the Augustinian theory of signs, as delineated in *De Doctrina Christiana*, is presented. The diversity of signs and several principles of hermeneutics are considered. In addition, the existence of the some Post-Modern notions of polysemy, trace, and fore-structures of understanding in Augustine's thought is indicated. Also, the concepts of ineffability and of *res summa* in *De Doctrina Christiana* are examined as starting points for a deconstructive critique of Augustinian semiotics.

Third, Derrida's treatment of signifiers in *Of Grammatology* is analyzed as a (re)turn to a semiotics of the flux. Finally, the oral concept of memory reveals a connection between flux and stasis. The memory plays a role in the system of signs in creating a "generative reconstruction". According to Augustine, sign-making is also "incarnational." Humans retain something of the signs in memory; memory preserves the basis of the sign. This mnemonic fundament may be constantly adjusted to the present reality, *i.e.* the flux; the epistemological and semiotic data base in oral cultures is generative or fluid.

Memory ameliorates the semiotic tension between the flux of the world and the stasis of information in the system of signs.

The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither speaks nor conceals but makes signs [*sêmeinei*]. (Heraclitus, Fragment 93; in Kirk and Raven, 211)

War [*polemos*] is the father of all some he makes slaves, others free. (Heraclitus, Fragment 93; in Kirk and Raven, 195)

... there are also a whole set of deities, gods, shrines, call them what you will, who change in emphasis and in actuality. (I have argued that) this change is related to the kind of internal contradiction that is generalized by human thought about the universe ... It is therefore the problem of the God who failed ... In oral culture such contradictions are more easily swallowed up ... (Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*, 155-156)

This war of words [*pugna verborum*] is to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally. (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I.6)

This process of substitution, which functions as a pure play of traces ... operates within the order of the pure signifier which no reality, no absolutely external reference, no transcendental signified can come to limit, bound, or control; ... this unleashed chain is nevertheless not lacking in violence. One would not have understood anything of this linguistic "immanence," if one saw it as the peaceful milieu of a merely fictional war, an inoffensive word-play, in contrast to some raging *polemos* in "reality." (Derrida 1981, *Disseminations*, 89)

Signs and Leaky Pots

In the dialogue *Kratylos*, later appended with the subtitle "On the Correctness of Names," the roles both of nature and of convention in language are explored. One participant, Hermogenes, argues that language, and hence the system of signs, is purely conventional in origin. *Kratylos*, on the other hand, maintains that there exists

a natural or intrinsic correctness (*i.e.* meaning) in the bestowing of names.

Kratylos ... says that everything has a right name [*onomatos orthotêta*] of its own which comes by nature [*phusei*] and that a name is not whatever people call a thing by agreement [*xunthemenoî*]

I have often talked with Kratylos and many others, and cannot come to the conclusion that there is any correctness of names other than by convention and agreement [*xunthêkê kai homologia*]. (Plato, 383-4; references refer to the classical textual divisions of the dialogue as employed for example in the Loeb Classical Edition. Volume 4)

Hermogenes further notes that we can change the names [*metatithemetha*] of servants and that such new names functions just as well as the former. (Plato, 383)

Socrates counters by inquiring about truth and the problems of objectivity and subjectivity. To this interrogation, Hermogenes responds that truth is speaking of things as they are. This response, however, prompts Socrates to cite Protagoras: *Pantôn khrêmatôn metron êinai anthropon* (Humankind is the measure of all things. Plato, 385). But this observation raises the question of whether or not there is an absolute reality beyond that created by the one who constitutes the linguistic object.

After considering various crafts, Socrates elicits a concession that: "A name, also, then, is a kind of tool [*organon*] . (Plato, 388, *cf.* "Zeichen" [sign] and "Werk-zeug," [tool] as discussed by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*, §17; references refer to the standard divisions of *Being and Time*) A toolmaker, to be sure, produces such objects

appropriate to particular tasks. Furthermore, the toolmaker fashions these objects according to an ideal, a mental image, a Form. Thus, the naming of tools requires a knowledgeable artisan who is cognizant of their proper and correct uses. Most importantly, the proper and correct name must somehow embody the Form (Plato, 390 E). This discussion moves Socrates to suggest that the names applied to the eternal and divine must have been bestowed with special care and attention. Thus, a long discourse on the appropriateness of the names of the gods ensues.

Socrates eventually returns to the concept of "name," which he interprets provocatively as "this being about which our search is [*on hou masma estin*]." (Plato, 421 B) "Truth" he relates to the notion of "divine wandering [*theia alê*]," while "falsity" is "the opposite of motion." (Plato, 421 B) Notice that truth as *alê theia* constitutes a significant alternative to the Heideggerian envisioning of truth as *alêtheia* or un-covering. (Heidegger, §7B) In Plato, such associations of truth and naming with flux and stasis acquire additional significance in view of Socrates' final stance in the dialogue and in view of Derrida's metaphor of movement in discussing *differance*.

Now *Kratylos* turns towards a conversation on the mimetic theory of language (Plato, 423,424,427) with the following question: "Oh Socrates, what sort of imitation [*mimêsis*] is a name?" (Plato, 423 C) In the ensuing, we can sense that Socrates is laying a trap for Hermogenes, because the description of the name-maker [*onomastikos*] revives unsavory associations from *Republic*, *Phaidros*, and *Symposion*:

... the name-maker grasps with his letters and syllables the reality of the things named and imitates their essential nature- [*apomimeisthai tēn ousian*], or not? (Plato, 424 B)

Here is the trap:

Just as in our comparison we made the picture by the art of painting, so now we shall make language [*logon*] by the art of naming or rhetoric or whatever [*tē onomastikē, ê rhêtorikē ... tekhnê*] (Plato, 425 A)

Naming is equated with painting and rhetoric which do not participate in the Socratic-Platonic economy of truth, but rather in that of seeming! An indubitably fanciful, mimetic theory of etymology is presented next, at the conclusion of which we have apparently arrived at a theory of the correctness of naming:

And in this way, the lawgiver [*nomothetês*] appears to apply the other letters, making according to letters and syllables a sign and a name [*sêmeion te kai onoma*] for each being, and from these names he compounds the rest by imitation [*suntithenai apomimoumenos*]. (Plato, 427 C)

That the dialogue will now experience a turn is signaled by the first participation of Kratylos (Plato, 427 B). Soon after his entry into the conversation Socrates inveigles a concession regarding the nature of *res* (thing) and *nomen* (name):

You would agree ... that the name is one thing and the thing of which it is the name another? ... that the name is an imitation of the thing named?...that paintings [*zôgraphêmata*] are also imitations, though in a different way, of things? (Plato, 430 D)

Kratylos' affirmative replies to Socrates' questions then elicit this response:

... let me state my position. I call that kind of assignment in the case of both imitations — painting and naming — correct [*orthên*], and in the case of names not only correct but true [*alêthê*] and the other kind which applies the unlike imitation, I call incorrect, and, in the case of names, false [*pseudê*]! (Plato, 430 D)

Socrates further states that a name is an image [*eikôn*], an icon, and may be fair or poor (K:431 D). Building upon the notion of image, he explores the function of identity and difference in the deictic activity of the sign: "... the image must not by any means reproduce all the qualities of that which it imitates." (Plato, 432 B) Subsequently the problem of identity and difference of Kratylos and his image [*eikôn*] are explored: If a god were to successively elaborate the image so that the icon gradually assumed all the properties of Kratylos, then in the end there would be not Kratylos and the icon, but two Kratyloi (Plato, 432)!

There would seem to be two principles operating here. The first is that a sign points to something else only as long as the sign is both like and unlike that to which it points (*cf.* Heidegger, §7A). Only the interplay of identity and difference within the sign

energizes its deictic activity. The second principle is the incapacity of the image to accommodate absolute identity. This particular construal of Plato may seem overly strong and anachronistic. Nonetheless, the icon points to Kratylos only while its identity to Kratylos is imperfect. For when the identity is complete and absolute, there are no longer image, or name, and thing, but two things. Thus, the reproduction of total presence, of complete identity, engenders consternation within the system of signs. Therefore, this dictum may be expressed as: *Language, or the system of signs, abhors the plenum*. To maintain the system of signs, absolute identity or full presence must be avoided.

Socrates then invites Kratylos:

... we must look for some other principle of correctness in images [*eikonos orthothêta*] ... and must not insist that they are no longer images if anything be wanting or added [*apê ê prosê*]. Do you not perceive how far images are from possessing the same qualities as the originals they imitate? (Plato, 434 D) Are you not satisfied that the name is the representation [*dêlôma*] of a thing? (Plato, 433 D)

The careful reader will not fail to perceive that Socrates now assumes Hermogenes' position *vis-a-vis* Kratylos:

Where do you think you can possibly get names to apply to each individual number on the principle of likeness, unless you allow agreement and convention [*homologian kai xunthêkên*] on your part to control the correctness of names? I myself prefer the theory that

names are, so far as possible like [*homoia*] the things named; but this attractive force of likeness is ... a poor thing, and we are compelled to employ in addition this commonplace expedient, convention [*tê xunthêkê*], to establish the correctness of names. (Plato, 435 C-D)

With this consensus obtained, Socrates launches into an exploration of the "function of names." (Plato, 435 D) Superficially, their application would appear to be didactic, for whoever knows names will know things also." (Plato, 435 E) This concept, however, leads Socrates to admonish:

Do you not see that he who in his inquiry after things follows names and examines into the meaning of each runs great risks of being deceived [*exapatêthênai*]? (Plato, 436 B)

Socrates, in fact, conjures up many doubts. He suggests that the giver of names [*tithemenos*] might have erred in the bestowal of some of the originary names, that these errors were then propagated, that any consistency among names would, therefore, be amazing (Plato, 436 D-E). Why so?

Names indicate [*sêmeinein*] to us the essence of all those things which, we said, are in motion or flux [*iontos ... pheromenou ... rheontos*]. (Plato, 436 E)

We may note that the terms, heretofore either designating name- or law-giving or designating convention, gravitated towards the roots *them-* or *thesis* — a setting or fixing. Socrates now plays on the connections of the words for knowledge (*epistêmê*)

and inquiry (*histo-ria*) to the notion of "standing still" or stasis: "And inquiry means much the same, that it stops (*histêsi*) the flow (*ton rhoûn*). (Plato, 437B) Next, Plato recounts indubitably fanciful derivations for "faithful" and "memory." For example, Socrates notes that *mnênê* (memory) expresses rest (*monê*) in the soul, not motion. Thus, knowledge, inquiry, memory and similar terms reflect stasis, not flux — the true, Heraclitean essence of the world. Hence, preoccupation with names should yield to experiencing things directly.

How realities are to be learned or discovered is perhaps too great a question for you or me to determine; but it is worthwhile to have reached even this conclusion, that they are to be learned and sought for, not from the names but much better through the things themselves than through names. (Plato, 439 B)

Yet there is still the problematic of how the "static" nature of knowledge and inquiry can correspond to the "fluid" world. How can stasis and flux be accommodated simultaneously within any semiotics? How can knowledge and inquiry deal with or even exist amidst change? Well, surmises Socrates, if Heraclitus is correct, then indeed knowledge, conceived as stasis, becomes an impossibility. He then proffers a final admonition:

... but surely no man of sense can put himself and his soul under the control of names, and trust in names and their makers [*themenois*] to the point of affirming he knows anything; nor will he condemn himself and all things and say there is no health in them, but that all things are flowing like leaky pots ... Perhaps this theory is true,

perhaps not. Therefore, you must consider courageously and thoroughly and not accept anything carelessly ... (Plato, 440 C)

This Heraclitean lectio of the *Kratylos*, while strong is surely justified by the text itself. Such an intrinsically fluxional view of language has been missed by both modernists and postmodernists alike. Fowler opines:

The Cratulus cannot be said to be of great importance in the development of the Platonic system, as it treats of a special subject somewhat apart from general philosophical theory; its interest lies rather in its technical perfection and in the fact that it is the earliest extant attempt to discuss the origin of language. (*Plato*, 4)

Foucault similarly falls to grasp the Heraclitean dimension of Plato's view of language:

From this follows a refusal of analyses couched in terms of the symbolic field or the domain of signifying structures, and a recourse to analyses in terms of the genealogy of relations of force, strategic developments, and tactics. Here I believe one's point of reference should not be to the great model of language [*langue*] and signs, but to that of *war and battle*. ... Neither the dialectic, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts. "Dialectic" is a way of evading the always open and hazardous reality of conflict by reducing it to a Hegelian skeleton, and "semiology" is a way of avoiding its violent, bloody, and lethal character by reducing it to the *calm Platonic* form of language and dialogue. (Foucault, 56-57, emphasis added)

The *Kratylos* is important for an understanding of the theory of signs both in the answers the dialogue provides and in the questions the dialogue excites. First, neither the position of Hermogenes nor that of Kratylos receives unqualified endorsement. Signs are both conventional and mimetic. The juxtaposition of naming and the imitative arts of painting and rhetoric instantly alerts to the possibility of fiction, poiesis, seeming, and deception in names. Second, inscription, the committing of names to the letter, is chastised as a detour from the things themselves. Third, the pointing function of the sign requires both identity and difference. A corollary to this assertion is that the absence of difference destroys the deictic function of the sign. Absolute identity, plenum, full presence, wreaks havoc within the system of signs.

Fourth, the larger question is broached as to how imitation and convention can function in a world, not of stasis, but of flux. The formation of concepts, requires grasping, apprehending, arresting the mobile. To what extent it is true that inquiry and the system of signs employed are attempts to immobilize the flux of the world? Perhaps Derrida supplies an alternative here. Fifth, the chief functions of signs are identified as didactic. The association of signs with teaching constitutes an appropriate segue to Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*.

Tracking the Ineffable

The composition of *De Doctrina Christiana* spans the nexus of the 4th and 5th centuries of the Common Era. During this time of great flux, both barbarian arms and

Christian faith vied for the control of pagan Rome. On the one hand, Cicero and Quintilian had rehabilitated eloquence or rhetoric, and consequently the use of figurative language. Rhetoric will evince itself as a seminal component of Augustinian hermeneutics. On the other, during the ascendance of Christianity in the Empire, all things classical or pagan became suspect. Also, Latin translations (Augustine calls them *interpretationes*) of Hebrew and Greek Scriptures were disseminated. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine turns to the semiotics and the hermeneutics of Latin Scripture.

The Prologue (Augustine, 1; references to *De Doctrina Christiana* follow the *Cor Script. Eccl. Lat.* edition) of *De Doctrina Christiana* speaks of the exposition and explanation of a text as an "opening [*aperiendum*]." Quickly, we can also detect an apologetic component, reflecting the debate on the appropriateness of things pagan in a burgeoning Christian culture. To rehabilitate pagan or classical rhetoric for his semiotics, the bishop of Hippo executes a subtle rhetorical turn: In Book I he enunciates broad principles of interpretation founded on faith and charity. Here his feint is initially to appear to align himself with the detractors of classical eloquence. Next, the system of signs is introduced; in Augustinian semiotics, all signs are ultimately subordinate to the deity. Then, in Books II and III, the treatment expands to cover unknown and ambiguous signs, respectively. Finally, in Book IV, eloquence is introduced as a hermeneutical principle by considering Pauline tropes and the rhetorical function of "persuasion" in the service of religion. Thus, we can appreciate the complex rhetorical *tour de force* by which the listener/reader is persuaded of the aptness of rhetorical study for Christian instruction and edification.

In anticipation of a final précis of Augustine's method, we can note two points to follow in the reading of *De Doctrina Christiana*. First, Augustine employs the notion of "trace"

sed quibusdam *vestigiiis indagatis* ad occultum
sensum sine ullo errore ipse perveniat

But by *following* certain *traces* he may come
to the hidden sense without any error. (Augustine, 9)

Second, there is an underlying weakness in the system of signs due to the problem of ineffability (Augustine, 5, I.6).

Book I commences with a programmatic statement about an approach to scriptural interpretation. What are sought are both *modus inveniendi* (a way of discovery) and *modus proferendi* (a way of teaching). Here Augustine invokes an element of classical eloquence in which the ultimate use of words to have a concrete effect upon the audience, moving them to a particular course of action.¹ Christopher Kirwan appears to subscribe to the idea of doctrine as "teaching," rather than the common translation as "doctrine," for he renders the classical citation (Kirwan, 36; *cf.* Augustine, 1.2)

Omnis *doctrina* vel rerum est vel signorum, sed res per signa discutuntur.

All *teaching* is of things or signs, but things are learnt through signs.

Therefore, we may consider one of Augustine's major goals didactic, and the title of this work is properly rendered *On Christian Teaching*.² In Augustinian semiotics, all signs — including words — are things by virtue of simply existing. However, every thing is not a sign. Furthermore, all things are to be used and/or enjoyed (*usus* and *fructus*). A singularity, in this respect, constitutes the deity; the deity is a thing which is not a sign and is only to be enjoyed (*fruendum*) and not to be used (*utendum*). The triune deity is *summa res* (Augustine, 1.5). Two chains of signifiers are established in Augustine's writing. One class contains: the highest thing, home, the Trinity, and *enjoyment* of the truth; the other class contains: signs (including all *res* which point to the deity), vehicle, the name of the deity, and *use*. This system of signs is relatively static and apical. For all signs point either to *res summa* or to other signs which themselves point to *res summa*. Consequently, all meaning of signs is organized about this nuclear entity, representing a transcendental signified and the source of all truth (Augustine, 7).

Phonic signs are related by Augustine to thought through an "incarnational" model:

Nec tamen in eundem sonum cogitatio nostra convertitur, sed apud se manens integra formam vocis ... adsumit. Ita verbum dei non commutatum caro tamen factum est ...

But our thought is not transformed into sounds; it remains entire in itself and assumes the form of words... In the same way the Word of God was flesh without change. (Augustine, I.12)

Thus, the Augustinian theory of signs exhibits retention. A thing is perceived by the mind and represented by a thought and finally "incarnated" in a *verbum* or spoken word which can subsequently enter the system of signs without loss or complete transformation of the thought. Such a retentive, incarnational model may be an attempt to treat and to describe the role of memory in the system of signs (Augustine, II.14,21). Indeed, a thought which is not totally converted in the process of sign-making may be "stored" for future use (Augustine, I.13). In addition, the citation "*verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis*" (Jn 1:14) at this point must be interpreted in the context of Augustine's refusal to elevate spirit (today's virtual reality?) unconditionally over body elsewhere in Book I (Augustine, I.18,19,20,24,25,27). For example:

And that which some say, that they would rather be without a body, arises from a complete delusion [*omnino falluntur*] (Augustine, I.24)

... not that the body should be destroyed but that its concupiscence ... should be completely conquered. (Augustine, I. 25)

Therefore, the nondebasement of writing conjoined to an appreciation of the equilibria among thought, memory, and "incarnational" sign-making may explain why Augustine was so well disposed to a mixed, oral-chirographic milieu.

This preliminary analysis permits Augustine to identify a foundational principle of scriptural hermeneutics:

... it is to be understood that the plenitude and end of the Law and of all Sacred Scripture is the love of a being [*dilectio rei(!)*] . (Augustine, I.39)

Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures ... so that it does not build on the double love [*geminam caritatem*] of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all. (Augustine, 1.40)

So the ultimate criterion of hermeneutical correctness is the principle of charity. This ethical dimension of Augustinian hermeneutics will be retrieved by Gadamer. None of Augustine's subsequent dealings with the theory of signs should be construed as overturning this principle. Again, he also links the use of textual interpretation to an effect upon the audience (the rhetorical movement), in that interpretation of signs serves to build up faith.

Book II considers the problems posed by indeterminate signs (*signa incognita*). Augustine prefaces the statement of a second hermeneutical principle with a slight revision of the nature of the relation of things and signs. Things should not be construed as signifying something beyond themselves (*non etiam si quid aliud praeter se significant*, Augustine, II.1). Perhaps the pointing of all things to the deity is excepted here. Signs, in contradistinction, should not be held for what they are, but

as signifying something else:

Signum est enim res, praeter speciem quam ingerit sensibus, aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire; sic *vestigio* viso transisse animal cuius *vestigium* est cogitamus ...

A sign is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the things makes on the senses. Thus if we see a *track*, we think of the animal which made the *track*. (Augustine, II.1)

Consequently, the essential function of the sign is to point beyond itself. Of course, in the Augustinian scheme, all signs ultimately point to *res summa*.

The sign as *vestigium* (trace, track, or spoor) must, even for Augustine, be a witness to absence. The sign is also deception, because the track causes something beyond its appearance (*praeter speciem*) to the senses to come into thought (*in cogitationem venire*). An extreme formulation may be that a sign is preoccupied with absence and mirage. Augustine further describes signs as either natural or conventional (*data*; Augustine, II.4), thus evoking the Platonic dichotomy. The mimetic component of *signum naturalium* is made explicit as a "certain verisimilitude in making signs (*quandam similitudinem in significando*)" is recognized (Augustine, II.38).

Words are the predominant signs among people (Augustine, II.4). For Augustine, words (*verba*) are essentially oral signs. However, because the vibrations of the air are ephemeral (*quia verberato aere statim transeunt*), letters are employed to create written words (*voces*), which hold speech fast for the eyes (Augustine, II.5). Yet the

written word is *pharmakon*, a poison:

Sed multis et multiplicibus obscuritatibus et ambiguitatibus decipiuntur qui temere legunt, aliud pro alio sentientes.

But many and varied obscurities and ambiguities deceive those who read casually, understanding one thing instead of another. (Augustine, II.7)

Thus the undertaking of immobilizing of the spoken word is fraught with the possibility of deception.

Augustine's first hermeneutical principle, the application of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, as the fiducial elements of correct interpretation, is now augmented with a second — that of the abundance or redundancy of signs in scripture:

ut locis apertioribus fami occurret, obscurioribus autem fastidia detergent. Nihil enim fere de illis obscuritatibus eruitur, quod non *planissime* dictum alibi repperiatur.

so that the more open places present themselves to hunger and the more obscure places may deter a disdainful attitude. Hardly anything may be found in these obscure places which is not *plainly* said elsewhere. (Augustine, II.8)

If most signs speak *planissime*, what is the purpose of such redundancy in scripture? Here both the rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions of Augustinian semiotics become

apparent (Augustine, II.8.55). First, the use of signs (*similitudines*) allows things to be "perceived more readily [*libentius*];" thus we find the rhetorical element *docere* here. Second, difficult passages are explicated with "more pleasure [*multo gratius*];" thus we find the rhetorical element *delectare* here. Finally, the use of similitudes seems "sweeter [*suavius*]," which suggests an aesthetic component. For the second hermeneutical principle to accord with the first, we must postulate that the principle of charity somewhat subdues the interplay of signs for Augustine, because a certain, consistent ultimate meaning (*Applikation*) of the signs is guaranteed by the supervision of the first principle.

Accepting the abundance or redundancy of scripture, we may nevertheless inquire into the origin of the obscurity of signs. Emblematic of the obscurity within the system of signs is the Tower of Babel (Augustine, II.5): "*voces dissonas habere meruerunt.*" Whatever the etiology of this "dissonance" is, the African bishop is sensitive to the problems of the incommensurability or noncorrespondence of various sign systems. Some of his suggestions to overcome such difficulties would be styled philological analysis or historical criticism today. However, one reason for the ambiguity is a bivalency; signs may be literal (*signa propria*) or figurative (*signa translata*, Augustine, II.15). Here there is a hint of the deferral of meaning and the interplay of signs. The meta-phoricity (*trans-latio*) of signs, therefore, is a cause of indeterminacy.

In addition, Augustine describes a hermeneutical move which would appear to anticipate the notion of fore-structures (*Vor-verständnis* [pre-understanding], pre-

judice, pre-conception) of the hermeneutical circle. In discussing the Latin version of 1Cor 1:25, he introduces this concept:

Without the *illumination of the idea* being conveyed [non apparet nisi *inluminatione sententiae*], it is not clear whether *hominibus* is ablative or dative. (Augustine, II.20)

The *inluminatio sententiae* seemingly designates some anticipation of the “true meaning [*sententiae veritas*].”

Finally, within the Augustinian principle of charity (read: ethics), there is room for polysemy. The report of the Egyptians presenting their jewelry to the Hebrews in *Exodus* is, so Augustine, “*sine dubito figuratim*.[without a doubt, figurative]” Such use of figurative speech in Scripture is interpreted as endorsing the use of the works of classical, pagan authors who likewise employ such literary figures. Augustine, however concedes:

Quod sine praeiudicio alterius aut paris aut meliores intelligentiae dixerim.

I say this without prejudice to any other equal or better understanding.
(Augustine, II.61)

Nevertheless, the hegemonic principle of the congruence of the meaning of *signa* in the scriptures must circumscribe the limits of possible polysemy (Augustine, III.35,38).

Book III addresses the problems of ambiguous signs (*signa ambigua*). The principle formulated here is that the believer enjoys a certain freedom with respect to signs, for some forms of literalism are compared to idolatry:

Sub signo enim servit qui operatur aut venerator rem significantem,
nesciens quid significet.

He is a slave to a sign who uses or worships a significant thing
without knowing what it signifies. (Augustine, III.13)

This discussion provides the context (Augustine, III.9) for the citation of the Pauline dictum, "Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat [the written sign kills; the spirit, however, enlivens]." (2Cor 3:6) Thus certain forms of literalism are the death of the soul and block the chain of signifiers by denying figurative meaning to signs. This latter notion becomes clear when we appreciate that "figurative language" renders the expression "*verba translata*" with its implication of "transferral" (Augustine, III.9). Figurative signification implies a trans-lation, a de-ferral of meaning, which is halted by literalism. The supervenient concept in determining whether literal or figurative use is to be understood is again the principle of faith (*regula fidei*, Augustine, III.2).

What are the contributions of the *doctor ecclesiae* to the theory of signs? First, the diversity of the nature and of the function of signs is emphasized. Attention is paid to issues of orality and literacy among conventional signs. Also, the subject-object relationship between sign-maker and sign is portrayed by an "incarnational" model.

This model, if further elaborated, can link sensation, thought, and memory in relation to the system of signs. Second, control over the interpretation and interplay of signs is maintained by the imposition of a master, hermeneutical principle of faith and charity. Third, faith may also be viewed as a hermeneutical fore-structure in the interpretation of signs, because it circumscribes possible exegetical outcomes. In addition, the application of *inluminatio* may correspond even more closely to present ideas of fore-structures of understanding. Fourth, within the confines of the principles of faith and charity, polysemy and interplay of signifiers in the transfer (*translatio*) of signification are permitted.

Fifth, Augustine introduces the terms "trace" and "tracking" into the theory of signs. Signs are tracks, *vestigia*, and, therefore, testify to absence. Parallel to the notion of the track is the idea of the tracker:

Erit igitur divinarum scriptarum solertissimus *indagator* qui primo totas legerit notasque habuerit ...

He will be the most expert *investigator* of Holy Scripture who has first read all of them ... (Augustine, II.12)

The *indagator* (*cf. vestigiis indagatis* in Augustine, 9) is the hunter, tracer, stalker, encircler of the game. The meaning behind the sign is such an elusive quarry that the meaning must be tracked and hermeneutically encircled.

Augustinian semiotics also evinces two difficulties: ineffability and the *res summa*. Augustine is aware of a contradiction at the apex of the system of signs:

Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak [*dicere voluisse*]: If I have spoken, I have not said what I wish to say. Whence do I know this, except because God is ineffable [*quia deus ineffabilis est*]? If what I said were ineffable, it would not be said [*dictum non esset*]. And for this reason God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said something is said. And a contradiction in terms [*pugna verborum*] is created ... This contradiction in terms is to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally [*Quae pugna verborum (war of words) silentio cavenda potius quam voce pacanda est*]. (Augustine, I.6)

Res summa is ineffable; the gravitational center of the Augustinian system of signs, to which all signs directly or indirectly point, cannot be en-coded or en-signed, or resists such activities. Truth or meaning in this theory of signs is found in the deity, and through the rule of faith, the deity regulates the outcome of hermeneutical inquiry.

Consequently, we suspect that the determinism exercised by the deity on the deictic function of signs is incomplete, because *res summa*, being ineffable, unspeakable, is exterior to the system of signs. Furthermore, the death of God or the absence of the transcendental signified removes the governor of *deixis*, the gravitational center of the universe of signification. This being the case, signifiers would be freer to point in other directions, indeed, toward each other. Augustine's use of the expression "war of words (*pugna verborum*)" may mark the nativity of the notion of play or flux in the Latin tradition of the theory of signs!

In summary, Augustine has described a well-ordered, somewhat static universe of signification. All signs gravitate towards *res summa*. Within the system of signs, polysemy is present, but circumscribed in scope. Faith and *sententiae inluminatio* correspond to hermeneutical fore-structures of understanding. The interpreter as *indagator* follows the tracks (*vestigia*) of the absent signified and hermeneutically encircles the sign. A shattering of the stasis dominating this system is possible in view of the discontinuity between *res summa* and the signifiers due to the ineffability of the deity. Appreciation of this rift between them recognizes the likelihood of flux or play among the signs.

Derrida's *Polemos*

Grammatology is the science of writing which attempts to free the use of written signs from the hegemony of the three major forces in Western metaphysics: *ôn* (being), *theos* (deity), and *logos* (truth, (full) speech, presence, the Word), in short, *onto-theology*. This pro-gram entails the nondebasement of writing, the freeing of the notion of inscription from the criticism of being secondary or derivative. Likewise, this pro-ject requires the "*Destruction*" (*cf.* Heidegger, §6) of the metaphysics of presence, of logophonocentrism. Of particular concern is the ontological difference (Heidegger, §3-4). In critiquing Heidegger, Derrida notes:

... all this indicates that fundamentally nothing escapes the movement of the signifier and that, in the last instance, the difference between signified and signifier is nothing The ontico-ontological difference

and its ground ... are not absolutely originary. *Differance* would be more "originary," but one would no longer be able to call it "origin" or "ground," those notions belong essentially to the history of onto-theology, to the system functioning as the effacing of difference. (Derrida 1981, 12-13)

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida first turns his attention to "The End of the Book and The Beginning of Writing" (Derrida 1976, 6-26). Here we must certainly think of *telos* as both "end" and "purpose," and of *archê* as not only "beginning," but as "command" and "principle." What are both the purpose of the book and the principle of writing? Writing is not merely a "system of notation," but also the nature and functioning of the activity of encoding (Derrida 1976, 9). *In the age of cybernetics and information technology, the activity of writing, in this full sense, may be the feature distinguishing human and "artificial" intelligence.* Derrida's notion of writing comprehends that of language itself, so that writing, far from being derivative, is "anterior" to language. History and knowledge ("*istoria*" and "*epistémè*") as activities of language have had as their end or purpose the reconstitution of presence. We recall that in the *Kratylos*, *historia* and *episteme* are linked to stasis. Thus, full presence is an anti-Heraclitean arresting of flux, violence, war, or play.

The linguistic activities of history and knowledge have entailed the "inflation of the sign." Truth and presence are compelled to reside in the *logos*. Derrida now revives a derogatory view of language: The thought which forms the sign stands in relation to the sign as the Form (*eîdos*) to the object modeled after it. Because of this "heritage," the written word occupies a precarious position. Phonocentrism privileges orality as

the system of signs closest to thought; in contrast, written signs are debased as being mere signs of signs. Yet common to all traditional use of signs is the "philosophy of presence," *i.e.* metaphysics. Logocentrism determines Being as presence. Signs are inflated by their presumptive *deixis* to the signified. Derrida wants to attack, to deconstruct, the notion of an absolute deictic function of the sign in relation to the signified by exiling the transcendental signified:

We know, however, that the thematics of the sign have been ... the agonized labor of a tradition that professed to withdraw meaning, truth, being, presence, etc., from the movement of signification. Treating as suspect, as I just have, the difference between signified and signifier, or the idea of the sign in general, I must state explicitly that it is not a question of doing so in terms of the instance of the present truth, anterior, exterior or superior to the sign, or in the place of the effaced difference. Quite the contrary. We are disturbed by that which, in the concept of the sign — which has never existed or functioned outside the history of (the) philosophy (of presence) — remains systematically and genealogically determined by that history. It is there that the concept and above all the work of deconstruction, its "style," remain exposed to misunderstanding and nonrecognition. (Derrida 1976, 14)

Derrida describes the "movements of deconstruction" as internal to the structure, as cannibalistic — *i.e.* feeding on the structure itself — as subversive, as self-destructive or -consuming, and as open to zealous criticism (Derrida 1976, 24; cf Jn 2:17). Deconstruction is an "end" or *telos* (*i.e.* goal) of grammatology.

Additionally, the science of writing should recuperate "the natural — that is, the simple and original — relationship between speech and writing." (Derrida 1976, 35) First, we must appreciate how the mind-body problem insinuates its way into language through the metaphor of speech as the integument of thought. Then, on the other hand, there is a curious inversion in the metaphor of speech as living spirit and writing as the body. Saussure had considered the spoken word (*vox*) to be a unity, the thought-sound, which embraces simultaneously signifier and signified. The silence of writing, especially encountered in the extreme both in theoretical mathematics and in the dumb printouts of the data bank, represents a detour from this unity by avoiding speech. The epitome of the inversion of speech and writing occurs, according to Saussure, when the spoken word derives its validity or authority from written signs, and "the natural sequence is reversed" (Derrida 1976, 37). This debate inspires Derrida to seek an "archaic" element of writing (in general) which is anterior to both the spoken word and to the letter. Yet it is precisely the notions of anterior or of full speech which have blinded us to or dissuaded us from this search.

Trace is introduced into Derrida's discourse. Trace is an element common to all systems of signs. The trace is "instituted" and "unmotivated" (Derrida 1976, 46). Here Derrida appears to describe the trace as both conventional or given in the Platonic-Augustinian usages, respectively, and yet detached from a real signified. Thus, trace would seemingly evince no naturally mimetic aspect. Indeed, Derrida would have the trace constantly signal the absence of a signified, as the Augustinian *vestigium* pointed to the absence of the track-making animal. The absence of the signified leads to signs pointing to other signs, thereby creating chains of signifiers. "The self-

identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly as it is always on the move" (Derrida 1976, 49). This absence opens the possibility of unlimited play: This is "the destruction of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence" (Derrida 1976, 50):

Here one must think of writing as a game within language. This *play*, thought as absence of the transcendental signified, is a play *in the world*....To think play radically the ontological and transcendental must be seriously *exhausted* ... It is therefore *the game of the world* that must first be thought before attempting to understand all the forms of play in the world. (Derrida 1976, 50)

Could not the game of the world be *polemos* or flux? For Derrida the game opens with the "becoming unmotivated of the symbol." Thus grammatology becomes the science of the arbitrariness of the sign (Derrida 1976, 51; cf. Kierkegaard, Vol. 1, 299; Vol. 2, 126). We may recall that precisely this consequence would be postulated by the absence of *res summa* in the Augustinian theory of signs.

The absence of the transcendental signified leads Derrida to posit that language has never been unaffected by writing, that, in fact, language had always already been an arche-writing. Arche-writing is the movement of *differance*, the pure trace (Derrida 1976, 60, 62). *Differance* "permits the articulation of signs among themselves within the same abstract order--- a phonic or graphic text for example ..." (Derrida 1976, 62-3). This use of the concept of *differance* would seem to differ from -- to be an adjunct, or indeed an alternative to its use in Dissemination (Derrida 1981, 127-159). In Dissemination, *differance* functioned as an alternative to the *Aufhebung* of the

Hegelian dialectic, whereby a *coincidentia oppositorum* is maintained without sublation. With the absence of the transcendental signified, there would no longer appear to be a dialectic or binary opposition. However, in *Of Grammatology*, trace and *differance* are related to meaning in a nonoriginary way. Trace is the origin of meaning, and, as the trace has no origin, there is no absolute origin of meaning. "Trace is the *differance* which opens appearance and signification ... and no concept of metaphysics can describe it." (Derrida 1976, 65)

By banishing the transcendental signified, Derrida has, by a single *coup*, deflated the logocentrism of written signs and restored free play, violence, war, flux among the signifiers. Formulated in the extreme, Derridean semiotics maintains that there can only be theories of signs, not of the signified.

After-Math

We live in the age of information production, storage, and retrieval of massive proportions. Semiotics now evinces digital, electronic dimensions because of our new "technologizing of the word," of the sign. Faithful sign-making confronts the dilemma of connecting the flux of life and the stasis of signifiers and knowledge.

In the *Kratylos*, Socrates remains indecisive as to whether the Heraclitean view of the world in complete flux is correct. In any case, we find that a theory of signs which is exclusively mimetic or exclusively conventional is not tenable. Socrates urges us to forsake the study of signs and to return to things. Unresolved still is the question of

how signs can retain their deictic activity in the face of the flux. Augustine elaborates a theory of signs in which signs are subordinated to deity, to *res summa*. Deity is the ultimate source of *deixis* by attracting all signs to itself; deity also exercises complete hermeneutical control through the same mechanism. Notwithstanding this situation, *res summa* escapes or refuses inscription in the system of signs because of its ineffability. Indeed, Derrida banishes the transcendental signified; such action equates to the death of deity and *deixis* in the Augustinian system. In the final analysis, Derrida's model appears to offer the promise of a semiotics which mimics the flux. In contrast to Socrates, Derrida urges us to concern ourselves with signs.

There appear to be two difficulties with the Derridean theory of signs. One is the problem of knowledge and of the communication of information. As Socrates suggests, inquiry and knowledge are attempts to stay the flux. Hence, such essentially immobilizing, epistemological concepts, which view knowledge and information as "real," vendible commodities in the cybernetic age, are barren in the economy of *differance*. To what extent does and can the play among signifiers support the transfer of information or of meaning? Second, what energizes or cathects the play among the signifiers and keeps the chains of signifiers intact, even if only for a time?

The preservation of meaning and knowledge apparently demands stasis, and this stasis would be mirrored by the very properties of the system of signs which Derrida, and perhaps Plato, would eliminate. In contrast, precisely the movement, the kinetics, within the flux could constitute the energization of the interplay of signifiers. How can the seemingly disparate requirements of flux and stasis be incorporated into any

theory of signs? Perhaps we have overlooked one component of the system of signs.

Saussure proposed a unitary structure for the thought-sound which Derrida rejects. However, we noted that Augustine's model for the production of signs was "incarnational." The sign-maker is not merely a semiotic funnel or conduit, but indeed a repository (*apud se manens integra* ; Augustine, 1.12), a true data bank. In such a context, semiotic and epistemological roles for memory become apparent. Derrida rejects the notion of presence (of the transcendental signified) as a dialectic of protention and retention. However, perhaps a similar but distinct, connective role could be assigned to memory. The function of memory might be to buffer changes in the world, not to still them altogether; the goal of memory is not stasis, but merely a temporary slowing of the flux. This view of memory would be consonant with the adaptive role of memory in oral, i.e. non-chirographic, nonprint, and non-cybernetic cultures.

Walter Ong, S.J., and Jack Goody have alerted to the distinctiveness of fluid, spoken sign-making, of reservoirs of knowledge *vis-à-vis* static, "inscribed" memory banks. In oral cultures, human memory, the reservoir of the system of signs, is adaptive: Every telling of an old tale, a recalling of signs, is simultaneously a nonoriginary telling of the tale. In delineating principles of oral hermeneutics, Ong observes: "oral societies live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance." (Ong, 46) He cites work indicating that oral genealogies of the Tiv of Nigeria and the Gonja of Ghana adapt to changing political life by adding or deleting names. "The integrity of

the past [especially of written records!] is subordinate to the integrity of the present." (Ong, 48-49) The flux of life wins out over the stasis of history. Contrast the fluidity of oral genealogies to the petrification evident in the written genealogies of Hebrew and Greek Scripture.

Similarly, Goody and coworkers have documented the role of memory in the oral transmission and performance of the *Bagre* by the LoDagaa of Ghana. In this instance, the cybernetic preoccupation with the flawless transmission of signs is convincingly indicted. In oral cultures, "the product of exact recall may be less useful, less valuable than the product of *inexact remembering*." (Goody, 178) Goody observes that literate and oral cultures function on the basis of contradictory epistemological and semiotic *mores*: The former adhere to a static repository, a written or electronic text; the latter enjoy, in contradistinction, a freedom of invention (Goody, 190). Goody's epistemological concerns echo *Kratylos* in an amazing fashion:

I have spoken of the growth of knowledge by the search, the quest, the journey, the sojourn in the woods, all common themes of oral recitation. I am concerned to stress that oral cultures are not imply incessant reduplications of the same thing, the model of perfect reproduction, a pre-literate photo-copier. There is some change in knowledge, sometimes perceived as growth by the actors.... The evidence of such changes in ideas and cults is of two kinds. First, the pantheon is often in considerable flux, not fixed or unalterable, as we wrongly imagine the Greek schema to have been because of the way it has been set down and arranged in writing....

The second type of evidence comes from *Bagre* recitation. ... it is clear that important variations are arising, variations that elaborate or slim down certain aspects of cultural potential, the idea-logic.... A creative act is involved. Something new is born, an idea which may well conflict with other ideas ... In oral societies such contradictions are more easily swallowed up ... (Goody, 155-156)

In the oral concept of memory, we find we find the bridge, the connection, between flux and stasis. The role of memory in the system of signs is "generative reconstruction," constructive remembering," "creative reconstruction," or "generative recall." (Goody, 178-180) According to Augustine, sign-making is also "incarnational." Humans retain something of the signs or data they pass on (*traditio*); memory preserves the basis of the sign. This mnemonic fundament may be constantly adjusted to present reality, *i.e.* the flux; the epistemological and semiotic data base in oral cultures is generative, creative, fluid — it mirrors the flux!

Printed and, especially, electronic memory — a static horde of alphanumeric or binary information — at best immobilizes a finite number of views of the flux. Can any *artificial, incorporeal*, intelligence hope to *em-body* the flux? A Heraclitean notion of memory must be fluid, must mirror change and arbitrariness — unlike computer memories. Human memory, in contrast, may function as the *differance* which permits signs to oscillate between stasis and flux. Still, the electronic, technologizing of the word recuperates, in a culturally significant manner, oral epistemology and hermeneutics. With a "key" stroke or *coup* — word processing — names, dates, paragraphs may be updated to adapt written or electronically stored signs to the flux

of life.

Modern information technologies, such as “word”-processing and fuzzy logic regenerate flux in writing, in the full sense. In any case, human memory, unlike binary, “write-protected,” electronic depositories of information, is capable of reconciling stasis and flux in the system of signs. In truth, human memory connects flux and stasis:

They do not apprehend how being at variance it agrees with itself:
There is a back-stretched connexion, as in the bow and the lyre.
(Heraclitus, Fragments 51; Kirk and Raven, 193)

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Notes

¹ Later, Gadamer will place similar emphasis on *Applikation* or *Anwendung* as the ultimate realization of hermeneutical activity (Gadamer, in *Truth and Method* II.II.2.A).

² In French, the title is *Instructions chrétiennes*. One might speculate whether Lyotard's *Instructions pâiennes* relied on Augustine's opus as an (anti)type.

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