

**Everything is Significant:
The Christian Semiological Presuppositions of *Moby-Dick***

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The System of Systems (of Signification): An Intro to Christian Semiology

According to Roland Barthes, "semiology...aims to take in any system of signs...and the complex associations of all these...which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment," which "constitute, if not languages then at least systems of signification."¹ The semiologist, then, handles systems of signification that are, presumably, not only distinct from one another as regards their substance, but which are also relationally specific. Thus, the phrase "Systems of Signification" appears to mean humanly constructed systems of signification. If this is the case, such a view further implies that apart from human agency there are no systems of signification.

While it is true that contemporary semioticians have taken some steps in articulating what theorists Jesper Hoffmeyer and Claus Emmeche have called a "semiotics of nature,"² the fact of semioticity-in-itself undermines their physicalist assumptions. For if semioticity-in-itself is communicated, then it is communicated through natural and human systems of signification, which implies its logical priority, as it is being communicated from beyond itself.

Systems of signification, in other words, are not only marked by internal *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* relationships between their own constitutive elements, but they also stand in *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* relationships to one another. In order to avoid nonsense or infinite redundancy, therefore, semioticians must presuppose the existence of another System of Signification that is logically prior to all other sub-systems of signification.

Hence, it is not surprising to see that Christian theology, by which I mean the system of Christianity deducible from the propositions of the Bible,³ gives emphasis to such a

logically prior System of Signification in many places. The Bible does not do this in explicitly semiological terminology, of course, but does so, nonetheless, by repeatedly emphasizing that God is Truth, and that He has created all non-conscious things in order to direct all human consciousness toward Himself. The System of Systems, in other words, according to the Bible is the Mind of God.

The abundance of Scriptural support for this position is too great to include here, so we will instead use Psalm 19 as the foundation for our introduction to Christian Semiology. In this psalm, "the heavens *declare*" the perfections of God, "the sky above *proclaims*" that He is their Creator, and the diurnal exchanges between day and night are said to "pour forth *speech*" and "reveal *knowledge*."⁴ Indeed, all of creation is said to have a "voice" that speaks "words" that travel from one end of the world to another.⁵ The remainder of this psalm identifies a second source of God's Word, *viz.* the written Law of God/the Bible itself, without which the first source is, in many ways, incomprehensible.

Creation, then, is a system of signification that implies the existence of still another System of Systems, namely the mind of God, which unites and organizes all subsystems of signification. This is a view articulated very early on in the history of the Church by Saint Augustine in a number of his works, but perhaps most notably in his dialogue titled *De Magistro*, his introduction to rhetoric titled *De Dialectica*, and his autobiography famously known as *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. These works all espouse the Scriptural teaching on the nature of all created things, i.e. That all systems of signification operate together and prod the mind to seek the infinite God via their seemingly infinite internal operations and supervenient external relations.⁶

Augustine's exposition of the Bible's teaching regarding signs and systems of

signification would later receive similar treatment in the writings of the American theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards, who

...constructed his own theology of nature, or typology — interpreting the physical world as a representation or a 'shadow' of the spiritual which celebrates God's glory and sovereignty as they are evidenced in the coherence and beauty, order and harmony, of world phenomena.⁷

Edwards' theory was constructed in response to "the mechanistic conception of the world of nature as...a self-inclusive machine running by itself...freed from subordination to God's dominion."⁸

This is also to be expected, given the fact that Edwards was also the spiritual grandson of the Puritans, who themselves "were confident about the legibility of this world -- i.e., its existence as a group of 'characters' written by God's hand."⁹ Edwards - like the Puritans, Augustine, and the writer of psalm 19 - understood creation to be "pervaded by divine meaning and significance...[and] accorded a singular role to play in reflecting images and shadows of the ontologically superior divine reality beyond it."¹⁰

*Uncle Tom's Semiotical Cabin*¹¹

The Biblical understanding of systems of signification, however, is also evidenced in the non-theological/non-philosophical writings of Christian American authors descended from a similar Augustinian-Protestant lineage. Perhaps most notable of these authors is Harriet Beecher Stowe, for whom Christian semiology is not explicitly set forth in precise theological and philosophical terminology, but is assumed and expressed via the medium of the novel. The foundational presupposition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for instance, is the idea that God has made mankind in His image, as speakers who attest to their identity as

creatures, judged, and/or redeemed through their employment of systems of signification.

Primarily, this is executed linguistically, as is the case with Mr. Haley, whose moral character corresponds to his abuse of language.

His conversation was in free and easy defiance of Murray's Grammar, and was garnished at convenient intervals with various profane expressions, which not even the desire to be graphic in our account shall induce to transcribe.¹²

Mr. Haley's wickedness is evidenced in his willful disregard for grammar and conversational propriety. His conversation is not directly about theological matters. Nevertheless, his attitude toward language is reflective of his deadened conscience that has no regard for laws of any kind.¹³

Stowe's narrator informs her readers that although George "...had been able to repress every disrespectful word [...] the flashing eye, the gloomy and troubled brow, were part of a *natural language* that could not be repressed -- *indubitable signs which showed too plainly* that the man could not become a thing."¹⁴ Whereas Mr. Haley bears no hint of consciousness of how his choice of language reveals his heart's disposition toward God, George purposefully employs visual signs, utilizing another system of signification when his ability to use verbal signs is limited by the restrictions placed upon him by his "master."

In like manner, Uncle Tom's attraction to "the language of Scripture," which he used to "enrich" his prayers,¹⁵ demonstrates that Tom's moral character compels him to use language that is appropriate for prayer, spiritual language. When it is appropriate for him to *not speak*, however, and reveal information about two runaway slaves, Tom's silence is, like George's gesticulating facial muscles, a sign belonging to another system of

signification.

Infinite Void or Infinite Surplus?

The influence of Christian semiology, unsurprisingly, abounds in Stowe's work. She was, after all, a devout Christian raised by a devout Calvinist minister.¹⁶ It is interesting to note, therefore, the fact that non-Christian texts of the same time period appear to have been influenced by Christian concepts in general, and Christian semiology in particular, albeit to a greater or lesser extent. Melville's masterpiece *Moby-Dick* is a text that exhibits not only a surface level dependence upon the system of Christianity, but also presupposes that systems of signification are in service of a greater reality, a spiritual and, *essentially*, ineffable reality.

The narrative structure of *Moby-Dick* seems largely dependent upon a "Miltonic allusive matrix" in which "the topoi, characters, and imagery of Paradise Lost engaged Melville more elaborately than has previously been appreciated [by Melville scholars]."¹⁷ Like Milton, Melville apparently has sympathy for his fallen, and ever degenerating, anti-hero, *viz.* Ahab, who "reminds the reader not only of the demonic voyager winging his way to Eden...but also of Satan-as-Serpent. Ahab is an 'anaconda of an old Man' [...] bent on a 'devil's chase.'"¹⁸ Moreover, like Milton, Melville's text also seems to be a sharp criticism of the ruling powers of his day. *Moby-Dick*, argues Gilmore, expresses Melville's "awareness of his country's wrongs [which] had dimmed his faith in its potential as world redeemer. [...] In his portrait of Ahab, he registered his protest against the imperious messianic pretensions which he saw as perverting the Republic's genuine mission."¹⁹

Melville's dependence upon Christianity goes deeper still, however, than merely

drawing structural inspiration from Milton's epic, for his characters, like Stowe's, are known by their semiological fruits.²⁰ Like the animals Adam named on the sixth day of creation, Melville's characters have names that exemplify their (moral) character and/or historico-narratological significance. Thus, Ishmael is literally a cast away, an anti-Isaac, an outsider to the chosen people; Ahab is the king of his ship, hell-bent on conquering the only (divine) opposition that threatens his kingdom's endurance and his own enduring prosperity; and Elijah,²¹ the madman, is a prophet who foretells the *Pequod's* demise.²²

Even more strikingly, however, Ishmael, the individual through whom all other characters are voiced, is very aware of the multiplicity of systems of signification which aim to "pin down" the nature of the White Whale, as well as the nature of the image on the aloof, and ultimately unattainable, Dubloon. Indeed, some have argued that such a linguistic self-consciousness, as evidenced *Moby-Dick's* prefatory material, serves as a "philological background, a lexical history, a retrospective index of meaning and usage from which the ensuing whaling narrative will draw (and which it will parody, critique, and outright attack)."²³

For these critics, Melville's characters are "caught up in a transitive game of signs and interpretations, [and] their desires and fears [are] at stake in its provisional outcomes."²⁴ Furthermore, they believe that these characters face

...a riddling despair, a vexing linguistic predicament. Compelled by human desire to "delineate chaos" (Ch. 3) and rationalize the unknown, yet suspecting their results (and the materials of investigations: themselves and their inventions), they alternate between confidence and skepticism, the gratification that comes with a commensurate image or statement and the dismay that

follows their recognition of a representation's insurmountable *incommensurability*.²⁵

Such criticisms are helpful in underscoring the multiplicity of signs constituting the constellatory network of signs that *Ishmael* utilizes, but they fail to recognize that it is *Ishmael* who is narrating the Tale. *Ishmael*, therefore, is the one who has chosen the systems of signification which appear in the text. He has, moreover, also chosen which systems *do not* appear in the text.

Moby-Dick is a novel; however, it is a novel within which there are not only numerous genres but there are references to external systems of signification, as well as the utilization of those systems within the text. Regarding genre, Chapter 40 (*Midnight, Forecastle*) demonstrates the interplay between verbal signification and signification arrived at via verbal direction, namely the placement of bodies in relation to one another. Thus, lingual and visual systems of signification are drawn together in the service of *Ishmael*. From the initial "MATE'S VOICE FROM THE QUARTER DECK"²⁶ to the last,²⁷ and to the "scattering" of the entire crew, which ends this small drama,²⁸ *Ishmael* desires to express the "various attitudes" of the crew via the signifying instrument of their bodies.²⁹ Similarly, this is observable in Chapter 32, *Cetology*. As the name of this chapter suggests, *Ishmael* is enamored with the *science* of whales. And the science of whales entails mathematical signification (via measurement, statistics, etc). Theatre utilizes space, relative position, etc in order to signify *non-linguistically*; science uses empirical investigation in order to signify *non-linguistically*.³⁰

Regarding systems of signification that are external to the text, however, Chapters 55-57 devote some space to addressing *Monstrous Pictures of Whales, Less Erroneous*

Pictures of Whales, and *Whales in Paint, in Teeth, Etc.* Ishmael again draws together two systems of signification in order to "...paint to [the reader] as well as one can without canvas, something like the true form of the whale as he actually appears to the eye of the whaleman."³¹

The progression from Chapters 55-56 underscore the fact that Painting is a system of signification which has its own peculiar rules for assessing the quality or "effectiveness" of artistic productions.³² Likewise, the engravings on the dubloon in Chapter 98 are akin to the paintings Ishmael analyzes in that they comprise an artistic production which can be assessed as such, that is to say according to its own internal, structural rules. The coin is, moreover, not meaningless. For, as Ishmael notes, "...some certain significance lurks in wll things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload..."³³ Queequeg's "mark" is another instance of the interaction between different systems of signification serving Ishmael's purpose. By attributing to Queequeg a non-linguistic sign, in exchange for his written signature, Melville is nearly incarnating the visual system of signification in the *foreigner*.

Ishmael's narrative causes difficulty for those who wish to maintain that Melville's intentions are, at their core, *nihilistic* and atheistic. Ishmael clearly indicates that what lies *beyond* the systems of signification is *a* System of Signification, the Mind of God, albeit in a manner that eludes the grasp of the unaided human intellect. Hence, there is not an infinite void lurking behind the multiplied systems of signification - linguistic, artistic, bodily, numismatic, etc - but a reality toward which all of these systems points, and infinite surplus rather than an infinite void.

Indeed, Ishmael's complex of systems of signification "confront[s] the complexity of

the whale and all reality on his own terms, neither adopting uncritically any single, insufficient explanation nor lapsing into a desperate nihilism."³⁴ And not only the whale, for as Stubb exclaims: "It's queer; very queer...Damn me, but all things are queer, come to think of 'em."³⁵ In other words: *All things* are infinitely rich with significance, despite the fact that their true significance sometimes eludes the human intellect. For Ishmael, therefore, there is an assumption, a Christian presupposition concerning the nature of things: *Everything* is significant.

Notes

¹ *Elements of Semiology*, Roland Barthes, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 9.

² See, Jesper Hoffmeyer and Claus Emmeche, "From Language to Nature - The Semiotic Metaphor in Biology," *Semiotica* 84 (1991), 1-42.

³ I am borrowing this definition from Dr. Gordon H. Clark's essay "The Bible as Truth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114.454 (April-June 1957):157-170.

⁴ Ps.19:1-3 ESV.

⁵ Ps. 19:4 ESV.

⁶ See, Laurent Cesalli and Nadja Germann, "Signification and Truth: Epistemology at the Crossroads of Semantics and Ontology in Augustine's Early Philosophical Writings," *Vivarium* 46 (2008):123-154.

⁷ Avihu Zakai, "Jonathan Edwards and the Language of Nature: The Re-Enchantment of the World in the Age of Scientific Reasoning," *The Journal of Religious History* 26. 1, (February:2002), 19.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Michael Clark, "'The Crucified Phrase': Sign and Desire in Puritan Semiology," *Early American Literature* XIII, (1978-1979): 279.

¹⁰ Zakai, 34.

¹¹ Some of my essay *Irrepressible Signification & Humanity* has been used in this section.

¹² *Uncle Tom's Cabin: Or, Life Among the Lowly*, [The Splendid Edition], David S. Reynolds, Ed., (Oxford:2011), 14.

¹³ See, *UTC*, 465-468.

¹⁴ *UTC*, 27. (emphasis added)

¹⁵ See, *UTC*, 49.

¹⁶ Augustine, as is well known, provided Protestant Reformers, including Luther and Calvin, with a solid theological corroboration of their own exposition of the Scriptures. Their focus was primarily upon religio-epistemological questions of authority. Nevertheless, Augustine's semiological influence upon these Reformers is clearly

evidenced in their developments in sacramentology, despite their respective differences with respect to the "real presence of Christ" in the Lord's Supper, for instance.

¹⁷ Leslie E. Sheldon, "Messianic Power and Satanic Decay: Milton in *Moby-Dick*," *Leviathan* (2002): 29.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Michael T. Gilmore, "Melville's Apocalypse: American Millennialism and *Moby-Dick*," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 21.3 (1975): 154-161.

²⁰ The phrase "You shall know them by their fruits" derives from the teaching of Christ on the nature of teachers of Scripture. This is, in other words, yet another instance of the Bible's teaching regarding the nature of signification as a mechanism of the expression of one's disposition, first and foremost, toward God and, secondarily, toward other persons.

²¹ The title of Chapter 19 is, in fact, *The Prophet*.

²² This alignment of extra-biblical characters with Biblical characters, in fact, was a practice overdeveloped by the Puritans, perhaps to their own spiritual and political detriment. See, Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Origins of the Puritan Self*, (Mass: Yale, 1976), 35-44.

²³ Mark Bauerlein, "Grammar and Etymology in *Moby-Dick*," *Arizona Quarterly* 46.3 (Autumn 1990): 17-32.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Moby-Dick*, Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, Ed., (New York: Norton, 2002), 146.

²⁷ *MD*, 151.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *MD*, 145.

³¹ *MD*, 214-215.

³² *MD*, 221.

³³ *MD*, 331-332.

³⁴ Gayle L. Smith, "The Word and the Thing: *Moby-Dick* and the Limits of Language," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 31.4 (1985): 260-271.

³⁵ *MD*, 112.