

The Power of the Written Voice

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I sit in a straight-backed wooden chair, an open book lying flat on the desk in front of me, a pen in my hand and a transparent 6" ruler nearby for sharp underlines. Early morning sunlight streams in the window at my shoulder. A voice speaks from the page:

The aim of this book is to explore the theoretical possibility and the social function of a unified approach to every phenomenon of signification and/or communication. Such an approach should take the form of a general semiotic theory, able to explain every case of sign-function in terms of underlying systems of elements mutually correlated by one or more codes.

A design for a general semiotics should consider: (a) a theory of codes and (b) a theory of sign production — the latter taking into account a large range of phenomena such as the common use of languages, the evolution of codes, aesthetic communication, different types of interactional communicative behavior, the use of signs in order to mention things or states of the world and so on.

Since this book represents only a preliminary exploration of such a theoretical possibility, its first chapters are necessarily conditioned by the present state of the art, and

cannot evade some questions that — in a further perspective — will definitely be left aside. In particular one must first take into account the all-purpose notion of 'sign' and the problem of a typology of signs (along with the apparently irreducible forms of semiotic enquiry they presuppose) in order to arrive at a more rigorous definition of sign-function and at a typology of modes of sign-production.

Therefore a first chapter will be devoted to the analysis of the notion of 'sign' in order to distinguish signs from non-signs and to translate the notion of 'sign' into the more flexible one of sign-function (which can be explained within the framework of a theory of codes). This discussion will allow me to posit a distinction between 'signification' and 'communication': in principle, a semiotics of signification entails a theory of codes, while a semiotics of communication entails a theory of sign production.

The distinction between a theory of codes and a theory of sign-production does not correspond to the ones between 'langue' and 'parole', competence and performance, syntactics (and semantics) and pragmatics. One of the claims of the present book is to overcome these distinctions and to outline a theory of codes which takes into account even rules of discursive competence, text formation, contextual and circumstantial (or situational) disambiguation, therefore proposing a semantics which solves within its own framework many problems of the so-called pragmatics. (3-4)

I sit sprawled in the rocking chair, Tim in my lap, Geordie ... *is he here tonight? Yes, Geordie lies on the couch ... golden incandescent light streams over my shoulder from the silver floor lamp. A voice speaks from the page:*

Chatterer the Red Squirrel had been scolding because there was no excitement. He had even tried to make some excitement by waking Bobby Coon and making him so angry that Bobby had threatened to eat him alive. It had been great fun to dance around and call Bobby names and make fun of him. Oh, yes, it had been great fun. You see, he knew all the time that Bobby couldn't catch him if he should try. But now things were different. Chatterer had all the excitement that he wanted. Indeed, he had more than he wanted. The truth is, Chatterer was running for his life, and he knew it.

It is a terrible thing, a very terrible thing, to have to run for one's life. Peter Rabbit knows all about it. He has run for his life often. Sometimes it has been Reddy Fox behind him, sometimes Bowser the Hound, and once or twice Old Man Coyote. Peter has known that on his long legs his life has depended, and more than once a terrible fear has filled his heart. But Peter has also known that if he could reach the old stone wall or the dear Old Briar-patch first, he would be safe, and he always has reached it. So when he has been running with that terrible fear in his heart, there has always been hope there, too.

But Chatterer the Red Squirrel was running without hope. Yes, Sir, there was nothing but fear, terrible fear, in his heart, for he knew not where to go. The hollow tree or the holes in the old stone wall where he would be safe from anyone else, even Farmer Brown's boy, offered him no safety now, for the one who was following him with hunger in his anger-red eyes could go anywhere that he could go — could go into any hole big enough for him to squeeze into. You see, it was Shadow the Weasel from whom Chatterer was running, and Shadow is so slim that he can slip in and out of places that even Chatterer cannot get through.

Chatterer knew all this, and so, because it was of no use to run to his usual safe hiding places, ran in just the other direction. He didn't know where he was going. He had just one thought: to run and run as long as he could and then, well, he would try to fight, though he knew it would be of no use. (11-16)

There is, of course, a vast difference between the two voices.

The first is Umberto Eco's, arising from the opening pages of *A Theory of Semiotics*. The second is Thornton Burgess's, from the opening of *The Adventures of Chatterer the Red Squirrel*. Perhaps, by thinking for a moment about the differences between these vastly different written voices, we can arrive at a deeper understanding of the nature of the written voice — and not only the written voice in general but, in particular, the written voice which has the power to engage the imagination of children ... and, simultaneously, the imagination of the adult who reads aloud to children.

We are picking up Eco's voice and Burgess's voice where readers usually engage a written voice first — on the opening page. And rhetorically, an opening is very important: in it, a writer must establish her subject, her purpose and something of the train of thought she will follow, and something, too, of her persona, including her written voice — that difficult to describe but distinctive set of patterns by which we intuitively recognize the writer through her characteristic use of language.

Expository and imaginative writing obviously follow different purposes and different conventions, perhaps the most obvious being (as these two excerpts illustrate) that expository writing usually develops primarily through abstractions, and imaginative writing primarily through imagery (although imaginative writing tends to establish its own rules). Notice how Eco is setting the reader up to anticipate the important abstract concepts his book will analyze and elucidate: *semiotic theory; signification; communication; sign-function; a theory of codes; a theory of sign production; discursive competence; text formation; contextual, circumstantial, and situational disambiguation; semantics; pragmatics*. He is letting us know his subject and purpose and the basic structure of his thought. His voice is clear, but his ideas are dense and complex; he demands a sophisticated reader or listener, one familiar with the basic concepts, to be able to follow his voice, to be able to construct the ideas.

Burgess, by contrast, is primarily interested in establishing *characters* in the reader's mind, characters engaged in a terrifying chase. Burgess is working with two large abstractions — hope and fear — but the effort is to have the images of the



characters so explode those abstractions with the overpowering emotions which they name that the abstractions, *as abstractions*, disappear into the images and feelings. His audience is open to anyone who will imagine a squirrel running through the woods to escape a weasel.

Imaginative writing, whether for children or for adults, frequently develops through imagery: for just as abstraction appeals dominantly to the intellect of the reader, imagery appeals to the imagination and, through the imagination, to the reader's emotions. This is, of course, an oversimplification — expository writing may appeal to feelings; and imaginative writing, particularly as it deals in symbols and values, may also appeal to thought. And thinking and feeling are, themselves, complex and interrelated. Nevertheless, a meaningful distinction can be made between voices which dominantly employ abstractions

and appeal largely to thought processes and voices which dominantly employ imagery and appeal largely to the imagination and emotions. However, imagery is such a powerful rhetorical device that, if their audiences will permit it, experienced expository writers will frequently evoke imagery, in as many of its sensory dimensions as is appropriate, especially in their opening passages. One mark of the young writer, whose written voice is not fully formed, is that she often feels compelled to choose between the abstract and the imagistic voice, commonly settling for the abstract if the situation demands something academic or intellectual.

In considering the written voice, let us return to the situation of the opening of a piece, for it is a crucial part of any writing: there the writer's voice is first heard, and it must hold some appeal and promise for the reader. Many factors are im-

portant in getting and sustaining a reader's interest. But the context in which a piece of writing occurs limits some of the rhetorical options. Recently, I explored with a group of science writing students how none of the articles in an anthology of award-winning science writing pieces (*Best Science Writing*, ed. Robert Gannon, Oryx Press, 1991) would be acceptable in scientific journals: the very rhetorical devices and moves which made these pieces appealing to a general audience (almost all of them had narrative, highly imagistic openings) would make the same works *unacceptable* as serious science writing. Most academic science reports begin with the very word "Abstract" and are structured by abstractions from beginning to end. An abstract, dispassionate, objective voice is the kind of voice scientific audiences expect to hear; and written voices which do not follow those conventions will not be allowed to appear in most scientific journals. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that what draws a reader to a piece of writing is strongly conditioned by the rhetorical context in which the writing appears. Indeed, context determines what voice an audience will be willing to listen to.

But many contexts for writing are not so strict in their expectations as academic journals are, and writers who read sensitively know that the creation of a compelling written voice is one of the most crucial factors in securing audiences for their work.

Of all the factors which reach out of the opening of a written piece to grab the reader's attention — including subject, purpose, direction of movement, persona, and (inextricably bound up with persona) voice — it seems to me that voice is the most important. If there's not an interesting written voice reaching from the page, cupping my eyes into my inner ears, I, as a reader, will continue to read only if the content is extremely important to me. And then the writer holds me somewhat tenuously, having lost some of my confidence and respect. But ah, the writer with a clear and, at best, musical voice — to her I'll listen, no matter what it is she has to say.

Beyond the rough distinction between abstract and imagistic voices, let us examine some other features of the written voice, particularly as they are expressed in longer pieces of fiction, written, if not primarily for children, at least to be available to children. For it strikes me that well-

written "children's literature" is, necessarily, appealing to the adults who read it aloud to the children: the voice *must* appeal to the adult who does the reading as well as to the children who listen. (We adults have many subtle ways of not being available to read unappealing children's literature.) Thus voice in children's literature comes close to being a "pure" prose achievement, since the content expressed by the voice is obviously limited.

Or to put it another way, children's literature, since it is commonly read aloud, features the writer's voice. It is, after all, in the act of reading aloud that the writer's voice is actualized. Reading aloud (although sometimes abused in institutional settings, such as academic conferences) is, ideally, a ceremony: a celebration of the written voice. It has occasionally occurred to me that the primary purpose for the existence of children in societies which have moved "beyond" oral culture is for adults to have someone to read aloud to. Oh, I know that it is *possible* for adults to read aloud to each other. But I find it a difficult practice for many of us postmodern creatures to launch into. Not that I don't experience reading aloud between adults. In gatherings which have something of a spiritual purpose and interest, reading aloud is likely to be a part of the activity. (And that is a very interesting fact in itself — that equation, among adults, between reading aloud and spirituality: reading aloud is, indeed, manifesting the Logos.) But even in gatherings devoted to spiritual purposes, reading aloud is merely a part of the group activity, and usually only a small part. Except for somewhat formal *performances* (papers read at academic conferences, readings by poets or fiction writers, and public radio presentations) or brief periods of spontaneously sharing a remarkable text, I rarely hear writing read aloud between consenting adults. It is not a common social activity, although it is obviously something many adults have some facility with. I am almost never invited to a social gathering in which the main activity is reading aloud. Which seems odd, when I think about it. I am invited to social gatherings to eat, to dance, to play cards, to listen to or make music, to work, to play a sport, to watch a film — even simply to sweat (in a sauna). I may be invited to a group whose primary function is to talk *about* a piece of writing. But I very seldom join others primarily and simply to read aloud.

With children, however, who come trailing clouds of glory, any moment is potentially an abrupt re-entry into the spiritual world. Thus, reading aloud to children is possible at any time — indeed, a very common activity. The only requirement that I can discern is that as the text release a captivating voice.

I have been reading aloud to my own children, the oldest of whom is recently turned sixteen, for almost sixteen years. I don't recall now how or when it came about, but for many years, our mutual choice for reading material has been novel-length books. And even better than novel-length books, novels in series. Thus we have read C.S. Lewis's seven novels in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (average length 200 pages), the eight novels of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series (average length 325 pages), the three novels by Lynn Reid Banks: *The Indian in the Cupboard*, *The Return of the Indian*, and *The Secret of the Indian* (average length 175 pages). We have read *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Little House* books not just once but two and even three times, each child hearing the series of novels once as a pre-schooler and again when the next youngest child is ready to hear the stories. And that happens at a very early age (which I say not because I think my children are exceptional but because I think all children have enormous capacities for absorbing the written voice if given the chance). We discovered *The Indian in the Cupboard* series too late for Emily (the oldest) and the novels of Thornton Burgess too late for both Emily and Geordie. Old enough now to be absorbed in reading silently to themselves, they are missing Thornton Burgess, for the most part (Geordie listens occasionally but rarely Emily, whose life now is totally committed to teenage-dom), and I am really quite sorry about that. Reading silently to oneself, rather than aloud, with others, is, perhaps, the clearest symbol, in a literate culture, of the fall from grace.

A writer from the first quarter of the 20th century, Thornton Burgess is someone I had never heard of until the summer of 1991, although he was tremendously prolific, producing novels in not just one but several series: *The Bedtime Story-Books* (all those with titles beginning *The Adventures of . . .*, of which there are 20), the *Green Meadow Stories* (four novels), the *Green Forest Stories* (four novels), the *Smiling Pool Stories* (four novels), and the *Mother West Wind Stories* (eight

book-length collections of stories, all about the same characters that are in the novels).

It is almost always I who calls a stop to a session of reading aloud. (I confess that, tired from a long day, I sometimes fall asleep, several paragraphs having passed through my lips unattended before consciousness closes altogether.) The children would willingly sit for hours, listening. We usually read for about an hour in the evening, before bedtime. But it is not unusual to read longer. We have, in fact, read two Thornton Burgess novels in a week (average length, 180 pages, but with a typeface somewhat larger than most adult novels).

I am quite convinced that the reason my children — and I, for that matter — are taken so by novels, and particularly novels in series, is that we want to sustain the experience of the captivating, even beloved, voice that comes to us from the pages.

Thus, if we can't get a series of novels, we read everything we can by our favorite writers. E.B. White's three novels — *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan* — are great favorites as are (to a somewhat lesser extent) the novels of Lois Lenski, Meindert DeJong, and Roald Dahl. We have read three or four novels in Walter Farley's 20-novel series *The Black Stallion*, and the boys would willingly read them all, but I am not as taken by Farley's voice and, fortunately, have no trouble in getting them to accept alternate choices. Alternate voices: the voices that compel us all.

I don't want to conduct an extended analysis of each of these favorite writer's voices, for that would feel rather tedious. It is, after all, the reader's — or listener's — *intuitive* awareness of the properties of a written voice which constitutes the voice's magnetic power. And it is somewhat difficult to disentangle a writer's voice from other properties of a piece of writing. In narrative, the voice may also be a subtle factor driving the plot and shaping the characters. In exposition, voice is a factor in driving the train of thought. Still, it may be worthwhile to list and discuss a few common characteristics which I attribute to voice. Although an extensive list could be made, these, to me, are the primary characteristics of a compelling voice: rhythm, wonder, and wisdom.

First, and perhaps inclusive of all the other characteristics, is rhythm. Without rhythm, there is no movement; without rhythm, there is

no emphasis, no suspense, no surprise, no wonder. Without rhythm, the language is crabbed, even painful: without rhythm, the words obviously lacks wisdom. Without rhythm, a text cannot be read aloud. Rhythm, in writing, occurs in many ways, at many different levels of a text. It occurs within sentences; it occurs within passages; it occurs as larger movements within a whole text. For rhythm is, fundamentally, repetition: controlled repetition, repetition with meaningful variation.

Look at the varied uses of rhythm in the Thornton Burgess passage. Burgess loves the cracker-barrel-storyteller's immediate repetition of a full sentence, a technique which, these days, tends to date a written voice. But it gives an oral storytelling flavor to the work, and seems quite appropriate for children's stories, and, somehow, particularly for animal stories.

It had been great fun to dance around and call Bobby names and make fun of him. Oh, yes, it had been great fun.

A variation is to give an immediate repetition of a phrase, interrupting the sentence:

It is a terrible thing, a very terrible thing, to have to run for one's life.

But there are many, many ways to use repetition to create rhythm, and Burgess seems to know most of them. Notice, for example, his use of elliptical patterns (an elliptical pattern being one in which the repeated phrase is implied rather than fully repeated):

Sometimes it has been Reddy Fox behind him, sometimes Bowser the Hound, and once or twice Old Man Coyote.

Rhythm in a prose voice, like rhythm in music, creates the underlying coherence and unity which allow for satisfying variation. Variety of sentence length, for example, is achieved only by being able to create the long sentence. Without the long sentence, there is no contrast for the short sentence, no frame in which a mid-length sentence finds value. But a long sentence can be read and understood only if it has a strong rhythm. Notice this lovely sentence of E.B.

White's which opens Chapter 9 of *Stuart Little*, a sentence which is a full 106 words long:

In the loveliest town of all, where the houses were white and high and the elm trees were green and higher than the houses, where front yards were wide and pleasant and the back yards were bushy and worth finding out about, where the streets sloped down to the stream and the stream flowed quietly under the bridge, where the lawns ended in orchards and the orchards ended in fields and the fields ended in pastures and the pastures climbed the hill and disappeared over the top toward the wonderful wide sky, in this loveliest of all towns Stuart stopped to get a drink of sarsaparilla.

The rhythmical flow of the sentence seems to embody the rolling rhythm of the countryside and Stuart's carefree ride through it. But always, underneath its relationship to the content of the text, the rhythm of the written voice carries something of the characteristic defining rhythms of the writer (perhaps even his or her "essence"??). George Leonard in *The Silent Pulse* claims that each person has a characteristic rhythm which is as unique as a fingerprint — an "inner pulse" which, when manifested in a work of art, is the quality by which we intuitively recognize the artist. Discussing his reactions to *Look Homeward, Angel* and Beethoven's *C-Sharp Minor Quartet*, Leonard writes:

Something of Wolfe, his "actual" presence, was contained, not so much in the content of his writing as in the cadence, the spaces between the words, if you will. Beethoven's presence was encoded and realized through an entirely different process, again a rhythmic one. (p.57)

Rhythm, of course, is a commonly discussed feature of prose. "Wonder," on the other hand, is not a term I commonly hear applied to written voices. But something like wonder seems to me to be a significant quality. By "wonder" I mean not simply the capacity to surprise the reader, although that is involved. Wonder is more: wonder is the capacity to lead readers to *know* what will come next but, at the same time, leave us in doubt, uncertain, almost unwilling to believe that what seems inevitable will actually happen.

Thus, caught between certainty and doubt, at times even between hope and despair, the reader is compelled to continue reading — just to see where the text is leading, to see what will happen, where it will all end up. But, of course, ending up is the one thing we don't really want to happen, breathless though we may be to get to the end. It is the quality of wonder in a writer's voice which leaves us saddened when we have reached the end of text: the magic, the wonder, is over, and we are left with the humdrum world. It is very difficult to point to passages where the wonder in a writer's voice shines through, difficult to isolate wonder of voice from wonders of character, plot, and setting or wonders of argument and analytical thought. But it is not difficult to feel the wonder of mature written voice.

Nor is it difficult to distinguish the wisdom of a written voice. Although, again, it is difficult to isolate. Wisdom is that quality of voice that lets us know that the writer is to be trusted, that the language flowing off the page is, somehow, connected to, flowing from, the greater Logos. Or, alternatively, that the voice has synthesized the ideas, feelings, events, values which it presents in a way that has a singularly satisfying logic and balance. And, curiously, it is in these aspects of the written voice that voice transcends the ego of the writer. If voice were nothing but the individual ego of the writer, paraded across the pages — and in some writers it comes dangerously close to being that — writing would nothing more than what Norman Mailer once suggested it to be: advertisements for the self. But when the written voice sweeps the reader up and along in a rhythm that echoes and carries the content, in a tension that marries predictability and surprise, inevitability and individuality, with a massive mountain-like substance, then, ah, then readers have a voice to carry them, a voice that captures and transcends the personality of the writer.

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