

Phytosemiotics: A Fork in the Road [Preface to the special issue of Semiotic Review on “Phytosemiotics”]

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There are two paths open before those who wish to elaborate a theory of “phytosemiotics.” The first, and the easiest of all, is to apply the insights of semiotics to the world of plants, bringing them into the fold of signifying, not merely signified, entities. The followers of this method will undoubtedly invoke a plethora of ways in which plants emit and receive biochemical signals through various media and, in doing so, communicate among themselves or across species—for instance, with insects. As a result, many of the traditional assumptions of semiotic theory will remain intact, including the insuperable (Saussurrean) divide between the signifier and the signified, the information-model of communication, and the interpretation of the sign as a pure means for externally posited organismic ends.

The second, incomparably more arduous, route is to contemplate the specificities of vegetal signification with the view to informing and, if need be, modifying the semiotic doctrine itself through its iteration in the world of plants. This is the path I have pursued in my own work thus far, from *Plant-Thinking* onwards, with the help of radical hermeneutics and phenomenological ontology. The idea here is not to treat plants, or any other signifying beings for that matter, as limited examples of the universal processes or phenomena of signification. Rather, the theory of the sign should be derived from a meticulous observation and description of singular signifying agents and their practices of sense-making, the practices of bestowing meaning onto the world around them *from their own perspective*.

What can we say about signification from the standpoint that inches, as close as possible, toward that of plants? –Above all, that the sign is not detached from that which it points toward or signifies; in growth and reproduction, plants signify *themselves*, express themselves in the embodied-extended language at their disposal. Their existence is a dynamic, ever metamorphosing sign of itself, now expressed in a particular placement of branches, now in the flowers that blossom on them, now in the fruit. As signs, plants are self-signifying, such that their semiotic means are not distinguishable from their ends. What we can learn, more universally, from this is that self-signification is a trait of living existence itself, irreducible to the mechanic—or mechanistic—approaches to the topic (e.g., information-processing) prevalent today. The living body of an existent is a sign of its life in a way that the extension of a machine, however intelligent, is not. Spatial appearances are the material articulations of this existential language expressing sundry actualities of the living.

This observation carries with it an important corollary. Vegetal self-expression is purely phenomenal and does not have anything like noumenal depth. It is not that the superficial and extended signs that plants and their parts are overlay some secret metaphysical meaning, such as the old principle of *signatura rerum*, the Creator’s signature engraved on the face of everything in Creation. There is no invisible Spirit orchestrating behind the scenes a vast variety of self-signifying

forms, unless this paleonym, spelled with a lower-case “s,” stands for the relational nature of existence and the honing of self-expression through the interaction of plants with the inorganic elements, on the one hand, and with other plants or animals, on the other. The “self” of self-expression is the forever-unfinished product of an engagement between any given plant and the milieu wherein it grows: a self, suspended between “self” and “other.” Perhaps animal and human “selves” equally happen and signify themselves in the relational in-between; after all, a sign is always given to the other, even if this sign itself is nothing but the self. This conjecture, in turn, would fall within the purview of *general phytosemiotics*, extrapolated from its original vegetal context and brought into contact with the existential significations of other living beings.

It follows—to stay with the vegetal world for the moment—that plants excel like no other creatures in the basic routines of signification, namely being-for-the-other. If the sign is always offered to the other, then plants are the most exuberantly signifying of existents who thrive on maximizing their exposure to alterity (in this case, sunlight). The core of signification is a matter of survival for them, as opposed to most animals and humans who recoil in themselves and limit their exposed surfaces for the sake of energy efficiency or protection from predation. Assuming that vegetal life is defined by its metamorphoses, it makes of plants something or someone other than what or who they are at any given moment, namely signs, temporal through and through. Their relation to alterity is not only external, as expressed in their striving to light, but also internal, predicated on their changeability, their becoming-other and being-for-the-other. Signification is what a plant *is*, in the temporal sense of being that combines being and non-being in the movement of becoming, and what it *does* as part of its life-activity. To speak about phytosemiotics is, by the same token, to discuss the ontology of plants, rather than a secondary feature of their existence.

Now, put the two sides of vegetal semiotics together and what you will obtain is a quasi-formula: *Plant signification is self-expression extended to the other*. Neither aspect of this succinct definition obeys the input-output model taken for granted in the cognitive sciences that invariably analogize thought to computational techniques. The typical criticism leveled at the cognitive-scientific scheme is redolent of metaphysics. It alleges that subjectivity is relegated to the status of a black box, such that it is unclear how it transforms the inputs into the outputs. Note that phytosemiotics avoids the Scylla of machine-discourse and the Charybdis of subjectivity, construed as the withdrawn domain of personhood or even individuality, responsible for variations in meaning-making. Insofar as plants are thought of as subjects, their subjectivity is inseparable from their mode of being-in-the-world characterized by their coming out of themselves and maximizing exposure in growth. If signification is plant-being and doing, then the reverse also holds: vegetation is signification! That is the second road of the two that “diverged in a yellow wood” of phytosemiotics, the one “less traveled” by far and all the more rewarding at that.

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