

The Estonian connection

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Exordium

The topic for this highly personal account was suggested, with Peeter Torop's concurrence and encouragement, by my colleague Kalevi Kull, a founder of the University of Tartu's Jakob von Uexküll Center. Its purpose is to chronicle my direct involvement with certain segments of scholarship in or derived from Estonia during the past thirty years or so. In what follows, I shall focus mainly on three quite disparate figures: Paul Ariste, né Berg (1905–1990) — an “Estonian” from Torma, who pursued his calling, after 1940, essentially in the Soviet Union; Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman (1922–1993) — a “Russian” from Petrograd, who settled in Estonia in the 1950s; and Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944) — a Baltic “Prussian” from Keblas, who emigrated from Estonia to Hamburg in the 1920s.¹

The order in which I list and deliberate about them herein is obviously not in the order of seniority, that is, according to their respective dates of birth, but meant to reflect the rough chronology of my own successive associations with their person and/or the realization thereof through family and *oeuvre*. This idiosyncratic arrangement is to be understood to track, and thus to roughly mirror, Estonian aspects of three consecutive stages in, or engagements with, three diverse but still in retrospect congruent domains of my academic career: I. Finno-Ugric Studies; II. Semiotic Studies; and III. Bio-semiotic Studies.

¹ Six different von Uexkülls are named in this article: Jakob, his wife Gudrun, their elder son Thure, their younger son Gösta (or Gustav), and their daughter Dana. To avoid confusion, each of the foregoing is referred to mostly by his or her first name. (The Baron's grandson, Gösta's son, not mentioned again below, is also named Jakob von Uexküll.)

I. Finno-Ugric Studies

When I joined the faculty of Indiana University in 1943, I was pigeonholed as a professional linguist in general, and, more narrowly, a specialist in Finno-Ugric studies. In a pair of recently commissioned articles (Sebeok 1991–1992 and 1997b), I recounted how, beginning the mid-1940s, I eventually came to formally, that is, administratively, establish our Program (later Department) of Uralic and Altaic Studies, as well as, on the national level — in close collaboration with my late friend John Lotz — a set of related activities, comprehending a vast publication program.

There is no need to rehearse these events once more here beyond noting the participation, in various respects and capacities and at various stages, of a number of Estonian scholars (for details, *vide* Sebeok 1997b), including Paul Ariste, George Kurman, Ilse Lehiste, Felix Oinas, Ants Oras, Valter Tauli, and Alo Raun (whose son, Toivo Raun, now chairs the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, the present avatar of the former department).

Miklós Zsirai, in his ambitious, enduringly monumental book (if now in many ways rather quaint) about “our” — that is, the Hungarians’ — kinship and affinities, devoted a fair amount of space to the Estonians (pp. 442–471) and, in a separate section, to comparative linguistics as practiced in contemporary Estonian workshops (pp. 570–573). In the concluding sentence of the latter (1937: 573), he rather pompously foretold that, among the activities of the “younger Estonians, much is to be expected from two well-trained ones,” naming Paul Ariste and Alo Raun. A decade or so afterwards, this pronouncement, having made a strong impact on me, led to several local consequences — as well as another, which eventually came to play a pivotal role in this story. From the outset of Uralic and Altaic Studies, being eager to establish a strong Estonian presence at this institution, I invited both Alo Raun and Felix Oinas, with at first different titles but eventually with tenure leading to full professorial rank, to join us in efforts.

The former, parochial narrative thread stops right here, because, by the middle of the 1950s, I had already turned to other scholarly activities, among them, psycholinguistics, computer research, and the barely nascent area of zoosemiotics. But another narrative trend now kicks in, marking Ariste’s entrance into the frame of my activities,

leading in due course, as will presently become clear, directly to Tartu.

From 1933 to 1988, Ariste was a Professor at the University of Tartu (with which he had been affiliated since his student days in the mid-1920s). His tenure thus overlapped for some four decades with Lotman's, who had received a teaching post in Tartu in the 1950s. (Ariste had spent 1932 in Hamburg, but there is no record of his having crossed paths there with Jakob.)

My own contacts with Ariste commenced in 1968, when I published as the 68th volume in the Indiana University Uralic and Altaic series his grammar of Votic. I had, in fact, edited one hundred volumes in that series between 1960 and 1970, including books by each of the seven Estonian scholars listed in the 4th paragraph of this article (above). I had also run into Professor — later Akadeemik — Ariste at various international Congresses and other meetings, where we exchanged friendly greetings.

Notwithstanding that we didn't really know one another all that well, I turned to him in the Spring of 1970 on the basis of our slender acquaintanceship — yet also in full awareness of the political clout he exercised in academic spheres of and beyond the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic — to request a considerable favor: that he help persuade the then ruling authorities in Estonia to enable me and my wife Jean to visit Yuri Lotman *in situ*, preferably while the Summer School on Secondary Modeling Systems would be in session. It will be remembered that Tartu was a “forbidden” city during Soviet rule, so foreigners in general, particularly Americans, but even most citizens of the Soviet Union or from other “Socialist” countries (Voigt 1995: 201), were ordinarily denied access. It was greatly to Ariste's credit that he graciously, and rapidly, acceded to my plea, and a bit later helped us out in an acutely suspenseful instant of need, as I shall presently recount.

II. Semiotic Studies

My first, remote contacts with Lotman date from 1966, when he joined the Committee on Publications and Development of the Studies in Semiotics section, for which I had been asked to assume overall editorial responsibility, lodged within the organ of the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies and of the Internatio-

nal Social Science Council, *Social Science Information* (see Vol. VII-2, pp. 101–169, April 1968). Our appointments ran concurrently through end of 1968 (VII-6, December issue); then the section was superseded the very next month by the advent of *Semiotica*.

The International Association for Semiotic Studies was founded in Paris on January 21, 1969. Lotman, *in absentia*, was elected one of its four Vice-Presidents. I was elected Editor-in-Chief of the newly created journal, whereupon I promptly moved to carry Lotman over to our new international Editorial Committee (Sebeok 1974: 230–231). On this he served until his death, that is, through no less than ninety-eight volumes. He himself published six articles in *Semiotica* (one in collaboration with A. M. Piatigorsky, another with B. A. Uspensky).

Voigt noted in his necrology of Lotman that he was “one of [those] scholars who do not maintain regular correspondence” (1995: 201), which was in general true enough. Nevertheless, in the course of our early contacts, coursing to and from our concurrent but divorced worlds — his in the USSR, mine in the USA — we found other means to keep in touch via circumspect postings of the outmoded kind; yet they tended to revolve almost exclusively around innocuous editorial matters of a technical sort. But after August 17, 1970, our mutual relationship was, if intermittently, radically transfigured.

During this same decade, Lotman’s reputation kept to steadily accrue. He soon ripened into “one of the first Soviet scholars who became famous abroad” (Voigt 1995: 200). This maturation coincided with, was even impelled by, the second phase in the development of Soviet semiotics, which quickened with the shift from Moscow to Tartu. It was observed most authoritatively by Vyacheslav Ivanov in his engrossing autobiographical sketch, adding: “many of our works which could not be published in Moscow were [hereafter] published by Lotman in Tartu” (1991: 36). In 1964, Lotman launched the year-book *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (reanimated now with the present 26th issuance). It became known world-wide under the portentous catchword *Sémeiôtiké* (cf. Voigt 1995: 192). Accompanying the geographic displacement noted by Ivanov, there came a transfer of focus upon “secondary modeling systems... characterized by an extremely wide-ranging subject matter and bold theoretical thinking,” a concern with the larger questions of “world-view” or “world-model”; and “[b]y the time of the fourth summer school [cf. Revzina 1972] this

tendency was given formal expression in the program for the study of semiotics of culture” (Shukman 1994: 560).²

Throughout my teaching career, I attempted to persuade my students, my colleagues, anyone who would listen, that it is important for us all to comprehend what the eminent University of Chicago psychologist Csikszentmihalyi has recently delineated under rubrics he identifies — and discusses at great length, with many examples — as *domains* and *fields*. Creativity, he defined (1997: 6), “results from the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate innovation.”

To simplify considerably, a *domain*, on the one hand, constitutes a set of symbolic rules and procedures, such as “semiotics,” or, at a finer resolution, “semiotics of culture” or “Paris semiotics” or “Tartu–Moscow School semiotics” or “medical semiotics” or “biosemiotics” or “musical semiotics” — or what Eco once similarly distinguished as “limiti politici [del] campo semiotico,” within “fenomeni ‘culturali’ complessi” (1975: 21).

A *field*, on the other hand, comprises “all the individuals who act as gatekeepers to the domain,” who decide “whether a new idea...should be included in the domain” (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 27–28) — such personages as, for instance, editors of major journals or book publication series, compilers of widely used reference books, officers of international organizations, leaders of important institutional centers or “schools”, organizers of colloquia, conferences, congresses, popular lecturers, and the like. From another perspective, a *field* may be viewed as a contemporary avatar, or modern expression of what used to take the form of a medieval *guild*, in short, the entity that controls the workplace in professions such as the various “academic disciplines” (or law or medicine) (Haskell 1997).

Complementary domains and fields can of course affect each other in a variety of fundamental ways, but my point here is that any pensive and resolute would-be practitioner of a *domain*, viz., semiotics, must make every effort to become thoroughly familiar as well

² In Sebeok 1988a, I argued that the concepts of “‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ modeling systems” are flawed; but, to avoid confusion, for the purposes of my present paper I retain this terminology, originally proposed in 1962 by A. A. Zaliznyak, V. V. Ivanov, and V. N. Toporov (available in English in Lucid 1977: 47–58).

with “the gatekeepers to the domain,” such as I have instanced, controlling the *field*. In short, ideas and the personalities who embody and propagate them are, in my view, kept asunder at one’s peril. It will be evident to the readers of this article that I aim to address here (subcontinents of) the *field* of semiotics, not its global *domain* (Sebeok 1997a).

According to my own precepts and standards, therefore, I felt an urge to seek every opportunity, to pursue any opening, to get to know Professor Lotman in person, and preferably to visit him in his adopted domestic setting, which was then a singular Mecca-like *field* for us “pilgrims” laboring in the *domain* of semiotics. My first chance came in 1970, and Academician Ariste turned out to be the provider of, as it were, an unassailable convoy to Tartu. The framing event was a call I had received to address, in Tallinn, an international congress in Finno-Ugric studies³. As soon as my invitation arrived from Estonia, I realized that the dates of the Tallinn congress would actually coincide with those of the Fourth Summer School on Secondary Modelling Systems: both were to take place in August 17–24, 1970.

Thus I immediately contacted Lotman, who had indicated that we would be cordially welcome at the Summer School, provided we could ourselves secure the necessary papers. I next wrote to Ariste, pleading for his intervention and assistance. He did not respond in writing, but, the day after we had disembarked and checked into our Intourist accommodations in Tallinn, a telegram was delivered to our room, clearing the way for the two of us to spend the following day, the 18th, in Tartu. I had alluded to some of the ensuing adventures in a new Foreword to Lucid’s anthology eleven years ago (Sebeok 1988b), but that appeared before the death of Ariste two years later (Domokos 1990), the liberation of Estonia one year after that (1991), and Lotman’s death in October of 1993. Now, five years after that, I feel free at last to furnish my recital with some particulars.

On Tuesday morning, barely at dawn, a car driven by a KGB man picked us up in the deserted lobby of our Tallinn hotel. Several hours later, it pulled up in front of the main building of Tartu State

³ Ariste was the President of the Finno-Ugric Congress. In my capacity as the U.S. delegate, I was member of the over-all international organizing committee. Both Ariste and Lotman held the title of “Akadeemik”, that is, were members of the Estonian Academy of Sciences (cf. Domokos 1990 [after Rätsep 1990]; Voigt 1995: 199).

University. Jean and I kept conversation to a minimum during the drive. We mostly dozed.⁴

At this point, it is necessary to mention that, during our entire stay in Estonia, and *a fortiori* in Tartu, neither of us took any notes, let alone photographs. My report of this crowded, exciting day may therefore contain some misapprehensions. Take, for example, the composition of the impressive gathering that greeted us on our arrival outside the gate: there were, to my best recollection, over twenty men and women there, only a few of whom I had met before, swarming around us, introducing themselves. I transcribed their names from memory several days later on the ship returning us to Finland. Here is what I do remember.

The very first colleague to come forward to greet me was Petr Bogatyrev, who seemed by far the most senior personage present and who was introduced, for the record (I guessed), as being the “President” of the School⁵.

Next, Lotman was introduced as the “Secretary” of the School, and he in turn presented us to his wife, Zara Minc⁶. I was then informed that D. M. Segal would be my interpreter for the day, and he was thereafter at my side until our departure.

To the best of my recollection, the following individuals were also in the group: T. V. Civ’jan, B. F. Egorov, T. J. Elizarenkova, B. M. Gasparov, V. V. Ivanov, M. B. Mejlax, A. M. Piatigorsky,

⁴ My improvised Tartu speech (in English) and the discussions in the lecture hall were routinely monitored.

My wife had never been in the Soviet Union before. I, to the contrary, had traveled there quite extensively over the previous 17 years (and in Outer Mongolia too [cf. Sebeok 1963], although not yet in the hardly accessible Baltic Republics), so I was quite inured to constant invigilation.

⁵ Born in 1893, Bogatyrev died a few months after I met him. Later that day in Tartu, I asked in a private conversation for his permission — to which he at once gave his consent — to translate (from the Slovak) and publish his classic 1937 monograph on the functions of folk costume. We then cornered on the spot and invited Boris L. Ogibenin (b. 1940) to write an introductory essay about the author and “Structural Ethnography” for the English edition. Bogatyrev penned and quickly sent me a gracious Preface of his “heartfelt indebtedness”. All these materials duly appeared the following year (Bogatyrev 1971) although, alas, too late for the author himself to see.

⁶ Early in June of this year, my friend Eero Tarasti and I (on my second visit to Estonia) paid joint homage to the Lotmans’ grave site in the Tartu cemetery.

B. Ogibenin, I. I. Revzin, O. G. Revzina, V. N. Toporov, and B. A. Uspenskij⁷.

As I had summarized previously, our searching discussions and debates of many semiotic topics were “freewheeling and never less than rousing.” They continued through lunch, and, most productively, “through the course of a leisurely, intimate amble outdoors, and finally during a farewell tea” (Sebeok 1988b: vii). Indeed, confidential talks with our hosts took place typically in the course of leisurely strolls in the woods. They constituted the most productive, memorable, and cherished moments of our exhilarating (if exhausting) day.

We returned to Tallinn at dusk to resume my normal responsibilities to the Finno-Ugric Congress, but now faced a new — although, to me, not unprecedented — problem. While in Tartu, a number of colleagues handed me manuscripts to convey to the West. Most of these were intended for publication in *Semiotica*; some were meant for delivery to other editors. Such scholarly papers (the only kind I ever accepted) were entrusted to me to sidestep nightmarish Soviet bureaucratic restrictions. I was aware of the illicit nature of such dodges and the risks if I were caught, but bowed to abet them because of my refusal to condone censorship of intellectual property of any kind. Too, many of the pieces by authors, such as the ones I list in fn. 7 below, that would soon come out in *Semiotica*, would scarcely have appeared in English otherwise and, very likely, would have remained unknown to all but a very limited readership.

However, in this instance, while I had been entrusted with a larger than usual number of works, I had relatively little luggage space. I knew that all incoming and outgoing baggage was subject to search in the customs shed of Tallinn harbor. So I decided to discreetly consult

⁷ There were perhaps still another dozen men and women there whose names I didn't catch or couldn't afterwards remember; and I can't be sure whether I had first met the folklorist E. M. Meletinsky there or later on in Moscow.

Several colleagues whom I met in Tartu became as a direct result of my visit contributors to *Semiotica*. In addition to Lotman himself (four articles between 1974 and 1977, plus one co-authored in 1978), they included Egorov, Gasparov, Ivanov, Ogibenin, Piatigorsky, Revzin, Revzina, Toporov (who went on to win the Mouton d'Or Prize in 1985), and Uspensky.

Rudy (1986: 557n13) singled out Revzina's 1972 piece (which also contained a brief report of my long talk) as “of particular significance for the history of the Moscow-Tartu school, since it represents an effort at stock-taking at a crucial moment in the evolution of the movement”.

with Ariste: should I gamble on endangering the several authors of these manuscripts, likely being myself apprehended, putting my wife in jeopardy, and, not least, embarrassing the Congress organizers? I thought he would advise me not to. To the contrary, he told me not to worry. I relate below how, thanks again to Ariste's propitious and imaginative succor, these mss. got out of the Soviet Union.

What transpired on our departure, as recollected after more than a quarter of a century of tranquility, takes on, in retrospect, the coloring of a farce. At the harbor, we noticed that all passengers ahead of us were ordered to pile their bags on a stand and open them. All were thoroughly searched. On being summoned by a Russian officer to step forward and submit likewise, I braced myself for serious trouble. At the very moment I placed our luggage on the counter, the entrance to the shed burst open and Ariste rushed in with a large bouquet of flowers, handing them to my astonished wife. At the top of his voice, he proclaimed what an honor it was for his country to have had two such distinguished and gracious American visitors in attendance at the Congress. While holding up the line behind us, the noisy hurly-burly fomented such befuddlement and delay that the impatient officer hurriedly waved us, with our untouched luggage, through to board the ship. I thanked Ariste warmly, saying goodbye. I never saw him again.

In 1973, responding to initiatives from the Academy of Sciences of the USSR to come for an approximately six-week sojourn in Russia, and conjoined but separate invitations from the Armenian and Georgian Academies for lectures, I was awarded an Exchange Professorship by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences for studies in Moscow, Leningrad, Erevan, and Tbilisi. My specific requests for additional visits in the Estonian and Mari Republics were rejected without explanation.

Soon after our arrival in Moscow, I made contact with several local members of the Moscow-Tartu School to set up an "unofficial" get-together with those willing to attend.

An all-afternoon tea was arranged in Ogibenin's flat. To my surprise and pleasure, Lotman, who came by train from Tartu, was there among half a dozen or more Muscovites, including Ivanov and Uspensky. Topics of mutual interest were discussed — notably, having to do with the publication of various books and articles bearing on semiotics.

However, one important novel topic, not broached with me in Tartu, was insistently raised in Moscow. This had to do with the fact

that several of the colleagues I met in Tartu had since left to live in foreign parts or were just now preparing to emigrate. I was quizzed at length about conditions, particularly job opportunities, in several major Western capitals and in the U.S. One of those present declared his interest in coming to Indiana University. It later became possible for me to arrange that he come to Bloomington for an interview, and even, on receiving favorable mention on the part of Roman Jakobson (who was coincidentally also here at the time), to offer him a permanent faculty appointment in semiotic studies. To Jakobson's fury and my own disappointment, this gifted young man declined our offer for the flimsiest of reasons. Reputedly living in Paris, he has since vanished from the academic scene⁸.

My next encounter with Lotman, most intimate, most interesting — but, as it turned out, the last — was an extraterritorial happening for both of us. It happened so.

In 1986, the Norsk Forening for Semiotikk (Norwegian Association for Semiotic Studies), convened in Bergen, upon the initiative of Dinda L. Gorfée and Sven Storelv, a Symposium on Semiotics in Theory and Practice. I delivered the keynote-speech on the first morning, October 2nd (Sebeok 1987). After some uncertainty about his whereabouts, Lotman landed late in the afternoon, on what was his first journey ever to the West. Not surprisingly, he at first appeared exhausted and nervous, but he performed with his customary brilliance the next day.

He spoke extempore in Russian (ably rendered into English on the spot by Professor Jostein Børtnes) — in electrifying fashion albeit with a touch of whimsy — during the second day, the 3rd, to “situate semiotics within the Slavic cultural tradition” (Lotman 1987). The local organizers assigned to us parallel roles, but there wasn't any doubt of Lotman's star quality. We both wrote special introductions to

⁸ It should be noted that while Lotman and his Tartu circle, with its augmentations in Moscow and, to a lesser degree, Leningrad, together constituted an extraordinary pinnacle of achievement in the domain of semiotics in the second half of our century, this group was not tantamount in its extension to semiotics throughout the Soviet Union. In Moscow alone, during my stay, I was in contact with other scholars who synchronously worked in several branches of general or applied semiotics, as the linguist R. Pazukhin, the paremiologist G. L. Permyakov, the linguist and textbook writer Y. S. Stepanov (1971) (whom I got to know better in Milano three years later), and more. In Leningrad, I especially enjoyed lively discussions, among others, with Y. V. Knorozov, a leading expert of Maya hieroglyphic writing.

precede the communications, published in the third issue of *Livstegen* (1987), Lotman's entitled "Semiotics and Culture in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century".

That evening, the two of us, just Lotman and I, had a protracted dinner at the Hilton, addressing one another mostly in German, with snatches of French, interspersed by his shaky English and my faltering Russian. Yet, as the evening progressed, palliated by some toasts, a mutual rapport and sympathy came to suffuse and envelop us as if we had been the oldest of friends.

In the course of the evening, Lotman handed me a typescript of his now classic, highly sophisticated if rather controversial essay "O semiosfere," which would appear in *Sémeiôtiké (Sign Systems Studies)*, Vol. 17, dated 1984. He rightly considered this to be an exceptionally important paper, yet which was hardly available to Western readers even two years afterwards. He asked that I arrange to have it promptly translated and printed in *Semiotica*, to which of course I enthusiastically assented. Unfortunately, although in the past he left the assignment of translators to my judgment, in this instance he expressly stipulated a specific individual. After my return home, I phoned this man (whom I had known and respected for his skills) in New York, who, after some haggling over his fee and the timing, took the job on — but, in the event, he neither delivered the English version nor, to this day, returned the original typescript. This was, needless to say, mortifying as well as a grievous disappointment to me, scarcely made up for by my modest role four years later in promoting the publication by the Indiana University Press of our colleague Ann Shukman's definitive presentation of Lotman's *Universe of Mind* (1990). Part Two of this book (pp. 123–214) is titled "The Semiosphere," which does convey his most mature statement of what he apparently intended by this concept, which seems to have recourse to a kind of multi-faceted universal semiotic "culture engine"⁹.

⁹ On *semiosphere*, see also Eco's prefatory remarks to Lotman's book on pp. xii–xiii. Sturrock (1991: 10) insightfully views the *semiosphere* as a "semantic version of the biosphere without whose support there would be no life-forms".

There exist at least two different German versions of Lotman's 1984 original: the earlier of the two appeared in 1989, in the *Studia Russica Helsingiensia et Tartuensia* 20: 7–24; the later one, retranslated anew without

Voigt later claimed that *semiosphere* was Lotman's "first personally invented term...his brainchild". If so, this may in part account for his fondness for and attachment to it. However, there is no evidence for his necrologist's further suggestion (1995: 197) that Lotman's term was "modeled after *noosphere*," a fuzzy contraption by the French Jesuit and metaphysician Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. To the contrary, there is plenty of internal evidence in Lotman's writings for my repeated contention (e.g., Sebeok 1991a: 8, 142) that Lotman coined his term by analogy with Vernadski's 1926 term *Biosfera*.

Here it should be noted that Kull is currently finishing an exploratory inquiry — based in part on extant texts, in part on interviews — titled "Towards Biosemiotics with Yuri Lotman," to appear in 1999 in a Special Issue of *Semiotica* devoted to Biosemiotics. Two companion articles in the same issue will take up comparable concerns by, respectively, C. S. Peirce (by M. L. Santaella Braga) and Charles Morris (by Susan Petrilli).

Lotman, in his introductory speech to *Livstegn* (1987: 10), rightly underlined the contemporary emergence of syncretic tendencies...in semiotic investigations. "In the humanities," he said, "different disciplines combine into a single science of man, centered around the semiotic study of culture." Commute *science* for *the humanities*, *life* for *man*, and *nature* for *culture* — and this great, charismatic thinker and I might have consummated a transcendental disputation. I had hoped to argue my basic case, and ancillary issues, at our next scheduled encounter, at the 25th Symposium of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, held in Imatra, Finland, July 27th–29th, 1987 (Sebeok 1988a), but, alas, Lotman could not attend, and I never saw him again.

III. Biosemiotic Studies

I first came across von Uexküll's name in 1936, when I was still in my teens and he was to have lived for eight more years. I chanced to catch his name on the verso of the half-title page to Ogden and Richard's *The Meaning of Meaning*, the 4th edition of which I purchased when I was an undergraduate at Magdalene College in Cambridge, where Richards was Pepys Librarian at the time and with which Ogden was

ostensible regard to the former, appeared in 1990, in the *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 12: 287–305.

also associated (according to the same page), and which also listed him as the “General Editor of the International Library of Psychology Philosophy and Scientific Method.” This consisted at the time already of some 85 volumes. *Theoretical Biology* was listed as the 34th book from the top, or 52nd from the bottom. The title having caught my attention, I obtained a copy from the library, found that it was a 1926 translation of a German book published in 1920, and that it was beyond doubt over my head. Not until some thirty years later did I come to realize that this judgment was premature as well as very wide of the mark. The English translation had in fact been carried out “wretchedly...under Ogden’s eccentric auspices” (Sebeok 1991b: 104). In the mid 1960s, when at last I read the authentic German version¹⁰, I came to believe that Ogden, the very animator of Anglo semiotics in the 20th century, had either known little or no German or, with all his polymathic gifts, had failed to understand what *Theoretische Biologie* was really about: not biology, not psychology, not physiology, but semiotics. What’s more, it unfolded a wholly unprecedented, innovative theory of signs, the scope of which was nothing less than semiosis in life processes in their entirety. It created and established the basis for a comprehensive new domain: we now call it *Biosemitotics* (for definition, cf. Sebeok 1973, and Thure von Uexküll 1987: 214).

This man who single-handedly brought biosemiotics about — *avant*, so to speak, *la lettre* — received his basic academic training in zoology at the University of Dorpat (now Tartu) (Gudrun von Uexküll 1964: 25–30; see also his portrait facing p. 32 as an Estonian student). It was therefore highly appropriate to have dedicated a research institution to this domain, to have named it the Jakob von Uexküll Center, and to have arranged to set it to function eponymously under the auspices of the master’s *alma mater* (1993)¹¹.

¹⁰ My curiosity about the work of Jakob was rekindled by a brief but suggestive passage in Klopfer and Hailman’s book about the foundations of ethology (1967: 126–127).

¹¹ For want of a ready-made term, Uexküll dubbed his invention “*Umwelt-research*”, and founded the Institute for Umwelt Research at the University of Hamburg accordingly (in 1926) to carry out investigations on “the behavior of living organisms and their interaction as cells and organs in the body or as subjects within families, groups, and communities” (Gudrun von Uexküll 1964: 145–151; Thure von Uexküll 1987: 147). The Tartu Center is the embryonic successor of the Hamburg Institute, with a program of research in

His had been a signal achievement. As Csikszentmihalyi noted in his book on *Creativity*, the term *domain* ordinarily “refers to the act of changing some aspect of a domain... But of course there was a time when domains did not exist... So, in a sense, the most momentous creative events are those in which entire new symbolic systems are created” (1997: 291). Such a novel system was *Umwelt*-research, that is, *Biosemiotics*, rooted in no antecedent semiotic theory or practice at all; it was, rather, connected to the thought of Plato, Leibniz, especially Kant, Goethe, and a handful of biologists, such as Johannes Müller and Karl Ernst von Baer¹².

Furthermore, as Konrad Lorenz himself had pointed out (1971: 275), “the research programme mapped out [by Uexküll] is pretty nearly identical with that of ethology.” This should surprise no one who remembers that Uexküll was “one of [Lorenz’s] most important teachers” (ibid. 274; cf. Gudrun von Uexküll 1964: 198); nor anyone able to get to the bottom of the congruence between ethology, viz., the study of ritualization, and diachronic semiotics (Sebeok 1989: 27–34).

On occasion, I tried to get a fix on whether the practitioners of the Tartu-Moscow School were aware of the writings of Jakob. While I don’t think that Lotman and I exchanged views about this particular question, I did pose it to Ivanov on several occasions, once in Berlin, another time over lunch when he visited me in Bloomington. Yet a

biosemiotics — which merits full funding — comparable at present with that of the Biosemiotics Group at the University of Copenhagen.

In 1943, K. J. W. Craik, an Englishman, independently proposed a kindred but not empirically based and now almost forgotten “biosemiotic” theory, wherein he hypothesized that “the organism carries ‘a small-scale model’ of external reality and of its own possible actions within its head” (cf. Sebeok 1991b: 104–105).

¹² The commonalities among C. S. Peirce, J. von Uexküll, Ernst Cassirer, Yuri Lotman, *et al.*, can all be traced back to Kant, but to do so would require extended and meticulous monographic treatment (see also Gudrun 1964: 19, 93; and for the “correspondence with Kant”, 220–228). Thure has confirmed (1987: 150) that his father was unacquainted with the works of Peirce or Saussure, indeed, any other contributors to semiotics than Cassirer (although he must have had at least an inkling of the principal tenets of Hippocratic medical semiotics). Terminological reconciliations, often provided by Thure, were unknown to his father.

Baer sits atop a statue in a charming park by the University of Tartu. On June 2nd, soon after lecturing at the Jakob von Uexküll Center, I was photographed to the left of Kull, standing in front of this famous memorial.

clear-cut answer continues to elude me. It's a fact, however, that the Russian semiotician Stepanov devoted an entire chapter of his book to "Biosemiotics" (1971: 27–32), a discussion which opens with a survey of some works by von Uexküll (to whom he refers as a German [sic] biologist). His scrutiny is vitiated by a ritual obeisance to Lenin. This is followed by a misestimation of the psychologist and primatologist Zhinkin, who, in a review of one of my books (Sebeok 1968), made two remarks: he correctly surmised that "one gains the impression that there is no branch on the tree of genetic evolution where living beings fail to engage in communication"; but he incorrectly supposed, and his view misled Stepanov, "that the roots of language lie deep in the layers of the evolution of animal life" (Zhinkin 1971: 75).

In brief, it is difficult to accept that, although the notion of *Umwelt* was evidently known in Moscow circles by the 1970s, yet it remained hermetic to Lotman. One hopes that further inquiries on the part of Kull and others may resolve this conundrum, with possibly far-reaching bearings on ambitious overarching conceptual twosomes such as *semiosphere/biosphere*, *semiotics/biosemiotics*, and the like, in their intricate interplay.

However that may be, in August 1977 I attended the III Wiener Symposium über Semiotik to present a paper titled "Neglected Figures in the History of Semiotic Inquiry: Jakob von Uexküll" (Sebeok 1979, Ch. 10). Thure was in the audience. Afterwards, we had a long talk, subsequent to which he paid a call on me in Bloomington, and, still later on, made arrangements for me to spend a week or so visiting him in Freiburg, accompanied by my late friend, Giorgio Prodi. Prodi, a distinguished oncologist by profession, a novelist, and a prolific contributor to general bio- and endosemiotics¹³ — he favored the comprehensive expression "natural semiotics" (e.g., in Sercarz 1988:55; cf. Prodi 1988) — had forged, without explicit reference to any other previous or contemporary thinker, still another variant of this sprouting, or re-emerging domain. Prodi was another remarkably creative individual (Eco 1988). While the three of us were together in Freiburg (with Thure's sister, Dana, home from Finland, "keeping house"), we conducted an intensive week-long open-ended seminar, so to speak, on the practical and conceivable ins and outs of biosemiotics. Over and above redefining and sharpening my over-all perception of this semiotic domain, this uniquely stimulating experience

¹³ On the cognate domain of *endosemiotics*, see the fundamental article by Thure von Uexküll *et al.* (1993), after Sebeok (1976: 3).

enabled me to enhance my writings and teachings (Sebeok 1995b) in biosemiotics in its various topical subdivisions.

Our intensive triadic “brainstorming” led directly to the series of pivotal seminars held annually in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Glottertal, on the outskirts of Freiburg. These thought-provoking international get-togethers were held at the Glotterbad Clinic for Rehabilitative Medicine, under Thure’s overall aegis and the superintendence of a student and associate of his, Jörg M. Herrman, M.D., its Director. They were attended by many German, Swiss, and other physicians, and were on occasion attended by the biologists Jesper Hoffmeyer (of Denmark), and Kull, now two of the leading figures of the biosemiotics movement.

The paper I had presented in Vienna and published two years later as Chapter 10 (pp. 187–207, 290–291) of my book, *The Sign & Its Masters*, was my attempt to come to terms with the historical fact that there were certain men in the history of ideas, and several women, who, unawares, turned out to have been seminal figures in the history of semiotic inquiry. Much later, I dubbed this phenomenon the *Jourdain factor* (Sebeok 1991b), offering a host of examples, but none more amazingly conspicuous, now all but universally granted redefinition, than Jakob.

“The Estonian Connection,” as I choose to call it, endeavors to set in motion the seeds of a fascinating dialectic between Jakob von Uexküll, emigrant from Dorpat to the West, renowned as the scientist who had the creative power to imagine and delineate what we now call Biosemiotics; and Yuri M. Lotman, immigrant from Russia to Tartu, the celebrated visionary humanist who invented the notion of what we now call Semiosphere. Seemingly polar opposites, they both formulated and brought into being vast subcontinents of global semiotics (Sebeok 1997a), the former of life itself in its multiform complexity, the latter, of the universe of the human mind in its profusion of profound discernment. At bottom, of course, the Biosphere and the Semiosphere must be the same, for semiosis is the criterial attribute of all life, inclusive of the mind observing the Universe which comprehends life, the Biosphere (Vernadsky 1926). The two together are linked in a closed cybernetic loop, or what physicists such as Wheeler, remarking that “meaning itself powers creation,” has called a self-excited circuit (1988). How the two are to be reconciled in their rich minutiae into a global synthesis is open to debate by their disciples at University of Tartu and elsewhere.

IV. Coda

In sum, there is far more that could be said about the issue of “domain-semiotics” vs. “field-semiotics.” A field-semiotic standpoint was exemplified in my mapping of some of the multifarious genealogical filiations, in their quite diverse ramifications, of three major scholars whose points of convergence or intersection — actual or symbolic, synchronous or otherwise — chanced to be the University of Tartu.

However, another, on the surface quite different, charting could be projected if these same scholars were to be reconsidered from a domain-semiotic standpoint — for example, the Peircean category of Indexicality (Sebeok 1995a). Were one to attempt an approach like this — more common, perhaps, in traditional academic publications — one would have to zoom in, for instance, on Votic demonstrative pronouns (Ariste 1968); on “how, for example, umbrellas, coaches, dinners, and card-playing occur (and can be understood) in literature” (Lotman; cf. Voigt 1995: 191); and on such biosemiotically dramatic events as predation (Jakob and Thure, *passim*; cf. Thom 1983: 267–269).

At the time of writing, I am trying to think through the implications of what I am calling “the genealogical method to semiotic historiography,” or what I have elsewhere elaborated under the ensign of “The Semiotic Web.” (Two months ago, I presented another fragment of this possible *modus operandi*, dealing with semiotic anthropology.¹⁴) For the time being, however, I remain content to leave the domain-semiotic facets of this and other possible such exercises for future occasions.

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¹⁴ Plenary address to the 24th Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America, Louisville, Kentucky, October 24th, 1997.

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Эстонская связь

Внимание автора сосредоточено прежде всего на деятельности проф. Ю. Лотмана как одного из основателей тартуско–московской семиотической школы и представителя традиции, альтернативной по отношению к той, которую представляет сам Т. А. Себеок. В целом, оценивая вклад в семиотику отдельных ученых, автор не рассматривает их как представителей определенных регионов, но, тем не менее, он признает, что Эстония представляла собой особо благоприятное место для семиотики уже в начале 20-го века (Я. фон Юкскулль) и продолжала быть таким для “подпольной семиотики” Ю. Лотмана, а в наши дни для институциональной семиотики (отделение семиотики в Тартуском университете).

Автор выделяет и описывает три важнейших этапа в развитии эстонской семиотики: исследования по финно-угристикe, семиотические исследования и биосемиотика. В целом мемуарного характера статья содержит наряду с научным обзором истории семиотических дисциплин в Эстонии и воспоминания о личных контактах автора с учеными Тартуского университета. Т. А. Себеок признается, что развитие науки, несмотря на свою универсальность, сильно зависит от открытости конкретных ученых и их готовности к формированию этой универсальности (как, например, усилия профессора ТУ по финно-угристикe Пауля Аристе в организации встречи автора статьи и Ю. М. Лотмана).

Во многом благодаря “нелегальному” установлению личных контактов удалось включить Тартуско–московскую семиотическую школу в международный научный диалог (работы советских ученых стали публиковаться на Западе, что, в свою очередь, привело к расширению проблематики западной гуманитаристики; привлечение материала восточно-европейской традиции связывалось с поисками

ответа на новые научные вопросы; активизировалась нормализация семиотики как науки). В ситуации политического давления сглаживались личные противоречия и усиливалась готовность к диалогу между представителями разных семиотических традиций.

Несмотря на то, что Тартуско–московская семиотическая школа была из-за политической изоляции представлена на международной арене *in absentia*, она, и через нее Эстония как географический регион стали значительным фактором концептуальной референции. Образовался необходимый для научного творчества треугольник, как его определил Csikszentmihaly: культура знаковой нормативности (Тартуско–московская школа); лицо, обновляющее сферу знаковости (проф. Ю. Лотман и другие ученые); группа экспертов, способная узнавать и оценивать эти новации (возникшая связь с Западом).

Eesti-side

Artikli keskne tähelepanuobjekt on Tartu–Moskva semiootikakoolkonna üks alusepanijaid, professor Juri Lotman, kes on vaadeldav alternatiivse semiootikatraditsiooni esindajana oma kaasaegsele, professor T. A. Sebeokile. Samas ei käsitleta üksikteadlasi kui mingi geograafilise ala esindajaid, vaid Eestit kui semiootikale kummaliselt soodsat regiooni alates käesoleva sajandi algupoolest (J. v. Uexküll) ning vahendatuna “põrandaalusest semiootikast” (J. Lotman jt) kuni tänapäevani (“ametlikustatud” semiootika Tartu Ülikooli struktuuriüksuse näol).

Vastavalt autori teadushuvide arengule vaadeldakse ka kolme erinevat distsipliinaarset etappi: soome-ugri uuringud, semiootika-alased uuringud ja biosemiootilised käsitlused. Samas on selles memuaristlikus artiklis need kolm valdkonda seotud isiklike kontaktidega Tartu Ülikooli teadlastega, ning selgub, et teaduse areng, hoolimata oma universaalsusest, on siiski tihedas sõltuvuses konkreetsete inimeste avatusest ja panusest selle universaalsuse tekitamisesse (nt Paul Ariste pingutused Sebeoki ja Lotmani kohtumise teostumiseks).

Tagasisidena ja komplementaarse vastusena neile isiklike kontaktide “illegaalsele” loomisele saavutati aga Tartu–Moskva semiootikakoolkonna lülitumine rahvusvahelisse teadusdialoogi (“nõukogude” teadlaste tööde publitseerimine Läänes ja Lääne humanitaristika problemaatika vastav laienemine, uutele küsimustele vastuse otsimine Ida-Euroopa traditsioonis, semiootika kui teadusvaldkonna normaliseerimine poliitiliste ja isiklike piiride teatavagi kaotamise kaudu). Tänu poliitilise surve

tahule maandusid isiklikud vastuolud teaduskontseptsioonide aspektis ning suurenes valmisolek erinevate semiootikatraditsioonide dialoogiks (utreeritult: biosemiootikalise orientatsiooni ja kultuurisemiootika süm-bioosiks). Hoolimata sellest, et Tartu–Moskva semiootikakoolkond oli tänu poliitilisele isolatsioonile rahvusvahelisel areenil esindatud *in absentia*, oli nii vastav koolkond kui ka Eesti geograafilise regioonina muutunud arvestatavaks kontseptuaalse referentsi teguriks. Nõnda moodustus loometegevuseks vajalik kolmnurk nii, nagu seda on määratlenud Csikszentmihaly: märgilise reeglistiku kultuur (Tartu–Moskva semiootikakoolkond), isik, kes toob märgilisse valdkonda uudsust (professor J. Lotman ja teised üksikisikud) ning ekspertide grupp, kes suudavad neid uuendusi ära tunda ja hinnata (tekkinud side Läänega).