Book Review

Fiction as semiotics

Geoffrey Beattie, *The body's little secrets*. London: Gibson Square, 2018

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With his latest novel, Dr. Geoffrey Beattie can now be projected onto the same international platform as the late Umberto Eco, who became famous for integrating semiotic theory with fiction, starting with his bestseller, *The Name of the Rose*. The reason for the unexpected success of Eco’s novel was, in part, the fact that it tapped into a late twentieth century resurgence of interest in legend, religion, mystery, and symbolism, but in larger part because it was based on themes and notions within semiotic theory, including its capacity for decoding signs in a criminal situation.

There is little doubt, in my estimation at least, that Geoffrey Beattie is Eco’s successor, displaying an uncanny and ingenious ability to blend his insightful work on nonverbal semiotics with an exceptional sense for narrative in this outstanding roman-à-clef. In this way, Beattie takes us both on a personal journey through his own trials and tribulations in fictional form, with which we all can empathize, and on a journey through the power of the body to tell it like it is. The theorist and writer crystallize seamlessly in this absolutely wonderful page-turner. A large part of the allure of Beattie’s novel is, in fact, due to the hero’s ability to interpret the nonverbal signs of human interaction, which allows him to get to the bottom of things – in fiction and in life.

Set as a rivalry between two brothers in Sheffield, there is no doubt that Beattie is projecting his own life onto the page, while at the same time maintaining a theoretical distance both as narrator and psychologist (or more precisely, in my view, as semiotician). The protagonist, Matt, was a psychology major at Cambridge, as was Beattie, if I am not mistaken. He is an intellectual who filters the information coming from everyday life in an abstract and generalizable way – that is, he does not just “react to” but “reads” the world through the lens of academic understanding and reflection. He appears to be somewhat timid, but his true strength lies in his “semiotic mind,” which allows him to understand those in his world by reading their nonverbal cues, which give him unique insights into those very people.
The novel revolves around a tragedy – the death of Matt’s brother, the darling of the family, in a freakish mishap. Unable to cope with the grief and the emotionally deleterious effects of the accident on those around him, he moves to the Northern city where his brother had been an activist. This allows Matt to glean meaning from his shattered life by engaging vicariously in his brother’s world. He takes a position at the local university, but this does not block him from descending into a murky world of nefarious inhabitants who are nocturnal creatures intent on “doing no good.” However, in this human quagmire Matt finds love in the person of Adele. To survive, he puts into play his semiotic skills to great effect, decoding the signs and signals that assail him. In this way he avoids disaster.

Without going further into the narrative, suffice it to emphasize once again that the novel can be read both as marvelous fiction and as psychological-semiotic theory. As one of the modern-day founders of semiotics, Charles Peirce aptly remarked that human life is characterized above all else by a “perfusion of signs.” Without them we would have to resort to a purely instinctual form of existence. Perhaps the most important function of signs is that they make knowledge practicable by giving it a physical and thus retrievable and useable form. Although we process information about the world through our sensory apparatus, the cognitive uses of such information would quickly vanish without signs to encode and preserve it in some reusable way. Knowledge is “signed information.” However, there is a price to pay for all this – the sign systems we acquire in cultural contexts constitute powerful mental and emotional filters for interpreting the world, guiding us constantly in our attempts to grasp the meaning of that very world. The dynamic interaction between signs, knowledge, and meaning is a basic axiom of semiotic theory. And it is the central axiom that shapes the subtext of this truly outstanding work.

A large portion of communication among humans unfolds, of course, in the form of unconscious instinctive signals. But humans are also capable of deploying signals for social intentions or purposes. In effect, human semiosis is characterized by a constant dynamic interplay among nature, inventiveness, and culture. Matt clearly knows this and uses it to survive emotionally and even physically. In all this, Beattie’s truly expert understanding of what is colloquially called “body language” comes out in Matt’s comments about and reactions to people. Body signals can be innate (unwitting), learned (witting), or a mixture of the two. Laughing and crying are examples of mixed signals. They may originate as instinctive actions or behaviors, but cultural rules enter into the picture to shape their structure, timing, and uses. These often accompany vocal speech, imparting a sense to a conversation remembered long after spoken
words fade away. On the other hand, they can be used to lie or conceal something – hence the title of the book as “the body’s little secrets.”

Anthropologists are unclear as to why many nonverbal forms of communication vary so much across cultures. Perhaps the variation is related to a perception of the body as a sign system of Selfhood. In many parts of the world, people perceive the skin as a surface “sheath” and the body as a “container” of the individual’s persona. Such people tend to think of themselves as being “contained” in their bodies and enveloped by their skin. Others feel instead that the Self is located only within the body shell. Such differences in perception are the sources, arguably, of differential behaviors. Matt’s world is a microcosm of the broader human world with its varying behavioral features. Although there are similarities in nonverbal cues among the characters, substantial differences exist both in the extent to which they are used. But as an expert in nonverbal psychology, Beattie, the author, knows that the interpretations given to their particular uses emerge as coded and thus interpretable. In this way, Matt is able to use this knowledge to engage with others strategically. The semiotic study of nonverbal behavior is a study in how people experience and define themselves through their bodies and their objects. The role of the body has always informed any meaningful reading of human nature, and no one like Beattie is able to show in narrative form why this is so true.

In sum, I will say again that Beattie is Eco’s successor. This is not an exaggerated claim. In my view it is a verifiable fact – all one has to do is read the two authors to glean similarities and analogies between them. If I were to teach a course on nonverbal semiotics, I would even use Beattie’s novel as a textbook, given that it would enthrall students with its powerful plot, at the same time introducing them to the intellectual importance of decoding the body’s little secrets.