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THE 'GOLDEN LEGEND' OF SEMIOTICS*

I

Potential disciplines which emerge from the progressive definition of a new object of study and its correlative methodology tend to legitimate themselves by pointing to their historical roots in a prestigious past. Their quest for a genealogy usually leads them to constitute a series of predecessors to both enhance their novelty and authenticate their enterprise; they invent a respectable legend about themselves from elements which are as objective as an 'historical object' can be. The result is generally a gratifying fallacy in as much as the texts which are recovered or unearthed for this purpose receive their relevancy precisely from the point of view which they are assumed to have generated, and not the reverse. Semiotics, as a discipline which has been tending toward institutionalisation for the last two decades, is no exception to the rule. Of course, this new paradigm, in Kuhn's sense of the word,¹ did not explode into existence suddenly, without any historical gestation. The actual process of its taking shape, however, is not likely to be discerned in various attempts in the past to deal with the problem of *semiosis*, but rather in the largely random 'migrations' of models from other disciplines. It is the availability of a new set of models which permitted defining previously unnoticed relations and which made the existence of this new approach possible.

This somewhat negative view must be corrected by taking into consideration the fact that any fledgling discipline encounters both external resistance and internal questioning. The issues of epistemological status and methodological basis are genuine and serious ones. A way to tackle them lies precisely in confronting the new approach, its achievements, its program, and its theoretical formulation with previous debates of a similar nature which can contribute to the theoretical awareness and maturation of the new discipline. It is obvious that the late seventies will see more and more

* Alain Rey, *Théories du signe et du sens*, Tome I, Editions Klincksieck, Paris, 1973.