THE ENLIGHTENMENT CODE IN YURI LOTMAN’S
THEORY OF CULTURE*

Giuseppina Restivo

Between two Descents

According to Richard Rorty, in contemporary philosophy and humanistic studies a split has occurred between two lines of thought: the Hegelian lignée, still dominant and represented by Deconstructionism and Hermeneutics, both stemming from Hegel’s Phenomenology of the Spirit; and the Kantian lignée, which preserves an epistemologic approach and is represented by Linguistic Analysis and scientific thought (Rorty 1982).

A disciple of Jean Hyppolite, an outstanding Hegel scholar, Jacques Derrida has combined his Hegelian descent with Heidegger’s radical rejection of metaphysics. He has enjoyed success first in Europe and then in the United States, starting with his famous lecture in 1966 at the Johns Hopkins University, where he was accompanied by Jean Hyppolite, Jacques Lacan, Paul de Man. From the States his fame boomeranged back to Europe, and has lasted for thirty years.

Building on the void left by the subsiding of what Ricoeur called “the school of suspicion” (Nietzsche, Freud, Marx), Deconstructionism has expanded from Derrida’s own thought, covering both “strong” and “weak” textualism, represented respectively by Richard Rorty’s pragmatism and the Yale critics (De Man, Hartman, Hillis Miller and Harold Bloom). It involved Lyotard, who has followed his own route to postmodernism, while Gadamer has turned Hegel’s philosophy of history into a Wirkungsgeschichte and produced his own Hermeneutics.

Derrida’s Deconstructionism is based on two assumptions: Kant’s trascendentalism definitely severed empirical science from non-empirical philosophy; after Heidegger the separation of the two cultures was, moreover, followed by the death of philosophy itself, brought about by the definitive end of metaphysics. As no

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truth or revelation is left for philosophy to discover, what remains is only the philosophical tradition. From such a tradition it is nevertheless necessary to take one’s distance, but without being able to go beyond it – as in Hegel’s dialectics, suppressing a thesis and its opposite through synthesis (Überwindung) – or to deviate from it – as in Heidegger’s Verwindung, a term meaning a transforming passage or “recovering from”, or a “distortion-deviation”. Within the circle of language and tradition, both philosophical and literary, the only task left is then the deconstructing of tradition itself. The rejection of commitment to either Überwindung or Verwindung brings about a game between the two, in a sort of double bind. The grands récits of the past have been swept away, as Lyotard pointed out, and the success of Deconstructionism “excluded” the Kantian line, represented by Putnam or Strawson.

From its own specific point of view, the so-called “Weak Thought”, shared by Vattimo, Rovatti, Eco, confirmed this line, which, via Heidegger, has at the same time developed and annihilated Hegel’s dialectic historicism.

In its antimetaphysical sway, Deconstructionism criticised structuralism, exposing its inner contradictions and curbing the success of French semiotics. But the Russian school of semiotics, which was different from the start, both in its aims and method, has survived, and Michail Bakhtin’s “philosophy of language” has today achieved worldwide success. His dialogism fitted into the frame of the dominant currents of contemporary thought and the postmodern outlook: its plurality and relativism have met with wide acceptance and merged with the main trend.

Yuri Lotman’s “philosophy of culture” has in its turn met with favour: but recognition of his work has not yet coincided with actual widespread critical practice, or with a debate about and development of his complex theories on the dynamism and phenomenology of culture. In its most engaging aspects it has virtually remained unexplored.

With Bakhtin Lotman shares several traits: both started their studies at Petersburg University, read German philosophy and reacted to Hegelism, Russian formalism and to Saussurean linguistics, living through the turmoils of contemporary Russian history. As Bakhtin died in 1975, and Lotman (27 years his junior) died in 1993, a continuation of what had become, in spite of their differences, a common line, was left to Lotman. His work responded
to, built upon and included Bakhtin’s heritage, while at the same
time reaching a more complex perspective.

Lotman’s background included both science and a philosophy: he
derived his concept of the semiosphere from the Russian biologi-

gist Vernadsky\textsuperscript{1} and, while avoiding direct philosophical debate, he
criticized Hegel and has discussed Kant, whose complete work he read in German, and in whose line of descent he belongs.

After a structuralist start, he denounced the limits of Jakobson’s
structuralism, from which he differed defining his own original
type of culture by surprisingly joining two terms which had pre-
viously been considered antithetic: historical semiotics. The defini-
tion suggests his unusual bridging position: if Lotman’s scientific
allegiances and his semiotics, characterized by a double depen-
dance from both \textit{a priori} principles and experience, can lead back
to Kant, his typical and unique blend of diachrony and synchrony
seems to account for historical dynamism. Lotman’s theory of cul-
ture can even provide, as I argue later, its own semiotic explana-
tion of postmodernism.

A debate on Lotman’s theories could therefore help to solve the
opposition between the two philosophical descents in contem-
porary thought – Hegelian and Kantian – as well as between the
scientific and humanistic cultures. Paradoxically, to its own detri-
ment, the theoretical search of knowledge on itself has split at pre-
cisely the time science is obtaining results quicker than ever,
suggesting new paradigms and new epistemological horizons.

\textit{A Code Typology}

In the context of Lotman’s theory of culture, his model of the
Enlightenment stands central. It refers to a period in which he
specialized in Russian literature under the influence of French
Enlightenment and Rousseau and it played a fundamental role in
the genesis of his theory of culture. He did not derive it by
choosing one or more key aspects from the vast production of the
age: its birth was instead tied to his intuition of a general “law of

\textsuperscript{1} Vladimir Vernadsky (Petersburg 1863 - Moscow 1945): the relevance of his
scientific thought and his relationship with Yuri Lotman are emphasized by
Tagliagambe 1997.
semiotics” underlying the enormous variety of cultural productions.

The empirical verification of a convergence of its outcome with recent historical-philosophical studies is striking and increasing, as the debate on the Enlightenment proceeds. It therefore poses a double problem of great interest, related to the nature of such an important phase or type of western culture and to its role in Lotman’s code type theory and its possible impact.

In a 24-page essay in the Italian translation (the piece has still to be translated into English or French) Lotman identifies in Russian (and in European) culture four basic types of codes, the infinite combinations of which are usually hierarchically organized and originate a manifold variety of texts. This essay, included in 1970 in Stat’i po tipologii kul’tury: materialy k kursu teorii literatury (Essays on the Typology of Culture: materials for the course of Theory of Literature), was briefly summarized in an article in The Times Literary Supplement of October 12, 1973. The same year it was translated into Italian (Lotman 1973). The essay marked a turning point in Lotman’s studies during 1970, as Ann Shukman pointed out in her 1977 volume Literature and Semiotics:

The year 1970 was in many ways the end of a stage [...] the beginning of a new trend, the turn towards the theoretical discussion of culture as a whole, and the attempt to define cultural universals in semiotic terms; from this period Lotman’s theory of literature became part of his theory of culture (Shukman 1977:1).

Yet, according to Ann Shukman, its roots went back to a 1967 essay, The problem of a Typology of Culture, translated into French in the same year, and then into Italian in 1969. Here Lotman distinguished two opposing types of culture built on different dominant codes, based on different relationships with the sign: one was the symbolic Medieval type, the other the Enlightenment one. The essence of the latter was expressed in Gogol’s rejection of “the horrible reign of words in the place of facts”, an attitude also mirrored in Tolstoy’s story Kholstomer and which leads back to Rousseau’s philosophy.

The attempt to define Enlightenment culture was indeed the starting point for Lotman’s formulation of the four dominant codes of culture, later developed and described in Lotman 1973. And this
model, deriving from years of study, can directly relate to or virtually combine with all of the author’s subsequent work.

Lotman nevertheless left the pieces of his typology of culture separate, as each essay stands autonomous. He did not provide a general theoretical system: even if the 1970/1973 essay could be seen forming the cornerstone to the typology (or phenomenology) of culture it had started, Lotman did not unify his theoretical production, interrupted by his death in 1993. In his final years, in particular, many of his essays partly overlap in their theoretical scope and in their perceptive insight into relevant and far reaching problems, suggesting his attempt to outline a mode of thinking which would be open to later exploration and development.

The range of Lotman’s essays is fundamentally complementary: when he speaks of the intersection of different “languages” in the culture of the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment or the Romantic period, such “languages”, not further specified but evidently intended as distinct communicative models, would be more specifically defined and become more meaningful if referred to the four basic types of codes and their combinations. His spatial typological models (for which he makes reference to his own code theory) and his description of the dynamics of cultures and of the centre/periphery exchanges, would acquire a more effective sense if it were connected with the workings of code combinations. These could better explain the transactions among cultural entities in that border or “contact area” in which, according to Lotman, renewal and invention are produced: a view that is today confirmed in scientific research, from quantistic physics to biology, from immunology to the neuro-sciences, with their shared emphasis on the contact areas, where evolutionary adaptations occur and qualities of objects can be defined or known (see Tagliagambe 1997).

The importance of dynamic connections in contact areas emerging today was indeed anticipated in Lotman’s thought, in his redefinition of communication as a variable intersection, but this variable intersection can acquire a tangible meaning if related to his code type theory. Before moving to such a wide range of problems as those suggested, the first task which can be faced here is to test the theory at its beginning: in the definition of the Enlightenment type code.

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Nature/Reason

Lotman’s four fundamental code types originate from a dual basis. Synchronically speaking, Lotman identifies the two elementary relationships of the sign in its binary opposition: with what “it stands for”, representing its symbolic, referential function; and with other signs, in its syntagmatic or syntactic connections. These two relations had already been studied in formal logic.

The syntagmatic relation marked Rudolf Carnap’s Wien neopositivistic phase: in 1934, in his *The Logical Syntax of Language*, Carnap delved into the problem of the syntactic control of scientific sign relations. The symbolic or referential function stood instead at the centre of his American period, under the influence of Charles Morris, in *Meaning and Necessity* (1947), where he analysed the relation between sign and object.

After choosing these two synchronic logic relationships, Lotman proceeds by considering their four basic possible combinations, as they can both be present or absent or, in turn, present in the absence of the other.

Then, diachronically speaking, the four types of code produced as combinations of the symbolic and syntagmatic relations of the sign appear as empirically and historically present and actually dominant in four cultural periods: the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Enlightenment and Romanticism.

The symbolic or semantic (referential) code type seems in fact to dominate and “explain” Medieval culture, in which the historical world is supposed to reflect God’s eternal structure and Providence. This ensures both social stability and cohesion, a precise collocation for every member of society, the more so as social roles and positions are maintained on an hereditary basis. The individual receives his meaning and worth from his place in the general order, rather than from his personal qualities: his biological attributes or needs are ignored, but his symbolic function makes him a part of society, the equivalent of totality. From this viewpoint, Lotman asserts, the part is not inferior but equivalent to the whole. This ensures protection for every state, be it the lowest servant’s in the social pyramid, but it prevents change and forbids the new, imposes static repetition and imitation of the *exempla* in a culture oriented towards the past. Only what has existed from ancient times can actually exist and be acknowledged.

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The syntagmatic code instead permeated Renaissance culture. The unit, the part, is now inferior to the whole and can be sacrificed to it and its efficiency. The concrete, pragmatic aspects of life that were sacrificed by Medieval symbolism, are vindicated. Effectiveness is of utmost value. Reference, the guarantee of symbolic meaning, can yield to the advantages of appearance or even deception: Machiavelli’s *The Prince* may teach the prince how to dissimulate, while rhetoric and trompe-l’oeil effects are extolled. This code allows space for individual enterprise and innovation (be this scientific or geographical), in favour of the social and global structure. Political and territorial centralization are favoured, as the town becomes the centre of social life, and mechanical invention develops: it’s the advent of the machine.

The negation of the fundamental types of code so far outlined (both symbolic and syntagmatic) becomes the dominant trait of the third type code, coinciding with Enlightenment culture. This provides a “double liberation” from past culture. By negating both principles of semiosis, this code would indeed lead to utter silence, to the very effacement of culture, but it rather tends to restrict its asyntagmatic, asemantic and aparadigmatic (anti-hierarchical) traits to a criticism of the two previously dominating codes and “creates the signs” of this double negation, as Lotman puts it (Lotman 1973:59).

The loss of meaning and the fragmentation of reality that were produced, were to trigger off the re-evaluation of the two semiotic principles denied, the combination of which in a semantic-syntagmatic code becomes the basis of the Romantic culture. After the nineteenth century – Lotman hints – the code typical of the Enlightenment and that typical of Romanticism both hold the stage, combining together: Lotman’s analysis stops short at the beginning of the twentieth century.

With its “asyntotic” double negation of the symbolic and syntagmatic functions, the Enlightenment type code produces two main effects: various degrees of desemiotization, brought about by its double semiotic negation; and the effacement of history, or rejection of its artificiality, in favour of the only residual reality left, nature, which is turned into the core value.

The distance between the signifier and the signified is denounced to the point of actual opposition to signs, which are perceived as artificial, not real: bread, water, life, love are essential and real,
not money, uniforms, grades or reputations, illusory and deceptive symbols. Besides, “singularity” is positive, while being a part, a fraction of a large totality, is now negative, it does not increase but decrease value.

The opposition natural/unnatural stands central to Enlightenment culture, Lotman insists, and turns social structures into the artificial constrictions of a false civilization. The individual’s anthropological qualities, life as a biological process and its basic needs are real, while the modern world of words and signs, rejected for instance by Gogol, implies the realm of lies. If for the symbolic, Medieval imagination “in the beginning was the Word”, for Enlightenment culture the word is rather a disvalue. Lotman quotes Rousseau profusely: as the inspirator of Tolstoy’s Kholstomer, in which a horse looks with critical desemiotizing eyes upon the human world of property, social roles and conventions; or directly, in his description of the child, who has still to learn about the artificiality of verbal language. He indeed uses the only natural language common to all men:

On a longtemps cherché, s’il y avait une langue naturelle et commune à tous les hommes: sans doute il y en a une et c’est celle que les enfants parlent avant de savoir parler. ([Quoted in Lotman 1973:56]).

This language is based on mimicry and intonation:

L’accent est l’âme du discours [...] L’accent ment moins que la parole. ([Ibidem]).

In Rousseau’s outlook the sharing of the syntagmatic ties of social life in a state does not increase individual freedom or dignity. In fact, the larger the state, the smaller the citizen’s freedom or strength of representation: Lotman quotes the famous Contrat social passage in which Rousseau argues that it is better to be a citizen in a state of 10,000 people rather than in one of 100,000, as the individual’s portion of suffrage power and influence on law-making decreases tenfold in the second case: “plus l’état s’agrandit, plus la liberté diminue” ([quoted in Lotman 1973:57]).

In a syntagmatic culture or code, Lotman remarks, one typically appreciates the impact of the majority as conferring superior power.
to the individual, while the opposite attitude, detracting value from social dependence, is a clear sign of an Enlightenment type code, as in the case of Robinson Crusoe on his desert island. Man’s happiness becomes therefore the sole proper aim of social doctrine. And the members of a crowd or a people are attractive not as a compact mass, but as a sum of single, equal, weak and subjected individuals, who need liberating.

The double attack that the Enlightenment code bears on the symbolic and syntagmatic structure of the state, leaving nature as the only important principle to test society, brings the natural man’s viewpoint to the fore, or even suggests to embrace an animal’s outlook, as in the case of Tolstoy’s horse in Kholstomer, so close, in this aspect, to Swift’s horses in Gulliver’s Travels. It is the appraisal of nature that fosters the rewriting of the social contract as well as the égalité-liberté-fraternité formula of French Revolution. And yet desemiotization, which is the main innovative tool of the Enlightenment code, comes to a paradox just regarding nature, its original founding value.

The historical world, where man actually lives, is seen as false, while the real entity, nature, is from the point of view of experience as ungraspable and indefinite as the natural condition, which escapes determination. “Real reality” becomes baffling and the debate as to the nature of nature becomes endless or grows fantastic, as in Voltaire’s Eldorado or in Swift’s Houyhnhnmland. Opposed to signs, nature has indeed become a second degree sign: such is the meaning of its heuristic value discussed by Rousseau.

But the Enlightenment type code, which dominates eighteenth-century culture, plays a particular critical function: it makes an insurgence at each critical moment of social change and devaluation of current social structures. If the four basic code types are “available” or “possible” at any historical moment, employable when necessary, the aparadigmatic-asyntagmatic type that fostered the French Revolution tends to appear whenever radical innovation is necessary. It is to be found, Lotman remarks, in the times of change, as from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, and from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment proper, which developed when the code became dominant. The code in question works as a renewing mechanism, complicating or “outphasing” the interplay and degree of code combinations.
Each of the four code types outlined by Lotman actually hides more than a paradox, and none can claim a right to hegemony. But the Enlightenment type, the most vigorous semiotic device of change, and probably the most characteristic code of Western civilization, perhaps implies the highest number of paradoxes. Lotman’s model both exposes and explains at least four of them, previously undetected as such, but actual sources of controversy. Besides the one concerning “the nature of nature”, already pointed out by Lotman, at least three more emerge from his model of the Enlightenment and will now be discussed.

The first is in fact immanent in desemiotization, the basic tool of the code. This enables the eighteenth century to produce on the one hand a deep skepticism and the most scathing criticism, and on the other a celebration of renewal and of the rebuilding quality of reason, which Kant defines in his first *Critique*.

Yet in his description of the Enlightenment, Lotman surprisingly never mentions reason and certainly this is not incidental. Indeed this term has caused controversial discussion as to the definition and evaluation of Enlightenment and concerning the actual philosophers and thinkers who can coherently represent its thought. It directly brings us to our main point: a comparison between Lotman’s model and previous extant models.

*Adorno’s Dialectic*

After Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1947), the problem of reason and its function would seem inescapable in any discussion concerning the Enlightenment. Lotman’s avoidance of the word reason is therefore particularly conspicuous.

In the Enlightenment culture Adorno sees not so much a specific moment of historical change, but a phase in the developing self, the bourgeois traits of which he considers as already at work in Homer’s *Odyssey*. The progress of this development increases during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment proper, only to shift its centre, after the French Revolution, to German philosophy and culture. Here it culminates in Hitler’s Nazism and then produces the alienated destiny of contemporary mass society, as best evident in America.
Its very cause and source are seen in the pressing problem of survival, which has imposed the alternative of either succumbing to nature or dominating it. The choice of dominion has developed bringing about both a denial of nature and the subjection of the weaker and the majority, with the aim of achieving an increasing control. But the logic of dominion soon backfired on the dominators themselves, in the shape of coercive self-dominion. Enlightenment then becomes a “dialectic” between a progressive attempt at dominating nature and a corresponding social regression in terms of growing coertion. Self-preservation has thus brought about totalitarianism through a double device: economic and scientific organization.

The “mathematic spirit”, the very core of reason, finds its climax in Enlightenment culture, which according to Adorno equates Positivism. It reduces thought to a mathematical apparatus, and denies value to abstract activities, like art and thought as such: this is, Adorno argues, what Ulysses’ attitude to the singing Sirens in the XXII canto of the *Odyssey* already envisaged.

Ulysses decides to hear the Sirens’ irresistible chant, but has himself tied to the mast of his ship in order not to yield to it, while his companions go on rowing indifferently, as their ears have been stopped with wax. In Ulysses’ impotence to act Adorno sees a prefiguration of bourgeois art, which, like nature, must be denied in order to keep the control and self-control necessary for survival. This denial for Adorno is the basic core of Enlightenment, seen as a transhistorical will of dominion or reason (*Verstand*), characteristic of Western culture and responsible for its dismaying outcome in the last century: the horror of the concentration camps and the “waste land” of a generalized distribution of means and goods, parallel to the growing social insignificance of subdued masses.

Adorno’s description, a political overall judgement of our civilization, does not offer a proper specific interpretation of the eighteenth century culture. It places Kant side by side with Sade and Nietzsche and considers them as all part of a coherent program, ultimately leading to Nazi pogroms and the contemporary “equalization” that levels culture.

If compared to Ernst Cassirer’s 1932 study, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (later discussed here), the Adornian 1947 theory of the Enlightenment can actually appear as an astonishing reversal. And Lotman’s later model, emphasizing the primacy of nature...
and the desemiotizing critical attitude towards history, seems, in its turn, to invert Adorno’s Enlightenment, as based on the primacy of a degenerating reason perverting history. Contrasts are indeed disconcerting.

The way to Adorno’s negative view had been paved by Hegel’s philosophy of history. Hegel’s discussion of the Enlightenment (or rather Aufklärung) in the Phenomenology of the Spirit is indeed ambiguous. On the one hand, it represents the culmination of the spirit’s progress since Antigone’s times, which caused “the descent of heaven on earth”, wiping out superstition and the trascendence separating self from self. But at the same time the experience of Terror marks the failure of the Enlightenment to liberate the self and poses the problem of the moral state, to a degree jeopardizing Hegel’s conclusion of his Phenomenology, as pointed out by Jean Hyppolite (Hyppolite 1972:396-399).

Under the pressure of recent historical horror, Adorno’s outlook, like Hegel’s, goes back to Greek civilization, to denounce a sovrahistorical structural constant pervading centuries of western culture, an increasing “bourgeois rationalistic dominion” culminating in Nazi terror. And he calls this constant Enlightenment.

But how has such a position been produced? Again it was Hegel who furnished two relevant premises for Adorno’s attitude: the effacement of nature in the Enlightenment culture and the depreciation of Newton’s science.

Hegel’s Deletions and Cassirer’s Return

In Hegel’s description of the Enlightenment in vol. II/VI of the Phenomenology it is not difficult to recognize the equivalent of Lotman’s desemiotization in what is called the “language of disgregation” (Zerrissenheit), typical of the period and expressed in Diderot’s Le niveau de Rameau. This is defined as an inversion – in terms of detached wit and brilliant irony – of the self’s values. But just as Hegel examines the rebellion implied in this Zerrissenheit, he finds a concept he cannot but recognize and immediately discards as inappropriate to his system of values: nature as opposed to history.

No individual, not even Diogenes, he argues, can really leave the world, while the single self as such is “the negative”. Rebellion
must be considered only from the viewpoint of “universal individuality”: this “cannot” revert to nature, abandon the civilized well-educated consciousness reached through the long historical progress he had described starting from the Greek “polis”. There, in Antigone’s rebellion to Creontes, he had detected the clash between natural blood bonds and history, marking the end of the “beautiful unity” of an undivided self. It simply could not be that the historical development reached in the eighteenth century should lead the self back to what he calls “the wildness of an animal-like consciousness, be it ever called nature or innocence” (Hegel II/IV:87).

Thus Hegel dismisses the uncomfortable concept of a return to nature, which he discovered in the Enlightenment, by dissolving the concept of nature along lines which were closely followed by his disciples. What prevents him from recognizing the importance of the concept he found, is his refusal to renounce the progressive development of his historical dialectics. This excluded the possibility to revert to a primitive stage (nature) and allowed no free alternative: an attitude Lotman denounces in one of his essays. In Historical Laws and the Structure of the Text (in Lotman 1990) Lotman opposes Hegel’s secular escatology and historical process to his own interpretation of history as an open experiment. This view is certainly closer to that of the French revolutionaries, who rejected the old year numeration to start history anew from year 1 after the revolution, and even changed the names of the months, recurring to seasonal natural aspects, to emphasize total renewal. But Hegel’s blindness to the role of nature in the Enlightenment was made even more relevant by his parallel refusal of another fundamental aspect of the Enlightenment, which was in its turn connected to nature.

In 1986, in an authoritative article entitled Povertà dell’iluminismo (Shallowness of the Enlightenment), a renowned Italian expert of the Enlightenment, Paolo Casini (Casini 1986), pointed to Hegel’s disregard, starting from 1801, for Newton’s theory of gravitation, described as “born from an illegitimate relation between physics and mathematics”. Newton had mistakenly assumed certain concepts of reason as natural laws and had admitted the irrational element of experience into a science like astronomy, that was to be founded a priori on dialectic thought. Newton’s method was a negative example of how experiments can lead nowhere and

Hegel’s attitude produced, Casini remarks, a double outcome in his philosophical descent: while up to Hegel the history of the scientific revolution had been included in the history of philosophy, after him physics, astronomy and mechanics were excluded. The relation between scientific method or discovery and Enlightenment thought – that was so vital to the Neokantian Ernst Cassirer in his The Philosophy of the Enlightenment – was erased. This left Enlightenment arguments and debate, including Kant’s distinction between phenomenon and noumenon, in a gnoseological void, caused by the impoverishment of the proper background. Hence the cliché of the “shallowness of the Enlightenment”, which Casini decidedly retorts on Hegelism.

It is therefore no chance that Cassirer’s 1932 study of Enlightenment had to wait until the 50’s for a translation into English, and even longer to receive a better, albeit belated recognition as a fundamental contribution, at a time when Hegel’s prejudices, and those of his descent, start dying down. From the point of view of Lotman’s model it offers amply documented proof of the validity of its two central points, desemiotization and opposition between nature and history. Lotman had indeed most probably read Cassirer, but what is relevant, in any case, is that Lotman reaches an analogous outlook by a totally different procedure, in the field of his own historical semiotics. This convergence appears to be a reciprocal testing and validation on the concepts in question: while the rich historical factuality brought about by Cassirer “fulfils” the expectations of Lotman’s model, this seems in its turn to solve or “justify” some of the apparently contradictory aspects in Cassirer’s exposition.2

These refer to the two scientific methods – Descartes’ and Newton’s – and the relative “genealogies” active in the eighteenth century, which Cassirer at times sharply distinguishes and at times melts into an undifferentiated continuum, a problem connected with that of the list of the philosophers worth considering, mentioned in the Preface.2

2 Herbert Dieckman discusses specific limitations and shortcomings in Cassirer’s work, which are not relevant in the present discussion (Dieckman 1979).
Stressing that “the real philosophy of the Enlightenment is not simply the sum total of what its leading thinkers – Voltaire and Montesquieu, Hume or Condillac, D’Alembert or Diderot, Wolff or Lambert – thought or taught”, Cassirer leaves out both Rousseau and Kant (Cassirer 1951.ix). Yet the latter – who is actually often quoted in the essay, although no specific part of the book is devoted to him – had already been the subject of a volume by Cassirer and, according to Dieckman, Cassirer’s description of the Enlightenment actually refers to Kant as its culmination (Dieckman 1979:24). As for Rousseau, he is likewise present throughout The Philosophy of the Enlightenment. Yet the problem remains that both names are not included in the Preface. Here this is relevant, as Lotman mainly exemplifies his model with Rousseau, his presence being so pervasive in Russian culture and literature.

Two Reasons

By quoting at the start of his first chapter, D’Alembert’s Essay on the Elements of Philosophy, Cassirer establishes the premises on which he bases the intellectual turmoil of the eighteenth century. The new analytic spirit nourishing “the century of philosophy par excellence”, challenging the old tutelage of established tradition and superseding the theological control of knowledge as well as political absolutism, stands at the core of the new nature-oriented science. And science has drawn attention to nature as the sole source of knowledge against the pretenses of Revelation: “Newton finished what Kepler and Galileo had begun” (ibidem, 9). D’Alembert has no hesitation as to the origin of the new “lively fermentation of minds”, the “enthusiasm which accompanies discoveries” characteristic of his age:

Natural science from day to day accumulates new riches [...] The true system of the world has been recognized, developed and perfected [...] In short, from the earth to Saturn, from the history of the heavens to that of insects, natural philosophy has been revolutionized; and nearly all other fields of knowledge have assumed new forms (ibidem, 3).
But, Cassirer points out, it is of no little importance that D’Alembert’s philosophical method involves recourse to Newton’s “Rules of philosophying” rather than to Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*, with the result that philosophy presently takes an entirely new direction. For Newton’s method is not that of pure deduction, but that of analysis (*ibidem*, 7).

Newton’s method is indeed the reverse of Descartes’: it does not begin, as in Descartes’ systematic deduction, by setting certain principles, general concepts and axioms from which the particular and the factual can be derived by proof and inference, through a rigorous chain, no link of which can be removed. The eighteenth century abandons this “scientific genealogy”, this kind of deduction and of proof: “it no longer vies with Descartes and Malebranche, with Leibniz and Spinoza for the prize of systematic rigour and completeness” (*ibidem*). It rather starts from empirical data – nature – proceeding not from concepts and axioms to phenomena, but vice versa: observation produces the datum of science to be analyzed, principles and laws are the object of the investigation, obtained through reduction. The methodological pattern of Newton’s physics triumphs in the middle of the century:

However much individual thinkers and schools differ in their results, they agree in this epistemological premise. Voltaire’s *Treatise on Metaphysics*, D’Alembert’s *Preliminary Discourse* and Kant’s *Inquiry concerning the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* all concur on this point (*ibidem*, 12).

The first assumption of the epistemology here implied is the independence of the original truth of nature, of the “realm of nature” as opposed to the “realm of grace”: nature has become the horizon of knowledge, and the comprehension of reality requires no other aid than the natural forces of knowledge. In the self-sufficiency of both nature and intellect lies the premise for Kant’s famous definition of the Enlightenment as “man’s exodus from his self-incurred tutelage” (Kant 1968:XI:51).

Cassirer’s distinctions are here clear and sharp, as his emphasis on nature and on the two concepts that can be immediately connected with the scientific method: that of reason and that of system. From them indeed, as Cassirer laments, so many misun-
understandings have originated, leading to “a customary consideration of the philosophy of nature of the eighteenth century as a turn toward mechanism and materialism”. This has actually often been taken as the basic trend of the French spirit (Cassirer 1951: 55).

Concerning the concept of system confusion must be avoided:

The value of system, the *esprit systématique*, is neither underestimated nor neglected; but it is sharply distinguished from the love of system for its own sake, the *esprit de système*. The whole theory of knowledge of the eighteenth century strives to confirm this distinction. D’Alembert in his “Preliminary Discourse” to the French Encyclopaedia makes this distinction the central point of his argument, and Condillac in his *Treatise on Systems* gives it explicit form and justification (*ibidem*, 8).

Fontanelle’s mechanical universe described as “clockwork” in his *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* is gradually superseded and then abandoned as the epistemologists of modern physics win the field, and Condillac in his *Treatise on Systems* banishes the “spirit of systems” from physics: the physicist must not explain the mechanism of the universe, but establish definite general relations in nature. While for Descartes geometry was the master of physics, the physical body being extension (*res extensa*) and this had entangled him in difficulties, Newton no longer believed it possible to reduce physics to geometry and recurred instead to mathematics. His analysis indeed implied no absolute end or closed geometries, but remained open, producing only relative provisional stopping points (*ibidem*, 51). This difference from the great seventeenth century systems – which in Lotman’s terms we could define as based on a dominant syntagmatic type code – is stressed by Cassirer, as he points out that

materialism as it appears in Holbach’s *System of Nature* and Lamettrie’s *Man a Machine (L’homme machine)*, is an isolated phenomenon of no characteristic significance. Both works represent special cases and exemplify a retrogression into that dogmatic mode of thinking which the leading scientific minds of the eighteenth century oppose and endeavor to eliminate. The scientific sentiments of the Encyclopaedists are not represented by Holbach and Lamettrie, but by D’Alembert: and in the latter we find the vehement renun-
ciation of mechanism and materialism as the ultimate principle for the explanation of things, as the ostensible solution of the riddles of the universe. D’Alembert never deviates from the Newtonian method (ibidem, 55).

The real meaning of the word reason used by eighteenth century thinkers now becomes apparent, as do the misconceptions it has raised. An expression indicating the power of the mind, “reason” becomes the unifying and central point of this century, expressing all that it longs and strives for, and all that it achieves. But the historian of the eighteenth century would be guilty of error and hasty judgment if he were satisfied with this characterization and thought it a safe point of departure. [...] We can scarcely use this word any longer without being conscious of its history; and time and again we see how great a change of meaning the term has undergone. This circumstance constantly reminds us how little meaning the term “reason” and “rationalism” still retain, even in the sense of purely historical characteristics (ibidem, 5-6).

As compared with the seventeenth century usage, the concept of reason in the eighteenth century undergoes an evident change of meaning:

In the great metaphysical systems of that century – those of Descartes and Malebranche, of Spinoza and Leibniz – reason is the realm of the “eternal verities”, of those truths held in common by the human and the divine mind. What we know through reason, we therefore behold “in God” (ibidem, 13).

This “centralized” unitarian (“syntagmatic”) reason of eternal verities is superseded by an analytical reason, taken in “a different and more modest sense”, “no longer the sum total of innate ideas [...] a sound body of knowledge, principles and truths, but a kind of energy, fully comprehensible only in its agency and effects”. This energy, Cassirer remarks, dissolves data through analysis, as it does with “any evidence of revelation, tradition and authority”, from Voltaire to Hume (ibidem): that is, it “desemiotizes” through nature.

It is now evident that Cassirer’s study confirms or rather “validates” both Lotman’s primacy of nature and principle of desemiotization as the basic tenets of the Enlightenment culture. But it also
delegitimates the very word reason which Lotman avoids as useless or misleading: the seventeenth century has its own (syntagmatic) reason, while the eighteenth (asynagmatic) century has a different one. Here are to be found the historical premises of Lotman’s semiotics, according to which every code type has its codifying principle or “reason”.

More evidence in favour of the two characteristics selected in Lotman’s model of the Enlightenment type code could be derived also from the vast range of recent historical reassessments, from Franco Venturi’s analyses to Reinhart Kosellek’s studies. But the convergences shown seem already to qualify Lotman’s “simple” model and its “elementary” logic for serious consideration within contemporary reflection on culture and its production.

Explications

Although clear in his fundamental distinctions, now and then Cassirer seems to hesitate when, for instance, he considers how Newton completes Galileo’s search, or how, apart from emphasis on method, he detects a steady development of the new ideal of knowledge spreading with no real chasm since the previous century (Cassirer 1951:22). While these remarks may seem contradictory to Cassirer’s own thesis of the innovation characteristic in the eighteenth century, Lotman’s theory of the code types can easily account for them.

Anticipations of the Enlightenment code, such as Galileo’s, are pointed out by Lotman in the passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and then from the Renaissance to the new epoch: this can explain what appear as cases of “continuity” within a frame of contrasting dominant codes in different periods. On the other hand, as Lotman points out, different phases of code dominance can coexist or overlap, and combinations of codes are the rule, since a text, and even more so a culture, is formed by a hierarchy of codes.

As to Cassirer’s (not unusual) difficulty in enlisting Kant or Rousseau side by side with the Encyclopaedians, while at the same time frequently referring to them, this again can be explained, in

3 See in particular, among the two authors’ many works, Venturi 1970 and Kosellek 1959.
Lotman’s terms, as due to their composite texture. Rousseau’s *volonté general* seems to reflect a code semiotically different (a syntagmatic one) from the one informing Rousseau’s own dominant “desemiotizing” nature, which does not prevent him from showing some of the most articulated and typical aspects of the asyntagmatic Enlightenment type code. Similarly, Kant can well embrace a compound of codes, the Enlightenment one already mixed with a relevant secondary Romantic component. Neither chronology nor authorship can guarantee the unitarian composition of a cultural text. This is indeed as variable as any organic individual adaptation to life. Only an immanent principle, capable of describing the possible outcomes of culture such as Lotman’s, can help distinguish, classify, evaluate the cultural syntax of texts.

This springs from code combinations, the variety of which is practically infinite, considering the different weight of each component in its incidence on the final overall result. A comparison with the combinations of the four bases of human DNA, giving rise to the infinite diversity of individuals and, at the same time, to the precise identification of each individual, comes easily to mind.

Moreover, Lotman’s model can explain an apparently contradictory aspect of Enlightenment culture: the presence of a utopian attitude, fostering new social contracts and innovation, alongside a skeptical disruptive attitude (what Hegel calls *Zerrissenheit*), which may verge on the absurd. Lotman points out the two different outcomes of the Enlightenment code as produced by its intimate nature (Lotman 1969).

Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and Johnson’s *Rasselas* well exemplify the double outcome that the two principles of the Enlightenment – the (heuristic) value of nature and desemiotization – can produce. In his description of an imaginary race of “noble horses”, following the example of More’s and Bacon’s imaginary utopias, Swift depicts an ideal world representing a positive natural condition. Johnson’s protagonist, Rasselas, instead, fails in his search for a positive “choice of life” in the actual world because of the disappointing results offered by his socio-anthropological observation or rather desemiotization. In the first case, the supposed “memory” of the heuristic image of natural positiveness is intended as an educational tool, simulated in the protagonist’s supposed experience in the ideal world; in the second case, as nature cannot but be experienced in history, natural positiveness
becomes ungraspable and this paradox prevents Rasselas from making a choice, leading him to the verge of the absurd.

Lotman’s code theory can, on the other hand, even help interpret Adorno’s attitude in its contrast with Cassirer’s almost completely inverted picture of the Enlightenment.

Thinking in terms of an Hegelian historical continuum, Adorno merges the specific type of Enlightenment culture in the subsequent (and also preceding) forms of culture, pointing to a transhistorical syntagmatism in order to explain the traumatic outcomes of contemporary history. At the same time he personally assumes a radically asyntagmatic attitude, denouncing the “artificial dominion” on nature: in Lotman’s terms, he pursues an Enlightenment type code. Such a code, in its absurdist outcome, informs his “negative dialectic”; while on the other hand Cassirer points to the renewing-utopistic aspect of the Enlightenment, with which his personal outlook seems to coincide or “intersect”.

As Cassirer laments, inversion in the evaluation of the Enlightenment was not unusual, and we can now have a cue to such contrasts. Cassirer himself belongs – with Dilthey (1901), Fueter (1911), Meinecke (1936) – to the first wave of scholars who started a reassessment of the Enlightenment against the Romantic bias.

In spite of an enhancement of the influence of the Adorno-Horkheimer outlook, produced by the 1968 crisis, more recent historical and philosophical research confirms a “renewed reading” of the Enlightenment; and Lotman’s theories can be considered to stand in this trend. At the same time, though, they can suggest why the contemporary tendency to include all aspects of the culture of the eighteenth century, with no distinguishing principle, has weakened the term Enlightenment itself, making it appear more and more elusive.

The attempt to avoid the (Kantian/scientific) principle of simplification, in order to embrace all the occurring manifestations, in an (Hegelian/historical) “completeness”, necessarily prevents an understanding of the workings underlying the surface appearance of phenomena.

Recently, in studies on the Enlightenment, a large variety of research methods have been applied, from nouvelle critique to statistical analysis, from the Annales tradition to Foucault’s inversion of official values and opposition/emargination, the latter ha-
ving become the protagonist of the century. Against this background, contemporary to Deconstructionism, Cassirer’s *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* was at first eclipsed as abstract speculation, but is now newly emerging, as the Hegelian dominant recedes.

Adding new emphasis to the scientific debate of the eighteenth century, siding against the old “spirit of system” in favour of hypothetical probabilistic procedures, Casini has recently pointed out Cassirer’s *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* as a valid reference on the historical, scientific, epistemological and aesthetic turn of the period (Casini 1994:12). And new attention has recently been paid to the central importance of nature in eighteenth century economic and juridical doctrines, in physiocracy and in jusnaturalism. These again confirm Lotman’s theory, in the light of which they are at the same time better understandable. In its unique stress on nature as agriculture, physiocracy reveals itself as a typical manifestation of the Enlightenment.

In François Quesnay’s *Tableau Economique* only agriculture produces wealth and is considered a positive investment, while commercial and industrial activities are seen as unproductive: from Mirabeau’s *L’ami de l’homme* (1760) and *Philosophie rurale* (1766) to de la Rivière’s *L’ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* (1767), the primacy of nature and of agriculture stands at the basis of a physiological self-maintaining natural balance in economics, and represents the first formulation of the *laissez-faire* principle. Though rejecting the unproductivity of non agricultural activities, Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (1766) was the critical heir to Quesnay’s theories.

Jusnaturalism in its turn leads to different outcomes in Enlightenment culture, but they all share the stress on nature as their founding principle, as well as its positiveness. This is evident in Locke’s juridical value of the state of nature, as in Rousseau’s sauvage, deprived of social links and juridical traits, or in Kant’s provisory natural right, forming the basis for social private right. At the same time nature as an originary condition of man is, like reason, a variable redefined in every dominant code: while for the Enlightenment it has a positive heuristic value, in previous outlooks it sometimes appeared very differently. According to the jusnaturalistic outlook of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, natural equality meant total war and led to the alienation of individual rights: these were renounced to establish a monarch’s absolute power, which
ensured peace through subjection. Here a syntagmatic outlook favoured centralized control, while the eighteenth century reversed the negative quality of the natural condition, preferring it to historical organization. For Rousseau in particular war is not primary, but is rather the outcome of civilization: original natural freedom and equality are lost when society comes into existence.

From the standpoint of Lotman’s model the actual texts – be they literary or not – appear, as already emphasized, usually based on a combination of different codes, one of them being a dominant one: a text is therefore plural, but mostly organized according to a hierarchic order. After Romanticism, though, the equal forces of the two latter code types – the Enlightenment and the romantic ones – seem to produce “half and half” combinations: a kind of dialogue on an even basis. Pushing this development further, we could see contemporary postmodernism as the outcome of the lack of a dominant code, or as the simultaneous presence of all types, none being hegemonic.

An Epistemology of Intersection?

Lotman’s theories can appear, as they did to Julia Kristeva in her 1994 essay in PMLA, as culturally “subversive” (Kristeva 1994:375). The metaphor of the fall of the Berlin wall, used by Kristeva to stress the impact of Lotman’s dynamic historical semiotics on the static philological attitude of classic structuralism, can still be valid today. A semiotic study, no longer of the text itself, but of its sociology as well, has not yet been tried, although as early as in 1977 Fokkema and Kunne-Ibsch defined in this sense Lotman’s theories as a potential “Copernican revolution” in humanistic studies (quoted in Sörensen 1987:309). Ten years later Dolf Sörensen analysed Lotman’s thought in his Theory Formation and the Study of Literature (Sörensen 1987:281-319) as capable of a far-reaching renewal in textual interpretation: which must be based on both micro- and macro-analysis, a “completeness” for the sake of which Sörensen even suggested a fusion of Lotman’s theories (more open to macro-analysis) with those (more inclined to micro-analysis) of Algirdas Greimas.

As an hermeneutic tool, Lotman’s model allows for utmost “comprehensiveness”, as it offers a possibility to recognize the
composite nature of semiosis, in cultures as in texts, and to map their hierarchical organization. At the same time it does not sacrifice an overall understanding and theoretical explanation of the diversified data compounding a text or producing a cultural outlook, as well as a dialogue of cultures.

What is striking about Lotman’s theory is its double move towards simplification and complication in the constitution of a text. A model of only four code types explains the basic characteristics of four historical periods, from the Middle Ages to Romanticism. Surprisingly, the general logical assets of these different periods are made to stand forth cogently, as Lotman’s essay shows, through a procedure typical of simplifying and non-reductive scientific generalization.

At the same time each text appears composite, and its interpretation more complex. This now consists in the encounter of virtually contrasting sets of code combinations, both the set that gave rise to the text and the set belonging to the reader or listener. An enormous gap opens on the hermeneutic front, since the probability of total coincidence between the two sets is low: this offers a semiotic justification for the infinite openness of interpretation. Interpretation becomes in fact a form of partial intersection, or rather the series of possible intersections.

If to the plurality of each text and its readings we add Lotman’s dynamic view of the text described in O semiosfere (Lotman 1984) – a work deeply influenced by biologist Ivan Vernadsky – we begin to appreciate a double profound affinity. On the one hand, with the general principles of Bakhtin’s dialogism, which are in Lotman transposed from the domain of genre to the domain of semantics and of its dynamics. On the other hand, with the play of interference, counteraction and combination, typical of the new scientific paradigm common today to physics as well as artificial intelligence, biology, immunology, or the neurosciences.

It has been observed in fact (see Tagliagambe 1997) that the quantum theory, Gödel’s and Church-Turing’s theorems, have all brought to an end the idea of objects as independent from the observer, as separable, localized and representable. Traditional epistemology, extending from Leibniz to Frege and Hilbert, which even Einstein still tried to defend in 1948⁴, is no longer viable.

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⁴ In a letter to Born, dated April 5, 1948 (Einstein - Born 1973:201).
today. Scientific research suggests a different outlook: reality is not “representable” but “explicable” through models. Object configurations can be described from the border area separating/connecting them with the outside, as it is in this area that relations with the observer and with the ambience are reciprocally determined and can be known. Vernadsky’s concept of co-evolution, of “biosphere” (based on the interaction of organisms and ambience) and “noosphere” (based on the interaction of human culture and ambience) stand at the same time at the source of Lotman’s models and concept of “semiosphere”, as at the root of the contemporary scientific outlook. Conceptual convergence is not therefore casual: Lotman’s intersectionism and its implied “epistemology of contact” can appear as the semiotic equivalent of the new epistemologic paradigm emerging in the fields of science.

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