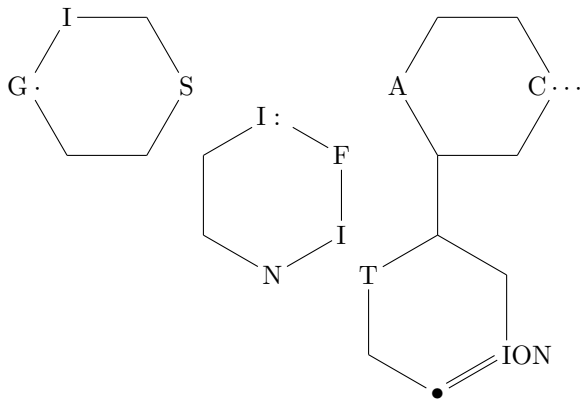


Federico Federici

I[3]ONIC⁺ LOG

[of expanded fields and other [textual] practices]

foreword by Nils Röllner, afterword by Michael Betancourt



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a Loredana e Annina
l'autore dedica

Michael Betancourt

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

Language is a thing-in-the-world, but unlike the objects we can easily and empirically measure, it mostly resides in the minds of the people interacting with it, and we consider it not only by its physicality, but from its capacity to communicate—*semiosis* describes this process of recognition, recalling past encounters and playing upon established knowledge and expertise (fluency). But what might appear to be a simple process is not. Neither is it obvious. When we look at one word, obviously we are not looking at another, different word, and this assumption of stability¹ allows us the fantasy that language fixes meaning upon the page or screen; that we are reading what is really there to be read, and what we think we receive as information from that encounter approximates someone else's encounter at a different place and time². Usually these assumptions are valid, but not always. The convergence between these questions about writing or language and quantum physics' models for the physical world shape the approach to asemic poetry employed by Federico Federici, producing the present volume whose discursive continually circles this relationship, drawing attention to how the problem of semantic form and semiosis is a question about our place in and understanding of the universe itself.

Academic debates over semiotics—the division of the sign into two or three parts, the potential for indexicality, the expansion of these dynamics beyond language—require assumptions about order and intention that rarely need to be considered, or even mentioned³. But in Federici's work these nominally axiomatic roles for expression and communication are investigated and explored with clarity and purpose: *the sign is the enigma of language*. What might easily be purely academic questions are not. What meaning is, and where it comes from are vital—these poetics address the foundations of expressiveness, but in place of the familiar, rational orders of grammar and the signification expected of communication, the elementary parts of language explode, and we are left to observe the residues of artifice, trying to discern their relationships to what they once explained: «if asemic writing is addressed in linguistic terms, it represents the idiomatic aspect that cannot be translated» (page 67); this search informs these poetics.

Federici suspends meaning in a superposition between resolution and ambivalence that creates unresolvable paradoxes. These continually shifting interpretations revel in the contingency of each alternative, one at a time,

that emerges from their asemic organization; it is unclear how to connect these signs to any signified, instead drawing attention to their circulation and capacity to invite an unending semiosis. These parallels between poetics and quantum physics emerge because they are both derived from paradoxes of interpretation⁴, where, as physicist David Bohm explains, *understanding depends on a measured bet*:

The laws of quantum mechanics are statistical and do not determine individual future events uniquely and precisely. This is, of course, different from classical laws, which do in principle determine these events⁵.

Bohm's «statistical» predictions of what an outcome may be require an observation to determine the *specific* result: this decision is what identifies the potential signs of asemic poetry, but having done so, one cannot attach a specific or particular meaning to them. Converging scientific and poetic responses to paradoxes⁶ shape contemporary understandings of semiotics: signs produce meaning only through an activity (or complex of activities) that only integrate with each other in a particular set of circumstances⁷. Meaning is not «real» but an imposition⁸. These relational and unstable protocols depend on the arrangements of their parts and the relationships imposed on them by their audience—meaning shifts as these organizational frameworks shift⁹. Expressiveness depends on the ‘intentional function’ to assign them an *interpretive status* as-encoded¹⁰, but only produces meaning when that identification is matched, a second time, with its particular decoding framework—a system that is either absent or unknown when confronting asemic poetry. Instead of being expressive modulations of individual subjectivity (the poet's), the asemic poem opens these relationships to include the ordering and comprehending mind of its audience: this introduction places the organization of marks—into—signs into a state of flux which Federici systematically explores and describes in this collection of poems and discursive texts.

Within this framework of shifting recognitions guided by a combination of enculturation and semiotics¹¹, the asemic poem is never «illegible.» The convergence of semiotic approaches and quantum physics in Federici's poetics emerges from how these models have convergent interests. It is the potentiality of *legibility* itself that is being held in superposition by asemic poesis: the viewer must define the relationships and connections of the various elements arrayed across the page to begin the puzzle of signification. This poetic¹² engagement proceeds as simultaneously conscious and yet completely autonomous «bets,»¹³ a superposed-yet-collapsed ambiguity arising recursively from discursive reasoning modulating perception and re-articulating apperception into meaningful order¹⁴. These are poetics that

invite a direct question whose simplicity masks a much more complex problem: *Where does meaning reside?*

Poetics and philosophy and physics converge on questions about the nature of the world we live in, and our role in understanding that world; they differ in their approaches and methods employed in asking and engaging these questions¹⁵. The audience's knowledge is a reciprocal connection between immanence and remembrance that defines their capacity to interpret, or *fluency*¹⁶. Meaning, what semiotics considers through the frameworks of signification, is not internal to the objects being considered, but is instead an emergent property that is often imagined to be an inherent quality of the things themselves¹⁷; the twentieth century finally laid this fallacy to rest¹⁸, creating a great dislocation where meaning resides in the human audience¹⁹, an invention in response to specific semantic cues that provide a physical foundation for the imaginary realms invented through signification²⁰. This great «disenchantment»²¹ of the world has drawn attention to exactly those processes that create meaning, but instead of being a loss, it offers the human imagination as a replacement for what were historically the actions of metaphysical, supernatural beings and processes. Scientific empiricism which grasps hold of the physical world informs the poetics Federici gives to us: these poems are physically produced using mechanical type, the textures of paper, pens and ink, but concern the metaphysical transformations of human consciousness. They visualize a semiotic process of investigation and exploration where the decomposition of texts into words, letters and shapes documents a search for foundational elements whose composition and arrangement becomes poetic; yet it is the search itself that is the subject of these poems.

The investigation is explicit from the beginning: *page 1* announces this project of semiotical poesis, an «INVESTIGATION OF EMPIRICAL TENDENCIES,» inviting the reader to participate in the explorations and their process of discovery whose comprehension relies on contingencies: as semiotician Roy Harris noted, «activity or complex of activities is to be integrated with another in a particular set of circumstances»²² because «signification and contextualization are not two independent elements but facets of the same creative activity»²³. The formal protocols of Federici's poetics offer a mechanism to isolate and identify the fundamental elements of signification, drawing attention to the organizational frameworks of language and presentation as pieces that are as important to signification as the specific signs they contain, illustrating semiotician Paul Grice's 'cooperative principle' that accounts for the connections of semiosis based on their relevance for consideration²⁴. These decisions guide the poetics which address the semic process in a parallel to the procedures of quantum physics, as Federici explains, «When deciphering an asemantic glyph, your perspective shapes the context and influences the meaning derived. Similarly, measuring a quantum

observable inherently alters the particle's state.» These are an asemic poetics whose focus is the interpretive act, that determinative role played by the decisions to identify and relate the glyph to something that is, at least potentially, meaningful. Federici instrumentalises human perception and engagement to bring the shifting and mobile articulation that semiotician Roland Barthes describes into consciousness as the poetic act itself:

Distance and proximity are promoters of meaning. Is this not the great secret of every vital semantics? Everything proceeds from a *spacing out* or *staggering of articulations*. Meaning is born from a combination of non-signifying elements (phonemes, lines); but it does not suffice to combine these elements to a first degree in order to exhaust the creation of meaning: what has been combined forms aggregates which can combine again among themselves a second, a third time²⁵.

These combinatory and recombinatory poems exploit the ambiguous nature of semic organization on a foundational level to introduce its mobility as an explicitly poetic term, a way of seeing language that does not require conscious comprehension of the glyphs themselves to understand they are meaningful. Presentation alone also serves as an expressive vehicle for semantic order in a multidimensional, nodal «space»²⁶. Federici recognizes this contingency, how «by removing signification, the process of writing eliminates a sort of gravitation, which had originally determined the absurdity of signifying» (page 49). These poetics are not about rendering a text illegible (asemic) but developing the graphic dimensions of this order – the visual order which identifies «text»—without engaging in lexicality. ‘Words without reading’ produce their meaning by how they remain familiar, but unknown; texts without words convey the assumptions of order, allowing that process of seeing-into-text to become the subject. This ambivalent process of organization shuffles the cues that separate articulations, inviting their reorganization into new forms, but in the process elevates the organizational dimensions to the level of explicit axioms for comprehension. Federici’s asemic poetics converts this semantic order into the site of expressive encounter, drawing the reader/viewer into the role of ‘poet’ rather than audience: these are an interactive aesthetic that, as Barthes explained, requires the viewer to complete it²⁷.

Making semic order into a source of poetics opens a realm of expressive potentials that are not typically considered, but which is definitional for asemic poetry. The question of legibility is not simply a matter of how complete or incomplete the letterforms are, nor of whether the words are a familiar language, but incorporates the articulation of its elemental parts as discrete units²⁸, and their constellation into recognizable and familiar arrangements²⁹.

When these types of ordering breakdown, the legibility of a text collapses—even if the letters and words remain recognizable³⁰. What happens in Federici's asemic poems involves blurring out the signification of the individual words without eliminating their organizational and propositional identification *as-words*. His poems reveal their lexical structure is an expressive unit in itself, implicated in the meaning of the words, but also separate from it. It is not a question of destroying letters, but of moving beyond them to the forces and attractions that create meaning from and through them: an elementary semantics where language demonstrates how its operative processes are all based in a hallucinatory poetics imposed by the reader, and held together by a segmentation that scales up from words to lines, paragraphs, and pages.

The «ionic metaphor» that informs this collection of poems is entirely appropriate for these scaling and transformative orders. Expressive parallels between ionic bonds and the conceptual linkages that create meaning are evident in Federici's poetic explorations: they shape *how* the asemic structures emerge and operate on these pages. The present, but invisible forces of attraction that group and link the disparate elements on the page into coherent and stabile forms cause the spontaneous emergence of order from their connections and associations: attractions of elements that are not otherwise linked, but whose association is unquestionable: this is the «staggering of articulations» that creates meaning from coherent ordering, but which cannot escape the essential role of human consciousness. His asemic poetry brings the role of human agency—the mind responsible for linking the elements—back into discourse to dispute the rational ordering normally assumed for human consciousness³¹, offering instead a model where rationality will always fail because the linkages and associations rely on metaphysical and emotional resonances as much as directed and normative connections. Introducing this irrationality into semiotics brings the fantastic and hallucinatory aspects of asemic poetics where the recognition of language begets something other than meaning into focus as the foundational moment of ordering *before* the invention of signs or their linkage to signification—an instability that Federici connects to the indeterminacy of quantum physics.

How the audience connects the various pieces together is neither fixed nor an *a priori* certainty, despite Federici invoking familiar organizational structures in these poems. This question, *articulation*, remains in a state of superposition where multiple and not necessarily converging ways of seeing these pages offer distinct potentials, but it is not the resolution of these ambiguities, but their maintenance that guides reading for this collection: a theoretically inflected mode of reading where the investigation becomes the poetic expression, rather than the permutation and deflection of signs in familiar, lexical poetics.

- ¹ Richard Feynman, *The Meaning of It All: Thoughts of a Citizen-Scientist* (Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1998), 15.
- ² Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 95.
- ³ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 208–217.
- ⁴ Ernest Nagel and James Newman, *Gödel's Theorem* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 10–11.
- ⁵ David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (New York: Routledge, 1980), 175.
- ⁶ David Albert, *Quantum Mechanics and Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 119.
- ⁷ Roy Harris, *Signs, Language, and Communication* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 12.
- ⁸ Albert, *Quantum Mechanics and Experience*, 15.
- ⁹ Feynman, *The Meaning of It All: Thoughts of a Citizen-Scientist*, 23.
- ¹⁰ Michael Betancourt, «The 'Intentional Function' in Still and Moving Photographic Images,» *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*, vol. 253 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2020-0065>.
- ¹¹ Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- ¹² Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings III: Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 25.
- ¹³ Roy Harris, «The Integrational Conception of the Sign,» *Integrationist Notes and Papers 2006–2008* (Gamlingay: Bright Pen, 2009).
- ¹⁴ Mark Garrison, «The Poetics of Ambivalence,» *Archetypal Psychiatry* (Spring 1982): 213–232.
- ¹⁵ Johanna Drucker, «What is a Word's Body?» in *What is? Nine Epistemological Essays* (Victoria: Cuneiform Press, 2013), 38.
- ¹⁶ Philippe G. Schyns, «Categories and Percepts: A Bi-Directional Framework for Categorization,» *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 1, no. 5 (August 1997): 183–189.
- ¹⁷ Howard Wainer, «Preface to the 2010 Edition of the English Translation,» in *Semiology of Graphics*, trans. William J. Berg (Redlands: Esri Press, 2010), xi–xii.
- ¹⁸ William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, «The Intentional Fallacy,» in *Essays in Modern Literary Criticism*, ed. Ray B. West, Jr. (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1962), 174–189.
- ¹⁹ Jakobson, *Selected Writings III: Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry*, 18–21.
- ²⁰ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 216.
- ²¹ Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* (Minneapolis: University of

Minnesota Press, 2011).

²² Harris, *Signs, Language, and Communication*, 12.

²³ Harris, *Signs, Language, and Communication*, 164.

²⁴ Herbert P. Grice, «Logic and Conversation,» in *Studies in Syntax and Semantics III: Speech Acts*, eds. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975), 183–198.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1985), 141.

²⁶ Michael Betancourt, *The Critique of Digital Capitalism* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2016), 153–190.

²⁷ Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*, 142.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 88.

²⁹ Eero Tarasti, «The Semiotics of A. J. Greimas: A European Intellectual Heritage Seen from the Inside and the Outside,» *Sign Systems Studies* 45, no. 1/2 (2017): 33–53.

³⁰ Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 232–233.

³¹ Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, trans. J. H. Bridges (New York: Robert Speller & Sons, 1957), 49–50.