Any semiotic approach (cf. Eco. 1976) should distinguish between a theory of codes and a theory of sign production, that is between a theory of signification and a theory of communication. In other words it is indispensable to distinguish between the criteria of organization of the cultural encyclopedia (a merely intensional system of meaning postulates) and the various phenomena of communicational interaction (among which there is the extensional use of languages, that is, the use of languages in order to designate actual or possible states of the world).

A system of signification is a social product that can be established (and recognized as such) even though one does not design it for the purposes of communication and even though one does not resort to it in order to designate states of actual or possible worlds. For example, one can decide to correlate each finger of one's hands to the first ten Roman emperors: thus, for instance, a given finger of the left hand means the second Roman Emperor, whose name is Tiberius and whose properties are of having reigned from 14 to 37 A.D., whose prime minister was Sejanus and so on... Such a system of signification (which allows one to name Tiberius by raising a given finger) can however be described and semiotically analyzed apart from the question as to whether one has established it with the intention of naming Roman emperors or not. In principle each of the ten fingers can be correlated at the same time to an imaginary attribute of the fourth person of the Trinity as described in an unwritten novel by Jorge Luis Borges. In this case one would have two different signification systems with two different content planes and two homonymous expression planes. If, in the course of a conversational interaction, one mistakes the designation of a divine attribute with the name of an Emperor, such a misunderstanding does not affect the organization of the two systems of signification qua systems of signification; it rather concerns the felicity conditions of a given process of textual actualization.

The third chapter of Voltaire's Zadig, which will be examined in this paper, represents a paramount example of such a semiotic situation. As we

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will see, Zadig is here concerned first with a complex intertwining of visual signs (imprints, clues and symptoms) and then with the linguistic expression of the contents previously expressed by these non-verbal devices. However in this story not only the functioning of two semiotic systems, but also the discrepancy between intensional and extensional approach are made blatantly evident, so that — as in a sudden epiphany — a whole web of semiotic questions is brilliantly displayed.

It must be clear that the following analysis does not represent an interpretation of Voltaire’s text. Zadig’s chapter 3 is taken as a “pre-text”, that is, as a transparent report about three different texts, namely:

(a) the text represented by an ensemble of physical phenomena that Zadig assumes as significant devices;

(b) the text represented by the discourse by which Zadig tells the story of his interpretation of the text (a) — this second verbal text being a metalinguistic discourse dealing with the semiotic nature of the first (visual) one;

(c) the text represented by the dialogues between Zadig and the King’ and Queen’s officers.

The three texts must be approached from a double point of view: they deal with the semiotic rules of signification which make them potentially understandable and they are inserted in a process of communicational interaction in which they are used in order to designate states of the world. It happens that — during the dialogical interaction — the speakers are using the same expression in order to name individuals belonging to different possible worlds, which in their turn depend on the speakers’ propositional attitudes. As we will see, while Zadig shows a certain embarrassment in distinguishing between intensional and extensional approach, his opponents are unable to recognize the practical (as well as the theoretical) possibility of such a discrepancy.

Fortunately the misfortune of Zadig and the communicational mish-mash he is involved in will allow us to make clear the reasons of the semiotic agony he is suffering.

2. VOLTAIRE’S TEXT

Zadig found that the first moon of marriage, even as it is written in the book of Zend, is of honey, and the second of wormwood. After a time he had to get rid of Azora, who had become too difficult to live with, and he tried to find his happiness in the study of nature. “No one is happier,” said he, “than a philosopher who reads in this great book that God has placed before our eyes. The truths he discovers belong to him. He nourishes