

# SEMIOTICS 1993

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## PREFACE

We are pleased to present this volume to the members of the Semiotic Society of America. This year has been an especially fruitful one, as the sheer size and complexity of this volume will attest. A special feature of this year's anthology is the collection of papers from the first session ever held by a major society on Peirce biography. The papers presented honor the dual efforts of Joseph Brent and Nathan Houser to bring some sophistication to our understanding of the founder of one major trajectory within semiotics, while also marking out territory that calls for further exploration.

We have also seen the beginning of an important new tradition in the society; namely, the awarding of the Thomas A. Sebeok Fellowship for distinguished work in the field of semiotics. The first recipient, John Deely, has not only written ground breaking work in anthroposemiotics, among many other things, but has done as much as anyone to steer the society through both rough and calm seas over the past two decades.

As was evident in the 1994 summer meeting of the Fifth Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies at Berkeley, semiotics has indeed become a thriving global enterprise. Much of the most important work is moving toward a cross fertilization between the Peircean tradition of semiotics, and the Saussurean tradition of semiology. Linguistically driven frameworks are being compelled to recognize extra-linguistic forms of semiosis, such as physiosemiosis or zoösemiosis, while the more generic forms, tied to the sign/object/interpretant triad, are finding that language contains some order-specific features that must be honored in their own right. I am further persuaded that depth psychology, via Jung and Kristeva, also contains some powerful secrets for wedding semiotics to semiology in a way that honors the complexity of the human process. Put in simpler terms: we are no longer being forced into the Peirce verses Saussure dilemma that has often stultified query into generic patterns of meaning.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the heroic work of my graduate student Michael Monos who was able to bring this volume into photograph ready shape. Michael came to the job with a knowledge of several ancient and modern human languages as well as with the perhaps more important knowledge of a vast number of computer languages. He also suffered the indignity of having one computer and one printer destroyed in the midst of this project. As you can see in the following pages, we were able to gracefully recover from what could have been a disaster. His work for the society was made possible by a research grant from the Theological School of Drew University.

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## PEIRCE'S ABJECTION OF THE MATERNAL

Robert S. Corrington,  
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I am persuaded that Peirce developed his categorial structure as a partial defense against the lure of the maternal that haunted him throughout his life. In even stronger terms: Peirce abjected the material maternal ground of his own existence in order to negotiate between and among public signs and thereby secure himself against the devouring presence of firstness. In what follows, I will trace out the psychoanalytic aspects of this fear of firstness and correlate them to his organic manic depressive illness (cf. Goodwin & Jamison 1990). In the process, several dimensions of firstness will become clarified.

The movement from the maternal toward the paternal marks the development of the male child. For female children it would be psychic suicide to engage in a matricidal break with the ground of nourishment and meaning, while for the male, such a break is essential—at least under the aegis of patriarchal society. Peirce need not abject his biological mother in order to abject and deny the maternal per se, as the maternal is correlated to the ground of being, a ground which is only fitfully manifest in biological structures. Contrary to orthodox Freudian theory, Peirce's relation to his actual mother is somewhat independent from his relation to the maternal ground of being. One can abject the latter without necessarily abjecting the former. It is also possible, of course, to abject both simultaneously.

The transition from the maternal to the paternal is marked by language. In the words of Kristeva, "There is language instead of the good breast." (Kristeva 1980: 45). As the child enters into the power of negativity it pulls away from the originating ground of power and meaning in order to become a willing captive in

the blinding world of public interpretants. Not all interpretants need be linguistic, a point often missed by French semiology, nor need all interpretants be clear and distinct. But they must be the locus of thirdness, so that meaning can emerge more distinctly against the maternal background of firstness.

The equation of firstness with the material maternal makes sense in the light of the subsequent correlation of thirdness with interpretants. The public semiotic codes belong to the domain of the father. As such they hover over and against the domain of firstness from which they have come. Shifting our language slightly we can envision firstness, or more precisely, the firstness of firstness, as the maternal unconscious, while the domain of interpretants is the secondness of thirdness, that is, the domain where meaning and resistance work together to shape public semiotic space. Were Peirce to remain within the maternal unconscious, he would never have attained the full consciousness that arises out of the primal negativity that opens out secondness. Secondness, as sheer otherness not yet funded with meaning, enters into *human* life when the dreaming innocence of the firstness of firstness falls away.

What happens to the maternal unconscious when the secondness of thirdness (the paternal) takes over? Were this process a mere quantitative and incremental unfolding, the domain of firstness could remain fully operative within the self. However, the logic of psychic growth is much more severe. The maternal unconscious is soon seen as a profound threat to the self, always ready to pull it back down into the domain of unconscious dreaming innocence. From the standpoint of the newly forged conscious attitude, the domain of pure firstness looks like death itself. Consequently it must be abjected so that it does not exert its uncanny lure over fragile but sovereign consciousness. However, the plot takes a dramatic turn.

Not only is the domain of the firstness of firstness felt to be a threat to the self of signs and interpretants, but it also, and at the same time, exerts a counterlure that is deeply sexual and oedipal. The maternal unconscious remains a rhythmic presence to consciousness (held captive in the secondness of thirdness) and will not let it rest content in the blandishments of thirdness. With each gain in semiotic power and linguistic skill, the maternal unconscious intensifies its efforts to lure consciousness back to its source. How does this play itself out in behavior?

Peirce, as noted by Brent, had an intense fascination for and to women (Brent 1993). He was a dandy who, like Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde, dressed in expensive and flamboyant garments as if to advertise his narcissistic hunger for admiration and gratification. His need for a constant stream of women in his life stems from two sources. On the psychological level, the fixation on what Jung called the "anima," that is, the contrasexual archetype in the biological male, drove him to seek psychic completion in a series of substitute maternal 'objects' so that he could return, however briefly, to the maternal unconscious. Sex was his means for recapturing the abjected domain of pure firstness. On the biological level, his severe manic depressive psychosis intensified his libido and his desire for excitement and change (cf. Jamison 1993 and Hershman & Lieb 1988). He was like an engine driven beyond its normal capacity, always teetering on the edge of a shattering breakdown.

In this sense, the particularity of his manic depressive disorder intensified

the more universal psychological structures that shape the transition from firstness to thirdness. What would normally be a merely neurotic longing for origins, became transfigured into a manic and uncontrollable longing for the heart of the maternal unconscious. This is not to say in a reductive fashion that Peirce secretly desired to sleep with his mother, although this is always a possibility, but that he felt that he could not function without concrete expressions of the material maternal in his life. Sex, flamboyant clothing, manic streams of discourse disrupted by the rhythms of the maternal, and his recurrent theatrical passions (he both wrote and acted in plays), mark his largely unconscious struggles with the firstness of firstness.

Like innumerable manic depressives before and after him (whether on Lithium or not--introduced in 1971), he was self-medicating (Fieve 1979). He suffered from a double curse. As noted by Brent, he was a victim of trigeminal neuralgia which causes unbearable pain in the nerves of the face. This was compounded by his manic and depressive mood swings that seemed to him to be invasions from an alien world. Manic depressives often drink alcohol or take some other substance (Peirce took morphine, heroin, cocaine, and ether) in order to stabilize their mood swings. Drugs can tone down a manic attack and pull one up from a depression--at least in the short run. Thus Peirce medicated himself for two legitimate reasons. Yet underlying this chemical process is the deeper logic of the maternal unconscious--always feared and always desired. Abjection would not exist without this double logic of fear and desire.

Conceptually, I am persuaded that Peirce developed his notion of panpsychism as a way of protecting himself against the rages of the maternal unconscious. Peirce had a truncated theory of the unconscious, which I detail in my Peirce book (Corrington 1993), but he failed to understand the sheer otherness of the unconscious to his conscious sign using self. Perhaps, as the foregoing would suggest, he understood this otherness all too well. In either case, he sanitized the unconscious by making it very much like consciousness, only slightly less luminous. Its darkness is lightened by the fact that it is really of the same stuff as consciousness, that is, it is mental through and through. Panpsychism thus becomes a kind of prophylaxis that protects Peirce from the depth structures that he otherwise seeks in his sexual acting out.

This logic of abjection does not, of course, remain stable. Panpsychism as a conceptual barricade against the maternal unconscious (firstness of firstness) cannot withstand the lure of the powers of origin. Two psychic aspects of this instability emerge. Both are deeply tied to manic depressive disorder, but here their psychological meaning becomes clarified. First, Peirce was prone to periods of what Jung called "psychic inflation" (Jung 1917). In the manic state, this is par for the course. What makes this interesting, however, is that it marks an extreme flight from the maternal, while also manifesting an uncontrollable fascination for it. Ego inflation is a profound denial of the need for the maternal unconscious, while it is also a signal that deeper energies are already entering into consciousness, hence causing the inflation in the first place. Second, Peirce was prone to what used to be called "conversion hysteria," in which his body would become almost paralyzed and incapable of action. This too is par for the course, and is a manifestation of extreme depression. On the psychological level, however, it also represents the revenge of firstness when it doesn't get its due in

the psychic economy. It is as if the energies of the self are withdrawn because the ego fails to honor their true source. Psychic inflation and conversion hysteria mark the outer boundaries of the tragic dialect of firstness and thirdness. The ferocity of the mood swings, and their attendant forms of acting out, is a manifestation of what we might call primal secondness, unmediated by the healing power of thirdness.

Peirce did struggle to find some kind of third that would abridge these extremes in his life. For Kristeva, this third that stands between the self and the maternal is the imaginary father (Oliver 1993). The role of the imaginary father is to bring some stability into the life of signs, while still pointing the self back to the maternal origin of semiosis. From a categorial standpoint, the imaginary father is an embodiment of the firstness of thirdness in that he brings together aspects of the abjected maternal with the codes of the father. Peirce tried out many imaginary fathers in his life time. Perhaps the most successful candidate was William James, who may himself have suffered from a milder form of manic depressive illness. James was the subject of deep transference energies, and, we may infer, was caught in his own countertransference as he idealized his friend Charles. Without these fathers in his life Peirce might have had no resources for negotiating the exhausting territory that lived between the firstness of firstness and the secondness (and thirdness) of thirdness.

Were the women in his life imaginary mothers? In a sense, I think that they were. The sexual act, by stilling the fury of interpretants, brought Peirce into the vicinity of the maternal unconscious. But, as a manic depressive, he could not remain within the exclusive orbit of any one self, male or female. It is as if sex gave him his most direct physical connection with firstness, but that his illness drove him away from the healing embrace of the anima. No woman was given more than a cameo role in his ongoing play. Was there a deeper love in his life that at least kept the connection with firstness alive?

His greatest love was not a person, institution, or object. It was his writing, an act that connected him with the maternal unconscious, even when he least understood the connection. Certain people are over determined to write material that may never see the light of day, or win the applause of the multitudes. Peirce's manic writing, right up to before the moment of his death, gives an indication of the true eros that governed his life. The anima disappears or is rejected, friends betray, institutions close their doors (Harvard, Johns Hopkins, the Coast Survey), wives disappoint (perhaps through no fault of their own), and one's own body betrays one again and again. But writing remains as a loyal friend that will not close off meaning or hope. This cannot be abjected, and because it cannot, it may provide the means for finding what has been abjected and for bringing it into the world of meaning. One lasting image I have of Peirce, whether apocryphal or not, is that of Juliette prying the pen from his fingers as he tries to write a few last thoughts before his consciousness sinks forever into the night of the material maternal.

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