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THE SIGN'S SIGNIFICANT OTHER[1]

1.   *Unbounded? How so?*

Augusto Ponzio's *Semiotics Unbounded* (2005), written in collaboration with Susan Petrilli, begins thus:

> The boundaries of semiotics are determined by the nature of its object of study – that is to say, by the nature of signs. In fact, when we consider the development of semiotics, it becomes evident that progress in the general science of signs depends on the fact that signs are gradually being discovered where it was once thought there were none (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: xvii).

In addition to a "gradual discovery" of signs, I would add – and I am certain Augusto would agree – that: (1) signs are always in the process of their becoming "re-invented", or otherwise "re-imagined", and (2) signs now making up the repertoire of our arts, sciences, and socio-politico-economic and cultural concoctions, are incessantly becoming other signs.

Which is to say that virtually everything that *is*, is of the nature of *signness becoming*. After all, what are signs that they may convergingly become other signs and begin taking on a life of their own? And what are we, living signs, that in converging with our signs of mind, with the signs of others, and with the world as signs, we may swimmingly flow along within the now meandering, now swirling, now whirlpooling, now whitewaterly cascading stream of semiosis? In a comparable vein, we read that: "Peirce's conception of the sign extended the boundaries of semiotics: the universe is permeated with signs" (*ibid*.). In such case, there is process rather than mere product, and any and all binary, dualistic, Manichean schemes will inevitably find themselves floundering about in the semiosic sea of complexity.

1.1   Re-*entering through the back door*

Indeed, the ongoing Peircean semiosic process by and large aids and abets philosopher Hilary Putnam's pragmatic concept of *meaning* (1975, 1981, 1983). Putnam refuses to compromise on his reservations regarding traditional theories of meaning. He argues that there is no "God's-eye view" of the world, no omniscient grasp of the whole context within which

meaning emerges, in all its possible ramifications. The world is simply too rich for the poverty of our interpretive capacities. Thus:

(1)   Contra Saussure, we cannot locate meaning in the head as if it were a matter of specifying a particular set of neurons that fire when properly stimulated: *meaning isn't in the head*.

(2)   Contra "word magic", a sign is not the carrier of information as if it were endowed with some spiritual force: *meaning isn't in the sign*.

(3)   Contra the "causality theory" of reference and meaning, there is no object of the sign such that it provokes its perceivers and conceivers to interpret it in a certain way: *meaning isn't in the thing with which the sign interacts*.

(4)   Contra "information theory", there is no medium – a sort of "conduit tube" – through which signs are en-coded, and their receiver re-codes the signs to internalize their meaning: *meaning isn't mechanically transferred through the medium of communication*.

So where is meaning? It's in the entire, processual, mind-numbingly complex situational socio-cultural context, including signs and their makers' and takers' past experiences, present experiences, and anticipation of future experiences. But if there is no "God's-eye view", then how can we adequately know the context? We can't. That is, we can have no *total grasp* of the context. For we are part of the process and thus we cannot by privy to the whole, which ultimately includes the entire sphere of semiosis. We're immanent, within the sphere of semiosis, wherever and whenever we are. Actually, *Semiotics Unbounded* says so much in many ways (*ibid*.: 143-44).

2.   *Dialogic imaginings*

Semiotics Unbounded highlights both Peirce and Bakhtin with respect to "dialogic interaction". The Peircean self, "I", dialogues with its other self, "me", as well as with other selves within its community and with its physical other (the natural world within which it processually moves). And Bakhtin, who writes that the idea of "dialogue" is inherent in "dialogism", can be interpreted along commensurate lines.

Augusto and Susan make the Bakhtinian distinction between "formal" dialogism and "substantial" dialogicism, opting for the latter (*ibid*.: 23-24). In a nutshell, "formal" dialogism includes the Saussurean *signifier* coming into play within the concrete unfolding of a dialogue, in conjunction with the *signified* in abstract interrelations with what is verbalized and "language" (*langue*). "Substantial" dialogism takes this entire process as itself dialogic, which involves concrete language (*parole*), or actual verbal interaction, combining with language (*langue*) to create concrete, contextualized dialogistic process. Dialogism, in this sense, is the *process of dialoguing* that organizes a cultural world's meaning (Bakhtin 1981: 279-82). Thus, the original *signifier* (formalized verbal interaction) becomes an enriched *signifier* (concrete substantial verbal interaction) (Pechey 1989)[2]. For Bakhtin, then, Saussurean semiology deals primarily with transmission of signs by a ready-made code, whereas in living speech, communication is a process without necessary mechanical connection to any code, within some specific context. A context is incessantly in flux, for it is process; a code entails linear generativity according to some set of rules. A code is a technical means for transmitting information contained within the signs, and nothing more; hence its purpose undermines the input of context and environment (Bakhtin 1986: 130). In Augusto and Susan's way of putting this, substantial dialogue is "an embodied, intercorporeal expression of the involvement of one's body with the body of another – thus, it is illusory to think that the body is individual, separate, and autonomous … [it] is the 'grotesque body'" (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 24-25).

2.1   *Critiquing*

Augusto and Susan thus embrace Bakhtin's "critique of dialogic reason", which is a critique of the "logic of identity" entailing linear, ossified, monologic, and totalizing dialectics (*ibid*.: 24). This calls for "responsibility without alibis", "responsibility that cannot be deferred insofar as it concerns existential "architectonics", relations with the I, the world, others" (*ibid.*).

Bakhtinian dialogism must have some *other* in order that there may be concrete interaction. Kant had his "critique of pure reason", and Sartre his "critique of dialectical reason", but according to Augusto and Susan, both of them fall short of Bakhtin's critique, which calls for dialogue as the impossibility of "indifference" toward the concrete other, as

"unindifference" toward the other. Indifference threatens to degenerate into hostility, hatred, ethnocentrism, racism, violence, and wars, since the indifferent subject views the other as if from an autonomous, neutral, "God's-eye" view (Putnam 1975, 1988). What is worse, it presupposes the subject as repository of individualism, and identity of the individual which sets it apart from all other individuals – as if they were all atoms careening about in an enclosed container.

In a Peircean manner of putting the *Semiotics Unbounded* project, the "critique of dialogic reason" chiefly includes Secondness and Thirdness, as do the critiques of "pure reason" and "dialectical reason", but, unlike the latter two critiques, it also includes a large dose of Firstness, abduction, iconicity, and concrete corporeality. Individual identity and autonomy, in other words, are not the "oneness" of Firstness, for they imply what Alfred North Whitehead (1924) calls the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" and of "simple location". Individual identity and autonomy are considered in the abstract; they are divorced from the body, from Firstness creatively giving rise to feelings and sensations, which in turn gives rise to abducted images and their interdependent counterparts. The critique of individual identity is the critique of purely abstract thought devoid of what Peirce called "concrete reasonableness" (*ibid*.: 144-46).

3.   *Semiotics Unbounded on a somewhat "logical" not, in this light*

By and large, with respect to the "critique of dialogic reason" Augusto and Susan are on target, that is, if they take their cues chiefly from Peirce and Bakhtin and deflates the "logic of identity" and pervading "abstraction", in favor of a "logic of otherness" along the lines of what it terms a "semiodialogic" perspective (*ibid*.: 481).

However, I would suggest a more critical stance toward Charles Morris's empirical positivist, behaviorist posture. In the first place, Morris was in tune with his times regarding his contribution to the "Unified Sciences" idea. But that project was part and parcel of logical positivist philosophy's reductionist effort to found human knowledge within logic and mathematics, and when that didn't pay proper dividends, to found it in a hierarchical view of the sciences, beginning with what was then considered the queen of sciences, physics[3].

In the second place, a critique of the "logic of identity", involving the classical Aristotelian logical Principle of Identity, should also imply a critique of the Principles of Non-Contradiction and Excluded-Middle. If identity is malleable more than fixed, then whatever identity there may be at a given timespace slice, it is always in the process of *becoming* what it was *not* becoming. This calls for a degree of contradiction embracing rather than intransigent contradiction barring. Which is also to say that, in addition to what *is* and what *is not*, there is always *something else* possibly in the process of its emergent becoming. So rather than Non-Contradiction and Excluded-Middles, we should entertain the idea of Included-Middles, whether contradictory or not, for something can at some unexpected moment slip through the virgule separating what *is* from what *is not*, and emerge into the light of day.

What, then, is the meaning of "Not Both A and Not-A" of the Non-Contradiction Principle, and "Either A or Not-A" of the Excluded-Middle Principle? That Both one alternative And another alternative, as possibilities, stand a greater to lesser chance of beginning their becoming somewhere and somewhen? That Neither the one alternative Nor the other one should be set up as a hard-rock, immutable thing? And that at any moment something else, something new, may be emerging to alter that nature of that which is now passing on-becoming in order to make way for its successor-becoming? What is the moral to the story? I would suggest that: (1) given vestiges of positivism inextricably lodged within our mind-set, we should struggle to free ourselves of whichever of those vestiges that we can, and do the best with what is left, and that (2) we should strive to define ourselves within some form or other of some "other logic", vaguely suggested by Augusto and Susan's "semiodialogic".

However, a question pops up….

3.1   *What is individualism without identity?*

Semiotics Unbounded judiciously, and on a Peircean note, brings up the idea of "identity" in terms of what might be termed "self-identity". Self-identity bears on that deadly concept, individualism once again, which has run rampant throughout the so-called developed Western societies, culminating in selfish "what's-in-it-for-me-and-everybody-else-be-damned" attitudes. We read that:

Against the concepts of "personality", "personal self", and "individual self", all of which theorize an individual, finite and defined self, Peirce contrasts the concept of self in dialogic communion with other selves. The finite self or "personal self" is an "illusory phenomenon", yet insofar as human beings are egotistical they believe they can live and flourish separately from others, separately from the human community to which they in fact belong. And to the extent that they believe this, they are creating the conditions for illusory forms of isolation (*ibid*.: 50-51).

Isolation and integration, solitude and solidarity, seclusion and communion, discontinuity and continuity. That is the inevitable tension we are all caught up in, "between the inward depths of the human spirit and the outward expressions of those inward depths" (Colapietro 1989: 118; Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 51). In an oft-cited article, Charles Taylor (1984) writes that every person is her/his own measure: I must live my life *my* way, express my individuality and my own identity. But Augusto and Susan, like Colapietro, react to this over-disjunctive form of identity and individualism. Self-identity is pliable, and it exists as the integral part of some community. There is no fixed self-identity, no self-identity in contrast to or in contradiction with other self-identities: self-identity is always *becoming something other*. Nor is there any Excluded-Middle between one self-identity and another one, especially if they hail from the same community or sub-community. Since all individuals are always *becoming*, there is some surfacing of what might conceivably have been taken as an exclusionary boundary between two alternatives, which often seem diametrically opposed.

3.2   *Honing in on the problem*

In order perhaps to find a conceptual hand-hold on this problem, consider Figure 1 (place about here)[4].
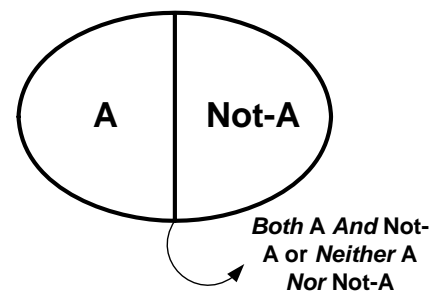
Figure 1

This diagram gives us a glimpse into the becoming I mentioned in the previous paragraph – granted, process presented in the form of a static diagram can be no more than an unfaithful image, but I hardly have any alternative. In this image we have identity: A is A. We have Non-Contradiction: A cannot be Not-A. And we have Excluded-Middle: Either a or Not-A.

And the line of demarcation is just that: a neutral mark of distinction. Well and good? No. Not really.

No, for what is the line anyway? Peirce goes at length to argue that we can take the line as not A, and not Not-A. However, as not A, it has something in common with Not-A, and as not Not-A, it enjoys commonality with A. It is A-less and it is Not-A-less, and at the same time it is A-ness and it is not-A-ness. So it is in a sense *both* of the two, and it is *neither* of the two. In a sense, it throws the Principles of Non-Contradiction and Excluded-Middle for a loop. Indeed, we can conceive of the line as an Included-Middle from which something novel, new, can somewhere and somewhen begin its process of becoming something other than whatever was becoming. This conception, in brief, allows for what Whitehead (1924) calls the "creative advance" of nature. By extension we can Peirceanly dub it the "creative advance" of the dance of life, of feeling and thought, all of semiotic import (*CP* 4.512, 6.193, 6.203-04, 6.260).

Figure 1 disallows the notion of proud, autonomous individuality, and it embraces community, commonality, communion. So where's the logic in all this? It's within the entirety of Figure 1; it's contained within the whole diagram, that whole evincing what Peirce called a "more general logic", or a "logic of abduction".

4.   *That "other logic"*

Semiotics Unbounded hints here and there of some "other logic", an alternative to standard bivalent logic. What would this have to do with a "logic of abduction"? Abduction as vague, conjectural, tentative, merely a possibility, a "might be"? Indeed, can we really speak of "abductive reasoning"? Of "abductive inference"? Of a "logic of abduction" or "discovery"? Peirce, and *Semiotics Unbounded*, I must reiterate, respond in the affirmative.

What, then, are the implications of these assumptions? If I may be allowed a healthy dose of conjecturing, the implications take us back to the initial observations of this essay. At the beginning of the twenty first century the Newtonian-Cartesian mechanistic worldview is slowly giving way to a non-mechanical world of process, impermanence, emergence. The *fin de siécle* mood has spilled into a different attitude toward the mind, body, others, and the

world. How could we have with such confidence separated body and mind, *bodymind* and the Other, *bodymindotherness* and world?[5]

How can we once again enter into a dialogue with nature? How can we enter into "re-enchantment of the world"? How can we become participants rather than presumed spectators? After all, feeling, integrated feeling, precedes sensation, experience, and thought.

Abduction, accompanying vague feelings, like daydreaming and musing, emerges not from the imperious, detached conscious mind, but from *bodymind interdependently interrelated* and in *interaction* with others and with the world. Beginning with a *participatory* semiotic approach to becoming, as it is attuned to our abductive faculties at the *bodymind* level, perhaps we can take a step in the right direction.

4.1. *The possible pitfall*

But does this not tend to lead us toward that eurphorously applauded, multiply construed, and occasionally denigrated or other wise rejected term, "postmodernism"? The postmodern move often takes Nietzsche's definition of truth as "the sum total of interpretations" and hence there are occasional attempts to see that Gestalt image – the duck and the rabbit – held in a single intuition.

The postmodernist appears before us as a rationalist in irrational times, a Don Quixote who hangs onto ideals long past their time, a Hamlet whose oscillation between possibilities eventually ends in his demise. In order to understand, to truly know the way of things in an age of multiple meanings, we would ordinarily take it that the senses of terms are not "arrived at" in the sense of weaning and honing them until univocity is achieved. However, in postmodern times there is an absence of univocity and linearity. Postmodernists recognize the principal terms defining our cultural past as vague, whose meanings can't be determined by logical or semantic analysis but by aesthetic juxtaposition and contrast, or by "abductive inference", so to speak. Jacques Derrida's deconstructive wordplay is but one of a number of illustrations of this posture – or posturelessness, if you will.

Then should we not resist any and all gentle nudges toward the postmodern turn? Are not these implications of "antifoundationalism" and the "crisis of representation" and "reference" repugnant to semiotic moderation and mediation? Well, yes, to a certain extent.

But "to a certain extent" is a tenuous notion, to say the least. A return directly to *Semiotics Unbounded* might be helpful regarding the problem at hand of representation and reference.

5.   *The modern/postmodern rage over pros and cons of reference*

According to Augusto and Susan's rendition, a sign always has a referent, or *designatum*; what exists insofar as it is the object of a sign's referent is the *denotatum*. "Unicorn" is a sign with a referent, albeit within a myth-world, so the sign enjoys a *designatum*. The imaginary beast exists, within the mythical text at least, so it is the *denotatum* of the sign. For a believer, "God" has both *designatum* and *denotatum*, but for the non-believer, "God" has no more than a *designatum*. *Semiotics Unbounded* embraces reference, for sure, but not in wholesale fashion. This we can note especially when Augusto and Susan come down hard on Eco's resistance to reference. To wit:

Arguments in favour of non-referential semantics can only be based on a reifying and reductive approach to the referent…. Eco has reason to reject this idea of the referent; however, his argument is highly questionable when used as the basis for concluding that semantics must deal with the relation between one sign and another, between signifiers and signifieds, between signifers and interpretants, without abandoning the chain of reciprocal sign reference that generates a process of unlimited semiosis (*ibid*.: 315).

In Eco's rejection of the referent, we read, he strives to liberate semiotics from what he calls a "metaphysics of the referent".

But he does so by resorting to the very metaphysics he purports to reject. It is metaphysical in the sense that it holds to "signification semiotics". This is semiotics of two-way sign-meaning relations that, unlike semiology's rejection of the physical world of objects, acts, and events with which signs are interrelated, posits reference for sure, but this reference is much as if it were an after thought. Such diminutions of reference, Eco goes on, isn't really necessary, for we can get along fine by assuming the meaning of the sign can be taken as referent and meaning wrapped up into one compact package. The problem is that the three-way sign is thus conflated into a binary sign, with the referent simply standing in as a relatively unnecessary and somewhat opaque proxy. We read further in *Semiotics Unbounded*:

Eco's reasoning is based on unacceptable presuppositions, which can be summarized roughly as follows: the referent can be considered either as a single, concrete entity or as an abstract entity – in which case it

identifies with meaning so that what the sign denotes is meaning. This leads to a confusion of two different functions, both of which are present (along with others) in the process of semiosis: that of being expressed (meaning) by a signifier, and that of being denoted by a sign (referent). In simpler albeit more imprecise terms, two distinct functions of the sign are reductively identified: expressing and denoting (*ibid*.: 318).

Thus semiology of the Saussure variety, or in other words "signification semiotics" in Augusto and Susan's terminology, has no use for the referent, that is, for the Peircean "semiotic object". In much the same manner, Eco also largely ignores reference. So it would appear that Augusto and Susan are on course in this regard. There *is* a "semiotic object", and it must be taken into account; otherwise any sign concept is seriously lacking. But indeterminacy of translation due to the problems of two-way reference between the sign and its object, if accepted – and I would by and large accept the idea – takes the "semiotic object" as in the long run vague, uncertain, and transient over time.

5.1   *Wrapping it up*

In sum, if reference there be, it is reference contextualized, which involves all sign present, past, and in the expected future. In this sense the semiotic process entails sign interdependence, interrelatedness and interaction. Whatever meaning that might happen to emerge, if of semiotic validity, it will endow the "semiotic object", through reference, with some element of the "real". In this manner the "semiotic object" can approach the "veridically real" regarding the physical world. But it can never actually reach that which is "truly real" of the object. This is not to say that the "truly real" is equivalent to Kant's *ding an sich*. The "semiotically real" can approach the "veridically real" only in the "long run". But what is the "long run"? Peirce tells us that it is at the infinite stretch, accessible solely to an immortal individual or to an infinite community of individual knowers. So as far as our finitude goes, the "veridically real" is out of reach. This attests to the vague, uncertain, and transient nature of the "semiotic object". Augusto, and along with him Susan, have written so much in a variety of ways.

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[1] Most sections of this paper consist of parts of a larger review article of *Semiotics Unbounded* by Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli, to appear in *Semiotica*.

[2] This process, as I take it, is along the lines of Putnam on meaning as briefly described above.

[3] Moreover, Morris's ideal of biology, regarding which *Semiotics Unbounded* seems uncritically favorably disposed toward, is outmoded, which is understandable, but his division of the whole of semiotics into *syntax*, *semantics* and *pragmatics* purportedly to offer a grand totalizing vision of signs is hopelessly limited to the anthropocentric logical positivist doctrine (178-81, 192, 198-201).

[4] The following is a theme I have developed elsewhere (merrell 2004, 2005, 2006).

[5] I have also developed the topic of *bodymindotherness* and world elsewhere (merrell 2003), and would suggest that selfsame topic is implicit in *Semiotics Unbounded.*