

PEIRCE, WELBY, AND THE CONVERGENCE OF SEMIOTIC AND SIGNIFICS

IONUȚ UNTEA

Abstract. The correspondence of Victoria Lady Welby with Charles S. Peirce, as well as the recent studies dedicated to the philosophical connections between semiotic and significs have well emphasized that, if Peirce has been considered the founding father of semiotics, then Welby needs to be acknowledged widely as its founding mother. This article attempts to compare notable common features of the two sciences and explore those aspects in which they converge harmoniously. While Welby's notion of "mother-sense" generated profound insights for Peirce's own reflection, up to the point of inclining him to reflect on "mother-wit," Welby's own emphasis on experience in the generation of the human early mind, converges with Peirce's orientation on pragmatism as a way of formulating clear and distinct ideas. At the time, both Peirce and Welby were not perceived as leading philosophical thinkers. Currently, they are the harbingers of the ethical turn in semiotics.

Keywords: C.S. Peirce; V. Welby; semiotic; significs; mother-sense; pragmatism; semioethics.

INTRODUCTION

It would be difficult to trace the influence of C.S. Peirce's thinking on Victoria Welby's work if it were not for the extensive correspondence between Welby and Peirce, as well as Welby's correspondence with other philosophical figures, especially because, as H. Walter Schmitz notes, Welby does not mention Peirce in her published work.¹ The first time the correspondence between Welby and Peirce was brought to the attention of scholarship was in 1953 by Irwin C. Lieb², who nevertheless published only Peirce's

¹ H. Walter Schmitz, "Victoria Lady Welby's significs: The origin of the signific movement", in H. Walter Schmitz (ed.), *Significs and Language: The articulate form of our expressive and interpretative resources by Victoria Lady Welby, Reprint of the edition London, 1911, and of two articles by V. Welby*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985, p. CL.

² Irwin C. Lieb (ed.), *Charles S. Peirce's letters to Lady Welby*, New Haven, Whitlock's, Inc., 1953.

Ionuț Untea ✉

Department of Philosophy and Science of Southeast University, Nanjing, China;
Dipartimento di Ricerca e Innovazione Umanistica, University of Bari Aldo Moro;
e-mail: ionutzltea@yahoo.com

Rev. Roum. Philosophie, **66**, 1, pp. 65–84, București, 2022

letters, which made Peirce's arguments hard to follow.³ To counter this deficiency, Charles S. Hardwick edited a new collection in 1977, in which he also included Welby's letters, thus offering scholars the possibility of exploring the fruitful exchange of ideas between the two thinkers.⁴ Four more letters addressed by Welby to Peirce were subsequently published in the section "Some Comments and 'New' Documents on the Correspondence between C.S. Peirce and Lady Welby" of the new edition of Welby's volume *Significs and Language*, edited by H. Walter Schmitz in 1985. Since then, scholars have become aware of Welby's wide and multifaceted effort, developed throughout her life, to generate what Petrilli has called "the Welby network"; this can be seen as the effort of generating and maintaining "expanding epistolary relations" with many personalities of her time.⁵

Apart from her correspondence with Peirce, Welby corresponded with other personalities, such as Michel Bréal, Bertrand Russell, Henry and William James, Charles Kay Ogden, Henri Bergson, Rudolf Carnap, André Lalande, Frederick Pollock, George F. Stout, Ferdinand C. S. Schiller, Giovanni Vailati and many others.⁶ The correspondence with Peirce started in 1903, after Peirce positively reviewed Welby's *What is Meaning?* and lasted until 1911, just a bit before Welby's death.⁷ This correspondence contributed to firmly establishing the intellectual profile of both Welby and Peirce. On one hand, the "connection with Peirce has been important in saving Welby and her significs from complete oblivion in semiotic circles".⁸ On the other hand, at the time the correspondence began Peirce himself was having trouble getting his ideas widely disseminated,⁹ and Welby's "epistolary network"¹⁰ brought these ideas firmly to the attention of a wide range of thinkers from Europe who had not previously encountered any of his writings.¹¹

For instance, Vailati was the first Italian thinker to enter in contact with Peirce's writings via Welby's correspondence with him, making Vailati "the first to introduce Peirce's pragmatism to Italy, proving to be without a doubt one of his most rigorous interpreters".¹² As Hardwick informs us, Welby even tried "to instigate an interchange

³ Priscila Borges, "Tracing signs of a developing science: On the correspondence between Victoria Lady Welby and Charles S. Peirce", *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1–4, 2013, p. 164.

⁴ Charles S. Hardwick (ed.), *Semiotic and significs: The correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1977.

⁵ Susan Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs: Significs, semiotics, philosophy of language*, New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers, 2015, p. 145.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 146.

⁷ Susan Petrilli, Augusto Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded: interpretive routes through the open network of signs*, Toronto, Buffalo and London, University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 83.

⁸ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 146.

⁹ P. Borges, "Tracing signs of a developing science", p. 183.

¹⁰ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 136.

¹¹ Gérard Deledalle, "Victoria Lady Welby and Charles Sanders Peirce: Meaning and signification", in H. Walter Schmitz (ed.), *Essays on significs: Papers presented on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Victoria Lady Welby (1837–1912)*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1990, p. 133.

¹² Susan Petrilli, "Presentation: Two texts at the beginning of a research itinerary. From significs to semioethics", *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1–4, 2013, p. 514.

of ideas” between Peirce, Bertrand Russell and J. Cook Wilson by sending to the latter and to George F. Stout, the editor of *Mind*, copies of Peirce’s letter of 14 December 1908 in which Peirce had explained to her the categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness.¹³ However, the effective reception of Peirce in England started when Charles K. Ogden, after reading copies of Peirce’s letters to Welby as a student in Cambridge, decided to include an excerpt from this correspondence as an appendix to the book *The Meaning of Meaning* that he co-authored with I. A. Richards.¹⁴ Ogden’s book was reviewed by Franck P. Ramsey, who was particularly attracted by the appendix.¹⁵ As Schmitz argues, it is possible that Ramsey and Ludwig Wittgenstein discussed Peirce’s ideas, and that Wittgenstein even examined Ogden’s book.¹⁶ Moreover, Ogden’s *Meaning of Meaning* also impressed Charles Morris, who had a decisive influence on Thomas Sebeok’s choice of career trajectory into semiotic studies.¹⁷

At the time of the exchange of letters with Welby, Peirce was still a “background” figure¹⁸ in the intellectual landscape, and Welby helped popularize his work. Peirce was having difficulties in gaining recognition, especially “because of his independent mind and original contributions in a great number of different subjects, making it hard to apply a conventional label to him”.¹⁹ While the correspondence with Welby helped Peirce making his ideas more widely known, this is not the immediate gain that Peirce had from this intellectual relationship. More than anything, Peirce found in Welby a precious interlocutor who had sensed, for the first time, what other established thinkers of his time had failed to see, that is his theory of signs. Since “Peirce had so much difficulty presenting his theory in a way acceptable both to himself and to his colleagues”,²⁰ the correspondence with Welby proved to be “crucial to the development of his own ideas”.²¹

Even the aspect that Welby could not follow the intricacies of Peirce’s “technical philosophy”²² constituted a further challenge to Peirce, as it helped him shape and reshape his theory in such a way as to make himself better understood. In the letter of 23 December 1908, Peirce admits that his endeavor to produce a convincing definition of the sign “is a sop to Cerberus, because I despair of making my own broader conception understood” (SS 81). Peirce’s and Welby’s common interest for a comprehensive theory of signs brought them to challenge each other’s thinking and, according to Deledalle,

¹³ Charles S. Hardwick, “Introduction”, in Charles S. Hardwick (ed.), *Semiotic and significs: The correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1977, pp. XXIX–XXX.

¹⁴ C. S. Hardwick, “Introduction”, p. XXI.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. XXXI.

¹⁶ H. W. Schmitz, “Victoria Lady Welby’s significs”, p. CLIII.

¹⁷ S. Petrilli, “Presentation”, p. 515.

¹⁸ John Deely, “Lady Welby and Lady Petrilli”, *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1-4, 2013, p. 17.

¹⁹ P. Borges, “Tracing signs of a developing science,” p. 183.

²⁰ C. S. Hardwick, “Introduction”, p. XXVI.

²¹ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 146.

²² C. S. Hardwick, “Introduction”, p. XXVIII.

“neither surrendered” in the effort to “convert” each other to the particular science each one was trying to establish (i.e., Peirce’s *semeiotic* and Welby’s signifiics).²³ That is why, while Peirce has been established as the “founding father” of twentieth-century semiotics, Welby has also come to be recognized as its “founding mother”.²⁴

This article will be developed in three steps. The first step is to identify the main reasons for which Peirce considered Welby’s work valuable even as a source of inspiration for his own thinking. Welby became an unexpected ally in Peirce’s struggle to make his own ideas clearer, and the correspondence with her represented for him an opportunity to look at his theory of signs from a fresh perspective. The second step explores the complementarities between Peirce’s semiotic and Welby’s signifiics and emphasizes in which aspects Welby’s “mother-sense” was meant to overwhelm the “gulf” between emotion and intellect in a way that resonated well with Peirce’s own theory of agapasm. The third step aims to argue that Welby’s language-oriented pragmatism rejoins Peirce’s emphasis on the weight of common sense and experience in the discovery by the human mind of an extra-rational activity in the universe and in nature which is sign activity. The essay will close by arguing that Peirce and Welby have been the harbingers of a new orientation in semiotics, more recently called semioethics, which conceives unlimited semiosis as resonating well toward the evolutionary formation of an unlimited, although responsible human conscience, which is thus endowed with unlimited responsibility.

1. PEIRCE’S REASONS FOR APPRECIATING WELBY’S WORK

Peirce’s decision to review Welby’s *What is Meaning?* together with Russell’s *Principles of Mathematics* represented an initial encouragement for Welby regarding the philosophical potential of her signifiics.²⁵ While in his review Peirce noted that “a too masculine mind might think parts of” this “feminine book” as “painfully weak,” he recommended the “male reader” to carefully read first the chapters XXII and XXIV dealing with the development of the primitive mind (CP 8.171). As Eschbach argues on the occasion of the reprinting of Welby’s book in 1983, even the twentieth century reader might find Peirce’s observation adequate, but if this does happen, then this kind of reader will have “to search for additional arguments” that “moved” Peirce, on one hand, to compare Welby’s book with that of Russell and, on the other hand, to give “a positive overall judgment” of her book.²⁶ In his review, Peirce considered that *What is Meaning?* addresses “a very fundamental question of logic,” to which the “authoress” answers in both theoretical and practical ways, while “incidentally” establishing “three orders of

²³ G. Deledalle, “Victoria Lady Welby and Charles Sanders Peirce”, p. 133.

²⁴ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 81.

²⁵ P. Borges, “Tracing signs of a developing science”, p. 168.

²⁶ Achim Eschbach, “Signifiics as a fundamental science”, in Victoria Lady Welby, *What is Meaning? Studies in the development of significance*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, p. XV.

signification” (CP 8.173). In Peirce’s opinion, the way these three orders are developed, that is “wisely” abstaining “from any attempt at formal definitions,” avoids “a long and needless discussion” (CP 8.173). This is enough for Eschbach to conclude that this indicates Peirce’s “far higher esteem than many Peirce scholars, who make only occasional mention of Lady Welby and then frequently in footnotes as the correspondence partner of the great semiotics expert”.²⁷

Peirce’s appreciation of Welby’s argument contained in the book as being “free from the slightest shade of pedantry or pretension” (CP 8.171), largely contrasted with his opinion of Russell’s *Principles of Mathematics*, which he confesses in the letter to Welby of 1 December 1903, to have found as a mere “digest of what others have done” and as “pretentious & pedantic, —attributing to its author merit that cannot be accorded to him” (SS 9). As soon as Peirce discovered Welby’s perspective, he employed it in his 1903 Harvard and Lowell lectures.²⁸ For instance, in the Lowell Lectures he praises the importance of Welby’s inquiry over meaning as a necessary understanding of three different grades of meaning, the lowest one consisting of “communicating our knowledge to others,” the second one appealing to the totality of intended “conditional prediction,” while the third one evokes “a vast ocean of unforeseen consequences which the acceptance of the word is destined to bring about, not merely consequences of knowing but perhaps revolutions of society” (CP 8.176). It is therefore Welby’s “feminine” way of looking at things and understanding meaning that made Peirce dramatically conclude: “One cannot tell what power there may be in a word or a phrase to change the face of the world” (CP 8.176).

Peirce was pleased to find in Welby an unexpected, but perhaps long sought for, ally “in an area that had occupied his own interests for a number of years”.²⁹ Like him, Welby had difficulties in making her work known due to “the unique nature of her ideas and partly to the difficulties of her style”,³⁰ but unlike him she also had to face the male prejudice against women thinkers, a prejudice that had initially tempted Peirce himself at the time of his review. While Welby’s association with Peirce might have played a role in Russell’s opinion that Welby’s way of thinking was “very wrong”,³¹ and while other thinkers, such as F. Tönnies, C.K. Ogden, and W. Macdonald criticized her for orienting herself toward a theory of signs that would not be restricted to linguistic signs, Peirce’s encouragements allowed her to develop her entry on signifiacs for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.³²

In his 1903 review, Peirce had already seen a parallelism between his thinking in triads and Welby’s own triad of *sense*, *meaning* and *significance*,³³ although he mis-

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. XVI.

²⁸ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 146.

²⁹ C. S. Hardwick, “Introduction”, p. XVI.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. XVI.

³¹ Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen, “Christine Ladd-Franklin’s and Victoria Welby’s correspondence with Charles Peirce”, *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1-4, 2013, p. 157.

³² H. W. Schmitz, “Victoria Lady Welby’s signifiacs”, p. CLII.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. CL.

takenly believed that Welby was inspired by Hegel.³⁴ In the letter of 18 November 1903, Welby dispels this presupposition, as she argues that she somehow naturally arrived at her thinking in triads before acquiring any knowledge about Hegel's philosophy (SS 7). In the letter of 14 March 1909, the very letter published as an appendix in Ogden's and Richards's *The Meaning of Meaning*, Peirce acknowledges that "my division" between *immediate* interpretant, *dynamical* interpretant and *final* interpretant "nearly coincides with yours" (SS 109).³⁵ The "greatest discrepancy," Peirce argues, lies between his dynamical interpretant and Welby's meaning because, for Peirce, the dynamical interpretant indicates a "direct effect actually produced by a Sign upon an Interpreter of it," while Welby's meaning indicates, in Peirce's view, the effect that the "utterer (whether vocally or by writing) of the sign intends to produce" upon "the mind of the Interpreter". Still, both "agree in being effects of the Sign upon an individual mind, I think, or upon a number of actual individual minds by independent action upon each" (SS 109–110).

Peirce's final interpretant "is, I believe, exactly the same as your Significance," indicating the "full effect" of the sign expressed in specific "circumstances" (SS 110) or as he had presented it in his review of 1903, "that which *would finally* be decided to be the true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached" (CP 8.184). As Petrilli understands it, "Peirce's final interpretant concerns the sign as it appears at the extreme limits of its interpretative possibilities, that is, it concerns all those possible responses that signs may provoke in the unlimited chain of interpretants"³⁶. This indeed corresponds with Welby's significance understood as "the maximum expression value of a sign".³⁷ In Welby's own words, the "philosophy of Significance" consists in "a raising of our whole conception of meaning to a higher and more efficient level"³⁸ and this is indeed Peirce's direction of thought, with the provision that, from this perspective, Peirce's "final" interpretant will never be "final" in an absolute sense, but only in a circumstantial way, as it reaches the limits of the interpretative possibilities, indicated by the "ultimate opinion" (CP 8.184) present in a certain context. Perhaps that is why, in the review, Peirce agreed that "Significance seems to be an excellent name" for his "final interpretant" since it indicates the "deepest and most lofty" level of signification (CP 8.184). Lastly, Peirce confesses to Welby, "[m]y Immediate Interpretant is, I think, very nearly, if not quite, the same as your 'sense,' because he sees it as "the effect the sign first produces or may produce upon a mind, without any reflection on it" (SS 110). This indeed corresponds with Welby's view of the sense, expressed in her article for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as "the organic response to environment" (SS 169).

For Peirce, the encounter with Welby meant a renewal of energy in pursuing his major insight into the study of signs. As Hardwick puts it, the reader of the correspond-

³⁴ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 154.

³⁵ Emphasis in original.

³⁶ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 155.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

³⁸ Victoria Lady Welby, *What is Meaning? Studies in the development of significance*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1983, p. 161.

ence “gets the impression that Peirce is dealing with semiotic from a fresh point of view”.³⁹ Following Borges, who argues that, throughout the correspondence, “Welby’s writing is more spontaneous and less concerned with proving all of the written statements”,⁴⁰ it can also be argued that Welby’s letters functioned as incentives for Peirce to render his thought more explicit, even if this certainly meant sometimes considering his task to be a “sop to Cerberus” (SS 81). In his letter of 25 May 1911 Peirce also sent Welby an early draft of an essay on her work (SS 145–147) which was meant to be included in a collective volume planned by George F. Stout and John W. Slaughter.⁴¹ This volume, entitled *Essays on Signifiacs*, was seen by Welby as a collective effort of dissemination regarding the study of signifiacs.⁴² Unfortunately, Welby’s death in 1912 discouraged the editors from pursuing the project.⁴³

It took more than six decades before Welby’s letters to Peirce were finally published in the 1977 *Semiotic and Signifiacs*, edited by Charles S. Hardwick, followed by the reprint of Welby’s *What is Meaning?* under the supervision of Achim Eschbach in 1983. Two years later, Welby’s *Signifiacs and Language*, which had initially appeared in 1911, was reprinted with two additional articles by Welby and an introduction by H. Walter Schmitz. The same Schmitz also planned a collective volume, which appeared in 1990, borrowing the title of the failed *Essays on Signifiacs* to which Peirce was expected to contribute, the volume being seen a homage to the earlier project.⁴⁴ Alongside the Dutch signifiacs movement in the first half of the twentieth century,⁴⁵ these late twentieth-century volumes contributed to the fulfillment of Welby’s wish to raise wider philosophical interest in a dimension of the theory of signs that Peirce’s “father-reason” could only sense, but for the development of which it certainly needed the “feminine” sensibility of the “mother-sense”.⁴⁶ As Welby wrote to Peirce in the letter of 4 December 1908: “I come to what is my business though in a much more elementary sense than it is yours. I mean the essential value of Sign; ‘so to speak, the Sign’s Soul’. For that, as you know, under the term Signifiacs and the phrase *what things signify*, is my special interest” (SS 63; CP 6.455).

2. MOTHER-SENSE AND FATHER-REASON: COMPLEMENTARITIES BETWEEN SEMIOTIC AND SIGNIFICS

Peirce had already opined, in the 1903 review, that Welby’s signifiacs seemed to him to be “chiefly” oriented towards the “study of words,” while admitting that her sci-

³⁹ C. S. Hardwick, “Introduction”, p. XXVIII.

⁴⁰ P. Borges, “Tracing signs of a developing science”, p. 179.

⁴¹ S. Petrilli, “Presentation”, p. 514.

⁴² P. Borges, “Tracing signs of a developing science”, p. 182; S. Petrilli, “Presentation”, p. 514.

⁴³ S. Petrilli, “Presentation”, p. 514.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 514.

⁴⁵ Susan Petrilli, “Early recognitions of Welby’s signifiacs and the movement it inspired in the Netherlands”, *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1-4, 2013, p. 551.

⁴⁶ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 16.

ence should be conceived in a wider sense as “the study of the relation of signs to their interpretants” (CP 8.184). From this perspective, over years of correspondence, he remained inclined to include signifiacs in his semiotic. For instance in the letter of 23 December 1908, where he explains to Welby how he expanded his logic from the mere inquiry on the relation between symbols and their objects to the study of all sorts of signs, he restated his opinion that signifiacs only studied the relation of signs with their interpretant, while his broader semiotic investigated the nature of the sign, as well as the relation of signs with their interpretant and with their object (SS 73–86).⁴⁷ In Schmitz’s view, in the letter of 14 March 1909 Peirce was worried that “the restriction to language” might have amounted to a further restriction “to one single language, namely English” (SS 118). Still, as Schmitz himself argues, “[b]oth Peirce and Lady Welby aimed for a general theory of signs which is in no way restricted to linguistic signs”.⁴⁸

Moreover, as Petrilli argues, the notion of meaning at the heart of Welby’s signifiacs needs to be seen as a relational notion, rather than a merely linguistic one. Petrilli argues that, since the movement that Welby’s signifiacs engendered among the Dutch signifiacians was oriented towards “the relation of action to values, considering not only the action of verbal signs, but also the great variety of nonverbal signs”, signifiacs as a science comes “closer to semiotics than to traditional linguistics”.⁴⁹ Even so, as Welby had already argued in the letter of 18 November 1903, signifiacs need not be reduced to a part of semiotic, but rather it was to be conceived as a “practical extension” of Peirce’s science (SS 6).⁵⁰ In the letter of 21 January 1909, Welby placed her signifiacs side by side with “semeiotic,” as a way to prevent its absorption into “your own more abstract, logically abstruse, philosophically profound conception of Semeiotic” (SS 91). For Petrilli, this meant that Welby was also trying to avoid the risk, perhaps entailed in Peirce’s approach to signs, of “a purely descriptive approach to studies on language, knowledge and expression,” which did not place enough emphasis on the “valuation” aspect of the “human semiosis,” as discoverable in the ethical, aesthetic, or the broad ideological approach characteristic of “human sign activity”.⁵¹

These considerations were motivated by Peirce’s ambivalent approach regarding the relationship between human reason and instincts that formed the common ground of human and non-human animals. On one hand, as he argued in the letter of 7 May 1904, “in my logic there is a great gulf between the methods proper to practical and to theoretical question, in which latter I will not allow instinct, ‘natural’ reason, etc. to have any voice at all” (SS 19–20). On the other hand, Peirce’s distinctive conception of the agapastic evolution of the universe (CP 6.302) and his emphasis on the power of

⁴⁷ P. Borges, “Tracing signs of a developing science”, pp. 176–177.

⁴⁸ H. W. Schmitz, “Victoria Lady Welby’s signifiacs”, pp. CLI–CLII.

⁴⁹ Susan Petrilli, *Signifying and understanding: Reading the works of Victoria Welby and the Signific Movement*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton, 2009, p. 765.

⁵⁰ Susan Petrilli, *Signifying and understanding*, p. 272; Anna Cabak Rédei, “Signs, senses and cognition: Lady Welby and contemporary semiotics”, *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1–4, 2013, p.190.

⁵¹ S. Petrilli, *Signifying and understanding*, p. 289.

“sympathy” (CP 7.591) as the intraspecies “élan” facilitating the transmission of a species’ “general purpose” from parents to offspring (CP 6.303; CP 8.108) brought him to allow for what Petrilli and Ponzio see as a “double valency” of “knowledge as a whole”: “knowledge was to be understood in the gnoseological and epistemological sense, but also in terms of responsible awareness, as dialogism between the interpreted and the interpretant signs, and in terms of intercorporeity, as an otherness relationship”.⁵² This agapastic conception goes as far as conferring “emotional overtones” to the Peircean perspective on human knowledge.⁵³

In the letter dated 29 June 1904, one can read what Petrilli and Ponzio call “Welby’s polemical response” to what Peirce saw as a “gulf” between reason and instincts:⁵⁴

But in *my* logic (if you will allow me any!) I see no great gulf, but only a useful distinction between methods proper to practical and theoretical questions. So then ‘Never confound, and never divide’ is in these matters my motto. And I had gathered, I hope not quite mistakenly, that you also saw the disastrous result of digging gulfs to *separate* when it was really a question of *distinction*, —as sharp and clear as you like. (SS 21)⁵⁵

Petrilli and Ponzio further argue that, in Welby’s horizon, a separation between “logic in the strict sense” and what she called “primal sense,” or “mother sense” was out of the question, as the “original or primal dimension” of sense “interweaves” with “rational, intellectual life”.⁵⁶ In this way, “[s]ignifiacs sets itself the task of recovering the relation of reciprocal interpretation between the constant *données* of mother-sense, on the one hand, and constructions of the intellect, on the other”.⁵⁷ In a previous letter, dated 22 December 1903, Welby had also connected the problem of the gulf between emotion and intellect and Peirce’s appeal to love as a distinctively creative power in the universe:

May I say in conclusion that I see strongly how much we have lost and are losing by the barrier which we set up between emotion and intellect, between feeling and reasoning. Distinction must of course remain. I am the last person to wish this blurred. But I should like to put it thus: The difference e. g. between our highest standards of love and the animal’s is that they imply knowledge in logical order. We know *that*, *what*, *how* and above all, *why* we love. Thus the logic is bound up in that very feeling which we contrast with it. But while in our eyes logic is merely ‘formal’, merely structural, merely question of argument, ‘cold and hard’, we need a word which shall express the combination of ‘logic and love’. And this I have tried to supply in ‘Signifiacs’. (SS 15)⁵⁸

⁵² S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 41.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

⁵⁵ Emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 72.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 72.

⁵⁸ Emphasis in original.

More generally, the task of signification will be to explore the connection between “mother-sense” or “primal sense” on one hand and “intellect,” of “father-reason,” on the other hand.⁵⁹

As Petrilli explains Welby’s choice of terms, by this distinction Welby did not wish to deepen the gulf between genders in doing philosophy, but to express “two predominant modalities in the engendering of sense” in the human being’s capacity to think.⁶⁰ Indeed, the fact that her work had been called too “feminine” by Peirce himself might tempt the reader to think that she was simply reacting to prejudices against women philosophers and to a male-infused approach to human intellect. While her reference to “mother-sense” undoubtedly involves and advocates the contribution to human sensibility brought by the feminine sensing of reality and relationships, her philosophical goal was indeed one of avoiding separations of any kind, including a gender-infused separation between male- and female-specific thinking. That is why Welby describes mother-sense as both “primordial” in the sense of being a step further in the development of the animal instinct, and “universal,” in the sense of being more or less present, in varying degrees, in all stages of human development, irrespective of gender differences.⁶¹

Welby’s conception of mother-sense finds roots in a Peircean soil oriented rather towards what she calls “father-reason,” or intellect,⁶² but which nevertheless does not exclude “creative love,” or agapasm (CP 6.302) and the concept of “the Sensible Heart” (CP 6.295) which is not incompatible with scientific outlook, as long as the mind preoccupied with scientific accuracy does not lose sight of human realities, such as communion, or interrelational and intersubjective dimensions of knowledge and the self.⁶³ Thinking through the Peircean framework of logic and argumentation, Petrilli and Ponzio argue that Welby’s conception of “intellect,” or “father-reason” matches the Peircean dimension of the “logic of identity,” which can be associated with the inferential actions of induction and deduction.⁶⁴ Moreover, in the semiotic approach, “father-reason” may be associated with indexicality and symbolicality. In contrast, they argue, “mother-reason” may be associated with the Peircean “logic of otherness,” bringing to light “the creative and generative power of sense that is a result of the capacity to associate things that would seem distant from one another but that are actually mutually attracted to one another”.⁶⁵ From this point of view, “mother-sense” seems rather to correspond to the abductive inferential attitudes, as long as they “are regulated by the values of otherness, creativity, dialogism, freedom, and desire”, while in semiotic terms it evokes the iconic dimension of signs.⁶⁶ In this view, Welby’s “mother-sense” is not only compatible with the Peircean framework of thought, but also introduces its complementary dimensions

⁵⁹ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 16.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

⁶¹ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 356.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 70.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

which better emphasizes something which the focus on the work of intellect would leave unnoticed, despite its struggle to reason upon love, uniqueness of an individual and interrelationship.

As he had shown from the beginning of his conversation with Welby, Peirce wanted to emphasize the potential danger of confusing the sign itself with the marginal aspects related to the sound or the voice of the one who speaks. This might mean that Peirce was rather preoccupied with safeguarding the “living freedom” of the sign (CP 6.305) which, in this perspective, might suffer from the distracting sound of the voice of the one who speaks. Still, as Welby reacts, this approach might unfairly bring “father-reason” on the verge of excluding anything that does not fit with the obsession of logical coherence, and thus ignore the very sensibility related to the feminine side of any human being, the exclusion of which might leave a void in human creative possibilities.

Moreover, in the horizon of the Peircean “interpretive-cognitive model” which proposes that the meaning of a sign develops into another sign⁶⁷, corroborated with the iconic dimension on which “mother-sense” capitalizes, it can be argued that the one who speaks is not merely the “vehicle” of the sign.⁶⁸ The speakers, through the dimension of iconism, may themselves become signs, infusing into the sign the vocal aspects which at first seemed marginal or irrelevant in the interpretation of the previous sign. Hence Welby’s emphasis on the quality of the experience of the sign as indicated by “mother-sense,” its enquiry upon this experience being developed through sense, meaning and signification. Perhaps this is why Rédei emphasizes that “[t]he qualitative aspects in Welby seem to match Peirce’s conception of the final interpretant (something to strive for)”.⁶⁹ At the same time, the unlimited semiosis characteristic to the triadic structure of the sign that both Peirce and Welby embrace indicates that neither the “final interpretant,” nor “significance” will ever be seen as “final” in the sense of reaching an absolute meaning as in code semiotics rooted in the tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure.⁷⁰ This aspect will become even clearer with the exploration of the pragmatic dimension in which semiotic and signifiacs meet.

3. THE PRAGMATIC DIMENSION CONNECTING SEMIOTIC AND SIGNIFICS

The convergence of signifiacs and semiotic has both struggled and gained new ground when it came to Peirce’s and Welby’s understanding of language. In his review of Welby’s book, Peirce argued that she might “not realize how deep the knife would have to go into the body of speech to make it really scientific” (CP 8.175). Already in a

⁶⁷ S. Petrilli, *Signifying and understanding*, p. 538.

⁶⁸ John Deely, “A sign is *what?* A dialogue between a semiotician and a would-be realist”, *Sign Systems Studies*, vol. 29, nr. 2, 2001, p. 733.

⁶⁹ A. C. Rédei, “Signs, senses and cognition”, p. 192.

⁷⁰ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 218.

series of letters, such as those of 18 November 1903, 22 April 1904, and 21 January 1909, Welby had shown that she took seriously Peirce's warning.⁷¹ From the perspective obsessed with reasoning and intellect, Welby's vision might appear surprising: in order to achieve the precision of the scientific tool, language needs not be conceived as encoded with precise and finite meanings, but rather the terminological precision of language stems from *sense*, understood as an "organic response to environment," develops with *meaning* in the evaluation of the intention of the use of language, and matures with *signification*, which includes the organic character of sense and the intention involved in meaning, but at the same time strives toward "the far-reaching consequence, implication, ultimate result or outcome of some event or experience" (SS 169). From this point of view, precision is not a question of the analysis of words taken out of context, but precisely a work of training, which needs to start from the earliest age, so as to perfect human receptivity to the environment of language and include its sensing into the meaning and significance of language. This means that there is a need for an "educational signification" (SS 89) which would help new generations to discover practically how experience informs language.⁷²

From this perspective, Welby's language-oriented pragmatism rejoins Peirce's critical common sensism which, rooted in Peirce's early critique of Kant, points toward the aspect that doubt does not come from the exclusive effort of the will, but also from experience, that is from common sense.⁷³ Moreover, like Peirce, Welby rejects introspection as a flawless way of knowing or cognition without emotion⁷⁴ and comes close to Peirce's emphasis on sympathy in his proposal of the "agapastic theory of evolution" (CP 6.295). Doubt, for instance, is part of a constructive process in which common sense is involved and contributes to the clarification of vague ideas. Even vague insights of the primitive human beings, such as that fire burns, have their contribution to forming indubitable beliefs,⁷⁵ and to doubt such instincts would amount to alienating oneself from reality. As Peirce argues, even great intellectuals cannot hold their breath for too long (CP 5.499), and this may show that instincts are only dominated by reason, but not completely irrelevant in the formation of indubitable beliefs. To doubt without taking into account the evidence from the experience would amount to doubting for the sake of doubting, an attitude which the pragmatist wishes to avoid by taking into consideration not only reason and will, but also the experience of common sense.⁷⁶

Already in *What is Meaning?* Welby had emphasized the impossibility for the "early mind" to "start from a complete break" from the environment, and argued that the human mind expanded precisely thanks to the import of "self-acting clues derived through the organic from the physical world" into "the imaginative and intellectual

⁷¹ P. Borges, "Tracing signs of a developing science", pp. 169–170.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 170.

⁷³ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 55.

⁷⁴ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 54.

⁷⁵ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 55.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

region”.⁷⁷ In his review, Peirce agrees with Welby’s argument, finding in her an ally against the theories of E. B. Tylor and Herbert Spencer, who had depicted the primitive mind as a deficient instrument of early hominids.⁷⁸ As Petrilli and Ponzio argue, Welby’s perspective on the human mind, developed in her essay “Is There a Break in Mental Evolution?” parallels that of Peirce, exposed in “Logic and Spiritualism” (CP 6.557–6.587),⁷⁹ in which Peirce rejected the Cartesian view “that the mind consists solely of that which directly asserts itself in unitary consciousness” (CP 6.569).

From this perspective, Peirce’s pragmatism is not oriented, as that of William James, toward merely settling disputes, but rather to bringing more precision to vague ideas of common experience.⁸⁰ Welby too was advocating for a change of approach to the understanding that diminished the importance of primitive cultures in human evolution.⁸¹ By granting a link between the more developed human mind and nature’s physical and biological processes via the primitive, or early mind, both Peirce and Welby oriented their inquiry over the importance of common experience to formulating clear and distinct ideas. What Peirce understood, and Welby insisted upon, was a kind of extra-rational activity existing everywhere in the physical and biological environment, and even in the universe at large, which nevertheless resonated well with human reason through a kind of reasonableness of matter made evident through vibrations and movements oriented toward certain goals. This activity, much wider than the activity of the human reason, could only be understood as sign activity.

Welby’s emphasis regarding the intimate connection between sign activity in the universe and human reasoning had already appeared clearly to one of her earliest commentators. As Petrilli informs us, L. P. Jacks, the author of the Introduction of the 1931 edition of some of Welby’s letters, edited by her daughter Mrs. Henry (Nina) Cust and entitled *Other Dimensions: A Selection from the Later Correspondence of Victoria Lady Welby*, characterizes Welby’s approach in the following manner: “Like the universe, whose offspring it is, thought rests—so we learn—on no ‘foundations,’ but revolves in an endlessly ‘ascending spiral’ to higher forms of itself, retaining its conquests and perpetually enlarging them”.⁸² This resonates well with Peirce’s “semeiotic” (CP 8.343) since, as Petrilli and Ponzio argue, for Peirce, “terms such as ‘mind,’ ‘thought,’ and ‘semiosis’ are in some respects interchangeable”.⁸³ This means that both Peirce and Welby understand human thought in a non-Cartesian way, as indeed the “offspring” of the semiotic processes that are to be found everywhere in the universe. This development, from more simple, or “primitive,” or “early” mind-consol-

⁷⁷ V. Welby, *What is Meaning?*, p. 167.

⁷⁸ Vincent Colapietro, “The life of significance: Cultivating ingenuity no less than signs”, *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1-4, 2013, p. 43, p. 53.

⁷⁹ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 123.

⁸⁰ C. S. Hardwick, “Introduction”, p. XXVI.

⁸¹ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 123.

⁸² S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 111.

⁸³ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 45.

dating semiosis to autonomous rational capacities has been possible, in Peirce's view, thanks to the unlimited chain of semiotic developments, which Deely calls the "semiotic spiral".⁸⁴ Welby sees this development as a "translation", that is a semiotic process involving not only human thinking, but also physical and biological transformations determined by the activity of signs.⁸⁵

Moreover, the very notion of a *distinction* (but, as Welby warned, not *separation*) between biological body and semiotic body which, according to Petrilli and Ponzio,⁸⁶ is suggested in Peirce's reflection that we are not "shut up in a box of flesh and blood" (CP 7.591) brings the body to the fore, in the same way that Welby wishes to emphasize, as a privileged experiential filter and interface for all sign processes in the world that influence, through the activity of the body, the individual's thinking activity. After all, while Peirce notes that the universe is "perfused with signs," and perhaps "composed exclusively of signs" (CP 5.448), this also means that the pleroma of signs that permeate the universe are indeed "at a remove from the actions of external agents," and can never depend on "the action of interpretive will".⁸⁷

The development of sign activity in nature in such a way as to lead to the emergence of human thought is expressed by Peirce in the following way:

What is the physiological function of thought? If we say it is action, we must mean the government of action to some end. To what end? It must be something, good or admirable, regardless of any ulterior reason. This can only be the esthetically good. But what is esthetically good? Perhaps we may say the full expression of an idea? Thought, however, is in itself essentially of the nature of a sign. But a sign is not a sign unless it translates itself into another sign in which it is more fully developed. Thought requires achievement for its own development, and without this development it is nothing. Thought must live and grow in incessant new and higher translations, or it proves itself not to be genuine thought. (CP 5.594)

In her essay *To What End?* dated 8 June 1907, Welby exposes similarities between her perspective and that of Peirce, while placing emphasis on the process of translation. Welby believes that human beings themselves are the actual result of translative processes expressing the expansion of semiosis from the vegetable to the animal realm and further toward the development of emotional and intellectual life.⁸⁸

Welby's theory of translation meets Peirce's pragmatism in the sense that Peirce's infinite semiotic chain of reactions can never be realized in a void, or, in the case that there is a human subjectivity involved, this subjectivity will never be able to claim neutrality.⁸⁹ As Petrilli and Ponzio argue, any Peircean interpretant is both a

⁸⁴ John Deely, "Physiosemissis in the semiotic spiral: A play of musement", *Sign Systems Studies*, vol. 29, nr. 1, 2001, p. 27.

⁸⁵ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 543.

⁸⁶ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 53.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

⁸⁸ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 135.

⁸⁹ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 41.

response and a summoning toward another interpretant, and the “response” needs to be conceived as “relating to practical action”.⁹⁰ From this perspective, Welby’s intuition that “semiosis is not possible without translation”⁹¹ points toward the pragmatic aspect of any semiosis and any thought developed on its basis. On one hand, the full meaning of translation will be recovered if translation is ultimately formulated “into valid terms of life and thought”.⁹² On the other hand, if the human being “fails to make his translation—to moralise and humanize his knowledge of the cosmos, and so to unify and relate it to himself,” then, “mentally,” the human being “lags behind his enacted experience”.⁹³

Experience plays a crucial part in the very orientation of the sign toward higher and higher meanings, and at the same time the sign itself remains centered on enlarging the possibility of a particular experience to a wider number of individuals. As Peirce argues in the letter to Welby dated 12 October 1904, “[i]t appears to me that the essential function of a sign is to render inefficient relations efficient,—not to set them into action, but to establish a habit or general rule whereby they will act on occasion” (SS 31). The mere action, or inciting the participants in a semiotic relationship simply to act in a particular way is not something that the sign aims at, but rather this action needs to find constructive ends, which mean in many cases to generate habits of action and reaction and predictability in the interaction between those participants, even though, ultimately the lack of absolute predictability and habit is the condition of emergence of subsequent, and more developed, interpretants. Indeed, on one hand, the Peircean “general definition of sign does not remain frozen at the level of abstraction; rather, it is described as orienting praxis”.⁹⁴ On the other hand, any sign aims at identifying the “truth,” and is still based on a “logic” that includes “vagueness” (CP 5.506), which itself points toward the importance of the dimension of “dialogism”⁹⁵ for remaining in a fresh orientation toward “the eternal life of the ideas Truth and Right” (CP 1.219).

In *What is Meaning?* Welby had already expressed a perspective that remains compatible with Peirce’s pragmatism: “There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as the Sense of a word, but only the sense in which it is used—the circumstances, state of mind, reference, ‘universe of discourse’ belonging to it”.⁹⁶ That is why, for her, translation is not an automatic process, such as those generated today by computer software, but rather an event of concrete experience: it is an “encounter and opening toward new worlds”.⁹⁷ This means that, for Welby too, as for Peirce, “meaning develops in trans-

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

⁹¹ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 158.

⁹² Victoria Lady Welby, *Significs and language: The articulate form of our expressive and interpretative resources*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985, pp. 2–3.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 2–3.

⁹⁴ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 46.

⁹⁵ Augusto Ponzio, “Modeling, dialogue, and globality: Biosemiotics and semiotics of self. 1. Semiosis, modeling, and dialogism”, *Sign Systems Studies*, vol. 31, nr.1, 2003, p. 31.

⁹⁶ V. Welby, *What is Meaning?*, p. 5.

⁹⁷ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 165.

lative-interpretative processes from one sign to the next and is forever in becoming”.⁹⁸ Moreover, the way in which Welby understands that translation is somehow automatic comes in sharp contrast with the “code semiotics” emerging from the Saussurean tradition.⁹⁹ Placing her inquiry firmly in the “interpretation semiotics” perspective revived by Peirce,¹⁰⁰ Welby acknowledges the manifestation of an “automatic process of translative thinking” rather in the sense that, wherever we look, “[e]verything suggests or reminds us of something else”.¹⁰¹ This means that experience plays an essential role in the formulation of translation, so as to prevent it from going astray, while at the same time opening the sense toward new aspects of reality which enhance the sign’s “signifying capacity”.¹⁰²

Both Peirce’s “final interpretant” and Welby’s “significance” are actually formulated on the basis of the concrete experience possible in certain contexts. From this perspective, both need to be understood as “final” in the sense of tempering their agonistic strive toward outside themselves. Their “condition of unfinalizability”¹⁰³ needs to be both tempered and reemphasized for the sake of recovering the “essential value of Sign; ‘so to speak, the Sign’s Soul’ (SS 63; CP 6.455) discovered in the concrete encounter with other interlocutors, individuals or even semiotic objects. As Peirce argues, there are “myriads of forms into which a proposition may be translated,” but the “very meaning” of this proposition is both that which “becomes applicable to human conduct” and that which “lies in the future” (CP 5.427). Meaning is therefore developed through the interplay between effectiveness in “these or those special circumstances” and “self-control,” which carries effectiveness toward future, that is to make it applicable to “every situation, and to every purpose” (CP 5.427). This might be read as a suggestion that the “final” interpretant is that which can be read as the most *valuable* interpretant, not only because it can be effective here and now, but also because it remains somehow *in futuro* (CP 1.218), that is always open-ended even for a future radical translation, although containing concretely the incentives for current self-control.

For Welby, significs aspires to embrace what is valuable in the concrete meaning stemming from the experience of the average semiotic being:

‘Significs’ sums up what for the ‘man in the street’ *signifies*; whatever does not signify, he will tell you, is nothing to him; and he well understands that the value of a sign is not that it may mean anything you like, and thus be used to confuse, bewilder, mislead, or that it means what is no concern of his, but that it means somewhat which in some sense has interest either for him or his fellows: he knows that it is his business to find out what this is. He knows also that signs of all kinds

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 156.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 156.

¹⁰¹ V. Welby, *What is Meaning?*, p. 34.

¹⁰² S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p. 156.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*, p. 165.

must point beyond themselves, must in that sense ‘mean’ something, or they would not be signs at all.¹⁰⁴

This approach in the conception of the sign echoes indeed Peirce’s vision that signs emerge at the interface between triadic relations. Therefore, in Welby, as also in Peirce, the sign which is grounded, as Petrilli and Ponzio argue, on “the logic of otherness,” may be seen as always “extralocalized”.¹⁰⁵

While Welby’s above-quoted text resonates well with the Peircean perspective, at the same time there is a difference of orientation in her pragmatic approach regarding the experience of signs in action and the valuation of their meaning. Welby seems to be preoccupied with finding meaning down to the experience that usually does not attract enough philosophical attention, this being the experience of the “man in the street”.¹⁰⁶ This is a way of “harvesting” valuable interpretants even from the “arid soils” of the experience of those deemed incapable of higher insights.¹⁰⁷ For Welby anybody can be a “significian,” as anybody is, at certain points in their life, a “man of action,” who “must translate thought into deed as fast as ideas come to him; and he may ruin the cause he would serve by missing the significance of things”.¹⁰⁸ Welby thus emphasizes a horizon taking into account a pragmatism of “the Why-Asker,” children and simple people asking instinctively philosophical questions such as “What does it all mean?” or “Why is it thus?”¹⁰⁹

From this perspective, the encounter between Welby’s signifiacs and Peirce’s semiotic has helped paving the way toward what has been called the “turn to ethics” within semiotics,¹¹⁰ and which saw Peirce’s and Welby’s insights being developed by their twentieth-century followers, such as Vailati, Morris, Bakhtin, Sebeok, Schaff, Rossi-Landi, Ponzio and Petrilli.¹¹¹ At the core of this tradition of thought rests the idea that knowledge of signs can never claim neutrality,¹¹² being inextricably connected with the values of the knowers and the values that the signs themselves summon from those who experience them and enter in contact with each other. Semioethics, the inheritor of this tradition, capitalizes on a vision that is less elitist, strives to avoid philosophical jargon, or the fallback of lively thinking into ideology, and treasures embodied dimensions of the experience of reality and otherness. Semioethics evidences the relationship between, on the one hand, the values and the ethos giving *telos* to the potentially infinite semiosis, and, on the other hand, human infinite responsibility.

¹⁰⁴ V. Welby, *What is Meaning?*, p. 8. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁵ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 46.

¹⁰⁶ V. Welby, *What is Meaning?*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁷ Ionut Untea, “Semioethics and the Average Life: Philosophical Harvesting from Arid Soils”, *The American Journal of Semiotics*, vol. 37, nr.1-2, 2021, p. 47.

¹⁰⁸ V. Welby, *What is Meaning?*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, p.198.

¹¹⁰ John Deely, “Ethics and the Semiosis-Semiotics Distinction”, *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*, vol. 37, nr. 3-4, 2015, p. 13. pp. 13–30.

¹¹¹ S. Petrilli, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs*, p.158.

¹¹² *Ibidem*, p.158.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Peirce and Welby were part of a “generation coming of age in the wake of Darwin,” which took seriously the challenge “to explain how humans and their world were of a piece,” in contrast with the vision, cultivated by evolutionists such as Tylor and Spencer, of a radical break of the modern human mind from the more primitive cultures and from nature in general.¹¹³ Peirce and Welby believed that a gap between modern and primitive mind could not explain the survival of the human species and human evolution itself, which is why they focused on the “ingenious competence” of the primitive, or the early mind.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the postulation of a gap between modern human mind and the primitive mind of its ancestors will always remain an insurmountable obstacle in understanding the connections between the human embodied being and nature’s embodiments, and ultimately, the activity of signs founding these connections.

In the letter dated 22 December 1903, Welby writes to Peirce: “May I say in conclusion that I see strongly how much we have lost and are losing by the barrier which we set up between emotion and intellect, between feeling and reasoning” (SS 15). Peirce borrows from Welby the insight on “mother-sense” to talk in the following way:

Man’s fully-conscious inferences have no quantitative delicacy, except where they repose on arithmetic and measurement, which are mechanical processes; and they are almost as likely as not to be downright blunders. But unconscious or semi-conscious irreflective judgments of mother-wit, like instinctive inferences of brutes, answer questions of ‘how much’ with curious accuracy; and are seldom totally mistaken. (CP 6.569)

In Colapietro’s view, both Welby and Peirce strive toward making visible a “life of significance” through the putting into practice of the “human ingenuity” comprised in the vital aspect of “mother-wit”.¹¹⁵ It is under the influence of this “mother-wit” or “mother-sense,” or as Peirce also calls it, “*instinctive insight*,” that human beings get to sense “certain highly pervasive laws” in nature (CP 5.604) and actively develop thinking in accordance with “nature’s pattern” (CP 7.39). This suggests that human thinking is a kind of evolved resonance of the vibration of the signs at work at the heart of nature’s life processes.

One of the greatest challenges that the orientation toward bridging the gap between human mind and nature’s processes has to deal with was expressed by Peirce in a humble and, arguably, less optimistic manner regarding the potential fruits of his early writings. Despite his decade-long effort to cultivate his ideas in a coherent manner, he was not sure about the outcome, since “the harvest time has come, at last, and to me that harvest seems a wild one” (CP 1.12). At a later stage, nevertheless, Peirce adopted a more optimistic tone, warmed up by the appeal to an insight echoing a kind of human reasoning appropriating vibrations similar to those found in nature’s growth and beauty: “It is not

¹¹³ V. Colapietro, “The life of significance”, p. 52.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

by dealing out cold justice to the circle of my ideas that I can make them grow, but by cherishing and tending them as I would the flowers in my garden” (CP 6.289). In Colapietro’s view, Peirce’s employment of the wild harvest metaphor suggests the impossibility of a complete mastery over “our own meanings”.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, in the light of Peirce’s later ideas, some of which being articulated through fruitful exchanges with Welby, it may be argued that this impossibility of mastery can be read rather in terms of the impossibility of imposition of one’s own formulated meanings on other people’s minds, something which Colapietro himself acknowledges.¹¹⁷ At the same time, it may also be seen as an incentive for human beings to take upon themselves the great task of cultivating not only ideas, but also values.

This means that the potentially unlimited generation of ideas by human minds which matches the infinite semiosis in nature needs to be connected with the attitude of responsibility which limits, although does not necessarily constrain the creative possibilities of thought. As Peirce and Welby have intuited, and as it has been lately developed in the semioethic approach, the ethical leap that human beings are bound to make, from the perception and reasoning upon unlimited semiosis to the embracing of the task of “unlimited responsibility”¹¹⁸ is a matter that might concern life on the entire planet, or even in the universe at large.

REFERENCES

- Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 1–6, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 1931–1935; vols. 7–8, ed. Arthur Burks, 1958, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1958. (CP)
- Semiotic and signifiacs: The correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, edited by Charles S. Hardwick, Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1977. (SS)
- Borges, Priscila, “Tracing signs of a developing science: On the correspondence between Victoria Lady Welby and Charles S. Peirce”, *Semiotica* vol. 196, nr. 1-4, 2013, pp. 163–184.
- Colapietro, Vincent, “The life of significance: Cultivating ingenuity no less than signs”, *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1-4, 2013, pp. 35–56.
- Deely, John, “Ethics and the Semiosis-Semiotics Distinction”, *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*, vol. 37, nr. 3-4, 2015, pp. 13–30.
- Deely, John, “Lady Welby and Lady Petrilli”, *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1–4, 2013, p. 13–20.
- Deely, John, “A sign is *what*? A dialogue between a semiotician and a would-be realist”, *Sign Systems Studies*, vol. 29, nr. 2, 2001, pp. 705–743.
- Deely, John, “Physiosemosis in the semiotic spiral: A play of musement”, *Sign Systems Studies*, vol. 29, nr. 1, 2001, pp. 27–48.
- Deledalle, Gérard, “Victoria Lady Welby and Charles Sanders Peirce: Meaning and signification”, in H. Walter Schmitz (ed.), *Essays on signifiacs: Papers presented on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Victoria Lady Welby (1837–1912)*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1990, pp. 133–149.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 50–51.

¹¹⁸ S. Petrilli, A. Ponzio, *Semiotics unbounded*, p. 386.

- Eschbach, Achim, "Significs as a fundamental science", in Victoria Lady Welby, *What is Meaning? Studies in the development of significance*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1983, pp. IX–XXXII.
- Hardwick, Charles S. "Introduction", in Charles S. Hardwick (ed.), *Semiotic and significs: The correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, Bloomington and London, Indiana University Press, 1977, pp. XV–XXXIV.
- Lieb, Irwin C. (ed.), *Charles S. Peirce's letters to Lady Welby*, New Haven, Whitlock's, Inc., 1953.
- Petrilli, Susan, *Victoria Welby and the science of signs: Significs, semiotics, philosophy of language*, New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers, 2015.
- Petrilli, Susan, "Early recognitions of Welby's significs and the movement it inspired in the Netherlands", *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1-4, 2013, pp. 551–570.
- Petrilli, Susan, "Presentation: Two texts at the beginning of a research itinerary. From significs to semioethics", *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1-4, 2013, pp. 513–519.
- Petrilli, Susan. *Signifying and understanding: Reading the works of Victoria Welby and the Signific Movement*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton, 2009.
- Petrilli, Susan; Ponzio, Augusto, *Semiotics unbounded: interpretive routes through the open network of signs*, Toronto, Buffalo and London, University of Toronto Press, 2005.
- Pietarinen, Ahti-Veikko, "Christine Ladd-Franklin's and Victoria Welby's correspondence with Charles Peirce", *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1-4, 2013, pp. 139–161.
- Ponzio, Augusto, "Modeling, dialogue, and globality: Biosemiotics and semiotics of self. 1. Semiosis, modeling, and dialogism", *Sign Systems Studies*, vol. 31, nr.1, 2003, pp. 25–63.
- Rédei, Anna Cabak, "Signs, senses and cognition: Lady Welby and contemporary semiotics", *Semiotica*, vol. 196, nr. 1-4, 2013, pp. 185–195.
- Schmitz, H. Walter, "Victoria Lady Welby's significs: The origin of the signific movement", in H. Walter Schmitz (ed.), *Significs and Language: The articulate form of our expressive and interpretative resources by Victoria Lady Welby, reprint of the edition London, 1911, and of two articles by V. Welby*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985, pp. IX–CCLXVII.
- Untea, Ionuț, "Semioethics and the average life: Philosophical harvesting from arid soils", *The American Journal of Semiotics*, vol. 37, nr.1-2, 2021, pp. 47–69.
- Welby (Lady), Victoria, *Significs and language: The articulate form of our expressive and interpretative resources*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985.
- Welby (Lady), Victoria, *What is Meaning? Studies in the development of significance*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1983.