

# Semioethics and Literary Writing: Between Peirce and Bakhtin

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## *Abstract*

In the early phase of its development, semiotics was understood as “semeiotics” and studied symptoms. Today we propose to recover this ancient dimension of semiotics focussed on health, care and the quality of life, and reorganise it in *semioethical* terms. In fact, as interference increases in communication between the historico-social sphere and the biological, between culture and nature, between the semiosphere and the biosphere, the need for a “semioethical turn” in the study of signs with an understanding of the relation of signs to values has become ever more urgent.

Literary writing is particularly interesting from this perspective thanks to its extraordinary capacity to stage values that animate life to the best in terms of the properly human. These values are characterized by high degrees of opening to the other, by responsiveness/answerability toward the other, by a propensity for listening to the other, for giving time to the other.

Construed on relations of distancing and at once of affinity among signs, metaphor—or more broadly imagery, figurative language—is emblematic of literary writing, though not limited to it. As amply demonstrated by Victoria Welby, far from serving as a mere decorative supplement, the figurative dimension of expression is structural to signifying processes, to the acquisition itself of knowledge and understanding. Welby’s work may be read as prefiguring recent trends in language studies as represented by cognitive linguistics today.

Mikhail Bakhtin has also made an important contribution in this sense. He has developed the study of signs in terms of moral philosophy and, in fact, his approach to semiotics is easily oriented in the sense of semioethics. In such a framework he evidences the close relationship between sign studies and literary writing. For a full understanding of the sense of Bakhtin’s approach to studies on verbal language, it is important to highlight his insistence on the inexorable interconnection—which he describes as direct and dialectical—between literary language and life.

Bakhtin deals with questions of literary writing from the perspective of literature itself. His excursions outside the field of literature do not imply recourse to an external viewpoint

with claims to offering a description that is totalizing and systemic. On the contrary, Bakhtin remains inside literature and never leaves it; literature is his observation post, the perspective from which he conducts his critique, which is anti-systemic and detotalizing. Bakhtin reveals the internal threads that connect literature to the extra-literary, thematizing the condition of structural intertextuality in the connection between literary texts and extra-literary texts. In Bakhtin's view, the literary text subsists and develops in its specificity as a literary text thanks to its implication with the external universe. Such implication is also understood in an ethical sense.

Charles Peirce's semiotics as well has a focus on the relation between cognition, the interpersonal relation, communication and moral value. He evidences the development of signifying pathways (the open-ended chain of interpretants) which he describes as potentially infinite, the role of the imagination and musement in abductive inferential processes, of similarity (in particular the agapastic) in metaphor, and of metaphor in abduction with its capacity for invention and innovation. All this makes Peirce's *Collected Papers* another precious source for reflection, together with Bakhtin's texts, on the relation between semioethics and literary writing.

***Keywords: answerability/responsiveness, cognition, creativity, intertextuality, listening***

## 1. Semiotics and Semioethics

In the early phase of its development semiotics was understood as "semeiotics" and studied symptoms. Today we propose to recover this ancient dimension of semiotics focussed on health, care and the quality of life, and reorganise it in *semioethical* terms. In fact, as interference grows in communication between the historico-social sphere and the biological, between culture and nature, between the semiosphere and the biosphere, the need for a "semioethical turn" in the study of signs with an understanding of the relation of signs to values has become ever more urgent.

Symptoms were the first signs to be studied scientifically. As such they constitute a historically important category for the beginnings of the science of signs, semiotics. From this point of view, let us evoke the work of the "father of medicine", Hippocrates of Kos (c. 460 BC - c. 370 BC), and of the physician and philosopher (as he defined himself), Galen of Pergamon (129 AD - c. 200 or 216 AD). "Semiotics" today indicates the general science of signs according to a tradition that extends from John Locke (1632 - 1704) to Charles S. Peirce (1839 - 1914) to Charles Morris (1902 - 1979) and Thomas A. Sebeok (1920 - 2001), and also includes the Eastern European traditions. Instead, "semeiotics" (or "symptomatology") indicates that branch of medicine that deals with symptoms. Semeiotics was the first among the "sectorial semiotics" or "special semiotics" to be developed. We could even make the claim that semiotics today originates from medical semeiotics (cf. Sebeok, 2001).

The Hippocratic conception of the physician, as evidenced by the "Hippocratic oath",

foresees a close connection between medicine and ethics (see Petrilli, 2016b, pp. 1-4). This is not simply a question of professional ethics. In other words, reference is not only to the physician in his role as a physician, but rather involves him as a person, his behaviour in everyday life (see Hippocrates, *Decorum VII*, and *Precepts VI*), his devotion to others to the point of offering his assistance, even free, not only to those who belong to his community, but also to the foreigner. “Sometimes you will even offer your assistance for free, and if the occasion presents itself you will assist the foreigner in financial strife as well, you will give him all your support. For where there is love of man, there is also love of the art” (*Precepts VII*).

Thomas A. Sebeok (1921 - 2001) connected the sign science to medical semeiotics and juxtaposed the “minor tradition” in the science of signs represented by Saussurean semiology to the “major tradition”, thus described with reference to both its temporal and thematic extension. The latter as represented by Locke, Peirce, and Morris, as anticipated, can be traced back to scientific studies on the sign and symptom in ancient medical semeiotics with Hippocrates and Galen, precisely.

On the basis of the assumption, the axiom that where there is life there are signs, Sebeok successfully introduced a whole new vision according to which the sphere of semiotics converges with the sphere of the life sciences. As a result of Sebeok’s reflections—amply inspired by Charles Peirce and Charles Morris as well as by Roman Jakobson—both our conception of the semiotic sphere and that of the history of semiotics have changed radically.

Semiotics today owes its current configuration as “global semiotics” to Sebeok (2001; see Petrilli, 2012a, pp. 71-120; 2014b, pp. 251-258). By virtue of this “global” or “holistic” approach, we have pointed out that semiotic research on the “life of signs” is directly connected to the “signs of life”. From a global semiotic perspective, semiosis (that is, the relation or process or situation by which something is a sign) and life converge. In fact, semiosis is described by Sebeok as the criterial attribute of life. Consequently, global semiotics presents a critique of semiotic theories and practices of the anthropocentric and glottocentric orders.

The connection between *semiotics* and *semeiotics* (the study of that particular type of sign constituted by symptoms and which in its archeology counts Hippocrates and Galen among its most representative names), we believe, cannot be limited to a question of the mere historiographical order. This connection is not simply about tracing roots and recovering the memory of a discipline.

Once medical semeiotics is considered as one of the most ancient branches of semiotics, indeed its starting point, the connection to reflection on signs in general implies a great responsibility for the semiotician. This connection invests the sign science with a commitment that goes well beyond the limits of “theoretical reason” to concern “practical reason”: in fact this connection also involves a commitment of the ethical order to concern *the health and the quality of life*.

The quality of life is a specifically human problem. And it is an ethical problem.

Responsibility for life is specifically human, specific to humankind: and responsibility is responsibility for life over the entire planet. In fact insofar as he is the only *semiotic animal*, in this sense a unique animal—capable not only of *living* on signs, but of *reflecting* on signs—the human being answers for signs and life (signs and life converge) concerning all living beings, and does so with his or her very own life, as science today evidences ever more clearly.

The term “symptom” has been transferred from strictly medical and somatic circles to the psychological—think above all of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis—and to the social sphere. In *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (1953 [1857 - 1858]), the section dedicated to machines, Karl Marx studies the automatic machine as a symptom of the metamorphosis of work in its capitalist configuration. Machines today, “intelligent machines capable of semiotics” and not only of semiosis, can be considered as the symptom of a transformation that is underway in the man-machine relationship (see Petrilli, 2014a, pp. 248-253; see also Petrilli & Ponzio, 2005, pp. 3-6, 540-550, 563).

The Polish philosopher and semiotician, Adam Schaff (1913 - 2006) describes unemployment in today’s world as structural, caused by automation as it characterizes the “second industrial revolution” (when the automatic machine replaces human intelligence). Schaff reads this development, “structural” and not “contingent” unemployment, as a symptom of the end of capitalism.

With Freud himself even the most intentionally communicative of signs, the verbal sign, presents itself as a symptom. We could say that semioethics identifies symptoms in “semiosis of information” and in “semiosis of communication”, and not only in what constitutes “semiosis of symptomatization” understood in the strict sense (see Petrilli & Ponzio, 2002, 2007).

Therefore, we could make the claim that *semioethics is interested in symptoms relating to life over the planet, to life today in its current historical-social phase of development, in globalization* (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2002, 2003, 2010; Petrilli, 2010, pp. 3-47; 2015b, pp. 319-313). In this context interrelation of every single portion of life over the planet with every other is such that implication between the parts and the totality has reached the highest degree ever.

## **2. Semioethics and Significs. Victoria Welby**

With the term “significs”, Victoria Welby (1837-1912) signalled the direction in which she believed the study of sign and meaning should be more strongly developed (see Petrilli, 2015a), in our terminology, in the direction of “semioethics”. With her analyses of meaning into *sense*, *meaning*, and *significance*, Welby at the end of the 19th century had already developed her own research on sign and meaning in this direction, ultimately, that is, with a view to the relation in human signifying behaviour between signs and values.

This perspective characterizes all of Welby’s research contributing to a larger vision than that offered by semiotics, given her focus on significance. In fact, the term

“significance” designates the disposition for valuation, the value attributed to something, its relevance, worth, import, the value of meaning itself, the condition of being significant: all this is determined with the human being’s involvement in the life of signs, both at the theoretical level and the pragmatic-operative level. In a letter to Peirce dated 18 November 1903, Welby maintains that *Significs* is a “practical extension” of semiotics, reporting that the Italian philosopher and mathematician Giovanni Vailati (1863 - 1909) was also interested in logic in the same sense.

In her book of 1903, *What Is Meaning?* Welby explains that

Significs concerns the practical mind, e.g. in business or political life, more closely and inevitably than it does the speculative mind. For the thinker may go on through all life turning over his own or others’ thoughts and working them logically out. But the man of action 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. (Welby, 1983 [1903], p. 8)

Therefore significs may be considered as a critique of practical reason united to the critique of pure reason, in the sense that it aims to give indications for responsible human behaviour. Translation of thought into praxis must be the fruit of interpretation of the sign, reinforced by awareness of the sense that sign has specifically for its interpreter. The question “what does it mean?”—not only for the specialist, but also for the everyday man, he too a potential significian—tells of the need to account for the sign’s meaning, worth and value for each one of us, translating thought into action in the light of such awareness. As the study of significance, significs invites us to develop a participative approach to our methodics of everyday life and of research. This approach must be both “scientific” and “ethical”, that is, responsible and reasoned, always ready to reconsider and to call to question, as such completely free of any form of dogmatism.

This is why we can claim that “significs” is “semioethics”, not in the sense that it concerns ethics as a sphere in itself, or human behaviour from the point of view of morals, but in the sense that ethics itself—the other—constitutes the point of view of significs. In other words, meaning as the potential for significance and infinite interpretation, and for conscious representation, constitutes the condition as much as the measure of the semantic-pragmatic validity of all fact, experience, thought and human behaviour.

The connection between signification and value is a constant in Welby’s writings. She believes it subtends the human capacity to establish relations among things, with ourselves and with others, and to translate interpretations uninterruptedly into other spheres of knowledge and practical action. This induces us to read the proposal of a new form of humanism in significs, which is inscribed in the analysis itself of the production of values in signifying processes.

To comprehend reality, to comprehend it in terms of *participation* and *involvement*, the concept will not suffice. On the basis of assimilative, aggregational likeness, the concept unites what appears to be identical, thereby cancelling all otherness, difference,

singularity. Understanding requires the *metaphor*. The metaphor operates on the basis of likeness, similarity of the associative, elective, sympathetic type. Charles S. Peirce (1839 - 1914)—who considered the metaphor as an expression of the type of sign he denominated “icon”—would say that the metaphor operates on the basis of “agapastic” association (from “agape”); metaphor is generated on the basis of attraction between the terms it associates, while leaving them in their mutual otherness, difference, singularity.

Construed on relations of distancing and at once of affinity among signs, metaphor—or more broadly imagery, figurative language—is emblematic of literary writing, though not limited to it. As amply demonstrated by Victoria Welby, far from serving as a mere decorative supplement, the figurative dimension of expression is structural to signifying processes, to the acquisition itself of knowledge and understanding. Welby’s work may be read as prefiguring recent trends in language studies as represented by cognitive linguistics today.

### **3. Semioethics and Literary Writing. The Bakhtinian Conception of Literature**

Metaphor is structural to literary writing together with other “figures of discourse”, amongst which is allegory. Through inventiveness, parody, irony, experimentation in the construction of the fantastic, literary writing opens to otherness, to depiction of a vision that is other with respect to the dominant vision of reality in the world, and of the world, the “world-as-it-is”. Literary writing addresses the question of depicting, of portraying the discourse of the other, and consequently the question of listening to the other, and of dialogue. Artistic value cannot be reached by a vision of the world, by viewpoints or values centred on the self, the monological and totalizing self. Instead, artistic value requires the other, perspectives and values relating to the other, detotalized with respect to the self and its identity logic. From this point of view, literary writing is particularly interesting thanks to its extraordinary capacity to stage values that animate life to the best in terms of the properly human. These values in fact are characterized by high degrees of opening to the other, by responsiveness/answerability toward the other, by a propensity for listening to the other, for giving time to the other.

Beginning from his writings of the early 1920s, “Towards a Philosophy of the Act” (see Bakhtin, 1993) and “Aesthetics of Verbal Art” (see Bakhtin, 1986), based on a philosophical standpoint Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895 - 1975) takes the perspective of literary writing and never leaves it. He deals with questions of literary writing from the perspective of literature itself. Indeed, literary writing is the observation post from which he conducts his *anti-systemic and detotalizing* critique of the relationship between artistic discourse (whether verbal or nonverbal) and life. His excursions outside the field of literature do not imply recourse to an external viewpoint with claims to offering a totalizing and systemic description of his object of analysis, the literary text, literary writing. On the contrary, Bakhtin remains inside literature and never leaves it. In this sense literature is the perspective from which he conducts his critique, which is anti-

systemic and detotalizing. Bakhtin reveals the internal threads that connect literature to the extra-literary, literary texts to life, thereby underlining the structural intertextuality of literary texts. He thematizes structural intertextuality as a characteristic of the literary text thanks to the condition of interconnectivity with the extra-literary text. In Bakhtin's view, the literary text subsists and develops in its specificity as a literary text thanks to its implication with the external universe, in the condition of *involvement* with the external universe. Such implication, such involvement, is understood in the *ethical sense* as well. His contribution on this issue is noteworthy as he develops the study of signs in terms of moral philosophy. And given his focus on the close relationship between sign studies and literary writing, thus between signs, literature and life his approach to semiotics is easily oriented in the sense of semioethics. Indeed, for an understanding of the overarching sense of Bakhtin's approach to studies on verbal language, his insistence on the inexorable interconnection—which he describes as direct and dialectical—between literary language and life is of tantamount importance.

Even though his main field of research is theory of literature and literary criticism, Bakhtin proceeds so as to break internal boundaries among disciplines that relate not only to literature, verbal art, but to art in general. With all his research he shows how an adequate understanding of the literary text and of the artistic in general calls for a shift outside literature and outside art according to different perspectives, a process of *extralocalization*. The concept of exotopy, extralocalization (*vnenachodimost'*), “finding oneself outside”, “extrafindability”, plays a central role in Bakhtin's conception of literature, from his early writings and along all the different pathways in his research (see Bakhtin, 1920-24, in Bakhtin, 1986). “Exotopy” (or “extralocalization”) in space, time, value and sense implies an alterity that does not serve the constitution of the totality, of identity, that does not complement the realization of individual consciousness, that is not functional to the sphere of the Same. Artistic activity gives expression to a special relation to the other. In artistic activity the otherness relation has a special “location”, “extralocalized” and “detotalized”, in which there resounds a multiplicity of different voices that make no claims to recomposition within a monological totality. Aesthetic activity only properly begins when the author takes a position outside the event s/he is describing. Extralocalization is a necessary condition and starting point for the literary word, for artistic creation in general, as much as is participative involvement in life, in its contents and values.

Life enters art and art responds to life in a dialogical relationship of mutual implication: it ensues that to understand the text, any text whatsoever, it will be necessary to raise the gaze and extend it across boundaries. An understanding of the literary text implies an understanding of verbal and nonverbal signs, both at a theoretical level—that of general semiotics—and of its specification in relation to the different cultural forms, popular traditions, feasts, rites, myths, cults; the literary text implies an understanding of ideologies; of the psychological and psychoanalytical relationship between conscious and unconscious; of the problem of social stratification and of the relation among social

classes; of the relation between history and structure; and between the genetic approach and morphological approach, etc.

Such a method inevitably involves all the human sciences. However, Bakhtin never abandons his special interest, that is, the problem of the *dialogical consistency of the word* which manifests itself in all its potential expressiveness, in all its semiotic consistency in the word of literary writing above all. What Bakhtin denominates the “secondary genres” of literary writing, the “complex genres”, depict “primary genres”, the “simple genres” of the direct word, the nonliterary word, where in fact depiction implies the capacity for objectification, distancing, exotopy. Through depiction (potrayal, picturing) which presupposes a shift from the logic of identity to the logic of alterity, that is, from the centre of value as represented by the *I* to the centre of value of the other, the word no longer converges with itself. The genres of literature evidence the polycentric nature of language, the dialogism of the word, consequently its creative and critical potential.

Insofar as it is founded on the category of *I*, on identification with the subject of discourse, insofar as it is oriented according to a given thesis, a unitary project, a conclusion, cognitive discourse cannot reach the high levels of opening and otherness (in spite of its innovative and revolutionary capacities) as instead can be traced in artistic discourse.

Cognitive processes, no doubt, also call for the category of otherness, as Bakhtin did not fail to underline at different points in his research. In *Rabelais and His World* (1965), he evidences how in the Humanist and Renaissance era official culture opened to nonofficial culture, to popular, carnivalized culture, to culture connected with the grotesque body, and how this was essential for the birth of modern scientific knowledge, and he continued to work on this perspective through to his more recent writings (see in particular “Notes Made in 1970-71”, in Bakhtin, 1979). For what concerns the condition of opening to the other, artistic experimentation surpasses the scientific, affording an understanding of humanity (as Bakhtin says in his reflections on Dostoevsky’s “polyphonic novel”), of human experience, of our relation to others, inclusive of our relation to nature, that is altogether inaccessible from a monological perspective. From this point of view, Bakhtin makes an important distinction between Dostoevsky’s polyphony and what he baptizes as “Dostoevskyism” and its monological vision of the existent.

The problem of value is a constant theme, a constant topic of analysis throughout Bakhtin’s research, from his early writings of the 1920s to those of the 1970s. Moreover, given that his perspective is *interdisciplinary* with a special focus on *sense and value for the human person*, that is, for the *properly human*, his interest in the question of value is not limited to a specific field in a given human science (e.g., linguistics or theory of art and literature).

As anticipated above, Bakhtin’s method as applied throughout all his research consists in relating fields and objects of study that may even be distant from each other, through a process of shifting and opening, rather than of englobement and closure. Such a method is dialectical in a strong sense, considering also that it recovers the connection—vitaly



important for dialectics—with dialogism. What in this paper we have indicated as a “detotalizing method” is effectively a “dialogical-dialectical method”.

Bakhtin placed the prefix “meta” in front of the word “linguistics” (see, e.g., his *Dostoevsky*, 1963) to describe his particular approach to (verbal) language; but, in reality, it would be more appropriate to extend the prefix “meta” to all disciplinary fields involved in his research. And, in fact, he described his research as philosophical research, as critical research focussed fundamentally on conditions of possibility. For what concerns the problematic of values and the signs in which values are necessarily formulated and expressed (which is at the origin of Bakhtin’s interest in the general science of signs or semiotics), this means to take a theoretical attitude, but a theoretical attitude that is orientative of praxis as well. Bakhtin critiques the reification, the absolutization of signs and values and investigates, instead, the dialectical-dialogical processes of their production and circulation.

A central topic of analysis in *Rabelais and His World* is the “carnavalesque word”. Bakhtin evidences the corporeal dimension of the word. But the term “corporeal” can lead to misunderstanding and mystification given that it tends to evoke the body of the individual subject. Considering Bakhtin’s aim to show how the word, the body, the conscious are all interconnected among themselves and to the outside, “intercorporeal” is the better term. The word, the body, the conscious are all shaped in the relation with the other, with other bodies: from this point of view the expression “intercorporeality” is an interpretant of the concept of “dialogism”. The category of the “carnavalesque” alongside “dialogism” is pivotal in Bakhtin’s analyses of the “polyphonic novel” and of the relationship between Medieval popular comical culture and renaissance literature.

In his monograph on Rabelais as, in truth, throughout all his writings, Bakhtin valorizes the condition of time for the other, the time of alterity, whether one’s own or the other’s, as the real social wealth. By contrast to reductive and suffocating analyses of Marxism, in his own approach Bakhtin echoes that Karl Marx who maintains that the human can only ever be fully accomplished with the end of the “reign of necessity”. Consequently, a social system that aspires to be an alternative to capitalism is a system that privileges *available time*, that is, time for the other as a central value, as the real wealth of society, and *not work time* (see Marx, 1974 [1857]). In Bakhtin’s language, this is the time of “unofficial festivity”, of carnival strictly connected to the “great time” of the literary word, the dialogical word *par excellence*, to what he calls the “great experience” of life which he believes can only arise from the condition of “dialogism”. Hence, in Bakhtin’s vision, dialogue is the incarnate, intercorporeal expression of participative involvement of one’s own body (delusorily considered as an individual body, separate and autonomous with respect to other bodies) with the body of the other. These problematics too are thematized by Bakhtin in his monograph on Dostoevsky (1963) in addition to his treatment of them in his monograph on Rabelais, and in fact they carry out a central role in the architectonics of his thought system overall.

In *Rabelais and His World* the condition of intercorporeity is well portrayed with

Bakhtin's vision of the "grotesque body" in popular culture, in the vulgar language of the public square and in the masks of carnival. In the grotesque body, one's own body and the body of the other, the human and the nonhuman, the animal and the vegetable, the cultural and the natural are indissolubly interconnected.

Listening, the welcome, hospitality are necessary conditions for the quality of life and its improvement in the current situation of globalized communication (even more, for persistence of life over the planet, considering the extraordinary potential for destruction thanks to progress in technology in the present day and age). The quality of life is directly proportional to the quality of our relationships to the other, to our standards of living together with others, our neighbours whom these days more than ever before can be close in a geographical sense, but also distant and ever closer.

Today's global communication world is dominated by the ideology of productivity, competitiveness, velocity and efficiency. This is in net contrast with the carnivalesque conception of the world. The world of global communication is the world of individualism and egocentrism, of the logic of competition among individuals, pushed to extreme degrees, of egotistic self-interest. Production, efficiency, individualism, competition represent dominant values in today's world. All the same, however, we cannot ignore the structural presence of the grotesque body, the condition of intercorporeity, of involvement of one's own body with the body of others. The human vocation for the "carnavalesque" and for the "intercorporeal", for dialogism and heteroglossia, resists still today, and literary writing testifies to this. And where this vocation is suffocated in the social, the symptoms of a disease well tagged as "social alienation" are immediately visible, manifesting themselves in widespread forms of depression and anxiety to the point even of suicide.

Bakhtin distinguishes between the "small experience", on the one hand, experience centred on the logic of identity, conditioned by a short-sighted and egocentric vision of the I, by limited and closed experience, a logic that is asphytic for the I itself, for the body, the world in its entirety, that is indifferent towards the other; and the "great experience", on the other hand, experience centred on the logic of alterity, on the unfinalizable and transgredient experience of the "great time", of the relation to the other, on the "great memory", a disinterested memory, oriented by the search for the other, and by a disposition for unlimited responsibility/responsivity towards the other.

If education *is not* only scholarization for the sake of building a society made of specialists, technicians, people with special skills and competencies who exchange their experiences and are appreciated and valued in relation to their capacity to be functional and productive; if, instead, education *is* also education to listening, to availability to the other, to encounter among words, languages, cultures, signs, then a place of first importance should be attributed to the literary word. In fact, thanks to its capacity for reflection on the genres of ordinary discourse, the primary genres, to its capacity for depiction and critical distancing with respect to primary genres functional to different contexts and social roles as foreseen by contemporaneity, by the dominant social system

and ideology that regulates it, the literary word is an important medium for education oriented by semiotics conceived as semioethics.

#### 4. Semioethics and Peircean Semiotics

Charles Peirce's semiotics too has a focus on the relation between cognition, the interpersonal relation, communication and moral value. Pivotal in his research are such problematics as the development of signifying pathways (the open-ended chain of interpretants) which he describes as potentially infinite, the role of the imagination and musement in abductive inferential processes, of similarity (in particular of the agapastic order) in metaphor, and of metaphor in abduction with its capacity for invention and innovation. All this makes Peirce's *Collected Papers* another precious source of reflection, similarly to Bakhtin's writings, for a better understanding of the relation between semioethics and literary writing.

Peirce too, coherently with his pragmatism, develops an approach to cognitive semiotics that is closely related to the study of the social behaviour of man and the totality of his interests. It ensues that, according to Peirce, the problem of knowledge necessarily involves considerations of the valuative order.

In addition to his writings as presented in his *Collected Papers* which testify to this connection, the title of another posthumous collection of essays by Peirce, edited by M.R. Cohen, is worth recalling: *Chance, Love and Logic*, published in 1923. During the final phase of his production (which extends from approximately 1887 to 1914), Peirce turns his attention specifically to the normative sciences, that is, beyond logic, to aesthetics and ethics. Most interesting to observe is that he addresses the question of ultimate ends, the *summum bonum* identifying it neither in individual pleasure (hedonism), nor in "the good of society" (English utilitarianism), but in "reasonableness" (*CP* 5.4), a principle which he describes as regulating evolutionary development in the universe.

In other words, according to Peirce, the ultimate value, the *summum bonum* is reason and the development of reason in the direction of reasonableness: reason as an open dialectical process, as inquiry without prejudice, as dialectical-dialogical process to echo Bakhtin, as process that is never complete nor finalized, as becoming and development regulated by the logic of otherness, and by the principle of continuity, synechism in Peirce's terminology (*CP* 1.72).

But the semioethic orientation in the semiotics of Peirce is already present in his model of sign. Thematizing interpretation as a phenomenon that arises from a dialogical relationship among "interpretants", Peirce assumes otherness as a condition for the sign's meaning, for its identity. This approach influences how Peirce thematizes subjectivity, his concept of the I which too is a sign, or better sign activity, sign process. With his theory of the thought-sign Peirce evidences the dialogical structure of the I. In fact, he describes the I as developing in terms of a dialogue between a thought that acts as a sign and another thought that acts as an interpretant.

Peirce's "semiotics of interpretation" theorizes a relation of noncorrespondence

between sign and interpretant, regulated by the logic of otherness. According to such logic the interpretant-sign never corresponds exactly to the preceding sign, the interpreted-sign, but says something more (*CP* 2.228), developing it and enriching it with new meanings. The interpreter/interpretant responds to something assuming it as a sign, an interpreted-sign, and in the process becomes in turn a sign, an interpreted-sign, that calls forth another interpretive response, another interpretant-sign, and so it goes on in what emerges as a potentially infinite chain of deferrals from one sign to the next. In such a framework, the function of the interpretant sign is not that of mere identification, but rather, as Bakhtin would say, of “responsive understanding”, “answering comprehension”. Such interactivity implies the evolving of a concrete dialogical relationship among signs, signs and relations in becoming, founded in mutual otherness.

Meanings develop dynamically in open-ended interpretive processes in which the higher the degree of alterity of the interpretant sign with respect to the interpreted sign, the higher the degree of dialogism in their relationship and the more interpretation develops as a response, that is, as dialogical responsive understanding, creative reformulation, inventiveness, rather than mere repetition, literal translation, synonymic substitution, identification.

In Peirce’s specific terminology, as much as it may contain traces of symbolicity and indexicality, the iconic relation proceeds by affinity and attraction, it is regulated by the logic of dialogism and alterity, and is characterized by its capacity for innovation and creativity. Iconicity and dialogism are closely connected: in fact, the highest degrees of dialogism are reached by the iconic sign. Given that it is neither the expression of a convention nor the mechanical effect of a cause, iconicity is associated to the concepts of “responsive understanding”, “active participation”, “dialogical valuation”, “point of view”, “semiotic materiality”, “resistance”, “irreducibility” to the logic of identity and its boundaries, to “alterity” in the sense of “absolute alterity” by contrast to “relative alterity”.

All inferences can generally be considered in terms of the transition from a sign to its interpretant, which (as we have seen) are connected *dialogically*. But it is above all in *abduction* or *retroduction*—where inference proceeds backwards, from the consequent to the antecedent availing itself of interpretants of the iconic type—that the terms of the argument are always connected dialogically, at high degrees of alterity, whatever the level of innovation, novelty and creativity. For Peirce, therefore, the connection between semiotics and logic, that is, between the typology of signs and the typology of arguments or inference is also the connection between *semiotics* and *dia-logic*.

Beyond the differences between their respective approaches, Peirce (in their intense epistolary exchanges, see Hardwick, 1977) identified a series of correspondences between Victoria Welby’s meaning triad, “sense”, “meaning”, and “significance”, and his own tripartition of the interpretant into “immediate interpretant”, “dynamical interpretant”, and “final interpretant”.

Peirce’s “immediate interpretant” concerns meaning as it unfolds in the ordinary,

habitual use of sign by the interpreter. It involves immediate response to the sign, designated by Welby as “sense”. The “dynamical interpretant” concerns meaning in a specific context. Insofar as it focuses on intention it corresponds to Welby’s “meaning”, the second level in her triad. Even more interesting is the connection established by Peirce between his “final interpretant” and Welby’s “significance”. The “final interpretant” concerns the sign at the extreme limits of its interpretive possibilities, therefore all possible responses in the open chain of deferrals from one sign to another. Analogously to Welby’s “significance”, Peirce’s “final interpretant” concerns the creative potential of the sign. Moreover, this particular correspondence also evidences how, for Peirce, signifying potential is essentially a question of valuative orientation and pragmatic relevance generated in the intricate interrelation among signs, values and behaviour.

## 5. Concluding

On the basis of different perspectives and interests, Bakhtin, Peirce and Welby have each contributed to the special bend in semiotics tagged as “semioethics”.

This special bend in semiotics, as we are describing it, has been conceived as a result of Thomas Sebeok’s global semiotics above all.

Sebeok has evidenced the relation of convergence between *semiosis* and *life* and he has identified the species-specific character of human semiosis in the capacity for *meta-semiosis* or *semiotics*: with John Deely, Augusto Ponzio and myself have posited that the human being is a “semiotic animal” (Deely, Petrilli, & Ponzio, 2005).

Insofar as we are semiotic animals capable of signs on signs, that is, of reflecting on signs and of developing a global vision of semiosis, that is, of life, human beings are unique. This is the starting point for *semioethics*, for our understanding of the condition of being responsible for and responsive to all of semiosis (deriving from the human capacity for reflection, for metasemiosis), hence to all of life over the planet. As an animal endowed with “semiotics” or “metasemiosis”, and not only as an expert in “semiotics”, here understood as the discipline, the task of the human being is to contribute to the quality of life, to the health of semiosis.

As a “doctrine of signs” (Sebeok), recovering the function of *semeiotics* (one of its most ancient branches) semiotics can contribute to studying today’s symptoms of *social malaise*, of unease under whatever aspect, and wherever these symptoms appear. And in the presentday communication-production world, in globalization, semiotics theorized and practiced as *global semiotics*, precisely, is in a position to face the task.

Literature and literary writing can make an important contribution to the realization of a new form of humanism, one that is all but anthropocentric as it has generally been so far. Our allusion here is not to the humanism of identity, but to the *humanism of otherness*, as perspected for example by Emmanuel Levinas (1906 - 1995) (see Levinas, 1972).

Bakhtin above all has contributed to evidencing a constitutive propensity for otherness in literary writing, a propensity for extralocalization, for a vision that is not

centred on identity, closed identity, a propensity for evasion from the perspectival limits of contemporaneity. The gaze of literary writing is far broader and may be characterized in terms of the “great time”—Bakhtin in fact speaks of the “great time of literature”. And this is why he selects the literary word, its extralocalized and detotalized gaze, as his standpoint and perspective for his philosophy of language, or metalinguistics.

Bakhtin explains his position by exemplifying the difference between Dostoevsky the journalist and Dostoevsky the writer: in the first case, Dostoevsky the journalist remains anchored to the problems and situations of his time, to the historical context and society he inhabits; in the second case, Dostoevsky the writer, the lives narrated, though part of the sphere of the personal and of daily life, take place “in the presence of the earth and the sky”, opening up and developing as they participate in the “universal divine life” (expression retrieved by Bakhtin from the poem “Spring” by Tjučev, 1938).

We believe that to place literature in the perspective of “global semiotics” oriented in the sense of semioethics is to contribute to the bend conferred upon semiotics by Sebeok. With his “biosemiotics” (see Cobely, Deely, Kull, & Petrilli, 2011; Petrilli, 2012a), he called to issue specialism and separatism among the sciences, division between the human sciences and the natural sciences, as much as the idea of creating bridges between them (he in fact preferred the image of the *web* to the *bridge*). Moreover, we also know that by upholding this position, we are simply giving expression to, articulating a propensity that was already present in Sebeok’s “global semiotics”. In fact, as he developed his global semiotic vision of life and its different expressions, of communication throughout the signifying universe, Sebeok never neglected the opportunity of referring to the texts of literary writing.

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