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Welby's Conversations with Peirce and Others

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“Of course, the attitude of mind which assumes all attempts at resistance and reform to be ‘futile,’ creates the futility.” (Welby 1903/1983: 142, n.1)

“The appeal of Significs is to all that is truly and fully human; for it gathers up into one word our concern for all that Signifies [...]” (Welby, “The First Thing,” 24 October 1906, *in* Petrilli 2009<sup>1</sup>: 808)

“I see no great gulf, but only a useful distinction between two methods proper to practical and theoretical questions. So then ‘Never confound, and never divide’ is in these matters my motto.” (Welby to Peirce, 29 June 1904, *in* Hardwick 1977: 21)

## 1. Global Humanity and Dialogical Inquiry

- <sup>1</sup> The aim of this paper is not to classify Victoria Welby's thought which resists attempts in that sense, whatever the trend of reference – pragmatism, analytic philosophy, or other. Beyond categorization and the limitations of oppositional logic, Welby's meditations are expansive, inclusive, dialogical, and detotalizing: hers is work in progress in consultation with others, with different theoretical horizons, as testified by her epistolaries and general writings. From her lifelong investigations there emerges a commitment to addressing problems and searching for solutions in dialogue with the community of inquirers, a cooperative effort, without ever falling into the traps of the logic of identity and correlate preconceived, prejudicial ideas. For Welby, philosophy is

dialogue and conversation. On the example of Socrates in Plato's dialogues, all stances and beliefs arise from encounter, convivial interrogation, confrontation, and listening. To read Welby is to read signs in translation as she challenges dogma in philosophy and science, signifying behaviour in everyday life, promoting learning and understanding in a critical key against the temptations of abstract intellectualism. Progress in knowledge and human action evolves from interdisciplinary dialogue in expanding dimensions, focused on echoes of larger life and signifying implications in ever broader contexts (Cust 1929, 1931).

- 2 The dialogical nature of her philosophical engagement, turned indiscriminately to scholars and researchers from different schools, caused Welby to impact her contemporaries in unexpected and largely unrecognized ways. This emerges from her papers, mostly unpublished and unknown in spite of her inclusiveness and participation in public debate, whether of the epistemological, social, or political orders. She concludes her 1897 book *Grains of Sense* with reflections on war, tragically topical still today. Though she wished to be considered for the scientific validity of her ideas (Welby to Peirce, 22 December 1900, in Hardwick 1977: 13), as a noblewoman she had the advantages of social status and consequent visibility, notwithstanding the disadvantages of her sex (Petrilli 2022c).
- 3 Her significs is a contribution to pragmatism, a movement she – mother of semiotics (Petrilli 2010b, 2015d; Sebeok & Petrilli 1998) and of pragmatism alike – prefigured and influenced (Hurley 2022; Petrilli 2022b), as testified by her exchanges with the “founding fathers,” figures like Charles Peirce in the USA, Ferdinand Schiller in England, Giovanni Vailati in Italy (Petrilli 1990a: 339-47; Ponzio 1990a: 94-106, 1990b; Welby 2010, 2021). But Welby contacted numerous personalities of the time, all variously fascinated by her investigations. She is easily described as anticipating and contributing to different, even contrasting (to her mind always interconnected) trends on the international scene, nor just in Europe (Petrilli 2015a, 2019a, 2022a, 2023c). With “significs,” Welby emphasizes the relation of meaning to practical action, connecting analytic philosophy, continental philosophy, pragmatism and beyond.
- 4 Her motto was “Never confound, and never divide”: in terms of impact, besides pragmatism she influenced developments in late 19th and early 20th century English analytic philosophy, though officially unrecognized. *Significs* – the neologism introduced for her theory of meaning in “Sense, Meaning and Interpretation” (*Mind*, 1896) – was instrumental in raising interest in meaning, even setting the agenda for future studies, and not only in linguistic-analytic circles. In “Meaning and Metaphor” (*The Monist*, 1893), Welby had already expressed her hope for the future: “that one of the most practically serviceable of subjects – that of Meaning, its conditions and its changes – shall be seriously taken up” (in Petrilli 2009: 422).
- 5 Ten years later, she published *What is Meaning?* which, as Peirce claims in his review (*The Nation*, 1903), “signals a very fundamental question of logic” (in Hardwick 1977: 157-9). Welby's 1903 monograph was followed by the 1920 symposium, “The Meaning of Meaning,” organized in Oxford and published in *Mind* (1920-1921).<sup>2</sup> Her interest in signifying conditions converges with her concern for life conditions, for the formation of facts, matter and ideas benefiting social practice and interpersonal relationships in their different expressions. Consequently, her approach to questions of interpretation, mutual understanding and significance is interdisciplinary, involving both science and religion.<sup>3</sup>

- 6 Evoking Kant, Peirce too focused on signifying conditions. Despite differences in their research and foci of attention, Peirce and Welby alike were interested in identifying principles common to the natural, hard and human sciences. Logic, philosophy, mathematics and science all enter the architectonics of Peirce's thought system as well. His "doctrine of categories" unites two opposite conceptions of reality that still tend to dominate Western philosophical thought: that which originated with Aristotle and contends that things exist on their own account, independently from mind, and the opposite conception that describes reality as depending on mind (Peirce, "On a New List of Categories," CP 1.545-59). The point of encounter between these two traditions is the semiotic perspective (on Peirce's journey from the categories to semiotics, see CP 2.84-96). In this framework, objects, minds and representations are inextricably entangled in semiosis, a position which resounds in Welby's significs, especially when she critiques reductive, oversimplifying interpretations of matter and thematizes the evolution of life in all its aspects in terms of the r/evolutionary open-ended processes of interpretation, translation, significance (Petrilli 2009: 554-9).

## 2. Pragmatism and Significs

- 7 Among the most important orientations in philosophy from the end of 19th, early 20th century is doubtlessly Peirce's pragmatism. Independently from Peirce, Welby's significs, a "philosophy of interpretation," "translation," "significance" (Welby 1903/1983: 161; Petrilli 2023b), is an original contribution in a similar direction. Welby responded to contemporary debates on theoretical-pragmatic issues through the kaleidoscope of significs. Significs considers the practical-ethical consequences of the interplay between signs, sense and values relatedly to human behaviour, unreducible to behaviouristic or mechanistic paradigms. Significs is thus oriented toward the ethic-pragmatic dimension of signifying processes.
- 8 With her linguistic-philosophical and ethic-pragmatic perspective on meaning Welby critiqued strictly linguistic-philological approaches, represented by "semantics," "sematology," "semasiology." Significs studies the conditions of possibility of meaning, keeping account of the biological dimension of signifying processes with their historical-social and practical developments (Petrilli 1999). In formulating her theory of meaning in dialogue with the sciences, biology was a privileged interlocutor. Meaning is context-related and communication-oriented, linguistic and nonlinguistic, verbal and nonverbal. Though critical of Hegel's triadism, which Welby considered reductive, triads are central in her thought, as they are in Peirce's (see her 1886 essay, "Threefold Laws," in Petrilli 2009: 331-40).
- 9 Her main triad distinguishes between "sense," "meaning," "significance." From *What is Meaning?*:
- There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as the Sense of a word, but only the sense which it is used - the circumstances, state of mind, reference, "universe of discourse" belonging to it. The Meaning of a word is the intent which it is desired to convey - the intention of the user. The Significance is always manifold, and intensifies its sense as well as its meaning, by expressing its importance, its appeal to us, its moment for us, its emotional force, its ideal value, its moral aspects, its universal or at least social range. All science, all logic, all philosophy, the whole controversy about aesthetics, about ethics, about religion, ultimately concentrate upon this: What is the sense of, What do we mean by, What is the significance of,

that is, Why do we care for, Beauty, Truth, Goodness? Why do we value experience? And why do we seek for Significance, and resume the value of innumerable observed facts under formulae of significance like gravitation or natural selection? Because we are the expression of the world, as it were “expressed from” it by the commanding or insisting pressure of natural stimuli not yet understood.

Man questions and an answer is waiting for him. But first he must learn to speak, really to “express” himself and the world. To do that he must learn to signify and to signalise. He must discover, observe, analyse, appraise, first the sense of all that he senses through touch, hearing, sight, and to realise its interest, what it practically signifies for him; then the meaning – the intention – of action, the motive of conduct, the cause of each effect. Thus at last he will see the Significance, the ultimate bearing, the central value, the vital implication – of what? of all experience, all knowledge, all fact, and all thought. (Welby 1903/1983: 5-6)

- 10 Sense is the condition for adaptation and experience. “Sense in all ‘senses’ of the word is the fitting term for that which makes the value of ‘experience’.” (*Ibid.*: 27). As the first level of meaning, “sense,” shared by all life-forms, refers to the generation of signifying processes relatedly to organic life, to the perceptual sphere. In present-day semiotics this is meaning in a vastly “biosemiotic” dimension (Petrilli & Ponzio 2002, 2007). With the advent of human life, sense develops into “meaning” or volitional, intentional, purposive, and rationally idealized sense. “Sense” in the biological-organic dimension can be extended more specifically to the sphere of anthropo-socio-semiosis and, as such, is not separate from the ethic, pragmatic or aesthetic dimensions. Beyond sense as “meaning,” the second level of Welby’s triad, “significance” refers to ethic, pragmatic and ideologic sense, also unintentional sense – but always relatively to organic sense and meaning sense. Organic-perceptual-volitional sense is presupposed by the pragmatic-ethical dimensions of signifying processes and is used to interrogate them. “Significance” represents the highest value of sense-experience, sense as it emerges in the relation between signs and values, enhanced in ongoing translative processes from one sign or sign-system to another. “Sense” is also a synonym for “meaning” and “significance.” Understood broadly, the relation of “sense” to “sign” and “value” is pivotal in significs.
- 11 Indicative of the affinity with Peirce’s thinking are Welby’s comments explaining the reason for her neologism *significs*. “Significs” is a “practical extension” of his “semeiotic,” and his semeiotic is inseparable from his “pragmatism” (18 November 1903, in Hardwick 1977: 6). Welby and Peirce shared a special interest in both verbal and nonverbal human signifying behaviour, investigated in philosophical-linguistic-ethical perspective. Meaning is a “universal and ubiquitous concern,” of both “theoretical” and “practical” relevance, as Peirce observes in his 1903 review of *What is Meaning?* (Hardwick 1977: 159). In a letter to Welby dated 14 March 1909 (*ibid.*: 108-11), Peirce describes significs as coinciding with that part of “semeiotic” focused on the relation between sign and interpretant, identifying correspondences between Welby’s triad “sense,” “meaning,” “significance” and his distinction between “immediate interpretant” “dynamical interpretant” and “final interpretant.”
- 12 Beginning with his review of *What is Meaning?*, the Peirce-Welby correspondence continued over the last decade of their lifetime.<sup>4</sup> “What is meaning?” is a question that drives “significant” inquiry on the relation between sign and meaning value – linguistic, pragmatic, social, ethic, aesthetic – in live communication, on signifying scope as it effects all human interest and behaviour. With reference to everyday life and social practice in its different expressions, not just the scientific and theoretical, significs

seeks to answer the questions: “What does it signify?,” “What does it mean?,” “In what sense?” which lead beyond strict problems of logic to interrogate signifying value overall (Petrilli 2020). Significs transcends pure descriptivism to study signs and signifying behaviour, experience and human action in their ethical-pragmatic dimensions beyond the gnoseological.

- 13 Common opinion recites that some of Peirce’s best formulations in semeiotic reflection are in letters to Welby (Fisch 1986: 341-50). Welby took an interest in Peirce’s later writings when they had been ignored by many as incoherent with his pragmatism, truly a mistake. After an initial edition of their epistolary containing only Peirce’s letters (Lieb 1953), a new complete edition included Welby’s letters as well (Hardwick 1977). This full corpus of exchanges highlights the affinity that bonded them in terms of intellectual work and friendship, an editorial event that not only contributed to spreading Peirce’s thought from his late years, but also to reproposing Welby and her significs.
- 14 Father of modern semeiotic and originator of pragmatism, Peirce connects semeiotic (general sign theory), logic (theory of inference) and pragmatism (or pragmaticism).<sup>5</sup> Theory of inquiry, theory of meaning, such problematics as the practical verifiability of truth all enter his research, finding an early expression in “The Fixation of Belief” (1877) (CP 5.358-87) and in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878) (CP 5.388-410), a title indicating a mission that Welby could not have but undersigned. Peirce’s commitment to the clarification of ideas and their sense for action is resumed in the following proposition: “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” (CP 5.402). Pragmatism critiques 1) Cartesian dualism – mind (spirit, thought) is not a substance; 2) Idealism – mind is not a process as conceived by the latter, and; 3) Classical empiricism – mind is not a set of relations as conceived by the latter. Rather, mind is ongoing semiosical activity, evolving from the interrelation among signs, in open-ended chains of deferral among signs, a function performed by verbal and nonverbal signs together.
- 15 Welby too registered the lack of clarity in philosophical and scientific writings, which she addressed with her significs. Nor did to advocate clarity mean to undermine the essential nature of ambiguity or the role of figurative language in expression and communication, always social communication whether private, public or institutional. Rather, the point was to resist confusion, false problems, mystification in reasoning.
- 16 In 1896 the “Welby Prize” was advertised in *Mind* for the best analysis of the causes of lack of clarity and terminological confusion in psychology and philosophy, with suggestions for practical remedy (cf. Petrilli 2009: 185-94). Welby believed that inadequate linguistic usage compromised precision in the formulation of ideas (which did not mean to be a “precisionist”) and, ultimately, caused bad logic, the formulation of false problems. She also highlighted the role of metaphor and imagery in the formation of the psyche.
- 17 Welby shared her concern for clarity with Vailati. While maintaining the principle of terminological precision, paradoxically necessary conditions for precision and clarity are “semantic ambiguity,” “polysemy,” “plasticity,” characteristics which facilitate the verbal-linguistic capacity for adaptation to changing circumstances in communication. Vailati joined Welby in critiquing the “plain meaning fallacy” and ambiguity understood negatively, cause of linguistic anarchy and confusion – the solution was not

definition, but development of a “linguistic conscience” (Welby 1896, *in* Petrilli 2009: 434, 443-4). In addition to social reform, Welby campaigned for educational reform based on linguistic awareness, *critique* and *care* – care for language and logic, for expression and communication, care for the other (*ibid.*: 357-63, 373-81; Petrilli 2007).

- 18 Like Peirce, Welby too applies the biological paradigm inaugurated by Darwin in 1859 to the various sciences and general social practice (Petrilli & Ponzio 2005: 102-37). Far from predestined by the divine, the human being is an evolving, responsible animal, in our terminology a “semiotic animal” (Deely, Petrilli & Ponzio 2005), programmed for creativity, planning and problem-solving. Distinctive traits specific to the human are imagination, investigation, experimentation, interrogation which presuppose the life of the senses and interrelation between feeling, consciousness, and behaviour constitutive of signifying processes.
- 19 Beyond the necessary work of the specialist, philosophy and science as methods of interpretation and understanding are for everybody. À propos the specific relation between science and religion, Welby concludes “New Wine in Old Bottles” speculating that “[m]an might follow science, if every man could become a scientist; and in some sense, this is possible.” In fact, significs recommends the art of questioning, investigation, experimentation not only in the higher spheres of learning, but in the everyday practices of the “man of the street.” And though not all people can become specialists in the diverse sciences, ethics is transversal: “what is religion,” asks Welby, if not a “popularized system of ethics?”: “And this religion of ethics will be the religion of the future. All of us who aspire after progress, work for the realization of this religion. Let the religion of the future be a religion of science” (*in* Petrilli 2009: 124). Such reflections read as an appeal not only for knowledge and learning, but for commitment to the social based on scientific knowledge and ethics, hence for political action thus oriented. Proceeding in these terms makes philosophers of us all. In a world, our own, plagued by human crisis and ecological emergency, such a perspective renders both Welby and Peirce particularly topical today.
- 20 Like Peirce’s pragmatism associated with his semeiotic, Welby’s significs transcends the strictly logico-cognitive boundaries of semiosis to contemplate problems of the axiological-pragmatic order, where “transcendence” does not mean to break with reality, but to recognize alterity as the prime mover in the generation of sense and signifying processes, thus the centrality of relations, interconnections, translations. In live signifying processes the epistemological dimension of semiosis is not separable from the ethical, aesthetic or ideological-political, if not by abstraction. Significs calls upon the human capacity for participation in the life of others, valuation and critique based on responsiveness to the other, responsibility for the other.

### 3. Significs, Logic, Mother-Sense

- 21 Peirce described significs as a branch of logic and acknowledged the ethical dimension of the signifi- cal approach to meaning. Welby appreciated how the ethics of language resonates in Peirce’s own writings. To his essay “The Ethics of Terminology” (1903), she reacted with a letter dated 22 December 1903: “I welcome with gratitude ‘your profession of faith’ on the ethics of terminology – a sadly neglected subject” (Hardwick 1977: 14).

- 22 In a preceding letter dated 18 November 1903, where she mentions Vailati, Welby defends her choice of the term “significs” as a “practical extension” of “logic proper”:

Prof. G. Vailati [...] shares your view of the importance of that – may I call it practical extension? – of the office and field of Logic proper, which I have called Significs. For the latter seems to see as I do that the acceptance of such an extension will bring a time when no one with any sense will any longer say “Oh, I don’t care for (or, am incapable of) the study of Logic. That isn’t my line.” For that would be to announce indifference not merely to rational order, but also to the very attribute which may be said to give its human value to life, – that is, (1) its “Sense” and sense-power in every sense from the biological to the logical, (2) its intention, conscious and increasingly definite and rational, which we call “Meaning” and (profess to) use language to express, (3) its Significance, its bearing upon, its place among, its interpretation of, all other cosmical facts. (Welby to Peirce, *ibid.*: 6)

- 23 Significs was neither a branch of logic, as Peirce thought, nor convergent with “sem(e)iotic,” as Vailati suggested (Petrilli 2009: 310). Welby confirms her preference for the term “significs” in a letter to Peirce of 21 January 1909:

Of course I am fully aware that Semeiotic may be considered the scientific and philosophic form of that study which I hope may become generally known as Significs. Though I don’t think you need despair of the acceptance of your own more abstract, logically abstruse, philosophically profound conception of Semeiotic. Of course I assent to your definition of a logical inference, and agree that Logic is in fact an application of morality in the largest and highest sense of the word. That is entirely consonant with the witness of Primal Sense. Alas, there is no word (except religion) more dangerously taken in vain than morality. (Hardwick 1977: 91)

- 24 Agreeing with Peirce that logic is an application of morality, an ethics of the intellect, Welby proposes her “primal-sense,” though she preferred the expression “mother-sense” (other synonyms include “primary-sense,” “racial-sense,” “native-sense,” “original-sense,” “matrix,” see Petrilli 2009: 573-616; also 2017). Mother-sense evokes the ethical dimension of expression and signification beyond the perceptual and cognitive. In his review of *What is Meaning?*, Peirce underlines how for Welby the question of meaning cannot be confined to the “logician’s study alone” (in Hardwick 1977: 159).

- 25 To recover the connection of logic to “mother-sense,” the matrix of sense, thus the original relation of mutual interdependency and empowerment that bonds them, is a major goal for Significs. This necessarily involves reviving “common sense” in all its signifying valency, from the instinctive-biological to significance. In the properly human world, sense and inference, sense and value are inextricably interrelated. Logic as a discipline is called to extend beyondgnoseological boundaries, connecting to the organic level of signifying processes, on one hand, and ethic-pragmatic-aesthetic dimension, on the other (Petrilli 2015d). Statements like the following leave no doubt as regards the vocation inspiring Welby’s inquiries into meaning – to safeguard and enhance the human, ultimately to humanize humanity: “To adhere to the linguistic framework of an obsolete science and a misread experience, and thus to atrophy a truer instinct as fast as it rises and to falsify all our great systems of inferential synthesis alike, is, if we did but know it, a crime against our own humanity” (“A Plea for Significs [1904],” in Petrilli 2009: 342).

- 26 Welby worked on the notion of “mother-sense” in the early 1900s. Her manuscripts on the topic are collected in two files (now in *Signifying and Understanding*): “Mother-Sense (1904-1910)” and “Primal-Sense (1904-1910)” (*ibid.*: 670-715, 715-22). Welby appreciated



logic, the symbolic order, cognitive methods, but insisted in the spirit of significs on critique and innovation with respect to set habits in logic, outdated cognitive instruments and interpretive models. As the generative source of meaning, critical sense, creativity, problem-solving, mother-sense belongs to the properly human which presupposes a disposition for otherness, participative co-implication, and responsibility.

- 27 In “Mother-Sense and Significs” (1907, *ibid.*: 704-6), Welby compares significs to pragmatism, explicitly associating meaning and significance to human action and linguistic usage. This standpoint is developed in a 1908 text, “The Social Value of Expression” (*ibid.*: 260-3), which too valorizes the social-pragmatic dimension of signification: “The sense of a word is our sense of its special use, of what it signifies” (*ibid.*: 260).
- 28 Moreover, Welby’s significs corresponds more closely to Peirce’s pragmatism than to James’s or Schiller’s, which she describes as characterized by “intellectualism.” Nonetheless, in another (untitled) paper of 1908, she claims that significs is “prior to Pragmatism” and does not aim to contradict, but rather to translate and absorb contrasting tendencies. Significs valorizes the propensity to energise, vitalise, transmute, transfigure, that is, translate experience and meaning into ever more enhanced expressions of sense. Vital energy translated into speech, interconnecting “mind and mind,” ultimately translates into significance and value:

But Significs can never become a denial of any opposite. It can never be controversial. Nobody will seriously champion insignificance or defend the senseless and the unmeaning from the significant onslaught! Intellectualism, for significs, has its work no less than pragmatism; though as a fact and in the sense of a return to a too widely neglected and ignored standpoint, it is prior to Pragmatism and absorbs the controversial element. Absorbs? Yes; if we add – energises, vitalises, transmutes and transfigures all this: if we add that Significs deprives us of nothing but adds much to our store even as the animal has added to the plant and man to the animal, we shall not be far wrong or altogether presumptuous or extravagant. In a sense and a true one, this is and must be so.

For it recognises – and this for the first time – the full significance and the full meaning and sense of full Value itself, in all expression of “energy” in the widest sense of that great word, and in the expressive nucleus which we call articulate speech, the supreme link between mind and mind. (*ibid.*: 711)

- 29 “Mother-sense” is the “mother of senses,” a comprehensive faculty, a psycho-physical inclination for response and adjustment, an organic form of knowledge necessary to the survival of the human species, and a prerogative of humanity beyond gender boundaries (Petrilli 2017, 2019b). As the matrix of the human signifying capacity, mother-sense is an a priori for the acquisition of language, experience, interpersonal relations: I/self, I/other, a sort of modelling device for worldview, for critique, planning and construction, the source, limit and measure of the rationalizing intellect. The task of significs

is not only to criticise, but also to reason out and construct from, the *données* of Mother-Sense, its warnings, its *insights* and *farsights*, its revelations, its swift reading of worth, its penetrative recognition of reality.

It is just here, then, that the place and work of Significs is to be found, as the necessary link – rather, the medium of interpretative communication – between the constant “givings” of Mother-sense and the constant “constructions” (in all senses) of the intellect. (in Petrilli 2009: 574-5)

- 30 “Primordial and universal,” mother-sense is present to varying degrees in all stages of human development. From a “biosemiotic” perspective, it originates a new course in evolution leading to *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Mother-sense provides the material of “immediate awareness, conscious and interpretive”; in evolutionary terms it represents “a further stage in value, of the animal’s instinct.” It concerns the real as part of all human practices and the ideal as a precondition for continuity in social progress and perfection. To recover the connection between mother-sense and rational behaviour is to reclaim the sense of symbolic pertinence in the child. The connection between logic, reason, intellect and mother-sense is a precondition for understanding the meaning-value of conscious experience. Significs describes the relation of mutual implication between the constant “*données*,” gifts of “mother-sense,” and the constant constructions of the “intellect.”
- 31 Language, consciousness, intelligence evolve interrelatedly from mother-sense. In significs this translates into the politics of critical awareness, linguistic consciousness, articulate expression and inferential logic capable of using language without obstructing understanding, “responsive understanding” (Mikhail Bakhtin). The work of critique is largely mediated by language in the strict sense, verbal language, which is not to exclude nonverbal languages. Consequently, in line with Welby’s “critique of language” (pivotal in significs), a major concern is to care for language, keep it in good order, eliminate linguistic misuses and abuses that inexorably generate social illnesses such as prejudice, mystification, alienation and conflict.

## 4. Meaning “Plasticity” Between Philosophy and Biology

- 32 Peirce introduced the term “pragmaticism” in 1905 to differentiate his position from James’s and Schiller’s (CP 5.414-15). The alternative between “pragmatism” and “pragmaticism” provides an example of Peirce’s concern for the ethics of language, “The Ethics of Terminology” being the title of his 1903 paper (CP 2.219-27). As emerges from “What Pragmatism Is” (1905), the relation is more complex than mere opposition – beyond differences, “pragmatism” and “pragmaticism” are united in a common project (CP 5.414).
- 33 Like Peirce Schiller too entertained important epistolary exchanges with Welby (see Petrilli 2009: 617-40). Though he critiqued certain of Welby’s stances, he accepted others including her choice of a neologism for her theory of meaning.
- 34 Peirce rejected the idea of “Doing” as “the Be-all and the End-all of life” (CP 5.429). In contrast to vulgar pragmatism, meaning is a general law of conduct and is independent of the particular circumstances of action. As such, it is general and communal. Pragmatism valorizes action in relation to cognitive processes keeping account of progress in research across different spheres from the natural to the hard to the human sciences. We have observed how both Welby and Peirce address the life sciences. The influence of Darwinian biology is obvious in Peirce’s “Fixation of Belief” (1877) where he relates logic in practical matters to natural selection (CP 5.366). Welby highlights the link between the organic and the intellectual, the biological and cultural dimensions of sense, underlining the action of organic intelligence in the specifically human world of signs and language in “Mental Biology or Organic Thought” (1887)

(Petrilli 2009: 464-76). Though she reads Darwin critically, his evolutionary theory exerts a strong influence on her theory of meaning, interpretation, translation.

- 35 Based on her triad “sense,” “meaning” and “significance,” Welby had already identified different types of sense in *Grains of Sense* (1897). In three short paragraphs (nos.7-9) grouped together under the title “Sign and sense” she lists “word sense” or “verbal sense,” “pragmatic sense,” “common sense,” “ethic sense,” “religious sense,” “philosophical sense.” Moreover, prefiguring today’s biosemiotic perspective on signs and signifying processes, she also lists “perceptual sense” signaling the interconnection between the organic and the intellectual dimensions of sense, the biological and the cultural, verbal and nonverbal. A central goal for the significs project was to fully recover the relation between the biological and the logical, thus sense in all its signifying valency from the instinctive-biological to the ethic-axiological, to sense as significance.
- 36 In her exchanges with Schiller, Welby theorizes the need for “plastic language” in a biological sense, which she associates with pragmatic, ethical and aesthetic sense. The artist shaping materials into complexes of beauty refers to models in biology; and the literary writer most appreciates the “sense-wealth” of verbal language. Paradoxically, *plasticity* rather than *rigidity* is the pre-condition for accuracy, indeed for evolutionary development of life on the planet, in all its aspects (Petrilli 2009: 357-63). From *What is Meaning?*:
- What we do want is a really plastic language. The biologist tells us that rigidity in organic activities can never secure accuracy – is indeed fatal to it. The organism can only survive by dealing appropriately with each fresh emergency in more and more complex conditions. Only the utmost degree of plasticity compatible with persistence of type can give the needed adaptiveness to varying circumstance. (*Ibid.*: 60)
- 37 Schiller too thematized the principle of plasticity as a central value in language and worldview, describing his approach as “humanistic pragmatism.” As one of Welby’s most acute critics, he accepted her theory of meaning and communication though he did not undersign her principle of “pedagogical perfectibility,” as he called it, regarding language. As exponents of a dynamic conception of thought-language described as process, energy, activity, motion, change, behaviour, Welby and Schiller both critiqued the thesis of “pure thought” fixed by universal and immutable laws, and correlate theories of language and meaning. Both were critical of dominant Oxfordian philosophy, especially formal logic represented by Francis Bradley, Harold Joachim, Bernard Bosanquet. Schiller in particular was critical of Russell.
- 38 All signifying behaviour, all experience from the organic to the cognitive and the ethical, presuppose the interpretive capacity at the level of sense. “Sense” indicates the pragmatic aspect of signifying processes insofar as it implies sign use, circumstance, and – in higher forms of animal life – mental state and reference, even if only at a preconscious level. But as pointed out earlier, the term “sense” is polysemous and refers to meaning in all its signifying implications as represented by Welby’s meaning triad, constitutive of the value of experience.

## 5. Expression and Understanding Between “Significal” Therapeutics and Education

39 With organic metaphors, Welby critiques the “maladies of language,” “linguistic pathology” and promotes the “critique of language” and development of “linguistic conscience.” A major cause of expressive pathology is antiquated linguistic usage – whether a question of words, propositions, outdated metaphors and analogies –, a source of confusion, false problems and misunderstandings, in special languages and in everyday languages.

40 A task for significs is to supply a method to diagnose “linguistic pathology,” the starting point for expressive regeneration:

It is unfortunate that custom decrees the limitation of the term diagnosis to the pathological field. It would be difficult to find a better one for that power of “knowing through,” which a training in Significs would carry. We must be brought up to take for granted that we are diagnosticians, that we are to cultivate to the utmost the power to see real distinctions and to read the signs, however faint, which reveal sense and meaning. Diagnostic may be called the typical process of Significs. (Welby 1903/1983: 51)

41 Significs assumes the dual task of theoretical analysis and therapeutic remedy striving for practical solutions to problems of expression which involve the general speaker, from the everyday person to the specialist or intellectual. Important to improve is the capacity to perceive distinctions, thus interpret meaning more precisely. Confusion for lack of linguistic awareness and poor logical procedure concerns all speakers and interpreters alike in the signifying universe (Petrilli 2009: 371-84).

42 Welby’s concern for bad linguistic usage, misuse and abuse of language, thus bad logic, resounds in Ludwig Wittgenstein when he theorizes the therapeutic vocation of philosophy whose purpose is to care for language and understanding: “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language,” he claims in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953: 109). Like Welby Wittgenstein searched for practical remedies in the philosophical and linguistic spheres.

43 Peirce and Schiller are less optimistic than Welby concerning the perfectibility of language usage and logic, the level of accuracy attainable in the expression of ideas. As Peirce claims in a letter to Welby dated 1 December 1903, to pursue “perfect accuracy” may cause lack of clarity:

I fully and heartily agree that the study of what we mean ought to be the [...] general purpose of a liberal education, as distinguished from special education, – of that education which should be required of everybody with whose society & conversation we are expected to be content. But, then, perfect accuracy of thought is unattainable, – *theoretically unattainable*. And undue striving for it is worse than time wasted. It positively renders thought unclear. (Hardwick 1977: 11)

44 In a letter to Welby dated 2 October 1907, Schiller also questions “what can practically be done to remedy the defects of language” (in Petrilli 2009: 632), expressing a position comparable to Peirce’s. For Schiller verbal language is an imperfect instrument and reflects the mental condition of its users. Confusion and dishonesty are common vices, but language use is not so imperfect. Communication is always somehow possible. “In their context words get and convey meanings which they do not seem to bear per se. Misleading metaphors are seen through, hints are taken, ambiguities and illogicalities

are overlooked (in the good as well as in the bad sense). In short, we somehow do manage to express ourselves and to be understood.” (*Ibid.*: 633).

Undeterred, Welby responds (October 1907) underlining the importance for logic of mother-sense and the connection to pragmatism: “mother sense never ‘sets its heart’ on any ‘pet hypothesis’”: “No: it takes one hypothesis after the other, treating the one it ‘cares’ for with a more uncompromising scrutiny and severity than the others. The very life of its owner and her children once hung upon this instinct of suspicion and of test. It is sheer mother-sense – instinct of intellectual danger – which in you, as in Dewey, Peirce and James, calls out the pragmatic reaction!” (*Ibid.*: 633-4).

- 45 Welby promotes education for meaning, language and logic, a significal education for critical thinking, acquisition of practical competencies and social progress (Petrilli 2015b). In his review of *What is Meaning?*, Peirce expresses his doubts about eventual effects of the “critique of language” on linguistic practice: “[Welby] thinks that modern conceptions call for a modern imagery of speech. But we fear that she does not realize how deep the knife would have to go into the body of speech to make it really scientific. We should have to form words like those the chemists use – if they can be called words” (in Hardwick 1977: 159). Nonetheless, he points to the importance attributed by Welby to logic for education: “she preaches making logic – ‘significs,’ she calls it, but it would be logic – the basis or core of education” (*ibid.*).
- 46 Significs for education, particularly a *linguistic education*, is a recurrent theme in Welby’s correspondence. Her papers on the topic, collected as “Significs-Education (1903-1911),” are now available in *Signifying and Understanding* (in Petrilli 2009: 494-515; cf. Petrilli 2016b). She maintains that the interpretive capacity and focus on the relation between language, logic and meaning should be cultivated from early childhood. The child’s curiosity, propensity for investigation and playfulness are a learning model for the adult. Welby signals the importance of studies on the development of mind from infancy. She criticizes the educational system for not sufficiently recognizing the child’s typical capacity to interrogate the reason of things, ask questions that are logically connected, for systematically blunting the child’s interest in language. Teaching methods should be revised and updated in light of research on language and meaning, the relation to values, and the principle of translation. Educational reform is described as a necessary condition for social reform at large.
- 47 For Welby, to educate for meaning, which is to educate for sense, meaning and significance, involves educating for the gifts of fitness, freedom, beauty, grace and dignity. From a letter to Peirce, 21 January 1909:
- Consistent usage and context, the adoption at all costs of the most illuminating forms of language, and the cultivation in education of a keen sense of fitness and freedom which is inborn (in various degrees) in every child, that is our crying need. In the direction of beauty, grace, dignity, some of us at least have it; we must have it also as the very condition of our awareness of these gifts in the direction of significance [...]. Our sense both of fitness and of consequence – not merely what follows but what leads, is more maimed than we know by the present lack betrayed by our helpless toleration of the unrecognized confusion of imposed usage in which the conventions of expression for most of us remain. (in Hardwick 1977: 87-8)
- 48 “Mother-sense” is a capacity common to all human beings and a pre-condition for critical consciousness, creativity, and responsibility, which a significal education can enhance. But educational systems tend to “inducate” rather than “educate,” producing

“dead” or “dissipated knowledge” (Welby 1903/1983: ch. XVI, note III). Welby advocated systematic training in critical reflection and creative meaning from early school-days, aiming “to persuade parents and schoolmasters that the first need is to centre all education upon the question of ‘Meaning and how to convey it’” (1903: ch. XVIII). All can learn to become “significians,” children and the “man in the street” included. Educating to the correct use of language, to interrogation of sense, meaning and significance implies a commitment to improving the human condition and as such is a moral responsibility.

## 6. Conclusions. For Pragmatism and Beyond: Understanding in the Feminine

### 6.1. With Peirce

- 49 Welby disregarded descriptive approaches to language that ignore the relation to values and valuation, thus losing sight of the ethical, aesthetic, pragmatic, and *ideological* dimensions of human semiosis.
- 50 For Welby logic is called to recover its relation to ethics, reason to reasonableness, cognitive theory to axiology, identity to alterity. A “significal” approach to signifying and understanding highlights interdependency between inference, signs and values, united in orienting human action.
- 51 Like Peirce Welby too transcends the boundaries of ontology and identity-based rationalism. She too advocates knowledge, inquiry, experimentation and learning guided by otherness at the origin of semiosis, the *arché* of signifying processes. Neither Peirce’s pragmatism nor Welby’s significs are reducible to theoreticism. For both knowledge is not understanding *tout court*, but is also caring for the other, participation and co-implication with the other, commitment to action and transformation, the propensity for inventiveness and imagination. Significs has a focus on the individual as a concrete singularity inexorably interrelated with the other, the human other and the nonhuman other.
- 52 Moreover, this concrete singularity, the single individual in one’s uniqueness, is inevitably implicated with “semiotic materiality” (Petrilli 1990b).<sup>6</sup> Whether a question of verbal or nonverbal sign processes, the expression “semiotic materiality” refers to the fact that signs can enter more than one interpretive trajectory formed by signs that defer to each other in open-ended semiotic fluxes (Petrilli 2010a: 137-58). Beyond merely organic materiality, merely physical materiality, this is the materiality of the other’s alterity, of signifying otherness, of the body itself, one’s own included. Thanks to semiotic materiality subjectivity and the conscious do not converge, identity is multiplex, polylogic, characterized by otherness and excess within the egological community itself. It ensues that semiotic materiality explains the human capacity to exist on one’s own account in the face of intention, thus for resistance even with respect to the individual will (Petrilli 2012: 34, 152-7; 2013: 62-6). The significal-pragmatic perspective rejects the arrogance of cognition and practical action based on authoritarian inclinations and incontestable norms, on the representation of indisputability, whether in the sphere of the exact, natural or human sciences. Monologizing reductivism, oversimplification in whatever form is unacceptable, as

when multiple languages (a resource) are neglected in search of unification in a “perfect language” (Petrilli 2009: 545-7).

- 53 Likewise, unity through dogmatic imposition, domination and oppression in the religious and moral spheres as in the political is just as delusory. In cognition, whether scientific research or daily life, appeal to irrefutable data, “plain meaning,” “hard dry facts” is deviating, and certainly inadequate (*ibid.*: 357-8). This orientation neglects the signifying power of ambiguity, vagueness, imagination, confrontation, relation among different interpretative possibilities, all indispensable for rigour and progress in science, for the acquisition of new knowledge and the quality of life. Authentic *reason* is *reasonableness*, reason inspired by *otherness*, *dialogism* and *listening*. In political terms such values are the inexorable condition for social justice.
- 54 The destiny of bodies and signs as determined in *semiotic materiality* is a hope for the future. In the sign of resistance offered by the materiality of signifying otherness, ideas travel beyond the traps of identity, beyond boundaries, certainly national boundaries. With Welby and with Peirce let us add to conclude – a homage to women in the world today, particularly in such Nation-States as Afghanistan and Iran – that the materiality of ideas and ideals resist, travel and flourish, and do so well beyond the horror of deadly regimes. The present is the future perfect of freedom and responsibility in resistance, as we work together for new and better worlds.

## 6.2. For Welby, A Singular Feminist Viewpoint

- 55 What Welby calls *mother-sense* is a center of value in the architecture of her thought-system, her *significs*. In her studies on sign, meaning, communication, she highlights how whatever we do and say depends on “mother-sense.” “Mother-sense,” a propensity for the *other* is proper to the human; mother-sense tells of the human disposition for alterity, co-implication, caring, responsibility. All this outside role, affiliation, profession or trade, in a word outside identity, *hors sujet* (Levinas 1987; Petrilli 2013).
- 56 Welby denounced the exploitation and degradation of humanity, social abuse in all forms – slave trade, child-labour, poor labour conditions, poverty. Echoing her own words, to assume the futility of resistance and opposition for change is to create the futility itself whether at the epistemological, social or political level (Welby 1903/1983: 142; Petrilli 2009: 595-7). As to woman abuse, in a letter to Schiller (October 1907, *ibid.*: 633-6), she denounced male dominion, the processes of masculinization of civil society, the fact that the human universe, in its ontogenetic and phylogenetic expressions, is overwhelmed by masculine discourse repressive of the feminine. The whole social order was laid down for women “on masculine lines only” causing loss in the original female capacity for inventiveness, knowledge, critical awareness, her “natural and complementary powers of interpretation and problem-solution, of suggestion and correction.”
- 57 Today I consider Welby as an important exponent of the movement, awareness, claim to rights that characterize “feminism.” Not only because her relationships feature women who at the time were committed to the rising cause, but because Welby emphasizes the importance for human existence, human thought, talk and action, of connotation in the “feminine,” the “woman” sense. Mother-sense is essential not only for renewal and regeneration in science and society, but for the “properly human,” for

development of each single individual in uniqueness, singularity. And as Welby teaches us, the value of singularity is feminine.

- 58 All Welby's work bears traces of the specifically feminine, not in the sense of female *identity*, but of *singularity, uniqueness*. Her feminine discourse stems from her singular perspective. Hence her originality. And while highlighting the feminine as an inevitable dimension of human behaviour, theoretical and practical, her viewpoint and commitment is *sui generis*. Feminine *identity* is not enough to be Welby, just as feminine identity is not enough to be each one in singularity, as unique single individuals.
- 59 In Welby's thought the feminine is indispensable to better the human condition, the possibility of living together, in relationships of involvement and non-indifference to the other. Her originality, singular contribution, personal participation, her legacy is undoubtedly feminine, as emerges from the original sense she attributes to the expression "female" – "original-sense" also as synonym of "mother-sense" (Petrilli 2015c, 2015d).
- 60 Welby's *feminist stance* is in keeping with a *humanist stance*, but this is clearly a question of *new humanism, the humanism of alterity, otherness* where the feminine stance counts, and counts especially in the manifestation of the alterity, singularity, incomparability of each one. Welby's feminism is also in keeping with the disposition for experimentation, verification, interrogation and critique, all conditions of a *scientific stance*; but her feminism also consists in highlighting how *mother-sense* – the place of her intransigence, her "resistance" – is inescapable, the condition itself of *living together, of life understood in all its variety*, outside the oppression of totalizing visions, whether macho or anthropocentric.

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## NOTES

1. *Signifying and Understanding*, Petrilli 2009, an edited over 1,000-page volume containing Welby's essays, letters, notes, an anthology of writings by first generation significians, my monograph discussing her work and influence, and correlate bibliographies.
2. Participants included Charles Strong, Alfred Sidgwick, Ferdinand Schiller, Bertrand Russell, Harold Joachim, all familiar with Welby and her theory of meaning. Nonetheless, Welby was neglected by her British compatriots. Instead, the Significs Movement in the Netherlands recognized its connection to Welby thanks to Frederik van Eeden (cf. Pietarinen 2009).
3. Early examples of her dialogical method of inquiry on science and religion include "Truthfulness in Science and Religion (1888)" (in Petrilli 2009: 197-207) and the essaylets, "New Wine in Old Bottles (1890)" (*ibid.*: 123-4) and "Breath and the Name of the Soul (1891)" (*ibid.*: 125-6).
4. Welby was well-known for sharing copies of her letter exchanges with the intellectual community. For Peirce this practice translated into the promotion of his ideas among English and Continental philosophers: through Welby Vailati introduced Peirce's pragmatism to Italy; Ogden appended an extract from a letter by Peirce to Welby to *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), co-authored with Ivor Richards (see Gordon 1994 for the critical edition which includes a discussion of the Welby-Peirce correspondence with extracts; also Gordon 1991; Petrilli 1993). Through Ogden and Frank Ramsay, Ludwig Wittgenstein also discovered Peirce (Thayer 1968). In sum, Welby contributed to spreading Peircean pragmatism with interesting developments specially in Continental Europe (Misak 2016).
5. See Peirce's "What Pragmatism Is" (1905), CP 5.411-37; "Issues of Pragmaticism" (1905-1906), CP 5.438-63; "Pragmatism and Abduction" (1903), CP 5.180-212.
6. On "semiotic materiality," see Petrilli (1990a: 365-92; 2010a: 137-58; 2014: 69-88; 2015e: 151-66; 2016a: 25-44).

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## ABSTRACTS

Welby's correspondence with Peirce began with his review of *What is Meaning?* (1903), a contribution not only to spreading Peirce's later thinking, but also to reproposing Welby's "significs." This is encounter between the pragmatist Peirce's approach to *semiotic* and Welby's *significs* oriented by *mother-sense*. A dialogue between two conceptions of meaning which, notwithstanding differences, meet in a participative contribution to constructing the sign sciences – from Peirce to *semiotics*, from Welby to *significs*. Their focus does not only concern signs but also values which are inextricably interconnected. In this encounter, *significs* doubtlessly exerts a non-negligible influence on *semiotics*. If with (Peirce's) "play of musement" we are endowed to imagine different worlds from the present, a male-dominated world, to resist the world as-it-is and construct new worlds presupposes what Welby calls *mother-sense*. In human signifying processes the epistemological dimension is clearly not separable from the axiological, aesthetic or ideological-political.

## AUTHOR

**SUSAN PETRILLI**

Università degli Studi di Bari "Aldo Moro"

susan.petrilli[at]gmail.com