Book Review

Peirce's Approach to the Self: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity. By Vincent M. Colapietro. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989. 160 pp. $44.50 cloth, $14.95 paper.

You may be tempted by the title of Vincent Colapietro's book, with its promises about "Peirce" and "subjectivity" and "self." As a reader of *Operant Subjectivity,* your interest in "subjectivity" and "self" needs no explanation, of course, and you may already know Charles S. Peirce as a brilliant, original contributor to modern logic of science and as the champion of the logical form he variously called "abduction" and "hypothesis." So far so good.

Colapietro's title further promises you these topics will be seen from "a semiotic perspective," and the author is faithful to that pledge. In Colapietro's slender book, Peirce is revered not for his contributions to logic of science but as the founder of semiotics, the study of signs and sign systems.

But there is trouble in Semioticsville.

The Semioans are fighting among themselves. Various factions quarrel about fundamental matters. The natives do agree that Peirce founded their village, but clash about the charter Peirce left and what the village rules and regulations should be.

Into the fray steps Colapietro, a native scholar defending Peirce against ungrateful intellectual offspring. Colapietro writes to clear up Peirce's views about topics now disturbing semiotic peace. He hopes to rescue the quarrel from becoming "a ferocious debate among irritable professors," but it appears too late for that.

In Colapietro's account, the two main Semioan factions are the Peircians and the Buchlerians, and they differ on the essential definition of "sign," the cornerstone of semiotic theory. Both factions agree that a sign has three components, but they

contend fiercely about what the components might be. Any Semioan must take such clashes seriously, of course, and Colapietro, himself a Peircian, indeed does. (The author also introduces other minor village viewpoints. The most strident seems a Semioan named Eco, but his arguments are so arbitrary and contradictory that even Semioans ignore him. The author hears another minor voice, that of Lyotard, who opts for no system at all, but the author, wisely enough, ignores such anarchists.)

In Colapietro's book, much is revealed about early semiotic: Peirce invented it. He developed it over the better part of half a century. He invented neologisms incessantly to present it. He proposed a welter of definitions filled with his neologisms. His writing about semiotic was persistently dense.

Much is also revealed about modern semiotic: Its proponents spend enormous energy inventing categories and definitions and never seem to get beyond assumptions. They appear to do no primary research whatsoever. They compete with each other to write sentences they themselves could not parse. They seem marooned in scholasticism.

Much is revealed about Peirce: The author clearly knows Peirce. He seems devoted to Peirce in a personal way, respectful of him as a person and synthetic about what Peirce may have meant.

Colapietro reveals something of Peirce's view of "self": Peirce was deeply interested in the topic. He corresponded with William James about it. He seems to have recognized several phenomena fundamental to understanding self, for example, the distinction between what Mead and others would later call "I" and "me," the person absorbed in process to the point of being unaware of self versus the person being self conscious.

Much is revealed about Peirce's view of "subjectivity": To Peirce, following Plato, subjectivity meant "internal dialogue." Peirce knew feelings existed, of course, but his theory of semiotic ignored feelings as phenomena, leaving them

out of fundamental definitions and recognizing no operations by which feelings might issue into thought.

Peirce appears not to have considered the idea of different states of subjectivity (the phenomena Q researchers recognize as "factors," either in the way they are revealed in studies with multiple subjects or in the richer way they are revealed in single case studies).

If we take him at his word, Peirce needlessly rejected subjectivity in favor of objectivity. As strongly as he could express it, Peirce believed that the world is meaningful apart from our efforts to make sense of it. He believed that ultimately, there are "right answers," saying "pluralism doesn't satisfy my head or my heart."

Colapietro also reveals much about Peirce as a human: In the author's respectful hands, Peirce is shown as an intellectual passionately committed to elevating philosophy, particularly logic, to the status of science. Why such passion? The author reveals Peirce as a person who wished deeply for people to be better, more open, more tolerant. Peirce believed that ideal required "reasonableness." Above all, he believed that ideal required self control, and for him rationalism was the ultimate method for self control. This made him a passionate rationalist, a person who believed that "anything deserving the name of thought" could be expressed in a way open to review and criticism according to "universally valid laws governing thought," which for Peirce were rules of logic.

That desire was the basis for his approach to semiotics, and for his heartfelt attempt to use it to externalize subjectivity so that reasonable people could find some stable commonality based in rightness and wrongness.

It seems likely Peirce's desire to externalize subjectivity is a reason his writing was so often dense. It may be the reason so much of his presentation of semiotic is written in passive voice, a form that denies a subject and allows a writer to mask personal opinion as thought belonging "out there" to a larger audience, perhaps to "mankind." Peirce's habit of writing in passive voice, along with his passion for neologisms, has left

his meaning open to widely differing interpretations. One result is that today, in the centennial of Peirce's heyday, his intellectual children are still quarreling about assumptions.

Ultimately, semiotic is a theory that denies subjectivity. It did so in Peirce's hands, and it does so in Buchler's. Semiotics, in its several varieties, is finally based on the classification of signs, which offers no more to the understanding of subjectivity than does the classification of rocks. Semiotic is based on categorical definitions that are nonfunctional in a psychological sense and often dysfunctional as communication.

It seems a great tribute to Peirce's originality that he is still read and revered. If you are interested in Peirce, you should read Colapietro's book. If you wish to avoid the civil disturbance among Semioans, you can simply skip the introduction and the first three chapters. You will miss only an occasional lucid island. The remaining chapters will tell you much about Peirce and why scholars such as Colapietro remain devoted to him.

Charles R. Mauldin, 133 Broadmeadow Road # 12, Marlboro, MA 01752. (Dr. Mauldin is Director of Marketing, Harte-Hankes Newspapers/Massachusetts.)

It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts. (Sherlock Holmes)