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BOOK REVIEW | RESENHA

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RAPOSA, MICHAEL L. *Theosemiotic: religion, reading, and the gift of meaning*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020. 308p.

In the “Preface” to his comprehensive study Michael Raposa writes that he coined the word “theosemiotic” in 1989, in his book *Peirce’s philosophy of religion*, as “a label for Peirce’s distinctive world-view (which led him to perceive the universe as ‘a great work of art, a great poem’)” (p. IX). Peirce’s thought, Raposa points out, has “historical roots that run deep in the American tradition and beyond,” and it provides “a uniquely promising framework for the contemporary reconsideration of certain classical issues in philosophical theology”—in particular for a productive reconfiguration of the relationship between religious experience, belief, and practice (*Ibid.*). While in *Peirce’s philosophy of religion* Raposa focused on an exegesis of Peirce’s writings, the main aims of his new book are: (a) the systematic exploration of Peirce’s relevance for the scholarly investigations of religious topics, as well as (b) a historical inquiry into “theosemiotic” as “a distinctive tradition in American thought.” This tradition started with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Jonathan Edwards, came to full flower in the philosophy of Peirce, and was continued by William James and Josiah Royce, whose book *The problem of Christianity*, as Raposa shows, “represents the first deliberate attempt to develop Peirce’s ideas for specifically theological purposes” (p. XI). In his new study, Raposa thus goes, in important respects, beyond what Peirce himself developed, providing “a sketch of theosemiotic, not simply as Peirce conceived it, but as it might be understood and further developed by contemporary philosophical theologians” (p. XI).

Raposa’s book has seven chapters. It starts, in *chapter 1*, with “A Brief History of Theosemiotic”, in which, *inter alia*, not only the “esthetic spirituality” of Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson is analyzed, but Raposa also, with recourse to Peircean motifs, emphasizes that theosemiotic has not only an aesthetic but, at its center, also an ethical dimension. When analyzing the depth structure of Peirce’s triadically dimensioned semiotics Raposa finds interesting parallels in Duns Scotus’s interpretation of “signs.” He looks briefly at Spinoza, as well as—in view of Peirce’s “pragmatism”—at Schelling’s “objective idealism,” and starts to investigate (with reference to Peirce’s reflections



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on “musement” in “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God”) Ignatius Loyola’s “highly pragmatic manual of meditations” (p. 28). He then deals with the work of Josiah Royce, whose “detailed investigation of what it means to understand interpretation as an essentially ordered ‘time process’” is, Raposa writes, “the logical extension of what Peirce (indeed following the Scholastics) had already observed about semiosis as an event” (p. 37). In Royce’s mature writings, Raposa argues, semiotic “became explicitly theosemiotic” and thus Royce, “in a very real sense, had launched the inquiry that is now being pursued in these pages” (p. 38-39). Royce’s “absolute pragmatism”, as well as his architecture of “communities” (which culminates in his analyses of “the Beloved community” as well as the “universal community”), was carefully studied, decades later, by the American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, who, as Raposa points out, “adopted and adapted Royce’s thinking about loyalty, so that it came to be the life blood of his own meditations about faith and fidelity” (p. 40). Two other (non-American) authors are also important to theosemiotic inquiry, Raposa writes: “the French philosopher, mystic, and activist, Simone Weil” (p. 40-41), and the founder of “modern Latin American liberation theology,” Gustavo Gutierrez (p. 41).

After his brief survey of (segments of) the history of theosemiotic, Raposa examines, in chapters 2 to 7—now not in a historical but in a systematic manner—how philosophical theology can be reconfigured and solidified in a semiosis-related, Peirce-inspired mode. *Chapter 2*, “Signs, Selves, and Semiosis,” analyzes and defends two core Peircean claims: that “all thinking is in signs,” and that “every person is a living sign or symbol.” The first claim is, after the linguistic turn in the early twentieth century, relatively uncontroversial today: thought and sign-use are deeply intermingled. The second thesis – that persons themselves are “complex signs”—is (as a “de-transcendentalized,” post-Kantian attempt at an explication of the human “self”), however, fraught with considerable problems. While being aware of this, Raposa, nevertheless, defends this “strong thesis” (p. 45): “On Peirce’s account,” he writes, “it is entirely consistent to say *both* that persons make words meaning this or that by using them in a certain fashion *and* that persons are complex signs whose meanings are determined by the word that form their stream of consciousness.” Therefore, as Peirce puts it, “men and words reciprocally educate each other” (CP 5.313). Josiah Royce, whose mature philosophy “represents the first serious attempt to develop Peirce’s ideas for the purpose of theosemiotic” (p. 278, fn. 22), worked out, more explicitly than Peirce himself—according to Raposa—the idea that human thought “most typically takes the form of a dialogue.” Royce observed “that ‘when a process of conscious reflection goes on, a man may be said to interpret himself to himself’ (ROYCE, *The Problem of Christianity*, p. 287)” (p. 51). Accordingly, the self is “both a process and a product of interpretation, oriented toward the future” (*Ibid.*). Following Peirce and Royce, Raposa argues that “the self must be portrayed not as existing here and now, once and for all, but can best be regarded as an emergent product of semiosis: to some degree it is able to “direct this process (especially by means of a long-term project of habit formation) and yet it is also the product of it” (p. 63). The human self is thus – as, using a Peircean term, Raposa puts it – a “legisign”: “at one and the same time a [self-imposed, L.N.] law and a sign” (p. 64, see also p.72). What distinguishes the human self from other organisms is the fact that “humans not only react to their environment, but also continuously reinterpret themselves” (p. 64). This human capacity for reflection and decision making Raposa expresses (thereby reformulating Kant’s first “postulate of practical reason,” “freedom” within the conceptual framework of semiotics) as follows: “While the universe might well be ‘perfused’ with signs and semiosis [as Peirce puts it, CP 5.448, fn. 1], the human self-as-sign appears [...] as an instance or example of *meta-semiosis*, a continuous relation of the self to itself in explicitly semiotic patterns,” *i.e.* as “the ‘replication of self-control upon self-control’ (CP 5.402, fn. 3)” (p. 65). Thus, what Raposa shows in *chapter 2* is that, if the self is conceived—along the lines of Peirce—as a sign, the human self “is *distinctive* among other signs in the way that it also plays the role of an active reader [...] of an intricate and evolving narrative.” In this process, the self “presents itself to others as something/someone to be read” (p. 73).

With reference to this human possibility of “self-control” and self-rereading the core *theological* question arises as to how this (semiotically reformulated) human potential to act freely is connected to an understanding of (as Peirce puts it) “the role that ‘God permits’ human beings to have in the work of creation [CP5.402].” (p. 65). The connection between freedom and cosmological evolution is thus the core theme of *chapter 3* of Raposa’s book, “Love in a Universe of Chance”, which analyzes and expands reflections that Peirce presented in his Darwin-critical, “agapism”-focused essay “Evolutionary Love” (1893). Does the human experience of free inter-subjective “acknowledgment” and love—in contrast to a Darwinian world-view—hint at an evolutionary process with a “potentially religious significance?”, Raposa asks. And does this lead theological reflection to necessarily affirm the idea of theism? In view of religions such as Jainism and Buddhism, as well as of the various forms of “religious naturalisms,” Raposa avoids such a strong claim, asserting that “the possibility of genuine theological reflection being pursued without a presupposition of the truth of theism ought to be considered as a real one” (p. 76). Theosemiotic is nowhere able to spell out *fully* a concept of “the divine”: it has at all times also, as Raposa argues, an “apophatic” aspect (p.85). Peirce rightly “considered the word ‘God’ to be an extraordinarily vague symbol for a knowable but deeply mysterious and vastly indeterminate reality,” Raposa writes (p. 95). If Peirce’s account of the evolutionary significance of love is carefully extrapolated, it can be argued, however, “that love’s teleology presupposes the existence of a relationship between persons, albeit not necessarily human beings. The experience of falling or being in love with the universe (as Royce expresses it in “Neglected Argument”) makes sense only if something personal can be discerned at the heart of the cosmos: only if (as Peirce claimed) “a hypothetical God emerges into view as the author of the book of nature” (p. 95). This, however, falls short “of constituting a ‘proof’ of God’s existence” for Peirce (p. 96). But “Peirce, James and Royce all seemed convinced,” Raposa writes, “that theism in at least one of its forms represented the best answer available given the present state of inquiry” (p. 96). Theosemiotic, on the one hand, thus affirms (elements of) the apophatic theological discourse, but it does not embrace it *in toto*: it is much closer to the complex theological concept of *analogia entis* (*i.e.*, to the idea of a not homologue, and not heterologue, but analogue sign use in our conceptual attempts to explore the divine)—to a medieval concept which, however, it re-reads in an innovative, “semiosis”-focused and praxis-related manner: “While the divine reality may remain deeply mysterious from the perspective of theosemiotic, some limited knowledge about that reality is a genuine possibility” (p. 96). “God’s ‘great poem’”, according to Peirce, “will have to be regarded as a sign of extraordinary complexity with indexical and symbolic as well as purely iconic features,” and thus “the best interpretation of such a symbol may be embodied in some disciplined practice, [... in] the conduct that it inspires.” This “is a theosemiotic insight of the greatest significance,” Raposa points out (p. 96-97): in its most elaborate mode, human praxis is “love,” a (mutual) person to person attentiveness which, “since persons are living legisigns [...] can be construed as a form of semiosis, each serving as a sign for the other” (p. 104).

This central focus on “conduct” and “habit” is further investigated in *chapter 4* of Raposa’s study, “Theology as Inquiry, Therapy, Praxis.” At the beginning of this segment of his book Raposa points out that “any theology conceived as theosemiotic will be fueled by Peirce’s rich and discriminating *pragmaticism*”—*i.e.*, by Peirce’s mature philosophy, which has to be “contrasted sharply with the crude or narrow instrumentalism” that founded the popular version of “pragmatism” which was wrongly derived from Peirce’s early essays (p.107-108). Raposa’s emphasis on Peirce’s elaborate *pragmaticism* is very much needed today since selective appropriations of Peirce’s philosophy have become increasingly popular. In the chapter on Peirce in Jürgen Habermas’s new book on the history of the philosophical discourses on knowledge and faith, for instance (HABERMAS, 2019, p. 703-748), mature Peirce’s “pragmaticist” reconstruction of “objective idealism,” which Raposa, with valid motives, integrates into his theosemiotic, is all too quickly put to one side, and left unanalyzed. Unlike Habermas in his new book, Raposa avoids a narrowed down conception of pragmatism and extensively re-explores Peirce’s *pragmaticist* argument for the “Reality of God.”

In his detailed analyses of the role which “inquiry, therapy and praxis” play in theosemiotic, Raposa focuses on three themes: he first portrays, along the lines of Peirce, “inquiry as semiosis, exposing the fundamental sense in which all thinking is analogous to a form of reading” (p. 113); secondly, he argues that theosemiotic thinking has “a therapeutic function, resulting in habit change” (p. 113); and, thirdly, he claims that—as a praxis-oriented and pragmatism-inspired project—theosemiotic cannot stay focused, in a solitary manner, on individual religious experience, but—as community-oriented—will in its general attitude be “more akin to the position developed by certain liberation theologians” (p. 141): “If it is truly a practical science, in the way that Duns Scotus envisaged, theology should enable us to see more, to pay better attention, ultimately to love better by helping to perfect in us a habit of love” (p. 154).

The *locus* of agape is human interaction and discourse: Raposa thus dedicates *chapter 5* of his study to the topic “Communities of Interpretation,” asking, along the lines of Peirce and Royce, “what conditions must obtain in order for any collection of persons to be recognized as a community” (p.155). The central questions to be investigated in this context are: “How are the identities, characters, purposes, and practices of individuals shaped by their membership in certain communities?”, and “What is it about a community that qualifies it, in Roycean terms, as something that demands our loyalty?” (p. 155). The last question is of central importance for theosemiotic, since “one of the things that members of any genuine community must share will be certain sets of ideals” (p. 157). Even if idealism “does not at present constitute a popular item on the philosophical menu,” Raposa writes, it is important for theosemiotic “to think both about the nature of ideals and about the plausibility of a certain type of idealism:” with regard to these two questions “Peirce, Royce and Dewey will each prove to be reliable guides” (p. 158). Looking at their explorations of inter-subjectivity, Raposa starts with a sketch of several elements that are needed for a “fuller account of the nature of community”: that is to say for an account which analyzes “the crucial role played by a loyalty that in its highest forms is manifested as love”, and which is able to show that the “context within which community (its rationale and its rationality) can best be understood is one supplied by a theory of semiotic.” However, no pragmatism *philology* is needed at that point. What Raposa advocates is what he calls “‘thinking with’ Royce, Peirce, Dewey and others” by *extending* their semiotic analyses of community for contemporary theological purposes (p. 162). A series of questions thus arises, as Raposa points out: first, how does an explicitly semiotic context enable us “to analyze the relationship between different religions” and “to address the challenge of religious conflict and religiously motivated violence?”. And, secondly, “What would be entailed by a commitment to develop a theosemiotic of social justice?” (p. 177-178). Concerning the first question, Raposa advocates “the significance of practices over doctrines” (p. 184): different religious communities “enshrine contrasting beliefs in their official creeds [...] yet display in their behavior a significant number of overlapping practices” (p. 179). In view of this situation Raposa advocates a liberal approach, “semiotic complementary, displayed in praxis:” “A Roman Catholic devotee,”—he writes—might, for example “come to the conclusion that the regular discipline of sitting *zazen* with Zen Buddhists adds something of real value to a spirituality organized around the kind of private, liturgical, and sacramental rituals associated with traditional Catholic piety” (p. 179). Friendly, non-dogmatic practices like these lead, however, to questions of greater generality: to the problem of how traditional communities can bond together in a larger community. In the exploration of this question, Raposa points out, “both Peirce and Royce were early pioneers” (p. 183). Peirce “is pretty explicit that some commitment to agapism as a leading principle would fill this prescription”, and Royce “posits the loyalty to loyalty” as a supreme ideal—an ideal which “while empowering the members of such an unlimited community to remain faithful to their separate causes and commitments, [...] rules out any vicious loyalty of the sort that can be maintained only at the cost of undermining the ability of others to sustain devotion to their own ideals” (p. 184).

This leads Raposa to the second question: how theosemiotic and the idea of social justice are interconnected. Raposa argues that “the *desideratum* of a truly unlimited or universal community,

emphasized in the philosophies of both Peirce and Royce” should be “translatable in a liberationist context: That no community of this kind presently exists [...] underscores the reason why a liberation theosemiotic must take the form of a theology of hope” (p. 186). In order to make this hope real, not only “developing habits and strategies of resistance to whatever might be judged as oppressive is necessary” (p. 187), but also the development of “genuine inclusion,” of “careful listening,” as well as the creation of “a semiotic space in which a lively conversation between different reading experiences [of persons, as “signs”] becomes possible (p. 190).

This emphasis on “reading” is further explored in *chapter six* of Raposa’s book, “Rules for Discernment,” in which “a type of attending” is analyzed which is focused “on what lies ‘within’ a person”—*i.e.*, on a reading “that has oneself as the primary text” (p. 192-193). Raposa is well aware, however, that “the traditional theological talk about the ‘discernment of spirits’ muddies the water.” He thus wants to bring two theological authors of the past into conversation with Peirce and Royce, who developed a complex, non-traditional conception of “discernment” (p. 195). The first is Ignatius Loyola, whose *Spiritual Exercises*, as Raposa argues, “were designed to assist the religious practitioner in the task of self-examination—in particular, to determine how feeling-states of both ‘consolation’ and ‘desolation’ might be interpreted as signs of either spiritual progress or regress.” The second author is Jonathan Edwards, who, in his *Treatise on Religious Affections*, tried to delineate “signs that he argued were reliable indicators of the presence of divine grace” (p. 197). Raposa asks: “How might Peirce’s semiotic theory be adapted for the purpose of exploring these two theologies of discernment?” (*Ibid.*). Theosemiotic, to be sure, “need not embrace either Ignatius’s or Edward’s religious worldview,” but their “theological method, ‘deep listening’” (p. 222) deserves an appreciative “semiotic” rereading. Ignatius “emphasizes an awareness of feelings”, and Edwards “concentrates on purposeful action:” “Yet neither in Ignatius’s manual nor in Edwards’s treatise is either aspect of discernment ignored:” hence “both theologians were pragmaticists” (p. 225). Contemporary theosemiotic, Raposa therefore concludes, “should build on the model that these thinkers have provided” (*Ibid.*). What Ignatius has pointed out in his reflections on “prayer” (that prayer “is to be regarded not simply as an act of recitation but as an opportunity for cognitive play” [p. 201-202]) comes very close to Peirce’s analysis of “musement” in the *locus classicus* of his philosophy of religion, “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” (*Ibid.*). In Peirce, as in Ignatius, the love of God which musement is able to induce is not destined to terminate in a solitary self-affirmation of the “musing” person, but, because of its “dramatically self-transformative consequences,” can become, as Raposa argues, a “powerful force shaping human contact” (p. 225).

Chapter 6, “On Prayer and the Spirit of Pragmatism,” as well as the “Postlude” of Raposa’s study, “The Play of Musement,” extrapolate (elements of) Peirce’s analyses of religion, in order to reread with their help pre-semiotic as well as extra-semiotic attempts to elucidate our ability to address the divine. The core of these analyses is Raposa’s innovative (but, as critics of his interpretations might say, in some respects not totally unproblematic) reconstruction of part 1, the “humble argument”, of Peirce’s essay on the “Reality of God.” What Raposa aims at is—as he writes—“a reading of Peirce’s Neglected Argument in a way that he himself intended it to be understood: as an a posteriori, experimental version of the ontological argument” (p. 227).

This claim might seem puzzling to two groups of Raposa’s readers: to those who, (a), defend the classical, established interpretation of Anselm’s “argument,” pointing out that any logical derivation of the “existence of God” from the “idea of a supremely perfect being” has, with necessity, an “a priori” status; and (b), to those Peirce scholars who argue that Peirce claimed, in part two of his “nest of three arguments” for the Reality of God (EP 2:446, “Additament”), that all traditional theological attempts to explore the divine (such as, for instance, the “argument from design” and the “ontological argument”) *neglected* the necessary, in-depth exploration of the “humble argument” and, therefore, were not able to provide a valid reconstruction and defense of the (immediate) insights gained in “musement.” By

wrongly focusing on God's "existence" (which, in Peirce's semiotic terms, is a "Secondness"-related "object"-quality) the traditional theological discourse was unable to, convincingly, back up the belief in God's "Reality". Therefore, according to Peirce, the core content of the "humble argument"—the musement-induced idea of a "hypothetical God"—has to be explored in a way that differs from classical theology: in a manner, that is, which is tied to "certain parts of the work of scientific discovery" (EP 2:447). When the depth-structure of science is pragmaticistically explored (via an analysis of our "guessing instinct", "abduction") it turns out to be tied to the category "Thirdness", and thus to "objective idealism." This insight does not rest on the "theoretical" proofs which Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, rightly criticized. Peirce scholars might thus claim that—by means of his semiotic analysis of the possibility of "scientific discovery"—Peirce avoids two dangers: "the danger that the investigation [of God's reality] stops at the first stage" (i.e., at the immediacy of the "humble argument") (EP 2:447); and the danger of repeating some of the problematic patterns of classical theological argumentation. What Peirce actually aims at is a new, semiotic exploration of the "God hypothesis:" a Kant-sensitive, post-Kantian *transformation* of the "postulate of God" which derives its strength not from an irrefutable theoretical "deduction", but from the important role that "the hypothetical God" it is able to play as a praxis-motivating "horizon of hope" in human action.

Confronted with these considerations and possible objections it is, however, plausible that Raposa might point out that his "theosemiotic" attempt to explore the depth structure and the implications of "musement" – an attempt in which the "playful re-reading" of the self, as well as the universe, is brought into contact with (*transformed motifs* of) the Classical ontological argument – does explicitly emphasize the "experimental" (i.e. *praxis-related and thus: finite*) character of *all* human readings of "God's Reality." What his "theosemiotic" re-exploration of "musement" thus intends is *not a philological* reconstruction of *all* the constituents of Peirce's defense of the "God hypothesis" in "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God", but "merely the attempt to employ [some] philosophical resources borrowed from Peirce and pragmatism" in order to explore further today's options for a "spiritual life." Raposa's creative re-reading of Peirce's "humble argument" thus allows him to provide a plausible elucidation of many different forms of "spirituality:" not only those that were already explored in classical theology (by Augustine and Ignatius Loyola, for instance), or in early American thought and in non-Western, Daoist and Zen-Buddhist meditation practices, but also those that can be found in the work of Simone Weil and of H. Richard Niebuhr and in recent "liberation theology."

Raposa's book is thus an important—pragmatism-inspired and praxis-focused—contribution to the emerging global discourse on religion in our "secular age."

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List of Abbreviations*

The works of Charles S. Peirce are cited as follows:

Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce: volume (v) and paragraph (p) (CP v.p).

The Essential Peirce: volume (v), page (p) (EP v:p).

* Editor's Note: This list of abbreviations follows the rules described at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Sanders_Peirce_bibliography. Accessed on: 20 Dec. 2021.