

Semiotic and Folkloristics

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In this presentation I have been requested to outline some of my research into the nature of folkloristics and semiotic. I shall try to suggest why semiotic is important for folkloristics, and vice versa. Because the only subject matter for any discipline lies in the questions it asks and the methods it uses to answer these questions, I shall adopt the technique of outlining in the questioning mode. Since my outline covers a large area, it will be short on detail, yet I hope the perspective it might provide will be useful.

Semiotic is the study of semioses. A semiosis is any process possessing the abstract logical relational property that in the process some — is represented by some — to an interpreting —. These blanks can be “filled” by many kinds of concepts, yet the basic relational process will retain the same logical properties. It is the business of semiotic to study the relational features that are common in all instances of semiosis. It is the goal of applied semiotic to use such insights as semiotic can provide to improve understanding of specific or particular kinds of semioses as they occur in situ. Some of the basic principles of semiotic, therefore, will involve answers to the following questions. If we call “that which is represented” by the name “object”, what is the nature of such an object in general? If “that which represents an object” is given the name “representamen”, what is the nature of any representamen? If “that which interprets a representamen” is described as an “interpretant”, what are interpretants? There are additional questions that arise here. Can an interpretant in one semiosis become an object for a later semiosis? Can a representamen sometimes have more than one object? or more than one interpretant? How does an object “influence” an interpretant? Are there any objects that are “logically basic”, that is, are there any objects which influence some interpretant, but which themselves are not influenced by any logically prior object or interpretation? Is semiosis a discrete series of separate processes, or is it a complex web of continuously interconnected activity with no logical starting or stopping point — that is, does the very notion of semiosis presuppose or require the concept of infinity in a mathematical sense? Are some objects real and some unreal? How are such objects different? Are all semioses themselves realities? What must the cosmos be like if semioses occur in it? If semiosis is occurring on a grand scale in the cosmos, does this semiosis have a final cause? If so, can we perceive anything about that?

These questions and a great many more like them comprise the discipline of semiotic. Notice I have not been using the name “semiotics” for this study. The reason I make this distinction is because these questions were first systematically posed *and* systematically answered by Charles S. Peirce. For etymological reasons he wanted the name “semiotic” for this study, which

left his hands in a very full and viable state (contrary to the uninformed belief of some contemporary scholars). It is true that Peirce's writings on semiotic have not, until recently, been in a perspicuous format, but that is being remedied quickly through the editorial work of scholars in the international Peirce community, with the result being, that there now exist the following interlocking research tools to which every serious student of semiotic must have access: *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 1–6 edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, vol. 7–8 edited by A. W. Burks, 1965, Cambridge; *The Charles S. Peirce Papers at the Houghton Library*, Harvard University, 35 mm microfilm, 1966, Cambridge; Robin, Richard S., 1967: *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, Amherst; Ketner, Kenneth L. and James Cook, eds., 1975–79: *Charles Sanders Peirce: Contributions to the Nation*, in four parts, Lubbock; Eisele, Carolyn, 1976: *The New Elements of Mathematics by Charles S. Peirce*, in four vols., The Hague; Ketner, Kenneth L., Christian Kloesel, Joseph Ransdell, Max Fisch, and Charles Hardwick, eds., 1977: *A Comprehensive Bibliography and Index of the Published Works of Charles Sanders Peirce with a Bibliography of Secondary Studies*, Greenwich; Same editorial board as previous entry, 1977: *Charles Sanders Peirce: Complete Published Works*, microfiche edition, Greenwich. Some additional works are in preparation: Max Fisch is preparing an intellectual biography of Peirce, and is editor-in-chief of a new edition of selected Peirce writings; Christian Kloesel is preparing a major revision of the catalogue of Peirce's papers; Carolyn Eisele is preparing an edition of Peirce's history of science; Joseph Ransdell is preparing an edition of Peirce's Carnegie application. All these items form an integrated plan, and any library serving serious Peirce scholars should have the entire list of works given above.

Semiotics, on the other hand, is the name of a mixed and as yet incomplete approach to some issues similar to those Peirce addressed. Semiotics is quite eclectic and disunited, at least so far. Therefore, in the interest of scientific clarity, let us preserve a distinction in these names — semiotic for Peirce's elaborated approach, and semiotics for the more recent study.

Now, what is folkloristics? To make a very long story short, it is the study of those kinds of cognitive behavioral processes that are universally exhibited in the animal species known as *homo sapiens*. Folklorists have historically expressed more interest in the particular panhuman cognitive behavioral processes that are associated with human esthetic response, but even a full understanding of just human esthetic response processes will logically require research into many other kinds of panhuman processes, in particular several connected with belief and emotion, wish and fantasy. In addition to their tendency to be explicit about the panhuman basis of their studies, scholars of folkloristics are also distinguishable from earlier ways of dealing with so-called "folklore" in that students of folkloristics attempt to avoid all forms of cultural and epistemological relativism, and they approach their studies in the attitude that they are scientists in the sense meant by Peirce.

Two additional tendencies underlie a recent debate, at least one in the American Folklore Society. Folklorists (the older school of thought) wanted to understand "folklore" as the lore or learning of certain kinds of social or

cultural entities known as "folk cultures". Scholars of folkloristics basically wish to avoid use of the word "folklore" whenever possible because of its unfortunate associations with class prejudice, especially in countries that have been associated in past years with British colonialism, including the land of the United Kingdom itself. If forced to employ the term "folklore", students of folkloristics will insist that by it they only mean "the lore or learning that is universal in homo sapiens", and that "folk" simply means "any human being whatsoever in their capacity as human". Folklorists additionally argued (or in many cases merely assumed without investigation) that in addition to the existence of certain unique kinds of cultural entities known as "folk cultures", there also existed, in a kind of hypostatic space, other unique kinds of data which they called "the genres of folklore". And within each genre they proposed to detect THE form of each entity to be found there. For example, under the genre "myth", a folklorist might perform historical and geographical studies trying to discover, for instance, THE original form of THE Gilgamesh Myth (near eastern flood story). What these studies usually produced was a lot of instances of stories or myths that scholars would finally arbitrarily decide to identify as "versions" of THE hypostatized Gilgamesh Myth. That is, they reified story content, treating it as an existence instead of treating it as part of a process. If they had retained their scientific nerve at this point, they would have concluded there is no such thing as THE Gilgamesh Myth, but simply a lot of human beings exhibiting storytelling behavior, with some similarities being detectable in the individual instances of such behavior as far as the content is concerned. Students of folkloristics, on the other hand, begin their studies by noting that there are no defensible ways to characterize the notion of a "folk culture", for every attempt has crashed against the shoals of hard logic. They note that while there seem to be no universal reified story forms in regard to the content of what has been called "folklore", the communicational processes of storytelling, sharing of myths (perhaps better known as sacred narration), or other phenomena such as belief systems, curative behavior, and other kinds of panhuman behaviors, can be studied with a method that relies on testing of hypotheses instead of the charismatic approach that has served as a crude method in the humanities for all too long a time. They note, moreover, that since the scholar is also a human being, one might study man's nature by first getting to know one's self as the best prelude to aspiring to know mankind. This might be contrasted to the prevailing assumption among cultural relativists that they will only know themselves or know the nature of man after knowing several other cultures. In the spirit of Husserl, we might say to relativists, "Unless each scholar is free of presuppositions, seeing another culture may only be an exercise in academic narcissism".

But instead of trying further to trace for you the rather tangled history of these debates, I might best proceed by means of an example of how students of folkloristics organize their research. Let us again consider storytelling. This is a behavioral process common to all normal human beings of the world. To convince yourself of the truth of this, try the experiment of spending a weekend in a social (nonhermit) setting without doing anything that can remotely be considered as telling a story.

Cultural or historical differences are to be found, but the basic logical or relational processes of storytelling are a world constant. A person from city A might tell stories about Götz von Berlichingen, while a person from city B might relate a story about Till Eulenspiegel, but common to each is the process of storytelling. Briefly, one common process of this kind involves semioses in which a storyteller remembers a plot outline, tells the plot outline, with some embellishments, to one or more hearers, finally to bring a unity between teller and hearers. This unity can be one of feeling, information, or a number of other things. Such a unity state is the "end" of the story, and here we see that the word "end" means both the conclusion of "the story process" and its final cause.

Examples of this kind could be also found among musical processes, or processes in which cosmology is presented, or in artistic processes.

I hope now that we can deal with some reasons why semiotic is important for folkloristics. Peirce considered philosophy to be scientific (as opposed to charismatic), which means he thought philosophers posed hypotheses which a community of philosophers could publicly confirm or disconfirm through data in the form of observations not requiring special instruments, observations that any normal person could make in their own experience. Peirce is thus not an a priori or deductive philosopher like Kant or Spinoza. The kind of confirmation experience open to a philosophical hypothesis is that it explains, or makes more intelligible, the matter in need of explanation or illumination, in a better way than a competing hypothesis, in the objective judgement of the community of scientific intelligences. (I must be permitted one note in this essay for which I swore to myself there would be none. I *tell* you to notice the similarity between the term "storytelling" and words like "intellect", "intelligible", or "intelligence". My dictionary gives the history of this term as arising from "understanding or perception between or among humans". In response to this comment, someone might remark that perhaps this coincidence is unique to the English language, to which I would reply that if so, the English language community alone has stumbled onto an important truth about humans.) For Peirce, a scientific intelligence is one capable of learning from experience.

So semiotic is important for folkloristics because the former can bring theoretical illumination to the latter, better by far than that offered by previous theories of folkloristics. And if semiotic can do this for folkloristics, it might do it for the other Geisteswissenschaften also. In fact, semiosis is probably the Geist about which all these Wissenschaften are studies in their departmental ways.

And folkloristics is important for semiotic in that it provides a confirming instance of the hypotheses of semiotic. Folkloristics is important for semiotic in another way too because even in its older forms it has always been a science interested in panhuman phenomena associated with esthetic response. So folkloristics seems to be an especially appropriate study from among the sciences of man with which to test the universalizing strategies of the semiotic approach. This test case seems now to be encouraging, so the possibility for progress using this same approach in the human sciences in general lies before us to try.

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