Joseph M. Ransdell

Review of *His Glassy Essence*

*Peirce-L* Internet Discussion List, October 1998.

 I want to add my opinion about *His Glassy Essence*, and to try to explain why it works, as a way of suggesting to other possible readers of it how they might find it most profitable to approach it.

 I found that the book works. When I first read it, I was prepared for catastrophe—at first description it sounded like one of those ideas that seem really good after the sixth beer or so, but looks oh so very different in the harsh light of the morning after! But, in fact, it does work, or at least it did for me, and I strongly recommend it.

 Why does it work? I think the reason is simply that it is mostly just Peirce himself talking—and of course his family and others that knew him talk in their own voices, too—and the subtitle, *An Autobiography of Charles Sanders Peirce*, is a literal truth about the book, strange though that may seem initially. Ketner will doubtless take some heavy hits on this book from reviewers who misread it by mistakenly thinking that it is to be adjudged as a literary work having the general form of a novel, that genre being used in an innovative way to do a biography. It can certainly be assessed from that perspective if one thinks it important to do so, and I imagine a good many people who have no real interest in Peirce to begin with and merely want to form an opinion about him in case they happen to need such an opinion for this purpose or that—you never know when such an opinion will come in handy—will find that sort of assessment to their purposes. But the sort of people to whom I recommend the book won't be much interested in the book in that respect since they will be people who will be reading it in hopes of coming to know Peirce as a person, first-hand, as he really is, and not just as he is represented to be by a biographer of some supposed repute. People of the sort I have in mind will therefore particularly appreciate the fact that Ketner has figured out a way to remove the biographer from the role of authoritative interpreter as much as possible, so that the reader can be affected directly by Peirce himself (and by those around him) and can thus be his or her own biographer of Peirce by being provided with documents which make it possible to do so.

 However he may originally have conceived it, this is what Ketner has actually accomplished, in my opinion, though of course others—including Ketner—may disagree with this, for various reasons. That is fine. That is what the discussion is for: disagreement and subsequent discussion generated by it.

 Now, I understand quite well that Ketner is at work in the book, busily selecting, ordering, and providing documents, including some at the expense of leaving out others arguably just as important, and is also at work within the book in and through the first person narrator Ike and the two other fictional characters Betsey and Roy, each of whom function in different ways to carry out the biographical task of ordering the documents, providing a minimal rationale for the ordering, supplying additional factual data, constructing a complex time line, providing some guesswork about reasons for this and that and, in the case of the third character in particular, introducing hypothetical explanations of some importance supposed to have some evidential credibility, at least. Yes, Ketner as biographer is of course doing interpretation, just as any biographer does. But by using fictional characters for this purpose what Ketner does is to eliminate the biographer **AS** a person with special authority in the presentation of the material since the shifting of the various functions usually carried out by the biographer as narrator to overtly fictional characters has the effect of discouraging the uncritical acceptance of what the character provides by way of opinion or guesswork. This then enables him to present a book that is about 90% or more just Peirce himself, or others of his time, rather than Ketner on Peirce. It makes a very big difference in practice to do it this way.

 If Professor Kenneth Ketner, Peirce Scholar, says such and such the reader feels constrained by the authoritative position of the author as author and also as known scholar to accept what is said in a way that one does not when a mere fictional character named Ike Eisenstaat or LeRoi Wyttynyss says it, even though one knows that the fictional character actually represents Ketner in some way. In what way? Well, that is the point: one has to ask that question and thus it automatically "brackets" the authoritativeness of the character simply because the character is just a character and what a character says has the force first of all as a representation of an opinion rather than the force of an assertion. One is compelled to put the opinion into the status of an opinion and nothing more.

 The connection between being an author and being authoritarian is complex but there is not merely an accidental verbal similarity of the two—the voice of an author can and does carry authority, given a supporting context, and biographers in particular frequently speak in the distinctive tones of an authority, which is where authoritarianism begins; for any self‑identified authority is ipso facto authoritarian. The novel strategy that Ketner uses serves here substantially the same function that the use of the form of the drama serves for Plato, at least for those readers who are capable in practice of taking due account of the dramatic form of presentation, namely, of annulling that authoritative force of the author as such.

 Of course, just as several generations of philosophers were trained to read a Platonic dialogue as if it were a poorly composed journal article, thus losing all of the intellectual benefits of the non-authoritarian form of dramatic presentation, so also it would be possible for a genre of biography to develop which uses the same techniques that Ketner uses but which is always read in such a way that the fictionality of the narrating characters is never taken into account **AS** a presentation in the mode of a fiction, but is regarded rather as nothing more than a literary affectation that leaves the authority with the author exactly as it is left with the author in the usual first person non-fictional presentation in a biography. But since that debasement has not yet had the chance to occur, it doesn't affect the way the technique actually does work in Ketner's book now, or at least so I find it to be working myself.

 This self-effacement of Ketner as author is also helped along by the narrative theme, which is that of the detective story, which supplies the entire narration with the standing overall form of a question, so that the reader encounters the fictional first person narrator as on par with he or she as regards being in question in connection with everything said, which annuls the authoritarian aspect of biography in another way.

 I am sure one could elaborate on all this further but the upshot is that I think the reason the technique works is simply that the presentational strategy is in fact wholly in the service of acquainting the reader with Peirce directly in a way that does not and cannot occur in a conventional biographical form, and Ketner has in fact done a fine job of arranging these voices in a reasonable coherent way. I should think he would be appreciative of any negative criticism along this line, though, since finding out where it is going wrong would enable him to correct the technique as he works on the next couple of volumes. I am curious myself as to how others experience his book.