Arien Malec

Review of His Glassy Essence

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In Ken Ketner’s *His Glassy Essence* (which I would like to recommend highly), even in its oddest moments, such as when it uses manuscripts from the early 1900s to illustrate Peirce’s thought in the late 1860’s, it works: I suddenly had an image of Peirce collecting phenomenological data on scraps of paper to train himself to detect Firstness, of doing exercises with Weights to get a glimpse of Secondness, of connecting chemistry with logic to get the Logic of Relatives. Ketner reproduces MS 645, of which a part is: “A feeling is the only true *Ding an sich*. Everything else is relative, and has its Being in something else.”

*Later Elaboration—*

I had meant to post a longer message to *Peirce-L* about *His Glassy Essence* but had to slip in a much briefer word of praise since I quoted from it. This is probably all for the best, since it got me off my good intentions.

I agree with all that Joseph Ransdell [see his review above] has said about it. I'll give some additional impressions.

First, what is it? For those who have not read it, *His Glassy Essence* is an odd sort of work, which in style looks like a work of fiction (except that it bristles with footnotes, though this device has been used by works offiction as well): as is common with modern-day works, there is the forward and epilogue (and footnotes) by Author #1 who purports to be the inventor of certain characters in a frame and running narrative about letters and fragments from supposedly real characters: Charles Peirce mostly, and a bit of Benjamin Peirce and others—except that this is also an (auto)biography about the real Charles Peirce by the real Ken Ketner (with admittedly fictional characters whose fictionally does not stop them from uttering real opinions whose truth or falsity is in no way dependent on the reality of their speakers).

Ransdell has already hit some of the main reasons this all works. As with a Platonic dialogue, the format allows multiple perspectives to come out, to disagree at times, to provide different interpretations, and most importantly, to highlight the abductions (and the evidence for them) and not the speaker. It will be difficult for people to quote this book, with some solemn preface: "As Dr. Ketner argues in *His Glassy Essence*, ...." In many cases, so much the worse for them, because there is some marvelous scholarship there.

As we all know, from (often Peirce-inspired) literary theory, at some point in any work, we have to pretend that the author is not important, and listen to the text. In the case of works of literature, this means listening to the work as a Rheme; for a piece of scholarship, this means listening to the work as an Argument. Generally, though, the tendency it to look at the work as an indexical sign into the mind of the author, in which case, the work tends to stand or fall on the Authority of the Author. The somewhat paradoxical nature of the fictional dressing of *His Glassy Essence* is to augment the work as Argument. Is such and such an interpretation correct? You know just as much as Ike (the central fictional co-narrator for this volume) does: figure it out for yourself.

And that seems to be one of the principle themes of *His Glassy Essence*: *figure it out for yourself*. There is a rather extended section in the book on pedagogical method, distinguishing helping someone to learn from teaching them. This is a book for learning, not for teaching. Here is where a second helping of the literary dressings comes in: we, the readers, identify with a group of narrators who are wrapped up in the process of coming to know Peirce, of coming to understand who Peirce is. This is not a book that lends itself to an attitude of passivity: sit back and absorb the great teachings of the Doctissimus Kenneth Laine Ketner. In this book, we live, for a few hours, from the perspective of Ken Ketner, passionate about the philosophy and the life of Charles Peirce. Or, rather, Ike Eisenstaat, complete amateur (in the best sense of that word) who brings the only indispensable of scholarship: love of truth, love of subject, and intense curiosity.

OK, so again, what is it? I've been focusing on the function of the literary devices of the work. But the center of the work is a selection of autobiographical excerpts from the writing of Peirce, combined with early philosophical writings and later philosophical work that touches on what Peirce was coming to know earlier. (It was that latter that most threw me for a loop, but as I said, it works by forcing one to think about where that later thought came from). Much of the time, you are reading, as the subtitle says, the autobiography of Charles Peirce. But, because this is not a worked out autobiography, but rather something like a collection of material for an autobiography, to the extent that one reads this as a biography or autobiography, again, one has to figure it out for one's self. As I said, you are, while you read this, Ike, and the other narrators, reading this material, and trying to understand the life of Peirce.

There are some shocking moments reading the excerpts of Peirce's manuscripts. Sometimes, the shock is of seeing familiar writings in different contexts from those to which one is accustomed, like seeing the parable of the jinee and the date-stone as Ben Peirce reading a bedtime story to little Charley. Often, the shock is that which I have heard of a number of time on this list: reading unpublished manuscripts and being astonished that they are languishing in boxes, and are not out there for the world to read. (The first section of the book is the sad early story of the manuscripts).

Footnotes. One of the signs of very good scholarship is when work itself inspires one to explore the footnotes, and branch out and continue the curiosity and love of truth and subject inspired by the main work. As well as pointing into the corpus of Peirce's work, into letters and other material from those around Peirce, and the like, one is also, for instance, pointed to material on the Spanish Gypsies. For me, a personal connection came when I realized the link between Charles Peirce and the city in which I live, through the person of John LeConte, friend of Ben Peirce and member of the Lazzaroni/Florentines. Berkeley has both a LeConte street, and a LeConte school—I suspect these are named after Joseph LeConte, John's brother, friend of John Muir, and co-founder of the Sierra Club. I also had an opportunity to look into the early history of the University of California at Berkeley (originally, Oakland, where I live). It seems that during the time that John LeConte was president of UC, Cal students were known to tip over streetcars so as to have an excuse not to attend school. I bet that the LeConte graves are at the Mountain View Cemetery, in Oakland (designed by Olmstead)—I hope to look them up soon. Again, I think this is a mark of scholarship done the way it should be done: that love of truth spills over everywhere, causing one to look at the everyday world differently.

My only quibble with the book is the character of LeRoy Wyttynys, who, as drawn, is almost too believable. He is supposed to have actually had Peirce as teacher, and to have met Juliette Peirce and William James. His opinions thus take on, I think, more certainty than they ought. I suspect that, since he is used to do some of the heavier work, disabusing some facile acceptance of received opinion on Peirce, that fictional authority serves to counteract the authority of the assumed and never challenged, but as a result, it become hard to separate the Argument from the person, in the way the rest of the book does so brilliantly. So when he speaks on history (the same faults are not shown on philosophy, where he is an effective teacher), jump to the footnotes, and decide for yourself.

All and all, a marvelous book. I'm looking forward to volume two (and hearing more from Betsey?)