

Women in Semiotics

ROUNDTABLE

9th World Congress of IASS/AIS
Communication: Understanding/Misunderstanding
11-17 June 2007, University of Helsinki
and International Semiotics Institute at Imatra

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Symbol, Logic, and Signification. **Victoria Welby, Mary Everest Boole and Suzanne Langer**

Abstract

Continuing my research on 'Women in Semiotics', which is also the title of a paper co-authored by myself with Thomas A. Sebeok (in G. F. Carr, W. Harbert, L. Zhang (eds.), *Interdigitations: Essays for Irmengard Rauch*, 1999, and again in T. A. Sebeok's monograph *Global Semiotics*, 2001), this paper will focus on women who have contributed to the development of semiotics from their own original perspective, in particular Victoria Welby, Mary Everest Boole, and Susanne K. Langer. Considerations will also be made on 'women in semiotics', with reference to the contribution of semiotics to women's issues and to the development, formulation, and expression of a feminine worldview.

Victoria Welby : Significs, Primal Sense, and Logic

Welby elaborated the original concept of 'mother sense' in a series of unpublished manuscripts (essaylets, notes, letters) written at the beginning of the twentieth century, between 1904 and 1910, and grouped together in a file entitled 'Mother Sense'. The expression 'mother sense', which we actually preferred, was subsequently replaced by 'primal sense' and its variant 'primary sense', to avoid misunderstanding. (The expressions 'mother sense,' 'primal sense,' 'primary sense,' 'racial sense,' 'motherhood', etc. are written indifferently by Welby with or without a hyphen). The concept of 'mother sense,' 'primal sense,' or 'primary sense,' had already been formulated by Welby around 1890 and played an important role in the architecture of her thought system, in particular in her theoretical work on the human capacity for signifying processes, experience, knowledge acquisition, development of consciousness and subjectivity, and worldview. However, it was only from 1904 onwards that she worked on the concept of mother sense or primal sense systematically, encouraged among other things by the public debate on eugenics (a new science founded by the English psychologist Sir Francis Galton [1822-1911]), to which she herself contributed with two papers delivered at the Sociological Society, respectively in May 1904 and February 1905, being the only women who took part in the discussion.

Mary Everest Boole

Mary Everest Boole is one of many interesting women populating Welby's correspondence. A philosopher, mathematician, educationist and writer in her own right, she also acted as secretary over a period of nine years to her husband George Boole. The Welby-Boole correspondence fully conveys the sense of profound social and cultural transformation of the day, appreciation from these two women of the

multiform nature of the existent and potential expressivity of a plurilingual world, contrary to the myth of Babel and the biblical malediction. Communication, understanding, progress in science, knowledge and experience are only possible on the basis of dialogue among differences capable of confronting each other, of relating to each other according to the logic of mutual understanding. Boole was particularly interested in logic and signifying processes. Reflecting on her commitment to teaching logic, in her correspondence with Welby she declares that 'I shall try to make the men realise that rhythmic pulsation is a stronger force than an explosion'. To this provocation Welby responded that 'woman' is neither a 'sex' nor a 'creature,' but rather 'within undivided humanity': a guardian of 'differences' or 'distinctions,' of 'what makes logic possible.' Femininity is described as the condition for the development of logic, where differences and distinctions do not imply separation, but dialogical interrelation.

Susanne K. Langer: Signs, Symbols and Significance in a New Key

On the basis of her critique of traditional approaches which distinguish between rational intelligence and irrational feeling and instinct, Susanne Langer proposes a general theory of symbolism which distinguishes between "symbolic modes" (which are formulated verbally and nonverbally), without separating and dividing them. With her symbolic logic Langer aims to develop a theory of understanding that keeps account of both the rational and irrational realms of conception and their interconnection as the basis and motor of human signifying behaviour.