Victoria Lady Welby and Significs: An Interview with H. Walter Schmitz

Susan Petrilli

Introductory Remarks

In the 1890s, Victoria Lady Welby (1837-1912) gave the name of *significs* to her particular theory of meaning. In making this choice she deliberately distanced herself from the possible alternative terms (such as semiotics and semantics) that had been proposed to her. She in fact felt that these sciences were too restricted in scope and too specialized, owing to their linguistic-philosophical emphasis, to accommodate the much broader approach she envisioned for her new science. Significs is concerned with 'the very condition of human intercourse, as of man's mastery over his world', wrote Welby in the introduction to her 1911 book, *Significs and Language*. The problem of signification becomes that of grasping the true value that the sign has for each of us in 'every possible sphere of human interest and purpose', as such value emerges in relation to the signs of all types of language, verbal and nonverbal, and in all types of discourse—from the philosophical-scientific to everyday discourse. Consequently, significs designates a frame of mind by which we are stimulated into asking such questions—which find correspondence in the three levels of meaning identified by Welby as sense, meaning, and significance—as 'What is the sense of...?', 'What do we mean by...?', and 'What is the significance of...?' Such interrogation falls, either consciously or unconsciously, within the broader project aiming at the understanding of the ultimate value of all things invested with meaning. Significs is a science which surpasses the limits of the above-mentioned sciences, moving in the direction of pragmatics and the semiotics of interpretation, with a special view to the relation between signs and values.

Welby's main writings include the essays 'Meaning and metaphor' and 'Sense, meaning, and interpretation' (1893 and 1896, respectively—these are now available in Italian translation in Welby 1985b), the books *Grains of*

Sense (1897), *What is Meaning?* (1903), and the previously mentioned *Significs and Language* (1911—partially translated into Italian in Welby 1985b).

H. Walter Schmitz, of the University of Bonn, is the editor of the 1985 re-edition of *Significs and Language*, which he augmented with an ample monographic introduction. He is the author of numerous essays concerning significs, the signific movement in The Netherlands, and related areas of study, and is currently editing a collection of essays to appear in a volume entitled *Essays on Significs*. The papers by S. Auroux and S. Delesalle, A. Ponzio, and W. Terrence Gordon cited below by Schmitz will appear in that volume.

The Interview

Petrilli. May we speak of an influence exerted by significs, even if indirectly, upon the various conceptions of sign and meaning taken up in this last century? From a historiographical viewpoint, how important is it to remember Welby's theories?

Schmitz. The connection between these two questions is very close. To begin with, let me answer the first one. It is true that Welby's significs have for the most part been neglected until recently; her influence has gone unrecognized for so long because it usually remained clandestine. In order to understand this, it is necessary that one keep in mind the nature and closeness of the contacts between scholars around the turn of the century; one must also remember that Welby corresponded with an enormous number of the most prominent scholars of the Western world, in some cases over a period of many years. She conducted a kind of classical salon in the form of letters centering around her ideas. Let us consider a few examples.

Although we find only two or three passing references to Welby in Bertrand Russell's writings, he did comment on the cover sheet of his collection of Welby letters: 'From Lady Welby who helped to turn my attention to linguistic problems'. An important focus of this correspondence, which I will be editing with A.F. Heijerman shortly, was Welby's critique of Russell's conception of 'meaning' as set forth in his renowned

essay 'On denoting' (dated 1905). Here, interestingly enough, Welby anticipates Strawson's critique of Russell (1950).

The most prominent English pragmatist, F.C.S. Schiller, makes no mention of Welby anywhere, but it can be demonstrated that both his theory of meaning and his related critique of formal logic were influenced by his long-standing exchange of ideas with Welby. It was Schiller's studies and polemics against Russell on the one hand and the English Hegelians on the other that eventually led to the historically important symposium 'The Meaning of "Meaning"' (published in *Mind*) in 1920, in which Schiller, Russell, and Joachim outlined their theories of meaning and contrasted them with one another.

It is no coincidence that Ogden and Richards entitled their important and influential book (1923) *The Meaning of Meaning*. C.K. Ogden, during his close and frequent contact with her, was strongly influenced by Lady Welby in 1910-11. He gave lectures on 'Significs' at the time, and began to write those texts which were later fundamental to his collaboration with Richards on the book which, as has recently been shown in detailed analyses by W. Terrence Gordon (forthcoming), owes a great deal indeed to Welby's ideas. Due to Ogden's intimate acquaintance with significs and his having copied Peirce's letters to Welby, *The Meaning of Meaning* was able to become something of an intermediary between Welby and Peirce, and subsequently between semanticists and semioticians as well.

Aside from these and a few other cases of the hidden influence of Welby, the only scholars and scientists who consistently and explicitly cited Welby as the source of their approach belonged to the thoroughly interdisciplinary Signific Movement in The Netherlands. As early as 1916, however, a transition from Welby's theory of signs and meaning to a general theory of communication took place among these 'significians'.

This also leads to an answer to your second question. We can truly understand the above-mentioned authors and their works only in light of Welby's significs. And in our attempts to do so, arriving in the process at Welby's ideas, we discover that this tradition leads us to encounters with formulations of questions, concepts, and attitudes which are still (or once more) quite modern. The point of departure for Welby's work on the theory of signs is the actual, concrete sign process; the emphasis of her reflections is on the interpretive process—or, in the words of Ogden and Richards, 'an

account of the process of interpretation is thus the key to the understanding of the sign situation, and therefore the beginning of wisdom.' This is a prime example, even today, of a major alternative to the purely classificatory approaches, those which focus on the role of the speaker/author, or even behavioristic approaches.

Petrilli. Welby very soon became aware of the necessity of developing a science of knowledge and expression, and therefore of turning our attention systematically upon the analysis of such concepts as sign, meaning, language, expression, and interpretation. Briefly, how may we describe Welby's particular conception of sign, linguistic meaning, and signification processes in general?

Schmitz. I will answer the question as carefully and clearly as possible, since it touches on the heart of significs. For Welby, a sign is any object in general which stands for something else. She always expounds in her significs exclusively on sign relations with two arguments: namely, the connections between a sign and its 'sense', 'meaning', and 'significance'. And, as she states in 1902, 'Significs treats of the relation of the sign in the widest sense to each of these'. This is misleading, for as Welby starts with concrete sign processes as a matter of principle, one must always make a mental note to add at least one person who interprets the sign.

The remarkable points in her concept of signs are the nature of and emphasis on her three classes of sign meaning. Welby's concept of 'sense' is basically organismic. 'Sense in all "senses" of the word' is, for Welby, the appropriate term for what constitutes the value of experience in this life on this planet. Therefore, her general definition of the relation between a sign and 'sense' assigns a direct, spontaneous reaction of an organism to a stimulus in the organism's environment—a sign—as its value; i.e., 'Implication, indirect Reference, or intimate Response'. In Welby's works there is also a more specific definition, from a communications point of view, which sees 'sense'—the expression value of linguistic or nonverbal signs—as being determined by the specific use of the sign as well; that is, by the circumstances, state of mind, reference, and universe of discourse belonging to it. For example, a word as such does not have a definite 'sense' for Welby. Rather, it receives its definite 'sense' only when it is used in a concrete situation and in a specific context. That is why the truth of a statement, according to Welby, depends on the 'sense' in which it is made, and not on formal exactness and clarity. Thus Welby defines 'sense' in its more general and its more specific meaning as the reference by means of signs to reality as it can be perceived by the senses—or, more precisely, of previous, present, or potential experience.

'Meaning' is defined primarily in terms of communication as the 'expression value' of the intentional and willed use of a sign, whose value consists of the communicative intention of the speaker or writer. This makes 'meaning' no more identical than 'sense' with the linguistic dictionary entry. 'Meaning' is not an attribute of the word as a sign contained in a vocabulary, but is instead solely the sense a communicator intends to convey by using a word or an utterance in general in a concrete communication situation. Welby's differentiation between 'sense' and 'meaning' becomes very clear in one of her letters to Russell: 'in speaking of the "present King of France" as bald, we intend to convey what is sheer mistake or sheer nonsense. That is, it is not meaningless (or purposeless) but senseless.' However, 'meaning' occurs not only in uttered words, but also in any occurrence where a will or intent is evident, as it is in actions.

'Significance', according to Welby, includes sense and meaning, but transcends them in range to cover the far-reaching consequence, implication, ultimate result, or outcome of some event or experience. However, there is in Welby's later works a more general use of the term 'significance', which no longer necessarily includes 'meaning'. In this sense, every sign has 'significance' for us insofar as it is a sign. Thus 'significance' stands for the basic possibility and necessity of sign interpretation itself. For in its general sense, every impulse and impression, every phenomenon and every stimulus gaining attention and causing action has a referring (or at least indicating or implicating) value for an individual, and must therefore be considered a sign invested with 'significance'.

Even from these few references, it is abundantly clear that Welby's fundamental concepts stand on their own—granting all their affinity to the theory of signs developed by Peirce, whom she did not come to know and admire until a later date. The prospect of taking them more seriously than has previously been the case holds great promise.

Petrilli. Welby intentionally chooses the word *significs* to designate her specific theory of meaning, refusing to use such terms as semantics, sematology, and semeiotic (which Vailati had in fact suggested to her). What is

the relation between significs and all those analyses of meaning that are commonly grouped together as the object of study of either semantics or semiotics? May we consider significs to be a science in its own right? What are the innovations that significs contributes to scientific research with respect to the above-mentioned disciplines?

Schmitz. These three questions deal with different aspects of the status of significs within one division of a network of scientific disciplines. It is advisable here to distinguish between Welby's own view of the position of significs among the sciences and our present-day perspective on significs. As far as Welby is concerned, there can be no doubt that she considers significs to be an independent science: 'the science of meaning or study of significance'. To the extent that significs handles linguistic forms, it embraces, in her opinion, (Bréal's) semantics as an application of significs within strictly philological boundaries. After all, she was inclined to view Peirce's semiotics as a subdivision of significs, whereas it was Peirce's opinion that significs is that part of 'semeiotic' which investigates the relation of signs to their 'Interpretants'.

I believe that Lady Welby was mistaken on all three points. In *her* day, significs was not an independent science, for at the time it lacked a 'social group of devotees'—Peirce's criterion for the independence of a science. Not until after Welby's death did significs attain the status of a science in The Netherlands. Turning to the relationship between significs and Bréal's semantics, Auroux and Delesalle recently showed in a thorough study (in Schmitz forthcoming) that the two pertain to discretely different paradigms. With regard to their respective theories of meaning and their attitudes, one could characterize them as representing the same opposition found today between communication semantics and linguistic semantics. On the other hand, Welby's significs, with *all* its constituent parts, cannot be made to fit into semiotics if one takes the term 'semiotics' in its strictest sense: a number of Welby's ideas and works are better understood as contributions to a theory of communication, and others stand squarely in the tradition of the philosophy of language.

Welby's contributions to the founding of the semantics of speech and the rise of text semantics—both of which break the boundaries of the linguistic semantics tradition, and both of which remain relatively undeveloped even today—stand out as perhaps her most important innovations in the broad field of semantics. In the realm of semiotics, her innovation consists of the basic conception of the signific theory of signs, which, as Welby's followers in The Netherlands have shown, paves the way for the amalgamation of a theory covering both signs and communication.

Petrilli. Welby says that the method of significs is the method of translation and that the typical process of significs is 'diagnostic'. Furthermore, she gives particular attention to the fundamentally metaphorical character of language, whether at the sectorial level of usage or in the language of everyday speech. She insists on the necessity of developing a critique of imagery. Would you say that these are some of the central themes of Welby's research, and could you point out others?

Schmitz. You are quite right. The themes you have named can be traced through Welby's entire thirty-year investigation into the problems of the theory of signs, meaning, and epistemology. To avoid misunderstandings, I should perhaps first explain Welby's 'translation' method and its relation to the fundamentally metaphorical character of language.

By 'translation' Welby means not the rendering of one language into another, but 'a method both of discovering, testing, and using analogy (or in some cases homology)'. She is concerned with the use of analogies, which can by all means be experimentally constructed, for the acquisition of new knowledge, or at least for developing stimulating hypotheses. The 'translation' of a set of ideas (A) into terms of a conception or theory (B) amounts to the same thing as the elaboration of the 'significance' of B for A or in the field of A. An example of the application of Welby's 'translation' method may be found in Rossi-Landi's homology between material and linguistic production.

'Translation' as a possibility has its roots in both the plasticity and the thoroughly tropical nature of language. However, it owes its strictness as a method primarily to the construction of analogies. 'Translation' is Welby's concept of an interpretation process broadened in its realm of application and validity and methodically strengthened. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that she considers 'translation' to be a component of any semiosis and any communication process.

Now to the central themes of significs. I think the emphasis of Welby's conception of significs as a fundamental science is threefold: (a) contributions to a unique theory of signs placing studies of the meaning of

concrete signs used by a speaker/author alongside analyses of the interpretation processes on the part of the hearer/reader; (b) a stern critique of inadequate insight into the workings of communicative processes, the resulting inadequate use of language, and above all the burgeoning terminologies of the scientific disciplines; and (c) the development of religiously and ethically motivated goals pertaining to teaching, education, and social reform, springing from the conviction that social and political problems are basically communication problems. Thus, Welby views the basis for problems of knowledge and the dissension among the sciences in her day as problems involving the use of signs and communication. And she identifies a lack of insight into the workings of the interpersonal processes of making oneself understood as the cause of social problems. Thus, Augusto Ponzio (forthcoming) touches the heart of Welby's significs in a recent study of Vailati and Welby by designating significs as 'ethosemiotics'.

Welby gains her sign-theoretical concepts 'through a prodigious sensitiveness of perception' (Peirce) by proceeding from communication processes and the informative intentions and interpretations they entail. Generally, her reflections proceed from a careful observation and description of sign processes. The next steps to follow are those of comparison, the construction of analogies; in short, processes of translation. These must be tested on the basis of their effects and their results. A general possibility of testing is provided by graphic representation. Metaphors can be tested either by experimental use in widely different areas, or by the criterion according to which one should be able to translate the metaphor back into other words if it has been appropriately used. However, for analogy as for the truth of a statement, the rule holds that 'the test by result' or 'result on a living mind' is preferable to a test by formal criteria applied strictly mechanically in formal analysis. In this matter Welby is well aware that the conclusion by analogy is only a probabilistic conclusion, and that therefore even obvious analogies must be carefully substantiated and founded on evidence before they are tested on the basis of their power and results. Indeed, Welby's critique of the language of her times, of the terminologies of the sciences, and of obsolete ideas, ways of thought, and attitudes places the diagnostic aspect of signific investigative procedures in the forefront.

Petrilli. Welby makes frequent references to cosmology, biology, religion, ethics, and ethnology. What is the relation between such fields of interest and Welby's conception of language, knowledge, and meaning?

Schmitz. To understand these closely interrelated ties between Welby and cosmology, biology, and ethnology, we must recollect three points. First, Welby's reflections started out with the treatment of theological, religious, and exegetical questions, and she advocates that central religious ideas be given a new meaning in keeping with science, in order to work out a 'religion of ethics'. Thus, K. Horstman is quite accurate is speaking of a 'bridging function of significs between religion and science'. Secondly, Welby's thought is plainly influenced by biological and physiological advances in the nineteenth century, particularly the theory of evolution. Thirdly, the nineteenth century's ethnological theories claimed to parallel biological evolutionary theory in grasping mankind's cultural and social development. Welby, however, encountered in this context inconsistencies between the altogether too ethnocentric ethnological interpretations of 'primitive' religions and rituals and two fundamentals which were essential to the idea of evolution: a) 'appropriate reaction to stimulus, direct or indirect', and b) 'the invariable tendency of such reaction on the whole in the direction of the development, preservation and reproduction of life.' This presented her with the problem of reinterpreting earlier human manners of behavior and thought within the existing framework of the biological theory of evolution.

It was in the process of dealing with these problems that Welby developed her organismic concept of 'sense' and postulated three evolutionary stages: the 'sense-scheme', which was evidently more dominant in the primitive mind than in more advanced stages of human development, and which reacted to more subtle appeals from the realm of nature; the 'meaning-scheme', which, while highly developed today, was in the primitive mind still in embryo; and the element of 'significance', which has only relatively recently been assimilated. Three 'levels of psychic process'—namely, 'instinct', 'perception', and 'conception'—are postulated as parallels. Simultaneously, this framework of evolution theory led her to the far-reaching epistemological assumption that certain forms of the 'sub- or pre-conscious reaction to natural stimulus' have survived up to the present day, through all the development of the human mind, even though they have

been overlaid by the increasingly dominant role played by the intellect and have therefore become stunted. Welby calls this inherited capacity of adequate reaction to natural stimuli 'primal sense' or 'intuition'.

Lady Welby was entirely aware that with her reflections on some of the bases of interpretive and communicative processes and the resulting triad of 'sense', 'meaning', and 'significance' she could improve the understanding of essential connections which had until then been ignored, and that she could thereby make knowledge and the sign-mediated communication of knowledge more effective; but she was also aware that she could not adequately ensure them. I assume that it was precisely the fact that she realized this that led her to further develop her concept of 'primal sense'. This further development was to build up all symbolic knowledge on the basis of intuitive knowledge. 'Intuition' or 'primal sense' is for her not the unreliable and suspect road to knowledge which the majority of her contemporaries considered it to be; rather, she saw the faculty of intuitive knowledge as being anchored in the controlled and successful organic reaction to stimuli from the environment which comes from the realm of animals.

Welby's religiously motivated references to a cosmology stand in close relation to the roots of her theory of meaning and her epistemology in the theory of evolution. She draws parallels between the 'three main levels or classes of expression value' and the three 'levels of psychic process' on the one hand, and three types of experience and knowledge or 'three levels of consciousness' (namely, 'planetary', 'solar', and 'cosmical') on the other. 'Significance', for example, Welby assigns to the level of consciousness and experience which she calls 'cosmical'. Cosmical knowledge is 'in a sense doubly indirect'; the favored image for this is the use of a telescope attached to photographic equipment. However, the cosmos can also only be interpreted in terms of our own sense experience in that our sense-scheme is transposed to the surroundings. That which transcends sense experience can only be deduced. Proceeding on the basis of perception, which Welby assigns to the second level of the mental process, solar consciousness, man construes, deduces, and creates his world in a rational order which includes its analysis. As an essential result of this cognitive process, she finds that not only the planetary world, but also the 'sense-scheme' is secondary and derivative. She expresses what she means by this in an analogy to physiological assumptions:

> All action is literally ex-cited—called from beyond; all physiological phenomena are generated, not self-created. The presumption, then, is that we do not originate and then 'project' our highest conceptions; we receive and pass them on, though it may be in woefully childish dialects. (Welby 1983)

Thus she conceives of the highest human ideals in this post-Copernican cosmical world view 'rather as "injected" than as "secreted"'. And her frequently used expression 'man, the expression of the world' is to be understood accordingly. Welby explicitly states as a goal of the signific method to make possible 'the philosophy of significance'. As soon as this philosophy is given, she argues, it can then be correctly maintained for the first time that man is in a true sense the expression of the world, since it finds in him 'articulate description and definition'.

However, in order to achieve this, an improved insight by man into the functioning of all sign processes—especially those involving language—must be attained. Here we find another motive for Welby's critique of language, one which aims to free language and language usage, with the thought patterns and boundaries they create, from adherence to the planetary and (in part) solar world views. Our capacities for expression and interpretation are to fulfill the requirements of a cosmical consciousness.

Welby constantly uses an organic analogy for language and emphasizes language's plasticity and flexibility to the extent that she finds them given and calls for them wherever they have been lost due to the forms of language usage and inadequate views of language. She understands the mutual adaptability between word and context in analogy to the adaptation of the organism to its environment. And even her conception of ambiguities in language is characterized by her assumption of (or call for) the plasticity of language and (generally) her mobilistic conception of the relation between sign and meaning. Thus, ambiguities are primarily positive constituents of any language, and constitute part of its adaptive capacity. The only ambiguities capable of negative effects are those which arise, or which cannot be remedied, due to inadequate understanding by the communication partners of the inevitable communicative regularities.

As you can see, Welby's various ideas are closely related; they definitely make up a unified whole. But that is not all. Throughout her works, the

present-day reader encounters a wealth of stimulating pointers which force him to examine modern discussion on signs and meaning in a new light. For this reason it would be desirable to cease writing about and mentioning Welby solely in her role as the most famous person to have exchanged letters with Peirce, and to start reading Welby's writings again. *Ad fontes!* It is worth it.

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Approaches to Semiotics
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The Semiotic Web 1987

Edited by
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Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York · Amsterdam 1988

Mouton de Gruyter (formerly Mouton, The Hague)
is a Division of Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin.

Deutsche Bibliothek Cataloging in Publication Data

The semiotic web ... - Berlin ; New York ; Amsterdam :
Mouton de Gruyter.
ISBN 3 11 011711 8
1987 (1988)
(Approaches to semiotics ; 81)
NE: GT

Printed on acid free paper.

Printing: Gerike GmbH, Berlin. Binding: Lüderitz & Bauer, Berlin. - Printed in Germany.

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