MICHAEL L. RAPOSA PLAYS WITH PEIRCE, LOVE, AND SIGNS: REVIEW ESSAY ON *THEOSEMIOTIC: RELIGION, READING, AND THE GIFT OF MEANING*

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Those of us who are convinced that Charles Peirce had something important to say, not just about the practice of scientific inquiry, metaphysics, and semiotics, but about how best to navigate an evolving and often precarious universe, sometimes find ourselves struggling with his infelicitous overstatements and rhetorical missteps. Brilliant but cantankerous, his personal and professional frustrations often bleed over into his writings. If this is a pardonable sin, and I think it is, then we should note those places where Peirce acknowledged the occasional coarseness of his prose. He was, "a pioneer, or rather a backwoodsman, in the work of clearing and opening up what [he called] *semiotic* [. . .] and [he found] the field too vast, the labor too great for a first-comer."[1] So it is no surprise that Peirce wrote something of a disclaimer into *How to Make Our Ideas Clear* (1878), in reference to his essay from only a few months earlier, *The Fixation of Belief* (1877). In arguing in that earlier essay that "the action of thought is excited by the irritation of doubt, and ceases when belief is attained; so that *the production of belief is the sole function of thought*," he had used language "too strong" for his purposes. It was, he suggests, as if he "had described the phenomena as they appear under a mental microscope."[2] Peirce's early and most famous essays are remarkably insightful and, while his aperture was often too narrow, they both opened sufficient ground for him to develop his mature philosophy of inquiry and blazed a broad enough trail for future scholars to follow.

It may seem odd to open a review of Michael L. Raposa's *Theosemiotic: Religion, Reading, and the Gift of Meaning* with a cautionary note on Peirce's writing style, but it highlights the degree to which Raposa has accomplished something remarkable; he has done what the early Peirce suggested could not

1. CP (5:488). All references to Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. I–VI., ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1931–1935) follow the convention of noting volume and paragraph number within parentheses. Read CP (5:488) as volume 5, paragraph 488.

2. CP (5.394), emphasis added.

be done.[3] He has identified an additional function of thought, "something more than doubt's removal, much more than the fixation of belief," and *attentively* developed a technique of playful musement.[4] Beginning with only the merest "outline" offered by Peirce in *A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God* (1908), Raposa *rereads* works from, most notably, Ignatius of Loyola, Jonathan Edwards, Josiah Royce, and Simone Weil in order to *reread* Peirce's semiotics and his philosophy of inquiry. While Raposa's *Peirce's Philosophy of Religion* (1988), his most well-known and often cited book, is a careful exposition of Peirce's writings on religion, *Theosemiotic* is something less and something much more.[5] There is very little line by line analysis of Peirce's writings and Raposa makes no claim to offer readers a canonical interpretation. Rather, it is the act of rereading Peirce, most especially his A *Neglected Argument*, that is central to *Theosemiotic* and is intended to serve as an exercise in habituation.

Peirce's claim in *Fixation of Belief* to have identified the *sole* purpose of thought *is* overstated, and it is more than just a bit amusing that, in *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*, even as he attempts to soften his position with a musical simile, and allow room for considering other incidental results of thought, he cannot help but insult those who might find other purposes.[6] Whether or not Raposa feels the sting of Peirce's barbed words, I do not know, but contra the early Peirce's portrayal, there is nothing *debauched* or *perverted* in the program laid out in *Theosemiotic*. Indeed, Raposa takes the act of thinking (always thinking with signs) at least as seriously as Peirce, and likely more so than the early Peirce in at least one respect. Playful thought, thought without serious or antecedent purpose, thought as musement or even amusement can be richly rewarding form of engagement that trains the muser, over many years and through long practice, to *receive* what the universe has to give. The notion

3. Michael L. Raposa, *Theosemiotic: Religion, Reading, and the Gift of Meaning* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

4. Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 262.

5. Michael L. Raposa, *Peirce's Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989).

6. The action of thinking may incidentally have other results; it may serve to amuse us, for example, and among *dilettanti* it is not rare to find those who have so *perverted* thought to the purposes of pleasure that it seems to vex them to think that the questions upon which they delight to exercise it may ever get finally settled; and a positive discovery which takes a favorite subject out of the arena of literary debate is met with ill-concealed dislike. This disposition is the very *debauchery* of thought. But the soul and meaning of thought, abstracted from the other elements which accompany it, though it may be voluntarily thwarted, can never be made to direct itself toward anything but the production of belief.

CP (5.396), emphasis added.

that playful musement is important but not serious, and that it is a skill that can be cultivated resonates with the Daoist tradition that Raposa also brings into conversation with his theosemiotic. However, one should not overlook the dissonance that lurks at the heart of the claim that theosemiotic is a matter of vital importance, even as it requires "Pure Play" and "has no rules."[7] Luckily *Theosemiotic* is crafted more to evoke than to describe the habits of habit formation that musement entails. Musement cannot be serious, but throughout the text Raposa shows the religious import of learning to think playfully.

I have three aims in this brief review essay. First, I situate *Theosemiotic* within Raposa's larger body of work. Second, I locate what I take to be the central contribution of his text, an extended articulation of musement as a form of experimental inquiry and therapy that is defensible in its own right, not just as a preparatory stage of scientific probation. Finally, I circle back to what I believe to be a serious flaw in Peirce's writings on musement and God and argue that, despite my disagreement with both Peirce and Raposa on theism, *Theosemioitc* provides many of the tools necessary to see our way past anthropomorphism.

I. A Promissory Note Fulfilled

Scholars of Peirce with an interest in religion have been anticipating *Theosemiotic* for at least three decades, ever since Raposa, in the final chapter of *Peirce's Philosophy of Religion*, hinted at the possibility of an expanded treatment. During this time there have been additional tantalizing hints and gestures toward a larger project,[8] even as others have taken up the term and contributed their own reflections.[9] As a final realization of a trajectory, *Theosemiotic* more than meets expectations. Here, however, I focus largely on the degree to which Raposa's book answers a nagging question that has often bothered me concerning Peirce's description of the God hypothesis.[10] Granted, Peirce is careful to defend only a very narrowly conceived variety of anthropomorphism

7. CP (6.458).

8. See especially Michael L. Raposa, "Theology as Theosemiotic," *Semiotics: Yearbook of the Semiotic Society of America* (1992): 104–11; Michael L. Raposa, "In the Presence of the Universe" Peirce, Royce, and Theology as Theosemiotic," *Harvard Theological Review* 103:2 (2010): 237–47; Michael L. Raposa, "A Brief History of Theosemiotic," in *The Varieties of Transcendence: Pragmatism and the Theory of Religion*, ed. Harmann Deuser, Hans Joas, Matthias Jung, and Magnus Schlette (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 142–57.

9. See especially Peter Ochs, "Theosemiotics and Pragmatism," *The Journal of Religion* 72:1 (1992), 59–81.

10. Brandon Daniel-Hughes, "The Neglected Arguments of Peirce's Neglected Argument: Beyond a Theological Dead-End," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 6:2 (2015): 121–39.

when he suggests that God is "vaguely like a man" and even more careful in *A Neglected Argument* to surround the God hypothesis with enough caveats and stipulations as to its vagueness that one is left to wonder if the hypothesis retains anything determinate enough that it might be subjected to rational inquiry.[11] As an extraordinarily vague hypothesis, God would seem to be too vague to have any determinate conceivable practical effects. How does one go about interrogating such a supremely vague hypothesis?

A deep dive into the earliest works from Raposa, especially a remarkably insightful article that predates his first book, yields one of the clearest articulations of this question.[12] Though he does not yet use the term theosemiotic, there he formulates both the question and a set of three possible inquisitive strategies, the third of which would eventually give birth to *Theosemiotic* more than thirty years later. As I read this early piece, it is a kind of promissory note and it is worth our attention both because it so well situates *Theosemiotic* among other attempts to explore the God hypothesis and because it shows just how seriously Raposa has taken Peirce's philosophy of inquiry and Peirce's recommendation of a thoroughly scientific approach to all questions, even those involving religion.

Peirce made strong claims about the indubitability of the exceptionally vague God hypothesis, but overstatements aside, Raposa focuses on an additional potential problem. "[O]wing to its obscurity or vagueness, it is virtually impossible to deduce the testable implications of the hypothesis."[13] Even if it were determinate enough to allow for deducible implications, one still faces the enormous challenge of beginning the inductive phase of inquiry and gathering evidence for the claim that God is real and has real effects. There are, Raposa notes, three possible ways forward. First, one might engage in the onerous tasks of scientific cosmology in the hopes of garnering sufficient evidence through careful study and observation and developing sophisticated enough techniques and theories that one might in the very distant future explicate the God hypothesis well enough that it becomes empirically testable. This would be one goal of scientific inquiry, though it is rarely (I will not say never) pursued with such explicitly theological aims. Second, "since the meaning of the idea of God is revealed in human conduct, a test of the reality of that being might consist in a long-range assessment of the fruitfulness, the success of behavior

11. CP (5.536).

12. Michael L. Raposa, "Peirce's Theological Semiotic," *The Journal of Religion* 67:4 (1987): 493–509.

13. Raposa, "Pierce's Theological Semiotic," 503. Peirce strong claim can be found in CP (6.489).

that conforms to this hypothesis as an ideal."[14] This would seem to offer a more promising program for theologians, though its final realization would need to be put off into the indefinite future.[15] These are both live options for inquiring into the God hypothesis, but they both run aground or at least encounter serious frustrations when they come up against the indeterminate future. Such inquiries cannot be restricted to any bounded period of time without rendering the hypothesis more determinate than Peirce intends it to be. But here Raposa notes a third "more practical possibility," and suggests that "Musement itself constitutes a kind of 'experiment.'"[16]

Years ago, in graduate school, when I first encountered this article from Raposa and dove into his *Peirce's Philosophy of Religion*, this third option did not spark any insights. It always seemed to me merely a restatement of Peirce's neglected argument, the second in a series of three nested arguments that comprise *A Neglected Argument.* What I failed to see then, though in my defense Raposa only fully develops the notion in *Theosemiotic*, was that musement might entail more than simply entertaining an intuitively appealing hypothesis.[17] One of the themes Raposa returns to repeatedly throughout *Theosemiotic* is the idea that, though playful musement might be most closely associated with the logic of abduction, it is not devoid of "proto-deductive" clarifications of attractive hypotheses and "vaguely inductive" appeals to experience.[18] The entire process of rational inquiry is, in fact, present in musement in at least some embryonic form. It is not going too far, then, to suggest that musement itself, so long as it is engaged in repeatedly, may become a living experiment.

As both the culmination of more than three decades' work on Peirce's religious thought and the fulfillment of some early promises, *Theosemiotic* is perhaps most provocative insofar as it simply ignores any apologetic readings of *A Neglected Argument* and opts instead to focus on discernment. To be clear, Raposa does not explicitly reject an apologetic interpretation, but I confess to severe reservations regarding the validity of *A Neglected Argument* as an

14. Raposa, 504.

15. I have explored this option at length in Brandon Daniel-Hughes, *Pragmatic Inquiry and Religious Communities: Charles Peirce, Signs, and Inhabited Experiments* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

16. Raposa, "Peirce's Theological Semiotic," 504.

17. Notably, Christopher Hookway and Michael L. Raposa engaged in an extended discussion of this issue. See Hookway's original review of *Peirce's Philosophy of Religion* in Christopher Hookway, "On Reading God's Great Poem," *Semiotica* 87 (1991): 147–66. See also Raposa's delayed response in Michael L. Raposa, "On Reading God's Great Poem: A Delayed Response to Christopher Hookway," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 54:4 (2018) 485–95.

18. Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 224.

argumentation in defense of the truth of any God hypothesis, and suspect that Raposa does as well. However, in the pages of *Theosemiotic* something much more nuanced emerges: a suggestion that the subtlest, most important, and most rewarding inquiries need not be so serious, so focused on problem solving, so relentlessly (ahem!) pragmatic, and oriented toward final truthful formulations as to denude inquiry of joy and grace and render it purely instrumental. If the God hypothesis is the raw material with which inquiry must work or, better yet, the game with which inquiry is often drawn to play, then it is not the final adequacy of that hypothesis that is in question but rather the character of the player that emerges through such ludic inquiry.[19] Peirce famously contended that we each have particular habits and beliefs and a certain character antecedent to undertaking any inquiry, but while adequately appreciating the degree to which the process of inquiry often changes these habits and beliefs, he was less apt to mark the degree to which the character of the inquirer is shaped in the process. It is this more fundamental change that primarily interests Raposa in *Theosemiotic*, and the potential contained therein for genuine therapeutic self-reform and religious discernment.

II. Musement as a Living Experiment

In an evolving universe shot through with precarity and chance, departures from well tested habits and norms may often prove dangerous. Experimentation always entails risk. But while carefully designed experiments may exploit this situation to advance our understanding of the universe by intentionally putting thoughtfully formulated hypotheses at risk, it would be a mistake to assume that only fully controlled and intentionally designed scientific trials are experimental.[20] Throughout *Theosemiotic* Raposa stresses both the pervasiveness and variety of experimentation but notes that, despite their shared etymology, not all experience is experimental.[21] Rather, self-controlled experience is experimental. From my perspective this is the hinge upon which the entire text turns, the insight that allows Raposa to develop a notion of theosemiotic that moves well beyond a consideration of Peirce's insights. Theosemiotic is

19. "Not only individual persons, but also communities of persons, are properly to be regarded as "embodied experiments" in this sense, a testing ground in which the primary data of relevance will be the character and conduct that they regularly display." Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 212.

20. This contention is explored and defended from a Peircean perspective in Brandon Daniel-Hughes, "Defanging Peirce's Hopeful Monster: Community, Continuity, and the Risks and Rewards of Inquiry," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 37:2 (2016), 123–36.

21. Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 119–20.

experimental, but theosemiotic is more than theology. It includes much prayer, praxis, ritual, reading and rereading, love, and communal belonging. What then is gained in labeling so much religious behavior "experimental?" One is tempted to interpret this as a mere appropriation of the language and prestige of science, and there are passages in *Theosemiotic* that appear at first reading to do just that.[22] But Raposa is too careful and well versed in the intricacies of Peirce's philosophy of inquiry to make such a simple mistake. Adapting a famous line from Peirce he writes, "[t]his is the very broad sense in which experience is always also experimental, not confined merely to what appears at the gate of perception but reaching all the way to the gate of purposeful action."[23] Experience is experimental when it is self-controlled, not in the sense that a self has complete mastery of every engagement but in the sense that a self can exercise varying degrees of self-control and learn from repeated engagements. Experience becomes experimental whenever it is an iterative process, a process in which we not only learn from repeated engagements and rereadings of the universe but learn how to learn more effectively.[24] Passive and uncontrolled experience (if there is such a thing) would not be experimental. Experiments may be dangerous precisely because they entail intentionally novel actions and responses.

Calling frequently upon Jonathan Edward's notion of "experimental religion,"[25] Raposa hits all of the notes that one might expect from a religious thinker steeped in the history of Peirce and pragmatism, and in a telling early paragraph notes Peirce's identification of Jesus as a proto-pragmatist. This

22. "Theosemiotic can be regarded as a scientific discipline only insofar as it is committed to fallibilism, as well as to a kind of empiricism and to a broad understanding of the experimental method. To opt for fallibilism is not suddenly to lose confidence in all of one's beliefs but rather properly to understand their origin, as well as the nature of all experience as semiosis" Raposa, 152.

23. Raposa, 153. Per Peirce, "The elements of every concept enter into logical thought at the gate of perception and make their exit at the gate of purposive action; and whatever cannot show its passports at both those two gates is to be arrested as unauthorized by reason." (CP 5.212).

24.

> Experience like semiosis, indeed, *as* semiosis cannot be exhaustively captured in an episode or an encounter. But this is true (indeed, the recitation of its truth has become a philosophical *mantram* here) precisely because experience is given its determinate shape and meaning both by our repeated encounters with things in the world and then by what we *do* in those encounters and in response to such things. In this latter sense, experience is intrinsically experimental (except on those rare if even possible occasions where what we do is utterly devoid of self-control) and is perfectly continuous with praxis.

Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 153.

25. See especially chapter 6, "Rules for Discernment," of Raposa, *Theosemiotic.*

paragraph contains the germ of the entirety of *Theosemiotic*, for here we find Raposa's first hint that "the vagueness of religious ideas and the extended or "long run" character of what may be regarded as meaningful religious "experiments" make the task of assessment delicate and formidable."[26] No easy separation between "fruits" and "roots" will do for finite creatures always situated *in media res*. The meaning of any event, undertaking, or any sign is "not a property of the sign," or of what Peirce sometimes called a sign vehicle.[27] Nor is it a simple property of a sign's object or interpretant. Better to recognize that "[m]eaning is an event, generated in semiosis and merging with other events in the continuous flow of signs."[28] It is the *continuous flow of meaning* that renders assessment delicate and formidable and, I would add, fallible and sometimes dangerous. But then, why must religious interpretation and experimentation always be taken so seriously? If such experiments are exclusively construed as linear processes of abductive guessing, deductive explication, and inductive testing then they are maximally serious undertakings insofar as they yield purposeful actions that have serious consequences in the world. But what if this process could be in some manner 'short-circuited?' What if experimental inquiry did not have to progress stepwise along a linear path beginning with the irritation of doubt and ending with the establishment of a new habit of action? As Raposa observes, Peirce told two "quite different stories about the roots of inquiry." The first and more widely known is found in his essays from 1877–78, but a later story traces inquiry's "gradual emergence as rigorous science from out of the womb of playful thinking."[29] Seen through the lens of this later story, not all experiments are so fraught with consequence and risk as to render inquiry a serious affair and experimentation a weighty proposition. Musement, as Raposa tells it, is a kind of playful experimentation, never serious but always important.

In amplifying Peirce's suggestion that musement is both important and unserious, Raposa does more than advocate for the value of religious brainstorming. The aim of most brainstorming is, after all, to generate a wealth of hypotheses so that the right or best one might be found. Even this is too serious a purpose. As an example of the importance of such unserious experimentation I turn to a short passage from a text far removed from the concerns of *Theosemiotic.* The psychologist Daniel Kahneman offers the following description of

26. Raposa, 6.

27. Raposa, 56.

28. Raposa, 7.

29. Raposa, 107.

the kinds of playful research conversations he and his colleague Amos Tversky used to have during long walks:

> We quickly adopted a practice that we maintained for many years. Our research was a conversation, in which we invented questions and jointly examined our intuitive answers. Each question was a small experiment, and we carried out many experiments in a single day. We were not seriously looking for the correct answer to the statistical question we posed. Our aim was to identify and analyze the intuitive answer, the first on that came to mind, the one we were tempted to make even when we know it to be wrong.[30]

These unserious experimental conversations laid the groundwork for later serious scholarship on both judgment and prospect theory, scholarship that was rewarded with the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics. However, as Kahneman acknowledges, the experiments were not undertaken with any serious purpose in mind. They were potent precisely because they were playful and served to train the two men better to see and interpret subtleties that more serious and organized experimentation would never have registered. A mind at play is not a mind looking for answers to predetermined questions, nor a mind seeking to banish doubt. It is, as Raposa so often reminds us, a mind open to what the universe has to give.

The unseriousness of musement does not mean that it is not hard work. Playing children, after all, often go to bed exhausted. It should not be confused with goofiness or mindlessness. "Nothing becomes a sign without my cooperation," Raposa asserts in his postlude.[31] Playful musement, as alluded to in his subtitle, requires an intentional attitude of openness to interpreting what is given, to accepting as significant "whatever special depth of meaning or religious insight emerges in the process of re-reading," whenever one is "standing still in one place, by recollecting and reviewing signs already present to consciousness."[32] Seriousness of purpose would interrupt this process and push on toward meaningful action, and this is one reason why Raposa returns again and again to the potential fecundity of boredom.[33] "Yet in its deeper forms," he argues, "boredom is a more pervasive quality of experience, not something that arises only on an occasion, but a way in which one becomes attuned to whatever one happens to encounter. At this level or in this form, as

30. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2011), 6.

31. Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 261.

32. Raposa , 214.

33. See his earlier text, Michael L. Raposa, *Boredom and the Religious Imagination* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

a fundamental human attunement, our boredom is potentially revelatory."[34] What, we might ask, is potentially revealed?

Raposa repeatedly emphasizes the temporal and metaphorical distance between *The Fixation of Belief* and *A Neglected Argument* and is right to note that Peirce's description of the various processes that might initiate inquiry evolved considerably.[35] There is, however, an important continuity that should not be missed. "In what respect," he asks, "on a Peircean account, can musement be regarded as preparatory *either* for prayer [. . .] *or* for rigorous scientific inquiry."[36] Here, I think, is where Peirce's "two quite different stories about the roots of inquiry,"[37] alluded to above, come together, for inquiry rests on faith, both a faith that "There are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them,"[38] as Peirce famously phrased it, and a faith that "[t]he faithful reading again and again of a great poem still being written is the practice that might best enable us to catch a fragment of its meaning, a tiny fragment, nevertheless a gift of infinite generosity."[39] To answer the concluding question of the previous paragraph, what is revealed in musement is the Real, no less real than what is revealed through scientific inquiry. In fact, and Peirce is perfectly clear on this point, the playfulness of musement may, through specialization, be converted into scientific study. But where science seeks out, according to Peirce, "the one True conclusion,"[40] musement is free to prune less thoroughly and interpret more generously, to engage in "esthetic contemplation" and "distant castle-building,"[41] to enjoy, in other

34. Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 210.

35.

> Peirce's emphasis on doubt as a starting point is not the only difficulty with the theory sketched in 1877. Even if there are "milder" forms of irritant, it should not be assumed as necessary that inquiry must originate with the experience of any irritation at all. Notice that the Neglected Argument begins as an exercise in the philosophy of religion but soon evolves into a rather extended analysis of Peirce's mature pragmaticism, a detailed account both of the various stages of inquiry and of the role that instinct plays in such a process. Thirty years after the publication of "Fixation," this process is no longer being portrayed as one arising out of some kind of problematic situation that undermines belief and so generates doubt; by contrast, in the latter essay the type of inquiry under consideration is described as a process initiated simply by the decision to take a walk.

Raposa, 110.

36. Raposa, 107.

37. Raposa, 107.

38. (CP 5.384)

39. Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 264.

40. (CP 5.384)

41. (CP 6.458)

words, the beauty of a universe perfused with signs without immediate regard for the more serious question of whether or not such signs be True.[42]

Theosemiotic is a bold enough undertaking that others will surely glean different insights than I, but the central insight that I take from Raposa's text is his subtle observation that all the requisite properties of scientific inquiry are present in Musement, save one. Musement, in other words, is a microcosm in which all three phases of inquiry (abduction, deduction, and induction) make their mark as the muser engages in repeated self-experimentation.[43] From a first-person perspective the aim is pure play, but from a third-person perspective musement "serves as an exercise useful for developing the *habitus*-as-skill that is crucial for effectively performing such an experiment," and this is not, as Raposa immediately points out, so different from the kinds of skillful expertise that make for a good scientist.[44] Of course, what is missing in musement that distinguishes it from fully fledged scientific inquiry is the more rigorous application of deduction and the more thoroughgoing commitment to inductive testing wherein the intuitive appeal and instinctive character of a hypothesis, its attractiveness, are entirely immaterial. But to expect scientific rigor from musement would again miss the point. What is tested in musement is not a particular hypothesis but "the spirits," and this emphasis allows Raposa not only to draw on the work of Ignatius and Edwards, but to draw from them an emphasis on developing one's habits of discernment and interpretation. As a philosophical naturalist, Raposa's take on the significance of "spirits" eschews supernatural interpretation, but one's interpretive habits deserve attention as well and are certainly worthy of experimental investigation.

III. The Stubborn Theism of *Theosemiotic*

For a non-theist theologian like me, Peirce's anthropomorphic claim that God is best conceived as "vaguely like a man" has always been deeply problematic. However, Raposa's careful reflections on Peirce's logic of vagueness and anthropomorphism as they pertain to this irksome characterization of the

42. The freedom to entertain interpretations and play with signs without immediately moving on to the weightier question of truth lends a kind of potency to musement that indicates its indispensable creative function in both rigorous scientific inquiry and aesthetic explorations. Musement, as a form of reflection in which abduction is given nearly complete freedom, foregrounds the "*may be*" and backgrounds the "*must* be" and "*actually is*," for the sake of suggesting and exploring new signs. (CP 5.171)

43. See Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 119–21.

44. Raposa, 121.

universe's "adequate cause," are compelling in the truest sense of that term.[45] I am compelled to consider them in closing even as I resist assent and gesture toward an alternative reading. My central question concerns both the sources and the consequences of our interpretive habits. I am, along with evolutionary psychologists, concerned with both the roots "of belief in a personal God" as well as being concerned with, alongside "[p]ragamtists like Peirce and James," its observable fruits.[46]

While all of *Theosemiotic* entertains the meanings of this unabashedly anthropomorphic conception of God, Raposa most carefully explores the entanglement of vagueness, anthropomorphism, love, and semiosis in the third chapter, "Love in a Universe of Chance." "Extrapolating from Peirce's account," Raposa writes, "it becomes possible to argue that love's teleology presupposes the existence of a relationship between persons, albeit not necessarily human beings. The experience of falling or being in love with the universe (as Royce expressed it) makes sense only if something personal can be discerned at the heart of the cosmos, only if (as Peirce articulated it) a hypothetical God emerges into view as the author of the book of nature."[47] This is easily misread if "persons" and its cognates are not understood as Peirce conceived of them in essays such as *Evolutionary Love*. "Love," Peirce wrote, "is not directed to abstractions but to persons; not to persons we do not know, nor to numbers of people but to our own dear ones, our family and neighbors. 'Our neighbor,' we remember, is one whom we live near, not locally perhaps, but in life and feeling."[48] There is an intimate relationship, for Peirce, between synechism (his theory of continuity) and agapism (his theory of evolution by creative love) that renders the entire universe of being a neighborhood of potential interpretive sympathy wherein one might attend to any idea, take it up as an object of love and endeavor to aid in its evolution. Per Peirce:

> It is not by dealing out cold justice to the circle of my ideas that I can make them grow, but by cherishing and tending them as I would the flowers in

45. Per Peirce:

> For much the same reason, I do not believe that man can have the idea of any cause or agency so stupendous that there is any more adequate way of conceiving it than as vaguely like a man. Therefore, whoever cannot look at the starry heaven without thinking that all this universe must have had an adequate cause, can in my opinion not otherwise think of that cause half so justly than by thinking it is God.

(CP 5.536)

46. Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 91.

47. Raposa, 95.

48. (CP 6.288)

> my garden. The philosophy we draw from John's gospel is that this is the way mind develops; and as for the cosmos, only so far as it yet is mind, and so has life, is it capable of further evolution. Love, recognizing germs of loveliness in the hateful, gradually warms it into life, and makes it lovely.[49]

Note that love here is the active agent, making the hateful lovely. This does not mean, as Raposa notes, that "X is a subject, Y a direct object, with "love" as an active verb, something that someone *does to* someone else."[50] Rather, through attention X interprets Y as lovely. Interpretation, like love, is triadic so that it is the dynamic relation (a third) between the two that evolves, enabling both to serve as further signs for one another, to grow, and to develop. Thus, Raposa contends, "in its fullest sense love must be recognized as a matter of thirdness: a drawing of what was once separate into living harmony, the achievement of real mutuality, so that love is never reducible to a single feeling or action, but rather, best displays itself as an enduring habit of love."[51] And this mutuality would seem to demand a personal interpretation of God.

Raposa's careful distinction between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism embraces the former as natural while rejecting the later as deeply problematic: "[t]o observe that human thinking will typically take a certain distinctive form—as Peirce did in insisting that anthropomorphic conceptions are natural to the point of being virtually inevitable—does not entail the judgement that such a form should necessarily be preferred to other ways of thinking."[52] Anthropocentric conceptions of God suffer from a lack of vagueness and almost always entail idolatry and involve "slippage into various sexist and racist modes of discourse,"[53] whereas merely anthropomorphic conceptions resist overly determinate conceptions of what it means to interpret the source of the universe as somehow "vaguely like a man." While I am deeply skeptical that such a distinction can long be maintained outside the rarified and circumscribed spaces of quiet contemplation and playful musement, it is to Raposa's credit that he faces this potential criticism head on. In many ways his entire third chapter offers an extended defense of anthropomorphism and the reader is well rewarded by following closely his arguments. At its heart, I take his argument to hinge upon a single question: granting that anthropomorphic hypotheses are natural, spontaneously generated, and inevitable in

49. (CP 6.289)

50. Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 104.

51. Raposa, 84.

52. Raposa, 92.

53. Raposa, 93.

human thinking, and granting the role that such anthropomorphism has played in generating hypotheses that have contributed to the otherwise "inexplicable success with which scientists have so rapidly and efficiently discovered truths about nature,"[54] and even granting that "anthropomorphic is what pretty much all conceptions are at bottom,"[55] just how anthropomorphic or "vaguely like a man" can any conception of the adequate and ultimate cause of the universe be without being problematically anthropocentric? And that question mirrors the following: how much anthropomorphism can be stripped away from such a conception before it becomes unlovely?

What emerges is something of a Goldilocks problem in theosemiotic. Any conception that is too hot (too personal) becomes anthropocentric, while any conception that is too cold (not personal enough) becomes unlovely. But this is exactly the kind of conundrum that theosemiotic is well positioned to address, provided it takes seriously enough the task of loving not just the neighboring and familiar, but that which is foreign and initially unlovely. We may be habituated to loving only that which we interpret as personal, but this seems to be the kind of habit most in need further development, most in need evolutionary love.

While I fully agree with Raposa's contention that theosemiotic must critically guide us away from anthropocentrism, I am not convinced by Peirce and Royce, and to a lesser degree Raposa, that "[t]he experience of falling or being in love with the universe [. . .] makes sense only if something personal can be discerned at the heart of the cosmos."[56] Is not this interpretive habit, the *habit of interpreting* the object of one's love *as personal*, the very kind of habit that theosemiotic might critique and ultimately dissolve?[57] Might the same not also be true of habitually *interpreting a gift* received with gratitude *as a gift given by a personal giver*? If, as noted at the end of the previous section, one of the upshots of playful musement is to allow one's interpretive habits to manifest themselves more freely, are we not then empowered in other, admittedly more serious, probative phases of inquiry, both to ask after the roots of such habits and to examine their potential fruits and thorns? Such examinations undoubtedly encompass more than playful periods of disinterested musement but need not leave musement behind nor abandon evolutionary growth and love. As Raposa notes:

54. Raposa, 88.

55. (CP 5.47)

56. Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 95.

57. As Raposa argues, "[h]ere perhaps a theology conceived as theosemiotic would be especially well-positioned to generate such a critique, given the pragmatic emphasis entailed by such a conception on exploring how habits continuously shape human thought, speech, and behavior, also how such habits are created and dissolved" Raposa, 93.

> Growth in meaning is a process of habit formation, also habit dissolution, thus, as Peirce indicated in identifying the ultimate logical interpretant of any sign, essentially a matter of *habit change*. From the theological perspective being developed here, I want to suggest that the development of a well-established habit of love is what any person conceived as a sign should ultimately come to *mean*, in relation not only to other persons but to the entire universe of signs.[58]

What could be less demonstrative of love, less illustrative of robust interpretive mutuality than to interpret oneself and one's own predisposition toward anthropomorphic or personal interpretations of the universe as the apotheosis of theosemiotic. To be clear, Raposa does not make this mistake, and in fact offers up a similar, though less vociferous, observation in the final paragraph of his third chapter.[59] But Peirce does commit this error, and it worth noting that some of Raposa's most careful analyses aim to wring all the semiotic insight he can from Peirce's logic of vagueness without fully and finally endorsing a theistic reading of theosemiotic.[60]

It may prove helpful, in closing, to attend to a tension between two kinds of hypotheses regarding the natural human inclination toward anthropomorphism. Raposa notes that evolutionary psychologists have recently advanced a family of theories involving "a hyperactive tendency to detect "unseen presences" in natural environments," have suggested that this tendency was adaptive "for some of our early hominid ancestors," and contended that this

58. Raposa, 83.

59. Raposa, 106.

60. Though I characterize myself as a non-theist at the opening of this section and admit to reaching an entirely different conclusion than did Peirce regarding the adequacy of theistic interpretations of the universe, it is fair to note, as did an anonymous referee, that this may seem "un-pragmatistic." This would indeed be the case were I arguing against even entertaining theistic hypotheses in musement or against any program for exploring and testing the adequacy of such hypotheses. I in fact argue the opposite. Theistic hypotheses can and should be explored, as should non-theistic hypotheses. And I have very little expectation that the question shall ever be decisively settled. My preference for non-theistic interpretations of the universe and my characterization of theism as a particularly potent interpretive habit, native to and nearly ubiquitous within our species, are not intended to block the way of inquiry and in fact do not. Peirce and Raposa are both likely correct to suggest we are almost unavoidably anthropomorphic when drawing explanatory inferences, but I follow Raposa's contention that one of the important functions of prolonged and repeated musement is to help us to develop and hone our own interpretive and inferential habits. Criticizing, evolving, and finetuning an interpretive habit like theism is not the same as rejecting it *a priori* or dismissing its interpretations as useless or unworthy of exploration. In more Peircean terms, the community of inquiry includes theists and non-theists who do not just advocate for the rightness of their respective hypotheses, but more importantly continually animate, inhabit muse and experiment upon these hypotheses in countless ways and contexts.

evolutionary account might explain our "anthropomorphic propensity."[61] He raises this alternative explanation of our "anthropomorphic promiscuity"[62] so as to contrast it with Peirce's frequent claim that there is an affinity or attunement between human thought and nature, a theory intricately tied to both his synechism and his objective idealism. But, as Raposa also notes, it is most especially Peirce's agapism that suggests that love is a primal force for growth and evolution. Raposa's treatment of agapism throughout *Theosemiotic* is nuanced, but he does not much address the fact that agapism does not negate or contradict tychism (evolution by fortuitous variation) or anachism (evolution by mechanical necessity). These different accounts are only in conflict if any of the three is taken as sufficient on its own.

I have argued elsewhere that Peirce's agapism necessitates something like the accounts offered by evolutionary psychology insofar as agapism works with tychism and anacism.[63] Love needs some object, some other to love. Analogically, when taken as contributing to the rise of anthropomorphic habits of interpretation, adaptive utility and evolutionary love are not inherently in opposition, nor do they offer conflicting exhaustive explanations of love unless one opts for undue reductionism. Tychism, anacism, fortuitous variation, natural selection, adaptive utility, and other Darwinian principles are not "replaced" by evolutionary love.[64] They are, as Peirce's emphasis on continuity would suggest, augmented by agapism. Whether we should favor the theories of evolutionary psychology or those offered by Peirce as the best explanation of "the tendency among members of our species to generate anthropomorphic

61. Raposa, 90.

62. "Anthropomorphic promiscuity" is a theme developed at length in LeRon Shults, *Theology after the Birth of God: Atheist Conceptions in Cognition and Culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014). Shults' work is put into conversation with a Peircean theory of experimental inquiry in Brandon Daniel-Hughes, "Postpartum Theology: Axiological Experimentation at the Margins," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 39:3 (2018), 48–64.

63. See chapter 2 of Daniel-Hughes, *Pragmatic Inquiry*.

64. At the risk of picking nits, in a key passage Raposa suggests that Peirce's philosophy of nature was "seriously *delimiting* the role played by natural selection," that "the Darwinian principle that leaves nature "red in tooth and claw" is *replaced* on Peirce's account by the gentle law of love," and that "[t]he claim that fierce competition is the motor driving evolution is *supplanted* by the belief in a spiritual force drawing all things into harmony with itself." Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 77, emphases added.

Two of the three highlighted verbs are, I suggest, misleading insofar as neither anacism nor tychism is "replaced" or "supplanted" by agapism. However, in an endnote Raposa calls attention to passages in his earlier book, Raposa, *Peirce's Philosophy of Religion*, 9–10, 72–74, where his analysis is more sensitive to the continuities between these "different "modes" of evolution," (72).

hypotheses" pertains to identifying not just the better explanation of the origins of that interpretive habit, but the relative contributions of each.[65] Here I suspect that Raposa and I disagree. However, the more important question, indeed the more *serious* question involves the effects that anthropomorphic interpretive habits have on present beliefs and practices. When the time for musement has ended, as it must, and we again choose how best to interpret the world through action, do we better love the world by interpreting it and its meanings as gifts of a personal giver or is this natural interpretive habit best left behind? There is, so far as I can tell, no way to answer this question within the playful spaces of musement and it is no accident that Raposa ends his text with the final question: "What then must I do?"[66] Musement goes a long way toward equipping us with a wealth of hypotheses and developing finely honed interpretive habits, but probation awaits. We must choose and act.

IV. Conclusion

When Peirce suggested early in his career that "the production of belief is the sole function of thought," he both overemphasized the importance of fixing belief in response to doubt and underestimated the sheer fecundity of thought, the profligacy of playful interpretation. It would be understandable if readers were to take my words in the previous section as a rather dour reminder that one must eventually put away childish play and engage in serious adult inquiries, but this would be a mistake. There is nothing inherently immature in cultivating a taste for musement. One can take profound joy in playful interpretation and, as Raposa so aptly demonstrates, engage in musement as its own end, even as one learns a great deal about one's own interpretive habits. From the perspective of the more serious inquiries that come later, it may always be viewed as a preparatory exercise and its most beloved interpretations may be understood as too often jejune, but that does not render musement less important or profound. Indeed, as Peirce himself noted, abduction is the only mode of inference that can "originate any idea whatever."[67] It is a necessary component of all inquiries, the "womb" out of which rigorous science emerges, but it is no accident that Raposa insists that playful musement is "never completely left behind"[68]

My hope for *Theosemiotic* is that is sparks a renaissance in appreciation for the vital necessity of abduction, retroduction, and musement, not only in

65. Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 90.

66. Raposa, 264.

67. (CP 5.145)

68. Raposa, *Theosemiotic*, 224.

scholarship on Peirce and Pragmatism, but in all fields of inquiry where human cognitive habits, dispositions, instincts, and intuitions are interrogated. Raposa focuses his efforts almost entirely on religious undertakings, but there is much in this text that points toward a wider application. Musement is indeed preparatory for *both* prayer and rigorous scientific inquiry. And while I do not doubt that serious scientific inquiry is often inspired by religious emotions like awe and gratitude, there is also much to be gained by taking a few moments to reread these natural inclinations to personify, to muse on our habits of musement, and to playfully consider the plausibility of our cannons of plausibility. Whether or not personal and non-personal, theistic, and non-theistic symbols and hypotheses are ever finally reconcilable at some supreme level of vagueness is a question that can only be answered in the infinitely long run.[69] In the short and medium run, we have ample time to muse.

69. Raposa, 257.