

Editorial – In Memoriam

Passings

By Geoffrey Sykes

The meeting with Marcus Solomon occurred in Calea Victoria, Bucharest Romania, and a main elegant thoroughfare, lined with embassies, main hotels, galleries, fashion shops, restaurants and museums. Visitors can be surprised by the urban buildings – much of it coming from Parisian inspired construction early in the twentieth century. Yet my meeting with Marcus was surprising in a quite unexpected way. From the counter of a franchised French bakery, my back was to the front of the shop, with only some glass panels above bread baskets by which to see into the stream parades of pedestrians and traffic outside, it was a random if fortuitous movement that caused me, at the very moment of Marcus passing on the pavement outside, to order a cheese roll. It was May 2015. I had met Marcus on several occasions over 17 years before this occasion – but always inside a lecture room, at a conference, or else at a table for dining or morning tea. Some who knew Marcus better than I, might testify to his agile walking speed. The sighting of him, as a peripheral, background vision to already busy and agile act of perusing, selecting and ordering foodstuff, would at best have been passing or incidental. Yet for some reason, I could interpret in this barest speedily passing individual, midst a canvas of streetscape, someone I knew – it must have been something in the gait, in posture, in costume, the grasp on a briefcase. I did not know who the person was – the sensed unexplained knowledge was in Peircean terms an intuition – and the brisk movement to finalise the sale, pushed through any other customers and make my way the pavement, then looked up in the direction of the moving body, in abductive gaze, my reasoning based only on very vague information. Looking from inside the shop he had been left to right, but outside there was no one to be seen on that side of the thoroughfare. But there, some 100 metres or more on the other side of the street – was the dimly perceived shape of a person I thought I knew, although I still could not identify who that person was.

This process of recognition of someone in a crowd or public place can often be mistaken. It is an example of how the mind uses fragments of a whole to recall or identify the whole. Yet such reasoning can be very fallible – indeed such reasoning relies on fallibility and error to establish reliable outcome. It is common to introduce oneself to a person whose appearance had attributes of someone you know – and might not have seen for some time – only to find, much too late, that you do not actually know the person standing directly in front. This subject, of misplaced recognition, is probably one that deserves a full and formal paper. It is a good example of the topic of faciality – of the face as a plane of signs. Yet in this instance I had not yet seen the face – only attire and posture as glimpsed in specific and animated situational context. I moved quickly yet there seemed to be more than 100 metres to catch up. The person was older, around

eighty I guessed, but how quickly could an eighty year old move. Sometime during the fast paced steps to catch up with the persona, memory kicked in and I realized whom I was chasing.

Marcus Solomon seem to be moving away the faster I followed, yet some 200 metres later he met and he was most gracious about having his focused and efficient ambulation interrupted. He remembered me from the 2010 Summer Institute of Semiotics Conference, held in Imatra, Finland. In fact we had met on two previous occasions (2005 and 1998) at that Russian castle inspired hotel, close to the Russian border, and also I assume but have no specific memory of meeting at the International Semiotic Congress in Dresden in 2009. In 2010 he heard my paper, on geo-politics and structuralism, and later in the day I had played a short game of conceptual sparring following his own paper, in a large, under-filled lecture hall, with an appreciative audience comprising a Finnish fir forest outside plate glass outside, and , along with several dozen scattered attendees within. Marcus liked an intellectual challenge, and usually won such events simply in the process of clarification of the terms of discourse. For myself, his demeanour, accent and discursive posture were quite unique. One way or another, the kernel and memory of recognition had already been planted in our respective brains – and in some uncanny flash that pre-knowledge was summoned.

He genuinely was in a rush – but graciously afforded me a few minutes squeezed from an arduous schedule. He had just returned from a Cultural conference in Istanbul, and was off the next day to Finland. But he listened to my own activities, and yes he would be happy to send in a paper for journal, and yes, also be an editor, and yes, he remembered our last meeting well.

He called me Professor, then left as quickly as he had previously passed on by. It was as if there was so much to be done, that intellectual tasks were had were publically and personally urgent, that the intellectual somehow held a privileged place in staking a direction to the future. Whether because of the accidental rare nature of the event, or the oxygen from my quick breathless scamper to catch up with Marcus, I briefly, on the board pavement that characterises most of the length of that prominent boulevard, considered how best to explain this unusual meeting – its possibility, its perception, its progress. It was a meeting of two individuals sharing a discipline, and one might symbolically locate that discipline the cultural and historical layering of Parisian, East European, Communist and modern architectural styles arrayed along that precinct of the boulevard. I knew Marcus was East European although at that moment had not concluded that he was Romanian, and did not know his specific age. If I had realized he had spent 70 years walking the same pavements – perhaps winter and political conditions had conditioned his speed of walk as much as anything else – then I might have speculated how Marcus was a survivor of different eras of Romanian history – liberal, communist, autocratic – having to fashion an academic career during years of extreme austerity and oppression. It would be possible to map his life and ideas symbolically along Calea Victoria, where the archives and oral history of this streetscape

would offer up a distinct sense of the conditions under which he had crossed disciplines, dedicating himself to logic, mathematics, semiotics and linguistics. He made himself indispensable for any regime - the intellectual life offered a refuge from harsh or changing conditions – revolutions, strikes, war, oppression, protests – that happened on these same streets. Marcus was an autodidact, but not one of the nineteenth century (like Peirce) of independent wealth. He was one born and refined out of the austerity and vicissitudes of the mid twentieth century, where intellectualism, including semiotic specialism, gave him a passport to the world – both conceptually as well as in terms of personal travel and freedom across the Cold War borders. The first generation of post WW1 modernism was reborn post WW2, and with it a renewed aspiration for rational forms of universal knowledge that could transcend cultural and national differences that wreaked such trauma on European states.

In addition, preceding any general historical knowledge of place, there was the clutter of the environment of signs that further layered the architectural streetscape. Codes of street signs, graffiti, poster and peeling ephemera, directions, shop dressage, billboard placarding and brocading walls, strips, not to mention interior prices, labels, tickets and tags - all of these sign accoutrements of an inner urban visage, with a distinct Bucharest flavour, came into play in the rapid fire micro events of the past five minutes, beginning in the franchised French bakery. These were the essential tools of discovery and recognition – yet it would never be enough to classify or recode their meanings. This myriad offers options whose meaning had to be enacted, in an interlocutory sense, by a citizen or visitor. Road signs require response – they might have aesthetic qualities, but it is not enough to gaze on them in abstraction, especially if traffic is heavy (as it was that day). This pragmatic sense, of *signum loci*, of the sign situated in a particular place, lending and gaining meaning from its location, occurred to me, in passing, and then, they passed. Marcus was not the only one busy – the next morning I had to leave for a five hour train trip to Bacău in the north of the country for a performance of a theatre work. The main reason for being in the country was artistic not academic, although in recent months I had begun to interlace the two practices, and had months later asked Marcus for a paper on Semiotics and the Arts. At that pavement meeting he offered the paper he had just given in Istanbul. The two papers by Marcus have been published in Issue 6 and 7 of *Southern Semiotic Review*.

Two days later I had a lunch of pizza and salad, with Nicoleta Popa Blăniariu and her partner at the “Vasile Alecsandri” *University of Bacău* (“Universitatea Vasile Alecsandri” din Bacău). They were touched to know I had met and indeed had some acquaintance with Marcus, whom they knew and valued much. He was a native of Bacău, and was a highly regarded contributor to regional and national cultural and intellectual life. I was beginning to get a picture of Marcus very much as a public intellectual, and anything but cloistered in his research – someone who was generous with many interests as he had been with myself, who found time to be on many regional and national bodies, and was currently undertaking a review of the national Education Board.

It was only a few months later that I learned of his sudden death, and also just how old he was – 90 when I met him. He was someone with an intent, even fixed, demeanour born from serious be-speckled attention to scholarship – at conferences he seemed senior but also ageless.

His life cast a shadow of modern learning into the twenty first century, and a personal and precocious commitment to knowledge regardless of material reward that seemed unending in its motivations and satisfaction. The surprise of an actual ending, of such an example of continuities and pursuits of a modern age, provides a sense of aporia, of difficulty and puzzlement of this passing, and challenge of moving beyond all the resources and gravitas that one lifetime such as his can represent. On other hand, the passing of a life, especially of an acquaintance, can be as incidental and fleeting as meeting a person in a street. This is especially so when the person seems timeless in one life, when several propitious, seemingly ordained, meetings have occurred, then surely the hiatus of one passing will be the pretext for a further occasion, within the subtle micro text of time and place.

The introductory excursion at the Dresden 1999 biennial Congress of Semiotics was a modest affair – a visit to an exhibition on the history of the city at a city museum. I say modest partly because the display of photographs and accompanying text including those of the Allies' aerial bombing in 1945, was more factual than theatrical or grand. Even though the congress was held at the Polytechnic, on the outskirts of the main city, any visitor is inevitably aware of the transformation of its architecture and appearance caused through the catastrophe of 60 years before. In a city like Berlin one is aware of consequences on philosophy and culture of the war – Berlin can be seen as a pinnacle of a certain kind of theatrical, public postmodern anarchism in its rejection of order and traditions of philosophy, in theatre, arts and publications- and presumably in semiotic theory. Yet little of that edgy, iconoclastic postmodern demeanour could be felt the regional city of Dresden – that for most of the post War years had been under Communist rule. The regional conference organisers catered to an international and eclectic audience. The visitors transported by bus to the city museum were orderly, a little tired (the excursion occurred at the beginning of the conference), yet in a comfortable and predictable event. Despite this general sense of order, little surprises can occur.

On the plane, I had read Robert Innes book "Consciousness and the Play of Signs", which, along with other topics, includes the author's interest in a semiotic of perception, based on the writings of Karl Bühler on the plane. A long haul flight from Australia allowed full and unusual absorption into selected and few reading materials. It seemed a full domain or subject matter had been opened up – the topic of perception, normally studied in psychology or biology, became a field of semiosis, subject to interpretation alongside the markers of culture.

Writing now about a meeting that occurred 17 years ago, reminds me that the in-flight reading of “Consciousness and the Play of Signs” might have been seminal in my interest in facial semiotics – with papers on faciality being delivered at Moscow Institute of Humanities, Buenos Aires University, and New York University at Stonybrook, Long Island, in the next year or so. Perception of faces, and facial recognition and expression, was not some holistic or natural phenomenon or process that preceded semiosis – rather it was constructed and maintained through glimpses, glances, perspectives, micro fragments and linearities of tissues, fallible muscularities and corpuscular reasoning. We need to look no further than the palpable learning of perception in a young child to understand this process – we remain, despite our habitualised behaviours as adults, linked to simplicities of childlike reasoning about the everyday reality we see. Obviously based on reflections in this reflection paper, it is a topic that does not seem to have been exhausted.

It turned out the first person I spoke to (at length) in Dresden was Robert. He was sitting next to me on the bus going to the museum. We introduced ourselves, I expressed surprised, I complimented him on the book of course, and he said how pleased he was to meet someone who had read the volume and so well. Academic authors can value such immediate feedback from the unknown international scattered readers of a publication.

That casual interchange led to a meeting – some three years later – in Cambridge, and an extended interview with Robert on Peirce, and the history and philosophy of American pragmatism. Robert graciously conducted a long interview over a day on many subjects in the lovely interior and surroundings of his house in Cambridge, New England. One segment of this video has been included in a previous issue of Southern Semiotic Review – another one is included in this issue. The context of that video is more elaborate than I can explain just now – however it will become relevant later in this article.

Robert’s expertise in American philosophy extends with tempered passion to the pragmatists – and their belief that what and how we think very much relates to experiences in the world that, in the words of Dewey, the mind is in the world and that subject indeed had relevance to what happened next in Dresden. Upstairs in the exhibition on the history of the city in its museum, I was standing behind a room divider in front of some copies of copies of Dresden as it was, bombed and flattened, at the end of WW2. The pictures were inevitably arresting in content if a little washed out in resolution and also somehow familiar - and their presentation and the room generally documented and factual, rather than compelling attention to their subject matter. The exhibition worked well for the purpose of the conference – attendees began to mingle and talk, and the subject on the wall acted as a good conversation starter or background to the main business at hand, to meet and greet other guests.

There was one other person next to me behind the divider. We were separated from the rest of the crowd in the room. The man was male, burly, older than myself, and we shared an impression about photos without turning or making eye contact. I am not

sure if it was a quality in the voice or a sideways glimpse that led me to realize I was standing next to, and conversing, with no less than Umberto Eco – who was an invited keynote speaker at the congress.

I immediately exchanged pleasantries while realizing there would be little time to continue. Whether through obligation or necessity, he would soon circulate amidst the crowd in the centre of the room. So I asked if I could ask a question, and then asked the following – after two decades considering and utilising the work of Peirce, what did he ultimately conclude about the consequences of pragmatism for his own culturally based paradigm of semiotics. Were the two entirely compatible? Words to that effect. He smiled. The answer was postponed and brief when it came. No, he said. No, he repeated, in a quiet aside, almost as if it was not meant to be heard. And that was that. He touched me gently on my coat, and was off into the room – someone it seems had beckoned him.

The next time I saw Eco he was delivering a main lecture. His fame had preceded him. Campus students had been invited as well as conference attendees – the main auditorium was packed, the talk was prepared, read and quite formal. The casual, candid demeanour found in the meeting at the museum had gone – and I not sure that that question and its answer would have been possible again.

I have later thought how appropriate that the keynote semiotician of European culture – of semiology in the tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure – had little to say as he stood in front of pictures of a city of pre-eminent European culture that was virtually destroyed by war, that followed on from its abhorrent mid-century government. The centuries old layering of cultural significations, that were the supermarket of Eco's study, were gone, the shelves of signs emptied, culture stopped. Did we move too quickly from that linguistic Armageddon? Have we learnt all we need to know, all that we should and could learn, from that catastrophe? These were the questions I should have asked Eco.

When the death of Umberto Eco was announced, last year, it seemed quite symbolic. The occasion was the opportunity to a lifetime achievement, in scholarship and fiction. In a sense the work transcended the life of the author – the author might be dead, to cite Roland Barthes, but his texts would outlast and endure in a kind of semiotic immortality. The occasional meeting with him, 16 years before was, I am sure, long forgotten by Eco, and almost quite forgotten by myself, until this small memoriam to several recent passings, brought it to mind.

There were two links from that meeting at the Dresden museum to events that happened three years later in Paris and Montbazin in the South of France. Gerard Delledalle had his residence in the town of Montbazin, on the hills overlooking the Mediterranean. Roman, medieval and religious buildings were present in the old town, as they did in many smaller regional towns scattered throughout France. Gerard lived in a three storey residence near shops in the old part of town, in what was once the vintner's old residence. He said he had bought it in a rundown unwanted state decades before, and gradually restored charm into what was now an intellectual household.

Parts of the old vineyard were still visible from a large patio on the top floor, although other parts were subject to housing subdivision. The house was charming, sprawling with stateliness of staircase to three libraries, dining room, kitchen and bedrooms, with the old cellars in the basement making a spacious studio bedroom. This setting would well befit the presence and work of Umberto - yet Gerard's own publication and research seemed strangely divorced from the immediate surrounds.

Gerard was not a specialist in European philosophy. His specialism was American philosophy, and since World War Two he had become known as a main exponent of the ideas of James, Mead, Dewey, Royce, and in particular, the seminal figure of American philosophy, Charles Peirce. Dewey was a student of Peirce, and before the war, Deledalle was a student of Dewey.

I found this biographical lineage out, for the first time, when he drove me into the small internal garage of the home, having picked me up from Montpellier airport only a few days following the Dresden congress. It followed my previous visit to Montbazin a year before, following the 1998 Summer Institute at Imatra where we first fortuitously meet. "But you are a philosopher" he said. "Not formally". He was impressed with our discourse on Peirce then – beginning with my paper. There were three days on Peirce, a reason to travel the long haul from Australia, to find necessary essential contacts to complete my doctorate, half of which was an intellectual history of Peirce.

In the case, at start of the visit, in that garage, he said, with French irony, 'Welcome to the museum.'

'Yes it looks like a fine building,' I said.

'Not the building. It is I, who am the museum,' Gerard said, in passing, as the Peugeot sank with pneumatic exhausted and we clambered, with luggage, through a narrow door.

He then explained the short biographical facts stated above – more a sanguine reflection on age, and the pleasant happenings of life, than a boast of any kind.

Soon afterwards I was escorted by Janice, Gerard's attentive wife, into a small visitor's bedroom upstairs, when it was suggested by Gerard we could meet again at 5, in the semiotic library, for a discourse. The layout of the house, along with some its organisation (including the dining room and secret kitchen) was at first as delightful as it was unusual for someone from the southern continent – but at the content of inquiry and talk in this house belied its appearance. Pragmatics was a long way removed for the formal refinement of European households. Pragmatism was a philosophy of experience and perception, it stressed how meaning arose through everyday events and communication.

Four years later, there was to be a third visit to Montbazin – Gerard kindly agreed to be interviewed at length over several days and in those delightful interiors – on his philosophy, biography and experiences. In particular, the aim was to encapsulate, by

way of oral philosophy, the ideas of American thinkers through their main European exponent. Robert Innes was to be the second voice for the work – I thought an American voice would enhance Gerard's contributions even more, and provide a transatlantic exchange of mutual ideas.

I also hoped to get contacts through Gerard to interview one or more keynote European thinkers – including Umberto Eco. Gerard would be well positioned, and one hoped something with Eco would certainly be possible, even on the same trip.

I travelled on a round ticket via America – if I had gone via Asia the outcome of this short narrative might have been different. By the time I reached France there had been a turn of events for the worse. I rang Janice and she said not to come – he had been hospitalised, wait a few days, she said. I was esconced in a small unrenovated room, with a 4th floor Juliet balcony overlooking the East Bank and Palaise de Justice, in the Henri IV hotel, on the *Île de la Cité*. This stunning and affordable prime cultural and historical location was at odds with a personal, restless unease – that this trip would not be fulfilled, that my host was so unwell, critically so, that so much seemed to be on a knife's edge. A phone call two days later – from a little booth on the Seine – told the worst that I could only begin to fear beforehand.

Gerard had passed away, in the hospital. He had never come back home. Janice told me that while he was sedated, he said he had to go home because Geoffrey was coming for the interview. One can be touched at the unending project of semiotic philosophy that endured to his last days and hours. Who knows, he must have thought, it might have been possible for him to be safely brought home again – and to conduct further discourse in the semiotic library

The immediate response to that news, from Janice, at the small phone booth on the *Île* on the edge of the Seine, was one of overpowering emotion, anything but intellectual. The passing had immediate grief and loss – at the loss of a person, a colleague and mentor, an endearing collaboration, and even of this round world journey. Mixed regrets were bundled in a moment I probably have not fully understood or returned to fully – a passing can be a discontinuity that is too hard to move through.

One speaks of three individuals who never retired, who lived full lives committed under differing circumstances to a pursuit that centred on the twentieth century discipline or pursuit of semiotic. They kept that pursuit alive for the better part of the 20th century and into the 21st – their lives put paid to any notion that semiotics died prematurely decades ago, or is in itself a failed or obscure or arcane pursuit.

To say that is not to suggest that the respective work of the scholars cannot be developed – or critiqued – to move onwards in this century that might need to be the case. One can use the context of this informal obituary to outline a possible direction.

Two of these three scholars – Eco and Solomon - shared a belief in rationalism, indeed logic that is often used in critiques of semiotics. There can be a cognitivism assumed or

entertained in their work that can be at odds with other directions in the humanities - since Foucault's critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss - that desire for a more social reality and political conceptions of language and sign systems. These scholars can be regarded as modernist in a belief in the search for transparent universal logico-semiotic systems that generalise and transcend individual experience.

What would a postmodern semiotic then look like, that does not commence with idealist assumptions about the mind? One does not need to look for an answer for it is contained in the American tradition of pragmatism, and its accord with European phenomenology, built on individual experience. This is a more moderate, understated postmodern direction than the anarchic artistic collective expressions of post war Berlin. This stress communicative exchange, perception, individual acts and interpretation. Within such a perspective, informal meetings such as outlined in this article become something more than minor accidents - they become the building blocks and kernel of a way of doing research and of being in the world.

A perceptual phenomenology can have a lot to say about casual meetings. Life is full of passing, or passing-bys. Appearances, and disappearances. Presence and absence. Light and shadows. Memory, intentionality and rationality, can struggle to keep pace with the nuanced micro flux that is at play just below the quotidian reality. Signs come into play, to mediate between the known and unknown, to point to what is peripheral or not known. Our vision does not need to be as melodramatic as the baby you cries when a parent leaves the room and cannot be seen. Death is not that imminent - although in a way we die a millions times over in one lifetime, to the myriad acquaintances and friends we encounter. We are lost, forgotten, remote - but suddenly can reappear, reborn as it were.

Of the three scholars, Gerard was the one who was most familiar with semiotic phenomenology, and would have comfortably located it. Gerard well knew of Dewey's complex notion of mind in the world, of how our pursuit of ideas is very akin to the tracing of a map, and lines of reasoning in one regard can be as literal as the markings in the centre of that Bucharest boulevard.

Three figures, three passings, three semiotic paradigms all at play, interlacing and linking the 20th and 21st centuries. A history of ideas can readily be studied biographically, indeed in any pragmatics it in one sense must be so studied. Rather than a disembodied quasi platonic play of concepts, intellectual history can be embodied through the lives of exponents of particular disciplines, whose lives become more than personal, but intellectual biographies where key events, emotions and relationships can all be synchronised to the development of key ideas being espoused or followed.

In this case the demise or loss of a major thinker is heralded in public and scholarly life as being something much more than personal. A death becomes a milestone in intellectual history. It can mark the conceptual limitations of our paradigms of

knowledge, it can motivate reflection and evaluation on a system of knowledge as much as the achievement of one individual.

In the last decade, the loss of these significant figures in semiotics, seems to mark the culmination, if not the twilight, of two great movements in modern semiotics. Their loss provides a positive opportunity to take stock, and evaluate where we are now. How to carry on the flame by which they illuminated their particular style of knowledge? Can their respective traditions be easily continued, or have they now become part of a history of ideas that should be critiqued and seen largely in the past tense? Should the biographical ending be used positively as philosophical aporia and an opportunity to move beyond and supplement what was already accomplished?