

## **Susan Petrilli (ed): Signifying and Understanding: Reading the Works of Victoria Welby and the Signific Movement**

**De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, 2009, 1048 pp,  
ISBN: 978-3-11-021850-3**

**Marco Wan**

Published online: 12 April 2011  
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

This volume seeks to restore a largely overlooked chapter in the history of semiotics, that of the life and work of Lady Victoria Welby (1837–1912) and of the Signific Movement which she founded. It does so by presenting the reader with a meticulously edited selection of passages from the entire span of Lady Welby's writings, as well as commentaries which set these passages in their historical, cultural and intellectual contexts.

Lady Welby was born into aristocratic circles in England and was a goddaughter of the Duchess of Kent, the Queen Mother. She travelled extensively with her mother, Lady Emmeline Charlotte Elizabeth, until the death of Lady Emmeline in the Syrian Desert in 1855. Together, they visited a number of countries including the United States, Canada, Mexico, Morocco, Turkey, Palestine and Syria. After her mother's death, Lady Welby spent most of her time with the Queen Mother at her residences, and after the death of the Queen Mother she entered into the court of Queen Victoria. She was extremely well read and had an active intellectual life; amongst her many indicators of distinction were memberships to the Aristotelian Society of London, the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, and the Sociological Society of Great Britain (of which she was a founding member).

The Significs Movement is an intellectual movement that took root in the late nineteenth century and developed in the early twentieth century; it advocates the study of "the conditions that make meaning possible" while "keeping account also of the biological basis of the signifying processes" (p. 2). The central term in significs is "significance", which designates "the value conferred upon something, the relevance, import, bearing and meaning value of signs, the condition of being significant, the propensity for valuation" (p. 272). The terrain of significs is broader than that of semiotics as traditionally defined, and encompasses both verbal and non-verbal expressions.

---

M. Wan (✉)  
Faculty of Law, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong, China  
e-mail: mwa@hku.hk

For Lady Welby, the question of language does not exist in and of itself, but is instead tied to much broader questions about life. This vision of language and meaning as inextricably linked to broader questions of human existence is reflected in the selection of “essaylets” in the first chapter, in which Lady Welby muses on issues as diverse as the meaning of God, the meaning of gender, and the mysteries of Creation. Such essaylets seem to occupy a marginal place in the development of the Signific Movement, for they rarely approach the question of language directly. However, it is often precisely output not designated as part of the canon of Welby’s works—scribbles, musings which spill over generic boundaries, occasional pieces, first drafts, writings in the margins—which are most revealing. The editorial decision to include the essaylets is a wise one in so far as these pieces give the reader a much fuller sense of how Lady Welby responded to the major intellectual conundrums of her time, and hence of the place of her thought in the history of ideas.

Even from the brief description of the life and thought of Lady Welby given above, it becomes amply clear that here is a fascinating chapter in the history of semiotics which had been curiously overlooked. Susan Petrilli, an Australian academic based at the University of Bari in Italy who has painstakingly sought to restore this chapter for us, is attuned to the gender dynamics at work in this oversight. There is some variation amongst different critics over how the contours of semiotics should be delineated, but however one understands the field, it is difficult not to be struck by the preponderance of male figures: Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles W. Morris, Roland Barthes, Thomas Sebeok, to name but a few. Petrilli notes that the rediscovery of signifiics is largely a consequence of Lady Welby’s correspondence with Peirce, and that it was time she was given a place in the history of semiotics independently. In his foreword to the volume, Paul Copley notes that when he read the correspondence between Lady Welby and Peirce, “it became clear that she was not just Peirce’s interlocutor”, but was someone with a “formidable intellect” who had a compelling theory of how signs create meaning (p. viii). Like Petrilli, he argues for the restoration of Welby’s rightful place in the development of semiotics: “semiotics has not just two founding *fathers* but also a founding *mother*” (p. x). It is therefore possible to understand the genesis of the volume through a feminist lens: at stake is the rediscovery of a female figure in the founding of semiotics. The need for this project is highlighted by the correspondence between Welby and the Italian philosopher of language and mathematician Giovanni Vailati in 1903. Writing to Lady Welby, Vailati notes that the word “Signifiics” “could ... with some advantage, be replaced by “Semiotics”, which has already been appropriated to the very same meaning by no less an authority than that of Locke” (p. 3). In this passage, we see that “Signifiics” was in danger of being obliterated by “Semiotics” from the very moment of its inception, the latter of which is here gendered as male through recourse to no less a paternal authority than that of John Locke. Welby’s response to Vailati’s objection is that it is necessary to ask questions which “all men alike”—including Locke—fail to ask, and in this endeavor signifiics carves out an intellectual space for itself.

The volume presents Welby’s writings in such a way that readers encountering her for the first time can easily navigate through her work, while those already

familiar with her contribution would appreciate the chronological and thematic clarity with which it is presented. The volume begins with an overview of the life, times and works of Victoria Welby. It then gives a sense of Welby's intellectual development culminating in arguably her most important work, *What is Meaning?* (1903), before moving on to an account of the major tropes and issues in signification, including the definition of signification, the creation of meaning, signification, translation, "mother-sense", and subjectivity.

The volume ends by looking beyond Welby's work: the penultimate chapter analyses Welby's influence, with a particular focus on her impact in the Netherlands, and the final chapter considers secondary writings on signification. The section on the Signific Movement in the Netherlands is particularly interesting: beyond its immediate significance as an analysis of the impact of Welby in the country, it also serves as a reminder of the more personal dimension of intellectual traffic: ideas are dispersed not only through one's writings and the solitary digestion of abstract linguistic formulations, but through personal encounters, intense debates, and networks of friendship.

In fact, one of the major achievements of the volume is its ability to give the reader a sense of the more personal dimension of the Signific Movement: not only the ideas, the theories and the public pronouncements, but the friendships, the excitement, and the personal networks that form the basis of this intellectual endeavor. The emphasis on Lady Welby's correspondences plays a major role in this respect: in addition to Welby's more established writings, Professor Petrilli gives her letters a prominent place in the volume, and it is these letters which make the reading experience most enjoyable and informative.

Lady Welby was in correspondence with many of the key intellectual figures of her time, including Henry and William James, Bertrand Russell, Michel Breal, Andre Lalande, and Charles K. Ogden. Many of her ideas are expressed through her exchanges with these figures, and she posits and defends her arguments with passion. What emerges from these letters is the portrait of a woman who is persistent, intelligent, cosmopolitan, engaging, and respected. When Lady Welby admires someone and wishes to meet him or her, she is persistent in obtaining the right introductions and forthcoming in her desire to make acquaintance. Her letters show that she is extremely well read, and that she is able to engage with the best minds on matters relating to language, cognition, and truth. The sheer number of correspondences itself indicates that the respect and admiration she showed was largely reciprocated. Ultimately, *Signifying and Understanding* gives the reader not only the trajectory of a semiotic movement, but a portrait of one of the most fascinating and intelligent writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Finally, one further strength of this volume is that it makes available for the first time material which was previously unpublished. Many of the extracts in this volume are gathered from collections at York University in Canada and the University of London Library in the United Kingdom. The editor notes that one of the aims of the project is to facilitate further research, and the inclusion of such a wealth of primary material, together with the selection of secondary material on Lady Welby, will ensure that this volume will be invaluable to the study not only of the Signific Movement, but of the history of semiotics more broadly.