

SINGER, MILTON: *Man's glassy essence: explorations in semiotic anthropology.* xiv, 222 pp, table, bibliogr., index. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984.

Man's glassy essence is both an hypothesis ('man is essentially a symbol') and an intellectual genealogy. Professor Singer's reflects in this book on how the maturing of his ideas have led him from 'philosophical – to 'semiotic anthropology', in search of a symbolic framework for understanding the human condition, especially as it bears on the question of personal and cultural identity. His solution is Peircean semiotics as a means to break from de Saussure's semiological model with its focus upon codes, which arguably excludes the relation of signs and their objects, and a coherent account of humans as at once symbolizers and symbols. He seeks further to demonstrate *post hoc (ergo propter hoc?)* how the history of anthropology may be read as a movement towards the semiotic vision of humans in culture. Like so many genealogies it serves to legitimate a particular pedigree – from Kroeber to Geertz – centred about Chicago.

Apart from offering a distinctive interpretation of that most evasive philosopher, Charles Saunders Peirce, the book reads well as a fascinating, if contentious, reconstruction of some interesting debates in anthropology, and uses an exegesis of Peirce to expose shortcomings in earlier theories of society and culture. If it skirts the vexing issue of how words or sentences refer to the world or to previous utterances, it is full of insights on the problematic position of humans in the symbolic process. Here Singer sides with Morris against Dewey on the crucial issue of what Peirce understood, in his triadic scheme of object, sign and 'interpretant', by this last and difficult notion. Does an interpretant necessarily involve 'a personal user as its interpreter' (p. 67) so anchoring symbolizing in 'the knowing subject'? Or is it better understood in terms of Peirce's own logic of relations as a determinant of possible references of the sign, and dynamically as conventional habits of interpretation? Singer's argument, which leans towards Morris's processual reading, requires the first version – of humans as both producing and being symbols – in order to produce a thorough-going semiotic model. Now Singer aptly cites Peirce as remarking that consciousness, and therefore thought and man, are inferences and so symbols in Peirce's terminology (p. 55). Further, 'men and words reciprocally educate one another' (p. 56). One can read this as underwriting the essentially symbolic nature of humans; but it is perhaps better understood in terms of his ontology as simply treating humans, like thoughts, as abstract but real, and as part of his complex evolutionary and (confessedly Hegelian) dialectical philosophical vision.

At this point the going gets hard, for it is by no means self-evident how one is to read Peirce. A difficulty is that Singer's book is neither an introduction, nor a reasoned account of an alternative philosophical framework of analysis, but rather an illumination of recent anthropological endeavours in the light of semiotics. A knowledge of Peirce (no mean feat) is assumed; and, as his ideas metamorphosed endlessly, those with some acquaintance have long needed a critical unravelling of the conflicting statements he made about semiotics and its bearing on his logic and ontology.

There seems, to borrow Kuhn's phrase, to be an essential tension in Singer's work. On the one hand he gives a good account of a received, and idiosyncratic, reading of Peirce which places him firmly as a phenomenological bedfellow of Schutz, rather than an objective idealist or a realist who started from Kant and Duns Scotus; and through pragmatism as the ancestor of symbolic interactionism, despite his careful distancing of his 'pragmaticism' from the

action and ego-centred focus of the former. On the other there are innumerable subtle remarks which stir far deeper waters.

When one looks more closely the suspicion arises that the tension is between Singer's original insights and the millstone of the lineage he lauds, especially its pervasive essentialism. So there are delightful critiques of German idealism, Cartesianism and simple-minded empiricism. Against this, and usually when invoking past sages, the mirage appears of a unitary evolving debate in anthropology; language and symbols so homogeneous that one can draw universal generalizations; 'the Indian' or 'the American identity', or 'the human being as a cultural, social, and psychological universal' (p. 53); let alone of cultures in conversation. Debates, cultures and Man in the title have essences revealed through symbols – a view shot through with unargued assumptions of the psychic unity of mankind and the myth of perfect communication. One senses, in contrast, a counter-theme that, as we come to understand more about human nature, its representations change, and that different discursive traditions may have different accounts of reference and signification (sadly Indian semiotics receives short shrift). So Singer seems caught, instructively, between two interpretations of 'Man's glassy essence' which is not as transparent as appears. The dilemma seems to have been anticipated, for the original reads:

but man, proud man!
Drest in a little brief authority, -
Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd,
His glassy essence, - like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven,
As make the angels weep.

Measure for Measure II, ii, 117-22.

Mark Hobart