## Vincent Colapietro

## IN THE NAME OF THAT WHICH HAS BEEN DESECRATED

"We must recognize that there cannot be any critique without some sort of affirmation, that we cannot avoid asking the question, 'critique in the name of what?"" (Richard J. Bernstein)

Augusto Ponzio has produced a monumental body of quite diverse writings, ranging from the highly technical to the broadly humanistic<sup>1</sup>, from the strictly exegetical to the boldly theoretical, also from the polemical to the celebratory. The bulk of these writings are, however, addressed to the intellectual community, rather than more popular audiences, but they are mostly at the intersection of various disciplines (e.g., philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, literary studies, and cognitive science), rather than securely within the confines of a single discipline.

Even so, the characterization of Ponzio as a philosopher of language is not necessarily misleading (cf. Petrilli 2002: 55), at least if both philosophy and language are taken in a generous, inclusive sense; moreover, especially if the philosophy of language is itself taken to be integral to the defense of a distinctive form of the humanistic perspective. This form of humanism emerges from a radical critique of traditional humanism. In this critique, traditional humanism is unmasked as an ideological celebration of the sovereign self (the unanswerable individual, i.e., the subject who is not answerable to anyone except the subject and those with whom s/he has consciously and voluntarily consented to be linked)<sup>2</sup>. In such humanism, the logic of sameness precludes the dia-logic of otherness (Ponzio 1993: 117), the presumption of a unique identity demands a refusal to acknowledge the alterity constitutive of human identity (see, e.g., Petrilli & Ponzio 2005: 387). Drawing upon insights from especially Emmanuel Levinas and Mikhail Bakhtin, themselves creatively conjoined by Ponzio in dialogue<sup>3</sup>, he articulates a truly alternative form of the humanistic position, one founded "on the basis of the category of the 'other" (Ponzio 1993: 117; cf. Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 381, 391). It is nothing less than a relentless effort to imagine a "properly human world"; and, for Ponzio, this means a world in which "need is overcome in the direction of excess," also one in which functional values (exemplified by the ideological sense of *efficiency* enshrined in capitalist cultures) are subordinated to values of another type (a type of value to which the world of art often bears eloquent, even if conflicted, testimony) (cf. Ponzio 2003: 117).

The properly human world is a genuinely dialogical sphere in which excess is characteristic and, thus, the limits of efficiency are continuously transgressed. It is a world, at once, prefigured by and realized in works of art. The movement of the self toward the other, elicited by a work of art, blocks the return of the self to itself, as the self was before undertaking this movement (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 391). While this movement is "especially evident in artistic creation, in the artwork," it is not limited to this field of encounter. The possibility of such movement is virtually ubiquitous: "it is present each time a human product conveys *something more than* its function – a chronotopic excess ..." (*ibid*.: 391-92; emphasis added). This movement, so dramatically illustrated in our encounters with artworks but potentially present in any encounter with any artifact, even ones of a seemingly insignificant status, defines the form of humanism that Ponzio defends: the humanism of otherness (of what Levinas identifies as humanisme de l'autre homme) is both the general, theoretical insistence upon this movement and the specific, situated enactments of the movement itself in the actual historical settings in which we as theorists, friends, citizens, lovers, and in countless other guises are caught up in the thrust toward the other. Ponzio is quite explicit about this: "This movement toward the other without return to the self, to identity, connotes the specifically human that is traceable in any human enterprise" (2005: 392). The "itinerary of philosophy" need not retrace the journey of Ulysses: it need not be a series of adventures on the way home (Levinas 1972; quoted in Petrilli & Ponzio 2005: 392). It may rather be transformed into a ceaseless exile in which the very meaning of home, understood as a properly human habitat, is itself radically transformed (Scheman).

In the texts of this philosopher of language, we encounter a defender of humanism who feels the full force of the radical critiques of traditional humanism and, in his revision of this position, grants the fairness and implications of these critiques. In this defender of humanism, we thus encounter one of the most astute critics of the humanistic position. We also encounter a postmodern author unhesitant to address questions of being alongside questions of alterity, in addition, an intellectual historian as much at home in the texts of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida as those of Petrus Hispanus and indeed Plato. Here

is a philosopher of language, fully conversant with the work of Noam Chomsky and other important contemporary linguists, who realizes that the philosophy of language is inseparable from the philosophy of art. Finally, in this philosopher of language, we encounter a theorist of signs whose inquiries work to undermine, in this context, traditional (i.e., ideologically entrenched) conceptions of signs and their functions, as much as his investigations work to undermine, in another context, traditional conceptions of humans and their roles.

Ponzio's critique of traditional conceptions of the sign is of a piece with his critique of traditional forms of humanism. Part of the explanation for this is that both are undertaken in the name of excess, also that of alterity, finally that of ephemerality; and these names are not those of disjoined values but the names of inseparable concerns. The connection between these two critiques might even be taken as itself a sign, something emblematic of what is characteristically true of Ponzio's writings. Again, he leaves no doubt about his awareness of this connection: "Otherness and dialogism materialize in the sign, which is *for somebody*". That is to say, "the sign is always oriented toward the other according to the terms of the dialogic relation" (2005: 381). The easily overlooked connection between these two critiques (the critique of traditional forms of humanism, on the one hand, and that of inherited understandings of the sign, on the other) is emblematic of other and equally important connections among the only seemingly disparate themes and topics explored by Ponzio.

On this occasion<sup>4</sup>, this essay is addressed to both Augusto Ponzio and an indefinite of possible readers. It is truly as much *to* and *for* him as it is *about* him. If "the terms of the dialogical relation" are in this instance ones of an affectionately personal relation, they are not those of a *merely* personal relationship. I would, however, be less than candid if I did not confess that, in my judgment, the seventeenth of February calls for not only festive celebrations but also celebratory discourses, though ones honoring the character of Augusto Ponzio's intellectual accomplishments, precisely as intellectual achievements, not only the life of a singular person. But the most appropriate way to honor such intellectual accomplishments and, thus, the life of the thinker whose energies, commitments, and passions are embodied in these achievements is an engagement with the work itself. *La relazione interpersonale* can – perhaps must – be, at least in some instances, also a strictly intellectual relationship, moreover, one in which personal affection and admiration are

expressed primarily through a theoretical interpretation and interrogation. Such is, at least, how I propose to mark this august occasion! (cf. Colapietro 2003).

Accordingly, it seems especially fitting to highlight some of the defining features of the monumental achievement evident in a literary production running from 1967 to the present (to bring into sharp focus some of the characteristic traits of what might strike the inattentive reader as unrelated writings). In asserting this, I am simply acknowledging what I have been doing thus far and also indicating what I will continue to do in this essay. To highlight these features is, then, my way of celebrating this thinker, on his *anniversario*.

No feature of Ponzio's corpus is more striking than the complex but pervasive themes weaving together these diverse writings (the intricate unity flowing from these intertwined themes), except the cutting edge of what is, at bottom, a critical project. In other words, the thematic unity of these wide-ranging writings is surpassed only by the critical force of their deep-cutting interrogations of texts and traditions, theories and tropes, practices and institutions. This force makes of these writings sites wherein spaces for otherness – other ways of interpreting familiar texts, other ways of configuring our actual past, thus other ways of reconfiguring our possible futures – are not only opened but strenuously held open (against much opposition, not least of all against a relentless logic of hegemonic sameness).

The unity resulting from the interwoven patterns of Ponzio's central preoccupations (above all, those of alterity, ideology, communication, and answerability) is as difficult to identify succinctly as it is to miss. The  $arch\acute{e}$  ( $\alpha\rho\chi\eta$ ) of his literary production nonetheless provides us with invaluable clues for interpreting the telos ( $\tau\epsilon\lambda\sigma\sigma$ ) of his far from fully realized project<sup>5</sup>. At the outset of his career Ponzio exhibited a degree of prescience that would have been remarkable even in a more established scholar – a critical engagement with Emmanuel Levinas in which the power and importance of  $Totalit\acute{e}$  et infini (1961) were exhibited for the first time. It would actually be more accurate to say that Ponzio's career was launched by his engagement with this work by Levinas. The central focus of Ponzio's critical engagement with this French thinker is clearly indicated in the title of his first monograph, La relazione interpersonale (1967). The relationship to other persons, both as others and as persons (cf. Derrida; also Bernstein), when this relationship is defined in terms of difference (decisively, a continuous effort to avoid being indifferent to difference, i.e., to cultivate a

sense of unindifference [Petrilli & Ponzio 2005: 381 & 410]), is arguably the source from which the whole of Ponzio's oeuvre flows.

As important as it is to trace this work to such a source, it is equally illuminating to note its scope and character (cf. Petrilli 2002: 55-58). The range of Augusto Ponzio's work is at least matched by its depth, the moral passion and orientation of this thinker at least equaled by his theoretical sophistication and subtlety. His work is, at once, deeply rooted in a specific cultural context and potentially relevant to quite distant cultural settings. It is national (without any hint of nationalism) and international (without any trace of naiveté), palpably Italian and prophetically global. In certain respects one might even say that it is regional without ever being provincial. Ponzio's work is, moreover, distinctively European without being Eurocentric: indeed, it is decisively eccentric without ever being cleverly idiosyncratic. We might say that it is Euroeccentric, since it involves drawing upon admittedly European (and American) authors, but ones who provide him with the resources to decenter the identity of Europe itself as much as that of the modern subject, in addition, the identity of the Western intellectual as much as that of the ordinary citizen. The distinctive "eccentricity" of Ponzio's philosophical genius is a consequence of his commitment to alterity. The congealed and solidified centers of power (cultural, philosophical, and otherwise) are by virtue of his critiques destabilized – the muted and scattered voices of various individuals and groups are through his writings rendered more audible and unified.

The notion of the sign and allied conceptions are taken up by Ponzio and carried forward in truly novel directions. One of the most innovative and fruitful ways in which this has been accomplished is in his pivotal conception of the interpretive route. Whatever else the "interpretive route" in and through which the meanings of signs are established, solidified, but also destabilized might mean (whatever else this expression might mean), it at least means a potentially ongoing process in which a movement between center and margins is facilitated. As a result of the way that Ponzio deploys this conception of meaning, the center is time and again shifted, often to the margins themselves; and, in the process, a series of displacements renders thought eccentric and, thereby, truly critical.

As much as the deployment of this conception is animated by the desire to transform a critical mass of overlapping fields (from communication theory to literary studies, from philosophy to linguistics, from the human sciences to cognitive science), it is inescapably

undertaken against a still relatively secure background of our inherited conceptions. One technical way of identifying this background and the modifications for which Ponzio is calling can be expressed in semiotic terms. "Semiotics today," Petrilli and Ponzio note, "can be described as growing beyond decodification semiotics" 6, thereby "working in the direction of interpretation semiotics" (2005: 301; cf. 74-75). A *decodification* semiotics is rooted in the theoretical presupposition that a code strictly governs the transmission of information from a source to a destination. Meaning is, from the perspective of those who advocate "an interpretation semiotics", not a matter of equivalence (especially an equivalence that can be ascertained on the basis of an antecedently fixed codes), but rather an instance of excess. It is the route of interpretations forged by (see, e.g., Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: 75) a series of interpretants of various kinds, operating ordinarily at various levels.

The conception of meaning in terms of routes of interpretation, establishing or at least sustaining by their trajectories open networks of nonetheless structural constraints<sup>7</sup>, is in Ponzio's hands a nuanced and powerful tool. This is nowhere more evident than in the fundamental distinction between what are arguably the most forms of interpretants, "the identification interpretant" and the "answering comprehension interpretant". The "identification interpretant" operates on the more primordial level of recognition, whereas the "answering comprehension interpretant focuses on the pragmatic dimension of signs" (2005: 76). The recognition of an alteration of one's pigmentation as a symptom of illness would be an example of this primordial level of recognition, the suspicion (or hypothesis) that, in this alteration, we have a difference that makes a difference. But this recognition opens or at least intimates countless paths of interrogation, interpretation, and critique; and the task of blazing these trails, forging these paths, decisively distinguishes "interpretation semiotics" from either "communication semiotics" or even "signification semiotics" (the two forms of decodification semiotics). That is, meaning is not given as an equivalence or correlation between two (or more) historically fixed factors (e.g., the malfunction of a particular organ – say, the liver – and these alterations in skin pigmentation). Rather it is established and indeed re-established always in excess of any historically determinate equivalence or correlation.

The routes of interpretation lead beyond anything currently instituted or fixed, though the sedimented habits and other dynamic structurations of organisms and their environments make of the free play of signs always an intricately structured process of play. The two most important points to stress here are, however, simply (1) Ponzio's reconceptualization of meaning in terms of interpretive routes and (2) his crucial distinction between those rudimentary interpretants by which signs are recognized (or identified) as such and those infinitely evolving interpretants by which ever more comprehensive and intricate networks are woven. Even at the most rudimentary or basic level, however, the sign is a response to what is other. At the more properly human levels, it involves nothing less than radical openness to irreducible otherness, especially when such otherness is not conceived abstractly and historically, but experienced – and on the basis of this experience – theorized in as concrete and historical a manner as poetic imagination and human empathy allow.

The angles of vision are by means of this approach to signs multiplied, the resources for criticism augmented. The irrepressible life of signs is nowhere more evident than in the interminable work of critique. In turn, this work is in no respect more effectively critical, thus more dramatically transformative, than in rendering audible what historically has been silenced, visible what culturally has been erased, and effective what politically has been sequestered. In the case of Ponzio, the interpretive route of especially our most charged signs forges paths to the marginalized, those *others* who have been silenced, erased, and sequestered. Such routes provide in this case both routes of escape and paths of attack, for they avail opportunities to move beyond the logic of sameness and also opportunities to move against this logic.

In general, interpretive routes are forged at various levels of description, analysis, and critique, ranging from the most intimate to the most remote (from the most seemingly interior and personal to the most apparently distant and impersonal). In particular, Ponzio's work illuminates the interstices of everyday life but also the dynamics of an increasingly globalized world. It touches upon the practices and rituals of ordinary persons in their everyday lives, while situating these in a globalized economy. It interprets the local in light of the global but also the global in reference to the local. Specificity and concreteness are hence not sacrificed on the altar of generality and abstractness. The reason for this is that the series of displacements whereby reflection is rendered eccentric and critical is one with the series of recontextualizations whereby reflection situates (or re-situates) itself and its object of interrogation. Concreteness is the result of such contextualization or, more precisely, recontextualization. The situated character of theory and critique is itself brought into critical

focus, while the critical force of theory is freed from the blunting constraints of purely contingent circumstances.

One of the contexts in which Ponzio's own work must be located in order to be adequately understood is that of a certain intellectual tradition, encompassing such figures as Peirce, Welby, Bakhtin, Morris, Sebeok, Levinas, and Derrida. He is a vital part of a living tradition, one being carried forward by not only Ponzio himself but also numerous others (many of whom have been directly influenced by him). In other words, his work draws heavily upon significant figures in intellectual history, ones transcending narrow disciplinary identification, but also drives unmistakably toward a unique perspective. Ponzio pays his theoretical debt to his intellectual allies by bringing into sharp focus the continuing relevance of their often overlooked writings, equally often misinterpreted works, yet also by appropriating their fundamental insights in a creative manner.

Ponzio is manifestly carrying forward the work of (as much as anyone else) Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, but in directions and ways that are indicative as much of Ponzio's innovative genius as they are of Rossi-Landi's own distinctive originality. What so many theorists have either in effect or in intent rent asunder Ponzio, following Ross-Landi, have tried to integrate, not least of all language as "both a biological and cultural phenomenon" (Rossi-Landi 1985: 218; emphasis added). The life of signs exemplifies in a singularly dramatic manner nothing less than the phenomenon of life, envisioned in the first instance as a ceaseless flow and confluence of irrepressible forces (cf. Caputo 2002: 85), also as an arena in which mutable forms are ceaselessly undergoing fateful alterations, momentous mutations. The life of human signs, no less than the evolution of biological species, is undeniably shot through with contingency, randomness, and mutability. Even so, we can - indeed, we ought - to acknowledge a dimension of this semiotic life and, as a consequence, also a dimension of human evolution itself for which we are answerable. The insistence upon various forms of human answerability, an insistence drawing inspiration and insights from the writings of Emmanuel Levinas no less than those of Mikhail Bakhtin, constitutes what is arguably the center of Ponzio's vision. In its most recent articulations, the range and depth of this answerability effectively define the range and depth of Ponzio's project: we are answerable for what we say and do, also for how we live and allow (or fail to allow) others to live, and finally for nothing less than the inhabitability of the earth.

While Ponzio is a philosopher of alterity, a thinker for whom the phenomena of otherness in their irreducibly diverse senses are of abiding, focal concern, he tends to be less skeptical than other such philosophers about the concrete possibilities for human community. Though he is acutely aware of how ephemeral and elusive is the constitution and maintenance of any community in which otherness is made pivotal (alterity being truly that around which everything ultimately turns), he is unfailingly hopeful in recovering the bases for solidarity among those who have historically defined themselves in opposition to one another. For the philosopher of alterity, the invocation of the name of community or solidarity needs to be interpreted ideologically and historical, but the permanent need to decipher the actual work such an invocation is doing in a specific setting does not preclude the legitimacy of this invocation: there are occasions when the name of community (or solidarity) is something other than an instrument of ideological manipulation. Put positively, there are occasions when such an invocation is an indispensable means by which an inchoate public constitutes itself as an effective presence in the historical circumstances into which this public has been thrown. According to Karl Marx, humans make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing. But as he implied and as Ponzio virtually asserts, humans increasingly make history in circumstances for which they are answerable. In our own historical moment, the emerging form of human responsibility is global answerability, the emergent condition of being answerable for the very framework, extending to the earth itself, in which we are making history.

To modify slightly the title of one of Ponzio's own essays, we are presented in his writings with nothing less than *a dialogical critique of dialogical reason*, a critique in which each of the three terms intertwined here (dialogue, critique, and reason) is destabilized in reference to the other two. The most painstaking, critical attention must here be given to the "preliminary" work of securing the material and moral conditions in which anything approximating a humane exchange among different voices, in their irreducible differences, has a chance of taking place.

Especially among theorists of alterity, the ideal of dialogue, much like that of community, is more often than not an object of derision rather than an object of allegiance. Even the most robust defenders of dialogical relationships are often forced to acknowledge the limits of dialogue. For example, Richard J. Bernstein (echoing a claim put forth by Jürgen

Habermas in *Knowledge and Human Interests*) insists: "it is a fiction to think 'Socratic dialogue is possible everywhere and at any time" (1992: 50).

On the other side, the ideal of such dialogue, precisely as an ideal, is not altogether jettisoned even by some of its most severe critics. In an interview conducted by Paul Rabinow, Michel Foucault explains his principled opposition to polemics in terms of an explicit espousal of this very ideal! Here Foucault is quite emphatic, insisting on the difference between polemics and dialogue "as something essential: a whole morality is at stake, the morality that concerns the search for the truth and the relation to the other" (1984: 381). He who was so sensitive to the asymmetrical relationships of power so inimical to the possibility of genuine dialogue, nonetheless, articulates as eloquently and forcefully the ideal of dialogue as any author with whom I am familiar:

In the serious play of questions and answers, in the work of reciprocal elucidation, the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion. They depend only on the dialogue situation. The person asking the question is merely exercising the right that has been given to him: to remain unconvinced, to perceive a contradiction, to require more information, to emphasize different postulates, to point out faulty reasoning, etc. As for the person answering the questions, he too exercises a right that does not go beyond the discussion itself; by the logic of his own discourse he is tied to what he has said earlier, and by the acceptance of dialogue he is tied to the questioning of the other. Questions and answers depend on a game – a game that is at once pleasant and difficult – in which each of the two partners takes pains to use only the rights given him by the other and by the accepted form of dialogue (*ibid.*: 381-82).

Closely linked to this, there is a deep, widespread skepticism regarding the ideal of community. In this same interview, Foucault gives arresting voice to this postmodern doubt. He does so first be recalling a criticism put forth by Richard Rorty: "Rorty points out that in these analyses [in which Foucault is trying to determine what "posing a problem" to politics really, thus experientially means] I do not appeal to any 'we' – to any of those 'we's' whose consensus, whose values, whose traditions constitutes the framework for a though and define the conditions in which it can be validated" (*ibid.*: 385). But, for Foucault, the possibility of appealing to a relevant community cannot be presumed: indeed, "the problem is, precisely, to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a 'we' in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or is if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a 'we' possible, by elaborating the question". He goes so far as to insist that the only viable form of human humanity is one consequent (rather than antecedent) upon

the question; moreover, only a "necessarily temporary" instance of solidarity, never a historically enduring form.

Somewhat idiosyncratically, Derrida expresses his own reservations about community: "I have always had trouble vibrating in unity" (1995: 348). Along these same lines, he confesses:

If one by community one implies, as is often the case, a harmonious group, consensus, and fundamental agreement beneath the phenomenon of discord or war, then I don't believe in it very much and I sense it is as much a threat as promise (*ibid*.: 355).

This appropriately critical stance toward community, somewhat ironically, brings together a vast number of contemporary intellectuals: they in effect, if not in consciousness or intent, define themselves as the "we" who are skeptical of appealing to the "we". This is not necessarily a performative contradiction, though it might be too thin a basis for political action, especially sustained efforts against entrenched forces.

What is remarkable here is that Ponzio's humanism of the other is itself rooted in these doubts and misgivings about the ideal of community, especially about the way appeals to this seemingly irenic ideal are made in contemporary life. Even so, he does not seem troubled by the prospect, time and again, of vibrating in unity with others. While he is committed to avoiding any uncritical presumption that anything approximating a properly human form of community is antecedently in place, he is equally mindful that we are always already bound up with others in not only deep but also constitutive ways. This much is acknowledged in his very understanding of identity: "the self in itself is already dialogue, already an I/other relationship. Otherness is present at the very heart of identity; it is [indeed] structural to identity ..." (*ibid*.: 387). You might stand other to me on this or that question. Such otherness is however relative to a role or circumstance or some other contingent feature of our actual relationship. It is thus properly identified as "relative otherness". In contrast to this form, there is "absolute otherness". Absolute otherness "is pure excess"; as such it explodes the bounds of functionality and consciousness, also those of equal exchange and exact equivalence. This is one of the numerous places in which the ever deepening thematic unity of Ponzio's evolving project is manifest. But, the names of humanity and dialogue, otherness and love, as well as those of solidarity and democracy, tolerance and friendship are manifestly ones that have been cynically manipulated and credulously followed, seemingly

emptied of any defensible meaning and also of any emancipatory force. In other words, they have been desecrated and disfigured, defiled and denigrated<sup>9</sup>. But if excess has relevance anywhere it has relevance here; for the meaning and force of these terms exceed their historical uses and distortions, they transcend specific ideological appropriations and general linguistic abuse. How these themes are sounded in Ponzio's writings, most frequently sounded together in the theoretical analogue to contrapuntal music, reveals their excessive relevance and relevant excesses, their inevitable transcendence of historical appropriations and their possible redeployment for historical transformation. If I have done anything to highlight some of the salient features of this thematic unity, also to bring into sharp focus several of the individual themes themselves, finally to render the more subtle strains of this contrapuntal music more audible than they otherwise would be, then I have accomplished my purpose.

But, on this occasion, it seems especially apposite to conclude on a distinctively personal note. Whenever I am in the presence of Augusto Ponzio, there can be no mistake that, here in this person at this moment, I am confronted by the palpable presence of an intensely serious yet irrepressibly humorous interlocutor to whom I am answerable. But my felt sense of answerability is itself a response to his defining stance of answerability: Augusto Ponzio has from the very outset assumed responsibility for very the context in which our utterances are to be exchanged, above all, that in which our differences are to be elaborated. This responsibility extends to nothing less than what I as his other – as his other in this setting and, more radically, his absolute, irreducible other in any imaginable setting – am striving, or struggling, to say. The possibility of alterity and solidarity becoming so concretely and memorably allied is, as a consequence of exchanges with such an individual, no ungrounded hope. For this possibility in this relationship can be and almost always actually is, in the presence of such a person, an experienced achievement. A life in which the hope of such an alliance is so deeply grounded, so dramatically exemplified, is one worthy of celebrating. Along with other ways of being joyously recalled, such a life is worthy of being celebrated by an engagement with the ideas, passions, and preoccupations through which this singular life has acquired much of its defining purpose. This volume and my own contribution to it exemplify such engagement. I hope that beyond this they also embody

some hint of the values that Ponzio's humanism of otherness so fully and forcefully defends – above all, exuberance, ephemerality, excess, and eccentricity.

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Vincent Colapietro is a Professor of Philosophy who has written extensively on C. S. Peirce and, more generally, the pragmatic movement from its inaugural moment to its contemporary reconfigurations. Moreover, he has explored the topics of subjectivity, agency, and identify from an explicitly semiotic perspective. In conjunction with this exploration, he is undertaking a systematic re-evaluation of psychoanalytic theory. Finally, questions concerning art (most recently, ones about music and, above all, jazz) continue to be of paramount importance as opportunities for both exploring phenomena especially worthy of painstaking consideration and testing the adequacy of the Peircean theory of signs.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Part of my purpose in this essay is to underscore the most important respects in which Ponzio's advocacy of humanism deviates from traditional forms of the humanistic position (see, e.g., 2005: 381, 391, 546).

But, unlike Michel Foucault, Ponzio does not allow his radical critique of traditional humanism to drive him in the direction of an anti-humanistic stance (cf. Stoper 1985).

- <sup>2</sup> Even this might be granting too much to the sovereign subject who has proven so cunning in dissociating himself from even voluntarily contracted relationships. The ideal of such a subject is bound up with a conception of freedom by which the subject is able to free itself from not only its chance but also chosen, not only its inherited but also previously accepted, attachments and relationships. This makes of this subject a virtually unanswerable agent, a being answerable to no one but itself *at present*.
- <sup>3</sup> All too often thinkers are, in the hands of interpreters or critics, merely juxtaposed to one another, in such a way that no genuine encounter, not unsettling dialogue, takes place. This is not the case here or in those other instances in which Ponzio puts otherwise disparate authors into genuine dialogue with one another. This is a matter about which he is fully conscious (see, e.g., 2005: 380).
- <sup>4</sup> This is of course the occasion of Augusto's 65<sup>th</sup> anniversario.
- <sup>5</sup> Especially in light of Ponzio's own understanding of the open-ended character of interpretive and critical projects, this is not criticism but praise.
- <sup>6</sup> Decodification semiotics can be itself divided into *communication* and *signification* semiotics (2005: 74-75).
- <sup>7</sup> These structural constraints are not only constraining; they are also enabling. That is, the various historical configurations and sedimentations constituting the open networks of semiosic structures are, at once, constraining and enabling. Any natural language is, for example, as liberating as it is limiting.
- <sup>8</sup> This is one of those places in Ponzio's writings where the felt need for a precise designation, or accurate description, seemingly usurps other potentially equal considerations. As precise as these expressions are after working through the definitions and illustrations offered by Ponzio, they are less than optimal as labels or names, not least of all because they lack elegance (especially "answering comprehension interpretant" strikes harshly upon the ears of a native speaker of English). But, like Peirce, Ponzio is willing if truly necessary to sacrifice literary elegance or euphonious expression for strict precision.
- <sup>9</sup> It is not only in the name of that which has been desecrated but also in the name of that which is not presently even imaginable, not only in the name of that which has been defiled and disfigured but also the name of that which has been silenced and erased, that Ponzio offers his deep-cutting critiques.