

BOOK REVIEWS

Travails and Travails

Charles Sanders Peirce. A Life. JOSEPH BRENT. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1993. xviii, 388 pp., illus. \$35.

"Nobody understands me," Charles Sanders Peirce groaned to his friend William James in 1907. "America is no place for such as I am." He was right on both counts. Widely celebrated in Europe for his scientific accomplishments, Peirce—who could legitimately claim eminence as a mathematician, astronomer, chemist, geodesist, philologist, lexicographer, historian of science, psychologist, logician, metaphysician, and semiotician (and much else besides)—could not find a position in the universities of his own nation, where his moral laxity weighed in the balance more heavily than his brilliance as a scholar and teacher. Though he is regarded by many today as the greatest of American philosophers, his pathbreaking work in logic, metaphysics, and semiotics was little understood by his contemporaries. Even James, who followed his work with care and sympathy, found most of it incomprehensible. Without a steady job for the last 25 years of his life, Peirce died in desperate poverty, leaving behind thousands of pages of unpublished manuscripts, which his friend Josiah Royce deposited in the care of the philosophy department at Harvard.

Joseph Brent has written the first full-length account of Peirce's tragic life and the first to make full use of this vast Peirce archive. And therein lies a tale that does as little credit to Harvard as its failure to make Peirce a member of its faculty. Brent began his research 35 years ago while a graduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles and completed the dissertation that forms the foundation of his book in 1960. Yet the Harvard philosophers, who had granted him access to most of Peirce's papers, then refused for undisclosed reasons to permit him to quote further from these documents and thereby torpedoed his plans to revise his dissertation for publication. Long after Brent had set aside this project and retooled as a scholar, it was rescued from oblivion by the good offices of semiotician Thomas Sebeok, Indiana University Press (publisher of a new edition of Peirce's *Writings*), and a fresh generation of Harvard philosophers willing to let Brent's research

see the light of day. Thus this *Life* of Peirce has had travails that eerily mirror those of the life it describes, though in this case the ending is a happy one.

Students of the history of American philosophy and science may be glad that Brent persevered. He has given us a full and compelling account of Peirce's troubled career and a wealth of persuasive arguments and plausible inferences (what Peirce called "abductions") to help explain it.

Peirce was nothing if not ambitious. He intended, he said, "to outline a theory so comprehensive that, for a long time to come, the entire work of human reason, in philosophy of every school and kind, in mathematics, in psychology, in physical science, in history, in sociology, and in whatever other department there may be, shall appear as the filling up of its details." As this remark suggests, he was an extraordinarily systematic thinker—the most systematic of American philosophers—and over his career he slowly and steadily ("pedestrianism" was his own term for his thinking) built a remarkable "architectonic" that nearly matched his ambitions, while at the same time his outward career steadily collapsed. In the late 1890s as Peirce added vaulting cosmological towers to his house of theory he could also be found stealing food on the streets of New York.

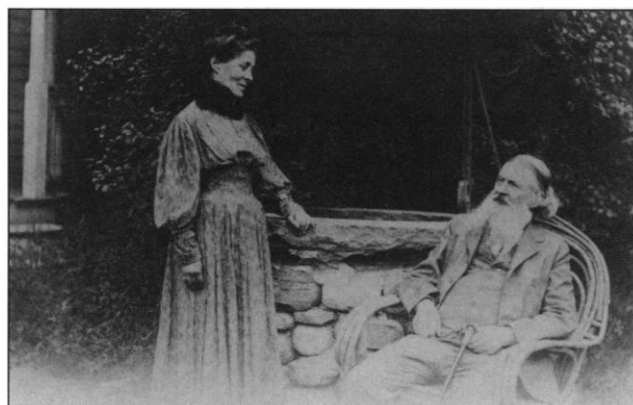
Brent's focus is on the collapsing career. He traces Peirce's downward trajectory from his birth in 1839 and a promising childhood amid the elite world of Harvard and Cambridge, Massachusetts, as the intellectually



Charles Sanders Peirce as depicted in *Sun and Shade*, August 1892. [From *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life*; Peirce Edition Project, Indiana University, Indianapolis]

precocious, favored son of the leading mathematician in the United States, Benjamin Peirce, to the desperate circumstances of his final years. Building on a treasure trove of unpublished correspondence and manuscripts (many of which are quoted at length), Brent opens to view many heretofore cloudy aspects of Peirce's biography: his close, loving, but eventually debilitating relationship with his father; his disastrous first marriage; the even more disastrous love affair that ended it; his brief, stormy years (1879–1884) as a lecturer at Johns Hopkins; his long, conflict-ridden career (1861–1891) as a geodesist with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey; his struggles to make ends meet through book reviews, translations, and handouts from friends so that he might publish the fruits of his mature philosophical labors; and the pathos of his death in 1914, "five months before the guns of August thundered abroad the beginnings of the First World War and the end of an age whose dominant values he despised."

Brent leaves no doubt that many of Peirce's difficulties were self-inflicted. He was a spoiled, arrogant young man; an abusive husband; a difficult, contentious employee; and a paranoid, deceitful old man. In sum, Brent contends, Peirce was, for all his intellectu-



Peirce and his second wife, Juliette, around 1907. [From *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life*; Peirce Edition Project, Indiana University, Indianapolis]

al brilliance, morally blind. He attributes much of the philosopher's erratic, unconscionable behavior to an extraordinarily painful chronic physical ailment, trigeminal neuralgia, from which he believes Peirce to have suffered. As he says, "When free of pain [Peirce] was often pleasant, considerate, cheerful, loving, charming, and good company, but when the pain was on him he was, at first, almost stupefied and then aloof, cold, depressed, extremely suspicious, impatient of the slightest crossing, and subject to violent outbursts of temper." The pain drove Peirce to distraction, despair, and drugs.

Brent makes a good case as a medical detective. He has less success as an anatomist of the heart—probably because his sources are less revealing—in explaining the public love affair that Peirce launched while still married to his first wife Melusina (Fay) with a mysterious French woman, Juliette Pourtalai (probably not her real name), who eventually became his second wife. This scandalous behavior, more than anything else, ruined Peirce's career. It guaranteed his exile from the precincts of the American university and won him powerful enemies. Most notable of these was the prominent astronomer Simon Newcomb, who got Peirce fired from Johns Hopkins in 1884, engineered his dismissal from the Coast Survey in 1891, and in 1903 deprived him of a grant from the Carnegie Institution that would have enabled him to finish his life devoting himself full-time to philosophy rather than book reviews for *The Nation*.

Brent's book will prove less satisfying to those in search of an account of the development of Peirce's thought. He has surprisingly little to say about the philosopher's ideas, and what he does say is often allusive and elliptical. Because Brent keeps his nose so close to his documents, especially correspondence, he has much more to say about Peirce the experimental scientist at work within the coils of the Coast Survey bureaucracy than about Peirce the pathbreaking logician toiling alone in his study. We learn little of the intellectual context in which Peirce worked and less of the wider social and cultural circumstances in which his thought took shape.

This paucity of intellectual and cultural history is especially regrettable, because Brent gives every evidence in his final, all-too-brief summary chapter of having both a firm grasp of Peirce's system and some provocative things to say about it. Most notably, he supplements his medical argument for Peirce's character flaws with a provocative assessment of the ill effects of his exclusive commitment to the narrow virtues of truth-telling and the circumscribed community of scientific inquiry. For much of his life, Peirce believed that out-

side this community individuals were morally incorrigible—a belief that, as Brent says, authorized his own shortcomings.

At the end of his life, Peirce had second thoughts, and his philosophy took a decidedly ethical and religious turn. His system built its way toward God. "All science must be a delusion and a snare," he contended, "if we cannot in some measure understand God's mind." It was thus fitting that it was the recalcitrant absolute idealist Josiah Royce, alone among Peirce's contemporaries, who penetrated the complexities of his thought, and fitting as well that Royce should have made best use of this philosophy in his great late book, *The Problem of Christianity*. Though Peirce is widely admired in our own time among scientists and philosophers, facts such as this, as Brent says, are "likely to be disconcerting to most scientists and to many philosophers."

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Emotion and Memory

Affect and Accuracy in Recall. Studies of "Flashbulb" Memories. EUGENE WINOGRAD and ULRIC NEISSER, Eds. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1992. x, 315 pp., illus. \$44.95 or £30. Emory Symposia in Cognition, 4. From a conference, Feb. 1990.

The term "flashbulb memories" was coined by Roger Brown and James Kulik in a definitive paper published in 1977. Brown and Kulik intended it to refer to unusually detailed and durable memories of the circumstances under which one first learned of an event. Events that generate flashbulb memories are usually very surprising and emotionally arousing and are perceived by the subject as personally consequential. Using as the prototype of the class the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Brown and Kulik found that all the subjects they tested had highly detailed and vivid memories of learning of the assassination, which had occurred ten years prior to the time of testing. Moreover, they found interesting variations in the incidence of flashbulb memories; for example, many more black than white Americans had flashbulb memories of the assassination of Martin Luther King. This finding seemed to confirm their belief that level of personal consequentiality of an event influences how it is remembered. In order to explain these findings Brown and Kulik controversially proposed that a "special" memory mechanism (they even speculated as to the under-

lying neuroanatomy) "fired" in response to high levels of personal consequentiality and emotional arousal, creating a detailed, accurate, and long-lasting memory.

By no means all memory researchers agree with this "encoding" account of flashbulb memory formation. Ulric Neisser has probably been its most steadfast opponent. The contribution of Neisser and Nicole Harsch to this collection of papers on the phenomenon reports on what they call "phantom flashbulbs," or false recollections of hearing the news of an event (in this case, the space shuttle Challenger disaster). Phantom flashbulbs are detected when an individual gives radically different accounts of learning of an event when asked to describe these circumstances immediately after the occurrence of the event and again months or years later. In Neisser and Harsch's study many subjects gave completely different accounts when retested after a delay of over a year. This phenomenon has led Neisser to conclude that "flashbulb memories" are actually created over a period of time as a result of subsequent retelling of the circumstances surrounding an event, either to oneself or to others. With each (covert or overt) "rehearsal" certain details that otherwise might have been forgotten are reinforced in the subject's memory and thereby preserved, leading to a highly detailed and vivid memory. On the other hand, with each retelling errors can be introduced into the memory. Minor elaborations gradually become part of the actual memory, and eventually the memory, though highly detailed and vivid, may bear little resemblance to the original recollection. In this way false "flashbulb memories" come into being.

The phenomenon of phantom flashbulbs appears fatal for the "encoding" account of flashbulb memory formation, for according to the encoding theory a permanent and static record of the personal circumstances surrounding learning of an event is created. If erroneous flashbulb memories arise through the evolution of an inaccurate "story" or narrative of these circumstances, then the encoding theory must be wrong. Such, indeed, is the conclusion of Neisser and Harsch, and it is lent support by other contributions to *Affect and Accuracy*, including that by Bohannon and Symons and that by Warren and Swartwood, which document a low incidence of flashbulb memories of the Challenger disaster.

Quite obviously these findings demonstrate that memories can be inaccurate and that events can be forgotten. We know that this happens with most memories of inconsequential and mundane events. But do the findings in fact challenge the encoding theory of flashbulb memories as Neisser and Harsch suppose? In order to make this case it is critical to establish that the Challenger