

Peirce the melancholy prestidigitator*

ROBERT S. CORRINGTON

For several decades the Peirce community has awaited a definitive biographical study of the founder of pragmatism and of all that is compelling in semiotics. Rumors about Peirce's personal life have long circulated underground, exacerbated by the reluctance of the Harvard authorities to release the relevant material for publication. Joseph Brent at long last brings this material to light in a forceful and beautifully written account of the life and work of Peirce, and places the demonic aspects of Peirce's personality in their proper social and psychological contexts. Brent's dissertation at UCLA, 'A study of the life of Charles Sanders Peirce' (Brent 1960), has been privately copied and circulated among the cognoscenti as if it were a ticking time bomb waiting to go off. The published version, written some thirty years later, after Harvard finally gave Brent permission to publish the damaging material from the Peirce archives, goes beyond the dissertation, even if it often softens the much more negative tone of the earlier version. In addition, the book balances the tragic qualities of Peirce's life with a sensitive and accurate analysis of his conceptual achievements, and brings out his marred heroic stature.

What, then, is the nature of this ticking time bomb that has now had its public explosion? And, more to the point, will Peirce's achievements be undermined because of the material Brent brings to light? One is reminded of what happened to Paul Tillich, the noted liberal theologian, when his wife Hannah published two scathing books after his death in 1965 (Tillich 1973, 1976), in which his many sexual escapades were laid bare to an astonished theological world. It took some time before Tillich's reputation returned to its previous high status, and all graduate seminars on Tillich must now address the correlation between his life and his work. It will be interesting to see how Peirce fares, and whether or not philosophers and semioticians are judged by different standards than are theologians.

Brent begins his tale by tracing the Peirce family history from its roots

*Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.