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Semiotrix Deux

Richard M. Carp

[A man enters the room, ambiguously dressed as a woman. Or, a woman enters the room, ambiguously dressed as a man. Or, a hermaphrodite enters the room. Throughout s/he speaks directly to the assembly, making eye contact, perhaps walking among them, occasionally touching or stroking one. From time to time her screaming, raving, gibbering or glossolalia may momentarily carry her away from them. However, s/he returns with great focus and clarity. After meeting eyes here and there in the assembly, frankly but without challenge, s/he emits a long laugh, or howl, as if from a coyote, or in a bordello. This may go on for some time. When it is complete, s/he addresses the assembly]

AThe dark side?@ AOf Trickster!@ You people crack me up. You must have watched the AStar Wars@ movies too many times! I can hear Darth Vader breathing in the background, now. [Imitates Vader=s Breath Sound] (By the way - is he dark or light?)

AThe dark side of Trickster. . . .@ Hah! How would you know? How would I know? What scale and what perspective should we choose?

The extinction of the dinosaurs: good or bad? [Pause]

The first Earth creatures= poisoning in their own oxygen waste - the excretion you now breathe and need to live: light or dark? [Pause]

Humanity=s impending ecological devastation: can you tell? [Pause - Laughter.]

Hermes, foundational trickster for you Western folks, faces opposite directions, looks both ways. What face is He showing you, which is He hiding? What face is truly His own? In Rome, His name was Mercury. Like that elemental He flows . . . freely . . . gladly taking any shape you wish: dark, light, sphere, cube, rhombohedron, Klein flask, blob - it matters not at all to Him. You try to think Him, you put Him in a shape you have devised; without effort He flows into and fulfills that shape: a shape that is not His; a shape that you invent. Giving Him form, you trick yourself! Leave Him uncontained, and He evaporates without a trace under the mild heat of your gaze. . .

In Europe, in medieval times, the planet Mercury was a hermaphrodite who changed sex - male to female to male to female, over and over again. (Classen, 1998, 68) This planet-god ruled semiosis! Speech was a sense, and Mercury lorded and ladied over the sense of speech and all communication, which was itself ambivalently male and

female - Hermaphroditic semiotica! (Classen, 78) Framing any meaning is playing tricks! Dark and light are Tricksters children; they hold her mercurial ambivalence in their hearts. Opposing them to one another, you only trick yourself.

Trickster confounds your silly attempts to split the world in two=s: dark/light, male/female, self/other, matter/spirit, living/dead, you/me. . . .[S/he stares at the assembly, challenging them.] Trickster has no sides; Trickster is not solid; Trickster casts no shadow, Trickster makes no light.

[S/he reproduces each image vocally and visually as s/he speaks it.] Think of me as water; think of me as wind; think of me as speech; think of me as dance. Ambivalent; ambiguous; erotic; ecstatic; uncontainable; uncontrollable; unspeakable; unthinkable: wild. Which Aside@ is it that is dark?

My poor darling Euripides, his moods grim, his vision bright, told you in a play. (1986) Dionysos returns to Thebes, place of his birth. The Thebans refuse by royal decree to recognize this Anew god Dionysos,@ claiming his mother Semele was impregnated not by Zeus, but by her own base lusts acted out with a commoner in the bushes. Dionysos drives the women mad with ecstasy; they dance, nude, on wild Mount Kithaeron, led by queen-mother Agave. Pentheus the King is consumed with curiosity, with lust, with shame - with curiosity! He climbs Mt. Kithaeron to spy upon the women he despises and he fears - to see his mother=s nakedness. Dionysos inhabits Pentheus crouching in lurid fascination watching the dance. Pentheus glows with the power of the God within him: apotheosis! The women, led by Pentheus= mother Agave, dismember and consume him, uniting with the God of ecstasy, the power of all that cannot be controlled, channeled, formed, or denied. Triumphant, she returns from the holy mountain, a head impaled proudly on a thyrsus staff. ALook at the lion cub,@ she exults, Awe have killed him.@ It falls to her father Cadmus - the dragon slayer, the dragon-seed sower, the father of the autochthonous race of Thebans, raiser of the alphabet (order incarnate) from the earth - to disillusion his daughter, to show her her son his grandson, reveal the truth. ALook at the sky,@ he tells her (the sky - elemental, in-finite, uncontainable). (cf. Levinas, 19) Now look again at your sacred thyrsus.@ She moans in grief. The ecstatic women awaken, chastened, remembering forever ecstasy and the taste of the god in their mouths. The city is devastated, cleansed, filled with the fury of this new divine power. A tale of darkness? Or a tale of light?

When Lord Siva could not defeat the Demon, Kali trampled Siva into dust, taking his power and adding it to her own to throw down the Ravager and save the cosmos. What a dark and fearsome Goddess Kali is! She is light! She is dark!

Trickster rules immodest modesty! S/he is full of herself: braggadocio, *hubris*, overweening pride. Trickster can do anything!

Creator made the world so everything that aged could be renewed, restored to youth. Coyote had a better way, she was sure of it. S/he was tired of the new People

roaming the earth. When Creator was not there, s/he put her better idea into effect, s/he invented Death. Aaaahhhhh!. But Death could not come to those Human People only - it must come to ALL. Coyote knew no fear. S/he could trick Death along with all the rest. S/he let loose Death to stalk the world. S/he missed her Human targets; Coyote=s kin were first to die. (S/he herself died next, but s/he returned, countlessly, infinitely, without surcease.) (Based on Thompson, 1973, 24-30. See also 38.)

A sacred being brought a box, and told Pandora not to open it. But Pandora was a trickster, consumed with curiosity, poking her nose everywhere it could go. And so she opened the box, and pestilence was loosed on the earth - disease and death. Curiosity killed . . . us all! And what a blessing came to us!! Death is a great creative power, set free in the cosmos, unstoppable generative evolutionary change. When Trickster freed Death, s/he let loose Sex as well. [She looks around. Licks her lips luridly. Grins at the assembly. Flirts a bit.] Death and Creation wed as Change: the inexhaustible power of creativity that drives evolution on. (See, e.g., Savage, 1977, 152). A-sex makes boring copies - identical genetic individuals - a sort of practical immortality. Sex mixes things up (oh does it mix things up!), creating new genetic compounds, increasing the creativity and flexibility of the life system as a whole. But once new individuals are created, the old individuals (you call them parents) have to die, have to make way for their children. Death and Sex arise together! Had Death not been born, humans would never have come to be! Pandora is a heroine. She gives us blessings, not a curse! [S/he kneels, prostrates herself, and otherwise embodies worship.] ALL HAIL PANDORA - CREATRIX OF THE RICH, FULL WORLD WE KNOW, WE LIVE IN, AND WE LOVE. BLESSINGS ON PANDORA - CREATRIX OF US ALL.

Trickster=s immense immodesty teaches modesty itself: effects exceed intentions! Knowledge is faulty and insecure! The universe is vast . . .mysterious. The world in which you act is Trickster, too!

Your Hebrew ancestors knew. Why do you suppose one cannot speak the sacred name, the Holy One of Israel? Just ask Job: now you see it, now you don=t, now it=s back again! The Unspeakable One made a bet with his friend, the assayer, the Holy Prosecutor, the Satan - let=s play a little trick on Job. . . Ha, ha! [Laughter.]

Or Hosea, ask him, too. AMarry a hooker, Hosea,@ said the Nameless One. AShe=ll stand for your people, you can stand for me!@ How do you feel about that?!(Well, she is good in bed. What=s the metaphor here?) Have children, call them ANot Pitied,@ andANot My People.@ (Hosea 1:2-8) Then hear My word: AI will have pity on Not Pitied, and I will say to Not My People, >You are my people.=@ (Hosea 2:23)

I guess that Garden trick was pretty good, too! YOU MAY EAT OF EVERY TREE IN THE GARDEN EXCEPT THOSE TWO OVER THERE!!! (Yeah, right!) [Laughter.] Of course they ate. And then He walks around the Garden in the cool of the day and asksAWhere are you?@ and AWho told you you were

naked?@ And AWhat is this you have done?@ (Genesis 2:8-13) As if He hadn=t known it all along.

But was the Unspeakable One tricked by his own tricks, in true Trickster fashion? Depends on how you think He feels the Covenant=s worked out so far; about the Holocaust; about modern Israel. . . .

Or what about the One who was His child? What a Trickster!!! AGive me a break, Mom. I just came here to attend the wedding! Come one, leave me alone!!! Alright, if you really want me to, I will. Bring me those jugs. Fill them with water. Let me bless them. Take a drink. Best wine you ever had?! Damn right. Now let=s drink it up!@ Good trick! (John 2:1-11)

AOur brother is sick,@ Mary and her sister say to him.

ARelax,@ he says, Ait isn=t deadly, you know.@ And he goes on his way.

ALazarus is asleep,@ he tells his friends later. AI=ll go wake him up.@

AWhy does he need your help to wake up? Doesn=t he do it every morning?@

AHe=s dead, guys. Watch what I do next.@

And Martha came to him to say Lazarus was dead, complaining that if Jesus had come when she asked, he would still be alive. And later, Mary made the same complaint.

AOh, your brother=s dead? I liked him. I like you. You want me to bring him back? You know, he=s been gone a while. It won=t be a pretty sight. Four days - he=s going to smell bad. Oh, yes, we can clean him up later. Lazarus, arise!@ (They gasp! Lazarus rises from the dead, embraces his friend, blows a kiss to his sister - takes Jesus with him so he can be restored while he cleans up. The women and the others are scared out of their wits! Are you telling me Jesus was not amused?!) (John 11:1-44)

Oh yes, and then the BIG trick. Hung from a cross, stabbed in the side, broken, mutilated, deader than a damned doornail. And then He comes back to see them. But what a sense of humor he reveals! Here=s how John tells the story:

Mary Magdalene went to Jesus= tomb early in the morning, but the huge stone was rolled away, and it was empty. So Mary ran to get Peter, and he and a friend went with her to the tomb and saw the death wraps rolled up in a corner. (Do you think he was standing nearby? Was he watching? Did he chuckle at his scared, befuddled friends? It WAS a pretty good trick!).

The two men went away, but Mary stayed there, weeping. So Jesus came up behind

her, disguised as a gardener, to ask AWhy are you crying?@ She told him plainly, and then he addressed her by name, smiled that grin she knew so well and at last she recognized him. Then He sent her away, to tell the others stories they could not possibly believe. (The trick=s on her!)

That evening they were gathered together, huddled behind locked doors. They were scared! And then He showed up. Didn=t knock on the door, didn=t call from the hall, didn=t send a messenger ahead - just suddenly He was there, inside with them, behind the still locked door! They were freaked out! (Wouldn=t you have been?) They were more scared than before! I bet they had to change their pants after that (I would have, you can bet on that!) And what does He say? APeace!@ Yeah, right, sure thing guys. He just shows up like nothing has happened - AHi, guys! How ya doin?@ And then He showed them His wounds - thanks for that, too. (John 20:1-22) I=m sure they weren=t feeling creepy at all - are you? So then He tells them that any sins they cannot forgive will stick to them like glue, and then He disappears! Are you telling me He didn=t have a laugh on them? Any Trickster would be proud of such a scene.

And did things work out just the way He planned? He=s as hoist on his own petard as any Trickster ever. And just as powerful, creative, playful, generative and wild, as well!

In the Call that brought me here you claimed that Satan has become the Trickster in the Western imagination, that Trickster has been viewed as dark, dark, dark, dark, dark.[Each Adark@ is spoken with a different tone, timbre, and intention.] You want to learn how to study Trickster! Give it up!!!! You cannot study Trickster - that is who He is. Dionysis will not, cannot, submit to Apollo. You can be Trickster, see Trickster, be fooled by Trickster, fool Trickster, laugh at Trickster, hear Trickster=s mocking laughter coming back, laugh it yourself, but study Trickster is the one thing that you cannot do. Trickster cannot be thought, cannot be known, cannot be understood.

When I was with you before, I told you of the roots of the Academy: born in intoxication - first the Sibyl breathing chthonic fumes, then Socrates drinking good Athenian wine; born in silence, first Socrates= wise ignorance, then Aquinas final speechlessness. I told you then, I tell you now:

A Meaning breaks through. In-sight transgresses in-formation. Ignorance is the womb of knowledge. Confusion is the source of wisdom.

An unexamined life is not worth living; yet ignorance is all we can know. Truth lies in questioning - where the questions stop - DEATH! Offering knowledge to others is bad faith. Offering knowledge to oneself is delusion.

Meaning, understanding: deftly responding NOW with wisdom, and NOW again,

and NOW again: defies skill, exceeds knowing.

Semiosis is erotic; Semiotrix is its daemon; Socrates knew her: Diotima taught him.

Philosophers are tricksters - willy nilly!@ (Carp, 2002, 41)

Now comes the terror. Does this mean you cannot judge? Surely the Holocaust was evil; exploiting women is dark and rank; poisoning the beautiful world is foul! Yes, yesss, yesssss, yesssssssssss. [At first affirmative, then erotic, then serpentine, tongue flicking in and out.] And no, nooo, nooooo, nooooooooo. [At first negation, then refusal, then resistance, then a howl, like Coyote or Wolf] Much evil takes place in the world; much good happens, too. Try as you might, the good you do brings evil, and the evil leads to good. Who can tell the Truth? Is not something always lacking? Who can tell a Lie? Is not something always there? Why have you been told, Aresist not evil?@ Why was it said, Ajudge not, lest you be judged?@ Trickster seeks the good, but is distracted by the beauty of the moon, or the strength of lust, or the impact of the unknown, or the delight of a good joke.

Is the dark Moon Adarker@ than the full? Is Crucifixion Friday Good or Bad?
Sita=s self-immolation in the underworld to save Rama, was it light or dark?

Trickster inhabits distinction without separation. Dark and light flow into one other, male and female, life and death, matter and spirit, knowledge and ignorance, you and I exchange faces, bodies, valences, significance: even when they can be clearly told apart, sometimes it is a mistake! Trickster lives with others. Turn to them for such distinctions: Vishnu, not Kali; Apollo, not Dionysos; Creator, not Christos (or is the Trinity completely Tricksterish?); Spider, not Coyote. Take care how you interpret their answers (remember Sibyl always)! Trickster will be there - playing in the light side of the dark, the dark radiance of the light!

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¹Please note that ASemiotrix@ is performance scholarship.

Live, ASemiotrix@ involves costume, setting, performance vocalization, movement, and other techniques more often associated with theatre than with scholarly conference presentations. In its print form, therefore, ASemiotrix@ is formatted as a script, with stage directions that include suggestions to the performer. It should be read as one would read a play, with the mind=s eye visualizing a performer in space and time, and the mind=s ear hearing the words and other sounds. The affective dimensions of the piece are as critical as its conceptual elements. For these reasons, the visual format of the print version differ from standard academic procedures. [Stage directions] are printed in Franklin Gothic while the remainder of the text is printed in Times New Roman.