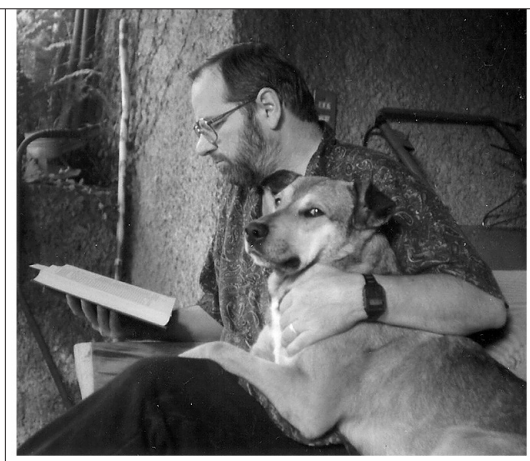
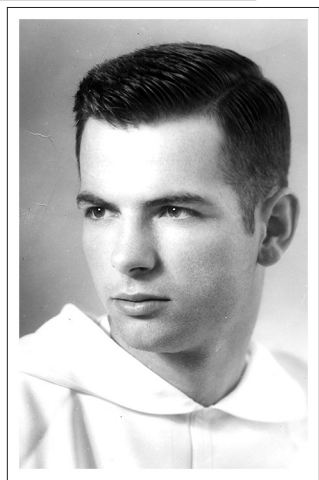
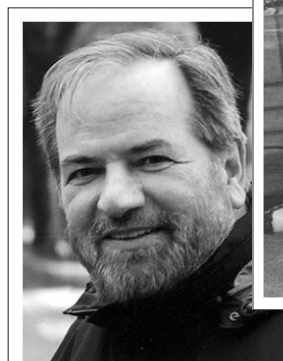
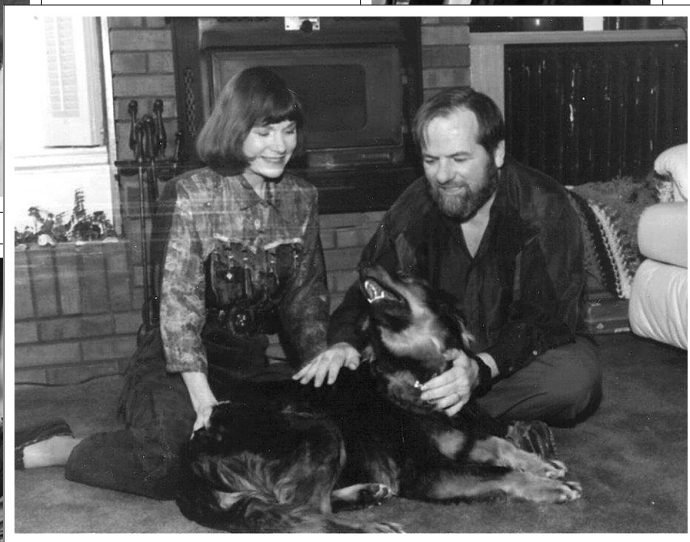
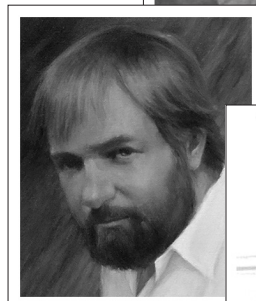
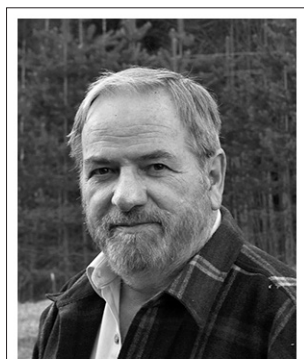
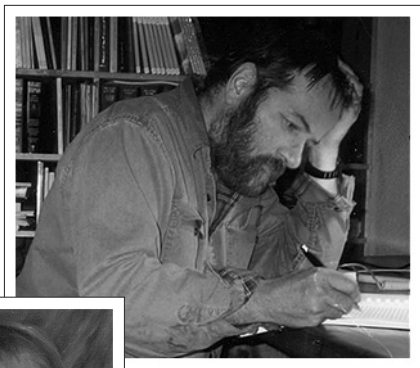




## **John N. Deely (26 April 1942–2017 January 7)**

This painting by Margaret Footit is based on a 1989 photo of John, when he was a Fulbright professor in Brazil.



# John N. Deely

## (26 April 1942–2017 January 7)

When John Deely, Editor-in-Chief of *The American Journal of Semiotics*, passed away on January 7, 2017, the world lost one of its keenest philosophical minds. Members of the Semiotic Society of America know how central John was to its history. The story of his life is a spiral of semiosis that blazed brightly from the founding of the SSA to its flourishing.

Born in Chicago on April 26, 1942, John was educated at the Pontifical Faculty of Philosophy of the Aquinas Institute of Theology in River Forest, Illinois, receiving a Ph.D. in 1967. After briefly holding several academic posts, John's first major career accomplishment was his close work with Mortimer Adler at the Institute for Philosophical Research from 1969 to 1974. A fruitful disagreement between John and Mortimer over key issues in semiotics resulted in John going his own way in order to continue unhampered his investigations into the history of semiotics in the Middle Ages. "I am indebted to him and regret that unresolved differences of opinion between us about certain aspects of a theory that we otherwise share prevent him from associating his name with mine in the authorship of this book", wrote Adler in the preface to *Some Questions about Language: A Theory of Human Discourse and Its Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 1976), which they had originally begun writing together in collaboration.

John continued his intense and innovative work in semiotics as he went on from Adler's Institute for Philosophical Research to work as full Professor at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa (1976–1999). John's academic career had an international impact, as it was a career that included service as a Fulbright scholar-professor in Brazil (1988–1989), Mexico (1994–1995), and Bulgaria (2005). He was also a visiting scholar-professor at the University of Helsinki in Finland and at the University of Tartu in Estonia. As a founding member, John worked with Thomas Sebeok from the outset of the Semiotic Society of America in 1975, was involved in the drafting of its constitution, and has played a central role in its academic activity ever since, including much diligent work on its yearbook and journal.

In 1999, John became a professor of philosophy at the Center for Thomistic Studies at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, and went on to hold the Rudman Chair of Graduate Philosophy there from 2007 to 2015. From 2015 to the time of his death, John was Philosopher in Residence at St. Vincent Archabbey College and Seminary in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, the oldest Benedictine institution in North America.

His books, over thirty in number, are complemented by over 200 articles and a number of book series that he edited. Two of his most important achievements, both produced at Loras College, are his bilingual edition of John Poinso't's *Tractatus de Signis*, which upon publication received the featured book review in *The New York Times* (Easter, 1986), and his *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001), which presents a full-scale demonstration of the centrality of the theory of signs to the history of philosophy, rigorously establishing a semiotic philosophical perspective for the twenty-first century.

As a philosopher, John developed this prospective semiotic viewpoint in the fertile soil of the Catholic intellectual tradition. The influence of Jacques Maritain was immense, not only in John's professional life, but also deeply within his personal life. His most treasured photograph was a picture of a very young John with Maritain himself. John was among the founding members of the American Maritain Association, of which he remained a devoted member throughout his life.

Most importantly, John met his wife Brooke Williams Deely, herself a noted Maritain scholar, at a meeting of the American Maritain Association. Throughout their married life, John and Brooke remained close collaborators in John's philosophical work. Brooke's devotion to John's vocation as a philosopher is a moving testimony to a wife's deep and mature love.

John's seminal legacy is his lifelong promotion of the works of John Poinso't (also known as John of St. Thomas) as an explicit link between Baroque Thomism and the current emerging worldview of semiotics. It is a legacy that ties John's efforts not only to the work of semioticians such as Charles S. Peirce and Thomas Sebeok, but also to the historic Benedictine Order. The Abbey of Solesmes is the publisher of the critical edition of Poinso't's writings. John's move near the end of his life to St. Vincent College and Seminary was an act that joined together both his devotion to Dominican scholasticism and the ancient Benedictine order. It thereby paralleled the intellectual-spiritual union of these two religious orders in the lives of St. Thomas Aquinas and



Jacques Maritain, himself a Benedictine Oblate for whom Poinsett was the Thomistic commentator with whom he fell in love.

Though aware of his own philosophical accomplishments, John did not desire to have his life trumpeted in a grand, eulogistic manner. When recently asked whom he would like to be his eulogist, he conceded only slight ground to the request—he desired his eulogist to be his faithful canine companion, Bruno. In response, Bruno is reportedly working with John and Brooke's other rescue dog, Bella, on the next translation of John's masterful introduction to semiotics, *Basics of Semiotics*, a foundational text which has been published around the world in nine different editions and translated from English into Portuguese, Romanian, Japanese, Spanish, Ukrainian, Italian, Estonian, Chinese, Russian, and French.

*With contributions from an earlier obituary written by Gary Shank and published in the Greensburg Tribune Review on Jan 12, 2017.*



Photo of John, 1989, when he was a Fulbright professor in Mexico.