

# CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE'S THEORY OF SIGNS, MEANING, AND LITERARY INTERPRETATION

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*Now thought is of the nature of a sign. In that case, then, if we can find out the right method of thinking and can follow it out—the right method of transforming signs—then truth can be nothing more nor less than the last result to which the following out of this method would ultimately carry us.*

*--Charles Sanders*

*Peirce*

**D**espite 9/11, “United We Stand,” and the USA Patriot Act, it seems that we are still afflicted by logocentrism and essentializing metanarratives. Decades of inoculation by deconstructive serums—first introduced by Jacques Derrida’s 1966 lecture at Johns Hopkins University entitled “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”—have failed to immunize us, readers and scholars, from lusting for truth, presence, or origin far removed “from freeplay and from the order of the sign” (1986, 492). The order of the sign instructs us, following Saussure’s dictum, that the relation between the signifier (word), its referent (thing or idea) and its signified (meaning) is arbitrary. Not in the sense that words mean just anything you decide it means. There is no natural resemblance between sound-image, referent, and idea; the link between signifier and signified is based on alterable social convention. Saussure taught us that the meaning or value of a sign in any language results from its difference to all the other signs in that language. What is important is not history (diachrony) nor reality (the referent), but the system of differential relations among signs (synchrony). Such differential relations are embodied in the spacing and ambiguity of writing as material practice or process, in contrast to speech (which Saussure privileged) and its single, self-identical intention. Barbara Johnson glosses Derrida’s valorization of writing as the euphoric “free play” celebrated earlier: “When one writes, one writes more than (or less than, or other than) one thinks. The reader’s task is to read what is written rather than simply attempt to intuit what might have been meant” (1990, 46).

Now there is general agreement that “free play” does not sanction anarchy or “anything goes,” although Derrida’s invocation of Nietzsche and the end of humanism tends to inspire the abolition of boundaries and rules. What is often stressed is that reading, re-presenting, depends on the historical and social contexts in which language is used. However, such contexts are always changeable and changing. Derrida contends that “There is no meaning outside of context, but no context permits saturation” (1979, 81). Derrida assumes that there is an infinite number of contexts for any utterance; this iterability of discourse is possible

because the code underlying convention is slippery or unknown, hence meaning is undecidable. Since contexts are multiple, heterogenous and fluid, we cannot fix on a single guaranteed meaning for any text; all such attempts to make sense presuppose an act of interpretation, an operation of construal—in short, ceaseless multiplication of significations. The signifying chain never ends. From another angle, Paul de Man inflects this undecidability by his theory of criticism as deconstructive reading. He argues that any text generates an aporia from the conflict between its decodable rule-oriented grammar and its rhetorical potential that “suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration” (1986, 467). Still, there is implicit here, as in Derrida, the assumption that on one side, there is the objective world of fixed objects and on the other, the mind or intuitive sensibility that constructs sense and meanings.

### ***A Fateful Intervention***

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce formulated a theory of signs that ingeniously resolved the old Cartesian dualism of subject and object. Paralleling subsequent developments in phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty) and dialectical Marxism (Lukacs, Gramsci), Peirce’s logic helped clear up the traditional disputes concerning indeterminacy, intention, reference, agency, interpretive validity, etc.

On the matter of hermeneutics, we are not proposing here a return to the formalist view of an autonomous text relying on authorial intention. Nor do we envisage a recuperation of the legible/readable text based on the hermeneutic circle replete with multiple if contradictory significations (Gadamer, Ricoeur). Saussure is of course not the “culprit” responsible for legitimizing modes of misreading or misprision as heuristic if not axiomatic techniques of exegesis. Even when one begins to focus on Saussure’s linguistics, or its distortion, as the single source for authorizing free-floating interpretations, one is immediately disabused. The zealous exponent of deconstruction, Jonathan Culler, has named Peirce as an accomplice in the oscillation or drift/deferral/slippage of signifiers and signifieds:

There are no final meanings that arrest the movement of signification. Peirce makes this structure of deferral and referral an aspect of his definition: a sign is “anything which determines something else (*its interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself [*sic*] refers (*its object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*.... If the series of successive interpretants comes to an end, the sign is thereby rendered imperfect, at least” (1982, 188).

Derrida tellingly omitted Peirce’s qualification before the last sentence in the quote: “No doubt, intelligent consciousness must enter into the series” (Peirce 1991, 239). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida enlists Peirce in support of his scheme of destroying the “transcendental signified,” and with it, ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence, on account of Peirce’s view that the represented is “always already” a representamen, a palimpsest or fabric of traces (1976, 50).

Let us rehearse again Peirce's inaugural definition that he refined with significant nuances over the years. For Peirce, the sign or representamen is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity." The representamen provides the occasion for linkage or ground for connecting object and sign. It does so by addressing somebody, that is, creates in the mind of someone an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign" which is called the interpretant or the effect that the sign produces (more precisely, a moment in the evolving consensus of a community of interpreters): "The triadic relation is *genuine*, that is, its three members are bound together by it in a way that does not consist in any complexus of dyadic relations. That is the reason the Interpretant, or Third, cannot stand in a mere dyadic relation to the Object, but must stand in such a relation to it as the Representamen itself does" (1955, 100). In other words, the interpretant determines how the sign represents the object and can be regarded as the meaning of the sign (Ducrot and Todorov 1979, 85). Eventually the sequence of interpretants glossing other interpretants leads to an "ultimate logical interpretant," which is equivalent to "a change of habit of conduct" (Hilpinen 1995, 567). In effect, the intervention of the interpretant (divisible into emotional, energetic, and logical; Short 1986, 107) makes impossible what postmodernist critics call the reified binary closure of signifier/signified, a syndrome resolved in favor of fetishizing "*differance*" and "dissemination."

For Peirce, 'the word or sign that man uses *is* the man himself," hence "expression and thought are one," and "every thought is a sign" (1958, 381; Innis 1985, 2; compare Hjelt's theory in Hasan 1987), Peirce's concept of semiosis is not the unwarranted extravaganza posited by Derrida because there is in it a continual reference to the object of the representamen/signifier existing in a world outside consciousness, a world manifested in the phenomena of experience mediated by signs. This referent is not a static entity but a dynamic object, "an ever-developing cumulative definition of it, to be distinguished from the immediate object conjured up in any individual signification" (Potts 1996, 19; see also Eco 1995). Further, the exigencies of practical life, as well as the criteria of logical economy and "concrete reasonableness" (Thompson 1953, 255; Apel 1995, 89) circumscribe the actualization of the endless development of sign-production. While the meaning of a sign is "altogether virtual," the fully articulated meaning inheres in the habits of interpretation, the capacities and dispositions these habits are calculated to produce; such habits are assessed in terms of whether it leads to the "entire general intended interpretant" which, for Peirce, gives "command of a whole range of a sign's possible interpretations" (Gallie 1952, 130) resulting from the use of a more adequate and systematized body of information. Semiosis is thus rendered concretely determinate by the goal of "concrete reasonableness"; the latter phrase refers to the logically controlled use of signs in purposive thinking, with relevance to real problems of adaptation and adjustment of humans to their sociohistorical environment.

### Synoptic Overview

Peirce's semiotics is thus a crucial rectification of Saussure's semantics of differential values. Peirce's realism subtends the objective persistence of a social order or civilization, a continuum, "the pulp itself of the matter which is manipulated by semiosis, to use Eco's words (1984, 45), which is problematized by post-structuralist deconstruction. For Peirce, a sign is anything—from pictures, words, signals, microscopes, legislative representatives,

musical concertos, their performances, etc.—which stands for something else. Peirce emphasizes that “signs are reals” bearing formal characteristics: “anything which is related to a Second thing, its Object, in respect to a Quality in such a way as to bring a Third Thing, its *Interpretant*, into relation with the same object...” There are four requirements three of which depend on Peirce’s categories: the sign, like everything else, has some form or ground of intelligibility (Firstness); the sign stands in relation to something (Secondness), and the sign is comprehended or translated by something else (Thirdness). I stress the fourth requirement stipulated by Peirce: “The whole purpose of a sign is that it should be interpreted in another sign and its whole purpose lies in the special character which it imparts to its interpretant. When a sign determines an interpretant of itself in another sign, it produces an effect external to itself” (CP 8.191). Given the dynamic relation between the three constituents of the sign (sign, object, interpretant), the sign’s power resides in its efficacy to represent something to a collectivity of inquirers, thus establishing intelligibility.

We can now define Peirce’s semiosis as the triadic interaction of sign, object and interpretant, together with their ramifying combinations. It constitutes language-games (Wittgenstein) and frames of intelligibility. Semiosis is the condition for a community of inquirers who use signs for communication: “The very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an increase in knowledge.” Peirce also posits the existence of “that mind into which the minds of utterer and interpreter have to be fused in order that any communication should take place. This mind may be called *commens*. It consists in all that is, and must be, well understood between utterer and interpreter, at the outset, in order that the sign in question should fulfill its function” (1958, 406). Semiosis testifies not only to the social principle in thinking (logic) but to the continuity of the universe which Peirce called “synechism.”

It is clear then that Peirce’s semiotics differs from Saussure’s and kindred theories founded on the dyadic or binary pair “sign/signifier.” Peirce’s is not based on the signifier but on the proposition—the triadic relation that produces meaning. The interpretant is not the signified but the act or process of signification, the experience of intelligibility that unifies consciousness and produces comprehension. This is the reason why Leroy Searle contends that “Peirce’s account of the sign offers a very powerful way by which to represent and analyze literature as argument, always concerned with and embedded in a real historical context, aware of consequences, without becoming systematically entangled in linguistic issues that are always indeterminate when considered apart from pragmatics” (1994, 560).

### **Anatomy of Configurations**

Before exploring the idea of literature as argument, let us apply the Peircean heuristic organon to two signs of the times: “terror” and “terrorism.” As everyone knows, this is a domain of often rancorous debate where massive interests and motives collide, inaccessible to rational resolution by courts or bombs (other terms that provoke contestation are “collateral damage,” “preemptive war,” “clash of civilizations,” etc.). We need to chart the locus of their varying interpretants and map their shifting resonance in diverse usages.

Noam Chomsky, the indefatigable “gadfly” of the Establishment, has traced the genealogy of those contested terms. He points out that the U.S. government’s war against terrorism did not begin with post-9/11, but with the administration of President Reagan and Secretary of State Alexander Haig who officially declared such a war against terrorism as the core of US foreign policy. Chomsky adds that the U.S. responded to the plague spread by “depraved opponents of civilization”—non-western barbarians, agents of the Soviet “evil empire”—“by creating its own extraordinary international terrorist network, unprecedented in scale, which carried out massive atrocities all over the world” (2001b, 4).

What is the object to which the sign “terrorism” refers? Chomsky cites the U.S. army manual’s definition: “terror is the calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to attain political or religious ideological goals through intimidation, coercion or instilling fear” (2001, 6). So here, the sign stands for the object/idea in the definition, but the interpretant is Chomsky’s questioning of the ostensible neutrality of the definition. We are interested in the ground connecting representamen and object. Who is using terror, converting it into terrorism? The ground connecting the phenomenon/object and the sign produces the dynamical interpretant or translation into other signs that Chomsky presents, namely, his demonstration that the signifier “terrorism” can be deployed with a value contingent on the user’s purpose. For example, when the UN General Assembly in December 1987 passed a strong resolution against terrorism, the U.S. and Israel voted against it because it contained one paragraph that says that nothing in it infringes on the rights of people struggling against racist and colonialist regimes or foreign military occupation. In effect, the UN use of terrorism excludes the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation, the Nicaraguans’ resistance against U.S. aggression, and the black South Africans fighting against the apartheid regime supported by the U.S. We have not reached the final interpretant here, properly the meaning of the sign “terrorism,” which Chomsky inflects further by naming the U.S., as, in the world’s eyes, “a leading terrorist state” (2001a, 23).

In general, Peirce’s pragmaticist maxim follows the triadic process: the meaning of an idea lies in its consequence or effect, what it would lead to. Meaning is discovered in the itinerary of a thought experiment: “Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we might conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (CP 5.402). Put another way, meaning resides in the conceivable consequence of an abduction (inference or guessing) that we are considering. It is not the consequences of the logic of abduction, it is what we think them to be; hence, meaning is virtual, arising from the transformation and interpretation of signs. In this regard, Peirce underscores the rule for the admissibility of hypothesis: every idea involves “a conception of conceivable practical effects” (CP 5.196).

A historical genealogy of the terms “terror” and “terrorism” might help us shed light on the vicissitudes of meaning embroiled in social antagonisms. The English word derives from the Latin root “terrere,” “to frighten” and the nominal root “terror” glossed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) as “intense fear, fright or dread” and “the action or quality of causing [such] dread; terribleness; a thing or person that excites terror.” Aside from its occurrence in the

Bible and in Gothic novels of terror, we find its first negative use in 1788 by Gibbon: “The ferocious Bedoweens, the terror of the desert” (Mesnard y Mendez 2002, 110). The object here are those non-western barbarians who fed the vampiric Orientalism of the colonial empires. The political ground in this semiotic chain came with the French revolution and the Jacobin’s “Reign of Terror” which the OED designated as “the period...when the ruling faction remorselessly shed the blood of persons of both sexes and of all ages and conditions whom they regarded as obnoxious.”

The word “terrorism” is extrapolated from the French, used in England (circa late 18th century) as a label to classify the policy of systematic intimidation by the government apparatus in revolutionary France. The translation of this usage resonates today when the ground for varying interpretants shifts. In the recent past, the English charge of terrorism was placed on Irish insurgents, and later on Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress. Meanwhile, the lexeme “terror” has been combined with other signs, for example, “terror-bombing”(such as Hitler’s bombing of Rotterdam, Guernica, etc.), defined by the OED as “intensive and indiscriminate bombing designed to frighten a country into surrender.” In February 1945, *Time* identified it as U.S. and British policy: “Terror bombing of German cities was deliberate military policy” (Mesnard y Mendez 2002, 111). This techno-scientific form of mass-killing originated from the Italian, Spanish, French, and British imperial responses to colonial uprisings between two world wars. It persists in subsequent U.S. and allied campaigns from Dresden, Hamburg, Tokyo, Hiroshima, then to Hanoi, the Gulf War, Serbia, and the “awe and shock” of the recent Iraq invasion. Here, of course, the interpretant of “terrorism” is grounded on the task of assigning the practice to the historical actors or agents—a hermeneutic process captured by conservative English historian Harold Nicolson as he wrote in his diary for 1986: “When people rise against foreign oppression, they are hailed as patriots and heroes; but the Greeks whom we are shooting and hanging on Cyprus are dismissed as terrorists. What cant!” (Mesnard Y Mendez 2002, 111).

At this juncture, we may ask if we are able to grasp fully what is meant by the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism”? “Terror” as a quality or action has become personified into “terrorism.” The signifiers have changed with the objects, but what about the interpretants and the grounds for linking sign and object? Obviously they have changed too since meaning is a triadic interanimation of the three categories (sign/object/interpretant). The Establishment (media, government) now uses “terrorism” because any “ism” sounds foreign, ideological, non- or un-American. If terrorism implies political killing of civilians, it is something that they, aliens, do and not us, nor the state. Terrorism acquires a transcendently evil or satanic power. It does not designate a group of people who have certain views, reasons and purposes; hence, terrorists are people who draw their identity and rationale from the sinister occult essence of “terrorism.” The slogan of “war on terrorism” of course is designed to rally citizens to support whatever military actions may be proclaimed as “anti-terrorist” or against the targeted criminals, outlaws, and the amorphous Others stigmatized by official decree. Its authority is derived from the state’s theological pretense at global omniscience (for a sharp critical analysis of the “metaphysics of terrorism,” see Badiou 2002). What is more revealing is that under the USA Patriot Act, which implements the general State policy of the war against terrorism, domestic terrorists have now been included: “The second category of domestic terrorists, left-wing groups, generally profess a revolutionary socialist doctrine and view themselves as protectors of the people against the ‘dehumanizing effects’ of capitalism and imperialism” (FBI Webpage 2001).

To remedy these biased construals, Mesnard y Mendez expands the object of the signifier “terrorism” to include State terrorism side by side with contemporary forms of non-State terrorism: religious group terrorism (as between Hindus and Muslims in India, Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka, Muslims and Christians in Indonesia) and political group terrorism.

I want to enter a parenthesis here for further clarification. The occurrence of state terrorism may be succinctly illustrated by quoting the proponents of a war of “shock and awe”—memorable words used by Secretary Rumsfeld as he threatened Saddam Hussein on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq—this time, however, the alien barbarians are the Japanese during World War II:

Theoretically, the magnitude of Shock and Awe Rapid Dominance seeks to impose (in extreme cases)...the non-nuclear equivalent of the impact that the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had on the Japanese.... The impact of those weapons was sufficient to transform both the mindset of the average Japanese citizen and the outlook of the leadership through this condition of Shock and Awe. The Japanese simply could not comprehend the destructive power carried by a single airplane. This incomprehension produced a state of awe (Ullman and Wade 1996, 106).

The strategy of “shock and awe” seems to mobilize the iconic and indexical function of weapons as signs, except that the Japanese—before they could call their hermeneutic wizards—immediately succumbed to catatonic paralysis!

### **Rectification of Names**

We can sum up this semantic labor by revising the conventional definition of terms. In addition to the definition of *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* of “terrorism” as “the use of terrorizing methods of governing or resisting a government,” Mesnard y Mendez suggests this final interpretant which takes into account the range of historical examples noted earlier: “terrorism is a strategy that consists in pursuing political power by striking dread into the civilian population through exemplary killings among them. It follows that terrorism is a matter of influencing through huge bodily harm the collective imagination by transfer contagion: an exasperated form of psychophysical warfare grafted onto techniques of economic and political propaganda in the media” (2002, 117). The object of the signifier “terrorism” is still the violence found in all the other instances, but the interpretant focuses on the agent or group who commits or threatens to use it for gaining or promoting political power by coercing a population. In this context, the interpretant also adds the qualification that the killing is selective and instrumentally chosen. The ground for this interpretant is a

kind of basic semantic hygiene: to stop “this morally indefensible and politically unachievable ‘war on terrorism,’ while intensifying the struggle against terrorism on all sides by political and nonmurderous means” (Mesnard y Mendez 2002, 121). The meaning arrived at here aims to distill the nuances of the genealogy without renouncing responsibility, that is, without shirking the conception of effects that follow from choosing particular grounds of determinate interpretants. Inquiry such as we have engaged in here, prompted by what Peirce calls the Firstness of new qualities and the Secondness of experienced reaction and brute actuality, functions in the direction of attempting to break entrenched habits and usher a more comprehensive, historically informed intelligibility, a step toward “concrete reasonableness,” relative to current social urgencies and long-term needs.

Peirce’s semiotic proceeds by a logic of hypothesis, testing by induction, and its implication in belief-formation. I can only sketch here the outline of this logic in operation. The search for meaning is a matter of formulating a synthetic inference, by abduction, in real-life situations. What do we think of the consequences or effects of choosing a certain ground for our interpretants, pressured by our needs and desires? We are far removed here from the epistemological skepticism of Locke and the dualistic idealism of Descartes. Unlike the ideas perceived introspectively in Descartes’ mind, whose meaning is intuited or immediately known, the meaning of a sign, although a thought (Thirdness as mediation), is not self-evident. We have to interpret the sign by a subsequent thought or action to know what it means. For example, the crashing of the planes on the twin towers in New York City on September 11, 2001, may be a strange, non-customary happening. But upon translating that Firstness (apprehension of qualities) into Secondness (indexical), an interpretant emerges: the perception is interpreted either by a translation into “accidental tragedy” or “deliberate act of terror.” Ideas are not immediately, intuitively known or experienced; their meanings can be grasped by a process of inference.. The thoughts we have (interpretants) spring from the triadic relation: an interpretation of the thought as a sign of a determining object. Peirce asserts that “Only by external facts can thought be known at all...all thought, therefore, must necessarily be in signs” (1991, 49). Thinking is an interpretive process, a sequence of translation and transcoding.

One might pose the following questions: If objects are signs that suffuse the universe, what is there left that is not a sign? What of the somebody, the observer or interpreter of the cycle of sign-actions? Peirce answered that “the word or sign which man uses *is* the man himself....my language is the sum total of myself, for the man is the thought” (Sebeok 1986, 41). The self is manifested in a sign relation; the known universe is constituted in thought which is equivalent to the triadic sign-action. From the perspective of Peirce’s semiotic realism, the world may be said to be accurately represented by thoughts/signs, thought grasped here as bodily feeling or action. If thinking is behavior or action, just as historical as everyday activities, then it is not an absolute free process unconstrained by natural forces that determine other kinds of human activity.

We have already remarked that for Peirce thoughts are not immediately perceived in a soul, mind or self; thought—the Cartesian *cogito*—is a relation of signs possessing material properties, as brain process. The “I” itself is a sign entailing the triadic constituents of signification. However, the universe cannot be reduced to simple mechanical forces



(Secondness) derived from sheer thisness (Firstness), a pattern of action and reaction. Knowledge of the universe springs from Thirdness (mediation; law), the intelligence found in semiosis, in the production of meaning: the representation of one object to a second by a third. Intelligence then is not immediate spontaneous knowledge of ideas in the mind or soul, nor a dyadic relation between objects. It is an objective interpretive relation.

Peirce was a realist, not an idealist, who believed that universals and other relations are real. Truth hinges on the real understood as something that cannot be changed and stands outside (though partially known) human inquiry. He insisted on the reality of universals and of all relations, specifically the relation of representation. He opposed nominalism as the view that consciousness (percepts) is not the real thing but only the sign of the thing. Peirce held to the view that “Reals are signs.” In contrast, deconstruction and post-structuralist theory generally subscribe to a nominalism that questions objective reality, general laws. Nominalists reduce reality to individual facts, decentering phenomena into dyadic relations artificially fashioned by subjective will or textual fiat. Early in life Peirce reflected that “just as we say that a body is in motion, and not that motion is in a body we ought to say that we are in thought, and not that thoughts are in us” (1991, 11). In old age, Peirce advised William James that “one must not take a nominalistic view of Thought as if it were something that a man had in his consciousness.... It is we that are in it, rather than it is any of us” (CSP 8: 189).

### Artifice of Comprehension

We now come to appreciate the strength of Peirce’s semiotics as a speculative instrument for understanding the dynamics of representation and its role in knowledge-production. Its value may be demonstrated in the analysis of thought, not the analysis of verbal language (the arbitrary machine of *differance* made paradigmatic by the Saussure-oriented postmodernists). Thought is taken here to be the signifying process of inference, the methodology of meaning-production. The meaning of the sign is not always and necessarily arbitrary because it depends on the thought that interprets it; numerous interpretants predicate real relations between signs and their objects, as in the case of indices (for example, weathercocks). Nor is it correct to assume that conventional symbols (such as a red stop sign) are arbitrarily interpreted; the interpretant has to translate it correctly, or expose herself to real risks. In short, be warned that reading/understanding entails real sometimes deadly consequences. In this connection, James Hoopes offers this insight: “Peirce’s semiotic therefore allows for realistic recognition that human life and society are to a significant degree a matter not only of freedom but also of constraint, a matter of people being shoved this way or that by bullets and ballots, a surplus or shortage of land, the rise and fall of technologies and industries, and so on. On the other hand, Peirce’s monism and semiotic realism allow for some freedom or, rather, a role for thought. By explaining how thought is action, Peirce’s semiotic makes it possible to understand why thinking, language, and culture are *real* historical forces” (1991, 12). Again, here, the goal of “concrete reasonableness” compels the thinker to judge not individual thoughts but habits of argument, habits of forming intelligible and appropriate responses to signs, bearing in mind that what enables the intelligibility or meaningfulness of signs are the consequences, effects, and future experiences that they produce.

This is where the old traditional problem of mind-body dualism, the antithesis of consciousness and objective reality, may be fully elucidated if not converted to propaedeutic use. We confront the perennial themes of classic philosophical controversies. In Peirce's philosophy, intellectual activity as real action produces effects under determinate conditions. Social institutions (governments, corporations, media, cultural practices) can be understood as thought unfolded in a process of sign interpretation, the result of a process of multiple intelligences—in short, semiotic syntheses of the thoughts of groups and communities. Society can then be comprehended as a collective human process that subsumes any focus on the local or particular. Unlike the postmodern nominalists, Peirce's approach allows the study of society, culture and history to become an objective science not in the narrow mechanistic or positivist sense but in a genuinely dialectical mode where human rational agency participates in the discovery of truth in historically specific situations. Dialectical also because thought or intelligence demonstrates its real creative force not in absolute "free play," in undecidable cyborg self-fashioning divorced from history and nature, but within the constraints of the real world in which we live (the universe of Thirdness) and the reciprocally interactive logic of necessity and chance.

### **Toward a Pragmatist Aesthetics**

Richard Shusterman (1992) has propounded a "pragmatist aesthetics" based primarily on John Dewey's instrumentalism. Here I can only initiate a prolegomenon for a "science" of pragmatist aesthetics based on Peirce's logic of sign-production

as described earlier.

From the perspective of Peircean semiotics, how do we read a literary work, a text like Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* which renders with lyrical realism the anatomy of terror in Sri Lanka? Before sketching an approach, let me summarize the fundamental categories of Peirce's epistemology. Here we confront the problem of how knowledge can be acquired from representation, more precisely, how artistic truth can be derived from glossing the modalities of representation through the triadic sign.

Before commenting on the novel, I want to sketch the background for understanding the literary text as a semiotic phenomenon possessing iconic, indexical and symbolic properties. Kant demonstrated that the faculty of understanding deploys a priori concepts to produce the unity of a manifold of sensuous impressions. This is accomplished through a transcendental deduction. Peirce begins with a pure act of attention that generates universal concepts as "the present, in general," as well as the consciousness of some "It," analogous to Aristotle's substance or what Greek metaphysics designated as "logos." This "It" is prior to any act of comparison and discrimination, functioning as the subject to which any and all predicates apply. This "It" can be grasped through impressions that present it when they are reduced to the unity of a proposition which requires the logical and grammatical function of the copula (the copula translates to "either actually is or would be"). "Being implies an indefinite determinability of the predicate," as in the observation that a stove may be black, iron, heavy, hot, in the corner, and so on. Cognition is thus based on predication (being, in contrast to substance which is not the Kantian "noumenon"). We cannot collapse being (predication)

and substance; there is no essence behind appearance: “The thing in itself is precisely what we do see, and since it is substance, its reality is not ever in question, only its intelligibility: we bring it into being by understanding in some light” (Leroy 1994, 561).

There is thus no need for a Kantian transcendental analysis or a hierarchical Hegelian dialectic in Peirce’s theory. The quality abstracted from an “It” retains its character in any occurrence and prepares the way for the explanation of a truth claim. In the proposition “The stove is black,” the quality (Firstness) abstracted or prescinded from the stove as the precise respect in which the experience is available to thought. Peirce points out two distinct moments in this experience: first, reference to a “ground,” as in the focus on color rather than weight or temperature of the stove. Second, the reference to a “correlate,” whereby the specific quality (say, “black”) is abstractable so as to be applicable to other things, such as black shoes, black pots, comparable to what is seen in the stove. What this demonstrates is that our capacity to make comparisons needs, in addition to the related thing, the ground and the correlate, a “mediating representation” or “interpretant” that can be addressed to someone (including ourselves). This mode of analysis lays the foundation for Peirce’s theory of pragmatism as an epistemology and ontology: Firstness signifies quality, a feeling, a possibility. Secondness signifies an individual apprehended as a resistance to and interaction with its environment, embodying a possibility as actuality. Thirdness refers to a general term a rule, a law or a “habit” that corresponds to the fallible but determinate knowledge of a regularity or principle (CSP 8.264-69).

Applying this triad of categories, signs or representations are divided into icon, index and symbol. Icon is a sign based on resemblance to its object, possessing some character contained in or expressed by an instance of the icon. Index is a sign based on correspondence to fact, some existential relation into which the instance enters (for the indexical sign in cinema, see Wollen 1972). Symbol is a sign of generality which is connected not only to the ground and object but also to the interpretant. Symbol as a sign function assumes both quality (in reference to a ground) and the existential relations of a particular object or situation; symbol is also specific in referring to an interpretant, a cognitive moment, determined by Firstness and Secondness but not limited to either. Meaning derives from representations that involve the triadic categories, not any binary relation between signifier and signified.

Peirce’s pragmatism elaborates the consequences that follow from a “first” being accessible by reference to a ground; thus, we are instructed to pay attention to what specific aspect of a phenomenon we are noticing or representing. Reasoning by inferences does not allow unlimited “free play,” following Peirce’s reminder: “The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct that, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol” (CSP 5: 438). Meaning is not infinitely deferred but is conceived as a continuous process of inference or reasoning in communities of inquiry. While the heterogeneity of circumstances and desires influence these communities, the mode of rational inquiry implies a normative ethics and aesthetics to be scientific. Belief arises from the process of inquiry and experiment that should be pursued freely without the threat of heresy from the



two” (1983, 226). In John Sheriff’s view, literary art is “a representamen of possibility experienced as Rhematic Symbol” (1989, 78). A novel, poem or story presents us with signs of immediate consciousness, feelings, qualities, rhemes, in instants of time, as we read without sustained reflection or analysis. However, while the interpretant of an art-object are signs of ontological Firstness (Rheme), separated phenomenal elements which are merely potential, this aesthetic experience becomes an object of reflection, inference, thought. The interpretant (Rheme) becomes a new representamen that determines a new interpretant (another Rheme, Proposition or Argument). So the reader undergoes the experience of immediate consciousness in the first moment, then transforms this sign-process into a new sign, and so on.

Given the dynamic nature of signs constituting a literary text, the text as we read will continue to generate a series of interpretants within specific parameters, frames of intelligibility, or “language-games.” A sentence in a text such as “Cain killed Abel” can be read as a Rheme or Proposition depending on what ground the sign relates to its interpretant. The sentence may have the form of a proposition, but they do not refer to facts or actual existents; they function as signs of immediate consciousness registering aspects of the “It,” the knowable reality subtending experience. They are, as Peirce asserts, “symbols for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way...So the poet in our days—and the true poet is the true prophet—personifies everything, not rhetorically but in his own feelings. He tells us that he feels an affinity for nature, and loves the stone or the drop of water” (1958, 13). Art is then not just a set of formal properties separated from the real; experience is broader than the signs in our conscious thought, an experience in the world of signs whose complex apprehension or transcription of reality is made more accessible by artistic mediation.

In reading a literary text, we move from Rheme (Firstness) to Dicent Sign (Secondness) and Argument (Thirdness). We can reason and argue on the basis of interpretants that translate the rhematic symbol, even though, following Peirce’s doctrine of fallibilism, we cannot arrive at “absolute certainty concerning questions of fact” (CSP 1:149). While there are no rules or objective standards to determine the grounds for choosing interpretants, the practice of reading/interpretation is not wholly subjective, relativist or nominalist. Why we choose a certain framework, paradigm or language-game can be explained by prior choices and commitments that can be rationally examined and evaluated. Questioning and analysis, at some point, must come to an end for us to act on certain beliefs “and begin from there as rational human beings” (Sheriff 1989, 94).

For Peirce, the terminal goal of semiosis is the emergence of “concrete reasonableness” and its embodiment in a community of inquirers open to the impact of experience, the intractable factuality of an objective world, the historicity of life, and the influence of traditions. This follows from Peirce’s insight that the ultimate foundation of meaning is not found in arbitrary conventions but in the rectifiable process of interpretation. Such process leads to the shaping of general habits and the correction and improvement of traditions based on a “critical common-sensism” (Rochberg-Halton 1986, 50).

### Narrative as Argument and Symbol

Let us turn now to *Anil's Ghost* with Peirce's experimental optic. Ondaatje's novel centers on the pursuit of truth—the structure and totality of social conditions and personal relationships in their spatiotemporal unfolding. The fable deals with the search for the identity of victims of state or collective terrorism, a quest that also uncovers the history (archaeology, genealogy) of the protagonists in the national crisis of Sri Lanka. Individual identities have so far been muddled or truncated by global and national disasters. What can be salvaged and identified? Can the ruined Buddha be restored? Yes, as the concluding section shows by describing Ananda Udugama's performance of an ancient ritual of restoration. The focalization of this fable in the *mise en scene* or actual plot translates rheme and dicent sign to argument, the realm of legisign and symbol. One interpretant of the whole novel's point is that truth can be discovered by sacrifice and dissolution of identity in the cultural complex which survives through ordeals of civil war and internecine conflict. That, I think, is a central thematic argument of the narrative.

Anil Tissera, the western-trained forensic scientist sent by the UN to investigate human rights abuses, becomes involved with (among others) two brothers, Sarath Diyasena, an archaeologist, and his brother Gamini, a doctor treating the victims of the civil war in Sri Lanka. She has been away for fifteen years, tied to her birthplace less by memory than by a passion to help and serve a larger good. Both brothers know first-hand the violence of torture, cruel murders, and other humiliations. But there are also tensions and disparities between them, conflicts emblematic of the larger ethnic and class war raging around them. Towards the end of the novel, the anonymous skeleton of a victim that Anil and Sarath had recovered is identified as Ruwan Kumara, a rebel sympathizer. The novel does not end there; after presenting their findings before a government panel, and before the episode when Gamini confronts the corpse of his brother, a victim of official treachery and revenge, we have a short scene where the two brothers succeed in talking comfortably to each other “because of her presence. So it had seemed to her.” The point of view in this passage, that of the expatriate Anil, allows her a synthesizing angle or vantage point from which to make sense of her own detached but also involved relation to what is going on in her once beloved homeland, to her past as well as to her future:

It was *their* conversation about the war in their country and what each of them had done during it and what each would not do. They were, in retrospect, closer than they imagined.

If she were to step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gamini and the memory of Sarath be a part of her life? Would she talk to intimates about them, the two Colombo brothers? And she in some way like a sister between them, keeping them from mauling each other's worlds? Wherever she might be, would she think of them? Consider the strange middle-class pair who were born into one world and in mid-life stepped waist-deep into another?

At one point that night, she remembered, they spoke of how much they loved their country. In spite of everything. No Westerner would understand the love they had for the place. ‘But I could never leave here,’ Gamini had whispered.

‘American movies, English books—remember how they all end?’ Gamini asked that night. ‘The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or

Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit.'  
(Ondaatje 2000, 285-86)

Some readers have applied Gamini's sardonic remarks on the novel itself. This choice of an interpretant is grounded on the expectation that postmodern artists are more self-conscious and reflexive. But this is to dismiss the framing angle of Anil, the vehicle through which Gamini's voice is registered, preventing it from being a utopian free-flowing signifier. There is some ambiguity as to whom Gamini is directing his utterance, to his brother or to Anil; the combination "American movies, English books," a complex quasi-indexical dicent sign for Western consumer voyeurism, metonymically implicates Anil and her European sponsor. The whole scene, however, may be taken as symbolic of the novel's attempt to construct a community, beginning with the restoration of ties between the brothers up to the problematic reinscription of Anil's visit into her own life-history as an uprooted Sri Lankan, into the disrupted lives of her compatriots. We are faced with examining the novel as a legisign of the artist's (including Ananda Udugama) endeavor to oppose the terror of isolation and separation, alienation, ethnic exclusion, demonization of any person as "terrorist," and, last but not least, anonymous disappearance/death.

What needs underscoring here is the rheme of speculation, that feeling of quasi-nostalgia and regret, that Anil is experiencing as she muses what it would be like to be already distant and removed from the scene. It is a moment of suspension that we are witnessing here, the interpretant of these signs rendering Anil listening (playing the addressee) to words exchanged between the brothers. Sarath is not quoted, but Gamini is given the last words about his love for his country, and how Western visitors claiming to be experts only reveal their stupidity and arrogance. Or is that depiction of the scene from Hollywood movies and pulp fiction simply a critique of cultural taste and artifacts, not of the societies that nourish and consume them? If we have to choose a ground that will take into account as much of the expressive and referential properties of the text, I would say that the semiotic ground has to center-stage Anil's role, her recording sensibility, and her own "take" on the fraught relationship of the brothers. My view is that the ground of our interpretation needs to connect this scene with what comes after, as well as what has happened already up to this point. In that expanded horizon, Anil's mediation here prepares for Gamini's reception of his brother's body in the morgue in the next section, and her disappearance from the novel.

### **Interminable Inquiry**

A concluding remark may return us to the quest for knowledge and truth via representation. What then is the rationale for structuring of the narrative in this specific manner? Numerous reviews and commentaries have converged on the judgment that the novel does not explicitly choose any side. One writer observes that Ondaatje "ensures that no side emerges unstained: the government, the Tamil separatists, or the insurgents to the south" (Singh 2000); another commends the author when he "reveals the depths of his homeland's adversity with a scientist's distance" (Barnett 2000). Another thinks that the author "has no

clear political position...and appeals to conscience only by depicting the extremes of fear and violence that war engenders" (Champeon 2003). These opinions diverge from signs of partisanship which are ignored for the sake of endorsing a putative neutrality, for example: "Yet the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit in Matale" (Ondaatje 2000, 11). Consider also Gamini's psychic condition as he examines his brother's lifeless body after he discovered the shattered hands: "He had seen cases where every tooth had been removed, the nose cut apart, the eyes humiliated with liquids, the ears entered. He had been, as he ran down the hospital hallway, most frightened of seeing his brother's face. It was the face they went for in some cases. They could in their hideous skills sniff out vanity" (2000, 289-90). Here, the signs of "terror," "terrorism," and their cognates find their charged sensory manifestations in these rhematic symbols and their interpretants.

We can of course allude further to numerous historical and documentary accounts of the situation in Sri Lanka in the mid-1980 to early 1990s, the time period circumscribing the events of the novel. We can consult an early commentary such as *Sri Lanka: The Holocaust and After* (1984) by L. Piyadasa to test the truth-claims of propositions enunciated in the narrative. While a 1987 peace accord was signed granting regional autonomy to the embattled Tamils, the rebellion continued and worsened because the Tamil nationalists were excluded by both the Indian and Sri Lankan governments (Gurr 1993, 301). By 1998, an estimated 50,000 persons have died since the war began in the eighties (Instituto del Tercer Mundo 1999, 521).

The relevant context for understanding the art-work can be enlarged and offered for inspection. The final interpretant—in Peirce's view, "the effect the Sign would produce upon any mind upon which circumstances [history, artistic techniques, biography, and other contextual information] should permit it to work out its full effect" (1985, 413; see Fitzgerald 1966, 124-25)—would deploy such information provided by historical accounts as elements of the hermeneutic circle or horizon to help us appraise the cogency of all the "possibles" rendered in the narrative.

We can indeed anticipate a range of possible meanings/interpretants we can formulate for this particular scene, or for any other pivotal episode, as a representamen in a sequence of representamens, and for the novel as a whole. As I have argued, however, that range can not be infinite nor arbitrary since the over-all principle of "concrete reasonableness" (the logic of abduction) imposes a provisional end to this phase of the inquiry. The knowable reality which the art of the novel strives to represent is not an indeterminable, mysterious "something"; to the extent that the representation exhibits the "power to live down all opposition," the interpretant can grasp the "true character of the object... The very entelechy of being lies in being representable," Peirce insists; indeed, "a symbol is an embryonic reality endowed with power of growth into the very truth, the very entelechy of reality" mediated through the community of interpreters (1976, 262).

Knowledge and reality, "cognizability" and being, are synonymous terms for Pierce (CSP 5:257). His critique of meaning ultimately directs us to fix our attention on the habits of thinking and action precipitated by our act of reading, effects with practical bearings in



everyday life. Perceptions and habits of inference generating knowledge/truth always take place within the domain of semiotic representation (Habermas 1971, 98; Moore and Robin 1994). Aesthetics, for Peirce, is nothing else but “the theory of the deliberate formation of such habits of feeling (i.e., of the ideal)” which he also called “the play of Musement” after Schiller’s *Spieltrieb* (Brent 1998, 53; Feibleman 1969, 392). Reading *Anil’s Ghost* and analyzing the repertoire of interpretants of politically loaded terms such as “terrorism” may be said to constitute those significant practices that challenge not only our hermeneutic skills and capabilities of construing perceptions and translating perceptual judgments; they also elicit signs of whether we, and others in the collaborative enterprise, embody what Peirce calls “an intelligence capable of learning by experience” (1955, 98; see Sheriff 1994).

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