

Semiosis and the Crisis of Meaning:  
Continuity and Play in Peirce and Derrida

by

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## Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## Abstract

*Semiosis and the Crisis of Meaning* addresses the difference between continuity and play in Charles Peirce's and Jacques Derrida's theory of signs. The main aim is to offer a reply to Derrida's reading of Peirce in *Of Grammatology*—a reading which results in a crisis of meaning by redefining the process of semiosis as a limitlessness of play. To furnish a Peircean reply, I draw connections between Peirce's semiotic and both his categories of being and method of scientific investigation. In doing so, I attempt to circumscribe Derrida's play by restoring a direction to the movement from sign to sign. In the first chapter, I give an account of Peirce's early theory of signs in order to set the stage for Derrida's reading of Peirce. In the second chapter, I turn to Derrida's work, give a general outline of his project in *Of Grammatology*, and provide a close reading of his brief encounter with Peirce. In the final chapter, I return to Peirce to show how there is a continuity to the process of semiosis that is missing in Derrida's reading. This continuity provides us with the means to solve what is at stake in the crisis of meaning.

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Dedicated to

Daryl J Metzger

for all you have done, and in your absence, still continue to do.

May you rest in peace.

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Turning and turning in the widening gyre;  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned...

...somewhere in sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

—*The Second Coming*, William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (1989).

## INTRODUCTION

In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida refers to Charles Peirce's theory of signs in an integral move toward his "de-construction of the transcendental signified"—which shows, roughly, that there is no way to get outside of the network of signs to perceive the *thing-in-itself* in the "luminosity of its presence" (Derrida *OG* 49). For Derrida, the very nature of the sign leads to a semiosis (or deferral of meaning): the *signified* (to use Saussure's terminology) is always already deferred by a further *signifier* and so the ultimate meaning of the sign is always out of reach, beyond (transcending) the infinite play (semiosis) of signifiers. Derrida *uses* Peirce as a close ally to help him articulate his notion of semiosis. By referring primarily to Peirce's early semiotic theory ("the doctrine of the thought-sign" (W2: 223)), Derrida shows how Peirce's view that "all thought is in signs" (W2: 207) leads to semiosis: "the *representamen* functions only by giving rise to an *interpretant* that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity" (Derrida 49). Derrida's point is that, once we admit, as Peirce does, that the universe is "perfused with signs—if not composed exclusively of signs" (EP 2.394) and also that "all thought is in signs," then we have no choice but to realize that meaning, in the traditional sense (as "presence" in Husserl and "clear and distinct ideas" in Descartes) is unobtainable. In Derrida, we are left only with semiosis—the infinite *play* of signs—and this deferral of meaning is supposed to liberate us from the pitfalls of the "logocentric metaphysics of presence" (49). By conceptualizing semiosis as *play*, Derrida urges that philosophers should joyously plunge into the abyss of deconstruction—embrace the *play* of signs rather than try to pursue some ultimate meaning (or truth) that transcends the *play*.



Derrida's use of Peirce's "doctrine of the thought-sign" has been investigated by Peirce scholars like Umberto Eco, Thomas Short, Vincent Colapietro, Leon Surette, David Pettigrew, and Jeffrey Barnouw (to name a few). Whereas scholars like Short, Surette, and Barnouw claim that Derrida misappropriates Peirce's view, others like Colapietro, Eco, and Pettigrew make an effort to outline some key similarities between their positions. For example, both Peirce and Derrida utilize their theories of signs to challenge traditional accounts of meaning--Derrida through critique of the Metaphysics of Presence, and Peirce through critique of Cartesianism (Pettigrew 371). Furthermore, Pettigrew argues that, at the moment Peirce and Derrida claim that there is no way out of the network of signs, they each (in their own right) "rend the fabric of the subject, overturning or decentering the simple self-certainty which would be thought to be at the archic center of the self" (Pettigrew 371). Despite these two similarities though, Pettigrew suggest that there is one crucial difference between Peirce and Derrida that demands further inquiry: that of the "oceanic gap" between, on the one hand, Derrida's emphasis that semiosis leads to play; and, on the other hand, Peirce's later account of signs which maintains that we can still know truths about reality even from within the nexus of signs. While Derrida supposes that semiosis stretches out infinitely (and perhaps chaotically) in each direction, Peirce maintains a sense of continuity—that signs are *tending* toward meaning in the long run. While Colapietro and Pettigrew offer brief descriptions of this oceanic gap, none have fully traced out why, in Peirce, a claim to the continuity of signs is crucial to mitigate against the *play* in Derrida.

My thesis turns on this tension between continuity and play in Derrida and Peirce. By further outlining Peirce's later account of signs, as sketched in his correspondences with Victoria Welby, I hope to show that, for Peirce, semiosis does not, as Derrida supposes, result in the deferral of meaning, but that rather, one can (and should) maintain the cheerful hope that our

collective inquiries will converge in the long-run. To this end, I show that Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence functions in Peircean Secondness and that by choosing play over continuity Derrida fails to move, as Peirce urges us, into Thirdness. By considering the important role that Thirdness plays in Peirce's semiotic, I reveal how Peirce overcomes the problem of semiosis and ends up resisting Derrida's reading of his earlier semiotic formulation. I suggest further, that Peirce's revisions to his semiotic in his correspondences with Welby is especially pertinent today, as it shows us a way out of the post-truth era we find ourselves in (an era that C.G Prado claims is born out of Derrida's critique of meaning) (Prado 4).

## CHAPTER ONE:

### Peirce's Early Theory of Signs

*...I am, as far as I know, a pioneer, or rather a backwoodsman, in the work of clearing and opening up what I call semiotic, that is, the doctrine of the essential nature and fundamental varieties of possible semiosis; and I find the field too vast, the labor too great, for a first-comer.*

—Peirce, EP 2.413

By the time Peirce died in 1914 he had neither provided a final account of his theory of signs, nor published a book dealing specifically with the topic. However, Peirce considered a theory of signs to be crucial to underpin his pragmatist tracts and began charting his own account as early as 1865 (Short 28). Like a good fallibilist, Peirce continued to revise his theory of signs until his eventual death in 1914. Scholars like T.L. Short and Vincent Colapietro have scoured Peirce's writings to reveal the trajectory of Peirce's reasoning about signs. Particularly, Short distinguishes between Peirce's early and mature theory of signs (Short 27). He suggests, in *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, that Peirce's early account is flawed and that much confusion has been borne out of scholars failing to note the many revisions that led to Peirce's mature taxonomy of signs (27). Derrida (although he approaches Peirce on his own terms) is guilty of giving birth to such confusions. His reading of Peirce in *Of Grammatology* focuses primarily on Peirce's early semiotic account without considering the resistance that his reading meets when cast against the backdrop of Peirce's later, mature account. In order to ultimately show how, by revisiting Peirce's mature theory of signs, Peirce ends up favouring *continuity* over Derrida's *play*, I first need to outline Peirce's early semiotic account, and provide a detailed description of Derrida's reading/use of that account in *Of Grammatology*.

The primary objective of this first chapter, then, is to sketch Peirce's early theory of signs with enough detail so that the crucial aspects of Derrida's reading of it can be brought into focus

later on. To this end, my aims are threefold: 1) I provide an account of Peirce's triadic formulation of the sign (the fundamental component of Peirce's theory of signs and the only aspect left unchanged throughout his career-spanning inquiry (Short 30)); 2) I show how the triadic formulation of the sign folds into Peirce's three categories of being; and 3) I outline how Peirce's denial of intuition and introspection give rise to the "Doctrine of the Thought-Sign" (the view that "all thought is in signs" (W2:207)). Finally, I will conclude the chapter by briefly tracing the contours of the problem of semiosis—a problem borne out of the thought-sign. This final remark will set the stage for Derrida's entrance in the following chapter.

Since Peirce's semiotic is far from being fully explored and the terrain daunting to traverse (in part due to its incompleteness and in part due to its difficulty), I enlist Short as a guide into Peirce's vast labyrinth of signs. By starting, where Short does, with Peirce's 1865 account of thought as representations, I slowly build the context for his triadic formulation of the sign, his categories of being, his subsequent "doctrine of the thought-sign," and the alleged problem of semiosis that follows from it.

## A World of Representations

While Peirce's early theory of signs is usually attributed to his Doctrine of the Thought-Sign (as expounded in his Cognition Series of 1868), Short notes that Peirce first began charting his theory of signs in 1865, when he was only twenty-five years old (Short 28). In his eighth *Harvard Lecture* titled "Forms of Induction and Hypothesis" Peirce gives a rudimentary account of representation<sup>1</sup>. While only providing a rough sketch, Peirce's work in this lecture shows that he was aware of the important role that representation plays in philosophy, and this is crucial to his eventual claim that "all thought is in signs" in the Cognition Series. Here, however, Peirce attempts to differentiate his own use of 'representation' from Kant's use of the term *Vorstellung* which Peirce felt limited 'representation' solely to mental content (Short 28; W1:257). Instead, Peirce wished to broaden the term 'representation' so that it applied to "mental contents as well as to other things" (Short 28). Peirce writes:

I, however, would limit the term ['representation'] neither to that which is mediate nor to that which is mental, but would use it in its broad, usual, and etymological sense for anything which is supposed to stand for another and which might express that other to a mind which truly could understand it. (W1:257)

The takeaway from this passage is that Peirce's use of 'representation' more closely resembles the German verb *Vorstellen* which literally means 'to place before,' or, as Short claims, "to place something before someone or something—hence, to present it" (Short 29). In this way, a representation implies an object: the thing out in the world that determines the representation. So, a representation, in a sense, is a thought which mediates between an object out in the world and a

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<sup>1</sup> Peirce would later refer to representations as representamens or signs.

further thought that fills the representation with meaning. Notice also that the representation expresses its object to “a mind which truly could understand it” (W1:257). The representation, then, does not express meaning all on its own, but only once it addresses a mind, or a further thought, that gives the representation its meaning.<sup>2</sup> In his 1867 “On a New List of Categories” Peirce clarifies that ‘representation’ is better understood through examples than by definition. Helpfully, he provides a list of instances that best capture his notion of ‘representation’:

a word represents a thing to the conception in the mind of the hearer, a portrait represents the person for whom it is intended to the conception of recognition, a weathercock represents the direction of the wind to the conception of him who understands it, a barrister represents his client to the judge and jury whom he influences. (W2:54)

In each instance, the representation is a thought which stands between an object and a further thought that gives the representation its meaning. Peirce claims that “No one can deny that there are representations for every thought is one” (W1:257). If every thought is a representation of some object to an interpreting mind, then cognition, or the process of thinking, involves representation through and through.

Consequently, we can only understand the world through representations. “Thus,” Peirce claims, “our whole world—that which we can comprehend—is a world of representations” (W1:257). Peirce’s point is that there is no way to cut through representation to perceive the *thing* (“that for which a representation might stand prescinded from all that would constitute a relation with any representation” (W1:257)), nor is there any way to extrapolate from representation to know about the *form* (“the respect in which a representation might stand for a

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<sup>2</sup> As I will show in the subsequent section, Peirce revises “the mind that the representation addresses” to be an “interpretant.” This distinction between interpretation and interpretant will be crucial toward developing Peirce’s triadic formulation of the sign.

thing, prescinded from both thing and representation” (W1:257)). This is because, for Peirce, one can only “know *forms* and *things through* representations” (my emphasis) (W1:257). Appeal neither to the *form* nor to the *thing* can successfully liberate one from the realm of representation. In this way, Peirce’s account of representation counters both the Lockean view that we could have immediate access to objects in the world; and the Cartesian view that we can have clear and distinct ideas by virtue of the natural light of reason. The whole world is a world of representations and one ought to devise a proper method/logic for understanding the world through representations. This method is what Peirce would ultimately refer to as his semiotic. For the moment that there is thought, there are only representations and representations are really just signs. In the subsequent years, Peirce would refine his notion of thought as representation and his account of the triadic relation that thought shares with its object and interpretation (or as we will shortly see, interpretant).

## The Triadic Formulation of the Sign

Peirce's claims that 1) we live in a world of representations and that 2) our thoughts *are* representations already foreshadows his triadic formulation of the sign. By broadening the scope of the term representation, Peirce implies a triadic relationship wherein the representation stands *for* some object out in the world *to* some interpreting mind. His use of the term representation in 1865 functions here by playing the role of the 'sign' in his triadic formulation: Object-Sign-Interpretant. Peirce writes that "a sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (CP 2.228). The sign stands for an object—some external permanency which circumscribes and determines the sign. But the sign needs to address something else so that it can be comprehended or interpreted as a sign. Peirce continues that the sign "addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign" (Peirce: CP 2.228). That "equivalent" and "more developed sign" to which the sign addresses is not an interpretation, but what Peirce calls an *interpretant*—a further thought which arises *within* someone to give the sign (which is also a thought) its meaning. Short writes that the "interpretant, then, is a second representation of the same thing" (Short 29). By replacing interpretation with interpretant, Peirce is able to maintain that the interpretant, insofar as it is a further thought within the mind of the interpreter, is itself a sign. The interpretant, then, is a particular thought within the interpreter, whereas interpretation or signification occurs in general—"interpretation" is "something embodied in or expressed by any number of interpretants" (Short 30). Thus, Short concludes that, for Peirce, the interpretation "is general but borne by a particular, the interpretant" (30).



Having replaced representation in his 1865 account with sign, Peirce arrives at what Short calls “Peirce’s unchanging conception of a sign as being one of three relata [‘sign’] of a single, triadic relation [object-sign-interpretant]” (Short 30). The three relata ‘object,’ ‘sign,’ and ‘interpretant’ make up the core foundation for Peirce’s theory of signs and this triadic relation remains unchanged as Peirce shifts from his early semiotic account to his mature semiotic.

In order to understand the upshot of the addition of a third relatum (the interpretant) it might be helpful to contrast Peirce’s triadic formulation of the sign against Saussure’s dyadic conception of the sign. For Saussure, the sign is composed of a signifier and a signified (a “signal” and a “signification” as Saussure first writes in his *Course In General Linguistics*) (Saussure 67). The signifier consists in the “sound-image:” the letters ‘a-r-b-o-r’ which bring to mind the signified of the concept tree (67).<sup>3</sup> For Saussure, the meaning of a sign is achieved once the arbitrary connection between a signifier and signified is brought together to form a sign—when the word ‘arbor’ presents the concept tree. Saussure’s dyadic formulation of the sign is quite different from Peirce’s triadic formulation. Short notes that, for Peirce, “significance is not a direct relation of sign to object” as is the case in Saussure’s account of signifier and signified (Short 30). “Instead,” Short writes, “the significance of a sign is to be found in its interpretant” (30). It is only the third, further, thought [the ‘interpretant’] which arises in the mind of the interpreter as “equivalent” to the sign or representamen yet, in some ways, “more developed”

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that I am breaking with the word of Saussure to follow in the footsteps of post-structuralists in this construal of the signifier. I mean that, for Saussure, the “sound-image” is too material of a description for the signifier. In an attempt to make semiology its own discipline, Saussure wants to distance himself from any account of the signifier that gives it a material quality (like “sound-image”). In this way, he argues that the signifier is purely psychological (ie. has no connection with the empirical world): “the two elements involved in the linguistic sign are both psychological and connected in the brain by an associative link” (Saussure 66). While this is the case for Saussure, I choose, instead, to think of the signifier as many post-structuralists do: as something resembling a sign-vehicle (ie. not entirely psychological).

that gives the sign its significance. Short writes that “the sign signifies its object only via being so interpreted” by an interpretant (Short 30). This point harkens back to Peirce’s insistence in 1865 that a representation needs to address a mind (or more precisely an interpretant) in order to be comprehended as a sign. Without an interpretant, that is, a sign cannot be understood *as* a sign.

In this way, there are two respects in which the triadic formulation of the ‘sign’ gives rise to significance (or meaning). In the first respect, Short writes that the “sign mediates between object and interpretant” (30). Here, the sign mediates by standing *for* its object *to* an interpretant. The sign (of a weathercock blowing) stands *for* the object (the direction of the wind) *to* the interpretant (that the wind is blowing North). In the second respect, Short says, “the interpretant mediates between sign and object” (30). The interpretant brings a kind of reconciliation to the sign and its object—furnishes our acquaintance with the object via the sign. It, in a sense, reconciles the connection between an object out in the world (the direction of the wind) and the sign in the mind of the beholder (of the weathercock caught in the wind). The interpretant, insofar as it is both “equivalent” to the sign yet still “more developed,” supplies the meaning of the object’s sign to the mind of the beholder. In this way, the significance, or meaning, of the sign is found in the interpretant, yet always consists in the triadic relation of Object-Sign-Interpretant.

Following Peirce’s move in the “New List of Categories” to provide examples of representation rather than an abstract definition, it would be helpful to outline a few examples of how the triadic relation of object-sign-interpretant functions in practice. I have already provided one of Peirce’s favourite examples (that of the weathercock caught in the wind), although it would be helpful to consider another example to drive the point home. In his introduction to

*Peirce on Signs*, James Hoopes uses the example of a stop sign to outline how the triadic relation of the sign functions. Hoopes claims that, for Peirce, a sign “receives its meaning by being interpreted by a subsequent thought or action” (Hoopes 7). This subsequent thought, of course, is the interpretant. He asks the reader to imagine that they are traveling in an automobile and eventually come to a stop sign at an intersection. The stop sign is a real object out in the world. Its post is made of metal and is strong enough to hold up the red octagon featuring the white markings S-T-O-P. While the actual object (the stop sign in the brute thrust of reality) surely exists, the driver of the automobile does not immediately perceive the object, or stop sign, in itself.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the driver’s perception is mediated via the sign of its object. But that sign, or representation, does not contain the significance of the stop sign—does not entail what it means to stop. Hoopes claims that it is “only in relation to a subsequent thought—an interpretant—that the sign attains meaning” (Hoopes 7). So, the driver has a sign of the stop sign (object) in their mind and that sign addresses a further thought: the interpretant. Thus, Hoopes claims that “the meaning lies not in the [driver’s] perception but in the interpretation of the perception as a signal to stop or, better still, in the act of stopping” (Hoopes 7). Hoopes emphasis on “the act of stopping” is especially pertinent. It suggests that the interpretant does not just have to take the form of a further thought, but it can also take the form of a thought carried out in an action, or habit. The driver notices the sign on the road, understands the rules of the road, and values their

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<sup>4</sup> There may be a worry here that Hoopes is making Peirce out to be more of a Kantian than he actually is. I am not suggesting that there is a lacuna between perception and reality—Peirce’s doctrine of synechism maintains that there is not such a gap between perception and reality. This description, by Hoopes, seems to stem from Peirce’s test for the blindspot on the retina (I will get to this later). In the case of the test for the blindspot on the retina, Peirce is dealing with perception. His conclusion is that the very fact that there is a blindspot on the retina shows, by our anatomy, that we do not immediately perceive the objects of our conception, but that, rather, the mind fills in the blind spot. That there is this blindspot, seems to suggest that we are dealing with representations and not the things in themselves. Though this blindspot should not lead us to believe that there is a gap or abyss or space between perception and reality.

safety. When addressed by the sign of the stop sign, the driver promptly stops. The interpretant of the sign is fulfilled in the action of the driver stopping.

Similarly, I might question whether the fire burning on the wick of the candle next to my computer is hot. I might put this question to the test by holding my finger inside the flame. Ouch! The interpretant—that the fire is very hot indeed—arises in the action of me pulling my hand away. However, the interpretant that the candle flame is hot could also be fulfilled by my performing and inductive inference from the time I fell beside a campfire as a child, or when I doubted my mother’s testimony that I should stay away from the wood fireplace at Grandma’s house. The point is that the interpretant, for Peirce, sometimes takes the form of an action. Every time, however, the interpretant functions both as the subsequent thought addressed by the sign which stands for its object and as a reconciliation of the relationship between the sign and its object. “Thus,” Hoopes writes, “the meaning of every thought is established by a triadic relation: an interpretation of the thought as a sign of a determining object” (Hoopes 7). Every instance of thought, and so thought in general, consists in this triadic relationship of object-sign-interpretant. The ‘sign’ stands for an ‘object’ to its ‘interpretant.’ The weathercock, taken by a gust, stands *for* the direction of the wind *to* the trained mind who observes it. Fire is hot to the hand that touches it. And the apple rotting in Gregor Samsa’s back is a sign to his father that he is still a member of the family (Kafka 110).

As Peirce remarks later in his life: the “universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs” (EP 2.394). With the claim that the “universe is perfused with signs” one might go back to revise Peirce’s point in 1865 that “our whole world—that which we can comprehend—is a world of representations” (W1:257). Instead, our whole world—that which we can comprehend—is a world of *signs*. More precisely, perhaps, it is a world composed

of triadic relations between objects, signs, and interpretants. It is only by reasoning in (and through) signs that one comes to understand the world.

## The Three Categories of Being

In order to provide a final clarification of the triadic formulation of the sign, I turn to Peirce's 1894 essay "What is a Sign?". Here Peirce accomplishes two key philosophical moves. First, he provides an illustrative example of how his triadic formulation of the sign folds into his categories of being: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Second, he provides an account of three classifications of the sign: icons, indexes, and symbols. I tend to each of these points briefly now and will circle back around to them in my final chapter when I take up Peirce's mature semiotic as a response to Derrida's notion of play.

Peirce's categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness are notorious for being difficult to grasp. Even Short refrains from delving too deeply into Peirce's "New List of Categories" worrying that doing so would be cause of great confusion (Short 31). Despite their difficulty, however, the categories play an integral role in underpinning Peirce's triadic formulation of the sign. Each component of the triadic sign corresponds to one of Peirce's three categories. Without wishing to proceed too far into the deep chambers of Peirce's categories, I need to at least acknowledge the important role that the categories play in Peirce's semiotic. To do so, I limit my discussion of the categories to the few paragraphs that begin Peirce's "What is a Sign?".

Peirce begins the essay with a thought experiment that helps to explain his categories of being. *First*, he invites the reader to imagine a person who is caught up in a dreamy state. Peirce claims:

Let us suppose he is thinking of nothing but a red colour. Not thinking about it, either, that is, not asking nor answering any questions about it, not even saying to himself that it pleases him, but just contemplating it, as his fancy brings it up. (EP 2.4)

The dreamer has only a red colour in his mind. He is not thinking about the colour (more so feeling it), yet the colour is all that occupies his contemplation (and ‘contemplation’ might not be the right word because it entails a kind of thinking which is not yet present in this First). He is in a half-waking state. It is difficult to explain what Peirce means by such a half-waking state because you “cannot touch it without spoiling it” (W6:171). By today’s standards, we might imagine that the dreamer is “zoned out” or in an alpha state (as when I am driving down a familiar road and, for a moment, zone out and forget that I am driving). Peirce writes that “this is about as near as may be to a state of mind in which something is present, without compulsion and without reason; it is called Feeling” (EP 2.4 ). This state of pure feeling—independent of a causal origin and independent of external stimulus—is an example of Firstness. Firstness can “only be a possibility” (Peirce: CP 1.25). It involves a kind of spontaneity and indeterminacy. The dreamer only *feels* a “sensation”<sup>5</sup> of the colour red—it has not come from an external stimulus, nor has he yet *thought* about the colour. Peirce claims that humans are rarely ever in a state of pure feeling or Firstness. Sooner or later, reality impinges on us. It is difficult to remain a dreamer.

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<sup>5</sup> I put sensation in scare quotes because it is not really a sensation which, by definition, occurs when a body bumps up against something. There is no external stimulus in this feeling of sensation. I am struggling to find the right word, but there is no right word to describe this state of firstness—to put firstness into words is already to “spoil it”—it would be to bring the First into relation with a Second. For the time being, I cannot frame this category of being Firstness in any technical way. However, in the final chapter, I return to Peirce’s categories and offer a more technical definition of Firstness that might help shed some light on this category which, at the present, is difficult to frame. We must start at the shallow end, and slowly make our way into the deep.

Hence, Peirce continues his thought experiment: the dreamer is at once startled by the shrill and prolonged sound of a steam whistle. The steam whistle irritates the dreamer and shatters his pure feeling of the colour red. He instinctually brings his hands to his ears in an attempt to drown out the sound. This action, of course, is compulsive. The whistle is an example of reality impinging on the dreamer—causing him to break his concentration by bringing his hands to his ears. Peirce argues:

This sense of acting and of being acted upon, which is our sense of the reality of things, – both of outward things and of ourselves, – may be called the sense of Reaction. It does not reside in any one Feeling; it comes upon the breaking of one feeling by another feeling. It essentially involves two things acting upon one another. (EP 2.4-5)

The dreamer is faced with the brute thrust of reality—secondness. The second comes to break the feeling of the first—replaces the peaceful contemplation of red with the shrill sound of the steam whistle. Secondness does not occur *in* the steam whistle, but importantly, in the rupture of, or break of, the feeling of the colour red with the sound of the steam whistle. The dreamer has awakened, so to speak; but he is still not thinking.

Peirce continues: the dreamer “jumps up and seeks to make his escape by the door, which we will suppose had been blown to with a bang just as the whistle commenced” (EP 2.5).

However, as the dreamer opens the door, the steam whistle stops. Satisfied that the noise has stopped, the dreamer decides to close the door and return to his dreamy half-waking state “contemplating” (again, in scare quotes) the colour red. Just as the door closes, though, the sound recommences. Here, the dreamer begins to wonder whether his opening the door caused the whistle to stop. He decides to open the door once more. Sure enough, the whistle stops again.



Peirce claims that the dreamer “is now in a third state of mind: he is Thinking” (EP 2.5). Peirce clarifies:

That is, he is aware of learning, or of going through a process by which a phenomenon is found to be *governed* by a rule, or has a general knowable way of behaving. He finds that one action is the means, or middle, for bringing about another result. (EP 2.5) (my emphasis)

Through a process of *thinking* the dreamer comes to know that the steam whistle is caused by the closing of the door. The action of his opening the door is a means, or middle, for bringing about the result of the whistle stopping. The man understands that the whistle’s blowing is governed by a general law: that when the door is closed, the whistle sounds; and when the door is opened, the whistles ceases. This general law, or Thirdness, arises to govern the Reaction brought about by a particular Secondness—the whistle first impinging on the dreamer. The notion of the government of Thirdness is especially important—just as a government governs its populace, so too does Thirdness (insofar as it is a law) govern the forces at play in the universe. Gravity governs objects that are dropped; the door’s position governs whether or not the whistle commences. Now, one could be content to remain in Secondness and only acknowledge the clash of the train whistle impinging on the dreamer contemplating red. To do so, however, would be to deny the import of Thirdness—that beyond this particular instance of Secondness there lies a general law (which is real) that serves to govern the action and reaction of Secondness.

So, while Firstness is understood only as possibility, Secondness arises in the reaction of two things—in the brute thrust of a Second clashing with a First. Thirdness, on the other hand, suggests that the reaction or clash of particular Seconds are governed by real laws or norms in general. Peirce writes:

In the second there was only a sense of brute force; now there is a sense of government by a general rule. In Reaction only two things are involved; but in government there is a third thing which is a means to an end. (EP 2.5)

For example, the weathercock is caught by a gust of wind. In Secondness, the observer only recognizes the instance of the weathercock changing direction—of the wind forcefully moving the pointer in one way or another. However, in Thirdness, the observer realizes that the weathercock pointing in a new direction is indicative of a change in the direction of the wind at that given time. Furthermore, in Thirdness, the observer realizes that the weathercock is generally governed by the following norm: that whenever it is caught by a gust of wind, it points in the direction that the wind is blowing. It is only in Thirdness that the observer can begin to use the weathercock—a farmer can use the weathercock as a tool that helps determine whether or not to spray pesticides on her crop (if the wind is blowing in the wrong direction, she might end up poisoning her livestock).

To return to the triadic formulation of the sign, each of the three relata can be understood as corresponding to one of the three categories. The sign (or representamen) can be understood through Firstness, the object through Secondness, and the interpretant through Thirdness. The sign is a first because it carries with it a kind of indeterminacy and spontaneity. Recall, Hoopes describes the triadic relation as “an interpretation of the thought as a sign of a determining object” (Hoopes 7). The sign is, in a sense, determined by its object, but there are degrees of indeterminacy involved in the way in which the sign relates to its interpretant. The sheer interpretability of the sign leaves open the possibility of error on the part of the interpretant—an indeterminacy which makes possible an array of interpretants. The object is a Second because it impinges on and circumscribes the sign—it limits the sign insofar as the sign is determined by it.

The interpretant is a Third, then, because it functions to govern the relationship between sign and object (Firstness and Secondness)—is the middle which furnishes our acquaintance with the object that the sign is a sign of.

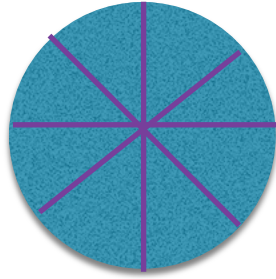
## The Three Classifications of the Sign

Peirce's categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness cut deeper than this, though. In "What is a Sign?" he muses that "a regular progression of one, two, three may be remarked in the three orders of signs, Likeness, Index, Symbol" (EP 2.9). Here, Peirce is mentioning how his categories further inform his three primary classifications of the sign.<sup>6</sup> Likenesses, or icons as they are sometimes called, "serve to convey ideas of the things they represent simply by imitating them"—it is the appearance of a sign as it is in itself, prescinded from any object or Secondness (EP 2.5). One of Peirce's favourite examples of likenesses are photographs. A photograph is an iconic 1:1 imitation of the thing being photographed. In this way, it is only a likeness of that thing. However, this example is not quite precise. As Peirce notes, at least in his time, photographs are produced "under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature" (EP 2.6). In this way, there does seem to be a connection<sup>7</sup> between the photograph and the thing being photographed which suggests that, in some ways, a photograph can also be understood as an indication, or indicative sign. This point is minor, but it does show that, for Peirce, the same sign can be in one sense an icon, while in another sense an indication. For the purpose of providing an example of a pure likeness then, we might imagine a digitally rendered image—one conjured by computer-generating software that does not share an indicative relationship with the thing being photographed. Consider the following image of a wheel:

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<sup>6</sup> While, in his early semiotic account, Peirce concludes that there are only three classifications of signs, in his mature semiotic, he suggests there are 64 different types of signs.

<sup>7</sup> Often times when Peirce writes connection he spells it: "connexion". I was told to omit this spelling, but I want to point out that the "nex" in Peirce's connexion seems to suggest a connection within a nexus. Perhaps, then, Peirce uses this spelling deliberately when speaking of signs so as to account for connections taking place within the nexus of signs.



Peirce suggests that, while the image denotes a wheel, “it leaves the spectator uncertain whether it is a copy of something actually existing or a mere play of fancy” (EP 2.7). The uncertainty involved in this example shows that, for Peirce, likenesses persist in the mode of being, Firstness. He claims:

The likeness has no dynamical connection with the object it represents; it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness. But it really stands unconnected with them. (EP 2.9)

Insofar as a likeness stands unconnected with an object, it is an instance of Firstness; and it is an instance of Firstness insofar as it has yet to come into reaction with a Second.

Next, there are indications, or indices. Indications are signs that “show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them” (EP 2.5). An example of an indicative sign is that of the weathercock caught in the wind. There is a physical connection between the weathercock and the wind that serves to indicate which direction the wind is blowing. Similarly, a man with a rolling gait “is a probable indication that he is a sailor,” smoke is indicative of fire, and the sweat on my arm is indicative of my skin being porous (EP 2.8). For Peirce, the indicative sign corresponds with Secondness. He writes that “the index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair” (EP 2.9). That is, an indicative sign always involves two things in interaction with one another—a first and a second. Yet, it is crucial to note

that “the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established” (EP 2.9). This point is important as it suggests that, regardless of the interpreter’s interpretation of the indicative sign, that connection will always be the same. A weathercock will always point in the direction of the wind regardless of whether or not the interpreter recognizes that it does. The interpreting mind does not have the power to will the indicative sign to be indicative of something else—they may try, but if they do, it will only be an instance of misinterpretation through ignorance or error.

Lastly, there are symbols. Symbols, or general signs, “have become associated with their meanings by usage” (EP 2.5). For example, the stop sign described above is a symbol. Not that particular stop sign; but stop signs in general. Through the usage of stop signs it has become commonly agreed by all who know the symbol, that a stop sign is a sign to stop. There are thus certain conventions surrounding the symbol that inform its use. Peirce continues: a symbol “cannot indicate any particular thing; it denotes a kind of thing. Not only that, but it is itself a kind and not a single thing” (EP 2.9). Since symbols are general, they do not encompass the convention of a particular thing in the world at time *t*, but all instances of those particular things across time. For example, Peirce claims that

you can write down the word “star”; but that does not make you the creator of the word, nor if you erase it have you destroyed the word. The word lives in the minds of those who use it [and the word is general in this sense]. (EP 2.9-10)

In this way, “A symbol, once in being, spreads among the peoples. In use and in experience, its meaning grows” (EP 2.10).

Unlike indications (which do not depend on the mind of the interpreter), “the symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such

connection would exist” (EP 2.9). Thus, insofar as a symbol’s meaning depends on how it is used, the symbol requires, and in some sense, is made, through its use by symbol-using minds. A stop sign means nothing to someone who has never encountered one before. As such, symbols relate to Thirdness. They denote the common laws and norms that govern the use of a sign.

For Peirce, “we think only in signs” (EP 2.10). In all cases of reasoning, then, “we have to use a mixture of likenesses, indices, and symbols” (EP 2.10). We cannot afford to do away with any of them—they each play important roles in the process of reasoning. Peirce explains how each classification of signs affect reasoning with the following metaphor (which I will quote in full to capture the vivacity of his prose):

...though a man may be said to be composed of living tissues, yet portions of his nails, teeth, hair, and bones, which are most necessary to him, have ceased to undergo the metabolic processes which constitute life, and there are liquids in his body which are not alive. Now, we may liken the indices we use in reasoning to the hard parts of the body, and the likenesses we use to the blood: the one holds us stiffly up to the realities, the other with its swift changes supplies the nutriment for the main body of thought. (EP 2.10)

Together, the indices and likenesses merge to form symbols—make up the whole *body* of thought. They, in a way, carry the mind from one point to another. The whole art of reasoning then, consists in “the art of marshalling such signs” and only through tending to such signs can one ever hope to obtain the truth (EP 2.10).

Peirce’s categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness are thus woven together with his triadic formulation of the sign and his three primary classifications of the sign: likenesses, indications, and symbols. Peirce’s insistence that his semiotic is closely related to his categories

is indicative of him being one of the great philosophical systematizers—he is trying to build his theory of signs out of the foundations provided by his three categories of being. For now, this rudimentary sketch of the relationship between Peirce’s semiotic and his categories will suffice.

I will return to the categories once again in the final chapter, to hone my Peircean upshot against Derrida. In the meantime, however, there is one crucial point that requires further explication. Namely, that *we think only in signs*. The point is hinted at by Peirce in the passage quoted above, but the reasoning done to support that claim occurred a number of years prior, in his famous Cognition Series of 1868.



## The Doctrine of the Thought-Sign

The Cognition Series is composed of three essays: “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed For Man,” “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,” and “Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic.” For the purpose of the present investigation, I limit my scope to consider the first two essays most closely. In them, Peirce elaborates his Doctrine of the Thought-Sign: that *we think only in signs*, or more precisely, that the process of cognition is semiotic at its core. In the first essay, “Questions” (for short), Peirce asks a series of questions that aim to challenge some of the core assumptions of Cartesian and Kantian philosophy: namely, that the mental faculty is furnished with the powers of intuition and introspection. His investigation reveals four incapacities:

1. We have no power of Introspection, but all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts.
2. We have no power of Intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions.
3. We have no power of thinking without signs.
4. We have no conception of the absolutely incognizable. (W2: 213)

In the second essay, “Some Consequences” (for short), Peirce traces the consequences of these four incapacities. In what follows, I both briefly outline Peirce’s denials of introspection and intuition and elaborate his view that *all thought is in signs*. I further show how the conclusion that *all thought is in signs* leads to the Doctrine of the Thought-Sign, which implies, in its infancy, the problem of an infinite deferral of meaning, or semiosis (and this is precisely the aspect of Peirce that Derrida uses to arrive at his de-construction of the transcendental signified).

In “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man,” Peirce ultimately concludes that “*all thought is in signs that have no immediate content* but require a subsequent

thought, an interpretant, to give them meaning by interpreting them as representations” (Hoopes 34) (my emphasis). That is, for Peirce, not only is the entire universe composed of signs, but cognition is semiotic at its core, rooted in the categories, and can be understood through the triadic formulation of the sign.

Before I get to Peirce’s claim that *all thought is in signs*, I will first give an account of Peirce’s denial of the faculties of intuition and introspection. Indeed, Peirce’s four incapacities function, separately, to critique some aspects of both the Kantian and Cartesian edifice which ruled philosophy in his time.

Peirce begins “Questions” by asking:

Whether by the simple contemplation of a cognition, independently of any previous knowledge and without reasoning from signs, we are enabled rightly to judge whether that cognition has been determined by a previous cognition or whether it refers immediately to its object? (W2: 193)

This question deals, primarily, with intuition in the Kantian sense (Peirce notes that his target is Kantian intuition in the lengthily footnote found at the bottom of W2: 193). However, Peirce targets both Kant and Descartes’ view of intuition. So we will see how Peirce switches targets when he moves from a critique of Kantian intuition in the first question, to a critique of Cartesian intuition in the second question. An intuition, for Peirce (as for Kant), is “a cognition not determined by a previous cognition of the same object, and therefore so determined by something outside of consciousness” (W2: 193). More precisely, Peirce claims that an intuition is a cognition “determined directly by the transcendental object” (W2: 194). We must keep this precise definition of intuition in mind, if we are to follow Peirce’s train of thought.

The first question asks whether we can distinguish between an immediate cognition of the transcendental object (as in the case of an intuition) and one determined by previous cognitions. More clearly, Peirce wonders whether we can intuitively know that our cognition is an intuition and not a cognition determined by previous ones: can we intuitively distinguish between an intuition and a cognition determined by previous cognitions? Peirce suggests that it often *feels* as though we can; but further investigation will show that this feeling is only a kind of trickery (W2: 194). In short, Peirce's answer is no: we have no power of distinguishing between intuitions and non-intuitions. In order to show this, he proves that, contra Kant's theory, space is not intuited, but rather, is filled in by the work of intellect.

The most vivid test Peirce provides for this incapacity is the test for the blind spot on the retina. Here, Peirce urges the reader to turn the journal on its side, place one coin on each end of the paper, cover the left eye and stare at the coin on left with the right eye, then move the coin on the right towards the center of journal. Once the coin (from the right) reaches about the center of the journal, it will disappear from sight. "It follows" Peirce says "that the space we immediately see (when one eye is closed) is not, as we had imagined, a continuous oval, but is a ring, the filling up of which must be the work of the intellect" (W2: 197). In this way, we do not perceive an immediate intuition of the outside world (the world is not transparent to us; space is not intuited), but rather, by our anatomy, we make an inference about what the world is like—the intellect, in this way, aids in the construction of space. The blind spot on the retina shows that, since we cannot immediately perceive the object, we are already dealing with a representation, or sign of the object. This does not, however, mean that the object is separated from us by an abyss. The object determines the sign, and so is intimately and synechistically connected with the object that it is a sign of.

Having reasoned that we cannot distinguish between intuitions and cognitions determined by previous cognitions, Peirce concludes we are not able to immediately intuit the transcendental object. All thought, it seems then, is mediated through signs composed of triadic relations.

Having dealt with Kant, Peirce moves to his second question: “Whether we have an intuitive self-consciousness?” (W2: 200); and his third question: “whether we have an intuitive power of distinguishing between the subjective elements of different kinds of cognitions?” (W2: 204). These questions challenge the Cartesian view of intuition more broadly. In the second question, Peirce challenges Descartes’ view that we could have intuitive access to our self-consciousness—that we could know, by an intuition alone, that we exist. To do so, he shows how our sense of self does not arise from the cogito, but rather, from ignorance and error.

By self-consciousness, Peirce means “knowledge of ourselves”—“not a mere feeling of subjective conditions of consciousness, but of our personal selves” (W2: 200-201). Peirce admits that he is well aware that he exists. The question is: “how does Peirce know he exists?” Is it by a “special intuitive faculty, or is it determined by previous cognitions?” (W2: 201). To answer this question, Peirce undergoes a thought experiment about how children come to know that they exist.

Peirce begins by stating that “it is almost impossible to assign a period at which children do not already exhibit decided intellectual activity in directions in which thought is indispensable to their well-being” (W2: 201). From a child’s point of view, the body begins as the most important thing in the universe. Peirce claims that “only what it touches has any actual or present feeling; only what it faces has any actual colour; only what is on its tongue has any actual taste” (W2: 201). In this way, a child does not think of herself as hearing the toy sound, but of the toy

as sounding. This disposition, however, gradually changes as the child comes to interact with the outside world.

Eventually, Peirce says, the child is endowed with language, learns to speak, and communicate—to express her desires (W2: 202). It is around this time, Peirce thinks, she comes to regard “testimony as an even stronger mark of fact than appearances themselves” (W2: 202). So, Peirce writes:

A child hears it said that the stove is hot. But it is not, [she] says; and, indeed, that central body is not touching it, and only what that touches is hot or cold. But she touches it, and finds the testimony confirmed in a striking way. Thus, she becomes aware of ignorance, and it is necessary to suppose a self in which this ignorance can inhere. So testimony gives the first dawning of self-consciousness. (W2: 202)

In this way, we do not become aware of our self-consciousness by some intuitive mental faculty. Contra Descartes, the cogito does not situate the ego. Rather, we learn of our self-consciousness through ignorance and error, by supposing a “self which is fallible” (W2: 203). In this way, there is “no necessity of supposing an intuitive self-consciousness, since self-consciousness may easily be the result of inference” (W2: 204). Hence, Peirce shifts from a critique of Kant to a critique of Descartes, challenging, in each thrust, some key aspects of the respective thinker’s views about intuition.

For the present investigation, I will not here delve too deeply into Peirce’s answer to his third question: “whether we have an intuitive power of distinguishing between the subjective elements of different kinds of cognitions?” (W2: 204). Peirce, rather quickly, dismisses this intuitive power. Suffice it to say that Peirce denies that we have the intuitive power to distinguish between the subjective elements of different kinds of cognitions. Roughly, this means that we do

not need to suppose such a subjective intuitive power. Peirce remarks that the objective feature of a cognition relates to its immediate object;<sup>8</sup> while the subjective feature relates to “some action or passion of the self whereby it becomes represented” (W2: 204). We can, Peirce thinks, rightfully distinguish between such things as sense and imagination based on the difference between their immediate objects alone, without needing to posit an additional subjective intuitive power:

...the very fact of the immense difference in the immediate objects of sense and imagination, sufficiently accounts for our distinguishing those faculties; and instead of being an argument in favour of the existence of an intuitive power of distinguishing the subjective elements of consciousness, it is a powerful reply to any such argument, so far as the distinction of sense and imagination is concerned. (W2: 205)

Thus, Peirce finds no reason to suppose a special intuitive faculty to mark these distinctions.

These first three questions combine to make up Peirce’s denial of the power of intuition as found in both Kant and Descartes. For Peirce then, we have no faculty of intuition because 1) we cannot distinguish between an intuition and a cognition determined by previous cognitions, 2) we have no intuitive access to our self-consciousness, but knowledge of our mental lives stems from testimony and error; and 3) we have no intuitive ability to distinguish between the subjective elements of different kinds of cognitions.

Peirce’s fourth question turns his focus to introspection. Peirce asks “Whether we have any power of introspection, or whether our whole knowledge of the internal world is derived from the observation of external facts?” (W2: 205). Peirce says that there are certain facts that are often regarded as external and others that are often regarded as internal. “The question is,” he

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<sup>8</sup> In the final chapter, I will show how the immediate object is apart of the triadic formulation of the sign.

muses, “whether the latter [internal facts] are known otherwise than by inference from the former [external facts]?” (W2: 205-206). Peirce describes introspection as the ability to have a “direct perception of the internal world” (W2: 206). This definition of introspection seems to echo the Cartesian view that we can have direct and transparent access to the narrow contents of our mental states. In order to firmly oppose Descartes and show that we have no power of introspection, Peirce first begins with the example of seeing the colour red. Peirce claims that it is often thought there is an internal element to our sensations. He argues those who believe this understand that “the sensation of redness is as it is, owing to the constitution of the mind; and in this sense it is a sensation of something internal” (W2: 206). Contrarily, Peirce suggests that “that knowledge would, in fact, be an inference from redness as a predicate of something external,” not as a sensation of something internal (W2: 206).

Peirce wants to extend this reasoning to mental states like emotions. Traditionally, it is thought that emotions do not arise as predicates, but are referable to the mind alone, such that we can have knowledge of the emotions without inference from external facts. However, Peirce argues that:

if a man is angry, his anger implies, in general, no determinate and constant character in its object... on the other hand... there is some relative character in the outward thing which makes him angry, and a little reflection will serve to show that his anger consists in his saying to himself, "this thing is vile, abominable, etc." and that it is rather a mark of returning reason to say, "I am angry." (W2: 206)

Peirce's example outlines that even the emotions (typically thought of as purely internal states) are inferences from the external world. The man realizing he is angry, is the conclusion to the premise: his saying “this thing is vile”. What is often mistaken as introspection, then, is simply

an inference from facts about the external world. In this way, even introspection is mediated by representations, and this leads Peirce to propose his view of the semiotic mind.

We arrive, finally, at the most important question: “whether we can think without signs?” (W2: 207). Peirce forcefully argues that “if we seek the light of external facts<sup>9</sup>, the only cases of thought which we can find are of thought in signs” (W2: 207). Since thought can only be known by reference to external facts, and since, by the blind spot on the retina, our knowledge of external facts take semiotic form, “the only thought, then, which can possibly be cognized is thought in signs” (W2: 207). And further, since “thought which cannot be cognized [such as intuitions and introspections] does not exist” it follows that all thought “must necessarily be in signs” (W2: 207). One can understand Peirce as arguing that, if we have no faculty of intuition or introspection, then all thoughts are interpreted *as/in* signs, and this is necessarily the case. Furthermore, Peirce argues that “from the proposition that every thought is a sign, it follows that every thought must address itself to some other, must determine some other, since that is the essence of a sign” (W2: 207). Continuing, in his subsequent essay, “Some Consequences,” Peirce claims that “there is absolutely no first cognition of any object, but cognition arises by a continuous process” (W2: 214). That we think in signs, taken in conjunction with the fact that all cognitions rise from a continuous process, gives rise to a conception of cognition as a continuous process of signs that point to other signs. Each thought we have addresses a further thought, and so on, and so on *ad infinitum*. In this way, for Peirce, “every thought must be interpreted in another” (W2: 208). In other words, there can be “no cognition not determined by a previous cognition,” no sign which does not point to another sign (W2: 209).

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<sup>9</sup> Notice Peirce’s subtle play on words here, referencing Descartes’ seeking the *natural light of reason*.



Consciousness, then, is semiotic in nature, and takes the form of what Peirce calls a “thought-sign” (W2: 223). The “thought-sign” consists in life as a train of thought—“each former thought suggests something to the thought which follows it, i.e., is the sign of something to this latter” (W2: 223). As Short points out, the “thought-sign” is both an infinite “*progressus*” and an infinite “*regressus*” (Short 34). Cognition involves an infinite *progressus* because, as I have previously shown, every thought, being a sign, must address itself to a subsequent “more developed” interpretant (CP 2.228). This interpretant, then, becomes a sign that addresses another interpretant which itself becomes a sign and so on ’til death. The thought-sign involves an infinite *regressus* then, because, at the same time that thought stretches out infinitely into the future, it also traces back infinitely to the beginning—the first cognition. But since, as Peirce argues above, there is no first cognition of the object, there is no way to arrive at an immediate conception of it. So, Short says each thought-sign is both “a sign that interprets the preceding thought-sign that determines it, and it is a sign interpreted in the succeeding thought-sign that it determines” (Short 34). Given Peirce’s denial of intuition and introspection, he has no choice but to accept that a sequence of thought stretches infinitely in each direction. “Otherwise,” Short notes, “we come to an intuition at one end or to a self-explanatory thought at the other end” (Short 35). Thought thus “stretches infinitely in both directions, toward the past and toward the future” (Short 34). Though it is important to note that, by infinity of thought, Peirce has a continuum in mind. That is, similarly to how “an infinity of real numbers are packed into the finite interval between 0 and 1, so also an infinity of thoughts may be packed into a finite period of consciousness<sup>10</sup>” (Short 35). As such, Peirce claims that “there is no exception, therefore, to

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<sup>10</sup> One can think of the “0” in this continuum as being the *thing in-itself*. Peirce calls this “the ideal first, which is quite singular, and quite out of consciousness. The ideal first is the particular thing-in-itself. It does not exist *as such*” (Peirce W2:238). It does not exist as such because we can have no pure intuition

the law that every thought-sign is translated or interpreted in a subsequent one, unless it be that all thought comes to an abrupt and final end in death” (W2: 224). Without the powers of intuition or introspection, all mental action takes the form of the thought-sign—*all cognition is necessarily in signs*.

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of it, only a representation of it mediated through signs. The “I” in this continuum, then, can be thought of as reality. As Peirce describes, reality is an “*ens* such as would stand in the long run. The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus the very origin of the conception of reality show that this conception essentially involves the notion of a community, without definite limits” (W2: 239). So, the thought-sign stands between, on the one hand, the thing-in-itself, and on the other hand, reality. As inquiry progresses, we slowly approximate back toward the thing-in-itself (though never actually reach it) and simultaneously forward toward a conception of reality that is *in* signs (though never actually reach it) (Short 37).

## Semiosis and the Crisis of Meaning

So far, I have provided an outline of Peirce's early account of signs by trying to trace the drift of his thought about signs. I have shown, through Short and Hoopes, how his early work on representation is the first dawning that leads to his ultimate conclusions that both: 1) the universe is composed entirely of signs; and 2) that all thought is necessarily in signs. I further outlined how, unlike for Saussure, Peirce's semiotic consists in the triadic relation of object-sign-interpretant. I also showed that each relatum of the triadic formulation is grounded in one of Peirce's three categories of being and that there are three further classifications of signs (icons, indications, and symbols) that also relate to the categories. Finally, I returned to Peirce's Cognition Series to show how his denial of the faculties of intuition and introspection allow him to propose the Doctrine of the Thought-Sign which places the process of cognition within a continuum of signs stretching infinitely in each direction.

In its early formulation, the doctrine of the thought-sign leads to an unlimited semiosis. Since the process of signification stretches infinitely in each direction, it never stops, but keeps on going and going. From the moment we think in signs, there are only signs—*all the way down, all the way up, and all the way out in each direction*. In "What is a Sign?" Peirce claims that "it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow. *Omne symbolum de symbolo*" [every symbol follows from a symbol] (EP 2.10). Since, as Hoopes expounds, meaning is found in the interpretant; and since, as Short notes, each interpretant leads to another, there does not appear to be anyway to obtain meaning within a sequence of thought-signs. This is precisely because any given interpretant at time  $t$  has the potential of becoming more developed by a further interpretant at a time sufficiently in the future. Furthermore, any given interpretant at time  $t$

cannot be said to contain complete access to the thing-in-itself, either. Thus, there does not seem to be anyway to arrive at a final interpretant of what the sign is a sign of. We are caught up in the continuum of signs from before the beginning—placed in a vast labyrinth of signs from which there is no way out.

This brief account of the problem of semiosis and the crisis of meaning is intensified by Derrida's reading of Peirce in *Of Grammatology*. I have only sketched the contours of the problem here, so that it can be brought into focus more clearly, with textual support from Derrida, in the following chapter. To foreshadow where I am ultimately headed, Short, Umberto Eco, and Vincent Colapietro note that the problem of unlimited semiosis confronting Peirce's doctrine of the thought-sign has been grossly misinterpreted by Derrida (Short 42; Eco "Unlimited Semiosis" 205-07; Colapietro "Ground of Semiosis" 129-31). Peirce was aware of the problem of semiosis and made great attempts later in his life to overcome it. The shift from Peirce's early semiotic account, to his mature account, hinges on addressing this problem of semiosis. For, contrary to Derrida's reading, Peirce did not believe that the claim that *all thought is in signs* rises at the expense of meaning and truth. On the contrary, Peirce provides all the tools necessary to arrive at conception of reality, in Thirdness, and bursting with meaning. Until then, though, I must pinpoint exactly where Derrida enters the fray.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Derrida and the Dawn of Deconstruction

*Imaginations as candescent as ...Derrida's do not blaze very often. We should not let the constant brouhaha around Derrida—created, for the most part, by people who have not read his books—either rush us into premature judgements or hinder us from being glad to be his contemporaries.*

—Richard Rorty, “Derrida and the Philosophical Tradition” (1998, 328)

Jacques Derrida is an enigma. It is difficult to know where to begin with Derrida because so much has been written about him already. On the one hand, some have praised Derrida for his playful, but rigorous, criticisms of, what he calls, the “logocentric metaphysics of presence”—which he traces from Plato through to Descartes, Kant, Frege, Husserl and so on into the 20th century (Derrida OG 49). Rudolphe Gasché elucidates how Derrida works from *The Tain of the Mirror*. The *Tain* referring to “the tinfoil, the silver lining, the lustreless back of the mirror” (Gasché 6). Gasché is taking Derrida seriously, and placing him in high honour, when he writes:

Derrida's philosophy, rather than being a philosophy of reflection, is engaged in the systematic exploration of that dull surface without which no reflection and no specular and speculative activity would be possible, but which at the same time has no place and no part in reflection's scintillating play. (Gasché 6)

Derrida's deconstructions function to overturn metaphysics by exposing the very “dull surface” that makes philosophical reflection possible—exposing the limit of possibility which is never present within the “scintillating play.”

On the other hand, Derrida's work has been met with resistance, ranging from skepticism to disdain, by many important philosophers. In an interview with *Reason*, John Searle recalls a humorous encounter with Foucault:

I once said this to Michel Foucault, who was more hostile to Derrida even than I am, and Foucault said that Derrida practiced the method of *obscurantisme terroriste* (terrorism of obscurantism). We were speaking French. And I said, “What the hell do you mean by that?” And he said, “He writes so obscurely you can’t tell what he’s saying, that’s the obscurantism part, and then when you criticize him, he can always say, ‘You didn’t understand me; you’re an idiot.’ That’s the terrorism part.”<sup>11</sup>

Derrida is thus a controversial philosopher who receives just as much criticism as he does praise. But, does Derrida practice *obscurantisme terroriste*? Or have Searle and Foucault failed to see through to the “dull side” of the mirror? In what follows, I will take Derrida as seriously as I can, and try to uncover what he is up to when he refers to Peirce in *Of Grammatology*.

The main aim of this chapter is to provide the necessary background of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* so that his reading of Peirce can be properly explicated. Now, Derrida only ever mentions Peirce for a few pages in all of *Of Grammatology* and his reading of Peirce is cast to the wayside almost as soon as it is broached. Derrida shifts from a critique of Saussure, through to Peirce, and then back to Saussure—leaving Peirce at the margins of the *movement*<sup>12</sup> of his deconstruction. However, Derrida praises Peirce and his reading of Peirce marks a crucial step along the way to his “de-construction<sup>13</sup> of the transcendental signified” (Derrida 49).

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted from:

Postrel, Steven, and Edward Feser. “Reality Principles: An Interview with John R. Searle.” Reason.com, Reason, 1 Feb. 2000. Web.

<sup>12</sup> I use “movement” because, as we will see, signs are always on the move and deconstruction is a process or movement through signs.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida writes “de-construction” rather than “deconstruction” because the transcendental signified is constructed at the very moment its deconstruction begins to unfold. And so, the hyphen is meant to signify the simultaneous construction or desire to have a signified and the very same instance that that signified is put beyond the play of signifiers. This will all make some more sense as our discussion develops.

Furthermore, it is Derrida himself who believes that in order to understand what is at stake in a particular text of philosophy, we must look to the margins of the philosophical text—to see where the author has limited their scope and find ways to show how the margins of the text undermine the text’s central governing structure. If we take Derrida seriously then (and I do), we should not so hastily gloss over his reading of Peirce, but rather, conduct a thorough excavation of his use of Peirce at the margins of *Of Grammatology*. Such an excavation might show where Derrida himself has gone astray, in his eventual turning back to Saussure moments later. For, Derrida once wrote that “every particular borrowing brings along with it the whole of metaphysics” (Derrida *Writing and Difference*, 281). It seems then, that at the very moment Derrida evokes Peirce, he opens himself up to Peirce’s entire philosophy—leaves a “trace” back to Peirce that has, at least, the potential to turn itself back on the very reading of Peirce that Derrida deploys. In what follows then, I track Derrida’s deconstruction of the Saussurean sign up until the point where he summons Peirce, I analyze Derrida’s reading of Peirce, pinpoint the “trace” back into Peirce’s work, and then follow that trace, in the final chapter, toward Peirce’s mature semiotic, which seems, to question Derrida’s use of Peirce’s early semiotic formulation. Before pinpointing the specific aspects of Derrida that pertain to the question of semiosis in Peirce, however, it would be helpful to both briefly iterate some of the main ways that Derrida has been deployed by his followers in the recent years and give an account of the greater project that Derrida is pursuing in *Of Grammatology*.

## Four Different Derrida(s)

There are at least four different Derrida(s). The first is the Derrida taken up by scholars in literature and rhetoric departments around the globe. This Derrida is praised for developing the *method* of “deconstruction”—a particular way of reading literary texts that seeks to reveal *what is really going on*, between the lines, and deep within the structures of the text. In “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” Richard Rorty claims that he “has never been able to figure out what this method is, nor what was being taught...” to students in literature departments *as* the method of deconstruction (Rorty, “Remarks” 15). He states that he thinks of Derrida’s so-called deconstruction only as *the sort of thing that Derrida does* (Rorty, “Remarks” 16).

Derrida’s ‘method’ of deconstruction (applied to literary texts) is not of concern here. For the present purposes, we should heed Rorty’s advice, quit thinking of Derrida as a literary critic, and begin to take him more seriously as a philosopher—not as a philosopher of language either, but as a philosopher who “has a great deal to tell us about philosophy” (Rorty “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing” 308).

The second Derrida is placed, not in the literary tradition, but in the realm of philosophy. This is the Derrida that was taken seriously by thinkers in the American analytic tradition. Most notably is Samuel Wheeler. In *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy*, Wheeler presents a series of essays that attempts to get Derrida on the same wavelength as Quine, Davidson, and Wittgenstein—to cast Derrida as a kind of French Wittgenstein. Here, and contrary to Rorty’s aforementioned claim, Wheeler makes Derrida out to be a philosopher of language—one who shares, with Quine and Davidson, worries about a “magic language” consisting of self-interpreting marks (Wheeler 15; 61-2). Wheeler hopes to show those philosophers—who tend to



disdain Derrida—that, in fact, Derrida shares many affinities with their projects in the philosophy of language. Only, Derrida approached the problems from the perspective of a vocabulary stemming from Hegel, while his counterparts in America often inherit the vocabulary of Kant and Frege. The point is, however, that those in analytic philosophy should not dismiss Derrida wholesale, but consider the many fruitful connections his work shares with some of the leading philosophers in their tradition. Wheeler attempts to build a bridge from the *Continent* to *America*—bridge the gap between so-called continental and so-called analytic philosophy. This second Derrida—call him Wheeler’s Derrida—is not of primary concern, either. In the present inquiry, I follow Wheeler only insofar as I am attempting to bridge the gap between Peircean pragmatism and Derrida’s deconstruction.

Thirdly, there is Rorty’s Derrida. Rorty’s Derrida is not strictly a philosopher of language (though he ascribes to and is sympathetic with Wheeler’s project). For Rorty, Derrida is best thought of as an ironist stemming from the Hegel-Nietzsche-Heidegger trajectory of thought. Rorty writes:

To understand Derrida, one must see his work as the latest development in this non-Kantian [and so Hegelian], dialectical tradition—the latest attempt of the dialecticians to shatter the Kantians’ ingenious image of themselves as accurately representing how things really are. (Rorty “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing” 307)

For Rorty’s Derrida, philosophy is nothing more than a kind of writing. Contrary to those who follow from Kant, for Rorty’s Derrida, there is just no way to move beyond writing to accurately represent the things in themselves—the whole division between *noumena* and *phenomena* evaporates into a system of writing. “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology* (Derrida OG 158). *There is nothing outside of the text*—there is no outside-the-

text. From the very beginning, we are placed within the text. And just as there is no final accumulation of history (but history just keeps on unfolding), so too is there no final written text that would hold all the truths of philosophy in place at once. As Rorty notes, for Derrida, “no one can make sense of the notion of a last commentary, a last discussion note, a good piece of writing which is more than the occasion for a better piece” (Rorty “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing” 328). But this conclusion should not to be met with disdain.

We need to give up the Kantian hope that philosophy can be something *more* than a kind of writing. Rather, we need to follow Derrida who adamantly claims: “On the contrary we must *affirm* it—in the sense that Nietzsche brings affirmation into play—with a certain laughter<sup>14</sup> and with a certain dance” (Derrida “Speech and Phenomenon” 159). By affirming the notion of philosophy as a kind of writing, rather than disdaining it, we approach the text of philosophy with joy. We find, in the absence of the thing-in-itself (in the claim that philosophy is nothing more than writing), a kind of “limitlessness of play” (Derrida OG 50). In other words, by saying that there is no way to pierce through writing to get to the noumena, there is only writing and more writing. The joy is found in that fact that more writing and more writing still will result in *better*, new and interesting ways of understanding the history of philosophy—the play of philosophical ideas through history and into the future.

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<sup>14</sup> To get a sense of the kind of laughter Derrida has in mind, one might recall the passage in Nietzsche where Zarathustra comes across a shepherd “writhing, gagging, in spasms, his face distorted”—a “heavy black snake” having slithered into his throat while he was asleep. Zarathustra, tugging on the snake in vain, urges the man to bite down with all his might—to chew the head off the snake and spit it out. The shepherd bites “with a good bite” and spews the snake out of him. The shepherd jumps up and begins to laugh. Zarathustra remarks: “Never yet on earth has a human being laughed as he laughed! O my brothers, I heard a laughter that was no human laughter; and now a thirst gnaws at me, a longing that never grows still.” (Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “The Vision and the Riddle,” qtd. in *The Portable Nietzsche* 271-72).

Now, since Rorty is ultimately concerned with social hope and the public usefulness of philosophical views, he is at pains to stake out the usefulness of Derrida's insistence that philosophy is just writing. On the one hand, the claim that philosophy is just writing is in accord with Rorty's neopragmatist tracts: if philosophy is just writing, then the meat of it hinges on the way in which philosophical texts operate within historical epochs. Philosophical writing is deployed for one purpose or another within a particular culture at a particular juncture in history. On the other hand, while Rorty agrees with Derrida on the point that philosophy is just writing, he does not think that Derrida's later "deconstructions" of particular philosophical texts are useful to society at the public level. Rather, Rorty thinks that Derrida's many unique deconstructions should be relegated to the private sphere—they do not add to social progress but make up the musings of a poetic philosopher in private. Hence, Rorty's view of Derrida as a private ironist (Rorty *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 125; "Remarks on Pragmatism and Deconstruction" 16). In this way, when Derrida writes of circumcision or of masturbation in Rousseau, he is not offering up a philosophical view pertinent to the public domain but is rather embracing the play of philosophy qua writing in the private domain. By framing Derrida as a private ironist, Rorty is able to forgive him for approaching the texts of philosophy on his own terms. Derrida does not care whether he is providing the "correct" reading of a philosophical text (because, for Derrida, there is no final reading of a text) nor whether he is giving adequate argumentation (in the traditional logical sense) to support his readings, but rather prefers to *play* with his favourite philosophical heroes in ways that please his idiosyncratic fancy.

When I say that Derrida does not care to give arguments to support his readings, I do not mean this as an insult or defamation. Although, some, like Thomas Short, have negatively

responded to Derrida's lack of deploying adequate argumentation (Short 45). Derrida very clearly writes that

There is argumentation and argumentation... and I think that the accusations that are often made against deconstruction derive from the fact that its raising the stakes of argumentation is not taken into account. The fact that it is always a question of reconsidering the protocols and the contexts of argumentation, the questions of competence, the language of discussion, etc. (Derrida "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism" 78)

Derrida's point is that deconstructive readings lift philosophy out of the realm of traditional logical argumentation. Rather than considering the propositional form of a philosophical text (to determine its validity or soundness or to poke holes in its premises), a deconstructive reading always takes a step back and considers the particular context in which the argument is being deployed. By "raising the stakes" in this way, Derrida attempts to show that we cannot distill a philosophical argument into its logical components because to do so would be to limit the possible ways in which we can read or interpret the text—it would be to constrain the play of the text by fixating it within a logical center that governs and restricts the wide array of possible interpretive moves available to the 'reader'.

Derrida calls this *raising the stakes* "pragmatology" and uses the word to try to outline at least one similarity between his own deconstruction and Rorty's neopragmatism. So, when Rorty uses Derrida to outline his view that the meaning of philosophical writing depends on the way that it is deployed within a given epoch, we can understand Rorty (and Derrida too) not as doing away with argumentation, but as raising the stakes of argumentation to consider the pragmatic contexts in which the arguments are deployed. We can think of this move as a kind of

looking-to-the-margins that inform argumentation; or as a kind of letting-the-margins inform argumentation.

It is worth noting, however, that while Derrida and Rorty are on the same page regarding argumentation, Derrida does not agree with Rorty's reading of him as a private ironist. Derrida claims that he "obviously cannot accept the public/private distinction in the way he [Rorty] uses it in relation to my work" (Derrida "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism" 78). Derrida writes that, rather than think of his writing as choosing the private over the public, one would do better to think of his later work as "performative problematizations of the public/private distinction" (Derrida "Remarks" 79). In this way, by problematizing the very distinction that Rorty deploys, Derrida is showing the public usefulness of his later texts. I will refrain from showing exactly how Derrida does problematize the public/private distinction. I merely wish to point out that Derrida himself does not agree entirely with Rorty's reading of him as a private ironist. We should not, then, let Rorty's Derrida as a private ironist inform our entire conception of Derrida.

Rather, we should think of Rorty's Derrida much like we think of Wheeler's Derrida: as trying to make a French Wittgenstein out of Derrida. In "Derrida and the Philosophical Tradition" Rorty writes that "People like me, who esteem Davidson and Wittgenstein equally and for the same reasons, typically read both men as nominalists, and thus as people who will have no truck with transcendental philosophy—with the discovery of conditions of possibility..." (Rorty "Derrida and the Philosophical Tradition" 331). By trying to get Derrida on the same wavelength as Wittgenstein and Davidson, Rorty ends up reading Derrida as a kind of nominalist who is equally displeased with the talk of transcendental philosophy. Rorty wants to read Derrida, like he reads Davidson and Wittgenstein, as showing that only the third dogma of

empiricism<sup>15</sup> gives one reason to divide philosophy into two separate realms: an empirical realm [content] that pursues the causal conditions of actuality and a transcendental realm [scheme] that pursues conditions of possibility (Rorty 331). Borrowing from Geoffrey Bennington (who we will hear from shortly), Rorty wants to say (quoting Bennington) that nominalists like Derrida, Davidson, and Wittgenstein show that

any philosophy which gives itself world [content] and language [scheme] as two separate realms separated by an abyss that has to be crossed remains caught, at the very point of the supposed crossing, in the circle of dogmatism and relativism that is unable to break. (Bennington 103; Rorty “Derrida and...” 331)

As we have seen earlier, Rorty’s Derrida claims that philosophy, once thought of as a kind of writing, distills the divide between *noumena* and *phenomena* in Kant. This move functions here to simultaneously distill the divide between language and world in Bennington and scheme and content in Davidson. Rorty seems to have good reason to want to place Derrida alongside Davidson and Wittgenstein—to say, that once this gap has been collapsed, Derrida has freed himself from the chains of transcendental philosophy. However, Rorty admits that “for all the jokey and raunchy desublimizing that goes on in Derrida’s books, it is not clear that such escape, escape from a dusty fly-bottle, is what he wants” (Rorty “Derrida and...” 332).

This move, by Wheeler and Rorty, to turn Derrida into a Wittgensteinian nominalist who wishes to leave the traditional problems of philosophy behind—step outside of the transcendental domain of philosophy (outside of Wittgenstein’s “fly-bottle”) and into writing—has been met with resistance by the fourth Derrida.

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<sup>15</sup> The third dogma of empiricism was popularized by Davidson in his essay “On The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” in which he extends Quine’s “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (reductionism and the analytic-synthetic distinction) to tend to the distinction between language (scheme) and world (content). Davidson wants to say that we cannot draw such a distinction between scheme and content.

The fourth Derrida is perhaps the closest to Derrida's Derrida (though, as we will soon see, there is no Derrida's Derrida because, for Derrida, there is no pure conception of the self or transcendental signified). The fourth Derrida is the Derrida of Geoffrey Bennington. Bennington wants to maintain a quasi-transcendental tone in Derrida's work. He holds that, contrary to Rorty's reading, Derrida does not do away with transcendental philosophy wholesale, but remains in a quasi-transcendental mode of philosophical thinking. Derrida, as quasi-transcendentalist, would say that it is not a matter of choosing the empirical over the transcendental, but of letting the empirical play the role that the transcendental once played (Rorty "Derrida and..." 333). In this way, Bennington claims that, for Derrida, there is no way to sever one's self completely from the metaphysical logos—every philosophical position that claims to be empirical is always going to be bogged down by a kind of *transcendental contraband* (Bennington 309). This is precisely because the empirical, typically furnished in finitude, is what gives rise to the condition of possibility of transcendence<sup>16</sup>.

Bennington marks this *transcendental contraband* in the following difficult, but important, passage:

If one says that finitude is in some sense the condition of transcendence, one makes it into the condition of possibility of transcendence, and one thus puts it into a transcendental position with respect to transcendence. But the ultra-transcendental thus produced puts into question the very structure of transcendence, which it pulls back down onto a feature that transcendence would like to consider as empirical... This deconstruction moves toward a comprehension of any discourse ruled by the empirical/transcendental opposition and everything that goes along with it: but this movement, which would traditionally be represented as a movement upward... is in fact, or at the

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<sup>16</sup> By "transcendence" I think Bennington is playing with two senses of the word: in the first sense, the transcendent is beyond the finite or actual—it is that which exists beyond the play of signs. In the second sense, transcendence is meant to signify the Kantian project of transcendental idealism—the doctrine that the conditions of possibility of all experience are space and time and the categories.

same time, a movement “downward,” for it is the empirical and contingent, themselves necessarily displaced... which are found higher than the high, higher than height, in height’s falling. *L’érection tombe*. (Bennington 279)

The main thrust of this passage hinges on the first claim that “If one says that finitude is in some sense the condition of transcendence, one makes it into the condition of possibility of transcendence, and one thus puts it into a transcendental position with respect to transcendence.” If, from a finite experience, we can ascertain, a-priori, the condition of transcendence—space and time as the form in which this finite experience must take place—then, in that instance, we make the finite into the condition of possibility of transcendence. That is to say, the finite experience is what makes the project of transcendental idealism possible. But in this move, one ends up putting the finite into “a transcendental position with respect to transcendence”—makes the finite out to be transcendental. And so, the finite and empirical is always bogged down by this transcendental contraband—by the inability to separate the finite from the transcendental.

At the very moment that the finite/empirical is chosen over the transcendental (as is the case with Rorty’s nominalistic Derrida), the empirical or finite position that Rorty is left with ends up making possible the very transcendental project that he is attempting to displace. The very distinction between the empirical and the transcendental becomes, for Bennington’s Derrida, both “inescapable and forever unusable” (Rorty “Derrida and... 333). As Bennington continues: ““Quasi-Transcendental” names what results from this displacement, by maintaining as legible the trace of a passage through the traditional opposition, and by giving this opposition a radical uncertainty” (Bennington 279). Bennington rephrases this “radical uncertainty” as a kind of “undecidability” thus signaling the inability to choose between either a purely empirical approach or a purely transcendental approach. Derrida is thus neither a purely transcendental philosopher, nor a philosopher whose claim that *there is nothing outside the text* provides good



reason to stop asking transcendental questions. Rather, he is caught in the space between these two opposing traditions: unable to come down firmly on either side of the divide, but willing to entertain the notion of a *trace* through the divide.

If we consider the quasi-transcendental notes in Derrida's writing, we see that Rorty's Derrida as French Wittgenstein is called into question. The nominalistic bent that Derrida's writing sometimes resembles does not, as Bennington warns, signal the end of philosophy (the end of asking transcendental questions). Furthermore, it does not mean, as Rorty's depiction of Derrida as a private ironist seems to suggest, that there is "no possible occupation left other than that of rifling through the dustbins of philosophy to get out of them the meager nourishment that the tradition had not managed to swallow" (Bennington 285). It does, however, suggest that there is no way for one to wiggle one's self out of this stranglehold "by sharpening the distinction between phenomena and things in themselves" (Bennington 286). This is because the distinction between phenomena and noumena is already cast into doubt by Derrida's claim that there is no way to get outside of the text (Bennington 286). Derrida, as a quasi-transcendentalist, is caught in "the milieu of differentiation"—in the differ-*a*-nce between the finite and transcendental (286). As Rorty describes: quasi-transcendentality is what you get "if you respect philosophy enough to realize that it is inescapable, but not enough to take the idea of conditions of possibility as seriously as Kant did" (Rorty "Derrida and..." 332). Bennington's Derrida seems to have just this attitude towards philosophy.

## Speech and Writing in *Of Grammatology*

So far, I have been trying to locate Derrida in the philosophical terrain. I have considered four different ways that Derrida's work has been deployed by his followers—some of whom wish to read Derrida as driving the final nail in the coffin of transcendental metaphysics, while others wish to maintain that Derrida cannot do away with the metaphysical logos completely. Now, I turn to give a brief account of the project that Derrida is up to in *Of Grammatology*. By outlining his critique of the tendency to favour speech over writing, I move toward the moment where Derrida evokes Peirce's theory of signs. Once the general project of *Of Grammatology* has been outlined, I will be in a position to give an account of Derrida's reading of Peirce. Afterwards, I will consider some of the ways that scholars of Peirce have responded to Derrida's reading. This will set the stage for the final chapter in which I will return to Peirce to show how he solves the problem of semiosis without doing away with meaning altogether.

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida turns his deconstructive eye toward the common trend to privilege speech over writing throughout the course of philosophical history. Particularly, Derrida's target is Saussure, although, to deconstruct Saussure, he needs to pass through Plato. His ultimate aim is to show that Saussure's choice, in his *Course in General Linguistics*, to favour the phonetic (spoken, interior, essential) system of signs over the graphic (written, exterior, inessential) system of signs has always already been intruded by writing. That is, by building his general semiology from phonetic foundations, Saussure limits the import of the written system of signs—restricts the play of writing to the margins by fixating on the presence of the spoken word. So, when Saussure *says* that sound is “the only true bond” which

“constitutes the unity of language throughout time” (Saussure 25), Derrida likens Saussure’s move to a kind of Platonism born out of the *Phaedrus*.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates warns of the *intrusion* of writing. Derrida writes that, for both Plato and Saussure, writing is *exterior* to speech: “writing would have the exteriority that one attributes to utensils; to what is even an imperfect tool and a dangerous, almost maleficent technique” (Derrida OG 34). Recall, Socrates claims that writing results in forgetfulness. That the truth can only be obtained through the dialogical method—through dialogue—through speaking with one another and challenging one another’s ideas. Writing can be misinterpreted, whereas, in speech, one can ease the listener out of misinterpreting the message being conveyed through a back and forth exchange. It is only through dialogue that we catch a glimpse of the forms and of our souls.

Derrida thus claims that “the *Phaedrus* denounced writing as the intrusion of an artful technique, a forced entry of a totally original sort, an archetypal violence: eruption of the *outside* within the *inside*...” (Derrida OG 34).<sup>17</sup> In other words, writing—blemished and imperfect—intrudes speech (which is interior). That is, writing—a violent force from the outside (from the exterior)—penetrates and threatens the inside of Saussure’s phonetic system.

Indeed, Saussure follows this Platonic denouement of writing. Derrida claims that:

For Saussure it [writing] is even a garment of perversion and debauchery, a dress of corruption and disguise, a festival mask that must be exorcised, that is to say warded off, by the good word. (Derrida OG 35)

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida seems to have his finger on the pulse of the whole divide between logic and rhetoric here. The “artfulness” of writing can be thought of as rhetoric which intrudes on and has been traditionally opposed to pure and genuine philosophical inquiry. Writing is a sophist technique. Speech is reserved for truth and philosophy.

And so, “writing is not a garment but a disguise,” Saussure says (Saussure 29). The system of graphic written signs gets in the way of the pure system of phonetic spoken signs—the phonetic signifier is closer in proximity to thought itself, while the graphic signifier is farther removed from thought. Writing should thus be forced to the exterior—left outside of a general semiology.

For Derrida though, Saussure’s best efforts to contain semiology within the confines of the phonetic signifier has already been undercut at the very moment Socrates marked the *intrusion* of writing:

By a slow movement whose necessity is hardly perceptible, everything that for at least some twenty centuries tended toward and finally succeeded in being gathered under the name of language is beginning to let itself be transferred to, or at least summarized under, the name of writing. (Derrida OG, 6)

His deconstruction of the relationship between speech and writing amounts to a complete debunking of the traditional opposition: once the deconstruction is underway, writing overtakes, or “usurps” (as in dethroning a king who once ruled), the power that speech is thought to have over language and writing (Derrida OG 37). In this way, Derrida writes that the ““Usurpation” has always already begun” (Derrida OG 37). The usurpation of the spoken word by a system of writing has been slowly gaining traction from the beginning of language and meaning. The intrusion of writing from the *outside* has always been present within the *inside*.

## Difference, Differance: What's the Difference?

One of the best ways to understand Derrida's deconstruction of Saussure's phonetic system of signs is by considering his 'concept' (I put 'concept' in scare quotes because it is not a concept so much as it is an "assemblage" of meanings) difference in his famous lecture "Differance" (Derrida "Differance" 129). Derrida begins this essay/lecture<sup>18</sup> with the following passage:

The verb "to differ" seems to differ from itself. On the one hand, it indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility; on the other, it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a *spacing* and *temporalizing*<sup>19</sup> that puts off until "later" what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible. (Derrida "Differance" 129)

For Derrida, *differance*<sup>20</sup> is an "assemblage" precisely because the word contains both of these meanings. In the one sense, difference (with an *e*) marks a distinction between two things. This is, of course, the meaning traditionally assigned to difference. It stems from the Greek word *diapherein*. In the second sense, Differance (with an *a*) marks a kind of deferral: a putting of until later. This second sense is not captured in the Greek *diapherein*, but instead, finds its etymological root in the Latin word *differre*. Derrida's difference (with an *a*) is meant to capture

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that this essay was delivered as a lecture at the meeting of the Société at the Sorbonne on January 27, 1968 (one year after *Of Grammatology* was published). It is important because, being a lecture, Derrida actually spoke the words herein. And the very fact that the context in which this piece was delivered meant that it was spoken, actually informs the point that Derrida is trying to make. If we consider the quote from earlier about how Derrida wishes to look to the context in which arguments are posed to get a full grasp of the position being articulated, we will see this lecture as a telling example of the kind of *raising the stakes of argumentation* that Derrida has in mind.

<sup>19</sup> Differance gives us the conditions of possibility: of space and time (spacing and temporalizing) as in Kant.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida never writes difference with a capital "D" because to do so would be to make the assemblage out to be a master-word, which governs the play of signs, like Heidegger's choice to capitalize Being.

and assemble both of these meanings together at the same time. Differance is to both differ and defer. Now, I will delve deeper into the upshots of Derrida's "assemblage" when I consider David Pettigrew's comparison of Peirce and Derrida later on. At the present, however, I want to pause here and consider how Derrida's "differance" helps to show that writing has always already intruded upon the spoken word.

Recall, first, that Derrida is delivering this piece as a lecture and so is conveying his message by speaking rather than by writing—we must *raise the stakes of argumentation* to grasp this point. Recall, second, that Derrida is speaking in the French language when he gives this lecture. Now, in French, there is no audible/phonetic (or *heard*) difference (with an *e* in the sense to mark a distinction) between the two meanings: difference and differance. It is impossible to know whether Derrida intends to mean difference (with an *a*) or differance (with an *e*) when he is speaking the word "differance" in French because, in both instances, the word rolls off the tongue in the exact same way. The difference between the two meanings cannot be marked phonetically, but only graphically, by a written signifier. Derrida says:

Now, in point of fact, it happens that this graphic difference (the *a* instead of the *e*), this marked difference between two apparently vocalic notations, between vowels, remains purely graphic: it is written or read but it is not heard... it remains, silent, secret and discreet, like a tomb... It is a tomb which cannot even be made to resonate. For I cannot even let you know, by my talk, now being spoken before the Société Française de Philosophie, which difference I am talking about at the very moment I speak of it.

(Derrida "Differance" 132)

There is thus a *limit* to phonetic signification which is exposed by the “assemblage” of difference. The phonetic signifier fails to mark the difference between the two senses of difference, whereas a graphic signifier can.

Derrida continues:

I can only talk about this graphic difference by keeping to a very indirect speech about writing, and on the condition that I specify each time I am referring to difference with an *e* or difference with an *a*... In any event, when I do specify which difference I mean—when I say “with an *e*” or “with an *a*”—this will refer irreducibly to a *written text*, a text governing my talk, a text that I keep in front of me, that I will read, and toward which I shall have to try to lead your hands and eyes. (Derrida “Difference” 132)

Derrida’s remark here relates back to our discussion of *Of Grammatology*. Derrida extends the limitations of the phonetic signifier by referring to a *written text* which serves to govern his speech about difference. Each time he says “with an *a*” or “with an *e*” he exposes the very difference that the phonetic signifier attempts to conceal. He, in each instance, lets the graphic difference be heard by paradoxically reducing the phonetic signifier within a graphic system of signs. Whereas, for Saussure, the graphic signifier is merely a representation of the spoken word, for Derrida in the case of difference, the phonetic signifier is only an imperfect representation of the purely graphic signifier—it is an imperfect representation because it fails to mark the difference between the two senses of difference. The roles are thus reversed in Derrida. Speech disguises writing, not the other way around.

The text governing Derrida’s talk usurps and displaces the phonetic signifier—drains it of its power over the system of signs. While Rousseau once said (and this is in accord with Plato and Saussure too) that “writing is nothing but the representation of speech” (Rousseau

“Fragment inédit d’un essai sur les langues” qtd. In Derrida OG 27) and so is a sign of a sign; Derrida wants to argue that “writing is not a sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true” (Derrida OG 43). Derrida thus concludes his deconstruction of the phonetic sign in *Of Grammatology* by claiming that

What Saussure saw without seeing, knew without being able to take into account... is that a certain model of writing was necessarily but provisionally imposed (but for the inaccuracy in principle, insufficiency of fact, and the permanent usurpation) as instrument and technique of representation of a language. (Derrida OG 45)

The imposition of writing on speech threatens the phonetic foundations (or origin) of Saussure’s general semiology.

More importantly, writing has threatened this origin from the very beginning—it has been permanently usurped from the start. We cannot appeal to *the bond of sound to unify language through time*. There is only writing; and it is only *then* that

one realizes that what was chased off limits, the wandering outcast of linguistics [writing], has indeed never ceased to haunt language as its primary and most intimate possibility. Then something which was never spoken and which is nothing other than writing itself as the origin of language writes itself within Saussure’s discourse. (Derrida OG 45)

Writing calls into question the conception of speech as the origin of language. Writing qua representation “mingles with what it represents [speech], to the point where one speaks as one writes, one thinks as if the represented were nothing more than the shadow or reflection of the representer” (Derrida OG 36). Writing stands in for speech as a representation stands in for its representer—as a sign of a sign—and so conceals and effaces what it represents: shows that “the



point of origin becomes ungraspable” (Derrida OG 36). We thus cannot maintain a radical distinction—as Saussure, Rousseau and Socrates tend to—between a purely spoken and a purely written system of signs. By a movement of deconstruction, the *outside* (writing) has become intimately interwoven with the *inside* (speech). With this radical distinction dissolved, Derrida moves to deconstruct the Saussurean sign (composed of signifier and signified) in its totality.

## The Detour of the Sign

For Derrida, it is only after the distinction between phonetic and graphic signifiers has been deconstructed that we can begin to deconstruct the Saussurean sign in its totality. Recall, from earlier, that the Saussurean sign consists, in its totality, as a combination of signifier and signified:

I propose to retain the word sign [signe] to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by signified [signifié] and signifier [signifiant]; the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts. (Saussure 67)

The signifier plays the role of the sound-image or signal and the signified plays the role of the concept (the sense and referent (or object) are both encompassed by the term signified). The two unify to form the sign in its totality: one can think of a piece of paper as being the sign; the signifier and the signified occupying the space on each side of the piece of paper. They are inseparable in the sense that they make up each side of the paper. However, the unity between signifier and signified is *arbitrary* and so is synchronically<sup>21</sup> marked by a structure of difference.

Indeed, Saussure's thesis of *the arbitrariness of the sign*, seems, for Derrida, to challenge the very distinction between phoneme and grapheme before it is even posed as a distinction. To explain how the sign, in its totality, comes prior to the distinction, we need to consider, more thoroughly, *the arbitrariness of the sign*. For Saussure, the thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign suggests that there is no natural link between the signifier and the signified: "The bond between

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<sup>21</sup> The diachronic axis marks the history of a word's meaning throughout time, while the synchronic axis contains the meaning of the word in a single instance in time; but only by its difference from other words held in place at that same time.

the signifier and the signified is arbitrary” (Saussure 67). That is to say, the signified is not motivated by an actual object existing in the world, nor is the signified tied to its signifier by a natural link. The connection between a signifier and its signified is only marked by its difference from the other signs at play within the system or structure of language. Saussure writes:

Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. The idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it. (Saussure 118)

The word, or signifier, ‘dog’ is not naturally tied to a four-legged furry creature (does not motivate the signified or concept dog), but only signifies the dog by its difference from other signs (like say, ‘cat’ or ‘donkey’). In this way, there can be no natural bond between a signifier and its signified, but only an arbitrary unity marked by difference.

Here, Saussure distinguishes his concept of the sign from the symbol.<sup>22</sup> Saussure claims that a symbol

is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified. The symbol of justice, a pair of scales, could not be replaced by just any other symbol, such as a chariot. (Saussure 68)

There seems then, to be a natural bond between the pair of scales and the symbol of justice—this bond has become natural because it has gained traction in a linguistic community, diachronically, through time. Whereas the symbol is seemingly naturally unified, the sign is arbitrarily unified:

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<sup>22</sup> This is not to be confused with Peirce’s use of the term “Symbol”. In fact, by symbol, Peirce means quite the opposite: that symbols, as we have seen, are conventional and determined by use, not natural. Derrida, as we will soon see, evokes Peirce precisely because his definition of “symbol” directly opposes Saussure’s use of the term.

“I mean that it is unmotivated [by nature], i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified” (Saussure 69).

Following, Derrida sets up a binary between natural motivated symbols and institutional unmotivated signs, between *physis* and *nomos*:

...from the moment that one considers the totality of determined signs, spoken, and a fortiori written, as unmotivated institutions [as arbitrarily unified], one must exclude any relationship of natural subordination, any natural hierarchy among signifiers or orders of signifiers. (Derrida OG 44)

For Derrida, the intrusion of writing (of grammatology (or the study of writing qua signs)) disturbs this binary between nature and institution—opens up the possibility of a total system of signs in general—a total system which must be thought before the division between grapheme and phoneme. “The very idea of institution—hence of the the arbitrariness of the sign—,” Derrida writes, “is unthinkable before the possibility of writing and outside its horizon” (Derrida OG 44). This is to say that we cannot make sense of Saussure’s thesis unless we have already contested the distinction between the phonetic and graphic system of signs. At the very moment that Saussure speaks of the arbitrariness of the sign, he calls into question his prior claim that the phonetic system of signs is, in some ways, more fundamental to the study of language than the graphic system of signs. He, in this instance, makes writing out to be a mere *symbol* of the spoken word: “We must then conclude that only the signs called *natural*, those that Hegel and Saussure call “symbols,” escape semiology as grammatology” (Derrida OG 45). It is precisely because Saussure makes writing out to be a symbol—and thus as a *natural* representation of the spoken word—that he is able to exclude writing from his general semiology which deals only

with signs. *Symbols*, which are natural and thus motivated, are for Saussure, opposed to *signs* which are arbitrary and unmotivated.

But Derrida finds, in Saussure's thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign, the means to turn Saussure's opposition between sign and symbol—between speech and writing—in on itself:

The thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign thus indirectly but irrevocably contests Saussure's declared proposition when he chases writing to the outer darkness of language. This thesis successfully accounts for a conventional [and so instituted] relationship between the phoneme and the grapheme... but by the same token it forbids that the latter be an "image" of the former... One must therefore challenge, in the very name of the arbitrariness of the sign, the Saussurean definition of writing as "image"—hence as natural symbol—of language.

(Derrida *OG* 45)

By showing that the relationship between writing and speech—grapheme and phoneme—is conventional and instituted, Derrida challenges the Saussurean division between symbol and sign: makes the symbol out to be a sign "within a total system open, let us say, to all possible investments of sense" (Derrida *OG* 45). And for Derrida we must begin, not with a division between symbol and sign—speech and writing or *physis* and *nomos*—but with "the possibility of that total system" (45). The beginning has already begun before the separation of sign and symbol—the whole history of metaphysics springs from the possibility of this total system of signs composed of signifiers and signifieds.

Derrida's move to consider the total system of signs brings along with it the concept of the *trace*. In her preface to *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Spivak clarifies that, for Derrida, the word *trace* in French connotes "track," "footprint," and "imprint" (Spivak xv). The *trace* is a word

“that cannot be a master-word [in the sense that Heidegger makes Being out to be a master-word], that presents itself as a mark of interior presence, origin, master” (Spivak xv). In the case of signs (composed of signifier and signified in the Saussurean sense), the *trace* marks a passage, or foot trail, back to a moment of originary *différance* between the signifier and the signified. I use *différance* (with an *a*) here, carefully, to suggest that the point of difference between signifier and signified, for Derrida, is not only different (as with an *e*) but also deferred (as with an *a*)—or put off indefinitely. That is to say, the signifier is forever different from the signified and that that difference is put off or deferred indefinitely.

For Derrida, the great error of metaphysics is to seek a unity between signifier and signified which would declare that “a sign brings forth the presence of a signified” (Spivak xvi). The longing to seek the presence of the signified—to ascertain the truth of all signs by fixating on the presence of the signified—is the main thrust of the logocentric metaphysics of presence that Derrida is ultimately deconstructing. In Derrida, there can be no such unity between signifier and signified. The presence of the signified is put off, or deferred, by an endless succession of signifiers, or traces. We can imagine Derrida, then, as peeling Saussure’s piece of paper apart such that the signifier is separated from the signified. Spivak writes that:

Word and thing or thought never in fact become one. We are reminded of, referred to, what the convention of words sets up as thing or thought, by a particular arrangement of words. The structure of reference works and can go on working not because of the identity between these so-called components parts of the sign, but because of their relationship of difference. The sign marks a place of difference. (Spivak xvi)

The Saussurean conception of the sign leaves a *trace* to this “place of difference.”

Now for Derrida, both the phonetic and graphic system of signs are made possible by the same structure of *différance* in general. This allows Derrida to claim that “what opens the possibility of thought is not merely the question of being [as in Heidegger], but also the never-annulled difference from the “completely other” [the *completely other*, here, playing the role of the signified]” (Spivak xvii). The *completely other* plays the role of the signified because the signified is *other than* the signifier—is always *different from* the signifier. Bennington clarifies this point when he writes that, for Derrida, *différance* marks the “differentiality or being-different of those differences” (Bennington 71). The being-different (or *différance*) is what produces and maintains the differences between, say, time and space (in Kant), beings and Being (in Heidegger), and signifier and signified (in Saussure). *Différance* is what makes the difference possible—is the condition of possibility for all possible interpretation (and is thus thought before, or prior to, all of the differences mentioned above).

The *différance* which produces the difference between signifier and signified, then, is what keeps one from unifying the signifier and signified within the confines of the sign. And with this lack of unity, we ruin the notion of the Saussurean sign in its totality. In this way, Spivak claims that the “the structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other [signified] which is forever absent” (Spivak xvii). The signifier leaves a *trace* to this signified, but the *trace* never leads one to the signified, only to another signifier.

Derrida must then borrow a technique from Heidegger and put the Saussurean sign *under erasure* (*Sous rature*):

the sign must be the unity of a heterogeneity, since the signified (sense or thing, noeme or reality) is not in itself a signifier, a *trace*: in any case is not constituted in its sense by a relationship with a possible trace... This is the inevitable response as soon as one asks:

“what is the sign?,” that is to say, when one submits the sign to the question of essence, to the “ti esti.” The “formal essence” of the sign can only be determined in terms of presence. One can not get around that response, except by challenging the very form of the question and beginning to think that the sign ~~is~~ that ill-named ~~thing~~, the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy: “What is...?” (Derrida OG 18-9)

Put *sous rature*, the sign ~~is~~ that ill-named ~~thing~~. The ‘is’ and the ‘thing’ in the sentence are crossed out because, as Derrida shows earlier in the passage, the sign is not actually the thing or signified: the presence of the signified is deferred, but the signifier still leaves a trace to this signified. In this way, the ‘is’ and ‘thing’ still play a role in the structure of signs, but by crossing them out, Derrida strips them of their presence. Derrida clarifies a few pages later that:

That deletion is the final writing of an epoch. Under its strokes the presence of a transcendental signified is effaced while still remaining legible. Is effaced while still remaining legible, is destroyed while making visible the very idea of the sign. In as much as it de-limits onto-theology, the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism, this last writing is also the first writing. (Derrida OG 23).

By showing that the signified is never present within the play of signifiers, Derrida marks the closure of the metaphysics of presence—the desire to reach the signified in all its splendor. The signified becomes transcendent: is placed beyond the play of signifiers. In doing so, he destroys the unity of the Saussurean sign as signifying presence, while at the same time, laying the concept of the sign bare through difference. We see the sign split apart, not as a unity between signifier and signified, but as an indefinite stream of signifiers that constantly defer the presence of the signified. The mark of this closure, found only once the sign is put *sous rature*, is the end of the metaphysics of presence, but only the beginning of deconstruction.



Before I turn to Peirce, I point out one more passage from Derrida, found in his lecture “Differance,” that helps to summarize the movement of the deconstruction of Saussure’s sign that I have been tracking in this section. Since, in this lecture, Derrida is speaking to a general audience, his description of the deconstruction of the Saussurean sign is especially clear. The passage nicely sums up the meat of Derrida’s critique of Saussure. Derrida writes:

Let us begin with the problem of signs and writing—since we are already in the midst of it. We ordinarily say that a sign is put in place of the thing itself, the present thing —“thing” holding here for the sense as well as the referent. Signs represent the present in its absence; they take the place of the present. When we cannot take hold of or show the thing, let us say the present, the being-present, when the present does not present itself, then we signify, *we go through the detour of signs*.<sup>23</sup> We take up or give signs; we make signs. The sign would thus be a deferred presence. Whether it is a question of verbal or written signs, monetary signs, electoral delegates, or political representatives, the movement of signs defers the moment of encountering the thing itself, the moment at which we could lay hold of it, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, have a present intuition of it. (Derrida “Differance” 138)

What Derrida is expressing here is profound: the signifier does not signify its signified, but rather, the absence of its signified. The sign thus signifies deferred presence. From the moment that we pose a system of signs, we have no choice but to pass through the *detour of the sign*.

Imagine, if you will, that you are driving to a destination. Let’s call the destination the signified. For Derrida, you never actually get to the destination you are seeking—you never reach the signified. At each turn or crossroads, when the destination seems a little bit closer, you

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<sup>23</sup> My emphasis.

come across a sign for a detour. You have no choice but to veer in the direction of the sign. You follow the sign, hoping it will lead you to your destination. But you never get there. At the next turn, there is only another detour sign. And, at the turn after that, another. And still after that, another; and so on ad infinitum. You just keep on driving until you run out of gas or die. You never reach the signified but are forever enclosed in this series of detours—in the detour of the sign. Indeed, the sign is “only conceivable *on the basis of* the presence that it defers and *in view of* the deferred presence one intends to reappropriate (Derrida “Differance” 138). It is this very structure of differance that allows for the de-construction of the transcendental signified. And it is precisely Peirce, whom Derrida invokes to get this de-construction underway.

Derrida's Reading of Peirce; or  
the de-construction of the transcendental signified

Derrida turns to Peirce, in *Of Grammatology*, just after he has exposed the Saussurean tendency to favour speech over writing and in the midst of his deconstruction of the sign in its totality. Indeed, Peirce provides Derrida with the machinery to broach the deconstruction of this greatest totality (the sign). It is important to note at the outset, however, that when Derrida invokes Peirce, he does not do so to give an adequate interpretation of Peirce's theory of signs—this is not Derrida's aim. Rather, Derrida deploys Peirce as a technology, a tool or utensil, that aids the movement of his deconstruction only insofar as it exposes the indefiniteness of reference from sign to sign. Derrida dispenses with Peirce shortly thereafter and returns to a Saussurean conception of the sign *sous rature*. We will see then, that while Derrida ultimately ends up turning away from Peirce, it is Peirce who provides him with the means to do away with the presence of the signified—it is Peirce who motivates the de-construction of the transcendental signified. I will thus begin by outlining just how Derrida uses Peirce as a means to de-construct the transcendental signified. In the final chapter, however, I will suggest that the Peircean technology that Derrida utilizes provides us with a trace back into Peirce's theory of signs. The trace into Peirce that Derrida leaves behind is enough to expose the fundamental difference between Peirce and Derrida: that of continuity and play.

When analyzing Derrida's reading of Peirce, scholars like Umberto Eco, David Pettigrew, and Jeffrey Barnouw begin with the famous passage in *Of Grammatology* where Derrida writes that:

Peirce goes very far in the direction I have called the de-construction of the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference<sup>24</sup> from sign to sign. (Derrida OG 49)

However, Derrida actually evokes Peirce on the page prior, and so we should begin there and work our way slowly and carefully to the aforementioned passage.

Derrida first poses Peirce in direct opposition to Saussure:

In his project of semiotics, Pierce seems to have been more attentive than Saussure to the irreducibility of this becoming-unmotivated [of the sign]. In his terminology one must speak of the becoming-unmotivated of the *symbol*, the notion of the symbol playing here a role analogous to that of the sign which Saussure opposes precisely to the symbol.

(Derrida OG 48)

When Derrida says that *Peirce is more attentive than Saussure to the irreducibility of this becoming-unmotivated* he means that Peirce has recognized the inability to reduce the symbol to a simple origin of presence. Peirce has already recognized, and independently of Saussure, that the process of signification does not refer to a presence that the signified brings forth. Rather, for Peirce and Derrida, the presence of the thing itself is, as we have already seen, mediated through signs. Derrida then goes on to quote a passage from Peirce's "What is a Sign?". I have already discussed this passage in the context of Peirce's work earlier. But I will revisit it again, here, in the context of Derrida. I thus quote Peirce through Derrida:

Symbols grow. They come into being by development out of other signs, particularly from icons, or from mixed signs partaking of the nature of icons and symbols. We think

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<sup>24</sup> In the original French, "reference", for Derrida, is *renvoi*. Barnouw suggests that a more adequate translation of *renvoi* would be referral. This would disambiguate Derrida's use of "reference" here from the meanings attributed to "reference" in the traditional philosophy of language (Barnouw 78).

only in signs. These mental signs are of mixed nature; the symbol parts of them are called concepts. If a man makes a new symbol, it is by thoughts involving concepts. So it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow. *Omne symbolum de symbolo* [every symbol follows from a symbol]. (Peirce qtd. in Derrida *OG* 48)

Derrida's reading of Peirce focuses primarily on the Peircean symbol. He does not go into detail about icons or indices, but he does recognize that, in Peirce, symbols "come into being by development out of other signs." In this way, it is Peirce's claim that symbols can only grow out of other symbols that Derrida focuses on. From this claim, in Peirce, Derrida seems to suggest that the icons and mixed signs that make up symbols do not act as roots that "comprise the structural originality of the field of symbols" (Derrida *OG* 48). That is to say, the signs which make up symbols—underpin them—are not roots, or sturdy foundations, or a presence which contains the symbol. No, Derrida claims that since every symbol follows from a symbol there could be no foundation on which all these symbols could rest.

Unlike for Saussure, there is no way to reduce the referral from sign to sign—symbol to symbol—within the confines of a foundation or presence that persists outside of the growth of symbols. We are left in a web or nexus of symbols that stretch out indefinitely and irreducibly in each direction. The symbols continue to grow indefinitely and irreducibly because each symbol follows from another and there is no way to reduce this process by terminating it with a presence. There is, as Derrida warns, "no ground of nonsignification—understood as insignificance or an intuition of a present truth—[that] stretches out to give it foundation under the play and coming into being of signs" (Derrida *OG* 48). It is signs or symbols all the way down and all the way out in each direction, for Derrida. And it is Peirce who apparently leads him to this conclusion.

In this way, Semiotics no longer depends on a logic that exists prior to the growth of symbols to provide its foundations. Rather, “Logic, according to Peirce, is only a semiotic” (48). Logic qua semiotics finds its heritage in the “project of the *Grammatica speculativa* of Thomas d’Erfurt, falsely attributed to Duns Scotus” (48). The *grammatica speculativa* sets out to elaborate “a formal doctrine of conditions which a discourse must satisfy in order to have a sense, in order to “mean”, even if it is false or contradictory” (48). This project of discerning the conditions which a discourse must satisfy in order for it mean or signify, however, is only one prong of a tripartite enterprise—there are three branches of semiotics for Peirce (*grammatica speculativa* is the first). Derrida goes on to claim that, for Peirce, once we have ascertained these conditions, we move on to logic proper. Peirce describes logic proper as the “science of what is quasi-necessarily true of the representamina of any scientific intelligence in order that they may hold good of any object, that is, may be true” (CP 2.229). Whereas *grammatica speculativa* seeks only the conditions that would allow a sign or representamen to mean, logic proper extends this investigation to consider the “conditions of the truths of representations” (CP 2.229).

Finally, one passes from logic proper into pure rhetoric: “its task is to ascertain the laws by which in every scientific intelligence one sign gives birth to another, and especially one thought brings forth another” (CP 2.229). The project of pure rhetoric, sometimes called the speculative rhetoric of the sign, focuses primarily on how signs are used to convey meaning and what laws the signs follow when they do. Presently, we can say that Derrida is mostly interested in the *grammatica speculativa*: he is, after all, pursuing the conditions of possibility of all signification, and it is this first branch which deals primarily with such an investigation. Importantly then, and as I have shown, Derrida finds that the conditions of possibility of all signification do not depend on or rest on a logical foundation that persists outside of the system

of signs. Logic is only born of signs: “from the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs” (Derrida OG 50).

It is exactly after Derrida challenges—through opposing Peirce to Saussure—the foundations of semiotics, that he arrives at the passage I began this section with. Considering only the treatment of Peirce that Derrida provides, we can begin to understand why it is that Derrida praises Peirce for heading in the direction of the de-construction of the transcendental signified.

Peirce moves in this direction precisely because his conception of the symbol (as following from other symbols) challenges the “reassuring end” that followers of the metaphysics of presence attempt to impose on the “[referral] from sign to sign” (Derrida OG 49). If every symbol follows from a symbol, then there would be no end to the referral from sign to sign. Derrida continues: “I have identified logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for such a signified” (49). The metaphysicians of presence fixate on the idea of restoring presence to the sign—they want the sign to signify presence instead of absence—they ground the process of signification in presence. This desire is systematic and powerful. It controls the flow of signifiers by restraining them within this narrow search for presence.

For Derrida, Peirce resists just this desire. Indeed:

Peirce considers the indefiniteness of reference as the criterion that allows us to recognize that we are indeed dealing with a system of signs. *What broaches the movement of signification is what makes its interruption impossible. The thing itself is a sign.*<sup>25</sup> (49)

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<sup>25</sup> Derrida’s emphasis.

As I showed in my account of Peirce's Cognition Series, the very fact that we cannot have an immediate intuition of the object of our conception is what leads him to hold that cognition arises by a continuous process—a process of signification which Short describes as an infinite regress and progress. It is, just as Derrida supposes, the indefiniteness of reference (the inability of the process of cognition (qua signs) to be traced back to a first cognition, or in Derrida's words, an origin) that lets us recognize that we are dealing with a system of signs. And following, the very process of cognition, which allows us to broach this movement of signs, is what makes its interruption impossible: from the very instant that we consider the movement of signification in terms of a process of cognitions qua signs, we keep ourselves from being able to interrupt that process by fixating on the presence of the thing itself. This is because the *thing itself is a sign*—we cannot reach its presence because its presence is deferred by the detour of the sign.

This, Derrida continues, is “an unacceptable proposition for Husserl, whose phenomenology remains therefore—in its “principle of principles”—the most radical and most critical restoration of the metaphysics of presence” (Derrida OG 49). Whereas, in Husserl, the phenomenological idea of manifestation is to reveal a presence, for Peirce, “manifestation itself does not reveal a presence, it makes a sign” (49).

By opposing Peirce to Husserl, Derrida shows how Peirce's semiotic circumvents the metaphysics of presence. If manifestation itself gives rise to a sign rather than to presence, then there is thus no phenomenality reducing the sign or the representer so that the thing signified may be allowed to glow finally in the luminosity of its presence. The so-called “thing itself” is always already a *representamen* shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. (49)



Since the “thing itself” is *always already* a representamen for Peirce, there is no way for the thing itself to manifest in all of its presence, to take command of the process of signification.

It is also crucial to note Derrida’s claim that the representamen shields us from *simplicity of intuitive evidence*. This point is in keeping with Peirce’s denial of the faculty of intuition. Since there is no intuition, but all thought passes through signs, we can never have an immediate cognition of the presence of the thing itself.<sup>26</sup> In this way, “the *representamen* functions only by giving rise to an *interpretant* that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity” (49). Here Derrida is, again, referring to the continuous process of cognition qua signs. It seems as if Derrida’s claim finds its roots in Peirce’s doctrine of the thought-sign. As I have shown, for Peirce, “each former thought suggests something to the thought which follows it, i.e., is the sign of something to this latter” (Peirce, “Some Consequences” 67). By the doctrine of the thought-sign, each interpretant itself becomes a representamen from which a further interpretant is formed and so on. This process is interminable unless it ends in death.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Recall, also, the passage quoted from Derrida’s “Differance” earlier: “...the movement of signs defers the moment of encountering the thing itself, the moment at which we could lay hold of it, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, *have a present intuition of it*.” Even here, Derrida is cognizant of the inability to appeal to intuition to overcome the detour of the sign. This denial of intuition found both in Peirce and Derrida is a striking example of one of the many affinities the two thinkers share.

<sup>27</sup> I want to include a brief note on this point. My claim here is riffing off of a quote that I used in the first chapter where Peirce talks about how the continuous process of consciousness qua signs will only stop if it comes to an abrupt end in death (W2: 224). This, I think, holds true for Peirce only insofar as the end would occur within an individual. If I die, my train of thought is terminated—as far as I know (and I guess no one really knows) my consciousness will not continue to produce interpretants after I die. However, this does not mean I die outright—only that my thought-sign stops signifying. In a beautiful essay by Kieran Cashell entitled “Ex Post Facto: Peirce and the Living Signs of the Dead,” he argues that parts of the individual live on after death in the signs that they have left behind. I do not plan to go down this rabbit hole here, I only wish to point out that work has been done to show how individuals—insofar as they are signs—have a kind of after-life, where they are still, in a sense, alive through the signs that they have left behind. This is a topic which I wish to investigate further in the coming years. Though, for now, I can only hint at it in a footnote. It should be noted that Cashell’s analysis suggests that it is the same for Derrida—individuals live after they die in the traces that they leave behind.

Furthermore, there is no way to trace this process back to a first cognition, a place of origin, a presence. Derrida thus sees in Peirce that “the self-identity of the signified [or in Peircean terms the self-identity of the object] conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move” (49). The object (or *signified* or *thing itself* or *presence*) is always effaced by the movement of one sign to another; kept just out of reach by the detour of the sign.

As a result, Derrida claims that “the property of the representamen is to be itself and another, to be produced as a structure of reference, to be separated from itself” (49). Just after, he provides one iteration of Peirce’s definition of the triadic sign:

Anything which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its object) in the same way, this 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. (Peirce qtd. In Derrida *OG* 50)

Derrida’s reading suggests that the representamen, in Peirce’s triadic formulation of the sign, *is separated from itself* because it functions simultaneously, and in some ways paradoxically, both as a representation *of* itself as a sign of the object and as a representation *for* (or determining) a further succeeding interpretant which itself becomes a sign. If the series, or process of signification, comes to an end, then the sign is rendered imperfect because it ceases to continue signifying—is cut off from the possibility of all further signification. We find “meaning” then, not by constraining this movement, but by moving through it—going along with it. We find “meaning” in the *traces* of the sign; in differance, that is to say, in the difference between, and in the deferral of, one sign to the next.

It is exactly here that Jeffrey Barnouw claims Derrida takes leave of Peirce by way of a swift transition, from Peirce to Nietzsche, to consider the notion of *play* (Barnouw 80). “Having

quoted Peirce's definition of the sign," Barnouw writes, "Derrida remarks in a characteristically "playful" succession of thoughts" (Barnouw 80). That is, immediately after Derrida provides the aforementioned Peircean definition of the sign, he swiftly shifts the discussion away from Peirce by passing through Nietzsche to the concept of *play*:

From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs*. Which amounts to ruining the notion of the sign at the very moment when, as in Nietzsche, its exigency is recognized in the absoluteness of its right. One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play, that is to say as the deconstruction of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence. (Derrida OG 50)

Barnouw, commenting on Derrida, claims that

the contrast with Nietzsche resumes the burden of a passage from the preceding chapter in which Nietzsche is said to have "contributed a great deal to the liberation of the signifier from its dependence or derivation with respect to the logos and the related truth or the primary signified" (Derrida OG 19). (Barnouw 80)

Toward Nietzsche, and away from Peirce, Derrida finds that, in the absence of the transcendental signified, we are left only with a semiosis (or process of signification) defined by a limitlessness of play. Semiosis is thought of as *play*, for Derrida, because the process does not move "toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language [or outside of the play of signs]" (Derrida OG 158). Recall, "*There is nothing outside of the text*," nothing beyond the play of signifiers (or traces) (158). Consequently, the Peircean object seems to be swept away along with the signified—it is lost in the deferral, or what Eco calls the "drift," from signifier to signifier (Eco 208). The object, or thing itself, can no longer be thought of as

the ideal limit of semiosis—there is no limit to signification, and without this limit, there is only limitlessness, or *play*.

By dropping the object along with the signified, Derrida has *opened up* semiosis, through stepping beyond Peirce to Nietzsche, to a limitlessness of play. And as Eco notes, this play proliferates

like a cancer, and at every step the previous sign is forgotten, obliterated, because the pleasure of the drift is given by the process of shifting from sign to sign and there is no purpose outside the enjoyment of travel through the labyrinth of signs or of things” (Eco 210).

From the moment that the sign is shown, through Peirce, to be irreducible to an origin of presence, we are caught up in this *drift*. We can thus reimagine Derrida’s famous claim that *there is nothing outside of the text* to say something like: there is nothing outside of the deferral of signifiers or the growth of symbols qua *play*. Indeed, Eco thinks that, consequently, for Derrida (but unlike for Peirce) this irreducibility serves to raze any *telos* or direction or purpose from the process of semiosis: “there is no purpose outside the enjoyment of travel through the labyrinth of signs” (210). It is thus the Nietzschean liberation that Barnouw speaks of which undercuts the possibility of such a *telos*. As Leon Surette writes, in freeing us from the pitfalls of the metaphysics of presence (of illusion and delusion), “Derrida either liberates us into cognitive chaos or incarcerates us in Nietzsche’s “prison house of language”—or perhaps both” (Surette 4). By “Nietzsche’s prison house of language,” Surette has Fredric Jameson’s famous essay in mind. However, the image of the prison house of language finds its source in *The Will to Power*. By shifting to Nietzsche just after this irreducibility has been marked, Derrida seems to move in the direction of the 522nd aphorism of Nietzsche’s *The Will To Power*:

We cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language [or signs]; we barely reach the doubt that sees this limitation as a limitation. Rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot throw off. (Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, aphorism 522)

By liberating us from the metaphysics of presence, Derrida ends up imprisoning us in “a scheme that we cannot throw off”—we fly out of one fly-bottle and straight into another. However, if we harken back to our discussion of Rorty’s Derrida earlier, we will recall that this liberation (that Surette and Eco worry entraps us further) should not be met with disdain, but with a Nietzschean affirmation: when we find ourselves in the prison house of language, we say “Yes!”

Spivak gives an account of this Nietzschean affirmation when she writes, contrary to Surette, that:

Deconstruction seems to offer a way out of the closure of knowledge. By inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality—by thus “placing in the abyss” (*mettre en abîme*), as the French expression would literally have it—it shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom. The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom. Thus a further deconstruction deconstructs deconstruction, both as the search for a foundation (the critic behaving as if she means what she says in her text), and as the pleasure of the bottomless. (Spivak, lxxviii)

The “pleasure of the bottomless” that Spivak finds in Derrida echoes Eco’s claim that there is no purpose other than the “enjoyment” of moving through the labyrinth of signs. Though, in Spivak’s account, this *plunging* is given a kind of sex appeal—it is posed as freedom. “The fall into the abyss of deconstruction inspires us with as much pleasure as fear,” yet Surette seems to

let the fear of never hitting bottom get the better of him. By letting semiosis be defined by play, Derrida provides us with the means to critique and undercut any instance where philosophy attempts to get beyond this play by restraining it in presence. But, at the same time, there is no aim to try to reconstruct a working theory of truth from the ashes and rubble of the metaphysics of presence. We are left in this endless deferral, only to play.

## Peircean Fossils

In this chapter, I have foregrounded Derrida's reading of Peirce by tracing the movement of his deconstruction of the sign in *Of Grammatology* up until the point where he takes leave of Peirce to follow Nietzsche. After outlining four different Derrida(s), I followed this movement from a critique of Saussure (favouring the spoken word over the written word) to a deconstruction of the Saussurean sign in its totality. In order to move through this movement, I stopped at different points, to outline Derridean terms such as "differance," "trace," and "play." By slowly tracing Derrida's movement, I arrived at his reading of Peirce which exposed the irreducibility of grounding the process of semiosis in something outside of the play of signs—we are forever caught up in *the detour of the sign*. Finally, I suggested that a main consequence of Derrida's reading of Peirce is that it drops the Object from the Peircean sign. In the absence of this object, which acts as the ideal limit of semiosis, we are left only with "a limitlessness of play". This "play" brings about a further consequence, noted by Eco and Surette, wherein we must replace the pursuit of truth with mere "enjoyment" and "pleasure". This enjoyment and pleasure is at the expense of reality; for reality is made unobtainable, and seen as a pointless endeavour, within the bottomless pit of deconstruction. In accord with Derrida (but written in disdain), Short claims that any appeal to a "reality beyond play manifests a totalitarian impulse to impose his arbitrary semiotic constructions, tendentiously named 'reality,' on others" (Short 45). The pursuit of reality is usurped by *play*—we cannot pursue reality because to do so would be to give a direction, or *telos*, to the movement of signs. And in this way, Derrida leaves Peirce behind to pursue Nietzsche.

Now, when Derrida swiftly shifts from Peirce to Nietzsche, he is not suggesting that Nietzsche is somehow responding to or extending Peirce. Earlier, I mentioned that I think

Derrida only deploys his reading of Peirce as a kind of technology to aid in the movement of his deconstruction. At the moment Derrida switches to Nietzsche then, he is replacing one technology with another. That is to say, the Peircean technology has, at that point, done all the work that it was enlisted to do (show the irreducibility of the referral of signs to an origin of presence). And so, it is replaced, at that exact instance, with the next bit of Nietzschean technology, meant to move us from this irreducibility to play.

But why does Derrida take leave of Peirce so quickly (with such a speedy transition to Nietzsche)? My best guess is that he needs to, or else he risks the possibility of a Peircean reply. In the midst of this transition, he hopes to conceal a trace back into Peirce by burying his reading of Peirce in the movement of signs that follow from it. Yet, the trace to a Peircean reply still lingers in *Of Grammatology*. In fact, if Derrida *is* trying to conceal a Peircean reply, then by the very movement of deconstruction, we should attempt to unbury it. What I am suggesting is that the fossils of the Peircean technology that Derrida leaves behind, provide us with the very means (by Derrida's own position) to reconsider the reading of Peirce that he provides—a *further deconstruction deconstructs deconstruction*. For unlike Derrida, Peirce in no way wants his semiotic to result in play. There is a continuity to the movement of signs, utterly unlike play in Derrida, that I will presently unearth from the trace Derrida leaves behind.

The work done in this chapter adds to the overall arch of my thesis in two main ways: 1) it provides a rough sketch of what Derrida is up to when he deploys his deconstruction to destroy the concept of the sign by opening it up to an unlimited deferral; and 2) it expounds, carefully, Derrida's "reading" of Peirce which uses Peirce's early work on signs as a means to broach this destruction. Derrida's "reading" of Peirce exemplifies and builds on the crisis of meaning that I am trying to overcome—this crisis being one that calls into question the traditional notion that



truth is found in the presence of the signified. By showing that no such presence, or truth, is revealed by the sign, and that there is no way out of the referral from sign to sign, I have revealed that there is no way to have meaning from within this deferral (because meaning typically arises by freezing or attempting to get outside of this deferral). However, insofar as Derrida uses Peirce to reach this conclusion, his reading seems to suggest that Peirce allows for the same kind of limitlessness of play that Derrida is trying to articulate. That, if we follow Peirce's reasoning about signs, we will be led to the same conclusion—that there is no meaning available to us in the movement from sign to sign, only deferred presence. While, for Derrida, this may be the case, Peirce would not subscribe to the kind of play that Derrida endorses. In the following chapter, I return to Peirce to further develop his notion of continuity which seems to be in direct opposition to Derrida's play.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### The Oceanic Gap

*The interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series.*

—Peirce, CP 1.339

I began this investigation by pointing out that I think Derrida's reading of Peirce leads to a crisis of meaning. Having outlined Peirce's early semiotic and traced Derrida's deconstruction of the sign beyond his reading of Peirce, we are now in a position to name this crisis and begin to furnish a reply from the Peircean perspective. To begin to put a finger on the pulse of this crisis, I want to consider what consequences seem to follow from Derrida's insistence that semiosis is defined by play. Eco nicely sums up these consequences when he writes that, after Derrida has liberated us from the metaphysics of presence,

it is thus possible to conclude that language is caught in a play of multiple signifying games, that a text cannot incorporate any absolute univocal meaning, that there is no transcendental signified, that the signifier is never co-present with a signified that is continually deferred and delayed; and that every signifier is related to another signifier so that there is nothing outside of the significant chain which goes on ad infinitum. (Eco 212)

This series of conclusions, or consequences, seem to result in a crisis of meaning because, in the absence of the transcendental signified, we are left in a limitlessness of play within a significant chain that never stops signifying. Since we cannot get outside of this chain, we cannot have a theory of truth or meaning that would ground the chain of signs in a reality persisting outside—there seems to be no ground for this semiosis. This inability to ground the chain of signs, results in a change of attitude about what the purpose of philosophy is. Philosophy is no longer

interested in seeking the truth, reality, meaning, or whatever—philosophy cannot reveal the presence of the signified from within the play from sign to sign

Instead, in this play, we find only a “pleasure” or “enjoyment”—not in seeking the truth—but from the realization that we could never reach the truth anyway, so why bother? We must, then, remain content with deconstructing and undercutting those philosophers who *think* that they are seeking the truth—show them why, once we pass through the detour of the sign, such a pursuit is as hopeless as trying to reach God through meditation. But, while we can use deconstruction to point out these instances where philosophers have gone astray, there is little attempt to rebuild, or reconstruct, once the deconstruction is underway. Indeed, it is deconstruction without reconstruction: it is deconstruction *all the way down* and into the bottomless pit. As Derrida writes: “The concept of play [jeu] remains beyond this opposition, on the eve and aftermath of philosophy, it designates the unity of chance and necessity in an endless calculus” (Derrida “Differance” 135). Thus, the crisis of meaning finds its footing in the following two ways: 1) it keeps us from ever having a conception of truth or reality so long as those conceptions are defined as a presence that exists outside of the semiotic chain; and 2) it changes our attitude toward philosophy such that, in play, we no longer care to orient ourselves toward truth or reality, but remain content only with the “pleasure” or “enjoyment” of freely falling into the abyss of deconstruction.

While to some, like Spivak and Bennington, this play is understood as freedom or liberation in a Nietzschean sense, others, like Short, think that “the denial of unambiguous reference is a perfect cover for someone fearful of facing reality” (Short 45). Still though, Derrida has shown us that we cannot remain content with pursuing the real so long as we think of the real as something which takes place beyond the chain of signification. If there is meaning at

all, and a purpose to philosophy beyond “pleasure” and “enjoyment,” it would have to function within this semiotic chain—within the movement of signs—because we are trapped in this “scheme that we cannot throw off.”

In order to furnish a Peircean reply to this crisis of meaning (which, I will admit, is not a crisis for Derrida, but is a crisis for anyone who wishes to follow Peirce), the reply would have to meet two criteria: 1) it must not, in any way, give in to an appeal to presence to ground the chain of signification; and 2) it must not circumscribe or restrain the movement from sign to sign. If, through Peirce, there is a way to have meaning or truth without going against either of these criteria, then we could rightfully respond to the second threat of the crisis of meaning and say that there is more to philosophy than mere “pleasure” and “enjoyment”. To move toward this Peircean reply, I will show that Peirce’s pragmatist conception of reality is built out of the consequences outlined in his Cognition Series: that is to say, Peirce provides us with a theory of meaning, from within semiosis, that allows us to replace the Derridean notion of play with continuity.

The aim of this final chapter, then, is to suss out the similarities and differences between Peirce’s and Derrida’s account of signs. Once the similarities have been marked, we will see that the main difference between Peirce and Derrida is between continuity and play. And it is this difference that motivates a Peircean reply. I will begin by giving a treatment of the similarities between Peirce and Derrida that David Pettigrew notes in his essay “Peirce and Derrida: From sign to sign”. Afterwards, I will mark the “oceanic gap” between Peirce and Derrida: that of the difference of continuity and play. With Peircean continuity in mind, I will turn, in the second part, to attempt to bridge the gap between Peirce’s pragmatist theory of reality and his claims that 1) the world is perfused with signs and 2) that all thought is in signs. By

bridging this gap, I show that Peirce provides us with a pragmatist theory of meaning that neither relies on presence to constitute reality, nor freezes the movement from sign to sign.

## Peirce, Derrida, and Meaning-In-Crisis

David Pettigrew's essay "Peirce and Derrida: from sign to sign" is remarkable because he takes the time to try to point out two similarities between Derrida and Peirce's theory of signs. Both Peirce and Derrida's treatment of signs result in a total debunking of the traditional metaphysics of their respective times; and each thinker's foray into semiotic terrain firmly challenges the traditional claim that we have transparent and direct access to our inner-selves (Pettigrew 365). By attempting to trace out these similarities, Pettigrew distances himself from other Peircean critics of Derrida's reading of Peirce by, at least, attempting to draw some connections between the two philosophers who seem so radically different at a first glance. Whereas critics like Eco, Short, Barnouw, and Surette criticize Derrida's reading of Peirce, Pettigrew is more charitable and carefully charts out these points of similarity. Strikingly, the two similarities that Pettigrew foregrounds result in a "meaning-in-crisis" for contemporary philosophical thought (Pettigrew 372). I will argue, however, that this crisis can ultimately be mitigated by focusing on Peirce's continuity of the sign.

In order to see how these two similarities between Peirce and Derrida result in a "meaning-in-crisis," I show, through Pettigrew, how Peirce and Derrida 1) each seem to rely on a notion of difference within their theory of signs; and 2) each challenge our capacity to have any transparent knowledge of ourselves. After these two similarities are marked, we can clearly see the main difference between them.

## The Similarity of Difference in Peirce and Derrida

I begin with Pettigrew's claim that both Peirce's and Derrida's treatment of signs rely on a notion of difference. Pettigrew writes:

Common to Derrida and Peirce... is the notion that fundamental to the relation of signs, and the operation of signs as such, is a notion of difference which problematizes the simple binary relation of a sign to the thing it signifies. With Derrida, *différance* took the form of an irreconcilable break or rupture, resulting in the destruction of the sign as such, while in the case of Peirce, the triadicity of signs is paradoxically "complete" insofar as it results in a difference or change of habit. (Pettigrew 369)

Let's trace Pettigrew's moves up until the point of this conclusion to better understand what he takes this similarity to consist in. To show the "irreconcilable break or rupture" that results from Derrida's notion of *différance*, Pettigrew follows a set of passages from Derrida that we have already dealt with in the previous chapter. Having cited Saussure's thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign and the unity of difference, the passage about the *detour of the sign* from Derrida's "Difference," and the string of quotations from *Of Grammatology* where Derrida "reads" Peirce, Pettigrew concludes that

Derrida's appropriation of Saussure's notion of differential negativity emphasizes that the difference between the signifiers is a spatio-temporal difference; a deferral of presence. What the sign or signifier signifies, then, is not its signified, but rather this very displacement of the signified by the signifier. (Pettigrew 367)

As we have seen, in Derrida, this displacement through the *différance* between signifier and signified, is what results in the rupture of the sign in its totality—the *différance* keeps the

Saussurean sign from ever being a whole unity between signifier and signified. Consequently, the rupture that this *différance* brings about (insofar as it is a spatio-temporal difference) is what results in the indefinite referral from sign to sign. There is no sign (as whole unity or totality) that could disambiguate or terminate this indefinite referral from sign to sign. Thus, it is the notion of *différance*, in Derrida, which challenges the “simple binary relation of a sign to the thing it signifies” (369). It is the *detour of the sign* which keeps us from ever having such a whole.

Shifting from Derrida to Peirce, Pettigrew proceeds to show how, like Derrida, Peirce’s theory of signs relies on a notion of difference (though, it is unclear at this point if Pettigrew means Peirce’s theory relies on *différance*). Pettigrew notes that for Peirce there *is* an ultimate stage to the process of semiosis called the interpretant—the most proper significant outcome of a process of semiosis (Pettigrew 368). Pettigrew clarifies that

The interpretant, however, is not a *terminal*—or in Derrida’s terminology, a *transcendental*—signified. The interpretant is itself triadic, including its emotional, energetic and logical aspects—with the logical interpretant serving as the widest scope, or general meaning, of the sign insofar as it influences reflection and action. (368)

Pettigrew’s reading of Peirce is remarkable because he clarifies that the interpretant is not beyond the triadic process of semiosis like Derrida’s transcendental signified is. The interpretant is itself apart of the triadic relation and can be broken down into three additional parts: the emotional, energetic, and logical. He continues that “the general logical interpretant would always be in relation to another logical interpretant, to which it is related or under which it is subsumed” (368). The logical interpretant is not beyond the process of signification, but is a part



of it.<sup>28</sup> This logical interpretant is not the transcendental meaning of the sign, but rather, it is a part of the process of semiosis—is indebted to this process of semiosis and cannot be actualized without an object and a representamen (or sign). The final interpretant, as I will show more clearly in the subsequent section, is not beyond semiosis, but a product of it.

Pettigrew brackets the emotional and the energetic and focuses solely on the logical interpretant (sometimes referred to as the final interpretant of a process of semiosis). The final logical interpretant is the meaning of the sign in general—it is the interpretant that would stand once all investigation into the sign has been sufficiently exhausted. As Peirce writes to Victoria Welby on March 14, 1909, the final interpretant is “the effect the Sign *would* produce upon any mind upon which circumstances should permit it to work out its full effect” (Peirce *Semiotic and Signifcs*, 110). Notice here Peirce’s description of the final interpretant as an “effect”.<sup>29</sup> This echoes my discussion earlier where Hoopes notes how the interpretant is thought of as the carrying out of a habit of action. Pettigrew claims that the final interpretant can be understood as “that of a difference or change with respect to the general concept of the logical interpretant, however infinitesimal that difference may be” (368). He continues: “the difference, more precisely, is the change of habit in which the sign results” (368). The significance (or meaning) of the sign is found in the difference or change in action that occurs with respect to the interpretation of the sign. The logical interpretant marks a difference between the habit of action

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<sup>28</sup> In his letters to Victoria Welby, Peirce seems to contradict Pettigrew’s gloss here. He claims that the “interpretant is not necessarily a sign” (Peirce *Semiotic and Signifcs* 31). That is, the interpretant, as we have seen, can be considered a habit of action (which is not necessarily a sign). Yet, Eco suggests, and I am inclined to agree with him, that “it is true that even the practical effect must then be spelled out by and through signs and that the very agreement among the members of the community cannot but take the form of a new chain of signs” (Eco 218).

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, this focus on “effect” nicely aligns with Bennington’s interpretation of Derrida when he writes that, after the de-construction of the transcendental signified, “there is no signified or meaning, but only *effects* of them” (Bennington 34, my emphasis). We are left, so to speak, only with the effects that the signifiers produce.

prior to the interpretation of the sign, and the habit of action which changes after the sign has been fully interpreted. If I do not know that fire is hot, I might act differently around fire than I would if I knew that it was hot. My habit of action changes once I touch the flame and it burns me—the mark of this change is the difference between how I acted prior to, and how I will continue to act after, touching the flame.

The notion of *habit-change* thus implies a kind of difference which Pettigrew likens to that of the difference found in Derrida (Pettigrew 368). Peirce and Derrida seem to be on the same page when they each challenge the traditional dyadic relation of the sign found in Saussure—Derrida through showing how difference marks the deferral of the signified by the signifier; and Peirce through showing that logical interpretant results in a difference or change in habit which extends the traditional dyadic relationship of signifier-signified.

But are these two senses of difference really similar? Or is Pettigrew making a shallow comparison that does not withstand critical scrutiny? Since Pettigrew stops at the above comparison, claiming that it is a similarity, I will have to extend his comparison to see if it *really* is. Now, when Derrida deploys the term *différance*, he does not just mean difference as in distinction, but also difference as in deferral, and differentially (or *being-different*) which acts as the condition of possibility for all meaning (Bennington 71). At the surface, it seems that Pettigrew's comparison does not hold up because, while for Derrida the whole assemblage of *différance* is at play, in Peirce, the change of habit seems only to entail a difference (with an *e*) to mark a distinction between two habits of action. When Derrida talks of the *différance* between signifier and signified it is utterly unlike when Peirce talks about the difference born from a change in habits of action.

Or is it? I want to suggest that the notion of habit-change encapsulated in Peirce's final logical interpretant, in fact, resembles Derrida's *différance*. In order to draw out the similarity, we need to take Pettigrew's comparison a little bit further. In order to show how, in some respects, Derridean *différance* is at play in Peirce's triadic formulation, we need to revisit the claim from his letter to Welby above: the final interpretant is "the effect the Sign *would* produce upon any mind upon which circumstances should permit it to work out its full effect" (Peirce *Semiotic and Significs*, 110). We have already seen how the final interpretant marks a habit-change in the sense of difference (with an e)—this is made clear by Pettigrew in the aforementioned passages. To see how Peirce's final logical interpretant also seems to entail *différance* (with an a) though, we need to fixate on the role that the "*would*"<sup>30</sup> is playing in the above quoted passage to Welby. By emphasizing the "*would*," Peirce is suggesting that the ultimate final habit-change that rises from the final interpretant is placed at a time sufficiently in the future—it is that change (or difference) that *would* come about were our investigation into the sign to be carried out indefinitely. Peirce writes that "the final interpretant is the one interpretive result to which every interpreter is destined to come if the sign is sufficiently considered" (Peirce *Semiotic and Significs* 111). This final interpretant is to be distinguished from any dynamical interpretant, "that which is experienced in each act of interpretation and is different in each from that of any other" (111). In the distinction between the dynamical and final interpretant, then, we see the distinction between the particular and the general. Whereas the dynamical interpretant is the interpretant of any particular encounter with a sign, the final interpretant is the one which would stand in the long run—is the general meaning of the sign once a community of interpreters has sufficiently interpreted the sign.

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<sup>30</sup> Emphasized by Peirce himself.

In the case of the dynamical interpretant, we see that the particular interpretation of a sign is different (with an *e*) from the other dynamical interpretants at play at time *t*. However, in the case of the final interpretant, we see that that interpretation is different (with an *a*) from any particular dynamical interpretant at time *t*. That is to say, the final interpretant is, in a sense, *always potentially* deferred or put off—left to be ultimately decided by a future community. “Thought now depends on what is to be hereafter,” Peirce writes in “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” (W2: 241). The future-bound aspect of the final interpretant (encapsulated in the “*would*”) is always potentially deferred by any particular dynamical interpretant—can never be guaranteed to have been reached in any particular instance of the interpretation of a sign. This point is made evident by Eco when he writes that “if the possibility of error is always present, therefore, semiosis is potentially unlimited” (Eco 216). So, we can say that dynamical interpretants differ from one another, that final interpretants differ from one another, but that final interpretants are always potentially deferred by dynamical interpretants. At any given instance, the change in habit marks a difference between one habit of action and another, but the final change of habit is always potentially put off in that particular instance. There is always the possibility of error residing in any particular interpretation and this is made evident by Peirce’s fallibilism and his insistence that we can always take another sample. If thought now *does* depend on what is to be hereafter, then it is deferred to the hereafter in any instance of the here-and-now.

It seems then, that once we consider the difference between a particular dynamical interpretant and a final interpretant, that the kind of difference involved in Peirce’s theory of signs starts to resemble Derridean *différance*. Not only does the habit change mark a difference from the habit held before, but the final change of habit is always potentially deferred in any

particular instance of the interpretation of a sign. For Peirce though, the final interpretant does not take place outside of the process of semiosis—it is well within its bounds and can theoretically be reached if the proper method of interpreting signs is endorsed and carried out to its end. There is no way of knowing that we have reached the final interpretant in any instance of the here-and-now. Meaning for Peirce, like for Derrida, is thus found in the movement through signs—in the constant investigation into the nature of the sign so as to hopefully, one day, reach a final interpretant—a final change in habit.

## Person-Signs

Having traced out how both Peirce's and Derrida's treatment of signs entails a notion of *différance*, Pettigrew moves to note the second instance of similarity between Peirce and Derrida: namely, that each thinker challenges the Cartesian position that we have direct, immediate, and transparent access to our inner selves. For both Peirce and Derrida, this Cartesian position is challenged by reducing the individual to a sign. For, at the moment that Peirce claims all thought is in signs and at the moment Derrida claims that there is nothing outside of the deferral of signs, each thinker (in their own way) is led to conclude that we, as individual human-beings, appear as signs, and can only understand ourselves through signs.

For Derrida, the deferral of presence—the detour of the sign—functions doubly to problematize the human subject. Pettigrew notes that Derrida's problematization finds its roots in his essay "Freud and the Scene of Writing." Here, Derrida writes that "the structure of the psychical *apparatus* will be *represented* by a writing machine" (Derrida "Freud and..." 199). Following Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Pettigrew notes that for Derrida, "the energetics of the psyche are nothing if not represented by signs, images, and symbols" (Pettigrew 369). The psyche is thus a writing machine that both produces and interprets text (i.e., signs). In this way then, we can only understand ourselves through signs. This is a striking similarity with Peirce who, as I showed in chapter one, believes that we have no direct access to our inner-selves—no power of introspection—but that we can only understand ourselves through signs. For Derrida, the presence of the self, like that of the signified, is always deferred through signs—just as we pass through the detour of the sign when trying to reach the thing-in-itself, so too do we pass through the detour when we attempt to perceive ourselves in the *luminosity* of our own

presence (to borrow a turn of phrase from Derrida from earlier). The sign stands in for the self, and so marks the absence of the self—denies us access to the pure Cartesian self. “The erasure of selfhood,” Derrida claims, “is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance, of the disappearance of its disappearance” through, we might add, the detour of the sign (Derrida “Freud and...” 230). Pettigrew thus concludes that, for Derrida, “just as difference amounts to the destruction of the sign, so it cleaves and erases the self as simple presence to itself” (Pettigrew 370). So, the same process of deconstruction that Derrida applies to the Saussurean sign functions doubly to deconstruct the Cartesian claim that we have transparent access to our mental states.

Similarly, and as I have shown in my treatment of Peirce’s Cognition Series in chapter one, Peirce challenges the Cartesian assumption that we have direct access to our inner-selves—he both denies our power of intuition and introspection, the two cognitive faculties often thought to bestow us with such direct access. In “Some Consequences,” Peirce claims that “when we think, then, we ourselves, as we are at that moment, appear as a sign” (W2: 223). Since all thought is in signs, we can only think about ourselves through signs—there is no way to get to our self, as it really is, without passing through signs.

Consequently, we discover that “the content of consciousness, the entire phenomenal manifestation of mind, is a sign resulting from inference” (W2: 240). A few moments later he claims that

For, as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an *external* sign, proves that man is an external sign. That is to say, the man and the external sign are

identical, in the same sense in which the words *homo* and *man* are identical. Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought. (W2: 241)

The symbol that a person uses is the person, just as the person using the symbol is a symbol. There is thus no difference between the person and the symbol that the person uses—the person is a sign, a person-sign. Pettigrew argues that “the status of this person-sign must be seen, then, in terms of Peirce’s treatment of the growth of signs—the process he interrogates under the heading of semiosis” (Pettigrew 370). Just as symbols grow, so do person-signs. Our habits of action shift and change as we, and the symbols we use, grow and evolve through time. The self is only represented, triadically fragmented, and caught in the movement of difference (Pettigrew 370).

Following Vincent Colapietro, a notable scholar of Peirce’s theory of signs and self, Pettigrew claims that the person-sign is both futural and conditional: “that is to say, not fully formed in the present, depending rather, on the hereafter; and in a way it is other than itself” (Pettigrew 370). Here Pettigrew and Colapietro are borrowing from the passage just quoted above where Peirce claims that “thought now depends on what is to be hereafter, so that it only has a potential existence, dependent on the future thought of the community” (W2: 241). Colapietro adds to Pettigrew’s discussion that the notion of the person-sign, insofar as it is future-oriented and conditional, requires the notion of a community: “the individual self is, in its innermost being, not a private sphere but a communicative agent” (Colapietro, 1989: 79). At any given instance, the self is “always incomplete” and “inherently unrealizable” (Colapietro, 1989: 76). This is because the self depends and is ultimately constituted by each future thought that takes place hereafter. The individual in the here-and-now “is only a negation” (W2: 242) of what *would* be in the long run—the individual is only a negation of the community of inquirers.



Thus, for both Peirce and Derrida, at the moment one challenges the relation of the sign to its object, one simultaneously “rends the fabric of the subject, overturning or decentering the simple [Cartesian] self-certainty which would be thought to be at the archic centre of the self” (Pettigrew 371). Not only do both Peirce and Derrida share a similar notion of *différance*, they both also challenge traditional accounts of the self, by reducing the self to a sign.

Both of these similarities meld to reinforce the crisis of meaning. Not only is it the case that we cannot have a theory of meaning, truth, or reality, that relies on an appeal to presence, but, by the same thrust, we lose access to our inner selves—what it is that makes us *us*. The reduction of everything (meaning, truth, reality, self... and so on) to signs, is what is at stake in this crisis of meaning—it is the consequence, for all of us, which stems from Peirce and Derrida’s shared belief that there is no way outside of the movement from sign to sign. In this way, both thinker’s projects can be understood as challenging the traditional assumptions that philosophers have held about truth, reality, and the self—each, in their own right, is offering a way out of the metaphysics of presence by focusing on the movement from sign to sign.

However, Derrida exits the metaphysics of presence and enters into a limitlessness of play, whereas Peirce takes the same exit but wants to maintain that there is a continuity to the movement of signs. In my second chapter, I have already given an account of the kind of play that Derrida has in mind, and I have considered the consequences of such a play in the introduction to this chapter. Now I turn to outline Peirce’s view of continuity, in order to begin to reply to Derrida’s insistence that semiosis is defined by play. For, as Pettigrew notes, “in spite of the co-problematic with respect to the disruption of metaphysics which is being suggested here, there is a notion of continuity fundamental to Peirce’s project which is not present in Derrida’s work” (Pettigrew 372).

## Continuity and the Categories

To understand why it is that Peirce believes there is a continuity to the movement from sign to sign, we need to consider again his categories of being: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.<sup>31</sup> In a rough sketch of the first chapter of his unfinished book, *A Guess At The Riddle*, Peirce gives yet another account of his categories of being:

The First is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anything. The Second is that which is what it is by force of something to which it is a second. The Third is that which is what it is owing to things between which it mediates and which it brings into relation to each other. (W6: 170)

The First cannot be thought without ruining what it is (because to think it is already to put it into relation with a Second). This is to say that, for Peirce, “the First must be entirely separated from all conception of or reference to anything; for what involves a Second is itself a second to that second” (W6: 170). The First precedes thought. It is difficult to describe or convey the First—impossible to, without thinking of a Second. “Stop to think of it [the First],” Peirce writes, “and it has flown!” (W6: 170). Despite this inability to articulate Firstness on its own, Peirce at least attempts to frame the category through the following example:

What the world was to Adam on the day he opened his eyes to it, before he had drawn any distinctions, or had become conscious of his own existence,—that is first, present, immediate, fresh, new, initiative, original, spontaneous, free, vivid, conscious, and evanescent. (W6: 170-71)

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<sup>31</sup> Peirce is not consistent with whether or not he capitalizes the categories. When he first announces them, they are all capitalized. However, as he continues, he sometimes does not capitalize them. For the sake of consistency, I will capitalize them in each instance that I use the terms. However, to remain faithful to Peirce, when I am directly quoting from his text, I will not capitalize them if he does not.

Remarkably, the First precedes “all synthesis and all differentiation” (W6: 171). In this way, it would even be prior to Derridean *différance* because a difference or *différance* is always between *two* things, spatially or temporally, and, in this way, requires a Second (a *space* of being-different, or an *interval*<sup>32</sup> of *différance*, between two things). The First is the condition of possibility of all possible interpretations of the sign. It is, in a way, the very interpretability of the sign—the potential of the sign to be fully interpreted by a mind that could actually comprehend it. The First is, in this sense, of the mode of being a possibility—it is the Absolute First which makes all that follows it possible.

The Second cannot be thought without the First. The Second requires a First to be made possible. But to think the Second in its “perfection” we must, at least for a moment, “banish every third” (W6: 171). Peirce writes:

[The Second] meets us in such facts as Another, Relation, Compulsion, Effect, Dependence, Independence, Negation, Occurrence, Reality, Result [, and Difference I might add]. A thing cannot be other, negative, or independent, without a first to or of which it shall be other, negative, or independent... The genuine second suffers and yet resists, like dead matter, whose existence consists in its inertia. (W6: 171)

The Second, as I showed earlier with Peirce’s example of the steam whistle, is the brute thrust of reality that impinges on us. It is quite independent of what you or I think about it. Its existence, indeed, consists in its “inertia”—it is unchanging and unaffected by the vagaries of any one individual. “We find secondness in occurrence,” Peirce writes, “because an occurrence is something whose existence consists in our knocking up against it” (W6: 171). An occurrence takes place in space and time—it happens at a particular instance within space and time. The

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<sup>32</sup> I use “space” and “interval” carefully here to account for the spatio-temporal nature of *différance*.

Second is the “knocking up against it”—a force or collision, an action and reaction. I bang my hand against the table; the table resists. Secondness.

Interestingly, in this iteration of Secondness, Peirce seems to focus on a kind of finality that is part and parcel with the Second, or absolute Last. Peirce continues:

Note, too, that for the Second to have the Finality that we have seen belongs to it, it must be determined by the first immoveably, and thenceforth be fixed; so that unalterable fixity becomes one of its attributes. (W6: 171)

While the First makes the Second possible, the Second marks the ideal limit of all possibility insofar as it is fixed and unmoved.

Earlier, I claimed that the Object in Peirce’s triadic formulation relates to Secondness. This is still the case. However, now we need to make a distinction between two types of objects: the dynamical object, and the immediate object. This distinction will mark, yet again, the difference between the particular and the general. The immediate object is the object which is conceived through the sign in any given instance of interpretation—it is the representamen of the object to the beholder at time *t*. On the one hand, when I interpret the weathercock blowing north, I interpret the immediate object (through the representamen of course) of the weathercock. On the other hand, the dynamical object relates closer to the kind of Secondness—as Finality—that Peirce is expressing in his *Guess at the Riddle*. Eco muses that “every semeiosic act is determined by a Dynamical Object—as such still external to the circle of semeiosis—which is “the reality which by some means contrives to determine the sign to its representamen” (CP 4.5365)” (Eco 217). Peirce also writes that “an endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it, may be conceived to have an absolute object as its limit” (CP 1.339). The dynamical object acts as this limit—it is never present within semiosis (only the

immediate object is). The dynamical object, as Secondness, is what *would* mark the terminus of the movement from sign to sign. It is made out to be the ideal limit—reality—toward which a given chain of signs is gravitating.

We can thus think of the First and Second then, in terms of semiosis, as follows: we see the First as the condition that makes a semiosis possible and the Second as the ideal limit of the semiosis—the real which would terminate the movement from sign to sign in the long run.

Peirce writes that

First and Second, agent and patient, Yes and No, are categories which enable us roughly to describe the facts of experience, and they satisfy the mind for a very long time. But at last they are found inadequate, and the Third is the conception which is then called for.

The Third is that which bridges over the chasm between the absolute first and last, and brings them into relationship. (W6: 172)

The Third functions to bring the First and Second into relation with one another. For example, the interpretant is a Third which brings a representamen into relation with its immediate object so that it signifies X. Similarly, a sign can be a Third which stands between an interpretant and an object.

The First (as absolute First) and the Second (as absolute Last) can be represented as the first and last point of a line:

First (Possibility)—————Second (last, ideal limit,  
dynamical object)

The line between the First and Last makes a continuum. The First is the origin, and the Last, the terminus—each point between the First and Last being somewhere between the condition which

makes semiosis possible and the reality that we bump up against when we investigate.<sup>33</sup> The process of semiosis stretches between this First and Last—we, as person-signs, can never reach the origin or terminus. We exist, within semiosis, somewhere between these two points of the line.

Indeed, each point on the line is a Third which helps to make sense of, or reconcile, the movement from First to Last. Peirce claims that:

...the third is the action by which the former influences the latter. Between the beginning as first, and the end as last, comes the process which leads from first to last. (W6: 172)

This process is the process of semiosis—the movement of signs which bridge the chasm between First and Last. Unlike in Derrida, however, this process is not defined by a limitlessness of play, rather, it is limited by this dynamical object (Last) which serves as the ideal limit of the movement from sign to sign within the continuum between First and Last. By placing semiosis within a continuum, Peirce is able to restore a direction to the movement of signs which is not present in Derrida. There is thus, as Eco points out, a kind of purpose, or telos, involved in the idea of semiosis for Peirce (Eco 216). The movement of signification is tending, from this First, toward this Last. We do not find meaning by trying to get to either the First or Last, but rather, by recognizing the Thirds, or signs, which serve to mediate between this First and Second which are forever unreachable. We cannot focus on any one category in particular, but must recognize the complex triadic relations which hold all three together at once.

Peirce writes that

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<sup>33</sup> We might also think of this as a continuum between 0 and 1, each point between 0 and 1 being a fraction within the continuum. In Putnam's essay *Peirce's Continuum* he provides an account of Peirce's continuum in the philosophy of mathematics. Peirce, in his *Guess at the Riddle*, also mentions the connection of his continuum with the line in mathematics. I wanted to point out this connection, but it is not pertinent to our discussion here. *Origin* and *terminus* will suffice.

These two points are the absolute first and the absolute last or second, while every measurable point on the line is of the nature of a third... If you think the measurable is all there is, and deny it any definite tendency whence or whither, then you are considering the pair of points that makes the absolute to be imaginary and are an Epicurean. If you hold that there is a definite drift to the course of nature as a whole, but yet believe its absolute end is nothing but the nirvana from which it set out, you make the two points of the absolute to be coincident, and are a pessimist. But if your creed is that the whole universe is approaching in the infinitely distant future a state having a general character different from that toward which we look back in the infinitely distant past, you make the absolute to consist in two distinct real points and are an evolutionist. (W6: 173)

Peirce is an evolutionist in this respect. The process of semiosis is approaching this infinitely distant future (reality) while, at the same moving from the First which makes the movement possible. These two points are not the same; they are distinct yet held together by the movement from sign to sign between them. Indeed, in his famous October 12th letter to Welby, Peirce claims that “a sign is something by knowing which, we know something more” (Peirce, Semiotic and Significs 31-2). If 1) the sign mediates between the First and Last, and 2) by knowing the sign we know something more, then it follows that the process of semiosis is, in someways, moving toward a Last which is distinct from, yet still indebted to the First—it is, by the same movement, moving toward an increase in knowledge, or a final interpretant, which would furnish our acquaintance with the object being represented by the sign.

Derrida, on the other hand, seems to fall somewhere between an Epicurean and a Pessimist. He remains in Secondness, and does not posit a Third, which would give a purpose to the movement from sign to sign. For Derrida, by knowing a sign we *do not* know something

more. We do not even know the sign in its totality—we only have the signifier which defers the presence of the signified thus keeping us from ever knowing the sign at all. Derrida thus denies semiosis “any definite tendency whence or whither” (W6: 173). The tendency or continuity found in Peirce is replaced by play for Derrida. But by replacing this tendency with play, Derrida ends up polluting reality with fiction.

In his March 14 letter to Welby, Peirce describes the bitter fate of John Stuart Mill, who has a “dreary outlook upon a world in which all that can be loved, or admired, or understood, is figment” (Peirce *Semiotic and Significs* 118). One can imagine Peirce directing a similar criticism toward Derrida, whose emphasis on play (insofar as it neglects the import of a Third) seems to permit that fiction, or the unreal, is all that we can hold on to in the movement from sign to sign.

Peirce’s scholastic realism, however, suggests that Thirds are real<sup>34</sup> and that there is a real tendency to the movement from sign to sign—that as we move along, so long as we do with the right method, we will approximate reality. If it be that we could, with the right method, actually gravitate toward the real as it really is, then we would find the means to challenge Derrida’s instance that there is only play. For if there really is a real that we are tending toward, it would impinge on and reduce the various fictions which Derrida’s play seems to produce.

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<sup>34</sup> One might wish to investigate Peirce’s “Lectures on Pragmatism” to understand why it is that he believes Thirds are real. The piece begins with Peirce claiming: “I proceed to argue that Thirdness is operative in nature” (MS 309). The law of gravity is, in fact, a Third which is real. If Peirce holds a stone up, he can predict, rightfully, that upon letting it go it will fall to the ground. There is a real law, in general, which holds for all objects—that when they are dropped, they will fall.



## The Link: Peirce's Realism and his Semiosis

So far I have suggested that by considering Peirce's categories we can begin to see why the process of semiosis is tending toward reality and is not, as Derrida supposes, defined by a limitlessness of play. This move is made effective by placing the process of semiosis within a continuum which is ever so slowly approximating, asymptotically, the ideal limit, or dynamical object. Now, to say that semiosis occurs in a continuum is not enough to overcome Derridean play. We may very well be caught in such a continuum, but that does not necessarily mean that we are always tending toward the ideal limit. We do not *magically* head in the right direction. Peirce would be the first to admit that there is always the potential of error involved in interpretation and that we often get things wrong. However, Peirce *does* believe that if we could discover the right kind of method of interpreting signs, then we would be equipped with the tools necessary to, at least, theoretically reach this ideal limit only insofar as we carry out the method indefinitely.

In the *Fixation of Belief*, Peirce is trying to work out the best method for fixing our beliefs. Having criticized the methods of authority, tenacity, and a-priority, he eventually concludes that it is the method of scientific investigation that would give us the best chance of understanding reality. Peirce's conception of the scientific method requires a communal consensus to attain knowledge—that “the sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion” (W3: 248) but that such a settlement can only be reached in the indefinite long run. While Peirce holds that “all human thought and opinion contains an arbitrary, accidental element, dependent on the limitations in circumstances, power, and bent of the individual” (W2: 468), in “The Fixation of Belief” he describes the fundamental hypothesis of science as holding that “there are

real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them” (W3: 254). In short, there is an external permanency, or dynamical object, which is independent “from the one-sidedness of [the inquirers’] idiosyncrasies” (W2: 469) that the scientific method gravitates toward. In this way, Peirce claims that to deploy the scientific method fruitfully “essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge” (W2: 239). A communal scientific enterprise, conceived of as a constantly evolving practice, gives individual inquirers a way to tease out their idiosyncrasies by comparing and contrasting their various opinions about the object of their conception in hopes of arriving at a future consensus.

In his review of “Fraser’s *The Works of George Berkeley*” Peirce states: “let any human being have enough information and exert enough thought upon any question, and the result will be that he will arrive at a certain definite conclusion, which is the same that any other mind will reach under sufficiently favourable circumstances” (W2: 468). Consequently, scientific knowledge resides in the final opinion, or the consensus, or the final interpretant, that the community would reach were it to carry out its investigation indefinitely. For Peirce, “different minds may set out with the most antagonistic views, but the progress of investigation carries them by a force outside of themselves to one and the same conclusion” (W3: 273). “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate,” Peirce claims, “is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real” (W3: 273). In this way, Peirce argues that “we individually cannot reasonably hope to attain the ultimate philosophy which we pursue; we can only seek it, therefore, for the community of philosophers” (W2: 212). This final opinion, then, exists in a time sufficiently in the future, and only through continuous application of the method of scientific investigation can we ever hope to approximate it.

Little work has been done to link the indefinite process of scientific investigation with Peirce's work on signs. Though, it seems clear that the links are abundant. I want to suggest that the method of scientific investigation takes place within the continuum between First and Last (First and Second) which I have been tracing in the previous section. It is the very method, that, if deployed indefinitely, would ensure that we are constantly tending in the right direction. Consider how Peirce's view of scientific investigation is tending, in the long run, toward a conception of reality. The process of semiosis simultaneously moves from the First toward the Last as we embark on the method of scientific investigation. The agreement that the community would reach, might resemble the form of the final logical interpretant which brings the sign into relation with its object, such that we have a conception of the object (reality) through the sign and interpretant.

This link between the process of semiosis and the method of scientific investigation is perhaps made most clear by Peirce in the following passage from his "Basis of Pragmaticism:"

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. (EP 2.380) (my emphasis)

Strikingly, Peirce is here describing, in a different way, the same method of scientific investigation that he outlined in the "Fixation" and the Cognition Series. Only here, Peirce is describing the method as a method of transforming signs. This passage seems to me to link Peirce's method of scientific investigation with his process of semiosis—to say that the two go

hand in hand. The method of scientific investigation is a method of interpreting signs—the best one, at that. It is a method of *signtific*<sup>35</sup> investigation.

Now in light of this connection, let's consider again the aforementioned line from Peirce's "How to Make Our Ideas Clear:"

The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. (W3: 273)

There are closer readers of Peirce and the secondary scholarship surrounding Peirce than I, but in my limited studies as a graduate student, I have not found anyone who has remarked on the striking similarity that this passage shares with Peirce's triadic formulation of the sign. *And the object represented in this opinion is the real...* And the *object* represented (as through a sign) in this opinion (the final interpretant) is the real. The object is represented through a sign in an opinion, or interpretant; and that object so represented in the interpretant is the real.

In his October 12th letter to Welby Peirce defines the sign thus:

A sign therefore is an object which is in relation to its object on the one hand and to an interpretant on the other in such a way as to bring the interpretant into a relation to the object corresponding to its own relation to the object. (Peirce *Semiotic and Signifys* 32)

The sign is of an immediate object which stands in for the dynamical object on the one hand and to an interpretant on the other. The sign functions as a middle here to bring the interpretant into a kind of conformity with the dynamical object that the sign is an immediate object of. Still, the dynamical object is not present in this interpretant. Eco writes:

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<sup>35</sup> This is my term. And I think it is quite funny considering Derrida's "différance" which, in the French language, cannot be distinguished phonetically. Similarly, when I speak the word "signtific" in English, you do not know whether I am saying "scientific" or "signtific". More seriously though, it also opens up the term "science" to a broader meaning. The signtific method is not narrowly deployed in laboratories, but more generally, is conceived of as a method of interpreting signs.

When the interpretation is produced, the dynamical object is no more *there*... But the presence of the representamen, as well as the presence (in mind or elsewhere) of the Immediate Object, means that in some way the Dynamical Object, which is not there, *was* somewhere. Being not present, or not-being-there, the Object of an act of interpretation *has been*. Moreover, that Dynamical Object that *was*, and which is absent in the ghost of the Immediate One, to be translated into the potentially infinite chain of its interpretants, *will be*, or *ought to be*. (Eco 218)

The sign thus has two objects: “its object as it is represented [immediate object] and its object in itself [dynamical object]” (Peirce *Semiotic and Significality* 32). Furthermore, the sign has three different types of interpretants: “its interpretant as represented or meant to be understood [final interpretant], its interpretant as it is produced [dynamical interpretant], and its interpretant in itself [immediate interpretant]” (Peirce *Semiotic and Significality* 32). The Final Opinion then, is the final interpretant—the way the interpretant is meant<sup>36</sup> to be understood—which brings the community, through the mediation of signs, into relation with the immediate object of their conception.

But in the instance of a final interpretant, this immediate object closely approximates the dynamical object (reality) precisely because it is the final, or last interpretant of the signifying chain. Peirce writes “that to which the representation should conform is itself something in the nature of a representation, or sign—something noumenal, intelligible, conceivable, and utterly unlike a thing in itself” (EP 3.80). The dynamical object is not present, but its ghost lingers so closely to the immediate object in this Final Opinion that, until doubt calls us to inquire again, we might be satisfied that we have actually come to terms with reality.

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<sup>36</sup> Notice the tendency, or telos, encapsulated in the “meant” here.

The method of scientific (significant) investigation is thus a method of transforming signs—a way forward that would allow us to have a conception of reality, in the long run, were we to continually apply it to the immediate objects of our conception. It is a method which maps nicely onto Peirce's triadic formulation of the sign and his view that semiosis takes place within a continuum. For we, as person-signs (or semiotic beings), find ourselves within this continuum, this semiosis. But in order to tend, in the long run, toward this final opinion (or interpretant) we cannot, with Derrida, define the process as a limitlessness of play. Rather, with the right method of transforming signs, and a community of semiotic beings backing us, we can move along with the movement toward this end, reality. We never will, of course, reach the end—we are in the continuum and can only approximate it asymptotically—but the point is not to reach the end. The point is to continue to inquire, to never be satisfied with our state of knowledge at time  $t$ , but to always be open to further signification—further investigation. If, with Derrida, we leave ourselves to play, we will give up on the potential of arriving at a conception of reality in the long run—we will let fictions dictate our lives.

For the real springs forth in opposition to the unreal or illusion—it is not a private figment of any one individual's imagination, but is public and accessible to a community of inquirers in the indefinite long run. Derridean play is different from Peircean continuity, then, in the following way: whereas play is emblematic of, what Peirce calls, “an *ens* relative to private inward determinations, to the negations belonging to idiosyncrasy,” continuity is of “an *ens* such as would stand in the long run” (W2: 239). “Thus,” Peirce writes, “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 indefinite increase in knowledge” (W2: 239). Through the formation of a community of semiotic beings, we negate the many

negations (or vagaries, or play) of any one individual by slowly distilling our private inward idiosyncrasies within the public opinion of the community of inquirers. The play slowly becomes constrained as we asymptotically approximate the end of inquiry.

Indeed, for Peirce, we are physiologically disposed to approximate this end insofar as we are irritated by doubt to inquire so as to have true beliefs about reality—the irritation of doubt leads us to inquire to have a state of belief (W3: 247). In *A Guess At The Riddle* Peirce claims that

the ultimate effect of this will be that a habit [final logical interpretant]<sup>37</sup> gets established of at once reacting in the way which removes the source of irritation; for this habit alone will be strengthened at each repetition of the experiment, while every other will tend to become weakened at an accelerated rate (W6: 192).

As we move toward this end, we develop habits of action which are closer aligned with reality. Consequently, as we inch ever closer, the play becomes weakened at an “accelerated rate.” The closer we get to reality, the less play there is.

Now, we may be content to play for a while, but Peirce teaches us that sooner or later reality will impinge on us, and in that *occurrence*—when we first *knock up against it*—a seed of doubt is planted that calls into question the very play that we have enveloped ourselves in. This seed of doubt marks the first instance of our gaining a sense of direction within the movement from sign to sign.

If we return, now, to my example of the Derridean driving their car through the endless detour of the sign, we might imagine them smashing into the driver ahead of them. This is reality

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<sup>37</sup> I add this to maintain the consistency I have developed between Peirce’s method of scientific investigation and his semiotic. By showing how the habit change which Peirce is speaking of here can also be understood as a final logical interpretant, I keep the semiotic closely interwoven with Peirce method of scientific investigation.

in its most brute force. It is “hard and tangible... forced upon us... In youth [or in play] the world is fresh and we seem free;” Peirce writes, “but limitation, conflict, constraint, and secondness generally, make up the teaching of experience:

With what firstness

The scarfed bark puts from her native bay

With what secondness

doth she return

With overweathered ribs and ragged sails” (W6: 171-72).<sup>38</sup>

The limitlessness of play is thwarted by reality impinging. And it impinges on us all the time.

The Derridean cannot go on playing forever. Eventually they will hit the bottom of the bottomless pit.<sup>39</sup> And when they do, they may come to have a real doubt about their conception of play. The Peircean can only hope, that faced with this brute Second, this genuine doubt, the Derridean goes on to consider the Third.

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<sup>38</sup> I maintain the unconventional formatting to capture the poetic spacing of Peirce’s writing in this passage.

<sup>39</sup> I am aware that a bottomless pit, by definition, cannot have a bottom. What I am trying to express is that it is only Derrida who thinks that the bottomless pit is, indeed, bottomless. With the addition of the dynamical object (as ideal limit) we see that the bottomless pit really does have a bottom—it is just a pit. The Derridean may plunge into it thinking that it is bottomless, but they eventually hit the bottom—reality. The bottomless is found to have a bottom after all.



## The Two Criteria Met

Throughout the course of this final chapter I have tried to outline why it is that, for Peirce, the process of semiosis is tending, in the long run, toward a kind of Finality that is reality. Furthermore, I tried to show, by linking the gap between Peirce's method of scientific investigation and his semiotic, that if we can fashion the right method of transforming signs, we can restore a sense of direction to the movement from sign to sign—find the means to approximate reality through the interpretation of signs. Afterwards, I suggested that, in the very act of approximating this reality, the notion of Derridean play (insofar as it seems to be inward and private) is slowly reduced and dissolved by the uptake of a communal enterprise. I even suggested that, physiologically, we are disposed to move toward this end and that even the most liberated Derridean would be bound to face reality eventually.

At the beginning of this chapter, however, I suggested that in order for Peircean continuity to rightfully respond to Derridean play, it would need to meet two criteria: 1) it must not, in any way, give in to an appeal to presence to ground the chain of signification; and 2) it must not circumscribe or restrain the movement from sign to sign. Does the continuity of semiosis, once melded with Peirce's method of *sign*tific investigation, satisfy these criteria? I am inclined to say that it does for the following reasons:

Firstly, Peirce's notion of the ultimate truth—as found in the final logical interpretant—does not reveal the presence of the dynamical object (reality in its unmoving fixity). Rather, as I showed through Eco, the presence of the dynamical object is absent within the triadic formulation of the sign. In each instance of interpretation, we have only the immediate object—itsself mediated by the representamen (or sign). The dynamical object is not present, it is a ghost

which lingers behind the immediate object (which is itself a sign). Still though, the dynamical object is not erased completely... it is still *somewhere*—just not present in any given instant. To encapsulate what I mean by this, I might follow Derrida and put the Dynamical Object *sous rature*: ~~Dynamical Object~~. It is not present, but it is still legible. It is still the Finality at the opposite end of the line between First and Last. But by crossing it out, we can see more clearly why it is not fully present in the final logical interpretant at the end of inquiry.

The second criterion, however, is harder to meet. In the case of the final logical interpretant—insofar as it is a habit of action—it seems, at first glance, to freeze the movement from sign to sign. It would put an end to the movement from sign to sign insofar as the production of a habit seems, at least temporarily, to freeze the process of semiosis within a pragmatic context. But this is only the case if we think that we have, indeed, arrived at such a final interpretant. As I tried to point out though, we can never be certain that we have reached the end of inquiry in any given moment precisely because all thought in the here-and-now depends, for Peirce, on what is to be hereafter. While the formation of a habit in the here-and-now may freeze the movement from sign to sign for some time, in order to truly remain a fallibilist, one must always be open to the *potential* of further signification. This very *potential* suggests that we can never remain content with freezing the movement from sign to sign. We must always be willing to take another sample, run another experiment, carry our inquiry a little bit further. We must always entertain the possibility that, while we are in a state of belief now, a future doubt may irritate us to inquire yet again. In this sense, then, we can never, by Peirce's own fallibilism, completely freeze the movement from sign to sign—there is always the potential of the semiosis to continue signifying.

In this way then, I like to think of Peircean inquiry as a Sisyphean struggle. We find ourselves, like Sisyphus, at the foot of a mountain, doomed (potentially) to inquire for all eternity. We move and push the rock of inquiry all the way to the top. It rolls back down. In our descent, we are free from the weight of inquiry—from the irritation of doubt. This descent resembles a temporarily stable belief—“at each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his own fate... He is stronger than his rock” (Camus 121). But Camus warns us that “one always finds one’s burden again” (Camus 123). We always need to be ready to lift the rock of inquiry if doubt calls us to once more. Indeed, it is not the end of inquiry that matters, but the moving toward the end: “the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” (Camus 123). Like Sisyphus, we must imagine that the inquirer is happy.

Thus, by considering Peirce’s mature semiotic and its relation to both the categories and his method of significant investigation, I have shown that Peirce is able to meet both of the criteria set out at the beginning of this chapter. He neither gives in to the metaphysics of presence, nor permanently freezes the movement from sign to sign. Rather, he shows us, that by placing semiosis within a continuum, and furnishing the right method of investigation, we are able to tend toward reality even from within the movement from sign to sign.

## CONCLUSION

What then of the crisis of meaning and of the difference between continuity and play in Peirce and Derrida? Throughout the course of this investigation I have tried to show that, while Peirce and Derrida both maintain that we are caught up in an unlimited semiosis, they express different attitudes about how to cope with such a semiosis. Whereas Derrida takes semiosis to result in a limitlessness of play in which the hope of reaching truth and reality are replaced by pleasure and enjoyment, Peirce opts to develop a method of transforming signs, from within semiosis, that allows us to tend toward reality in the indefinite long run.

This difference in attitude suggests that at the moment we are faced with unlimited semiosis, we have a choice: either we can, with Derrida, say “Yes!” and embrace the play in the movement from sign to sign; or we can, with Peirce, maintain a cheerful hope that, with the right method, we can nonetheless approximate reality. As Pettigrew suggests, the difference between Peirce and Derrida is like that of the difference between Nietzsche’s “artistic” and “scientific” tendencies:

The artistic tendency celebrates the limitless variability of nature—what Nietzsche considers as an infinite metaphoricity. The scientific tendency forgets the metaphoricity of nature, setting a structure in place to control that very metaphoricity. (Pettigrew 375)

While Derrida celebrates the artistic tendency, Peirce celebrates the scientific tendency.

I find myself being pulled in both directions. On the one hand, if Pettigrew’s assessment is right, then I can imagine Derrida replying that Peirce’s move to develop a method of transforming signs is just another attempt to govern the limitlessness of play—his terms “reality” and “continuity” and his “method of scientific investigation” are really just master-words that

circumscribe the freedom of play. We might then, following Bennington's Derrida, say that when Peirce chooses the method of scientific investigation he is choosing the empirical over the transcendental without realizing that, in doing so, he puts the empirical in a transcendental position with respect to transcendence and is thus bogged down by all that contraband that he tries to cast to wayside.

On the other hand, however, Peirce teaches that we cannot be content to play forever. I have tried to show that play leads to the production of fictions insofar as it lends itself to idiosyncrasy. Furthermore, I have shown that reality (or Secondness) impinges on us, and that when it does, we are often physiologically disposed to come to terms with it. By coming to terms with reality, through the method of *signific* investigation, the play in Derrida slowly subsides. It is true that by endorsing such a method we are circumscribing the play of signs. But, I have tried to show that, in doing so, we do not give in to the metaphysics of presence. This is precisely because the method of scientific investigation takes place within the same continuum that semiosis does—the same continuum that we, as person-signs, inhabit.

We have a choice between these two competing attitudes, and we have to make a decision. Will it be continuity, or will it be play? We seem, at this juncture, to stand where William James once stood:

...on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? ' Be strong and of a good courage.' Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better. (James, "The Will to Believe" 92)

Which is more likely to dash us to pieces? Would we meet death better in the abyss of deconstruction, or by asymptotically approximating the end of inquiry?

While Peirce can provide no guarantee that we will reach the end of inquiry, it is not good enough reason to abandon the entire project of significant investigation outright—it is not reason enough to say that, in place of continuity, there is only play. Rather, the very potential that we could reach such an end through the application of the right method is enough to maintain, what Colapietro calls, the cheerful hope “of discovering unsuspected regularities [Thirdness] and rational consensus” (Colapietro “The Ground of Semiosis” 137). Indeed, it is Peirce himself who claims that one “fights the battle of life better under the stimulus of hope” (CP 1.406 qtd. in Colapietro “Ground” 137). As Colapietro suggests, if we endorse Derridean play our cheerful hope that there is continuity will evaporate:

We plummet into a sense of the endtime, a point in time when the end of philosophy (Wittgenstein) or of metaphysics (Derrida) or even of “humanity” itself (Foucault) is announced—sometimes with shrill exuberance, sometimes with muted sadness, but always with absolute certainty. (Colapietro “Ground” 137)

The certainty with which Derrida marks the closure of the metaphysics of presence is what stifles the hope that there could be continuity in the long run. By confining himself to play, he loses sight of the tendency and continuity of the process of semiosis. While Derrida champions Peirce to show the indefinite referral from sign to sign, he fails to recognize that, for Peirce, that indefinite referral is only *potentially* indefinite.

Derrida may not care that he did not get Peirce right. I do not care that Derrida did not get Peirce right. The prospect of getting Peirce right seems too great for any one individual anyway.

However, were Peirce still alive today, he likely would have thought that Derrida's playful attitude toward philosophy is exactly the kind of attitude which infringes on the progress of significant investigation. It is just the sort of attitude that leads one into a post-truth age—an "endtime" (Colapietro 137) where reality no longer holds sway over what might constitute the truth. Indeed, in this hellfire that seems everywhere to surround us—the failing climate, the fragile economy, the fact the Nazis are crawling out of the gutters in America—we might do best to try to maintain a little *cheerful hope*. Without such hope, we will surely be dashed to pieces.

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