

The Literary Practice on the Immediate Horizon of the Elaboration of Semiotics

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We are invited to elaborate a critical thought about the articulation between the semiotic theory emerging from Peirce's work and literature or, in more accurate words, on the practices of text which are writing and reading.

Continental semiotics, ensuing from the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Louis Hjelmslev and the Paris School, have already given an abundance of studies on literary semiotics. These works have led to extremely important assets, namely on the question of narration and the great narratives in their links to the questions of signification and representation. Following the development to these works, the reflexion now deals with the questions of perception, taking semiotics to the threshold of phenomenology. Future works, one can imagine, will take place within this space.

In regard to the semiotics ensuing from Peirce's works, elaboration is much less advanced. This theory corpus has been constituted, as an object of knowledge, for less than twenty-five years. The considering of the literary object under such perspective is new or at least very recent [NOTE 1]. But, simultaneous, Peirce's semiotics, belonging to what he called phaneroscopy (which remains close to phenomenology), seems to take us near the area of the actual continental studies in semiotics. Therefore, I would like to present, with an attitude of complementarity to that other place of semiotics, some reflexions and propositions that open the way to new relations between the elaboration of a signification theory and the practices of literature: writing and reading. But, however, it must be acknowledged that the semiotic theory elaborated in Peirce's corpus comes from a philosophical context whose foundations differ radically from those of continental semiotics; for that reason, the relation of this latter to the literary matter must be imagined in a renewed perspective. It is in view of this objective that this article is written.

I will begin by recalling some specific aspects of this semiotics, in its relation to the pragmatist position. Then I will briefly question about the effecting presence of literature in the very text by Peirce. Finally, after having put forward some general propositions, I will allow myself to evoke, with two examples, a relation between the theory and literature which would respect what makes the specificity of *semeiotic*.

But a preliminary annotation is needed. The term *semeiotic* designates the theory of signification specific to Peirce, whereas the term *semiotics* refers in a more general way to all theoretical reflexions and analysis practices interested in the question of signification. It is quite interesting to discover that the issue of the discussion suggested here is situated precisely in the interaction of these two notions, one which is more restrictive and the other taken in a broadened sense. As I will be referring essentially to Peirce's theory and therefore no ambiguity is possible, I prefer to use the term *semiotics* because it evokes openness and interdisciplinarity, which corresponds well with the actual project. And when I use the term *semeiotic*, I refer to the meaning restricted by Peirce's position.

1. Semiotics and Pragmatism

The first feature I would like to recall concerns the link of semeiotic to the philosophical position of pragmatism.

Nathan Houser (1998) has demonstrated, in a way which is particularly clear, that Peirce tried to validate the position of pragmatism by three application domains : first by works performed at a younger age and which deal with the question of sensations and perception; secondly by elaborating semiotics; finally by the treatise of existential graphs.

Now, in the standpoint of semioticians rather than of philosophy historians, it makes sense to reverse the perspective and place semiotics at the centre of our preoccupations, making pragmatism the philosophical context of semiotics.

We must, then, take into account the fact that the position of pragmatism is central and that it is precisely such a position which confers to Peirce's semiotics its originality among the other theories of signification, namely continental semiotics to which I alluded at the beginning. I recall briefly, with a few propositions, the epistemological context here summarized : 1. the signification of a unit, sign or symbol, lies in its use rather than in a prior definition. 2. This use does not refer exclusively to a contemporary situation but also and above all to what is yet to come. Hence the definition of sign as a "would be". 3. Therefore, in the present or the immediacy of representation, signification is, to a great extent, virtual. In a more general way, we could suggest that instead of being strictly the outcome of an acquisition stored, let us say, as a value, meaning is rather a process under way, an action, which never ends. In short, it could be suggested that the very idea of a well delineated meaning is replaced by what we could call, more appropriately, *avenues of signification*. Hence the central place occupied by the notion of *semiosis ad infinitum*. We can already foresee that the literary text, rather than being subjected to a semiotic theory, will instead constitute an area located in an all near horizon [NOTE 2], a place where, precisely, sign can be extended and realized according to its semiotic movement.

The second point on which I want to insist is just as important: the very project of *semeiotic* is a non completed object of knowledge or, using once again the metaphor by Peirce, an elaboration which was a land laid fallow. Our task as semioticians is therefore to understand the foundations of the questioning and extend its realisation. For this reason, the pragmatist position, which defines knowledge as a process always under way, applies perfectly to the very conditions of semiotics theory. I think that the study of literature under the semiotic point of view necessarily meets the requirements for the elaboration of the theory.

2. How does Literature Appear in Peirce's Text?

Literature is not very present in texts written by Peirce. His education and his own interests directed him rather towards science, philosophy and specifically logic. Yet, his texts regularly allude to literary works, sometimes to music and frequently to painting. If I were to give a general picture first, I would suggest that the elaboration of Peirce's semiotics is done mostly on the logical ground, while at the same time the various forms of artistic activities are often present in his mind, since they occupy the horizon towards which the philosophical thought tends, as his semiotics is being worked out.

I will attempt, in the first place, to determine the mode of incidence of the literary object in Peirce's discourse. To do so, I will refer to some cases that are particularly significant and representative of the references he makes to literary works.

2.1 The ambiguous references to Emerson's Sphinx.

Numerous references are made to Emerson's well-known poem, "The Sphinx.[NOTE 3]" The main occurrence (C.P. 1.306-311) is a reflection on the term *feelings* and its definition. Peirce's discussion could be summarized as follows: the whole conscience, at a given instant, is nothing but a feelings, which means that the state of such conscience is strictly one of immediacy; then what can

psychology -- which is a cognitive process inscribed through mediation -- tell us on the nature of a feelings? And ourselves, what can we discover by introspection, in regards to the nature of a feelings? The answer is clear and simple: nothing. The feelings remains unknowable, for it is veiled by the immediate conscience to which it belongs. Peirce goes on to say that there is, in this hiatus between the immediacy of feelings and the mediation of knowledge, a “curious truth.” And, at the very core of this particularly entangled reasoning, he adds that it is presumably what the poet Emerson was trying to grasp when he wrote the following verses:

"I am thy spirit, yoke-fellow,
Of thine eye I am eyebeam.
Thou art the unanswered question;
Couldst see thy proper eye,
Always it asketh, asketh;
And each answer is a lie."
[Verses cited in Peirce's text]

Then Peirce adds mischievously that if it is this “curious truth” that the poet was trying to express, he did it “pretty unsuccessfully.”

In a different context (C.P. 2.302), where the issue is on the central purpose of symbol in all forms of cognition, another allusion is made to Emerson's poem: “The symbol may, with Emerson's sphinx, say to man, *Of thine eye I am eyebeam.*” And, on the first pages of the manuscript of *A Guess at the Riddle*, Peirce had reproduced, accompanied with the same verses from Emerson, a sketch of a Greek sculpture representing a sphinx, and which had previously appeared in the *Century Dictionary*.

Finally, I want to recall that Peirce alludes once again to Emerson at the beginning of “The Law of Mind” (C.P.6.102), to dissociate himself clearly from the transcendentalist Concord movement, of which the poet constituted a central figure. It is understandable that Peirce felt the need to dissociate himself from any possible tie with the transcendentalist position of the Concord group, since their philosophical position [NOTE 4] comes into contradiction with the pragmatist position.

So what is the relationship displayed by Peirce towards the poet? First, he allows himself some nastiness concerning Emerson whose poem is not particularly clear, nor very well written. But at the same time, Peirce refers precisely to this obscureness or indecisiveness of meaning to indicate the difficulty, even the impossibility to reach and understand the nature of feelings. And, when he comes back to Emerson, it is to attest, in a more positive way, the central role played by symbol in the knowledge. Ultimately, the prominent place reserved to the poem, as he begins his most important project -- a treatise on logic called *A Guess at the Riddle* --, give the image of the sphinx and Emerson's verses as symbols of his own research in the field of logic.

The major features to be remembered about Peirce's relation to Emerson are as follows: the poet does not represent any authority whatsoever due to his status as a prominent writer [NOTE 5] ; on the contrary, Emerson's renown and his ideological belonging would instead play against this reference, which, however, remains frequent. As a whole, it must be acknowledged that the relation to the poem and the associate image of the sphinx, is ambivalent, sometimes ironic or amused, sometimes clearly distanced, sometimes respectful; this ambivalence appears to me as the counterpart to an attitude of familiarity Peirce takes with the poem: it seems that Peirce used Emerson's text to witness his own inquiry, or that he recognized in Emerson's assertions and hesitations, his own reasoning; finally it seems that he appropriated the text. The assumption I am making here is not one of a mere thought resemblance in the content of propositions, but, in a more subtle way, an affinity between inquiries.

In other words, it could be suggested that the poem participates in the inferring process or, if one prefer, in the semiotic movements in which the mind is involved. This way, Emerson becomes a witness (a support or a counter-argument) in which these few verses constitute, momentarily, a place for various aspects of the semiotics, to be elaborated. The last aspect which appears to me as particularly significant, is that the action of thinking, of imagining, or, more simply, of supposing is shared. This, of course, brings back the idea, central to Peirce, of the necessity for a community of thought.

2.2 Hamlet, Robinson Crusoe, and C. Auguste Dupin

I am now going to briefly drop a hint to three literary figures. Though occupying limited positions, they possibly represent strategic points in Peirce's text.

Of all the references made to Shakespeare, which are quite numerous, those to Hamlet are of a special interest: in the texts of the *Collected Papers*, I have found numerous allusions to Hamlet's *presumed madness*. What appears significant is that these references serve as a context to discuss topics of very different natures (be it theoretical or philosophical); six of these references can be used as examples. They relate to the following themes: the indexical function (C.P. 2.337); the predicative function (C.P. 2.342); the world of fiction (C.P. 4.43); the place and function of the imagination in the universe of discourse (C.P. 4.172); the determining effect of the object on the sign (8.178); finally, the necessity to take into account collateral information when it comes to sign interpretation (8.179). Many more allusions to Hamlet's madness probably exist, but those evoked here should be sufficient for my purpose.

The major point concerning the references to Hamlet, is indeed the status of his madness. I would like to visit again briefly the core of these discussions, just to give an idea of the variety of questioning having to do with this literary figure. Peirce puts forward that Hamlet's presumed madness were thought of, in our modern period, in a different way than it was at the time of Classicism, or even Romanticism; does madness possess an objective reality or would it rather depend on our interpretations as readers? Considering that Shakespeare's play and the character are fictitious, what is the meaning of the term "reality"? Or, looking at it another way, can a symbolic existence be conferred to Hamlet while being unaware of his presumed madness? Or still: is madness just an attribute of Hamlet or, on the contrary, would it be precisely this madness represented that confer an existence to Hamlet, the character? One thing remains sure: the Hamlet case, far from being expressed by a single and simple reasoning, can be made plenty more complex, widening the variety of questions and problems encountered in semiotic reflections. What appears significant to me and which I want to emphasize, is the fictitious aspect of the character which, by making the status of madness problematic, allows the opening to a variety of questioning.

The footprint found by Robinson on the beach of his island (C.P. 4.531) becomes a favoured iconic place, for establishing the organisation of the three kinds of relations between the sign and its object. A print found in the sand with no known object (icon), the encounter with a black man, Friday, producer of the footprint to which refers the sign (index), and finally the renown this episode brought to Daniel Defoe, since it "has been stamped in the granite of fame" (symbol). A first level, reading of this example shows the simple movement of sign development, going -- in accordance with the definition of categories -- from the initial feelings, to the index of reality, and then to the symbolic value put together by culture. This reference to Robinson Crusoe is found in a passage where Peirce inverts the hierarchy, and asserts that the icon, which shares with its object the characteristics of lies and deceptions, has "more to do with the living character of truth than have either Symbols or Indices." This passage by Peirce -- pertaining to the period of great maturity [NOTE 6] -- comes to problematicize the notion of icon, which, as we know, occupies a central position in *semiotic*. What is significant is that this inversion (in the allocation of the predominance to the icon) could only be done through the use of a fictitious

situation, in this case being the well known adventure of Robinson on his island, which is deserted as uncertainly and problematically as Hamlet's madness is. Outside this reference to a fiction novel, the few sentences -- where Peirce develops this idea of the "living character of truth" possessed by the icon -- would remain supportless and improbable. I propose reading the following sentences: "The Icon does not stand unequivocally for this or that existing thing, as the Index does. Its Object may be a pure fiction, as to its existence. [...] But there is one assurance that the Icon does afford in the highest degree. Namely, that which is displayed before the mind's gaze -- the Form of the Icon, which is also its object -- must be logically possible." (C.P. 4.531) It is significant that this passage, aiming toward generalisation and abstraction, can only lean on a fictitious episode.

In a "Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" (C.P. 6.460-461), the idea of Pure Play and Musement is said to be realized in an exquisite manner in the effort of thought of C. Auguste Dupin who, in the well known *Rue Morgue* case, manages to piece together the entire scenario of events, through the sole use of his mind concentration power. The context of this reference is similar to the previous one with Robinson Crusoe. By elaborating this idea of Pure Play, Peirce takes care of indicating that Musement should not be limited to a "method of such moderate fertility as logical analysis." And later on he adds: "logical analysis can be put to its full efficiency in Musement." So, then, what makes the specificity of Musement, if not the full freedom of the mind, beyond all rules and all formal requirements, in an exercise where the mind allows itself all daring ideas. Giving this "law of liberty" as a rule of play, he takes care of distancing himself from the "tribes of Sir Oracles" -- Auguste Comte being the typical representation, he says -- , of which, Peirce assures, hawking could be countered by the jokes of a Rabelais. Thus, such as in the cases previously examined, one find here a displacement: the references to Rabelais and to Poe [NOTE 7] induce an *other place* escaping rules of logical analysis, a place where the liberated mind can have access, through its own power, to propositions that are related to knowledge and which otherwise would remain inaccessible. This *other place*, one of Musement as to what regards the rules of formal logic -- Peirce writes that the Player should "retain the perfect candour proper to musement" (C.P. 6.458) -- , is purely imaginary; therefore, we can understand Peirce's needs for the support of a fiction text, in order to succeed in imagining this *other place*. It seems coherent that in the continuation of the same article, this *other place* should be described only on a metaphorical basis; Peirce uses indeed a sequence of three metaphors: "skiff of Musement", "lake of thought", and "the breath of heaven." A few lines further, the metaphorical scheme is always predominant, such as attests the metaphor of "castle-building (whether in Spain or within one's own moral training)" (C.P. 6.458).

In these three cases, literary allusions serve a function similar to the one previously discovered in the references to Emerson's poem. The characters -- Hamlet, Robinson, and C. Auguste Dupin -- , not the authors, accompany the thought and the discussion; and their presence should not be reduced to the simple status of an illustration, an example, or an attestation of a proposition. As previously suggested, we could propose the idea that Peirce allows himself a certain familiarity towards these literary works and these characters; we could also propose the idea of an harmony or an affinity between these literary writing and the semiotic discourse; finally, theoretical elaboration seems to lean on the fictitious nature of the stories told, in order to constitute itself as a fully semiotic discourse, pertaining as much to the order of Thirdness and its abstract values, as to the order of Firstness and its imaginary representations. Finally, it could be said that literary texts seem to impose an abductive type inferring process.

3. The Imaginary of the Theory

I use the word *Imaginary* as a noun marking a nominalisation of the adjectival function. The *imaginary* designates a symbolic place where images appear, like sketches of sense or simple possibilities not yet effective (in the way of an unreal number) but which will come to feed the construction of signification. Literary practices—writing and reading—lie within this place.[NOTE 8]

3.1 The Iconicity of Literary Texts for the Elaboration of Theory

This predominance for an accompaniment and enrichment function of the literary works, as to what regards the imaginary, is related to the iconic function. The idea of values hierarchy inversion, that we have retained from the short analyses effectuated in reference to Robinson's island and C. Auguste Dupin's power of imagination, is particularly indicative of the predominance of the iconic function. There need only remind briefly a few characteristics of the icon, to advance a little further in the comprehension of this collusion between the imaginary -- feed on literary fiction -- and the elaboration of theory.

The icon constitutes a place where a solution to a problem is found from the simple act of formulating it. For Peirce, mathematician, the typical icon is the algebraic formula, in fact a diagram; it allows to figure out a problem and, through manipulation of the data, reach a solution. I recall this passage:

“... a great distinguishing property of the icon is that by the direct observation of it other truths concerning its object can be discovered than those which suffice to determine its construction. [...] This capacity of revealing unexpected truth is precisely that wherein the utility of algebraical formulae consists, so that the iconic character is the prevailing one.” (C.P.2.279.).

Later in Peirce's work, the Existential Graphs theory will come to actualize that same idea, but in a project that stands out due to its scale: graphs would allow, suggested Peirce, to show the work of the Mind as it unfolds.

The literary text is present in Peirce's text precisely as such. That is to say as a place of inscription, sketching, and elaboration of the theory. It constitutes a place for illustrating, and where solutions can be found to questions of logic and semiotics, a place where, in other words, “other truths concerning its object can be discovered than those which suffice to determine its construction.” If we were to borrow an image from the theory of Existential Graphs, we could suggest that Peirce makes of Hamlet's madness, Robinson's roaming in the land of America, or of the total mastery of logic by C. Auguste Dupin as many “sheets] of assertion”, that is to say *draft paper* where Peirce comes to inscribe his own sketches on the accounts of the three functions he acknowledges: the Graphist, the Muser, and the Interpreter. In short, literary references become *shared spaces*.

This metaphor, which allows me to make Peirce a draftsman involved inside the representation, leads me to a main proposition: the literary text is never a sheer and simple object extrinsic to signs which could be described in a remote way; and that is for many reasons, including one which is essential: the literary text is a language; it is therefore a system of signs; its existence is intrinsically semiotic; and our theoretical discourse is, in the same way, semiotic: these two discourses are interacting and inseparable.

The reason why the literary text can not be reduced to the status of an object, is that this would be contradictory to the definition of the icon. In other words, these stories told by literature

are, in themselves, places and occasions for semiotic movements, that start when the mind — the author's or the reader's *Mind* — projects itself on a scene called *icon*. The literary text is always linked to the semiotic movements going on in our minds, and the literary text can never become a simple and passive object on which to make, from an abstract level, an analysis.

3.2 A Few General Propositions

For more clarity, the previous reflections on the presence of literary works in the *semiotic* discourse could be reformulated and specified by the following propositions.

1. The well-known poet, the playwright, and the novelist, as prestigious as they may be, do not confer authority to a statement.
2. Literary references rarely concern an author or a work; they involve much more specific objects: a character's trait, an argument, a passage in a story, a metaphor, etc.
3. The literary text is not the object of a description, analysis, or study. It is simply not a separate *object*. Hence it can not be looked at from the point of view of a foreign discourse.
4. The cited text is associated -- or annexed -- with the actual processes of the semiotician who grasps it and even appropriates it.
5. The literary text becomes, in an iconic way, a place where a new knowledge is elaborated.
6. The literary material is seized as an object of fiction or as discursive material; in short, it is received for what it is, symbolic material: it is rigorously composed of the same essence as the discourse questioning it, and must be regarded to be just as important. The distinction between language and metalanguage has no purpose whatsoever here.
7. The literary text is brought in as a place where knowledge, in regard to signifying conditions, gets elaborated. It is the theoretically infinite generating process of new signs by interpretants -- the semiotic movement --, coming to supply for the fixity-imposing and over-simplifying model of the language-metalanguage duo.

Two supplementary comments could be made:

- What is said about literary texts can also be applied to painting and music [NOTE 9] .
- If one follows chronologically Peirce's writings, he finds that with the passing years, movements back and forth between the semiotic discourse and references to literature, painting, and music become more and more frequent; and affinities are more and more asserted. On this, "A Neglected Argument", the last text published by Peirce, marks the outstanding outcome of a long process.

3.3 A Few Consequences...

We are therefore invited to read literary texts, as parallel to the philosophical discourse where signification is being elaborated. As if poems, narratives, and theatre plays took part in a vast semiotic movement. And, for that reason, we must renounce the very idea of a metalanguage, since it corresponds to a language used for scientific description, and remains remote from its object.

This leads us to acknowledge that the signification issue, such as elaborated by Peirce, helps us grasp the semiotic movements taking place at the heart of the literary work. And, vice versa, we must also acknowledge that the literary text is likely to help us understand questions at

the core of the semiotic reflection. We know that the verb *to understand*, in the area of pragmatic semiotics, simply means to extend beyond the conditions that allowed a representation to take place. So, to analyse a literary work from a Peircian point of view means to pursue the elaboration of semeiotic.

4 Collusions within our Readings

I would like to use this type of presence of the literary text in Peirce's text, as an example, and suggest a way of reading texts, deriving from it directly. The propositions made below are linked to my teaching semiotics over the past years. This teaching -- intended to students of literature -- pursues two main objectives: the formation as to the learning of semeiotic rudiments; and the discovery, mainly by students themselves, of the modes through which a literary text manages to produce meaning which, for the reader's mind, becomes a way of signification. The pursuit of these two objectives must avoid two obstacles: to prevent semiotics from becoming a knowledge entirely abstract, dense, and objective; and to avoid that the reading becomes pretext to a mere overflow of fantasies, memories, and emotions necessarily solicited by reading. It seems to me that the proposition put forward, consisting in a double and mutual enrichment relationship between the theoretical elaboration and the reading of a fiction text, allows to get round these two pitfalls.

I wish to present two Peircian-reading experiments on literary texts. I will try to demonstrate the articulation between the text and the theory, or, more specifically, the way in which the *other space* (i.e. the imaginary involved in literary practice of writing and reading) is susceptible of providing solutions to questions which, if held on the abstract level, remain unanswered. And, conversely, it becomes clear that the signification issue, built of a particular way by semiotics, comes to open new signifying ways for the literary text. The abrupt shifts I make between presentation of theoretical propositions and analytic readings of literary texts are due to such a stand.

4.1 Firstness at the Origin of Writing: the «Madeleine» Episode in *Swann's Way* by Marcel Proust

This Proust's text passage has become a classic—it is found in the last pages of “Combray” (part I), in *Swann's Way* (Proust 1956: 60-66). The writing project that led to *La Recherche*, is inscribed in these pages. This madeleine episode has become, in a way, the image (slightly stereotyped) of Marcel Proust's writing issue. While acknowledging the immense asset represented by countless studies dedicate to Proust's work, I will try, quite modestly, to link this passage to an issue specific to Peirce's semiotic thought.

4.1.1 Taste and Smell, the Aesthesias Closest to the Body: the Pleasure and the Enigma

At first, a feature that strikes in Proust's text is the presence of the body having been marked by sensory perceptions, notably those that escape most easily the control by the mind: the taste and the smell. These two aesthesias happen to distinguish themselves from the sight, insofar as the signification they are susceptible of bearing remains inaccurate and undefined, as if waiting for a discovery yet to come. Explicitly, the text indicates that they have “more vitality” for they are “more unsubstantial” and “more persistent”: if they are *unsubstantial* and *persistent*, that is because they remain relative (they do not possess an independent existence). They are relative to the body and its surroundings, of which they assure the cohesion. These sensations bring pleasure, all the more vivid since this pleasure originates mysteriously; the vividness of pleasure seems to rest on the unknown and, simultaneously, pleasure is responsible for the very articulation of the body to the world.

This is what is needed to recognize the elements of Firstness, in the Peircian sense, that which Peirce calls “feelings,” and which takes back to material qualities of things. It is interesting, here, to remind that the term *feelings* -- the gerund of the verb to feel -- is built from a metaphor on the sense of touch, that is to say the aesthesia with the lowest discriminating capacity, but also the one most closely linked to the body.

4.1.2 The Encounter between Feelings and the Virtual in the Category of Firstness

In the elaboration of semiotics, there is an articulation which, to me, has posed a question remained opened for a long time: how to attribute a meaning to the encounter, in the category of Firstness, between “feelings” and the “virtual”?

The three phaneroscopic categories first originate from simple arithmetic, more specifically from ordinal numbering. Ultimately, this origin is enough to logically define the categories. Except that a category defined and referred to only on a formal basis would remain totally useless, since lifeless and with no access to the world and therefore without signification. It is in a second step, as in an application done *a posteriori*, that Peirce places in the first category the theme of the sensory perception, hence the “feelings” which will lead him, in the elaboration of his first semeiotic map, to designate the first constituent of the sign, grasped under the aspect of Firstness, by the term *qualisign*. When elaborating his second semeiotic (in the correspondence to Lady Welby), Peirce defined Firstness as a virtual space, since he preferred, at that time, to consider the corresponding sign as a sign of possibility, which he expressed by the neologism *Potsign* (abbreviation for *Potential Sign*). I add, however, that at that point the idea of virtuality, which characterizes Firstness, was already present in Peirce’s first text (1868), “On a New List of Categories”.

The question I am asking concerning this encounter, between the virtual and the sensation, remains open. It is true that in the texts of the 1870s and 1880s, the question of the perception and sensations occupies an important place. But, nevertheless, in the writings subsequent to these questions of perception, and therefore in writings more specifically semiotic, “feelings” continue to belong to Firstness. Then, how can the *qualisign* be articulated with the *potsign*? For, all things considered, *feelings* and *virtual* are not communicating vessels: they even belong to quite different cognitive registers. I think the only answer to that question, is to designate an *other place*, a place where these two terms can meet. According to the examples previously found in Peirce’s texts, it can be encountered in a literary text, that is to say in a place for the imaginary.

4.1.3 The Signification as Virtuality and the Writing of *La Recherche* as Promises of Signification

In comparison with taste and smell, the sense of sight is presented, in this passage of *Swann’s Way*, as something closed or inhibited, for it is darkness, the night, which comes to sketch an image on this non-knowledge at the origin of a strange pleasure-provoking sensation. This obscurity ends up covering a shifting movement, which appears to be effectuated on a vertical axis; immersed in a well and looking for historical origins [NOTE 10] . And then the ascent on a stairway also leading to a place of the past, this one, more personal. These two extremities of this imaginary axis, obscure places as expected, are places of origin, traces of the past; and, simultaneously, they will become the places where lies the outcome of *La Recherche*, a radiant place: spaces for signification.

How, therefore, is effectuated the passage, which will be at the same time a discovery and a revelation, from the time lost to the time found? What is the condition of this shift, which is the signifying act? All the more interesting, since the answer brought by Proust’s text is a semiotic one in the most authentic meaning of the term. What is this answer?

In the depth of the night, appears a “luminous panel”, a strange space of light. Then, at the very end of this passage, lies a superb metaphor, of an amusement performed in Japan, which consists in little pieces of paper drifting on the water surface of a porcelain bowl. There lies, in this setting, what the text calls the “scenery of a theatre” from where will come, as we know, the flowers of the village, the streets and the houses, the old aunt and the good people, and the church, in short the past which, being remembered, becomes present. The cohesion of the metaphor is telling us a lot; this porcelain bowl, on whose water surface, the light is reflected, is also, necessarily, the initial cup of tea and, through metonymy, the smell and the taste and the awakening of the body that the aesthesias had aroused by provoking pleasure. These sensations -- owing to various aesthesias -- , as unstable as they may be, like the water surface of the bowl, become icons in which the signification is still virtual, waiting for a semiotic movement that would open the way for significations to come: we know that this passage is programmatic and that it will be the task of the entire work to extend indefinitely these signifying ways.

This Proust’s text passage can be read on two superimposed levels: first, it portrays, thematically one could say, the inquiry adventure that it inaugurates. Then, on a semiotic level (through metaphors we pointed at briefly), the writing process is knitted between two shores: one dedicated to aesthesias (a symbolic place for the body and therefore for pleasure) and, the other, dedicated to the formation of images that suggest gleaming significations (which are numerous, protean, and unpredictable). To sum it up, we are talking of the feelings and the virtual (or *qualisigns* and *potsigns*). If these icons prepare the way to semiotic movement, it is because, as writing goes along, they turn out to be neither of a brutal opacity -- this would be the night, the absence of knowledge -- nor simply transparent; in that latter case, all would be given as obvious, no permitting any going ahead nor pleasure; I would suggest that, as a silk fabric, these icons, not shiny bright, iridescent instead [NOTE 11] , borrowing in an oblique manner glints of light, and radiating it in unpredictable directions.

And that is precisely because these significations to be created are unpredictable, that the writing process, rather than just thematizing a remembrance journey linked to the character’s psychology, creates, in its very inscribing act, significations of a semiotic type. The question I previously asked (in terms of the semiotic issue), about the articulation between feelings and virtuality, brings me to Proust’s writing act. This act comes, indeed, from that very same kind of encounter, giving Proust’s writing its dynamism. The double origin of the sign, i.e. the Firstness in Peirce, appears to be, in Proust, the very condition of creativity. For that reason, the experience of writing in Proust brings an answer to the question first asked concerning the encounter of the sensation and virtuality in Firstness.

4.2 The Excess of Iconicity and the Impossible Semiosis: *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe

The angle from which I want to approach “The Fall of the House of Usher” is one that tries to deal with the excess of representation. Everything in that story is a matter of representation, which, overweighted, becomes unable to generate anything new. But it remains, of course, a characteristic of the Gothic narrative genre, of which “The Fall of the House of Usher” has, in the course of literary history, constituted one of the key moments for the establishment of the genre.

I wish to recall just a few representative examples taken from this story. First, the title, which associates the house, an old construction in ruins and lost in the Scottish Lands, to the figure of Roderick Usher. An old mansion, a hostile and wind-swept region, never ending rain (all requirements for the genre!), a family lineage not having given rise to lateral branches and bending beneath the burden of the past (therefore no hope of renewal), these constitute some of the elements of the story. Obviously, in his very writing movement, Poe finds delight in accumulating details with no restraint, and often near sordidness or close to moral and physical decay.

4.2.1 The Paradox of the Icon: a position for Sign Reduction and its Resurgence

There is something paradoxical to the definition of the icon: first, the place it occupies in the sign components chart, which presents it as a case of *degeneracy*: it must be reminded, of course, that in the context of semiotics theory, the word *degeneracy* does not imply any moral judgement and must therefore be understood strictly in a formal sense: icon refer to a dyadic relation between the sign and its object; now, the icon is peculiar in the sense that it abolishes the discriminating principle between the sign and its object, so that these two terms are reduced to an utopian identity of function. The term *degeneracy* designates this reduction of the dyadic principle to a monadic realization. To put it differently, the icon does not exist without its object and, the other way around, the object of the sign has no existence outside the sign representing it. The fiction objects (a character in a novel or a play, an aesthetic sensation felt while watching a specific scene in a movie or during a privileged moment at a choreography, or a completely new feelings while listening to a piece of music), they are all objects which, for their existence, strictly depend on the visual or auditory sign giving rise to them. The icon, therefore, marks a lack, in that this sign loses the backing effect of the existence; thus the idea of reduction or shrinking of the sign in the case of the icon.

But the principle of semiosis, which governs the movement and the infinite development of signs, comes, in a way, to remunerate these signs by replacing their inherent shortcomings, the guaranty of existence, by a development which is done in the very place of representation, that is the arena of the icon. There stands a whole chapter, central to the development of semiotics, but which, for the moment, I am only going to mention (see Fisette: 2004): the development of the sign under the hypoicon scheme. We know that in this region, the icon, for its development, becomes, successively and following the logic of the three phaneroscopic categories, an image, a diagram, and a metaphor. The artistic objects to which I have just referred earlier are, as a matter of fact, constructed this way, that is by projecting themselves onto the hypoicon scene.

This position occupied by the icon, could be imagined as the narrowing section of an isthmus (let us say Panama's isthmus): a place of reduction, in what regards the guaranty of existence; and, simultaneously, a place of involvement aimed at a future development, this time on the very scene of the representation (therefore becoming simply a *presence*). This prospect of a double development of semiosis lies on synechism, a general principle that guides the pragmaticist thought of Peirce, that is to say the instability of representations, the inevitable movement of growth in significations, called semiosis, and the continuity in the sequence of signs.

There remains a theoretical question which presents itself in the opposite direction to the theory, like at the back of a tapestry in an entanglement of thread ends that do not allow to guess at the character of smoothness and homogeneity of thought. Could a movement of semiosis, instead of growing according to one of the two directions as suggested earlier, be submitted to repetition, to redundancy and to a wearing out effect? Could a writing process chose to grow by destroying its object? Or even by destroying itself?

4.2.2 The Entropy of Signs and the Implosion of the Mansion of Usher

It is quite obvious that the very writing of this story of the house of Usher, lies on such a paradox. To convince us, there need only remind some other elements of this strange story.

The days that the narrator spends at the house of Usher are busy with creation activities: they paint, read, discuss books, play music, and recite poetry. According to a custom of the time, a long poetic text -- titled, moreover, "The Haunted Palace" -- is given at the heart of the story. And this time, it is Edgar Allan Poe himself, the poet [NOTE 12], who analyses the poetry, in short the theoretician, citizen of Baltimore, managing to inscribe himself into the story taking place in the Scottish Highlands: outrageous intervention of the author, some would have argued; most probably it is the very principle of the activity of creating which is there projected, represented, and

challenged. For the story tells that the music becomes more and more strange and less and less sustained, up to a perverted pastiche of a waltz by Von Weber. As to painting, it becomes more and more abstract (“pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas”) (Poe 1984: 324), even non figurative, the old master going so far that he “painted an idea”(ibidem) [NOTE 13]; as to literary works, the numerous titles pertaining to the world of esotericism, the fantastic, and perversion behave as indices of a state of mind.

Now these literary works and these artistic activities each fit inside the narrative as a mirror of the events told: the oddness and the dilapidation of the mansion, Roderick Usher’s morbidity, the enigmatic character of Lady Madeline Usher. The characters as well as the indices of the strange atmosphere of the place, can not be told entirely and therefore created immediately; the narrator (meaning Poe and not the narrator-character) has no other choice but to resort to devices and allusions, as in an anaphora. The narration is, therefore, done through rebounds in mirrors, as if at a distance from things told and evoked, which are, nevertheless, very close; as if the voices coming from Baltimore and northern Scotland were merging, one being mimed by the other. For, in this story, everything is unlikely; everything is merely the reflection of what is being listed on the basis of creation activities. And, another striking feature: things are devised to be made degenerate in the immediacy of their conjuring-up.

The passage ending the narrative is wholly evocative on that subject: the narrator-character reads three passages from a mythic narrative; each event told through the reading act, sends back to a sound: and, simultaneously, an echo of the same sound is heard coming from the other end of the mansion. There is, in this, the representation of a breach of the usual-and-implicit fiction contract between the author and the reader, the position of “reader” being fulfilled by the listener this time, Roderick Usher. It is precisely through this breach of contract that the outcome of the short story is given, that is the event inscribing the horror owing to the genre. The culminating point typical of Gothic style and coming to expedite the story, coincides therefore with a rupture in the order of discourse.

The old mansion collapses starting from its inside, in a perfect implosion movement. This self-destruction process, even if hinted at already on first page by an allusion to a fissure indicating the dilapidation of the building, is based on nothing but mutual metaphorical references made between the mansion and the remaining descendants of the Usher family. Of course, such an outcome to the story, typical of the Gothic narrative, is not surprising in Poe’s works, where falls into the maelstrom are relatively frequent. But beyond the simple pre-codified narrative logic, it could be asked how this disintegration finds its place in the logic of the signs that constitute the story.

The answer is simple enough and it is genuinely semiotic: the story is made of signs reduced to the state of icons, which have not had access to semiotic development movements; words and narrative means have become similar to the old draperies, furniture, books, and images reaching the end of their useful lives. These signs are stuffed with history, hypertrophied and made unable to come out of themselves. The degeneracy nature of the icon was therefore presented as the fusion of two constituents, the sign and its object, resulting in a loss of difference normally allowing their mobility. The signs in the story, because of their growth and their getting heavier, are doomed to entropisation, or a sort of indefinite reproduction as cancer cells do, clogging and stifling the very organ they make up. From this perspective, it could be suggested that the fall of the old mansion is, first of all, the fall of the sign-words that are telling the story: it is a fall of a semiotic kind.

4.2.3 The Necessary Negativity within the Sign

The Gothic narrative, and remarkably this story by Poe, attests, in the negative, that the only assurance signs have of outliving their enunciation, is to lead to “something more,” to generate a

semiotic movement. Outside this move forward -- achieved in the unforeseen -- , signs stagnate and are submitted to withering [NOTE 14]. It is probably not a coincidence that the term *degeneracy*, which is defined by semiotics solely on a formal basis, corresponds so perfectly to the decline of the Usher family [NOTE 15] ? Nowadays, informed with the principles of psychoanalysis, we can not read this story without seeing traces of an incestuous relationship, which comes to mark the end of the Usher race; it is quite significant that, on the semiotic scene, and in an identical way, the tendency to sign withering comes from the loss of discrimination in representation, and their absence of open-mindedness to otherness.

Couldn't we also draw from this reading interpretation the idea that a margin of indecision or vagueness, in short a lack, if not a certain *negativity*, is needed for the development of the sign? It is well known that the intelligence finds its most favourable conditions not in a fully lit environment, nor in total obscurity, but in twilight.[NOTE 16] Poe was certainly aware of that, but he was a man of extremes; and, in fact, he did not limit himself to the Gothic style. For instance, Poe's investigation stories staging C. Auguste Dupin appear as the opposing view to his narrative of the *overflow*. The most unlikely sign (for instance the *purloined letter*, becoming evasive and later on nowhere to be found) is presented as the one which, above all else, revives the ever-changing significations [NOTE 17] . Perhaps one of the most exact semiotic lessons to be learnt from the reading of *The Fall of the House of Usher* is that a sign *overflow* usually remains sterile.

5. Conclusion

I looked, in the texts of Proust and Poe, for answers to questions which arise on the theoretical level of semiotics and which concern at first the double thematic investment of the category of Firstness -- the virtual and the sensitive- and, secondly the status of signs which, contrary to the idea we usually make of it, present either a promise of semiotic development, either a spectacular fall.

These two literary texts, so placed opposite one in front of the other one, seem to me particularly precious in that they display movements of semiosis which theory -- formal and abstract, by definition -- can not give with this sharpness that belongs to the literary writing. The vector which seems to me the most significant here, lie in the fact that the story, being registered in a temporal axis, can stage the movements of transformation of signs, specially their flow and their instability. The exemplary nature of these two texts is there: in the inaugural fragment of *La recherche*, signs begin a movement of semiosis toward a renewal life while in *The Fall of the House Usher*, signs filled with history and with former manners, are at the end of their semiotic life. In both cases, one finds simple icons, that is signs which are placed in a state of neutrality which is either the wait of a fall [NOTE 18] either the expectation of a promise.

One find there an important enrichment to semiotics which the practice of the literary text, that of writing or reading, places in the immediate horizon of the theoretical elaboration. Naturally, the literary text does not bring any formal answer to theoretical questions; it is not of its capacity. Rather it open questioning and suggests, it opens ways to the imaginary, it forces the widening of the thought, sometimes at the price for a seeming obscuring. I remind that it is exactly this enrichment that Peirce searched for in the literature of imagination by referring to Hamlet, to Robinson Crusoe and to the knight Dupin.

Throughout this article, I wanted to maintain this idea of a dynamic interaction between the literary text and the imaginary which presides over the elaboration of the theory. I registered this reflection in the field of semiotics, but I am assured that this mutual feeding is inevitably present in the other theoretical domains. And as I proposed it higher, if this conception of mutual relation between literature and theory falls against the idea of metalanguage, it enters in perfect coherence with the proposition specifically semiotic, of the movement of the semiosis, such as Peirce had first

imagined it. It is by virtue of this principle that the theories of the sign and the literary writing belong inevitably to the same one series, feeding themselves mutually.

[NOTE 1] As examples, one could refer to Johansen (2002), Veivo (2001), Fiset (1996), Francoeur and Francoeur (1993), and Haley (1988).

[NOTE 2] I use the term *horizon* in a very close sense as that given by Jauss in the well-known expression “horizon of expectation”, i.e. a symbolic place where representation -- be it a literary work or a simple enunciating act -- is achieved by becoming “something else.” This meaning of *horizon* coincides with Bakhtin’s use when he writes about the verbal interaction. One understands that the uses of this term superbly achieves the Peircian idea of the semiosis advancing movement.

[NOTE 3] Ralph Waldo Emerson published "The Sphinx" in the journal of the transcendentalist movement, *The Dial*, in January of 1841, pages 20-25. *The Dial* had been founded in 1840 by Emerson and Margaret Fuller. The first to be the editor was Fuller; Emerson followed in 1842. *The Dial* was published until 1844. The transcendentalist movement of Concord has brought together many New England intellectuals, most of them coming from different protestant religious sects. This before-the-Civil War generation has tried to define a position which, detaching itself from European origins, would create an American specificity. A text which is central to this movement is Emerson’s conference delivered on August 31, 1837, “The American Scholar.”

[NOTE 4] Here is how Emerson himself defined transcendentalism: «The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy. He wishes that the spiritual principle should be suffered to demonstrate itself to the end, in all possible applications to the state of man, without the admission of anything unspiritual; that is, anything positive, dogmatic, personal. Thus, the spiritual measure of inspiration is the depth of the thought, and never, who said it? And so he resists all attempts to palm other rules and measures on the spirit than its own....» (*The Transcendentalist*, 1842).

[NOTE 5] In “The Fixation of Belief” (1878) (C.P. 5.379-381), Peirce rejects, in fact, the authority method of fixing belief.

[NOTE 6] “Prolegomena to an Apology of Pragmaticism”, 1906.

[NOTE 7] Peirce has left a transcript of Poe’s poem “The Raven”. This transcript is peculiar in that it displays the movement made by the forearm when engaged in the writing act of this writing which Peirce called *chirographic*. The appropriation of the text, which I discussed earlier, is done, in that case, on modes that are graphlike and physiological. A reproduction is shown in Brent (1993 : 329), and in Fiset (1996: 171).

[NOTE 8] The great French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, referring to the definitions of the phaneroscopic categories, has built his famous triad — Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real — where the term *Imaginary* occupies the position of Firstness. This term refers indeed to the space of Firstness, but remains more vague than the terms *icon* and *hypoicon*. We might suggest that it designates the agency of Firstness.

“Un nommé Charles Sanders Peirce a construit là-dessus sa logique à lui qui, du fait de l'accent qu'il met sur la relation, l'amène à faire une logique trinitaire. C'est tout à fait la même voie que je suis, à ceci près que j'appelle les choses dont il s'agit par leur nom -- symbolique, imaginaire et réel -- dans le bon ordre.” (Jacques Lacan, *Ornicar*, 9:33. This citation from Balat (2000: 8-9).

[NOTE 9] See, on that subject, Fissette 1996a.

[NOTE 10] It would be interesting to underline that the very same metaphor is met in Peirce, in an expression saying that consciousness is a “bottomless lake” (C.P. 7.547, 7.553, and 7.554).

[NOTE 11] I borrowed the idea of glistening from Langer (1942 239), who, referring to music, suggests that the sign would be “iridescent”.

[NOTE 12] This poem appeared in April of 1839, in *American Museum*, Baltimore, five months before the publication of “The Fall of the House of Usher”.

[NOTE 13] Richard (1989. note 28, p. 1350) says that abstraction, for Poe, constitutes the height in perversion.

[NOTE 14] In a quite passage evocative, Peirce imagines a situation in which a map inclusively representing a country and, spread on the ground, would contain a point index of this same map. This point would itself become a map containing another point index of the latter, and so on *ad infinitum*. This proposition can recall the narration of the story of the House of Usher. Peirce concludes from this situation of a map referring to itself indefinitely: “We may therefore say that each is a representation of the country to the next map; and that point that is in all the map is in itself the representation of nothing but itself and to nothing but itself. It is therefore the precise analogue of pure self-consciousness. As such it is self-sufficient.” (C.P. 5.71). This example is called in to illustrate a case of two times degenerate Thirdness.

[NOTE 15] It seems than this theme (family configuration degeneracy leading to insanity) is a *cliché* of the Gothic narrative genre; as an example, let us recall the novel by Sir Walter Scott (*The Bride of Lammermoor*) and the version presented at the opera (Donizetti, *Lucia di Lammermoor*), which ends on the famous Mad Scene, or a classic of the American cinema, *Psycho*, by Alfred Hitchcock, who, in the middle of the twentieth century, reuses, in Gothic style, this same topic of the hypertrophy of signs burdened under a stifling family past that leads to madness.

[NOTE 16] This brings to the status of the mental image. Here, I am just going send the reader to this proposition by Peirce: “... for thinking no more needs the actual presence in the mind of what is thought than knowing the English language means that at every instant while one knows it the whole dictionary is actually present to his mind. Indeed, thinking, if possible, even less implies presence to the mind than knowing does ...” (C.P. 4.622).

[NOTE 17] In the title «The Purloined Letter», the word *purloined*, pertaining to an older form of English, meant also a letter deferred, relaunched, in the pursuit of it addressee who is on the move.

[NOTE 18] In a larger and more studious analysis of «The Fall of House of Usher», one would propose that all these antiques which confer to the manor house its specific nature, belonged, in a past simply evoked here, genuinely to the class of symbol, that is a class of interpreted signs and which, on the basis of this interpretation, had become values recognized in the culture. Now the central argument of this story concerns, as was suggested in this brief analysis, the decay of these values; from a semiotic point of view, the only possible analysis of this withering consists exactly in recognizing a negative semiotic movement, a regression of signs towards a purely virtual state, oriented toward the past rather than the future.

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Abstract

As a consequence of the specific nature of Peirce's philosophical view, the literary text need not to be set against semiotic theory; instead, it may be situated in such a way as prolonging the sign and the movement of semiosis. In the first instance, the author investigates the manifestation of the literary object within Peirce's semiotic discourse. Several references to Emerson's famous poem *The Sphinx* are analysed. This is followed by an analysis of three recurring literary figures: Hamlet, Robinson Crusoe and Chevalier Dupin. It becomes obvious that Peirce had a significant knowledge of these figures but more importantly, this leads to recognizing the affinity that exists between such literary projects and Peirce's semeiotic: the latter seemingly feeding off the fictional nature of such literary works in constituting itself as a full-fledged semiotic discourse.

In the second part of the article, the author examines two theoretical themes such as they develop within two classical literary works: aspects of Firstness (feelings and potentiality) with regards to the famous «Madeleine» episode in Proust (*Du côté de chez Swann*); and an excess of iconicity such that it inhibits any movement of semiosis in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

Peirce, Semiotics, Theory, Literary works, Poe, Proust

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