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PEIRCE AND DERRIDA ON FIRST AND LAST THINGS

Gary Shapiro

The movement of philosophical ideas across national and linguistic borders, especially in these days of international conferences, is notoriously slower than the physical movements of philosophers themselves.¹ When rumblings of new names or new ideas come from afar, there is a rather predictable but unphilosophical tendency to claim that the putative new thoughts are either old hat, trivial or absurd; this trichotomy is not much of an improvement on the older positivistic dichotomy of tautologically trivial or merely empirical. Jacques Derrida is a philosopher of some eminence in France who has generally been subjected to such treatment by English-speaking philosophers, when they have deigned to take notice of him. In fact when such notice has been taken, it has very often been through the pressure and mediation of our colleagues in comparative literature who have professional responsibilities to effect just such pressures and mediations. John Searle has charged Derrida, for example, with an elementary ignorance of the type-token distinction in their controversy concerning speech acts, signatures, and reiteration.² This might strike even a rather superficial reader of Derrida as somewhat surprising, for the areas in which the French philosopher shows himself most obviously acquainted with Anglo-American thought are semiotics and formal linguistics. While I believe that Searle does misunderstand Derrida's criticism of the type-token distinction and his concept of "iteration," I am interested here in unearthing some of the issues between Derrida and some of our more native thought about the nature of signs and communication.

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida pays handsome homage to Charles Peirce, anticipating the rather catholic and measured judgments on J. L. Austin which roused Searle's criticisms. Both Peirce and Derrida exemplify the virtue, highlighted by John Stuart Mill in his essay on that "continentally" inclined maverick, Coleridge, of being concerned with antagonistic schools of thought and alternative traditions. Recognizing this antagonism, Mill suggests, working through it and with it is much healthier for philosophy than the easy movement of subsumption or dismissal. Balancing Derrida's interest in Peirce and some of the formal linguists, Peirce himself thought it very important to rescue American philosophy from its almost British insularity by his close study of the medievals and of contemporary French and German philosophy. Together with James and Royce he helped to create a receptive climate for "continental" ideas. Such a climate is always in need of revival because of our tendency to "assimilate" foreign ideas by plugging them into our familiar trichotomy.

I propose to walk a fine line between Derrida's strangeness and the tendency to superficial assimilation or dismissal by examining some of his affinities and differences with Peirce in regard to the nature of signs. For those who know of Derrida's excursions and eccentric travels into the sexuality of Hegel and Genet or of his meditations on the castration motif in Nietzsche, this will seem to be a rather tame and limited topic. However, since both thinkers have taken the linguistic turn their thoughts on signs turn out to have rather far-flung implications so that I will end on a somewhat religious note. Let me begin with the point for which Derrida praises Peirce and which is the most obvious topic in which their approaches converge. This is Peirce's linguistic anti-Cartesianism, specifically his rejection of any version of the claim that thought or the sign process must have its origin in an intuition or absolutely first sign. In his important series of papers of 1868, Peirce begins by offering a *reductio* argument against the Cartesian claim for the self-evidence of such an intuition or thought which would be a premise not itself a conclusion, or a thought not

derived from other thoughts. The claim to self-evidence may not itself be put forward as such an intuition, for that would be to beg the question. In addition Peirce shows that there is no intrinsic absurdity in the idea that the sign-process can get along perfectly well without any first sign or intuition.³ The Cartesian claim is that thought cannot form an infinite regress; as in the cosmological argument for the existence of God there is a kind of instinctive horror at the suggestion that there can be an ordered series of things with real relations in which there is no *first*. Now Peirce nicely puts this horror of the infinite out of play by showing its thoroughgoing parallelism with Zeno's paradoxes of motion; and it is dissolved in the way that Zeno's are. The crucial distinction is between infinite extension and an infinitely dense continuum. Space is infinitely divisible but that does not mean that Achilles must make an infinite number of discrete motions in order to catch the tortoise. Thought may very well have a beginning, Peirce argues, without having a unique first term. In his constructive semiotics Peirce attempts to show that all thought takes place in signs and that the continuum of signs and thought is dense and devoid either of any exit from the web of signs or of any unique origin.⁴ Semiotics therefore becomes a general theory of all thought and linguistic activity, including logic. In his ontological moods Peirce will expand this semiotics to the claim that the universe is perfused with signs. Every sign has both an object and an interpretant and each of these is itself a sign.

It is such themes which Derrida has in mind in saying that Peirce "goes very far in the direction . . . [of] the de-construction of the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign."⁵ Derrida's own *hête noire* is what he calls logocentrism or the metaphysics of presence. These consist in the belief that there is something anterior to all language and signification which is in principle capable of being made completely manifest. The absolutely present, as Heidegger has traced it in his schematization of the history of philosophy, may be variously thought of as the Platonic Ideas, as a transcendent God, the immediate certainties of the Cartesian cogito, the "impressions" of British empiricism or the various forms of will found in German idealism and in Nietzsche. But according to Derrida "the so-called 'thing itself' is always already a *representamen* shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence."⁶ A sign, on Peirce's view, is just that which cannot, in principle, be there all at once because it is essentially related to other signs through its object and interpretant.

Derrida gives this his own tone by saying that "the self-identity of the signified conceals itself and is always on the move." His attack on the myth of origins is a linguistic version of Heidegger's critique of the alleged hegemony of presence. The latter claims that reality is as essentially concealed as it is revealed, that every truth is an *a-letheia*, an unconcealment which supposes a ground that must remain largely concealed. Derrida suggests that our belief in the metaphysics of presence has been fostered by a specific view of the relation between thought, speech, and writing. In that view, which is reiterated from Aristotle to Hegel, written language is a sign of spoken language which is in turn a sign of thought. Thought is conceived of as completely present to itself in this tradition. And thought is capable of an immediate presence to the real (as in theories of intellectual intuition) or is the real itself (as in idealism from Berkeley to Hegel). Derrida argues that it is writing, traditionally neglected and denigrated, which is the encompassing concept, just as Peirce had argued that the apparently secondary and merely representative thing, the sign, was in fact primary. Like the sign process, writing is not present all at once. Any given text refers us to the laws of its formation, to its various interpretations, to other texts to which it refers and ones which will refer to it. Like the sign, as understood by Peirce, writing is constituted by its being a system of relations and distinctions, or to use Derrida's term, by its *difference*. That is, any word in a given text is one which might have been replaced by another, it is one which gains its sense only by being distinct in its function from

other words in the text while differentiable from others which might, in the context, have done roughly the same job. In my last phrase “roughly” is adverbial; its function is differentiated from the verb which it modifies. But “roughly” is also part of a family of words which will do the same job of modification approximately, more or less, crudely, well enough for the folks in Peoria and so on. When Socrates said (in the *Phaedrus*) that written discourse had the disadvantage of rigidity, of just standing there dumb when a question was put to it, he had in mind our tendency to clarify things by moving around within the scheme of differences which characterizes all language. Derrida’s response is like Kant’s figure of the bird which imagines that its success in flight in the air promises an even more glorious ascent in empty space. The movement which is churned up by the dialectic is just the system of differences itself; no matter how thoroughly we shake our tenses and modes we only get more language.

The points of convergence between Peircean and Derridean thought do not stop with their critique of intuitionism or presence and their suggestions that all is signs or writing. Both are concerned to show that if there are no simple presences, the ego is not so much a substance as a complex linguistic function which supposes a system of differentiating oneself from others. According to Peirce man is strictly identical with his language and signs.⁷ If there is no privileged origin of discourse then the search for origins is not likely to be illuminating. The history of thought and of institutions is not likely to be the unfolding of an idea always immanent; it will resemble much more what Nietzsche calls genealogy, the patient sifting of tangled affinities and family relations. And — this is admittedly a somewhat more distant connection — both Peirce and Derrida seem to give a certain priority to the *aesthetics* of the sign, (as opposed to what Peirce considered to be the other two normative sciences of logic and ethics). In Derrida this takes the form of *play* — the “liberation of the signifier” from the “tyranny of meaning.” In Peirce it emerges in the normative priority of aesthetics, thought of as the pursuit of qualities and relations of intrinsic interest without regard to principles of ethics or logic (both of which will in fact be derivative from aesthetics). Moreover the two notions of play and aesthetics seem to have a common origin in Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* — a work which Peirce tells us was seminal for his aesthetics and one which is the clearest expression of the ideal of play which Derrida inherits through German idealism, Marx, and Nietzsche.⁸

At this point I want to consider a series of differences, some superficial, and some more genuine, between Peirce and Derrida. The first has to do with the suspicion that Derrida’s conception of writing is much narrower and rather more eccentric than Peirce’s idea of the sign process. Understood superficially the thesis that all language is writing seems designed to give preschool children practice in generating counter-examples. However it is clear that Derrida’s usage does not confine “writing” to visible inscriptions in books or on bathroom walls. Writing cannot be mistaken for pure thought or its representation or expression; it exists apart from its author, is part of an indefinitely larger context of further writing, and any particular text is *inscribed*, that is, it imposes itself at a particular point in the entire ensemble of writing. Peirce too emphasizes the Secondness of signs, their existing at just this place and time and in just the manner that they do. No doubt there are significant differences between Derridean writing and Peircean signs, but they are to be found elsewhere than in the presumed narrowness of the concept of writing.⁹

In order to suggest those differences I want to return to the very aspect of Peirce’s semiotics which Derrida finds most congenial, that is, the supposed rejection of origins. Here I think Peirce may be a bit more subtle than Derrida supposes him to be. Derrida’s denial of any origin to the process of writing takes the form of arguing that every bit of writing (every text) refers to more writing in the background, and so on *ad infinitum*; he believes that an infinite regress of writings implies that in following back the chain of texts and interpretations we will never reach

a point prior to the writing process itself. He denies not only an origin of writing and of each text; in addition he denies that any writing process or text comes into being at a specific time, that is, that it has a beginning. This is the semiotic version of Derrida's critique of the linear conception of time. Now I have already noted Peirce's distinction between the continuity of the sign-process and its indefinite or infinite extension. That distinction allows him to think of a sign-process, like any motion, as having a datable beginning or end while lacking any unique first or last term. Derrida's skepticism about meaning is like Zeno's skepticism about motion. If there *were* any meaning, he believes, it would require the completion of an infinite number of meaning-stages at the beginning or end (or both) of the process which determines meaning. The density of all intervals, he implicitly argues, is such that no such set of meaning-stages could ever be traversed. Whatever is taken, at first, to be a full meaning dissolves into an endless range of prior and posterior writing. Where we expected to find meaning there is only an ultimately plural and diffuse web of *l'écriture*. In the face of this absence of what is required to ground rational discourse, Derrida believes that we can liberate the signifier by rejoicing in and playing with the diverse possibilities of connection and affinity in the con-text which surrounds and engulfs any given text. Or in more traditional terms, Derrida's response to the absence of meaning is song rather than speech, poetry rather than philosophy.

Peirce's belief in meaning, however, does not rest on either a presumed origin (first term) or datable beginning of the sign-process. According to the pragmatic maxim, the meaning of a concept is what it leads us to do under all possible future circumstances or — which is to say the same thing — how we interpret the concept in the indefinite future.¹⁰ That is, while Peirce rejects that aspect of metaphysical eschatology which bases itself on origins, he accepts the idea of a final or last meaning. It is not only meaning which will be completed in the fullness of time when the "ultimate interpretant" becomes manifest; it is also at that point that we shall have arrived at truth which is nothing other than the ultimate opinion of the community of inquirers, or (adopting Royce's formulation, which is closer to our purposes) the final interpretation produced by the community of interpretation.¹¹ Now it is true that Peirce seems to reject the idea of an actual end to inquiry and interpretation, preferring to treat these ultimates as regulative rather than constitutive ideas. Nevertheless he argues that we must believe that these activities are destined to approach these ends asymptotically. The result is a subjunctive version of Hegel's concept of absolute knowledge: the final truth and meaning is what inquiry would arrive at were it to be continuously and indefinitely extended.¹²

At this point Derrida would be correct in suspecting that there is more than a figurative point in saying that Peirce has an eschatological doctrine of last things. In a technical paper on probability Peirce asks why any given individual should be logical or rational. For if all reasoning hinges on probabilities which require the verification of an indefinite future, the certainty of our own death seems to render the rational process uncertain in our own case. (This may be taken as Peirce's posing of the existential problem of death and finitude which is the Heideggerian precursor of Derrida's rejection of the idea of rationality). In order to be rational, Peirce suggests, we must identify our interests with the widest possible community of inquirers, we must recognize the possibility that the interest of that community may be made supreme, and we must hope that intellectual activity will continue without limits. Peirce observes that "these three sentiments seem to be pretty much the same as that famous trio of Charity, Faith, and Hope, which in the estimation of St. Paul, are the finest and greatest of spiritual gifts."¹³ In an essay called "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve" Derrida has attempted to show that there is an alternative to the process which begins by fleeing from the

ultimacy of death by identification with a larger interest and ends by arriving at a total and complete meaning.¹⁴ The argument is directed against the move from the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave to Absolute Knowledge; now I have attempted to show that Peirce's semiotic approach to truth and meaning rests on a similar *Aufhebung* of finitude. Making allowances for the fact that Peirce's ultimate interpretant or destined truth are regulative ideas or subjunctive versions of Hegelian absolutes, we can read Derrida's critique of Hegel as a critique of an essential move in Peirce's thought. Derrida's central point here is that one might take a different turn at the juncture where Peirce and Hegel see the fear of death as requiring our commitment to a totalizing process. The alternative is a sovereign nonchalance which in its disdain of death can maintain a comic indifference to "the tyranny of meaning" and which can engage in a playful writing which will "interrupt the servile complicity of speech and meaning." Peirce's dialectic contains a number of arguments which will reduce such skepticism to silence once the claims of rationality are granted. Derrida's challenge, however, is to the implicit acceptance of the desired or destined totalistic end which such arguments presuppose.

I will not attempt to resolve this confrontation here. Yet it may be useful to point out the fact that Derrida's thought and its implicit critique of Peirce makes a significant tension in the latter rather perspicuous. Peirce's commentators have often been troubled by his insistence that semiotics must be teleologically directed toward the determination of ultimate interpretants. There seems to be a rather straightforward contradiction between Peirce's definition of a sign in such a way that every sign must have an interpretant and his claim that we must suppose and seek an ultimate interpretant in our semiotic activities. If every sign means just what it is interpreted as, how are we to make sense of the conception of an ultimate interpretant which would, in good Hegelian fashion be self-interpreting and exclude all further interpretation? Peirce might be partially defended here by suggesting that he believes that any sign-process can come to a definite end, just as it can have a definite beginning, without there being a unique final term any more than there is a unique first term. Here, I think, Peirce has seen an important distinction which Derrida has overlooked between continuity and indefinite or infinite extension. Yet the termination of the sign-process as a process — as when our conversation is over, the book is closed, the particular line of experimental inquiry ceases to be interesting or as Hegel would have it, when a form of spiritual life has come to an end and philosophy can only paint its gray in gray — does not yield a final or ultimate interpretant. This is Derrida's critique of origins and of the metaphysics of presence applied to Peirce's semiotics. Moreover, as I've suggested, there are important strands within Peirce's thought, including his very definition of the sign and his conception of the primacy of aesthetics, which also militate against such conceptions of ultimacy. Just as it is possible to reconstruct Derridean grammatology through Peircean semiotics, it is possible to deconstruct Peirce's philosophy through the insight which Derrida will encourage into its internal tensions.

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NOTES

1 This article is published here with the permission of the editor of *Philosophical Topics*.

2 See Jacques Derrida "Signature Event Context" and John Searle "Reiterating the Differences" in *Glyph 1* and Derrida's lengthy reply to Searle "Limited, Inc., a b c..." in *Glyph 2*.

3 See Peirce's *Collected Papers (CP)* 5.213-357. I follow the convention of citing *CP* by volume and paragraph number.

4 For Peirce on Zeno in a semiotic context see *CP* 5.333-4; an excellent presentation of Peirce's thought about the continuity of the sign-process is John Boler "Habits of Thought" in *Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce, Second Series* edited by Edward C. Moore and Richard S. Robin (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1964), pp. 382-400.

5 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 49. Derrida's most extended comments on Peirce are on pp. 48-51 of the same book.

6 *Of Grammatology*, p. 49.

7 *CP* 5.313-317..

8 For Peirce on Schiller see *CP* 2.197 and 5.402n.

9 Derrida is quite clear, early in *Of Grammatology*, that he is, extending the ordinary sense of "writing:" see p. 9, e.g.

10 For versions of the pragmatic maxim, see e.g. *CP* 5.14-18, 402 and 402n3.

11 On truth and reality as the destined results of inquiry see *CP* 1.578, 5.311, 407-8. Royce develops the thought in *The Problem of Christianity*, vol. 2.

12 On the convergence of Peirce and Hegel see Gary Shapiro "Peirce and Hegel on Absolute Meaning" in *Proceedings of the International C.S. Peirce Conference*, edited by Kenneth Ketner (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1981), pp. 259-263.

13 *CP* 2.655; Peirce also says "He who would not sacrifice his own soul to save the whole world, is, as it seems to me, illogical in all his inferences, collectively." He often explores the idea that the pragmatic maxim is an extension of the Biblical "By their fruits shall ye know them." For an initial study of religion in Peirce, including the esoteric, see Walter P. Krolkowski, S.J. "The Peircean *Vir*" in *Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce, Second Series*, pp. 257-270.

14 *In Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 251-277.