

SEMIOTICS AND THE ART OF UNDERSTANDING

Introduction

The question of interpretation is essential in Peirce's semiotics. His triadic semiotics IS a theory of interpretation: sign is an entity which interprets and is interpreted. The process of semiosis is nothing else than interpretation itself. There are, however, many other concepts and theories of interpretation different to semiotics. Hermeneutics, phenomenology of art, literary theory, structuralism, deconstruction, to mention only some, all deal with interpretation. When we face this diversity of interpretations of interpretation, the question must be asked what is the specificity of Peirce's concept of interpretation and how is it related to those others. This is not a purely comparative question but it intends to better understanding of the nature of interpretation itself.

1.

The main feature of Peirce's concept of interpretation is its rationality. Interpretation is by nature an intellectual, logical process. "All that we know or think is known or thought by signs ..." (Ms. 7) and "a thought itself is a sign." (Ms. 318) - writes Peirce. Semiosis is a process of logical thinking. This full identification of thought and sign is implied by the triadic definition of sign. Triad, or mediation, necessarily is thought. "In its genuine form, Thirdness is the triadic relation existing between a sign, its object, and the interpreting thought, itself a sign". (*Semiotic and Significs*, 31) Thought is a sign and it appeals for another thought or sign to interpret it. When a feeling or an action are effects of signs they also promote the process of interpretation, but on lower levels. Peirce calls them the *degenerate* interpretants. The notion of degenerate interpretants (emotional or energetic) not only fails to deny the rational nature of interpretation, but, on the contrary, emphasizes it. The genuine sign is a legisign that has an argumentic interpretant and represents its object by a symbol. The genuine sign is a moment in the rational process, which is not necessarily a linguistic discourse, though language could be a constitutive moment of interpretation. Peirce writes: "The interpretant is evidently the Divine Logos or word." (Ms. 359, p. 24) But in other places of his work he carefully separated logic from language.

2.

According to semiotics, interpretation is a way of being of a sign. Sign and

interpretation are equi-primordial. They exist in a circular relation: interpretation determines a sign and a sign generates interpretation; none of them is the first and none can be by itself. There is no meaningful sign without another sign which interprets the former and thus defines its meaning. The meaning is not self-evident and can be grasped only by interpretation in another sign. However, that does not mean that the meaning of sign is constituted by interpretation. Meaning is IN sign, not between signs. Interpretation discloses only the intrinsic meaning, since according to Peirce it is a sign which *determines* its interpretant. Peirce writes about sign: "In every genuine Triadic Relation the First Correlate may be regarded as determining the Third Correlate in some respect". (CP 2.241) This intrinsic meaning of a sign is what Peirce calls the "immediate interpretant". It is "the interpretant as it is revealed in the right understanding of the sign itself, and is ordinarily called the meaning of the sign." (CP 4.536) and it is "*all* that [a sign] immediately expresses..." (CP 8.314) Interpretation is a disclosure of *this* meaning by another sign; so, it is *not* a free constitution of a meaning. Meaning is "within" a sign, not without. Interpretation is possible when there is a meaningful sign. If there was no sign then no interpretation could be possible.

3.

Semiotic interpretation is an endless process of generating new signs. It is never completed; when completed it would be annihilated. As long as there is a sign, another sign, interpreting it, is necessary: sign must produce another sign to be itself a sign. In other words, sign is essentially a self-reproductive being. Signs generate signs. Interpretation is an open, infinite process. This openness has its roots in the complex structure of sign. Peirce, in his definition of sign, uses the equivocal term "interpretant". This term means two different things: a meaning of a sign and also a sign which interprets the first one. Peirce writes: "interpretant is the possible third correlate of a triadic relation" (CP 2.242), that is: it is the Third of a triad, but he also writes "... the interpretant is nothing but another interpretation." (CP 1.339) This ambiguity discloses the double function of sign/interpretant: it interprets and is interpreted. That what can be interpreted is already a sign, it interprets something else and it appeals for a new interpretation. The term "interpretant" discloses the unity of two sides of a sign: its passivity and its activity. That what interprets must be interpreted itself. One triadic relation starts necessarily another triadic relation and so on. "Interpretant" indicates the infinite nature of interpretation. As Peirce writes: "The idea of representation involves infinity, since a representation is not really such unless it be interpreted in another representation." (CP 8.268) There is "a capability of endless translation of sign into sign." (CP 7.357)

4.

However, this endless generation of new signs stays always in a relation to an objective world. Thoughts refer to objects. A sign mediates between the interpretant and ITS OBJECT. Peirce says that the object has "its mode of being as an independent agent determining the sign." (Ms. 292) An object is an indispensable element of the triadic semiosis: sign cannot be objectless. Obviously, the object can be real or ideal. Moreover, the immediate object, i.e. the object as it is represented by the sign, is never identical with the real or dynamic object. Nevertheless, semiotic interpretation is a referential process: this is the process of objectifying thought. Peirce's semiotics takes not only a clearly referential position but it also presents a strong realistic tendency in its understanding of object. This is expressed by the pragmatic maxim. A sign which can be translated into a rule of action speaks about the real empirical world. The pragmatic maxim describes the conditions of the objective validity of interpretation.

5.

The essential point of the semiotic concept of interpretation is its non-subjective character. Interpretation is a way of being of signs. It is not an external operation made on signs; in particular, it is NOT a subjective act of understanding performed by mind. Peirce says frequently that he wants to analyse *how signs are affecting other signs* without any relation to mind. Semiosis is a logical process, not a mental one. The term "interpretant" means a sign, not an interpreter. The question of interpretation belongs to logic, not to psychology. Peirce's semiotics offers a concept of interpretation without a subject.

6.

Another essential moment of semiosis is the notion that interpretation is a truth-directed process. There is a growth of knowledge which approximates truth. Every new interpretation brings some new cognition. "A sign is something by knowing which we know something more." (*Semiotic and Significs*, 31-32) and "... every reasoning connects something that has just been learned with knowledge already aquired, so that we thereby learn what has been unknown." (CP 7.536) The progress accomplished in interpretation approximates the truth. As Peirce writes: "The interpretant is nothing but another representation to which *the torch of truth* is handed along." (CP 1.339) Truth is a destiny of interpretation. Peirce expresses this notion in his concept of the final interpretant. Final interpretant is "that which would finally be decided to be true interpretation if considerations of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached." (CP 8.184) And elsewhere: it is "the interpretative result to which

every interpreter is destined to come if the sign is sufficiently considered." (*Semiotic and Significs*, 111) Truth is the goal of interpretation.

7.

Interpretation, however, in its disclosure of truth is not infallible. The question how to make a difference between the correct interpretation and the mis-interpretation becomes essential. Peirce solves this problem by his pragmatic maxim. Pragmatic maxim becomes the main methodological principle of semiotics. It is a method of eliminating mis-interpretations. The lack of empirical meaning disqualifies an interpretant. Interpretation which cannot bring a habit of action is meaningless. Nonsense, ambiguity, empty abstractions, all these mistakes of interpretation can be avoided due to the pragmatic maxim. Knowledge is never absolute and no certainty is possible, but errors and mistakes can be detected through applying a practical directive of action as an interpretant. If semiosis intends to disclose the truth, then the method of avoiding mis-interpretations is a necessary part of it. For Peirce this method is the pragmatic maxim.

8.

The temporal aspect of interpretation is another theme of semiotics. Temporal duration is that what distinguishes thought from self-evident intuition. Interpretation cannot happen in an instant but requires time, i.e. a sign requires its interpretant to be really a sign. Semiosis is a process developing *in time*. Semiotics elaborates primarily the question of the future aspect of sign. Temporality (non-physical time) means here the openness of a sign to the future: meaning is disclosed by the future interpretation of a sign; an interpretant is a *future* sign and something is a sign only from the perspective of the future. Peirce writes: "The rational meaning of every proposition lies in the future" and a pragmatist "locates the meaning in future time". (CP 5.427) The pragmatic maxim, which eliminates mis-interpretations, also defines the *future* habit of action. The final interpretant discloses the true interpretation *in the future*. "The Past is - according to Peirce - our sole store-house of premises and there is nothing else in it." (Ms. 290) How does the past enter into semiotics? An interpretant, which is the future meaning of a sign, is determined by a sign of which it is an interpretant and which is its past. So, it is the past which determines the future meaning. Peirce uses always a deterministic terminology in his theory of interpretation. Interpretation is determined by the past; it always goes ahead and never turns back. Interpretation is not an understanding of the past, but a result of it. Its pattern is a deterministic relation between an earlier and a later event. A present sign is a moment in which the past influences the future. Interpretation is a one-direction movement consisting of the overcoming of past by future.

According to the pragmatic maxim, the future has to appear always as a prediction and expectation. Interpretation, which is directed forward has also a practical and prophetic sense.

9.

Semiotics, despite its apprehension of the temporal aspects of sign, is not calculated to the historical sense of interpretation. Interpretation is considered as a process beyond history. Each act of interpretation which according to Peirce depends on the "dynamical interpretant", is an isolated now-moment and has its absolute sense. It is deprived of any historical sense. Its whole significance consists of the fact that it is a step on the way to truth, that it "tends toward the final interpretant." (*Semiotic and Significs*, 111) The past interpretant loses its significance when a new interpretation is bestowed. The understanding of a sign is not rooted in its own occurrence. It is beyond historical time and simply is directed to the future final interpretation. The past, when overcome, is by-gone but may be stored in later moments. The only important perspective is the future destiny of final interpretant. Interpretation grows and approximates the final consensus. It is a teleological development with an absolute goal. The dynamical interpretant brings only a relative truth, it is only a step towards the absolute truth. Its historical relativity is simply its imperfection which should be improved in the future. The goal and destiny of interpretation is to overcome the historical relativity of every dynamical interpretant and to reach the absolute truth of the final interpretant. Semiotic interpretation has a linear structure: it is open toward the future and never turns back. In this structure, every present "now" gains its significance only as a step towards the future; its connection with the past is simply deterministic. In other words, semiotic interpretation is deprived of this richness of historical perspective which is typical for hermeneutics.

Conclusion

I have mentioned briefly some basic moments of Peirce's semiotic concept of interpretation. Even this short analysis shows clearly that semiotics stays in a crucial opposition to many of the present tendencies in theories of interpretation. In particular, I have in mind such trends as: a) historicism with its notion that truth is a historical phenomenon; this is the approach mainly represented by hermeneutics; b) irrationalism and voluntarism, which claim that there is no such thing as meaning and that interpretation is simply a re-writing of nothing; c) anti-logocentrism, which denies the referential sense; - these two last approaches are represented by deconstruction; d) relativistic cultural and emotional destruction of intellectual meaning represented by different forms of so-called ethnic semiotics; and finally e) psychologism and behaviorism, which dominate

naive thinking. Apparently, Peirce's notion of interpretation does not belong to these said trends of the late 20th century. However, it does *not* imply that Peirce was wrong.

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