

DOES SEMIOTICS LEAD TO DECONSTRUCTION?

The purpose of this brief text is to point out some radical oppositions between semiotics and deconstruction. It has been provoked by Derrida's manner of speaking about Peirce. This manner seems to suggest that semiotics helped to pave the road to the deconstruction of sign.

Derrida discusses Peirce's superiority over Husserl on the question of sign and meaning, and in conclusion recognizes Peirce's contribution to the intellectual process of overcoming logocentrism. He underlines such moments in Peirce as: symbols growing from symbols: *omne symbolum de symbolo*; identification of logic and semiotics; the notion of pure grammar; the infinitude of sign universe. Moreover, he claims also that Peirce de-constructs the sign and that he undermines the significance of logic. This is clearly stated in the two following fragments from Derrida's *De la grammatologie*. The first speaks about the sign and representation:

Peirce va très loin dans la direction de ce que nous avons appelé plus haut la de-construction du signifié transcendantal, lequel, à un moment ou à un autre, mettrait un terme rassurant au renvoi de signe à signe. Nous avons identifié le logocentrisme et la métaphysique de la présence comme le désir exigeant, puissant, systématique et irrepressible, d'un tel signifié. Or Peirce considère l'indéfini du renvoi comme le critère permettant de reconnaître qu'on a bien affaire à un système de signes. Ce qui entame le mouvement de la signification, c'est ce qui en rend l'interprétation impossible. La chose même est un signe.¹

And the second, where Derrida suggests that Peirce overcomes logic:

La sémiotique ne dépend plus d'une logique. La logique, selon Peirce, n'est qu'une sémiotique . . . Et la logique au sens classique, la logique 'proprement dite', la logique non-formelle commandée par la valeur de vérité, n'occupe dans cette sémiotique qu'un niveau déterminé et non fondamental.²

1 Jacques Derrida: *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Les Editions Minuits 1967, 71-72.

2 *Ibid.*, 70-71.

However strange the last quotation may seem, I do not want simply to discuss Derrida's interpretation of Peirce but I would rather prefer to focus on some principal oppositions between semiotics and deconstruction.

The distance dividing semiotics from deconstruction is marked by such Peirce's terms as: sign-representamen, pure grammar, final interpretant, destiny, fallibilism and truth.

First, Peirce's semiotics does not abolish the distinction between sign and signified, which is the purpose of deconstruction. Peirce's numerous definitions of sign as a triad always mention the object of sign. Sign necessarily stands for "something else", and the fact that Peirce correctly refuses a naive realistic understanding of object does not imply a possibility of a sign which would not be a REPRESENTAMEN and semiosis which would be objectless. Representation is a constitutive moment of the semiotic process that cannot be dismissed without destroying the whole semiosis as such. And Peirce underlines this referential character of semiosis when he identifies the object with a cause of sign. The object has "its mode of being as an independent agent determining the sign".³ Moreover, Peirce's pragmatic maxim is, of course, another crucial argument for the referential understanding of sign. Thus, Peirce has the same logocentric concept of sign as Husserl has, when he writes about meaningful expression. Semiotics does not lead to any post-logocentric play. Derrida is right when he emphasizes that Peirce's triadic sign reflects the nature of thinking better than Saussure's dualism of signifié and signifiant but he is wrong when on this ground he claims that Peirce rejects the notion of representation. Sign is a representamen by definition. And semiosis is not the non-referential *écriture*.

Secondly, another radical opposition between semiotics and deconstruction may be found in the question of meaning. For Peirce, meaning is WITHIN the sign, not beyond signs, not in-between them. This intrinsic meaning of the sign is its "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."⁴ And Peirce's broad analysis of different interpretants makes interpretation, i.e. deciphering of signs, a central topic for semiotics. Deconstruction, however, negates any meaning of the text and locates it only outside, only "in-between". Meaning, for Derrida, is that which is NOT PRESENT in

³ Charles Sanders Peirce: *Manuscripts*. MS 292.

⁴ Charles Sanders Peirce: *Collected Papers*. Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 4.536.

the sign. It must be remade in the infinite process of differing/deferring, which is *écriture*, that is, writing a new text, MAKING the meaning which disappears in the same moment when it is made. The text is an enigma that cannot be deciphered, it brings nothing except open possibilities for differentiations. There are only traces, never meanings. To deconstruct is to go beyond the meaning, the sign, the text. To take that which was supposed to be a meaning as a vague trace only and to abandon any attempt to understand it. Reading becomes only writing. While semiotics is a theory of meaning and interpretation and a methodology of deciphering meaningful signs. Therefore, there is a deep gap between Peirce's semiotics and deconstruction in the question of meaning. And this gap may be characterized as the distinction between "within" and "without". Semiotics deciphers meanings of signs, while deconstruction or *écriture* is a "chute dans l'extériorité du sens".⁵

Thirdly, semiotics is for Peirce the way "to make our ideas clear". It is the ideal of clarity of thinking which divides semiotics from deconstruction. Derrida claims the principal "indécidabilité" of meaning. Ambiguity is intrinsic to *l'écriture*. The sign, the text is an enigma never to be known, and its undecidability brings only contingency of understanding. Any rational argument is excluded from the process of writing, which is only a play of permanently flowing presence. And if no sense can be really grasped, then, of course, no sense can be "made clear". In the immediacy of writing, nothing can be proved, explained or disproved; it is like intuition: simply given, present and disappearing. But one should remember that it is precisely intuition with its simple presence, that Peirce wants to overcome through the concept of the sign and semiosis.

Derrida writes:

Le jeu joue toujours la différence sans référence, ou plutôt sans référent, sans extériorité absolue, c'est-à-dire aussi bien sans dedans. ... Dans cette allusion perpétuelle au fond de l'entre qui n'a pas de fond, on ne sait jamais à quoi l'allusion fait allusion, sinon à elle-même en train de faire allusion, tissant son hymen et fabriquant son texte.⁶

However, from the semiotic perspective a sign exists among other signs and is linked with them by a system of formal rules. Those which come before or after make its connex and help to define its meaning. That is why semiotics is for Peirce a tool of making "our ideas clear". For deconstruction, on the other hand, there is only a

⁵ Jacques Derrida: *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Les Editions Minuits 1967, 24.

⁶ Jacques Derrida: *La dissémination*. Paris: Editions du Seuil 1972, 248.

free play of allusions with radically undecidable sense. Meaning cannot be defined, since it is everything that is NOT meant, everything that comes from the vague differentiation. Ambiguity dominates the scene. Thus, the distance between clarity and undecidability divides semiotics from deconstruction.

Fourth, semiosis is for Peirce the process of growing knowledge. More developed signs bring better cognition. "A sign is something by knowing which we know something more."⁷ And: "[...] every reasoning connects something that has just been learned with knowledge already acquired, so that we thereby learn what has been unknown."⁸ Derrida's *écriture*, however, is not a cognitive process at all. And no growth of any sense can be accomplished by it. The later *écriture* is in no way better than the former one, there is no growth, no declining, and there is no evaluation of it possible at all. What does matter is only the present immediacy without its relation to the past or the future. It is like a screen showing something now: "l'écran réfléchissant ne capte jamais que l'écriture, sans arrêt, indéfiniment, et le renvoi nous confine dans l'élément du renvoi."⁹ According to Derrida, all writing is simultaneously erasing: an old sign is replaced by a new one, the old text substituted by the other. Subsequently, there is no continuity of interpretation, only punctuality of nows. Peirce, emphasizing the growing nature of semiosis, does not only mean the accumulation of knowledge but also an intrinsic continuity of interpretation. Interpretation is possible as a continuous development where the former element implies the present one and the present makes a ground for the next step. Continuity is an essential feature of semiosis. Derrida is right when he emphasizes that Peirce understands the flowing nature of sign universum; however, he misunderstands this flowing on the basis of his own concepts of erasing and immediacy. That which really, at this point, differentiates semiotics from deconstruction is the distinction between erasing and accumulating. According to Peirce, the past is "our sole store-house of premisses"¹⁰, and all our future signs are grounded on it, while from the perspective of deconstruction, the past is simply erased by a new *écriture* and never present in it. These two different structures are also reflected by the distinction between the concepts of cognition and play.

7 Charles Sanders Peirce: *Semiotics and Signifcs*. Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press 1977, 31-32.

8 Charles Sanders Peirce: *Collected Papers*. Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 7.536.

9 Jacques Derrida: *La dissémination*. Paris: Editions du Seuil 1972, 229.

10 Charles Sanders Peirce: *Manuscripts*. MS 290.

Fifthly, we find two different understandings of time in Peirce and Derrida. According to Peirce, temporal duration is what is intrinsic to the sign and what makes it different from intuition. A sign, in order to be a sign, requires its interpretant, and semiosis is a process developing in time. There is a natural openness of the sign to the future: meaning is disclosed by the future interpretation of the sign; an interpretant is a future sign, and something is a sign only from the perspective of the future. The question of the future is crucial in Peirce's semiotics. He says, "The rational meaning of every proposition lies in the future" and pragmatism "locates the meaning in future time".¹¹ The pragmatic maxim also speaks about the future habit of action as a criterion of meaningfulness. This future habit is defined by the present sign in the same way as a result is determined by its cause. While *écriture* emphasizes only the present, the past is erased and the future "undecided" and hidden beyond endless possibilities. There is only the immediacy of the present and the flowing from one to another present through the play of contingent allusions. However, these different understandings of time in semiotics and deconstruction only hide another, more crucial problem: the question of TELOS. Semiotic stress on the future comes from the radical teleological nature of semiosis, while Derrida equally negates any goal present in the *écriture*.

All this brings us to the next, sixth point, namely the problem of truth. Semiosis is a truth-directed process, its growth approximates truth, and truth is its *telos*. As Peirce writes, "[...] the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the TORCH OF TRUTH is handed along."¹² Truth is the goal as well as the destiny of interpretation. Peirce's final interpretant "is that which would finally be decided to be true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached"¹³, or it is "the interpretative result to which every interpreter is destined to come if the sign is sufficiently considered"¹⁴. While truth is the main concern of Peircean semiotics, Derrida's leading intention is the liberation from *telos* and truth. The *écriture* has no goal and does not aim at truthfulness. Truth is the concept which belongs to the condemned logocentrism.

11 Charles Sanders Peirce: *Collected Papers*. Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 5.427.

12 *Ibid.*, 1.339.

13 *Ibid.*, 8.184.

14 Charles Sanders Peirce: *Semiotics and Significs*. Bloomington, London: Indiana University Press 1977, 111.

Seventh and last, that which divides semiotics and deconstruction is the opposition between pure grammar and the notion of a play free of rules. This is the difference between law and logic on the one hand and pure contingency and arbitrariness on the other. For Peirce, semiotics is logic. However, he does not mean, as Derrida wants, weakening logic; on the contrary, he means that semiotics is nothing else but logic. So, this is a very strong emphasis on the logical (and subsequently: rational) character of semiosis. Derrida's attempt to liberate the sphere of signs from the tyranny of *logos*, is directed against Peirce's strongest goal to build the *mathesis universalis*: logic, pure grammar of the universe of signs. This radical understanding of semiotics as logic has found further continuation in Max Bense's semiotics.

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