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Peirce in France

Gérard Deledalle, *Charles S. Peirce's Philosophy of Signs. Essays in Comparative Semiotics*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000.

By Geoffrey Sykes

For the past four decades Gérard Deledalle has been the main exponent of American philosophy in France. Books such as *La philosophie américaine* and *À la recherche d'une méthode* have become widely known and circulated. Much of his exposition has been centred at l'Université de Perpignan, in southwestern France, in regular weekly seminars that ran for over 25 years until his retirement.

Commencing with his personal association with John Dewey, Deledalle's scholarship, including several publications on Peirce, would seem to run counter to post-war French interest in structural and Marxist semiotics, and philosophical traditions. Yet it is part of his professional achievement not only to represent pragmatism as a minority, mainly American influence, in France, but through its advocacy to help question and overcome stereotypical divisions between European and American thought. Through personal and professional contacts, he has introduced the work of James, Dewey and Peirce, and pragmatism generally, to thinkers such as Foucault, Deleuze and Lacan. Such introductions, and the consequent influence of pragmatism on post-structural French thinking, cannot be underestimated, and testify to Deledalle's role in modern French philosophy and semiotic theory.

The reason Deledalle might not be more widely known and read outside of France is simple: most of his books were written in French, and have remained untranslated. We are indebted to Susan Petrelli for the English version of the short, but elegant and penetrating, intellectual biography *Charles S. Peirce, 1839-1914: An intellectual biography*. Deledalle's other English contributions, to *Semiotica* and international meetings, such as IASS congresses (Deledalle: 1992), have remained dispersed and not always readily accessible.

The recent publication of an anthology of Deledalle's papers, *Charles S. Peirce's Philosophy of Signs*, provides a necessary and helpful catch-up and introduction for English readers of Deledalle's life-long work. Seventeen papers are included, previously published in whole or part between 1964-1999. This is "a collection of papers written over fifty years" (vii). Any problem of translation of the thirteen articles first published in French, and included in whole or part, has been overcome by the author, who has undertaken virtually all translations, including Latin, Greek and German quotations.

The papers are not ordered chronologically, but organized into four distinct, thematic parts: Semiotic as Philosophy, Semeiotic as Semiotics, Comparative Semiotics and Comparative Metaphysics. The largest part is Comparative Semiotics, which uses the exegetical strategy of comparing Peirce, indirectly or in terms of his direct reception, with a number of prominent philosophers such as Wittgenstein, De Saussure, Jakobson, and Morris.

A leading question can immediately, if somewhat rhetorically, be asked: what are we to make of this publication? By this, I mean, is it fundamentally a re-issue, of retrospective worth and interest for a history of ideas, or an anthology of one scholar's lifetime work? Does this retrospective publication and translation add anything to the field of contemporary Peircean studies? My response to the last question is affirmative: there appear to be several distinct approaches present in the book, towards pragmatism, semiotics, philosophy, metaphysics, and biography, all of which deserve ongoing attention by Peircean scholars. What is distinct in its content might be explained in part by the book's inter-cultural origins. The French context suggests a dialectic with other semiotic and philosophical traditions, which led, at least indirectly, to a focus on pragmatic themes that remain as pertinent as ever.

The sectional presentation and introduction of the book implies that the selection of papers in this anthology is not merely one of editorial or bibliographical convenience. Rather, it is an aspect of an argument and a contemporary approach to Peirce that seeks a response by a wider, international audience.

The Introduction states clearly that Peirce's semiotic should be approached in terms of the philosophical questions it addressed: that the philosophical hue of Peirce's writings distinguishes them from the ethnology of Levi-Strauss, and the linguistics of Jakobson or De Saussure. The introduction stresses another distinctive theme - that Peircean exegesis should be mindful of the context of the writing and publication of his seminal work. Deledalle alludes to dates and periods of Peirce's life - 1867, 1878, 1906 - that were elaborated in *Charles S. Peirce, 1839-1914* (1990). There is a correspondence of audience, circumstance, chronology and ideas that can be overlooked by overly philosophical readings. Peirce may be polyglot, even a genius, but he cannot mean all things to all readers: it is more likely that he only ever meant a few things to a few people at any one time.

Peirce did not write systematic large-scale accounts of his schemes, in which a consistency of terminology would be ensured. As a result, he probably often contradicted his own "ethics of terminology," transforming, eliding and substituting key words of his semiotic theory. Throughout his book, Deledalle responds to changing nuances in the meaning of terms such as "sign," "representamen," "semiosis," and "icon," and invites us to re-read Peirce accordingly.

The argument about contextualized exegesis suggests parallels between this anthology and Peirce's own writings. Deledalle writes in a concise, notational and nuanced conceptual style that is flexibly adapted, in individual papers, to various audiences and circumstances. Any approach to the assemblage of writings selected from thirty years' output needs to be qualified by a sense of the author's own "different periods and in different contexts" (viii). Thus, the paper on Lady Welby is from a collection in a book dedicated to Peirce's correspondence with that English linguist: a response to a colleague, Jerzy Pelc, is previously unpublished.

The Conclusion of the book involves a close study of Peirce's "Contributions to *The Nation*" journal. This involves close analysis of key terms such as "sign" and "phanoscopy," as they are introduced and discussed by Peirce in that publication. Critical articles by Peirce on fellow philosophers such as Dewey and James are seen to qualify generalized, retrospective claims about what these thinkers had in common. Once again, the stress is on a contextualized exegesis that reaches beyond the pages of philosophy. What other approach would suit a thinker who arguably gave some currency to the term, "pragmatism"?

In a further similarity, whether intended or not, Deledalle's peripatetic and notational style seems to resemble the concise, conceptualized form of Peirce's prose since both share a sense of interdisciplinary intellectual inquiry, distributed across a miscellany of publications. The result can be enjoyable and exploratory for the reader, sharing the subtleties and shifts of argument across different circumstances and times.

There is arguably one more similarity between Deledalle and Peirce, and that is in content. Behind a miscellany of publications and concise elliptical style there is a controlling, motivating and coherent "philosophy of signs." The Introduction hints at one main theme that will provide a thread of coherence through its various papers. That theme is the pragmatic nature of semiosis: of the fallible, experiential process of sign acts and sign making that is the subject matter for any semiotic analysis and theory. It is a theme or premise that will be echoed again and again in the papers that follow.

The first two essays overlap in their presentations of Peirce's triadic semiotics as "Peirce's New Philosophical Paradigms." They aim to set forth the philosophical context and "paradigms" that question and inform Peirce's development of a semiotic, and in particular trace the transformation of Peirce's work between "New List of Categories" (1866/67) and "The List of Categories: A Second Essay" (1894), in terms of a response to philosophical problems; in particular, the debate between nominalism and realism that characterized the differences between English and European philosophy up to the twentieth century. Deledalle sees the crucial role of phenomenology or "phaneroscopy" in developing mature categories (9), and in providing a philosophical basis for Peirce's pragmatic semiotic.

As demonstrated in *Charles S. Peirce, 1839-1914*, and argued in the Introduction of this book, Deledalle has an acute historical sense. The first paper, "Peirce's New Philosophical Paradigms," stresses the significance of 1885-1887 as a delineator of the development of Peirce's mature thought. The paper repeats the seminal role of one paper, "On a Logic of Algebra" (1885), in anticipating the mature categories of Firstness and Secondness (8-9). The 1885 paper responded to mathematical epistemology, or a philosophy of mathematics, and revised icon and index sign types from the "New List" (1867). The article, inspired by De Morgan's theory of a logic of relatives, began a decade-long inquiry into diagrammatic signs and reasoning, which explained abstract and intuitive thought within a representamen/sign act/interpretant relationship. Analysis of the iconic nature of mathematical expressions helped resolve the dualism of realism and nominalism that had pervaded his work up until 1885. "We are beyond nominalism and realism. The mind is in the world and in continuity with it. The law is a natural as well as logical process." The law is also, we might add, as Deledalle does in later papers, "geo-social" (43), produced by and in public and communal testing (51).

Henceforth, the representamen of sign acts could be located in complex graphic

form in the artefacts of mathematics and culture: the mind can be studied in the world of dynamic rich signs. The development of indexicality into Secondness is central to Peirce's work, which can be seen as a whole as a speculation on the sign/object relationship. Peirce, in terms of Deledalle's interpretation, invites a specific semiotic explanation of action and "behavior," something omitted from many semiotic and pragmatic theories.

These early papers convincingly argue that "Peirce's semeiotic is a branch of philosophy" (xiii), that what is distinct about his theory of signs can be described in terms of the philosophical questions, of ontology, epistemology, ethics, metaphysics and language, that it addresses and seeks to resolve. The title of the book thus remains convincing: Peirce's semeiotic truly is a *Philosophy of Signs*.

Paper three, "Peirce's First Pragmatic Papers, 1877-1878" (23-33), is a brief yet tantalizing study in intellectual biography. As is suitable from the author's culture, it focuses on an aspect of the "French connection" in Peirce's life. Peirce travelled to France, spoke French fluently and wrote in it often. In 1904 he was given the great honour of election as foreign associate to the French academy of science.

This paper compares French and English versions of well-known and seminal papers, "How To Make Our Ideas Clear" and "The Fixation of Belief" (both published in *Revue Philosophique*, 1878-79). It demonstrates subtle inflections and differences of meaning that resulted from changes in language and audience. It also outlines the possible historical influence of French politics, including the Paris Commune and libertarian thought, on the social philosophy of "The Fixation of Habit."

The result is no arcane or dry hermeneutic, but something representative of a type of intellectual biography that integrates very particular circumstances and events of a subject's professional and personal life, with the content of their ideas. Such an approach makes a lot of sense for a pragmatist who argued ideas need to be assessed in terms of their outcome or communication in sign acts. As detailed as it is, what is frustrating about the paper remains its strength: its specialism and concision. How many other digressive narrative sequences, involving Peirce's work at Johns Hopkins, with the Metaphysical Club, in travels to Europe, in the Coastal Survey or while at Arisbe, await further analysis?

A sense of concision and brevity is shared with other papers, and it is not really a judgement on the anthology to note as much: within and between papers many different themes and points are made, seemingly in passing. These cannot all be taken up with the constraints or purposes of the present volume, yet we are tempted on occasions to want more development.

Part Two is "devoted to Peirce's theory of signs" (35). It takes up themes introduced in the first part directly. The organization of the First and Second section is thus very clear: having clarified the philosophical background, the focus is on distinct features of semiotic theory. "Sign: Semiosis and Representamen" and "Sign: the Concept and its Use" focus immediately on themes that Deledalle regards as central to a pragmatic understanding of Peirce. A sign has two aspects or "acceptations": the sign object (representamen) and the sign action (semiosis) (37). These two aspects function with an effect that is conceived as the interpretant, third acceptance of the sign.

Focus on these key terms allows Deledalle to expound the general features and terminology of Peirce's semiotic. A representamen is the sign object: it can function as a symbol (a general sign acting in a repertory of signs), an index, or icon (likeness to objects); yet its function as a sign can only be analyzed in the process of semiosis through

a relational act that produces an interpretant effect (38-39). Through semiosis natural or dynamical objects are transformed into immediate objects: the potential of transforming any object or stimulus to become part of semiosis, to change from dynamic to immediate object, led Peirce to argue the whole universe “is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs” (5.448).

Deledalle notes the semiosis of Peirce’s own ideas, which results in a kind of “terminological laxity” (42) in the progressive development of a key term like representamen. This term seems to change from a Kantian mental image or idea, to an aspect of the process of semiosis, of the mind in the world and thought in action. In the latter it is a “written, gestural or spoken sign” (43) participating in a continuous, temporal discourse of a community (51). Deledalle traces a move from mentalist to sociological concepts of truth and epistemology. Peirce sees a “regressus ad infinitum” in the interplay of sign act, object and interpretant that is discursive and communicative in effect. Peirce moves from singular acts of indexicality to a composite discursive account of truth and mind. The result provides, in a semiotic model, a theory of mind and cognition that “all thought is in signs” outside of mental signs (43).

There is a fascinating sub-section here on “Semiosis and Time” (50-53) suggesting temporality as a factor essential to a pragmatic account of semiosis. Temporality involves more than chronology, but was conceived by Peirce, we know, in terms of synechism or continuity, as well as the discontinuity of Seconds. Deledalle stresses that the “continuous temporal process” involved in any semiosis-structural analysis of representamen divorced from the nuanced “existential” or “instantiated” context of spatial temporal relations, seems almost impossible in Peircean terms. The temporal process can be understood in infinitesimal intervals of particular movement, or in long discursive tropes of an expanded community. Once again, it is the concision of this section that brings forth its own critique: the topic it introduces is important enough to beg expansion. Gilles Deleuze (1986: 1-11) has argued against the synchronous nature of structural semiotics, and that any contemporary revisionist theory needs to be diachronic, and focus on the moving image conceived in a temporal sequence. A comparative study of Deleuze and Peirce could help elaborate the topic of temporality and semiosis.

In “Sign: The Concept and Its Use,” Deledalle provides close exegesis of the term representamen, thus further illustrating the aim of providing a contextualized study of Peirce’s thought. Through Deledalle’s focus on the etymological shifts of the term, we can see how Peirce expounds, within a semiotic frame, notions of indexicality, context and action that remain crucial to behavioral semiotics.

Part Three is the longest section of the book. It comprises eight papers, commencing with an occasional reply to a fellow semiotician, Jerzy Pelc, that was previously unpublished. This is followed by an exegesis of Peirce in terms of his reading of Greek philosophy. “Semiotic and Significs” discusses Peirce’s mature correspondence with the English linguist Lady Welby, and essays on De Saussure, Morris, Jakobson and Wittgenstein follow. An unusual inclusion addresses the semiotic potential of Marshall McLuhan’s writing on mass media, and seeks to commence what is claimed as a semiotic of media.

The papers of Part Three have a valuable goal: to approach the comprehensive and divergent writings of Peirce in terms of their reception by or comparison with that of other philosophers. It is an innovative and useful approach in which themes of the preceding Parts are dispersed, repeated and elaborated. The paper on De Saussure seems entirely satisfying and helpful, with a detailed focused approach to a question that is often put: how

similar or different are “the a priori conditions” of Peirce’s and De Saussure’s thinking? (100) Can Peirce’s Representamen be equated with De Saussure’s signifier? Detailed comparisons are presented in tabulated lists. In conclusion, the social basis of sign theory is acknowledged: nevertheless, Deledalle sees a psychologism in De Saussure that can be contrasted with Peirce’s anti-psychologist behaviorism. The triadic dynamic of Peirce’s schema cannot be reduced to De Saussure’s mentalist-based dyadic model. The paper ends with a useful, diagrammatic attempt to map De Saussure within a more inclusive and comprehensive Peircean schema.

The controversial topic of the use of Peirce by Charles Morris, and comparison of his behaviorism and the semiotic behaviorism of Peirce, are directly addressed in “Peirce and Morris.” The differentiation of physiology and natural signs, and human signs and language, has been an issue in all branches of modern semiotics. Inquiry into corporeal and facial signs and gestures has been too readily classified as physiological, rather than classified according to a suitable repertoire or theory of sign types. Can one suggest that a comparison of the behaviorism of Morris, and his mentor Peirce, might provide more illumination about the boundary of natural and social signs, and corporeal behavior generally, than the current fashion for biosemiotics?

Critical analysis of Jakobson’s appropriation of Peirce follows the discussion of Morris, and then comparison between analytic themes of Wittgenstein, Frege and Peirce. Once again, the strategy of employing such critical comparative readings seems successful, and limited only by their length. One always wants more, much more, principally because such comparison is a useful, indeed necessary way to expound Peirce in the context of a history of ideas. Can one truly specialize in Peirce without regard for his place in the crowded and competing fields of modern philosophy and semiotics? Undoubtedly such comparative study will need to be based on a coherent reading of Peirce, something that Deledalle provides in Part Two.

Individual points, such as involved in discussions of Frege and McLuhan, cannot preoccupy this one review. What can be argued is an overall impression of Part Three as an elaboration of themes implicit in previous Parts: that Peirce’s work, in terms of traditional philosophies and of major philosophers of the twentieth century, retains distinctive pragmatic themes, of sign acts embodied in triadic sign functions and semiosis generally.

The last Section has the intriguing title, “Comparative Metaphysics.” Deledalle reminds us that Peirce, in his middle age, inquired about larger truth claims of transcendental, theological and ideological perspectives that could parallel or co-exist with pragmatic analysis. What are we to make of the extensive cosmological writings of Peirce, and of his references to Christian and mystical theology? What are the implications of a temporal understanding of semiosis, of how signs “evolve,” for any epochful or determinist account of historical and natural evolution? (164) What are we to make today of Peirce’s notions of creative and evolutionary love? Deledalle (1990: 44-45) has elsewhere argued that by 1887 Peirce had “walked free” from the cave of Platonism: that paradoxically, despite social isolation, poverty and professional failure, he increasingly saw “the sun set free.” In Part Four, Deledalle interprets Peirce’s cosmology and metaphysics without retreating from his previous argument about Peirce’s anti-Platonism and anti-idealism. The comparison of Peirce’s triadic categories, and the Christian trinity (170-180) should be regarded in this inquiring context: to investigate appropriate non-realist general philosophies that ground pragmatism in some generalized narrative of time and existence. Peirce analyzed semiosis in a micro “geo-social” context: he illuminates context in a semiotic framework. Yet his work lacks and even opposes grand sociological or cultural

narratives. For instance, he opposed Hegelian historiography. Peirce himself adopted gospel and Christian references to hypothesize a general “metaphysical” philosophy. It seems reasonable someone like Deledalle should do the same.

On arriving at the end of the middle-sized, 199-page volume, one can readily ask supplementary questions in terms of the author’s wider writing, and from questions that the anthologized papers raise. Philosophically, what was the influence of thinkers like Locke, Hume, Hamilton, Darwin, to name only a few, on Peirce, especially in his early years, in addition to the influence of Greek thought and Kant, so well identified in this volume? Esposito (1999) has done so much to foreground such inquiry, that to complete it would require a book several times as long as Deledalle’s. Semiotically, how well can the sub-type of index be identified with the sign-act? Comparatively, how useful is any approach, critical or otherwise, to McLuhan as a point of departure to a contemporary semiotic of media? Is any political metaphysic or ideology implied or present in Peirce? The links to contemporary themes of “post-structural” semiotics, of habitus, discourse, temporality and power, are all there, yet only briefly so. What would a Protestant, non-conformist Peircean apology be like? What extended applied studies would best illustrate the themes of semiosis argued in the book? It is, of course, unfair to ask, from such a varied and broad miscellany of topics, cases and papers, that all its ideas and direction be followed up. It is more a compliment to suggest how pleasing such a prospect would be.

Such reader-based editorial requests, for supplementary commentary, do not diminish this volume at all. Part of its appeal is to invite seminar-like responses and debate - perhaps the papers finally reflect the seminars at Perpignan, where much of their content was apparently first delivered. The book is a useful, highly readable, even entertaining addition to any collection of contemporary Peircean commentaries. The controversy about Peirce continues unabated, especially with the international ubiquity his life and work has attained retrospectively in the last two decades. Long since Rorty and Eco debated the nature and value of his semiotic, Peirce has become a philosopher of convenience in fields as widespread as biosemiotics, neuroscience, business and architecture, and information studies. Is such attention warranted, or consistent? Deledalle reminds us that the nature and status of Peirce’s contribution will not be resolved until his semiotic behaviorism is fairly and widely understood. This book is a most timely contribution in that regard.

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