An American View of the Structuralist-Poststructuralist Controversy

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Ce qui vaut pour 'hymen' vaut mutatis mutandis, pour tous les signes qui, comme pharmakon, supplément, différence et quelques autres, ont une valeur double, contradictoire, indécidable qui tient toujours à leur syntaxe, qu'elle soit en quelque sorte intérieure, articulant et combinant sous le même joug, uph'en, deux significations incompatibles, ou qu'elle soit extérieure, dépendant du code dans lequel on fait travailler le mot.

—Jacques Derrida.

What distinguishes a man from a word?
— Charles S. Peirce.

I

To begin my tale, I should like to talk about the hyphen between 'structuralist' and 'poststructuralist' in my title. Although Jacques Derrida has assured us this little mark is like a hymen—o Hymen Hymenaeæ (Catullus, LXI, LXI I) joining as it separates the inner sanctum of that holiest of spaces—, the two concepts (of events) this
hyphen unites even as it separates were in actuality hardly separated in time, if appearances are of the essence, for the change from the one tendency or movement in literary criticism to the other was so rapid that it transpired almost imperceptibly. Indeed, according to B’rer Jas’ epithalamium, so rudely forced from a thought of Jacques Lacan, the most rapidly moving tongue twisted into a language could never come to join any signifier with a signed since, in the strictest structuralist theory, the hyphen-hymen is replaced by a slanted stroke, and a sign becomes written as it is interpreted, as ‘Sr/Sd.’

Time is of the essence in the story for two reasons: first, the theoretical, which demands that the space of writing, created by the placement of differential signifiers, be joined by an indefinite deferral of any fulfilling signification that would end the play (the slippage, the polysemic references) of any author’s language use; and the second, cultural, which indicates an epoch of our recent history. The time period thus uncovered spreads between 1949 and 1967, and itself constitutes another kind of Derridean “fold” he has found so intriguing to introduce into theoretical discourse about intellectual discourse of any kind whatsoever.

But not all recent linguistic theory has been so heavily charged with sexual imagery.

The first French edition of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté,*¹ which imported into the study of anthropology the structuralist principles of Ferdinand de Saussure’s general theory of linguistics, appeared in 1949. While Saussure’s course in general linguistics had been taught at the University of Geneva three times in the first two decades of this century, the first edition of the *Course in General Linguistics* appeared in July, 1915, under the editorship of two of the students who had heard Saussure give the lectures.² Merleau-Ponty, of course, had already introduced the principles of structuralism into his general theory of expression, but that impulse faltered with the eventual publication of his *Prose of the World.*³ When he died in 1961, existential phenomenology lost its most influential proponent and that philosophical movement began its eventual decline. But structuralism lived on in other forms, both as a theory of linguistics, i.e. as a general theory of sign interpretation, and as the ultimate butt of later critical appraisal. In 1967, Jacques Derrida published the three main volumes of philosophical criticism he brought against the structuralist program.⁴
American students of French literature and criticism were just getting the hang of the structuralist methodology when Professor Derrida’s groupies, blinded by their teacher’s brilliance, had the temerity to announce its recent demise. As a result of this phenomenon very few American critics mastered the subtleties of structuralist criticism. The time was simply too short for those, who, like Roland Barthes, found themselves in the rear of the avantgarde. But, as explained below, Barthes at least made the transition.

It would be a mistake to explain this phenomenon as just another fad in a culture addicted to change so much that its politics has given us the very image of a self-defeating revolution, expressed in its own language as “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.” One need not have been blinded by anyone’s brilliance to perceive that.

Throughout the changes within the institutions—political or linguistic—the life of the French intellectual has gone on, whether we choose to describe it as a circle returning upon itself or as developing in a straight line. Whether the one or the other, the process will merely repeat an angle of 180 degrees. The same sort of musing, some of us remember, led Nietzsche to declare the eternal return as a matter of cosmological principle.

Let me begin by attempting to penetrate the hyphen between structuralism and poststructuralism leisurely, by supplying the historical background for the applications of the first of these hyphenated terms. I shall not dignify what I am about to do by referring to it as a “deconstruction”; it will only be an attempt to understand how the grip of historical circumstance has pushed contemporary critics into taking a stand on the nature of literary texts, written as they are as a series of writerly strategies, and interpreted, as they should be, as a set of disciplinary controls on readers’ responses. In the fold between the strategies and the discipline lies a living, breathing text.

Before becoming a theory of literary criticism, structuralism was known by those intellectuals influenced by Saussure as a general theory of linguistics, which had as its object the living language of a people. A language is a tongue by metonymy, since without a biological tongue nothing can be said in any language. Studying a living language of a people, as codified, is only a limiting case of a more general science of semiotic, which, in his famous course of linguistic study, Saussure
had called "sémiologie." And that ramification of Saussure’s linguistics into a general theory of signs still flourishes under the same rubric.6 For the founder of structuralism, semiotic was an as yet unnamed science, a part of social psychology, which studied communication managed by a system of signs whose meanings are determined by the social responses of sign-users. Although linguistics in the narrower sense—the study of language as communication—is a necessary tool for elaborating the more general language of semiotics—communication as "language"—, whatever is said of signs in general will apply to words in particular. Rather than by comparing the phenomena of codified language use with the patterns of behavior in acts of communication by the use of any other signs to arrive inductively at the laws of semiosis, Saussure chose la langue (spoken and written language) as his subject, and mandated an "internal point of view" for its study.7 Internally, a language has two different aspects: a social one (the conventional meanings expressed in a living language) and an individual one, the uses of such meanings to express an individual intention. The social aspect defines a language properly so called, while the individual aspect defines an individual speech act. Corresponding to the two different aspects of a language, there are two differing dimensions: the synchronic and the diachronic. The synchronic dimension unites a signifier with a signified in a functional relationship; indeed, for Saussure, this dyadic relation constitutes the sign in its function as signifying. To visualize this synchronic relationship Saussure drew a set of superimposed waves, the upper one a fluid mass of "ideas" (images, concepts) floating over an equally fluid mass of phonic materials (sounds, phonemes) that are distinguishable only by marks differentiating one phoneme from another. In general, he says, language possesses nothing positive, only differences related to other differences. Diachronic changes are instituted within the historical time spread defining the life of a living language by virtue of the characteristic uses individuals make of the system of just those structural differences unified by the code of the language as synchronically constituted. In later applications of the theory, both metonymy (reference to a whole by naming of a part) and metaphor (extension of a name proper to one thing to another resembling it) will be used to explain differential uses of the same signs.8

Saussure’s structural linguistics furnished the foundation for two diverse cultural manifestations. Claude Lévi-Strauss turned the theory
into a methodology for cultural anthropology in 1949 and later elaborated the doctrine in two volumes of *Anthropologie culturelle* (I, 1958; II, 1973). And Roland Barthes, whose *Degré zéro de l’écriture*, published in 1953, is judged by some to have initiated the change from the older New Criticism (the American school of formalism) to the newer New Criticism (la nouvelle critique) of France, was here in the avantgarde.

Barthes’ gambit, from this position, was to change Saussure’s emphasis upon the spoken language to a careful consideration of its substitute, the written language, considered as art. Besides the express informative function of language, which constituted the crux of Saussure’s linguistic, the poetic arts display an indirect mode of communication. Within literary narratives, words may be used to describe events, and those events themselves may divulge otherwise hidden structural significances—psychological, anthropological, mythological, or what have you: and when they do, signifieds become signifiers. And reading what these scribes have scribbled may instill within the sensitive reader the “pleasures of the text.”

As a result of the earlier Barthesian description of writing as the inscription of a text within the history of a language—the material process by which a writer manipulates the signifiers and the signifieds of his or her language to create, rather than merely to record, significance, and thereby to enrich the language one has inherited—, the criticism which operated upon such assumptions became known as “structuralist,” to distinguish it from the formalism of the American New Criticism.

Thus, the transition to poststructuralism was not without its preparation. Under the world-wide onslaught of Freudian psychoanalysis, French intellectuals began to question the hereditary value of the Cartesian soul-substance, even though, for the most part, they had elected to ignore the work of Freud himself for as much as a half century or more. Lacan’s famous continuous seminar on Freudian psychoanalysis as linguistics was instituted in 1953, while Freud’s *Traumdeutung* was first published in 1899, and postdated to 1900. Lacan’s “writings,” of course, are better known through the transcriptions of the proceedings of his free style dialogical seminar meetings than by a shorter collection of pieces assembled under the title of *Ecrits*.

Although the theoretical purpose of his pedagogical dialogues was the rescue of Freud from the Freudians (particularly Melanie Klein and Erich Fromm, among others), the immediate and more practical end
was to produce more effective French psychoanalysts. The method was dialogical because psychological practice is dialogical, and the seminar sessions themselves, in their seeming chaos, resembled the dialogue initiated between a patient and her analyst. Not forgetting his humanities, Lacan recalled Arthur Rimbaud’s laconic “...Je est un autre,” which is obviously as ungrammatical as it is insightful into the composition of the human subject. So much, one would suppose, for the supposed supremacy of grammar in the study of languages. The question to be determined is the relationship between a speaking unconscious id and a self that must be led to understand what has already been “expressed” in that speech when the speaking id and the addressed self are of the same person. In classical psychoanalysis that demands an interpreting physician’s complicity in the intercommunication, in the same way that some texts need the complicity of an understanding critic.

Recalling Rimbaud’s mot—textually directed against the romantic poets’ preoccupation with and narcissistic love of their suffering souls as the inexhaustible source of human feelings—was itself a poetic tour de force. Lacan, however, calls Rimbaud a “poet,” as indeed he was in another dispensation; but the sentence occurs in one of the poet’s letters to Paul Demeny that begins with the telltale sentence, “—Voici de la prose sur l’avenir de la poésie....” Lacan saves himself from the charge of essentialism with the polysemic reference to Rimbaud’s plight: poets always say beforehand what a scientist later discovers to be the truth (the Viconian theory of language), although by force of the play between the self and the other, which is their unconscious, they do not of course know what they are saying—at least until they have said it. What speaks in any event, whether the voice is poetic or prosaic, is not the conscious self, but the id: in Lacan’s linguistics, “ça parle.”

Primitive thought, for Lacan as for Claude Lévi-Strauss, is already a code of systematic, i.e. structural, references to an established order of significances: for the anthropologist, to discover this code in the behavior of peoples; for the psychoanalyst, to discover the subjectivity of his subjects in the patterns of their speech. Language itself, in this scheme, is the play of signifiers always separable from their signifieds by the tissue of a hymen, as expressed by the vertical slash within the functional representation of a sign as Sr/Sd. In the sequel, I shall continue to probe the significance of this hymenal ligature.

Writing about the same time that Lacan was beginning his seminar, Michel Foucault’s first book encapsulated his study of the concept of
madness in psychology. The very language used by psychiatrists to separate the mad from the sane in every alienated personality itself has been inherited under the influence of theoretical presuppositions—linguistic, historical, and social. In a book entitled “*Les mots et les choses,*” Foucault introduced the term *épistémè* to define the characteristic patterns of interpretation proper to a given culture or epoch of our developing history. As an *épistémè* changes, so do the patterns of significance noted in the resemblances and differences of things to each other. What is sane in a feudal world is insane for Don Quixote straddling the two worlds of feudalism and the burgeoning postfeudal society of the Renaissance.

The epochal folds and joints of history as occurring events show the differences in the treatment of the mentally disturbed—from ostracism, imprisonment, and shackling, to contemporary psychoanalysis—, which depict the series of changing social evaluations of such a condition. In the same way as the traditional concept of man has changed—from that of a being composed of body and soul, which Descartes brought forward from the medieval age, to help establish the classical *épistémè* that was displaced by the modernism of the nineteenth century, and which has all but disappeared in our own postmodern views on the subject—so has the ideal of a well-constructed, algorithmic language to depict what goes on in our natural and social worlds. Our behavioral worlds are all historical. So, to Lacan’s Freudianism, we must link Marxism and its theory of history to our understanding of human significance.

To further trace the dependence of the concepts we have of our objects upon the methods pursued to elaborate a science of those objects, it would be fruitful to compare Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* with W.V.O. Quine’s *Word and Object.* Should we accept this gambit, and should we at the same time choose Lévi-Strauss’ concepts of *bricolage* and engineering as models of practical knowledge, it would be surprising to see who comes off as the engineer, and who the bricoleur in matters of metalinguistics.

Foucault’s place in the transition between structuralism and poststructuralism seems assured on the basis of the structural differentiation he finds determining the differences between the successive *épistémès* of our own lived history, as by his insistence that language tends to follow this same system of differentiations. That he should claim his work is not structuralist merely emphasizes the point of this essay: that Foucault’s method of “archaeology” falls clearly within the split
between structuralism and poststructuralism, within two modes of theoretical inquiry joined by the hyphen of my title.

Not only does it fall within this split, it contains a theory of how such epistemological changes may fruitfully be studied—or, as it has been said, how the later movement illustrates the dis-semination of the first. 20

For the third figure making his appearance on the hyphen, I refer once again to Roland Barthes, mentioned before as in the avantgarde of structuralist criticism. In an interview for the avantgarde journal Tel Quel, 21 he describes himself, not as a critie, but as a romance writer—not of novels, but of texts revealing the essence of the novel (le romanesque). The writer of the avantgarde obviously knows, claimed Barthes, what is already dead within the culture, and those in the rearguard of the avantgarde find themselves there for the love they bear for what has already died. The dead texts are the merely readable ones; those that live are writable.

In his Le Plaisir du texte, Barthes’ appreciation of a written text finally comes to be expressed in an image of love. But the image is hardly scatological, only metaphorical and drawn without the least crudity or reprehensible degree of insensitivity. Where critics of the past dealt with the readability of a text—interpreting it, explaining its meanings, exposing the structures of lived significances found in the system of codified significations, after Lévi-Strauss and Lacan and Foucault they could only describe a text’s “scriptibility.” The users of a living language no longer enjoyed the privilege of being the center of a verbal communication; their own lives as writers and readers were themselves texts expressing an unconscious self as an “economy of desires.” And, if two economies of desire came into contact through the medium of a written text—wherein each meets the other objectified as if as an image in a mirror—the experience is properly described as the blissful union of complementary intents of the consenting partners. Thus, reading a text for its scriptibility is an experience of (sexual) pleasure (la jouissance). But, in the process, the old fashioned text likewise has lost its readability: it is reduced to an intertext between two communicating economies of desire. Nowhere in recent French culture could one perceive so clearly how Descartes’ substantial theory of the thinking, feeling soul had been so thoroughly traduced into a basically Freudian theory of the human ego as subtended by an
unconscious field of libidinal drives—a motive introduced into that culture by Lacan’s reading of Sigmund Freud.

For Barthes, the intertext flows in a circular pattern of images, like a flower unfolding into a newer pattern of existence, as image calls out image in the reader’s response to the textual stimulation. In this way, an old fashioned “readerly” text, closed in its significance, becomes a current “scriptible” text that each reader completes in the unfolding of an intimate and personal intertext merely for the pleasure of the experience.

The new French criticism thus proclaimed itself as a theory of writing. And the impetus supplied the movement by Barthes was reinforced by the theoretical writings of Jacques Derrida, beginning with his 1967 proclamation that the book was dead, long live the act of writing. His blitzkrieg shattered three fronts at once.

Against Saussure and the fixed functional relationship between signifier and signified understood by a society of language users he argued, with Heidegger and Foucault, that the temporal differences of human subjectivity are as important as the spatial structures of a human world reflected in a body’s orientation to the one world of nature. In its efforts to write, the space for the writing had to be created. This space eventuates from the articulation of signifiers, unifying in their differences the space of human subjectivity as described in the stretch between the unconsciousness of our pasts and the consciousness of being lost between some past and an as yet nonexistent future. The human subject, in this Heideggerian way, is hemmed in, not by a field of presence but by an open and indeterminate horizon of absence; and so, a source for a distinctively human communication is lost as the conscious self is lost in the depths of the unconscious. Writing is a way of discovering the what that writes. Since the personality of the writer has been decentered within the locus of communication, the initiating gestures of the writer—themselves a text wherein is inscribed the subject’s unconscious mind—reveal themselves only as a set of linguistic signifiers.

And how does such a “person” understand what is written? Merely by substituting for the set of signifiers set down in the text of the writer’s act another set of signifiers, which in a later, reflective, moment is another act of writing. In this process there is no signification brought to consciousness by an act of insight, not even an indefinite circular referral of image to image in an act of “reading,” but only an indefinite
deferral of meaning fulfilling conscious acts. When the two sorts of differences—those between the signifier and the signified as articulated in an act of writing and the moments of the first articulation of a set of signifiers and that of the second, which merely supplements the first, the word for the phenomenon of meaning should be spelt *differance* to encapsulate both senses of the term—the spatial separation of the signifiers and the temporal deferral of their signification.

Careful readers will observe that the words “sense” and “signification” of the last sentence should be written under erasure (following Heidegger’s writing of *Sein* in the same way to refer to Being, which, as applied to any and all entities indeterminately as to their differences, constitutes a concept that is identical to that of non-Being), since the lexical meanings of these terms are exactly what is being denied by the grammatological theory, i.e. that every expression of our language possesses either a sense or a sense and a signification as its fulfillment. A mere inconvenience, this, since the “logocentric” metaphysics of our Western tradition has chosen to close the infinite progression of sign supplementation by positing the existence of essences, ideas, or logoi to codify what is brought to awareness in acts of insight. Whether these acts are imaginative or perceptive, they constitute the two meaning-fulfilling attitudes of the Husserlian epistemology.23

In the older dispensation, discourse was logos, and closed, by its own ingathering, into an essential determination; in the new, it is always in the making, and open for a future determination in an act of creative speech. Again, writing is dis-semination: delogicized and germinating, blossoming forth and spreading into an indefinite future in continuous acts of textual supplementation.

Derrida’s second front was a war against Husserlian phenomenology. He begins by asking the difference between signs that actually point to a signified and expressions as signs that merely symbolize what they signify. Is there some notion of sign that englobes them both, a genus for the two species? No, because the two senses of “sign” are not mutually exclusive. As Saussure had indicated, expressions of our language may be of the spoken or written variety, and if they are written they serve as a substitute for the spoken version in the same way that an indicating sign points to its signified. But please note: the visual signifier (the written morphemes), as a supplement, stands for the verbal signifier (the sonic phonemes).
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We have in this reference the same system of supplementation that was described in the case Derrida brought against Saussure in *Speech and Phenomena*, a book in which he casts anathema upon the houses of structuralist and phenomenologist alike. The argument is clear: if Saussure’s distinction between spoken and written signifiers is accepted we cannot distinguish our linguistic expressions from merely indicative signs: the written characters of a phonetic language indicate what sounds must be uttered to make sense of the expression. He did not say, though he might have, that this is one reason poor readers still move their lips when reading a text.

The case against Husserl continues with the assault upon subjectivity. As Lacan had already made clear in an alternative manner, Derrida mocks the Husserlian methodology by seeking an intuition for the phonic stuff fulfilling the function of a Saussurean signifier. Reflecting upon one’s own use of the voice, a speaker does not intuit a sound, but an ideally recognized sound that is only the trace of the past real sound. Granting, then, that signifieds may be separated from the phonic signifiers, these signifiers themselves can be intuited only as a trace—a phenomenon, to be sure, but not one that yields the presence of what it is the trace of. A trace, as the form of the uniformed (according to Plotinus, from whom Derrida draws this designation), only leaves a mark.

What is left, then, when one dispenses with the essences of the Western tradition that are signified by a “correct” use of language? Only a trace; and this, not of the absent signified, but of a signifier that evanesces, with the rest of our self-conscious selves, into the depths of our unconscious experiences. The crossing out of fixed concepts, then, comes to mean the actual disappearance of the signifier as such: not into an absolute void, since there remains a trace; and this trace is supplemented by a second expressive act wherein the first is criticized. Criticism in this process becomes the deconstruction of a pre-existent text, an examination of the traces left between its empty spaces wherein the undecidable marks constitute a fleeting presence that is more than present (*plus-que présent*) and hence not present at all. Once again, the emphasis is upon the reading, but only as revealing the temporal structure of the human subject doing the reading, not, as in Barthes, as revealing a qualitative slice of human experience.

In such criticism, a text is not so much explained as it is supplemented by another text. And this other text “disseminates” the first,
since that first leaves its trace in the space and time of our collective cultures. Although I have not read another critic of Derrida refer to the polysemic significance of this “dissemination,” the play upon the etymology of the word seems obvious. Whether we write the word as ‘dissemination’ or as ‘dis-semination,’ as I have done above to accentuate the obvious polysemy of the graphe, it too is to be written under erasure, since the original “sense” of spreading the word is intended, along with that other (clearer when the word is spelled ‘dis-semination’) which is likewise a double entendre: first, the removal of the source, biologically contained in the seed, indicating that the word mentioned above was seminal in its effect, and, next, the destruction of the seme as the unit of discursive semantic significance.

The discovery of such linguistic phenomena in the confrontation with a written text might very well be the source of some covert critical sexual jouissance, but like, Roland Barthes, we should have to situate ourselves ever so slightly to the rear of the avantgarde to experience the thrill. Texts, dead or alive, readerly or newly and plainly writerly, need the effective presence of an interpretive consciousness to establish the evidence of their palpable conditions. But of this, more later, where the American voice supplements the Gallic strains of contemporary criticism.

The third prong of the Derridean offensive is to establish a science of the gramme, of that language before language which is neither written nor spoken, but which like the missing link in evolutionary biology has more lately become both spoken and written, both the apes and man. To achieve this aim Derrida deconstructs the essays of Rousseau on the “Origin of Language.”

Repeating the gambits of the poststructuralists outlined above, he shows that there is no origin of the Northern (written) languages from the Southern (the spoken), no significance on the “outside” of an expression that is different from that already apparent on the “inside,” no primacy of the spoken over the written language. The gramme of this primitive language are supplied by the traces or marks inscribed within the life experiences of individuals becoming conscious of themselves as they become conscious of their placement in a world. As we remember our Heidegger, that was the experience of a primal opening given in an act of circumspection, which is the source of all our felt worldly significance. What gets disclosed to a worldly individual
in such felt significance arrives, through the act of interpretation, into the ordered figures of speech that communicate what he or she already knows of the experience. All else, he said, was idle chatter—or, as our intrastructuralists would object, the sometimes pleasant play of our polysemic tongues against the folds of historical circumstance. And this can be understood even if all our concepts to express this fact are left behind the cloak of words written under erasure.

II

I shall begin the Americanization of my thesis with an account of Peircean semiotics. Just what stance does this particular theory permit our literary critics in search of a method? Unfortunately, there can be no question of mapping the various linguistic or semiotic theories that were argued before, during, or after the hyphen uniting structuralist criticism of recent memory with the predominant poststructuralism of the present day. Space and time are both lacking. I shall in what follows attempt to indicate what a thoroughgoing understanding of Peirce’s semiotics, considered as an aesthetic theory, might offer to avoid some of the easier of the criticisms brought against both structuralism and its alterego.

What the two critical theories sketched above have in common as the likeness in their difference is a dyadic account of a sign. The difference by which they constitute the dual of one another is the presence or the absence of a clear signified or set of signifieds functionally related to a set of articulated signifiers in a given literary text. Peirce’s triadic notion of a sign as it signifies is the functional relationship between sign-vehicle, its object, and an interpretant. Along with his ceno-Pythagorean categories (ontological structures, these, of an attentive consciousness), which he chose to denominate firstness, secondness, and thirdness, and which denote either quality, fact, and law on the side of things known; or feeling (sensation), resistance (perception), or habitual action (conception) on the side of the knowing consciousness; such a theory of a sign’s functioning certainly disposes of a number of pseudo-problems associated with the scientific or ontological pretensions of Peirce’s competitors.

Why, for example, is it a scandal that structuralism offers no explanation of a thinking subject? We can replace the certainty of Descartes’ cogitating soul with a Freudian unconscious self if we like;
but the risk is to exchange one kind of spurious certainty for an overinvestment in a quantity or quality essentially unknown and unknowable. A feeling of desire, even of conflicting desires, is still only a firstness, which, considered in itself, means nothing outside itself. We can, of course, make any feeling an object (and therefore a second) by intending it in an act of reflection. Of course, it will in the process become mediated as reflected upon, and in this state of secondness even be designated by the symbol ‘feeling,’ as the legisign for all similarly isolated conscious states.

But, it does not follow from the fact that a searchlight-like transcendental ego cannot be brought into self-presence that nothing is known; only a fool would deduce from this fact that there were no feelings in the world, or that a sighted person cannot see, or that human beings cannot initiate gestures that become habituated responses to recurrent appearances of things or their qualities, as we do whenever we form concepts. Although Peirce is concerned that this account resembles too strongly the Hegelian description of a completely reflexive consciousness,26 he admitted to Lady Welby that he could offer no better phenomenological account of the matter. Firstness, secondness, and thirdness are irreducible characteristics of a human awareness.

Derrida—God preserve his metaphysically skeptical soul—should have known better: even Heidegger distinguished the mode of being of things and tools from the mode of being of existent subjects. For Heidegger, the being of a human being is a manner of being related to a world—caring, as he explains it; and the meaning of this caring is temporality—the stuff (under erasure) of which our souls are made. Heidegger had written Being and Time in the language of ontology peculiar to himself, using a method of hermeneutics that would be recognized for what it is if we called it a consistently applied set of interpretant symbols to the phenomenon of being in a world.

The being of a human being gets interpreted as caring for the entities it finds in its world; it is not, as Jean-Paul Sartre claimed for the being of consciousness,27 always present to itself. For this reason, the metaphysics of presence has nothing to do with the meanings of our linguistic expressions, since these are signs which need only some kind of interpretant to fulfill their function, and which, when experienced as signs are always already interpreted. Such would be the Peircean view on the matter, had Heidegger’s ontology been his own. Heidegger’s “existentials” (human ontological categories) are, for an interpretant,
structural components of a living conscious body temporalizing its spatiality in a distinctive way. Like any other categorial expression they denote the most general characteristics of the entities so characterized.

And along with the metaphysics of presence, so goes the so-called "logocentrism" of Western epistemology. Both are red herrings, confusing the linguistic issues of human intersubjectivity. Nothing-determinate follows from the abandonment, in our postmodern épistémè, of a substantial soul; that was, in the first instance, merely a sense without a reference; in Husserl's language, a meaning intention that went unfulfilled. Husserl merely replaced that useless notion with his own of an intentional act; and Lacan, with still another, the libidinous id. We have in these differences of concept three distinct philosophies of mind. If, for our part and in our own perversity, we should feel driven to replace these intentional acts with a set of linguistic functions, we would find our minds in our words, particularly in those words used to interpret the relationship between a sign and its object, just as Peirce had indicated we always do.

Some of our references, to be sure, will still misfire, and go by their referents; but if they do, the reason will be that we have failed to observe carefully what there is that can be referred to, a phenomenon of secondness, or to have exercised sufficient care to frame the concepts to sort out what can be referred to, a phenomenon of thirdness. As for the phenomena of firstness, that is the concern of Peircean aesthetics.28

An aesthetic sign, as a rhematic, iconic, qualisign refers only to itself as a possibility of precisely that quality it is perceived to be when we let ourselves go to the play of its "text," i.e. when be begin to make our interpretations by associating signifiers (signs) with their signifieds (the objects signified). As an act of the reading consciousness, signs and their objects are related by an interpretant; ultimately, in the aesthetic mode, the interpretant of a sign is the felt tension of the relationship between the sign and its object as registered in the behavior of any reader willing (and able!) to submit him or herself to the disciplinary actions required by the text.

The relationship between an aesthetic sign and its object is iconic because the sign-vehicle (an interpreted text) resembles its object (a possible qualitative experience) by virtue of a similarity in structure.

I realize that above I have only sketched out a Peircean criticism of structuralist linguistics. There is much more to this metacritical approach
than a simple substitution of a dyadic for a triadic relational structure. For example, we still have to learn how Peirce’s semiotics constitutes a full blown philosophy of mind, obviating the need for the Freudian basis of Lacan’s and Barthes’ and Derrida’s linguistics. At the same time we must be led to see how the same semiotics, along with that philosophy of mind, which owes so much to Hegel for the cenopythagorean categories (firstness, secondness, thirdness) with which he interpreted human sign behavior, can be turned into an interpretive tool for demonstrating the aesthetic pleasures of a literary text.

Although Peirce was distrustful of the grand Hegelian synthesis of the stages in mental development, as described in the Phenomenology of Mind, and as traducing the empirical study of logical relatedness in the larger Logic, he admitted to Lady Welby, his partner in the study of “significs,” to use her word for semiotics, that he could find no better way to characterize a reflective self-consciousness. At least his terms for the categories of consciousness were value-free and descriptive, rather than theoretical and normative.

In this contrast of semiotics and grammatology, one thing seems already apparent: it is not the openness or the closedness of a narrative plot that determines the qualities of a literary expression—that too is a red herring obscuring the contemporary debate concerning structural significance. Some pieces of writing, as scriptible as you please, have no plot at all, and yet are full of the tensions between an expressing surface and an expressed depth; the new French novel is a case in point. And the experience of the relationship between the surface and depth of a text (the signifiers and the signifieds, phenomenologically interpreted) is that quality which stands for the possible feeling it represents. The overuse of sexual metaphors by structuralist and poststructuralist alike tends to debase this feeling by universalizing, and thereby overly sanitizing our actual sexual responses. That, after all, is a consequence of treating all literature as metaphor; if Peirce is right, a literary work is an icon of a definite, particular feeling. And not every jouissance has the same determinate character; not every hymeneal, the same singing of the spirit actually expressed in feeling. How songs become spirited is yet to be clearly explained.

We can make such functional relationships as those between the surface and depth of a literary expression apparent, provided that we first feel the tension (which should not be so difficult, since in reading we are that tension, a quality of feeling in itself a mere possibility (or
first), actualized by a perception of syntactic structures (as perceived, a second), in relationship with the field of semantic references deployed as a matter of habit (a third) before our imaginations in the act of attentive reading. After all, calling a literary text a "rhematic iconic qualisign"—as I insist we ought to—is merely one way of saying that it is something to be read for the feeling that experience affords. And the secret of enjoying the pleasure having such feelings may occasion is to learn how to live in such worlds.  

There can be no play in the experience of a set of signifiers, no pleasure in supplementing one such set by another, unless an interpretant sets the play in motion. That is what the completer notion of the sign-function guarantees—at the same time it places human "subjectivity" back into the structures of significs. The poststructuralists have failed to make complete sense (even when this word is written under erasure) because they committed the impardonable gaffe of accepting Saussure's incomplete notion of the sign. For this reason, apparently, a poststructuralist is only a structuralist "qui s'ignore," i.e. one ignorant of his own condition, but still linked by a hyphen within the flow of time to an apparently incoherent past.

What, precisely, are the differences between a semiotic reading of a text and a poststructuralist one? Perhaps only two or three.

First of all, the semiotician finds his readings structured by the signs of his text; but since all interpretants may themselves become signs for further interpretation, each is capable of an indefinitely extensible fine tuning that permits closer and closer approximation to exactness of expression. As always, here the criterion of "correctness" is supplied by the synchronic dimension of the written language as conventionally used by a society of interpreters who may introduce novelty into the code by various figures, such as metonymy or metaphor. Since these two figures make their appearance in the structuralisms of both Saussure and Lacan, there is no difference here between a structuralist and a Peircean semiotic theory. Only Lacan's doctrinaire dismissal of a signified justified the claim to a difference between the two. But he was talking about a signified self. And Roman Jakobson introduces the same terms as seminal meaning generating categories in his own general linguistics.  

A semiotician accepts the reality of a text; the poststructuralist, through the arrogance of his theory, insists upon supplementing a text
he claims never to have existed with a text of his own—even though he is consistent enough to admit that his own text, in its turn, is to be supplemented by still another. But the process by which the supplementation of signifiers is carried to infinity in poststructuralist theory is more adequately motivated by Peirce’s triadic account of the sign: all interpretants need further interpretation, as the grounds establishing them come under further investigation. Meaning, like truth, is never just given; it is something to which we approach ever so asymptotically.

Next, besides the controlled reading of a text, perhaps the most salient difference between European structuralism and American semiotics is the resultant corrigibility of a reading—not with respect to a purely subjective intention of a writer, or the reactions of an implicit reader, but by virtue of the systematic code embodied within a living language. Saussure had already referred to this code as the “collective consciousness” of a society of language users, while we would, perhaps, refer to the same phenomenon as the intersubjectivity of the communication mediated by the systematic usage of a set of signs. Variations from the code, by either metonymy or metaphor, bespeak the mind of an individual author.

Between an author and his or her text, there is no third, connecting entity or process, just as there is no need of a supplement to the text offered us, if only we have learned how to read. When speaking of a text and its author, we are not speaking of two entities, but only of one: the language of the text. There is absolutely nothing outside the text, not even an economy of desires, that may guide the reading of a written text; indeed, as Peirce had said, there is nothing to the very concept of man, but the signs men and women use to express themselves.

These texts are always already interpretants of other signs; and they become aesthetic only as their unfolding yields a quality that is interpreted as an icon of itself, merely as a possibility, which is the ontological counterpart of the cenoPythagorean category of firstness, i.e. a feeling unconnected to anything beyond itself.

What would have been the case had Lacan read Peirce and Freud, instead of Saussure and Freud? Perhaps a more insightful reading of Hegel would have made the difference between his structuralist linguistics and a phenomenological semiotics more clear. Adding Freud to either Saussure or Peirce is simply not enough to cover the facts of aesthetic communication through the effects of sign interpretation.
Scientists, like the anthropologists and the psychoanalysts we have been discussing, invent concepts, in the order of thirdness, to communicate to us what a human being is; artists, like the writers criticized in la nouvelle critique, use language to create the myths by which they create themselves in the order of firstness. And that, as we reflect upon it, is a matter of fact, in the apparent order of secondness. So, what is all this talk about logocentrism and the ubiquitous metaphysics of presence? Apparently, in the interpretant, an erroneous order of thirdness. But such is the fate of all thinkers who would attempt to refute a fact with some pet theory or another. When the facts of the case are trimmed to match our theory, we are dogmatists; when our theories are trimmed to match the facts, our inquiries may be said to be sensible.

But, then, what is a theory that is constructed with nonconcepts? Itself a myth for which there is no accounting without the creation of another myth. Every pharmacon is double barreled; every drug, a remedy and a poison, depending upon how it is used. And for that I have the word of Jacques Derrida.

For a third and final difference between the two theories, try the seriousness of their framers. That too is a quality of language use, and is palpable to any curious reader of the theoretical texts—to which, by these presents, I direct anyone interested in investigating the aesthetic properties of literary texts.

The cure for any malfunctioning theory is successful metatheory, and it is not yet clear to enough practicing literary critics that the road to theory passes through metacriticism—where linguistic theory and aesthetic theory both have a role to play. The hymen-hyphen between these two conscious functions seems grounded in a single phenomenon by Peirce, while the theoretical metacriticism of poststructuralist linguistics must import its connection to aesthetic theory from outside its linguistic context.

For that reason alone—for the rational preference of simplicity over complexity—the one seems superior to the other. From within the standpoint of the Peircean semeiotic theory of aesthetic signs, literary metacritics are themselves the hymenal tissue that unites and separates aesthetic and discursive uses of language. As interpreters of signs interpreting texts their responses must be grounded upon that feeling of tension between the signifiers and the signifieds by which those texts are structured. Why? Because, as written, texts are the results of rhetorical strategies; and, as read, they are reconstructed according to
the discipline governing the intent of the work. And it is for this reason that a critic’s "job of work" is to concern him or herself with the work, the whole work, and nothing but the work—as a system of signs referring to nothing other than their own potentiality to become, in interpretation, the icon of a definite feeling.

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NOTES

7. See Ferdinand de Saussure. op. cit., p. 33. The course had been taught by Saussure at the University of Geneva in 1906–7, 1908–9, 1910–11.
11. For an account of this movement, see Chalumeau, op. cit.