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Part II
Interpretant, Interpreter, and the Discourse of Community

My work on language and interpretation has brought me into contact with the thought of C.S. Peirce, arguably the greatest American philosopher, a truly original thinker who foreshadows many developments of 20th-century philosophy of science, semiotics, hermeneutics, and, aspect to date little explored, the role and possibilities of rhetoric.[10] Perhaps the key element in his thought, which both confirms and allows us to elaborate our initial starting hypothesis, is that his semiotic is *both* the foundation of pragmatism as well as a key element in what I have developed into a rhetorical hermeneutics.[11] If we look at Peirce's very first major essay, "On a New List of Categories," published in 1867, (CP 1: 545-59; EP I: 1-10),[12] he introduces the notion of the *Interpretant*, a key concept of his future theory of signs, but also as what permits *mediation* and which he says "fulfills the office of an *interpreter*" (my emphasis). The interpretant is not an "accident" (6) and by definition entails a "correlate" and therefore a reference to three possible domains: a ground, the object, and once again the necessary interpreter. What we want to emphasize from this important early paper is that the third category, that of symbols, *determine* their interpretants and, revealing detail, "the minds to which they appeal by

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[10]   This section is an abbreviated version of a chapter from my *The Elusive Hermes* (2013), 257-72.

[11]   The reference is to the above-cited *The Elusive Hermes*.

[12]   All references to Peirce's works are to the *Collected Papers*, indicated with the standard abbreviation, CP, followed by volume number and pagination. I also include references to the more easily available two-volume edition, *The Essential Peirce*, the first volume edited by Nathan Houser and Christina Kloesel, the second by the Peirce Edition Project, and abbreviated EP by volume and page numbers (see Works cited).

premising a proposition or propositions, which such a mind is to admit. These are *arguments*" (8; emphasis in the original). Arguments correspond to the Aristotelean *topics*, the linguistic constructs which are intrinsically world-oriented and interpersonal, and legitimated by situation, by purpose, by audience. Another aspect which will lay the premises for the later conflation of method and rhetoric is that Peirce is asserting the primacy of *reference* and the necessity of *correlations*.

During this early period, he published another essay titled "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" (CP 5: 264-317; EP I: 28-55). Here Peirce distances himself from Descartes for rooting his principle of certainty in the ego, and shifts the emphasis again to the community, to the need of inquiry to find validation in society broadly understood or in a specific community, perhaps a professional organization. The reason is that *the very process of cognition is intrinsically related to the continuum of social forces and interactions*. Peirce soon makes evident that the very nature of knowledge is ultimately a question of *comparison* since "whatever is wholly incomparable with anything else is wholly inexplicable, [and] because explanation is bringing things under general laws or under natural classes" (I:41).[13] The way to account for their evaluation is to furnish a different viewpoint, which places one's position one step removed from anyone else's. There's a perspectivism implied in this gesture. Aware that everything the mind focuses on can be understood as a sign, he stipulates that the *content* of consciousness itself is but a sign, therefore it can be the object of thought. On this, Locke docet. The model is: A stands for a representation B in someone's field of intellection C. But having said that, we can already see how the consciousness must be receptive to and potentially capable of standing in its turn as the possible producer of D with relation to a hypothetical E. The signifying chain begins to come into view, and discourse emerges as the effective, material basis for both intellection *and* action by real human beings *in carne e ossa*.

Nearly ten years later, in 1877-78, in a series of papers published in *Popular Science Monthly*, we start to notice another development important to our investigation, and that is a previously unremarked connection

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[13]   Cf. on this C. Hausman 192-94. Peirce called this first moment one of *sciousness*, therefore primordial with respect to *con*sciousness.

between method and rhetoric. In an 1878 article, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (CP 5: 388-410; EP I: 124-41), Peirce turns his attention to the notion of belief. This may at first appear odd, considering that the scientific community *strictu sensu* had declared, since the time of Galileo, that belief has no role in scientific investigation. But for Peirce, the practicing investigator must be aware of the general beliefs of the community insofar as they establish *habits*. Peirce recognizes the role belief plays in creating perspectives which are not necessarily self-conscious or are routinely systematically analyzed. But he recognizes as well that beliefs are, at some deeper level, and historically so, responsible for determining what can be termed a universal truth, even when not yet scientifically proven. One can think here of the co-existence of belief in astrology and astronomy in the 17th and 18th centuries, or the co-existence, in 20th-century physics, of the wave and quantum theories of light. For Peirce, the final upshot of thinking is the exercise of *volition*, and that's a different faculty than that of pure scientific or mathematical thinking. Perhaps some people do not want to challenge beliefs acquired through cultural habits, but for the understanding, there seems to be a latent necessary connection between theory and praxis at work here that needs to be examined.

In a sense, Peirce says, there must be continuity in that amass of presumably discrete facts out there in the world, even though reality "swims in indeterminacy."[14] Continuing his reflection, he claims that "belief is only a stadium of mental action, an effect upon our nature due to thought, which will influence future thinking" (129). So what we are dealing with at this juncture is an attempt at figuring out what may be the rules and principles for a valid, objective, dynamic approach to knowledge without, at the same time, ignoring that the scientist too – and therefore the knowledge that she seeks to unearth, formalize, and transmit to the community – actually lives and exists as a member of *that* community. Peirce says explicitly once again that "the whole function of thought is

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[14]   From CP 6.138, cited in Rosenthal (5). What we can demand of the world, Peirce claims, is that it be "*reasonable*." Interestingly, in his later work Umberto Eco speaks of "ragionevolezza" instead of "ragione" as the objective of cultural interpretation and its underlying ethos.

to produce habits of action," a statement which reminds us of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. There is, in short, recognition of a *sensus communis* present in the undifferentiated mass of individuals, yet *the process of establishing what counts as valid knowledge appears to follow similar rules whether we are dealing with the doxa or the episteme.* It is an important concession to non-scientific knowledge, and Peirce was not at all intellectually disengaged from his social reality.[15] We can therefore perceive an effort to maintain a dialectical relationship between the philosopher and his society in a mutually co-enabling dynamic, for our search for knowledge "come[s] down to what is tangible and practical" and, furthermore, "there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to exist in anything but a possible difference of practice" (ibid). Would that our scientific-minded interpreters heed that! Or take Kuhn and Feyerabend seriously.

In fact, it is here that we read that any conception that we may have of an object is never something totally removed from the real world, for an object is defined actually by its effect: "our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects" (132). It is the effects that determine the meaning of a thought, and it is not by coincidence that William James refers to this 1878 paper in his 1907 lectures on pragmatism (James 1981:26). James goes on to de-emphasize the theoretical frame in order to foreground the practical one. The "pragmatic method," he writes, is really a question of "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts." Meaning in brief is derived from habit, there may coexist many habits side by side and in complex societies any one statement about what reality is can be no more "true" than any other person's conception.

This thought probably did not sit well with logicians, positivists, transcendentalists, secular idealists, über-rationalists, and specialists in the then emerging and consolidating university disciplines. Peirce was going against the grain of the general tendency of philosophic and scientific

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[15]   It is known that Peirce wrote an incredible number of reviews, traveled extensively, especially when he worked for the U.S. Geological Survey, and kept a rich correspondence. For a study on the political aspect of his thematization of belief, see Douglas Anderson in Brunning and Forster, 1997: 223-40.

communities, which since the 17th century were pruning religion, literature, myth, emotion, creativity, and the x-factor in human interaction out of the formal and restricted fields of their investigations. But such is the fate of original thinkers.

In an 1884 paper, "Design and Chance" (EP I: 215-24), Peirce reminds us of the existential, institutional, and methodological flexibility afforded by a rhetorical understanding of human discourse. Here Peirce embraces *chance* not as something to be avoided in the name of some unshakeable axiom or theologeme, or in abeyance to propositional logic, but *as the foundation of the human condition*. If we understand chance as *entropy*, we are suddenly looking at information theory. He writes: "it appears to me that chance is the one essential agency upon which the whole process depends" (219). The background to this assertion is his interpretation of the competing schools of evolution, which at the time made front-page news. In terms of the rhetoric of interpretation of any one phenomenon, or the impact of a text, Peirce claims that "explicability has no determinate and absolute limit... everything has been brought about; and consequently everything is subject to change and subject to chance" (219). Not too distant, conceptually, from both, the notion of infinite semiosis,[16] on the one hand, and that of interminable interpretation, on the other.[17] Understanding and accepting this factor is crucial to begin piecing together his overall system.

This particular setup of the nexus between theory and logic finds one more development in another 1903 lecture, "Pragmatism as the Logic of Abduction" (CP 5: 180-212; EP II: 226-41). Drawing on our starting characterization of method as the figurative "path" toward yet unknown knowledge, here in fact we meet up with the required activity of monitoring the findings along the itinerary, realigning and revising the overarching thesis in the process. The philosopher reiterates another medieval dictum, that is, that nothing is in the intellect that is not first given in the senses, (*nihil est in intellectus quid non fuit prius in sensu),* and that the necessary propensity to make abductive inferences *does* impact upon, and to some

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[16]   Cf. Eco 1975:71, 129, et infra.
[17]   See on this S. Freud, "Analysis terminable and interminable," (1953) and G. Pasqua-lotto, "Nietzsche o dell'ermeneutica interminabile" (1988).

sense color, the very percepts which we register and account for in the process of coming up with some stable knowledge. This is consistent with what we saw above about *an object being defined in part by its effect on something else or on its purpose for being*. Abduction, he writes, is the fundamental way in which an experiment is conducted, and it is the way in which we actually regulate our lives. This is in sharp contrast to the pre-established rules for conducting an experiment according to the mechanical and positivistic sciences.

What Peirce introduces here is a real-world consideration whereby neither logic nor science is removed from the lives of humans in a community, something which Gadamer does not take into account (nor does Heidegger or Vattimo). A worthy hypothesis seeks to explain facts, yet, he asks, "what other conditions ought it to fulfill to be good?" (235). The answer is something which is at *the basis of pragmatism*, that *something is good if it fulfills its end*. A purpose, a telos. I am aware that this raises Hegelian specters, but we must learn to get out of his shadow. So in a way, whether we are talking about a scientific hypotheses or a political strategy or just household planning, any projection is admissible in the absence of any argument to the contrary or in light of less defensible alternatives. One can sense right here how this resounds with rhetorical strategies already in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and in Perelman's *New Rhetoric*.[18]

If the word rhetoric is still indigestible to some, let us think of it in terms of Discourse, as it has become plain throughout my investigations that it *precedes* and in fact *constitutes* the necessary foundation of Logic and Method. This applies as well when, within the purview of studies on interpretation theory, scholars have been developing the notion of the groundlessness of being and knowing.[19] What we have as basic tenets of a new conception of interpretation at this juncture are:

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[18]   I demonstrate this in my cited *The Elusive Hermes*, 305-20.
[19]   Besides Heidegger, Vattimo and Derrida, we ought to read Joseph Margolis on this topic. See in particular his *Pragmatism without Foundations* (1986) and *Science without Unity* (1987), both of which would require an in-depth exposition. To a lesser degree, Rorty also, though not a fan of Peirce (Rorty 1982, 161), was also pointing in this direction, at least during his middle period. On anti-foundationalism, see the cited anthology by Rockmore and Singer (1992).

a. the conscious (as opposed to automatic and unquestioned) applications of method,

b. the awareness that science is intrinsically a process of discovery (and as such as being informed by chance and abduction),

c. a constant interrelating of the experiencing, investigating consciousness in relation to others, and finally,

d. the "ineliminable openness, the inherently *asystematic* nature, of both inquiry and reality." (Margolis 36; my emphasis)[20]

These aspects bring together all three of our starting hermeneutic elements, that is, the Work, the Interpreter-Society, and the Interpreting, and each and every time we focus on one of the three, we are dealing with the triad of theory-method-discourse.

Peirce's idea of pragmatism was "a method of ascertaining the meanings not of all ideas, but only as such that I term 'intellectual concepts,' that is to say, of those upon the structure of which arguments concerning objective fact may hinge." This is as close as we have come to a notion of rhetoric which is, as all forms of discourse, intrinsically *relational*, *intersubjective*, *based on fact*, *and aiming at a broader understanding of the human project* (I might add: of how some persons or groups of persons contextually understand the human project). Rhetoric entails a speaker who, insofar as he or she is always caught in the process of sign-production and sign-transmission, must make choices that invest the intellectual with the broader responsibility of being the mediator and transformer of the values of the particular society in which he or she lives. This does not in any way debilitate the scientific project, nor its intrinsic armamentarium of deduction, induction, and hypothesis forming and testing.[21] Rather, it places them within the larger horizon of intellectual inquiry and with the added onus of a responsibility

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[20]   The passage continues: "For, *if* the intelligible world presupposes an ultimately impenetrable symbiosis (only partially suggested by the alternative schematisms of 'subject' and 'object' and *Dasein* and *Sein*), then *no homonomic system can be in place*, no foundationalism or transparentism is possible" (*ib.*, author's emphases). All of the authors collected in Rockmore and Singer (1992) point to the "myth" of foundationalism in Modern thought. See in particular Sandra B. Rosenthal's "Pragmatism and the Reconstruction of Metaphysics," 1992:165-88, in particular 169, 178.

[21]   Cf. Edward Madden, "C.S. Peirce's Search for a Method," in Madden 248-62.

to keep the boundaries of established fields of knowledge open and free to change as contexts, habits, and needs of the community change.

To return to our initial premises and sketch a provisional conclusion. Although in the scientifically informed Marx this is seen as opposed to what we propose, we cannot operate a clear-cut distinction between theory and praxis because the very act of articulating our interpretation comprises a theoretical moment, a fore-seeing, based on our fore-having or pre-liminary grasp of the universe and its contents, therefore involving a pre-judgment, *and* the necessity to reach into and effect an action on the situation at hand. This we saw is intrinsically bound up with the methodic-rhetoric process and the temporally marked interest in, and intervention upon, that very same situation at hand. In traditional hermeneutics it is called *applicatio*, but for our context it can simply be called *praxis*.

And *praxis* is from the start *contingent*, *time-and-place bound*, directly influenced (when not determined) by the general context at hand. Specifically: the given moment where a situation occurs, each time being a specific one wherein the interpreter, the I, enters into a relation with others. I do not necessarily see it as implying something revolutionary, or of elaborating it into a programme, as Marx wished it could. But it does express the co-presence of an actor intervening upon the immediate circumstances or relations with others. Praxis, or the practice of interpretation, is not simply a description but a productive experience. As such, it is always local and is significant or acquires value in view of an objective, a local *telos*, one which need not apply to all humanity for all time and since forever, but is worthwhile in *this* circumscribed life-space or chronotope. It would be a weak *telos*, at any rate, one which accepts finitude, melancholia, a light irony, and is predisposed to tolerance of the other (at least until the other shows its fangs).

An awareness that the context or situation in which I intervene is marked by conventions, and delegated, legitimated spaces for action – say, a classroom, parliament, or an amusement park – will induce one course of action as opposed to another. Hence the reason why elsewhere I argue for the introduction, however re-conceptualized, of the notion of the *will*

(*voluntas*) or of *having to make a choice*, a conscious, willful decision to act in one way rather than another.

Hence the last word of my title, a local purpose, and why we needed to recover some insights from the founder of pragmatism.[22]

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[22]   But we must read philosophy and studies on rhetoric at the same time and as reciprocally enabling, for thinking in the post-metaphysical, postmodern age must focus on interpretation *and* language. We ought to re-read Chäim Perelman, who retrieved and developed ideas already in Quintilian. Perelman intends to devise a discipline which would enable one to know *what* to say, *how* and *when* and *for whom* to say it, and finally on the basis of what *specific situation*. In other words, he seeks to define the theory of argumentation as basically *a process of adaptation* between a speaker and a listener *in real-world contexts*. In their anthology, *Rhetorics and Hermeneutics in Our Time*, Walter Jost and Michael Hyde draw attention to the reciprocality of understanding and speaking (4), and to the fact that rhetorical implies *intentionality* and that therefore "theoretical reflection" does not entail "cognitive detachment, but rather the practical engagement of concrete involvement" (5). They revaluate persuasion as *practical reason*, and relation not as just another category, as in Kant, but as the foundational ante-predicative field or horizon of interpersonal exchange (23).

On a similar vein, but stressing the skeptical thread of classical rhetoric and thematizing the main concern of contemporary rhetoric, we must consider the notion of justice, not knowledge per se, as we read in James Kastley's *Rethinking the Rhetorical Tradition* (1997), which begins with an enthusiastic "Rhetoric has returned." Another excellent collection is Richard Cherwitz, ed, *Rhetoric and Philosophy* (1990), containing an article by Barry Brummet, "Relativism and Rhetoric," which makes the case for the greater philosophical relevance of skepticism, historical context, and anti-universalism, against rationalists and cognitivists. See also Michael Hyde, author of a significant article, "Existentialism as a Basis for Rhetoric," in which he conjoins key topics from existentialism, – such as self, temporality, emotion, and freedom – with the eminently rhetorical preoccupation with the *Mitwelt*, that is, with the implied imperative to communication with the others, and with the sense of community (1990: 213-51). A fuller treatment is represented by the work of Stephen Mailloux, who in his *Rhetorical Power* (1989) mounts a case, both theoretical and historical, supported by proof – i.e.: actual applications of his perspective – for a *rhetorical hermeneutics*, which is anti-foundationalist in principle, and is very critical of some of the literary theories that dominated since the time of New Criticism, down to deconstruction.

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