UNLIMITED SEMIOSIS OR ENDLESS REDESCRIPTIONS? PEIRCE, ECO, AND RORTY ON THE LIMITS OF INTERPRETATION

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Abstract. In this paper I discuss Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of semiosis, particularly its implications for the debate between Umberto Eco and Richard Rorty on the limits of interpretation. Starting from what Eco labelled as *unlimited semiosis*, I draw some parallels between his Peircean account of semiosis and Rorty's views on interpretation. Rorty's late position was that redescription can be endless, contending that there are no limits to possible interpretations. Eco considered that Peircean semiosis does not accommodate this view. I explore some of the similarities between Peircean unlimited semiosis and Rortyan endless redescription and identify some of differences which help distinguish between Peirce's (and Eco's) account and Rorty's. Namely, I draw on the triadic structure of Peircean semiosis and the concept of *interpretant*. I conclude that, unlike Rorty, Peirce and Eco's notions do not allow for arbitrarily imposed interpretations.

Keywords: unlimited semiosis; redescription; interpretation; anti-essentialism; C. S. Peirce; Richard Rorty.

In an illuminating paper, Vincent Colapietro asks "What are the limits of redescription, the possibilities of renarration, regarding the relationship between Charles Peirce and Richard Rorty?"[1] Rorty also seems to give an answer to such a question when claiming that: "The critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose […] He does this by imposing a vocabulary […] on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens."[2] This might indicate that there are no limits to redescribing authors so as to create a sense of

[1] Vincent M. Colapietro, "Richard Rorty as Peircean Pragmatist: An Ironic Portrait and Sincere Expression of Philosophical Friendship", *Pragmatism Today*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2011, p. 31.

[2] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. 151.

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convergence between their respective projects (if that is our purpose, or as a means for achieving our purpose). But one should note that such extreme redescriptions are not necessary in the case of Peirce and Rorty, as their views exhibit some overlap. Beyond the infamous quip that Peirce's only merit in the pragmatist tradition is to have given it a name and to have inspired James,[3] Rorty's early thought owes a great debt to the first of the classical pragmatists. Rorty's first works[4] deal directly with Peircean philosophy and try to extend some of Peirce's insights in order to account for what Rorty saw as the metaphilosophical issues plaguing philosophy after "the linguistic turn."[5] There are several points of convergence between Peirce and the young Rorty, which, one might argue, are recurrent in Rorty's later work.[6]

But in this paper, I shall touch on only one of these, namely the ineluctability of interpretation. I shall do so by means of a comparative analysis of Umberto Eco's notion of Peircean *unlimited semiosis*[7] and Rorty's conception of interpretation and redescription. My working hypothesis is that Peirce's semiotic theory might help illuminate one of the discussions between Eco and Rorty concerning the limits of interpretation, an exchange found in Eco's *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*.[8] In that debate, Rorty comes out as a defender of the idea that there are no limits one can impose upon possible interpretations. Eco instead denies this, and insists there are better and worse interpretations, and this is not merely a matter of better and worse *uses* of the texts. Therefore, he would deny the association between unlimited semiosis and Rortyan endless redescription (an association which is supported for example by T. L. Short's assessment[9]). These notions feed into what Mats Bergman considers to be "the central semiotic and pragmatic issue,"[10] namely the question of the limits of interpretation.

In the first section, I sketch Peirce's semiotic theory and introduce Eco's notion of "unlimited semiosis," which he ascribes to Peirce. The second section details Rorty's views on redescription and interpretation. I claim here that Rorty's particular form of

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 161.

[4] I am referring to "Pragmatism, Categories, and Language" (1962) and "Realism, Categories, and the 'Linguistic Turn'" (1962), both recently republished in Richard Rorty, *Mind, Language, and Metaphilosophy, Early Philosophical Papers*, Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia (eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 16–38, and pp. 55–68.

[5] *Ibidem*, pp. 16–17: "I want to suggest that Peirce's thought envisaged, and repudiated in advance, the stages in the development of empiricism which logical positivism represented, and that it came to rest in a group of insights and a philosophical mood much like those we find in the *Philosophical Investigations* and in the writings of philosophers influenced by the later Wittgenstein."

[6] Chris Voparil, *Reconstructing Pragmatism: Richard Rorty and the Classical Pragmatists*, Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 50, 55.

[7] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington & London, Indiana University Press, 1976, p. 71.

[8] Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (with Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler, and Christine Brooke-Rose), Stefan Collini (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

[9] T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 45.

[10] Mats Bergman, "C. S. Peirce on Interpretation and Collateral Experience", *Signs*, vol. 4, 2010, p. 135.

anti-essentialism leads him to the conclusion that there are no limits on the possible interpretations one can give to any text, discourse, vocabulary, and so on. To this end I discuss Rorty's notions of metaphoric redescription and inquiry as recontextualization. In the third section, I identify some of the similarities between Eco's unlimited semiosis and Rorty's redescriptive practice. I examine Eco's arguments against this association, and try to use Peirce's semiotic theory in order to flesh out the main differences between Rorty and Eco. I underline that Peirce presents Eco with the conceptual tools necessary to fend off Rorty's attempt at enrolling him in his neo-pragmatist camp. As I will argue, Peircean unlimited semiosis differs from Rorty's notion of interpretation, in that the former's account of semiosis envisions interpretation in terms of a triadic structure, whereas the latter views interpretation simply as a dyadic relation between that which is interpreted or redescribed and the interpreter. I claim that Peirce's notion of *interpretant*, as a constitutive element of the sign and the whole signifying process, ensures that in his conception of semiosis one could not accept interpretations arbitrarily imposed on texts.[11] Therefore, whereas for Rorty there are no limits to interpretation that are not self-imposed or entailed by our uses of the text and our freely chosen purposes, and interpretation is, in one sense, arbitrary, for Peirceans like Eco, unlimited semiosis cannot proceed arbitrarily.

PEIRCE'S SEMIOTIC THEORY AND THE NOTION OF "UNLIMITED SEMIOSIS"

Peirce claimed that the only way to inquire into semiosis is to begin from the definition of "the triadic relation Sign-Object-Interpretant" (CP 8.361). It is well-known that Peirce formulated his own set of categories, namely Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. As Gérard Deledalle observes, Peirce follows Kant's example in claiming that one can only apprehend the world by recourse to his categories or "modes of being."[12] In Peirce's account, *Firstness* refers to "that whose being is simply in itself," (EP1 248) so it is not denoting something else or associated with something besides itself. To take an example, Peirce mentions "the qualities of feeling, or mere appearances. The scarlet of your royal liveries, the quality itself, independently of being perceived or remembered".[13] T. L. Short describes such examples of Firstness as "the qualities as experienced, not as conceptualized."[14] Meanwhile, *Secondness* is "that which is what it is by force of something to which it is second." (EP1 248) Peirce's example of pure Secondness, as Rorty remarks, is that of two billiard balls colliding.[15] Other candidates for Secondness

[11] Stefan Collini, "Introduction: Interpretation terminable and interminable", in U. Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 16.

[12] Gérard Deledalle, *Charles S. Peirce's Philosophy of Signs: Essays in Comparative Semiotics*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 9.

[13] T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, p. 75.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 76.

[15] R. Rorty, *Mind, Language, and Metaphilosophy*, p. 19.

can be encountered in the facts of "Relation, Compulsion, Effect, Dependence, Independence, Negation" (EP1 248) and so on. Among his many attempts to define these three categories, we find a peculiar example which compares Firstness and Secondness: "The starting-point of the universe, God the Creator, is the Absolute First; the terminus of the universe, God completely revealed, is the Absolute Second" (EP1 250–251). To these we add *Thirdness* which refers to evolution, to that which mediates between the First and the Second; and one of Peirce's central doctrines is that of the irreducibility of Thirdness.[16] To take an example from T. L. Short's study, if we nail two boards together, the nail is not a Third. Instead, the triadic fact that a nail connects the first and the second board can be reduced to a pair of dyadic facts: that the nail is in the first board, and that the nail is in the second board. "But," writes Short, "the whole that is formed by nailing these boards together – and is owing to the things it relates – is irreducible."[17] Peirce contends that "the third is of its own nature relative" (EP1 250), which is why commentators accept that "Thirdness is where both evolution and semiosis reside."[18]

Since one could argue that in Peirce's thought Thirdness is that which confers meaning and "is meaning itself,"[19] one has to acknowledge its importance for understanding the Peircean notion of semiosis. Rorty says that Peirce's notion of Thirdness functions as a category necessary for his brand of realism, enshrining conceptually all those "vague things which, he thought, nominalists could not reduce"[20] such as, among others, intentions, rules, potentiality, habits, meanings, and *signs*.[21] Peirce called these phenomena Thirds since he believed that they all exhibit the same characteristic, namely that "their adequate characterization requires a language which contains, as primitive predicates, the names of triadic relations."[22]

It is natural then that this focus on triadic relations surfaces in Peirce's definition of the sign, and in his general notion of semiosis. As Vincent Colapietro notes, Peirce tried to articulate a sufficiently general notion of semiosis,[23] one capable of embracing *all signs*, be they pictures, winks, tokens, letters, words, memories, concepts, a pointing finger, and so on.[24] Colapietro remarks that Peirce's definition of a sign differs from the classical ones in that the former conceives of a sign in terms of a *triadic* structure. A sign,

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 16.

[17] T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, p. 84.

[18] Austin Bailey, "'Man Himself is a Sign': Emerson, C. S. Peirce, and the Semiosis of Mind", *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, vol. 64, no. 4, 2018, p. 689.

[19] Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 335, cited in Bailey, "'Man Himself is a Sign': Emerson, C. S. Peirce, and the Semiosis of Mind", p. 689.

[20] R. Rorty, *Mind, Language, and Metaphilosophy*, p. 18.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 18.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 18.

[23] Vincent M. Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 3.

[24] *Charles Sanders Peirce: Contributions to the Nation. Part Two: 1894–1900*, Kenneth Laine Ketner and James Edward Cook (eds.), Lubbock, Texas Tech Press, 1978, p. 149, cited in Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, p. 3.

for Peirce, does not just stand *for something*, but it stands *for* something *to* someone (i.e., to a mind).[25]

Albert Atkin suggests that there are three main phases in Peirce's development of the theory of signs.[26] The first one is dated in the early 1860s, the second around 1903, while the third dates from 1906 onwards.[27] A striking common feature of these phases, which Atkins considers to be an "issue" and "a problematic notion," is the notion of there being "infinite chains of signs."[28] According to Mats Bergman, the early Peirce insisted on "the open-ended character of the action of signs".[29] This suggests that there is no possibility of imposing limits on the semiotic process, except in an ideal end-point of inquiry, which, as Bergman notes, is "never reached in real life."[30] Furthermore, one cannot hope to identify either first objects, nor final interpretations, that can then act as the Archimedean point from which to judge our interpretative processes. These points might appear to lend support to an easy parallel between Peircean semiosis and Rorty's account of interpretation, which also rejects any possible constraints on our interpretative processes. I shall return to this point in the third section. For now, I wish to clarify a bit Peirce's definitions of the sign, for here lies, I think, the key to distinguishing between Peirce's unlimited semiosis and Rorty's endless redescription.

During his career, Peirce proposed various formulations for a definition of the sign. At one point, he claimed that:

> A sign has, as such, three references: 1st, it is a sign to some thought which interprets it; 2d, it is a sign for some object to which in that thought it is equivalent; 3d, it is a sign, in some respect of quality. (EP1 38)

Another formulation is that:

> A Sign, or Representamen, is a First which stands in such genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its Object, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its Interpretant, to assume the same triadic relation to its object in which it stands itself to the same Object. (EP2 272–273)

And a third one maintains that:

> Sign [is] anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former. (EP2 478)

[25] V. M. Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self,* p. 4. The author also adds that the triadic character of Peircean semiosis serves to distinguish it from Saussure's semiology which conceives the sign as a correlation between *signified* and *signifier*, i.e., as a dyadic relation (*Ibidem*, p. 5).

[26] Albert Atkin, *Peirce*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, p. 126; M. Bergman, "C. S. Peirce on Interpretation and Collateral Experience", p. 142.

[27] Atkin cautions that one should not think of these phases as "discrete or distinct accounts," instead there is a clear process of development and maturation of Peirce's theory of signs: "Divisions and outlines of the semiotic are, then, to some degree contentious and even artificial." (Atkin, *Peirce*, p. 127) For a clearer picture of this process, see chapter 2 of T. L Short's *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 27–59.

[28] A. Atkin, *Peirce*, p. 126.

[29] M. Bergman, "C. S. Peirce on Interpretation and Collateral Experience", p. 142.

[30] *Ibidem.*

The common thread is that a sign is composed of three elements, namely a sign, an object and an interpretant.[31] While the *interpretant* should not be confused with the *interpreter*, scholars disagree about its exact definition. Atkins takes the *interpretant* to be "the most innovative and distinctive feature"[32] of Peirce's theory of signs. Bergman agrees that it is an original concept, and adds that Peirce employs this notion to designate "the characteristic effects that signs may have on human beings".[33] From a Peircean point of view, the action of signs is "interpretational and translational," a process in which signs stand for objects to interpretants, the interpretant being an "interpretational or semiotic effect brought on by the sign."[34]

Umberto Eco, on the other hand, was concerned that, being a very broad category, the notion of interpretant may be useless. Defining it as he does, as "any semiotic act," it verges on becoming an empty notion.[35] Among the various shapes the interpretant can take, Eco mentions that it can be an index directed to a single object, a scientific definition in terms of the same semiotic system, an emotive association transformed by convention and use in an established connotation, a translation of the term into another language.[36] Eco claims that the vagueness of the notion gives the interpretant its force and it is "the condition of its theoretical purity".[37] He elaborates that it is this very vagueness of the interpretant which allows one, in the course of signification, to never be forced to refer to any "Platonic, psychic, or objectal entity".[38] Instead, one can always fall back upon another sign, and another, and another: "by means of continual shiftings which refer a sign back to another sign or string of sings […] *Semiosis explains itself by itself.*"[39] So formulated, it would seem that Peirce accepted a form of infinite regression in the interpretation of signs. "If each sign," writes James Liszka, "is a representation of a previous sign, then there is an infinite regression that Peirce is hard pressed to overcome."[40] This regression of signs sending back to signs is, in Eco's words, "the basic condition of semiosis."[41] From this doctrine, Eco arrived at the notion of "unlimited semiosis," entailed, for example, by the following passage by Peirce:

[31] Austin Bailey notes that, for Peirce, the sign means *the total signifying process*, constituted by the three elements: "[the] sign (that which stands for something to someone), its object (the object or thing to which the sign or signifying element refers), and its interpretant (the person to whom the sign stands, often defined by Peirce as a subsequent and more developed sign)" (Bailey, "'Man Himself is a Sign': Emerson, C. S. Peirce, and the Semiosis of Mind", p. 686).

[32] A. Atkins, *Peirce*, p. 128.

[33] M. Bergman, "C. S. Peirce on Interpretation and Collateral Experience," p. 142.

[34] *Ibidem*.

[35] U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 71.

[36] *Ibidem*, p. 70.

[37] *Ibidem*, p. 71.

[38] *Ibidem*.

[39] *Ibidem*.

[40] James Liszka, "Teleology and Semiosis: Commentary on T. L. Short's *Peirce's Theory of Signs*", *Transactions of Charles S. Peirce Society,* vol. 43, no. 4*,* 2007, p. 637.

[41] Umberto Eco, T*he Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1979, pp. 188–189.

> The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off: it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So, there is an infinite regression here. Finally, the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series. (CP 1.339)

T. L. Short ironized Eco's pronouncements about unlimited semiosis as unhelpful, to say the least, and complained that this notion is a consequence of "Peirce's early failure to explain what significance is and the unhappy implication that significance is imposed arbitrarily."[42] Short believes that while Eco is not wrong in attributing this view to the early Peirce, he is mistaken in the case of the later Peirce.[43] Again, turning to Eco, he elsewhere notes that, traditionally, we know of two modes of interpretation, namely that of limited interpretation (interpretation understood as discovering or uncovering the meaning of the text, or its nature or essence, be it the meaning given by the author or the meaning of the text-as-such) and limitless interpretation,[44] interpretation as "limitlessness of play," as Jacques Derrida[45] would say. Based on what we have said so far about semiosis, one could conclude that Eco's unlimited semiosis favours the second kind of interpretation: given that if meaning is arbitrarily imposed[46] then interpretations can be arbitrary as well. And this brings us to Rorty, the strong textualist, for whom the very idea of "an essence of the text" seems outdated. Before I return to Peirce's theory, to see what it entails for the Eco-Rorty debate on the limits of interpretation, I will detail in the next section Rorty's conception of anti-essentialism and its consequences for the issue of interpretation.

FROM ANTI-ESSENTIALISM TO "ENDLESS REDESCRIPTIONS"

Derrida noted one aspect of Peirce's output which makes a link between Eco's unlimited semiosis and Rorty's endless redescription an alluring option. As Derrida writes: "The *representamen* functions only by giving rise to an *interpretant* that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity."[47] And he adds a little later that "From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We *think only in signs* […] One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified as limitlessness of play".[48] T. L. Short demurs at Derrida's conclusion, remarking that from this passage it would

[42] T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, p. 45.

[43] *Ibidem*.

[44] Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 24.

[45] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 50.

[46] T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, p. 46n10.

[47] J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 49.

[48] *Ibidem*, p. 50.

seem that only "the weak would desire a 'reassuring end' to reference, fleeing from the limitless freedom of semiotic play."[49]

Rorty is one philosopher who not only embraces this Derridean conclusion, but celebrates the "limitlessness of play," believing as he does that any normative constraint which would be grounded in some non-human authority would be tantamount to subordinating and debasing human beings.[50] The dignity of human beings requires that the logical space of reasons be distinguished from the logical space of causes,[51] so that even if things are causally independent of us this does not stop human beings from "putting the causal forces of the universe to work for us."[52] As far as texts are concerned, the causal forces involved are merely "print little replicas on our retinas."[53] What we decide to do with that data is completely our choice, a choice which is articulated and defended in the space of reasons. This in turn allows Rorty to claim that nothing can serve as a criticism of a redescription except a re-redescription, and so on.[54] This would be, briefly put, the connection between Rorty's anti-authoritarianism, his Sellarsian distinction between the space of reasons and the space of causes, and the notion of redescription. "Redescription," of course, is one of Rorty's favorite words. (I take it that for Rorty, interpretation involves a both metaphoric redescriptions and recontextualizations.) As he says, anything can be made to look good or bad through metaphoric redescription.[55] In Rorty's sense of the term, redescription is an amalgam[56] between Wittgenstein's notion of "language as a tool" and Kuhn's revolutionary scientific discourse (as opposed to "normal" scientific discourse). Intellectual progress is achieved by promoting new and exciting redescriptions which then render a new vocabulary as attractive to users of old vocabularies.[57] Rorty explains "the power of redescribing" as "the power of lan-

[49] T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, p. 45.

[50] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 45, 103.

[51] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 157, 389. Citing Sellar's distinction, Rorty concludes that seeing knowledge in anti-essentialist terms entails that "the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood" is the conversation of mankind. This, Rorty claims, shifts the focus from the relation between human beings and objects of inquiry to the relation between various vocabularies and the cultural changes enacted through their succession (*Ibidem*).

[52] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, *Philosophical Papers*, volume 1, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 82.

[53] *Ibidem*.

[54] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 80: "For us ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription."

[55] *Ibidem*, p. 73.

[56] Chris Voparil, "The Problem of Getting it Right: Richard Rorty and the Politics of Antirepresentationalism," *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2004, p. 224.

[57] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 9: "Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things." In this sense, Rorty's notion of "abnormal philosophy" seems to me the key-notion of his philosophical arsenal (cf. Richard Rorty, "Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy", *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 74, no. 11, 1977, pp. 678–679; Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 320).

guage to make new and different things possible and important."[58] Redescription acts, in Rorty's thinking, as the engine of social and cultural change, and is a form of interpretation.

Rorty's philosopher is first of all a staunch anti-essentialist. As such, he does not accept the thesis that there are essences, denying even the idea that a text can have an essence. That Rortyan anti-essentialism is radical can be glimpsed from his criticism of Sartre's notion that only the *pour-soi* can be redescribed endlessly, while the *en-soi* possess a fixed essence: "It would have been fortunate if Sartre had followed up his remark that man is the being whose essence is to have no essence by saying that this went for all other beings also."[59] In another essay, Rorty rejects "the distinction between lumps and texts,"[60] admitting as a difference only the fact that while the lump can be offered a stable description by a community of inquirers (i.e., by a specific scientific community or group of experts), the texts can only receive a number of (sometimes conflicting) interpretations. An anti-pragmatist, says Rorty, will insist that there are real essences, for both things and texts; so, he or she would be inclined to claim that there are correct and incorrect interpretations, and that one cannot arbitrarily come up with them. A pragmatic anti-essentialist, on the other hand, will only accept that he or she can distinguish merely between "more and less useful descriptions"[61] of either lumps/things, or texts. We can see that Rorty's anti-essentialism extends to human beings, things, and also texts (therefore, one could conclude, also to signs, chains of signs, or, in his terms, "strings of marks and noises"[62]). This extension is important because it changes the relation between self and world, between self and any other thing. It is not only that the human self can be redescribed again and again in a continuous process of self-creation, but other things are subject to such endless redescription as well. Both redescription and recontextualization are, similarly to Peircean semiosis, interpretational and translational processes. Redescription entails translating certain issues, discussions, texts, objects, and so on in unfamiliar, metaphoric terms, or rather in a different vocabulary, in the hope that this new vocabulary and these new metaphors might help us overcome whatever difficulties or problems we faced earlier. Recontextualization, on the other hand, is Rorty's substitute for "inquiry." When we encounter some anomaly or unfamiliar thing which cannot be easily accommodated by our web of beliefs, we might find that it is necessary to employ a new *context*, which can be a new explicative theory, a new comparative class, a new set of purposes, or a new vocabulary. As Rorty says, the possibilities of recontextualization are endless.[63]

This constellation of positions is a "specifically post-philosophical form" of romanticism[64] which, at one point, he terms "strong textualism."[65] Rorty compares the

[58] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 39.
[59] R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 361–362n7.
[60] R. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 83.
[61] *Ibidem*, p. 86.
[62] Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress", in U. Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 97.
[63] R. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 94.
[64] R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 143.

strong textualist to the weak textualist ("the decoder"), the one who believes that each work, each text or discourse, has its own vocabulary, "its own secret code," incommensurable with any other.[66] The strong textualist, on the other hand, devises his own vocabulary and has no qualms if nobody else shares it. Eschewing what Nietzsche called "metaphysical comfort," the strong textualist abandons the notion that there is some privileged vocabulary which grasps the essence of the object (or the text, or the discourse) and which expresses the properties that object has in itself. Instead, he or she takes notice that "vocabularies are as mortal as men."[67]

One could then conclude that whereas the weak textualist would seek correct interpretations, interpretations which are getting the text right, the strong textualist simply beats the text in whatever shape[68] his purposes require, overinterpretation being his preferred mode of reading.[69] In a reply to one of Eco's papers, Rorty draws some consequences, from the positions mentioned above, regarding interpretation and its limits. Criticizing Paul de Man's insistence that there is a difference between texts and natural objects, and between literary and philosophical discourse, so that philosophy can offer guidelines to literary interpretation, Rorty asserts that a pragmatist will reject the notion that there is something a given text is *really* about, and which a *correct* interpretation will uncover.[70]

In another place, he claims that from a pragmatist point of view, there is no crucial difference between texts, tables, rocks, and so on: "these are *all* just permanent possibilities for use, and thus for *redescription, reinterpretation, manipulation*."[71] And this brings us to the problem of the limits of interpretation. The trouble, as some critics noted, is that Rorty does not envisage any constraints whatsoever on where the process of redescription or interpretation might end. This leads to several issues, the most important being that redescribing other people in terms which they do not condone might lead to an increase in cruelty and suffering. So, there is a strong moral objection to the practice of ironic redescription.[72] But beyond this moral objection there is also the issue of the limits of interpretation. In short, Rorty believes there are no possible limits of interpretation which could be set forth in advance of the actual practice of interpreting a text, a discourse, and whatnot. This attitude is fueled, as we have seen, on the one hand by his

[65] *Ibidem*, p. 152.

[66] *Ibidem*, p. 152.

[67] *Ibidem*, p. 153.

[68] *Ibidem*, p. 151.

[69] Rorty states in one of his essays that "Reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens." (R. Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress", p. 105) This view of reading further to supports the contention that Rorty's account of interpretation is relational through and through (i.e., it involves a process of reweaving relations between beliefs and descriptions, rather than a relation of adequacy between our description or interpretation and the nature or essence of the interpreted text or object).

[70] R. Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress", p. 102.

[71] R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 153 [my emphasis].

[72] One which Rorty readily acknowledges at the end of one of his essays (see R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 158).

radical anti-essentialism, and on the other, by his commitment to a view which takes vocabularies to be contingent, continually changing, and the product of time and chance. In the end, Rorty thinks that one should not succumb to the essentialist urge of distinguishing, in the act of interpreting a text, between getting it right and making it useful.[73] One should instead revel in the endless play that produces innumerable interpretations. Among the sources Rorty identifies for the resistance against his neo-pragmatic position, he cites Kant's point, that things have value, but persons have dignity. For some intellectuals, Rorty suggests, texts are "honorary persons," so that *merely using them* ("to treat them merely as means and not also as ends in themselves") amounts to an immoral act.[74] One could suspect that something akin to this fear is behind Eco's refusal to associate his position with Rorty's. I will now turn precisely to this distinction between using a text and interpreting it, a distinction which one finds at the centre of the Rorty-Eco exchange on the limits of interpretation.

PEIRCE AND THE ECO–RORTY DISCUSSION ON THE LIMITS OF INTERPRETATION

In Shorts's view, Eco cannot claim that his conception differs fundamentally from the Derrida-Rorty picture of interpretation as limitless play. Short concludes that as far as Eco's unlimited semiosis is concerned, meaning is imposed arbitrarily and, therefore, there can be no limits on possible interpretations.[75] This seems to be Rorty's conclusion as well, since we can discern from his comments that he took Eco's novels and some of his theoretical writings as legitimizing a neo-pragmatic reading of his position. For example, Rorty approvingly quoted the following passage from Eco's *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*:

> The universe of semiosis, that is, the universe of human culture, must be conceived as structured like a labyrinth of the third type: (a) it is structured according to a *network of interpretants*, (b) It is virtually infinite because it takes into account multiple interpretations realized by different cultures [...] it is infinite because every discourse about the encyclopedia casts in doubt the previous structure of the encyclopedia itself.[76]

In Rorty's reading, this description of the universe of semiosis and of human culture is a description of the only universe relevant to human minds. He reiterates the anti-essentialist and textualist point that both texts, and things (rocks, quarks, and so on) are "grist for the hermeneutic process,"[77] and even if we don't exactly make them

[73] R. Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress", p. 108.
[74] *Ibidem*, p. 106.
[75] T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, p. 46n10.
[76] Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 83–84.
[77] R. Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress", p. 99.

in the process of interpretation we are not finding them ready-made either: instead, what we do is we form beliefs as a result of our causal interaction with these things and then we compare those beliefs not with the things themselves, but with other beliefs, other vocabularies, alternative interpretative grids, and so on. Expanding on Eco's encyclopedia metaphor, he concludes that the encyclopedia can get changed by things outside itself, through causal interaction, but "it can only be *checked* by having bits of itself compared with other bits."[78] This seems to mirror Eco's remark that "*Semiosis explains itself by itself.*"[79]

But Rorty also finds unappealing aspects in Eco's account of interpretation. He faults Eco for imposing a distinction between the *interpretation* and the *use* of texts,[80] a distinction he finds unpragmatic and, if it means that interpretation differs from use by being an attempt of uncovering the essence of a text, a step backwards.[81] Rorty claims that, as a radical anti-essentialist, he must reject Eco's distinction as yet another guise of traditional distinctions like reality-appearance, essential-accidental etc. Another distinction Rorty rejects is that between what Eco terms the *intentio operis* and the *intentio lectoris*. Based on this, he criticizes Eco for wanting to distinguish "internal textual coherence" from "the uncontrollable drives of the reader."[82] Accepting Eco's description of texts as being made in the process of interpretation,[83] Rorty doubts one can specify what Eco's supposed "internal textual coherence" might amount to.[84] So, he finds it unnecessary to postulate an *intentio operis* since Eco accepts that the reader (even the Model Reader[85]) is entitled to "infinite conjectures" in his interpretative endeavours, and also that one cannot possibly narrow down interpretations to *the one correct interpretation*.[86] Rorty's conclusion is that a text's coherence is given simply through the hermeneutic practice of interpreting (redescribing, or recontextualizing it) "just as a lump of clay only has whatever coherence it happened to pick up at the last turn of the potter's wheel."[87] We come back therefore to Rorty's analogy between texts and lumps, and to his conclusion that whatever coherence a text possess it is just a function[88] of what has been said and accepted so far about that particular text. In Rorty's view, there is no textual coherence apart from a particular description or redescription of a given text.

Eco defends himself against Rorty's reading through a couple of strategies. I shall briefly sketch two of them, and then elaborate on what I take to be the internal resources

[78] *Ibidem*, p. 100.
[79] U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 70.
[80] Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress", p. 93.
[81] *Ibidem*.
[82] U. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, p. 59.
[83] *Ibidem*.
[84] R. Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress", p. 97.
[85] For the notion of Model Reader see U. Eco, T*he Role of the Reader*, pp. 7–11.
[86] R. Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress", p. 96.
[87] *Ibidem*, p. 97.
[88] *Ibidem*, p. 98.

of Peirce's semiotic theory for distinguishing between unlimited semiosis and Rorty's conception of interpretation. Eco's first strategy against Rorty is to invoke, as one element of a given interpretation, the set of previous interpretations of the same text, which in turn refers, in Peircean fashion, to the community of readers and its judgment.[89] Taking the consensus of the community as a *factual guarantee*,[90] Eco affirms that this extends from banal truths to scientific ones, and also to interpretations. Our cultural community can help us discard from the beginning some interpretations and stick to others, in order to see if and how they can prove successful. The relevant community (in our case, the community of readers or scholars) can help us discern which features of a given text are relevant and important for a successful interpretation and which aren't.[91] Eco reminds us that Peirce emphasized the conjectural element of interpretation, as he did with the infinity of semiosis, and the fallibilism of our interpretations. In his account, Peirce offers a paradigm of acceptability of interpretations on "the grounds of a consensus of the community."[92] As a consequence, according to Eco, the idea of unlimited semiosis does not entail a relativistic (Rortyan) account of interpretation:

> To say that interpretation (as the basic feature of semiosis) is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object and that it 'riverruns' merely for its own sake. To say that a text has potentially no end does not mean that every act of interpretation can have a happy end.[93]

Eco alludes to Harold Bloom's stance that all interesting readings are cases of misreading, rejecting this critical position, and insisting that there are public criteria for interpretation.[94] While he shies from claiming that one can invoke formal criteria for setting these limits, he nevertheless appeals to what Stefan Collini terms "a kind of cultural Darwinism."[95] Interpretations, while not limited in advance, can be evaluated by the relevant community. In time these eliminates some interpretations and reinforces others.

This opposes Rorty's view: it might seem convergent with Rorty's quasi-Darwinian and pragmatic insistence that a given redescription or interpretation can only prove itself through whether or not it helps us cope or obtain what we want (among those purposes, Rorty notes, one can enumerate the task of convincing our peers of the merits of our interpretation[96]). Moreover, one cannot persuasively make the case that the Peircean notion of interpretative community is fundamentally different from Rorty's.[97] I

[89] U. Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 143.
[90] *Ibidem*, p. 144.
[91] *Ibidem*, p. 146.
[92] *Ibidem*, p. 144.
[93] *Ibidem,* pp. 23–24.
[94] U. Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 25.
[95] S. Collini, "Introduction: Interpretation terminable and interminable", p. 16.
[96] R. Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," p. 95.
[97] Although some authors tried to make such a distinction. For example, Ryan White claims that Rorty seeks to establish certain limits for our (Western liberal democratic) interpretative community, aiming for "an

find that Rorty and Peirce (and Eco) differ on the matter that Rorty thought that there are cases when we are free of the constraints from the community (e.g., in the redescriptive, interpretative processes we engage in in the course of our projects of self-creation, relegated as they are to the private space[98]). For Peirce, on the other hand, there is no semiotic process that is not, in principle, also social, also dependent on the community of inquirers. I take this to be the case. As Colapietro observes, on Peirce's account, a person cannot be whole except as member of a community: "Not only is the subject [engaged in the semiotic processes] a possible member of community; the person qua subject possesses the actual form of community."[99] The "foregrounding of interpretative communities"[100] that we find in Peirce and Rorty serves to underline that one cannot get outside one's own skin, language, or culture so as to judge them from a "view from nowhere," to borrow Thomas Nagel's phrase.

One of Peirce's ideas which Rorty quotes repeatedly is the so-called "first rule of reason" (i.e., Do not block the way of inquiry), which Rorty reads as entailing that one should never think that the regress of interpretation can be stopped once and for all, but rather that interpretation is open-ended. Another interpretation, or redescription, or vocabulary could come up which might throw all our previous interpretations up in the air.[101] Peirce insists that the open-ended future requires that human beings be able to purse purposes different from those presently pursued: "Were the ends of a person already explicit, there would be no room for development, for growth, for life; and consequently, there would be no personality. The mere carrying out of predetermined purposes is mechanical" (CP 6.157). Colapietro comments on this by emphasizing that for Peirce a sign can only realize its essence, that is to say the possibility of being a sign, by being open to future interpretants.[102] A sign cut off from future interpretants is, on this view, the negation of semiosis. Here, one can see another similarity with Rorty. He too distinguishes between "knowing what you want to get out of a person or thing or text in advance and hoping that the person or thing or text will help you want

erasure or expulsion of that which is alien or other" (Ryan White, "Pragmatism after Humanism: Peirce, Rorty, and Realism", *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 69, no. 4, 2013, p. 63). Peirce, on the other hand, claims that communities are by definition "unlimited," with continually changing borders: "Communities may never answer the question of limits, since communities are never whole, never singular or identical to themselves" (*Ibidem*). But Rorty never argues for setting fixed limits on our interpretative community. Instead, the "we" he talks about is an ever-expanding community, which, in virtue of its liberal values, tolerates (and eventually treasures) the new, the abnormal, the foreign. Our leaps forward, our intellectual progress is fuelled by this meeting of different cultural voices, of "us" and "them," a meeting which is possible even after adopting ethnocentrism since *the particular ethnos* to which we pledge allegiance is the liberal democratic one. (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 64, n24, p. 196)

[98] R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. XIV, 65, 87.

[99] V. M. Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self,* p. 43.

[100] R. White, "Pragmatism after Humanism," p. 62.

[101] Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. XLVII, n52. See also Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 115, and *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 4, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 192.

[102] V. M. Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self,* p. 77.

something different"[103] This helps him differentiate between methodical and inspired readings of texts. While the first ones hope only to use texts for some pre-established purpose or task, the latter ones result from an encounter with a text, or an author, or a vocabulary, which makes a difference to the reader's conception of who he or she is: "an encounter which has rearranged her priorities and purposes."[104]

A second strategy Eco adopts in his rebuttal of Rorty is that of appealing to Peirce's idea that an interpretation of signs will produce a *habit* (i.e., a disposition to act in a certain way and to produce certain effects).[105] Peirce, Eco says, would require that a certain interpretation produce a practical habit which will help the interpreter to cope or to act successfully according to that interpretation. Unless this happens, the process of semiosis is a failure.[106] A good, legitimate interpretation will produce a successful habit, while a bad one will not. (Eco gives the example of the alchemist who thinks that certain elements might be transformed into gold, but the habit produced by his interpretation is an utter failure.[107]) But one could read this into Rorty's account as well, based on his notion of coping and his Peircean conception of beliefs as habits,[108] to his belief that one can evaluate a certain interpretation or redescription by how well it fares in the market-place of ideas. It is here, I argue, that the main difference between Rorty's position and the Peirce-Eco account lies.

The main difference I want to argue is that while Rorty's conception and that of unlimited semiosis appear to be similar, they differ insofar as the first conceives of interpretation in dyadic terms (i.e., a relation between the interpreter and the interpreted object) while the latter explains it in triadic terms, as a relation between Sign, Object, and Interpretant. The most important element, distinguishing, in the last analysis, between unlimited semiosis and Rorty's endless redescriptions is the Peircean notion of the *interpretant*.

A fundamental principle in Peirce's semiotics, which Eco quotes, is that a sign is "A sign is something by knowing which we know something more." (CP 8.332) Eco reads this as saying that through the succession of interpretants, a sign gets more determined, "both in its breadth and in its depth." This means that a result of unlimited semiosis is that the interpretation can approximate the final logical interpretant, so that at one point we could say that we know more about the content of the sign which started this particular chain of signs.[109] Peirce affirms that one can know more of a sign because in the process of knowing its object one does so in accord to a certain ground, or under a certain description, in relation to a particular context (CP 2.228). For Eco, this suggests that Peircean semiosis is "potentially unlimited from the point of view of

[103] R. Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress", p. 106.
[104] *Ibidem*, p. 107.
[105] U. Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 148.
[106] U. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, p. 29.
[107] U. Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, p. 149.
[108] See Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 34, where Rorty claims that Jamesian anti-representationalists also accept Peirce's view that "beliefs are habits of action".
[109] U. Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, p. 28.

the system but is not unlimited from the point of view of the process. In the course of a semiotic process, we want to know only what is relevant according to a given *universe of discourse*."[110]

Colapietro remarks that Peirce's definition of the sign underwent significant changes reaching the point where any reference to mind or the mental was circumvented. In his final account, Peirce viewed the mind as "a species of semiosis."[111] In this reading, Peirce introduces the notion of interpretant specifically so as to give a formal definition of semiosis, one which does not specify the nature of the participants in the semiotic process.[112] This general definition of the sign is then clarified through Peirce's famous classification of signs according to their relation to either their objects, or their interpretants.[113] Nathan Houser explains that as it developed, Peirce's theory of signs came to identify different kinds of objects and interpretants.[114] A sign has two objects one which Peirce labels as (1) the dynamic object, the other being (2) the immediate object. In turn, each sign has three interpretants:(1) the final or logical interpretant; (2) the dynamic interpretant; (3) the immediate interpretant:

> a final (or logical) interpretant, which is the "effect that would be produced on the mind by the sign after sufficient development of thought," a dynamic interpretant, which is the "effect actually produced on the mind," and an immediate interpretant, which is the "interpretant represented or signified in the sign"[115]

According to one view, the interpretant designates a subsequent thought which interprets a previous sign: "It is only in relation to a subsequent thought – what Peirce called an interpretant – that the sign attains meaning."[116]An example offered by James Hoopes is the following: a child who is not yet self-conscious (i.e., not yet aware of the possibility of ignorance and error) will not be able to differentiate between "its body and the body of a hot stove. The child may therefore touch the stove. From the resulting feeling (sign), the child arrives at the conclusion (interpretant) that there is such a thing as error and that it inheres in its self (object)."[117]

[110] *Ibidem*, p. 28.

[111] David Savan, *An Introduction to C. S. Peirce's Semiotics*, Toronto, Toronto Semiotic Circle, 1976, p. 35.

[112] V. M. Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self,* p. 6.

[113] I shall not delve here into the complex classification of signs specific to Peirce's account. Suffice to say, following Nathan Houser ("Introduction", in *The Essential Peirce*, Volume 1, p. xxxvii), that according to its nature, a sign can be classified as: a *qualisign* (a quality), a *sinsign* (an existent thing or event), or a *legisign* (a law or a habit) (cf. T. L. Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, pp. 208–214); according to the sign's relation to its dynamic object, it can be: an *icon* (when it is like its object), an *index* (when it has an actual connection to its object), or a *symbol* (when it is related to that object by convention or habit) (cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 214–225); and if we look at the relation between the sign and its final interpretant, we can classify signs as: a *rheme* (a sign of possibility), a *dicisign* (a sign of actual existence), or an *argument* (a sign of law) (cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 231–234).

[114] N. Houser, "Introduction", pp. XXXVI.

[115] *Ibidem*, pp. XXXVI–XXXVII.

[116] A. Bailey, "'Man Himself is a Sign': Emerson, C. S. Peirce, and the Semiosis of Mind", p. 686.

[117] James Hoopes, "Introduction", in James Hoopes (ed.), *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1991, p. 8.

Peirce affirms that the interpretant is "the proper significate outcome of a sign" (CP 5.473) These outcomes are diverse, as indicated by Colapietro; for example, they can be feelings associated with "emotional interpretants," or, along with feelings, actions or exertions, associated with "energetic interpretants". And in other instances, they giver rise, along with feelings and exertions, to other signs or interpretants, the logical interpretants.[118] Colapietro stresses that we should distinguish between initial and ultimate logical interpretants.[119] The first ones take the form of first conjectures, experimental moves that one can engage in in order to assess and try to cope with a problematic situation or a difficulty. The ultimate logical interpretants, on the other hand, are patterns of coping which emerge in the wake of a series of experiments, or actions meant to help one out of the perceived difficulty. Ultimate logical interpretants are therefore *habits*.[120] Adding to this, Austin Bailey remarks that in Peirce's thought *habit* is taken in a double sense, as both a natural instinct, and as an acquired social convention.[121] Therefore, Bailey notes that "For Peirce, *nature* and *culture* are terms that distinguish two different types of semiosis on an evolutionary continuum."[122]

CONCLUSIONS

I consider that the Peircean outlook allows not only to discern between better and worse interpretations, but it even has an advantage on Rorty's own pragmatic grounds, as it offers the necessary resources to explain the conjectural, experimental component of interpretative processes, which is never limited to the satisfactory uses one individual can give to a text. Ironically enough, Rorty himself seemed to embrace this more nuanced view of interpretation at one point. In one of his early essays, Rorty refers to Peirce's concept of interpretants and draws the conclusion that, for Peirce, "language is incurably vague, but perfectly real and utterly inescapable."[123] This echoes Rorty's point that we cannot escape our own skins, and step outside our language, in order to take a God's Eye Point of View. But, surprisingly enough, Rorty affirms that Peirce manages to save the best of two worlds (idealism and realism), by accepting the regress of interpretations ("a regress of rules, habits, and signs standing behind rules, habits, and signs") and by referring to action which "can take place at any step in the eternally incomplete series of interpretations."[124] On Rorty's reading, the permanent possibility of practice transforms Peirce's infinite regress of interpretations into something harmless.[125]

There are many similarities between unlimited semiosis and the Rortyan account of interpretation. Both emphasize the open-ended character of interpretation, both insist

[118] V. M. Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, p. 107.
[119] *Ibidem*, p. 57.
[120] *Ibidem*, p. 58.
[121] A. Bailey, "'Man Himself is a Sign': Emerson, C. S. Peirce, and the Semiosis of Mind", p. 687.
[122] *Ibidem.*
[123] R. Rorty, *Mind, Language, and Metaphilosophy*, p. 22.
[124] *Ibidem*, p. 37.
[125] *Ibidem*, p. 36.

on the infinite regress of interpretations, and both take the role of the interpretative community to be important. But they differ insofar as Peirce's and Eco's views take into consideration more aspects characteristic of our interpretative processes. While Rorty simply eschews talk of the nature of texts, and controversially affirms that there is no interesting difference between texts and other objects (only the different descriptions and uses one offers for them), the Peircean picture takes into account the fact that indeterminate character of semiosis is not merely a product of our choice of vocabulary or language, but of our *given* situation; we are forced to contend with the indeterminate character of the world, of things, and of signs themselves. And while this entails that we cannot establish an end-point for our interpretative practices beforehand, we can still, through the social character of these very processes and appealing to our communal constraints and public criteria, discern between good and lesser interpretations, between acceptable and unacceptable redescriptions.

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