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Conclusion

This study began with a reference to a programme for semioticians which might further our understanding of Peirce's sixty-six classes of signs. The research undertaken in the previous chapters involved a less ambitious project, one that sought to exploit not all of the original ten divisions announced in the 1908 letter to Lady Welby but a subset of six of those divisions, and to contrast it with his better-known three-division system from 1903. The very significant differences that the study has brought out between the two can be summarized as follows. In the first case, the 10-class typology was defined within a phenomenological framework since it used three categories – predicates bearing on whatever can be present to the mind – as the criteria by means of which to subdivide the sign and two sign-correlate relations. The second typology, on the other hand, was defined within an ontological framework, and employed three universes – receptacles of what there is, embracing possible, existent and general objects – to define the subdivisions of the six correlates of semiosis which, when properly combined, generate twenty-eight very different classes. Such an 'ontological turn' – modal and diagnostically triadic – can be nothing but the inevitable consequence of Peirce's unremitting realism: collections are real and so are the collective signs that represent them.

In view of his desire to classify as many possible signs as was in his power, the attraction of establishing sixty-six classes must have far outweighed the twenty-eight offered by the six divisions as described in the study, and this probably explains why Peirce never sought to develop and exploit what is in effect an organically organized set of divisions. Moreover, as he admitted to William James in the 25 December 1909 letter mentioned in Chapter 2, he was not so much interested in classifying existing classes of signs as in discovering new ones: in his search for possible signs Peirce presumably passed over the semiotic interest of the 28-class system, and one can only surmise what might have happened if he had developed the full potential of the 1908 hexad. In spite of this evident lack of interest on Peirce's part, within the restricted but more feasible project adopted in the study, the following conclusions can be drawn, although they might better be considered as programmes for future research.

First, one of the very interesting results of the work on the hexad has been to identify clearly the relations holding between the two objects and the sign with respect to one another and the way these relations come to determine the structure of the latter, with interesting implications for future work in the field of rhetoric. The definitions and conventions attributed by Peirce to the hexad have shown that each of the three can belong to one or other of three universes of increasing complexity. This means that the sign can be as complex as, or less complex than, the two objects, and that the immediate object can be as complex as, or less complex than, the dynamic. This being the case, tokens, which form the vast majority of the signs we use to communicate with others, can be classified with respect to two objects as complex as, or more complex than, themselves. This makes it possible to explain how allegorical and metaphorical utterances, text and images, and so on, which perforce are existential themselves, can present a form which may be underspecified with respect to their respective dynamic objects. It was seen to be the immediate object, functioning as a sort of filter, which determines what form or forms emanating from the dynamic object find expression in the sign. If the immediate object is a necessitant, for example, the dynamic object must be, too, while the sign, if it is a perceivable and therefore existent entity such as a painting, a photograph or an utterance in a conversation, will display a complex, sometimes incongruous but logically valid structure. This incongruity stems from the sign's being identified as copulant with respect to a necessitant immediate object, a class of objects 'which neither describe nor denote their Objects, but merely express the logical relations of these latter to something otherwise referred to' (CP 8.350). It is these logical relations which determine the complex structure that has to be accommodated by an existent, simply structured token, leading to underspecification and incongruity. Such underspecification and incongruity were accommodated in the 1903 system by Peirce's theory of the hypoicons, but the theoretical justification of how these functioned semiotically was never given: however, the notion that metaphor is a formal configuration representing a parallelism between two or more universes can now be justified logically by the semiotic differential between the two objects and the sign as defined within the hexad of 1908.

Second, the study has brought out the explanatory power of Peirce's late definition of the object, which led to several lines of enquiry. For example, it was shown in Chapter 4 that reference to one or more universes organized in very specific ways but represented in a single sign offered an alternative analytical methodology to the hypoicons in the analysis of certain types of figurative signs, metaphor, irony and simulation being the cases in point.

Here, too, there is much promising work to be done. Another line of enquiry involving the concept of the universe of existence was explored in Chapter 5 and concerned the sorts of objects identified by Peirce in 1908. Now, at the time of writing, Britain is preparing for a referendum on its continued presence in the European Union, while in the United States presidential candidates are vociferously debating their differences. In both cases, battle lines between newspapers have been drawn, with each expressing its particular editorial stance, and although the articles published are written by individuals, it is the opinion of the institution – a necessitant object – which is being canvassed (a more sinister scenario would have obscure, money-hungry gnomes working the strings of their puppet media, but even in such cases the object is quite general). These living institutions, daily newspapers, together with other sources of public expression unimaginable in Peirce's time – social media such as Facebook, Twitter and the applications on mobile telephones – are the new realizations of Peirce's extended conception of the sign's object. The logic now has the theoretical means to specify the sign's dynamic object more fully than in 1903, with the result that in addition to changes in the direction of the wind and the unexpected presence of another human on an island, the inventory of potential objects can now be extended to include propaganda, worldviews and social movements. Peircean semiotics, which appeared to be 'frozen' in 1903 and the triadic system developed for the Lowell Lectures with its reassuring abundance of examples and comments from Peirce himself and an often perfunctory reference to the two objects and three interpretants from its commentators, has, with the later systems, been shown to be logically capable of accommodating the complex signs of our age.

Third, the study has contributed to the specificity of Houser's programme by isolating the 28-class system and establishing its viability as a means of analysing signs. There obviously remains much research to be conducted in this field, too, particularly with respect to the interpretants, but discussion of the ordering problems encountered in Chapter 3, for example, offers researchers interested in the 66-class system a number of lines of enquiry, and shows that in attempting to establish the correct order of the ten divisions, it is a theoretical necessity and a source of considerable semiotic interest to work out what sorts of sign classes the hypothetical arrangement might lead to, and actually give examples of them – a challenging enterprise. The hexad has been shown to be a fully functional, organically organized and autonomous system, enabling the researcher not only to analyse signs but understand better the way the various subjects of the typology relate to each other.

What of the sixty-six classes of signs? As far as adding the four supplementary divisions as Peirce suggests in the 1908 letter, there are two possible strategies: first, to add them to the end of the hexad in the order Peirce suggested, or some variant of it, and in effect combine divisions obtained within distinct theoretical frameworks; second, as several authorities have tried to do, interleave them with the divisions of the hexad. In the first case, it may be possible to find some arrangement which, respecting the universe hierarchy rule, might generate the sixty-six classes; in the second, disturbing the order of the hexad by interleaving, for example, the division concerning the relation between sign and dynamic object, the sign's mode of representation, in other words, between the divisions of the dynamic and immediate objects might disturb the organic unity of the original association of the two and introduce 'noise' into the hexadic system. Such a strategy might work, but the lessons to be drawn from the comparisons conducted in Chapter 4 incline to doubt.

As for the philosophy of representation which occupied much of Chapter 1, the 10-class system remains, but the project of a grand logic with all its branches accounted for is a task for future Peirce scholars since the great man was forced by age, ill health, overwork and incredible poverty to abandon this mission. This will not be an easy task: as the later sign-systems grew in importance, the hopes of a grand logic seemed to diminish. What we are left with, on the other hand, shows how Peirce had departed from the European tradition in which he began his logical investigations and had finally forged his own.

The third branch of Peirce's grand logic may never be satisfactorily developed. There may never be a solution to the problem of the correct ordering of the ten divisions, either. Whatever the case, the present study will, perhaps, contribute to Houser's programme by stimulating informed reactions to it or further research into the classes of signs made available by the late sign-systems, the more manageable hexadb in particular. A final word, now, and a personal one: the research reported in the previous chapters was undertaken by a – hopefully – responsible academic, who is also – most certainly – an unregenerate member of the 'wrong crowd'.