The Hermeneutical Turn in Semiotics
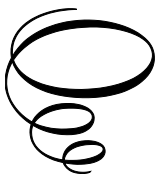
The Hermeneutical Turn in Semiotics

By

Rodica Amel

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While reading this book, reflect upon

J. S. Bach, Cello Suite No 5 in C minor

(Sarabande)

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INTRODUCTION

Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel
Ordungen? Und gesetzt selbst, es nähme
einer mich plötzlich ans Herz: ich verginge von seinem
stärkeren Dasein. Denn das Schöne ist nichts
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,
und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht,
uns zu zerstören. Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Erste Elegie* (*The First Elegy*)

This is about the human being and the mystery all around. The *frightening* messenger of the Unknown. Nothing, but unbearable beauty. Man in his pure innocence. He is calling for an answer. He is waiting to **hear** an answer.

Stimmen. Stimmen. Höre mein Herz wie sonst nur
Heilige hörten: daß sie der risige Ruf
Aufhob vom Boden; sie aber knieten,
Unmöglichen,weiter undachteten's nicht:
So waren sie hörend.
Aber das Wehende höre,
die ununterbrochene Nachricht, die aus Stille sich bildet.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Erste Elegie* ("The First Elegy")

The poet is "waiting" for an answer, *aber das Wehende höre, die ununterbrochene Nachricht, die aus Stille sich bildet.* "Waiting" for an answer is an existential state which means being open to understanding something, to hear something, to receive a SIGN. "Opening" (das *offene*[1]), in the case of the human being, is the initial existential state of *respiro*, the beginning of a relationship, a possible "communication" with the unknown.

One could consider Rilke's *Erste Elegie* a kind of laic prayer. By a careful interpretation we discover, in the deep structure of the *Elegy*, the myth of the terrible confrontation with the Sublime. Converted in the tragic myth of impossible communication, the Messenger of the Sublime, the Engel, refuses the three attempts of the poet/man to receive an answer from Beyond:

The poet's *call*: he *cries*;
The poet's *listening; waiting* for an answer: nothing, but the *frightening silence* of angels;
Then an *answer* is possible only for a religious person: "Stimmen. Stimmen."

In the *state of grace*, man *hears* something, but what he hears is rather a wish, a hope, a desire, a wonder, than a real perception of a voice. At such moments, the human being uncovers the depth of his own soul, his own voice which *speaks* in "das Offene".

When the *cognitive will* coincides with the *need of expression*, the *hermeneutical turn of semiotics* begins. In an allegorical way, Rilke's *Erste Elegie* has been presented as an example of the human being's attempt to decipher the high voices of life by his own power of expression.

Note

[1] *Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur das Offene*
"With all its eyes, the Creation sees *the Openness*".
Die achte Elegie (*The Eighth Elegy*)

CHAPTER ONE

CASSIRER'S DEFINITION
OF THE HUMAN BEING

Animal symbolicon

1.1 The premises

The concise presentation of Rilke's *Die Erste Elegie*, at the beginning of the book, could be considered the design of the main argument regarding the semiotic turn. Far from being "Semiotics and Beyond", the *Hermeneutical Turn of Semiotics* points towards a mysterious level of the human condition. The main thesis emphasizes the fundamental feature of the human being: the symbolizing power of the psyche "to make visible the abstract, and to transcend the visible" as the Romanian philosopher, Gabriel Liiceanu says (2005: 7)[1]. Ernest Cassirer (*Essay on Man*, 1970) includes among the multiple definitions characterizing the human being that of a *symbolic animal*, which is opposed to the most quoted definition of the human being – still valid – given by Aristotle: *man is a rational animal.*

The argumentative premise of this book outlines the philosophical framework within which the opened semiotic problem is developed. The intention is to extend the communicative approach of signs by endorsing it with cognitive purposes in a very specific way. In accordance with the general semiotic view, signs have conventional senses, to implement a communicative function. By speaking about *the hermeneutical turn of semiotics*, the interest is focused on the "sense-giving" function: signs are "instruments" by which *reality* gains sense. The problem regarding the SENSE OF SIGNS will be connected to the complicated problem of perception and its conditions. From the beginning of the argumentation, it should be emphasized that the *sense* of reality is different from the *truth* of reality, a distinction largely debated in *Doxastic Dialectics* (Amel, 2019). Trying to avoid the confusion of TRUTH vs. SENSE, there will be an emphasis on the final task of the study of signs – to exhibit life's SENSE

OF VALUE, and consequently, the acts of "sense-giving" represent **judgements of value,** of existential values.

To understand the importance of signs in human life and the perspective in which they have a valuation function, two oppositions are taken for granted: *The sacred vs. the profane*, in our perspective, *transcendent* vs. *human condition* and *representation vs. evaluation.*

What is generally understood by "reality" and how the "sense of reality" is reached remain open questions. Some philosophers sustain that "reality" means everything that affects human sensitivity and sensibility; others speak about a "reality of essences" perceived in themselves as (Plato's) *ideas*, the rest being only "appearances". The sacred texts speak about the "transcendent reality of God/gods", opposed to human reality.

Both terms of the opposition – *sacred* vs. *profane* – including the relationship between them, are largely and deeply analysed by Mircea Eliade in his study *Le Sacré et le Profane* (1965).

On the one hand the first term of the first opposition, the *sacred*, refers to a reserved space, inaccessible for utilitarian activities, which is ontologically defined as the place of *hierophany* – "revelation". The Latin word *sacer* is the etymological origin of the concept *sacred* and means "devoted to gods"; the etymology of the equivalent word *hierophany* has Greek origin and is composed from two words: *hieros* "sacred" and *phanein* "to appear".

The religious traditions identified the sacred space and the sacred person as a consequence of a "revelation", a kind of experience impossible to define. For instance, *the way to Canaan*, *where Avraam arrived* obeying God's command is a sacred event: *Leh leha! / Me beit aviha, / Me aretz moledetha, / El haaret / Asher artzeha.*[2]

Another example: Mount Sinai became a sacred place because God delivered the *divine law* to the Jewish people there, choosing Moses as the messenger. Those people involved in such unnatural experiences were able to perform wonderful acts.

Sacred spaces are delimited by using semiotic indicators and are considered *chosen (by God) places*. Men assign them by erecting temples there for praying in the name of God.

On the other hand, *profane* is the space outside the "sacred space". The Latin etymology – the Latin word *profanes* "outside the place of revelation" / "outside the temple" – explains the difference existing between the two concepts.

Questions of the kind WHY? and WHAT FOR? are troubling man's quietness. At these moments, *Stimmen* are heard *aus Stille sich bildet*

(voices which come out from silence), and man calls upon a higher "presence", "somebody" or "something", mentally unable to be conceived. The meaning of such a reality is approximated, and SEMIOTICALLY instituted.

Usually, signs **represent** something, making *present* what is absent. The *representation* puts before our mental eyes the "design" of reality. Representation, being a synthetic operation, has cognitive power. The **interpretation** is a process subsidiary to representation, but, by the hermeneutical turn of semiotics, **interpretation extends its task**. To search the meaning of signs – in the extended way, proposed by this book – represents a specially cognitive attitude of the human consciousness, oriented towards a supra-sensitive reality, trying to make it perceptible by means of signs (by inventing/creating signs).

1.2 What is semiotics?

The question is, how could **semiotics** be defined? Is it *science, theory, method* or *philosophy*?

In the case that the researcher considers semiotics a *science,* other questions are open: is the respective science

descriptive – that presents the specific characteristics of its constitutive elements; or
analytical – that establishes the nature of its constitutive elements; or
explicative – that investigates the relevant relationships between its constitutive elements; or
cognitive – an instrument that supports the cognitive process?

In another series of questions, one may ask, is semiotics a *theory*? This question seems proper for the modern approach of semiotics. The word *theory* has Greek origin – *theoria* "to contemplate", "to examine", but the meaning of the original Greek word has become more general – "to have a global abstract view". As a theory presupposes metalanguages and explicative models suitable to the object in search, many semioticians consider semiotics a *model* in itself. Precisely, if semiotics is a *model*, one may consider it a *method*, a "technical" modality to approach specific fields of reality or cognition.

There are many scholars for whom semiotics is *philosophy* because it is searching the ontological and cognitive roots of particular phenomena of human life. From this perspective semiotics could be considered, and actually is, a humanist science.

Although one can refer semiotics to either of the mentioned fields, we prefer to call semiotics a *science of signs* (both theoretical and applicative). The perspective from which signs could be investigated is either *communicative* or *cognitive*, and *cultural.* Signs are used to accomplish *speech functions*, or to *conceptualize* cognitive targets, reminding the important aspect that semiotics is not the way cognition reaches the TRUTH through signs, but the SENSE of existential events. The SENSE, in this respect, means *understanding* – or even discovering the sense of life through the meaning of signs. Cognitive and cultural semiotics are two fields difficult to be distinguished, because they are based on common principles. The fusion, even the confusion, between "cognitive" and "cultural" is due to the subjective parameter of cognition. This fusion becomes relevant when "subjective" means "existential", and the SENSE has a vectorial meaning, a turning point where signs open the transcendent horizon of life. The turning point is a theoretical movement within the concept of UNDERSTANDING that engages the semiotic mechanism, movement called in this book: *Hermeneutical Turn of Semiotics.*

1.3 Historical evolution of semiotic studies

Semiotics is relatively a new science, but the interest in the signs themselves is as old as human civilisations. Since the ancient times men lived within the "empire of signs", their existence being governed by sacred formulae. Primitive people appealed to signs convinced they have magic force; in an analogical way, signs were invested with sacred power induced in the development of religious ceremonies.

More recently, philosophers questioned the nature of signs – like Plato, for instance, in his dialogue *Cratylus*[3]: are signs naturally, etymologically or arbitrarily connected to things? Are the names of signs "motivated" or not?

The foundation of a systematic study of the semiotic mechanism was realized towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the science of signs became an autonomous study only in the middle of the twentieth century. There are indecisions regarding the name defining the semiotic field: Ferdinand de Saussure introduced the name *semiology*. Charles Peirce had chosen the name *semiotics*, a term borrowed from the English philosopher John Locke.

In spite of a frequent use of the term *semiology*, the name *semiotics* has become the standard option.

In parallel, two different approaches, one regarding the extension of the semiotic field and the other regarding the importance of the generic

concept – the SIGN, were fruitful in establishing the theoretical ground of the new science. From the linguistic side, Ferdinand de Saussure, who was a linguist, is considered the founder of the semiotic studies. Many of his concepts and rules are still valid. Saussure's interpretation of the "word" as a SIGN, constituted by the relationship between two terms: *signifié* – the object or the idea of the object, and *signifiant* – sound/image, was an approach rapidly adopted by many theoreticians in various fields, and even by philosophers. Semiotics became a pilot science. In Saussure's view, *semiology* was the *genus proximus* of linguistics. The subject of this book finds no further need to approach the relevance of Saussure's semiotic – linguistic points of view. We are limiting our investigation by emphasizing the importance of Saussure's **formal criteria**: "Language is form, not substance". In contrast to the "father" of the **sign study** and his formalism, many semioticians have been interested in the semantic aspect of signs, by emphasizing the content aspect of language.

Due to the American neo-positivist philosopher Charles Morris and his book *Sign, Language and Behaviour* (1946), semiotics received a comprehensive definition, becoming classical, still in use now. For Morris, **semiotics** has three great chapters: *semantics, syntax* and *pragmatics. Semantics* presents the relationship between signs and their meanings; *syntax* analyses the relationship between the signs themselves, *pragmatics* is the study of signs from the perspective of those who produce and use them. The subjective parameter of the semiotic meaning was approached by linguistic pragmatics, from which the object of pragmatic hermeneutics has been developed, a field closer but different to our argument, as we shall explain further.

The theoretical progression of semiotic studies was extremely important when the dynamic perspective of its instruments became the mainstream. Nowadays, the critical examination is confronted with a shifting inside the semiotic matter itself. Semiotics is no more an analytic instrument, but a cognitive synthesis, able to find a common ground for both exact and humanist sciences alike. In our opinion it is less relevant to say, "man uses signs", than to say, "man lives inside an empire of signs" and, consequently, Cassirer's saying *homo symbolicon* has become subject of new reflection.

1.4 Two oppositions

The sacred vs. the profane; in our perspective *transcendent* vs. *human condition*
Representation vs. evaluation (/creativity)

The semiotic interpretation, in this book, does not consider the religious connotations of the two concepts, but proposes a regard oriented towards fundamental meanings. The opposition *sacred vs. profane* is interpreted in cognitive terms: the human being (as a *profane/*ignorant entity) vs. the transcendent reality (a higher ontological condition than that of the human perception). When the cognitive endeavour of the human being is "virginal" – not influenced by prejudices, he is confronted with an undetermined feeling about himself and about everything around, the feeling of a strangeness, of a "reality" much deeper than sensitive reality, an unnamed "something", which "exists" in spite of being questionable.

The second opposition, *representation vs. evaluation*, expresses the distinction between two ways of understanding the reality by means of signs: the *contingent* vs. *spiritual* reality. In both cases the semiotic process of **interpretation** is involved, with the difference that the interpretation of the contingent reality is made by "using signs" conventionally recognized in society (= **interpretation A**), and the interpretation of the spiritual reality is made by "inventing signs" (**interpretation B**), which are able to discover the value of existence, by sense-giving/finding features.

Traditionally, the main concern of the representative function of the signs was **signs reading**, including the complicated process of *deciphering* unknown writings. In the chapter dedicated to hermeneutics, we shall see that, at the beginning, the object of hermeneutical studies was concerned with the "reading and understanding" of sacred texts, a task similar to interpretation B, proposed in this book. Understanding the sacred texts is a spiritual activity of decoding the "divine voice". Historical details should not be avoided, although they are not in incidence of our argument regarding the hermeneutical turn of semiotics.

By taking for granted the above-mentioned oppositions, the semiotic view presented in this book is culturally oriented. The subjective implication of signs – a parameter our argumentation emphasizes – offers a synthetic way by which human consciousness assumes the meaning of the experienced reality.

The semiotic subject or the "semiotic self" – the term used in Innis's book (1985: 2) – defines Peirce's concept of the semiotic subject – precipitates the answer to the question Why? What does "the all around" mean? The ontological transfer from the meaning of **what** (the basic SENSE) towards the meaning of **why** (the vectorial SENSE) represents the main engagement of the human condition, a kind of **interpretative** attitude (**interpretation B**), named CULTURE, which, in its fundamental sense, represents a return to the original sense of worship – the Latin **cult**um.

Notes

[1] See Liiceanu, Gabriel, 2005, *Om si Simbol* ("Man and Symbol"), Humanitas, Bucharest.

[2] "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, onto the land that I will shewe thee." (*Genesis*, 12: 1)

[3] Explanations about Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, see, in this book, Chapter Five.

CHAPTER TWO

SIGNS VS. SEMIOSIS

Hermeneutical Turn of Semiotics is an essay, a book in which the understanding of the semiotic process is extended, by problematizing the concept of SIGN.

From the perspective of the present study, the semiotic problem is to search both the **origin** and the **finality** of signs.

The intention to demonstrate that the study regarding both the origin and the finality of signs leads to a common parameter – the subjective dimension of signs – seems to be a confusing idea. At the moment, no more explanations in this respect will be necessary. A single theoretical limitation should be mentioned: by subjective dimension of signs we do not mean the individual sensitivity of the Ego, but the **will of expression of a higher understanding** manifested by the "speaking" subject, when "understanding" means **participation** in a higher sense.

2.1 Why are there signs?

Traditionally, *sign* and *symbol* were different concepts, although they are now part of the same field, *semiotics.* Without any theoretical involvement, we can say that "signs" are/were elements of recognition, "symbols", elements of cognition. In conformity with the Robert dictionary, **sign** (Latin *signum*) is "Chose perçue qui permet de conclure à l'existence ou à la vérité d'une autre chose, à laquelle elle est liée – *indice, manifestation, marque, preuve, symptôme*". In the same dictionary, the *symbol* is defined as the following: "Objet ou fait naturel de caractère imagé qui évoque, par sa forme ou sa nature, une association d'idées (naturelle) (dans un groupe social donné) avec quelque chose d'abstrait ou d'absent – *attribut, emblème, insigne, représentation.*"

Semiotics raised the theoretical importance of the concept "**sign**" to the generic level.

2.1.1. Some examples

Examples of classical signs:

WORD – **linguistic sign**, *arbitrary* or *symbolic*, with denotative function;
NUMBER – **graphic** (linguistic) sign, *arbitrary* and symbolic;
MARK – **emblem**; marks are *indexes*, frequently having *symbolic* functions; heraldic signs: **arms; shield; brand; badge; flag**; or a **stamp** – a sign used to warrant the authenticity of a document for example.
GRAPHIC SIGNS – **maps** etc., iconic *abstract* signs; **zodiac**, an iconic, *symbolic* sign; **traffic signs**, using iconic or symbolic signs;
SONOROUS SIGNS – **siren**; **ringing** of bells; **hissing**; **whistling**, etc.
COMPLEX SIGNS – macro-signs (picture, cinematographic images, etc.), texts: **legends**, **myths**, etc., fashion; rituals.

Remark: many kinds of the signs enumerated above are part of specific speech acts, about which we will speak later, in a special chapter.

Examples of symbols:

The symbolic thought, including the symbolic knowledge, was the ancient way of life of the whole of humanity, indifferent to what kind of mentality (idolatrous or superstitious) we are currently speaking nowadays. To read *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* [1] is an opportunity to find out and to meditate upon the inherent feature of human beings to create an *archetypal image* of life. It is the best guide in learning how extended the *archetypal reflection* was/is. This book is not an encyclopaedia, but an inventory of symbols from all domains of life: creation (e.g. **egg**, **breath**), cosmos (**star, eclipse, rainbow**, etc.), plant world (**medical plants and flowers**), animal world (**turtle, fish, snake, scarab, owl**, etc.) human world (**brain, falling, cripple, knife, wheel**, etc.) spirit world, (**mythical beings**, **ritual and sacred systems**, **sickness and deat**h, **soul and psyche**), etc. The volume is a collection of "original essays, accompanied by images that represent art from around the world and from every era since human beings first depicted, on rocks and cave walls with simple tools and objects, psyche's imaginal forms." (Kathleen Martin, *Introduction*, p. 8). The original essays offer two ways of approaching the symbolic world, both by following the symbolic roots planted in the deepest human psyche (the editor of the volume, Kathleen Martin is a Jungian analyst), and by reflecting the ambiguity of the symbols' meanings, and judging how the good and the evil perceptions of existence coexist.

We cannot advance a theoretical study of signs by ignoring "the differentiated ways in which diverse cultures have engaged the symbolic image" (*idem*). The editor-in-chief Ami Ronnberg begins the *Preface*, by quoting Meister Eckhart: "the (symbolic) image – as a threshold leading to a new dimension of meaning" (p. 6). This "new dimension of meaning" constitutes the target of the *Hermeneutical Turn of Semiotics.*

2.1.2. The sign – a generic concept

The semiotic thought will be extended by critical arguments, considering the analytical criteria as basic notions. Constitutive elements are as follows. In an *atomist* perspective, the sign is defined in itself and isolated from the constitutive ensemble. This perspective is representative for the scholastic definition of the sign: *aliquid stat pro aliquo.* Before being a systematic theory of signs, the relation between the two members of a sign, in the atomist perspective, has no other relevance than a "reading" convention.

When the study of signs took the great step and entered the theoretical stage, two parameters became the most important semiotic issues: the sign's inner structure and the sign system.

The *dual* structure of the sign was the semiotic perspective introduced by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure on linguistic elements, in his *Cours de linguistique générale*. His approach to linguistics was systemic: the definition of language – "où tout se tient" [where everything fits] – is eloquent. The sign gained theoretical relevance within a linguistic system, formulated in terms of oppositions. In spite of being educated in the tradition of the atomistic interpretation of linguistic elements, Saussure was interested in finding formal criteria in describing them. In accordance with his famous definition mentioned above, "language" is **form** not **substance** and, by defining the "word" as a linguistic sign, Saussure's contribution initiated a *structural orientation* of research, the weak point of which was the *static approach of the system*. Given the formal criteria, the history of semiotics recognized Saussure as the first theoretician of linguistics, defined in semiotic terms. The sign structure, conceived in the form of a relation between *signifié* (object/idea of the object) vs. *signifiant* (word/sign), was a consequence of Saussure's formalism. The relation *signifié* vs. *signifiant* has an *arbitrary* nature, and the concept of meaning was substituted by that of **value**, which the (linguistic) element has inside an ensemble organized in relationships of oppositions.

The study of the *semiotic triad* of the sign is relevant against the communicative scheme, the mechanism of which is subject-oriented. The

semiotic triad could be considered the sign's "deep structure". The relationship between the two terms (in Saussure's definition) implies a third term. Charles Peirce, the American philosopher and logician, was the first who spoke about the semiotic triad from a cognitive point of view. Concerned with the relationship between thought and language, his explanation includes problems regarding the subject's function of reflection.

Interpretant

Representamen   Object
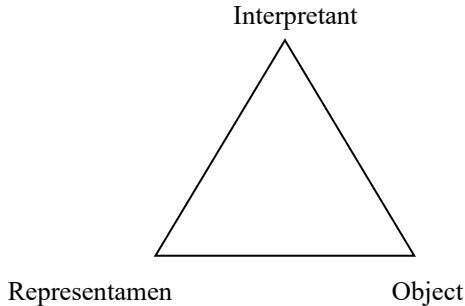
Inside the triad of the sign, the *representamen* "represents" the sign of the *object*, on the language level. Somebody's representamen / the sign is addressed to a person for interpretation. What the sign generates in the thought of the person – the "interpreter" – who is in contact with the respective sign is called by Peirce the *interpretant.* Peirce specified that the object which the sign represents is the *Platonic idea.* Peirce was the first who spoke about sign **interpretation**, a concept which, translated in our terms, represents a psychological approach of subjectivity. It is important to emphasize that Peirce has introduced a *dynamic* perspective on signs, the interpretation of which engenders an *infinite semiosis* (acts of interpretation) (see Innis 1985, p. 1–24).

The parameter **interpretant**, introduced by Peirce, is ambiguous in Umberto Eco's opinion (1976; 2003). One view is, in spite of the ambiguity of the term "interpretant", the semiotic theory cannot ignore Peirce's original contribution. With the development of the new trend – *pragmatics*, the problem of "interpretation" and "understanding" of the speaker's use of signs has become a subject matter that is extensively debated.

It is useful to establish a parallel between Peirce's triad and that of Ogden and Richards (see Ogden and Richards, 1923, *The Meaning of Meaning*).

Referring acts

Symbol   Referent
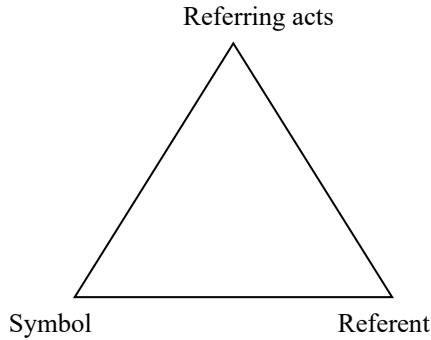
Although Peirce's concept of *interpretant* and respectively, Ogden and Richards' concept of *referring acts* are not similar, they both presuppose a person – the "interpreter", a subject who is in contact with signs, and is trying to understand their meanings. Gottlob Frege's triangle (see Frege, *Sens şi semnificaţie* ["Meaning and Significance"]) presents the distinction between "meaning" and "signification", a distinction which has cognitive consequences. The interpretative subject is presupposed, being the agent of this distinction.

Sinn
(sense, meaning features – including *connotation*)

Zeichen   Bedeutung
(sign)   (sign signification)
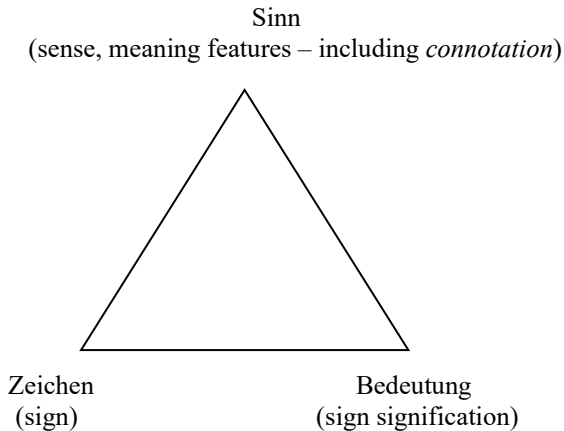
Peirce's signs classification is an issue of equal interest both for specialists and anybody curious to understand and to put in order their own linguistic/semiotic instruments.

The philosopher Charles S. Peirce wanted to produce a comprehensive sign classification. In the section of his work *Logic as Semiotic: The*

Theory of Signs², we may find an ambitious organization of signs in three divisions: *qualisign* – a quality as a sign; *sinsign* – a thing or an event which is a sign; *legisign* – a law which is a sign. Our interest is oriented toward the second division, according to which *sinsigns* may be differentiated in *icons*, *indexes* and *symbols.* This typology was universally adopted and is still in use in many fields as a semiotic instrument.

An *icon* is the "image" of the object/thing, represented by the sign. The representation is obtained by similitude or analogy, with several degrees of simplification, for instance photographs, imitative pictures, conventional images (as diagrams, maps, algebraic formulae, etc.).

An *index* is a dynamic sign. An index is associated with a speech act, an indication of a specific nature usually in virtue of a convention established by a community and recognized within this community as generally valid. The index can be, but not obligatorily, an *icon* of the object to which it refers. Indexes refer to contingent facts and not to concepts or ideas. By referring to individuals, they indicate their presence or existence. For instance: "**H**" is the index of an hospital; the **clock** is the index of time and indicates the hour; the **thermometer** is the index of fever or temperature; the **barometer** indicates the atmospheric pressure. The **proper names**, the **individual names**, the **personal or relative pronouns** etc. are all indexes. There are **mathematical indexes**, signs indicating directions, **street directories** etc. In language, the indicative mood is an index of the performed action; from the linguistic point of view, indexes are associated with a proposition of reference. Many signs indicate speech functions, and so on.

A *symbol* is a sign in which the sense is highly concentrated; more precisely, the symbol is the *expression* of an *abbreviated idea*, raised to the level of a "representative" perception. Under the structure of *pars pro toto*, a **part** of a situation, event, human figure or behaviour for example, concentrates the idea of the *toto* (the respective situation). For instance, the Greek **Parthenon** is the symbol of the ancient Greek art; the text in the French **national anthem** *La Marseillaise* – "Allons enfants de la patrie (le temps de gloire est arrivé") – is more than a national anthem, it became emblematic, a *motto* of the revolutionary engagement in the name of liberation; the **raised fist** is "representative" (the symbol of) of the proletarian protest; to **beat the breast** is to make broad one's chest; **to make broad one's** phylactery (from Gr. *phvlacterion* – strips of parchment with a portion of law written upon them) is to make a show of one's piety, and so on.

The symbol, as a category, is not a homogenous ensemble of types. The symbol, with its abbreviated meaning, represents the semantic

conceptualization of sensitive properties (qualities) or principles. The symbol is *representative* of the integral meaning of contingent facts. It has the highest cognitive power, able to lead the intelligible perception towards the significant meaning, which is the idea/the value of a situation, event, etc. The symbol contains a *significant relevance* of the global sense. It represents the *type* or *archetype* or *prototype* (a typical personality – the hero; a typical event, quality – for example, the Resurrection, a religious event becoming the symbol of the spiritual rebirth), a *mark*, an *emblem*, a *nickname* etc. all referring to an entire class. Due to its significant relevance, the symbol is invested with both ontological and rhetorical force. Through symbolization, the ontological register of "something that *is*" gains an existential (VECTORIAL) SENSE, loaded with the rhetorical force of a significant VALUE. "Rhetorical" here means the argument in favour of a qualifying act.

According to Peirce's definition, "Symbol is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of *a law* (my emphasis), usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object" (Innis, 1985: 8). The *law* refers to the significant force of the structure *pars pro toto*, a "law" meaning the "association" socially accepted. In this respect, the Greek etymology of the word "symbol" – *symbolon* – is defined in dictionaries as follows: "D'abord morceau d'un objet partagé entre deux personnes pour servir entre elles de signe de reconnaissance" [First piece of an object shared between two people to serve between them as a sign of recognition *Collins-Robert French Dictionary*], is eloquent. A remark is necessary: in contrast to the *index*, the *law* in the case of a *symbol* is more than a possibility to "recognize" the whole when the part is given. "By virtue of *a law*" the *symbol* intermediates the act of the semantic raising from the pragmatic status to the significant *ideea*. The context in which the symbol appears renders evident the semantic enrichment. Here are some examples that illustrate the difference: *the medical mask* is the *index* of protection against infection; *the flag hosted in front of a public building* is the *index* that the respective building is an official institution belonging to a certain state; *the flag*, in itself, is the *symbol* of the autonomy and sovereignty of a state, officially recognized as a symbol of state.

The extended explanation accorded in this chapter to the semiotic concept of *symbol* prepares the correct understanding of the way we conceive the *hermeneutical turn*.

2.1.3. Aristotelian four causes of a phenomenon –
their relevance for the study of semiotics

At the moment semiotics became a subject-oriented study, the Aristotelian four causes of a phenomenon, respectively of an act, became a relevant hermeneutical means.

For Aristotle, CAUSA (Latin) does not mean the determination, the consequence of a phenomenon with respect to a previous one. Aristotelian CAUSA represents an explicative **principle**. The issue regarding CAUSA is relevant for the argument of this book, as far as the fundaments of semiotics cannot be understood without a justificatory approach of the SENSE. What is the CAUSE of signs? In other words, why does the human being appeal to signs? Can we measure the semiotic extension? By referring to the philosophy of causes – the beginning of which is announced with the Aristotelian definitions – the mechanism of the cognitive process of interpretation, intermediated by signs, could be delimitated from the syllogistic mechanism.

In what follows, the Aristotelian definitions of the four causes – (1) *material*, (2) *formative* or *structural*, (3) *generic* or *efficient* and (4) *final* – should be read having in mind the triad structure of the sign. The definitions of the four causes may be found in two Aristotelian books: *Metaphysics* and *Physics*.

> Knowledge is the object of our inquiry, and men do not think they know a thing till they have grasped the "way" of it (which is to grasp its primary causes). In one sense, then (1), that out of which a thing comes to be and which persists, is called "cause" (e.g. the bronze of the statue …). In another sense (2) the form of the archetype, the statement of the essence, and its genera, are called "causes" (e.g. of the octave the relation 2: 1). Again (3) the primary source of the change of coming to rest (e.g. the man who gave advice is a cause). The father is cause of the child, and generally what makes of what is made, and what causes change of what is changed. Again (4) in the sense of end, or "that for the sake of which" a thing is done (e.g. health is the cause of walking about) (*Physics*, 1962, Book II, Chapter 3; 1968, see Bibliography).

Applied to semiotics, the study of Aristotelian causes emphasizes the rationality of the semiotic mechanism and allows a better structural analysis of signs from the four points of view: generative, formative, material and final. All these principles establish the role of signs within the human existence. Due to their intelligible function, signs facilitate their own understanding, both as a pragmatic reality and as a cognitive-spiritual means. First of all, (1) the material cause – the matter – refers to the

material substance of signs, which is especially relevant when the cultural turn of signs is at stake. The second cause/principle (2), the formal one, regards the intelligible characteristics of language and governs the structural disposition of the ensemble of signs. Appealing to this principle, one may explain the cultural dimension of signs as far as culture itself is a question of FORMA MENTIS. The third cause/principle (3), the generative principle defines the language origin – the human being as a speaking subject. Due to the generative principle and the auto-referentiality of signs, humanity defines itself. Finally, (4) the final cause/principle of signs becomes dominant in the moment the sign interpretation discovers the intelligible transfiguration of the contingent Sense into an existential Sense. The human being, by appealing to signs, tries to define himself. It is the moment when he finds a sense for himself, finds that his own answer corresponds to what he believes is significant or has relevant signification for the existential effort.

The four *causes* are subordinated to the original cause – *causa prima*, a divine intervention within the phenomenal world.

2.2 Semiosis

In general terms, semiotics has three objects of study: signs, language and communication. The three chapters remind us of the approach of the American neo-positivist philosopher, Charles Morris, and his classification of semiotics (1946) in three sections – semantics, syntax and pragmatics.

In spite of the didactic criteria of this classification, it remained an efficient means to start any semiotic explanation. The theoretical progression of semiotics has adopted, step by step, a dynamic perspective. Semiotics is no more an analytical study, a "language" that sketches other studies, but has become a science in itself, a cognitive synthesis which has developed a humanist view on the life of signs. It is sufficient to say: the "human being is living inside an empire of signs" or "is living by means of signs" to certify the importance of saying that the human being is an *animal symbolicon,* quoting Cassirer's formula. Semiotic thought is much older than the rational one, and many people have maintained the preference for the semiotic logic. The popular sapience, resumed in a collection of inferences based on semiotic relations, is the best illustration. For instance: *There is no smoke without fire!* or *In for a penny, in for a pound!*

In this study, by approaching a dynamic perspective two semiotic issues are relevant for the argument at stake: **sign function** and **sign act** (or semiosis).