

# The Life of Symbols and Other Legisigns: More than a Mere Metaphor?

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For every symbol is a living thing, in a very strict sense that is no mere figure of speech. The body of the symbol changes slowly, but its meaning inevitably grows, incorporates new elements and throws off old ones. (CP 2.222, 1901)

## Life as Semiosis and the Life of Symbols

Biosemiotics, as defined by Jesper Hoffmeyer, assumes as its fundamental tenet that “life is based entirely on semiosis, on sign operations” (1996, p. 24). Major proponents of this approach to the life sciences proclaim that *Life is the Action of Signs* (Emmeche and Kull 2011). They are convinced that semiotic answers to the questions concerning the essence of life are possible and necessary (Emmeche and El-Hani 2000). The determination of the “basic principles of a semiotic study of life” and the demonstration of how “sign processes *per se* and the processes of life” are “intimately and inseparably interconnected” (Kull et al. 2009, p. 168) are among the essential goals of the biosemiotic research program.

This biosemiotic research program has avid supporters, but also critics who reprimand biosemiotics for what they consider to be undue semiotic imperialism (cf. Nöth 2001, p. 74). Some claim that the foundations of biology are in the natural sciences, whereas others believe that semiotics should restrict itself to the study of intentionally produced symbols (Böhme 1996, pp. 20–21). Such criticism is unjustified because it is based on reductionist premises concerning the nature of signs and sign processes. Semiotics is not only the study of intentional and conventional signs. It is also the study of signs in nature. A distinctive feature of signs is their power to make absent things present to an interpreting organism. Peirce shows that this characteristic is shared by signs and living beings. Both have the “active power to establish connections between different objects, especially between objects in different Universes” (CP 6.455; 1908).

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Natural scientists and humanists who resent the claim that the study of life can be approached from a semiotic perspective must find the complementary thesis that *symbols are living beings* even more appalling. Is not a symbol a product of human minds, and if so, how can symbols have a life of their own? Does life not need to be embodied in chemicals, such as amino acids, in molecules, and in real matter, whereas symbols are products of human minds, which are in their essence immaterial? To dualist minds accustomed to dividing the world into matter and mind and into living beings and material things, the suggestion that symbols have life must sound provocative. And yet, it was Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), a natural scientist by training and profession, who put forward this provocative thesis, when he wrote, in 1901, that “every symbol is a living thing, in a very strict sense that is no mere figure of speech” (CP 2.222) or, a year later, when he affirmed that symbols actually live, “that there not only *may be* a living symbol, realizing the full idea of a symbol, but even that there actually *is* one” (CP 2.114; 1902; italics added).

Peirce’s assertion that symbols (and other legisigns) live is the topic of the present paper. Since it is an assertion concerning the nature of signs and not a statement about the nature of life, the paper does not directly seem to be a study in biosemiotics. However, if signs are to a certain degree living beings, the scope of biosemiotics must begin with and include the study of the life of signs. Furthermore, biosemiotics is certainly involved in the thesis that symbols are living beings because it presupposes a definition of life, and this definition can only be a biosemiotic one.

### ***Synechistic Premises: Symbols, Things, and Life***

What does Peirce mean with his biologically provocative thesis that symbols are living things? Certainly not that symbols have the biochemical or molecular characteristics of organisms. If he nonetheless claims that symbols evince life “in a very strict sense”, his words must be examined in light of synechism, his “doctrine of continuity”, which teaches “that all that exists is continuous” (CP 1.172, c.1897). Synechism is opposed to dualism, “the philosophy which performs its analyses with an axe, leaving as the ultimate elements, unrelated chunks of being” (CP 7.570, c.1892).

Peirce develops his thesis that symbols are living things under synechistic premises insofar as he presupposes that continuity must not only be assumed very generally between mind and matter, as he postulates (following Schelling) in his evolutionary cosmology (cf. CP 6.158, 1891; Nöth 2004), but that there is also continuity between life and the products of living minds, i.e., symbols. Whether symbols live or not is a matter of the degree to which they have characteristics in common with living beings, but Peirce is convinced that symbols are close to life on the continuum between living beings and lifeless things.

In the light of this premise, Peirce’s argument that it is no mere figure of speech to say that symbols evince life must be read as the rhetorical device of a caveat, by which the author positions himself against readers who might be inclined to interpret his argument as a “mere metaphor” and to conclude that symbols are actually only

*lifelike*, and in fact *lifeless*, as metaphors are never literally true. Peirce counter-argues that on the life/nonlife continuum, he sees symbols very close to living beings.

It is interesting to note that Peirce uses this rhetorical device against misinterpretations of his arguments as “mere metaphors” in other contexts that deal with his synechistic views concerning the continuity between matter and mind. Another example of this device appears in a manuscript of 1903, in which he develops the argument that the human mind is not only determined by the laws of natural evolution, but also displays similarities, in its modes of operation, with elementary laws of the material world from which it has evolved. His argument is: “It is somehow more than a mere figure of speech to say that nature fecundates the mind of man with ideas which, when those ideas grow up, will resemble their father, Nature” (CP 5.591, 1903).

## Habits and Laws, Symbols and Legisigns

The essential criteria which Peirce sets up in defining symbols are neither *codedness* nor *conventionality*, but *generality* and *habit* (cf. Nöth 2010). A symbol is a sign “whose special significance or fitness to represent just what it does represent lies in nothing but the very fact of there being a habit, disposition, or other effective general rule that it will be so interpreted” (CP 4.447, 1903). By *habit*, Peirce means both “acquired” and “inborn” dispositions (CP 2.297, c.1895). Habits in this sense certainly presuppose life. An inborn habit presupposes birth and hence life in a phylogenetic perspective. An acquired habit presupposes learning and hence life in an ontogenetic perspective. But the habit Peirce has in mind is not merely the interpreters’ habit of complying with the conventions necessary to make themselves understood; it is neither a “precept” nor does it describe the action of an interpreter “in obedience to a law” (CP 1.586, c. 1903). Instead, the one who interprets a symbol does so according to a general “rule of conduct, including thought under conduct [...] in conformity to [a] norm [...] in the sense of a precept, [...] a pattern which is copied” (CP 2.315, 1902).

All symbols are also legisigns. A sign is a symbol with respect to “the relation of the sign to its object”, whereas it is a legisign with respect to “the sign in itself” (CP 2.243, 1903). A legisign is “a sign which is of the nature of a general type” or law (CP 4.414, 1903). Legisigns are *types* which produce *replicas* or *tokens*. Replicas or tokens are sinsigns, signs characterized as singular:

A Legisign is a law that is a Sign. This law is usually established by men. Every conventional sign is a legisign [but not conversely]. It is not a single object, but a general type which, it has been agreed, shall be significant. Every legisign signifies through an instance of its application, which may be termed a Replica of it. Thus, the word “the” will usually occur from fifteen to twenty-five times on a page. It is in all these occurrences one and the same word, the same legisign. Each single instance of it is a Replica. The Replica is a Sinsign. Thus, every Legisign requires Sinsigns. But these are not ordinary Sinsigns, such as are peculiar occurrences that are regarded as significant. Nor would the Replica be significant if it were not for the law which renders it so. (CP 2.246, 1903)

Cultural anthropologists and humanist philosophers usually define symbols as uniquely human signs (cf. Nöth 2000, pp. 178–184). When Peirce, by contrast, defines the symbol as a sign related to its object by a habit, he means habits which can also be found in nature. Peirce's symbol is a sign “merely or mainly by the fact that it is used and understood as such, whether the habit is natural or conventional, and without regard to the motives which originally governed its selection” (CP 2.307, 1902). Habits in this sense do not presuppose human intentionality. The sign behavior of mating birds and the dance of the honey bee are examples of symbols although they are not conventional signs (cf. Short 1982, pp. 296–297). They are determined by instincts, which are habits in an evolutionary sense.

When Peirce defines the legisign as a sign due to a law “usually established by men”, this definition sounds rather similar to the way cultural anthropologists and philosophers of the symbol (such as Cassirer) define the symbol, but in this instance the adverb “usually” is particularly important. Since all symbols are included in the class of legisigns according to his typology, the category of legisigns is no less comprehensive than the one of symbol in the broader Peircean definition. The difference between symbols and legisigns is that all symbols are legisigns, but not all legisigns are symbols. According to Peirce's typology, there are two other types of legisign, the iconic legisign and the indexical legisign (CP 2.258–2.260, 1903). The editors of the *Collected Papers* suggest that a “diagram apart from its factual individuality” (CP 2.258) is an example of an iconic legisign. Short (2007, p. 223) gives the example of a (general) geometrical diagram. In the context of his theory of Existential Graphs, Peirce defines graphs as legisigns and individual instances of graph-replicas (CP 4.414, 1903). Typical examples of indexical legisigns are proper names and demonstrative pronouns. Indexical legisigns differ from symbols because they lack generality and denote individuals. Iconic legisigns differ from symbols since they derive their potential to signify not from a convention, but from the quality which it has in common with the object it denotes.

Symbols may include indexical and iconic features. For example, the dance of the honey bee signaling the direction towards and the distance from the nectar has both indexical (i.e., directional reference) and iconic elements (i.e., similarity of dance angle and proposed flight angle). The reason why symbols are nonetheless symbols, despite their indexical and iconic features, is “that the rules for indexical or iconic legisigns refer interpreters to indexical or iconic grounds, whereas the rules for symbolic legisigns are themselves grounds of significance” (Short 1982, p. 294).

The reason why Peirce often mentions only symbols and no other legisigns when he discusses signs as “living things” is simply that he only introduced the distinction between symbols and legisigns in 1903, so that earlier reflections could not have drawn on this distinction. In short, whenever symbols are discussed in following discussions, it may be assumed that “symbols and other legisigns” are meant according to Peirce's typology of signs after 1903. However, even after 1903, there are contexts in which Peirce restricts himself to speaking merely of symbols, even though his arguments also apply to other legisigns.

It is true that hardly anybody has ever denied that symbols presuppose life, but it is also true that postulating habit as the distinctive feature of the symbol places

greater emphasis on the living nature of symbols than on criteria such as codedness and conventionality. Furthermore, postulating that symbols presuppose life is not the same as saying that symbols are living beings. So, what are the really distinctive biological characteristics of symbols?

## Purpose and Autonomous Agency

Both symbols and life pursue purposes and act according to a scheme of final causality (Santaella 1999). Purpose is a characteristic of life. The biological purpose of any organism is to survive both individually and as a species. If the final cause of life is self-reproduction and self-replication, symbols are “living realities” (CP 6.152), which have their teleology in self-replication, the creation of interpretants, and in determining future thoughts and interpretations. “The whole purpose of a sign is that it shall be interpreted in another sign” (CP 8.191, 1904). What is characteristic of the teleology of both symbols and biological organisms is that their goals are not predetermined with exact precision. “The law of habit exhibits a striking contrast to all physical laws [...]. A physical law is absolute, [...] but no exact conformity is required by the mental law. [...] The law of mind only makes a given feeling more likely to arise” (CP 6.23, 1891). Only symbols and other legisigns, but not sinsigns and qualisigns, can be said to have the purpose of self-replication. A sinsign cannot replicate since it is “an actual existent thing or event which is a sign” (CP 2.245, 1903), while a qualisign, which is a mere “quality which is a Sign” (CP 2.244, 1903), is too vague for the purpose of replicating in another sign.

What the symbol represents is determined by habits of interpretation, which are not only the habits of individual interpreters; it is not a matter of some individual habit. Symbol users neither are the creators of the symbols they use nor can they do away with any specific symbol. “You can write down the word ‘star’, but that does not make you the creator of the word, nor if you erase it have you destroyed the word” (CP 2.301, ca. 1895).

Of course, symbols are created by humans, just like children are created by their parents. However, once created, symbols begin to lead a life of their own just like children created by parents do. This is why Peirce says that signs are created *in* and not *by* human minds: “The Sign creates something in the Mind of the Interpreter [...]. And this creature of the sign is called the Interpretant. It is created by the Sign; but not by the Sign qua member of whichever of the Universes it belongs to; but it has been created by the Sign in its capacity of bearing the determination by the Object. It is created in a Mind (how far this mind must be real we shall see)” (CP 8.179, 1903).

Another characteristic which signs share with biological organisms is that both are agents in processes of semiosis. This may sound paradoxical, for are signs not *produced* and used by biological organisms to serve the purpose of the latter? Undeniably they are, but signs also have lives and purposes of their own independently of the ones of individual sign users. Symbols are not merely the instruments of living

agents, but they act in processes of semiosis with purposes of their own: the purpose of the symbol is to represent its object and “to convey some further information concerning it” (CP 2.231, 1910). The autonomy which a symbol develops in relation to its creators raises the question of semiotic agency (cf. Nöth 2009). Agents are by presupposition living beings. To the degree to which symbols act autonomously in the process of semiosis, they act as “living things”.

Ransdell (1992) points out that the autonomy of the symbol does not go so far as to make its users blind agents. “To regard semiosis [...] as always due primarily to the agency of the sign itself rather than to the agency of an interpreter, human or otherwise, does not deny that human agency has an important role in the occurrence of meaning phenomena.” The determination of the symbol user by the symbol does not exclude the partial determination of the symbol by those who use it. After all, the users’ minds, their memories, and their experiences are the loci of the embodiment of the objects of the sign, so that the users are co-agents in the process of semiosis. In this sense, symbols and symbol users are intertwined in a cybernetic master-slave dialectic, which is a synechistic circle of mutual semiotic growth.

## Self-Reproduction and Self-Replication of Types in Their Tokens

In organisms, just as in nucleic acid molecules, life shows itself in the form of self-reproduction and self-replication (cf. Kull 2000), features which have more generally been subsumed under the heading of autopoiesis (Maturana and Varela 1972). In 1904, Peirce writes: “A symbol is something which has the power of reproducing itself”, which is a reference to the processes of self-replication and self-reproduction in semiosis. In symbols, replication can be found in the process of their embodiment of types in tokens. Peirce describes the process as follows:

*A Symbol is a Representamen whose Representative character consists precisely in its being a rule that will determine its Interpretant. All words, sentences, books, and other conventional signs are Symbols. We speak of writing or pronouncing the word “man”; but it is only a replica, or embodiment of the word, that is pronounced or written. [...] The] succession of three sounds [...] becomes a sign only in the fact that a habit, or acquired law, will cause replicas of it to be interpreted as meaning a man or men. The word and its meaning are both general rules [...]. A Symbol is a law, or regularity of the indefinite future. [...] But a law necessarily governs, or “is embodied in” individuals, and prescribes some of their qualities. (CP 2.292-93, 1902)*

It is not the symbol user, but the symbol itself, *by means of* symbol users, that creates replicas as its embodiments. The three-letter word *man*, which exemplifies the sign type of a symbol, “is not a thing. What is its nature? It consists in the really working general rule that three such patches seen by a person who knows English will effect his conduct and thoughts according to a rule. [...] The being of a symbol consists in the real fact that something surely will be experienced if certain conditions be satisfied. Namely, it will influence the thought and conduct of its interpreter” (CP 4.447, 1903). As a habit, the symbol determines its replicas through

the minds of its users in form (pronunciation and spelling) and meaning. As a law, the effects created by the symbol are general, whereas its replicas are the singular instances of its occurrence.

The self-replicative power of the symbol *man* thus consists “in the fact that a habit, or acquired law, will cause replicas of it to be interpreted as meaning a man or men” (CP 2.292, 1902). In sum, the symbol is self-replicative since it has “the power of reproducing itself, and that essentially, since it is constituted as a symbol only by the interpretation” (EP 2: 322, 1904).

Replicas are thus determined by the types they embody, just like the biological phenotype is determined by its genotype. In their singularity, replicas are phenomena of the category of secondness, whereas symbols as types are phenomena of thirdness. Only the replica, not the symbol itself, has a real existence, but although the symbol, because of its generality, cannot be said to exist, its power to produce replicas of itself is a real fact. As types, symbols merely consist in the potential to determine tokens that come into existence and exert their effects: “The word lives in the minds of those who use it. Even if they are all asleep, it exists in their memory” (CP 2.301, ca. 1895). In its genuine thirdness, a symbol is a mere “idea abstracted from all efficiency” (CP 1.213, 1902). The effect a symbol embodies in real tokens is a matter of secondness. This is why it can neither be reduced to any, nor to all of its replicas.

Nevertheless, symbols need replicas to survive. A type “has to be embodied in a Token which shall be a sign of the Type, and thereby of the object the Type signifies” (CP 2.537, 1901). A symbol is the representation of an idea, but even without any real existence, it needs to be embodied, for “an idea without efficiency is something equally absurd and unthinkable” (CP 1.213, 1902). A symbol that is not replicated falls into oblivion and eventually dies out. Peirce compares the symbol as a type to the agency of a court and its replicas to the acts of its sheriff. A symbol is powerless without its replication, just like “a court cannot be imagined without a sheriff” (*ibid.*).

## Procreation and Growth

Symbols procreate symbols insofar as the interpretant they create are (new) symbols, and a symbol “is constituted as a symbol only by the interpretation” (EP 2: 322, 1904). The interpretant of a symbol not only reproduces (or replicates) the symbol as it is, but also displays a proclivity to growth since the interpretation a more complex symbol can offer about its object conveys new information about it. The fact that “symbols grow” (CP 3.302, c. 1895) in time thus means that “the body of the symbol changes slowly, but its meaning inevitably grows, incorporates new elements and throws off old ones” (CP 2.222, 1903).

Growth is an essential characteristic of life. In organisms, the most elementary form of growth is cell division (mitosis), which begins with the egg dividing into “daughter cells” at a ratio of 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 etc. (cf. Schrödinger 1947, p. 8). Symbols grow differently. They are “born”, when they are first invented, and they can

“die” by falling into oblivion or by being substituted by new symbols. The homologies between the life of words, on the one hand, and biological organisms as well as species, on the other, have been much discussed in the framework of historical and evolutionary linguistics (cf. Driem 2005). It is true that to say that they are born and die makes the argument that symbols are living things somewhat weak. The same can also be said of lifeless objects, such as consumer goods, of which marketers say that they come to life (with their invention) and die (when they become obsolete). Do symbols grow in any stronger sense of the word?

Peirce describes how symbols grow in at least three different ways, (1) the growth of symbols in the process of semiosis, as discussed above, (2) the growth of the meaning of concepts, and (3) the growth of complex ideas and arguments. How concepts grow in meaning is the topic of the following much quoted passage:

Symbols grow. They come into being by development out of other signs, particularly from icons, or from mixed signs partaking of the nature of icons and symbols. We think only in signs. These mental signs are of mixed nature; the symbol-parts of them are called concepts. If a man makes a new symbol, it is by thoughts involving concepts. So it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow. *Omne symbolum de symbolo*. A symbol, once in being, spreads among the peoples. In use and in experience, its meaning grows. Such words as *force, law, wealth, marriage*, bear for us very different meanings from those they bore to our barbarous ancestors. (CP 2.302, c. 1895)

The growth of symbols in this sense is the growth of the meaning of ideas or concepts. Symbols grow as the information stored in them and conveyed by them increases in time (cf. Nöth 2012a). Peirce’s favorite examples stem from the natural sciences, where new discoveries lead to redefinitions of key terms: “How much more the word electricity means now than it did in the days of Franklin; how much more the term planet means now than it did in the time [of] Hipparchus. These words have acquired information; just as a man’s thought does by further perception” (CP 7.587, 1866).

Words grow in the history of language, acquiring new meanings from generation to generation, but what grows is only the word as a type; word tokens cannot grow, because they exist only in the singular moment of their utterance, never to be replicated as tokens (only as another token replicated from its corresponding type). Consider the example of a novel, which is a complex symbol. An individual copy of the book is a token of this sign; it remains essentially unchanged until it decays or is destroyed. As a sign type, this novel grows with the interpretants it creates, acquires new meanings and loses older ones.

Words do not only grow individually, but the whole vocabulary of a language grows in number. This is so because words have an autopoietic potential, which they share with biological organisms: symbols have a self-regenerative ability that is manifested through the creation of new symbols. Peirce describes this autopoietic potential of symbols as follows: “Perhaps the most marvelous faculty of humanity is one which it possesses in common with all animals and in one sense with all plants, I mean that of procreation. [...] If I write ‘Let Kax denote a gas furnace’, this sentence is a symbol which is creating another within itself” (CP 3.590, c. 1867).

A different and more general kind of growth takes place as symbols evolve in the semiosphere of ideas. Ideas are symbols. The characteristics of life, which Peirce



ascribes to an idea, are three: “The first is its intrinsic quality as a feeling. The second is the energy with which it affects other ideas, an energy which is infinite in the here-and-nowness of immediate sensation, finite and relative in the recency of the past. The third element is the tendency of an idea to bring along other ideas with it” (CP 6.135, 1892).

This kind of growth of symbols is the topic of Peirce’s *Law of Mind* (1892). It states that ideas tend to spread continuously, influence other ideas, and thereby become more and more general: “In this spreading they lose intensity, and especially the power of affecting others, but gain generality and become welded with other ideas” (CP 6.104). The continuous growth of symbols in this form is evidence of life, insofar as “general ideas are living feelings spread out” (CP 6.143). Generality, which is a distinguishing feature of all symbols, implies the possibility of determining future events in which the symbol will be used again. “A general idea, living and conscious now, it is already determinative of acts in the future to an extent to which it is not now conscious” (CP 6.156).

### **Self-Control, the Strength of Symbolic Arguments and the Goal of Revealing the Truth**

Anthropologists have claimed that prevarication is at the root of human semiosis (Sebeok 1976). If Peirce says the opposite, namely that “the purpose of signs—which is the purpose of thought—is to bring truth to expression” (CP 2.444 fn, c.1893), he does not mean that humans do not lie. Nor would he deny that the possibility of saying the truth implies the possibility of lying. Instead, Peirce refers to the logical power inherent in symbols of the class of arguments. The argument, he states, is “the only kind of representamen which has a definite professed purpose [...] and] the professed purpose of an argument is to determine an acceptance of its conclusion, and it quite accords with general usage to call the conclusion of an argument its meaning” (CP 5.175, 1903). Arguments oblige us by logical necessity to reach the conclusion which derives from their premises. They are, thus, endowed with a capacity for self-control, which consists in their resistance against representations ignoring “that truth and justice are the greatest powers in this world”. Although these powers need “defenders to uphold it”, they are also able to create their own “defenders and give them strength”. After all, “there is efficient causation and there is final, or ideal, causation. If either of them is to be set down as a metaphor, it is rather the former” (CP 8.272, 1897).

The logical force of arguments thus exerts a control over those who use them, and this is why “it is a perfectly intelligible opinion that ideas are not all mere creations of this or that mind, but on the contrary have a power of finding or creating their vehicles, and having found them, of conferring upon them the ability to transform the face of the earth” (CP 1.217, 1902). Therefore, the revelation of truth is not only a purpose of individuals; arguments have this purpose in themselves. In the long run, the correct arguments cannot be ignored.

Strong ideas and arguments have a strength that resides in their evidence and not in the minds of their proponents. Not only proponents create good ideas, but good

ideas create their own proponents since the very “ideas somehow manage to grow their machinery, and their supporters, and their facts, and to render the machinery, the supporters, and the facts strong” (CP 2.149, 1902). It is important to emphasize that not only words (rhemes) are signs in the framework of Peirce’s semiotics, but also propositions (disisigns) and arguments. Only propositions and arguments can be true or false, valid or invalid, but they are so independently of what a sign producer claims. Ideas have their own strengths or weaknesses, the power “to grow their machinery and their supporters”. Although “most of us [...] look askance at the notion that ideas have any power [...], that some power they have we cannot but admit” (CP 2.149, 1902).

## On the Parasitic Nature of Symbols

Parasites are organisms which live as uninvited tenants at the expense of their host organism, a life from which only the tenant benefits, whereas the host is mostly harmed. In a weak sense, all symbols live in symbiosis. Words live in symbiosis when they acquire signification in and from sentences and texts. Like symbionts that depend on other species for their survival, symbols live as agents connecting themselves with objects of a different kind, *viz.*, with the objects they represent and the interpretants they create. In the morphology of inflected languages, affixes (prefixes and suffixes) live a vicarious life. Like parasites, that can only live attached to their hosts, they need *stems* (or *roots*) to live and to survive in language and discourse (cf. Nöth 2012b).

What is true of morphemes and words is no less true of *texts*. How they live at the expense of other texts has been studied in the theory of *intertextuality*, according to which no text can live on its own. In fact, there are no texts, but only *intertexts*, which, like parasites feeding on hosts, nourish themselves from other texts since intertexts, like symbionts, are made up of “citations, references, echoes, antecedent or contemporary cultural languages (what language is not?), which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony” as Roland Barthes (1977, p. 160) puts it.

To the degree that signs live in symbiosis, they have an agency of their own. Can this be true in a more than metaphorical sense? Skeptics will object that a symbol is a mere mark on paper or a *flatus vocis*, a mere external tool of its user, who is the only and real semiotic agent. However, in alignment with Peirce’s argumentation, it must be objected that this is to confound the replica of a symbol with the symbol as type. Replicas of symbols in their acoustic or written form are indeed lifeless things (phenomena of secondness), but symbols as genuine thirdnesses live on as self-replicative beings. It is true that symbols cannot replicate themselves without the agency of symbol users, but neither can parasites live without their hosts. Like a parasite that only reproduces in the organism of another species, a symbol needs a symbol user to replicate. We, as symbol users, are of course living semiotic beings, too, but not the creators of the symbols we use. We are not the copyright owners of our own words since we did not invent them. In much the same vein we can say, in extension of Peirce and Serres (1982), that *we* are the parasites of the symbols we use and on which we feed—quite to the contrary of those who maintain the opposite, namely that the symbol (resp. language) is the parasite (e.g., Salverda 1998; Kortlandt 2002).

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