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Peirce's Reception in France: just a Beginning

“It is a grievous shame and imposition that the reader should [...] have to traverse this space, so full of marvels and beauties, as in a night train, pent up in this cramped section, obscure and airless.” (Peirce, EP2, 376.)

The same caveat might apply to the present note: what follows is only a roadmap for a larger account of Peirce's reception in France and it will not aim at comprehensiveness. Moreover, it will not attempt to assess the extent of the “misunderstandings” concerning Peirce's system. It will only mention who made use of what. To put it in a nutshell, one can argue that Peirce's reception is just starting, with a strong scholarship that has been developing in the last thirty years in France, even if the reception dates, as in Peirce's own country, back to the 1870s, after a kind of Peircean “craze” in the 1960s and 1970s.

1. A Faint First Reception

For the classical period of American Philosophy (1860-1914), historians were facing at least two classical riddles, concerning France:

(1) The first one is being solved little by little: what did Peirce do during his sundry stays in France?¹

(2) The second one is still unsolved: Why did Théodule Ribot, the editor of the brand new *Revue philosophique*, choose to publish the two first papers of the *Illustrations of the Logic of Science series*?² The archives from the *Revue philosophique* have provided no clue so far.³ Peirce's texts must have been deemed paradigmatic of the new philosophic style endorsed by the *Revue*, discussing logic, psychology and science, under Ribot's editorship, but knowing how and when exactly Ribot got acquainted with them is still a mystery. Interestingly, publishing the two first *Illustrations* as a kind of stand-alone version of the “Logic of science,” as Peirce would sometimes wish to do later on, was also encouraging misunderstandings: it was

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1. We have some precious insights through some of the letters retrieved by Jaime Nubiola and his colleagues at the university of Navarra: <http://www.unav.es/gep/CorrespondenciaEuropeaCSP.html> (See in particular the letters from Paris in 1875).

2. C. S. Peirce, “Comment se fixe la croyance,” *Revue Philosophique de la France et de L'Étranger* 6 (December 1878), 553-569; “Comment rendre nos idées claires,” *Revue Philosophique de la France et de L'Étranger* 7 (January 1879), 39-57, both are retrieved in W2. For the differences between the two versions, see Deledalle (1981). Passing assertions, by Peirce, that the English version is a translation from the French are not reliable. They were translated from the English by Léo Seguin, an anarchist who had taken part to the “Commune”.

3. A point confirmed to the author in private communication by Jacqueline Carroy, who did extensive work on these archives.

cutting this “Logic of science” from the examination of the modes of inference, from the theory of probability, from the problems of uniformity and of the order of nature. All this involves a significant kind of distortion. Contemporary readers should keep in mind that *The Popular Science Monthly*, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, and even in some respects, later, *The Monist*, the main philosophical sources for Peirce's thought, were not easily accessible at that time in France, so much so that these two papers remained for a long time the one and only source for Peirce in French.

This being said, the first French reception is paradoxical enough: as mentioned, Peirce's *Illustrations* have been published very early in French *but* until recently Peirce never reached the kind of recognition he enjoyed in Italy, and maybe in England (See here Maddalena and Hookway).⁴

In the English-speaking world, there were at least four of Peirce's contemporaries who had clearly perceived his genius while he was alive: W. K. Clifford in England, but he died at 33, James in America, but he clearly referred to Peirce to say something else (the very nature of the “else” in question being still a matter of controversy), Lady Welby in England, but it was very late in Peirce's life, to which one should certainly add Royce, with the same proviso. They had no French counterparts, there was no young French Ogden discovering the semiotic work. Peirce has been read, but Peirce's disciples, those at least who were able to gain some knowledge of Peirce's contribution to Logic, whether it was Royce himself or his students, have only had a dim echo in France. If we compare with another pragmatist, there was no one who played the active role Renouvier played for James, no equivalent of what Bergson would be to him after 1900.

Peirce was not totally absent, for sure, but he was definitely a minor, or even a “repressed,” voice in the pre-1914 literature:

(1) Paul Tannery devoted a few notes to Peirce's writings, and, even if he did not do Peirce full justice, he clearly perceived what was at stake in the new logic of relations that Peirce was building.⁵

(2) When the quarrel over pragmatism started, in particular after 1904, it would become a *topos* in each and every account to mention Peirce's role as the inventor of pragmatism and to speculate about the “larger” version James was offering, which confined Peirce into the role of a forerunner, a dangerous category indeed.

(3) Louis Couturat mentions Peirce in his accounts of symbolic logic and of the algebra of logic (Peirce, Ladd-Franklin and Couturat are even listed as coauthors of the entry on “Symbolic Logic” in Baldwin's *Dictionary*), but in a reading that was on the whole not favorable.⁶

(4) André Lalande, who was also interested in the ethics of terminology, devoted

4. For the early reception of Peirce, see Chevalier (2010).

5. See Paul Tannery, “Review of the Algebra of Logic,” *Revue philosophique* 1881, 646-50; Review of Peirce's “Small Differences of sensation,” *Revue philosophique* 1886, 386-87.

6. Bertrand Russell claims that Peirce was on the most original minds of the late XIXth century but, in his correspondence with Couturat, also claims that Peirce is the source of most of the bad ideas that James and Schiller are circulating (See to that effect an interesting, but very negative, exchange on Peirce between Russell et Couturat, Feb 3, 1899, Feb 11, 1899, Jan 17, 1901, May 7, 1905, May 12, 1905, June 28, 1905 in Schmid 2001).

a detailed paper to Peirce (Lalande, 1906), which is perhaps to only place in the French literature where Peirce is considered for himself, before 1914, but the larger framework of Lalande's thought, with its remnants of spencerianism certainly did not help Peirce's contemporaries to get a fine grasp of the powerful resources of his system, even if the "Pragmatism" entry in his dictionary is still a good starting point for the early history of the "two" pragmatisms, insofar as Peirce's and James's contributions are clearly disambiguated.

(5) Peirce's scientific correspondents, physicists and mathematicians, held him in high regard, but this was not enough to help with a philosophical recognition.⁷

Peirce was then confined to a marginal presence, and it is certainly ironic that the most famous pages dealing with Peirce were those where, under James's pen and to his own dismay, he was compared to Bergson, in Appendix B of *Pluralistic Universe*. The book was translated in France in 1910, and Peirce was put on a foothold with Bergson and James as far as "synectic pluralism" was concerned, and Peirce's tychism and synechism were compared to Bergson's "devenir réel" and Creative Evolution.

2. A Peircean Craze?

The next step occurs in the 1960s, when the publication of the *Collected Papers* was complete. There are mentions of Peirce before, when the first volumes of the CP were published, in the 1930s, but nothing comparable to the kind of hype Peirce "enjoyed" later in the 1960s.

It is always easy, with the benefit of hindsight, to tell in which ways earlier scholars were partial in their reading of Peirce, whether they emphasized Peirce's semiotics, his epistemology, whether they overlooked Peirce's account of continuity or his architectonics: one can easily start compiling a long series of "misunderstandings" or of "misuses." It is certainly true that the emphasis on Peirce's post-1880s doctrine of signs had shortcomings, but in the context of structuralism and post-structuralism, it is the aspect that was the most salient to contemporaries, in the same way perhaps as his formulations of the pragmatist maxim were germane to logical positivists in 1930s, and it prompted a good deal of interest in Peirce's texts.

During that period, Gérard Deledalle (1921-2003), who received a H. Schneider Award in 1990 for his outstanding achievements, has been a pivotal figure, as far as Peirce's recognition in France is concerned. His doctoral work – his Thèse d'État – was on Dewey's theory of Experience and was soon followed by his translation of the *Logic* and of *Democracy and Education*. But the French public, for a large part, has discovered Peirce through his edition/translation of Peirce's late texts on Semiotics (Peirce and Deledalle, 1978). Deledalle showed, through comments and annotations, that Peirce's semiotics was much more promising than the dualisms of the main reference for French structuralists and post-structuralists, Saussure.⁸ *Écrits sur le signe* is where Deleuze found one of the main inspirations for his twofold

7. Peirce's exchanges with his European colleagues are retrieved in W3 and W4.

8. The book had a companion, Deledalle and Réthoré (1979). On Peirce and Saussure, see Liszka (1993).

book on *Cinema*, in particular for the classifications of signs and for the obvious resources provided by a non-linguistic semiotics for film-analysis: Deledalle's volume is explicitly credited in the course that provided the materials for the book.⁹

It would be wrong, though, to make of this edited book the main reference about Peirce for the 1970s, for several reasons: it was anticipated by Deledalle's history of American philosophy (*La philosophie américaine*, 1954), which dealt with many other aspects, and by a very useful anthology on Pragmatism (Deledalle, 1971). Deledalle also stressed the relevance of Peirce to contemporary philosophical debates (Deledalle, 1990). But on the whole it is fair to say that it is Peirce as a semiotician who took the lion's share in that account, where semiotics is the foundation of the philosophical contribution. This course of events took place through research papers,¹⁰ through very large conferences at Perpignan mixing major philosophers and linguists (Balat *et al.*, 1992), through research activities in Deledalle's own center, IRSCE (Institut de Recherches sur la sémiotique, la communication, l'éducation), launched in 1974 and still active in the early 2000s. Members such as J. Réthoré, M. Balat, T. Jappy and other scholars have explored Peirce's contributions to phanerescopy, language, psychoanalysis and to philosophy of communication and have established a strong tradition of semiotic scholarship, with Peirce as the core reference. English-speaking readers will find in Deledalle's *C. S. Peirce's Philosophy of signs* (Deledalle, 2000) some samples of his works on Peirce. Finally, Deledalle's work was not confined to purely semiotic texts, he was in charge, with colleagues, of the translation of *In Search for a Method* (following roughly the plan designed by Peirce in the 1890s) and also, even if it was published posthumously, of a selection of entries from Baldwin's *Dictionary* (Deledalle *et al.*, 2007).

Still, a closer study of Peirce's reception in the late 1950s and in the 1960s, after the publication of the CP was completed, also shows that there was a Peirce "hype" before the translations of the 1970s and before the Pragmatism revival of the 1980s. If Peirce's doctrine of signs was the prominent feature during that period, one should mention at least three significant uses of Peirce before Deledalle's translations:

(1) Derrida has passing references to Peirce and is claimed to have worked on Peirce's texts when he was doing some research at Harvard in 1950. He quotes from Peirce in *De la Grammatologie* (in the chapter, "Linguistics and Grammatology"), where he came close to claiming Peirce as a deconstructionist: "Peirce – Derrida writes – goes very far in the direction that I have called the de-construction of the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign. I have identified logo-centrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for such a signified." (Derrida 1976, 49.) The question of whether Derrida's own notion of

9. See Deleuze's course "Cinéma cours du 23/11/82." Peirce is described as an "English" (sic) philosopher and founder of "semiology" (sic) and, if the CP are mentioned, the main reference goes to Deledalle's *Écrits sur le signe*. See also "Peinture cours du 05/05/81."

10. A list is given in Deledalle (2000) but a comprehensive list, with an online-access to the texts, would be useful. As far as the present writer is aware, there is a Deledalle's *Nachlass*, it would be useful to have an idea of the Peirce-related content.

deconstruction and differance could be thus traced to Peirce's unlimited semiosis has fueled fierce debates.

2) A mere glance at Lacan's seminar, for example, might comfort us into thinking that it is a merely "mercenary" use of Peirce's semiotic texts and of the notion of the "quadrant".¹¹ But a close reading of the 1972 sessions shows, for example, that there were also more extended readings of Peirce in the same seminar, for example through a presentation by François Récanati on zero-ness, on the potential, and continuity. Récanati, who was to become and is still a leading figure in philosophy of language and of mind, clearly traces today the intuition of his more recent works, including *Mental Files*, back to the work he made on Peirce very early in his career: "The basic idea can be traced to Peirce, one of the first philosophers I studied in my early years: there is an irreducibly indexical component in our thought, without which representation would not be possible. We think about objects in virtue of standing in certain relations to them. That's the core idea of the book."¹²

(3) Another telling use, more discreet but perhaps more decisive for the last part of our story, at least for the French philosophers versed into the analytic style, was Gilles-Gaston Granger, starting with his *Essai d'une philosophie du style* (Granger, 1968). If there are important differences between Granger and Peirce, in particular over the interpretation of triadicity, he credited Peirce with the most complete account of signs to date and many readers have discovered the semiotic triangle and Peirce's series of interpretants in Granger's book and in the following publications, which led to see that another, more systematic, use of Peirce, distinct from the semiotic craze, was possible. Granger stressed that how "fascinating" Peirce's texts on the signs were (*op. cit.*, 114) and for many readers and young scholars, it opened new avenues for rational thought.

3. Academic Recognition

For this last wave, which starts somewhere between the mid-seventies and the mid-eighties, my account will be more impressionistic.

It is fair to say that, contemporaneously with the ongoing chronological edition, Peirce reached the philosophy departments within the last three decades: dissertations were devoted to Peirce, books and numerous papers were published, seminars and international conferences were organized.

In addition to Granger's incentive, Jacques Bouveresse certainly was *the* key character in this new stage. Early in the 1970s, he stressed the resemblances between Peirce's fallibilism and Popper's philosophy of science (Bouveresse 1974), encouraging, this time also, a genuine and first-hand appropriation of Peirce's philosophy of science, as a resource against sundry kinds of relativism and irrationalism. Peirce was still

11. CP 2.455 *sq.*, see in particular the "Identification" seminar IX, Jan, 17, 1962. Peirce is introduced again in quite a very mysterious way in the session for May, 23, 1962, since Lacan never gives his name (an "American author"). There are several "bootleg" versions of the seminar, which is still in the process of publication. For a source, see Balat and Peirce (2000, 7-8).

12. F. Récanati, from a recent interview on his work, private communication.

present in Bouveresse's inaugural lecture, when, in the mid-nineties, he was elected at Collège de France. André de Tienne, now Director of the Peirce Project, recalls having first heard about Peirce, when he was 18, in a lecture by Bouveresse at Brussels¹³ and it would be interesting to know how many students experienced the same thing while Bouveresse was Professor at Paris I.

During this period, several influential works were published. For example Pierre Thibaud, at Aix-en-Provence, has contributed fundamental work on key notions of semiotics and the graphs (Thibaud 1975). It is important for the reader to know that, up to the 1990s, a Professor had to defend two dissertations: a *thèse de troisième cycle*, a relatively short dissertation, and, some ten or sometimes fifteen years later, a *thèse d'État*, exceeding 1000 pages sometimes, and providing a quarry of manuscripts, texts and books for decades. Christiane Chauviré, who published several papers on Peirce already in the 1970s, started her thesis in 1975 and defended it at Paris I in 1988, while she was a Professor at Besançon; the advisor was S. Bachelard and Chauviré provided an account of the semiotic and logic of vagueness, with a keen interest in the philosophy of mathematics. Parts of it are published in *Peirce et la signification* (Chauviré, 1995) and *L'oeil mathématique* (Chauviré, 2008), and some other papers, where Peirce and Wittgenstein, as well as Hintikka, Quine and Popper often dialogue, can be found in *Le grand miroir* (Chauviré, 2004). Chauviré made very frequent use of Peirce in her courses and seminars at Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne, and she contributed to the translation of Peirce's 1898 Lectures. She was also in charge of a seminar "Mental et social," with Sandra Laugier and Jean-Jacques Rosat, starting in 1996, the subject of which was mainly Wittgenstein, but where Peirce (as well as James) was frequently discussed. At Paris I, the Groupe d'Études sur le Pragmatisme et la Philosophie Américaine, active from 1999 to 2006,¹⁴ launched by Guillaume Garreta and myself, hosted many seminars and several conferences on Pragmatism and American philosophy (where R. Rorty, R. Brandom, R. Shusterman, R. Goodman, and others gave lectures), and featured work on Peirce (reading seminars, lectures by C. Hookway, I. Hacking, G. Heinzmann and others). I defended my dissertation on Peirce's account of belief there at Paris I in 2007. Now at École normale supérieure (Paris) since 2009, I am using Peirce on a regular basis in my courses and working, again, on Peirce's early texts.

Back to our story. Bouveresse was the advisor for Claudine Tiercelin's thesis on realism and the universals, defended in 1990, building on the metaphysical, and

13. "I was eighteen when I attended for the first time a public lecture by a professional philosopher at a university in Brussels. Professor Jacques Bouveresse had come from Paris to speak about connections between Peirce and Popper. Attending philosophy students were required to pick some subtopic from the lecture and explore it at greater depth. I thereupon went to the library, serendipitously found Gérard Deledalle's recent translation of Peirce's *Écrits sur le signe* (1978), and got my first exposure to Peirce, in complete innocence and ignorance. The paper I submitted summarized whatever I was able to understand, which could not have been much. But unbeknownst to me, a seed got planted deep into my mind's recesses, and it germinated three or four years later while I was studying at the Catholic University of Louvain." From an interview to be published in Bellucci – Pietarinen – Stjernfelt (eds), *Peirce – 5 Questions*, Automatic Press/VIP, 57.

14. Some of the archives can still be found at <http://pragmatisme.free.fr>.

in particular Scotist, dimension of Peirce's works. It was soon followed by two books on Peirce – a collection of essays (Tiercelin 1993b) and an introduction to Peirce (Tiercelin 1993a) – and numerous papers on Peirce defending a scientific and rationalist metaphysics, with a particular interest in the metaphysics of dispositions.¹⁵ Tiercelin taught at Paris I, at Paris XII, then at Collège de France where she was elected in 2010, and she was also, shortly, a C. S. Peirce Professor of Philosophy at Fordham, and in another register, President of the C. S. Peirce society. At Créteil and Collège de France, she advised several dissertations on Peirce (for example, O. Derooy in 2008 and J. M. Chevalier in 2010), and organized several conferences on Peirce. These were certainly the two places where Peirce was given full academic recognition but there were many other sites. To take just two very different instances, Bernard Morand at Caen used Peirce in an account of the logic of conception, Jérôme Havenel defended his Ph.D. on Peirce's account of continuity in 2006, with F. Nef (EHESS) as advisor. A comprehensive bibliography of French Peirce-related content would be extremely useful. But Peirce also turned into a key reference to non-peirceans, i.e. to major philosophers who were not working primarily on Peirce. One might hardly overemphasize the import of Descombes's *Institutions du sens* (Paris 1996), which is not a Peircean text. The main influences would rather be Wittgenstein and Dumont, but the book, through illuminating paragraphs on the irreducibility of triadic relations, such as the most of the mental and the social, on the externalism of the mental, revived an interest for Peirce in all the discussions on reductionism in the philosophy of mind and on the social dimensions of mind.

As regards translations, the reader of Peirce's 1868-69 and 1877-78 series had the *Écrits anticartésiens* (Paris, Aubier 1984); if she was curious also about the *Monist* series, she had *À la Recherche d'une méthode* (Pup 1993). The most comprehensive project, though, was the ten-volume edition of *Œuvres philosophiques* at Éditions du Cerf (Tiercelin – Thibaud 2002—). It is thematic, as the CP, but takes advantage of the philological work made by the Peirce Project for the chronological edition. It seems to be slowing down, though, after three volumes only. If the French philosophical contributions to the Peircean scholarship are often published in English, if Peirce scholars read Peirce in English, it is much easier for younger students and for the general public to have access to James and now to Dewey in translation than to Peirce, which might be a cause of concern for the future of Peirce's reception. Still, if the latter, as we suggested at the beginning, is just beginning, it relies on firm and wide-reaching foundations. Peirce should be soon where he belongs, with all the classics, with Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Frege, on library shelves, where he is often already, and also in undergraduate and graduate courses, where he might and should be more present.

15. For a list see http://www.college-de-france.fr/site/claudine-tiercelin/bibliographie__1.htm.

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