

A Semiotics of the Proxy

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This paper approaches the stand-for relationship that is fundamental to semiotics from the point of view of a specific semiotic situation: that of relationships of proxy whereby a person is authorised to act for an absent party. I hope to open up the question of what a semiotics of the proxy might look like, but also make some observations about semiotics-in-general as a discipline reliant on proxy relationships. The paper makes special use of Derrida's writings on communication and Peirce's theory of signs. My reading of Derrida and Peirce is not exhaustive, but rather seeks to highlight the way that both thinkers provide useful frameworks for discussing the example of the proxy, and the challenges it represents.

From a basic starting point, semiotics can be described as the study of signs, and the sign described as an entity that 'stands for' something else. As Eco writes, 'when—on the basis of an underlying rule—something actually presented to the perception of the addressee *stands for* something else, there is signification' (1979: 8). Peirce defines the sign as 'something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity' (1932: II 228). Articulated in this way, semiotics cannot be restricted to natural communication or systems of representation like speech or writing. As Chandler (1994) notes, 'semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as "signs" in everyday speech, but of anything which "stands for" anything else'. Sless refers to the 'stand-for' relation as 'ubiquitous', and from a semiotic point of view 'the basis of existence' (1986: 3).

While the stand-for relation may be basic to our understanding of the sign, it is also controversial, and political. Indeed, intense discussion surrounds the question of exactly how entities stand for something else, and the substance of this relationship. The well-known 'debate' between Jacques Derrida and John R. Searle highlights numerous issues in the stand-for relationship, among which we can highlight questions of plenitude and fulfillment, or the degree to which something fully stands for, or realises, something else (see Derrida 1988: 121). As Rosenthal notes, 'Derrida finds the signifier to be related to other signifiers in relations of difference rather than to be dependent on a relation to any particular signified and holds the system of signifiers to be inescapable' (1996: 20). Derrida's emphasis on the trace problematises any idea of the stand-for relation as one existing between two autonomous or fully present entities situated in a particular place (see Caputo 1987: 103–104).

Having introduced the stand-for relationship, my aim is to approach this issue

from the point of view of a different and specific semiotic phenomenon: that of relationships of proxy whereby a person is authorised to act for another, in the absence of the latter. One example of this phenomenon is a proxy wedding, which can be described as a marriage ceremony conducted in the absence of one of the contracting parties, who is represented by a proxy.¹ As recently as 1956, Australian foreign policy made marriage-by-proxy necessary because it prohibited unmarried women immigrating to the country. As a result, brothers or friends in the 'old country' would stand in for the groom during the nuptials. Focusing on the example of the proxy, I hope to draw some conclusions about this semiotic phenomenon, but also make some observations about semiotics-in-general as a discipline reliant on proxy relations. While the example of a proxy wedding or situation is specific, it is my contention that analysis of the proxy can open up a questioning of representational theories of communication, and the structure of representation. In this context, a proxy-semiotics would study the characteristics and effects of proxy relationships, as well as the processes through which the 'stand-for' relation, along with the domain of representation, is established and secured.

In the following discussion, I shall make special use of Derrida's writings on communication and Peirce's theory of signs. My reading of Derrida and Peirce is not exhaustive, but rather seeks to highlight the way that both thinkers provide useful frameworks for discussing the example of the proxy, and the challenges it represents. I should make two points of clarification at this point. Firstly, despite a tendency in the critical literature to place Saussurian and Peircean approaches in opposition to one another, it is not my intention to place Derrida and Peirce in an antagonistic relationship (see Hoopes, in Peirce 1991: 3).² My motivation for turning to these two philosophers is primarily out of a comparative interest. While Derrida's work is useful for discussing the threatening nature of proxy relationships within Western theories of representation, Peirce's work appears to be very comfortable with the idea of the proxy. Secondly, my use of the term 'semiotic' is clearly not equivalent to Peirce's '*semeiotic*', which is a 'formal doctrine of signs' (Peirce 1932: II 227), closely tied to logic, and the 'analytical study of the essential conditions to which all signs are subject' (Peirce 1998: 327). As a study of specific situations of the proxy, proxy-semiotics would not sit on the same branch as *semeiotics*. However, as I am suggesting that study of proxy dynamics can have more general implications for the way semiotics-in-general establishes the stand-for relation, proxy-semiotics might cross over into the domain of what Peirce calls 'speculative rhetoric', 'the science of the essential conditions under which a sign may determine an interpretant sign of itself and whatever it signifies ...' (1998: 326).

Part I

In his essay 'Signature, Event, Context', Derrida examines writing as a means of communication, of transmitting the content of the semantic message through time and space. In the course of this examination, Derrida comes to question some key aspects of communication as it is discussed and experienced today. Summarising his argument, especially in the section 'Writing and Telecommunication', we can say

that Derrida challenges a particular interpretation of communication as the representation and transmission of an ideal content. Derrida finds this interpretation so dominant that he suggests a close connection between ‘representation’, expression, and transmission, albeit in the context of his reading of an influential text by Condillac that is at the heart of the section (Derrida 1982: 312; 1988: 5).³

A key aspect of Derrida’s argument is his discussion of the idea of extension. Derrida locates this idea in the historiography of writing. Its most ‘self-evident’ formulation comes to us in the idea that writing ‘extends’ the field of oral and gestural communication (Derrida 1982: 311; 1988: 3). Writing thus extends the range of this field, making its content available across time and space. Derrida raises several problems with this formulation, however. Primarily, he is concerned with the way the idea of extension presupposes ‘a kind of *homogenous* space of communication’ (Derrida 1982: 311; 1988: 3). There are two aspects to this homogeneity. On the level of content, Derrida suggests that the idea of extension gives rise to a presumption that what is being communicated is the *same* content, that writing is simply a question of opening the ‘same field’ up to a broader range without transforming the content: ‘The same content, previously communicated by gestures and sounds, henceforth will be transmitted by writing ...’ (Derrida 1982: 312; 1988: 4). On the level of milieu, Derrida highlights how the idea of extension enacts a homogenisation of the ‘range’, emptying it of its variation. Derrida ties these two concerns of content and milieu together in the following passage:

When we say that writing *extends* the field and powers of a locutionary or gestural communication, are we not presupposing a kind of *homogenous* space of communication? The range of the voice or of gesture certainly appears to encounter a factual limit here, an empirical boundary in the form of space and time; and writing, within the same time, within the same space, manages to loosen the limits, to open the *same field* to a much greater range. Meaning, the content of the semantic message, is thus transmitted, *communicated*, by different *means*, by technically more powerful mediations, over a much greater distance, but within a milieu that is fundamentally continuous and equal to itself, within an homogenous element across which the unity and integrity of meaning is not affected in an essential way. (Derrida 1982: 311; 1988: 3)

In this passage, the idea of extension aligns writing closely to a spatialised idea of communication within a range, or across distance. At the same time, it establishes writing as a subordinate to communication by separating the discussion of the nature of content from the means of communication. Thus, Derrida writes, ‘the history of writing will conform to a law of mechanical economy: to gain the most space and time by means of the most convenient abbreviation; it will never have the least effect on the structure and content of the meaning (of ideas) that it will have to vehiculate’ (Derrida 1982: 312; 1988: 4).

To understand the structure or system that enables this view of communication—the subordination of writing to a particular idea of transmission—Derrida traces the links between representational thinking and communication. If writing is able to be

distanced from content, this is because content is determined through a different operation. ‘Representative thought precedes and governs communication which transports the “idea”, the signified content’ (Derrida 1982: 312; 1988: 4). In Derrida’s analysis of the passage from Condillac, he uncovers a (for Derrida) familiar operation whereby writing is subordinated to a more ‘natural’ process of imagining or picturing new signs. It is here that the indissociable connection between ‘representation’, expression, and transmission comes to the foreground. ‘The representational character of written communication—writing as picture, reproduction, imitation of its content—will be the invariable trait of all the progress to come’ (Derrida 1982: 312; 1988: 5). It is this representational character that produces a powerful and primary relationship between the idea with the ‘signified content’, such that communication, understood in terms of this relationship, can only be a question of getting one’s meaning ‘across’, and transporting this message. For Derrida, even though the means of communication may become more complex, the subordinate place of writing continues to be derived from the idea/sign relationship.

Representation, certainly, will be complicated, will be given supplementary weighstations and stages, will become the representation of representation in hieroglyphic and ideographic writing, and then in phonetic-alphabetic writing, but the representative structure which marks the first stage of expressive communication, the idea/sign relationship, will never be suppressed or transformed. (Derrida 1982: 312–313; 1988: 5)

By tracing the role of representational thinking in the discussion of writing and expression, Derrida is able to uncover fundamental links between our contemporary ideas about communication and notions of transportation. ‘Communication, hence, vehiculates a representation as an ideal content (which will be called meaning); and writing is a species of general communication’ (Derrida 1982: 314; 1988: 6). This system of representation informs our understanding of the proxy as a bearer of a function—of voting, or saying ‘I do’—but also explains its unusual status. The proxy is not just a messenger, but stands in for the absent party. The proxy is not a ‘vehicle’ in any straightforward sense, since the function of being a proxy must co-exist in the subject alongside other identities, desires, and passions.

Part II

Having identified the subordination of communication in a ‘vehicular’ relationship to representation as an ideal content, Derrida challenges the representational theory of communication by arguing that writing is not a species of general communication, and that such an understanding of writing and communication is ‘ideological’ (Derrida 1982: 314; 1988: 6). In the displacement that Derrida proposes,

writing would no longer be a species of communication, and all the concepts to whose generality writing was subordinated (the concept itself

as meaning, idea, or grasp of meaning and idea, the concept of communication, of sign, etc.) would appear as noncritical, ill-formed concepts, or rather as concepts destined to ensure the authority and force of a certain historic discourse. (Derrida 1982: 314–315; 1988: 7)

A key aspect of the displacement that Derrida seeks to enact is a rethinking of absence. In the representational theory of communication that Derrida derives from Condillac, communication is about making meaning known to absent persons. ‘One writes in order to communicate to those who are absent’ (Derrida 1982: 313; 1988: 5). In Derrida’s reading, this absence is characterised as ‘a continuous modification, a progressive extenuation of presence’, which can be taken to mean that this idea is in fact based on a conception of known or present meaning, which needs to be re-presented to others. As such, ‘absence’ is part of what Derrida refers to as the ‘reparation’ of presence, a ‘modification of presence’ designed to bring others into the fullness of meaning (Derrida 1982: 313; 1988: 5). Absence is thus admitted in this system only insofar as it constitutes a particular retracing of meaning.

In his reading, Derrida recognises other possible determinations of absence. There is, for example, ‘the absence of the sender, the addresser from the marks that he abandons, which are cut off from him and continue to produce effects beyond his presence and beyond the present actuality of his meaning’ (Derrida 1982: 313; 1988: 5). Indeed, against the notion of absence as the continuous modification of presence, Derrida sees absence as structural to writing. ‘Since every sign ... supposes a certain absence (to be determined), it must be because absence in the field of writing is of an original kind ...’. By attempting to see absence as structural to writing, Derrida suggests that the notion of the ‘absent addressee’ is in fact an idealised presence, ‘a presence that is distant, delayed, or, in one form or another, idealised in its representation ...’ (Derrida 1982: 315; 1988: 7). More radically Derrida suggests that for a system of writing to exist it must operate in the absence of both its addresser and addressee. This is, for Derrida, a principle of iterability:

My ‘written communication’ must, if you will, remain legible despite the absolute disappearance of every determined addressee in general for it to function as writing, that is, for it to be legible. It must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the addressee or of the empirically determinable set of addressees. (Derrida 1982: 315; 1988: 7)

For Derrida, this absence which is structural to writing breaks with the idea of absence as a continuous modification of presence. It is in fact ‘a break in presence’ (Derrida 1982: 316; 1988: 8).

Moving at this point to consider the example of the proxy, it is important to note that a proxy relationship can only be established on the basis of an acknowledgement of a radical absence. In the case of a proxy wedding, this is through the absence of one of the contracting parties. As such, a proxy arrangement involves an acknowledgement of a limit to presence. I refer to ‘a limit’ here to suggest that while

geographical distance, or government sanction, can impose a limit to presence, a limit that makes the proxy necessary, it is clear that the field of representation is able to compensate for this absence via the figure of the representative.

Indeed, an economic word such as ‘compensate’ is apposite in this context, in the sense that a wedding is a ritual of exchange. It is interesting to note in this respect that, as a word, ‘proxy’ is related to ‘procure’, its etymology deriving from Medieval Latin ‘procuratia’. A ‘procurator’, according to the Merriam–Webster entry, relates to an officer entrusted with the management of the financial affairs of a province, and often having administrative powers as agent of the emperor. These latter powers are akin to powers of proxy.

In terms of Derrida’s analysis, the proxy situation is unique in that it formally admits the absence of the addresser to an extent that is exceptional in terms of the representational theory of communication. Two aspects of the proxy situation are worth highlighting. The first is that it operates in that manner outlined by Derrida when describing absence as a continuous modification of presence. Indeed, through a complex operation, the absent participant is retraced into the scene of representation. A reparation of presence is enacted through the proxy. This leads to the second point, however, which is that for this retracing to operate, the desires of the proxy must be effaced. This effacement is complex. The proxy must represent the absent party ‘fully’ in legal terms, without contaminating the exchange. The proxy must be constrained from becoming the groom in the full sense. The proxy must give expression to the intentions of the absent party without ‘contaminating’ those intentions. An over-affectionate gesture, or prolonged kiss of the bride, could see the desires of the proxy conflict with those of the absent groom. At the same time, in terms of the system of communication more generally, the structural absence that is acknowledged by the presence of a third party must be effaced. The possibility that all written communication leads to a dependence on proxies (others, actors, writing, alternative forms of representation) must be suppressed. In other words, the challenge to ideal content that the proxy introduces must be counter-balanced by an institutional authority.⁴

It is on the basis of this interplay between retracing and effacement that we can suggest that the proxy dynamic is relevant to other semiotic situations. While the proxy is an obvious locus for this retracing and effacement by a greater authority, we can suggest, following Derrida, that it operates in communication more generally. A semiotics of the proxy, or proxy-semiotics, once attuned to this dynamic, could work the space between a theory of communication based on the continuous modification of presence and a grammatological theory based on the interrogation and affirmation of absence as central to writing. It should be pointed out that in describing proxy-semiotics in this way, I am operating in a space already occupied by several Derridean terms—writing, the trace, supplementarity—all of which are explicitly discussed in ‘Signature, Event, Context’. This said, while the section of Derrida’s essay that we have been discussing seeks to displace writing from its subordinate role to communication, a proxy-semiotics would describe an effect within communication, within the domain of semiotic exchange and signification, and possibly on a broader semiotic level.⁵

Part III

Charles S. Peirce's theory of signs provides a range of tools with which to construct a semiotics of the proxy, especially his discussion of 'Thirdness'. Peirce summarises the concepts of First, Second and Thirds in the following passage:

The First is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anything. The Second is that which is what it is by force of something to which it is second. The Third is that which is what it is owing to things between which it mediates and which it brings into relation to each other. (Peirce 1991: 188–189)

In these terms, the proxy could either belong to the class of Second or Third. As a Second, the proxy is an agent of the primary party, a delegate. However, there is a sense in which the proxy goes beyond being a delegate or representative because of the manner of their circumscribed participation in a particular action (such as voting), ceremony, or a semiotic relationship we might call 'getting married'. Here, the proxy enters the realm of Thirds. In the example of a proxy wedding, the proxy mediates between the parties, drawing them into relation to one another. In Peirce's semiotic, Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness correspond to the notions of Icon, Index and Symbol. As a Third, the proxy relationship corresponds to a symbolic relationship: and indeed this is appropriate in that a marriage is a symbolic event, involving acts of giving and exchange.

A Peircean reading of the proxy would, having located the proxy in the general category of Third, go on to carefully analyse the nature of this sign in terms of what Pharies calls 'the mode of apprehension of the sign itself', 'the relation between the sign and its dynamical object', and 'the relation of the sign to the immediate interpretant' (Pharies 1985: 30). Here, the analysis would draw on a range of trichotomies articulated by Peirce. In terms of the mode of apprehension of the sign, Peirce distinguishes between: qualisigns, relating to a quality that is a sign; sinsigns, an existent (singular) thing or event that is a sign; and legisigns, a law that is a sign, or a general type that signifies through an instance of its application (Peirce 1998: 291). We can suggest that a marriage ceremony, serving as a ritual of transition between one legal state and another, would qualify as a form of legisign. The relation between the sign and its dynamical object becomes relevant at this point. A Peircean object is not a Saussurian referent or signified. As Parmentier notes, 'in Peirce's model the object is what the sign is about and the meaning is "the significative effect of the sign" embodied in the interpretant' (1994: 10). Peirce draws a distinction between two kinds of objects: the *dynamical object*, which is not dependent on the sign for its reality, and which can only be known through collateral experience; and the *immediate object*, which is the mind's own representation of the dynamical object (Pharies 1985: 15). In a proxy wedding, the nuptials, undertaken before a priest or figure of authority, would form the content of the immediate object, but the marriage as an on-going economic, familial, sexual, and intimate bond would form a dynamic object.⁶ In the case of the relation of the sign to the interpretant, a similar set of distinctions operates between an *immediate* interpretant, all the information

included in the sign itself, a *dynamic* interpretant that draws on collateral knowledge, and the *normal* interpretant that consists of the eventual effect on the interpreter (Phariss 1985: 26).⁷ Clearly, the nature of the interpretants vary depending on the object (immediate or dynamical) under consideration.

In his discussion of Thirds, Peirce is vigilant to identify Thirds that simply break down into Dyads. Accordingly, he notes three grades of thirdness: a genuine kind, and two ‘degenerate’ types. ‘The first is where there is, in the fact itself, no thirdness or mediation, but where there is a true duality; the second degree is where there is not even true secondness in the fact itself’ (Peirce 1991: 195). This distinction is worth mentioning in this context, insofar as it is possible that in the case of the proxy relationship ‘true secondness’ is undermined. For example, given the absence of the groom at a proxy wedding, one could consider the groom present only by means of the third. In this way, the purpose of the proxy arrangement is to bolster the station of the second in order that the ritual of a wedding can occur.

Part IV

In terms of the relationship of absence and representation already discussed in the context of Derrida’s philosophy, Peirce’s theory of signs is apparently unique. Whereas the proxy embodies the threatening possibility that all communication leads to a dependence on proxies (others, actors, writing, alternative forms of representation), Peirce’s semiotics openly embraces this view. For Peirce, ‘every thought is a sign without meaning until interpreted by a subsequent thought’ (1991: 7). I write ‘apparently unique’ only because it needs to be remembered that, for Peirce, Thirds operate exclusively in a space of representation, whereas in my discussion of the proxy in the context of Derrida a limit to representation is invoked.

While Peirce’s work obviously provides a sophisticated set of terms for the analysis of proxy situations, I want to turn the analysis back on Peirce’s system in order to examine the manner in which the stand-for relationship is established and secured, and draw some insights into the nature of representation in Peirce’s work. On closer examination, what becomes evident is that Peirce’s notion of representation is closely tied to a logic of the proxy. The following passage is indicative:

[Every] comparison requires, besides the related thing, the ground [First or Object], and the correlate [Second or Sign], also a *mediating representation which represents the relate to be a representation of the same correlate which this mediating representation itself represents*. Such a mediating representation may be termed an *interpretant*, because it fulfils the office of an interpreter, who says that a foreigner says the same thing which he himself says. The term ‘representation’ is here to be understood in a very extended sense, which can be explained by instances better than a definition. In this sense a word represents a thing to the conception in the mind of the hearer, a portrait represents the person for whom it is intended to the conception of recognition, a weathercock represents the direction of the wind to the conception

of him who understands it, a barrister represents his client to the judge and jury whom he influences. (Peirce 1991: 28)

What this passage draws attention to is the complex relationship between the object and the interpretant in Peirce's theory. While Peirce's semiotics proves productive in thinking about proxies, we can suggest that his theory of signs seems to incorporate a logic of the proxy at the heart of its operations, namely in the distinction between object, sign and interpretant.

It will be useful at this point to re-visit Peirce's description of the operation of the sign,

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to something for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a kind of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen. (Peirce 1932: II 228)

In this passage, Peirce focuses on the complex relation between the object and interpretant, which may be 'equivalent' or 'more developed'. The complexity of this relation increases when one notes, as Parmentier does, that in Peirce semiosis is an infinite process, 'the three elements in the sign relation are never permanently object, representamen, and interpretant, but rather each shifts roles as further determinations and representations are realised' (Parmentier 1994: 27). For Parmentier, the fact that symbols can 'grow' in this way leads to an interest in the 'need for the object of the sign to "resist" the interpretant's powers of representation' (1994: 26). How does the object resist being supplanted by the interpretant? The solution requires a more formalised understanding of the stand-for relation that brings the object and interpretant into a quasi-proxy arrangement: 'the object specifies the sign in a particular way so that the sign determines that this third element (the interpretant) represents or stands for the *same* object in similar respects that the sign represents' (1994: 26).

In Peirce's work, terms like 'form', 'quality', and 'ground' are used to describe and account for the manner in which the object resists the interpretant, usually by determining the representamen in some way. But these do not account fully for the way in which the 'stand-for' relation works for Peirce, which in Parmentier's reading can be through a quality or form that allows the representamen to be 'taken for the object', leaving them 'practically interchangeable'; or a realm of common context in which a representamen occupies a particular spatial or temporal position; or a 'symbolic' mode of relation that occurs when the interpretant functions as a representamen in a further process or cycle of semiosis (Parmentier 1994: 27–28). Here, the interpretant could be said to become a proxy-object for a pre-existing object–representamen relation or, in Peirce's terms, a thought-sign that becomes the object of another thought-sign (Parmentier 1994: 28–29).

Part V

For Parmentier, the problem of how the object resists the interpretant is discussed through the a notion of semiotic mediation, in which vectors of determination and representation combine to constrain the interpretant. Here, determination relates to an action of the object on the interpretant. At the same time, on a different vector, the interpretant represents the object. We can suggest that this interplay of determination and representation is analogous to the interplay of retracing and effacement identified earlier in our discussion of the proxy in the context of Derrida's work. The vectors of determination and representation contribute to Peirce's understanding of how representation works. Returning to the passage quoted earlier, if 'a weathercock represents the direction of the wind to the conception of him who understands it', this is because the wind determines the direction of the weathercock in an indexical fashion, but also because the person understands this action as a representation. In his discussion of this aspect of Peirce's work, Parmentier notes a change in doctrine and terminology whereby the term 'medium for the communication of a Form' comes to replace the dual emphasis on determination and representation. It is as though the 'stand-for' relation becomes less important, and the functions of determination and action become more prominent than issues of representation. The editors of *The Essential Peirce*, volume 2, note that this shift is especially prominent in Peirce's 1906 writings, as in the following passage:

For the purpose of this inquiry a Sign may be defined as a medium for the communication of a Form. It is not logically necessary that anything possessing consciousness, that is, feeling of the peculiar common quality of all our feeling, should be concerned. But it should be necessary that there should be two, if not three, quasi-minds, meaning things capable of varied determination as to forms of the kind communicated ... As a *medium*, the sign is essentially in a triadic relation, to its object which determines it, and to its Interpretant which it determines. In its relation to the Object, the Sign is *passive*, that is to say, its correspondence to the Object is brought about by an effect upon the Sign, the object remaining unaffected. On the other hand, in its relation to the Interpretant the sign is *active*, determining the Interpretant without being itself thereby effected. (Peirce 1998: 544)

The term 'quasi-mind' arises in the same period, and seems to account for the way the 'Form' of an object is mobile as the interpretant becomes an object of a subsequent thought-sign. In other words, the term is introduced to help get away from the notion of the Form existing exclusively in the object, towards an idea of the Form being independent of the Sign in an on-going process of semiosis. In a related passage to the previous quote, Peirce writes that 'in order that a Form may be extended or communicated, it is necessary that it should have been really embodied in a Subject independently of the communication; and it is necessary that there should be another Subject in which the same form is embodied only in consequence of the communication' (1998: 477).

At this juncture, we can ask the question: does the shift in terminology towards 'medium of communication' lead to less of a reliance on proxy dynamics? On the one hand, as we have seen in our reading of Derrida, the term communication carries a great deal of baggage, especially in terms of the distinction between idea and sign-vehicle. Indeed, in a perhaps worrying gesture, Peirce's writing at this stage is peppered with terms like 'vehicle', 'extension', and 'transmission', suggesting a less sophisticated model of analysis. Parmentier, for example, laments the way that 'Peirce in the end reduced the role of signs to being blind vehicles for communication of meanings that do not influence' (Parmentier 1994: 44). On the other hand, however, Peirce's turn to 'communication' is not straightforward. He writes:

A medium of communication is something, *A*, which being acted upon by something else, *N*, in turn acts upon something, *I*, in a manner involving its determination by *N*, so that *I* shall thereby, through *A* and only through *A*, be acted upon by *N*. We may purposely select a somewhat imperfect example. Namely, one animal, say a mosquito, is acted upon by the entity of a zymotic disease, and in its turn acts upon another animal, to which it communicates the fever. The reason that this example is not perfect is that the active medium is in some measure the nature of a *vehicle*, which differs from a medium of communication in acting upon the transported object and determining it to a changed location, where, without further interposition of the vehicle, it acts upon, or is acted upon by, the object to which it is conveyed. A sign, on the other hand, just insofar as it fulfils the function of a sign, and none other, perfectly conforms to the definition of a medium of communication. It is determined by the object, but in no other respect than goes to enable it to act upon the interpreting quasi-mind; and the more perfectly it fulfils its function as a sign, the less effect it has upon that quasi-mind; and the more perfectly it fulfils its function as a sign, the less effect it has upon that quasi-mind other than determining it as if the object itself had acted upon it. (Peirce 1998: 391)

On reading this passage, what becomes apparent is that Peirce's conception of the medium of communication has little to do with an understanding of medium as a channel, or vehicle, for the transportation of ideal content. This is precisely why the example of a mosquito transporting a virus is imperfect. At the same time, we can suggest that while Peirce no longer relies on the 'stand-for' relation to explicate the working of the sign in this context, this does not mean that he has abandoned the notion that the interpretant acts in a proxy relation to the object. Indeed, based on a reading of the previous passage, it could be suggested that Peirce presupposes that the sign acts as a proxy for the object, determining the interpretant 'as if the object itself had acted upon it'. The constraints placed upon the sign by the object are consistent with a proxy dynamic insofar as fulfils a specific function of the sign, and this new framework allows for a conception of circumscribed action typical of proxy arrangements, such as in the formulation '*I* shall thereby, through *A* and only through *A*, be acted upon by *N*'.

Part VI

In the preceding discussion I have sought to use the specific example of the proxy not only to elaborate a semiotics of the proxy, but also elaborate on the extent to which semiotics-in-general relies on a proxy dynamic, the tip of the iceberg being the 'stand-for' relationship so fundamental to semiotics. The 'stand-for' relation in semiotics is clearly not simply a matter of a sign-vehicle bearing the content, nor is it just a matter of decoding, of 'taking' the sign as something. As is hopefully evident from my reading of Peirce, a more complex dynamic of representation is involved that begins to approach the status of a proxy relation. This interest in semiotics-in-general should not lead to neglect of specific examples of the proxy phenomenon (surrogacy is one such example that would re-pay further study in a different context). Nevertheless, what is apparent on both levels is the complex position of the proxy in the system of representation.

Re-visiting the scene of a conventional Western Wedding ceremony from the viewpoint of proxy relations can, for example, disturb the theatre of presence that usually characterises the ceremony. This example has already received some attention by readers of J. L. Austin's work, especially since he makes the 'I do' an example of explicit performative utterance: 'that is, the utterance which allows us to do something by means of speech itself' (Lane, quoted in Derrida 1982: 321; 1988: 13). Parker and Sedgwick present the following analysis:

Austin keeps going back to that formula 'first person singular present indicative active' ... and the marriage example makes me wonder about the apparently natural way the first-person speaking, acting, and pointing subject gets constituted in marriage through a confident appeal to state authority, through the calm interpellation of others present as 'witnesses', and through the logic of the (heterosexual) supplement whereby individual subjective agency is guaranteed by the welding into a cross-gender dyad. (1995: 10)

Their discussion focuses on the role of the 'witness' in enabling this performative/performance.

It is the constitution of a community of witness that makes the marriage; the silence of witness (we don't speak now, we forever hold our peace) that permits it; the bare, negative, potent but undiscretionary speech act of our physical presence—maybe even *especially* the presence of those people whom the institution of marriage defines itself by excluding—that ratifies and recruits the legitimacy of its privilege. (Parker & Sedgwick 1995: 10–11)

This passage provides interesting material for a proxy-oriented analysis, especially in the way it highlights the recruitment of witnesses, and the means by which subjectification in language is stabilised and secured. Far from being a contract between two individuals, the marriage ceremony can be re-read as a ceremony of and for the crowd.

It is interesting to note that while dictionary definitions may describe a proxy wedding as ‘a marriage conducted in the absence of one of the contracting parties, who is represented at the ceremony by a proxy’, we can also suggest that such definitions are themselves biased insofar as a proxy wedding could take place in the absence of *both* of the contracting subjects. The emphasis placed on the ‘cross-gender dyad’ in the wedding ceremony gives rise to a tremendous amount of effort in naturalising this structure, the pairing of Bride’s Maid and Best Man being one example. When this structure is disturbed, a need arises to reconstitute it. In a proxy wedding, it is commonplace, for instance, for the absent figure to be not only represented by the proxy-actor, but also by an image or photograph placed in the scene. Within the proxy wedding, it is possible to suggest a class of signs that explicitly do a special work in that context: formal signs on which strategies of effacement and retracing are specifically enacted. So-called spirit photographs in which the dead or absent are re-imaged into a family portrait form a related example. Images of a couple ‘made’ from two individual images while the parties were separated do a similar kind of work. Such signs operate doubly to authorise the scene or proxy operation (especially thanks to the photograph acting as a likeness), and to highlight or re-frame the artificial and unconventional nature of the situation. The emphasis on dyads in the marriage ceremony gives further impetus to my suggestion that the proxy is in fact a form of degraded Third, and that the purpose of the proxy arrangement is to bolster the station of the Second. This is not to suggest that the proxy remains solely in the class of Seconds, for it can be argued that the immediate object of the proxy is means of accomplishing a Symbolic relation (a Third), and forms a continuum with another dynamical object (which might be a state of being together in another country).⁸

The example of a proxy wedding, and the figure of the proxy, enables us to explore an alternative perspective on the way representation operates. This perspective can only travel so far given the very different operation of representation in Derrida’s and Peirce’s work. If Derrida’s work is often associated with a ‘crisis in representation’, it is interesting to note that, for one Peircean scholar, ‘there is no crisis in representation in Peirce’ (Santaella-Braga 2001). But the contrast can perhaps be overstated. While Peirce does not share Derrida’s attempt to displace the subordination of writing to communication, his challenge to the Idea/Sign relationship is isomorphic to Derrida’s gesture, even if Peirce attempts to articulate his semiotic within his unique definition of representation. As we have seen, the discussion of representation and signification in Peirce’s work is infused with a proxy-play that enables him to reconcile a representationalist theory with a complex theory of the sign in which absent signs are structurally central to communication. As already quoted, Derrida notes that the ‘representative structure which marks the first stage of expressive communication, the idea/sign relationship, will never be suppressed or transformed’. The place of proxy dynamics in Peirce’s theory of signs may give us some pause regarding this statement. In its reluctance to re-invest in notions of mind, representation, and genuine action, Derrida’s work apparently sits awkwardly with Peirce’s pragmatism. Derrida’s challenge to the fullness of signification and sense also stands as a challenge to any pragmatics in which action

completes signification or purpose in any final way. Of course, Peirce's pragmatics relies on its own radical theory of communication and determination, and this paper has sought to suggest that in the structure of Peirce's theory of the sign lies a complex proxy-play that places representation on a unique footing.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my colleagues in the Humanities at the University of Western Sydney, Blacktown Campus, especially Ruth Barcan, Chris Fleming, John O'Carroll, and Bob Hodge. My thanks also to the anonymous *Social Semiotics* referees for their useful suggestions.

Notes

- [1] Here I am paraphrasing the definition for 'proxy' and 'proxy marriage' (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate® Dictionary, <www.m-w.com>, Merriam-Webster, Inc.).
- [2] Petrilli, for example, draws a rigid distinction between the 'semiotics of the code and message' and 'the semiotics of interpretation' (in Delledalle 1990: xiii). Derrida draws greatly on Saussure, and pays some attention to Peirce (Derrida 1976: 48–49). Rosenthal (1996) explicitly brings Derrida and Peirce together around the theme of time, but in a way that situates Peirce as the solution to a major problem in Derrida.
- [3] The version of 'Signature, Event, Context' used in this paper is the Bass translation from *Margins of Philosophy* (Derrida 1982), although I present reference details to the Weber translation in *Limited Inc* (Derrida 1988).
- [4] In other sections of 'Signature, Event, Context', Derrida examines this authority in terms of the work of the signature.
- [5] It is clear that Derrida is interested in this level when he refers to the 'semiotic and internal context' (1982: 317, 1988: 9) of the written code. His is a more restricted use of semiotic than Peirce would grant the term. It should be noted that Derrida begins 'Signature, Event, Context' with remarks that suggest that his analysis of 'communication' relates to 'nonsemiotic' senses of this word as much as semiotic.
- [6] My thanks to the anonymous *Social Semiotics* reviewer for this point.
- [7] In a letter to Lady Welby, Peirce offers a different classification of: the *intentional* interpretant, determined by the utterer; the *effectual* interpretant, determined by the interpreter; and the *communicational* interpretant or *commens*, which is the combined mind of the utterer and interpreter required for communication take place (see Peirce 1998: 478).
- [8] My thanks to the anonymous *Social Semiotics* reviewer for this point.

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