



## Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics

---

Charles Sanders Peirce and Eugen Gomringer: The Concrete Poem as a Sign

Author(s): Mary Ellen Solt

Source: *Poetics Today*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Poetics of the Avant-Garde (Summer, 1982), pp. 197-209

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772399>

Accessed: 28/12/2014 01:08

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Duke University Press and Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Poetics Today*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

---

# Charles Sanders Peirce and Eugen Gomringer

*The Concrete Poem as a Sign\**

MARY ELLEN SOLT

Comparative Literature and Polish Studies, Indiana

---

Throughout his manifestoes and theoretical writings, Eugen Gomringer, founder of the European concrete poetry movement, emphasizes the "sign character" (*zeichencharakter*) of the concrete poem, referring to the poems themselves as "sign schemes" (*schemata von zeichen*) or "systems" (*systeme*) (GWKD:286).<sup>1</sup> But there is no evidence that he ever made a systematic study of semiotics. Implied throughout his statements, though, is a semiotic theory of the poem that needs only to be articulated, and at some points clarified and corrected, to make evident striking parallels with the theory of signs of Charles Sanders Peirce. Gomringer himself suggests that the contemporary poet might well investigate the new discipline of semiotics. My purpose is to take him up on this suggestion and to attempt a reading of his poem "ping pong" applying Peirce's theory of signs.

Peirce's view of the process of semiosis is triadic. What is involved is the mediation of a sign or *representamen* between the *object* it represents and the *interpretant*. Peirce defines the sign or *representamen* as "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity." The "something" for which the *representamen* (or sign) stands is its *object*. It is not necessary that it stand "for that object[. . .]in all respects" (2:228),<sup>2</sup> but it should bring about in the mind that perceives it an *interpretant* that can function as "the sign of that [object] of which it is itself the sign" (M599:RR38).<sup>3</sup> The *representamen* and the *interpretant* will stand in a "cor-

---

\* Paper prepared for the Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association in Budapest, Hungary, August 1976. A shorter version was read and was published in proceedings of the Congress.

1. "vom vers zur konstellation," Gomringer 1969b. Further references to Gomringer's writings from this manifesto will be noted parenthetically in the text thus: GWxx:000.

2. Peirce 1931-1935, 1958. Further references to these volumes will be noted parenthetically in the text by volume and page number: 0:000.

3. Peirce, unpublished manuscripts. Further references to Peirce's unpublished manuscripts will be noted parenthetically in the text: M000:000.

responding" relationship to the *object* (Peirce 1953:11), then, if the *representamen* functions properly as a sign. This implies, theoretically, an endless series of interpretants or explanations which should "ultimately reach a Sign of itself" (2:230). The interpretant of a poem, then, is a non-formal, probably more verbose explanation of the aesthetic sign that should in some way be able to substitute for it as a representation of the object being represented by both.

Peirce distinguishes three major divisions of signs: (1) the sign in relation to its "own material nature"; (2) the sign in relation to its object; and (3) the sign in "relation to its signified interpretant," that is to say, the sign as it is represented by its interpretant (Peirce 1953:12, 51; see also 2.243ff). The first major trichotomy, that concerned with the "mode of being of the sign" (1953:31), Peirce divides into *qualisigns*, *sinsigns*, and *legisigns*. When a quality acts as a sign, it must be embodied; but this embodiment does not affect its self-containedness, so Peirce denotes it as a *qualisign*. Our unanalyzed aesthetic response to the poem "ping pong" or any other work of art is a *qualisign* (2:244). A *sinsign* is defined by Peirce as "an actual existent thing or event which is a sign" (2:245). "Ping pong" as an existent, as a material thing in itself, is a *sinsign* that includes its aesthetic quality as a *qualisign*. A *legisign* is "a law that is a Sign." All words are legisigns in their dictionary meanings. Only when they are written, spoken or brought into being through use in some other way, do they exist. Gomringer knew this intuitively or conceptually when he wrote of the word: "whenever spoken and wherever written it exists." ("wo immer es fällt und geschrieben wird" – GWVK:280) These individual embodiments of *legisigns* Peirce denoted as *replicas*. *Replicas* are *sinsigns*; a *legisign* may have any number of them (2:246). The poem "ping pong" is made of six *replicas* (words) of the *legisign* "ping pong," but in its own mode of being, as a unique object in space, it cannot be classified as a law or *legisign*.

The second major trichotomy, which involves the relationship of the sign to the object it represents, Peirce considered to be "the most fundamental [division of signs][. . .]into Icons, Indices and Symbols" (2:275). "The *Icon*," he states, "has no dynamical connection with the object it represents; it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness. But it really stands unconnected with them." "The *index*" on the other hand, "is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established." "The *symbol*," he states, "is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist" (2:299).

ping pong  
ping pong ping  
pong ping pong  
ping pong

When we begin to read "ping pong" as a poem, we are immediately delighted by it as an imitation of the game ping pong. Its percussive, alliterative "p's" and alternating "i's" and "o's" coupled with the repeated final alliterative "ng's," bounce back and forth within the visual structure like a ping pong ball in an actual game. As a sign, then, or representamen, the poem "ping pong" exhibits qualities that are like those of its most obvious "dynamoid," (Peirce 1953:31) or real, or "dynamical" (4:536) object; so Peirce would say that the modality of the sign is "concretive" (1953:31). And since the "immediate" (1953:31) object, the object as it is represented in the poem, is represented as a "possible," meaning that the dynamoid object has been "indicated[. . .]by means of its Qualities," he would label the sign a "descriptive" (1953:31). In other words, Gomringer has made an *icon* (or image) because his sign relates to its dynamoid object on the basis of "likeness" or "resemblance" (M491:1, 2, 4).

Peirce tells us that the *icon*, when it is functioning as a sign, is determined "by partaking in the characters of the object" (4:531); but it "would possess the character which renders it significant" as a sign "even though its object [the centaur, for example] had no existence" (2:304; M307:10). Put another way, this means that the poem "ping pong" would be there on the page in full possession of its visual and sound qualities even if we were unaware through ignorance of the linguistic code that it was a representamen of the game.

Peirce seems to equate "icon" with "image," but does not insist that the image be "visual" (M599:RR41). All he insists upon is that the *icon* represent its object "by virtue of being like it, whether qualitatively or by the analogy of its parts" (M842:G31).

The *icon* as "pure" or "immediate" image exists "by virtue of characters which belong to it in itself as a sensible object" (4:447; M599:RR41). It makes "no profession of being a sign" (M599:RR41). The poem "ping pong" can substitute for the game "ping pong" only because we notice a resemblance that is in "the nature of an appearance." Strictly speaking this means that the *icon* actually "exists only in consciousness" (4:447). For instance, we have already determined that, as a physical existent, "ping pong" is a *sin*sign. Our perceiving of it as an image and our discovering of its iconic identification with its object happens entirely in our minds. Peirce explains it this way: "It is the appearance that constitutes the image; and any physical existence that may be connected with it is extraneous to it [the physical matter of it is no part of the *representamen*]" (M491:2-3; Draft, 2). The *icon*, then, is an *icon* of its object "by virtue of being interpreted as such" by the mind that discovers that it possesses a "quality in consequence of which [it] may be taken as representative of anything that may exist that has that [same] quality" (M462:86). Further, it "determines whatever interpretant it may determine by virtue of its own quality" (M599:RR43).

Although we have said that Peirce does not restrict his concept of icon to the visual image, the thrust of his discussion is necessarily oriented in that direction because, as he notes, iconic thinking is carried on predominantly by means of visual images in the mind. Iconic thinking is, though, highly complex—it operates on many levels—as we shall see when we attempt to

interpret "ping pong" as an *icon*. Basically the poem could not operate as an iconic sign at all if we did not have stored away in our memories an image of a ping pong game being played: its sights, its sounds, its movements, players, a table, a net, paddles, and above all the distinctive textural qualities and behavior of the ping pong ball (see M599:RR6-10). This image is called up in our minds because, as we have seen, the poem, as an audio-visual object, embodies sounds, tensions and movements which are like the sounds, tensions and movements that we recall as qualities of a real game of ping pong. But we do not yet know why. And we cannot know until we participate in what Gomringer calls the "game activity" (*denkgegenstand-denkspiel* – GWVK:280) of the poem by studying its structure and technique. At this point we move to a more abstract level of iconicity, icons of "relations" (M492a:22).

We have seen that in its mode of being as a *sinsign*, "ping pong" embodies its aesthetic *qualisign*, which Peirce tells us is "necessarily an icon" (2:254). The aesthetic *qualisign* of any work of art is the sign of its form. "No pure forms are represented by anything but Icons," according to Peirce (4:544), not that "a Form possesses, itself, Identity in the strict sense" (4:530). Still, he goes on to say, "the Form of the Icon [. . .] that which is displayed before the mind's gaze [. . .] is also its [immediate] object," the dynamoid (or real) object as represented in the sign (4:531). The dynamoid object on the level of audio-visual iconicity is, as we have seen in the poem under consideration, the game of ping pong. When we move to the level of structural or formal iconicity, the dynamoid object becomes as well what Ezra Pound called, when he defined the image, "an intellectual and emotional complex" (Pound 1954:4), which is expressed by the image as an audio-visual-semantic-structural-totality. Peirce does not attempt to deal with art forms *per se*, but it seems legitimate to extend his concept of icons of relations, which he often illustrates in relation to diagrams and mathematical formulas, to include them. "Every algebraic equation," Peirce writes, "is an icon, in so far as it *exhibits*, by means of the algebraical signs (which are not themselves icons), the relations of the qualities concerned" (2:282).

A much higher degree of relational iconicity than this is exhibited in the formal structure of "ping pong." Association of words by resemblance is carried to the extreme of identity, for we have but one word, which is repeated. The interesting thing here is that the word "ping pong" in itself is iconic. Repeating it, Gomringer intensifies its iconicity, and at the same time preserves its absoluteness in terms of its qualities, which reside in p, i, o, n, and g in particular combination. But how he repeats it is crucial. This can be seen if we think of the poem as having an underlying rectangular grid entirely filled in by the word:

pingpongpingpongping  
 pongpingpongpingpong  
 pingpongpingpongping  
 pongpingpongpingpong

Here "ping pong" is repeated ten times, and it has lost even the iconicity we perceive when we pronounce it normally once. Gomringer, to make his

poem, repeats it five times, removing the other five repetitions from the grid in an ingenious way which suggests a ping pong net with "ping" at the beginning of the poem bouncing over it to "pong" at the end of the poem and, by inference, back to "ping" at the beginning again. Repeating the word five times has intensified its audio iconicity. Its total iconicity is further intensified by an ingenious syntax which plays the word in alternation against itself and against page space, permitting what Gomringer calls *inversion*, that is, multidirectional reading (GWVK:281). We can see that the likeness of the poem "ping pong" to the game "ping pong" is established in its form, which presents an *icon* of relations, a *qualisign* of its aesthetic excellence, that is embodied in its objective being as a *sinsign*. And very abstractly it is an *icon* of the creative processes of the mind that created it.

"The chief need for Icons," Peirce writes, "is in order to show the Forms of the synthesis of the elements of thought." Language in its natural state, he points out, exhibits certain iconic qualities: (1) "the arrangement of words in the sentence [. . .] must serve as *Icons*, in order that the sentence may be understood"; (2) "in the precision of speech, Icons can represent nothing but Forms and Feelings." But where a more synthetic kind of thinking is required, as in mathematics, logic, and (may we add?) poetry and other art works, diagrams and forms are required (4:544).

Since the modality of "ping pong" as a sign is so strikingly "concrete," to use Peirce's terminology (1935:31), would we be justified in attempting to push its meaning beyond the literal reference to the game of ping pong made by its "descriptive" (1935:31) iconic representation? Certainly if the aim of poetry is to delight, it is delightful enough on this literal level of the concrete real to stand as an excellent poem. But if we are to read it as a sign of the general concept "poem," we have the obligation to investigate the possibility that Gomringer intends the poem to be a metaphor, which is the kind of *icon* by analogy we expect to find above all in poetry. Ping pong is a game. It is by now a cliché to use the metaphor "the game of life," but it still stands up well as an *icon*. Could it be that Gomringer is giving us the same old cliché in a revolutionary new form? If so, he will have to indicate that this is so. As a matter of fact, he has, very subtly in his technique, by emphasizing the alternation of the "i" (I) and the "o" (the zero, nothingness). The play between these two polarities is what the game of life is all about, and the poem begins with the "i" motif and ends with the "o." Other metaphorical associations can be added: thesis-antithesis, yin-yang, all binary relationships. That Gomringer intends this metaphorical-iconic level of interpretation is indicated by his statements that "Concrete Poetry demands a deeper foundation. It must [. . .] be closely bound up with the challenge of individual existence" (*konkrete poesie aber verlangt eine tiefere fundierung. Sie muss, meine ich, eng verknüpft sein mit der herausforderung der individuellen existenz*—GWJ:297) and that his innovation of *inversion* is related "[. . .] to one of the intellectual principles of existence," namely, "thesis-antithesis" (Gomringer 1967).

As we have been interpreting the poem as an icon, we have been creating its interpretant, most specifically its dynamic interpretant (8:314, 315). How far does the poet have the right to expect us to go? We have not yet



considered the question of purpose, which leads us into the domain of what Peirce denotes as the logical or final interpretant, which in all likelihood we will not be able to formulate (8:314, 315). But since Gomringer has chosen to make a new kind of poem with striking "sign character" (*zeichencharakter*—GWVK:277), and since he has published his manifestoes and theoretical statements, it is undoubtedly the case that the meaning of the poem "ping pong" includes his purpose or reason for creating this new kind of poetic form.

Throughout Gomringer's critical writings we find statements relating to his belief that, to put it in Peirce's terminology, language stands in an iconic relationship to culture. Changes in the social structure bring about changes in our views relating to language and usage, he tells us (see GW23:287). The principal supporting argument in defense of his new concept of the poem in his first manifesto, *vom vers zur konstellation* (1954) is that if poetry is to serve an "organic function" (*organischen funktion*—GWVK:280) in contemporary society, it must participate in contemporary "linguistic processes" (*sprachvorgänge*—GWVK:280); and it must pattern itself after the quick, direct messages that characterize contemporary modes of communication: the phone call as opposed to the letter; the radio (and we can add television) as opposed to the newspaper; signs in airports; traffic signs; headlines; slogans (GWVK:277ff).

Gomringer speaks of the tendency towards "structural simplification" (*formalen vereinfachung*) observable in contemporary languages and of the use of "reduced, concise forms" (*reduzierte, knappe formen*) such as "shorter clusters of letters" (*kleinere buchstabengruppen*) to express "lengthy elaborations" (*längere ausführungen*); and of the sound/content combinations and graphic/typographical presentations of headlines (*schlagzeilen*) and slogans (*schlagworte*) which could be "models for a new poetry" (*muster einer neuen dichtung*—GWVK:277-278). A poem made in conformity with these models becomes in turn a more highly formalized model, a "spiritual and material structure" (*geistige und materielle struktur*—GWKD:286) built in accordance with the "model character" (*vorbildlichkeit*) of the poet's "rules" (*spielregeln*). Thus constructed from the living language of its time, the concrete poem can in turn "have an effect upon everyday language" (*kann das neue gedicht die alltagssprache beeinflussen*—GWVK:280). This reciprocal relationship between poetry and everyday language can only be possible if they are like each other. The likeness where Gomringer is concerned seems to be mostly on the iconic or formal level of thought structures. The poem derives its "configuration" (*gestaltung*—GWVK:280) through a "thematic-conceptual association" (*eine gedanklich-stoffliche beziehung*—GWVK:280) of the words so that the "sign scheme" (*schemata von zeichen*—GWKD:286) of the poem presents itself "as an object for contemplation and use, an object of thought and game for thought" (*es wird zum seh- und gebrauchgegenstand: denkgegenstand-denkspiel*—GWVK:280) that "permits the formation of series of verbal concepts," (*erlaubt die reihenbildung der wortbegriffe*—GWVK:281) or, we could say, a series of interpretants. Perhaps Gomringer's intuitive grasp of the concept of the poem as a sign of its culture is most clearly stated when he tells us that the poem should "serve society" (*der gesellschaft dienen*) by taking on the role of

a "representation" (*stellvertretung* – GWVK:278). It is thus, as an icon of the linguistic processes of its time, that Gomringer's concrete poem becomes a "functional object" (*gebrauchsgegenstand* – GWG:291).

But Gomringer's implied concept of the concrete poem as an *icon* of the contemporary world extends beyond this fundamental reciprocal relationship with contemporary language. As a thought structure whose method of construction is based on "the art of combination" (*kombinatorik* – GWVK:282), the concrete poem, also, according to Gomringer, exhibits an influence directly from mathematics. Further, in its thought processes and in its method of construction, it establishes a connection between "artistic intuition" (*künstlerische intuition*) and "scientific specialization" (*wissenschaftlicher spezialismus* – GWG:293) blending "mechanical and intuitive principles" (*mechanistisches und intuitives prinzip* – GWVK:282). This can be seen in the machine-like precision of "ping pong." Gomringer insisted that the poetry of our century must manifest itself in "synthetic, rational structures" (*synthetisch-rationale gebilde* – GW23:290) which would place it in iconic relationship with the new synthetic-rational mentality (see GW23:288). Gomringer was convinced that by means of a new poetics based on "phonological-morphological reciprocity" (*phonologisch-morphologischen wechselbeziehungen*) the poet could convert the "new world experience" (*neues welterlebnis*) into linguistic structures (GW23:291). He felt that his new poems in their iconic relationship with linguistic science – which, considering their sign character, means semiotics – could reach out to new "semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic possibilities" (see GKB: unpagd).

The concrete poem as a visual object is also considered by Gomringer to be in analogous (or iconic) relationship with the other contemporary arts: industrial and graphic design, painting, sculpture and architecture where, as in the concrete poem, "the visible form [. . .] is identical to its structure" (*und wie in der architektur gilt für die sichtbare form der konkreten dichtung, dass sie gleich deren struktur ist* – GWKD:286). Concrete poetry as practiced by Gomringer, who acknowledges the direct influence of concrete art (GKB: unpagd), gives us icons similar not only to that art but of a general process of our century: "the great cleansing process in art and literature that has permitted the basic structural elements to be rediscovered" (*einem allgemeineren prozess: dem grossen reinigungsprozess, der da wie dort die elemente des aufbaus neu entdecken liess* – GWVK:279).

The new rational-synthetic view of the world Gomringer wishes his poems to represent in their method of construction will require a "universal common language" (*universale gemeinschaftssprache* – GW23:290). So in some respects the concrete poem, which Gomringer believes is in the "process of realizing the idea of a universal poetry," is an icon of the future (*die konkrete dichtung [beginnt] die idee einer universalen gemeinschaftsdichtung zu verwirklichen* – GWKD:287). This contradicts Peirce's view that "an icon has such being as belongs to past experience" (4:447) unless we consider that we cannot understand the new poem as icon of the future apart from the context of the past.

Perhaps the iconic relationship of the concrete poem to the contemporary world is most clearly exemplified in Gomringer's conception of the



ideal model for the new universal poetry he envisions: the international airport. Looking back approximately fifteen years, he speaks in 1969 of what we might call his master icon for the concrete poem (Gomringer 1969a:10):

Im Flughafen, in dem die Verbindungen der ganzen runden Welt hergestellt werden, in dem es nur wichtige und relativ wenige, dafür unzweideutige, klare Besschriftungen, Signale und Zeichen gibt, die jedermann, gleich welcher Muttersprache verständlich sein müssen. Der Flughafen spielte die Rolle eines idealen modells.

(Airports I saw as those places in which connections were made to the far corners of the earth, places in which only a limited number of necessarily unambiguous instructions, signals and signs were tolerated, which could be understood by everyone, regardless of his mother tongue. The airport played the role of ideal [perfect] model.)

It is obvious from the above interpretant, which is exhaustive but by no means final, that the dynamoid object of the poem/sign "ping pong" is (to expand Gomringer's term) a psychoculturaltechnicalphysical concentration (*psychophysische Konzentrationen*—GW23:187) and not just the game ping pong. The poet has, in fact, brought into focus in this small image his views of life, the art of poetry and the place of the poem in the contemporary world and stamped it indelibly with the quality of his mind; for to use his own words: "If the poet's attitudes are positive and synthetically rationalistic, his poetry will be so" (*seine lebenshaltung ist positiv, synthetisch rationalistisch. so auch seine dichtung*—GWKD:286).

It is possible that to be more precise we should classify "ping pong" as a *hypoicon*. Peirce has made this distinction to include "any material image, as a painting [. . .] in itself, without legend or label" (2:276). And he subdivides the term: hypoicons "which partake of simple qualities [. . .] are *images*; those which represent the relations [. . .] of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts, are *diagrams*; those which represent the representative character of a representamen by representing a parallelism in something else, are *metaphors*" (2:277). We have seen that "ping pong" represents its object as two kinds of *hypoicons*: as an image and as a metaphor.

Because the *icon* as a mere logical possibility can give us no assurance that its object actually exists, it needs an *index* to bring it into relation with the actual world. "The same sign," Peirce tells us, "may be at once a likeness and an indication." However, "the offices of these orders of signs are totally different" (M404:40).

He defines the *index* as "a Representamen whose Representative character consists in its being an individual" existent (2:283): "a real thing or fact." It "has the being of present experience" (4:447) in dynamical relation with the real world.

Peirce designates the "characteristic function of an *index*" as "that of forcing the attention upon its object" (2:357). The existence of the object is absolutely crucial to the existence of the index as a sign (unlike the icon), but it does not require the operation of an interpreting mind (2:304; M142, no page). The connection between the index and its object may be "natural, or artificial, or merely mental" (M142, no page).

Peirce classifies some indices as "genuine," others as "degenerate." In order to have a genuine index the "Index and its Object must be existent individuals (whether things or facts), and its immediate Interpretant must be of the same character." If representamen as an existent is a "reference," we have a degenerate index. "Any individual is a degenerate Index of its own characters" or the qualities it contains. And "since every individual must have characters, it follows that a genuine Index may contain [. . .] an Icon as a constituent part of it" (2:283).

As an existent that forces our attention upon its object, another existent, the poem "ping pong" is, before it is anything else where the second major trichotomy is concerned, an indexical sign. The iconic dimensions we have noted are contained by the index and give it heightened meaning. As was the case with the iconic dimension, the poetic structure serves also to intensify the indexical character of the word "ping pong," which is an existent or *sinsign* in its being as a replica of the legisign "ping pong."

Gomringer's statements indicate that (although he does not use the term) he was most aware of the indexical sign character of his poems and that he, in fact, sought to intensify it. For when he tells us that concrete poems should be "as easily understood as signs in airports and traffic signs," (*wie anweisungen auf flughäfen oder strassen-verkehrszeichen*—GWG:292) in speaking of the poem as "unreflected" (*unreflektierte*—GWKD:286) information; and when he tells us that our response to its "sign character" should be like our response to "a signal which—like a command—can only be followed by a purely or predominantly sensory reaction" (*wenn ihr schriftlicher zeichencharakter zugleich signal ist, auf das—ähnlich wie auf ein kommando—eine nur oder vorwiegend sensorische reaktion erfolgen kann*—GWKD:286), he is giving us a description of a response to an indexical sign that closely parallels that of Peirce (see 5:475; 2:287). The airport model, although it is in its cultural reference an icon, underscores Gomringer's indexical emphasis, for airports function as indexical sign systems.

The third type of sign included in the second major trichotomy, which is based upon the relationship of signs to their objects, is the *symbol*. Peirce defines the *symbol* as "a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object." The symbol, therefore, in its own mode of being as a sign that represents "a general type or law," is a legisign that "acts through a Replica" (2:249). The "Representative character" of the *symbol*, according to Peirce, "consists precisely in its being a rule that will determine its Interpretant" (2:292).

Words are symbols. And, as is the case with "many symbols," the meanings we attach to them are "mainly arbitrary" (M492b:34), although anyone sensitive to the iconic dimensions of language knows that this cannot be entirely the case. "Ping pong" in its dictionary meaning is a noun that is both a symbol and in its sound qualities an icon. It also points as an index to the thing it represents. So, since a *symbol* in itself is a *legisign*, the word "ping pong" fits Peirce's sixth classification: "Rhematic Indexical Legisign" (2:259). The term "rhematic" is used by Peirce to indicate iconic representation of the interpretant.

A *symbol* in its own nature as a *legisign*, apart from any iconic and indexi-

cal characteristics it may possess, represents its object, according to Peirce, "independently alike of any resemblance or any real connexion" (M675:18). It "is a sign which represents an object by virtue of having a character imputed to it by an interpreting mind." The object to which the symbol as a general refers "is of a general nature" (the word defined as the idea of a ping pong game); so it can only have "its being in the instance it will determine" (the word "ping pong" each time it is printed, pronounced or whatever) (2:249). The "complete immediate Object" (the object as it is represented in the sign) "or meaning" of a symbol "is of the nature of [ . . . ] a law or regularity of the indefinite future" (2:293). It is inconceivable that at any future time the symbol "ping pong" would cease to be defined as it is presently defined.

So its immediate interpretant – our understanding of the symbol in its own nature as a sign – "must be of the same description" (2:293) as that presented in discussing the relationship of the symbol to its object. For, as we have seen, the interpretant must be able to stand in the same relationship to the object as the representamen. Neither the icon nor the index requires an interpretant, but, as Peirce conceives of it, a symbol would "lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant" (2:304). We have, then, the symbol (or definition) of "ping pong" which denotes its object – the word "ping pong" – and in turn determines its interpretant, another version of the definition or idea of ping pong.

We have established that the *symbol* as a *legisign* can exist only in individual replicas of itself, or as it is embodied in individual sinsigns. Peirce sometimes uses the term "token" in place of "replica" to denote "a sign of the Type and thereby the object the Type signifies" (4:537). Replicas (or tokens), as "single 'occurrences' of a symbol," are "existent individual *indices* exciting in the mind images, which coalesce to form *icons* of the symbol" (the general law) (M491:7-8). It is in the nature of the general that "any information about a symbol is information about every replica of it," but this does not contradict the fact that in its own nature "a replica is strictly an individual" (2:315). Peirce tells us that *icons* and *indices* may be "constituents" of *symbols* because "a law necessarily governs, or 'is embodied in' individuals, and prescribes some of their qualities" (2:293). He goes on to say that "while the complete object of a symbol, that is to say its meaning, is of the nature of a law, it must *denote* an individual, and must *signify* a character" (2:293).

Symbols have two degrees of degeneracy. "A *genuine* symbol is a symbol that has a general meaning" (2:293). Degenerate symbols are of two types: (1) "the *Singular Symbol* whose Object is an existent individual, and which signifies only such characters as that individual may realize"; and (2) "the *Abstract Symbol*, whose only Object is a character" (2:293). The word "ping pong" as a singular symbol would be degenerate in the first degree.

The question arises as to whether the poem "ping pong", which is made of six replicas of the symbol "ping pong," is itself a symbol. It has been established that in its mode of being as a thing, the poem is a sinsign that contains an index and several levels of icons. It has been further established that, in relation to its object, it is predominately an icon but more immediately an index in that, in its reference to its most obvious dyna-

moid object, "ping pong," it is in the concreative modality. The poem, then, in relation to its object, is securely an indexical icon. But is there any point at which it takes on the character of a symbol? As a manifestation of the laws of number, time and place, defined by Gomringer in his essay *gedichtstechnik* (1955) (see GWT:283-5), "ping pong" as an art object does stand as a sign of the concept "concrete poetry." For Gomringer denotes: word repetition; instantaneous impression; reduced syntax and grammar; and inversion or ambiguity in reading direction as generally distinguishing features of the concrete poem. But "ping pong" remains an iconic *sinsign* because, as an existing thing, it exhibits features that are *like* the concept "concrete poetry." It does not state the concept in terms of laws of construction. It could also be said that in an even more indirect way, "ping pong," like any poem, stands as a sign of the general concept "poem."

The third major trichotomy of signs is concerned with the manner in which signs are represented by their interpretants. "In regard to its signified interpretant," Peirce writes, "a sign is either a Rheme, a Dicent, or an Argument" (1953:12). He defines a *rheme* as "a Sign which, for its Interpretant, is a sign of qualitative Possibility, that is, is understood as representing such and such a kind of possible Object" (2:250). It is "represented in its signified interpretant as if it were a character or mark (or as being so)" (1953:13). And it will, "perhaps [. . .] afford some information; but it is not interpreted as doing so" (2:250). "A rheme," according to Peirce's general conception of it, is "any sign that is not true or false, like almost any single word except 'yes' and 'no' which are almost peculiar to modern languages" (1953:13). It should be clear from the above why Peirce designates the *rheme* as the member of the third trichotomy which is in a corresponding relationship with the qualisign and the icon (2:254).

A *dicent* sign (or *dicisign*) is defined by Peirce as "a Sign, which, for its Interpretant, is a sign of actual existence. [. . .] A Dicisign," he tells us, "necessarily involves, as part of it, a Rheme, to describe the fact which it is interpreted as indicating. But this is a peculiar kind of Rheme; and while it is essential to the Dicisign, it by no means constitutes it" (2:251). How does the *dicisign* differ from the *index* which, we have learned, "involves the existence of its Object"? Peirce tells us that "the definition" [or mental operation] "[of the Dicisign] adds that this Object is [. . .] a real fact" (2:315); and it is "represented in its signified interpretant as if it were in a Real Relation to its Object. (Or as being so, if it is asserted.)" (1953:13). Since the poem "ping pong," and on a smaller scale the word "ping pong," exists as a *sinsign* because it embodies qualities which in turn make it an *icon* on several levels to the interpreting mind, it seems accurate to say that it is interpreted in the mind as a rheme although some note is taken of the actual existence of the poem as a material object.

We have seen that "ping pong," as a poem, states no law; neither does it in its interpretant formulate an *argument*. For an *argument* is defined by Peirce as "a Sign which, for its Interpretant, is a Sign of law. [. . .] [It] is a Sign which is understood to represent its Object in its character as Sign" (2:252). Having the character of a law, then, it can only represent "a General Law or Type" as its object. An *argument* must of necessity "involve a Dicent Symbol," as Peirce points out, "for the Argument can only urge the

law by urging it in an instance" (2:253).

Since "ping pong," in relation to the three possible ways in which a sign may be represented by its interpretant, remains in its functioning as a sign primarily a multi-faceted *icon*, our previous suggestion, that it is best classified with respect to its interpretant as a *rheme*, holds. This does not, however, alter our original conclusion that in its existence as itself, "ping pong" is a *sinsign*. Classifying it as a *rheme* with respect to its interpretant does, though, establish that, although as an *index* the poem forces our attention upon the dynamic relationship between the poem and the game ping pong, our experience of the poem is primarily that of iconic thinking coupled with that of a total aesthetic response to the qualities of feeling conveyed by the visual and sound qualities of the word materials; by the structural relationships; and by the overmastering stamp of the poetic intelligence of Eugen Gomringer. The poem "ping pong" belongs, then, as does the word "ping pong," to the third of Peirce's ten classes of signs. It is a *Rhematic Indexical Sinsign* (2:256) for which Peirce provides the example "A spontaneous cry" (1953:51), which is not far from the generally accepted definition of the lyric poem as "a cry from the heart." To arrive at Peirce's label has required of us a rigorous examination into the mode of being of the poem, its materials, its technique and structure, and its levels of meaning as it takes its place in the world as a functional object—a model (or *icon*) of processes of contemporary language and thought. Obviously Gomringer did not need Peirce's theory in order to write his poem, but when he tells us that the concrete poem possesses the character of a sign, that it is a sign scheme within the "great intellectual-spiritual playing field" (*grosses geistiges Spielfeld*—Gomringer 1969b:8) of our century, it is difficult to conceive of a better method than that developed by Charles Sanders Peirce for comprehending the meaning of a poem that is intended as a sign along the way towards the realization of Gomringer's vision of a new universal poetry that is an *icon* of a new universal community language.

## TERMINOLOGY EUGEN GOMRINGER

*denkgegenstand-denkspiel*: play or game activity. Intellectual puzzle.

*inversion*: multidirectional reading.

## CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE

*representamen*: sign.

*object*: that which is represented by the sign.

*dynamoid object*: the real or dynamical object.

*immediate object*: the object as it is represented in the sign.

*interpretant*: the interpreting sign in the mind of the interpreter of the sign. The interpretant should be able to stand in place of the rerepresentamen as a representation of the dynamoid object. It, too, will have an interpretant, so we have an implied endless series of interpretants.

*first trichotomy of signs*: the sign as itself in its mode of being.

*qualisign*: a quality that acts as a sign.

*sinsign*: an actual thing (existent) or event that acts as a sign.

*legisign*: a law that acts as a sign. (All words are *legisigns* in their dictionary meanings. Written or spoken they are *replicas* of the legisign.)

*second trichotomy of signs:* the relationship of the sign to its object.

*icon:* a likeness to the object.

*index:* a physical connection with the object.

*symbol:* no connection with the object except that established by convention in the mind.

*third trichotomy of signs:* the manner in which signs are represented by their interpretants.

*rheme:* represents a possibility in terms of its qualities. A sign of essence.

*dicent* (or *dicisign*): a sign of actual existence.

*argument:* can only represent a general law or type.

#### REFERENCES

- Gomringer, Eugen, (1962?) *die konstellationen. les constellations. the constellations. las constelaciones*. (Frauenfeld, Switzerland: Eugen Gomringer Press).
- GKB: "max bill und die konkrete dichtung." 1958.
- 1967 Letter to Author. April 4, 1967.
- 1969a *Poesie als Mittel der Umweltgestaltung*. (Izthoe: Verlag Hansen & Hansen).
- 1969b *worte sind schatten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag).
- GWVK: "vom vers zur konstellation." 1954.
- GWT: "gedichttechnik." 1955.
- GWKD: "konkrete dichtung." 1956.
- GW23: "23 punkte zum problem dichtung und gesellschaft." 1958.
- GWG: "das gedicht als gebrauchsgegenstand." 1960.
- GWJ: "die ersten jahre der konkreten poesie." 1967.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders, (1931-1935, 1958). *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Vols. I-VI edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss; Vols. VII-VIII edited by Arthur Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- 1953 *Charles S. Peirce's Letters to Lady Welby*, ed. Irwin C. Lieb (New Haven: Whitlocks Inc.).
- Unpublished Manuscripts. Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- M142: Notes on Topical Geometry. G-Undated-16 [c. 1899-1900].
- M307: Lectures on Pragmatism. Lecture III. Notebook. G-1903-1.
- M404: The Art of Reasoning. Chapter II. What is a Sign? G-1893-5.
- M462: Charles Sanders Peirce's Lowell Lectures of 1903. Second Draught on Third Lecture. October 5, 1903.
- M491: Logical Tracts. No. 1. On Existential Graphs. [c. 1903].
- M492a: Logical Tracts. No. 2.
- M492b: On Existential Graphs, Euler's Diagrams, and Logical Algebra. G-c. 1903-2.
- M599. Reason's Rules (RR). [c. 1902].
- M675. A Sketch of Logical Critic. [c. 1911].
- M842. A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God (G). G-c. 1905-1.
- Pound, Ezra, 1954. *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions).

Permission to quote from the Peirce manuscripts was granted by the Philosophy Department of Harvard University. Manuscript entries were made in accordance with: Robin, Richard S. *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce*. The University of Massachusetts Press, 1967.