

Literary Semiotics

A Critical Approach

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(on Derrida)



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rules, or else from within, by a collapse of the play spirit, a sobering, a disenchantment" [*Ludens* 21].)

Limited Infinite Play

A suitable illustration of this irrepressible creeping seriousness appears in Derrida's essay, "I have forgotten my umbrella." In his readings of a sentence from an unpublished text by Friedrich Nietzsche (consisting merely of: "I have forgotten my umbrella"), Derrida shows how a form of the infinite play like the one Carse outlines could be applied (in the "vulgar" sense of applying theory). Yet, he does so in a way that perhaps is not fully open to infinitude by virtue of its residual investment in the "theology" of finite play. Although Carse claims that infinite players can play with finite games, Derrida appears mired in finitude here in the end.

Derrida's point of entry into the system of Nietzsche's fragment consists of speculations about the sentence's uncertain ontological status. He notes that it might be a quote from someone or some other text, or may have functioned as a personal reminder for something Nietzsche wanted to recall later. "There is no infallible way of knowing the occasion of this sample or what it could have been later grafted onto," he concludes (at the *beginning* of his essay!). "We never will know *for sure* what Nietzsche wanted to say or do when he noted these words, nor even that he actually *wanted* anything."²²

Even the authenticity of assessing the origin of this sentence is questionable, Derrida notes, since the proposition of anchoring this "possession" or discerning its authenticity is undeniably questionable. "It is possible that it is not Nietzsche's sentence, and this notwithstanding any confident certainty that it is indeed written in his hand" ("Umbrella" 127). This observation leads Derrida to speculate on the authenticity of handwriting as well which, again, is vulnerable to forgery, and verifiable ironically only through the presence of the usual amount of variation in one's penmanship. (The perfect forgery thus signifies its falseness through its perfection.) The same is true, as he argues elsewhere (in "Signature Event Context"), about the status and authority of the autograph.

Let's pause to reflect on this argument as an opening strategy, for it holds considerable potential for a playful form of a progressive or critical semiotic analysis. Derrida's introductory ambit can be seen as an attempt to rule out the possibility of his essay leading to the outcome associated with a finite game. At the same time, he is also playing a finite game in an infinite fashion. This is revealed when he notes that he engages two opponents in the "game" of his essay. One consists of the editors of a specific volume of Nietzsche's work who, through a footnote, attempt to classify the differing values of his unpublished texts. (The other opponent will be discussed later.) This imposition of degrees of philosophical worth appears to stand as the first move in this game (with the editors attributing value only to those fragments that appear to them as "overwrought"). Derrida's counterplay is to characterize this gesture as "a monument

to hermeneutic somnambulism" ("Umbrella" 125). "In blithest complacency," he adds, "every word" of these editors "obscures so well a veritable beehive of critical questions that only the minutest scrutiny could possibly recover there those questions which preoccupy us here."

While Derrida adopts the stance of accepting that one can determine the "internal and external context" ("Umbrella" 125) of Nietzsche's sentence, even that outcome would not serve to end the game. "Such a factual possibility . . . does not alter the fact of that other possibility which is marked in the fragment's very structure." It appears here that Derrida is playing into the editors' hands with this observation, for he utilizes a term generically complicit with that of over-wroughtness. He immediately notes, though, that "the concept of the fragment . . . since its fracturedness is itself an appeal to some totalizing complement, is no longer sufficient here." The pursuit of a grounding context and origin is motivated by a finite semiotics, and the alternative to this deadening project is to consider elements that are "in principle" perpetually "inaccessible". After all, locating these elements would bring semiosis to a halt. In effect, belief in context and origin is essentially aligned with limited semiosis. This belief, furthermore, is nurtured by a need for an end, for the possibility that a semblance of comprehension, or explanation, has to be attainable. Without this possibility, it would seem to the finite semiotician that one could not generate something of value through signification (similar to the concept of the low "worth" of unpublished—or at least some unpublished—manuscripts).

For the infinite semiotician, however, this possibility of worthlessness is accepted as simply one mode of play. While acknowledging this outcome, Derrida turns it into new play mode potentials. Although there could be "no significance at all" to the sentence, it could also harbor "some hidden secret" or stand only as "an inconsistency" on Nietzsche's part ("Umbrella" 125). "What if Nietzsche himself meant to say nothing, or at least not much of anything, or anything whatever?", Derrida asks. Or, "what if Nietzsche was only pretending to say something?" (125-57). (It also could be argued that Derrida's use of rhetorical questions here emphasizes the open engagement of play he's ostensibly promoting. For, at least on the surface, they rehearse the indeterminate spirit of his approach to Nietzsche's sentence.)

Unlike Barthes, who denies the sway of the encoder over the decoder, Derrida takes this speculation on significant scenarios a step further by questioning whether the encoder here (although this could extend to all encoders) could be identified satisfactorily to begin with. "It is even possible that it is not Nietzsche's sentence" ("Umbrella" 127), Derrida adds. (Of course, one could draw upon Foucault's strategy in "What is an Author?" [discussed in chapter 5] and simply designate an author-function without worrying about its legitimacy.)

Still, this identification would not necessarily give the decoder a firm grounding for decoding. The citational plurality entailed in the release of a sign-vehicle is a similar problem, especially in this case where quotation marks draw attention to such a condition. "If one is going to suppose that this sentence is not 'his' through and through, it is hardly necessary to recall the fact that this sen-

tence appears in quotation marks in Nietzsche's text" ("Umbrella" 127). Derrida argues that the intentional context of a given sign-vehicle cannot reliably be implanted within it, or identified with certainty once it is released into the whorl of semiosis.

Could Nietzsche have disposed of some more or less secret code, which, for him or for some unknown accomplice of his, would have made sense of this statement? We will never know. At least it is possible that we will never know and that powerlessness (*impouvoir*) must somehow be taken into account. Much as a trace which has been marked in what *remains* of this nonfragment, such an account would withdraw it from any assured horizon of a hermeneutic question.

The process of reading is problematized and simultaneously each foothold becomes a compromise. This is true even for a so-called literal, commonsense assessment of language, in which simple intelligibility is not a matter of literary competence. Nevertheless, an infinite play form of intelligibility—a provisional playing model (as opposed to a more serious, "working" model)—can be banded about fruitfully. "As far as the unpublished piece goes, it is indeed still a matter of *reading* it, its *what for*, or why . . . it passes itself off for what it passes itself off for" ("Umbrella" 127). The one thing this play resists, however, is obedience to the tyranny of the "obvious" reading, a poor form of play that can't be denied, but also shouldn't receive privilege merely by virtue of its obviousness.

No fold, no reserve appears to mark its transparent display. In fact, its content gives the appearance of a more than flat intelligibility. Everyone knows what "I have forgotten my umbrella" means. I have . . . an umbrella. It is mine. But I forgot it. I can describe it. But now I don't have it anymore. At hand. I must have forgotten it somewhere, etc. I remember my umbrella. (129)

Contrary to Foucault's employment of the author system, Derrida offers examples of a systemic approach that recalls Geoffrey Hartman's analysis of a Wordsworth poem discussed in chapter 5. Those who share a "common belief that this unpublished piece is an aphorism of some significance" would look for a difficult-to-find meaning (131). "Assured that it must mean something, they look for it to come from the most intimate reaches of this author's thought. But in order to be so assured, one must have forgotten that it is a text that is in question, the remains of a text, indeed a forgotten text." Derrida "plays" on this notion by returning to systemic resonances of Nietzsche's sentence. It can function, in this respect, like "an umbrella perhaps. That one no longer has in hand."

Or, the sentence could be played from a psychoanalytical standpoint somehow grounded plausibly on Nietzsche's "idiom", for instance, given that "the umbrella's symbolic figure is well-known, or supposedly so" ("Umbrella" 129). Thus, it can be construed as "the hermaphroditic spur (*éperon*) of a phallus which is modestly enfolded in its veils, an organ which is at once aggressive and

apotropaic, threatening and/or threatened." And, the direction implicit for this reasoning could be justified on the assumption that "one doesn't just happen onto an unwonted object of this sort."

Or, the umbrella can be entertained as "the metaphor of a metapsychological concept, like the famous *Reizschutz* of the perception-consciousness system" ("Umbrella" 131). Moreover, this form of recollection is based on a dual operation of absence and presence. "It is not only the umbrella that is recalled but also its having been forgotten," Derrida notes. "And psychoanalysis, familiar as it is with forgetting and phallic objects, might yet aspire to a hermeneutic mastery of these remains." However, these systemic grids readily lend themselves to the abuses of finite play. Psychoanalysts, Derrida argues, "can still continue to suspect that, if these generalities were to be articulated and narrowed and the context itself thus prudently completed, they would one day be able to satisfy their interpretative expectations." In addition, Derrida offers a wholly subjective play connection with the sentence. Through a personal assessment regarding potential psychoanalytical connotations, he observes: "I remind myself of my umbrella" (129). Furthermore, he adds, one could reflect on the myriad human paradoxes related to the inevitability of needing precisely what one has neglected to bring. And, additionally, the uncertainty, the surprise, the vulnerability imposed by the weather is consistent with Carse's notion of the constant variabilities of infinite play. "An umbrella is that sort of thing that, just when it is really needed, one might either have or *not have any more (n'avoir plus)*. Or else one still has it when it is no longer needed. Simply a question of the weather at the time (*of temps, time and/or weather*)."

These views do not restrict the text to any set, presumably triadic movement of semiosis. Rather, they unshackle the decoding process so that it can move beyond wholly vestigial boundaries. As a result, Nietzsche's sentence remains free from the confines of a concrete and logical etiology of signification. "The remainder that is [this sentence] is not caught up in any circular trajectory. It knows of no proper itinerary which would lead from its beginning to its end and back again, nor does its movement admit of any center," Derrida says. "Because it is structurally liberated from any living meaning, it is always possible that it means nothing at all or that it has no decidable meaning" ("Umbrella" 131-33).

This form of semiotic play nevertheless does not careen off into a meaningless universe, as it is typically characterized by those who fear the apparent emptiness of unlimited semiosis. To the contrary, it instigates an infinite play of semiosis that attempts only to perpetuate the pleasurable transformation that its operations yield (that is, if this can be configured as a yield of some kind).

One must not conclude, however, . . . that any knowledge of [its inscrutable play] should be abandoned. On the contrary, if the structural limit and the remainder of the simulacrum which has been left in writing are going to be taken into account, the process of decoding, because this limit is not of the sort that circumscribes a certain knowledge even as it proclaims a beyond, must be carried to the furthest lengths possible. To where the limit runs through and di-

vides a scientific work, whose very condition, this limit, thus opens it up to itself. ("Umbrella" 133)

Derrida views this limit as nevertheless unlimiting, a horizontal boundary that never successfully imposes itself in a totalizing fashion. "If Nietzsche had indeed meant to say something, might it not be just that limit to the will to mean, which, much as a necessarily differential will to power, is forever divided; folded and manifolded."

This conclusion leads Derrida to posit that "I have forgotten my umbrella" may have a synecdochic relationship to the "totality" of Nietzsche's work. "Which is tantamount to saying," he notes, "that there is no 'totality to Nietzsche's text,' not even a fragmentary or aphoristic one" ("Umbrella" 135). But, this contention also instigates Derrida's own frame surrounding Nietzsche's sentence, which entertains the possibility of a parodic valence for it. "Suppose . . . that in some way the totality which I (so to speak) have presented is also an erratic, even parodying graft. What if this totality should eventually be of the same sort as an 'I have forgotten my umbrella'?"

In keeping with this possibility, Derrida proposes an oddly playful encoding upon the fragment. He cites a fragment from Nietzsche's *Joyful Wisdom*—"for we dwell ever closer to the lightning!" ("Umbrella" 135)—which establishes his shift toward play that is as dangerous as it is exhilarating. "There is evidence here," he maintains, "to expose one, roofless and unprotected by a lightning rod as he is, to the thunder and lightning of an enormous clap of laughter." Additionally, he declares, "my discourse . . . has been every bit as clear as that" of Nietzsche's sentence. "You might even agree that it contained a certain ballast of rhetorical, pedagogical and persuasive qualities. But suppose anyway that it is cryptic." Derrida goes on to explore the ramifications of his contention regarding his potential possession of a secret code in his essay—or possibly that he himself is unaware of its actual code. Or, furthermore, that no single encoder or decoder can possess the overall capacity to designate a specific code in relation to a given sign-vehicle.

In this situation, one might be tempted to side with Saussure and suggest that "one person does not make a code" ("Umbrella" 137). "To which," Derrida replies, "I could just as easily retort that the key to this text is between me and myself, according to a contract where I am more than just one." This contract is further problematized by Derrida's own mortal limit. The same would apply if a limited interpretive community of "accomplices" shared his secret. Derrida asserts that his own text is "really cryptic and parodying," yet this assertion doesn't deplete its signifying reserve. Despite his claim, one that carries with it the putative authority of the encoder, "the text will remain indefinitely open, cryptic and parodying." Playing again on the umbrella parallels, he concludes: "In other words, the text remains closed, at once open and closed, or each in turn, folded/unfolded (*ployé/déployé*), it is just an umbrella that you couldn't use (*dont vous n'auriez pas l'emploi*). You might just as soon forget it."

Earlier, I mentioned that Derrida identifies two "opponents" within his self-reflective discussion. The second one comes into play after the conclusion of his essay (or, rather, to complicate an "easy" sense of his conclusion). In the first of two postscripts, he recounts a story that he revisited when it was brought up again five years later. The story involves a conversation with Roger Laporte. "During this encounter," one Derrida says he can't recall, "we found ourselves, for other reasons, in disagreement with a certain hermeneut who in passing had presumed to ridicule the publication of Nietzsche's unpublished manuscripts" ("Umbrella" 139). "They will end up . . . publishing his laundry notes and scraps like 'I have forgotten my umbrella,'" he had complained. Derrida claims that when discussing this encounter later, others who were present could attest that it had indeed taken place. "Thus I am assured of the story's veracity, as well as the authenticity of the facts which otherwise I have no reason to doubt. Nevertheless I have no recollection of the incident. Even today." What follows, significantly, is the date: 1.4.1973. (That Derrida is using the day-month-year form of dating is suggested by the date of his second postscript: 17.5.1973.) Obviously, what Derrida is doing is framing what Gérard Genette refers to as a "paratext"²³ as part of a much larger joke: an April Fool's joke, no less. (Which, itself, is a form of decidedly finite play.)

I would like to turn from Derrida's emphasis on the lightning passage from *Joyful Wisdom* (which arguably diminishes the range of play one can propose for Nietzsche's sentence) to explore another scenario also from Nietzsche that might be more consistent with his other commentary on the will to power. This will demonstrate, possibly, that by selecting and characterizing the modality of a specific passage from Nietzsche the way he does, Derrida chooses an impoverished form of play like the finite game or the leading question. In effect, Derrida's essay is a joke (as my students consistently point out with disdain), a semiotic construct with a simplistic punch line of an ending that neatly wraps up his play in the very manner that has contributed to play's low status in recent years.

The passage I have in mind appears at the end of Nietzsche's essay mentioned earlier ("On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense"). After extensive commentary on the metaphorical nature of language, Nietzsche closes his discussion by comparing two representative approaches to engaging this metaphoricality, neither of which is privileged. He establishes this dynamic by positing the oppositions of monistic views grounded either in intellect or intuition. "Man," he claims, "has an unconquerable tendency to let himself be deceived" and will remain "enchanted with happiness" while he can sustain the illusion (255).

As long as it can deceive without harm, the intellect, that master of deception, is free and released from its usual servile tasks, and that is when it celebrates its Saturnalia; never is it more luxuriant, richer, prouder, more skillful and bold. With creative nonchalance it scrambles the metaphors and shifts the boundary-stones of abstraction.

The intellect perspective happily accepts the belief that "everything contains dissimulation" because this stance seems superior to the joyless life of a transcendental idealism in which everything perspectival "contained distortion" ("Lying" 255). The intellect "copies human life, taking it for a good thing, and seems quite satisfied with it," Nietzsche asserts. "That enormous structure of beams and boards of the concepts, to which the poor man clings for dear life, is for the liberated intellect just a scaffolding and plaything for his boldest artifices." The intellect does not harbor any false assumptions about the *truth* behind this undertaking. "When he smashes" this structure "apart, scattering it, and then ironically puts it together again, joining the most remote and separating what is closest, he reveals that he does not need the emergency aid of poverty, and that he is now guided not by concepts but by intuitions." Nietzsche then turns this project into a venture that fails by virtue of its necessary limitations of conceptual investment:

From these intuitions no regular road leads to the land of ghostly schemata, of abstractions. The world is not made for these intuitions; man falls silent when he sees them, or he speaks in sheer forbidden metaphors and unheard of conceptual compounds, in order at least by smashing and scorning the old conceptual barricades to correspond creatively to the impressions of the mighty present intuition.
(255-56)

Does the man of intellect, then, the one who stands "in fear of intuition," find solace over the man of intuition, who stands in "mockery for abstraction"? ("The latter being just as unreasonable as the former is unartistic" ["Lying" 256].) "Both desire to master life," he replies. One does so "by managing to meet his main needs with foresight, prudence, reliability." The other accomplishes this mastery "as an 'overjoyous' hero, by not seeing those needs and considering only life, disguised as illusion and beauty, to be real."

For Nietzsche, both of these figures fail in a sense because they refuse to acknowledge the benefits of a mediated rendition of their views of reality. In the case of the man of intellect, the world has to exist as an ideal manifestation separate from what is only insufficiently perceived, and thus any perception always has to be warily gauged by the extent to which this action may alter his apprehension of the actual world. Thus, "the man guided by concepts and abstractions merely wards off misfortune by means of them, without extracting happiness for himself from them as he seeks the greatest freedom from pain" ("Lying" 256). The intuitive man, on the contrary, views the world as only the result of perception, and not materially present itself, so whatever "real" that attempts to impose itself upon his consciousness has to be treated as something wholly at the disposal of his perceptions. This man, "standing in the midst of culture, in addition to warding off harm, reaps from his intuitions a continuously streaming clarification, cheerfulness, redemption," Nietzsche contends. "Of course, he suffers more violently when he does suffer; indeed, he also suffers more often, because he does not know how to learn from experience and he falls again and again into

the same pit into which he fell before." The intuitive man is "just as unreasonable in sorrow as in happiness; he cries out loudly and cannot be consoled."

Nietzsche shifts terms here, so it is difficult to discern whether he is continuing this comparison (which seems to be the case) or is introducing a third figure. But enough parallels between the earlier discussion and the latter one suggest he is still comparing the intellectual man with the intuitive man who is condemned to repeat his mistakes, since they are an integral part of his ontology. In times of strife, "the stoic person"—by which Nietzsche evidently means the man of intellect—"has learned from experience and controls himself by reason" ("Lying" 256). Through repeated—and repeatedly frustrated—testing of his world around him, he resigns himself to remaining unable to change it in any substantial way (significantly, including changing his *perception* of it). As a result, he merely suffers it to remain as it is—beyond his agency.

While the man of intellect typically "seeks only honesty, truth, freedom from delusions, and protection from enthralling seizures," when he falls upon hard times, he engages in a strategy remarkably similar to that of the intuitive man. He "produces a masterpiece of dissimulation" himself (as he did, Nietzsche notes, in times of happiness as well) ("Lying" 256). "He does not wear a quivering and mobile human face but, as it were, a mask with dignified harmony of features, he does not scream and does not even raise his voice," Nietzsche asserts. "When a real storm cloud pours down upon him, he wraps himself in his overcoat and walks away under the rain with slow strides" (256-57).

The parallel here with Nietzsche's "I have forgotten my umbrella" should be clear at this point. Either way—that is, either the intuitive or the intellectual approach—problematizes the status of a device like an umbrella as well as the situation of the subject who announces that it has been forgotten. For the intuitive man, this forgetting is the instigation of a rehearsal of woe. Not only is he getting wet, it is his own fault. His well-being—like his overall perceptual apparatus—was entirely under his control and as a result of his forgetfulness alone (disregard the role of nature here) he will suffer. The man of intellect, however, simply bears down on his suffering, finding no means for transcending it perspectively, and endeavors to move beyond its range, all the while neglecting to use his intuitive powers to frame this negative situation somehow positively.

Derrida hovers about these perspectives of the forgotten umbrella scenario, but then resorts to a dodge that encompasses both the intuitive and the intellectual perspective. In other words, instead of playing Nietzsche's text infinitely, he decides he has to choose both of these losing propositions to return the game of his decoding back to a type of originary, solid ground. Either Nietzsche's text is beyond the decoder's control, and thus Derrida can say all sorts of wild things about it, or it is a joke that can be revealed monosemously and thus decoded with "success", as designated by the date of Derrida's first postscript. (Thereby allowing the decoder who also understands this joke to become a member of the winning "team" within this game, like Eco's "model reader.")

The infinite player of this text, however, need not resort to either of these refuges.



Consider's Nietzsche's sentence again from this approach. The infinite player borrows from both orientations (to keep this example simple). She can cathect onto the "real storm" an array of joyous, figurative scenarios. Yet, at the same time, she doesn't deny that the storm is materially real. She doesn't have to necessarily suffer its reality, as does the man of intellect. But, neither does she, like the intuitive man, resolutely ignore the fact that its materiality is able to impinge itself upon her in a manner that is temporarily beyond her control. She can walk slowly from beneath the storm clouds, like the man of intellect, but she doesn't do so to intensify her martyrdom, as he does. Rather, she plays with the unfortunate situation (it's raining and I've forgotten my umbrella), refusing to make it either needlessly stoic or needlessly ironic.

One has to imagine the infinite player smiling as she walks away from the clouds, though well aware that she's getting wet and could have prevented it; learning a lesson, perhaps, that might lead to a different form of play the next time it rains. (Whenever it rains, I inevitably run into former students who have read this essay and make a point of reporting—empty-handed, wet, yet also usually smiling—that they've forgotten their umbrellas.) This response to umbrella forgetting would be consistent with Carse's commentary on the transformative, as well as enjoyable, component of infinite play, even though this transformation is by no means the straightforward conditioning that binds the man of intellect's future behavior. In fact, the infinite player will accept the likelihood that this forgetting will probably happen again, despite her best efforts. Forgetfulness not necessarily being an error she can learn from as much as an occasional lapse in her diligence, which if maintained, after all, leads to a sour restraint on her consciousness. (Like that of the man of intellect who will become obsessed with never forgetting his umbrella again.)

A New Semiotic Order

While Derrida outlines (ironically) a less-than-open form of infinite play, Floyd Merrell may offer a path that leads to a greater freedom for analyzing semiotic movement. To contextualize the potential desirability of a true openness, Merrell uses an example of the change in flow from a water tap as the volume is increased. What earlier might look like an orderly flow alters with this increase; but rather than destroying that earlier order, this other flow can be seen as "a new form of order."²⁴ Merrell conceptualizes this form of structure as "not schematic, determinable, or rigid," which, of course, is consonant with Barthes's structuration. As "a dynamic, ever-changing regime regulating the varying levels of flow," Merrell's water tap model would function as a *chora*-like perimeter of ineffability (as Julia Kristeva describes it).

Other useful models to draw upon for this schematization could be found in Ilya Prigogine's concept of "dissipative structures" or Erich Jantsch's "process structure" (cited in Merrell, *Signs* 22). This general class of structures, Merrell contends, consists of "dynamic interconnectedness and nonlinearity." Clearly,

though, one of the main difficulties entailed in grasping this formulation resides in the challenge to articulate it. Kristeva's depiction of the *chora* is an apt illustration: she employs as an example an individual going through psychological constitution. The individual eventually is constructed as a *chora*, or "a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated."²⁵ It is, in other words, "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases." Moreover, it exists as both "rupture and articulations (rhythm)" (26) and since it is "neither model nor copy," it "precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm."

Merrell's conception of semiotic modeling likewise emphasizes "process, not static product."²⁶ Significantly, he suggests that semiosis operates separate from our conceptualization of it. "Ultimately, semiosis is neither continuous nor discontinuous for us; our categorization tends to make it so," Merrell says. "Categories, historically contextualized, can be no more than hazy topologies of the mind" (*Signs* 223). This would mean, then, that any attempt to grasp the mechanics of semiosis is always undermined by the limitations of that attempt. "The agent, a sign among signs, is part of the very process she strives to alter, and, as a sign, she is in the process invariably altered" (260).

An important consideration here is that the individual preferences of the conceptualizer of semiosis serve to further account for the emphases within that model. (For example, someone who esteems high-level order may privilege similar orders—and subsequently denigrate level-low orders—in his rendition of semiosis.) It is perfectly understandable that we would yearn for a concept that fits the thing described (like Nietzsche's man of intellect), but at the same time, we should constantly be aware of the impact of that desire on the shaping of our paradigms. Merrell posits a gloomy metaphorical depiction of the human dilemma when it comes to grounding this desire on something that, out of desperation, comes across as even remotely objective. "We have no semiotic sonar mechanism with which to gauge the depth of the stream [of semiosis], no periscope so as to bring its banks into focus, no anchor we can drop to halt our movement within the flow, no sextant to determine where we are, no map to see how we arrived at this point or where we are headed" (*Signs* 240).

Clearly, this is a frustrating situation for human sign users to admit that they are, ultimately, "finite, fallible human semiotic agents" with idealistic drives for infinite, infallible semiosis (*Signs* 275). The problematic issue of sign origin only complicates this scenario. "Given the disconcerting irretrievability of a first sign and the impossibility of reaching a final sign," Merrell argues, "there can be no interpretant without a predecessor and a successor" (*Semiosis* 177).

Yet, Merrell proposes several ways around the challenges offered by some of the troubling aspects of this confrontation with an uncontainable semiosis. While these may in some respects smack of avoidance strategies characteristic of Nietzsche's man of intuition, they more compellingly serve, I would contend, to help theorize an infinite-play rendition of semiosis. The lack of a sign origin

