

# KNOWLEDGE AS ACCESS: AN INQUIRY INTO CREATURELY LIFE

JAMES RISING

“Let me tell the scientific men that the artists are much finer and more accurate observers than they are, except of the special minutiae that the scientific man is looking for.” – Peirce, CP 1.315

This paper contrasts the principles of Peircean semeiotics with the underpinnings of the creaturely life, and the epistemological potential of each. To bridge these divergent world views, I apply Lee Perlman’s insights on anthuphairesis, a method used by Greek mathematicians to examine incommensurability.<sup>1</sup> The crux of my argument is that a kind of anthuphoretic process that orbits the “kernel” of the creaturely life can provide access to a deeper level of knowledge of our internal and external worlds.

Access is a necessary precondition to all knowledge. In order to know something, we must be able to approach it, perceive it, or hold it in consideration. If we want to know the road to Larissa,<sup>2</sup> our surest way of learning it is to travel that road (empirical access), but we could also know it from a map or a set of directions; if nothing else, we must at least have grasped the place’s name so we can refer to it and ask (these are forms of symbolic access). The history of mathematics shows the same need for access in purely theoretical pursuits: modern notations used by mathematicians can describe relationships to which pre-modern mathematicians had no access and therefore could not explore.

The question arises, what kind of access, if any, do we have to the external world? The word ‘world’ partly begs the question: if the world is a fully human construct, in Heidegger’s sense that it represents part of Dasein, then we cannot help but have access to it. Intuitively, though, the real world is exactly whatever does not rely on a human or sentient mind to

---

<sup>1</sup>Lee Perlman is a lecturer at MIT. His application of anthuphairesis to epistemology comes from a series of seminars on Greek Mathematics and Thought, and forms the core of his forthcoming book *Knowing the Unknowable in Greek Mathematics, Epistemology, and Ethics*.

<sup>2</sup>Larissa is a town in Greece, and acts as an example in the *Meno*, one of Plato’s dialogues on knowledge.

exist. If our only access to external objects is as Heidegger's 'equipment', then to what degree does that ontological scaffolding stand in the way of our access to the world?

A few examples illustrate this concern. First is the capacity of our senses to register only the surface of a thing.<sup>3</sup> No matter how thoroughly we dissect a frog, our conception of the frog remains a maze of surfaces— tissues, pathways, divisions. Signs act in an isomorphic way, each registering a thing from a particular perspective. Behind all of these perspectives lies the thing itself, but we may have no way to refer to it. Our access is as impaired exploring our inner world as our external one. The activities of the unconscious lie at the center of our lives, but beyond the limits of our awareness. The personal pursuit of virtue is obscured by our biases and habits. How is it that our world-as-perceived can be so empty of things that lie so close to our core?

Peirce's pragmatism provides a powerful framework for this discussion. For Peirce, the first element of experience is direct "evidence of the senses" or percepts (CP 2.143). These are unelaborated *firsts*, and form the building blocks of our world. However, if we accept Peirce's view of these as completely simple, it seems that reality contains much more than what is available to us. Whatever wholes exist, they appear to us carved up by time and perspective. The percepts that we encounter are certainly elemental, but they do not appear to be fundamental— they are too simple to reflect reality. For example, a fundamental fact of day and night is their natural cycle, but the isolated *firsts* of lightness and darkness do not even hint at that fact.

Although knowledge arises from percepts, knowledge itself only appears in their departing wake. Percepts are translated, contextualized, and constructed into facts of reality as we experience it: "These perceptual facts are wholly unlike the percept, at best; and they may

---

<sup>3</sup>This is almost the opposite of Robert Pirsig's train analogy, but inspired by it:

Romantic Quality, in terms of this analogy, isn't any "part" of the train. It's the leading edge of the engine, a two-dimensional surface of no real significance unless you understand that the train isn't a static entity at all. A train really isn't a train if it can't go anywhere. In the process of examining the train and subdividing it into parts we've inadvertently stopped it, so that it really isn't a train we are examining. That's why we get stuck. (Zen and the Art, 362)

be downright untrue to the percept.... The perceptual facts are a very imperfect report of the percepts; but I cannot go behind that record” (CP 2.141). While we experience the percepts, we cannot *recognize* them. The process of identifying perceptual facts distances us from our experience of them: it requires that we make ourselves interpreters of signs. The very barriers we use to divide the elemental *first* of our experience into a triple relation of Object, Representamen, and Interpreter, act to separate us from the world. Using logic and inference, we can settle the uncertainties inherent in this process enough to form predictions and act with confidence, but our knowledge is about *thirds*, not the *firsts* that inspired them.

While Saussure’s signifier “stands for” some signified in the external world, Peirce’s hierarchy of signs calls that symbolic access into question. Consider one definition Peirce gives for the sign: “a Sign is anything which is related to a Second thing, its Object, in respect to a Quality, in such a way as to bring a Third thing, its Interpretant, into relation to the same Object, and that in such a way as to bring a Fourth into relation to that Object in the same form, ad infinitum” (CP 2.92). Peirce’s definition suggests a relation like (a) in figure 1. In each new semeiotic structure, a new Interpretant is brought in relation to the original Object. However, Peirce’s analysis of percepts suggests a more complicated relationship between subject and object.

A second interpretation is shown in (b) of figure 1: the interpretant’s relationship to the object continues to be mediated through the symbol in which it was encountered. The object into which the Interpretant is brought in relation is some representation “in respect to a Quality.” What is then passed to a “Fourth” (another Interpretant) is that Interpretant’s representation of the object, based on how it was represented to them. There are two immediate objections to this view. One objection is that the particular symbols of speech—what Peirce calls “genuine signs”—when used to represent an object to us do not have an enduring impact on our relationship with that object. This strikes me as naïve, in the face of the *traduttore, traditore* maxim: language is not transparent, and the mediation of language necessarily affects its content. A second objection is that we must have some outline of the object itself, to explain our ability to fuse together utterances that all concern the same object into a more complete view of that object. The difficulty in distinguishing between a

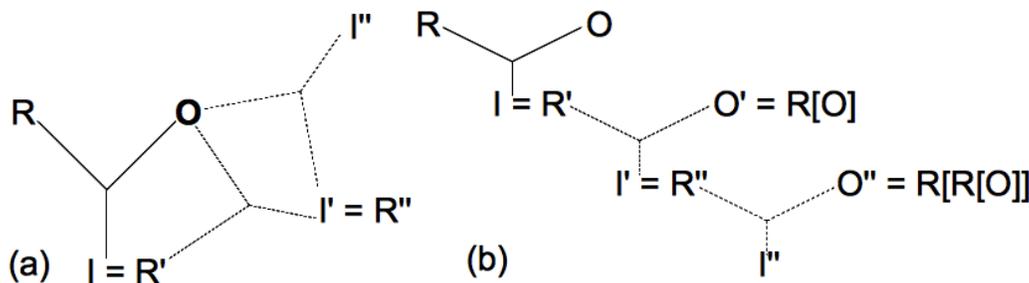


Figure 1: (a) represents an intuitive notion whereby  $I$ ,  $I'$ , and  $I''$  are brought into direct relation with  $O$  by means of  $R$ ,  $R'$ , and  $R''$ , respectively. In (b),  $I$ 's relationship with  $O$  is always mediated by  $R$ , and it passes that mediation on to future interpretants.

large repertoire of factoids, and a coherent conception of the object notwithstanding, I think that Peirce himself addresses this in his declaration of pragmatism: “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (Peirce CP 5.388-410). Peirce’s claim is that the whole of our mental object is based on our experiences— there is no additional epistemologically significant structure (like a pre-symbolic core) to our knowledge of an object. We can follow the roots of any tree of signs only back to our encounters with certain representamens, and no closer to the object itself.

According to Peirce’s framework, a triple barrier separates us from the external world: (1) the decomposition of the world into percepts, (2) the recomposition of it into a sign, and (3) the tree of signification that supports that sign. This conception draws well-tested barriers around the human experience, and our existence behind those barriers is the core feature of what can be called the symbolic life.

The symbolic life is deeply embedded in the Western worldview, and its academic and philosophical pursuits. While it is often balanced with other, equally fundamental and contradictory grounds, I believe that it can be easily identified as an complete, autonomous, consistent, and widely applied epistemological universe. Peirce recognized the power of the symbolic life and many of his works expand on its nature.

The symbolic life, as I definite it, is not a simple product of the role signs play in mediating our world. It is a distinctly postmodern cultural construct within which we live: a divorcing

of mind from body so complete that we suppose body to have no existence except through mind.

A few characteristics of the symbolic life will help to identify it and its connections. Within the symbolic life, all true knowledge is scientific knowledge. Knowledge is obtainable through scientific methods, and fully captured by the scientific viewpoint. Peirce wrote, “Provided the truly scientific logic were put before the world, the subjective treatises could do no harm except that of occupying men’s time in the examination of them, provided they were carefully examined and judged upon their merits.” There is no ultimate role for subjective information within the symbolic life. Furthermore, knowledge itself comes entirely within the purview of the semeiotic universe, and the objects about which we have knowledge are tools, symbols, and propositions— they exist wholly in our minds.

The process of learning about something, for Peirce, is a process of moving from the immediate object, which comprises our initial knowledge of it, to the dynamic object. Peirce would likely claim that it is exactly the role of scientific progress built into the dynamic object which allows it to better reflect reality. However, the symbolic universe imposes its own rationality upon its objects, and exactly by building up a dynamic object, we encompass it progressively within an objective, symbolic framework, disconnected from the universe.

The symbolic life is rational, meaning that everything can be put into a “ratio” with everything else. Objectivity is the primary technique of the symbolic life, and its ultimate relations are best represented mathematically. Even emotions or neuroses, it is thought, can be defined, categorized, and recognized as combinations or extreme or deficient forms of one another. There may be great difficulties in putting elements of the symbolic life in relation to one another, but an assumption holds that it can be done. A conceptual purity pervades the symbolic life. Nothing is unexplainable, or can resist an objective perspective. Every question is either computable or meaningless. If a question does not admit a rational decomposition, it is taken to have no meaning, and if it is decomposable, then its answer logically trivial. The cultural mantras of the symbolic life are evaluation and efficiency.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>In many ways, this is a world without God or miracles, and essentially incapable of ascribing meaning to the ideas of choice and value.

Several elements of knowledge seem lost within this paradigm. Intuitively, not all knowledge seems like knowledge to use. Even if we find some functional purpose within all knowledge, some knowledge seems to fall far short of the scientific bar, and yet we are not inclined to disregard it as opinion. The symbolic life is also fundamentally disconnected from immediate experience (Peirce's percepts or *firsts*), and from the present moment. As Thomas Nagel notes in *The View from Nowhere*, "An objective standpoint is created by leaving a more subjective, individual, or even just human perspective behind" (7). That is, objectivity is a kind of selective blindness, made by systematically ignoring aspects of experience. In a certain way, as much as we live the symbolic life, we choose not to live our own lives.

From the perspective of the symbolic life, one unifying quality pervades the universe prior to our reconceptualization of it: irrationality. Insofar as mental effort and analysis is required to reveal the rationality of the world, this is self-evident. However, irrationality continues to be refracted endlessly through the objects of the symbolic life, although rarely fully acknowledged. Within logic, Douglas Hofstadter suggested that the barrier of truth and knowability is infinitely complicated (see figure 2), based on the theorems of Gödel. The same dilemma is reflected in the failure of attempts in fields from science to ethics to identify axiomatic truth, only to find that the boundaries between cases are impossible to delineate.<sup>5</sup> The process of developing a dynamic object encompasses the original experiences progressively within an objective, symbolic universe disconnected from the irrational universe. This process attempts to capture all of an objects effects in a pragmatic, predictive model— to construct its Being as equipment. Our capacity to understand something is only by removing it from its irrational foundations.

Robert Pirsig suggested one escape from this difficulty in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, which also struggles with the contrast between rational knowledge and hidden realities. As an alternative to the scientific dynamic object, supported by analysis, experiment, and objectivity, Pirsig proposes a Quality dynamic object. The Quality dynamic object is approached intuitively, and never disconnected from the progress of the human

---

<sup>5</sup>As Douglas Adams wrote, "There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened." (Preface, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*)

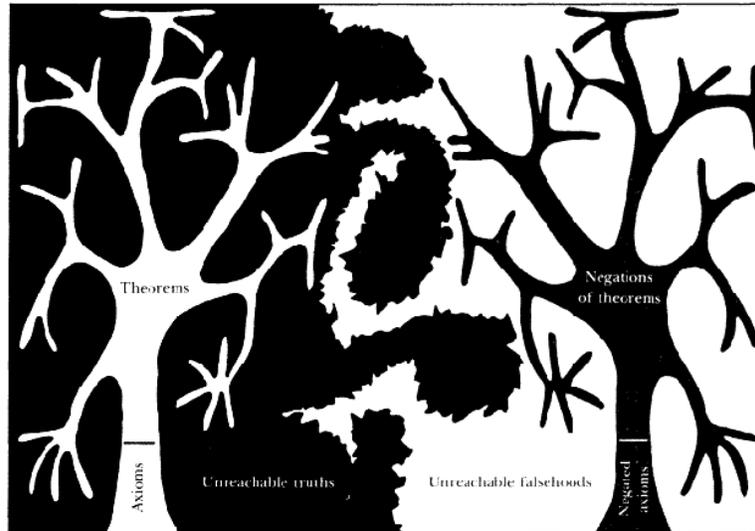


Figure 2: Visualization of the relationship between theorems (reachable truths) and unreachable truths, from Douglas R. Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, p. 71.

as a whole. The metaphysics of quality is presented as an alternative to the dualism of subjectivity and objectivity.

While the concept of Quality has considerable potential, Pirsig defined it mainly as a negation of existing modes of thought, and could identify little of its internal structure. One element of it that he focuses on, however, is “stuckness”, which is simultaneously a failure inherent to rationality, and a source of new inspiration. Pirsig claims that “stuckness shouldn’t be avoided. It’s a physic predecessor of all real understanding” (356). The creaturely life builds on this process of stuckness, touching on the empowering center of this idea of Quality, and opening new avenues for exploring it.

Santner begins his study of the creaturely life by distinguishing between the access to the natural world that Rilke grants to creatures and the access available to us. The creature, “endlessly knows, without craving [the natural world]”; indeed, it can see nothing but the Open (Rilke, 8th Elegy). Humankind’s world, however, is “crossed with borders, articulated with a matrix of representations” (Santner 1). Rather than taking in the Open, we bring our own expectations, our cravings, for how it should be.

As Heidegger points out, this humanization of the creature fails to recognize the role of our capacity for consciousness in knowing: “Only human beings can be said to be ‘on to’ things in a way that is responsive, indeed *beholden* to, what and how they are— in a way, that is, that necessarily includes the possibility of being right or wrong about them” (Santner 7). In the absence of a conceptual world to ground their knowledge, we can barely claim that animals know at all.

However, to reword Kant, although all our knowledge arises from world-forming, it does not follow that it begins with world-forming. Indeed, with the exception of *a priori* knowledge, it seems strange to claim that any knowledge comes from our ability to create worlds. If the conceptual world is our sole access to things then *a priori* knowledge might be the only kind we have. Rilke’s praise of animals’ access to the Open is motivated by a belief that our mental world may entirely fail to reflect the fundamentals of reality. By projecting our own psyche onto the world, we can more easily obscure it than reveal it.

While Rilke focuses on actual creatures (e.g. flowers, birds, and bats), he also suggests that we come close to the access of animals at certain moments: as young children, passionate lovers, and on our deathbeds. Santner contributes a variety of additional situations from Sebald’s oeuvre which have the potential to excite the creaturely life.

Santner’s motivating example of a situation which excites the creaturely life is “exposure to the particular ‘creativity’ associated with [the] threshold of law and nonlaw” optimized by sovereign *jouissance* (Santner 13). The sovereign lies within a “zone of extralegal authority within the law,” and this protruding of something (here, the sovereign) as inapplicable within its context (the law) is characteristic of the creaturely life. Santner also identifies the ruin as a recurring source of the creaturely life because it is “beyond our capacity to endow it with meaning” (xv). Ruins straddle the world of human history and nature, and are rejected by each.

The ruin also provides a special lens through which to view nature itself. The process by which a ruin is “denaturalized” paradoxically imbues it with more of the brute thingness of nature than if that were its natural state. This power comes from its internal incongruity, the juxtaposition of lost human purpose and unnatural elements. The ruin resists the symbolic life, and thereby provides an opening into the Open of creatures. Like Pirsig’s stuckness, the

creaturely life is what is elicited within us when something gives us pause, because it refuses to fit its context. Also like Heidegger's reading of the situation of creatures exposed to Rilke's *Open*, the creaturely situation forces us to be open to a closeness (Santner 11).

The creaturely life is characterized by two qualities. The antecedent I will call the "creaturely kernel", a hidden trauma foundational to the ego, and the source of an unidentifiable unhandleables in the world. The creaturely kernel is analogous to Lacan's *object a*, a sublimated lacking around which the world forms to cover up its loss. Because of this chaotic foundation, the creaturely life is experienced with uncanniness, discomfort, and anxiety, which I will call the "creaturely feeling", variously associated by Santner with undeadness, melancholy, and ruin. It is the feeling of being at odds with oneself, and is a uniquely human way of comporting oneself which sets us apart from animals.

The creaturely life is infused with a feeling of uncanniness, which is more typical of human experience than we usually admit. As Rilke notes, "the resourceful animals see clearly that we are not really at home in our interpreted world" (1st Elegy). Our psyche is filled with irrational elements hidden from our consciousness. For Freudians, the unconscious mind is the prototype and source of incongruity, and yet the holder of hegemony in our lives.

Several of the authors Santner evokes to discuss the creaturely life have focused on its inherent lacking. Sebald's stories are riddled with melancholy; Freud paints the modern man as a thinly veiled savage, seeing his neighbor as "not only a potential helper or sexual object, but as someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him" (*Civilization and its Discontents*, 94-5). Much of Santner's interest in the creaturely life is motivated by the German-Jewish literary and philosophical tradition (12). In this tradition, the creaturely life is deeply associated with injustice and a loss of humanity. For Santner, the epitome of the creaturely life is exhibited by the Jew broken by the death camps, where "redemption can be understood as a passage through and beyond the creaturely life materialized in these cringed bodies" (25). It is for this reason that Santner seeks "a way out" of "the agitations of the creaturely life" (133).

However, there is more to be gained from the creaturely life itself. Our creaturely expressivity provides an invaluable bridge between the world of psyche and the world in-itself. Heidegger claims that animals are “poor in world” (Santner 8), but he ignores the power of their unmediated access to it— an access sought by artists, scientists, philosophers of the West, and sages of the East. The creaturely kernel is a crack in our world-forming, and while we cannot see it directly, we can approach it through proxies. It has potential as a personal or psychological power, veiled by postmodernity but whose loss is felt nonetheless.

Like the irrational, the creaturely kernel is that which cannot be incorporated into the symbolic life— the center of a vortex that is unknowable within our world. Gödel’s incompleteness theorem showed that symbolic logic is necessarily incomplete or contradictory. The symbolic life, founded in logic and rationality, is similarly flawed. The creaturely kernel is exactly what is missing. Furthermore, in the absence of more concrete form of access, the creaturely feeling provides a kind of access to the knowledge in our creaturely kernel.

Knowledge through a hidden element is routine in psychology. Like the Rat Man’s jouissance, our inability to be at ease stems from the role of a great disconnect in our psyche, between the conscious and the unconscious. Although we can neither experience nor express the creaturely kernel at the core of our psyche, it asserts itself in unspoken ways. Psychoanalysts use our capacity to uneasily circle the creaturely kernel to recognize the shape of our organizing principle and our pathology.

Rationality and irrationality have also found a home together in some Eastern religions. One pivotal concept of Jainism is *anekāntavāda*, which might be translated as non-one-endedness. *Anekāntavāda* embraces the contradicting claims of the blind men in the famous anecdote about an elephant. Each of their claims— that an elephant is like a tree, or a rope, or a wall— is kind of pragmatic knowledge, with as yet unknown conditions. The elephant can be used like a tree, rope, or wall, for some purposes reliably or for other purposes only if the elephant is on very good behavior. However, behind all of these claims stands the elephant itself. Rather than using any possible elephant-as-equipment to try to patch these understandings together, *anekāntavāda* uses the pre-semeiotic knowledge that the elephant *is* and maintains the elephant’s fundamental inexpressibility.

For the ancient Greeks, this kind of inexpressible entity was much more prevalent, particularly in mathematics. Book 10 of Euclid's *Elements* refers to the irrational as “incommensurable” – that which cannot be put in terms of units. As *firsts* are the building blocks of the semeiotic universe, units for Euclid were the core of the mathematical universe, and the discovery of elements that could not be composed of them was cause for a punishment of death by the Pythagoreans. A powerful method called anthuphairesis was developed by ancient mathematicians to capture irrationals such as the diagonal of a square and the golden ratio as the result of an infinite process.

Without delving deeply into the mathematics, a brief sketch is informative. Anthuphairesis is first used in Book X, proposition II of the *Elements*.<sup>6</sup> See (a) of figure 3. Incommensurability is shown by a potentially infinite process of subtracting lines from each other. Importantly, the infinite sequence of subtractions obtained by this method can exactly captures the nature of the incommensurability. For example, in (b) of figure 3, anthuphairesis is applied between the diagonal of a square showing that it is not only incommensurable, but that it produces a consistent infinite pattern of subtractions: [1, 2, 2, 2, ...]. In other words, after the first subtraction, each newly generated side can be subtracted from the last side twice, ad infinitum. The connection between anthuphairesis and the quality dynamic object is seen in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, the true nature of each of the virtues is a kind of dynamic or final object, which lies at the mean between two extremes. However, the extremes are much more clearly delineated and accessible than the mean: “each state of character has its own ideas of the noble and the pleasant” (1113a30), and “the brave appears rash to coward, but a coward to the rash man” (1108b18-20). Our only approach to the mean is by way of the extremes: these are the definitive units which are incommensurable with true virtue. However, by dividing what can be divided using the units we have and examining the remainder, we can approach virtue.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>It should come as no surprise, but Euclid's core definitions share a strong resemblance to Peirce's foundations of logic: Euclid defines a “point is that which has no part,” like Peirce's *first*, and a line as “breadthless length,” whose extremities are points, much like Peirce's *second*, the core dualism. Even Euclid's figure, as “that which is contained by any boundary or boundaries” can be seen as analogous to the *third*.

<sup>7</sup>In Plato, a similar inexpressibility underlies the inevitable inconclusiveness of every dialogue, in which layers of rational understandings are considered and collapsed in pursuit of an intuitive goal.

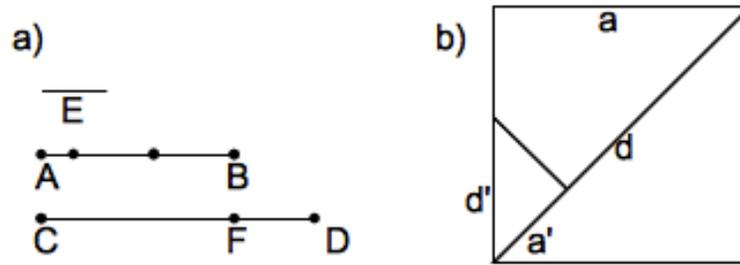


Figure 3: (a) The diagram from Euclid’s *Elements* Book X Proposition 2: “If, when the less of two unequal magnitudes is continually subtracted in turn from the greater that which is left never measures the one before it, then the two magnitudes are incommensurable.” AB and CD are shown to be incommensurable, by subtracting off commensurable pieces until the remainder is less than any given unit E. In the diagram, AB is subtracted from CD leaving FD. Then FD is subtracted twice from AB leaving a segment smaller than E. (b) Proposition 2 applied to the diagonal of a square: side  $a$  is subtracted from diagonal  $d$  leaving  $a'$ . Then  $a$  minus  $a'$  would yield  $d'$ , the diagonal of a smaller square.

The same infinite process is evident in any attempt to express our experience. Sebald wrote,

It would take an endless length of time to describe the events of such a day properly, in some inconceivably complex form... we try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us” (Austerlitz 71, qtd. in Santner 161).

This difficulty is not unique to historical events— it confronts us in every moment, in the inextricably bound complexity of experience. Ultimately, I think this is a fundamental aspect of Peircean *firsts* for us: an insect may be able to experience red as a unanalyzed whole, but we cannot. We cannot help but experience the world as a frenetic network of *thirds*, imposing a world upon our raw experience, “like barriers against its free passage” (Rilke, 8th Elegy). In the world of signs, every whole appears as an analysis which must be re-synthesized. With each new formulation, something is captured and something missed. However, it is exactly this infinite approach that provides some access: “It is there, in the encounter with an overwhelming magnitude, that one touches ‘the real’” (Santner 162).

Translation takes a multifaceted role in the relationship between the symbolic life and the creaturely life. The capacity of different languages to differently capture the form and content of a work is not simply a function of different dictionaries of signs. The world composed by the signs exposed by a language is both a symbolic world and a creaturely world. Its creaturely content is shared but untranslatable. Like subjectivity itself (a creaturely aspect of our language-built world), it holds the world in a framework that the world then hides from it. This suggests that each culture shares a unique creaturely kernel, and its language supports a unique Gödelian incompleteness, which is nonetheless exactly that which it knows but cannot express.

The incommensurable is ubiquitous in human experience, and yet hidden. Its nature is such an assault on the symbolic mind, where even thought consists of the passing of signs, that it cannot be fully confronted. Without any mode of symbolic access to these incommensurable elements, we are left with a deeply unsettled feeling. This is the feeling that lies at the heart of Santner's creaturely life.

Santner's account of the creaturely life provides an important counterpoint to the antiseptic, impregnable, and biased symbolic world, and one that is profoundly relevant to anthropology, psychology, and epistemology. Far from a further entrapment of the human condition, the creaturely life provides an outlet from the symbolic world, and the potential for messianic release need not be confined to historical discontinuities. Anthuphairesis provides an new way to manipulate and play with irrationality, and new insight into how Western culture can approach Pirsig's *Quality*.