Abstract: The study of signs is divided between those scholars who use the Saussurian binary sign (semiology) and those who prefer Charles Peirce's tripartite sign (semiotics). The common view of the opposition between the two types of signs does not take into consideration the methodological conditions of applicability of these two types of signs. This is particularly important in the field of literary studies and hence for the preparation of electronic programs for text analysis. The Peircian sign explicitly entails the discovery of a truth of meaning that claims to be universal and not reducible to a collection of opinions based on fragmented information; it also imposes the task of elucidating a transhistorical and universal signification encoded in a text. Contrary to Peirce's view of the sign, our use of computer programs for text analysis, however, demonstrates that we implicitly treat every literary text as a set of linguistic data (letters, phonemes, syntagmatic segments, etc.) which are reducible to units that can be treated separately. A brief comparison of the results obtained from computer analyses of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé's text, "Le Cygne," with those obtained from two Peircian analyses (by Riffaterre and Champigny) of the same text demonstrates that our current methods of computer textual analysis are based on a Saussurian semiology, which is unidimensional and limited, and that these methods are still quite unable to produce a semiotic interpretation based on a totalizing hierarchy of the text's various discursive components.

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The full title of this article should be: "Texts On-Line. Yes! But where do you draw the line?" In other words: certainly we should rely on electronic texts to perform literary criticism, but where is the intellectual and methodological limit of such a mode of textual analysis? All computer programs for literary analysis start with the linguistic components of the texts. The identifying and computing elements involved in the linguistic analysis are now well-known; but when one attempts to "go beyond the sentence," one has to choose a less standardized set of criteria. Often, the analysis has to rely on analytic tools borrowed from "semiology" or "semiotics" and the subsets that they entail for the study of related domains such as semantics or intertextual studies. It is my contention that the selection of models rooted in one type of study of the signs or the other necessarily determines, from the outset, the results that the literary scholar can expect. It is therefore essential to carefully consider the initial theoretical framework which will be used in the establishment of automated programs for computer-assisted literary analysis. The question is of some urgency in the case of large literary databases which often provide their users with one standard program for on-line literary analysis.

According to the commonly accepted presentation of semiotics, research in this discipline is dominated by two opposing groups. On the one hand, some researchers accept the Saussurean sign as revised by Hjelmslev – a bipartite sign made up
of a signifier and a signified which are unified, graphically, by the bar between them signaling their inseparability. On the other hand, some researchers prefer the kind of tripartite sign created by Frege, reworked by Charles Peirce, modified by Mukarovsky and, finally, popularized by Ogden and Richards in 1923. This tripartite or "Ternary" sign would consist of three parts – an "object" which, according to Gérard Deledalle would be "nothing more than the real object itself, whether imaginable or unimaginable"; the "representamen," an acoustic or visual image of the sign, and the "interpretant," "a mental image which gives us elements to interpret the sign" (Deledalle, 1978, p. 216). This clear bipolarization of semiotic studies is a direct result of Thomas Sebeok's project of the early 70s, a project commonly known as a "campaign for the rectification of terms." The first public manifestation of it occurs in a 1975 article entitled "The Semiotic Web: A Chronicle of Prejudices." The widely accepted irreducibility of "semiotics" and "semiology" is confirmed in Deledalle's book which, even today, commands authority in the world of Peirce studies. In the conclusion one finds the following commentary: "Peirce gives the name 'semiotics' to what French researchers since the time of Saussure have called 'semiology.' To be terminologically correct, semiotics is Peirce's theory of signs, while semiology is Saussure's theory of signs. We will continue to insist on this distinction" (Deledalle, 1978, p. 212). In the course of this assertion, Gérard Deledalle broadly defines another distinction between Saussure's and Peirce's respective signs – a difference concerning what we might call the "field of application" of the two types of sign: "Unlike those contemporary semiologists who, like Saussure, restrict their field of study to linguistic signs, Peirce makes semiotics encompass both linguistic and non-linguistic signs" (Deledalle, 1978, p. 212).

Refusing certain researchers' convictions that Peirce's "semiotics" would not contain linguistic semiology as a subdiscipline, Deledalle follows Sebeok in making Saussure's the more restrictive field. Sebeok thus writes, in the essay "Semiosis in Nature and Culture": "semiotics owes its preoccupation with the linguistic sign to no one but Saussure. Although this kind of study had been around since Cratylus, the conception of "linguistics as semiology" was obviously what allowed Saussure to be elevated to the semiotic Pantheon" (Sebeok, 1979, p. 6). Very schematically, then, the opposition seems to be founded on two aspects of the sign: (i) its nature: binary in Saussure's thought, and ternary in Peirce's system, and (ii) its field of application: while Saussure's sign is only intended to elucidate linguistic phenomena, Peirce's sign can be applied to all domains of semiotic production – as Umberto Eco writes, "semiotics, with its totalitarian ambitions, is a ghoul, a vampire intent on sucking the blood from all other disciplines" (Eco, 1974, p. 4).

I consider that this ready-made, popularized, opposition is incomplete, and that it does not allow for the discussion of the methodological conditions of applicability of these two types of signs, particularly in the field of literary studies. Or, at the very least, I propose that these presupposed oppositions obscure other oppositions which appear to me not only more productive, but also capable of leading to a fundamental and theoretical reflection on literature or its criticism and, thus, by implication, on the text analysis programs which, in the future, will help us for the in-depth study of texts. During this brief essay, I will support my argument by appealing only to the very limited domain of semiotic studies devoted to poetry.

In this area, dealing with Michael Riffaterre's critical work is unavoidable. The evolution of his critical approach confirms the idea that modifying the nature of the literary object under study necessitates a change from one type of sign to the other. Thus, in his earlier works, notably Essais de stylistique structurale [Essays on Structural Stylistics], Riffaterre analyzes segments of text and discourse fragments and makes Saussure's model of the sign his privileged tool. In more recent works such as Semiotics of Poetry, however, he studies the text as a whole and, predictably, turns to the model of Peirce. This transfer from one model of the sign to another is subsumed, in the introduction of his book, under a more general methodological bifurcation. Riffaterre justifies his critical comportment as follows: "[At this time] I began focussing on the poem as a whole, since it appeared to me that the unit of meaning peculiar