

Charles Sanders Peirce

C. S. Peirce

A Life

REVISED AND
ENLARGED EDITION

J O S E P H B R E N T

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INTRODUCTION

Facets of the Puzzle

[I intend] to make a philosophy like that of Aristotle, that is to say, to outline a theory so comprehensive that, for a long time to come, the entire work of human reason, in philosophy of every school and kind, in mathematics, in psychology, in physical science, in history, in sociology, and in whatever other department there may be, shall appear as the filling up of its details.

CSP, "A Guess at the Riddle," 1887

The past is a city in ruins—melancholy debris of the feast. The past haunts us with vague recognitions and inspires in us a musing curiosity about our seamless continuity with it. We guess at the riddle it embodies as we wander its vast reach lost in concepts, hunting for clues, inquiring of our ancestors about the signs of their times, and uncovering symptoms of our own malaise. We are pierced by time's barbed arrow, and from that irresistible outward clash we know that our universe is irreversible. The beauty of the past arises from its permanence, from the impossibility of changing what was done. It is this forgiving permanence, suffusing even folly and tragedy with melancholy beauty, that transforms the brilliant, bitter, humiliating, and above all tragic life of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce into an odyssey of spirit which is at once fascinating, saddening, and compelling. Peirce died at the age of seventy-four in the spring of 1914, five months before the guns of August thundered abroad the beginnings of the First World War and the end of an age whose dominant values he despised.

In 1934, the philosopher Paul Weiss, in his brief account of Peirce's life in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, called him "the most original and versatile of American philosophers and America's greatest logician," but outside the philosophic community his name and work are even now little known. Even among philosophers, he is usually mentioned only in passing as the

