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Notes toward a semeiotic of art: iconic beauties in cosmic poiesis

Notas para uma semiótica da arte: belezas icônicas na poiesis cósmica

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Abstract: Although Charles Peirce only rarely applied his semeiotic principles to art, his ideas are highly informative for contemplating the exchange of qualitative meaning in the iconic signs constitutive of art. Reflecting on Peirce's theory of the icon, three hypo-iconic sub-types, the formative role of the sign-interpretant, and the metaphysical "qualisignificance" of a universe "perfused with signs", I provide some theoretical notes toward sketching a semeiotic of art. Further illustrative of a Peircean semeiotic of art is the American painting of the Hudson River School and the modern poetry of Wallace Stevens that progressively advance its insights in their own beautiful signs. These philosophers and artists have intellectual roots in Emerson's transcendentalism with its Neoplatonic legacy, and together form a unique American strand of aesthetics.

Keywords: Aesthetics. Charles Peirce. Metaphysical semiotics. Neoplatonism. Transcendentalism.

Resumo: Embora Charles Peirce raramente tenha aplicado seus princípios semióticos à arte, suas ideias são altamente informativas por contemplar a troca de significado qualitativo nos signos icônicos constitutivos da arte. Refletindo sobre a teoria do ícone de Peirce, três subtipos hipocônicos, o papel formativo do signo-interpretante e a "qualissignificância" metafísica de um universo "permeado de signos", forneço algumas notas teóricas para esboçar uma semiótica da arte. Mais ilustrativas de uma semiótica peirciana da arte são a pintura americana da Escola do Rio Hudson e a poesia moderna de Wallace Stevens, que avançam progressivamente suas percepções em seus próprios belos signos. Esses filósofos e artistas têm raízes intelectuais no transcendentalismo de Emerson com seu legado neoplatônico e, juntos, formam uma linha única de estética americana.

Palavras-chave: Estética. Charles Peirce. Neoplatonismo. Semiótica metafísica. Transcendentalismo.

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1 Introduction

Charles Peirce's innovative ideas about signs are a fruitful resource for sketching a semeiotic of art. Pondering their implications for artistic creativity and appreciation, we can gather some important notes toward explaining artworks as meaningfully qualitative embodiments – or more simply, beautiful signs. Although Peirce never finalized a complete systematic theory of signs and although he only sporadically applies his semeiotic principles to art, many of his ideas worked out over decades possess a theoretical breadth applicable to a wide variety of contexts.¹



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1 One of the earliest efforts to formulate a semeiotic of art using Peirce's ideas about signs is found in Max Oliver Hocutt (1962).

The expansiveness of his semeiotic was intentional, and it naturally supported his cosmological theories, especially his hypothesis that “all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs” (EP 2:394). Consistent with these metaphysical speculations, the theoretical scope of his semeiotic is not limited to the domains of formal logic and language. Rather, there is a world of signs encompassing the greater human *umwelt*, and, moreover, a universe of signs including the biotic and abiotic worlds.

Peirce’s cosmological semeiotic uniquely builds upon a neo-Platonic legacy extending through Eriugena, Spinoza, Schelling, Goethe, and others.² Closer to home, this legacy further includes Peirce’s American compatriots of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his transcendentalist peers, and various modern artists including the Hudson River School painters and the poet Wallace Stevens.³ These figures are naturally supportive of my project on a semeiotic of art. Not merely contemporaneous, their writings and artworks were nurtured within an intellectual community – a “neighborhood” of thought, as Peirce conceived – where like-minded ideas in their living vitality spread, catch on, cross inform, and progressively ramify.⁴ In particular, their works contain clear Peircean pronouncements in their reference to a real cosmic *poiesis* that is organically continuous with the imagination of finite artists. An exemplary case is Stevens’s semiosically reflexive poetry that breaks the procrustean norms of siloed academic disciplines, arguing that poetry and philosophy exist as natural cohorts in a shared search for truth. His late visionary poetry and prose writings on reality and the imagination maintain multiple Emersonian commitments. The most central of these being his career-culminating goal to work out a poetic-metaphysical absolute, what he variously called the “supreme fiction”, “central poem”, or “essential poem at the center of things”.⁵ In my reflections to follow, I consider more fully these speculations. Furthermore, I conceptualize the American poetry and painting as semiotic participants within a cosmic *poiesis*. The artworks will serve both as illustrations *and* a source of philosophical insight toward a semeiotic of art.

2 Preliminary Note

Before providing some individual notes toward a semeiotic of art, it is important to first recognize the promise a semeiotic framework, in general, holds for philosophizing about art. We can ask: Why semiotics? That is, what is the special value of this theoretical framework for understanding art? In pragmatic spirit, the full answer will only bare out in the course of using that theoretical perspective and acknowledging any consequences that positively illuminate the subject of art; that is, its validation lies in its cash value. Nonetheless, a preliminary note about its relevance is also possible when we consider the main philosophical elements surrounding art. In short, a general theory of the sign can systematically handle the full spectrum of elements ranging from the creative process to artistic expression, representations of beauty, and aesthetic appreciation. These phenomena variously involve the communication, creation, and discovery of meaning across relational elements. The logical form here is that of the mediation of ideas, which is the very definition of semiosis. Peirce’s semeiotic is especially useful, thus, because of the way it integrates the three essential elements underling any form of semiosis, and because of its emphasis on process or the activity of signs. His well-known triadic definition of the sign as a relational

2 On this Alexandrian background to Peirce’s philosophy, see David A. Dilworth (2022).

3 For a detailed discussion of nineteenth-century American landscape painting in philosophical perspective, see Nicholas L. Guardiano (2017a, chaps 1 and 4).

4 Peirce’s concept of an intellectual “neighborhood” and the way ideas are organically related in continuous affectability can be found in his essay “The Law of Mind”. In two different essays, I attend to the workings of the law of mind within Peirce’s New England intellectual setting. On the way transcendentalism crucially informs his architectonic philosophy, see Nicholas L. Guardiano (2017b). Second, on transcendentalism informing his semeiotic, see Nicholas L. Guardiano (2021).

5 Wallace Stevens, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” and “A Primitive Like an Orb”, in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1990). On the centrality of the “supreme fiction” to Stevens’s career, see Joseph Carroll (1987).

composite of (1) the sign itself, (2) its object or that *to* which it signifies, and (3) its interpretant or that *for* which it signifies holds these elements as co-present and co-constituting. In any semiotic process, there occurs an irreducibly triadic interplay across the three elements. For this reason, Peirce's semeiotic on its most fundamental level lends itself to art, because of its potential to comprehensively attend to the rich network of meaning at play across artworks, artistic creation, artistic appreciation, and the interplay between these co-informing factors.

On the contrary, the other major theoretical contender in modern semiotics, Ferdinand Saussure's dyadic framework of signifier/signified, lacks such inclusivity in more ways than one. It is well known that Saussure's semiology fails to treat the interpretant. This vital flaw renders impossible an account of aesthetic appreciation. Such appreciation occurs not only in the audience that interprets the work of art but in the creative artistic process. Although the latter is less obviously an interpretive process, artistic creation involves the discovery of meaning in the process of making. One way pertains to the progressive unfolding of meaning via a feedback loop whereby the artist continually contemplates and revises his/her product toward some (at least vaguely conceived) end. I will return to this later. The inadequacy of the Saussurean model for philosophizing on art becomes even more striking when we consider that its oversight of the interpretant leaves it without any resources to account for our very interest in art in the first place, and thus any subsequent theoretical interest born from that attraction. Thus, a Saussurean semiology of art would be in the awkward position of being unable to justify its own existence. Last but not least, overlooking the interpretant necessarily inhibits any understanding of art's greater impact on a world beyond art per se. Following Peirce's lead, the interpretant is broadly conceived to include feeling, action, and thought, each a different kind of outcome of semiosis. Art clearly has sway over all three kinds of interpretants, and by means of all of them, it shows its expansive influence on culture, history, and human society.

3 Note 1. The work of art is primarily an icon: its iconicity grounding its qualitative meaningfulness

In addition to his triadic understanding of the sign and semiosis, Peirce is well-known for his threefold classification of sign-types consisting of the icon, index, and symbol. As his thinking about signs became more sophisticated throughout his career, this classification expanded to include ten sign-types, and then again to include as many as sixty-six sign-types.⁶ The original three find a place in the higher schemes, and they remain highly useful to understanding the varieties of semiosis in the world, as is evident from many interdisciplinary applications that have been made of them. Peirce defines the three types in the following ways.⁷ An icon is a sign that possesses a qualitative likeness or similarity to its object. An index is a sign that is the effect of its object by possessing a physical connection or causal link to it; and a symbol is a sign that relates to its object by way of convention or habit. One useful way of illustrating the sign-types is using a set of examples that holds constant the sign-object. For instance, consider three different representations of a particular wilderness area in the form of a painting, map, and descriptive pamphlet. The painting is an icon because it represents the wilderness area using similar shapes, colors, and tonalities, thus forming a likeness of the appearance of the land itself. The map is an index because its lines geometrically demarcate or indicate the layout of the physical space including its types of terrain, elevation gradients, and trails. Finally, the words of a pamphlet are symbols because they describe the region's flora, fauna, and natural history using linguistic signs, which attain their meanings based on the conventions of human language.

⁶ For Peirce's remark that his semeiotic supports sixty-six sign-types, see his letter to Victoria Welby, 23 December 1908 (EP 2:478-481).

⁷ A succinct account of the three sign-types along with helpful illustrations are found in Peirce's manuscript "What is a Sign?" (EP 2:4-10).

Now, as for the semiotic character of the work of art, it is primarily iconic and this feature grounds its *qualitative meaningfulness* or *meaningful beauty*. In the iconic relationship, quality and meaning – rather than traditionally opposed entities – are held together. This is so because icons are referential *by and through* their qualitative-felt characters. Quality works in concert with meaning in the performance of the iconic relationship. Art-signs are not mere sensuous particulars without significance. With Stevens we can say that “Art involves vastly more than the sense of beauty”, or that its beauty is not a “bare [sense] image” but a sense “image as meaning”.⁸ Regarding the opposing extreme, art-signs are not mere representations of cognitive content – as is the case with linguistic symbols whose qualitative character is minimally relevant.

Stevens’s aphoristic remark from his *Adagia* that “Art involves vastly more than the sense of beauty” helps illuminate the particular tract of American aesthetics that we are beginning to pursue. It contains a reference to Stevens’s former Harvard professor George Santayana who, around the time Stevens was a student, published *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory* (1896). Throughout his career, Stevens would grapple with Santayana’s philosophy, devoting a late poem, “To an Old Philosopher in Rome”, to critiquing the Epicurean worldview of his former mentor. In his aphorism that alludes to *The Sense of Beauty*, Stevens again distances himself from Santayana who, in his treatise, restricts aesthetics to a naturalistic or psychological inquiry dealing with human sensibility alone – its feelings, tastes, and values.⁹ In line with Santayana’s naturalistic approach to aesthetics is John Dewey’s aesthetics that focuses on the vital functions and experiences of “the live creature” through analyses of the biological, psychological, and social behavioristic aspects of the human being.¹⁰ Such detranscendentalized approaches to art diverge from the neo-Platonic legacy informing Stevens’s metaphysical poetry and Peirce’s cosmological semeiotic with their historical roots in the philosophy and art of American transcendentalism.

Similar to the qualitative meaningfulness of the work of art, aesthetic appreciation deals not with the simple satiation of desire, but with a *contemplative pleasure* involving a *felt-idea*. This is opposed to an either/or situation that engages only human rationality *or* sensation, at the exclusion of the other. Immanuel Kant’s insight in the *Critique of Judgment* that our reflections on beauty are characterized by a pleasure in the “free play” of the imagination *and* understanding correctly acknowledges the importance of both a sensuous and intellectual dimension in the life of beauty and art.¹¹ Peirce in one of his rare yet brilliant remarks about aesthetic experience captures the point precisely. Aesthetic experience consists in, he explains, the “totality of Feeling” or the state of “consciousness belonging to the category of Representation [in] representing something in the Category of Quality of Feeling”. It is the experiencing of “a sort of intellectual sympathy, a sense that here is a feeling that one can comprehend, a reasonable feeling” (EP 2:190). The Peircean icon supports this nuanced character of aesthetic appreciation. Again, by its iconic function, art is meaningfully suggestive in its very qualitative immediacy.¹²

I take the qualitative meaningfulness – or perhaps better, qualitative-meaning – of art to be one of its standout features. Arguably, it is what accounts for our original fascination of art, that is, the way art does not just satiate our will but grabs our attention making us ponder it. It also explains its ongoing attraction in our lives, rather than fleeting presence. Unfortunately, the foundational role of this feature is often lost in scholarly preoccupations with artist biographies, classifications of artistic movements, and critical analyses that overly emphasize the political, economic, or other secondary factors surrounding art. These scholarly interests may sometimes have value, yet they would not exist without our original

8 Wallace Stevens, “Adagia”, in *Opus Posthumous* (1989).

9 See the “Preface” and “Introduction” to George Santayana (1955). On the philosophical relationship between Stevens and Santayana, see David A. Dilworth (2005; 2017).

10 See John Dewey (1934, chap. 1).

11 See Immanuel Kant (1987, sec. 9).

12 John Dewey in his aesthetics borrowed such ideas from Peirce on qualitative experience and sign representation. See Robert Innis (2014).

fascination for beautiful works. Moreover, the qualitative-meaning of the artistic icon crucially pertains to the *reality* of art. From a Peircean perspective, art's impact on the feelings, thoughts, and conduct of people is evidence for its real causal power. In note 3 below, I will more fully address the ontology of art in reference to the iconic-qualisign and its metaphysical relationship to the interpretant. For now, I further note that this Peircean understanding of the icon has a superiority over Saussure's linguistic-centric model of the sign, in particular regarding its "arbitrary" – only view of the sign-relation. For Saussure, the relationship between signifier and signified depends purely on social convention, and thus the meaning born out of this relation depends not on any inherent or real feature of its parts. Thus, it cannot depend on any actual shared likenesses. This focus on arbitrary meaning is simply inadequate for discerning the rich qualitative-meaning of icons, which capitalize on the *real* similarities and continuities between things.

4 Note 2. Three unique types of icons contribute to art's diversity of expressive form

Peirce came to refine his definition of the icon over the course of his career. Rather than identifying it as an independent sign-type *simpliciter*, it became a descriptive element of a trichotomy of parameters describing the way a sign relates to its object. In 1903 he introduced this trichotomy along with two others: one pertaining to the way a sign relates to its interpretant; and another to the way a sign stands as a being in itself. Deriving from these three trichotomies is a revised typology of ten sign-types, where the logical structure defining any given type consists in three parameters, one selected from each of the trichotomies.¹³ Eventually, Peirce would expand his set of three trichotomies to a total of ten trichotomies, which would be his final word on the matter at the time of his passing. These theoretical developments of Peirce's semeiotic continue to have value for illuminating artistic representation. In the next section, I return to, in particular, the trichotomy describing the ontology of the sign while addressing art in the context of a cosmic *poiesis*.

For now, however, we address a related semeiotic idea introduced by Peirce in 1903. It is his identification of three sub-types of icons, or what he sometimes called "hypoicons", to refer to the icon in its pure theoretical state without any indexical or symbolic additions.¹⁴ Peirce's method in defining these sub-types is based on a mixture of his early and revised semeiotic ideas. On the one hand, it assumes the icon is an independent sign-type – rather than a trichotomic parameter – and, on the other hand, it gives special attention to the icon's character-defining relationship to its object. In addition, Peirce grounds on the nature of sub-types on his three onto-phenomenological categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness.

If a substantive be wanted, an iconic Representamen may be termed a hypoicon. Any material image, as a painting, is largely conventional in its mode of representation; but in itself, without legend or label, it may be called a *hypoicon*. Hypoicons may roughly [be] divided according to the mode of Firstness which they partake. Those which partake the simple qualities, or First Firstnesses, are *images*; those which represent the relations, mainly dyadic, or so regarded, of the parts of one thing by analogous

13 For the three trichotomies and the sign-types deriving from them, see "Nomenclature and Divisions of Triadic Relations, as Far as They are Determined" (EP 2:289-99). Peirce intended to use this document as part of a syllabus to be distributed during his 1903 Lowell lecture series.

14 Peirce's neologism – as is the case with many of his neologisms – is likely informed by his background in chemistry. There, "hypo-" describes a molecular structure of lowest order that is basic because formally constitutive of higher order compounds in a series. For instance, there is hypochlorite (ClO⁻), chlorite (ClO₂⁻), and chlorate (ClO₃⁻), each varying by a difference in the number of oxygen atoms. The prefix "hypo-" thus indicates a kind of abiding pattern, form, or *logos* that is the basis of a series. This helps correct a misinterpretation in Peirce scholarship that the hypoicon is a concrete particular instance of an icon (i.e. an iconic sinsign; see section 3 below), rather than, as I am arguing, a pure pattern or form of iconicity. T. L. Short (2007) makes this mistake. Consequently, he incorrectly concludes that "hypo-" means a supporting, material substratum.

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*. (EP 2:273-74).¹⁵

Understanding these iconic sub-types requires understanding the Peircean categories, which by their generalizing capacity affect our hitherto simple understanding of the icon as a likeness. Firstness is the positive character of that which is taken in itself, such as the *sui generis* nature of any sense-quality or feeling. Secondness pertains to that which is what it is relative to a second, including the existential facticity of things in their brute insistence upon our senses. Finally, thirdness pertains to mediation, continuity, representation, thought, creative processes, and forms of communication, because these involve the combining of entities into that which is more than the sum of the parts. Firstness and thirdness are particularly relevant to art. One exemplification occurs in the totality of feeling, a first of a third, that is characteristic of artistic appreciation, as already discussed.

Peirce's new hypo-iconic sub-types significantly expand the essential representative function of the icon beyond that of a mere qualitative or perceptual likeness. A likeness of the latter sort is now only one of the three iconic sub-types, namely the image. As the history of modern art in Europe and elsewhere has clearly taught by its abandonment of portraying the semblance of recognizable objects, art need not rely on such imagistic likenesses. Rather, it is free to explore alternative stylistic approaches, such as surrealism and abstraction. In Peirce's new threefold classification, each iconic sub-type still represents through firstness, that is, through its shared similarities with its object, yet these similarities may now either be a similarity in sense-quality (a first firstness), a similarity in the structural relation of parts (a second firstness), or a similarity in a representative function (a third firstness). The theoretical scheme here deploys the recursivity of the Peircean categories to describe the different types of similarity. Moreover, the third sub-type, the metaphor, possesses an inherent recursivity of reference: it iconically *represents* the *representative* character of its object.¹⁶

One way to apply the three iconic sub-types to art is to use them to distinguish different traditional forms of art. The pictorial representations of painting can be understood as iconic-images; the representations of sculpture, architecture, and other plastic arts as iconic-diagrams; and the representations of literature and poetry as iconic-metaphors. However, these distinctions are somewhat trivial and only skin-deep. Moreover, they do not capitalize on the heuristic potential of a higher-order of generality that accompanies the definitions of image, diagram, and metaphor, as these stem from the three Peircean categories.

Richer insight into the signifying power of art is gained by focusing on the way the sub-types disclose the multi-layered iconic expressiveness of many works of art. Such multi-layering or diversity of expressive form occurs in, for example, the American nature painting of the nineteenth-century.¹⁷ First, consider the realistic landscapes of the Hudson River School that feature iconic-imagery – the first sub-type – in their representations of beautiful natural scenery. Its artists sought to preserve the actual qualitative specificities of nature in the precise hues and tonal details of things, the spontaneous arrangement of objects populating a space, and the physical idiosyncrasies of individual trees, plants, and rocks. They also sought to depict the unique weather and ambient lighting of a select time and place. These sorts of iconic similarities and others are essential to Asher Durand's series of paintings, *Studies from Nature*. For instance, *Study from Nature, Stratton Notch, Vermont* (1853) depicts the spontaneity of the scene in featuring a dead, fallen tree and the idiosyncrasies of that tree with its particular leaves still

15 Similar distinctions between three iconic sub-types continue to appear in Peirce's later classifications of signs, thus suggesting he continued to hold to some version of it. For instance, a couple years later he mentions the three iconic sub-types of the likeness, analogue, and diagram, in connection with the way the sign relates to its dynamic object (contra immediate object); see SWS 161 and 224.

16 For another interpretation of Peirce's three iconic sub-types, see Tony Jappy (2020).

17 I am not the first philosopher to apply a Peircean perspective to painting. See also Albert William Levi (1962). However, while Levi uses Peirce's three categories, he makes no mention of his semeiotic.

held to its branches and the unique flecks of bark across its trunk. Replicating a precise image of nature was tantamount to Durand's overall artistic goal throughout his series, which was to accurately portray the qualitative semblance of a natural scene without modification or embellishment – to represent, in his words, the “truth” of nature.¹⁸

Similarly, many of Frederic Church's paintings are renowned for their *tromp-l'oeil* realism on the miniature scale. Contemporary viewers of, for example, *Heart of the Andes* (1859) were offered opera glasses in order to fully indulge in the great abundance of natural details, which were painstakingly represented by Church. One of these viewers was Mark Twain who observed the painting when it traveled to St. Louis in 1861. While appreciating the stunning beauty of the scene as a whole, he remarked on its abundance of realistic detail:

[It is] the most wonderfully beautiful painting which this city has ever seen [...] [There are] birds and flowers of all colors and shades of color, and sunny slopes, and shady corners, and twilight groves and cool cascades [...] I have seen it several times, but it is always a new picture – totally new – you seem to see nothing the second time which you saw the first. We took the opera glass, and examined its beauties minutely, for the naked eye cannot discern the little wayside flowers, and soft shadows and patches of sunshine, and half-hidden bunches of grass and jets of water which form some of its most enchanting features.¹⁹

Second, American landscape paintings additionally feature iconic-diagrams in portraying the existential facticity of nature, that is, in the way they capture the secondness of nature in its aesthetic immediacy. Martin Johnson Heade's series of tropical hummingbird paintings are artistic achievements in this regard. They iconically represent a similarity in the relation of parts to their represented objects in their scientifically precise renditions of the anatomical forms of different bird, insect, and plant species, and of the natural cycles that these species undergo. *Passion Flowers and Hummingbirds* (c. 1870-1883) is a fine example by the way it prominently displays the wings, tailfeathers, and headfeathers of a male and female hummingbird; the courtship ritual between the pair; the morphological structures of the passionflowers; and the life stages of the flower from bud to bloom to decay.²⁰ In the original conception of his series of paintings, Heade intended to have them serve the dual purpose of *art and science*. One early set of paintings were in fact prepared as illustrations for an ornithological text entitled *Gems of Brazil*. Although he never completed the project, he did generate about 20 paintings during an extended trip to South America where he carefully collected and examined specimens. An extant draft of the book's introduction declares that it aspires to be “reliable in the little ground [it] covers in this extended branch of natural history as any work yet published on the subject”.²¹ Thus, Heade sought to integrate a fidelity to scientific fact with an aesthetic appreciation for the beauties of the flora and fauna of a remote region in the tropics.

Earlier in the nineteenth-century, John James Audubon, the elite American painter of birds, helped innovate such ways of incorporating scientific study into art. In fact, in his introduction to *Gems*, Heade references Audubon's work as an authority on hummingbirds. Audubon's artistic-scientific method included the use of a “position board” with gridlines on which to pin fresh specimens, the use of drafting tools for making careful measurements, and the close study of bird anatomy through dissection and vivisection. Every effort was made to represent nature true to size and anatomically accurate in

18 See Asher Durand (1855), “Letter I”, “Letter IV”, and “Letter VII”.

19 Mark Twain, quoted in Barbara Novak (2007).

20 Also see the analysis of the painting in Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. (2000). Stebbins mentions some of the same aspects of the work while connecting them to Darwin's naturalism.

21 Martin Johnson Heade, “Introduction,” notebook on hummingbirds, c. 1864, Martin Johnson Heade Papers, *Archives of American Art*, Washington, D.C., 3, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/martin-johnson-heade-papers-7699/series-1/box-1-folder-9>.

order to produce his monumental 4-volume, double-elephant folio text, *The Birds of North America*. A comprehensive guide to all 497 bird species on the continent, its plates each include a caption that insists its content is “drawn from nature”. The artistic likenesses of individual birds can be understood as iconic-diagrams resembling their subject-matter. *Tricolored Heron*, for instance, prominently represents the unique species-specific facts of the heron’s physiology. First, as with all of Audubon’s plates, the bird is depicted at life-size scale, which in the case of the large body of the heron requires bending its neck downward and back in order to squeeze it into the picture frame. Second, the painting highlights many of the heron’s defining anatomical features including its unusually long and sharp bill, ornate crest and train, scaly skin, and large yet slender talons.

Last but not least, further contributing to the multi-layered iconic expressiveness of American landscape painting is its use of the third iconic sub-type, namely the metaphor. Recalling Peirce’s definition, the metaphor represents “the representative character of a representamen [sign] by representing a parallelism in something else” (EP 2:274). In other words, the metaphor represents a similarity with its object in terms of its representative function, which is a third. Similar to literary metaphors, paintings can be iconically metaphoric because their pictorial content may be employed for its own additional representative value. This occurs when that content is displayed in such a way as to suggest to an interpretant an idea that goes beyond the simple images or facts of the scene. Audubon’s masterful presentations of birds do just this by depicting not only their qualitative likenesses and scientific elements but *their semblance as lived beings*. In showcasing their energetic, emotive, and social lifestyles, the birds become iconic-metaphors of the vitalistic forces of nature. Powerful examples are his *Virginian Partridge*, *Mocking Bird*, *Great American Hen & Young*, and *Blue Jay*. These paintings present to their interpreters the caring for new hatchlings, the life-and-death struggles between predator and prey, and the playfulness had in daily routines. Similarly, in Audubon’s romanticized accounts of bird species in his *Ornithological Biographies* – the textual companion to *The Birds of North America* – we are provided with just that: not mere abstract ornithological data, but *the unique biographical stories of living creatures*. Heade in his short introduction to *Gems* quotes Audubon’s text and writes that “[o]f all naturalists[,] Audubon has written of [hummingbirds] with the greatest feeling, and his enthusiasm for his little favorites led him to very careful observations and study of their habits”.²² Heade continues the project of his teacher. To return to *Passion Flowers and Hummingbirds*, its iconic expressions include metaphoric references, such as to the romantic union between the male and female birds. Another metaphoric reference occurs in the complex layering of different plant and animal organisms. By populating the foreground with the procreative life of the hummingbirds and passion flowers, and by further enfolding these in the twisting vines of the plant and the profusive landscape reaching beyond, the painting suggests an ecological web of nature joining multiple organisms into a biotic unity.²³

5 Note 3. Art is of the real qualisignificance of a cosmic poesis

We have so far considered the formal structure of the art-sign in relation to its object. Now, we turn to consider the art-sign in itself, that is, in regard to its ontological status. To that end, Peirce’s semeiotic provides us with three possible sign-beings for our consideration. These are the qualisign, which is a mere quality or feeling; a sinsign, which is a singular existing object or event; and a legisign, which is a law, habit, or other generality.²⁴ In Peirce’s 1903 typology of sign-types, these three sign-beings combine

²² Ibid., 12-13.

²³ Many more iconic-metaphors occur throughout the Hudson River School landscapes in their spiritualized renditions of nature. See my *Aesthetic Transcendentalism* (2017a, chap. 4) where I discuss their representations of the immanence of the divine in nature, the metaphysical connaturality of mind and nature, and the ecstatic creativity of a progressively unfolding universe.

²⁴ Peirce defines these across several texts; see e.g. EP 2:291 and SWS 505-506.

with the icon to form the following types: (1) the rhematic-iconic-qualisign; (2) the rhematic-iconic-sinsign; and (3) the rhematic-iconic-legisign. Here we have in effect, much like we found in the previous section, a set of three iconic sub-types. However, where the previous set covered different ways the icon may be a likeness of its object, the new set covers different icons varying according to their ontological status. Despite future revisions to his semeiotic after 1903, Peirce continued to treat the ontological nature of the sign during his final years, where the qualisign, sinsign, and legisign reappear under the alternative names of the tone, token, and type.²⁵ In this section, we focus on the qualisign or tone as another fruitful resource for contemplating the iconic significance of art.

It is crucial to realize that these intricate semeiotic divisions are no mere theoretical matter. They address fundamental questions of being while directing our attention to the role of art in a universe of signs, a possible cosmic *poiesis*. Peirce made his own metaphysical conjectures about such a universe. In the same year of 1903 that saw substantial revisions to his semeiotic – and only a few years before his claim about a universe “perfused with signs” – he proposes that “the Universe is a vast representamen” having “organically attached to it, its Indices of Reactions and its Icons of Qualities” (EP 2:193-194). The statement is from the Harvard lecture *The Seven Systems of Metaphysics* where it occurs in the context of lauding the truth of poetry. In the same passage, Peirce further proposes that the universe is a symbol of God’s purpose, a fine argument, and a great poem. As Martin Lefebvre explains, the major aspects of Peirce’s cosmology were well in place at the time of these remarks. The universe, Peirce conceives, is “a rationally embodied idea endlessly growing in variety and complexity”.²⁶ Lefebvre adds that this seems nothing less than a perfect definition of a work of art for a semiotician.

It also is a perfect definition of art for a transcendentalist poet. Underpinning Peirce’s semiotic cosmology is the neo-Platonic worldview that had spread throughout his New England intellectual neighborhood, which included such major thinkers as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. These transcendentalists made similar avowals about the ubiquity of signs in nature and society, and the essential constitution of the self as semiotic. They found deep folds of meaning running throughout their environment and sought to explain these using a metaphysics of the universal mind, spirit, or God, which underlies and actively shapes our everyday experience.

Further reprising these transcendentalist ideas and consequently extending the neo-Platonic legacy into the twentieth-century was the modern poet Wallace Stevens. Across numerous poems, Stevens sought to grapple with the metaphysics of poetry under a cosmic perspective. Some examples are “Landscape with Boat”, “Chocorua to its Neighbor”, “The Creations of Sound”, “Description without Place”, “Credences of Summer”, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” “A Primitive Like an Orb”, “Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly”, “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour”, “The River of Rivers in Connecticut”, and “Reality is an Activity of the Most August Imagination”. The imaginative content of these poems and others makes a sustained effort to glimpse a universal poetry, or, as Stevens describes in a letter to a friend, “a poem equivalent to the idea of God”.²⁷ The universal poetry exists in continuity with the poems of finite artists, who serve as conduits of its creative power. To quote just one poetic example, there is the “essential” or “central poem” described in “A Primitive like an Orb” – a poem that confirms Stevens’s elective affinity to Emerson’s transcendentalism.²⁸

The central poem is the poem of the whole,
The poem of the composition of the whole,
The composition of blue sea and of green,
Of blue light and of green, as lesser poems,

25 See e.g. Charles S. Peirce (1906).

26 Martin Lefebvre (2007).

27 Wallace Stevens (1966).

28 See Carroll (1987).

And the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems,
 Not merely into a whole, but a poem of
 The whole, the essential compact of the parts,
 The roundness that pulls tight the final ring.²⁹

Stevens's central poem is about, generative of, and ontologically continuous with the beautiful multiplicity of singular poems. Such resonances with Neoplatonic cosmology further occur in the poem's title that references a primitive "orb" and its first stanza on the "gorging good" that casts "the cast-iron of our lives with good/And the cast-iron of our works".³⁰ This is something to ponder in connection to Peirce's metaphysical theory of the qualisign and in its relation to a cosmic *poiesis*.

There are two important details to note about the qualisignificance of art. When we attend to the signifying capacity of a quality, we attend not to an embodied or concrete thing (a sign or token); rather, we attend to an immaterial or idealistic entity that has the potential for embodiment. In terms of the Peircean categories, we are dealing with the first of a third, rather than the first of a second. The legisign similarly possesses an idealistic nature. Being a general law, it governs over its concrete instantiations yet while being always more than these. The being of the art-sign is idealistic too. Although it is embodied in a physical medium, it is not reducible to that medium – at least, not without losing its artistic significance. The art-sign in its full triadicity lives in the mind of its creator and audience.³¹ This is especially clear in poetic and literary works whose fictional characters, scenes, and plots only exist in the imagination. It is also evident in music, whose audible signs – more than mere soundwaves – carry powerfully evocative, intangible expressions. Idea-potentialities are no less essential to other works of art, including those in the style of representational realism whose consummate meanings culminate in an experience in which, as Peirce describes, "there is no sharp discrimination between the [art]-sign and the thing signified, the mind gloats in an ideal world and does not ask or care whether it be real or not" (EP 1:282). Elsewhere, Peirce explains that the more perfectly a sign functions the better it serves as an ideal conduit, a pure diaphanous medium, for its object, determining its interpretant "as if the object itself had acted upon it" (EP 2:391).³² In addition to describing the ideal world of the art-sign, Peirce's remarks further allude to the basic iconic nature of the art-sign in its real similarity with its object. We now can see that that similarity is the qualisign as shared being across the triadic sign-relation: a metaphysical conjoinment between sign, sign-object, and interpretant into a qualitative unity. Stevens in a prose essay theorizing on poetic analogy likewise argues that the primary image (Peircean icon) evoked by a given poem actually "partakes of the nature of the emotion" had by both the creator and appreciator of the poem.³³

It is not off topic to mention that the idealistic nature of the qualisign contributes to a transcendentalist metaphysics of beauty. In art, beauty is a function of the interplay between quality and meaning. It is related to the qualitative aspects of the work yet while not being merely skin-deep. For this reason, it can be associated with the iconic-qualisign whose unique signifying mark is the co-functioning of quality and meaning. Furthermore, beauty can be associated with the ability of the sign-type to realize a metaphysical conjoinment of the triadic sign-elements into a qualitative unity. Emerging here is a Platonic sense of beauty that objectively mediates subject and object. On the contrary, Santayana's

29 Stevens (1990), "A Primitive Like an Orb".

30 Ibid., 440.

31 See Hocutt (1962), who also conceives the work of art as a possibility that lives in the mind of the artist and audience. However, Hocutt is working with Peirce's early semeiotic and simple definition of the icon, rather than his revised semeiotic and theory of the qualisign.

32 C. M. Smith (1972) argues that the conjoinment between the object and interpretant in the icon bolsters a Peircean semeiotic of art against a standard criticism of semiotic theories of art in general that they contradictorily hold crucial the immediacy of aesthetic experience while claiming that that experience depends on a process of mediation through the work of art. Similarly, Charles W. Morris (1939) argues that the art-sign because an iconic likeness of its object allows for the direct apprehension of its object by an interpretant, while simultaneously mediating the value of that object through the sign that is its embodiment. Also, see the metaphysical discussion of semiosis consisting in the real joining together of the mind of utterer and interpreter in Nicholas L. Guardiano (2020).

33 Wallace Stevens (1948), "Effects of Analogy".

alternative American tract in aesthetics with its Epicurean worldview binds beauty to human sensibility with its tendency to objectify its pleasures outside itself.³⁴

A perhaps even more fundamentally semiotic aspect of beauty lies in the way its signs simultaneously *attract* our attention and *propel* our imaginative contemplation toward their referential objects and future interpretants. In art and aesthetically rich moments of everyday life, such a dynamic logic of semiosis governs our discovery and participation in the creation of beauty. Emerson, in his late-career essay on beauty, adds a neo-Platonic metaphysics in support of our intimate participation in the cosmic unfolding of beauty.

But the sovereign attribute remains to be noted. Things are pretty, graceful, rich, elegant, handsome, but, until they speak to the imagination, not yet beautiful. This is the reason why beauty is still escaping out of all analysis. It is not yet possessed, it cannot be handled. Proclus says, “it swims on the light of forms”. It is properly not in the form, but in the mind [...]. The new virtue which constitutes a thing beautiful, is a certain cosmical quality, or, a power to suggest relation to the whole world, and so lift the object out of a pitiful individuality.³⁵

Like the qualisign, the “cosmical quality” of beauty pertains to its idealistic and relational being. It lives in the imagination and across imaginations, suggesting the deeper metaphysical continuities between things.

The second essential aspect of the qualisign pertains to its qualitative firstness, that is, to its unique, positive, aesthetic character. The alternative term “tone” is thus fitting, as it suggests the distinct sensation of a particular sound when that sound is considered in isolation from others. This character is substantial ontologically, for Peirce, who understands the qualisign as “that whose *essential being* makes it a sign”; on the other hand, the sinsign is “that whose accidents of existence make it a sign” (SWS 154; my emphasis).³⁶ Thus, although the being of the qualisign is in one way idealistic, it is realistic by its inherent qualitiveness, and thus is no mere abstraction or unadorned conceptual representation. In this way, the realistic dimension of the qualisign lies in its qualitative firstness, whereas the idealistic dimension lies in its (triadic) relational thirdness. Firstness and thirdness thus arise again as two Peircean categories having special aesthetic relevance. In particular, the qualisign is central to artistic appreciation in its experiential immediacy. As already discussed, such an experience is a self-contained totality of firstness, that is, a totality flavored by the unique felt character of a qualisign. In terms of a transcendentalism of beauty, aesthetic experience would be understood as a dwelling within the vital presence of an objectively unique state of beauty.

Two poems by Stevens explore by way of imaginative illustration the two aspects of art related to its qualisignificance. Like many of Stevens’s poems, they are reflexive commentaries on their craft: enactments of the “very nature of poetry”, of “poetry’s essence”.³⁷ They are “*a poetry on the act of poetry*” as a living process of the mind.³⁸ Furthermore, they contain metaphysically astute reflections on art, and become powerful motivators of our own philosophical reflections on art in this regard. First, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” – one of the longest poems ever written by Stevens and one of his most sustained poetic commentaries on the nature of art – insists on three essential properties of poetry. These are announced in the titles of the poem’s three chapters: (1) It Must Be Abstract, (2) It Must Change, (3) It Must Give Pleasure. The first and third properties direct our attention to the blending of

34 See Santayana (1955).

35 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Beauty,” in *The Conduct of Life*, vol. 6, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 161.

36 Also see SWS 159–60.

37 Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 18.

38 David A. Dilworth, “The Life of the Spirit in Santayana, Stevens, and Williams,” 19.

idealism and realism in art, that is, to its mixture of conceptual and sensuous dimensions. The poem's opening stanza addresses that subject head on. "Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea/Of this invention, this invented world/The inconceivable idea of the sun".³⁹ The invention is the poem itself, which must be based on an *inconceivable yet perceivable idea*. Or, as the poet says in a later stanza, it is based on "an abstraction blooded", contra a dead abstraction.⁴⁰ An "abstraction blooded" or a perceivable idea is precisely a qualisign in its dual ontological roles as first and third. In addition to illustrating these dimensions of Peirce's sign-type through poetic metaphor, Stevens's poem directs our attention to the real power of poetic qualisigns in the world. Although the poem is an invention or fabrication of the imagination and although its essence is an abstract rather than concrete idea, it remains a vital force shaping the thoughts and feelings of its creator and audience. The poem as "idea of the Sun" resembles Plato's image of the Sun as child of the Good/Beauty/Truth, which radiates its creative energies into finite beings mediating their different relationships.

The qualisignificance of art is again described in the poem "Description without Place". Theoretically consistent with Stevens's other metaphysical poetry, its idealist-realist perspective proposes that the *topos* of the poem is no physical geography, no embodied thing, or description *with* place, but a qualitative idea-potentiality of the imagination. Its opening lines follow the logic of a Platonic dialectic between seeming and being, and, again, alludes to the Platonic image of the sun with its ontological status:

It is possible that to seem – it is to be,
As the sun is something seeming and it is.
The sun is an example. What it seems
It is and in such seeming all things are.
Thus things are like a seeming of the sun
Or like a seeming of the moon or night
Or sleep.⁴¹

The sun, moon, and night are, for Stevens, all references to poetry and the poetic imagination. Poetry by its qualisignificant images breaks through any metaphysical dualism of seeming and being, appearance and reality. Hence, it is analogous to the sun, which is no less real and efficacious by its appearing. Moreover, it is by and through its very appearing that its power is felt and disseminated – as is the case with the stellar body at the center of our solar system that nourishes life on Earth from a distance of 100 million miles.⁴²

Again, Stevens's metaphysical framework is clearly neo-Platonic, as seen in "Description without Place" with its use of celestial metaphors to convey metaphysical and cosmological truths. The image of the sun with its ontological meaning parallels the "central poem of the whole" in "A Primitive Like an Orb". That "central poem" exists as a primordial creator that is ontologically continuous with its effects and a ground of their vibrant power. Other images in "Description without Place" evoke the same reality: "the curling-out of spring/A purple-leaping element that forth/Would froth the whole heaven with its seeming-so/The intentions of a mind as yet unknown/The spirit of one dwelling in a seed/Itself that seed's ripe, unpredictable fruit".⁴³ As Joseph Carroll explains, these images are part of Stevens's career-long endeavor to fulfill "a poetic vision of the supreme spirit creating space and time and manifesting itself in each creative act of human consciousness. Within this spirit, all oppositions – between mind and

39 Wallace Stevens, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," 380.

40 Ibid., 385.

41 Stevens (1990), "Description without Place".

42 "Chocorua to its Neighbor" also explores the ontology of an ideal-realism while promoting a theory of "metaphysical metaphor" (STEVENS, 1990, "Note on Moonlight"). Likewise, see "Note on Moonlight" that considers the purpose of being "to be observed,/As if, among the possible purposes/Of what one sees, the purpose that comes first,/The surface, is the purpose to be seen" (STEVENS, 1990, "Note on Moonlight").

43 Stevens, "Description without Place," 341.

material reality, here and there, then and now, signifier and signified, and the individual and the whole – are resolved in a ‘pure principle’ of sentient relation”.⁴⁴ I suggest that this “pure principle of sentient relation” pertains to that of a cosmic *poiesis* in its qualisignificance. It is a principle continuous with artistic semiosis that realizes meaningful qualitative unities, ramifying interpretive appreciations, and multivalent iconic expressions.

One further upshot of the qualisignificance of art is the way artistic signs possess a kind of ontological freedom, so to speak. This freedom exists in both the thirdness and firstness dimensions of the qualisign; it pertains to its abstract or primarily imaginative nature and to its stand-alone, aesthetic uniqueness. The artistic qualisign is free because it is not fixed or bound to any physical embodiment (sinsign), thus remaining transferable across the work that mediates the mind of the artist and the contemplative pleasures of the audience. This is especially evident in historically great works of art when we witness their many iterations in print and digital media, and more generally, their on-going realizations across countless interpretive acts of the past, present, and future. Shakespeare’s plays and their modern performances in many a city park around the world are perfect examples. Keeping in mind this autonomy of the art-sign, it is not surprising that we lose a sense of art’s essential power when its sinsignificance as a physical particular becomes the main focus. This occurs in the commodification of art and all that goes with it, such as the sales of auction houses and obsessions over intellectual rights. Art is price-less not in the sense that it is worth a lot of money but in the sense that any pecuniary metric, necessarily attached to its materiality, is inapplicable to judging its imaginative qualisignificance. This truth has motivated countless artists to shun perspectives of their works as materially and economically driven objects. For instance, there is the recent Sotheby stunt pulled by the contemporary street-artist Banksy. His painting “Girl with Balloon” self-destructed by shredding itself before a bewildered artworld at the time of sale for a record-setting \$1.4 million. The work was set for destruction whether it sold for \$1 million or \$1. Not any particular price tag was the object of Banksy’s ridicule, but the general auctioneer mindset that in its excessive attachment to sinsigns remains blind to the true significance of art.

Shifting gears, the above understanding of the qualisignificance of art should be balanced by considering the legisignificance of art. Recall from Peirce’s 1903 semeiotic that the iconic-legisign is one of the three types of icons according to ontological status. While discussing the legisign above, I briefly mentioned its similar idealistic or abstract nature to the qualisign. More specifically, the legisign possesses a law-like or legislative nature. Now, art is found to have legisignificance in the way it governs over its future interpretants, whatever form these may take – material, emotional, or conceptual – by determining their general boundaries. Consider, for example, the constraints – both spoken and unspoken – that guide our felt-appreciations of artworks or the constraints that guide our construction of derivative renditions of classic works. Such interpretative acts operate under a governing power that is controlling without overly dictating precise outcomes. Much like Peirce’s view of natural laws existing as general habits, the legisignificance of art is not absolute but involves vague laws projecting over future cases.

Similarly, we find vague laws in the form of general constraints governing the creative artistic process, which is a process that evolves over time according to a developmental teleology. The artistic medium and other means are carefully controlled toward some end, albeit a revisionary one. In the various legisignificant situations of art, it is not the case that just anything goes. There are better and worse interpretations of art, better and worse artistic results. Attesting to this are the modernist drip paintings by Jackson Pollock, which, although they might appear as haphazard and blindly exploratory, required painstaking efforts by the artist:

When I am *in* my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing. It is only after a sort of “get acquainted” period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about

44 Carroll (1987).

making changes, destroying the image, etc., because *the painting has a life of its own*. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.⁴⁵

Likewise, in a radio interview in 1950 with William Wright who asked Pollock about the challenge of controlling his paint, Pollock responded, “I don’t use the accident – cause I deny the accident [...]. I do have a general notion of what I’m about and what the results will be”.⁴⁶ Failure was not infrequent, and Pollock would destroy his works and begin anew when necessary. His vision of an artistic idea or “life” striving for realization is that of an artistic legisign gently governing over its concrete embodiments.

Interpretations of art for its philosophical significance, such as those I have been offering in this essay, further demonstrate the legisignificant potential of art. If my examinations of American painting and poetry have been at all successful, it is evidence that these artistic works embody laws in the form of general philosophical truths, aesthetic, metaphysical, and moral. Insofar as these truths positively influence the direction of the thoughts, beliefs, and conduct of an audience, the artworks function as legisigns shaping the future in a general way. A specific example is the influence of Audubon’s Romantic representations of birds on Heade’s iconically-metaphoric and idealized paintings of the lives of hummingbirds. Moreover, the paintings of both artists are tokens of the vitalistic forces and laws of nature themselves. Those forces influencing Audubon’s and Heade’s understandings of nature, which in turn influence the creation of their artistic products, the audiences interpreting these works, and so on. Another example is Stevens’s metaphysically inspired poetry on my own philosophical notes toward a semeiotic of art. Given these additional dimensions pertaining to the legisignificance of art, we can conclude that there is the coexistence and interpollence of legisignificance and qualisignificance at play in the semiotic being of art.⁴⁷

In the Peircean qualisign, we thus have the real possibility of a qualitative being to signify by, through, and in itself. And in the Peircean legisign, we have a living law guiding the discovery and creation of new interpretants. They constitute the ontological-semeiotic core of the beautiful icons vitally present in our lives and available to our interpretive appropriations. In their semeiotic capacities, artistic icons are integral to a greater cosmic *poiesis*. They are essential constituents of the Peircean universe that is a vast representamen or great poem, or of the miraculous multiplex of Stevens’s central poem of the whole. Thus, they are key ingredients of an aesthetically pluralistic cosmos supporting its qualitative variety, expressive forms, and growth of future interpretants.

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⁴⁵ Jackson Pollock (1999, my emphasis).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁷ I am indebted to David Dilworth for bringing this idea to my attention and his critical feedback about the legisignificance of art.

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