

The Music of Meaning

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Abstract: This paper begins as a methodological musement inspired by a suggestion made by C. S. Peirce to William James (1905: CP 8.263). It takes his intellectual life as a complex affair displaying a creative tension between what, on the surface, appear to be exclusive impulses. On the one hand, there is the drive to attain the highest level of conceptual clarity humanly possible. This is of course evident in his pragmatism. On the other, there is his seeming dalliance with concepts so vague as to be possibly not concepts at all (arguably only “tones or tints upon conceptions” [Peirce 1901: CP 1.353]). His lifelong devotion to articulating a categorial scheme is the most telling example of this intellectual propensity. In this paper, following Peirce’s example with respect to his interest in his categories, then, the author gives himself over to the intimations of intelligibility conveyed by the expression “the music of meaning”. From this musing, he then claims more solid ground by offering an explication of Peirce’s theory of interpretants as the place where that theorist’s account of meaning is to be found. Ultimately, he tries to draw together what has emerged, first, in his methodological musement and, then, in subsequent discussions—his three main topics: music, that mysterious form of time; time, that mysterious form of Being; *and* meaning.

Keywords: Being, categories, interpretant, Peirce, pragmatism, semiosis, time

Music, that mysterious form of time

—Jorge Luis Borges (“Another Poem of Gifts”, [1972: 223])

Introduction

There is no misprint in my title. I mean the music of meaning, not the meaning of music. I am not certain I can explain clearly, let alone distinctly,¹ what I mean by this expression. Yet I will try very

¹ In a sense, I will in this exploration operate mostly on the level of the first grade of clarity, that of familiarity rather than conceptual distinction (formal definition) or pragmatic clarification.

hard to be as clear and distinct² as the phenomenon allows. Beyond this, my hope is to clarify a phenomenon pragmatically. The expression (“the music of meaning”) is, in my ears, very much like a line of poetry to which one is drawn but whose sense proves elusive.³ The lure of the line cannot be denied (Whitehead 1911: 119). I take my experience in this regard not to be idiosyncratic. In fact, I imagine it is very widely shared. Something for the most part, if not wholly, unintelligible claims us.⁴ In its very unintelligibility, it holds within itself the promise of being comprehensible. It both thwarts and invites our efforts to understand; and these efforts are nothing less than the expression of a drive. It draws one back to it, time and again; it holds one fixated.

Methodological Musement: Peirce’s Life as Exemplary

There is of course danger here, one about which Peirce was keenly aware. He explicitly calls our attention to it in one of his best-known essays, a text crafted precisely to confront this danger. In “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”, after noting “intellectual maturity with regard to clearness comes rather late”, this being “an unfortunate arrangement of Nature”, Peirce writes:

² There is Cartesian clarity and then there is Peircean. Whereas clarity and distinctness are, to some extent, confused by being fused together by Descartes, they are carefully distinguished by Peirce. Pragmatically, clarity *means* familiarity and, in turn, familiarity has nothing to do with intellectual intuition or cognitive immediacy, yet everything to do with those everyday forms of “immediate” recognition resulting from our experiential acquaintance with some more or less determinate object, event, or situation. For the carpenter who is experientially acquainted with the properties of wood, seemingly “immediate” judgments (judgments not requiring much or any thought, moreover, ones *seemingly* closer to perception than inference), this board is clearly better than that for the purpose at hand. While Peirce rather misleadingly identifies familiarity, as the first grade of clarity, with a subjective feeling, his meaning is better grasped—indeed, better conveyed—if we think in terms of a practical acquaintance. The kind of familiarity a practitioner has involves having a *feel* for the matter at hand (Bourdieu 1980: 67–70). This might be described as “intuitive”; but, from a Peircean point of view, such a description would be misleading.

³ In “The Poet”, R. W. Emerson suggests, “not metres, but a metre-making argument makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive . . . it has an architecture of its own” (Emerson 1844: 450). I am disposed to modify this: not music, but music-making qualities such as the rhythmic, the melodic, the tonal, and whatever else counts as such are the focus of my concern.

⁴ There is no doubt a danger here, perhaps any number of dangers. Not the least of all, there is that of celebrating a tendency all too easily open to becoming a love of obscurity, simply a defensive attachment to unwarranted vagueness. Obscurantism can in part trace its roots to fighting against the legitimate exigencies of making our concepts appropriately clear, distinct, and pragmatically elucidated. Umberto Eco is a thinker who was animated by a deep suspicion of our obsessions with hidden patterns and secret codes. This is evident in both his literary and philosophical writings (in, e.g., *Foucault’s Pendulum* [1988] and Richard Rorty’s “Pragmatist’s Progress”).

It is terrible to see a single unclear idea, a single formula without meaning, lurking in a young man's head, will sometimes act like an obstruction of inert matter in an artery, hindering the nutrition of the brain, and condemning its victim to pine away in the fullness of his intellectual vigor and in the midst of intellectual plenty. Many a man has cherished for years as his hobby some vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positive false; he has, nevertheless, passionately loved it, has made it his companion by day and by night, and has given to it his strength and his life and [. . .] in short has lived with it and for it, until it has become [. . .] flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone; and then he has waked some bright morning to find it gone, clean vanished away like the Melusina of the fable, and the essence of his life has gone with it. (Peirce 1878: EP 1.127, CP 5.393)

In order to avoid this, Peirce of course proposes a maxim.⁵ This maxim is not in itself a theory of meaning (it is even rather a stretch to claim that this maxim is implicitly such a theory); it is simply a heuristic maxim offered by an experimental inquirer, intimately *familiar* with the details and, of far greater moment, the spirit of scientific inquiry. It is a rule for how to conduct ourselves in the search for truth.⁶ In brief, it is a maxim offered by an inquirer for the sake of conducting inquiry most effectively. It bears upon the clarification of meaning, without offering anything approximate to a theory of meaning, let alone a full-blown theory.

On this occasion, two points above all others need to be stressed. First, a number of commentators have wryly pointed out that Peirce's formulation of his maxim is scarcely a model of clarity (see, e.g., Thayer 1968; Hookway 1985). What, however, these expositors too often fail to note is that this is hardly avoidable. In drafting legislation, designed to be sufficiently precise, the need for qualifications and delimitations drives legislators in the direction of what reads like a needlessly complex formulation. This can be true of even finely crafted pieces of legislation, arguably, must be true of such pieces. In the very nature of the endeavor, a certain involuted formulation is for the most part unavoidable. The prose turns back upon itself in a series of qualifications, in an effort to specify precisely what is to be legally permissible and what is not. So, too, Peirce's

⁵ "Consider what effects, which 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 1879: EP 2.132, also in CP 5.402. See Hookway 1985; Short 2007)

⁶ This is an allusion to the original title of Descartes's *Discours de méthode*: "The Method for Rightly Conducting One's Reason and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences". Peirce's semeiotic endeavors to offer nothing less than what Descartes's title indicates (See Fisch 1986: 288).

formulation of his maxim. Neither a superficial clarity (an immediately accessible articulation) nor literary elegance is to be expected in such cases. Such expectations betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the rhetoric, most of all, the rhetorical purpose, governing the articulation of, in the one case, a piece of legislation and, in Peirce's, a maxim offered to inquirers for the sake of rendering their ideas or conceptions sufficiently clear for the exacting purposes of experimental inquiry. It is, in my judgment, not altogether clear that Peirce in fact fails to be, given the nature of his endeavor, sufficiently clear in the formulation of his maxim. The need to articulate this maxim in other ways (see, e.g., Peirce 1905: EP 2.346, CP 5.438) might point as much to the complexity of the task as to any putative shortcomings of the original formulation. While it might be witty to claim Peirce was anything but clear in articulating his maxim for how to make our ideas clear, it also might be neither entirely accurate nor entirely fair. This is a rhetorical judgment and, as such, is at bottom a practical matter, hence one calling for heuristic deliberation. Rhetoric has nothing to do with superfluous adornments or embellishments. It has everything to do with crafting expression to fulfill most economically and effectively the functions of a discourse (see, e.g., Peirce 1904: EP 2.326; Colapietro 2007).⁷ Judged in this light, the charge that, in his articulation of his maxim, Peirce's rhetoric falls short of its goal is easy to make but hard to sustain.

Second, there is a closely related point to the one just made. On the surface, it might however seem that I am now about to argue the other side of the case I have above just argued, for I will be focusing on an apparent tension between Peirce's demand for increasing degrees of clarity, culminating in pragmatic clarification, and his tolerance of seemingly excessive vagueness, extended to inordinate solicitude for what others find unduly vague. Here, too, I am disposed to defend Peirce. The charge to be countered is however not Peirce's alleged failure to be adequately clear in the formulation of his maxim, but rather to be fully consistent in his application of pragmatism. The charge has been made by any number of expositors, including ones sympathetic to Peirce's pragmatism. The substance of it is that Peirce's pragmatism rules out some of the most important parts of his own philosophy, most notably, his metaphysics and

⁷ Peirce was convinced, "our conception of rhetoric has got to be generalized; and while we are about it, why not remove the restriction of rhetoric to speech? What is the principal virtue ascribed to algebraical notation, if it be not the rhetorical virtue of perspicuity? Has not many a picture, many a sculpture, the very same fault which in a poem we analyze as being 'too rhetorical'? Let us cut short such objections by acknowledging at once, as an *ens in posse*, a universal art of rhetoric, which shall be the general secret of rendering signs effective" (Peirce: EP 2.326).

cosmology (see, e.g., Gallie 1952: chapter 9; Hookway 1985: chapter 9). On his criterion of meaning, some of his own statements, many of them being central to his identity as a philosopher, are meaningless. This is of course a very serious charge and, if it stands (if it cannot be overturned), Peirce would be exposed as a fundamentally confused thinker who did not comprehend clearly enough the implications of the maxim which he put forth to eliminate veiled nonsense and simply excessive vagueness.

Part of the problem here is the tendency to assimilate Peirce's pragmatism too closely to positivism. There is without question a family resemblance between pragmatism and positivism, but the doctrines might be only distant relatives bearing, in one or more features, a striking resemblance, but being at bottom more divergent than similar. Some of Peirce's formulations of pragmatism certainly do suggest that he is offering a criterion of meaning enabling us to expose rather easily the gibberish of metaphysics, as gibberish, as so much nonsense. He was not oblivious to the possibility of his pragmatism being confused with positivism, so he took pains to distinguish them. And he did so precisely in reference to metaphysics. "So, instead of merely jeering at metaphysics, like other *prope*-positivisms, whether by long drawn-out parodies or otherwise, the pragmatist extracts from it a precious essence, which will serve to give life and light to cosmology and physics" (Peirce 1905: EP 2.339, CP 5.423).

Whereas the prefix *prope*- is a device designed to expand the breadth of a term, the ending *-icism* is designed for the complementary purpose of restricting the scope of some *-ism*. Peirce's pragmaticism is one of various forms of a *prope*-positivism: as a doctrine, it needs both to be distinguished, occasionally sharply distinguished from other *-isms* (specifically, other variants of pragmatism) and, for some purposes, allied to other doctrines. What pragmatism and positivism share is of course a commitment to experience, specifically, a commitment to making meaning and not only truth a function of experience.

Of course, everything turns on the meaning of experience itself. In Peirce's judgment, what pragmatism shares with positivism is also what enables us most emphatically to mark the difference between the two (at least, between his pragmaticism and positivism, properly understood): In contrast to the nominalistic understanding of human experience championed by the positivists (one in which there is an effort to eliminate completely generality and vagueness from the textures of experience), Peirce robustly defends a "realistic" conception in which thirdness is ingredient in experience (not an arbitrary imposition by the human mind), moreover, in which irreducible vagueness and generality are ineliminable

features. While the paradigmatic forms of human experience are ones in which the forceful “determination” of our cognitive lives is the dominant feature (while experience is a phenomenon in which secondness is predominant), firstness and thirdness, qualitative immediacy and at least an intimated intelligibility, are hardly absent. At times, indeed, either qualitative immediacy (firstness) or an unfolding intelligibility (thirdness) can be the most prominent feature of a given experience. Peirce insists, thirdness pours in on us in perception. This does not in the least contradict his claim that, in perception, secondness, the direct, yet mediated confrontation of the perceiving subject and a perceived object, is central. I perceive this chair, here and now. The *haecceity* of this-here-now cannot be gainsaid: it is a direct disclosure of what is always in some measure a compulsive experience (the object is forced upon me: I am compelled to acknowledge not only its presence but also its qualities—*this* yellow side, here and now).

While the positivist would charge Peirce with making more out of experience than it actually discloses, Peirce would counter by insisting the positivists make less out of experience than what it manifestly reveals itself to be. While the positivists would pointedly contend that Peirce introduces metaphysical fictions into his inflated account of human experience, Peirce would answer by charging they have blinded themselves by their theories to the ontological import of everyday experience. The modes of being are, for example, at least intimated by the disclosures of experience. On Peirce’s account, reality experientially understood does not designate anything recondite: it signifies what is encountered in experience and what is “represented” in a true proposition. It is not he, but the positivists, who make reality something more mysterious and occult than what everyday experience warrants and ordinary language implies. Experience itself does not jeer at questions regarding reality, except when they are posed in unduly high-flown language; it wrestles with them in as straightforward and reasonable a manner as the situation allows. Peirce’s pragmatism joins ordinary experience in this continual struggle. It will not tolerate the theoretical obfuscations of the doctrinaire positivist, but consult the experiential illumination of what the positivists themselves allege to champion, experiential compulsion in its truly *force majeure*.

Like the positivists, Peirce is committed not only to bringing our hypotheses to the bar of experience but also at a more basic level connecting meaning to experience. Unlike the positivists, he derives his understanding of experience from the disclosures of experience itself rather than a largely aprioristic conception of human experience inherited from diverse philosophical traditions.

The life of the experimental inquirer cannot, heuristically, be divorced from that of the plain person (e.g., the experimental inquirer himself walking to the research center). On countless occasions, the experimental inquirer is, even in the lab, a plain person, taking for granted the workaday conceptions of daily life. In their characteristic vagueness, these workaday conceptions tend to work extremely well.⁸ No surprise there, since they have evolved to address the most pressing exigencies of everyday life and our evolution is bound up with theirs.

I have not lost sight of our second point, but it has been necessary to elaborate in detail the context in which the alleged conflict (that between Peirce's demand for increasing degrees of clarity, culminating in pragmatic clarification, and his tolerance of seemingly excessive vagueness) is encountered. Peirce the logician is charged with both failing to meet what *he* sets up as the "very first lesson that we have a right to demand that logic shall teach us", the demand to show "how to make our ideas clear" (Peirce 1878: EP 1.126, 1877: CP 5.393), *and* failing to follow his own advice, to adhere to his own maxim, regarding the clarification of the meaning of his own words and expressions. In brief, he is insufficiently clear and demonstrably inconsistent. Having addressed the first charge above, it is now, aided with our understanding of how experience is to be understood in the context of his pragmatism, high time to address the second charge (that of inconsistency). We must not lose sight of the possibility of being seized by "some vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false" (Peirce 1878: EP 1.127, 1877: CP 5.393). His pragmatism was designed, decades before being rechristened in public as such, to expose these vague shadows for what they are. The positive task is to render our ideas sufficiently determinate so that they can experientially be shown to be false. Until we can do this, we are not in a position to know whether they are minimally meaningful, i.e., whether they escape, however narrowly, being nonsensical. Something has, in principle, to count against them and count against them experientially. If they prove to be so Protean as to be able to shift their shape to accommodate any and every experiential challenge,

⁸ In the lab, a very precise and even formally defined understanding of physical force is of course requisite. In our daily lives, this is hardly ever so. Our rough-and-ready understanding of force suffices for most purposes. Peirce goes so far as to assert: "For ordinary purposes . . . nothing is gained by carrying analysis [of such concepts as force] so far [as would be necessary in the context of, say, physics]; because these ordinary commonsense concepts of everyday life, having guided the conducted of men [and women] ever since the race was developed, are by far more trustworthy than the exacter concepts of science; so that when great exactitude is not required they are the best terms of definition" (c. 1907: MS 318, EP 2.433).

we cannot say anything significant about them. Despite appearances, we cannot mean anything by them, regardless of how much we feel these signs are full of import (not infrequently, full of deep import).

A problem arises however when we begin to consider how readily some ideas can be translated into a form allowing for falsification.⁹ With some ideas, this is an easy task. With others, however, it is far from a straightforward or unchallenging endeavor. The hypothesis of having left my keys in my jacket hanging in the closet is readily falsifiable, that of the origin of the cosmos or the emergence of life on the Earth is far less so. Some might even claim that, since there is no way of transporting ourselves back in time to the origin of the cosmos, the question is meaningless. No experience of ours can be, some severe opponents of speculation allege, brought to bear on our efforts to answer this question, nothing in the way of experience can be summoned to count against any claim anyone might make; therefore, the question is, as Peirce says in another instance, “a senseless vocable” (Peirce 1906: MS 283, EP 2.375; 1903: CP 6.6). Of course, most or (more likely) virtually all physicists and cosmologists would not be deterred from investigating the origin of the cosmos, just as no biologist would be deterred from inquiring about the origin of life on this planet, by such a stricture regarding meaning as the one invoked to undermine the legitimacy of these lines of inquiry. Indeed, these scientists would certainly feel as though the road of inquiry was being blocked by the insistence that their investigations violated the minimal standards of meaningful discourse. Even though we cannot transport ourselves back in time to the origin of the cosmos or the emergence of life, some forms of experience conceivably can be made to bear upon the various answers proffered in response to what practicing scientists accredit as a significant question. This makes any investigation of such questions inescapably speculative. But scientists who shun speculation are ones who condemn themselves to making relatively trivial discoveries. Put more positively, speculation is integral to science. Science is as much an adventure of the imagination as it is a confrontation with experience. The scientific imagination cannot avoid being a robust form of *speculative* imagination, at least if it is to serve the task of inquiry.

What I want, above all, to stress at this point is a tension (not to be confused with a contradiction), optimally, a *creative* tension, between the

⁹ It is important to stress, since it is not often enough done, that in Peirce’s mind pragmatism is connected to questions of translation, at bottom, this question: “of the myriad forms into which a proposition may be translated, what is that one which is to be called its very meaning?” (1905: EP 2.340, CP 5.427). See Short 2003 and Colapietro 2003.

wildly speculative impulses of the theoretical imagination and the experientially oriented preoccupations of the disciplined inquirer. Any facile resolution of this potentially creative tension is likely to sap inquiry of its élan. Those possessing an experimentalist temperament often become quickly impatient with those animated by a more speculative temperament. In turn, the theoretically disposed tend to think disparagingly of the experimentally oriented, at least when the latter press prematurely for falsifiable hypotheses. This is, in my judgment, a healthy tension. Just as any society is or can be well-served by the ongoing conflict between traditionalists and reformers, so any community of inquiry is well-served by containing within itself these deeply divergent temperaments, these rival camps.

Peirce characterized himself as an experimentalist. For such a person, “his disposition is to think of everything just as everything is thought of in his laboratory, that is, as a question of experimentation” (Peirce 1905: EP 2.332, CP 5.411). The quicker any such individual can translate anything whatsoever into experimental terms, the better. The overriding impatience of the doctrinaire¹⁰ “experimentalist” (likely a disguised positivist) targets the speculative musings of those claiming to be that individual’s “scientific brethren.”¹¹ What Peirce’s self-characterization, his emphatic identification with the experimentalist mind, is however likely to obscure is, on his account, the ideal scientist, the exemplary “experimentalist”, is unabashed, on occasion, in giving free rein to wildly speculative impulses. One dramatic moment in his writings where this becomes manifest is when he takes issue with a poet regarding the role of imagination in our discovery of truth. After quoting Tennyson, his lines “maybe wildest dreams / Are but the needful prelude of the truth”, Peirce (1892: SW 233) writes: “But I would doubt the [word] *maybe*. Wildest dreams *are*”, he insists, “the necessary first steps toward scientific investigation”.

What some expositors see as a simple contradiction (on the one hand, Peirce’s pragmatic maxim insists on the minimal condition for experimental significance being ideas clarified in terms of their conceivable or predictable observational effects, while, on the other, he indulged in speculation untethered to any such restriction), I see as a creative tension. I have pressed and want further to press this point principally for two reasons. First, it is critical for a nuanced portrait of Peirce’s intellectual

¹⁰ For Peirce’s stance toward the doctrinaire individual, experimentalist or otherwise, see Peirce 1910: CP 7.105.

¹¹ I am using here an expression commonly used by Peirce. This however does not altogether excuse the less than inclusive language of this expression.

persona. Second, and in terms of this Lecture a matter of greater moment, it provides me with a Peircean justification for tarrying at length with what might be called the “insecurely intelligible” (that which moves in and out of focus, now seeming to establish itself as being determinate in its significance, now becoming once again so vague or, in some other respect, indeterminate as to be nothing more than “some [utterly] vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false”). The drive toward ever greater and especially deeper intelligibility carries with it the risk of stretching our ideas beyond the range of significance (not merely the range of their significance, but the limits of meaning *simpliciter*)—more simply, the pitfall of nonsense.

There are philosophers (and of course Kant is the paradigm of one) who desire, above all else, to mark clearly and decisively the boundaries of rationality, the legitimate deployment of human reason. His critical project aims at fighting against the inherent tendency of human reason to overstep the proper bounds of legitimate (i.e., meaningful) discourse. Reason should hug the shoreline of the island wherein its proper use has acquired its undeniable efficacy (Kant: 257). In contrast, there are philosophers (and Hegel is the exemplar of one) who urge rationality to embrace its irrepressible drive toward ever greater intelligibility, even if this means making itself sound fantastically pretentious but also experientially untethered. Such philosophers are, typically, deeply concerned to show how speculation and experience square (see, e.g., Hegel 1837/1956). They however take most of the avowed forms of empiricism to be disguised instances of *empiricide* (Kaufmann 1979). Experience is richer and deeper, at once, more intelligible and, to an unsuspected degree, less allied to our sanctioned frameworks¹² than “empiricists” appreciate. As a result, such philosophers feel the need to rescue experience from the “empiricists”. Meaning is unquestionably tied to experience, better put, the possibilities of experience, but experience is in turn “an essentially contested concept” (Gallie 1956): the meaning of experience calls for theoretical elaboration. Kicking stones, as gestures of demonstration, has its limits. The elaboration of the meaning of experience might not, but for any number of purposes that meaning can be adequately delimited. Even so, our theoretical elaborations of this everyday concept (Peirce c.1907: MS 318, 1907: EP 2.433) can inform our contextual appeals and especially our understanding of

¹² Time and again, our frameworks have been shown *by experience* to be limited and distortive in ways those committed to these frameworks never suspected. History suggests our epistemic position is no different than that of our intellectual predecessors. Human history indeed suggests an unending series of paradigm shifts.

the foci of experience thrust upon our attention by those invaluable instruments of human inquiry (indexical signs). Indexical signs tether our discourse to experience, whereas symbols and icons allow us to obtain a critical understanding of the contexts, presuppositions, implications, and in general the meaning of our own experience, both in everyday life and in the contrived circumstances of formal experimentation.

To repeat, Peirce does not, in his commitment to his pragmatic maxim and, at the same time, his tendency toward “wild” speculation, contradict himself. Rather his life reveals a creative tension. Specifically, Peirce’s intellectual life actually reveals a singular susceptibility to what many readers have judged to be excessively vague ideas. Was he wrong, for example, to have devoted so many hours, indeed, so many years, to elaborating his categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness? Are we not the great beneficiaries of this lifelong struggle to cast these elusive ideas into an intelligible (if far from readily accessible) form? Was Peirce not here lured by an ideal of intelligibility, rivaling the most speculative aspirations of such predecessors as Plato or Plotinus, Schelling or Hegel? Is his commitment to this ideal itself intelligible without an appreciation of his willingness to venture far beyond the familiar precincts of his own city? Put otherwise, do we not have to be willing to follow him in his experiments of approaching familiar phenomena from uncustomary angles so that these phenomena themselves become, to some extent, uncanny or unfamiliar?

That to which I am pointing is most evident in his devotion to elaborating a recursive set of universal categories. He was uncertain whether the categories in the sense he was devoted to elaborating them were even concepts at all. In one place, at least, he confessed, “Perhaps it is not right to call these categories conceptions; they are so intangible [so elusive] that they are rather tones or tints upon conceptions” (Peirce n.d.: CP 1.353), rather than solidly determinate conceptions. If anything invites being pooh-poohed by the experimentalist, especially the more tough-minded ones, it is the very endeavor to frame such a set of categories. This is the business of utterly fanciful philosophers, not that of responsibly experimental inquirers. Or so such experimentalists are almost certainly disposed to pronounce. Yet Peirce persisted in his refinement and deployment of his categories, despite even the doubts of theoretically inclined, let alone experimentally oriented, inquirers. He was aware how his advocacy of them sounded in the ears of even those benevolently disposed to both him and speculation. His words in a letter to Lady Welby could not make this clearer. After confessing he was inclined “to throw all ideas into the three classes of Firstness, of Secondness, and of Thirdness,” he further revealed:

This sort of notion is as distasteful to me as it is to anybody; and for years, I endeavored to pooh-pooh and refute it; but it long ago conquered me completely. Disagreeable as it is to attribute such meaning to numbers [...] it is as true as it is disagreeable. The ideas of Firstness Secondness, and Thirdness [in themselves] are simple enough. Giving to being the broadest possible sense, to include ideas as well as things, and ideas that we fancy we have as much as ideas we do have, I should define [these categories as] [...] (Peirce 1904: CP 8.328)

At this point, Peirce defines his categories as modes of being! What is important, for our purpose, however, is not this specific move but his general reservation about his lifelong devotion to the systematic elaboration of a categoreal scheme such as he hit upon in his youth.¹³ In this, he was lured by intimations of an intelligibility of an extremely vague character and, in particular, by the promise of his categories providing uniquely valuable means for widening and deepening our understanding of whatever phenomena we encounter in experience and, beyond this, can conjure in imagination. *Of course*, he had misgivings about the very nature of such an endeavor. If we are to take him at his words, doubts arose early and persisted long after he provisionally convinced himself of the potential promise of his categoreal scheme (i.e., long after 1867, the year in which he published “On a New List of Categories”, though the essay only appeared in 1868). These were deep, abiding doubts. And, as persistent as they were, *he* persisted in this pursuit.

From the outside, it might certainly look like madness. Think of the countless hours Isaac Newton spent in trying to interpret the Bible, apparently, many more than he devoted to scientific investigation. Or, again, think of all the time, effort, and ingenuity Peirce spent on his categories. I readily imagine many philosophers would judge that he would have been far better off devoting himself to his *minute* logical investigations than his audacious categoreal speculation. I, however, am not to be counted among them. For I take his categories to be, at bottom, nothing more than what he suggested they were—a set of suggestions for how to look and see, for how to most effectively carry on an investigation. “This is all”, he insisted, “the categories pretend to do. They suggest a way of thinking” (Peirce c.1905: CP 1.351).¹⁴ They were designed to goad and guide inquiry, to remove obstacles from the path of inquiry, also to forge new paths.

¹³ The year in which Peirce wrote this letter is 1904, that in which he began to speculate about such a set of categories carries us back four or more decades (Esposito 1980).

¹⁴ “There is”, Richard J. Bernstein acutely observes, “a descriptive, empirical, pragmatic temper manifested in Peirce’s use of the categories. The ‘proof,’ or, more accurately, the adequacy of the categories is to be found in the ways in which Peirce uses them to illu-

They are principally heuristic tools, though in their application to metaphysics they suggest three irreducible modes of being. The application of the categories to Being generates a number of hypotheses, nothing more, but also nothing less (and this of course means *meaningful* hypotheses). But, in themselves (i.e., in their firstness), they do not offer a doctrine of Being (however much they might eventually prompt a series of guesses about Being): they are rather a set of hints or clues about how to comport ourselves as inquirers (Colapietro 2001).

The Implications of this Musement

The life of rational consciousness is one in which the lure of barely intelligible ideas, in some respects, possibly fantastic ideals, take and continue, indefinitely, their hold. Barely audible, legible, recognizable traces and intimations of intelligibility seize the theoretical imagination of even the seeming most tough-minded experimentalists—and the lives of these individuals take their determinate shape in large measure because of their personal devotion to these seemingly ethereal ideals.

We must insist upon the need to confine human rationality to the bounds of possible experience. But, at the same time, we must allow experience itself to disclose what the range and depth of meaning is and can yet become. Experience on this account is a medium of disclosure in and through which reality is not only encountered, in its brute secondness, but also ever re-imagined, in its boundless thirdness. What the lives of experimentalists reveals, among other things, is *the power of ideals* to lure individuals, in effect to enlist rational agents as their committed champions.

To give ourselves over to questions, “quite transcend[ing] our powers” (Peirce 1897–1909: CP 8.263), to allow ourselves to be carried and inspired by whatever insights we might glimpse, is arguably one of the best ways to spend our intellectual lives. Whatever strictures Peirce was disposed to offer regarding keeping meaning within the strict bounds of conceivable observation (and these are strictures *I* am disposed to take with the utmost seriousness), there is the experience of his life, his life as an experiment in coming to the fullest understanding of experimental inquiry possible, at that particular historical juncture. On the one hand, there is the stricture regarding the impermissibility of using concepts beyond the bounds of conceivable experience. On the other, there is the

minate fundamental similarities and differences in everything we encounter” (Bernstein 1971: 178; cf. Colapietro 2001).

life of an inquirer wholeheartedly given over to a number of investigations, generated by the slightest intimations of intelligibility. This life in effect grants permission to respond creatively to the lure of this ideal in one's own life. At least, that is how, at this time in my own life, I read *his* life vis-à-vis mine!

The prehistory of our acquisition of language must have been one in which even linguistic words carried *for the infant* felt meanings quite apart from their lexical significance (Kristeva 1981). The tender “nothings” and commonplace words spoken or sung to the infant could only be intelligible as a species of music, as a series of sounds in which inflections, alterations, rhythms, melody, and the other musical qualities of human language are audible. Is it not permissible to think that these sounds *were* meaningful in some sense? Were not our parents and others when addressing us as infants—are not we today in addressing infants, our children, grandchildren, or other infants—“saying” something to them, though they cannot grasp the meaning of our words as words? Do not the utterers of these sounds intend them as meaningful and even take the response of an infant to be indicative of having, in some vague manner, caught the significance of our utterances, i.e., our sounds, in all their musicality? Is the acquisition of language even possible apart from the apparently innate responsiveness of the human infant to human utterance, in the unquestionable absence of any linguistic understanding on the part of the infant? Is not the infant able to *become* a talker only because the infant (etymologically, the non-talker, one incapable yet of using or interpreting sounds as words) has already demonstrated the ability to respond intelligently to the differential patterns of auditory signs, including the musical qualities of these auditory patterns? Indeed, is not the acquisition of language predicated on the ability of the infant, presumably to some degree an innate or instinctual ability, to have already acquired a far from unsophisticated repertoire of nuanced responsiveness to the musical inflections of human speech?

One of course might ask, what makes the qualities under consideration here “musical”? My answer is: Partly because we actually sing to babies; partly because we vary sounds in such a way that these variations are of the utmost relevance in grasping their intended import; partly because the musical features of human utterance even in even their more muted (or attenuated) form could not help to be salient features for a being driven to make sense of (in James's famous expression) the “blooming, buzzing confusion” in which it is to such a great extent enveloped; and, finally, partly because of our instinctual attunement to persistent patterns of qualitative differentiation.

Certainly, if speculation about the origin of the universe or the emergence of life on this planet is legitimate, then speculation about both the origin of language in the history of our species and the acquisition of language in the case of an infant is also. For the moment, however, let me limit my attention to such acquisition. My speculative, thus tentative, hypothesis is that the acquisition of language points to the *music of meaning* as itself a meaningful expression. It is admittedly vague. It is, likely, irreducibly vague. But it is, I am confident, not so vague as to be utterly vacuous. My hope is to have, at this point, rendered the meaning of this expression as clear as an initial reflection about the relevant phenomena allows—that is, meaningful enough so that we can begin to imagine our way toward rendering this locution even clearer, to the point where it demonstrably becomes an idea determinate enough to be falsified. Only then will I have assuredly said anything meaningful. But, for the time being, I hope to have said enough to convince at least some of my readers to grant probationary status to what to other readers might still remain as “a vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false”.

Let us now turn from this attempt to explicate what I mean by “the music of meaning” and turn toward a consideration of the meaning of meaning. First, however, let us keep in mind the relevance of what I intend by “the music of meaning” by recalling an arresting line of poetic utterance. In recalling this line, temporality also becomes foregrounded. To make a complex topic even more complex, then, music, meaning, and time must be considered together. Indeed, the “music of meaning” points to the significance of time for a comprehension of significance itself. This will, I promise, not be as daunting as this must now sound. My aim in the next section is, after foregrounding the theme of time, to offer Peirce’s account of meaning, with the accent on the temporality of meaning and, thus, at least by implication, the musical qualities woven into the temporal processes in which meaning is humanly conveyed. For the most part, I can only gesture toward some of the main points. The main topic however—that of Peirce’s account of meaning—demands, even within the scope of such an essay, a more careful elaboration than the other topics.

Substantive Musement: The Meaning of Meaning

The last line of Jorge Luis Borges’s “Another Poem of Gifts” is an expression of gratitude for “Music, that mysterious form of time” (1972: 223). These words *are* that line in its entirety (to repeat: “Music, that mysterious

form of time”). The poem opens by identifying as gifts the universe and our endeavor to comprehend it:

I want to give thanks to the divine
 Labyrinth of causes and effects
 For the diversity of beings
 That form this singular universe,
 For Reason, that will never give up its dream
 Of a map of the labyrinth . . .
 (Borges 1972: 218)

The mystery of music might illuminate the mystery of time *or*, more likely, they might illuminate *each other*. It is one thing to explain the obscure by the more obscure, quite another to try to illuminate the mysterious by the equally mysterious.¹⁵ On this occasion, my purpose is to reflect on music as “that mysterious form of time”, in the hope of illuminating not only time but also *meaning* (especially meaning). What I intended to foreground by my title was the *temporality*, including the extemporaneity, of meaning. Whatever experiences of transcendence, including seemingly the transcendence of time itself, are provided by music, they are provided *by* and *in* the temporal flow of musical signs. What is true in this instance, is true, I am disposed to believe, in other ones: the transcendence of time is an episode in time. It may even be, as e. e. cummings (1958) suggests, that only time can set us free from time and, I would add, those moments of freedom or transcendence, tend to be just that—fleeting moments, transitory achievements. Their transience however does not count against their power or significance.¹⁶ Quite the opposite, their power and significance trade on their transience.

It is apposite, especially for me here, to recall Peirce’s suggestion (one made in a letter to William James): There is *nothing more elevating* “for us than to find problems that quite transcend our powers, and I must say too, that it [doing so] imparts a delicious sense of being cradled in the waters of the deep—a feeling I always have at sea” (Peirce 1905: CP 8.263). The implication is that we should devote ourselves most of all to such “problems”, in the hope not of solving them but of deepening our understanding.

¹⁵ My emphasis on mystery should not be read as an embrace of obscurantism. As I am using the word, a mystery is infinitely intelligible. It cannot be exhaustively known, but it can be increasingly rendered intelligible.

¹⁶ In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel writes: “we must [. . .] banish from our minds the prejudice in favor of duration, as if it had any advantage as compared with transience: the imperishable mountains are not [by virtue of their duration inherently] superior to the quickly extinguishing rose exhaling its life in fragrance” (Hegel 1837: 221).

Properly conceived, we can never get to the bottom of a mystery:¹⁷ outside of a murder mystery or real crime, a mystery is not a code to be cracked, a riddle to be solved, or a labyrinth to be mapped (even though Reason will never abandon its dream of abandoning this endeavor!). Each one of these problems or, as Farouk Seif identifies them, *paradoxes* or, as I am inclined, following Borges, to identify them, *mysteries*—the mystery of meaning, that of time, and that of music—in *itself* far transcends *my* powers, but the three in conjunction transcend my abilities to such an extent that it might be a mystery to you why I would seize upon this conjunction as the focus of my Lecture! Much in our lives is inexplicable: not least of all, why we are drawn to, and held by, questions we can *neither* address to our satisfaction *nor* banish from our minds, except temporarily.¹⁸ Time and again, these questions appear and claim us, often to reappear and reclaim us, with even greater force and freshness. Think of how Peirce was haunted throughout his life by the question of meaning, or James by ones concerning experience, in its elusive immediacy and thick actuality.

Even earlier than when I read a sentence from Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, but memorably from that time forward, what I am designating the music of meaning has claimed my fascination. Recall his observation: "What we call 'understanding a sentence' has, in many cases, a much greater similarity to understanding a musical theme than we might be inclined to think" (Wittgenstein 1953: 1.527; cf. Wittgenstein 1958: 167). Perhaps in disagreement with Peirce, *we* do not so much find such questions as *they* take shape in the course of our lives and, immediately or perhaps only eventually, seize us, hold us, transform us. Our freedom is entangled with acknowledging their importance, for both reasons all too obvious and reasons all too elusive. Our intellectual identity is the fruit of their ceaseless, if characteristically indirect, tutelage. In our endeavor to address such questions, these questions themselves help us to ask, in however halting and seemingly profligate a manner, more apposite questions, to hit or simply stumble upon promising paths of inquiry. In reading his manuscripts, what we encounter above all else, are the circuitous paths forged by Peirce as an essentially exploratory author—a thinker who took pen in hand primarily to carry out a series of experiments, to investigate a

¹⁷ As will not doubt be evident to many readers, my understanding of mystery has been shaped by Gabriel Marcel's distinction between a problem and a mystery.

¹⁸ These words are intended to echo the famous opening sentences of the Preface to Immanuel Kant's first *Kritik*: "Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is not able to answer" (Kant 1787: 7).

new topic explored many times before. These manuscripts are, to a great extent, maps of his meanderings (Colapietro 2019), ones illuminating just how worthwhile it can be *not* to know where one is going, not to allow a tyrannical sense of salience curb too quickly bold ventures into the unknown (MacIntyre 2010). “Some people think they are thinking,” William James wryly observed, “when they are merely re-arranging their prejudice” (James 1907: 168–169). In contrast, Peirce *was* thinking precisely by marshalling reasons to challenge his prepossession and, then, striving to challenge severely these “prejudices”.¹⁹

Though the word *meaning* in Peirce’s writings only vaguely identifies a topic in which he was intensely interested, a word not possessing therein a technical sense, it does unquestionably indicate a pivot around which his thought continually turned.

Even so, from a Peircean perspective, we cannot make sense out of meaning except in terms of the capacity of signs to generate interpretants, including their capacity to establish, consolidate, and integrate habits *and*, of even greater importance, their capacity to drive in the direction of habit-change (Almeder 1983; Rosenthal 1982; Short 2007). The locus of meaning is the interpretant as the offspring of the dynamic conjunction object and sign. While the status of an interpretant as an interpretant signals that it is generated by a sign, that sign itself having been generated by its object, the interpretant must itself possess the capacity to be *generative*. In being generated, its reality is hardly exhausted; in being generative, it proves itself to be a sign in its own right (or something akin to a sign, such as a habit). In even the simplest cases of semiosis, the action of the sign rarely, if ever, terminates in a single interpretant; rather, a series of interpretants is generated, not infrequently an open-ended series. To say then that the locus of meaning is the interpretant should be taken to imply: a series of interpretants, moreover, a series seldom unfolding in a linear direction (Ransdell 1980). Characteristically, the movement involves an oscillation between the centrifugal and centripetal forces inherent in semiosis. This is, without question, a speculative hypothesis, both as an interpretation of Peirce and as an account of semiosis. But it is one I am disposed to present on this occasion.

On one side, the loci of meaning are those processes in which interpretants “catch on” to what their generative signs have caught onto and then

¹⁹ Peirce’s critical commonsensism would align him to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s critique of the Enlightenment “prejudice against prejudices”. There are prejudices and prejudices! Certain forms of prejudgment are not only innocent but indispensable: without some “foreknowing”, there would not be knowing.

carry this influence forward. This is obviously the processual dimension of meaning. On the other side, these processes are not utterly random and completely aimless. They drive in a direction or *would* so drive if the conditions for their fuller realization were in place. Any instance of semiosis can of course be an arrested or aborted process. In terms of the subsequent development of sign-generation, inclusive of interpretant-proliferation, the influence of the dynamical object can be diverted, thwarted, or in some other manner negated. Apart from the first inchoate tendencies emerging from the primordial chaos of absolute chance (Peirce c.1890: EP 1.278, 1893: CP 1.412), the tendencies and directedness of natural beings displays a dynamism structured by dispositions. If we call to mind the flow of the river forging a path through the earth, the fold in a delicate fabric resulting in a recalcitrant wrinkle, the sunflower turning toward the sun, a bee returning to its hive and indicating to the bees there by its “dance” a direction to travel, the leaves turning colors in the fall of the year, what we have before us are phenomena in which actions disclose the presence of dispositions.

Indeed, words and other symbols are, at bottom, habits of interpretation (of taking, e.g., this sound to signify this range of objects). Though many habits change only slowly and imperceptibly, they ceaselessly do change.

Habits obviously vary in longevity. Some of our habits are coextensive with the history of our species, while other ones took root just moments ago and might be extinguished before we fall asleep this evening. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche praised “brief habits”, but condemned lasting ones.

I love brief habits and consider them an inestimable means for getting to know *many* things and states, etc. [But he is emphatic in adding:] Enduring habits I hate. I feel as if a tyrant had come near me. [. . .] Yes, at the bottom of my soul I feel grateful to all my misery and bouts of sickness [cf. Woolf on being ill] and everything about me that is imperfect, because this sort of thing leaves me with a hundred backdoors through which I can escape from enduring habits. (Nietzsche 1887: 295.237)

But he concludes this reflection on what cannot but sound to most of us an unNietzschean note: “Most intolerable [. . .] would be for me a life entirely devoid of habits, a life that would demand perpetual improvisation” (1887: 295.237). Do our lives not demand perpetual improvisation? What would make such a life intolerable? And do not some of our more or less stable habits facilitate the most apt and nuanced gestures in all their contextual spontaneity and extemporaneity? I have no desire to quarrel with Nietzsche on this point, only an inclination to suggest that the relationship between enduring habits and improvised gestures is more

intimate than he appreciates. The plasticity, thus the resilience, of mind, is nowhere more evident than in the mind's capacity to lose and acquire habits. The capacity to form brief habits is, if Peirce is right, an enduring feature of some animal minds: the habit of habit taking (not consciousness or reflexivity) is, from his perspective, *the* mark of the mental.

Habits insure continuity, but the forms of continuity thereby insured not only allow but also (in at least some respects) energetically *encourage* variability (Shapiro 1983: 66–72). Consider briefly the virtue of being considerate. As Aristotle stressed and Peirce held, virtues are habits, *good* habits, perfective of agents and their actions. A truly considerate person takes into account others in *a nuanced, variable manner*. Insofar as the individual is perfunctory in taking others into account, that person falls short of being fully considerate. Even the seemingly most perfunctory of our gestures (e.g., our manner of saying “Hello” to others) are more contextually sensitive than we might realize.

In the background of our lives, there is a vast, vague network of innumerable habits, many of which are better conceived as competencies or abilities than simply dispositions. In the foreground, there are *extemporaneous* gestures and other such deeds, some of which are finely attuned to the situations in which they are executed, others of which are quite inept or inopportune (or untimely), simply awkward or utterly self-defeating. Let me pause a moment, right here, to underscore the importance of the failure indicated by the adjectives *inopportune* and *untimely*. You re-read a draft of one of your own papers and realize that you have delayed too long, or introduced too soon, the treatment of a given topic and, as a result, your meaning is needlessly difficult to apprehend. The sequence of words orchestrates a flow of signs, but the arrangement of the movements but also the distinct phases of each movement—more prosaically, the parts of your paper—are organized in such a way as to facilitate or frustrate this flow. Reading a linguistic text is, as Roland Barthes suggests, akin to playing a musical score. One “plays” a piece of music. “Playing,” as he notes in “From Work to Text”, must be understood here in all its polysemy: the text itself plays (like a door, a machine with ‘play’) and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which reproduces it [. . . also laying the Text in the musical sense of the term” (Barthes 1971: 162). It is instructive to add that the child learns language, in part, by playing with sounds and incorporating sounds and a form of singing in virtually all of its forms of play. In infancy and ever afterwards, the flow of activity and that of signs, also simply that of sounds, draws impetus and direction from each other. The indefinitely held note can be

a part of music but for the most part music is an occasion for an alluring experience of sonic articulation, one wherein articulation as that which marks off this phase from yet but, in doing so, connects what it divides is of course the essence of the matter.

Does the reader hear the *music* in the flow of signs and, if not, can the reader grasp, except only in the most rudimentary manner, this singular flow in its full force and intricate details? If one misses the music of this flow, has not indeed one missed most, perhaps *all*, of the meaning?²⁰ It is, I hope, not untimely at this juncture to recall Peirce's invocation of lines from Milton's *Comus*²¹:

How charming is divine Philosophy!
Not harsh, and crabbed as dull fools suppose,
But musical as is Apollo's lute [. . .]

For the literate person, the static words on the page are inherently dynamic signs, the function of which is to inaugurate and sustain a flow of interpretants of diverse kinds (not least of all, emotional, energetic, and logical interpretants—moreover, initial, intermediate, and ultimate logical interpretants²²). They are conveyances, the means by which the reader is transported by *the power inherent in these words*. If we are more in thought than thought is in us, and, moreover, if thought is always an instance of semiosis, and, finally, if every instance of semiosis is in its realization a flow of signs, then we are in effect carried along by this flow. For my purpose, however, the critical point is that this semiotic flux is a temporal continuum in which the distinct phases of multilevel processes are integrally related to one another. Our ability to swim *with* the current is anything but a slight accomplishment, while our capacity to swim *against* it is an even more impressive achievement (for this capacity involves a sense of the direction in which the current is taking us and, to some extent, not exhausting ourselves simply by struggling against this direction). We swim in the currents of intersecting continua and our doing so is itself a continuum.

Words possess their meanings not by the fiat of either the writer or the reader but as part of an inheritance the reader shares with the author. Words mean what they have come to mean and what they might *yet* come to mean (to some slight extent, what users of them might yet make them to

²⁰ In "The Dry Salvages", T. S. Eliot writes: "We had the experience but missed the meaning / And approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form, beyond any meaning / We can assign to happiness . . ." (Eliot 1943: 39).

²¹ Peirce mistakenly attributes these lines to Shakespeare (Peirce c.1905: CP 5.537).

²² This threefold classification of logical interpretants is mine, not Peirce's. I however find it partially implicit in what he has written about logical interpretants.

mean). Even our most singular improvisations only take place in the context of an enveloping inheritance in which we are so deeply and intimately implicated as to be no more aware of it than the air we breathe. Semiotically speaking, this inheritance *is* the air we breathe—the air we breathe in and out, without ceasing for as long as we are alive. The absence of appropriate or efficacious signs however *can* be acutely felt, no less so than the absence of oxygen. This occurs when they are needed but not available.

Semiosis designates an activity or process (Fisch 1986: 330)—in the first instance, it designates the activity and, thus, the agency of signs themselves (Ransdell 1980). We might for the sake of analysis focus on a singular, isolated gesture (say, someone knocking on a door), but, in the mostly muted dramas of everyday life, such a gesture needs to be taken as part of a flow of signs. The persons announcing their presence by this sign (the object here is the arrival of these individuals, the sign of course the sound made in accord with a convention, and the interpretant the response of the person on the other side of the door). Typically, the gesture hovers between a request and a demand (the irritation of those who are making the gesture is indicative of where the gesture falls on the spectrum of making a request or issuing an imperative). It is an important feature of many of our commonplace gestures (and not so commonplace ones) that they are *imperatively ambiguous*. What precisely is one *doing* when one is making this or that gesture? There is no necessity that we are ourselves aware of our motives or intentions. The gesture itself might be inherently ambiguous.

If each instance of semiosis is a flow of signs,²³ it is one in which the actual temporal arrangement is always potentially at odds with some more ideal semiotic configuration (the earlier phase should come later, the later phase earlier, the pause here should be longer). The flow of signs is arranged in such a way that questions of *timing* are closely tied to questions of meaning. There is a thorny issue here whether this occurs at the most rudimentary level (that of the very *grammar* of signs) or at a “higher” level (that of the *rhetoric* of signs). Is this a grammatical or a rhetorical question? My inclination is to imagine that, even at the most rudimentary level, the sign is rhetorical (Bergman 2004). A completely inefficacious sign would be a meaningless one, since signs are powers to generate interpretants (Ransdell 1980) and powers are by definition modes of efficacy.

The habits firmly in place cannot be gainsaid. The propriety of their exercise is however contextual, in some instances unquestionably contest-

²³ The most static of signs magically become alive when they function as signs (Wittgenstein 1953: PI, I, #432).

able, in countless other ones effectively fluent, so much so their operation goes unnoticed.

A flow of signs in which a sensitivity, at once “instinctive” and reflexive, to the distinct phases of a temporal continuum in possibly alterable patterns is critical. To be attuned to the music of meaning is to be sensitive to just this feature of the flow of signs. Even the most fully drafted paper is little more than a choreographer’s sketch of how the dance of words might be joined by the reader.

To put the matter in an utterly abstract manner, my goal has been to highlight the *firstness of thirdness*—the qualitative dimensions of an intelligible series of interwoven signs. While this expression is certainly recondite and abstruse, what it signifies is anything but that. In the first instance, it concerns presenting the immediate in its immediacy, since even processes of mediation, even ones of intricately patterned mediation, have in some instances *the power to intimate* the firstness of firstness (qualitative immediacy as an invincibly ineffable but immediately available quality). All one has to do is smell the aroma of the coffee or hear a melody. The firstness of thirdness has folded within itself the firstness of firstness (also the firstness of secondness). Nothing makes more concrete the meaning of these words than music. Please listen carefully to a piece of instrumental music.

What makes a movement—say, the movement of the hand or that of the muscles in one’s face—a *gesture*? To make all movements gestures is to go some distance toward rendering the word *gesture* useless. Allow me to propose, rather tentatively, that, in the first instance, we can think of a gesture as a bid for expression. As such it cannot help but be expressive, for it expresses a move toward (or a bid for) expression (but it does not guarantee its success). Such a bid might fail; it might be rejected or deemed to be so inept as to say express nothing at all, save the desire to be expressive in a given medium. It is more like looking than seeing, more like listening than hearing (for we can look but fail to see, just as we can listen but fail to hear, as we can gesture and fail to be expressive).

One immerses oneself in a medium and explores, in terms of the qualitative dimensions of that distinctive medium, possibilities for expression, without any guarantee of being successful. As a dancer in the context of choreography (not that of performance), for example, one moves one’s arms in a certain manner and, by doing so, is consciously experimenting with the efficacy of placing this movement at this juncture in a sequence of other movements, attending to this movement both *in itself* and in its relationship to antecedent and subsequent movements. It is crucial to

stress that the artist is *thinking in terms of the medium* in which s/he is working. The possibilities for translation in the third sense identified by Roman Jakobson (translating from one semiotic system to another) tend to be very limited. The gestures of the dancer are using the medium of body in motion and at rest, the meaning of which cannot be adequately articulated in any medium other than this one.

Equally, it is important to emphasize the *exploratory* (or experimental) character of what at some point can only be *extemporaneous* actions (potential, but only, potential gestures). The artist is trying to steer a course between the hackneyed and the unintelligible, the all too readily intelligible but also the all too elusively intelligible.

Instrumentally mediated gestures in which the instrument is, in the hands of this individual, a part of that musician's body, are central to meaning in the making, just as somatically instrumentalized capacities (the voice as instrument) are for singers.

The flow of signs might be generated by a sequence in which *feelings of flow* are largely, if not completely, thwarted by the sequence, so much so it is hard (if not impossible) to make sense out of the sequence. In contrast, a sequence of signs might *immediately* generate a feeling of flow and, beyond that, effectively *sustain* for a lengthy time a dynamic sense of its own onward rush. We sit down and listen to a piece of intricate music and are held captive, from beginning to end. If one has not had such experiences, it is likely one is deaf or, at best, insufficiently attuned to music.

Conclusion

“Without music life would be a mistake” (Nietzsche 1889: 36). Most sequences of signs would however be meaningless were we not able to discern the music inherent in the sequence. It might not be *all* a matter of timing (there is more to meaning than the timeliness of our phrasings, our entrances and exits, our pauses and transitions). But, then, meaning might be far more a function of extemporaneity than we generally appreciate. That is, it is far more a matter of timing and thus timeliness (*kairos*) than we are given to believe (Smith 1969; Smith 1986).

In the time of the cosmos, the life of the Earth is but the blink of an eye. In the time of this planet, the history of hominids in all their forms, not just *Homo sapiens*, is also but a blink of an eye. In the time of any human life not tragically cut short, several days, however large in significance, are by definition slight in duration. In the time of flowers, the meaning of time and much more (including life) become themes for reflection. We “must”, Hegel insists, “banish from our minds the prejudice in favor of duration,

as if it had any advantage as compared to transience: the imperishable mountains are not superior to the quickly dismantled rose exhaling its life in fragrance” (Hegel 1837: 221). “The modern transformation of time from a condition into a force began”, John Berger suggests, “with Hegel” (Berger 2001: 485). The recognition of the *forces* of time and history was contemporaneous with the way composers such as Beethoven, Mozart, and Mahler in the context of their art were themselves engaged in the transformation to which Berger calls our attention.

The transient and precarious life of flowers offers invaluable clues for understanding more deeply than we customarily do the *force* of time. This is nowhere more evident than in a poem by e. e. cummings (“in the time of daffodils(who know”, 1958). Allow me simply to quote the first two lines of the last stanza:

and in a mystery to be
(when time from time shall set us free)

For our purpose, the parenthetical line is the one I most want to stress: (“when time from time shall set us free”). As suggested earlier, the transcendence of time is a movement (or accomplishment) in the flow of time, not (in my judgment, at least) a complete transcendence of the temporal flux.

What music, “that mysterious form of time”, intimates is just this possibility. The transcendence of time is never anything but a moment *in* the flow of signs, in the flux of time. We are not lifted out of time, only out of ourselves (“forgetting me” in the instance where *I* forget myself), and music in using time to set us free from time also uses the experience of being set free by time from time to set us free from ourselves. The transcendence of time, as a movement *in* time, ordinarily entails a *transfiguration of the self*. If you have listened to a great piece of music and not been transformed by the experience, you likely missed not only the meaning but also the experience itself (Eliot 1943: 43; Colapietro 2008).

When we come back to ourselves (e.g., “remembering me” in the instance when *I* recall myself, say, after a deeply immersive experience of listening to, say, of Mahler’s symphonies, the flow of signs continues to stream through me, if only in an imperceptible manner. I continue to live in this stream of semiosis. The meaning of music resides, in part (only in part, but even so in a significant way), in providing a tutelage in the temporality of meaning. It assists us in attaining nothing less than an intensified and nuanced sense of the possibilities for reconfiguring sequences of signs, *for the sake of their flow* (more often than not, a complex flow in which dramatic alterations, timely pauses, abrupt transitions, and other tempo-

ral devices are required to carry forward such semiotic complexity). In brief, the experience of music attunes us to the music of meaning and, in doing so, it renders more manifest (or audible or somatically discernible) the most salient feature of meaning: meaning is *ever in the making*, never definitively made. The banks of the river, however much they constrain the flow of water, are ever shifting, however imperceptibly (Dewey 1925: LW 1.370). Attention to the flux should not cause us to ignore the banks; they too are important.²⁴ More than anything else, however the river reconfigures *its own course*, shifts its banks. To some extent, even deeply sedimented habits are altered by their exercise. No doubt, disruption of our habits is dramatically due to forces external to these habits. But the energy and persistence of habits, in the face of disruption, contributes to their alteration.

We might recall here “The Treasure” by Robinson Jeffers. Earlier we noted Hegel’s warning against our prejudice for permanence over against transience (an unreflective tendency to see the imperishable character of mountains as more impressive than the fragile rose expending its life quickly. As it turns out, the mountains themselves are anything but imperishable. The poet Robinson Jeffers brings their transience into sharpest focus in “The Treasure”:

Mountains, a moment’s earth-waves rising and hollowing; the
earth too’s an ephemerid; the stars—
Short-lived as grass the stars quicken in the nebula and dry in their
summer [. . .]

Here, too, we might also recall what R. W. Emerson observed in *Circles*: “The universe is fluid and volatile. *Permanence is but a word of degrees*” (Emerson 1841: 404, emphasis added). But, Emerson and others attest to the *experience* of transcendence, even eternity, *in* the flow of time

Our experience of music especially provides us, at once, with a sense of transience and that of transcendence. Only time has and only time can set us free from time. The ephemeral event and the abiding memory, the singular memorialization and the memorialized singularity, are conjoined. We are drawn into, and held by, a series of intimations of intelligibility, in which qualitative immediacy and interwoven patterns of the most

²⁴ “Experience is”, Dewey asserts, “no stream”; “the stream of feelings and ideas that flows upon its surface [i.e., experience’s surface] is the part which philosophers most love to traverse” (Dewey 1925: LW 1.370). While including this stream, experience “includes the enduring banks of natural constitution and acquired habits”.

intricate *mediations*, fulfill, frustrate, and transfigure our expectations. some gathering within themselves the *force* of time (Berger 2001: 485).

They intimate forms and depths of intelligibility far transcending our capacity to identify these forms exhaustively or to fathom these depths fully. The experience of the most intense fulfillment does not preclude an awareness of unfulfilled promises. The immediately felt and cognitively apprehended sense of a complex piece of music such as Beethoven's String Quartet #13 or Mahler's 7th Symphony—or, I would add, the “compositions” John Coltrane's *Africa/Brass Sessions* (1961) or the pieces on Kamasi Washington's “Heaven and Earth”—returns us to the matrix of meaning, a conversation of gestures in which meaning is *ventured*. The meaning of our gestures does not solely inhere in their intent or origin. Their meaning emerges in the course of time. The culmination of that time often blurs the distinction between closure and interruption. It is ordinarily a rope woven of various threads, these threads being in principle distinct yet in our experience they are often practically impossible to disentangle.

The firstness of thirdness is an abstract expression for a primordial experience. We have always already ventured an expression and those around us have ventured a response. Our expression and their response is but the fragment of a history. The venturing of expressions, in which their qualitative features play a significant role, can generate a series of gestures in which *the very process of venturing* assumes a more or less integrated form. This process is anything but a completely random or chaotic series, however much variation and surprise might not obviously contribute to the integrity of the process.

What Emerson said of words might with modification be said of other symbols.²⁵ For we “ride on”²⁶ not only the words which we speak but also some of those we hear (Emerson 1844: 456). Linguistic and other symbols are “good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance” (Emerson 1844: 463). In a word, they are “fluxional”, the means by which we are *carried through time*. We are hardly passive in being transported through time on the backs of symbols. Just as riders fall off the backs of their horses, we can fall off those of the symbols on which *we ride*.

The feeling of being transported by a piece of music is, then, no illusion. It bears reliable witness to our actual experience. Moreover, the

²⁵ We might add, if only in passing, Emerson's assertion in *The Poet*, one Peirce will insist upon later in his own way: “We are symbols, and inhabit symbols” (Emerson 1844: 456).

²⁶ What Emerson says of the poet arguably pertains to each one of us as utterers of words, at least in our more inspired or effective moments: “in every word *he speaks he rides on them* as the horses of thought” (Emerson 1844: 456, [emphasis added]).

feeling of being set free from time by time itself is also no illusion, though given our prejudices against transience (Hegel 1837) we are likely to take this to be nothing less than the transcendence of time itself rather than what it is. It is the *transfiguration* of our ordinary experience of time into an extraordinary experience, though not an utterly extraordinary one. That is, we are likely to misinterpret what time setting us free from time ontologically and experientially entails. Finally, the customary focus on the scripted score of such classical composers as Beethoven, Mozart, and Mahler is likely to divert our attention from the fact that, at some point, *all* music is extemporaneous. In the *time* of composition, the work is an improvisational *venture* of a symbol-making and -creating animal, inexorably immersed in time. Composers are striving, in the flow of time, to transfigure temporal flux into an audible sequence in which qualitative immediacy, singular events, and, finally, fissuring and fusing patterns of temporal mediation work together to create a world. If we discover *in time* that, however fully engrossing and fulfilling is the world they have created, it is only one among countless other worlds, actual and possible, this does not in the least diminish their achievement or our experience.

Music, “that mysterious form of time”, and indeed time itself, that mysterious form of Being, in which Being is continually negating itself (Hegel 1837),²⁷ are rendered in such experience, paradoxically, in part because each is rendered in itself and in its relation to the other both more intelligible *and* more mysterious. A series of intimations of intelligibility carries us along and what at some point is never more than an extemporaneous venture evolves to the point of becoming a timeless achievement (Coetzee 2001) and, on the personal level, can often become an inextinguishable memory. In language and other symbols, these mysteries and all others are marked as such and, by symbols and other signs, the depths of the meanings of these mysteries are probed, if never fully fathomed. Our capacity to be astonished and enchanted by the barest hints of intelligibility, for example, a sound not only arresting in itself but also felt to be significant and salient,²⁸ provides the means by which we can bootstrap our way into

²⁷ “Time is”, Hegel claims, “the negative element in the sensory world: thought is the same element [in the ‘spiritual’ world]; but it is the innermost infinite form itself wherein everything that exists is, in principle, dissolved—and chiefly the finite being, the determinate form” (Hegel 1837: 80).

²⁸ There tends to be a tension here between perceptible signs in their arresting character, in their qualitative immediacy, and such signs precisely as signs, thus, as pointing to what is other than themselves. To hear words as words seems to require ceasing to be utterly absorbed in their purely musical qualities and to become attuned to their lexical import.

language and, once we have acquired even only the rudiments of language, to bootstrap ourselves from there ever more deeply into music, as that mysterious form of time, time itself, as that mysterious form of Being, and indeed meaning, as that mysterious form of self-effacement in which what is other than words or symbols is made available for consideration, contemplation, and a wide range of other intellectual responses.

But this gives us far too much credit. We are as much drawn into language by the actions and solicitude of others as we are driven into it by our irrepressible urge to express ourselves, also our drive to catch the meaning of the sounds enveloping us.²⁹ Meanings unfold in time and, in the course of history (the history of either an identifiable community or a singular individual), processes of semiosis inevitably forge habits. Even before doing so, however, habits are operative here: the more effective they are, the less evident is their presence. The flow of signs is always to some extent an indication of the fluency, the efficacy, of habits. The meaning of meaning is itself nowhere more clearly indicated than in this flow and, thus, in the habits both guiding and resulting from sign-processes. The musical flow of auditory signs, even in its most inchoate and unintended forms, is truly a mysterious form of time, but one in which time and indeed meaning are illuminated. Music, time, and meaning form, in my judgment, a triad of more than accidental unity.

My own idiosyncratic fascination with this triad has been on display in this Lecture, but I am hopeful it is more than a peculiar personal obsession. As I have been using it, the expression “the music of meaning” is intended to orient us to a dimension of meaning, intimately allied to the flow of time, three distinct mysteries might illuminate each other. This effort is of course only a first attempt, a preliminary exploration, of a topic “too vast”, demanding a labor “too great” (Peirce c.1907: MS 318, 1907: EP 2.413, c.1907: CP 5.488) for me to do much more than clarify, in the most provisional way, the elusive meaning of what has captivated my intellectual attention (in effect, the fragment of a line of poetry—“the music

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas somewhere suggests that the family is the spirit womb of the child. The child is enveloped by others as protectors and nourishers, not least of all as those addressing the child in words, though for the child these words are only sounds, but sounds, I am insisting, carrying, in countless instances, felt significance. In the mother’s womb, it seems undeniable that sounds, including of course the rhythmic heartbeat of the mother, are felt by the fetus. Even before its birth, then, the human animal is enveloped in the music of meaning, sounds carrying significance beyond the comprehension of the being who hears or simply feels them. The newborn no less than the fetus is enveloped in a sonic womb in which the musical qualities of its audible experience, perhaps especially rhythm and pitch, are in effect already tutoring it in the sense of sound (preparing it for the acquisition of language).

of meaning”—holding out the promise of a significance and salience I am not certain will ever be kept either by those words or me). Even so, I have, for good or ill, followed Peirce’s counsel and given myself wholeheartedly over to a question quite transcending my powers!

My last word is most appropriately one of gratitude. Specifically, I *thank* “the divine/labyrinth of causes and effects” for friends, acquaintances, and strangers who happen to be gathered here, this evening (now for readers of this essay in this journal). This lecture has been a series of ventures, aimed at suggesting how we might understand music, time, and meaning. The meaning of these ventures resides most of all in how you and others can take up and carry forward these suggestions, also in how you are disposed to contest or reject what I have said. In reading, you no doubt have already been doing so. My hope is to learn from your responses to my ventures.³⁰ Thank you for your attention and much else.³¹

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³⁰ Immediately after presenting this paper, I was extremely fortunate to receive comments, questions, and challenges from a number of individuals, most memorably, from Javier Clavere, André De Tienne, Robert Hatten, Ivo Ibric, David Lidov, Sally Ann Ness, and Farouk Seif. My recollection of these has been immensely helpful to be in revising and expanding my lecture into this “Lecture” or essay.

³¹ A *much* shorter version of this paper was presented as my Thomas Sebeok Lecture at Berea College (October 5, 2018). I feel it is inappropriate to efface entirely the origin of this as simply a lecture. Moreover, the hope expressed in my concluding sentences, addressed to those assembled on that occasion to hear this Lecture, can easily be transposed to the readers of this article: the meaning of my sentences can only begin to become clearer in my own mind by the responses of readers.

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