Title: Plato and Peirce on Likeness and Semblance

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Abstract:

In his well-known essay, 'What Is a Sign?'(*CP* 2.281, 285) Peirce uses 'likeness' and 'resemblance' interchangeably in his definition of icon. The synonymity of the two words has rarely, if ever, been questioned. Curiously, a *locus classicus* of the pair, at least in F. M. Cornford's English translation, can be found in a late dialogue of Plato's, namely, the *Sophist*. In this dialogue on the myth and truth of the sophists' profession, the mysterious 'stranger', who is most likely Socrates persona, makes the famous distinction between *eikon* (likeness) and *phantasma* (semblance) (236a,b).

For all his broad knowledge in ancient philosophy, Peirce never mentioned this parallel; nor has any Peircian scholar identified it.[1] There seems to be little problem with *eikon* as likeness, but *phantasma* may give rise to a puzzle which this paper will attempt to solve. Plato uses two pairs of words: what *eikon* is to *phantasma* is *eikastikhn* (the making of likeness [235d]) to *phantastikhn* (semblance making [236c]). In other words, icons come into being because of the act of icon-making, which is none other than indexicality. Witness what Peirce says about the relationship between photographs and the objects they represent: 'But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature.' (Ibid.) Thus the iconicity which links the representamen (sign) and its object is made possible not only by an interpretant, but also by indexisation.

Their possible etymological and epistemological links aside, the Peircian example of photographing and the Platonic discussion of painting and sculpturing in the *Sophist*, clearly show the physio-pragmatic aspect of iconicity. The paper will therefore reread the Peircian iconicity by closely analysing this relatively obscure Platonic text, and by so doing restore to the text its hidden semiotic dimension.

Key Words

Phantasia, *Eikon*, *Phantasma*, Peirce, Plato, Likeness, (Re)semblance, Sign

In his well-known essay, 'What Is a Sign?' (*CP* 2.281, 285) probably produced in 1894 as a book chapter, Peirce lists three kinds of signs, as is consistent throughout his writings.

> Firstly, there are *likenesses*, or icons; which serve to convey ideas of the things they represent simply by imitating them. Secondly, there are *indications*, or indices; which show something about things, on account of their being physically connected with them. . . . Thirdly, there are *symbols*, or general signs, which have become associated with their meanings by usage. (*CP* 2.281, 285; *EP2*, 5)

Peirce continues to explain the three kinds of signs. Regarding *likenesses*, he gives the examples of photographs, which 'are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent.' (5-6). But the relationship of 'likeness' between photographs and their objects is made possible by physical circumstances, i.e., by virtue of their relationship being indexical, as he says: '[T]his resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature.' (6)

The above quotation shows that Peirce uses 'likeness' and 'resemblance' interchangeably in his definition of icon. This synonymity is prevalent throughout his writings. In 1868, more than a quarter of a century before the above example, Peirce writes in 'Consequences of Four Capacities':

> The association of ideas is said to proceed according to three principles—those of *resemblance*, of contiguity, and of causality. But it would be equally true to say that signs denote what they do on the three principles of resemblance, contiguity, and causality. There can be no question that anything *is* a sign of whatever is associated with it by resemblance, by contiguity, or by causality; nor can there be any doubt that

> any sign recalls the thing signified. (‘Consequences of Four Incapacities’ [1868] *WCSP* 2: 237)

Anyone that knows some Peirce would agree that ‘likeness’ and ‘resemblance’ are two variants of his more extensively used ‘icon’; other synonyms include the less used ‘semblance’. In the *Collected Papers*, ‘semblance’ appears 8 times, 'likeness' appears 34 times, 'resemblance' 87 times, and finally 'icon' 99 times. There is an interpretation that Peirce uses ‘likeness’ in early writings, and ‘icons’ in later ones. Given the high frequency, one could easily cite over a hundred cross references pointing to the identification of the terms. In the following, I will just give a few examples randomly picked up from 1867 to 1895 to see how these words were treated as synonyms. The famous essay ‘On a New List of Categories’, dated 1867 (*CP*, 1.545ff) introduces the first kind of representation as ‘Those whose relation to their objects is a mere community in some quality, and these representations may be termed *likenesses*’ (1.558). In his ‘On the Algebra of Logic’, published in *The American Journal of Mathematics* 7.2 (1885), Peirce says, ‘I call a sign which stands for something merely because it <u>resembles</u> it, an *icon*.’ (3.362). The 1888 essay ‘Trichotomic’ simply defines the sign as likeness: ‘The sign is a *likeness*’ (*WCSP* 6: 213) in that ‘the idea in the mind addressed, the object represented, and the representation of it, are only connected by a mutual <u>resemblance</u>.’ (Ibid, 212-13). A c.1895 manuscript reads: ‘Every picture . . . is essentially a representation of that kind [i.e., icon]. So is every diagram . . . Particularly deserving of notice are icons in which the <u>likeness</u> is aided by conventional rules.’ (2.279. My emphasis). Again, in ‘The Regenerated Logic’, published in *The Monist* 7 [1896], the author asserts: ‘[Not only is the outward significant word or mark a sign, but the image which it is expected to excite in the mind of the receiver will likewise be a sign – a sign by resemblance, or, as we say, an *icon* – of the similar image in the mind of the deliverer,

and through that also a sign of the real quality of the thing].' (3.433).

The identification of 'likeness', 'resemblance' and 'icon' seems to be so well accepted that their synonymity has rarely been questioned by Peircian scholars. However, in the *OED* we find the exchangeability among 'likeness', 'semblance', and 'resemblance', and half dozen other synonyms, such as 'image', 'appearance', or even 'apparition' and 'vision', but strangely, not 'icon'. Nor, conversely, do the words 'likeness' and 'semblance' appear under the entry of 'icon'. In the same entry, we find two citations to Peirce.

> ***a*1914** C. S. PEIRCE *Coll. Papers* (1931) I. III. iii. 195 It has been found that there are three kinds of signs which are all indispensable in all reasoning; the first is the diagrammatic sign or *icon*, which exhibits a similarity or analogy to the subject of discourse. *Ibid.* 196 There may be a mere relation of reason between the sign and the thing signified; in that case, the sign is an *icon*.

And then immediately following is a quotation from R.B. Braithwaite's review of the *Collected Papers*.

> **1934** *Mind* XLIII. 497 An *icon* is a sign which represents its object by virtue of having some character in common with the object: the colour of a colour-card as representing the colour of the object which it resembles is an icon, and a map as representing spatial relations is an icon.

If the *OED* can claim any authority, then it is in terms of 'icon' that we see one of Peirce's contributions to the language.

But unlike the Old English 'like' and the French "semblance', the Greek word 'icon' has a much more ancient and renowned history, and it has already been treated 'semiotically' as early as Plato. A *locus classicus* of the pair, 'icon' and 'semblance', at least in Frances M. Cornford's English translation, can be found in Plato's late

dialogue, the *Sophist*. In this dialogue on the myth and truth of the sophists' profession, the mysterious 'stranger', who can be construed as a persona of Socrates', makes the famous distinction between *eikon* (likeness) and *phantasma* (semblance) (236a,b). Of these two terms, *eikon* has been more uniformly translated into 'likeness' rather than transliterated as 'icon' (Fowler 1921, Cornford 1935, Cobb 1990, but cf. the French 'image' in J.-P. Vernant 1975, and 'icon-copies' in Zeitlin's 1991 translation of Vernant), but the case of *phantasma* is more complicated in that it has been variously rendered as 'semblance' (Cornford 1935), 'appearance' (Fowler 1921, Cobb 1990, Silverman 1991), 'apparition' (Notomi 1999), the French 'apparence' (J.-P. Vernant), and 'simulacra-phantasms' (Zeitlin 1991) following Marsilio Ficino's '*phantastica simulachra*' (Allen 1989, 269).

Judging from the English equivalents, there seems to be little problem with *eikon* as likeness, but the ambiguous and polyvalent *phantasma* may give rise to a considerable Tower of Babel. The larger variety in rendition manifests itself in the introduction of Latinate words, 'image' and 'simulacra', the coinage of Greek-Latin compounds, 'icon-copies' and 'simulacra-phantasms', the invocation of philosophical concept, like 'appearance', or mystical and supernatural overtone, like 'apparition'. All these incidents bear witness to the trans-lingual phenomenon of semantic shifting. They also indicate the curious fortune of the word and its changing shape throughout history, from Plotinus through Augustine, from Quintilian through Ficino, and finally, to the Romantics where the classical concept of *mimesis* was to be equated to imagination. (Watson 1988, Allen 1989)

This is not the occasion to trace the word's *Wirkungsgechichete*, and by so doing attempting to reconstruct the archaeology of mimesis, I would rather propose a Peircian *rapprochement* to the Platonic concept of *phantasia* as outlined specifically in the *Sophist* starting from 235. To be sure, the topic is also discussed, to different

extent in Plato's two other dialogues, the *Republic* and the *Theaetetus*, but it is in the *Sophist* that *Phantasia* is more explicitly and fully treated (Watson 1988, 1). There are at least two reasons why I have chosen to deal with this late dialogue: one is conceptual, the other positivistic. Let me give the conceptual reason briefly for now but return to elaborate on it later.

In the *Sophist* Plato uses two pairs of words: *eikon* and *phantasma*, *eikastikhn* and *phantastikhn*. What *eikon* is to *phantasma* is *eikastikhn* (the making of likeness [235d]) to *phantastikhn* (semblance making [236c]). In other words, icons come into being because of the act of icon-making, as in *eidolopoiike* (image-making), where the involvement of the brute force of causality suggests secondness or indexicality. Thus iconicity, which links the representamen (sign) and its object, is made possible not only through the negotiation of an interpretant, but also by indexisation. The Peircian example of photographing cited above and the Platonic discussion of sculpture in the *Sophist* clearly show the physio-pragmatic aspect of iconicity. Furthermore, the Platonic concept of *phantasia* is closely related to another important concept of *ais?hsi?*, 'perception' or 'sense-perception' ("Then seeming [*Fantasia*] and perception [*ais?hsi?*] are the same thing in matters of warmth and everything of that sort." (*Theaetetus* 152c) which can be also understood in light of Peircian semeiotic, especially its pragmatic aspect.

Now the positivistic reason is in order. As we have just pointed out, the English equivalents of *eikon* and *phantasma*, 'likeness' and 'semblance', in Cornford's translation, are almost exactly the two words which Peirce uses, -- the only difference being his addition of the prefix 're' to 'semblance'. Very probably Peirce uses the words without awareness of their ancient parallels in the *Sophist* despite his broad knowledge of Greek philosophy. But on the other hand, Peirce is said to have written some 'one-hundred-and-twenty-five-page discussion on the order, history, and

contents of the Platonic dialogues', which never got published (*CP* 1. 584n). In his letter to Lady Welby dated 23 December 1908, Peirce explains icons, among other things, as:

> Simulacra, Aristotle's *omoiwmata*, caught from Plato, who I guess took it from the Mathematical school of logic, for it earliest appears in the *Phaedrus* which marks the beginning of Plato's being decisively influenced by the school . . . (*The Essential Peirce*, 481n) [*Semiotics and Significs*, p. 85 (?)]

From a semiotic or even stylistic point of view, the strange thing is Peirce does not relate his use of icon to the Greek word *eikon* used in the *Sophist* despite the fact that it is here that Peirce's path does cross with Plato's. Why strange? One could say there is nothing strange about it because as philosopher Peirce should be interested in ontology. The Platonic and Peircian texts are related, not by icon or iconicity, as they should be from my point of view, but by the time-honoured ontological theme of Being and Not-Being. But as if to assert that even ontology has to be articulated in discourse, Peirce produces a text in imitation of the Platonic text by using the dialogue form. This latter textual evidence is particularly fascinating because one could say Peirce's short dialogue serves as an icon, indeed a mirror reflection, of Plato's dialogue—to crack an Aristotelian joke on the genre of dialogue, a low mimesis of another low mimesis.

In addition to a few random references to the *Sophist* by Peirce,[1] the *Collected Papers* (6:349-52) records a dialogue between C.S.P. and a certain person called the Velian. This short dialogue is reminiscent of the *Sophist* in its discussion of the afore-mentioned Being and Not-Being, an ontological paradox begun by the Eleatic Canon of Parmenides (Seligman 1974). One of the two interlocutors is named C.S.P., presumably a dramatis persona of the historical Charles Sanders Peirce, but the

identity of the other interlocutor, the Velian, is rather puzzling. The editors Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss provide an annotation in the footnote:

> §§7 and 8 form a digression in ch. 4 of the *Minute Logic* (1902-3). The Velian is the stranger of Plato's *Sophist*, a dialogue which Peirce characterizes in the preceding, unpublished portion of the manuscript (see 1.584n) as being purely a logical dialogue with all Hegel's faults and more than a glimmer of Hegel's merit. The present section is part of an attempt to give the Velian stranger a little dose of his own cathartic.

We are informed here that Peirce did not attach much weight to the *Sophist*, but why did he bother to write a dialogue as rejoinder? As far as I can tell, the relationship between these two texts in terms of iconicity, i.e., both in subject matter and reflexively in form, or one may say, in signified and signifier, has not attracted serious critical attention. If, as Peirce says, echoing the *Sophist* 263e, 'All thinking is dialogic in form. Your self of one instant appeals to your deeper self for his assent. Consequently, all thinking is conducted in signs that are mainly of the same general structure as words,' (*CP* 6.338), this little dialogue will occupy a prominent position in his voluminous writings on signs.[2]

I will now give a brief account of the textual location in which the concept of *phantasia* is discussed. The *Sophist* is a late dialogue of Plato's, traditionally regarded as part of a trilogy, with the *Theaetetus* and the *Statesman*. The fictional time immediately follows that of the *Theaetetus*, showing the chain of events. The dialogue is noted for a partial framework structure which divides the text into two parts. Part One consists of the short exchange between Socrates and Theodorus, which serves as the dramatic protasis. Part Two covers the dialogue of Theaetetus and the Stranger from Elea, and this part constitutes the main body of the text. It is in

this second enchained dialogue that the Stranger launches his critique of the sophist as professing pseudo knowledge. This second part develops an extended metaphor that informs a dramatic scene of hunting, and this dramatisation enables the Stranger to invite his young interlocutor to unmask and catch the capricious and evasive sophist.

The Stranger's discursive strategies in hunting down the Sophist are two: first, the Socratic 'method' (*methodon*) (243d) of elenchos (217c); second, the use of *paradeigmata.* The word '*paradeigma*' or its plural form *paradeigmata* must sound familiar to us, thanks to its appropriation by Saussure to stand for the semantic axis of language. The Greek word has been variously rendered as 'model' (Rosen 1983, Notomi 1989), 'pattern" (Fowler 1921, Cornford 1935), or the more transliteral 'paradigm' (Cobb1990), thus reminding us of its legacy on Saussure. Stanley Rosen simply uses the compound 'paradigm-resemblance model' to show the relationship between this rhetorical method (paradigm- or model-using) and the subject matter (resemblance) under discussion. Plato is obviously aware of the word's metaphorical nature, and its semantic affinity to other key words, such as *eidolon* (image) (240a) and *phantasia*.

Altogether, the Stranger uses a series of seven *paradeigmata* to testify the sophist, and he elaborates on each model with the method of division or dialectic. The seventh and last model, which the Stranger uses, is *eidolopoiike* (image-making) or the art of portrait painting. And it is here (233d3 - 236d8), known as the 'paradigm of the image-maker', that our topic is discussed.

> STRANGER: Following, then, the same method of division as before, I seem once more to make out two forms of imitation (μιμητικης), but as yet I do not feel able to discover in which of the two the type we are seeking is to be found.
>
> THEAETETUS: Make your division first, at any rate, and tell us what two

forms you mean.

STRANGER: One art that I see contained in it is the making of likenesses. The perfect example of this consists in creating a copy that conforms to the proportions of the original in all three dimensions and giving moreover the proper color to every part.

THEAETETUS: Why, is not that what all imitators try to do?

STRANGER: Not those sculptors or painters whose works are of colossal size. If they were to reproduce the true proportions of a well-made figure, as you know, the upper parts would look too small, and the lower too large, because we see the one at a distance, the other close at hand.

THEAETETUS: That is true.

STRANGER: So artists, leaving the truth to take care of itself, do in fact put into the images they make, not the real proportions, but those that will appear beautiful.

THEAETETUS: Quite so.

STRANGER: The first kind of image, then, being like (εικος) the original, may fairly be called a likeness (εικονα).

THEAETETUS: Yes.

STRANGER: And the corresponding subdivision of the art of imitation may be called by the name we used just now—likeness making (εικαστικη).

THEAETETUS: It may.

STRANGER: Now, what are we to call the kind which only appears to be a likeness of a well-made figure because it is not seen from a satisfactory point of view, but to a spectator with eyes that could fully take in so large an object would not be even like the original it professes to resemble? Since it seems to be a likeness, but is not really so, may we not call it a

semblance?

THEAETETUS: By all means.

STRANGER: And this is a very extensive class, in painting and in imitation of all sorts.

THEAETETUS: True.

STRANGER: So the best name for the art which creates, not a likeness, but a semblance will be semblance making.

THEAETETUS: Quite so.

STRANGER: These, then, are the two forms of image making I meant—the making of likenesses and the making of semblances.

THEAETETUS: Good. (235d-236d)

From an inter-semiotic point of view the episode is interesting because the Stranger uses language to encode painting so as to decode the Sophist's use of language. In a strong sense, it anticipates Foucault's celebrated caption of Rene Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. This transcoding bears on the whole argument over the Sophist's paradoxical art of persuasion, with which he uses language to represent things non-existent (Not-Being), much as the painter reproduces the *eikon* (likeness) or *phantasma* (semblance) of something *in absentia*. One could say that the passage attempts to establish the homology between the four terms of two pairs: (1) true statements and (2) accurate images; (3) false statement and (4) inaccurate images (Rosen 150). What emerges from the homology would be a meta-semiotics of language and art.

As Plato uses it, *eidolon* ('image') or is an equivalent to *phantasia* which covers *eikon* and *phantasma*. The first kind of representation is relatively 'positive' because of the positive value (i.e., likeness) of the representation (representamen) to the object it aims to represent. On the other hand, the second kind of representation is not

desirable because it's poor or imperfect representation in terms of verisimilitude. We have observed that the word *phantasma* carries some associations unintended by Plato or even irrelevant to the Platonic context. This has much to do with what I earlier described as semantic shifting in the cross-lingual context. In his *Institutio oratoria* (6.2.29) the Roman rhetorician Quintilian says: "What the Greek call *phantasiai*, we call *visiones*, imaginative visions through which the images of absent things are represented in the soul in such a way that we seem to discern them with our eyes and to have them present before us." (qtd. in Vernant 1991, 164) Quintilian already interprets *phantasia* as something imagined rather than real. Later in the 15th-century, Ficino defines '*phantastica simulachra*', his translation of *phantasma*, as feigning 'what do not exist' ('*non existentium*') (Allen 268-9). And in the 16th-century Italian critics, Gregorio Comanini for one, mistook the Platonic 'phantastic' in the sense of 'out of proportion' for 'out of fantasy' (imaginative) (Panofsky 1968 [German 1924], 215). The error apparently results from the transposition of the sign from immediate sense perception to the less accessible 'imagination'. It is important to adhere to this sense perception, because it is actually what survives the changing shape of *phantasia*, in Gerard Watson's words, 'what appears particularly to the eyes.' (1988, x)

This reference to the sensory quality of the sign is an aspect that appeals to both Plato and Peirce although they accord different ontological and epistemological values to such a quality. In the *Theaetetus*, the dialogue immediately preceding the *Sophist*, Plato has already identified *phantasia* with *aisthesis* (perception, sense perception, sensuous perception, and of course aesthetic perception as the Greek root suggests) (152c). Plato never denies mimetic function to *eikon* and *phantasma*, being two versions of *phantasia* or *eidolon*, and the modern sense of fantasy as *creatio ex nihilo* is out of the question. As Panofsky observes, 'For Plato, everything

in human life that is classified as *eidopoiike*, of the activity that fabricates an image -- everything, just to start with, that has to do with the plastic arts, poetry, tragedy, music, and dance -- all belongs to the domain of *mimetike.*' (Ibid, 164-65) Where *phantasma* errs lies in the artist's recourse to inaccurate perspective rather than giving flight to his imagination. Peirce, however, writing in the wake of British Empiricists, in particular, David Hume and Thomas Reid, and the German Kant, makes no discrimination between the perceptible and the imaginable in his consideration of sign. A late definition dated 1910 reads: 'The word Sign will be used to denote an Object perceptible, or only imaginable in one sense.' (*CP* 2.230)

The two philosophers differ in dozens of aspects, not to mention the fact that Peirce claims himself to be an Aristotelian, and we all agree that a major difference lies not least in their positions towards transcendental ontology. Once problems of ontology are bracketed, the two authors have much to compare. The Platonic triad (Notomi 1999, 252) of *eidolon* (image), *eikon* (likeness), and *phantasma* (semblance) can be fully articulated by the Peircian triadic chain, which lies at the foundation of his semiosis. Given the fact that every sign is triadic in its composition, there is no difference between an *eikon* and a *phantasma* as representamen in so far as both are related to the object by an interpretant. The difference in degree rather in kind of likeness to the original proportions of an object is due to the viewer/producer's stance in relation to the object and his point of view of it, as well as to his feeling the need, or the lack of it, to represent the object as he sees it or to do so through some perspectival adjustment which he deems appropriate. This adherence or adjustment determines and is determined by one interpretant or another. Therefore, the semiosis of *eikon* or *mimesis eikastike*, and that of *phantasma* or *mimesis phantastike*, are theoretically the same, but they can be made empirically different by the performer's interpretant. They are the same because both can be subsumed by the more general

pragmatic category of *mimetike techne* (imitative technique), which constitutes the artist's interpretant on a higher order, along with other elements, including his sense perception (*aisthesis*). Finally, we have arrived at the Platonic interpretant which is axiologically charged because of its condemnation of the sense perception of Not-Being, and his aspiration to the transcendental Being.

Having said this, the seemingly fundamental difference between the Peircian triadic semiosis and the Platonic dialectic is no longer an issue at all. As far as his method is concerned, Plato is dyadic, as witnessed by the principle of division or dialectic used in all the *paradeigmata.* One of the outcomes of this division is the unfortunate pair of *eikon* and *phantasm* which this paper has been dealing with. Our discussion shows that the incompatibility between Platonic dichotomy and Peircian trichotomy can be easily overcome by the mediation of the very act, the *poisis* or *techne*, of image-making, which partakes in the triadic process of semiosis. Herein lies Peirce's potential contribution to Plato.

Notes

[1] To the inaugurating issue of *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in 1867 (1: 250-56), Peirce contributed an article entitled '*Paul Janet and Hegel* by W.T. Harris.' He comments on Hegel's discussion of Being and Not-Being in the German philosopher's *Logik und Metaphysik* as 'not widely different from that of Gorgias, as given us by Sextus Empiricus, nor from that of Plato in the *Sophist*.' (*WCSP* 2, 140.). An entry on *individuum* in *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (1911) is annotated as a Latin translation of *atomon* from Plato's *Sophistes* (*CP*, 3.611).

[2] Cf. 'Well, then, thought (διανοια) and speech (λογο?) are the same; only the former, which is a silent inner conversation (διαλογο?)of the soul with itself, has been given the special name of thought.' (The *Sophist* 263e)

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