



Art as Semblance

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ART AS SEMBLANCE*

MY purpose in this essay is to contribute in some way to a firmer understanding of the pivotal role exerted by Susanne Langer in the fifties. I cannot, in this brief space, explore the broad context of aesthetic thought as it developed and crystallized in Europe and the U.S., before *Feeling and Form* was published. Instead, I will focus on the problem of *semblance*, and on the original solution of it which Langer provided. It will, I hope, be of some service to my readers if I delineate at the outset where I am heading. Granting that this symposium is only the beginning of a renewed grappling with the significance of Langer's so-called "presentational symbolism," I would like to assess her style of thinking and her distinctive approach to the philosophy of art. To this end, I shall attempt first to highlight her closest philosophical pedigree, concentrating on Ernst Cassirer, to whom she often acknowledged her intellectual debt. I shall ask, in turn, what are the strengths and weaknesses of Langer's aesthetics, focusing on the idea of *semblance* which is central to her project. Then, I shall confront Langer's standpoint with the late views of Theodor Adorno and with Arthur Danto's recent analysis, in order to elicit the attraction that Langer's standpoint continues to hold.

In the introductions to *Feeling and Form* and also to the anthology, *Reflections on Art*, Langer cites a number of sources upon which she draws. The list includes such philosophers as Kant, Bergson, Croce, the aestheticians E. Bullough, K. Lange, D. Prall, R. Collingwood, the theories of art of F. Schiller, A. Hildebrand, C. Bell, R. Fry, as well as Freud's theory of the unconscious, and selected essays by O. Baensch, C. Morgan, G. Mehlis. Though the names belong to different strands of philosophical and aesthetic thought, they contribute, at least from Langer's perspective, to one current of thought, and provide the indispensable clues to sound theory. Langer assimilates from her predecessors everything that seems worthy to her of revalued continuation and further cultivation. Even some fleeting hints are credited by her with great attention, if they fit Langer's own pattern of thought. In this sense, though she tries to be as flexible as possible, there remains a kind of orthodoxy in such an attitude. The selected thinkers are treated as members of the same intellectual family, seeking the same distilled philosophical truth.

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This carefully and precisely carried out analysis and criticism of what is to be found in the philosophic and aesthetic heritage in order to facilitate and necessitate the best selection brings us directly to Cassirer. For what Langer furnishes us with is the consciously appropriated history of ideas done from a given outlook, a research strategy which does not draw any sharp distinction between this history of philosophy and philosophy itself. Langer is thus no simple historian, but remains a philosopher also when she affords us an enlightened account of the relevant past from which she draws her stimulation. This approach stems from Cassirer, and is characteristic of the whole Marburg school. Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, as we know, tackled classical Greek thought not for its historical value, but rather to show what genuine philosophy should be like. Langer's stance, i.e., her reiterated polemics with empiricism, naturalism, and with neo-positivist philosophers of science, her insistent cutting herself off from metaphysics and psychology—all these bear on the Marburg version of neo-Kantianism which characterizes Cassirer's work.

Cassirer transcended the boundaries of his Marburg teachers, taking culture and the humanities as the domain of his analysis. He reformulated the fundamental question that Kant articulated with respect to the strict sciences, posing it instead in the form: How is knowledge about spiritual life (*das Geistige*) possible? How can legitimate knowledge be attained when we inquire into language, myth, religion, art, philosophy, as well as when we inquire into the sciences? As we know, the monumental work in which Cassirer examined myth, language, and science meticulously from the same methodological point of view is his three-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. The over-all method of investigation implies that culture is an organic whole, the core of which is the same cognitive function, namely, the symbolic form materialized in given vehicles. For Langer, who inherits and elaborates Cassirer's theory in her own way, art is seen as a symbolic form of a special kind, an objectified expression of the felt life, but yet one which retains its conceptual character. Its concepts are nondiscursive, its symbolics is different from that of the natural sciences or mathematics, its logic consists of articulate forms which are the opposite of language, for they possess no vocabulary, no singled out, discrete units, no particularized reference to the fragments (objects) of the outer reality. The cognitive value of art lies rather in its presenting the structure of inward life, the idea of the imagination of feeling. Art then is the symbolic form of impersonalized subjectivity mediated through its material vehicles and its specialized devices or techniques.

Langer's conception, it may be said, suffers from the same draw-

backs as does Cassirer's. It invites a confusion with respect to philosophy, science, and art, if they were to be ranked according to the logical-historical order that the theory proposes. Why should science be regarded as a higher degree of constructing a *Weltbild* than the others? And, if one grants Cassirer's (and Langer's) view that philosophy is nothing but the highest possible understanding of the human participation in and creation of culture, that it does not establish any irrefutable truths, but rather gives rise to insights, that it is estimated not by its scientific truth, but by its understanding of the forms of knowledge—even granting all this, why should it turn out that the most adequate philosophical approach should be that grounded in Marburg neo-Kantianism? What justifies the typology of symbolic forms? Why is the distinction between the criteria of *quality* and *mode* left without any reasons given to justify it; and why are we not told whether these criteria are obligatory or only facultative? The arbitrariness of the solution is clearly seen in *Feeling and Form*: all other philosophical models are criticized for not being consonant with the given view of the a priori principles of how the human mind works; the virtual realm of art is divided into compartments based on the schema of *quality* (the fine arts, music, dance) and *mode* (literature, drama); film is interpreted as the domain of the perpetual *Now* and presented as the counterpart of Cassirer's characterization of myth (though without any solid arguments); the novel is understood as that form which gives symbolic expression to the past, whereas drama gives expression to human destiny. Granted, Langer's account is full of flashes of invention and insight. But it could hardly be said to capture the essence of the forms of the plastic, the literary, the dramatic, the comic, the tragic, the lyrical, or the epic, etc.

Nonetheless, these shortcomings do not alter the fundamental fact that it was Langer who revived and reargued the Kantian-Schillerian idea of semblance and who filled the lacuna within the framework of neo-Kantian philosophy; for there, the aesthetic domain had until then only been touched on in Cassirer's *oeuvre*. Thus, it took almost a half century for the Marburg school to come up with a significant aesthetic conception. In the face of the then-reigning disputes over whether mimesis is the chief category of art, and of the debates between linguistic analysts and Crocean intuitionists, in aesthetics, Langer's *Feeling and Form* introduced a glorious "return to Kant" by way of the philosophy of culture. Langer's contribution was of enormous weight. And incidentally, it had an important effect on my own thought as well.

I remember my first reading of *Feeling and Form*. It must have

been in 1954, or in any case, several months after Stalin's death. The atmosphere in my country was mostly unsympathetic for a Kantian revival, and I myself was deeply engaged in adapting my philosophical background (The Warsaw-Lwow school) to Marxism. The Soviet literature on the subject of aesthetics (the apprentice of which I attempted eagerly to be) led me nowhere. It happened to be mostly a waste of time and mental energy. I turned back to Marx and discovered—(This may strike you as sophistry, but is nevertheless true)—that he was a kind of Kantian in the sphere of aesthetics. Naturally, Marx posed different questions than Kant did and his manner of thinking about art's genesis and function had to be (because of his world view) completely divergent from Kant's basic ideas. However, with respect to the question of what makes art distinct from other forms of human (social) consciousness, he was simply the heir of German idealism, and primarily of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. True, he does not refer directly to the category of *Schein*, of semblance, but he respects it tacitly. He explicitly adopts the idea of "the free play of spiritual energies," when he characterizes the nature of aesthetic experience.¹

Digging at that time into Langer's work, I gratefully discovered her paramount category of *virtuality*, i.e. the self-sufficient microcosm of any artwork that does not appeal to mere sensuous response or merely offer occasion for the expression of the artist's feelings or simply reproduce the outer reality, Zeuxis-fashion, to deceive the birds with painted grapes. Rather, as Langer made clear, this virtual object, this artwork, elicits something different, which must be rendered as *strangeness*, *otherness*, *separateness*, despite the obvious relationship between the artwork and human life, its external surroundings and its inner realm. It was clear to me at the time that Langer's solution to the problem of semblance in art is entirely original, and that one has to take it as it is, in its own terms. No modification, no tailoring of her conception is possible. There is no option of dissociating this category of virtuality from that of symbolic expression.

The category of *Schein* is derived from Kant and Schiller, especially from the latter, who taught that form and content must be treated as an organic whole. Kant had much to say about the distinctiveness of aesthetic ideas, which, in his view, do not fall under a concept. But in pondering about the symbolic as against the schematic (e.g. in *The Critique of Judgment*, par. 59) he didn't add

¹ Cf. my introduction to S. Morawski and L. Baxandall, eds., *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* (St. Louis, Mo.: Telos Press, 1973), pp. 3-47. esp. pp. 13 and 41-2.

much to our understanding of the problem. Cassirer went further, in elaborating the category of symbol, holding that any cognitive form is a symbolic form, and that these symbolic forms are related to the a priori structures or rules of operation of the human mind. Langer, on the other hand, speaks of the structures or symbolic forms of feeling which are expressed by and are structurally analogous to the patterns or structures which the artist has constructed in the artwork. Virtuality, then, as abstracted impersonalized form, depends on the symbolic creativity of the artist. Something is or is not an expressive symbol because it embodies to one degree or another or fails to embody this structural homology with the life of feeling. In replying to criticism (in *Problems of Art*), Langer argued that she employed the term 'expressiveness' in a quite definite way and in the only appropriate sense, as meaning living form, articulated in a specific logical structure. The reader is easily persuaded that what she has in mind is something quite different from (one could even say, *alien* to) Collingwood's concept of expression. There is really a rather long way from the Marburg school to Croce!

There remains, however, some obscurity with regard to Langer's idea of *form*. She compares it to Clive Bell's and Roger Fry's notion of "significant form," and also suggests that it is the structural shape of a thing, i.e., a materially accessible object, a whole, or *gestalt*, achieved by means of given (artistic, technical) devices. But if this is so, why doesn't the form itself, as such an objectified pattern, constitute the virtuality of any artwork? But if it does, then how can we be told, in the same book, that the principal function of art is symbolization, and that the symbolic expression takes priority over form, in constituting the artwork as semblance? These and other difficulties with Langer's conception of form—which require a much fuller discussion than I can give in this limited space—lead me to the threshold of the temptation which, as I warned earlier, would be improper and dangerous to pursue, namely, that of tailoring Langer's conception from the outside, by separating it into two parts: *form*, on the one hand; *symbolic expression*, on the other; or, the virtual form which does not require symbolization *and* the symbolized form. But how could I possibly justify this procedure? Any argument on behalf of a notion of desymbolized *form* itself would be inconsistent with Langer's view that the form is inseparable from the content, and that the paradigm of semblance or virtuality cannot be reduced to formal structuration. For Langer, whether the symbolic form is expressive, or mimetic, or both, it does not stand for something, or represent it,

but yet it remains fully involved in the cognizance of the world beyond the artwork. The objection that immediately springs to mind is that many objects with deserved merit are acknowledged as artworks and fall under Cassirer's rubric of quality (space and time) as symbolic forms; yet they do not bear any structural homologies to the patterns of feeling, or to the felt life, as Langer views it. I am thinking of such examples as Persian carpets, Chinese porcelain, or polychrome lacquer cabinets of the Chia-Ching period, or J. Robbins' mechanical ballet, or the architectural designs of A. Loos or P. Behrens. None of these seems to me to meet the demands of symbolic form, or expressive form in Langer's sense, and yet they are artworks. I would borrow Langer's own usage to make this distinction between the *primary illusion* (which my examples exemplify) and the superimposed illusion, which opens up the avenues of the felt life.

Now one might object, in Langer's defense, that I am forcing her into an orthodoxy without good reason, by insisting that the *primary illusion*, the artworks of my examples, cannot themselves be instances of symbolic form, in their own terms, even in the species of quality (space or time structure) alone and without any relation to the structures of feeling. I would insist, against this, that there are persuasive reasons to restrict the process of symbolization to the felt life, i.e., to the homology of structures of human experience (the human being's response and challenge to existential, individual, and social problems), and to such complex artistic structures as Rembrandt's painting, Bach's music, Kafka's writing. By contrast, the ideas of mere space, or time, or the contexts of space-time or of movement *do not* constitute any symbolic world. They are nothing but the embodiments of rudimentary virtuality, upon which another, enriched super-virtuality can be grounded. Thus, my conclusion runs something like this: There is evident in art an arresting difference between the nonsymbolic articulation of a self-sufficient artworld and that in which there is a symbolic correspondence of art and feeling. Semblance, virtuality, on the one hand, and symbolic expression, on the other, can be separated. Symbolic expression can enhance semblance, but the latter does not necessarily imply the felt life. For I do not find that all artworks are counterparts to the "vital process" or to "man's fate" or to some mode of sentience. But if this is so, then semblance, *Schein*, is the primary virtuality of art and its constitutive factor, but in a narrower sense than in Langer's conception of it, which, by contrast, may then be called *expressive form*.

Thus primary virtuality, semblance in this restricted sense, ap-

pears to me to define what art is. Let me confront this narrowed conception of Langer's category of virtuality with the views of Adorno and Danto, as I suggested earlier I would do. Adorno struggled with the problem of semblance throughout his intellectual life. In his 1938 essay on fetishism in music, he counterposed the notion of virtuality to what he took to be the regressive counter-artistic production of entertainment or of jazz corrupted and transformed into commodity or exchange-value, and used to repressively manipulate an audience's emotions. In his *Aesthetische Theorie* (published posthumously), Adorno's duel with modernism is summarized: Art, we read, is always cognitive, but its truth content remains ever equivocal, a riddle not only to even the best critic, but to the artist himself. This manifold and flexible meaning of the artwork is enshrined in the interactions of *Erscheinung* and *Geist*, of semblance and spirit. The Hegelian concept of semblance is here assimilated by Adorno, and understood as revealing the untruth of the pathogenic world around us. Modern times (Adorno goes on) have engendered two polar attitudes: either of subordination to an alienated reality, or a constant counter-alienation. Art, in Adorno's view, is one of the main ways of achieving at least a partial victory in this contest. Why? Because, thanks to its virtuality, to the semblance which by its negation of what goes on in the muzzled world of reality and through which it unmasks the *Unwahrheit*, the untruth of this reality, art shows the potentialities of another, more human reality. The paradox of this *Wahrheit der Unwahrheit* doesn't require any political or even ideological engagement, nor does it require *mimesis*. What it needs (as is shown in the work of Schönberg, Beckett, Stravinsky, Kafka, and Ionesco), is a distinctive, innovative craftsmanship capable of producing artistic structures alternative to the *entzauberte und entkunstete Welt*. Of course, Beckett's alternative vision cannot be reduced to what I called (following Langer) primary virtuality. It is much more than that, and it is precisely this "*Mehr als Form*," this something more than form, that, in Adorno's view, makes the author of *Endgame* the perfect visionary of our atrocious and delirious times. Nonetheless, it is fundamentally *Schein*, or semblance, which constitutes the realm of art and which provides us the blessed opportunity to oppose the history of our own time, which is so full of cruelty and nonsense and which deprives existence of any meaningfulness.

Adorno did not surpass the limits of the theater of the absurd, and Beckett epitomized for him the present-day crisis of art robbed of its "auratic" character. By contrast, the object of Danto's analy-

sis is already of a historically more advanced sort. The newest *avant-garde* in its initial period—"pop art"—is his frame of reference. His solutions to the problem of art also seem to me more powerful, and clearly distinct from those of Langer and Adorno. For Danto, the artwork is not distinguished by technique or medium, nor by resemblance to an external reality (or its imitation), nor by any combination of perceptual qualities. The procedure of bracketing is, in Danto's perspective, totally opposite to the Husserlian one. There, it leads *zur Sache* itself, to the noematic essence grasped by the intellect. Here, it is an appeal to theoretical and historical knowledge—more precisely, to the artistic self-consciousness viewing the world in a certain way. Danto modifies to a considerable extent the institutional theory of art of which he was supposed to be the protagonist. Candidacy in the class of artworks has to be deserved, and the honors of election are, he states, of an ontological character.

Now what interests me here is the degree to which Danto's solution hangs on the category of semblance. Can his idea of metaphoric transfiguration of the commonplace be interpreted into Langer's concept of the primary illusion, of virtuality? Forgoing any critical discussion here of Danto's view (for lack of space), I will simply say that it seems to me that the virtuality fundamentally associated with the notion of *Schein*, or of *Erscheinung* (in contexts of perception) returns here again in Danto's account, like a boomerang, but in a different guise, that is, in what I would call a *semi-form*. The pop-artworks that Danto discusses are not to be judged simply as trite replicas of the corresponding objects they are presumed to represent. The bed, the lipstick, the diagram of Cézanne's composition, are remade, in pop art, and put at some distance from the trivial reality. This intensional bracketing produces a kind of "as if." It implies "appearance" versus what is there in the world of everyday banalities. And thus, the question of the artist's conceptual attitude and conceptually mediated aesthetic response is inevitably raised.

Danto is right in proposing that there is a rhetoric here, involving beliefs in what art could be, or should be. Art is understood as being metaphoric, as the personal expression within a given period with its immanent aesthetic self-awareness, as founded on *semi-virtuality*. This takes place, according to Danto, even if we simply arrange a real chair in real space (Kossuth) or send for exhibition dried excrement in a plastic bag (Manzoni), etc.—instances which, by the way transgress the ambiguity of Duchamp's challenge. For,

in these radical or extreme instances, no one dare make a claim to aestheticize the presented object, and what takes place is a disclosure of the intensional bracketing, treating the presented object only as its index. Intellectual timidity retreats from drawing the correct consequences of this fact, namely that art's rival status (with regard to what we accept as natural or social realities) cannot be circumvented or canceled. However, in Danto's case, this virtuality of the artwork is not identified as a special sort of articulated structure, an expressive form; nor is it simply the mind's figment. Rather, the space of any pop-artwork must be acknowledged to be a kind of semi-semblance, not in the sense of a perceptually given self-sufficient whole, but rather as the *idea* of art's non-identity with the world around us, and with the *appreciation* of what is worthy or unworthy in a given culture. If I interpret Danto correctly, the form belongs to the rhetorical mind, not to the objects or things which are only tokens or indices of the artists', recipients', critics' possible attitudes to their historical time and their communal existence. I do not subscribe to all of Danto's conclusions, though I cannot pursue my disagreement here. Yet, it seems clear to me that his approach to the question of what art is does not break ties with the aesthetic tradition that Langer stands for.

If my confrontation of the three conceptions generated by three different outlooks does justice to them, we are justified in affirming that Langer's philosophy of art has stood the test of several decades of stormy aesthetic dispute; further, that the impact of her ideas extends far beyond the aura of the fifties, when the star of her aesthetic thought was most brightly lit. Whatever difficulties I may have with the notion of symbolic form, or with what she means by the "felt life," it seems to me that her view that semblance is the main constituent of art holds true. Let me add that there is also a striking parallelism between Langer's understanding of the significance of the philosophy of art, and of how philosophy of art interacts with art itself, and the views on this question that Adorno and Danto hold. My own ideas on art as semblance, on the most recent *avant-garde* as situated *beyond* the virtuality of the art-object (thus, beyond the semi-form of pop-art, as verging on virtuality)—all this has to await the appearance of the longer essay of which this is a part. So too does my criticism concerning the limited application of Langer's main category. (For one thing, it does not provide a key to the newest "anti-art" movements.)

I remain uncertain whether my disagreements with Suzanne Langer do not rest on my misunderstanding. But I hope that this fragment of my fuller reflections on her work will be received by

the author of *Feeling and Form* as it was intended: namely as a tribute to her unquestionable philosophical achievements, which are alive, and inspire present-day minds to dig further and deeper in the soil she explored.

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CLASSICAL AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY: A REFLECTIVE BEQUEST TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY*

Real culture lives by sympathies and admirations, not by dislikes and disdains; under all misleading wrappings it pounces unerringly upon the human core.

William James¹

I

The twenty-first century will not begin totally anew. Symbolically, it is a calendar milestone. Yet, it will inherit the massive problems now facing us at the end of the twentieth century. In the area of human equity, the availability and distribution of food will loom large. So, too, will the preservation of our ecosystem and the judicious use of our natural resources be at the center of our concern. The seriousness of these human problems will increase geometrically in direct proportion to the growth of world population; a growth that is foreboding and dangerous to human survival. The fact that efforts to curtail population growth are often met with opposition, either cultural or religious, does not foretell a sanguine outcome of this potential crisis. In the past, famine, infectious disease, and war acted as population-growth deterrents, historically depressing as that may be. Of these, infectious disease is now under the scrutiny of the powerful scientific knowledge of modern medicine. Further, were the affluent nations of the world to address the issue of famine with resolve and independent of political considerations, famine could also be significantly alleviated. As for war, it now has escalated into the arena of possible nuclear obliteration, which is unthinkable, although ironically we are now duty-bound to think of virtually nothing else until its specter is obviated.

*To be presented in an APA symposium on American Philosophy, December 29, 1984. Richard Pruitt will comment; see this JOURNAL, this issue, 676/7.

¹"The College Bred," in *Memories and Studies* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1911), p. 322.