

Under the surface of American immediacy a multitude of important discussions go on about the nature of the human creature. The meaning of his perennial forming of symbols is one of them.

SYMBOL AS NEED

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AFTER READING SUSANNE LANGER'S extraordinary new work on aesthetics,¹ one inevitably goes back to her earlier book, *Philosophy in a New Key*, of which according to the author the former is the companion volume—not just to get one's bearings in the general semiotic on which the aesthetic is based, but in all curiosity to trace out the origins of what is surely an ambiguity in the thought of the recent study. *Feeling and Form* is written with all the power and contagious excitement of a first-class mind exercising a valuable new insight. In brief, it is an application to art of her general thesis that the peculiarly human response is that of symbolic transformation. The communication of meaning, positivists to the contrary, is not limited to the discursive symbol, word and proposition; the art symbol conveys its own appropriate meaning, a meaning inaccessible to the discursive form. In each medium, the virtual space of the painting, the virtual life of the poem, the virtual time of music, the form which is created represents, *symbolizes*—not just the thousand and one subject matters of the various arts but rather the *feelings*, the *felt life* of the artist and so the observer. Music symbolizes passage, “the form of growth and attenuation, flowing and stowing, conflict and resolution,” the pattern in time of sentience (here it is worth pointing out that the “feelings” that Mrs. Langer talks about

¹*Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

are not at all feelings in the modern sense of the word, that is, "emotions," amorphous affect, but rather the *form* of sentience, a notion which it would be interesting to compare with the Thomist concept of the tendential forms of orexis).

Not the least remarkable thing in a remarkable book is how very close at times she comes to a scholastic view of art, and that in a theorist with an otherwise encyclopedic grasp of her subject, there is not a single reference to Maritain or any other scholastic source (not that *this* is surprising from the author of *Philosophy in a New Key*). This resemblance may be noted without in the least suggesting that her theory should be judged by a scholastic standard of aesthetics, if indeed there is any such thing, or that she is approaching analogously "what the schoolmen knew all along"—for the fact is that her contribution is in the highest degree original and potent in its unifying effect, and if any one thing is certain it is that she owes not the slightest debt to a scholastic source. As we shall see, she has the most compelling of all reasons—one's own philosophical presuppositions—for steering as far clear of scholasticism as ever she can, and so it is all the more remarkable that from such an heroically disinterested source there should come forth

The making of the symbol is the musician's entire problem, as it is, indeed, every artist's.²

That, whereas language is the discursive symbol, the word symbolizing the concept,

Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feelings.³

That is why (because it gives the forms of imagination) it has the force of a revelation and inspires a feeling of deep intellectual satisfaction, though it elicits no consciousness of intellectual work (reasoning).⁴

And in protest against Croce's equating "intellectual" and "discursive"

But by contemplating intuition as direct experience, not mediated, not correlated to anything public, we cannot record or systematize them, let alone construct a "science" of intuitive knowledge which will be the true analogue of logic.⁵

²*Ibid.*, p. 8.

³*Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 397.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 377.

Compare with

The sphere of Making is the sphere of Art.⁶

Art is above all intellectual.⁷

Beauty is essentially the object of *intelligence*, for what *knows* in the full meaning of the word is the mind.⁸

. . . it is mind and sense combined, the intellectualized sense which gives rise to aesthetic joy in the heart.⁹

. . . the splendor or radiance of form glittering in the beautiful thing is not presented to the mind by a concept or an idea but precisely by a sensible object, intuitively apprehended.¹⁰

The capital error in Benedetto Croce's neo-Hegelian aesthetics . . . is the failure to perceive that artistic contemplation, however *intuitive* it may be, is none the less above all intellectual. Aesthetics ought to be intellectual and intuitivist at the same time.¹¹

Maritain is more explicit about the dual role of the art symbol in his latest work than in *Art and Scholasticism*.

Be it painting or poem, this work is made object—in it alone does poetic intuition come to objectivization. And it must always preserve its own consistency and value as *object*. But at the same time it is a sign—both a *direct* sign of secrets perceived in things, of some irrecusable truth of nature or adventure caught in the great universe, and a *reversed sign* of the subjective universe of the poet, of his substantial *Self* obscurely revealed.¹²

A text from St. Thomas is extremely interesting in this connection:

Therefore beauty consists in proper proportion because the sense derives pleasure from things properly proportioned *as being similar to itself* for sense also is a kind of reason (*logos tis*) like every cognitive virtue and as knowledge comes about through assimilation and similitude is concerned with form, the beautiful strictly pertains to the concept of a formal cause.¹³

It is apparently St. Thomas and not Mrs. Langer or Cassirer who had the first inkling of the mysterious analogy between the form of beauty and the pattern of the inner life.

It is not intended here to make out a case but only to draw atten-

⁶Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), p. 6.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹²Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Pantheon Books, 1953), p. 128.

¹³*Sum. Theol.*, I-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3.

tion to a rather remarkable example of two thinkers converging on the same truths from opposed positions and—unlike experimental science—each arriving and remaining unaware of the other. For although the idioms are different—to read one after the other, it is necessary to make a conscious shift of media, like changing languages—they are both saying the same things: (1) that art is a *making* and appreciation is a *knowing*, intellectual but peculiarly distinct from discursive knowing, and that delight is secondary and logically subsequent to the knowing; (2) that the art symbol represents both thing and self. It is a formidable construction indeed that is arrived at from exactly opposite directions, from a logical empiricism in one and a theistic realism in the other—though perhaps it must be allowed that in the order of achievement, in her breaking away from the restrictive *a priori*'s of pragmatism and psychologism, the experiential aesthetics of Dewey and the “minute stimuli” aesthetics of Richards, and in respect of the powerful and *explicit* delineation of a uniquely human faculty, it is Mrs. Langer who has come the longer way.

Since, however, her naturalism is apparently as stoutly avowed as ever, and since at the same time her debt to Cassirer and idealism is freely acknowledged, we turn or return to *Philosophy in a New Key* to discover how she has come to this pass, from logical positivism (she wrote a textbook on the subject) to a near-realistic aesthetic by way of idealism—and kept her old allegiance, or whether, in truth, she has. What we must evaluate are the consequences of her insight, what she calls her “heresy,” for an empirical science of man. Has she exposed a fatal weakness in an exclusively empirical semiotic and anthropology, deliberately in the former and perhaps inadvertently in the latter? Is her heresy, in short, an apostasy?

It is part of the stock in trade of *Philosophy in a New Key*—one of the unquestioned assumptions-behind-the-questions which, as Mrs. Langer says, are the most interesting thing about any philosophy—that the development of thought is linear. The history of philosophy could be written as the periodic sloughing of worn-out world views in favor of new generative ideas, of new ways of conceiving the world (she does not distinguish science and philosophy). The contrary notion, that truly generative ideas might be centripetal in action, that is, that they might progressively illuminate and specify

a perennial humanistic philosophy, is not allowed in court. Thus the Cartesian *cogito* can *only* be seen as one in a series of generative ideas because by the very nature of things there can be no criteriology to discriminate and measure, on the one hand, the unquestioned service of Descartes in clearing the decks of a corrupt scholasticism, or on the other, the disastrous effects of the mind-matter split. She is committed to the uniform and irreversible action of her "generative ideas." The worth of an idea is measured by the enthusiasm it generates; there is no good and bad to it. And so the later difficulties of Cartesianism must be ascribed to just the inevitable exhaustion of a great concept rather than the reaping of noxious tares planted in the beginning.

The naturalist orthodoxy of *Philosophy in a New Key* is well known, indeed repeatedly avowed (could the wheel have come full turn?—one can't help thinking of the protestations of Christian orthodoxy by Hobbes and Locke), but what is not recognized as widely is the thorough wrecking job done on behaviorist theories of meaning.

The new key in philosophy—and a truly exciting idea it is—is the universal symbolific function of the human mind. The failure of behaviorism to give an adequate account of meaning has been pointed out before (Urban, Barfield). Charles Morris has tried to justify a purely behaviorist semiotic on a methodological basis, declaring that his purpose is simply to advance semiotic as a science, and that there can be no science where there is no observable behavior. This conclusion might be warranted if it were true, as he assumes, that the symbolific function in the human were of the same order as the signal function in the animal. The fact is, however, as Mrs. Langer so admirably sets forth, that it is radically different, and any science which assumes that the symbolic transformation is but a genetic extension of the function of signification must omit precisely that which is peculiar to human semiotic.

For once and for all, we hope, Mrs. Langer has made clear the generic difference between sign and symbol, between the subject-sign-object triad and the subject-symbol-conception-object tetrad. Signs announce their objects. Thunder announces rain. The bell announces food to Pavlov's dog. When I say James to a dog, he *looks* for James; when I say James to you, you say, What about

him?—you *think* about James. A symbol is the vehicle for the conception of an object and as such is a distinctively human product.

This distinction of sign function and symbol function, she admits, is in direct contravention of the old biogenetic motto: *Nihil est in homine quod non prius in amoeba erat*. Heretofore the symbol function had been hailed by the psychogeneticists as a useful variation of the sign function, enabling man the better to adapt to his environment—and likened, we all remember, to the telephone exchange with its trick of sidetracking and storing messages. That it does not so operate is sufficiently attested by the positivists themselves (Ogden and Richards, Korzybski, Chase, Ritchie, *et al.*) who somewhat anachronistically complain about man's abuse of language and scold him for his perversities. All in all, the anthropologists and geneticists have had a bad time of it in their attempts to fit man's manifold follies into a plausible evolutionary scheme. It is as if he had not proven worthy of a decent evolutionary past.

Although Mrs. Langer credits several sources for the discovery of the new idea, namely, physical science, logical positivism, mathematics, Freudian analysis, German idealism, it would appear from her subsequent thought that the empirical and logical disciplines have actually had very little to do with the truly generative force of the idea, that is, the transformational character of the symbol function. Such arbitrary designations, for example, as let x equal an unknown, let a equal a variable, let p equal a proposition, are indeed symbol formations in the sense that x and a and p are convenient substitute counters for unwieldy concepts and so can be used in calculations. But this simple proxy relation would seem to have little bearing on the far more seminal and revolutionary concept of symbol as vehicle for meaning, the sensory form which is in itself the medium for organizing and re-presenting meaning.

It is the idealists and notably Ernst Cassirer who must be credited with the clearest explication of the peculiar nature of the symbol; and it is Mrs. Langer's distinction to have rescued it from the toils of idealism. After a shrewd look at the metaphysical antecedents of the insight, she saw clearly that there is no reason why it must remain as the end-product of speculation on a world spirit and whatnot, that in fact it only achieved its true vitality when seen as detached: as a finding, a human activity, and the beginning rather than the end of a science. (It is curious that Cassirer in his youth foundered on the

same rock as the naturalists: the difficulty of reconciling human stupidity with a monist view of reality. But instead of throwing up his hands at folly, he began to study it as a significant human activity and it was in this pursuit—in the act of boarding a streetcar, he relates—that the great idea came to him that by the symbol man conceives the world.)

Cassirer asks the question, How can a sensory content become the vehicle of meaning?, and answers in effect that it cannot, unless it, the symbol, the word, the rite, the art form, itself *constitute* the meaning (and here, as much as in Hegel, or for that matter, as in naturalist anthropology, there is excluded in the assumption any criterion of truth or value except an evolutionary one—in this case the extent to which the symbol is elaborated: thus the Mass is indeed a “higher” form than a native dog dance, but only in the sense that it is more highly developed). According to Cassirer, the only alternative to an idealist theory of meaning is a skeptical one, and to Urban the particular skepticism of the causal sign theories. As Richards puts it: we can never expect to know what things are but only how they hang together.

How indeed *can* a sensible, a vocable, an odd little series of squeaks and grunts, *mean* anything, represent anything? Therein surely lies the mystery of language. The word “buttermilk” and the word “William” (if I know a William) mean, represent the objects referred to in a wholly different sense than thunder means rain, and different too from the etymological intention of the word. There is an articulation of word to thing so powerful that word can still be taken for thing (i.e., the false onomatopoeia of words like fuzzy, scream, limber, slice). Is not a profound avenue of thought opened up by the realization that the sound I make can become for me the thing I see? Marcel has said that when I ask, “What is that flower?” I am not satisfied merely to be given a definition. I am only satisfied to be told “that flower is a lupin,” even though the word “lupin” may convey nothing to me.

But now we find the real paradox—the first unscientific answer, which consisted in giving the name of the flower, although it had practically no rational basis, yet satisfied the demand in me which the interpretation by reduction tends on the contrary to frustrate.¹⁴

¹⁴Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1951), II, 13.

Can this satisfaction be dismissed as just a prelogical remnant of the superstition of identifying words with things, or is this "superstition" in fact the very condition of our knowledge (and our ignorance)? When I am told as a child that this flower is a lupin, when you name something for me and I confirm it by saying it too—what I know now is not only that the flower *is* something, but that it is something for you and me. Our common existence is validated. It is the foundation of what Marcel calls the metaphysics of *we are* instead of *I think*.

What then is this extraordinary faculty, if as Mrs. Langer believes, it is neither a refinement of an animal function nor an idealist *logos* which constitutes the world? It is, according to Mrs. Langer, a *basically human need*.

This basic need, which is certainly obvious only in man, is the need of symbolization.¹⁵

Symbolization is the essential act of the mind, whether it be in art, in language, in rite, in dreams, in logic, and as such cannot be grasped by conventional biological concepts. It is an "elementary need" of the new cerebral cortex. There is no other way, it appears, of accounting for the "impractical" uses of language and the "perversity of ritual."

Now something is wrong here.

In what sense does Mrs. Langer speak of a "need"? Everyone agrees that in the genetic or naturalist schema the responses of an organism to the environment are adaptive and are specified by the needs of the organism. These needs are variously characterized as sex, hunger, defense, etc., but are all reducible to the service of two basic biological requirements: maintenance of the internal milieu and parturition. Moreover a response can be evaluated simply by the degree of success with which it fulfills the need. Now how can the *basic human need of symbolization* be subsumed under these valid biological categories? Can it be subsumed at all, except nominally: by calling it a "need," a need of symbolization as there is a need of food? One represents things by symbols simply because one needs to do so. But a need in the biological sense is always but one term in a functional schema, thus, for example: need: sex, mani-

¹⁵*Philosophy in a New Key* (Mentor Books, 1942), p. 32.

festing as drive: sexual activity, serving the function: propagation of species. Simply to call the symbolic transformation a need and let it go at that, is to set up an autonomous faculty which serves its own ends, the equivalent of saying that bees store honey because there is in bees a need of storing honey.

This is an intolerable disjunction, intolerable from any reasoned point of view, whether it be materialism, idealism, or realism. On the one hand, Mrs. Langer has seen that the naturalist theory of meaning, however admirable may be its effort to account for all meaning under the one rubric of causal relation between organism and environment, leaves out precisely what she has hit upon as the very essence of meaning—on the other, she senses that there is no reason at all to drag in the whole apparatus of idealism with its denial of subsistent reality.

If the language symbol is not just a sign in an adaptive schema, and if it does not itself constitute reality but rather represents something, *then what does it represent?*

It is regrettably at this point that she drops the whole epistemological problem, so charged with implications, and turns to aesthetics. There she sets forth to perfection the truly distinctive character of the symbol: that it neither signifies another meaning nor constitutes meaning anew, but that it re-presents something. And so she can speak of the truth and falsity of the art symbol, according as it does or does not succeed in representing its subject.

If, by the same token, it ever be admitted in the field of cognition that the symbolic transformation is not an end in itself, a “need,” but a means, a means of *knowing*, even as is the art symbol—then the consequences are serious indeed. For it will be knowledge, not in the sense of possessing “facts” but in the Thomist and existential sense of identification of the knower with the object known. Is it not possible that this startling semantic insight, that by the word I *have* the thing, fix it and rescue it from the flux of Becoming around me, might not confirm and illuminate the mysterious Thomist notion of the interior word, of knowing something by becoming something? that the “basic need of symbolization” is nothing more or less than the first ascent in the hierarchy of knowledge, the eminently “natural” and so all the more astonishing instrument by which I transform the sensory content and appropriate it for the stuff of my ideas, and

that therefore the activity of knowing cannot be evaluated according to the "degree to which it fills a biological need," nor according to the "degree to which the symbol is articulated," but by nothing short of Truth itself?

It must remain to be seen how valuable a hermeneutic of knowledge Mrs. Langer's new key will prove to be. We may admire the intrepidity with which she sets forth without regard for philosophical labels or consequences, while at the same time reserving the right to examine these latter, especially in view of her professions of allegiance. It is not impossible that the consequences of this particular "generative idea" may surprise even its gifted delineator.