

A NEW THEORY ON ART

Feeling and Form

BY SUZANNE K. LANGER

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Mrs. Langer is to be warmly congratulated on this monumental work on the philosophy of aesthetics, a sequel to her *Philosophy in a New Key*. She brings all the equipment of her trained and first-rate philosophical mind to bear upon the fundamental problems of art and the arts. In Part I she speaks generally of aesthetics. In Part II she writes of the ways in which aesthetic symbolism works out in visual arts, in music, in song, and opera, in dance, in poetry and other forms of literature, and in drama both comic and tragic. The book concludes (Part III) with a suggestive essay on 'The Power of the Symbol'.

Art philosophy is apt to begin with such generalities as 'art is expression', or 'beauty is harmony'. But, Mrs.

Langer says, propositions of this sort should occur at the end of a philosophical enquiry, not at its commencement. One should begin as they do in science with single fruitful problems doggedly pursued to their solution. Applying this to aesthetics, she tackles the problem of artistic creation. Is the artist's work really a process of creation? What actually is created?

Art is often conceived as giving vent to feelings, or as a stimulus producing sentiments in the spectator. On the other hand, expert critics think more objectively, treating the feeling aspect of a work of art as something integral to it, as objective as the physical form, colour, sound pattern or verbal text itself. But 'feeling' that is not subjective

presents a paradox. We talk about 'the mood' of a landscape, or the 'mood' of a piece of music—yet the landscape and the music in themselves are not sentient beings, and they have no feelings. The meaning of the 'objectivation of feeling', and our knowledge of feeling as objectified, is the main subject matter of the book. An important part of Mrs. Langer's solution of this problem is the assertion that in art feelings are not presented to enjoyment, but to *conception*.

In her *Philosophy in a New Key* she had developed a theory of presentational symbolism, which is here applied. Symbols, as distinct from signals, articulate and present *concepts*. But whereas in discursive language there is conventional 'dictionary' meaning, in an art (like music) there is none. Music is 'significant form' which by virtue of its dynamic structure can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey. 'Feeling, life, motion and emotion constitute its import' (p. 32). 'The tonal structures of music bear a close logical similarity to the forms of human feeling.' And 'art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling' (p. 40).

Art is genuine creation, and not just arrangement. This is fascinatingly illustrated in 'picture space'. The image presented on a canvas is not a new thing among the things in the studio. Something is created. The forms in a design are not like spots on a tablecloth. They have a new virtual life, and the image of art is a purely *virtual* object. The space in which we live and act is not what is treated in art at all. It has no continuity

with the space in which we live. It is a 'semblance' and an illusion which is not the same as make-believe, but an abstraction liberating perception from all practical purposes. The 'strangeness' or 'otherness' that characterises an artistic object is that although, like speech, it has a physical component, the semblance is completely filled with its meaning.

The same kind of conception is applied to the other arts. In sculpture the volume is not a cubic measure like the space in a box. It is space made visible and more than the bulk of the figure. Music, although it is made out of harmonic or melodic material, possesses its true elements not in these. It is something virtually created only for aesthetic perception. In spite of the fact that we speak of various 'movements' in music there is nothing that actually moves. This is illustrated by an illuminating comparison of the differences between physical and mental hearing of music, the first depending upon outside stimulus and containing much of irrelevancy derived from practical life. In mental hearing as it is experienced in silent reading of music, the opposite conditions hold. The formal elements, the harmonic tensions and resolutions, melody, progression, theme and development, come out much more clearly reinforcing the idea that the movement of music is virtual. So again 'real' personal emotions can interfere with the effective feeling of the music.

Mrs. Langer has a good deal to say about the relationship between the different 'combinations' of arts like song, dancing, and opera. One view is that these arts are either compound arts, that they are a fusion of a number of

Reviews

arts. The author repudiates this view. Song is not a fusion of perfect poetry with perfect music. In song the words enter into the music and are no longer prose or poetry: they are elements of the music. Music 'swallows' the sense of words. So if a poem is perfect form, a work completely developed and closed, it does not regularly lend itself to composition. A second-rate poem often serves the purpose better. Where the best poetry becomes the text of song, the reason is that all these poets imply as much as they speak. In dance, again, there is not fusion of movement and music. It is not true that the dancer 'dances the music'. The 'primary illusion' of dance is *gesture* become free symbolic form, used to convey ideas of emotion. And by this virtual gesture, the music is (once more) said to be 'swallowed'.

(Why, one may ask, must there be one 'primary illusion' for each art, to which everything else must be subordinate? The present reviewer finds the attack on 'compound' [or complex] arts not convincing, and inclined to be doctrinaire. May there not be very different emphases? In some songs the music may 'swallow' the sense of the words, though not, I think, completely. In other songs, analysis seems to show a distinct complexity of awareness. Nor is one convinced that the religious significance of a Kyrie or the 'life-meaning' of a love poem, or even something of the sheer verbal quality of the poem, is entirely 'swallowed' by music. Again it is too sweeping to deny that music is 'danced' and to make music always subordinate to gesture.)

The book is full of fascinating and

original discussions of every kind. There is no space here to summarise Mrs. Langer's views. Of poetry, she affirms that the *illusion of life* is the primary illusion. There are long discussions of both poetry and prose, the relation between poetry and dreams, the nature of drama—which is not literature, and whose primary illusion is virtual *history*, the 'mode of destiny', the act springing from the past but directed towards the future, and always 'great with things to come'. The book concludes (Part III) with a number of discussions on interesting questions:

(1) How can a work of art which does not involve temporal sequence—a picture, a statue, a house—express any aspect of vital experience, which is always progressive? What community of logical form can there be between such a symbol and the morphology of feeling? (2) How is the import of a work known to anyone but the artist? (3) What is the measure of good art? Consequently, what is 'good taste' in art? (4) What is beauty, and how is it related to art? (5) What is the public importance of art?

The subject of aesthetics is difficult and subtle, and summary criticisms could never do justice to the finesse of a writer like Mrs. Langer. My comments must therefore be taken merely as memoranda for further thought.

It is indeed difficult to keep a perfect balance between two opposite pitfalls in aesthetics. The thinker is like a mountaineer on a striding edge. On one side lies the common world. On the other side lies a realm of eternal snows, cut off from life and the world. To slip over on one side is to think that

art is not essentially different from ordinary life. To slip down the other side is to isolate art altogether from life. Mrs. Langer walks precariously. Her bias is towards the transcendent, certainly not of religion, but of art. Fortunately she is well roped; not infrequently slipping, she climbs up to balance again. Leaving parable, consider her doctrine of the virtual object, the 'semblance'. Doubtless it is essential to bring out that when we enter the world of art, we are in a sense entering a different world. 'The space in which we live and act is not treated in art at all . . . it has no continuity in the space in which we live'. The world of art is the world of the image, of imagination. On the other hand, the negation is an overstatement. It is true that 'picture space', or the virtual world of music, has a 'life' of its own. But it is *also* true that it is actual space which is the medium of painting and sculpture, actual space both perceived and imagined; and it is also true that in the experience of music we are living through actual events that are happening in the world. In other words, the embodiment of import in art is not just ideal or virtual but actual. Mrs. Langer refers to Bosanquet and myself as stressing (as against Croce) the fact of the importance of material embodiment (p. 376): but though she acknowledges this, as she acknowledges the place of the actual embodied emotions which we feel when we appreciate or make works of art, these are never fully integrated into her systematic thinking. Sound aesthetic doctrine must always (I believe) accept the basic fact of *incarnation of meaning*. In *that* sense it is 'materialistic'. Although

painting, music, and poetry are highly symbolic experiences which are not at all like ordinary ones, they are nevertheless experiences in which we must accept the material or the medium, and our total embodied imaginative life as we apprehend it. It is an overstatement to say, for instance, that in the movements of music 'there is actually nothing which moves'. There is much that moves, both in the music, and in us, and this is not just a pre-condition that can be ignored in aesthetic experience; it is an essential part of the experience. Virtualness, illusion, and semblance are contained within the total aesthetic experience: but aesthetic experience is also substantial in its enjoyment of real processes both in external objects and ourselves.

Another aspect of the same thing is the thought that art is 'knowledge *about* feeling' that art 'articulates ideas of something we wish to *think* about'. Of course it is important to distinguish on the one hand between the 'feeling' 'in' the work and the feelings which we may have in enjoying it, and between the logical structure in works of art which we accept as objective, and our psychological processes. On the other hand, if there is thinking about 'ideas' of feeling, it is 'thinking' which cannot exist except through feeling. Sometimes Mrs. Langer seems to acknowledge this. On page 323, speaking of Hindus, she refers to a state of 'emotional knowledge'. Elsewhere she speaks of the necessity for feeling. But I do not think that this life of feeling by which we apprehend the 'import conveyed' (p. 141) can be so separated from the total *aesthetic* experience as she makes

Reviews

out. In fact, in her justifiable concern with the object, she goes too far in separating the aesthetic object from the experience of it. This leads to a complete caricature of 'aesthetic emotion'. (She says, for instance, on page 395 that the aesthetic emotion is the *same* in all works of art, a feeling of exhilaration. But this is certainly not what many thinkers mean by the 'aesthetic emotion'.) It is, again, highly misleading, I think, to say that music is an 'analogy' of feeling or that it 'resembles' feeling. The 'feelings' in a piece of music are not analogues of feelings, are not 'like' the life of feeling. The feelings which are aesthetically important are what we experience when we hear the *actual* events of the music with all their material complications, *as symbolic*. Mrs. Langer thinks too much attention has been paid to the materials of music. I think she does not pay enough. It is the obstinately irreducible qualities of instruments, sequences, rhythms, etc., which, as physically heard, open up to the discerning embodied mind new possibilities of experience altogether. Mrs. Langer says again and again that in the life of art we discover what we do not and could not know before. But it is not simply that the artist invents or creates. It is also that the infinite richness

of the actual world, which (in spite of Mrs. Langer) is material for further construction, is always through its symbolism yielding us new embodied experiences. These new experiences are not 'like' the world of feeling. They *are* a new world of felt, embodied symbolic import.

The author's deep experience and exceptionally wide understanding of the arts very nearly saves her from the danger (against which she so justly warns us) of too great dominance by rigid concepts. But not, I think, quite. The dogma of the 'primary illusion' of each art, one feels, is sometimes forced, especially as regards 'compound' arts. So in (very rightly) arguing for the 'strangeness' of art, is the dogma of the 'virtual' object: why must the aesthetic transfigurations in art, of space, time, gesture, 'the mode of destiny', force us to the denial of their quite material contributions to art itself? And does not the emphasis upon the 'objective' characters of art lead to the underdevelopment of some very important hints (e.g., p. 14) about the contributions of the subject's feelings?

I would not wish however to end on a note of slight complaint. For this remarkably fine book one is indeed grateful.