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The making of the literary symbol: Taking note of Langer

ROBERT E. INNIS

12 *Abstract*

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14 *Why, in light of the multiple approaches to literature that mark the various*
15 *semiotic traditions and their complex intertwinings, would one turn to Sus-*
16 *anne Langer's seemingly 'marginal' or idiosyncratic semiotic theory of art*
17 *for conceptual resources? I argue that the conceptual core of the answer is*
18 *found in Langer's notion of a 'symbol of feeling,' which is connected with*
19 *her notion of 'semblance,' the imaginal power of art symbols to construct*
20 *and present their own 'primary illusions.' Works of literature — of the po-*
21 *etic art — do not follow a discursive, but rather a presentational logic, giv-*
22 *ing us access to 'virtual experience.'*

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24 *Keywords:* *symbol; semblance; primary illusions; virtual experience;*
25 *Langer.*

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28 **1. Introduction**

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30 Why, in light of the multiple approaches to literature that mark the var-
31 ious semiotic traditions and their complex intertwinings, would one turn
32 to Susanne Langer's seemingly 'marginal' or idiosyncratic semiotic theory
33 of art for conceptual resources?

34 An art work, in any genre, is for Langer essentially a 'symbol of feel-
35 ing.' Langer's use of the notion of a symbol is not that of Saussure, which
36 involves motivation, nor of Peirce, which is purely conventional, nor of
37 the 'symbolic' tradition. A 'symbol' for her, following Whitehead, is any
38 device by means of which we can make an abstraction (*Feeling and Form:*
39 xi, hereafter FF). For Langer a symbol mediates knowledge, giving us
40 cognitive control, or insight, in one way or another. An aesthetic symbol,
41 on Langer's conception, is an abstraction device that is meant to give us
42 knowledge of 'feeling.' Feeling, in Langer's use of the term, is bipolar: it

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1 refers both to anything that can be felt and to any way anything can be
 2 felt, in the most general sense of that term. The aesthetic symbol is able
 3 to do this because it expresses, in a constructed semblance, the ‘morphol-
 4 ogy’ of feeling, that is, it shares a ‘logical form’ with what Langer calls its
 5 ‘import,’ not its ‘meaning,’ in the traditional sense of that term. The logi-
 6 cal form is intrinsically connected to its ‘expressiveness.’ The role and
 7 function of the aesthetic symbol is not to ‘represent’ the world in the dis-
 8 cursive mode but rather in the non-discursive, or presentational, mode.
 9 The non-discursive nature of the art work gives it both a content and a
 10 certain ineffability, if that is meant to say that its import or content can-
 11 not be separated from its form. The art work does not ‘say’ or ‘assert’
 12 anything, for Langer, and hence cannot be ‘true’ or ‘false’ by reason of
 13 its being measured by something outside of itself. It exhibits or shows
 14 what it is about but it is not subject to the laws of discourse even if it is
 15 constructed in the medium of discourse, that is, language. A literary
 16 work, therefore, although it is made out of language as its materials, is
 17 not bound to a discursive logic. This fact makes the ‘interpretation’ of a
 18 literary work run parallel to the interpretation of all other types of art
 19 works.

20 Langer’s analysis of literary art exemplifies and clarifies the pivotal
 21 concepts of her aesthetic theory in a challenging and perspicuous way.
 22 Langer offers a kind of *propaedeutic* to the semiotics of literature or of
 23 the literary work. At the same time it is clear that if Langer’s semiotic
 24 framework cannot illuminate at least some of the key problems of a
 25 *literary* semiotics, then it is theoretically deficient. In *Feeling and Form*
 26 Langer attempted to develop a full philosophical position that covers all
 27 the arts and then is able to uncover what is particular, peculiar to each
 28 major art genre. Consequently, her account of the distinctiveness of liter-
 29 ature (of literary art) operates on two intertwined levels: (a) the general
 30 aesthetic level, which is thematized ‘semiotically,’ and (b) the level of ‘lit-
 31 erary art,’ which frequently avails itself of ‘non-semiotic’ categories.

32 With an eye on these two levels, I will focus schematically on three piv-
 33 otal and interlocked issues that will give a taste of Langer’s distinctive,
 34 powerful, and at times contentious approach: the literary work as a sym-
 35 bol of feeling, the literary work as a constructed semblance, and what
 36 constitutes an interpretation of a literary work.

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39 **2. The literary work as a symbol of feeling**

40

41 Langer’s permanent and fundamental position that all art works are non-
 42 discursive symbols. In *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942) such a form of

1 articulation is called a presentational form, as opposed to a discursive
 2 form. As a constructed expression, an art work is not reducible to any
 3 subjective state of the creator of the expression nor to a 'statement.' Sym-
 4 bolic expression for Langer is the 'articulation and presentation of *con-*
 5 *cepts*' (FF: 26). The peculiarity of the artistic expression is complex. First
 6 of all, Langer thinks, just as Peirce did in his reflections on iconism, of an
 7 art symbol quite generally as having 'a close logical similarity to the
 8 forms of human feeling' (FF: 27). For Langer, 'sentience' and 'feeling'
 9 are comprehensive notions: they cover the total range of 'movements'
 10 and 'states' that mark human subjectivity and its organic embodiment.
 11 Sentience has a distinctive pattern or logical form (FF: 27), which the
 12 artist has knowledge of or discovers. Such a pattern can be symboli-
 13 cally embodied when the artist can construct an artifact that shares
 14 with its 'object' 'some common logical form' (FF: 27). There is a 'formal
 15 analogy, or congruence of logical structures,' some formal likeness be-
 16 tween the symbolic artifact and the form of sentience it expresses. In gen-
 17 eral terms, Langer held the position, which transcends the discursive/
 18 non-discursive disjunction, that a 'fairly adequate symbolism' is a condi-
 19 tion for being able to think about something (FF: 28). Art gives us sym-
 20 bolic structures that allow us think about what cannot be said, but only
 21 exhibited.

22 Symbolism, as Langer is using the term, can be any 'articulate form,'
 23 whose 'internal structure is given to our perception' (FF: 31), and this in-
 24 ternal structure, with its reticulation of elements, carries the import of the
 25 articulate form. Not only, on Langer's account is 'music not a kind of
 26 language' (FF: 29), no work of art, no matter what the medium, is a
 27 kind of language, for works of art lack 'conventional reference' because
 28 they have no 'conventional meaning.' Works of art have significance,
 29 which can be complex indeed, but this significance is really a 'vital im-
 30 port' (FF: 32), which corresponds, I think, to Peirce's affective or emo-
 31 tional interpretant. Langer generalizes this notion, originally developed
 32 to account for music, to all the other art forms. 'Vital' here involves 're-
 33 stricting the relevance of "import" to the dynamism of subjective experi-
 34 ence' (FF 32). The articulate but non-discursive form is no 'symbol in the
 35 ordinary sense' (FF: 32), with a Peircean logical interpretant. It is a 'sig-
 36 nificant form . . . in which the factor of significance is not logically discrim-
 37 inated, but is felt as a quality rather than recognized as a function' (FF:
 38 32). This 'quality' belongs to the art work as a whole, permeating its ele-
 39 ments or parts and holding it together in a unity. It is the presence of this
 40 quality that elicits the so-called aesthetic attitude, not the aesthetic atti-
 41 tude that establishes the quality. The right approach, in Langer's concep-
 42 tion, is 'to look upon the art object as something in its own right, with

1 properties independent of our prepared reactions, and make art the au-
 2 tonomous essential factor that it is in every human culture' (FF: 39).
 3 The artist has a skill as well as a knowledge of the dynamics of conscious-
 4 ness. It is this 'affinity' between perception and form that Langer wants to
 5 foreground. Non-discursive symbols 'articulate' by 'exhibiting' and in this
 6 constructive activity on the part of artists we encounter radical novelty,
 7 each work of art having its own distinctive 'feel.' This deep Peircean position
 8 was also extensively developed by Dewey, although Langer has only
 9 pretty negative things to say about Dewey and pragmatism, and Peirce
 10 only appears obliquely in her discussions. (I am thinking of Dewey's two
 11 seminal essays, 'Qualitative thought' [1931a], 'Affective thought' [1931b]
 12 and his indispensable *Art as Experience* [1934].)

13 Still, an art work does not involve a mere rearrangement of 'given
 14 things — even qualitative things' (FF: 40). It is an achievement of the
 15 imagination, which Langer calls man's 'utmost conceptual power' (FF:
 16 40). It is the artist's great ability to envisage *what it feels like to feel the*
 17 *world* and to construct a *symbolic image* that articulates and carries, that
 18 is, embodies, such a feeling or complex of feelings. Langer's notion of a
 19 symbol of feeling is just a reformulation of her central notion of a present-
 20 ational form, worked out in great detail in *Philosophy in a New Key*.
 21 There Langer showed that symbolization is rooted in the primary activity
 22 of perception, where it is 'form' or 'Gestalt' that is proximately appre-
 23 hended. In spite of her criticism of positions such as Dewey's that are rep-
 24 resentative of what she calls the 'continuity hypothesis' that charts the
 25 deep connections between ordinary experience and aesthetic experience,
 26 both actively and passively considered, Langer also pushes the art work
 27 *down* into the field of perception or into the field of the vivid imagination.
 28 It is essential to understand that Langer thinks of 'presentational' in the
 29 strictest sense. The symbol of feeling, a symbolic presentation of the
 30 forms of feeling, is not a discussion of them. It is not so much 'about'
 31 these forms, in the discursive mode, as it is a symbolic analogue of them,
 32 that is, it is iconic.

33 Langer roots literature in the general category of *poesis*, which fore-
 34 grounds the 'made character' of the art work. Foregrounding the *way of*
 35 *saying things*, Langer writes that the 'poet uses discourse to create an illu-
 36 sion, a pure appearance, which is a non-discursive symbolic form' (FF:
 37 211). This form is a framed slice of perception that is defined by its intrin-
 38 sic virtuality.

40 The appearance of events in our actual lives are fragmentary, transient and often
 41 indefinite, like most of our experiences — like the space we move in, the time we
 42 feel passing, the human and inhuman forces that challenge us. The poet's business

1 is to create the appearance of ‘experiences,’ the semblance of events lived and felt,
 2 and to organize them so they constitute a purely and completely experienced real-
 3 ity, a piece of *virtual life*. (FF: 212)

4
 5 The ‘*illusion of life* is the primary illusion of all poetic art’ (FF: 213). But,
 6 just as a plastic work, or a musical work, ‘the poem is essentially some-
 7 thing to be perceived, and perceptions are strong experiences that can
 8 normally cut across the “momentary trembling order in our minds” re-
 9 sulting from assorted stimuli — whether comfort and sweet air, or cold
 10 and dreariness and cabbage’ (FF: 211). The making of such an illusion,
 11 ascribed to ‘poesis,’ results in a *semblance*, a key term in Langer’s general
 12 aesthetic theory, which is meant to be able to be extended to, and exem-
 13 plified in, literature as well as all the other great artistic genres. What is
 14 the nature of this notion?

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 17 **3. The literary work as a constructed semblance**

18
 19 Langer connects semblance with the ‘lure of the object’ rather than the
 20 taking on of the ‘aesthetic attitude’ (FF: 45). The work detaches itself
 21 from its surroundings (FF: 45). We do not have to ‘do’ something to get
 22 the process started. This production of a semblance is a process of disso-
 23 ciation from the ordinary, a form of ‘othering’ or of producing otherness.
 24 In this sense the art work is a ‘sheer image’ (FF: 46) marked by ‘strange-
 25 ness, separateness, otherness’ (FF: 50). These properties put a real gap
 26 between the image and its model, traffic between which is not central to
 27 art. Langer rejects, indeed, the notion of art as copying, or even, it would
 28 appear, of mimesis, if we are to think of the purpose of art to render a
 29 model, or make a model present. For Langer, rather, the purpose of art
 30 is to present a *way of accessing* a model. Art, in this sense, is an ‘access
 31 structure,’ but it is not the model that determines the access structure.
 32 While the model may indeed, and in some cases must, be represented,
 33 representation is not central to art or applicable to all the arts. Some-
 34 thing can be an image without representing anything through ‘imitation,’
 35 which is not ‘the essential power of images’ (FF: 47). Where does the true
 36 power of the image lie? In the fact that it is ‘an abstraction, a symbol, the
 37 bearer of an idea’ (FF: 47). An image ‘presents itself’ to vision alone, in-
 38 cluding inner vision and hearing, ‘as a sheer visual form instead of a lo-
 39 cally and practically related object’ (FF: 47). The visible character of an
 40 image is its ‘entire being’ (FF: 48), and it is abstracted ‘from the physical
 41 and causal order’ (FF: 47). So, in an image everything is ‘imaginary’ (FF:
 42 49).

1 Langer follows Schiller's notion that a semblance 'liberates perception'
 2 and 'lets the mind dwell on the sheer appearance of things' (FF: 49),
 3 extracting us from all instrumental contexts. Art works, then, are com-
 4 pletely 'virtual' objects that can arrest one sense (or multiple senses) and
 5 simply be there for it (FF: 49). Now the semblance of something is 'its
 6 direct aesthetic quality' (FF 50). Although Langer continues to studiously
 7 avoid Dewey's Peirce-inspired (and Schiller-inspired) position in an al-
 8 most perverse way, she is clearly delineating what Dewey calls a 'consum-
 9 matory experience.' Art works stand out 'like peaks' (FF: 53) from the
 10 flow of normal, everyday experiencing. Their function is to make 'the
 11 forms of things' present (FF: 51) by means of a specific type of abstrac-
 12 tion. These forms are 'abstracted only to be made clearly apparent' and
 13 'to be put to new uses: to act as symbols, to become expressive of human
 14 feeling' (FF: 51). Here is a crucial twist: art symbols express not 'the
 15 world,' but the *feeling* of a world. Langer notes that the artistic symbol
 16 is much more intricate than any traditional 'form' (FF: 51). The distinc-
 17 tive 'quality, or essence' (FF 50) that makes up the art symbol is a consti-
 18 tutive element of the artistic form. But what are fused in the art symbol
 19 are 'formal elements in the structure, not contents' (FF: 52). Indeed, on
 20 Langer's reckoning, the content of an artistic form is its *import* (FF: 52).
 21 The *content* of an art work is not its *theme* nor its *motif*, no matter how
 22 'evident' they may seem. The peculiarity of Langer's semiotic approach to
 23 art is that it sets up a kind of equivalence: meaning=significance=content
 24 =vital import=emotional content of the symbolic form='the feelings that
 25 are logically presented' (FF: 52), *not evoked* or caused in the interpreter.
 26 Langer could have been helped here by a Peircean account of interpre-
 27 tants, although she clearly, as we will see, deals with the interpreter in
 28 her own way, but in a more global fashion. At any rate, the semiotic
 29 'strangeness' of the art symbol comes from its liberation from the imita-
 30 tive impulse, from the demand for representation. The import of the work
 31 of art is found totally within the art symbol. This import is *created* not
 32 mirrored from an antecedent completed state of the artist or of the world.
 33 Langer argues that the work of art is 'a hundred per cent symbolic' (FF:
 34 59). It does not express an actual feeling, but 'ideas of feeling' (FF: 59),
 35 not an actual world, but a 'virtual world.'

36 There is a permanent tension in Langer's account of art due to the role
 37 the non-representational arts play in her theory. While in the case of the
 38 decorative arts of pure design we can recognize the validity of the meta-
 39 phor of carving out a figure from the 'amorphous sensory chaos' (FF: 62),
 40 since we can see in the resulting figure the appearing of 'basic vital
 41 rhythms' (FF: 62), the transposition to literature is not altogether clear, al-
 42 though it can be done. Pure decorative design is indeed a 'direct projection

1 of vital feeling into visible shape and color' (FF: 63), with 'motion and
 2 rest, rhythmic unity, wholeness' (FF: 63). The decorative design 'ex-
 3 presses life' (FF: 63), with its qualities of emanation, repetition, balancing
 4 (FF: 63). Motion is growth and what characterizes motion is 'continuity,
 5 directedness' (FF: 64). In this way a line can exhibit 'what is the essence
 6 of life — incessant change, or process, articulating a permanent form'
 7 (FF: 66), where permanence refers to 'a pattern of changes' (FF: 66)
 8 that are retained and sustained. This is the 'constant aim of living matter'
 9 (FF: 66). The goal of the decorative arts, then, can offer a key heuristic
 10 clue to art quite generally and to literature in particular: art is *symbolic*
 11 *exemplification*. The sense of life expressed by a line, for example, with
 12 its opposing principles of permanence and growth, is due to the illusion-
 13 ary nature of the form and its dynamic pattern. The movement of the line
 14 is situated within a 'framework of felt stability' (FF: 67), giving us a kind
 15 of 'duality of motion-in-permanence' (FF: 67).

16 The semblance is the medium of artistic expression, and expression is
 17 the 'presentation of an idea through an articulate symbol' (FF: 67). For
 18 Langer all art symbols have one unifying feature: they create a 'sem-
 19 blance' and articulate a 'vital form within its scaffold' (FF: 68). Extend-
 20 ing this notion to literature is both illuminating and at the same time
 21 rather perplexing. Langer's main assertion is that the '*illusion of life* is
 22 the primary illusion of all poetic art' (FF: 213), just as the illusion of
 23 space is the primary illusion of plastic art, the illusion of time the primary
 24 illusion of the musical arts, the illusion of a field of forces or power the
 25 primary illusion of the balletic arts, and so forth. Indeed, when Langer
 26 claims that the poet has made an illusion she refers directly to the visual
 27 arts, and the poetic illusion is 'as complete as the illusion of space created
 28 by a few strokes on paper' (FF 211). It is an illusion 'by means of words,'
 29 and words are the materials '*out of which* he makes his poetic elements.
 30 The elements are what he deploys and balances, spreads out or intensifies
 31 or builds up, to make a poem' (FF: 211). *Materials* are to be distin-
 32 guished from *elements*. Now every successful poem, Langer claims, must
 33 have 'organic character' (FF: 214). Its task is to create the 'semblance of
 34 experienced events . . . a virtual order of experiences' (FF: 214). But the
 35 import of the poem is not 'literal' in any sense of that term. It is a self-
 36 contained world, purely virtual, not actual, a 'presented "world"' (FF:
 37 217). This world is purely experiential. It is this feature that 'makes the
 38 "world" of a poetic world more intensely significant than the actual
 39 world . . .' (FF: 216). The virtual world of literature parallels the virtual
 40 space of a picture. 'For the primary illusion of literature, the semblance
 41 of life, is abstracted from immediate, personal life, as the primary illu-
 42 sions of the other arts — virtual space, time, and power — are images of

1 perceived space, vital time, felt power' (FF: 217). So, the primary illusion
 2 of literature arises from its primary abstraction — virtual events em-
 3 bodied in a text, a web of words.

4 In spite of her attempt to generalize the aesthetic lessons of music and
 5 of the plastic arts, which are treated in *Feeling and Form* before she turns
 6 to literature, Langer resolutely holds to the centrality of language in
 7 world building. 'Meditation,' she writes, is 'inseparable from ways of
 8 speaking' and 'discursive thought . . . is in turn the mold of our individual
 9 experience' (FF: 220). There is, for the language animal, no realm of
 10 'brute fact.' 'Whatever brute fact may be, our experience of it bears the
 11 stamp of language' (FF: 220). The consequence of this for literature is
 12 that 'in poetic events, the element of brute fact is illusory; the stamp of
 13 language makes the whole thing, it creates the "fact"' (FF: 220). Langer,
 14 totally in line with a Deweyan approach, claims that 'virtual events are
 15 qualitative in their very constitution — the "facts" have no existence
 16 apart from values; their emotional import is part of their appearance;
 17 they cannot, therefore, be stated and then "reacted to." They occur only
 18 as they seem — they are *poetic facts*, not neutral facts toward which we
 19 are invited to take a poetic attitude' (FF: 223).

20 As a result, literature — in whatever its mode — is not propositional.
 21 Propositions are 'only materials of poetry' (FF 227). A poem, and *a for-*
 22 *tiori* a novel or short story, is not a set of statements but a 'created ap-
 23 pearance, a fabric of virtual events' (FF: 228). It is not an 'escape from
 24 reality' (FF: 228). When direct statements are found in a poem or an-
 25 other form of literary 'fiction,' when, that is, we seem to be dealing with
 26 a discursive form, their 'directness is a means of creating a virtual experi-
 27 ence, a non-discursive form expressing a special sort of emotion or sensi-
 28 bility; that is to say, their *use* is poetic, even if they are bald assertions of
 29 fact' (FF: 228). Their role is to function as a 'symbol of a feeling' (FF:
 30 230). This role is 'iconic' in the Peircean sense or qualitative in the Dew-
 31 eyan sense. The peculiarity of Langer's approach here, in the case of the
 32 poetic arts, is to claim that the art symbol, in Langer's sense of that term,
 33 can iconically embody the feeling 'not by recalling objects that would
 34 elicit the feeling itself, but by weaving a pattern of words — words
 35 charged with meaning and colored by literary associations — akin to the
 36 dynamic pattern of the feeling (the word "feeling" here covers more than
 37 a "state"; for feeling is a process, and may have not only successive
 38 phases, but several simultaneous developments; it is complex and its artic-
 39 ulations are elusive)' (FF: 230). So, in Nelson Goodman's terms, the sym-
 40 bol exemplifies the properties of what it is 'about,' that is, it possesses,
 41 albeit metaphorically, the properties. (See Goodman 1976, 1978; Innis
 42 1977.)

1 No form of poetic art follows the laws of a ‘discursive logic’ (FF: 233),
2 for every ‘poem’ is a ‘non-discursive symbolic form’ that follows its own
3 laws of thought, which ‘never apply to scientific or pseudo-scientific (prac-
4 tical) reasoning’ (FF: 234). The effective laws here are the laws of the
5 imagination, not the laws of discourse. The use of verbal statement in
6 the poetic arts hides, by reason of its obviousness, ‘the characteristic
7 forms of verbal figment’ (FF: 234). Consequently, Langer draws a sharp
8 dividing line between actual experience and virtual experience, which de-
9 fines the sharp separation, in her opinion, between art and life in general
10 and between fact and fiction, literature and life, in particular.

11 For Langer a work of poetic art is not only an *image* of life but also an
12 image of *life*. Following Cassirer, Langer assimilates the poetic art to a
13 kind of mythic thinking, which does not follow the laws of discourse but
14 mingles, as primitive man did, abstraction with fabrication, which fuses
15 symbolic reference and power, and which, out of an emotional excite-
16 ment, initiates a complex naming process that ‘created entities not only
17 for sense perception but for memory, speculation, and dream’ (FF: 237).
18 These entities are isomorphic with the literary image, subject to a logic
19 of multiple meanings and employing ‘representative figures instead of
20 classes’ (FF: 237). But while mythic thinking may have arisen spontane-
21 ously and within self-conscious control of the abstraction process, the lit-
22 erary image is a patent construct. In weaving its verbal web it exploits the
23 full meaning of words which are ‘flashing, iridescent shapes like flames —
24 ever-flickering vestiges of the slowly-evolving consciousness beneath
25 them’ (FF: 238). Cassirer and Barfield, upon whom Langer relies, hold a
26 ‘theory of multiple meanings and fusion of symbol and sense’ (FF: 239).
27 When the symbol and the sense are fused, what Cassirer calls ‘symbolic
28 pregnance,’ we have a ‘non-discursive form,’ no matter what its material
29 embodiment may be. These forms, Langer insistently holds, ‘articulate
30 knowledge that cannot be rendered discursively because it concerns expe-
31 riences that are not *formally* amenable to the discursive projection’ (FF:
32 240–241).

33 What are these experiences?

34 Langer answers: ‘the rhythms of life, organic, emotional, mental (the
35 rhythm of attention is an interesting link among them all), which are not
36 simply periodic, but endlessly complex, and sensitive to every sort of in-
37 fluence. All together they compose the dynamic pattern of feeling. It is
38 this pattern that only non-discursive symbolic forms can present, and
39 that is the point of artistic construction’ (FF: 241). These forms are
40 marked by three great semantic principles: over-determination, ambiva-
41 lence, and condensation, which are well known to literary scholars and
42 to all workers in the human sciences, including those who work in the

1 realm of dream and neurosis, which for Langer is distinctly not the realm
2 of art. A poem, she says, is meant to be ‘always emotionally transparent’
3 (FF: 244), which does not mean ‘obvious.’ It is meant to be an ‘*illusion of*
4 *experience*’ (FF: 245), which is the ‘poetic primary illusion’ (FF: 245).
5 The virtual world of the poem — of the literary work, quite generally —
6 has an ‘emotional significance above the suggested emotions which are
7 elements in it’ (FF: 245). In this virtual world comes to expression what
8 Langer calls ‘the morphology of real human feeling’ (FF: 253). This mor-
9 phology is rooted in our intellectual and biological being: ‘we are driven
10 to the symbolization and articulation of feeling when we *must* understand
11 it to keep ourselves oriented in society and nature’ (FF: 253).

12 But the principle of poesis is that ‘everything actual must be trans-
13 formed by imagination into something purely experiential’ (FF: 258).
14 So, the literary work is a form of experiencing, a symbolic experiencing
15 that arises out of ‘biological unities of thought and feeling which are en-
16 tirely unexplored as yet’ (FF: 259) — or so Langer thought at the time
17 she was writing *Feeling and Form*. The subjectivity, however, that is em-
18 bodied in the literary work is an *impersonal subjectivity* (FF: 261). And
19 just as the *objects* in a painting are not its import, so the motif of a
20 poem is not its import. The subjectivity present in a literary work and
21 the consequent virtual experience do not belong to anyone outside of the
22 text. While, to be sure, narrative is a ‘major organizing device’ and ‘is as
23 important to literature as representation to painting and sculpture’ (FF:
24 261), it is clear that Langer does not think it is indispensable or even
25 necessary. While it is clearly a widely used ‘structural basis on which
26 most works are designed,’ the narrative is not the artistic import which
27 does not, in itself, point outside of the work to something else. The virtual
28 life that is presented in literature is ‘always a self-contained form, a unit
29 of experience’ (FF: 262), having a closed form that actual experience
30 does not have. The virtual experience, virtual history, and virtual mem-
31 ory of a literary work, Langer holds, must give us the illusion of a life
32 that is experiential through and through, wherein ‘all its connections
33 are *lived* connections’ (FF: 265). What Langer says about the poet,
34 whose paradigmatic product is the lyric, is apt to characterize the writer
35 of narrative whose paradigmatic product is prose fiction: ‘The poet makes
36 a semblance of events that is *experience-like*, but universally accessible; an
37 objectified, depersonalized “memory,” entirely homogeneous, no matter
38 how much is explicit and how much implicit’ (FF: 265). The job of
39 the critic or of the interpreter is then to discover ‘the intricacies of real
40 memory through the artistic devices that achieve its semblance’ (FF:
41 266), with all the complications of the ‘play of tenses’ that may be
42 involved.

1 Langer denies a sharp divide between the various literary forms. Speak-
2 ing of the novel, Langer contends that it is not discursive at all. It per-
3 forms no *essential* discursive function such as informing, commenting, in-
4 quiring, confessing, and so forth. The goal of the novelist is to ‘create a
5 virtual experience, wholly formed, wholly expressive of something more
6 fundamental than any “modern” problem: human feeling, the nature of
7 human life itself’ (FF 289). The ‘representational features’ of the novel,
8 Langer claims, are not determinative of its nature. The novel aims at at-
9 taining ‘a completely virtual, vital (i.e., organic) form, emerging with the
10 advance of the art itself’ (FF: 289). The ‘air of reality’ must always be
11 maintained while we keep the literary work’s fictional or virtual quality.
12 We do this by ‘the simplification and manipulation of life’s image that
13 makes it essentially different from its prototype’ (FF: 292). Thus litera-
14 ture operates totally in the ‘experiential mode’ (FF: 293), which is cre-
15 ated, not recorded. While, to be sure the *material* of literature is ‘discur-
16 sive language, not even modified and distinguished from ordinary speech
17 by the conventions of verse, yet the product is not discourse, but the illu-
18 sion of life directly lived, a world in which thinking and conversation may
19 occur’ (FF: 297).

20 In general, it is clear, Langer’s approach to the ‘semblance’ character
21 of literature follows rather traditional lines. But she embeds the tradi-
22 tional position in her theory of virtuality. This foregrounding of ‘virtual’
23 experience detaches the literary work from ‘reality’ or ‘real reference.’
24 While the ‘given’ can certainly be a motif for a literary work, the work
25 itself is designed to express not the ‘object, the fact’ as such but their
26 ‘emotional significance’ (FF: 301). The emotional significance is the ex-
27 pressive quality of the literary work, which adheres to the *form* of the ex-
28 pression. But even discursive forms have a distinctive feel and can be used
29 as a ‘vehicle of feeling’ (FF: 302) to display the ‘significant form’ of argu-
30 mentative thinking and reasoning, which have a distinctively phasal struc-
31 ture culminating in

32
33 the cadential feeling of solution, and the expansion of consciousness in new
34 knowledge. If all these phases merge in one configured passage, the thought, how-
35 ever hard, is nature; and the height of discursive style is the embodiment of such a
36 feeling pattern, modeled, word by word, on the progressing argument. The argu-
37 ment is the writer’s motif, and absolutely nothing else may enter in. As soon as he
38 leads away from the motivating thought to (say) mystical or moral reaction, he is
39 not supporting the process of understanding. (FF: 302)

40
41 This is, to say the least, an astounding comment. It shows the universality
42 of feeling in Langer and also the deep parallel to Peirce’s and Dewey’s

1 account of affective or qualitative thought. The message is clear: every expressive form has a distinctive feel. Expressiveness is the defining feature
2 of an art work in any genre or medium.
3

4 What, in more detail, does Langer have to say here?
5

6 7 **4. Interpretation and the expressive import of a literary work** 8

9 For Langer every work of art, including a literary work, is ‘a single, indivisible symbol, although a highly articulate one’ (FF: 369). But it is a
10 prime symbol, not a symbolism, since its elements play their roles in a
11 ‘total form’ and have no independent standing (FF: 369). This total
12 form is marked by tensions that arise from interacting elements. In the
13 case of plastic art space-tensions are united by space-resolution (FF:
14 370), but the space-tension belongs to virtual space where *esse est percipi*
15 (FF: 371). Indeed, the tension presented in an art work engenders, without
16 ‘causing,’ a total organic awareness (FF: 371), which is effected in the
17 body of the percipient (or reader) and is itself a form of interpretation.
18 The mental activity and sensitivity that ‘determines the way a person
19 meets his surrounding world’ (FF: 372) is also, Langer thinks, ‘molded
20 by imagination’ (FF: 372) and gives rise to, as Peircean ‘proper significant
21 effects,’ ‘attitudes with distinct feeling tones’ (FF: 372). This reference to
22 feeling tones is an echo of Whitehead’s philosophical position. It also is a
23 central feature of Langer’s notion of the ‘life of feeling,’ which is ‘a
24 stream of tensions and resolutions’ that are iconically embodied, and interpreted
25 recognitively, in the ‘appearance of life, growth, and functional unity’ that
26 give works of art an organic appearance, although they
27 are not organisms, a theme Langer develops extensively in *Mind*.
28

29 This organic, and hence holistic, appearance is the perceptual and affective
30 root of Langer’s assertion that what a work of art ‘sets forth . . .
31 has no counterpart in any vocabulary’ (FF: 374). The work of art — no
32 matter what the medium — effects the conveyance of ‘one nameless passage
33 of “felt life,” knowable through its incarnation in the art symbol
34 even if the beholder has never felt it in his own flesh’ (FF: 374). The art
35 work objectifies the life of feeling in a complex symbol that is not subject
36 to a discursive logic. The import of such a symbol is known by the ‘basic
37 intellectual act of *intuition*’ (FF: 375). But since, for Langer, ‘the basic
38 symbols of human thought are images’ (FF: 376), which function as symbols,
39 ‘no human impression is only a signal from the outer world; it always
40 is *also* an image in which possible impressions are formulated, that
41 is, a symbol for the conception of *such* experience’ (FF: 376). This notion
42 of *such*, Langer adds in a statement rich with implications, ‘bespeaks an

1 elementary abstraction, or awareness of form' (FF: 376). So, Langer has
 2 pushed meaning down to the very stratum where perceptual unities are
 3 first grasped. Grasping is a form of formulation, which goes over into
 4 representation and abstraction and these are 'the characteristic function
 5 of symbols' (FF: 377). The bottom line for Langer is that there is 'no for-
 6 mulation without symbolic projection' (FF: 377). Following Cassirer,
 7 Langer wants to uncover 'the basic symbolic value which probably pre-
 8 cedes and prepares verbal meaning' (FF: 378), something Cassirer calls
 9 'symbolic pregnance.' Langer's aesthetic theory, especially as developed
 10 in *Feeling and Form*, grows out of this deep Cassirerian insight.

11 The intuitive act by which a symbolically pregnant form is grasped is
 12 both an act of abstraction and an act of interpretation. Abstraction, on
 13 Langer's view, is a spontaneous and natural 'comprehension of form it-
 14 self, through its exemplification in informed perceptions or "intuitions"'
 15 (FF: 378). Interpretation is the recognition of the metaphorical value of
 16 'some intuitions, which springs from the perception of their forms' (FF:
 17 378). The literary work, in spite of being constructed 'in sentences' that
 18 have to be grasped sequentially and developmentally, with the meaning
 19 gradually emerging at a certain moment in a process, is really grasped in
 20 an 'intuition of a whole presented feeling and its import' (FF: 379). Langer
 21 wants to drive a wedge in general between synthetic construal in language
 22 by a 'succession of intuitions' (FF: 379) and the seeing or anticipation in
 23 art of 'the complex whole' (FF: 379). The radical difference between ver-
 24 bal meaning, even in verbal art, and artistic import is that import, 'unlike
 25 verbal meaning, can only be exhibited, not demonstrated to any one to
 26 whom the art symbol is not lucid' (FF: 379). The hermeneutic task,
 27 then, is to 'make lucid,' to 'envisage' the 'commanding form' of a more
 28 less permanent symbol.

29 One of Langer's most critical observations is that the public function of
 30 the art symbol imposes on it 'a standard of complete objectivity. It has to
 31 be entirely given; what is left to imagination being implied, not missing.
 32 But the implication may be subtle' (FF: 393). Indeed, it may be so subtle
 33 that the ideal audience or ideal beholder or ideal interpreter 'may come
 34 into actual existence only after many years of its career' (FF: 393).

35 Recognizing such a situation, and perhaps even being able to identify
 36 instances of it in our own lives, we are faced with a question that Langer,
 37 certainly innocent of the complexities of contemporary interpretation
 38 theory, nevertheless poses in all directness: 'How do we know that we
 39 have understood the artist's message' (FF: 393)?

40 First of all, Langer denies the legitimacy of the notion of a 'message.'
 41 The art symbol is not a discourse nor a comment, she claims, which is a
 42 very deceptive 'working model' (FF: 394). A work of art's import is 'not

1 separable from the form (the picture, poem, dance, etc.) that expresses it'
 2 (FF: 394). Once again, Langer has recourse to the fundamental distinc-
 3 tion between saying and showing, which grounds her work from the very
 4 beginning. The work of art is not a 'mere sign.' The artist is 'showing us
 5 the appearance of a feeling, in a perceptible symbolic projection' (FF:
 6 394). The feeling — the vital import — is 'always bound to its symbol'
 7 (FF: 394). The work offers to the beholder or to the reader 'a way of con-
 8 ceiving emotion' (FF: 394), rather than merely making judgments about
 9 it. The reader — and the art lover quite generally — responds to the *work*
 10 as he or she would to a *natural symbol*. The created form *has* the feeling
 11 *revealed*, which is *in* it. But the 'actual emotion,' as opposed to the 'vir-
 12 tual emotion,' is induced by the contemplation of the art symbol and
 13 this actual emotion 'belongs to the percipient' (FF: 395). It is, Langer
 14 thinks, 'a pervasive feeling of *exhilaration*, directly inspired by the percep-
 15 tion of good art' (FF: 395). Good here obviously means successful.

16 The feeling of exhilaration, which marks the interpreter, is not, how-
 17 ever, 'objectless' or 'empty.' The intrinsic expressiveness of a work of art
 18 is due to its being 'designed to abstract and present forms for perception
 19 — forms of life and feeling, activity, suffering, selfhood ...' (FF: 395–
 20 396). This means, in the case of literature, for example, that the literary
 21 symbol gives us *knowledge*, in the form of virtual experience, of what it
 22 means to act, to suffer, to be or become a self, to feel the world in a cer-
 23 tain way. Understanding a work of art, or reading and interpreting a text,
 24 entail one whole and entire qualification: responsiveness (FF: 396). While
 25 art in all its forms certainly 'does something to us,' exhilarates us, as
 26 Langer says, its job is not to give us in a causal manner 'emotions and
 27 moods,' though that certainly can happen. Its principal goal — its over-
 28 arching determinative goal — is to formulate 'our conceptions of feelings
 29 and our conceptions of visual, factual, and audible reality together. It
 30 gives us *forms of imagination* and *forms of feeling*, inseparably; that is to
 31 say, it clarifies and organizes intuition itself. That is why it has the force
 32 of a revelation and inspires a feeling of deep intellectual satisfaction,
 33 though it elicits no conscious intellectual work (reasoning)' (FF: 397).

34 Langer parallels Dewey in a most important way with her important
 35 claim that 'in art, it is the impact of the whole, the immediate revelation
 36 of vital import, that acts as the psychological lure to long contemplation'
 37 (FF: 397). The *lure of feeling* of an artwork must accordingly be 'estab-
 38 lished almost at once' if the artwork is to be successful or interesting.
 39 Langer calls this 'intuitive anticipation' (FF: 398). This intuitive anticipa-
 40 tion engages us in a process not only of making a revelation of our inner
 41 life, mediating self-understanding, but of shaping 'our imagination of ex-
 42 ternal reality according to the rhythmic forms of life and sentience' and in

1 this way impregnating the world with aesthetic values (FF: 399). Art and
2 language both shape seeing, acting, and feeling (FF: 399). Because 'life is
3 incoherent unless we give it form' (FF: 400), we construct *scenes* in which
4 we can *enact* important moments of the life of feeling. So, as Langer sees
5 it, the interpretation of a work of art is a process of performative envi-
6 sagement. The labor of interpretation allows art to penetrate deep 'into
7 personal life because in giving form to the world, it articulates human na-
8 ture: sensibility, energy, passion, and mortality. More than anything else
9 in experience, the arts mold our actual life of feeling' (FF: 401). Texts are
10 themselves 'symbols of feeling,' and we 'give ourselves up to their con-
11 templation spontaneously' (FF: 405), indeed integrate ourselves into
12 them. This is due to their expressive power, which imposes them upon us
13 and steers our modes of attending. But, Langer contends, there is no
14 theory that 'can set up criteria of expressiveness (i.e., standards of
15 beauty)' (FF: 407). No are there any methods that will automatically
16 guarantee the proper interpretative access to the symbolic form.

17 The notion of an 'intuitive symbol' is crucial: perception, interpreta-
18 tion, semiosis are interpenetrating 'dimensional planes' of the total phe-
19 nomenon of our encounter with a literary work.

20 Langer highlights the intertwining of dimensions in an important way:

21
22 The comprehension of form itself, through its exemplification in formed percep-
23 tions or 'intuitions,' is spontaneous and natural *abstraction*; but the recognition
24 of a metaphorical value of some intuitions, which springs from the perception of
25 their forms, is spontaneous and natural *interpretation*. Both abstraction and inter-
26 pretation are intuitive, and may deal with non-discursive forms. They lie at the
27 base of all human mentality, and are the roots from which both language and art
28 take rise. (1953: 378)

29
30 Langer points out that the logical, that is, semiotic, distinction between
31 discursive and presentational forms accounts in a pivotal fashion for the
32 different ways meaning emerges and is 'symbolized' in our experience of
33 any form. Discourse, she asserts, 'aims at building up, cumulatively, more
34 and more complex logical intuitions' (1953: 379). The sudden emergence
35 of meaning that marks discourse is 'always a logical intuition or insight'
36 (1953: 379). However, the art symbol, even the linguistic work of art,
37 Langer contends,

38
39 cannot be built up like the meaning of a discourse, but must be seen *in toto* first;
40 that is, the 'understanding' of a work of art begins with the intuition of the whole
41 presented feeling. Contemplation then gradually reveals the complexities of the
42 piece, and of its import. In discourse, meaning is synthetically construed by a

1 succession of intuitions; but in art the complex whole is seen or anticipated first.
2 (1953: 379)

3
4 Such is the challenge Langer issues to literary semiotics: to hold to a
5 general semiotic framework that brings all the art genres under the gen-
6 eral rubric of symbols of feeling yet respects the primary illusions of each
7 art genre and the severe tasks they place upon the interpreter. Interpreta-
8 tion is then not defined by a 'primary reading' but by a hermeneutic 'ex-
9 plication' or 'un-folding' of the content of an intuitive insight into a sym-
10 bolic whole (see Innis 2001). Absent this insight, this dialectically charged
11 holding-in-view of all the elements that make up the formed feeling that is
12 the import of the work, the work is a 'mere sign' without power to affect
13 us and release the train of interpretants that mark the presentational
14 order as opposed to the discursive order. Langer's whole approach to the
15 literary work is to maintain this pivotal distinction, the key to her semi-
16 otic theory of knowing and mind as a whole.

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36 Robert Innis (b. 1941) is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Massachusetts Lowell
37 <Robert_Innis@uml.edu>. His research interests include aesthetics, semiotics and language
38 theory, American philosophy, and philosophy of religion. His publications include *Karl*
39 *Bühler: Semiotic Foundations of Language Theory* (1982); *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthol-*
40 *ogy* (1985); *Consciousness and the Play of Signs* (1994); and *Pragmatism and the Forms of*
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