

Placing Langer's Philosophical Project

Robert E. Innis

The thematic concerns shared by Susanne Langer and the classic American philosophical tradition join them together in mutual reinforcement, supplementation, and vital tension. The thread that stitches together Langer's philosophical project and the American philosophical tradition is Langer's crucial and indispensable insight that a focus on the "logic" of signs, symbols, and meanings, her lifelong concern, does not take philosophical reflection away from experience, the axis point of American philosophy, but throws new light on just how experience itself is structured and accessed (see Innis 1994 and 2002). This is a deep and strong "tie that binds."

At the very beginning of her intellectual career, and even much later with a nod to James, Langer asserted that philosophy as a distinctive discipline was fundamentally concerned with the descriptive and critical analysis of meanings and their orders and not, like the sciences, with the discovery of facts. Langer wanted to determine "how to make our ideas clear" about meaning, a deeply pragmatist concern. At the same time, like the pragmatists, she famously proposed a "new key" in philosophy: the way philosophy, more as an activity than a doctrinal superscience, was to be "practiced," already the theme of her first book, was to recognize once and for all that meanings are "*embodied* in forms" that have a distinctive kind of "logic" and history, both "ideal" and "real." Under the influences of Henry Sheffer, her logic teacher, Whitehead, her "great teacher and friend," and the great German scholar, Ernst Cassirer, Langer thought the analysis of meanings had to be rooted in a precise and comprehensive account of the "logic of signs and symbols" and of the "symbolic forms" this logic structured and made possible. Such a way of thinking distanced Langer from the concerns and procedures of Anglophone analytic philosophy, which came to dominate the American philosophical scene. At the same time, while admitting that Peirce had made great strides in developing such a logic, she did not take over any of the Peircean technical terminology, although she reconstructed, or at least duplicated, his chief distinctions, using different sources. The "logical" and "semiotic" schemata she worked out in her first book, *The Practice of Philosophy* (1930), and then deepened, expanded, and applied in her classic *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), were never repudiated. They function as a categorial and critical backbone for her whole work, with implications for the theory of art presented in her

Feeling and Form (1953) and for the naturalist, but non-reductive, “metaphysics” of mind that Langer ultimately tried to construct, culminating in her trilogy, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967, 1972, 1982), which parallels in important respects Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* and Peirce’s metaphysical reflections and speculations.

The more abstract “logical” dimension of the practice of philosophy was complemented for Langer by a more concrete “hermeneutical” dimension, an engagement with “formed content.” Langer thought of philosophy as fundamentally an interpretive discipline. But this does not mean that philosophy is just interpretation, which it certainly is in practically any format; it rather means that philosophy studies the contexts, means, criteria, consequences, and contents of interpretation. Relying on the tripartite paradigm of sense-functions of *expression*, *representation*, and *pure signification* that informs Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Langer, like Peirce, wanted to show how the world *at every level* is accessed, projected, and interpreted through the construal as well as the construction of signs and symbols, and how the world of interpretations, the experienced continuum of embodied meanings, goes far beyond language and its close cousins, logic and mathematics. Interpretation as meaning-making is importantly and insightfully “pushed down” by Langer to the primary stratum of awareness or sentience, just as Peirce and Dewey, with different emphases, did. What I am calling here “interpretation” Langer calls “symbolic transformation” on the human level, the “new key” in philosophy, but Peirce calls, quite generally, “semiosis.” The multiform and multileveled duality of a *sign and meaning* model is to replace the old duality of a *percept and concept* model as the axle around which the philosophical wheel turns. This is the “semiotic turn” that Langer, and clearly Peirce, was concerned to effect. It joins their two projects together non-competitively—and intersects with Dewey’s own “logical” interests in how “qualitative” thought goes out into symbolization and in turn is informed by it (see Dewey 1931).

The chief conceptual and analytical tool of the semiotic turn for Langer is the radical divide separating the semiotic “mode” of indexicality from symbolicity, or indication from symbolization. Langer’s notion of indexicality is fundamentally identical with Peirce’s (and the philosophical tradition’s), in its original thrust and in many of its examples. That is, the defining or basis feature of indexicality is the “pairing” involved in “real connections,” both spatial and temporal. On Langer’s position, an index, being perceived, “leads” the percipient to become aware of something else: the “leading,” the connection, *is* the meaning. A bruise “means” prior

forceful impact. A scar “means” prior lesion or cutting. The absence of an ear “means” accidental loss or birth defect. Smoke “means” fire just as much as fire will lead us to expect, if not smoke, then at least heat. A persistent deep cough “means” pulmonary distress or upper respiratory problems. On the human level indication, or indexicality, can be, and often is, embedded in articulate frames or expressed by articulate elements in language itself, where it plays a major role. Medical diagnoses are obviously so embedded. But for Langer the defining feature of such instances of indication is the “seeing of connections” or establishing of connections and letting one part of experience, which has a substantial reality in itself, lead us to another part of experience. Chronic pulmonary disorders are marked by wheezings, coughings, shortness of breath, and so forth. Knowing that someone is afflicted with such a disorder leads us to expect or look for its symptoms just as experiencing the symptoms leads us to expect to find other real conditions that function as their cause. This “hypothetical turn” of perception, an essentially abductive process, is a common theme in Langer and Peirce, with Langer supplying interesting confirmations from the psychological and ethological literature. The main, indeed revolutionary, lesson here is that perceptual abduction is already a form of interpretation, of sense-reading, a theme I have treated extensively, starting with Peirce, in *Consciousness and the Play of Signs*.

We know as a commonplace of psychology that humans clearly share with non-human animals the ability to interpret, within their action-space, indices. This is the animal ambient explored by the ethologists. For Langer, though, as for Peirce and Dewey especially, arrays or configurations of indices are also diacritical markings of “wholes” or “forms,” which, without being “objects” in the traditional sense preferred by “classical epistemology,” are nevertheless recognized as “meanings” or meaningful. Langer, Peirce, and Dewey enable us, or rather force us, to see that our first experiential encounters are not with “objects” that *have* meanings that fit over them as an interpretative overlay, but with intrinsically meaningful wholes. Meaning here means “ordered context,” which Michael Polanyi, for instance, called an “existential meaning” in order to distinguish it from “representative meaning.” This is the core lesson of Dewey’s great essay, “Qualitative Thought.” It is the backbone of his whole aesthetics, developed in *Art as Experience*, as it is of Langer’s own aesthetic, as we will see. In his early “Unit of Behavior” essay from 1896, which foregrounds the “action of perception,” Dewey argues that *being burned*, as an undergone experience or feeling, *means* “hot,” is itself, in fact, an *interpretation* of the

flame. Each “object,” or rather focal center of attention, that functions in the experiential field or life-world of the percipient, is defined by its diacritical or pertinent features, which we have the ability (hardwired or learned) to recognize and to consolidate in habits. But these features are not, or need not be, thematic or thematized. They can be merely operative, as they are in the non-human world.

Langer, Peirce, and Dewey agree that on the most basic human level, which is their primary concern, there is a “feeling for quality” or a “quality of feeling” or a “qualified feeling” that marks our originary grasp of forms that is prior to, or superordinate to, our grasp of “objects” in the strict, objectifying, sense. This is a “physiognomic” level of “sense,” where the world presents its “face” to us, even in pragmatic action. It is Cassirer’s “expressive stratum” and sense-function. Clearly this is, or at least encompasses, the “iconic dimension” of Peirce, the realm of firstness or *suchness*, and it is also the realm that Dewey, with explicit reference to Peirce, foregrounds as grounding “qualitative thought.” On this level, both Langer and her “parallel thinkers” masterfully point out, we are “had” by the world prior to our having it, just as the indexical markers of a focal whole are “had” or *felt to be had* by an integrating qualitative “suchness.” This is the source of the fluctuating unity and constancy of our experience. Langer will correlate, with extensive documentation, but different terminology, primarily from Gestalt psychology, the indexical and the iconic dimensions of the experiential field, understood in this way, with the type of intelligence we share with non-humans. Non-human mentality is defined by “indexical connection and iconic quality” and it is precisely these levels that are also fundamental for humans and yet gets radically transformed by the advent of symbolization *qua tale*. This is Terrence Deacon’s fundamental principle in his Peirce-informed *The Symbolic Species* (1997), which in spite of its up-to-date neuroscience and cultural anthropology does not advance beyond the insights of Langer, Peirce, and Dewey. Grasping of “connections,” “objects,” “situations,” and “affective tones” involves, then, the dual functioning, and yoking together, of indexicality and iconicity. They are the conditions for having a coherent world, the ground floor of sentience. These two “lower” strata of semiosis prepare the way for “symbolization” proper, which marks the “great shift” that Langer wants to trace from animal mentality to the human mind. In this Langer holds to both a naturalistic continuity and a qualitative, not ontological, break between the animal and the human realms. This is also the deepest orientation of the classic American philosophical project.

For Langer, as for Peirce and the American tradition, human mentality is triadic, involving a distinctively symbolic mediation. It does not consist in, although it necessarily presupposes, correlation of equal parts or aspects of an experiential field, each of which has an independent reality, nor the mere grasp of segments (which Langer saw for the most part through the lens of a philosophically interpreted Gestalt theory) marked off as qualitatively different in the perceptual continuum, but rather the *transformation* of iconically and indexically constituted experiential material(s) into symbolic forms that mediate, or articulate, concepts or “import.” Langer very helpfully thinks of symbolization as involving two tracks, which encompass what Peirce classifies as symbolicity as well what he includes under one aspect or dimension of iconicity. But Langer uses, in my opinion advantageously, the single term “symbol” to delineate this dual member class of semiotic tools. For Langer what is primary is not just the radical distinction between indication and symbolization, which marks the “great shift,” but the radical distinction between two forms of symbolization: the discursive form and the presentational form. The *discursive* form, exemplified *par excellence* in language and mathematics, is marked by linearity, translatability, the existence of independent signifying units and rules for their connection (which Karl Bühler, a great influence on Langer and cited in her *Philosophy in a New Key*, called the “dogma of lexicon and syntax”), and so forth. The *presentational* form is marked by all-at-once-ness, non-translatability, the lack of independent units, and an intrinsic weddedness of the expressed meaning to the expressing or expressive form. Presentational forms clearly encompass Peirce’s icons or “the iconic,” but not completely or without remainder. Algebraic equations and geometrical figures, which Peirce includes in the class of icons, belong, according to Langer, to the discursive domain. They are “iconic symbols.” The difference from Peirce here is, however, more terminological than substantive. Moreover, for Langer even art works constructed in language as their defining material are not discursive, but presentational.

Langer arrives at such a position, which has certain advantages over the Peircean schematization, by means of the key idea that “objects,” perceptual forms, images of all sorts, can exemplify or exhibit “ideas,” or have an import, that elude the discursive domain yet are fully “rational.” But it is not just their form but the work they do that is critical for Langer. And this is not simply a general semiotic principle, but is indispensable for her approach to art or the art symbol, where, as we will see, hers and Dewey’s approaches fruitfully intersect in spite of certain surface differences. Langer is most concerned to validate the genuineness or “rationality”

of a true realm of meaning that is not formulable in linguistic terms. She shares in this Peirce's and Dewey's anti-logocentric thrust while maintaining their broadened idea of an ultimately semiotically defined "rationality." It is a constant drumbeat of Langer's reflections that humans have potentiated the pre-linguistic and non-linguistic ability to see "significance" in the experiential flow itself. This significance, once again, is a "qualitative significance," which Whitehead made much of under the rubric of "affective tones." Such a significance, Peirce and Dewey showed, underlies and supports iconicity. It is a central and systematically articulated theme of Langer's work that it is not only material objects such as fire, the sun, the moon, the forest, the sky, and so forth that can be both recognized as distinctive natural units in the continuum of experience, and can become true "natural" symbols, as the cultural anthropologists and historians of religion have shown, articulating meanings that cannot be named but only shown: life, waxing and waning, danger and darkness, divine omnipresence, and the like. We can go further, Langer thinks, and *construct* analogues of the very formal features of experience by producing *symbolic images*—in art, ritual, sacrament, and myth—that exhibit the "morphology of feeling" or the "logic of sentience." This realm of subjectivity is only accessible through presentational forms, or forms functioning presentationally. Philosophy, Langer argues, must commit itself in principle to a systematic study of the processes and contents of this presentational symbolism and not restrict itself to a discursively defined rationality. Here the interpretive, or hermeneutical, dimension of Langer's work really comes to the fore and its multidisciplinary, not just interdisciplinarity, is manifest. If the production of symbolic images is itself a process of interpretation, then a semiotically oriented philosophy becomes also an interpretation of interpretations. It spreads its interest to the whole field of meaning and to its constitutive elements and functions. This is exactly what Langer's project is aiming at—and, to say the least, so were Peirce's and Dewey's own projects. Semiotics and pragmatism intersect here in the most fruitful way.

From one point of view, though, and one I consider of high importance at least from the historical side, Langer's whole project could be seen as a double-sided attempt: first, to update and validate Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, foremost through the exploitation of its relevance for the theory of art (*Feeling and Form*)—a form of expansive updating—and, second, inspired clearly by Whitehead, but paralleled by the deepest thrust of American philosophy, to establish and to find the implications of a non-reductive naturalism for, and an anti-substantialist

approach to, the rise of mind and its embodiment in objective symbolic structures (the *Mind* trilogy). Langer's repudiation of a substantialist metaphysics at all levels is ultimately due to the permanent influence of Whitehead on her thought, although she is not a "process philosopher." Her attacks on "soul-substance" in *Philosophy in a New Key* clearly show this—the book was dedicated to Whitehead, just as *Feeling and Form* was dedicated to Cassirer—but her reflections on art and her reflections on the rise and nature of mind avail themselves of the *act-concept*, which she admits to having taken from Whitehead. Her world is a processual world, a world of events and relations, not of stable "things" embodying "essences." Organisms, on Langer's conception, which is developed systematically with acribious empirical detail, are self-organizing and self-unifying matrices of acts, which are dynamic wholes. In this she certainly is close to Dewey's metaphysical vision of "minding" in *Experience and Nature*, whose Langerian equivalent is her *Mind* trilogy. At the same time, like Dewey, she will not accept any form of pan-experientialism, which she finds also in Whitehead and which has been developed by others, often with theological intent, a stance she firmly opposes in the name of a sober, but by no means pessimistic, naturalism. Langer shares a strong anti-speculative bent that makes her, in this respect, closer to Dewey than to Peirce, although her position on the self, while naturalistic, is intrinsically semiotic, even if with a biological twist. Langer offers deep-grounded insights into the "semiotic body," both in its endosomatic and exosomatic forms.

Langer, like many in the American philosophical tradition, wanted to put philosophy into a relationship close to the empirical sciences and exploit the sciences for concepts that can be utilized and validated by means of progressive generalization. What she took from biology and psychology, her principal empirical sources, was this *act-concept* and the generalized notion of *sentience* as a *phase* of biological processes, not a new "ontological" level. Langer, as opposed to Peirce, tries to specify, with the help of developmental biology and neurophysiology, the exact mechanism for the emergence of mind and sentience, without recourse to the temptations of objective idealism to which Peirce was susceptible. Mind for Langer is a result or an emergent dimension of sentience, not an aboriginal cause or source of sentience. The rise of symbolically informed sentience, which is also Deacon's thematic concern, is fruitfully connected by Langer, relying on some classic French researches by Th. Ribot, Jean Philippe, and Philippe Fauré-Fremiet, with the analysis of the imagination and the internalization of symbolic processes *prior to external articulation*. Human mentality is rooted in an organism that undergoes a riot of

spontaneously formed images, founded upon certain cerebral shifts and conditions. Peirce himself thought, without contradicting Langer's point, that it was consciousness of signs as such and their explicit use and control that marked human mentality as semiosis. Langer supplies Peirce's systematic insight with genetic support that merits the closest attention.

The distinctively human ambient, Langer argues, is a symbolic or symbolically transformed ambient, with both endosomatic and exosomatic dimensions. But Langer's important, maybe even revolutionary, thesis is that it arises and is supported through the internalization and symbolization of an *immanent process of generating images*. When images, initially spontaneously produced whether in dreaming or waking, no longer directly evoke or express various types of reactions, positive or negative, but are used to give rise to a conceived or symbolized, internal or external, world—when, that is, images not only function but are recognized as *means of symbolization and conceptualization*, even of self-consciousness—that is the movement to the human ambient. Consciousness of images not as things to be dealt with or undergone but as symbolic tools, as primary carriers of “significance,” allows the human organism to abstract and fix a world, to stabilize the flow of experience even prior to language. But this stabilizing, on the operative level, is already a qualitatively new type of grasp and constitution of meaning or meaningful wholes. Langer, then, goes the genetic methodological route, different than Peirce, but she still pushes semiosis “down” before pushing it “up.” Indeed, on the basis of almost painful empirical detail, she defines feeling itself as a species of semiosis, but with feeling, as I have repeatedly noted, first appearing as awareness of physiognomic (Gestalt) qualities as the initial manifestation of *form*, both steering action and informing perception. In *Feeling and Form*, Langer writes:

The comprehension of form itself, through its exemplification in formed perceptions or “intuitions,” is spontaneous and natural *abstraction*; but the recognition of a metaphorical value of some intuitions, which springs from the perception of their forms, is spontaneous and natural *interpretation*. Both abstraction and interpretation are intuitive, and may deal with non-discursive forms. They lie at the base of all human mentality, and are the roots from which both language and art take rise. (1953, 378)

Abstraction, interpretation, symbolic transformation: this is the trajectory human mentation takes.

It is this paradoxical non-foundational search for a “base” that binds Langer, Peirce, Dewey, and, totally outside the American pragmatist tradition, Cassirer together. All four thinkers, in different but complementary ways, undermine any temptation to remain committed to epistemology “as we have known it,” with its abstract dialectic of knower and known, subject and object. Dewey went as far as to call the theory of knowledge “that confirmed species of intellectual lockjaw.” Langer wants to put our jaws in motion and give us something substantial to chew on. The iconic, the presentational, the qualitative, the physiognomic, and the expressive—these are all terms for characterizing the same primary “stratum” of consciousness. To use a spatial metaphor for something non-spatial, this stratum is marked by the least “distance” between the organism and its ambient and its sign-system. Other strata—proceeding from natural representational systems such as language to the totally abstract systems of symbolic logic and mathematical physics—interpose greater “distances.” The great merit of Langer’s work here is to fuse the hierarchical and even teleologically oriented schema of sense-functions that informs Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (expression, representation, pure signification) with reflections on empirical insights and discoveries. It is, as I have been emphasizing, not “things” and “objects” that first confront us or arise in consciousness but *value-laden centers of significance*. These centers are not merely perceived or noticed or “mirrored,” but responded *into*, in a circuit of action and interpretation, or interpretative action. This is a fusion of action and meaning-making, a deeply pragmatist insight and thesis. James and Dewey foreground this actional aspect perhaps a bit more than Langer does, at least from the more explicitly psychological, as opposed to the biological, side. At the same time, Langer gives empirical support, in fact if not in explicit intention, to Whitehead’s distinction between causal efficacy and presentational immediacy and to Whitehead’s notion that “affective tones” mark our first encounter with the continuum of experience and effect its primary segmentation.

The general aesthetic aspects of these shared concerns and positions merit especially close attention.

Langer asserts vigorously and straightforwardly in *Feeling and Form* that “in art, it is the impact of the whole, the immediate revelation of vital import, that acts as the psychological lure to long contemplation” (1953, 397). This is the “musical moment” that Dewey notes, whether it

occurs with a piece of music, a painting, a landscape, or a cathedral. It is a “first or analytic phase” that is marked by “the musical quality” of any art, which, as Dewey puts it in *Art and Experience*, is the “impression directly made by an harmonious ensemble” (1934, 150). Dewey notes that in our primary encounter with an art work “there is an impact that precedes all definite recognition of what it is about” and then adds that being seized by an art work’s “magical accord” is an “effect particularly conspicuous for most persons in music” (150), certainly a comment that provokes much thought in light of Langer’s love for and practice of music her whole life. The “lure to long contemplation” is what gives rise to a consummatory experience, in Dewey’s terminology. Langer and Dewey both share a non-instrumental notion of the primary value of art: long contemplation culminates in a consummatory experience wherein the experience is savored for its own sake or, for Langer, for the sake of “insight,” since an art work gives us not just heightened experience, but knowledge, although not in concepts.

Langer and Dewey, I am convinced, are really not fundamentally opposed on art and the aesthetic in spite of the one’s focus on the “art symbol” and the other’s focus on “art as experience.” The art symbol must be experienced just as much as the aesthetic experience must be embodied in some meaning-bearing frame. Think of *that* meal in Paris that Dewey speaks of in *Art as Experience*—the meal, as it does its work for Dewey, has become in memory, a presentational symbol that exhibits or exemplifies *the meaning of meals* or *meals*. It is precisely the multidimensional *pregnancy* of the art symbol—as an objective or objectified form—that carries our experience beyond mere “passing through” to experienced consummation. Dewey, for his part, however, is concerned to show—indeed to validate in the strongest terms—that experienced consummation is not restricted to the formally aesthetic or artistic, but it must be “framed.” Langer misinterprets, perhaps willfully, Dewey’s position as implying that “artistic experience is not essentially different from ordinary physical, practical, and social experience” (1953, 36). “True connoisseurs” of art, according to Langer, think such a position misses “the very essence” of art, which is to be a source of experiences “essentially different from the experiences of everyday life” (36). The essence of art, for Langer, is symbolic formulation, in the presentational mode, of the morphology of feeling in all its varieties and nuances and its exemplification in the primary illusions created by the various art genres. This, Langer claims, “sets it apart as an autonomous, creative function of a typically human mind” (36), which she wrongly claims Dewey denies. Dewey’s key idea, which is neither reductionist nor oblivious of

clear boundaries between types of experience, is rather to *desubstantialize* or *dereify* the aesthetic and art: art, he writes, “is a strain in experience rather than an entity in itself” (1934, 344). I do not think Langer and Dewey are in any real contradiction here. Dewey’s deep and nuanced reflections on expression and form in *Art as Experience* merit close comparison with Langer’s account of the different art genres and their “primary illusions.”

Both Dewey and Langer are concerned to show, by a vibrant selection of examples, the power of pregnant objects, events, and situations to organize and inform experience. For Dewey they do not have to belong to the thematically artistic domain, but can be found through the whole gamut of human experiencing. Langer downplays this feature, although I think her general semiotic position of mind as the locus of significance, no matter of what type, would allow such an extension. Dewey’s most powerful examination of this feature of the potential omnipresence of the aesthetic, and a link to Langer, is in the chapter on “The Organization of Energies” in *Art as Experience*. There he speaks of “art’s unique transcript of the energy of the things of the world” (190). A transcript is surely a symbolic articulation, aiming at capturing “the full energy of the object” (185). But, on Deweyan and Langerian principles, our engagement with the object is correlative to the object itself. “Esthetic perception,” Dewey writes, “is a name for a full perception and its correlative, an object or event. Such a perception is accompanied by, or rather consists in, a release of energy in its purest form; which, as we have seen, is one that is organized and so rhythmic” (184). Rhythm for Dewey is defined as “rationality among qualities” (169), involving ordered variation of manifestation of energy (164). Langer discusses these issues under the rubric of gradients and the morphology of feeling, which the art work both embodies and makes us aware of. Langer speaks of the “impregnation” of intuition and perception by forms. For Dewey the peculiar tension of art symbols is verified in “progressively enacted experience” in which “those potencies in things by which an experience—any experience—has significance and value” are selected for our fullest attention. One of Dewey’s most enduring and phenomenologically grounded insights is that this is not something, from the perceiving side, that we *do*, but rather something that *happens* to us and it can also arise from, permeate, and constitute everyday life, the message of the first chapters of *Art as Experience*.

For Dewey it is the function of the artist, on the producing side (the studio standpoint), to construct a form in which “order, rhythm and balance” raise above the threshold of everydayness those energies “significant for experience . . . acting at their best” (192). Balance and symmetry

are for Dewey, and for Langer, dynamic features, not static structures, and are specific to the different art genres and differentially exemplified in concrete art works, each of which is unique and irreproducible. The artistic and the aesthetic measure of art works, Dewey says, is the capacity of the experienced whole “to hold together within itself the greatest variety and scope of opposed elements” (187). This is why Langer strongly claims in *Mind* that art works are heuristically fertile “images” of mind and its workings. They exhibit the “morphology of feeling” in an objective form, whereby all forms of sentience, whether stable or fleeting, are revealed and embodied. This dynamic process, Dewey says, involves alternations of compressions and releases (James’s flight and perchings), which give rise to “the intension of energy due to multiplied resistances” (190).

Now it is precisely “multiplied resistances” presented in rhythmically balanced and dynamically ordered forms that for Langer is the heuristic key to mind and not just to the philosophy of art. Langer asserts that “all levels of feeling are reflected, explicitly or implicitly, in art” (1988, 83), revealing and articulating the “logic of sentience”: order, pattern, rhythm, growth and diminution of energies, sense of effort and release, dynamism and relaxation, and so forth. Clearly, for Langer the symbolic dimension is inextricably intertwined with the experiential with all its gradients: “Gradients of all sorts—of relative clarity, complexity, tempo, intensity of feeling, interest not to mention geometric gradations . . . —permeate all artistic structure” (85)—and experiential structures, too. Her work is a treasure house of precise, provocative, and empirical exemplifications of these gradients, especially in “The Import of Art” section of *Mind* and in the discussion of the great orders of art in *Feeling and Form*. Dewey and Langer have much to teach us here and we should read them without looking for false oppositions and without taking sides.

An extremely clear instance of their complementarity is the substantial overlap between Dewey’s nuanced and carefully worked out distinction between expression and statement in *Art as Experience* and Langer’s central and most important distinction between presentational and discursive forms. Although Dewey rejects any simple use of the sign-analogy for analyzing works of art, thinking of signs as “pointing” toward experiences rather than constituting one as art works do, Dewey is resolutely dedicated to the position that works of art have “meaning” and “significance” that cannot be separated from their particular form of embodiment. Their “meaning” is in them the way a pattern is in a carpet. They *exhibit* their meanings, making them

appear to our perception and informing our affective lives. They have, in short, “symbolic pregnance” on multiple levels, although Dewey does not use that term, which belongs to Cassirer. Langer formulates her parallel position in this way: the art symbol, even if embodied in linguistic form,

cannot be built up like the meaning of a discourse, but must be seen *in toto* first; that is, the “understanding” of a work of art begins with the intuition of the whole presented feeling. Contemplation then gradually reveals the complexities of the piece, and of its import. In discourse, meaning is synthetically construed by a succession of intuitions; but in art the complex whole is seen or anticipated first. (1953, 379)

Langer focuses primarily on the “object-side,” the symbol-side, of the aesthetic relation and its power to disclose the life of feeling, while Dewey focuses primarily on the “experience-side” of the relation and its intrinsic drive toward expression and organization of energies, which have to be embodied or at least “framed,” giving rise to “an” experience. I see Langer’s and Dewey’s work as deeply complementary in their main lines and in much of their detail.

In conclusion, while American philosophy was neither a source nor a resource for Langer, her philosophical project can be a resource for it and for developing its continuing relevance and analytical and creative power. It supplies independent confirmation of some of American philosophy’s central theses and focal concerns and supplies new sets of conceptual tools for broadening its appeal and exemplifying its essentially open character.

[[department]]

University of Massachusetts Lowell

Works Cited

- Cassirer, Ernst. 1923–1929 [1953–1957]. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. 3 vols. *Vol. 1, Language; vol. 2, Mythical Thought; vol. 3, The Phenomenology of Knowledge*. Transl. R. Manheim, intro. C. W. Hendel. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Deacon, Terrence W. 1997. *The Symbolic Species*. New York: W. W. Norton.

- Dewey, John. 1931. "Qualitative Thought." In John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization*. New York: Putnam's.
- . 1934 [1987]. *Art as Experience*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.
- Innis, Robert E. 1994. *Consciousness and the Play of Signs*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- . 2002. *Pragmatism and the Forms of Sense*. University Park: Penn State UP.
- Langer, Susanne K. 1930. *The Practice of Philosophy*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- . 1942. *Philosophy in a New Key*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- . 1953. *Feeling and Form*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- . 1967. *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling, vol. 1*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP.
- . 1972. *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling, vol. 2*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP.
- . 1982. *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling, vol. 3*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP.