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Cassirer, Langer, and Dilthey on the Distinctive Kinds of Symbolism in the Arts

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Abstract: This paper examines the ways in which Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer place the arts in the spectrum of symbolization. Langer claims that Cassirer is wrong to consider artistic symbolism as a more concrete mode of linguistic symbolism. Instead, artists create presentational symbols that are just as capable of *formal articulation*, i. e., of complex combinations, as words are. According to Langer, the presentational modes of articulation of music and the visual arts are altogether different from the syntactical mode that governs language. I argue that the way Langer imposes her presentational model on the literary arts goes too far in decontextualizing them from the real world. Thus I propose a more inclusive artistic spectrum which proceeds from Langer's presentational symbolism to the typifying mode of symbolization suggested by Wilhelm Dilthey to Cassirer's more ideational linguistic mode.

Keywords: Cassirer, Langer, Dilthey, symbolism, language, form, music, typification

In considering the intellectual descendants or “children” of the Neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer, Susanne K. Langer should be given an important place. Langer was an American philosopher born in 1895 and raised in a German-speaking household, and could have been an actual child of Cassirer who was then 21 years old. Of course, her kinship is to be located in her philosophical approach and will be focused mainly on the implications of Cassirer's thought for aesthetics. His thought provided her with one of the keys to rethinking how works of art should be understood and appreciated.

Langer was clearly influenced by Cassirer's three-volume work *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which she acknowledges as an important antecedent in her first major work, *Philosophy in a New Key* of 1942. However, she also lists her *Doktorvater* Alfred North Whitehead's *Symbolism: its Meaning and Effects* and the writings on language and meaning by I.A. Richards, A.J. Ayer, Carnap, and

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Wittgenstein as informing her work. These more analytical writings would lead her to add some new distinctions to Cassirer's approach to symbolism.

Both Cassirer and Langer hold that language and symbolism do not just record what we experience but help to shape how we come to experience the world and conceptualize it. Symbolism plays an especially important role in how we make sense of things scientifically and artistically. This means that traditional imitative theories of language and art need to be replaced with expressive theories of symbolic formation. Before proceeding to show how Langer modifies certain aspects of Cassirer's approach, it is important to recognize that she was especially influenced by the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* entitled *Mythical Thought* and of course the essay "*Sprache und Mythos*" of 1925 that she translated into English. Langer more than once quotes the passage where Cassirer writes that "it is typical of the first naïve, unreflective manifestations of linguistic thinking as well as the mythical consciousness, that its content is not sharply divided into symbol and object, but both tend to unite in a perfectly undifferentiated fusion."¹ This allowed words and names to exert a direct, magical power over things that would gradually be refined and become metaphorical and intellectual. For Langer the closest counterpart to the fusing power of myth is musical symbolism. She supplements her citation from Cassirer by adding: "Music is our myth of the inner life – a young, vital, and meaningful myth, of recent inspiration."² The fact that Langer speaks of music as a form of myth rather than of language is telling. Cassirer was willing to regard language as the vehicle of myth formation and cites Hermann Usener's "theory of signification in which linguistic and mythical elements become inseparable correlates."³ Langer, however, does not regard them as inseparable and often speaks of myth as being pre-linguistic.

Cassirer thinks of language in more generic ways than Langer and projects a symbolic continuum that moves from the sensuous to the intuitive and finally to the scientific intellect in constructing the meaning of the world. As he summarizes the results of the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* on language, Cassirer writes that "intellectual expression could not have developed through and out of sensuous expression if it had not been contained in it."⁴ This schematic or implicit containment is later described as a "symbolic pregnance" that places

1 Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key, A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1960), 245.

2 Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 245.

3 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2: *Mythical Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 22.

4 Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 1: *Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 319.

perception itself “in a determinate order of meaning” that can ultimately be made mathematically exact through “a universal functional equation.”⁵ Langer’s conception of symbolic formation differs from Cassirer in not being as geared to the physical world and its scientific elucidation. Her focus is more on how symbolic formation articulates human life whether conceived organically, mentally, or socially. The one science that she would work on is biology, and most of her writings are on aesthetics. There her main contribution was to offer an insightful articulation of the distinctive symbolic forms instituted by the various arts going back to functional arts such as ritual dance and architecture to the more creative arts of painting, sculpture, music, literature, and film.

Whereas Cassirer projects a continuum of signs and symbols, language and discursive thought, Langer introduces sharper distinctions. She claims that signs are direct proxies for their objects, whereas symbols are “vehicles for the conception of objects”⁶ and start the process of thinking. Human beings, “unlike all other animals, use ‘signs’ not only to *indicate* things, but also to *represent* them.”⁷ And when signs are used in this way to represent things even in their absence, they become symbols that express how we conceive of them. Basically “a sign is something to act upon, the symbol an instrument of thought.”⁸ In order to capture what is distinctive of symbolic formation in the arts, many of which are non-linguistic, Langer adds a further crucial distinction, namely, between *discursive symbolism* and *presentational symbolism*. Presentational symbols are non-linguistic and are already at work in dreaming. Such symbols are as much about what we feel as about what we think. Whereas the discursive symbolism of language and mathematics is necessary to order and make sense of the *real world*, presentational symbolism creates a *virtual world* that goes back to dreaming and mythical consciousness. According to Langer, the presentational symbols created in the arts cannot be related to the continuum of Cassirer’s three stages of language, which he called the mimetic, the analogical, and the truly symbolic stage. Although Cassirer too distinguishes between art and language as symbolic forms, he still allows art to be defined “as a symbolic language.”⁹ To this he adds that whereas language, especially as it approaches the goal of the ideal of scientific functionality becomes increasingly abstract, art “may be described as a

5 Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3: *The Phenomenology of Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 202–03.

6 Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 60–61.

7 Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 30.

8 Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 63.

9 Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 168.

continuous process of concretion.”¹⁰ Whether that would make art more contiguous with the earlier mimetic and analogical phases of language is not clear, since he accepts Immanuel Kant’s theory of artistic symbols as expressive. He also says in *An Essay on Man* that every art has its “characteristic idiom.”¹¹ Langer, however, insists on a more encompassing view of symbolic articulation that is not modeled merely on language and idiomatic word usage. She asserts that “visual forms — lines, colors, proportions, etc.—are just as capable of *articulation*, i. e., of complex combinations, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language.”¹² And the difference is not that artistic symbols are more concrete as Cassirer claimed. What art teaches us is the power of “abstractive seeing,”¹³ namely, the formal capacity to see “configurations as symbols”¹⁴ of a virtual world that can be felt. The discursive symbols of language and the presentational symbols of the arts are both abstract, but their organizational order is different. This is obvious when considering spatial visual forms, which “do not present their constituents successively, but simultaneously,”¹⁵ but as we will see later, Langer will argue that even temporal musical and poetic forms evoke a sense of co-presence. The contrast that Langer insists on is that all languages have a vocabulary of words with fixed, independent meanings, whereas the elements of a presentational symbol do not. The artistic “elements that compose a larger, articulate symbol are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure.”¹⁶ These elements of presentational symbols are configurative and do not have a denotative meaning but are purely connotational. Whereas languages excel in denoting the order of the external world, the presentational symbols of the arts are better in articulating the order of our inner life. They create a virtual world that has felt import. This becomes most evident when Langer describes how music expresses the significance of human feelings. Like Eduard Hanslick, she looks for harmonic formal patterns in music and rejects the notion that music is expressive of emotive content in a direct symptomatic way. She points out that symptomatically, some musical passages seem to allow for either a sad or joyful interpretation, but this is to look in vain for denotational meaning. Instead, music is to be appreciated for its general connotational import, namely, as a symbolic expression of the general forms of the dynamic life of our feelings. To quote Langer: “music has all the earmarks of a

10 Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 143.

11 Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 154.

12 Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 93.

13 Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 72.

14 Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 72–3.

15 Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 93.

16 Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 97.

true symbolism except one: the existence of an *assigned* connotation ... its import is never fixed. Music at its highest ... is an unconsummated symbol. Articulation is its life, but not assertion; expressiveness, not expression.”¹⁷

1 Langer’s Presentational Symbolic Forms of the Various Arts

Let us now turn from *Philosophy in a New Key* to her most developed theory of the arts in *Feeling and Form* of 1953. The formal character of artistic symbolism is still emphasized in this later work. However, in order to distinguish among the various arts, ideational thought-content cannot be excluded. Now she speaks of the symbolism of art as being “understood when we conceive the idea it presents.”¹⁸ Langer does not refer to Kant here but seems to similarly distinguish between aesthetic ideation and discursive conceptualization. Turning to music again, Langer describes its tonal structures as bearing “a close logical similarity to the forms of human feeling” and fills them in ideationally as “forms of growth and attenuation, flowing and stowing, conflict and resolution ... not joy and sorrow perhaps, but the poignancy of either or both.”¹⁹ Music does not directly refer to our emotions of joy and sorrow, but is allowed to provide a “tonal analogue of emotive life”²⁰ more generally.

The presentational symbols of art create semblances of what is real. Langer considers the term “semblance” the equivalent of Friedrich Schiller’s “*Schein*.” Its importance lies in liberating both perception and conception from all practical purposes. It allows us to think and see feelingly. She points out that “the function of artistic illusion is not ‘make-believe’ as many philosophers and psychologists assume, but the very opposite, disengagement from belief – the contemplation of sensory qualities without their usual meanings of ‘Here’s that chair,’ ‘That’s my telephone.’”²¹ The objects presented in a painting are “given only to the sense of sight,”²² so that we can abstract them from their usual context. The denotational references of discursive symbolism that make conceptual meaning possible are replaced with the import of the semblances of presentational symbolism.

Given that even the visual arts are not meant to imitate real things in the world, but are symbolically expressive, they too serve to articulate human feeling, just as

¹⁷ Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 240. Italics added.

¹⁸ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 26.

¹⁹ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 27.

²⁰ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 27.

²¹ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 49.

²² Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 49.

music does. Langer writes that “just as a good work of art clarifies and *exhibits the forms and colors* the painter has seen, ... so it clarifies and *presents the feelings* proper to those forms and colors.”²³ The lines in a painting can project the semblance of movement and its decorative patterns can create the semblance of rhythm that resonates with life’s potential for growth.²⁴

All the arts that rely on vision serve to articulate what Langer calls “*virtual space*.”²⁵ The space of our normal lives is amorphous, and the space of science is mathematically abstract. Only the visual arts create a virtual space and give it shape. This shape is still abstract in that it focuses on vision as distinct from the supporting data that are normally derived from the sense of touch and muscular movements of our bodies. Virtual space is purely configurative, yet it gives the illusion or semblance of living form. Whereas music is expressive of the inner life of the mind, the visual arts are expressive of life in a more biological sense as well. They can give a semblance of “growth, movement, emotion, and everything that characterizes vital existence.”²⁶ Each of the main three visual arts has its own mode of configuring space that also gives it an ideational form. The essential function of a painting is to transform the flat physical surface of the canvas into a three-dimensional space that produces the semblance of a *virtual scene*. Sculpture is already physically three-dimensional and may seem less illusionary. But here the challenge is to disclose more than the bulk of a figure by showing how it commands the space around it. Langer calls the semblance of sculpture a *kinetic volume*. Whereas bodily volume is originally given to touch, the challenge of sculpture is “to make tactual space visible.”²⁷ What is embodied in a statue and what gives it life is the “expression of biological feeling, not the suggestion of biological function.”²⁸ The third kind of visual art is architecture, which creates another mode of virtual space. Many regard architecture as “chiefly utilitarian, and only incidentally aesthetic, except in the case of monuments.”²⁹ Although architecture has the function of housing human life, it does so in more than a protective sense. It creates a public structure that “detaches itself from its actual setting and acquires a different context”³⁰ that Langer thinks of as “an *ethnic domain*.”³¹ Temples and cathedrals for instance organize a religious space that provides the gathering point

23 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 58.

24 See Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 64.

25 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 72.

26 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 82.

27 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 90.

28 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 89.

29 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 92.

30 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 47.

31 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 95.

for a group of worshipers. Important religious and governmental buildings often house statues, so that Langer conceives of sculpture and architecture as creating complementary semblances. One could say that statues organize space by extending outward from a human self, whereas architecture organizes space by drawing human beings into itself and connecting them.

Music is of course a temporal art using successive sounds as its material. Its symbolic elements, however, are “moving *forms* of sound” that create the simultaneous semblance of “a realm of pure duration.”³² Langer invokes Henri Bergson’s metaphysical intuition of duration that allows us to access the full flow of life in ways that are not available through the one-dimensional linear succession of moments of practical and scientific time. Just as Cassirer had pointed to the way linguistic symbols prepare for the intellectual symbols needed to order scientific time, Langer points to presentational musical symbolism as preparing the way to a philosophical understanding of time. Like Schopenhauer, she attributes the most profound significance to music, but not because it is a direct copy of the will itself which Schopenhauer conceived to be timeless. Instead music expresses the whole of time itself through the semblance of duration. However, Langer’s appeal to Bergson is problematic because his intuition of duration evokes ineffability. According to Cassirer, Bergson’s metaphysics constitutes “perhaps the most radical rejection of ... symbolic formation”³³ as such. Bergson would have rejected Langer’s presentational symbolism as much as he dismissed discursive symbolism. She would have been better off to align her views about the semblance of musical time with Wilhelm Dilthey’s philosophy of life rather than with Bergson’s. Dilthey’s philosophy of life is not anti-intellectual and has many more affinities with the symbolic approaches of Cassirer and Langer. For Dilthey too, music is experienced as a distinctive tonal sphere whose temporality is not a linear succession of states, but an overall nexus of being-pulled-along (*Fortgezogenwerden*).³⁴ This is akin to what Langer writes about the progressive movement of tonal forms that can encompass an “element of sustained rest” in which one musical phrase ends and makes way for another. At this “point of rest within a piece, the music does not ... stand still, but moves on.”³⁵ This speaks to the role of rhythm in music, which Langer defines as “the preparation of a new event by the ending of a previous one.”³⁶ Music expresses the life of feeling, but only its formal, rhythmic patterns. Although the words in a song refer to actual human emotions, Langer expects the composer to swallow up their meaning and

32 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 109.

33 Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 3, 36.

34 For a more extended discussion of this topic see Rudolf Makkreel, *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 31, 206-07.

35 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 108.

36 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 126.

extract their formal musical import. But to differentiate musical rhythm from the rhythmic movement of the lines of a painting that she spoke of earlier, the dynamism of musical form must be about more than ongoing plantlike growth. There must be the semblance of a more punctuated development that allows for recapitulation and summation. And surely, she would have to admit that the ideational contribution of words can contribute to that developmental aspect of musical rhythm.

The next artform that Langer considers is dance. Even though it involves rhythmic motion, its illusion is not merely spatial or temporal, but moves us into the “virtual realm of power.”³⁷ Sculpture could already be said to radiate biological power, but dance extends it further and is ecstatic. Dance symbolizes the efficacy of power itself. Langer relates the function of dance back to Cassirer’s mythical world of magical power and speaks of the circle dance that divides the sphere of holiness from that of profane existence. All vital important activities are “sanctified by dance, as in birth, puberty, marriage, death – planting and harvest, hunting, battle, victory.”³⁸ The circle dance articulates a sphere of cult power, just as architecture articulates a sphere of cultural influence.

The rest of *Feeling and Form* is devoted to the literary arts, and finally to how film relates to them. Langer’s task concerning literature is to show that although it uses discursive symbols as its material, the overall semblance created must be a presentational symbol. She begins by attending to a lyric poem by Blake. The opening lines, “Tyger Tyger, burning bright, In the forests of the night,” signal immediately that we are not dealing with an ordinary tiger and an actual forest. By assimilating the forest to the night rather than assigning darkness to the forest, Blake informs the reader that he is creating a virtual world. A lyric poem creates the semblance of something momentary, whether it be “the occurrence of a living thought, the sweep of an emotion, [or] the intense experience of a mood.”³⁹ But other forms of literature make it evident that the sense of life that is presented in them is not merely organic and mental, but also historical. Literature, beginning with the epic creates the illusion of a *virtual history*.⁴⁰ The connections in a poetically created world must be lived as motivations. This means that all causes and effects in fiction “operate only as the motives for expectation, fulfillment, frustration, surprise.”⁴¹ Drama stands out for creating the semblance of a history with a single rhythmic structure. Comedies may use comical motifs, but their semblance is to offer “an image of human vitality holding its own in the world amid the

³⁷ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 175.

³⁸ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 191.

³⁹ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 259.

⁴⁰ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 264.

⁴¹ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 265.

surprises of unplanned coincidence.”⁴² Langer extends the import of comedy beyond the comical by pointing out that Comus was a fertility God, “symbol of perpetual rebirth, eternal life.”⁴³ Tragedy creates a different kind of plot in which character development, moral conflicts, and sacrifice are presented. For Langer then comedy is destiny in the guise of Fortune, and tragedy is destiny in the guise of Fate.⁴⁴ A poetic illusion is created in all these modes of literature. But when Langer comes to discuss the modern novel her claims become more tentative as she moves from poetic fiction to prose fiction. She complains that it is all too easy for critics of novels to treat them as documents of their age and demands that the import of the novel must remain “formulated feeling, not sociological or psychological theory.”⁴⁵ It is characterized as a still evolving genre with many new “representational features”⁴⁶ whose presentational semblance is not yet definable.

When discussing film – an even more recent genre – Langer has no reservations and is more definitive. She claims that it “remains a poetic art”⁴⁷ because “like dream, it enralls and commingles all senses”⁴⁸ to produce a captivating illusion. In ordinary dreams we are at the center of the situations that emerge, but in watching a film we have before us the semblance of a dream without being at the center of it. Langer points out that dreams are often obsessed with space – “intervals, endless roads, bottomless canyons, things too high, too near, too far – but they are not oriented in any total space. The same is true for the moving picture, and distinguishes it – despite its visual character – from plastic art.”⁴⁹ Whereas the plasticity of sculpture was said to command the space around it, the space of dreams and films is characterized as a “*space that comes and goes*. It is always a secondary illusion.”⁵⁰ The semblance of film creates a “virtual present” that “can move forward and backward.”⁵¹ The stability of the real world gives way to an ethereal dream world.

So here we have Langer’s spectrum of the symbolic forms of the arts. What Langer has done convincingly is to show that artistic creation has something in common with the agency of our dreamlife and that the presentational use of symbols can suspend the rules of discursive language. Her attempts to highlight the various primary illusions of the different arts are often brilliant, but at times

42 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 331.

43 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 331.

44 See Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 333.

45 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 287.

46 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 289.

47 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 412.

48 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 414.

49 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 415.

50 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 415.

51 Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 415.

they give the impression of a kind of abstract meta-aesthetics. This is in part because she thought in the spirit of the New Criticism of the mid-twentieth century, which excluded biographical and historical information from literary criticism. Her efforts to downplay the discursive symbolism that is obviously present in literature as well as in vocal music led her to reject reflective approaches to the arts. Arts are allowed to present the semblance of reflection, but not reflection itself. She rightly dismisses the efforts of Albert Schweitzer to decipher the root musical figures that Bach regularly conjoined “with emotionally tinged words like ‘death,’ ‘joy,’ ‘suffering,’ ‘heaven,’” and his assumption “that those figures recurring in his purely instrumental music still carried the same poetic connotations.”⁵² She grants that “the words of the cantatas may have suggested tonal renderings by their emotive values, but what it all comes to is that those words, with all their religious or human significance, have been assimilated by a purely musical form, the matrix of the cantata.”⁵³ Similarly, if there are denotative themes in instrumental music based on birdcalls, hoofbeats, or rushing streams, Langer insists that they become conventionalized so that they can be absorbed into the overall virtual semblance of felt duration. We can agree with Langer that too much emphasis on such programmatic elements in a symphony can detract from its overall musical effect on us. But if the role of a work of art as a presentational symbol is to transform everyday emotions and ordinary discursive thought into more formal ways of appreciating things, then why not also consider how they can prismatically focus real life and reflect back on it? Since we can only experience “the hypnotic influence of music”⁵⁴ as long as the performance lasts, why not also expand on it to awaken a new attitude that can illuminate reality at large?

Langer’s sharp split between presentational and discursive symbols led her to resist reflective responses of the arts.⁵⁵ Although Kant deeply influenced her, she apparently does not agree that an aesthetic judgment is a reflective mode of judgment. She seems to think that to reflect on or interpret a work of art is an attempt to translate it into some root vocabulary.⁵⁶ Thus “musical hermeneutic” is ridiculed as the effort to interpret “the upward and downward movements of melodic phrases . . . as symbols of rising and sinking spirit, respectively.”⁵⁷ In fact, hermeneutics as a general theory of interpretation is neither some method of analysis to establish the

⁵² Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 165.

⁵³ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 165.

⁵⁴ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 167.

⁵⁵ A related critique of Langer is that she makes the spectator of a dramatic performance too passive. See Richard Courtney, “On Langer’s Dramatic Illusion,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 29, 1970, 14.

⁵⁶ See Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 233–35.

⁵⁷ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 164.

determinate meaning-elements of a work of art, nor a constructive effort to define the proper symbolic import of each artistic genre, but a more comprehensive effort to reflect on the various contextual resources that intersect in all human production including that of artists and writers.⁵⁸

The power of Langer's symbolic approach to the arts derives from her ability to delineate the specific presentational spheres they can draw us into. She shows how each art decontextualizes the real world to create its own virtual sphere. This works especially well for the way Langer illuminates the nature of music, but less well when she treats dance. She writes: "no matter what the dance is supposed to achieve, what dramatic or ritualistic elements it embraces, its first move is always the creation of a realm of virtual Power."⁵⁹ The movements of dance "present no ideas of things outside the organism, but only objectify vitality itself."⁶⁰ These claims threaten to strip dance of its original ritualistic power which she recognized as having an institutional bonding function, albeit one of setting the sacred apart from the profane. By reducing the semblance of dance to that of vital power, Langer stands in danger of focusing too much on the individualistic aesthetic feel of dance as musical ballet. There is good reason, however, to also aesthetically enhance the performative social functions of dance so that it can contribute to a more inclusive secular culture.

2 Presentational Semblances and Representational Typicality

In this section, I will develop a more encompassing hermeneutic approach to the arts that Dilthey fostered and that Cassirer made room for, in order to argue that the arts are more than symbolic forms that *decontextualize* the actual world into virtual counterparts as claimed by Langer. The arts also offer us ways to *recontextualize* the world and give new meaning to life. Thus for Dilthey the novel need not be considered a deficient mode of art because it still represents the world as long as it does so in a representative way. To be sure, aesthetics must allow for the "abstractive seeing" that Langer prizes in the visual arts, but it must also embrace the kind of "typical seeing" that novels make possible. To fill the gap between presentational and discursive symbols that Langer has generated, we should consider an intermediary representational kind of symbolization that brings out what is typical in a situation. Whereas presentational symbols are purely intuitive and discursive

⁵⁸ See Makkreel, *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics*, chapters 3, 7, and 9.

⁵⁹ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 192.

⁶⁰ Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 192.

symbols are purely conceptual, typicality provides an imaginative and schematic intermediary. The imagination allows us to hover between the particularity of intuition and the universality of conceptual thought and in so doing can generate individuating types. The imaginative typicality that Dilthey finds in literature occurs when what the poet expresses about specific lived experience at the same time articulates something about the larger context of life. This is the source of the style of works of literature that brings their form and content together.

Like Dilthey, Langer correlates the functions of expression and articulation. But the meanings expressed in her artistic symbols primarily articulate the formal patterns of our inner life. For Dilthey articulation also relates what is expressed to its historical worldly context. Accordingly, articulation becomes a hermeneutical function that relates us to a public or shared space. One of the ways in which I have compared the contributions that Dilthey and Cassirer made to aesthetics was to focus on how they illuminate the idea of style in the arts. Each in his way suggested a theory of style that keeps our understanding of the arts oriented to their cultural and historical context. Whereas Langer has given us a glimpse into the timeless symbolic form that each genre of art should aim to achieve by itself, Dilthey and Cassirer also bring out the kind of creative phases that the arts go through together over time to give symbolic meaning to human existence.⁶¹

Within the spectrum of symbolization that Cassirer laid out in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, we can say that Langer started on the intuitive mythical side to delineate what she considers to be the distinctive presentational semblances of the arts, many of which possess some dreamlike or illusory qualities. Cassirer himself discusses the arts as part of his theory of culture and tends to focus on the more ideational side of the symbolic spectrum. Despite his interest in aesthetics, Cassirer never developed a full-fledged aesthetics that could make room for both presentational and discursive symbolism. What is especially needed as an intermediary is a theory of the imagination that can do more than produce synthetic relations among separate representations. This is because most of what we perceive is already merged into patterns that we recognize. A more important function of the imagination is to reconfigure the particular patterns we see so that we can discern more pervasive qualities in them that point to a larger context. This reorienting power of the imagination intensifies our contextual awareness and allows artists to articulate new configurations.⁶²

61 For a comparative account of how Dilthey and Cassirer characterize the epochs of aesthetics since the seventeenth century, see Rudolf Makkreel, "Dilthey and Cassirer on the Development of Modern Aesthetics," in Thomas Leinkauf, *Dilthey und Cassirer; Die Deutung der Neuzeit als Muster von Geistes- und Kulturgeschichte* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2003), 39–52.

62 For such a conception of the imagination see Rudolf Makkreel, "Recontextualizing Kant's Theory of the Imagination," in Michael Thompson, ed. *Imagination in Kant's Critical Philosophy* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 205–20.

A good starting point for a theory of the imagination that can mediate between Cassirer and Langer is Dilthey's holistic conception of the poetic imagination. Dilthey saw the poetic imagination as having three functions in transforming our experience of life: the first is to "exclude" constituents that are not essential to the situation being portrayed, the second is to "intensify and enliven" the remaining constituents, and its third most important function is to unfold some of those core constituents as motifs to both typify and illuminate the overall meaning of the situation. Dilthey describes this last function as a process of "completion" whereby "the remaining whole is unified ever more decisively."⁶³ Imaginative completion can also be characterized as a process of discerning mutual resonances that allow some characters in a dramatic plot to embody the overall state of affairs in a concentrative way. For more general purposes we can also assign the intermediary imagination the symbolic function of contextual re-orientation we spoke of earlier whereby ordinary events are seen from a new perspective. Whereas the aesthetic symbolic forms that Langer offered us were said to be presentational and configurative, the imaginative symbolic formation being added here is representational and contextually re-configurative. Both set the stage for the more discursive and ideational symbolic forms that Cassirer develops.

The completing power of imaginative symbolism creates what Dilthey called a typicality that is individuating. It informs concrete literary types like Odysseus, Oedipus, Hamlet, and Faust that continue to inspire us. But Dilthey also ascribes typicality to the stylistic form that relates a painting by Raphael to its historical context and individuates it as a human achievement. I indicated earlier that both Dilthey and Cassirer explored the idea of style as a cultural index to art. Whereas Dilthey focused on style as a real individuating quality, Cassirer surveyed the more general and formal ways in which art historians like Heinrich Wölfflin distinguished between the linear and the painterly ways those things have been depicted throughout history. The classical style of Botticelli and Raphael stressed the linear contours of their figures, whereas the Baroque style of Titian and Rembrandt stressed painterly shading. This contrast reoccurs in the nineteenth century in terms of the bold linearity of the Romantic art of Delacroix and the subsequent painterly response of the Impressionists. Cassirer sees the linear and painterly styles as two equally valid "ideal types" that are never fully instantiated in any particular work, but can be used as a

⁶³ See Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Imagination of the Poet: Elements for a Poetics*, in *Poetry and Experience, Selected Works*, vol. 5, Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 102–04, 217.

reflective means to trace a coordinative tension within the cultural history of art.⁶⁴

In sum, we can say that Langer exhibited little interest in the stylistic qualities of artistic form. She has given us a brilliant but ahistorical delineation of artistic creativity, Dilthey offered the possibility of a richer individuated history, and Cassirer provided an overarching cultural continuum that still needs more filling in.

64 For a more extended treatment of what Dilthey and Cassirer contributed to style theory, see Makkreel, *Dilthey, Philosopher of the Human Studies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, chapter 10.