

THE ALLEGED DUALITY IN SUSANNE LANGER'S AESTHETICS : A REASSESSMENT

The purpose of this paper is :

- (i) to explore the alleged duality in Susanne Langer's aesthetical theory, said to be traceable to her use of the terms, "symbol" and "virtual";
- (ii) to attempt a refutation thereof; and
- (iii) to argue that both these key terms in her writing are not merely complementary to each other, but make for one single coherent viewpoint central to her theory of art.

A good way to begin would be to restate, briefly, Samuel Bufford's remarks on Susanne Langer's aesthetics in his essay in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1972).¹ He contends that there is no necessary connection between the two key terms in her aesthetical writing viz. "symbol" and "virtual"; and that they make for two *separate* theories of art, — the expression and the perceivability theories.

Let me begin by considering how Mr. Bufford interprets the two terms. The term "symbol" is for him the key concept of (what he regards as) the "expression theory". Indeed, he outlines the latter around Langer's use of the term "unconsummated symbols" for works of art, and by concentrating on that part of her theory which (according to him) says that :

"In art, feeling is *expressed symbolically*,.... Works of art are symbols because they have the same kinds of elements and relations, or the same forms, as the processes of feeling." (p. 10, my italics).

In this context, however, Mr. Bufford also refers to Mrs. Langer's view that works of art, as distinct from the ordinary manner of language, have a *non-discursive* form; and that they can articulate what discursive language cannot, — that is, "the subjective aspects of experience." (p. 10).

Unlike the "expression theory" which explains "how the arts are *alike*", the "perceivability theory", Mr. Bufford holds, is brought in by Mrs. Langer in order to account for "what is *distinctive*

about each realm of art". He further resolves the "perceivability theory" into two parts :

"The first is the contention that works of art are not like other things in the world around us. The second is a presentation of the aspect of experience that each of them makes 'more perceivable'. The two parts need not go together; the first might have been presented as an addition to the expression theory....The second part is thus the heart of the theory, and I shall argue that it is different from the expression theory, and that *neither implies or requires the other.*" (p. 10; italics mine)

Before, however, I weigh Mr. Bufford's arguments as to the alleged separability of the "two" theories, I think it is needful to examine the validity of the distinction he draws within the "perceivability theory" itself. Here, where he equates the virtual character of works of art with their being "a vision, a form or an image", I have nothing to complain. Nor do I disagree with his remark that each art (according to Mrs. Langer) is distinguished by one "primary illusion". But where he takes the next step of suggesting that their being an image or illusion means (in her view), that works of art "do not have material existence" (p. 11)² I find it difficult to acquiesce. And my difficulty is here heightened by his sweeping manner. Thus see :

"A second way, Langer thinks, works of art are different is they do not have material existence, while other things do (F.F., p. 47). We abstract the appearances of such things as buildings and pots from their material existence to consider them as work of art. She says each appearance then becomes a vision, a form, or an image." (p. 11)

Mr. Bufford here seems to ascribe to Mrs. Langer the view that a work of art results from the mere process of emptying some object of its content. But, if this is so, what would he say of music which has nothing to do with the corporeality of objects?

Further, before we turn to see whether Mrs. Langer actually says (categorically) that works of art do not have material existence, we may wonder as to what could Mr. Bufford suggest by saying that Mrs. Langer denies "material existence" to works of art. Surely, he cannot be said to imply that works of art *have* "material existence" in the manner of everyday objects. For no one can

miss the difference between a flower vase as such and the same *as painted*.

The real test, however, is the evidence of text. Does Mrs. Langer actually say that works of art "do not have material existence?" Mr. Bufford, we have seen, appeals to p. 47 of *Feeling and Form*.³ But there the actual words run as under :

"How can a work of art that does not represent anything—a building, a pot, a patterned textile—be called an image? *It becomes an image when it presents itself purely to our vision, i. e. as a sheer visual form instead of a locally and practically related object.*" (FF. p. 47; italics mine)

And, further :

"An image is, indeed, a purely virtual 'object'. Its importance lies in the fact that *we do not use it* to guide us to something tangible and practical, but treat it as a complete entity with only visual attributes and relations. It has no others; *its visible character is its entire being.*" (FF, p. 48; italics mine).

Now, to my mind, what is stressed in these passages simply is that works of art are *different* from other things in this sense that whereas the "existence" of other things *can be*, that of works of art *cannot be regarded* as a matter of practical serviceableness. A work of art "exists" only in the sense that when contemplated it is given to us as a self-complete autonomous *form* or *image*.

It is here necessary to add that Mrs. Langer uses terms such as "image", "form" etc. in senses quite different from their common meanings. In common parlance an 'image' is an image of something *other than itself*. In the contemplation of an art object, on the other hand, the image so formed is itself the work of art, and seems self-complete.

Perhaps all that Mrs. Langer could here be accused of is that many common terms — such as, "image", "form", "vision" — are given in her writing a quite uncommon range and meaning. But this hardly justifies Mr. Bufford's imputing to Mrs. Langer a view which is not really hers. It seems to me that what prevents Mr. Bufford from seeing Mrs. Langer's real view is his inability to clearly realize why she speaks of art as "virtual". The term 'virtual' in question is put forth in answer to the searching query

as to what is that which each art creates. Is what art creates *merely* material? An affirmative answer would here be clearly improper. For, art objects like sonatas and lyrics are not 'things' in the popular sense of the word. Nor is my protest confined to music and poetry. I quite see the presence of the material in painting, sculpture and architecture. But it is no less obvious that what is here *created* is no such thing as could be properly called merely or even essentially material. This may be brought out as follows :

The stone is there even before the sculpture comes into being. And so are the pigments and the canvas in relation to the painting. If this is so, how can art be said to *create* the material. How can the same thing (say, stone) which existed before, and has continued through the making of the sculpture be regarded as itself a "creation"? What is in fact created (and is new) is the pure form or image that the finished sculpture is for both the artist and the contemplator. This does not, however, warrant a rebound to the extreme view, which Mr. Bufford ascribes to Mrs. Langer, that the sculpture is utterly *immaterial*. No one denies the material in art; and the least of all, Mrs. Langer. All that she implies by (or openly says about) the "virtual" in the context of art is that the material medium, if any, does not obtrude itself upon the contemplating eye as a distinct and self-complete something. This is, I believe, amply borne out by her following utterance :

"Every work of art is wholly a creation; it does not have illusory and actual elements commingling in it. Materials are actual, but art elements are always virtual; and it is elements that an artist composes into an apparition, an expressive form." (P. A., p. 42)

I need hardly add that on seeing a painting such as Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers', no one proceeds to smell or touch them, as we may do in the case of actual flowers, for a fuller feel of their material existence. Mrs. Langer, therefore, distinguishes a work of art from a *mere* material object on the one hand, and from an experience of optical illusion, on the other. Space, a feature of materiality, may well emerge in a painting. But here it is "virtual space", as opposed to the space which things actually occupy; and this "virtual space", according to her, "is the primary illusion of all such art." (P. A. p. 36). Yet, I hasten to add, such artistic illusion

is obviously different from optical illusion. The extent of Mr. Bufford's opposition to "illusion" in the context of art is hardly proper. For Mrs. Langer herself realizes that "illusion is a prejudicial word", and that we would do well to replace it with "apparition" (P. A., p. 81).

A work of art differs from other things precisely because "its visible character is its entire being". It makes *perceivable* to us the felt aspect of the world around us. Aesthetic contemplation of a work of art calls for attention to the total perceptual or visible form; and in this it differs from our common attitude to everyday objects.

Mr. Bufford also argues that there is no necessary relation between "expressions of feelings" and their being made "*wholly* perceivable". His wonder is here a protest :

"Why should expressions of feelings make them *wholly* perceivable, and not hide somewhat their structure?" (p. 16, italics in the text).

But, I ask, in what precise sense does he here use the word "expression"? Mrs. Langer, it is known, makes a clear distinction between mere symptomatic expression and expression which is symbolic. Mr. Bufford, on the other hand, seems to think of expression as merely symptomatic. Thus, see his following words:

"Is it not natural for our feelings to hide some of their aspects from us, just as do things in the world around us? We repress feelings when we are afraid of showing them or admitting them to ourselves." (p.16).

But, even if attention be confined to expression which is merely symptomatic, the link between expression and perceivability seems pretty close. True, a shy person represses a part of his feeling. But, along with the part of feeling expressed, is not repressing itself quite manifest or perceivable? What otherwise would be the difference between a person's *looking* shy and his merely being reticent? In fact, the more perceivable the act of "repressing" in such cases, the more clearly expressed will be the shyness of the person.

This brings me to the other, more relevant aspect of feeling conceived as a form and represented in art as a symbol. The point I here wish to make is that (for Mrs. Langer) the only true

Now, by showing that the concept of "illusion" in Mrs. Langer's theory is not necessarily independent of the "expression theory" I have brought out by implication, I believe, the untenability of Mr. Bufford's thesis as to the independent and mutually exclusive parts *within* what he terms the "perceivability theory"; for that part of this theory which heightens the differentness of art from everyday things he himself regards as a mere addition to the expression theory. It follows, therefore, that the alleged dichotomy of the "two philosophies of art" is not really there in Mrs. Langer's theory. But the point needs focusing :

Using the abbreviations e. t and p. t for "expression theory" and "perceivability theory", respectively — and p. 1, p. 2 for the two parts of the p. t — I may summarize my argument thus :

According to Bufford, p. 1 can be taken as an extension of e. t; p. 2 on the other hand, is really the heart of p. t; therefore, e. t and (the essence of) p. t are independent of each other. I have shown, on the other hand, that no rigid distinction between p. 1 and p. 2 is possible; that p. 2 is, in fact, inseparable from p. 1; that p. 1 and p. 2 can both go well with e. t; and that therefore, e. t and p. t are not two distinct philosophies, but complementary parts of the same theory.

The way is now paved for a frontal attack on the 'duality' Mr. Bufford sees in Mrs. Langer's theory. Here the crux of his protest is that the two concepts of "symbol" and "virtual" have no link between them, and that they rather "lead us to concentrate our attention on different aspects of works of art, and thus to perceive them differently". (p. 19). I at once rejoin that the argument has two clear defects : First, it just misses the difference between symbol and symptom. Second, the *logical* distinction between a symbol and its import is here misconstrued as a *fact* of aesthetic contemplation. With these as my main grounds of protest, let me now turn to the details of Mr. Bufford's argument.

1. He contends that "tensions and resolutions" which (according to Mrs. Langer) are the "forms of feeling" should be perceivable in "things" and not in space; and that such forms of feeling have nothing to do with the *spatial* tensions and resolutions in a painting. Now, Mrs. Langer admits that tensions and resolutions *may* also be manifest in "things" — say, in the faces of figures in a painting. But she adds forthwith that such expressiveness is merely symptomatic, and not the symbolic import which the full picture possesses as art. What I would here like to emphasize is that Mrs. Langer's theory of "expressiveness" applies as much to representational as to non-objective or abstract painting; that in abstract painting "tensions and resolutions" are not mirrored in human faces, which are here not present at all; and that, therefore, Mr. Bufford's view in question does not cover the whole range of art.

2. As for dance, Mr. Bufford says that to be an expressive art-form it should "become an expression of (dancer's)... psychic

forces"; (p. 18) and that since the forces here made visible are in fact not psychic — but are rather "the powers of darkness, military power, the realm of demons, spirits and gods, important social activities such as birth, marriage, and death" what is made visible cannot be regarded as an expression of feeling. To this I react in two clear protests :

First, here again Mr. Bufford confuses artistic "expression" with mere symptomatic expression. Mrs. Langer, I may add, insists that what a dance expresses is only the "*imagined feeling in its appropriate physical form*. The conception of a feeling disposes the dancer's body to symbolize it." (FF, p. 181, italics in the text).

Second, as to the relative unimportance of (direct) self-expression in dance, Mrs. Langer's following words put the matter beyond doubt :

...the mystic force that works by remote control, establishing its own subsidiary centres in the bodies of the dancers, is even more effectively *visible power* than the naturalistic appearance of self-expression on the stage. (FF, p. 181, italics in the text).

The "mystic force" here — the force that determines and organizes the movements of the dance — is the conception of the dance, the dancer's imagination of the *felt* aspect of (say) darkness, gods etc. What a work of art expresses is not *raw feeling*, but "*an idea of feeling*"; the latter is what the dancer makes visible to the knowledgeable onlooker. (FF, p. 206) .

3. An important strand in Mr. Bufford's protest runs around the conception of "form" in Langer's aesthetics :

"The expression theory emphasizes the form of the work, in the special sense that Langer understands 'form': tension and interactions between shapes in paintings, between characters in drama, between dancers in the dance.... The perceivability theory, on the other hand, does not emphasize so strongly the form of the work of art. The whole art work, it holds, makes perceivable for us our experience or the world around us. (p. 19).

Now, this account misses a vital part of what Mrs. Langer means by "form". For, with regard to (say) a painting, she speaks

of "not only a shape in space, but (of) a shaping of space — of all the space that...is given". (FF. p. 71). The meaning is that the spatial *form* created by the interaction between shapes in painting is at once an organisation of the *totality* of space which (I add) is surely perceivable. The "expressive form" of painting is the form of its total space; and its expressiveness lies in making its whole space perceivable. It is an "organic whole" in which the parts, — say, shapes in painting — do not become visible except in and through the total organization.

4. Finally, Bufford argues that what is made perceivable in a work of art is not feeling; and that therefore

"there is a more striking difference between the two theories when it comes to interpreting a work of art. For the expression theory, if we are to get at the heart of a work of art, we must discover the feeling structure that it exhibits. For the perceivability theory, we must discover what it makes more perceivable or understandable for us". (p. 19)

Here again, I hold, "feeling" has been taken to mean raw, occurrent feeling, and not its "form" or the way it is felt. To attend to the *idea* of feeling presented in the work is at once to attend to the *form*; and "form" is *the way* the feeling is articulated or made perceivable. The basis of Mr. Bufford's rigid distinction between "expression theory" and "perceivability" theory" is hence unsound.

Having thus opposed Mr. Bufford's contention as to the presence of two *different* theories in Langer's aesthetics, I shall now state, briefly how the concept of "symbol" stands in relation to "virtual" in her theory of art. It would here be of help to attend to Mrs. Langer's following utterance :

"To keep virtual element and actual materials separate is not easy...It takes precision of thought not to confuse an imagined feeling, or a precisely conceived emotion that is formulated in a perceptible symbol with a feeling or emotion actually experienced in response to real events... Yet there are such imaginary affects...those which we imagine as our own,...those which are imputed to fictitious characters in literature or seem to characterize the beings

portrayed in a picture or in a sculpture, and are therefore part and parcel of an illusory scene or an illusory self. And *all these emotive contents are different from the feeling, moods or emotions, which are expressed in the work of art as such, and constitute its 'vital import'*; for the import of symbol is not something illusory, but something actual that is revealed, articulated, made manifest by the symbol. *Everything illusory, and every imagined factor...which supports the illusion, belongs to the symbolic form; the feeling of the whole work is the 'meaning' of the symbol".* (FF., pp. 181-182 italics mine).

Langer here distinguishes the "virtual" in two ways : First, we are told, it is not actual but imagined or conceived (i. e. virtual) feeling which goes into the making of the art symbol. Secondly, whereas the completed art symbol is "virtual", its import is actual. To put the two as one, the "virtual" is either a character of the symbol or of something that goes into the making of the symbol; but the word cannot be ascribed to the import of the symbol. A work of art's elements, whatever be its import, are always "virtual"; but, just as essentially, the import itself is in every case actual. This view at once liberates the work from the constraint of reflecting actual feeling. Further, this is why even the right *response* to a work of art has to be one of the imagined rather than actual feeling. The danseuse too, as she creates a dance, does not express her own actually felt feelings. Nor is a painting the (symptomatic) "self-expression" of the artist's own feelings. Here, I may add, the symptomatic expressions visible in the painted characters are neither the actually experienced (because, they are imagined) feelings of the artist himself, nor that of the characters portrayed (because, either the characters are fictitious, or, if real or historical, their feelings are imagined). The *art symbol*, on the other hand, is not the imagined feeling as such that has gone into its making, but *the way such imagined is made visible*, i. e., *the visible form*. The "feeling" that emerges from this "way" or the "form" is what the total work of art is imbued with. It is the work's "vital import". The emergent feeling is organically related to the total form. In other words, aesthetic contemplation of the "form" cannot be done apart from opening up to its import. The form is at once self-expressive; that is, the symbol and its

import are in fact quite inseparable. Yet, a *logical* distinction between the two is necessary for a clear understanding of the role of the "virtual" in the arts. In painting, "the way the imagined feeling is made visible" is by creating "virtual space". In this sense, the "visible form" *is* the "virtual form", or the symbolic form.

In Langer's aesthetics, I conclude, the concept of "virtual" always goes along with the idea of symbol. She in fact even couples the two words and speaks of the "virtual"symbol.' Nor is this coupling meaningless. It hints the truth that whereas the complete art symbol is virtual, its import is actual as revealed. (*FF*. p. 186).

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NOTES

1. Samuel Bufford, "Susanne Langer's Two Philosophies of Art", in *JAAC* 31 (Fall 1972).
2. Bufford refers to p. 47 of Langer's *Feeling and Form* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1953) for support.
3. Hereafter, I shall use abbreviation *FF* for Langer's book : *Feeling and Form*, *op. cit.* and *PA* for her *Problems of Art*. (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1957).

