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Susanne K. Langer as a *Romantic Thinker*

## 1. Neo-Romanticism / Post-Romanticism

Contemporary *Romantic studies* (developed at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) introduced Romantic aesthetics into a wider – postmodern – philosophical analysis. Romanticism is understood here in a broader sense than as a distinct system of symbols or particular formation of artistic style. Contemporary research into Romanticism has already given an impetus to the transformation of formalistic art theories embodied in the Romantic conceptions of expression and begun by Kant's formulation of art as a specific form of knowledge. In advancing the question, many different contemporary theories reflecting aesthetic questions about form and style (e.g., books such as Northrop Frye's *A Study of English Romanticism*, 1982, Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 1975, or W.J.T. Mitchell's *The Last Dinosaur*, 1998, to mention but a few) appear as divergent mutations of the same focus. Contemporary formalistic theories and studies reflect possible connections between Romanticism and modern aesthetics. They prolong Romantic aesthetics, even when its principles are hidden, negative or indistinct<sup>1</sup>.

Langer's theory of art is original and atypical in many aspects, but its logical matrix and constructive argumentation provide a clear base. Her interpreters often simply remain within this narrow area of possible understandings of her theory. Langer herself names Romanticism as the main shift in Western art history's process of the understanding of art<sup>2</sup>. The transformation of the great Western art tradition – especially in connection with the concept of representation and representational thinking in arts – is important to her discussion, though she does not employ exact references to Romanticism as such. Even in the introduction to the book "Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art" (1953), she declares this aim to reflect the particularity and meaningfulness of creativity

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1 Questions about the roots of formalistic aesthetics and its transformations are developed in the works of so called *archetypical criticism* (F. Kermode, *Romantic Image*. London; New York: Routledge, 2002) and continued in contemporary *Romantic studies*: M. Schechter, *Theorising Modernism in Art: Puzzles of Formalist Aesthetics and the Heritage of Romanticism*, in: *Assaph: Studies in Art History*, 2001, Vol. 6, p. 269-274; J. de Mul, *Romantic Desire in (Post) Modern Art and Philosophy*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999, etc.

2 S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, p. 12.

and the creative process instead of offering a narrow analysis of single artistic forms or examples. Her research encompasses a wide array of problems: it starts from a reflection on the venue of a creator (i.e., the studio of an artist), goes deeper to the considerations about the inner process (the construction of space-time and imagination along with memory), and expands with questions about anticipation of the public (questions of artistic prophecy, personal mythology, the passion of genius, the sacred powers of creativity and function of the sense of images). Besides, her style of philosophizing is clearly opposed to pure scientific research. The principles of *generalization* and *fecundity* of thought are defended as the most necessary means for philosophical thinking against those of constraining scientific procedures operating without intuition or imagination. Langer's insights come as if from the inside, not from scientific argumentation. She is open to philosophical investigations that do not have direct answers but have a direct aspiration – "what does art work mean?" or "what does art create?".

This reflection allows her to leave standard questions of aesthetics and attempt to create her own constructions. The main examples that Langer discusses in her analyses of painting, literature, and music are famous Romantic creators or artists influenced by Romanticism (Wordsworth, Blake and Mendelssohn or Whistler respectively), but she tries to create her own system of concepts. Notions and terms in her theory are related to each other and come to a new and original wholeness. The crucial concept is the concept of *symbolic thinking* / *symbolic logic*, as self-contained artistic thinking and form. The symbol is a spontaneous expression of human nature. It could not be designed; it simply appears. Appearance has a deep association with religious symbols, with the meaning of *epiphany* (this relationship in Langer's theory starts from questions about mythology and rituals and ends with considerations about the moral boundaries of vital, subjective expression and critical reflection of the status of art in our modern cultural life). Thus Langer's concept of *symbolic logic* could be called the intuitive knowledge of unique artistic experience, which is unfolded in the light of a more general problematization of creativity in the sources of Romantic aesthetics.

## 2. Langer and Formalism

Langer's reflection could be understood as manifesting connotations of Romantic thinking: *the significant form, living form, life, sensitiveness, musical matrix, virtual space, dramatic illusion*. The category of Beauty is treated purely Romantically: as expressive form that has various forms of appearance, and as a symbolic representation of infinite wholeness<sup>3</sup>. That is why her main concept in the theory of plastic arts – the *significant form* – is called the *unconsummated symbol*<sup>4</sup>. It declares the possibility of representation without direct or immediate

<sup>3</sup> S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 396.

<sup>4</sup> J. Snyman, "The significance of Clive Bell's formalism", in: *Koers* 58/2, 1993, p. 1-2.

depiction or even a condition of non-representativeness. The category of form seems that controversial element which opens connections with Romantic aesthetics – works as a meaning of symbolic sign.

Langer declares the necessity of “living form” for all good art as a refreshed Romantic imperative. *Living form* is an expression of vital feeling and springs out of the reflections about sensations, sense and creative act: “it expresses life – feeling, growth, movement, emotion, and everything that characterizes vital existence”; “this expression, moreover, is not symbolization in the usual sense of conventional or assigned meaning, but a presentation of a highly articulated form wherein the beholder recognizes, without conscious comparison and judgment but rather by direct recognition. [...] the emotive import belongs to the form itself, not to anything it represents or suggests”<sup>5</sup>. *Feeling* is associated with the conception of Romantic understanding of *sense*, which is also separated from the simple understanding of pleasure or of simply aesthetic emotions and is an important category for the concept of artistic expressivity as well<sup>6</sup>. *Feeling*, in her words, is not an emotional or psychological factor but also a logical form of sensation. Langer describes feeling as an “inner life” or a “subjective reality” (separating subjective and objective forms of feeling) and associates it with the symbolic function of art that essentially maintains the link with the search for the more universal totality.

Langer treats all kinds of fine art as a whole and her discussion of their differences and discrepancies is quite nuanced. She does not strictly generalize them, but treats them as parts of an implicit unity, as poetic modes or organic branches of the universal “Art Symbol”. Music has a significant (“commanding”) role in her theory, especially in explaining relationships between different kinds of art – e.g., the rhythmic principle grounds all forms of art and has an unfixed context (it functions as an objective matrix, similarly to in the theories of the Romantics<sup>7</sup>). The separation of temporal and spatial art forms is also important and original in her theory. In spatial arts, “the life of feeling” is shown in a timeless projection<sup>8</sup>. A lively presentation (as appearance) is the privilege of the spatial art, especially painting – a total illusion, “a Romantic vision” (i.e., painting even differs from sculpture here, because it does not have a “real stage” for its appearances).

Langer’s main statement describing artistic form is that visual arts are inaccessible to language and exist as separate systems, which have their own methods of image-making. *Pictures are not saying, they are showing*<sup>9</sup>. These non-discursive qualities can be expressed by the means of form, tone, rhythm,

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5 S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 82.

6 Langer’s concept of expressivity in art has a deep connection with the Romantic understanding of feeling – as a possibility of catching the sense of universal wholeness, emphasized especially by Novalis (M. Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2004).

7 A significant role is provided for music in the works of the Jena Romantics. Music is understood as art’s aim of reaching freedom and harmony, later developed by A. Schopenhauer and F. Nietzsche. The deeper connection with metaphysics and philosophical thinking is the most important here (A. Bowie, *Music, Philosophy and Modernity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

8 S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 373.

9 S.K. Langer, p. 394.

structure and other media. This essential question of expression is connected with the problem of representation – or, in Langer’s words, with the symbolization of something outside of the artwork. Langer is surely correct, insofar as she strictly separates the notion of representation from its understanding as a simple “world depiction” or “world mirroring”. She contends that in the visual arts this pseudo-problem of “imitation” obscures the more important purposes of artistic creativity<sup>10</sup>.

### 3. Langer and Goodman

Langer’s reflection of non-emotional properties of expression can be compared with another original definition of representation and symbolic thinking, which is provided in the book *The Ways of Worldmaking* (1960) by Nelson Goodman. The domains of art and science are analyzed there on a purely analytic platform (the very structure of mind and ideas is presented as analogous to the structure of the world). Sciences, philosophy, and the arts – as well as everyday discourse – are considered as individual systems based on their own principles of reality, as “worlds with multiple versions”. The meaning of the symbol has the same non-emotional sense as in Langer’s theory. “An abstract painting that represents nothing and is not representational at all may express, and so symbolize, a feeling or that quality, or an emotion or idea.”<sup>11</sup> Goodman uses the said symbolism as a basis for the world of painting as well; it is expressed through metaphorical (non-verbal) language, through the reality of the image created by it. He also claims that a “world” could not exist without symbols and signs: as in the case of painting, a form is required to give sense to the content. He states that elements of a picture (its “givenness”) do not coincide with external provisions. The internal elements of a work, such as form, colour, texture, dimensions, materials, and so on, are often defined as formal elements.

With regard to the perception of “non-objectivity” (i.e., an absence of direct narrative in a work of art), the explanation of “internal symbolism” provided by Goodman and Langer is of great importance. It seems that they both continue the thought of Cassirer and “are all working toward a similar end of clarifying the nature, types, and functions of particular symbolic forms”<sup>12</sup>. Of course, their differences highlight Langer’s broader attitude – her romanticism. Goodman’s theory is circumscribed by a concern for the “making” of symbolic worlds, for the creation process itself. According to Goodman, by means of *erasure*, *extension*, and *inversion*, new worlds that did not exist before and which differ from the primal material world can be made through such processes<sup>13</sup>. For Langer, “a work of art is always a primary symbol”<sup>14</sup>. Such a notion of symbol

10 S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. xi.

11 N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978, p. 61.

12 C.L. Carter, “After Cassirer: Art and Aesthetic Symbols in Langer and Goodman”, in: *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer: A Novel Assessment*, eds. J.T. Friedman and S. Luft, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015, p. 401-418.

13 N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 10-17.

14 S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 369.

contrasts with the concept of “copies” of possible worlds, with the “facts of fictions”, developed by Goodman. Moreover, her described genius is a power of creation: the process of different ways of “making” depends on it, and it develops the primary illusion given to consciousness. “[...] Since genius is not superlative talent, but the power to conceive invisible realities – sentience, vitality, emotion – in a new symbolic projection that reveals something of their nature for the first time”<sup>15</sup>. It can be observed that this inner stream is understood as a stronger power than the action of making-producing.

#### 4. Langer and Coleridge: Seeing, Envisioning, Creating, Symbolizing

Langer’s definition of painting seems simple: “Painting creates planes of vision, or “scene” confronting our eyes, on an actual, two-dimensional material”<sup>16</sup>. Painting operates with real and virtual space, together with sculpture and architecture. Painting appears as a material field that is able to create an illusion; it involves the tension between content and form, logic and feeling. As Donald Dryden noted in his research about Langer<sup>17</sup>, she has emphasized different aspects or conceptual underpinnings of forms of expression (that human consciousness can grasp), and painting is strongest in creating visual imagery. *Image and seeing* are the main categories describing pure plastic thinking. Image is understood as broader than a “sight”: a structure of a picture is always a part of a whole; form is a construction of different relations and shapes that are always in motion. But visual imagination is identified with the appearance of an image, which in each art field is formatted in its own way; it is often even compared with the religious sphere. “Seeing” describes the painter’s look at the outer world, which is also a part of the action of painting. When it works as a deep insight, a “copy of the world” is possible: “Cezanne was so supremely gifted with the painter’s vision that to him attentive sight and spatial composition was the same thing. Virtual space was his mind’s habitat”<sup>18</sup>.

It thus here seems that Langer’s thinking unfolds between contradictions. Mind and feeling as matter and idea, the spiritual and the secular, are the main contradictions typical to the thinking of the Romantics, who declared that the subject is active in the process of reflection: he becomes immersed in the process of imagination, where images of nature start to exist as living images, as productions of creative imagination<sup>19</sup>. This contradiction inherent to the Romantic attitude towards nature appears in contemporary discussions as well: is the contemporary combination of naturalism and technologies strengthened by

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15 S.K. Langer, p. 409.

16 S.K. Langer, p. 95.

17 D. Dryden, “Memory, imagination, and the cognitive value of the arts”, in: *Consciousness and Cognition* 13, 2004, p. 254-267.

18 S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 78.

19 This tendency to understand the image as a living “organism” manifesting the *sensation-remembrance-fantasy* construction is evident especially in the tradition of British Romanticism: W. Blake (“Songs of Innocence”, 1789), S.T. Coleridge and W. Wordsworth (“Lyrical Ballads”, 1798).

the impulses of the Enlightenment? Is it possible to understand Romanticism in the perspective of anti-naturalism?<sup>20</sup>

Langer herself fashioned one clear bridge with the Romantic conceptions of symbols created by S.T. Coleridge. Here, nature and the language and imagination of man approach a fusion – but nature is not a main cause in this process. To the contrary, nature is reconstituted by a human being's imagination and even its origins are suppressed during the process of cognition. Langer refreshed the so called Romantic *imagination-fancy* construction of Coleridge and developed her famous and authentic conceptual difference between *discursive symbolism* and *presentational symbolism*. In painting, *discursive symbolism* can be recognized when an effort is made to include desired meanings and intentions in the image being created, and *presentational symbolism* appears when disclosure of the image is seemingly spontaneous, free of any previous suggestions. Thus, the *fancy* of Coleridge and *discursive* mode of symbolism of Langer can be called merely analytic forms, standing for the sphere of reason. Meanwhile, the secondary creative *imagination* of Coleridge and *presentational* mode of symbolization of Langer are the spheres of creativity; they represent dynamic consciousness and the vitality to create immediate expressions. "If the primary Imagination is understood as the fundamental noetic process which orders human perception, then Coleridge's distinction between secondary Imagination and Fancy may be seen as directly correspondent to Susanne K. Langer's distinction between presentational and discursive modes of thought"<sup>21</sup>. Nature appears here in the Romantic way of treatment – in the stream of *the energy of thought*.

The logical argumentation of her theory dictated that such Romantic aspects be left aside. This contradiction is visible most of all in the discussion of plastic forms of art – the field of painting. In painting, the imaginable status and creation of a vision is the main aim, but the means of creation are inevitably material. Langer says that a work of art "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. If we receive it as a completely visual thing, we abstract its appearance from its material existence. What we see in this way becomes simply a thing of vision – a form, an image. It detaches itself from its actual setting and acquires a different context"<sup>22</sup>. But is then the material side of a painting not important at all? ("Materials are neither good nor bad, strong nor weak"<sup>23</sup>).

The Romantic attitude towards painting (even in the writings of the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Romantics<sup>24</sup>) particularly alters the concept of materiality in

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20 The authors that defend the theological background of Romantic theories point to an essential difference between the organic energy of nature and a power of creative (spiritual) imagination: T. Pfau, *Bringing about the Past: Prophetic Memory in Kant, Godwin, and Blake*, in: *Romantic Circles Praxis Series (Romanticism and Conspiracy)*, 1997; A. Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011.

21 B.A. Burton, *Prolegomena to archetypal criticism* (Texas Technological College, 1968), p. 38.

22 S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 47.

23 S.K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 406.

24 The letters and notes of painters: C.D. Friedrich, P.O. Runge, J. Constable (in: *Art in Theory, 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Ch. Harrison, P. Wood and J. Gaiger. Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing Company, 1998) and philosophical approach to painting developed in F. Schelling's tractate "Philosophy of Art" (published 1845).

painting: it forces one to review the equivalents of the traditional categories of content and form. Does a contemporary and extreme statement of the materiality of painting echo with a belief in the ability of Romantic art to materialize “anything invisible”? Such an appearance of Romanticism could be described by images near to the insights of Langer that include an allusion to the endless discrepancy of the internal relation with the reality and which disclose the internal dynamics of pictorial thinking. The striving to ideality-reality bursts into view quite suddenly, in the statement of the most radical material and sensory experience.

It is possible for the theory of Langer to yield unexpected insights when compared with such interpretations of Romanticism – when the components of the content and material “intertwine”, exchange their positions. Such “unidentified” structures of image in contemporary works of painting (seemingly coalesced with the author’s being) are not only a visualization of the surface aestheticism; they are an expression of painting as an organic endless process. Material expression is not finite or final; it is always only an ephemeral vision. In the sense employable in Romanticism, it is a pure pictorial *transfantasy* – an illusion of integrity, generalization and anticipation that is represented even in a minimized form (i.e., contemporary branches of abstract expressionism in painting). As Samuel Bufford formulated in the study “Susanne Langer’s Two Philosophies of Art” (1972), this combination of the *visual* and *symbolic* creates a duality for her philosophy. But it is interesting that *visible* (or virtual) form is also a *symbolic* form at the same time. Langer’s conclusion about the tension between feeling and form ends in the appearance – which is first of all a significant form, as a Kantian “thing in itself”.

## 5. The Naturalistic Turn? Langer and Danto

Langer’s theory lies between empirical resources and philosophical reconstructions. Especially today, her interest in integrating and comparing the widest contexts that inspire artistic creativity seems very provocative. Langer is sometimes controversial, leaving her investigations of a question without having formulated a straight answer. If so-called “aesthetical mysticism” is recognized in her thinking, it is often interpreted critically as unclear, underdeveloped places within her writing or as the appearance of unwelcome directions within her conclusions. It is obvious that her aim is to escape from previous theories, from antecedent groundings of expression and “mythic consciousness” (Cassirer). But she turns to naturalism while emphasizing instinctual, emotional, material factors – a concept of “life and mind in nature”. Dryden shared his apprehensions about the biological assumptions that he noticed in Langer’s theory, referred to as “the most pressing need of our day”<sup>25</sup>. Other researchers see a link between hers and postmodern theories: “Langer’s idea of a work of art as an *unconsummated symbol* lies half-way between Kant’s aesthetic idea and Derrida’s idea of erasure or postponing the closure of interpretation indefinitely”<sup>26</sup>.

25 D. Dryden, “Memory, imagination, and the cognitive value of the arts”, p. 265.

26 J. Snyman, “The significance and insignificance of Clive Bell’s formalism”, p. 137. The encouragement of a naturalistic approach has made Langer’s theory more popular today: A. Weber, *Feeling the*

One of the leading attitudes toward Langer as Romantic thinker comes from her defender, the art theorist Arthur Coleman Danto, who recognized the Romantic tone in her study "Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art" (1984). His interpretation appears exceptional in its strong attempt to avoid biological, naturalistic associations: "she has so imperialized feeling that even thought is but one of its modes"<sup>27</sup>. Danto discovers a deeper sense of this assimilation of mind and feelings, as his insights try to avoid "a retentive materialism"<sup>28</sup>. According to him, Langer's concepts of sense and form seemingly conform to the contents of A. Schopenhauer's categories of will and image. This doctrine conceptualizes the world as having two aspects related to each other: will and the world of representation. An ultimate foundation is the will – a purposeless urge, a striving akin to energy – which "objectifies" itself and appears through a shared form of cognitive conditioning. It is visible in the description of artistic form, which outlines something that actually exists, discloses itself visually, and is not affected by external processes but rather controlled by an internal stimulus. And at the same time it is an outward form – an expression of feeling, experience. Thus Danto shows that in the case of Langer, this theoretical demonstration of the Romantic background is possible. Danto opens up her theory within a pure philosophical field of serious debates about representation and the connection between mind and reality (as in Kant, Hegel, or Goodman). His striking conclusion about Langer is that feeling can be understood on the level of mind, and it is the main aim and possibility of art. "She is perfectly correct in saying that the subjectivity of felt experience, the lived presence of the world, is the central fact of mental life"<sup>29</sup>. Such statements allow a claim that her whole idea of the "creative mind" carries forward the Romantic imperatives. Langer leaves a suspicion that art (i.e., forms of expressivity and plastic thinking) can give a special knowledge about reality, about the missing sense of the world.

## 6. Langer's Relevance Today

Langer's theoretical platform may be used as a starting point for today's analysis of painting by trying to define the contents of its ideas, the pictorial "reality" and its principal categories. Her aesthetic conceptions of formlessness, musicality, and abstraction assume a new meaning. Even as contemporary art vividly attests to an absence of permanent structures, "set symbols" and methods of expression are usable for the sake of revealing the relation to the reality. Romanticism simply exists in fine arts and music – as something indefinite, variable, having no fixed shape, unrepeatable, and appearing every time in a unique way. The image dictates something about itself that coincides with the reality, and the structure of the picture most frequently is a pure vision. That is, in this way an

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*Signs: The origins of meaning in the biological philosophy of S.K. Langer and H. Jonas*, in: *Sign Systems Studies*, 2002, 30.1, p. 185-200.

27 A.C. Danto, "Mind as Feeling; Form as Presence; Langer as Philosopher", in: *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 81, no. 11, p. 641-647; p. 641.

28 A.C. Danto, p. 642.

29 A.C. Danto, p. 646.

appearance of archetypal structures (as if archaic shapes hidden in the author's visions) is possible: the content comes from inner insights; the form does not represent but rather invokes content. Langer's insights are a weighty argument opposing both the narrative and empirical interpretations of contemporary painting. She leaves an open question: is contemporary painting able to create a significant symbolic form?

### **Susanne K. Langer as a *Romantic Thinker***

Susanne Knauth Langer developed a theory of art that responds to transformations visible in contemporary art practice: a search for a more immediate expressivity, an attention to the material medium, and intensity of action and of the creative process. Theoretical insights into Langer's art philosophy often attempt to fashion emphatic yet superficial distinctions of empirical and emotional values. However, the extent to which such interpretations reflect a settled consensus is today at issue. This article attempts to demonstrate that Langer's understanding of art is grounded in formulations that transcend formalistic and psychological arguments. Painting (like other sorts of art) *is a distinctive world of symbols*; this statement of Langer's opens the way to Romantic propositions about artistic expression that are often gratuitously omitted from consideration.

Keywords: romanticism, symbolization, representation, expression, painting, form