

P R O F I L E S

PHILOSOPHER IN A NEW KEY

THE large, intricate, and interesting field of art has long been a subject for speculation on the part of philosophers, none of whom—not even the greatest—has ever succeeded in saying the last word about it. Some of the big-league systematic philosophers have ignored it, and a few of them have been downright hostile toward it, particularly toward those arts that, like music and painting, are not expressed in the printed word. A great many have tended to relegate art to a mysterious, irrational realm that they designate as intuition, emotion, or mysticism, thus begging the question from a philosophical point of view and neglecting the problem, much as an amateur does when he repeats the worn slogan that art belongs to the “heart,” while rational thinking belongs to the “head.” Yet nobody who has studied a Beethoven symphony or a Mozart opera or a Rembrandt painting can possibly attribute these complicated structures simply to intuition or emotion. They obviously required brains to produce, and they obviously entail a logic of some sort—and a very elaborate and profound logic at that. The philosophers who have understood art have, in the main, conceded this, and among such philosophers at the present time, Susanne K. Langer is one who has pursued the formulation of this logic to well-defined conclusions, having devoted much of her life to the problems of aesthetics and the creation of a total rationale for the subject. She is a rather remarkable philosopher in several respects, and most of her colleagues regard her as a maverick. For one thing, she is one of the very few women in a profession traditionally thought to be the exclusive province of men. For another, she is an educated musician—something that relatively few philosophers before her have been. She is also a former poet and writer of children’s fairy tales. These extracurricular activities have in no way diminished the discipline of her philosophical thinking, and though some fellow-philosophers may quibble about her conclusions, many of them, along with an adventurous section of the international reading public, have found her a fountain of stimulating theories and ideas.



Susanne K. Langer

In the particular realm she works in, Mrs. Langer is considered one of the important thinkers of her era. Her philosophy of aesthetics is certainly among the most comprehensive, systematic, and professionally coherent endeavors of its kind. She is, among other things, the author of one of the pioneer textbooks on symbolic logic, and her philosophy, taken as a whole, extends well beyond the aesthetic field. But the work for which she is mainly noted is contained in two impressive volumes entitled “Philosophy in a New Key” and “Feeling and Form,” both of which have for some time been required reading for anyone who proposes to discuss art in an informed manner.

Mrs. Langer, like most philosophers nowadays, is by profession a college teacher, and she has taught philosophy for many years—at Radcliffe and, more recently, at Connecticut College—interspersing her duties at these Eastern institutions with frequent seminars held as far afield as the University of Washington, in Seattle, and Northwestern University, in Evanston. A couple of years ago, however, she turned all her attention to writing, working on a grant from the Edgar J. Kaufmann Charitable Trust, and she currently carries on most of her work in a snug Colonial cottage in Old Lyme, Connecticut, where she manages to live an appropriately solitary life of contemplation in a community whose addiction to cocktail parties and

weekend sociability is pursued with a determination that frightens even hardened visitors from Manhattan. Mrs. Langer is not particularly unsociable by nature, but she manages to bypass most of Old Lyme’s social whirl, and her neighbors, aware that they have a distinguished philosopher in their midst, treat her with a respect that insures her privacy. Old Lyme is not far from New Haven and the Yale Library, where she spends a great deal of time, and it is also not far from New London and Connecticut College, where she still has many friends. Yet there are times when Mrs. Langer finds even the comparative privacy of her life in Old Lyme insufficiently isolated for her meditations, and on these occasions she gets into her Ford station wagon and drives to a little hideaway she maintains in the woods of Ulster County, New York. She is unable, she regrets, to take the Yale Library with her on these excursions into complete solitude, but her cabin in the Ulster County woods has several compensating advantages. One is the absence of a telephone. (“When I’m cooking one of my ideas,” she explains, “it gets so involved that a telephone call will break it.”) Another is the absence of postal service. Still another is the presence of three things she considers essential to the ideal contemplative life—hemlocks, white birches, and a waterfall. Mrs. Langer is a fervent lover of nature, and her idea of recreation is to tramp purposefully through the woods, collecting odd-looking sticks and stones, and sometimes lizards and tree frogs, all of which she brings home and cares for with great solicitude. Her woodland cabin has no electric light, but she makes do quite well with an admirable kerosene-operated apparatus known as an Aladdin Lamp. Machine-age comfort means very little to her. For a time, she was somewhat worried by the fact that some of her Ulster County neighbors had mounted television aerials on their roofs. It looked like an impending encroachment of the machine age. But on closer examination, she found, to her relief and amusement, that these neighbors had no television sets, and had put up their aerials simply as public symbols of prosperity.

Physically, Mrs. Langer is a small

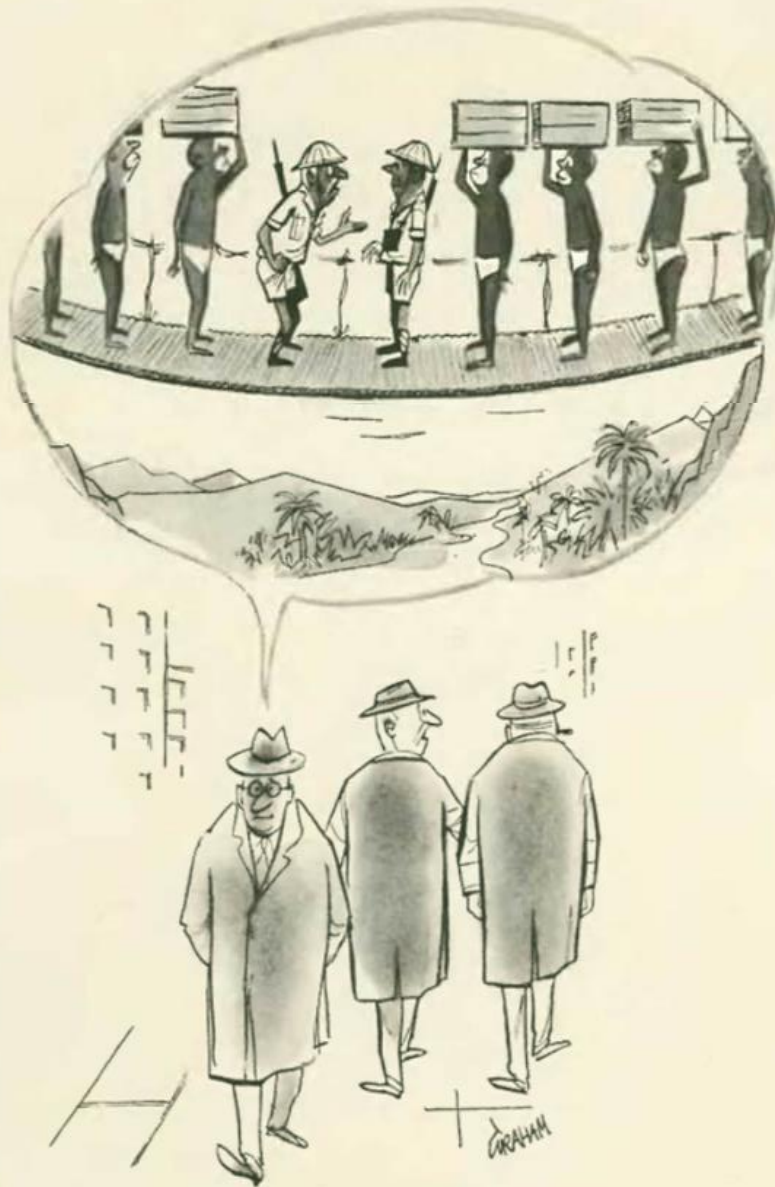
woman in her early sixties, tanned by the sun, bouncingly active, and vaguely suggesting a former model of Lucas Cranach who took up schoolteaching in her mature years. Both her father and her mother were born in Germany, and her appearance is unmistakably German, including a round face, made to look longer than it is by sloping eyebrows and a slightly aquiline nose, and containing a pair of clear blue eyes that seem to be constantly on the lookout for evidences of sloppy thinking. Her gray hair is chopped off functionally at the back, and her manner of dressing is severely practical—low-heeled shoes, denim slacks, and no hat for country wear; a hat (which one suspects is a grudging concession to propriety) and a simple, nondescript suit for visits to the city, where she goes occasionally to see friends or attend concerts or visit museums. Her air of slightly Germanic formality is relieved by a habit of talkativeness about topics she is interested in (probably the result of a lifetime of lecturing), a ready smile for the unphilosophical incongruities of life, and an intensity of feeling about things of the mind that conveys itself insistently to the listener. Though Mrs. Langer was born on the upper West Side of Manhattan and educated almost entirely in this country, she still speaks with a perceptible German accent—a product, no doubt, of her New York German upbringing and a life-long immersion in German literature and philosophy.

There is, moreover, a Spartan quality about her life not only in Ulster County but in Old Lyme as well. She was at one time married to the eminent Harvard historian William Langer, and is the mother of two sons, one of whom works for the General Electric Company, in Philadelphia, and the other of whom was for some time an associate professor

at the Harvard Business School and now teaches in Lausanne, Switzerland. Both have raised families of their own. But Mrs. Langer herself has lived alone for the past eighteen years, and she obviously likes it. She is a woman of iron will, impatient of laziness and self-indulgence. She smokes cigarettes in great moderation, and indulges in alcohol only to the extent of an occasional glass of sherry. She does all her own cooking, and is rather good at it. Even when she is alone, she serves her meals with considerable ceremony, setting herself a place at table as if she were her own guest. "I don't eat snacks at intervals, as people who live alone often do," she says. "The fact is that I really cook—meat and vegetables twice a day. I keep up a certain household formality. People are likely to let their

social behavior go to pot nowadays. I never allow company to do the dishes. Sometimes I let them pile up and do them all at once. Often I just turn out the light. That abolishes the dishes temporarily. I have too few guests to waste time on dishes while they are around. It's my good luck that I'm by nature domestic. I'm a natural cook." The visitors are few, but they are constant in their attention. Two of the most constant are Father David Brown, an Episcopal minister from Norwich, Connecticut, and James Dendy, of the music department of Connecticut College. Father Brown is a violinist, and Mr. Dendy, though professionally an organist, is a gifted pianist as well, and since Mrs. Langer herself is a cellist, they often combine their talents in an evening of music, playing trios by Mozart and

Beethoven, and occasionally even venturing as far as the chamber music of Hindemith. Father Brown and Mr. Dendy sometimes follow this with discussions of theology and metaphysics. Mrs. Langer listens to the theology with detached interest, and puts her oar in only when they get around to metaphysics. She is, she explains, not at all religious. "I was inclined to be instinctively religious as a child," she says. "I made up a religion of my own, based on the hymns we sang in school. I tried to imagine God. I thought of Him as the rising of the sun—that is, *not* the sun but the drama of the sunrise. But I left religion during college. When I began to have faith in my mind, and my feeling of insecurity disappeared, religion became untenable, and therefore dispensable." Mrs. Langer also considers arguments about religion versus science a waste of time, and, to her way of thinking, philosophy and theology require incompatible attitudes of mind. These firm opinions, however, apparently do not disturb her relations with Father Brown in the



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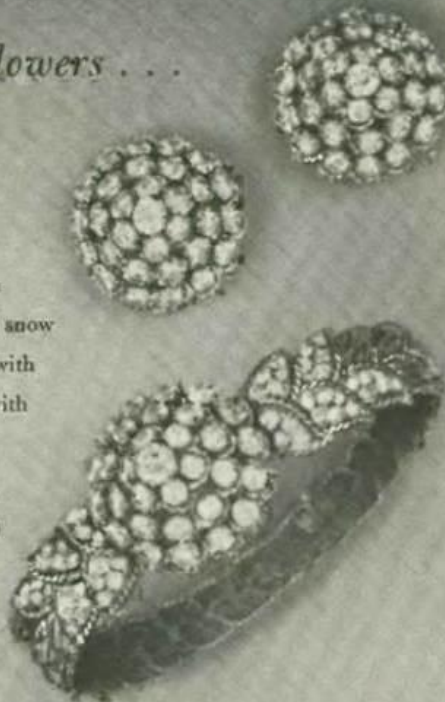
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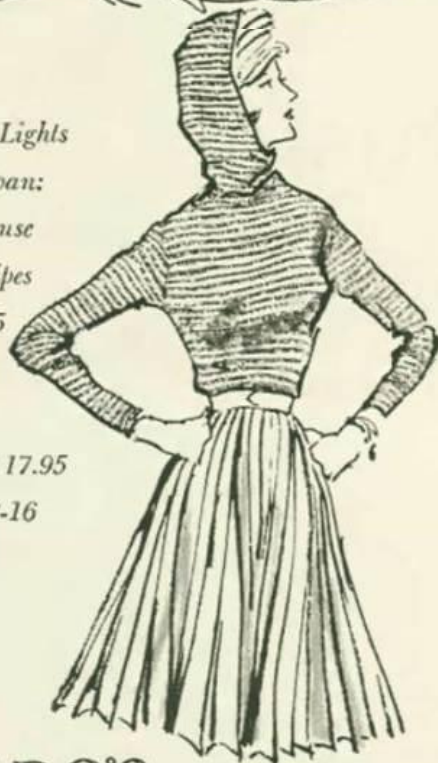
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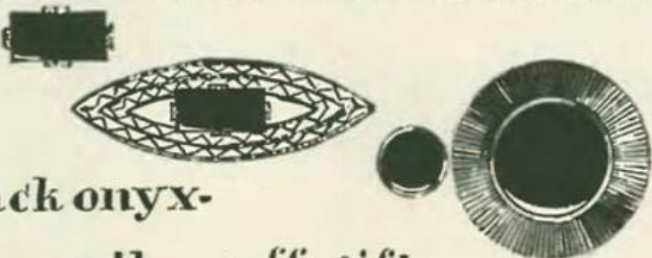
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least, and he continues to commune with her cello by means of his violin as if their spirits were entirely kindred.

Mrs. Langer has other friends, too, among them the Old Lyme painter Thomas Ingle and his friend Charles Palmer, who frequently invite her to their studio home, where they serve her sherry and discuss her theories about art with affectionate understanding. She also goes to Connecticut College a couple of times a week to visit two former colleagues, Bernice Wheeler and Dorothy Richardson, both biologists, whose conversation about science she finds stimulating. In making new acquaintances, though, Mrs. Langer is inclined to be reserved, and sometimes this reserve is accompanied by the absent-mindedness that is supposed to be characteristic of the true philosopher. Not long ago, according to her Old Lyme friends, she was invited to dinner by a professor at Yale, but mislaid the invitation and couldn't for the life of her remember which professor it was. The professor promptly became the x of an algebraic equation, and Mrs. Langer called up people all over Old Lyme in search of a value for x , formulating her question in the logical terms "What Yale professor could possibly have invited Susanne Langer to dinner?" Various solutions were suggested, but none seemed to fit. Ultimately, the equation proved insoluble; the professor remained a mystery, and the dinner never took place. This, however, was an exceptional case, for Mrs. Langer is ordinarily the soul of punctiliousness, and prides herself on such virtues as promptness and courtesy, though she admits that she has great difficulty remembering names and faces.

Despite her professed lack of religion, Mrs. Langer, like many lovers of art, seems to have a strong streak of instinctive pantheism, which expresses itself not only in a love of nature but also in the cherishing of various objects and pets. The rooms of her dark-red clapboard house are filled, in a somewhat unsystematic manner, with artistic, anthropological, zoological, geological, and documentary knickknacks, ranging from a head carved out of a coconut by some South American Indian to framed photographs of her family, and from a modern sculpture of a female figure (the work of the sculptor Alice Dunbar, who is her niece) to a carefully labelled collection of sea shells, sponges, and bits of driftwood that she has amassed on her frequent trips to seashore regions and that she keeps methodically laid out in glass cases in a



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room in the basement of the cottage. The effect of these latter trophies, for many of which she has carefully unearthed the Latin names, is scientific rather than artistic, but as she handles and exhibits them, it is obvious that she values them for their interesting forms rather than for their place in the Linnaean system of classification, and that each of them represents to her some fascinating facet of nature's endless industry in creating varied shapes and textures. She esteems such natural relics highly, and often pleases her friends in Old Lyme by presenting them with a rare and absorbing rock or sea shell. But she claims not to be essentially a visual person, and although the curious form of a specimen may set her off on a train of philosophical speculation, the inside of her home is devoid of any conscious effort at interior decoration. In her parlor, where she entertains guests, she has a pleasantly austere selection of straight-backed chairs, some useful tea tables, a grand piano, and her cello, which she keeps in a Victorian glass cabinet to protect it from the Connecticut climate. The parlor also contains a small and select library—works on philosophy, for the most part—and her pet of the moment. Currently, this is a chameleon, which inhabits a small cage on her desk. The chameleon has a long line of predecessors, including a pair of tree frogs that she kept for several years. "I don't anthropomorphize my pets," she recently told a caller, and went on to say that she has very strict philosophical distinctions to make between animal and human behavior. But then she added, "I have to have life about me." Not only does she love to care for her pets but she calls them by appropriate names. She refuses to tell anyone the name of the chameleon, on the ground that it is a pun too terrible to divulge, but the two tree frogs that preceded him had names of truly resplendent literary and philosophical character. They were known as Rennie and Resie. Rennie was named for Renfield, a character in "Dracula" who ate flies and spiders. Resie was named after Descartes's term for matter, *res extensa*, as opposed to mind, or *res cogitans*. "Descartes defined *res extensa* as 'pure extension,' you know," Mrs. Langer explained to her caller. "When Resie climbed around on a little tree in her cage, the stretch of her limbs was so incredible that she became pure extension. She was even better than Martha Graham." Both Rennie and Resie were great twitterers, and Mrs. Langer recalls with interest that they

were particularly inspired to vocal expression by the sound of frying bacon or of eggs being beaten in the kitchen. The sizzling of the bacon and the rattling of the egg beater apparently occupied an area on the scale of vibration frequencies to which Rennie and Resie were susceptible, and this phenomenon offered Mrs. Langer food for thought about the response of frogs to a limited realm of auditory experience.

The cage in which Mrs. Langer's pets are kept stands at the back of her work desk, a large and deceptively disordered-looking affair heaped with papers, pens, and pencils. Though she uses a typewriter for writing letters, her philosophical writing is done in a neat, very clear longhand, and the notes, outlines, and revisions she makes while getting her thoughts on paper have resulted in a more or less permanent haystack of closely written sheets, which she obviously knows her way through and toward which she assumes a vigilantly protective attitude, lest some visitor carelessly disarrange them. Behind the scattering of papers is a large card-index file, in which she has recorded, for many years, references to philosophical, anthropological, and psychological items she has discovered in books, and also ideas of her own, jotted down in moments of reflection. The moments are apt to occur at almost any time. She often thinks of a theory in the middle of the night, and has developed an efficient technique for writing in the dark. She has also been known to stop her station wagon on the road to record an idea before it escapes her mind, and she remembers once doing this while she was on her way to the dentist with a toothache. The cards on which her own and other thinkers' ideas are preserved are methodically cross-indexed in a separate file, so that she can instantly lay her hands on everything pertaining to a given subject. She is proud of the efficiency of her card-indexing system, a sort of handmade mechanical memory that she has kept ever since her undergraduate days. Her files contain some rather abstruse headings—for example, "Feeling Primary to Mental Life," under which are to be found numerous entries, some of them references to her own thoughts, others references to, or digests of, books in English, French, and German that deal with the field. Mrs. Langer is a methodical scholar, and before launching any theory of her own she will conscientiously ransack the literature of the subject for support, carefully giving credit to her precursors. She uses her

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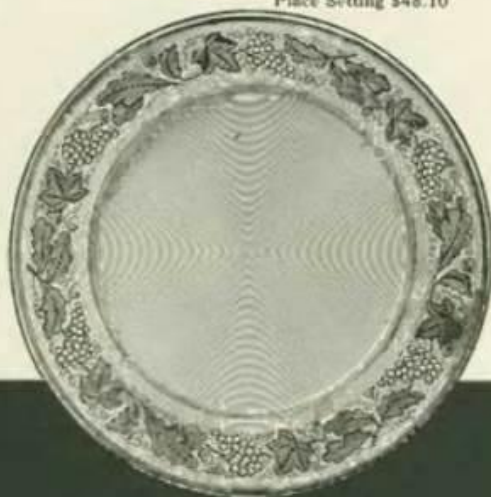
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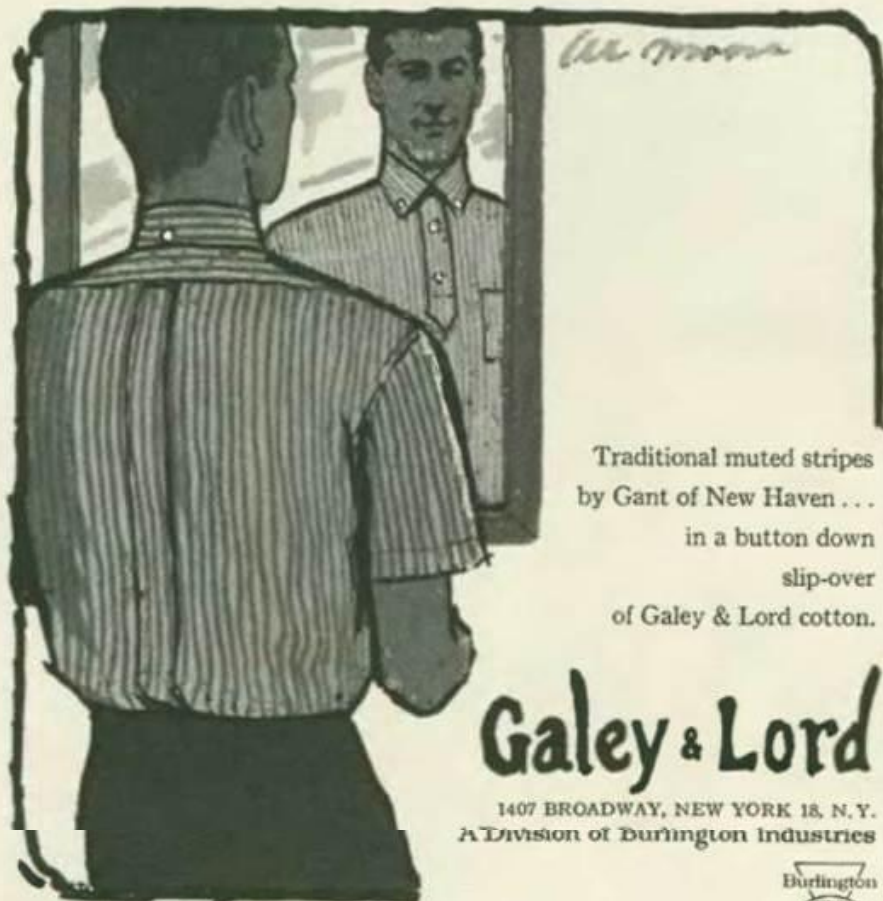
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card index not only as a storehouse of reference but also as a stimulation to thought. Many of her ideas have arisen suddenly from the fortuitous congruence of notions she has come upon while leafing through it.

THE Langer philosophy that is indexed in her filing cabinets and that exists in her head and in the books she has written is a complicated one, and since summarizing the work of any philosopher is apt to result in distortions and oversimplifications, it is probably better simply to hint at its nature. Her concept of art takes its departure from a general theory of symbolism developed in the nineteenth-twenties by the eminent German thinker Ernst Cassirer, who was rector of the University of Hamburg at the time the Nazis forced him into exile, and who taught at Yale for three years and at Columbia for a year before his death, in 1945. Cassirer believed that such apparently incompatible fields of intellectual activity as religion, science, art, and myth are actually different manifestations of symbolic thought, and Mrs. Langer leaned heavily on this theory in the first of her two most important books on aesthetics, "Philosophy in a New Key," published in 1942. It involved giving rationality a larger frame than it had traditionally had, and Mrs. Langer began to apply this larger frame, in a thoroughgoing way, to the arts. She found, like Cassirer, that the making of symbols—or what she calls "the process of symbolic transformation"—is a basic habit of the human mind, and the main thing that distinguishes man from the lesser animals. Man, in her view, is preëminently a symbol-making animal, and his proneness to symbolic thinking is so pronounced that it is part and parcel even of his habits of perception. He both thinks and perceives in terms of many kinds of symbol. Some symbols are "discursive;" that is, symbols of discourse, which are expressed in words. But discursive symbols are notoriously unsuited to the explanation of many of the phenomena of the mind. They are unable to cope with the subtleties of aesthetic experience, and, as Freud long ago pointed out, they do not have much relation to the symbolic language of dreams. Modern psychology and epistemology, in Mrs. Langer's view, call for a new philosophical formulation, able to take account of non-discursive as well as discursive thinking, and thus able to explain man's habitual preoccupation with myths, fantasies, ritual, pictures, and music. These



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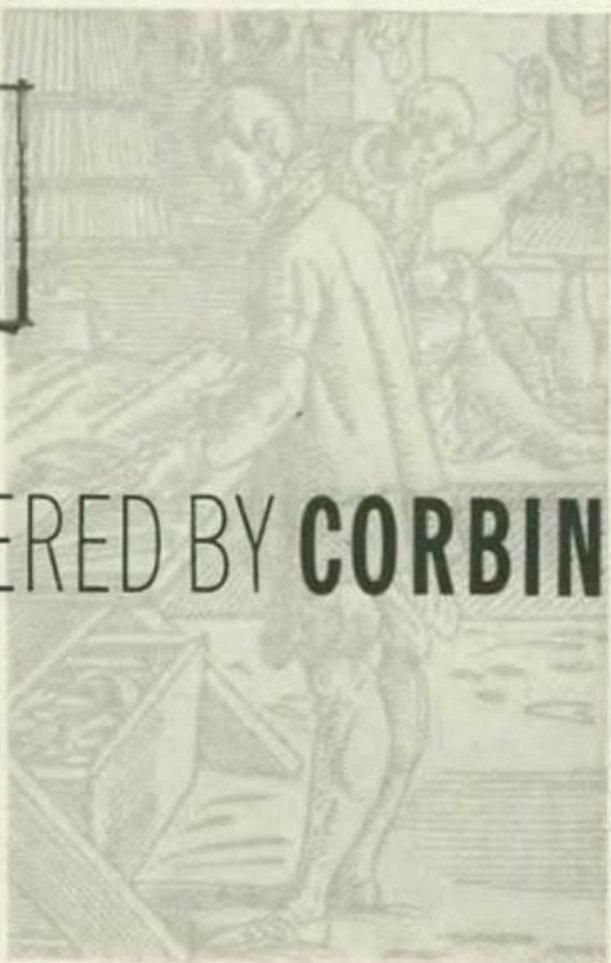
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things are as much a product of the mind as words are, and may be said to follow semantic systems of their own, which differ from the semantics of discursive language. Discursive language is, she admits, one of the richest forms of man's peculiar addiction to symbolization. But it has a limitation: it expresses ideas serially, rather than simultaneously—unlike, for example, a picture. Philosophers need to recognize the vast realm of non-discursive thinking not only for the sake of explaining art, dreams, and myths but also for philosophy's own sake. For fifty years, Mrs. Langer observes, philosophy has been in a state of decline, discernible in its dry formalism, its eclecticism, its endless logic-chopping, and its failure to come to terms with human experience. The way out of this decline, she believes, lies in an extension of philosophy's function, to take in a wider area of symbolism than is included in the syllogisms of discursive thought. "There is an unexplored possibility of genuine semantics beyond the limits of discursive reasoning," she writes in "Philosophy in a New Key." "This logical 'beyond,' which Wittgenstein calls the 'unspeakable,' both Russell and Carnap regard as the sphere of subjective experience, emotion, feeling, and wish, from which only *symptoms* come to us, in the form of metaphysical and artistic fancies. The study of such products they relegate to psychology, not semantics. And here is the point of my radical divergence from them. . . . The field of semantics is wider than that of language, as certain philosophers—Schopenhauer, Cassirer, Delacroix, Dewey, Whitehead, and some others—have discovered; but it is blocked for us by the two fundamental tenets of current epistemology. . . . These two basic assumptions go hand in hand: (1) that *language is the only means of articulating thought*, and (2) that *everything which is not speakable thought is feeling*. . . . I . . . believe that in this physical, space-time world of our experience there are things which do not fit the grammatical scheme of expression. But they are not necessarily blind, inconceivable, mystical affairs; they are simply matters which require to be conceived through some symbolistic schema other than discursive language. And to demonstrate the possibility of such a non-discursive pattern one needs only to review the logical requirements for any symbolic structure whatever. Language is by no means our only articulate product."

Having thus defined an area un-



dreamed of in the philosophy of most previous philosophers except Cassirer—that of the literally unspeakable but by no means inarticulate or un-understandable—Mrs. Langer proceeds to examine the forms of logic that it may contain. Painting and photography do not have a vocabulary, as writing does, but both present symbolic images (she calls these “presentational” symbols) that are certainly full of significance to the beholder. Ritual, arising from the repetition of symbolic gesture, is without doubt a reflection of human thought; indeed, it is a particularly rich reflection, and one with a long history among primitive as well as civilized peoples. Myth, which Mrs. Langer describes as “the primitive phase of metaphysical thought,” may or may not be expressed with the aid of language, but it is not essentially discursive; its symbols are presentational, like those of painting. So are the symbols of lyric poetry, and even of narrative, though both these arts, of course, employ language as a medium of expression and often deal with material that is discursive. In music one finds the type of symbolization that is best equipped for conveying the “intricacies and ambivalences of inner experience.” Music does this job much better than language does, Mrs. Langer says. She thinks that philosophers have often misunderstood this, and that musicians and musical psychologists have not been too clear about it, either. Some thinkers, like Plato and Immanuel Kant, have tended to disparage music as a low, or primitive, form of expression. Others have tried to explain it in terms of pleasant or unpleasant sensation—an explanation that, of course, is very wide of the mark indeed, and has never really got anywhere. Still others—among them a number of eminent composers as well as philosophers—have maintained that music is a matter of self-expression, and that its sounds convey the immediate state of mind of the artist who creates it. This, Mrs. Langer declares, is absurd. People do not create “emotional” music while undergoing the emotions it is supposed to express. In fact, people undergoing strong emotions seldom feel impelled to express themselves in music. Music is not “self-

expression” at all. It is not derived from emotions or intended to induce them, Mrs. Langer says; it is *about* them. It has an emotional content, in somewhat the same way that language has a conceptual content. Music is the formulation and representation of emotion—a logical picture of “sentient, responsive life.” It does not *convey* feelings; it *portrays* them and *stands for* them. It does this, as do all the other arts, by means of symbols. But the symbols used in music are not specific as to reference; they are, on the contrary, capable of multiple and shifting references. Thus, music has no vocabulary, no dictionary definitions. It is, like art in general, an expression of non-discursive thought. Nevertheless, it has meaning, or significance—Mrs. Langer prefers the term “import”—and this significance is symbolic, which is to say that the musical notes convey a rich content of experience lying beneath their purely sensory attributes as vibration frequencies or degrees of the scale.

On this collection of premises, Mrs. Langer has built a comprehensive, and



apparently watertight, theory of art—one that ramifies through a large territory in her 1953 book, “Feeling and Form.” This book departs more widely from Cassirer’s thought, and represents a contribution that is entirely her own. Here she applies the theory to each of the arts in turn, find-

ing that each creates a “virtual,” or symbolic, realm of its own, in which an illusory or abstract portrayal of some aspect of feeling and experience can be given. The abstractive realm created by each

of the arts she calls its “primary illusion.” That of the plastic arts is “virtual space,” that of music is “virtual time,” that of literature and the drama is “virtual history,” and so on. In each case, the mind of the artist is occupied in creating—and the mind of the beholder in deciphering—a system of symbols that stands for, but is never identical with, some facet of reality. It is the function of art, Mrs. Langer maintains, to bring order into perceptual life. Artistic training is the “education of feeling,” just as schooling in logic or mathematics is the education of discursive thought.

There is, of course, a great deal more



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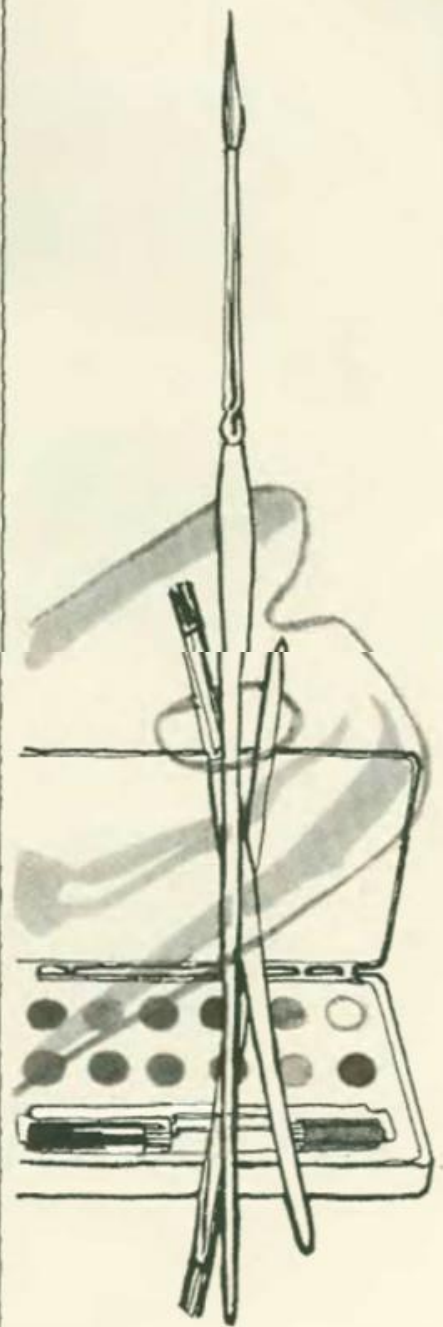
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to Mrs. Langer's complex reasoning than can be conveyed in any such drastically simplified summary. But at the root of all of it is the notion of man's profound habit of abstracting a world of symbols from the world of reality that surrounds him. And this habit is by no means limited to the realm of aesthetics. It underlies not only his art but his science, his religion, and his philosophy, and, as has been noted, even affects his methods of perception. In the scientific age, however, man has tended to neglect presentational thought in favor of discursive thought, and this, Mrs. Langer believes, has led to an impoverishment of his mental life. Nowadays, especially in urban environments, people tend to pay more attention to signs and signals than to symbols. "A life that does not incorporate some degree of ritual, of gesture and attitude," she maintains, "has no mental anchorage. . . . Technical progress is putting man's freedom of mind in jeopardy." Reliance solely on the discursive reasoning of science has produced a world bare of presentational symbols, and, in the process, has produced a poorer place to live, think, and feel in. In this conclusion, Mrs. Langer finds herself in the company of some modern psychologists, notably the disciples of C. G. Jung, but she is a far more lucid and coherent thinker than Jung, and, unlike him, she abhors the easy, irrational path of mysticism. The importance of her contribution, in fact, lies precisely in the circumstance that she has made much that was previously assumed to be irrational or mystical into a subject for the strictest logical thinking.

IT has not often been pointed out that one of the most interesting ingredients of philosophy is passion, and that it is the philosopher's passion for order in the face of chaos that gives his work illumination and eloquence. Mrs. Langer's passion for explaining and setting right the mysteries of art seems to have arisen at a very early age, when, as a little girl in Manhattan's old and respected German colony, she wrote poetry and played music, as so many cultivated German-Americans used to do. Later, of course, her notions about these arts became codified by the discipline of a philosophical education at Radcliffe, where she fell under the influence of a number of able teachers, including Ralph Barton Perry, Alfred Hoernlé, Henry M. Sheffer, and the celebrated philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. During and after her college years, she also succumbed to the spell of Bertrand Russell, on whose



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lucid literary style she claims to have modelled her own. But even as a child she was puzzled by problems of a logical nature. She remembers that at the age of seven she learned a little German song that went:

*Dornröschen und Schneewittchen,
Die sitzen auf den Thron,
Und jede hat zur Seite
Den schönsten Königssohn.*

This is roughly translatable as:

The Sleeping Beauty and Snow White,
They sit upon the throne,
And each has at her side
The handsomest prince.

This poem seems to have made her uncomfortable and to have aroused the first glimmerings of that passion for logical coherence that has dominated her life. Specifically, how many princes were there in the poem? Her sisters claimed that there were two, one for the Sleeping Beauty and one for Snow White. Their nurse backed her sisters up on practical grounds. "What good would one prince do two girls?" the nurse asked, with an air of finality. "The nurse," Mrs. Langer recalls with some distaste, "was a pragmatist, of course." The young Susanne was not deceived. There was just *one* prince, and he was sitting between the two girls. There could not, logically, be two "handsomest" princes, she maintained. Many years later, at college, she put the problem up to Professor Whitehead, and, to her great satisfaction, he agreed with her.

Susanne Langer's childhood was spent in a rich atmosphere of Teutonic imagination, myth, and culture, which, in retrospect, looks like the perfect environment for a budding philosopher, since it surrounded her with all those mysteries that have for generations impelled the German mind to metaphysical speculation, plus the leisure and education necessary to indulge in it. She was born Susanne Katherina Knauth, the daughter of Antonio Knauth, a successful lawyer who had migrated to America from Leipzig, and his wife, Else, who came from Chemnitz and never did succeed in speaking English with any fluency. The family was well off. Antonio's brother was a banker connected with the firm of Knauth, Nachod & Kuehne, which did business both in Leipzig and on Wall Street. Antonio himself owned a brownstone on West Seventieth Street, where Susanne was born, and later bought another on West Seventy-sixth Street, where she was raised. The family was a large one. Susanne had two sisters and two broth-

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ers, and old photographs show all of them riding horses in Central Park with almost military solemnity, Susanne and her sisters dressed in formal riding habits. Antonio was a slightly built, aristocratic-looking German of what is so often referred to as the "old school." He had a full beard, rather conservative notions of propriety, and an elaborate air of aloof gallantry toward females. As a lawyer, he never accepted a divorce case or a case against a woman. He removed his hat ceremoniously in greeting his infant daughters, and always had them precede him into an elevator. "He hated anything masculine in a woman," Mrs. Langer recalls, "and simply loathed bluestockings." He also disliked the idea of his daughters' going to college—a dislike that did not prevent Susanne from doing so, with her mother's encouragement, after his death, which occurred when she was twenty. Antonio was not all rigor and formality, however. He was a gifted pianist and cellist, and often invited Eduard Herrmann, an eminent violinist of the time, to his house to play chamber music with him. Some of Mrs. Langer's earliest memories are of sneaking down the stairs in her nightgown to listen, concealed behind a curtain, to her father and Mr. Herrmann playing works by Beethoven and Mozart, and she recalls that once she caught a bad cold while doing so. Sometimes Antonio permitted his children to listen to the music overtly, and on these occasions they did so with reverent formality. He taught his daughters to curtsy when spoken to, and, in general, to be seen and not heard. Mrs. Langer feels no resentment whatever about this. On the contrary, she thinks that it was an admirable idea. "Such rituals as curtsying are very good for children," she remarked recently, "and modern children would be better off if they practiced them. They give the children something to do. Children nowadays are very ill at ease with their elders. The poor little mites have no knowledge of the world and are not sure just how they should behave. They should be taught little automatic gestures. Now such things are considered mere empty forms, but they are not. They give a child a sense of security and a method of dealing with the society of grownups."

Mrs. Langer's mother, Else Knauth, was a different sort of person from Antonio—a highly romantic woman with a soft heart and a pronounced feeling for poetry—and it was she, rather than her husband, who dominated the household. Mrs. Langer remembers



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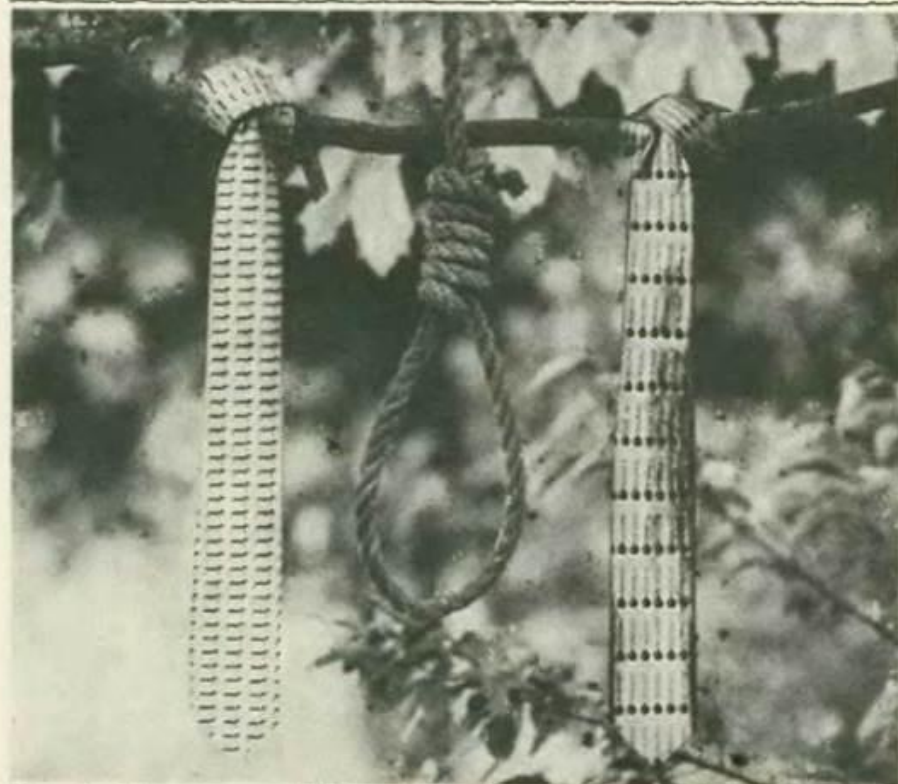
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that her mother, who was nearly blind and deaf during her declining years, amused herself by recollecting the poetry she had memorized early in life, sometimes asking Susanne to fill out a line she had forgotten. Susanne's own love of poetry, which her mother encouraged, blossomed at a very early age. She composed poems before she could write, and recited them to her father, who always listened with interest. Later, her nurse told her that if she learned how to write, she could set her poems down, and not have to tell them to anybody. This proved to be an excellent incentive to education. Susanne learned to write her poetry, and was soon involved in even more extended literary efforts, one of them being a drama called "Walpurgisnacht," in which the heroine was chased by evil spirits. The family generally spent its summers in a rather splendid rustic cottage at Lake George, where Susanne developed her intense love of nature.

Among the Knauths' neighbors there were the patriarchal-looking Carl Schurz and the eminent German-Jewish physician Abraham Jacobi, both close family friends and both refugees from the German Revolution of 1848. "Walpurgisnacht" was performed there, in a woodland setting, by Susanne and her cousins. They also performed "Hamlet," with words that they rewrote themselves. One of "Hamlet's" celebrated lines emerged as "I think the Lord Hamlet loves me; he must be crazy." Carl Schurz, who was present at the performance, vowed that it was the first time he had ever really understood the play.

The rest of the large Knauth clan, which included no end of uncles, aunts, and cousins, was a little awed by the intellectuality of Antonio's family and by the introspective habits of Susanne in particular. Somebody gave her a book on frogs, which aroused her interest in natural science, and after reading it she delivered a formal lecture on the subject to the family circle. At its conclusion, an aunt remarked, "Do you realize that the child has talked for forty minutes without notes and without stopping?" This feat may have seemed alarmingly precocious, but it was only one feat among many. Susanne studied anatomy, collecting the bones of small animals and assembling skeletons from them. Her habit of wandering alone in the woods earned her the nickname of *die Waldhexe*, or the Forest Witch. She continued to write poetry and to read omnivorously. "In my early teens," she remembers, "I read 'Little Women' and

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Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason' simultaneously." She also studied the piano, and—later, in college, where she took up the cello—harmony and counterpoint, though she insists today that she never had any pronounced talent for music. The other children studied music, too, her sister Ilse being a singer and one of her brothers, Peter, a talented pianist, though he has never played professionally. Today, the Knauth family is remarkable for the diversity of its beliefs and interests. One brother, Berthold Antonio Knauth, is an inventor who lives on a boat in Florida. Peter has become an industrial designer, and lives in Syracuse. Ursula, one of the sisters, married a lawyer who later became a minister. Ilse, the singer, married a botanist and former science teacher named Henry Dunbar, and, having raised a family, now lives, and conducts nature tours for visitors, in Ulster County, near the cabin where Susanne hides out from civilization. Ursula is very religious; Ilse is, like Susanne, an agnostic. This variety of belief has extended even to Mrs. Langer's own children. Leonard, the son who works for General Electric, is a devout Lutheran, who at one time studied for the ministry. The other son, Bertrand, who teaches in Lausanne, cares nothing about religion. The Knauths are numerous as well as varied. Mrs. Langer likes to point out that her mother, who died two years ago at the age of eighty-nine, had eighteen grandchildren, and these have had, so far, twenty-five children of their own.

Though Mrs. Langer's early education was voluminous, it was somewhat scattered, by orthodox standards, and to a great extent self-acquired. She attended the Veltin School, a private institution on West Seventy-fourth Street, which she remembers very favorably for its courses in art and English literature. She also remembers that when she first went there, she could speak English only haltingly (the Knauths spoke German among themselves) and had a hard time understanding her teachers. She had additional instruction at home—partly because she was very frail as a little girl, as the result of a case of cocaine poisoning she had suffered in her infancy, when a careless pharmacist made an error in a

prescription—and it was not until she entered Radcliffe ("a very serious and not at all social college in those days") that she faced formal education in a strictly systematic manner. There she discovered her talent for philosophy—more particularly, for logic—and decided to devote her life to the subject. There, also, she met William Langer, a beginning graduate student at Harvard, and in 1921, a year after they had both got their degrees, she married him. Together they continued with postgraduate work, making a trip to Vienna, where they spent what she refers to as a "not very successful semester" at the university of that city, and then returning to Cambridge. After a few years' teaching at Clark University, Mr. Langer was called back to Harvard to teach, and Mrs. Langer became a tutor in philosophy at Radcliffe, both remaining in Cambridge for fifteen years. It was during this time that Mrs. Langer wrote her first book—a book not of philosophy but of children's fairy tales. Called "The Cruise of the Little Dipper," it was illustrated by the late Helen Sewell,

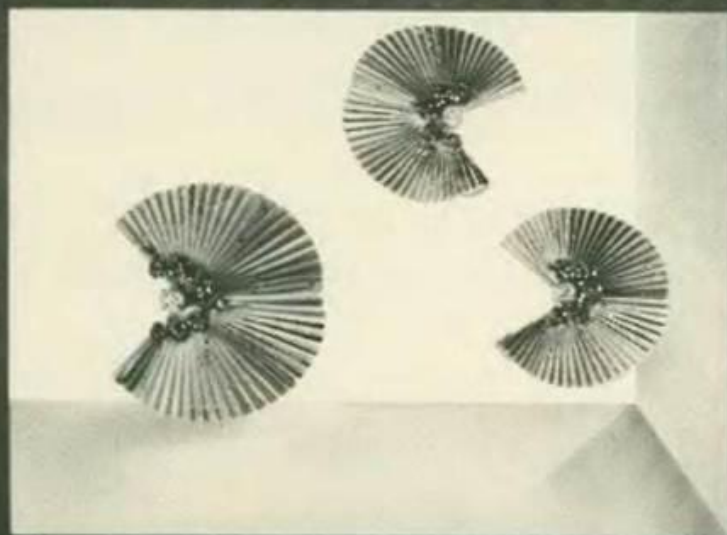


a close friend and an artist who later made a considerable reputation in this craft. The book has long been out of print and has become a collector's item. It contains a number of charming, rambling stories, in the German *Märchen* tradition, about beautiful princesses, Cinderella types, princes, and poor but persevering little-boy heroes who win fortunes with the collaboration of gifted animals and insects. Its association with what was to become an important philosophical mind

seems incongruous only at first glance, for philosophy and fairy tales are not necessarily unrelated. One need only consider Mrs. Langer's later statement that "myth is the primitive phase of metaphysical thought" to realize that the realm of childhood fantasy may be the irrational wellspring out of which a philosopher fishes clear, systematic rationality. Certainly it is no accident that the German mind has most eloquently expressed itself in the seemingly unrelated fields of music, fantasy, and philosophy; Mrs. Langer was simply following a deep-rooted national trait. Later, after immersing herself in the



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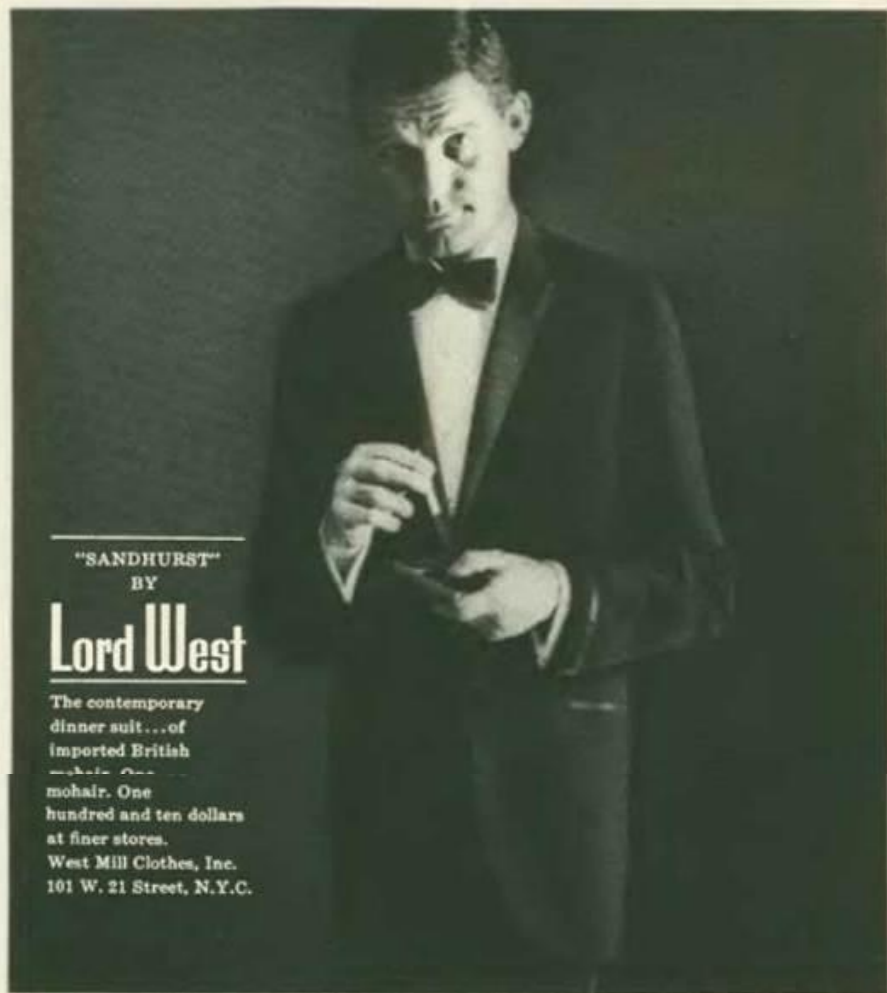
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mysteries of symbolic logic, she turned out her first philosophical work, "The Practice of Philosophy," and a few years later came her textbook "Introduction to Symbolic Logic"—a book that is still being used and that presents the subject as a study of the structure of abstract systems. "This work," Mrs. Langer says, "presents symbolic logic as Henry Sheffer taught it to us. Sheffer never wrote a book, but his method is all here."

THE home life of the Langers revolved mainly around study and teaching, and Mrs. Langer is nowadays a little doubtful about her success as a wife and mother. "It is questionable whether two deeply preoccupied parents can create the ideal environment for a family of children," she remarked not long ago. But her relations with her two grown sons remain very close, and this closeness was intensified after the Second World War, when Leonard returned from the Pacific and Bertrand from the European Theatre, the latter quite seriously wounded. Today, she is occasionally visited by younger members of the Knauth clan and their children, who know her as Tante Susi. In quite seriously wounded. Today, she is occasionally visited by younger members of the Knauth clan and their children, who know her as Tante Susi. In the basement room of her Old Lyme cottage, along with the cases of zoological specimens, she keeps a collection of toys for her grandchildren to play with. Among them is an old-fashioned rag doll named Nellie Perkins, which she inherited from the previous owners of the house and regards as a sort of household spirit. Nellie Perkins is permanently enthroned in a child's high chair, and Mrs. Langer handles her with undisguised tenderness.

Mrs. Langer's divorce occurred in 1942, after some twenty years of married life. Her present life of solitude and reflection is a rich, creative one, and obviously very much to her taste. In Old Lyme, she leads an existence gratifyingly free of the pressure and clamor of the city, and though she visits New York off and on, she finds it a very disturbing and distracting place, and certainly would not care to live here. "I'm afraid of the city and of people," she recently remarked. "I have been so ever since childhood. I was very shy as a child. Moreover, the city is not what it used to be. There's always the din of the radio. The radio has ruined city life. I said long ago that it was a menace. I was not a hermit until the radio was invented. I lived in a dormitory perfectly well at Radcliffe, but I wouldn't be able to do that today, with radios blaring away." Like many people who are sensitive to music, she finds invol-



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untary listening unendurable, and cannot carry on a coherent conversation, or even think, while music is in the air. She carefully avoids restaurants equipped with Muzak on her visits to New York, and she even dislikes the phonograph. "It's better than the radio, of course," she admits, "but it's still canned music." When she does listen to music, it is at concerts, and then the music absorbs her entire attention, making serious demands on her faculties of perception. Listening becomes, in fact, a profound exercise in concentration. "A half hour of music," she says, "takes as much out of me as ten hours of philosophical work." And, as might be expected, there is no radio or television set or phonograph at her place in Old Lyme; there she makes her music herself. There are woods to walk in, and nearby there is a fishpond, which she has recently constructed, and which she expects to stock with catfish. Catfish are quiet creatures. And though she welcomes an occasional visitor, and has a neighbor's boy in to help her with the garden, and a cleaning woman to help her with the house, she is at her happiest when she is thinking and writing by herself. There are exceptions to this. Visits from old friends or members of the family provide pleasant interludes, and on the top floor of her house she has arranged a guest room with an elaborate means of escape through the back of a closet, in case of fire. The guest room is about fifteen feet above the ground, and the means of escape, which she demonstrates with pride, leads to a window at the other side of the house, which is closer to terra firma.

Besides her dislike for canned music, she has some other marked aversions. She does not like the movies. "I'm like a tone-deaf person at a concert when I go," she observed not long ago. "The whole photographic projection does not interest me. I can tell when it's a good movie or a good photograph, but it simply doesn't register with me." One gathers that photography, still or cinematic, lacks the quality of having passed through the human mind—a quality she values highly in art. She prefers paintings and drawings, and among drawings she has a particular affection for the exact depictions of natural objects that one finds in books on biology. "Often, they have a special sort of beauty that I find wanting in imaginative pictures," she says. Moreover, history does not interest her very much. "I completely lack any historical sense," she explains. "To me, a well-constructed novel is more real than his-

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tory. I am very interested in world developments, though, and I read the newspapers, though I often get behind with the news." Mrs. Langer's strongest aversion, however, is her distaste for untidy philosophical thinking—a phenomenon she often comes across in the work of critics, popular psychologists, and even fellow-philosophers. Her reaction to a sloppy thinker is frequently expressed in an *ad-hominem* remark, which must be considered a luxury in a philosophical mind. "He's full of coke," she will say, with some emphasis, and then add, with a slight air of apology for so monstrous an accusation, "That's not as bad as it sounds, you know; it only means there's a clinker in the grate." People who are "full of coke" not only irritate her but provide excellent springboards for the philosophical reasoning that is necessary to refute them. Though she hesitates to apply this expletive to certain writers whom she respects, she is often quite contentious in her references to other thinkers. In a footnote in her book "Feeling and Form," she caught the celebrated literary historian I. A. Richards in what she considered a serious lapse from right thinking, and she made no bones about it. "Mr. I. A. Richards," she wrote, with very thinly disguised asperity, "in his 'Principles of Literary Criticism,' declares that when people speak of 'logical form' they do not know just what they mean. Perhaps he does not know, but I do; and if he really cares to know, he will find an elementary but systematic explanation in Chapter 1 of my 'Introduction to Symbolic Logic.'" Existentialism, among other things, makes her impatient. "It is interesting more for its symptomatic than for its philosophical content," she remarked not long ago.

Like many people of her age, Mrs. Langer looks at the contrast between past and present with a certain incredulity. "The past always seems to me like something I have read about in a book," she said the other day. "Actually, it was nice in many ways. But the young people today have no knowledge of it. Science fiction we always regarded as fantasy. But it isn't any more. The young people think of it as reality." One need not conclude from this, however, that Mrs. Langer is hiding away from the realities of the present. On the contrary, she is continually using them as grist for her philosophical mill. She *does* venture to New York, despite her dislike of the city, and she is a tireless traveller in her station wagon, driving alone not only to Ulster County but to really far-



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away places like Florida, the Middle West, and Seattle, either for strenuous vacations or to keep lecture engagements at various colleges. Off and on, too, she writes articles for learned magazines on political, military, and other insistently contemporary subjects, which she thinks out in the most scrupulous philosophical terms. She is, in fact, vitally concerned with the present-day world and relentlessly bent on reducing it to logical sense. When she finds an incongruity somewhere, her mind leaps into instant action. "I get a very uncomfortable feeling that something is wrong," she explains. "Then I see how it ought to be." The process of seeing involves what she refers to as "cooking" her ideas, and it usually ends in a tentative clarification. The "cooking" is so satisfying that she wishes it would go on forever. At present, she is occupied in writing a book that will "help lay a rational foundation for science," and that will, among other things, deal exhaustively with the probable origins of speech. "I'd like to be a cat and have nine lives," she said not long ago. "As it is, I've got to hurry. I have about ten more years at the peak of my thinking powers. Few philosophers retain them much after seventy. I'm really happy as long as I have a theory."

—WINTHROP SARGEANT

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