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II

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ON CASSIRER'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE
AND MYTH

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EVERY philosopher has his tradition. His thought has developed amid certain problems, certain basic alternatives of opinion, that embody the key concepts which dominate his time and his environment and which will always be reflected, positively or by negation, in his own work. They are the forms of thought he has inherited, wherein he naturally thinks, or from which his maturer conceptions depart.

The continuity of culture lies in this handing down of usable forms. Any campaign to discard tradition for the sake of novelty as such, without specific reason in each case to break through a certain convention of thought, leads to dilettantism, whether it be in philosophy, in art, or in social and moral institutions. As every person has his mother tongue in terms of which he cannot help thinking his earliest thoughts, so every scholar has a philosophical mother tongue, which colors his natural *Weltanschauung*. He may have been nurtured in a particular school of thought, or his heritage may be the less conscious one of "common sense," the popular metaphysic of his generation; but he speaks some intellectual language that has been bestowed on him, with its whole cargo of preconceptions, distinctions, and evaluations, by his official and unofficial teachers.

A great philosopher, however, has something new and vital to present in whatever philosophical mold he may have been given. The tenor of his thought stems from the past; but his specific problems take shape in the face of a living present, and his dealing with them reflects the entire, ever-nascent activity of his own day. In all the great periods of philosophy, the leading minds of the time have carried their traditional learning

lightly, and felt most deeply the challenge of things which were new in their age. It is the new that calls urgently for interpretation; and a true philosopher is a person to whom something in the weary old world always appears new and uncomprehended.

There are certain "dead periods" in the history of philosophy, when the whole subject seems to shrink into a hard, small shell, treasured only by scholars in large universities. The common man knows little about it and cares less. What marks such a purely academic phase of philosophical thought is that its substance as well as its form is furnished by a scholastic tradition; not only the categories, but the problems of debate are familiar. Precisely in the most eventful epochs, when intellectual activity in other fields is brilliant and exciting, there is quite apt to be a lapse in philosophy; the greatest minds are engaged elsewhere; reflection and interpretation are in abeyance when the tempo of life is at its highest. New ideas are too kaleidoscopic to be systematically construed or to suggest general propositions. Professional philosophers, therefore, continue to argue matters which their predecessors have brought to no conclusion, and to argue them from the same standpoints that yielded no insight before.

We have only recently passed through an "academic" phase of philosophy, a phase of stale problems and deadlocked "isms." But today we are on the threshold of a new creative period. The most telling sign of this is the tendency of great minds to see philosophical implications in facts and problems belonging to other fields of learning—mathematics, anthropology, psychology, physics, history, and the arts. Familiar things like language or dream, or the mensurability of time, appear in new universal connections which involve highly interesting abstract issues. Even the layman lends his ear to "semantics" or to new excitements about "relativity."

Cassirer had all the marks of a great thinker in a new philosophical period. His standpoint was a tradition which he inherited—the Kantian "critical" philosophy seen in the light of its later developments, which raised the doctrine of transcendental forms to the level of a transcendental theory of Being. His writings bear witness that he often reviewed and pondered

the foundations of this position. There was nothing accidental or sentimental in his adherence to it; he maintained it throughout his life, because he found it fruitful, suggestive of new interpretations. In his greatest works this basic idealism is implicit rather than under direct discussion; and the turn it gives to his treatment of the most baffling questions removes it utterly from that treadmill of purely partisan reiteration and defense which is the fate of decadent metaphysical convictions. There is little of polemic or apologetic in Cassirer's writings; he was too enthusiastic about solving definite problems to spend his time vindicating his method or discussing what to him was only a starting-point.

One of the venerable puzzles which he treated with entirely new insight from his peculiarly free and yet scholarly point of view is the relation of language and myth. Here we find at the outset the surprising, unorthodox working of his mind: for what originally led him to this problem was not the contemplation of poetry, but of science. For generations the advocates of scientific thinking bemoaned the difficulties which nature seems to plant in its path—the misconceptions bred by "ignorance" and even by language itself. It took Cassirer to see that those difficulties themselves were worth investigating. Ignorance is a negative condition; why should the mere absence of correct conceptions lead to *misconceptions*? And why should language, supposedly a practical instrument for conveying thought, serve to resist and distort scientific thought? The misconceptions interested him.

If the logical and factual type of thought which science demands is hard to maintain, there must be some other mode of thinking which constantly interferes with it. Language, the expression of thought, could not possibly be a hindrance to thought as such; if it distorts scientific conception, it must do so merely by giving preference and support to such another mode.

Now, all thinking is "realistic" in the sense that it deals with phenomena as they present themselves in immediate experience. There cannot be a way of thinking that is not true to the reports of sense. If there are two modes of thinking,

there must be two different modes of perceiving things, of apprehending the very data of thought. To *observe* the wind, for instance, as a purely physical atmospheric disturbance, and *think* of it as a divine power or an angry creature would be purely capricious, playful, irresponsible. But thinking is serious business, and probably always has been; and it is not likely that language, the physical image of thought, portrays a pattern of mere fancies and vagaries. In so far as language is incompatible with scientific reasoning, it must reflect a system of thought that is soberly true to a *mode of experiencing*, of seeing and feeling, different from our accepted mode of experiencing "facts."¹

This idea, first suggested by the difficulties of scientific conception, opened up a new realm of epistemological research to its author; for it made the *forms of misunderstanding* take on a positive rather than a negative importance as *archaic forms of understanding*. The hypostatic and poetic tinge of language which makes it so often recalcitrant to scientific purposes is a record not only of a different way of thinking, but of seeing, feeling, conceiving experience—a way that was probably paramount in the ages when language itself came into being. The whole problem of mind and its relation to "reality" took a new turn with the hypothesis that former civilizations may actually have dealt with a "real world" differently constituted from our own world of things with their universal qualities and causal relationships. But how can that older "reality" be recaptured and demonstrated? And how can the change from one way of apprehending nature to another be accounted for?

The answer to this methodological question came to him as a suggestion from metaphysics. "*Es ist der Geist der sich den Körper baut,*" said Goethe. And the post-Kantian idealists, from Fichte to Hermann Cohen, had gone even beyond that tenet; so they might well have said, "*Es ist der Geist der sich das Weltall baut.*" To a romanticist that would have been little more than a figure of speech, expressing the relative importance of mind and matter. But in Cassirer's bold and uncomplacent mind such a belief—which he held as a basic intellectual postulate, not as a value-judgment—immediately raised the ques-

¹ Cf. *Language and Myth*, 10f.

tion: How? By what process and what means does the human spirit *construct* its physical world?

Kant had already proposed the answer: By supplying the transcendental constituent of *form*. Kant regarded this form as a fixed pattern, the same in all human experience; the categories of thought which find their clearest expression in science, seemed to him to govern all empirical experience, and to be reflected in the structure of language. But the structure of language is just what modern scientific thought finds ungenial. It embodies a metaphysic of substance and attribute; whereas science operates more and more with the concept of *function*, which is articulated in mathematics.² There is good reason why mathematicians have abandoned verbal propositions almost entirely and resorted to a symbolism which expresses different metaphysical assumptions, different categories of thought altogether.

At this point Cassirer, reflecting on the shift from substantive to functional thinking, found the key to the methodological problem: two different symbolisms revealed two radically different forms of thought; does not every form of *Anschauung* have its symbolic mode? Might not an exhaustive study of symbolic forms reveal just how the human mind, in its various stages, has variously construed the "reality" with which it dealt? To *construe* the equivocally "given" is to *construct* the phenomenon for experience. And so the Kantian principle, fructified by a wholly new problem of science, led beyond the Kantian doctrine to the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.

The very plan of this work departs from all previous approaches to epistemology by not assuming either that the mind is concerned essentially with facts, or that its prime talent is discursive reason. A careful study of the scientific misconceptions which language begets revealed the fact that its subject-predicate structure, which reflects a "natural" ontology of substance and attribute, is not its only metaphysical trait. Language is born of the need for emotional expression. Yet it is not exclamatory. It is essentially hypostatic, seeking to distinguish, emphasize, and hold the object of feeling rather than

² See *Substance and Function*, Ch. I.

to communicate the feeling itself. To fix the object as a permanent focus point in experience is the function of the *name*. Whatever evokes emotion may therefore receive a name; and, if this object is not a thing—if it is an act, or a phenomenon like lightning, or a sound, or some other intangible item—the name nevertheless gives it the unity, permanence, and apparent substantiality of a “thing.”

This hypostasis, entailed by the primitive office of language, really lies deeper even than nomenclature, which merely reflects it: for it is a fundamental trait of all *imagination*. The very word “imagination” denotes a process of image-making. An image is only an aspect of the actual thing it represents. It may be not even a completely or carefully abstracted aspect. Its importance lies in the fact that it symbolizes the whole—the thing, person, occasion, or what-not—from which it is an abstract. A thing has a history, an event passes irrevocably away, actual experience is transient and would exhaust itself in a series of unique occasions, were it not for the permanence of the symbol whereby it may be recalled and possessed. Imagination is a free and continual production of images to “mean” experience—past or present or even merely possible experience.

Imagination is the primary talent of the human mind, the activity in whose service language was evolved. The imaginative mode of ideation is not “logical” after the manner of discursive reason. It has a logic of its own, a definite pattern of identifications and concentrations which bring a very deluge of ideas, all charged with intense and often widely diverse feelings, together in one symbol.

Symbols are the indispensable instruments of conception. To undergo an experience, to react to immediate or conditional stimuli (as animals react to warning or guiding signs), is not to “have” experience in the characteristically human sense, which is to conceive it, hold it in the mind as a so-called “content of consciousness,” and consequently be able to think *about* it.³ To a human mind, every experience—a sensation of light or color, a fright, a fall, a continuous noise like the roar of breakers

³ Cf. *Language and Myth*, 38.

on the beach—exhibits, in retrospect, a unity and self-identity that make it almost as static and tangible as a solid object. By virtue of this hypostatization it may be *referred to*, much as an object may be *pointed at*; and therefore the mind can think about it without its actual recurrence. In its symbolic image the experience is *conceived*, instead of just physiologically remembered.⁴

Cassirer's greatest epistemological contribution is his approach to the problem of mind through a study of the primitive forms of conception. His reflections on science had taught him that all conception is intimately bound to expression; and the forms of expression, which determine those of conception, are symbolic forms. So he was led to his central problem, the diversity of symbolic forms and their interrelation in the edifice of human culture.

He distinguished, as so many autonomous forms, language, myth, art, and science.⁵ In examining their respective patterns he made his first startling discovery: myth and language appeared as genuine twin creatures, born of the same phase of human mentality, exhibiting analogous formal traits, despite their obvious diversities of content. Language, on the one hand, seems to have articulated and established mythological concepts, whereas, on the other hand, its own meanings are essentially images functioning mythically. The two modes of thought have grown up together, as conception and expression, respectively, of the primitive human world.

The earliest products of mythic thinking are not permanent, self-identical, and clearly distinguished "gods;" neither are they immaterial spirits. They are like dream elements—objects endowed with daemonic import, haunted places, accidental shapes in nature resembling something ominous—all manner of shifting, fantastic images which speak of Good and Evil, of Life and Death, to the impressionable and creative mind of man. Their common trait is a quality that characterizes everything in the sphere of myth, magic, and religion, and also the

⁴ See *An Essay on Man*, chapters 2 and 3, *passim*.

⁵ *Language and Myth*, 8.

earliest ethical conceptions—the quality of *holiness*.⁶ Holiness may appertain to almost anything; it is the mystery that appears as magic, as taboo, as daemonic power, as miracle, and as divinity. The first dichotomy in the emotive or mythic phase of mentality is not, as for discursive reason, the opposition of “yes” and “no,” of “a” and “non-a,” or truth and falsity; the basic dichotomy here is between the sacred and the profane. Human beings actually apprehend *values* and expressions of values *before* they formulate and entertain *facts*.

All mythic constructions are symbols of value—of life and power, or of violence, evil, and death. They are charged with feeling, and have a way of absorbing into themselves more and more intensive meanings, sometimes even logically conflicting imports. Therefore mythic symbols do not give rise to discursive understanding; they do beget a kind of understanding, but not by sorting out concepts and relating them in a distinct pattern; they tend, on the contrary, merely to bring together great complexes of cognate ideas, in which all distinctive features are merged and swallowed. “Here we find in operation a law which might actually be called the law of the levelling and extinction of specific differences,” says Cassirer, in *Language and Myth*. “Every part of a whole is the whole itself, every specimen is equivalent to the entire species.”⁷ The significance of mythic structures is not formally and arbitrarily assigned to them, as convention assigns one exact meaning to a recognized symbol; rather, their meaning seems to dwell in them as life dwells in a body; they are animated by it, it is of their essence, and the naïve, awe-struck mind *finds* it, as the quality of “holiness.” Therefore mythic symbols do not even appear to be symbols; they appear as holy objects or places or beings, and their import is felt as an inherent *power*.

This really amounts to another “law” of imaginative conception. Just as specific differences of meaning are obliterated in nondiscursive symbolization, the very distinction between form and content, between the entity (thing, image, gesture, or

⁶ See *Die Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, II, 97ff.

⁷ Pp. 91-92.

natural event) which is the symbol, and the idea or feeling which is its meaning, is lost, or rather: is not yet found. This is a momentous fact, for it is the basis of all superstition and strange cosmogony, as well as of religious belief. To believe in the existence of improbable or quite fantastic things and beings would be inexplicable folly if beliefs were dictated essentially by practical experience. But the mythic interpretation of reality rests on the principle that the veneration appropriate to the meaning of a symbol is focussed on the symbol itself, which is simply identified with its import. This creates a world punctuated by pre-eminent objects, mystic centers of power and holiness, to which more and more emotive meanings accrue as "properties." An intuitive recognition of their *import* takes the form of ardent, apparently irrational belief in the physical reality and power of the significant forms. This is the hypostatic mechanism of the mind by which the world is filled with magical things—fetishes and talismans, sacred trees, rocks, caves, and the vague, protean ghosts that inhabit them—and finally the world is peopled with a pantheon of permanent, more or less anthropomorphic gods. In these presences "reality" is concentrated for the mythic imagination; this is not "make-believe," not a willful or playful distortion of a radically different "given fact," but is *the way phenomena are given* to naïve apprehension.

Certainly the pattern of that world is altogether different from the pattern of the "material" world which confronts our sober common sense, follows the laws of causality, and exhibits a logical order of classes and subclasses, with their defining properties and relations, whereby each individual object either does or does not belong to any given class. Cassirer has summed up the logical contrast between the mode of mythic intuition and that of "factual" or "scientific" apprehension in very telling phrase:

In the realm of discursive conception there reigns a sort of diffuse light—and the further logical analysis proceeds, the further does this even clarity and luminosity extend. But in the ideational realm of myth and language there are always, besides those locations from which the

strongest light proceeds, others that appear wrapped in profoundest darkness. While certain contents of perception become verbal-mythical centers of force, centers of significance, there are others which remain, one might say, beneath the threshold of meaning.⁸

His coupling of myth and language in this passage brings us back to the intimate connection between these two great symbolic forms which he traces to a common origin. The dawn of language was the dawn of the truly human mind, which meets us first of all as a rather highly developed organ of practical response *and of imagination*, or symbolic rendering of impressions. The first "holy objects" seem to be born of momentary emotional experiences—fright centering on a place or a thing, concentrated desire that manifests itself in a dreamlike image or a repeated gesture, triumph that issues naturally in festive dance and song, directed toward a symbol of power. Somewhere in the course of this high emotional life primitive man took to using his instinctive vocal talent as a source of such "holy objects," *sounds* with imaginative import: such vocal symbols are *names*.

In savage societies, names are treated not as conventional appellations, but as though they were physical proxies for their bearers. To call an object by an inappropriate name is to confound its very nature. In some cultures practically all language serves mystic purposes and is subject to the most impractical taboos and regulations. It is clearly of a piece with magic, religion and the whole pattern of intensive emotional symbolism which governs the pre-scientific mind. Names are the very essence of mythic symbols; nothing on earth is a more concentrated point of sheer meaning than the little, transient, invisible breath that constitutes a spoken word. Physically it is almost nothing. Yet it carries more definite and momentous import than any permanent holy object.⁹ It can be invoked at will, anywhere and at any time, by a mere act of speech; merely *knowing* a word gives a person the power of using it; thus it is invisibly "had," carried about by its possessors.

⁸ *Language and Myth*, 91.

⁹ "Often it is the *name* of the deity, rather than the god himself, that seems to be the real source of efficacy." (*Language and Myth*, 48)

It is characteristic of mythic "powers" that they are completely contained in every fragment of matter, every sound, and every gesture which partakes of them.¹⁰ This fact betrays their real nature, which is not that of physical forces, but of meanings; a meaning is indeed completely given by every symbol to which it attaches. The greater the "power" in proportion to its bearer, the more awe-inspiring will the latter be. So, as long as meaning is felt as an indwelling potency of certain physical objects, *words* must certainly rank high in the order of holy things.

But language has more than a purely denotative function. Its symbols are so manifold, so manageable, and so economical that a considerable number of them may be held in one "specious present," though each one physically passes away before the next is given; each has left its *meaning* to be apprehended in the same span of attention that takes in the whole series. Of course, the length of the span varies greatly with different mentalities. But as soon as two or more words are thus taken together in the mind of an interpretant, language has acquired its second function: it has engendered *discursive thought*.

The discursive mode of thinking is what we usually call "reason." It is not as primitive as the imaginative mode, because it arises from the syntactical nature of language; mythic envisagement and verbal expression are its forerunners. Yet it is a natural development from the earlier symbolic mode, which is pre-discursive, and thus in a strict and narrow sense "pre-rational."

Henceforth, the history of thought consists chiefly in the gradual achievement of factual, literal, and logical conception and expression. Obviously the only means to this end is language. But this instrument, it must be remembered, has a double nature. Its syntactical tendencies bestow the laws of logic on us; yet the primacy of *names* in its make-up holds it to the hypostatic way of thinking which belongs to its twin-phenomenon, myth. Consequently it leads us beyond the sphere of mythic and emotive thought, yet always pulls us back into it again; it is both the diffuse and tempered light that shows us the external world of "fact," and the array of spiritual lamps,

¹⁰ Cf. *Language and Myth*, 92.

light-centers of intensive meaning, that throw the gleams and shadows of the dream world wherein our earliest experiences lay.

We have come so far along the difficult road of discursive thinking that the laws of logic seem to be the very frame of the mind, and rationality its essence. Kant regarded the categories of pure understanding as universal transcendental forms, imposed by the most naïve untutored mind on all its perceptions, so that self-identity, the dichotomy of "a" and "non-a," the relation of part and whole, and other axiomatic general concepts inhered in phenomena as their necessary conditions. Yet, from primitive apprehension to even the simplest rational construction is probably a far cry. It is interesting to see how Cassirer, who followed Kant in his "Copernican revolution," i.e., in the transcendental analysis of phenomena which traces their form to a non-phenomenal, subjective element, broadened the Kantian concept of form to make it a variable and anthropologically valid principle, without compromising the "critical" standpoint at all. Instead of accepting one categorial scheme—that of discursive thought—as the absolute way of experiencing reality, he finds it relative to a form of symbolic presentation; and as there are alternative symbolic forms, there are also alternative phenomenal "worlds." Mythic conception is categorially different from scientific conception; therefore it meets a different world of perceptions. Its objects are not self-identical, consistent, universally related; they condense many characters in one, have conflicting attributes and intermittent existence, the whole is contained in its parts, and the parts in each other. The world they constitute is a world of values, things "holy" against a vague background of commonplaces, or "profane" events, instead of a world of neutral physical facts. By this departure, the Kantian doctrine that identified all conception with discursive reason, making reason appear as an aboriginal human gift, is saved from its most serious fallacy, an unhistorical view of mind.

Cassirer called his *Essay on Man*, which briefly summarizes the *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, "An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture." The subtitle is appropriate indeed; for the most striking thing about this philosophy viewed as a whole is the way the actual evolution of human customs,

arts, ideas, and languages is not merely fitted into an idealistic interpretation of the world (as it may be fitted into almost any metaphysical picture), but is illumined and made accessible to serious study by working principles taken from Kantian epistemology. His emphasis on the constitutive character of symbolic renderings in the making of "experience" is the masterstroke that turns the purely speculative "critical" theory into an anthropological hypothesis, a key to several linguistic problems, a source of psychological understanding, and a guidepost in the maze of *Geistesgeschichte*.

It is, as I pointed out before, characteristic of Cassirer's thought that, although its basic principles stem from a philosophical tradition, its living material and immediate inspiration come from contemporary sources, from fields of research beyond his own. For many years the metaphysic of mind has been entirely divorced from the scientific study of mental phenomena; whether mind be an eternal essence or a transient epiphenomenon, a world substance or a biological instrument, makes little difference to our understanding of observed human or animal behavior. But Cassirer breaks this isolation of speculative thought; he uses the Kantian doctrine, that mind is constitutive of the "external world," to explain the *way* this world is experienced as well as the mere fact *that* it is experienced; and in so doing, of course, he makes his metaphysic meet the test of factual findings at every turn. His most interesting exhibits are psychological phenomena revealed in the psychiatric clinic and in ethnologists' reports. The baffling incapacities of impaired brains, the language of childhood, the savage's peculiar practices, the prevalence of myth in early cultures and its persistence in religious thought—these and other widely scattered facts receive new significance in the light of his philosophy. And that is the pragmatic measure of any speculative approach. A really cogent doctrine of mind cannot be irrelevant to psychology, any more than a good cosmological system can be meaningless for physics, or a theory of ethics inapplicable to jurisprudence and law.

The psychiatric phenomena which illustrate the existence of a mythic mode of thought, and point to its ancient and primitive

nature, are striking and persuasive.¹¹ Among these is the fact that in certain pathological conditions of the brain the power of abstraction is lost, and the patient falls back on picturesque metaphorical language. In more aggravated cases the imagination, too, is impaired; and here we have a reversion almost to animal mentality. One symptom of this state which is significant for the philosophy of symbolism is that the sufferer is unable to tell a lie, feign any action, or do anything his actual situation does not dictate, though he may still find his way with immediate realities. If he is thirsty, he can recognize and take a glass of water, and drink; but he cannot pick up an empty glass and demonstrate the act of drinking *as though* there were water in it, or even lift a full glass to his lips, if he is not thirsty. Such incapacities have been classified as "apractic" disorders; but Cassirer pointed out that they are not so much practical failures, as loss of the basic symbolic function, *envisagement of things not given*. This is borne out by a still more serious disturbance which occurs with the destruction of certain brain areas, inability to recognize "things," such as chairs and brooms and pieces of clothing, directly and instantly as objects denoted by their names. At this point, pathology furnishes a striking testimony of the real nature of language: for here, names lose their hypostatic office, the creation of permanent and particular *items* out of the flux of impressions. To a person thus afflicted, words have connotation, but experience does not readily correspond to the conceptual scheme of language, which makes *names* the pre-eminent points of rest, and requires *things* as the fundamental *relata* in reality. The connoted concepts are apt to be adjectival rather than substantive. Consequently the world confronting the patient is not composed of objects immediately "given" in experience; it is composed of sense data, which he must "associate" to form "things," much as Hume supposed the normal mind to do.

Most of the psychological phenomena that caught Cassirer's interest arose from the psychiatric work of Kurt Goldstein, who

¹¹ For a full treatment of this material see *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, III, part 3, *passim*.

has dealt chiefly with cases of cerebral damage caused by physical accident. But the range of psychological researches which bear out Cassirer's theory of mind is much wider; it includes the whole field of so-called "dynamic psychology," the somewhat chaotic store of new ideas and disconcerting facts with which Sigmund Freud alarmed his generation. Cassirer himself never explored this fund of corroborative evidence; he found himself in such fundamental disagreement with Freud on the nature of the dynamic motive—which the psychologist regarded as not only derived from the sex impulse, but forever bound to it, and which the philosopher saw liberated in science, art, religion, and everything that constitutes the "self-realization of the spirit"—that there seemed to be simply no point of contact between their respective doctrines. Cassirer felt that to Freud all those cultural achievements were mere by-products of the unchanging animalian "libido," symptoms of its blind activity and continual frustration; whereas to him they were the consummation of a spiritual process which merely took its rise from the blind excitement of the animal "libido," but received its importance and meanings from the phenomena of awareness and creativity, the envisagement, reason, and cognition it produced. This basic difference of *evaluations* of the life process made Cassirer hesitate to make any part of Freud's doctrine his own; at the end of his life he had, apparently, just begun to study the important relationship between "dynamic psychology" and the philosophy of symbolic forms.

It is, indeed, only in regard to the *forms* of thought that a parallel obtains between these systems; but that parallel is close and vital, none the less. For, the "dream work" of Freud's "unconscious" mental mechanism is almost exactly the "mythic mode" which Cassirer describes as the primitive form of ideation, wherein an intense feeling is spontaneously expressed in a symbol, an image seen in something or formed for the mind's eye by the excited imagination. Such expression is effortless and therefore unexhausting; its products are images charged with meanings, but the meanings remain implicit, so that the emotions they command seem to be centered

on the image rather than on anything it merely conveys; in the image, which may be a vision, a gesture, a sound-form (musical image) or a word as readily as an external object, many meanings may be concentrated, many ideas telescoped and interfused, and incompatible emotions simultaneously expressed.

The mythic mind never perceives passively, never merely contemplates things; all its observations spring from some act of participation, some act of emotion and will. Even as mythic imagination materializes in permanent forms, and presents us with definite outlines of an 'objective' world of beings, the significance of this world becomes clear to us only if we can still detect, underneath it all, that dynamic sense of life from which it originally arose. Only where this vital feeling is stirred from within, where it expresses itself as love or hate, fear or hope, joy or sorrow, mythic imagination is roused to the pitch of excitement at which it begets a definite world of representations. (*Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, II, 90.)

For a person whose apprehension is under the spell of this mythico-religious attitude, it is as though the whole world were simply annihilated; the immediate content, whatever it be, that commands his religious interest so completely fills his consciousness that nothing else can exist beside and apart from it. The ego is spending all its energy on this single object, lives in it, loses itself in it. Instead of a widening of intuitive experience, we find here its extreme limitation; instead of expansion . . . we have here an impulse toward concentration; instead of extensive distribution, intensive compression. This focussing of all forces on a single point is the prerequisite for all mythical thinking and mythical formulation. When, on the one hand, the entire self is given up to a single impression, is 'possessed' by it and, on the other hand, there is the utmost tension between the subject and its object, the outer world; when external reality is not merely viewed and contemplated, but overcomes a man in sheer immediacy, with emotions of fear or hope, terror or wish fulfillment: then the spark jumps somehow across, the tension finds release, as the subjective excitement becomes objectified and confronts the mind as a god or a daemon. (*Language and Myth*, 32-33.)

. . . this peculiar genesis determines the type of intellectual content that is common to language and myth . . . present reality, as mythic or linguistic conception stresses and shapes it, fills the entire subjective realm. . . . At this point, the word which denotes that thought content is not a mere conventional symbol, but is merged with its object in an indissoluble unity. . . . The potential between 'symbol' and 'meaning' is

resolved; in place of a more or less adequate 'expression,' we find a relation of identity, of complete congruence between 'image' and 'object,' between the name and the thing.

. . . the same sort of hypostatization or transubstantiation occurs in other realms of mental creativity; indeed, it seems to be the typical process in all unconscious ideation. (*Ibid.*, 57-58.)

Mythology presents us with a world which is not, indeed, devoid of structure and internal organization, but which, none the less, is not divided according to the categories of reality, into 'things' and 'properties.' Here all forms of Being exhibit, as yet, a peculiar 'fluidity;' they are distinct without being really separate. Every form is capable of changing, on the spur of the moment, even into its very opposite. . . . One and the same entity may not only undergo constant change into successive guises, but it combines within itself, at one and the same instant of its existence, a wealth of different and even incompatible natures. (*Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, III, 71-72.)

Above all, there is a complete lack of any clear division between mere 'imagining' and 'real' perception, between wish and fulfilment, between image and object. This is most clearly revealed by the decisive rôle which dream experiences play in the development of mythic consciousness. . . . It is beyond doubt that certain mythic concepts can be understood, in all their peculiar complexity, only in so far as one realizes that for mythic thought and 'experience' there is but a continuous and fluid transition from the world of dream to objective 'reality.' (*Ibid.*, II, 48-49.)

The world of myth is a dramatic world—a world of actions, of forces, of conflicting powers. In every phenomenon of nature it [mythic consciousness] sees the collision of these powers. Mythical perception is always impregnated with these emotional qualities. Whatever is seen or felt is surrounded by a special atmosphere—an atmosphere of joy or grief, of anguish, of excitement, of exultation or depression. . . . All objects are benignant or malignant, friendly or inimical, familiar or uncanny, alluring and fascinating or repellent and threatening.—(*An Essay on Man*, 76-77.)

The real substratum of myth is not a substratum of thought but of feeling. . . . Its view of life is a synthetic, not an analytical one. . . . There is no specific difference between the various realms of life. . . . To mythical and religious feeling nature becomes one great society, the *society of life*. Man is not endowed with outstanding rank in this society. . . . Men and animals, animals and plants are all on the same level. (*Ibid.*, 81-83.)

To all these passages Freud could subscribe wholeheartedly; the *morphology* of the "mythic mode" is essentially that of dream, phantasy, infantile thinking, and "unconscious" ideation which he himself discovered and described. And it is the recognition of this non-discursive mode of thought, rather than his clinical hypothesis of an all-pervading disguised sexuality, that makes Freud's psychology important for philosophy. Not the theory of "libido," which is another theory of "animal drives," but the conception of the unconscious mechanism through which the "libido" operates, the dream work, the myth-making process—that is the new generative idea which psychoanalysis contributed to psychological thinking, the notion that has put modern psychology so completely out of gear with traditional epistemology that the science of mind and the philosophy of mind threatened to lose contact altogether. So it is of the utmost significance for the unity of our advancing thought that pure speculative philosophy should recognize and understand the primary forms of conception which underlie the achievement of discursive reason.

Cassirer's profound antipathy to Freud's teaching rests on another aspect of that psychological system, which springs from the fact that Freud's doctrine was determined by practical interests: that is the tendency of the psychoanalyst to range all human aims, all ideals on the same ethical level. Since he deals entirely with the evils of social maladjustment, his measure of good is simply adjustment; religion and learning and social reform, art and discovery and philosophical reflection, to him are just so many avenues of personal gratification—sublimation of passions, emotional self-expression. From his standpoint they cannot be viewed as objective values. Just as good poetry and bad poetry are of equal interest and importance to the psychoanalyst, so the various social systems are all equally good, all religions equally true (or rather, equally false, but salutary), and all abstract systems of thought, scientific or philosophical or mathematical, just self-dramatizations in disguise. To a philosopher who was also a historian of culture, such a point of view seemed simply devastating. It colored his vision of Freud's work so deeply that it really obscured for him the constructive aspect,

the analysis of non-discursive ideation, which this essentially clinical psychology contains. Yet the relationship between the new psychiatry and his own new epistemology is deep and close; "*der Mythos als Denkform*"¹² is the theme that rounds out the modern philosophical picture of human mentality to embrace psychology and anthropology and linguistics,¹³ which had broken the narrow limits of rationalist theory, in a more adequate conceptual frame.

The broadening of the philosophical outlook achieved by Cassirer's theory of language and myth affects not only the philosophical sciences, the *Geisteswissenschaften*, but also the most crucial present difficulty in philosophy itself—the ever increasing pendulum arc between theories of reason and theories of irrational motivation. The discovery that emotive, intuitive, "blind" forces govern human behavior more effectively than motives of pure reason naturally gave rise to an anti-rationalist movement in epistemology and ethics, typified by Nietzsche, William James, and Bergson, which finally made the truth-seeking attitude of science a pure phantasmagoria, a quixotic manifestation of the will. Ultimately the rôle of reason came to appear (as it does in Bergson's writings) as something entirely secondary and essentially unnatural. But at this point the existence of reason becomes an enigma: for how could instinctive life ever give rise to such a product? How can sheer imagination and volition and passion beget the "artificial" picture of the world which seems natural to scientists?

Cassirer found the answer in the structure of *language*; for language stems from the intuitive "drive" to symbolic expression that also produces dream and myth and ritual, but it is a pre-eminent form in that it embodies not only self-contained, complex meanings, but a *principle of concatenation* whereby the complexes are unravelled and articulated. It is the *discursive* character of language, its inner tendency to grammatical de-

¹² This is the title of the first section in Vol. II of *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*.

¹³ The knowledge of linguistics on which he bases vol. I of his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* is almost staggering. His use of anthropological data may be found especially throughout vol. II of that work.

velopment, which gives rise to logic in the strict sense, i.e., to the procedure we call "reasoning." Language is "of imagination all compact," yet it is the cradle of abstract thought; and the achievement of *Vernunft*, as Cassirer traces it from the dawn of human mentality through the evolution of speech forms, is just as natural as the complicated patterns of instinctive behavior and emotional abreaction.

Here the most serious antinomy in the philosophical thought of our time is resolved. This is a sort of touchstone for the philosophy of symbolic forms, whereby we may judge its capacity to fulfill the great demand its author did not hesitate to make on it, when he wrote in his *Essay on Man*:

In the boundless multiplicity and variety of mythical images, of religious dogmas, of linguistic forms, of works of art, philosophic thought reveals the unity of a general function by which all these creations are held together. Myth, religion, art, language, even science, are now looked upon as so many variations on a common theme—and it is the task of philosophy to make this theme audible and understandable.

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