

Langer, Problems of Art

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LIVING FORM

ONE of the most widely used metaphors in the literature of art is the metaphor of the living creature applied to the artistic product. Every artist finds "life," "vitality," or "livingness" in a good work of art. He refers to the "spirit" of a picture, not meaning the spirit in which it was painted, but its own quality; and his first task is to "animate" his canvas. An unsuccessful work is "dead." Even a fairly good one may have "dead spots." What do people mean when they speak as though a picture or a building or a sonata were a living and breathing creature?

Another metaphor of the studio, borrowed from the biological realm, is the familiar statement that every art work must be organic. Most artists will not even agree with a literal-minded critic that this is a metaphor. "Organic" simply and directly refers, in their vocabulary, to something characteristic of good pictures and statues, poems and plays, ballets and buildings and pieces of music. It does not refer to biological functions like digestion and circulation. But—breathing? Heartbeat?

LIVING FORM

Well, maybe. Mobility? Yes, perhaps. Feeling? Oh yes, certainly.

For a work to "contain feeling," as that phrase is commonly used, is precisely to be alive, to have artistic vitality, to exhibit "living form." We discussed yesterday why a form that expresses feeling appears not merely to connote it, as a meaning, but to contain it, as a quality. Since, however, we know that for a work to contain feeling is really to be an expressive form which articulates feeling, we may well ask, at this point, why such articulation requires a symbol having the appearance of vital organization and autonomous life; and furthermore, how this appearance is achieved. For, certainly, works of art are not really organisms with biological functions. Pictures do not really pulse and breathe; sonatas do not eat and sleep and repair themselves like living creatures, nor do novels perpetuate their kind when they are left unread in a library. Yet the metaphors of "life" and "organic form" in art are so strong that I have known a serious, reflective artist to be actually shocked at such philistine statements as I have just made, calling those terms metaphors.

Let us consider, first, what feeling and emotion have to do with organic life; secondly, what are the characteristics of actual organisms; thirdly, what are the most general features of artistic creation by virtue of which the semblance of life is produced, and finally, how this semblance empowers the artist to imagine and articulate so much of human mentality, emotion, and individual experience as men of genius do in fact put before us.

Sentience—the most elementary sort of consciousness

—is probably an aspect of organic process. Perhaps the first feeling is of the free flow or interruption of vital rhythms in the creature itself, as the whole organism interacts with the surrounding world. With higher phases of functional development, more specialized sentience develops, too—sensations, distinct emotions rather than total, undifferentiated excitements, desires in place of bodily discomfort, directed drives and complex instincts, and with every complication of activity a richer subjective immediacy.

It is a misconception, I believe, to think of sentience as something *caused* by vital activities. It is not an effect, but an aspect of them; as the red of an apple is not caused by the apple, but is an aspect of the apple itself in its mature phase. Sentience arises in vital functioning rather than from it; life as such is sentient. Naturally, then, life as it is felt always resembles life as it is observed; and when we become aware of feeling and emotion as ingredients in a non-physical nexus, the mind, they still seem to lie close to the somatic and instinctive level of our being. They are, indeed, like high-lights on the crests of the turbulent life-stream. Naturally, then, their basic forms are vital forms; their coming and going is in the pattern of growth and decline, not of mechanical occurrences; their mutual involvements reflect the mold of biological existence. If, therefore, a created sensuous symbol—a work of art—is to be in their image, it must present itself somehow as a version, or projection, of living process; it must be of a logical-form that is commensurable with the essential forms of life.

What are the distinctive features of life? What properties divide living from non-living things?

All living matter that we have identified as such is organic; living creatures are organisms. They are characterized by what we call organic process—the constant burning-up and equally constant renewal of their substance. Every cell, and indeed every part of every cell (and the functionally distinct parts are infinitesimal), is perpetually breaking down, and perpetually being replaced. The cell, the tissue composed of diverse cells, the organ to which the tissue belongs, the organism that subsumes the organ—that whole vast system is in unceasing flux. It actually has no sameness of material substance from second to second. It is always changing; and if the exchanges of matter stop for even a few seconds, the effect is cataclysmic; the system is destroyed. Life is gone.

An organism, which seems to be the most distinct and individual sort of thing in the world, is really not a thing at all. Its individual, separate, thing-like existence is a pattern of changes; its unity is a purely functional unity. But the integration of that functional whole is so indescribably complex and intimate and profound that the self-identity of the higher organisms (that is, the most elaborately integrated ones) is more convincing than the self-identity of the most permanent material concretion, such as a lump of lead or a stone. If you reflect on this strange fact, you realize why human identity is always felt to lie not so much in bodily permanence as in personality. It is a functional identity, a pattern of physical and mental process, a continuum of activity.

Let us hark back, for a moment, to a concept that was discussed in the first lecture—the concept of *dy-*

namic form. You may remember that the example we considered there was a waterfall. You can photograph a waterfall with an ordinary little camera, if you stand back enough, just as you can photograph a house or a mountain. The waterfall has a shape, moving somewhat, its long streamers seeming to shift like ribbons in a wind, but its mobile shape is a permanent datum in the landscape, among rocks and trees and other things. Yet the water does not really ever stand before us. Scarcely a drop stays there for the length of one glance. The material composition of the waterfall changes all the time; only the form is permanent; and what gives any shape at all to the water is the motion. The waterfall exhibits a form of motion, or a dynamic form.

If you put a dot of color on the rim of a wheel and spin it, you see a colored circle instead of a dot. This again is the form of the dot's motion—a purely dynamic form—made visible.

Vital form is always dynamic. An organism, like a waterfall, exists only while it keeps going. Its permanence is not endurance of a material, but of a functional pattern. The most elementary feeling, therefore—one might say, the sheer sense of life—is a sense of that dialectic of permanence and change that governs the existence of every cell, every fibre in a living creature. That is the foundation of what Henry James called "felt life."

But dynamic form is not enough. A waterfall is not an organism. The waterfall has no biography. It cuts its groove into the resisting rock; its own shape changes somewhat with that process, and very much more with

any changes in the water supply, with hot and cold weather, etc.—but under steady conditions the waterfall does not grow, age, decline, and cease forever, as an organism does. If the water source fails, the fall stops, but with renewed supply it begins again.

An organism has an entirely different relation to the outside world from that of a simple dynamism like the waterfall. It is also a dynamism, but not a stream; it contains a myriad of distinct activities represented by permanent structures, and coinciding with each other in ways that seem a miracle of timing and complementation. All its processes form a single system. In the higher organisms, certain very elaborate processes acquire control over the simpler and perhaps phylogenetically older ones; in man, for instance, the nervous system is so involved with all the other organic functions that any extensive injury done to it is likely to disturb or even abrogate the whole functional system. The organism is, to a great extent, inviolable if it is to exist at all. It can undergo many changes, survive many accidents, but only as long as the basic process of life goes on.

This basic process is the constant breaking down and reconstitution of every living part. For an organism is always taking in material that is not of its own system, splitting it up, and transforming some of it into living matter. Concomitantly, some living matter is always breaking down and resigning from the total activity. The one process is growth, and the other decay. Every organism is always both growing and decaying. When growth exceeds decay, the system increases (the process we commonly mean by "growth"); when they are

Biological
Amplification

evenly balanced, it maintains itself; when decay has the ascendancy, it ages. Finally, growth stops all at once; the life is done, and decay quickly dissolves the whole structure.

The character of inviolability and fragility marks all living things. Even the most persistent—redwood trees, and very long-lived creatures like crocodiles—are always maintaining themselves precariously against ravaging influences, from temperature-changes and bacterial blights to the brute hand of man. The nature of life is transient; even without accident, it is a passage from youth to age, no matter what its span.

The reason why so complex a network of events as the life of an individual can possibly go on and on in a continuous dynamic pattern is, that this pattern of events is rhythmic. We all know that many of our actions, like walking, rowing, even wood-chopping and rug-beating, are more easily done when they are rhythmic. People usually think of rhythm as a succession of similar events at fairly short, even intervals of time; that is, they think of rhythm as *periodic succession*. But what about a tennis player whose motions impress one as rhythmic? He probably does not repeat a single action; even his step is less metrical than that of a drunkard walking. What, then, is rhythm?

It is, I think, something related to *function* rather than to time. What we call an *event* is not simply anything that goes on in an arbitrary segment of time. An event is a change in the world having a beginning and a completion. The fall of an apple is the sort of thing we mean, ordinarily, by an event; it begins with the breaking of

the stem from the twig that bears it, and ends with the apple's coming to rest somewhere. Its falling may include its rolling on the ground, or we may call that another event, and say that after the apple fell it rolled. At any rate, what we identify as an event in nature (except for certain highly specialized, scientific purposes) is not something instantaneous, but a change that is begun and completed.

A rhythmic pattern arises whenever the completion of one distinct event appears as the beginning of another. The classic example is the swinging of a pendulum. The momentum of its drop drives the weight upward in the opposite direction, and builds up the potential energy that will bring it down again; so the first swing prepares the second; the second swing was actually begun in the first one, and similarly, after that, each swing is prepared by the one before. The result is a rhythmical series. Or, consider the breaking of waves in a steady surf on a beach: the momentum of the water drives it up the beach, until that momentum is spent, and the slant of the shore causes the water to run seaward again; but the piling of the second, incoming wave is also sucking back the spent water, and making its return a downward rush, that stops the bottom part of the new wave and causes it to break over itself. Here, again, is a rhythmic pattern. The completion of each breaker's history is already the beginning of the next one's.

In a living organism, practically all activities are rhythmically conditioned, sometimes interconnected not only by one chain of events but by many, functioning in many different rhythmic relationships at once. The most

obvious rhythmic processes are, of course, heartbeat and breath. In the heart, every systole starts a diastole, and vice versa. In breathing, the process starts all the time throughout the whole body; as the oxygen of a breath is used up, it builds up the imperative need of oxygen that is really the beginning of the new breath. This sort of mutual conditioning is the law of organic function; the more closely you look into the entire physiological process that constitutes the dynamic form we call "life," the more minutely, diversely, and elaborately rhythmic it proves to be. In every cell, the very process of its oxidation—its burning away, breaking down—is the condition that has already started the chemical change which builds up its characteristic substance again. The rhythmic interaction is incredible.

Many fundamental rhythms in the world are periodic; in fact, so many that periodicity is often taken to be the essence of rhythm. But the view we have just taken of rhythm as a functional involvement of successive events makes periodic rhythms a special sort, despite their immense importance, and lets us see why a tennis player, a wheeling bird, and a modern dancer who does not necessarily repeat any motion may exhibit rhythm, too.

Living form, then, is in the first place dynamic form, that is, a form whose permanence is really a pattern of changes. Secondly, it is organically constructed; its elements are not independent parts, but interrelated, interdependent centers of activity—that is, organs. Thirdly, the whole system is held together by rhythmic processes; that is the characteristic unity of life. If its major rhythms are greatly disturbed, or suspended for

more than a few moments, the organism collapses, life stops. Therefore living form is inviolable form. And finally, the law of living form is the dialectic of growth and decay, with its characteristic biographical phases.

In the higher organisms, secondary rhythms develop, specialized responses to the surrounding world, tensions and their resolutions within the system: emotions, desires, attentive perception and action. Finally, at the human level, instinct is largely replaced by intuition, direct responses by symbolic responses—imagination, memory, reason—and simple emotional excitement is superseded by the continuous, personal life of feeling. But all these typically human functions have evolved from the deeper vital complex, and still exhibit its fundamental traits—its dynamism, inviolable unity, organization, rhythmic continuity, and growth. These are the principles of living form.

If art is, as I believe it is, the expression of human consciousness in a single metaphorical image, that image must somehow achieve the semblance of living form. All the principles we have just considered must have their analogues in those of artistic creation. This is indeed the case. But it must be remembered that analogous principles are not identical. The semblance of life need not be constructed on the same plan as life itself; a device that serves to create a sense of change need not involve any actual change, nor the most forcible presentation of growth any actual accumulation. Artistic form is a projection, not a copy. Consequently there is no direct correlation between the constituents of an organism and the elements in a work of art. Art has its

own laws, which are laws of expressiveness. Its own elements are all created forms, not material ingredients; such elements cannot be compared to physical factors, nor their functions to physical functions. Only their product—the expressive form, the work of art—has characteristics symbolically related to those of life itself.

There are countless devices in the arts for the creation or enhancement of "living form." In the brief hour of a lecture we cannot do more than mention and illustrate a few of the major resources that artists draw upon for this purpose.

As I said earlier today, our sense of change in permanence, the balance of becoming and passing, is one of the profoundest aspects of human consciousness. If we look at even the most elementary forms of visual art—say, a purely decorative design, a wavy line adorning the rim of a pot, a repeated pattern on a cloth—the line, which is stationary, is said to "run" around the rim, and the over-all design, if it is good, seems to spread out over the cloth from any point where we happen to start. Let us talk about the line.

In talking about dynamic form we considered the effect of a dot of color on a rotating wheel: the little dot is seen as a circle, an even, closed line. This line expresses the form not of the dot, but of its motion. It projects this dynamic form as an apparently fixed visual datum, a circular line.

The relationship between lines and motions of objects rests upon the natural laws of our perception. Swift motions are actually seen as motionless lines. Objects that deposit a trail, like a crayon, leave an actual, perma-

nent line; this line, too, expresses the motion of the object, though it is not physically a dynamic form like the circle made by the spinning dot. But such a line does not naturally connote the thing that made it; what it connotes is only the directedness of its motion. It is a path; and in our seeing, every continuous line is a path, though it need not be the path of any imagined thing.

Lines, however, have another function, too: they are divisions of space, contours that define volumes. Volumes are the stabilizing elements in our world. In virtual space, lines express both motion and rest; and as virtual space is a pure creation, the lines that articulate it create both motion and rest, and, moreover, create both at the same time. A contour—as the word itself tells—is a turn, or path, that carves out a space. The way a line is handled makes it predominantly a dynamic or a static element, as the case may be. A space created by lines is *ipso facto* a temporal space, that is, a spatio-temporal form, which may readily be molded to express the dialectic of permanence and change which is characteristic of life.

Let us take another basic principle of art, that artists and critics are forever talking about: organic structure. Obviously, a picture or a poem does not really have organs and vital functions. But something about artistic structure exemplifies the principle of organization, too, though not in the same way that natural organisms do.

Every element in a work of art is so involved with other elements in the making of the virtual object, the work, that when it is altered (as it may be—artists make many alterations after the composition is well under way) one almost always has to follow up the alteration

in several directions, or simply sacrifice some desired effects. A key word in a poetic verse, for instance, has literal sense, perhaps obvious metaphorical sense, emotional overtones, grammatical cognates, familiar and unfamiliar uses. Each of these different functions may relate it in a different way from any other. Let us take William Blake's very perfect little poem, "Love's Secret," and examine the functions of a few words in it:

Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind doth move
Silently, invisibly.

I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart,
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears.
Ah! she did depart!

Soon after she was gone from me,
A traveller came by,
Silently, invisibly:
He took her with a sigh.

The first two lines exhibit three repetitions, but all of different degrees. "Never" is exactly repeated, but stands in different relations to the respective lines; "tell" is repeated in different grammatical form, at corresponding points in both lines; "love"—the key word—occurs in diametrically opposed positions, i.e., at the end of one line and the beginning of the next; and in the two clauses which it dominates it has both different meaning and different syntactical value. The first "love" is the indirect object of "tell" and designates a person; the second

"love" is the direct object of the same verb, and designates an emotion. And the two uses of love are in juxtaposition, but differently emphasized by the metrical structure of the lines. They are different elements, intimately related, at once, by their apparent identity; then by the shift of sense from one to the other which makes them homonyms instead; by the fact that their meanings, though distinct, are cognate; by the fact that they both complete the sense of the same verb, "tell," but in different ways. Finally, they serve in conjunction to link the two lines in a special way, making them seem like counterparts, a symmetrical pair. Symmetry is a strong form; this purely formal strength of the first two lines makes possible the erratic shift of thought in the following verses, which is logically, of course, a complete *non sequitur* introduced by the word "for." In the third line, another function of the word "love" (in its first occurrence) comes to light: it has also prepared the rhyme; and to save the poem from too much symmetry, it is a near-rhyme.

The use of "for" to link the first and second thoughts is a bold construction; it creates the feeling of a rational connection where literally there is none; but it refers the wind's movements—"silently, invisibly"—directly to love, and transforms them at a stroke into metaphors for its ineffable nature.

This many-sided involvement of every element with the total fabric of the poem is what gives it a semblance of organic structure; like living substance, a work of art is inviolable; break its elements apart, and they no longer are what they were—the whole image is gone.

I wish we could analyze all the leading principles; but I have already made great demands on your attention, and the two remaining subjects, rhythm and the illusion of development, or growth, are difficult. So I can only say, in conclusion, that the more you study artistic composition, the more lucidly you see its likeness to the composition of life itself, from the elementary biological patterns to the great structures of human feeling and personality that are the import of our crowning works of art; and it is by virtue of this likeness that a picture, a song, a poem is more than a thing—that it seems to be a living form, created, not mechanically contrived, for the expression of a meaning that seems inherent in the work itself: our own sentient being, Reality.

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ARTISTIC PERCEPTION AND
“NATURAL LIGHT”

By artistic perception I mean the perception of *expressiveness* in works of art. Expressiveness belongs to every successful work; it is not limited to pictures, poems, or other compositions that make a reference to human beings and their feelings, show looks and gestures or emotionally charged situations. The representation of feeling is one thing, the specifically artistic expression of it is another. A wholly non-representational design, a happily proportioned building, a beautiful pot may, artistically speaking, be just as expressive as a love-sonnet or a religious picture. It has an import which is, I think, a wordlessly presented conception of *what life feels like*. That is the significance of “Significant Form” (to use Clive Bell’s much-attacked phrase), the “livingness” Augusto Centeno calls the essence of art, the cryptic “artistic truth” that is independent of facts and actualities. I call it vital import: “vital,” because it is always