

Susanne K. Langer

FEELING
AND
FORM

A THEORY OF ART

DEVELOPED FROM *Philosophy in a New Key*

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT SOURCES QUOTED

- AMES, VAN METER, *Aesthetics of The Novel*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1928.
- ARMITAGE, MERLE, *Modern Dance*, E. Weyhe, New York, 1935.
- BARNES, A. C., *The Art in Painting*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., New York, 1928.
- BATESON, F. W., *English Poetry and The English Language*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, England, 1934.
- BENTLEY, ERIC, "The Drama At Ebb," *The Kenyon Review*, Gambier, Ohio, 1945.
- BROWN, CALVIN, *Music and Literature*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1948.
- BYNNER, WITTER, *The Jade Mountain*. Copyright 1929 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York.
- COLLINGWOOD, R. G., *The Principles of Art*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, England, 1938.
- DAICHES, DAVID, *The Novel and The Modern World*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1939.
- DE LA MARE, WALTER, "Berries," from *Collected Poems*, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., New York, 1920. Copyright 1948 by Walter de la Mare.
- EISENSTEIN, SERGEI, *The Film Sense*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., New York, 1942.
- FERGUSON, FRANCIS, *The Idea of a Theater*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1949.
- GOLDWATER, ROBERT, and TREVES, MARCO (editors), *Artists on Art*, Pantheon Books, Inc., New York, 1945.
- MONTAGUE, C. E., *A Writer's Notes on His Trade*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1930.
- PRALL, DAVID W., *Aesthetic Analysis*, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York, 1936.
- SACHS, CURT, *World History of The Dance*, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., New York, 1937.
- TILLYARD, E. M. W., *Poetry, Direct and Oblique*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1934.

COPYRIGHT, 1953, BY
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

Printed in the United States of America
B-4.58[MH]

*All rights reserved. No part of this book
may be reproduced in any form without
the permission of Charles Scribner's Sons*

INTRODUCTION

In *Philosophy in a New Key* it was said that the theory of symbolism there developed should lead to a critique of art as serious and far-reaching as the critique of science that stems from the analysis of discursive symbolism. *Feeling and Form* purports to fulfill that promise, to be that critique of art.

Since this philosophy of art rests squarely on the above-mentioned semantic theory, the present book cannot but presuppose the reader's acquaintance with the previous one; it is, in fact, in the nature of a sequel. I would rather have made it quite independent, but its own subject matter is so large—despite the sketchy form it has sometimes taken—that to repeat the relevant or even the most essential contents of the earlier book would have necessitated two volumes, the first of which would, of course, have practically duplicated the work which already exists. So I must beg the reader to regard *Feeling and Form* as, in effect, Volume II of the study in symbolism that began with *Philosophy in a New Key*.

A book, like a human being, cannot do everything; it cannot answer in a few hundred pages all the questions which the Elephant's Child in his 'satiabile curiosity might choose to ask. So I may as well state at once what it does not attempt to do. It does not offer criteria for judging "masterpieces," nor even successful as against unsuccessful lesser works—pictures, poems, musical pieces, dances, or any other. It does not set up canons of taste. It does not predict what is possible or impossible in the confines of any art, what materials may be used in it, what subjects will be found congenial to it, etc. It will not help anyone to an artistic conception, nor teach him how to carry one out in any medium. All such norms and rulings seem to me to lie outside of the philosopher's province. The business of philosophy is to unravel and organize concepts, to give definite and satisfactory meanings to the terms we use in talking about any subject (in this case art); it is, as Charles Peirce said, "to make our ideas clear."

Neither does this book coordinate theories of art with metaphysical

perspectives, "world hypotheses" as Stephen Pepper calls them. That aim is not outside of philosophy, but beyond the scope of my present philosophical study. In the limits I have set myself, I can develop only one theory of art, and have not constructed the "world hypothesis" that might embrace it—let alone compare such a vast conceptual system with any alternative one.

There are, furthermore, limitations I have to accept simply in the interest of keeping my own ideas and their presentation manageable. The first of these is, not to take issue explicitly with the many theories, classical or current, that contradict my own at crucial points. Were I to follow out every refutation of other doctrines which my line of argument implies, that line would be lost in a tangle of controversy. Consequently I have avoided polemics as much as possible (though, of course, not altogether), and presented for discussion mainly those of my colleagues' and forerunners' ideas on which I can build, directing criticism against what seem to me their limitations or mistakes. As often as possible, moreover, I have relegated comparative materials to the footnotes. That makes for many annotations (especially in the chapters on poetry, fiction, and drama, subjects that are traditionally studied by scholars, so that their critical literature is enormous), but it allows the text to proceed, unencumbered by any arabesques of eclectic learning, as directly as possible with the development of its own large theme. The footnotes have thus become more than just references by chapter and verse, and are intended for the general reader as well as the special student; I have, therefore, departed from the strict custom of leaving quotations from foreign authors in their original languages, and have translated all such passages into English, in the notes as in the text. Wherever, therefore, no translator of a work with a foreign title is named, the translation is my own.

Finally, nothing in this book is exhaustively treated. Every subject in it demands further analysis, research, invention. That is because it is essentially an exploratory work, which—as Whitehead once said of William James's pragmatism—"chiefly starts a lot of hares for people to chase."

What *Feeling and Form* does undertake to do, is to specify the meanings of the words: expression, creation, symbol, import, intuition, vitality, and organic form, in such a way that we may understand, in terms of them, the nature of art and its relation to feeling, the relative autonomy

of the several arts and their fundamental unity in "Art" itself, the functions of subject matter and medium, the epistemological problems of artistic "communication" and "truth." A great many other problems—for instance, whether performance is "creation," "recreation," or "mere craftsmanship," whether drama is "literature" or not, why the dance often reaches the zenith of its development in the primitive stage of a culture when other arts are just dawning on its ethnic horizon, to mention but a few—develop from the central ones and, like them, take answerable form. The main purpose of the book, therefore, may be described as the construction of an intellectual framework for philosophical studies, general or detailed, relating to art.

There are certain difficulties peculiar to this undertaking, some of which are of a practical, some of a semantical nature. In the first place, philosophy of art should, I believe, begin in the studio, not the gallery, auditorium, or library. Just as the philosophy of science required for its proper development the standpoint of the scientist, not of men like Comte, Buechner, Spencer, and Haeckel, who saw "science" as a whole, but without any conception of its real problems and working concepts, so the philosophy of art requires the standpoint of the artist to test the power of its concepts and prevent empty or naive generalizations. The philosopher must know the arts, so to speak, "from the inside." But no one can know all the arts in this way. This entails an arduous amount of non-academic study. His teachers, furthermore, are artists, and they speak their own language, which largely resists translation into the more careful, literal vocabulary of philosophy. This is likely to arouse his impatience. But it is, in fact, impossible to talk about art without adopting to some extent the language of the artists. The reason why they talk as they do is not entirely (though it is partly) that they are discursively untrained and popular in their speech; nor do they, misled by "bad speech habits," accept a "ghost in the machine" view of man, as Gilbert Ryle holds. Their vocabulary is metaphorical because it has to be plastic and powerful to let them speak their serious and often difficult thoughts. They cannot see art as "merely" this-or-that easily comprehensible phenomenon; they are too interested in it to make concessions to language. The critic who despises their poetic speech is all too likely to be superficial in his examination of it, and to impute to them ideas they

do not hold rather than to discover what they really think and know.

But to learn the language of the studios is not enough; his business as a philosopher, after all, is to use what he learns, to construct theory, not a "working myth." And when he addresses his own colleagues he runs into a new semantic difficulty: instead of interpreting artists' metaphors, he now has to battle with the vagaries of professional usage. Words that he employs in all sobriety and exactness may be used in entirely different senses by writers as serious as he. Consider, for instance, a word around which this whole book is built: "symbol." Cecil Day Lewis, in his excellent book *The Poetic Image*, means by it always what I have called an "assigned symbol," a sign with a literal meaning fixed by convention; Collingwood goes still further and limits the term to *deliberately chosen* signs, such as the symbols of symbolic logic. Then he stretches the term "language" to cover everything I would call "symbols," including religious icons, rites, and works of art.¹ Albert Cook, on the other hand, opposes "symbol" to "concept"; by the latter he means what Day Lewis means by "symbol," *plus* everything that he (Cook) condemns as "mechanical," such as the comedy of Rabelais. He speaks of "symbol's infinite suggestiveness."² Evidently "symbol" means something vaguely honorific, but I do not know what. David Daiches has still another usage, and indeed a definition: "As used here," he says in *A Study of Literature*, "it ['symbol'] simply means an expression which suggests more than it says."³ But shortly afterwards he restricts its sense very radically: "A symbol is something in which sensitive men recognize their potential fate . . ."⁴ Here the meaning of "symbol" may or may not be the same one that Mr. Cook has in mind.

All the poor philosopher can do is to define his words and trust the reader to bear their definition in mind. Often, however, the reader is not ready to accept a definition—especially if it is in any way unusual—until he sees what the author intends by it, why the word should be so defined; and that may be late in the course of the book. My own definition of "symbol" occurs, for just that reason, in chapter 20; and as that is really very late, perhaps I had better state it here, with the promise that the

¹A fairly full discussion of Collingwood's work is given below, in chap. 20.

²*The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean*, p. 173.

³*Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴*Loc. cit., infra.*

book will elucidate and justify it: A symbol is any device whereby we are enabled to make an abstraction.

Almost all the key words in a philosophical discourse suffer from the wide range of meanings which they have had in previous literature. Thus Eisenstein, in *The Film Sense*, uses "representation" for what one usually calls "image," and "image" for something not necessarily concrete—what I would call an "impression." Yet his word "image" has something in common with Day Lewis's "poetic image"; furthermore there is this to be said for it—both men know, and let us know, what they mean by it.

A more difficult term, and an all-important one in this book, is "illusion." It is commonly confused with "delusion," wherefore the mention of it in connection with art usually evokes instant protests, as though one had suggested that art is a "mere delusion." But illusion as it occurs in art has nothing to do with delusion, not even with self-deception or pretense.

Besides the difficulties presented to art theory in general by the good and bad odors of words, which interfere with their strict meanings, and by the variety of even their defined meanings in the literature, each art has its special incubus of natural misconceptions. Music suffers more than any other art from the fact that it has marked somatic effects, which are all too often taken for its essential virtue. The affliction of literature is its relation to fact, propositional truth; of the drama, its nearness to moral questions; of dance, the personal element, the sensual interest; of painting and sculpture, the pseudo-problem of "imitation"; of architecture, the obvious fact of its utility. I have battled against all these bogeys as best I could; in the end, however, I hope it may be not direct refutations, but the theory itself, the whole systematic idea that will dispel special as well as general prejudices.

Toward the end of the book one might well expect that the ideas developed in relation to some art taken in isolation would be generalized and carried over to the other arts. Often the reader will be able to do this, and wonder why I neglected it. The reason is that when I do bring the arts into relation, and demonstrate their fundamental unity, it will be systematically done; that is another book.

Nothing in this essay, therefore, is finished, nor could art theory ever be finished. There may be new arts in the future; there may surely be

new modes of any art; our own age has seen the birth of the motion picture, which is not only in a new medium, but is a new mode (see the Appendix, "A Note on the Film"). But as *Philosophy in a New Key* was a promise of a philosophy of art, this book, I fondly hope, is a beginning of something capable of indefinite continuation.

It would probably not be even a beginning—would not be at all—without the constant support of several friends who have aided me. For nearly four years I enjoyed, through the sponsorship of Columbia University, the help of the Rockefeller Foundation, that lightened my teaching load so I could devote myself to research, and gave me also, part of the time, an invaluable assistant. I thank both the Foundation and the University most heartily. The thanks I owe to that assistant, Eugene T. Gadol, cannot easily be rendered; besides putting his special knowledge of the theater at my disposal, he has been associated with the work almost constantly, and indeed has been my right hand. Furthermore, I want to express my special gratitude to Helen Sewell, who has given me the artist's view on many things, and has read and reread the script; in the light of her trenchant and frank criticism, chapter 5 was almost completely rewritten, and the faults that it retains are due to the fact that she did not write it. I am also indebted to Katrina Fischer for the research assistance she gave me with chapter 18, and to my sister, Ilse Dunbar, for help with the many translations from French and German sources; to Alice Dunbar for a sculptor's advices, and for her last-minute help in preparing the script for the press; and to Kurt Appelbaum for reading almost the whole work and giving me the benefit of a musician's very well-reasoned reflections. My debt to several of my former students is, I think, sufficiently clear in the text. But I must add a word in appreciation of the co-operative spirit with which the staff of Charles Scribner's Sons, especially Mr. Burroughs Mitchell, made this volume take shape according to my hopes.

A book that goes into the world with such a heavy load of gratitude is almost a community venture. I hope the community of artists, art lovers, and scholars will receive it with continued interest, and keep it alive by serious criticism.

S. K. L.

CONTENTS

Introduction

vii

Part I

THE ART SYMBOL

CHAPTER I The Measure of Ideas 3

Philosophy the study of basic concepts—rival doctrines a sign of inadequate concepts—art theory full of confusions—its basic problems not formulated—"fallacy of obvious abstraction"—methodology and method—generalities and generalizations—requirements of philosophical thinking—principle of generalization—principle of fecundity—function of a central problem—problem of artistic creation—systematic emergence of general concepts and special problems—difficulties and promises of this undertaking.

2 Paradoxes 12

Key ideas in aesthetics heterogeneous—each gives rise to a special type of theory—further complication due to two standpoints—expression and impression—tendency of theories to be paradoxical—"polarity" of feeling and form—feelings in art not felt—paradox of "objective feeling"—Baens on feeling as quality—his distinctions—old issue of "Significant Form."

3 The Symbol of Feeling 24

Several meanings of "expression"—all kinds found in art—most kinds not peculiar to art—summary of special theory of music in *Philosophy in a New Key*—music a symbolic expression of feeling—summary of semantic theory—articulated forms—vital import—meaning of "significant form" in music—Clive Bell and plastic art—Bell on "aesthetic emotion"—"aesthetic attitude"—source of the concept—supposed difficulties of attitude—criticism of psychological approach—the art symbol—technique—definition of "art."

Part II

THE MAKING OF THE SYMBOL

4 Semblance 45

"Aesthetic attitude" elicited by the work—illusion—images—their virtual character—semblance—Schiller on the function of *Schein*—abstraction of form—form and content—import as content of artistic forms—Prall on sensuous forms—on feeling in art—limitation of his principles—creation of virtual forms—design as logic of artistic vision—relation to feeling—movement and growth—"living form"—creation.

5 Virtual Space 69

Motifs—not works, but devices—suggestive shapes—form and representation—pure decoration expressive—representation as motif—visual articulation the aim of all plastic art—shaping of space—actual space and virtual space—primary illusion of plastic art—its autonomous char-

- acter—Hildebrand on "perceptual space"—"architectonic process"—the picture plane—third dimension—"actual form" and "perceptual form"—unity of perceptual space—visual values—imitation and creation—space made visible—"life" in works of art—expression of vital feeling—nature of "expressiveness"—primary illusion the basic creation—elements and materials—modes.
- 6 The Modes of Virtual Space 86
 Virtual "scene"—Hildebrand's generalization false—organic form of sculpture—"kinetic volume"—subjective space objectified—architecture and virtual space—arrangement and creation—"ethnic domain"—organic articulation of place—relation between sculpture and architecture—autonomy and unity of the arts.
- 7 The Image of Time 104
 Interest in materials—theories of sound and audition—not musical theory—nervous responses—vibrations—musical elements are audible forms—their motion illusory—primary illusion is virtual time—difference from "clock-time"—not one-dimensional—passage not succession of "states"—incommensurable tensions—musical time and pure duration—Bergson's failing—music and Bergson's *durée réelle*—musicians his really constructive critics—fear of "spatialization" unfounded—"musical space"—parallels with plastic space-conceptions—further problems.
- 8 The Musical Matrix 120
 Composition and presentation—organic whole the essential conception—"commanding form" and composition—not the same as the *Urhmic*—principles of art and major devices—many kinds of music—definition of rhythm—greatest rhythm the "commanding form"—objectivity of musical matrix.
- 9 The Living Work 133
 Ambiguity of "the piece"—inward hearing and physical hearing—poetry and music not simply comparable—essential factors in physical hearing—in inward hearing—composition incomplete—performance its completion—controlled by musical matrix—utterance—artistic expression and self-expression—actual feeling for the piece—pathos of the voice—formalization—musical imagination versus "mere technique"—power of listening—developed by practice—radio and records—advantages and dangers.
- 10 The Principle of Assimilation 149
 Words and music—theory and practice often at variance—words become musical elements—but not mere sounds—"aesthetic surface" not the perceptual form—form "swallows" foreign materials—poetic forms broken down—music swallows drama—Staiger on Wagner and Gluck—program music—hermeneutic principles as motifs—irrelevance of associations—daydream "swallows" music—other arts may do so.
- 11 Virtual Powers 169
 Aesthetics of dance presents special difficulties—dance as a musical art—contrary evidence and views—dance as plastic art—Noverre—as dramatic art—objections—dance an independent art—gesture its basic abstraction—complex nature of gesture—subjective and objective—actual gestures as material—virtual gesture—vital forces—dance—forces as virtual powers—dancers on self-expression—practice belies theory—imagined feeling—semblance of self-expression—confusion of actual and virtual aspects—dance—personages as virtual beings—*Scheingefühle*—analysis of problems involved—mythical statements resolved—value of the theory.

- 12 **The Magic Circle** 188
 Primitive conception of Powers—the Spirit World—Cassirer on the “mythic consciousness”—sense of power objectified in dance—prehistoric evolution of dance—Curt Sachs on types of mind—natural forms as motifs—what is created—illusion of freedom from actual forces—ballet—dance as apparition—dancer and his “world”—music as dance-element—balletic time and space—effect of passive audience—effects of secularization—entertainment—effect of dance on music—confusion of thought and clearness of intuition in dancers—dance as pure art.
- 13 **Poesis** 208
 Literature called art, but treated as statement—discourse its material—ways of saying things—criticism and paraphrase—I. A. Richards on understanding poetry—saying and creating—poetic illusion made by discourse—virtual life—all literary art poetic—two senses of “life”—semblance of events—subjective form—events the basic abstraction—philosophy in poetry—fiction and fact—dialect—Tillyard on “direct” and “oblique” poetry—fallacy of “deeper meanings”—no poetry is statement—moral themes legitimate—laws of logic and of imagination—art and life.
- 14 **Life and Its Image** 236
 Imagination as miscarriage of reason—Cassirer on language and imagination—Barfield on language and myth—Freud on non-discursive symbols—psychoanalytic “meanings” not artistic import—artistic import not hidden—Freud’s study of non-discursive “logic”—principle of over-determination—of ambivalence—of absence of negatives—of condensation—“dream work” and art work—poetic devices and schools—the ideal of “pure poetry”—poetry defined as an experience—as a kind of language— inadequacy of such treatments—poetry as semblance of events admits all poetic works—all good poetry “pure”—reality of its import—sources in actual life—no subject taboo—transformation of fact—prose a poetic form.
- 15 **Virtual Memory** 258
 Lyric poetry the clearest case of creative language—not a pre-eminent art—present tense of the lyric—narrative a major literary device—change to perfect tense—closed form of past—virtual memory—apparent vagaries of tense have creative functions—mixed tenses in ballads—myth and legend literary materials—no composition without personal authorship—poetry not necessarily oral—literacy and poetic arts.
- 16 **The Great Literary Forms** 280
 Poetic conventions—literary forms spring from special devices—no absolute literary “values”—techniques and creative purposes—strong means make others superfluous—ballad technique—romance—verse becomes dispensable—prose fiction—novel a recent form—often viewed as comment, not art—illusion of “felt life”—story and story-teller—character creation—Clive Bell on Proust—secondary illusions in literature—fact as the “model”—non-fiction as applied art—exploiting discursive form as motif—specialization of forms—the epic as matrix of all literary forms.
- 17 **The Dramatic Illusion** 306
 Drama is poetry, but not “literature”—basis abstraction the act—mode of memory and mode of Destiny—virtual future—Morgan on “form in suspense”—wholeness of dramatic action—organic form—situation—“setting” versus “environment”—drama a collaborative art—poet furnishes speeches—speech as culmination of action—must be enacted—real and fictive feeling—theory of dramatic make-believe—Bullough on “psychical

- Distance"—drama as a ritual—as amusement—as work-of-all-arts—Hindu theory—belied by Hindu stage practice—drama as dance—drama "swallows" dancing—*Rasa*—Oriental drama enacts physical objects—all elements of drama poetic.
- 18 The Great Dramatic Forms: The Comic Rhythm 326
- Moralism in dramatic theory—comedy as social criticism—tragic and comic as points of view—really different structures—universal sense of life—life and death—the comic rhythm—destiny as Fortune—the tragic rhythm—destiny as Fate—serious comedy—"Divine Comedy"—the *Nataka*—heroic plays—comedy and humor—theories of laughter—all ignore "psychical Distance"—humor a structural element in comedy—the buffoon—humor as brilliance of drama—many sources of comedy—audience response not ordinary laughter—the rhythm of universal life.
- 19 The Great Dramatic Forms: The Tragic Rhythm 351
- The tragic rhythm—potentiality and fulfillment—life as a total action—Fate—tragedy not known everywhere—"commanding form" of action—condensed life—the "tragic error"—tragedy does not illustrate fate, but creates its image—comic elements—comic substructure—function of spectacle—mere spectacle—drama not a hybrid art—its real relation to life.

Part III

THE POWER OF THE SYMBOL

- 20 Expressiveness 369
- Art symbol not a symbolism—central questions in philosophy of art—non-temporal projections of feeling—life of feeling—all vital patterns organic—associated ideas may vary—perception of import intuitive—Bergson on intuition—Croce on intuition and expression—consequences of his theory—Cassirer on abstraction and insight—art symbol does not "refer" or "communicate"—Collingwood on art as "language"—on candor and corruption—on irrelevance of technique—criticism of his book—fear of symbol-theory—dangers and strength of such theory—art and craft—art and personality—the artist's understanding.
- 21 The Work and Its Public 392
- Artist and public—objectivity—the ideal beholder—problems of art-perception—artistic import not comment—always held in the symbol—perceptible's relation not to artist, but to the work—real nature of "aesthetic emotion"—beauty—primacy of responsiveness—freedom and frustration of response—anticipation of form—effect of art on life—education of feeling—art and religion—effects of secularization—entertainment—not the same as amusement—art criticism—talent and genius—"artistic temperament"—art as cultural heritage.

APPENDIX

- A Note on the Film 411
- Motion picture not drama—not pantomime—not a plastic art—"swallows" all materials—is a separate poetic mode—"virtual present," the dream mode—basic abstraction is "givenness"—moving camera—creative character of film.

- BIBLIOGRAPHY 417

- INDEX 424

PART I

The Art Symbol

THE MEASURE OF IDEAS

PARADOXES

THE SYMBOL OF FEELING

Chapter one

THE MEASURE OF IDEAS

Philosophy is a fabric of ideas. It is not, like science, a body of general propositions expressing discovered facts, nor is it a collection of "moral truths" learned by some other means than factual discovery. Philosophy is a stocktaking of the ideas in terms of which one expresses facts and laws, beliefs and maxims and hypotheses—in short, it is the study of the conceptual framework in which all our propositions, true or false, are made. It deals primarily with meanings—with the sense of what we say. If the terms of our discourse are incompatible or confused, the whole intellectual venture to which they belong is invalid; then our alleged beliefs are not false, but spurious.

The usual sign of confusion in our basic ideas on any topic is the persistence of rival doctrines, all many times refuted yet not abandoned. In a system of thought that is fundamentally clear, even if not entirely so, new theories usually make old ones obsolete. In a field where the basic concepts are not clear, conflicting outlooks and terminologies continue, side by side, to recruit adherents.

This is notoriously the case in the domain of art criticism. All considered judgment rests, of course, on theoretical foundations of some sort; but the greatest experts in this field cannot really develop an interesting theory to account for their findings. Philosophical reflections on art constitute a large and fascinating literature, ranging from learned treatises to pure belles-lettres—essays, aphorisms, memoirs, even poetry. In this accumulated lore a wealth of doctrines has been laid down, some of them the flower of a long tradition, others quite new, genial insights,

unsystematic but profound, and all of them in mixed profusion that obscures their natural connections with each other and with the history and actual life of the creative arts.

Yet the arts themselves exhibit a striking unity and logic, and seem to present a fair field for systematic thought. Why the confusion? Why the disconnected theories, the constantly alleged danger of losing touch with reality, the many philosophical beginnings that still fail to grow into organic intellectual structures? A truly enlightening theory of art should rise upon important artistic insights and evolve naturally from phase to phase, as the great edifices of thought—mathematics, logic, the sciences, theology, law, history—grow from perennial roots to further and further reaches of their own implications. Why is there no such systematic theory of art?

The reason is, I think, that the central issues in the appreciation and understanding of art, however clear they may be in practice, have not been philosophically sifted and recognized for what they are. A systematic discipline becomes organized only as its key problems are formulated; and often those problems, the solution of which would require and beget a powerful terminology and a principle of operation, are obscured by the incursion of *obvious* questions, immediately proposed by common sense, and regarded as “basic” because of their obviousness. Such questions are: What are the materials of art? Which is more important, form or content? What is Beauty? What are the canons of composition? How does a great work of art affect the beholder? Many of them have been mooted for hundreds of years, but when we make up our minds about the answers, theory goes no further. We have taken a stand, and we stand there.

All these questions are legitimate enough, and the purpose of a philosophy of art is to answer them. But as starting points of theory they are baneful, because they are products of “common sense,” and consequently foist the vocabulary and the whole conceptual framework of common sense on our thinking. And with that instrument we cannot think beyond the commonplace.

There are certain misconceptions about philosophical thinking that have arisen, oddly enough, from the very concern of modern philosophers with method—from the acceptance of principles and ideals that sound

impeccable as we avow them in conferences and symposia. One of these principles is that philosophy *deals with general notions*. This dictum is repeated in almost every introductory text, and voiced in one connection or another at every philosophical congress. The accent is always on the "general notions"; but the interesting point is that we profess to deal with them, and that this dealing is philosophy.

The immediate effect of the principle is to make people start their researches with attention to generalities: beauty, value, culture, and so forth. Such concepts, however, have no systematic virtue; they are not terms of description, as scientific concepts, e.g. mass, time, location, etc., are. They have no unit, and cannot be combined in definite proportions. They are "abstract qualities" like the elementary notions of Greek nature philosophy—wetness and dryness, heat and cold, lightness and heaviness. And just as no physics ever resulted from the classification of things by those attributes, so no art theory emerges from the contemplation of "aesthetic values." The desire to deal with general ideas from the outset, because that is supposed to be the business of philosophers, leads one into what may be termed "the fallacy of obvious abstraction": the abstraction and schematization of properties most obvious to common sense, traditionally recognized and embodied in the "material mode" of language.

Instead of constantly reiterating that philosophy deals with general ideas, or treats of "things in general," one should consider what it *does* in relation to general notions. Properly, I think, it constructs them. Out of what? Out of the more specific ones that we use in formulating our special and particularized knowledge—practical, scientific, social, or purely sensuous knowledge. Its work is a constant process of generalization. That process requires logical technique, imagination, and ingenuity; it is not achieved by beginning with generalities such as: "Art is expression," or "beauty is harmony." Propositions of this sort should occur at the end of a philosophical inquiry, not at its commencement. At the end, they are summaries of explicit and organized ideas that give them meaning; but as points of departure they prejudge too much and furnish no terms for their own elucidation.

Another unhappy product of our professional self-criticism is the dogma that philosophy can never really attain its goal, a completely syn-