



## Memory, imagination, and the cognitive value of the arts<sup>☆</sup>

Memory has many aspects which psychologists have not discovered, but of which the poet, who constructs its image, is aware. But the poet is not a psychologist; his knowledge is not explicit, but implicit in his conception of the image. The critic, analyzing the way the remembrance' of the virtual Past is made, is the person who is in a position to discover the intricacies of real memory through the artistic devices that achieve its semblance.

—Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*

The theory of art is really a prolegomenon to the much greater undertaking of constructing a concept of mind adequate to the living actuality.

—Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An essay on human feeling, Vol. 1*

### 1. Voluntary and involuntary memory in Proust's theory of art and consciousness

In a fitting tribute to William James's vision of psychology, Russell Epstein (2004) proposes that the arts can contribute to the scientific study of consciousness through the resources they provide for investigating the phenomenology of conscious experience. Epstein makes sensitive use of Proust's novel, *The Remembrance of Things Past*, to argue that the task of the writer is to “convey experience truly” (Epstein, p. 218), which for Proust meant creating a work of literary art that makes explicit “the whole nexus of associations, memories, and emotions”—usually present in the “fringe” or background of consciousness—that gives each experience its unique “savour and significance” and therefore constitutes its “essence” (Epstein, p. 224). By creating “a work of art that brings this savour into the foreground” (Epstein, p. 224), the writer is able to convey the kinds of insights into the essential depths of experience that Proust found in moments of involuntary memory.

Proust believed that involuntary memories “re-instantiate a moment in the past as it *actually* occurred” (Epstein, p. 217), recovering “the whole tangled web of sensory, emotional, and appetitive experiences” which “made up these earlier moments in time” (Epstein, p. 218). Voluntary memories, on the other hand, give us “the experience as reworked by intelligence and at least partially translated into concepts” (Epstein, p. 219), reflecting the purposes of “the intellect,” which is interested primarily in “generalizable knowledge about the world” (Epstein, p. 219). In taking his inspiration from moments of involuntary memory, Proust sought to capture “the ‘essence’ of things” (Epstein, p. 226)—“the intimate composition of those worlds which we call individuals” (Proust, quoted in Epstein, p. 227)—and to convey it to others through his art.

<sup>☆</sup> Commentary on Epstein, R. (2004). Consciousness, art, and the brain: Lessons from Marcel Proust. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 13, 213–243.

Although there are some difficulties with Proust's views of memory that appear to present a challenge to Epstein's thesis, a careful reinterpretation of their claims—aided by some long neglected insights into the nature of art and consciousness from the work of the American philosopher Susanne Langer—can lead to a deeper understanding of the significance that memory might have for the creator of literary art.

It is now widely recognized by researchers in the psychological sciences that “memory is not a literal reproduction of the past, but instead depends on constructive processes that are sometimes prone to errors, distortion, and illusions” (Schacter, Norman, & Koutstaal, 1998, p. 290). Especially prone to error, apparently, are people's memories of “what they used to think and feel” (Hyman & Loftus, 1998, p. 942). Recollection of a past experience is “simultaneously constrained by traces left in the mind by the event we are remembering itself, by background knowledge of related material, and by constraints and influences imposed by the situation surrounding the act of recollection” (McClelland, 1995, p. 69). Remembering, in short, “is not a retrieval” (McClelland, 1995, p. 69) but “a creative, constructive process” (Hyman & Loftus, 1998, p. 945). Proust recognized that voluntary memories are “structured by concepts” (Epstein, p. 219), but he believed that involuntary memories give us “a ‘true’ re-instantiation of an earlier experience” (Epstein, p. 217) in which interpretation plays no significant role. There are good reasons to believe, however, that *all* acts of recollection are essentially dependent on conceptual processes of some kind. Jean Mandler, for example, has argued that recall requires *images*, and that images are not “uninterpreted copies” of what a person has earlier perceived “but are constructed from the underlying meanings a person has already formed” (Mandler, 1998, p. 276). Meanings, in turn, are essentially dependent on a system of *conceptual representations*.

Mandler's account rests on a fundamental distinction between perceptual and conceptual processes, the latter constituting what Mark Johnson calls “a distinct level of cognitive operations” (Johnson, 1987, p. 27). Initially, elementary perceptual processes organize incoming perceptual information into a stable world of objects and patterns and operate on segmented perceptual displays to generate *perceptual schemas or prototypes* that are based on physical appearance or overall physical similarity. These perceptual schemas figure in representations of sensorimotor procedures—they are part of a system of procedural knowledge, itself inaccessible to consciousness, that underlies adaptive sensorimotor performance. A further level of processes operates on these elementary formulations to produce *image-schematic conceptual representations*, or image schemas.<sup>1</sup> Mandler proposes that image schemas are formed by an active, attention-based process of *perceptual analysis* that operates selectively to analyze perceptual arrays, abstracting some essential aspects and using them to produce simplified, more abstract

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<sup>1</sup> Mandler offers the following definition of *representation*, which I will adopt for the purposes of this paper: “Representation is defined most simply as stored information. (The terms *representation* and *knowledge* can be considered synonymous, but the term *representation* emphasizes the format in which knowledge is stored.) Any organism that takes in information from the world in such a fashion that it influences its later behavior is storing information and so can be said to represent that information. All learning requires storage of information and so requires representation in some form or other” (Mandler, 1998, p. 257). In a footnote Mandler adds: “Needless to say, information from the world is transformed by the input process. Because organisms add information of their own which is unrelated to the sensory properties of the input, the notion of representation makes no commitment to veridicality or the structure of the environment” (Mandler, 1998, p. 257).

representations. Although image schemas are inaccessible to consciousness, they provide a network of underlying meanings from which accessible concepts can be formed and brought to conscious awareness as images, language, or other vehicles of thought that Mandler argues are required for recalling the past, imagining the future, referring to things and classifying them according to kinds, carrying out inferences, planning, and making choices. The formation of image schemas occurs simultaneously and in parallel with the activity of the sensorimotor system, and image schemas form a network of conceptual representations that can be acquired and elaborated prior to and independently of language.

An *image* is thus an expression in consciousness of an underlying network of image-schematic conceptual representations, where the term “conceptual” is extended—as it is by Mark Johnson—to include “*any meaning structure whatever* [italics added]” (Johnson, 1987, p. 17) and is therefore not limited to propositional forms, traditionally understood. In Mandler’s theory conceptual representations are “transformations of perceptual information” (Mandler, 1998, p. 264) into analogical, nonpropositional forms of representation; and I propose that *imagination* can be defined as the set of capacities involved in constructing and elaborating the network of image-schematic conceptual representations that we use to formulate and organize our experiences—a process that Langer calls “the symbolic transformation of perceptions” (Langer, 1953, p. 128), or more generally, “the symbolic transformation of experiences” (Langer, 1942/1957a, p. 44). Image schemas form an enormous store of potentially accessible conceptual material, some of which is mapped onto the propositional structures of language. But in Langer’s theory of imagination, “things inaccessible to language . . . have their own forms of conception” (Langer, 1942/1957a, p. 265); and vast regions of the underlying network of meanings are mapped onto a variety of nonpropositional forms—the material of dreams, myth, ritual, narrative, and the arts—that Langer contends are all vehicles of conception, insight, thought, and understanding.<sup>2</sup> At the center of human experience stands the activity that Langer calls “imagining reality”—“conceiving the structure of it through words, images, or other symbols, and assimilating actual [experiences] to [the resulting conceptual structure] as they come” (Langer, 1962, p. 150). Furthermore, the activity that Johnson calls “metaphorical projection” (Johnson, 1987, p. xx) provides a basis for establishing conceptual relations between domains of experience, connecting them together to make the larger fabric of meaning that frames the human world. In this sense, the framework of the human world is something conceptual—perceptible only through symbols (i.e., vehicles of thought)<sup>3</sup>—and the world as it figures in human experience is conceptually structured.

<sup>2</sup> Langer first presented this thesis, along with the theory of *symbolic transformation*, in her best-known work, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Langer, 1942/1957a), the third edition of which is still in print.

<sup>3</sup> Conceptual representations are “brought to mind,” or expressed in conscious experience, as images, language, or other vehicles of thought, which Langer calls “symbols” or “symbolic forms” throughout her writings. Although Mandler once used these terms as well (e.g., Mandler, 1988), she reports that she stopped talking about “symbolic processes” after 1988 because she had found the terminology “hopelessly contaminated by varying interpretations of its meaning” (J.M. Mandler, personal communication, July 5, 2003). Mandler’s theory allows access to the resources of Langer’s work by interpreting *symbol* as a general term for any of the forms in which image-schematic conceptual representations appear or are expressed in conscious experience.

*Narrative*, for example, can be understood as an elaboration of the imaginative structures that we use to conceive the passage of events. Katherine Nelson has argued that both specific and general mental representations of events “are basic forms of cognition available in early childhood” (Nelson, 1996, p. 190). Recent research has shown that elementary perceptual processes parse the stream of experience into distinguishable events “with boundaries, beginnings, and endings” (Nelson, 1996, p. 16) that structure our experience of time into “meaningful units” (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 140):

Temporal experience consists of drawing out from the continual flow of successive moments episodic patterns by marking off beginning and ending points. Linking events into a unified episode lifts them from their temporal surroundings and yields a whole that is internally articulated into its contributing parts. This configuration creates a temporal part-whole relation through which events are grasped as temporal Gestalten (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 140).

Polkinghorne characterizes narrative discourse as the expression of a set of “cognitive structuring processes” (Polkinghorne, 1991, p. 137) that build on these perceptual processes to formulate our understanding of human actions, whole lives, and much larger histories. Forms of narrative are therefore grounded in the general human capacity to construct conceptual representations; and Nelson (1989) has presented evidence that the capacity to understand and produce narrative discourse, which appears during the third year of life, serves a primary cognitive need to *make sense of experience*, rather than an interest in communicating with others. Seen from this perspective, one of the central cognitive tasks of childhood, and continuing throughout life, is the work of *construing reality*—using the conceptual representations expressed in language as “a way of coming to know about the world” (Nelson, 1989, p. 17). The arts, along with the other expressions of human imagination, make an essential contribution to this cognitive project.

## 2. Works of art as constructed images

There are several characteristics of *images* that are important for understanding their role in human cognition and their relationship to works of art:

- (1) An image is a *perceptible form*—a gestalt structure consisting of parts standing in relations and organized into unified wholes.<sup>4</sup>
- (2) An image is *abstract*, *selective*, and *interpretive*.
- (3) An image serves essentially *conceptual* or *symbolic* purposes; it is first and foremost a vehicle of thought.
- (4) An image abstracts the *phenomenal character* of an object, event, or situation—“its immediate effect on our sensibility or the way it presents itself as something of importance, magnitude, strength or fragility, permanence or transience, etc.” (Langer, 1967, p. 59).

Langer notes that some of the actualities we encounter have a predominantly *imaginal status*. Rainbows, for example, or the world reflected in a mirror appear to be fully concrete actualities although they are perceptible only through the agency of a single sense. Langer calls such things *virtual entities*, and the experience we have of them probably reflects a fundamental principle of human cognition—*metonymic understanding*—in which “we take one well-understood or easily

<sup>4</sup> But see Footnote 5 for an important qualification of this definition.

perceived aspect of something to represent or stand in for the thing as a whole” (Gibbs, 1994, p. 358).

All images are selective and interpretive of the experiences they represent. There are a multitude of ways in which any given experience might be construed—and hence formulated and expressed in a constellation of images—and the choices we make reflect the features that strike us as interesting or compelling, alluring or unsettling, reassuring or terrifying, holy or unholy, as the case may be. Mandler notes that conceptual representations and the images to which they give rise are based on “abstract characteristics” that “experiences have in common” (Mandler, 1992, p. 595). Langer emphasizes that “there is a kind of quality that different colors, or even a tonal form and a visual one, may have in common; even events may have the same quality, say of mystery, of portentousness, of breeziness; and a word like ‘breeziness’ bespeaks the qualitative similarity of some moods and some weathers” (Langer, 1967, p. 106). Similarly, Epstein speaks of a “quality” common to different “sensations, objects, situations, or events,” and he refers to events that have a similar “emotional structure” (Epstein, p. 225). Although Mandler herself does not consider the possibility, I propose that the abstract characteristics she refers to as the basis of conceptual representations might include the sorts of qualities that Epstein and Langer are talking about—qualities derived from the affective and motivational significance that experiences may have. “The universe contains an infinite number of objects,” Epstein writes; and “we choose what to look at [and, I would add, *how* we look at it] based on our concerns, our memories, our sensibility” (Epstein, p. 228). Experience as it is directly lived, Langer argues, is “qualitative in [its] very constitution” (Langer, 1953, p. 223) and presents itself to us in a mode “in which action and feeling, sensory value and moral value, causal connection and symbolic connection are still undivorced” (Langer, 1953, p. 217). In abstracting the phenomenal character of lived experience, an image “shows how something appears” (Langer, 1967, p. xix) to a particular sensibility or “apprehensive condition of the soul” (Langer, 1967, p. 118).

A mental image is a purely private occurrence. A work of art, by contrast, is what Langer calls a “constructed image” (Langer, 1967, p. 94); that is, it exhibits some of the important characteristics of mental images but is embodied in an object or some other publicly accessible medium. Like an image, for example, an artistic form is “a perceptual unity of something seen, heard, or imagined—that is, the configuration, or *Gestalt*, of an experience” (Langer, 1957b, p. 165).<sup>5</sup> A work of art, however, “is a much more intricate thing than we usually think of as a form [or

<sup>5</sup> Note that Langer is here extending the definition of *image* beyond its application to *sensory* forms in the strict meaning of the term. In defining art as “the practice of creating perceptible forms expressive of human feeling” (Langer, 1962, p. 84), Langer emphasizes that she is using the term “perceptible” rather than “sensuous” because “some works of art are given to imagination rather than to the outward senses,” and adds: “A novel, for instance, usually is read silently with the eye, but is not made for vision, as a painting is; and though sound plays a vital part in poetry, words even in poetry are not essentially sonorous structures like music” (Langer, 1962, p. 84). Later in the same essay she repeats her definition of a work of art as a *form* in the sense of “an apparition given to our perception,” and adds: “It may be a permanent form like a building or a vase or a picture, or a transient, dynamic form like a melody or a dance, or even a form given to imagination, like the passage of purely imaginary, apparent events that constitutes a literary work. But it is always a perceptible, self-identical whole” (Langer, 1962, p. 86). Hence, Langer’s definition of a work of art as a “perceptible form” (Langer, 1957b, p. 7) or “constructed image” (Langer, 1967, p. 94) differs in significant ways from Epstein’s “ordered set of sensory surfaces” (Epstein, p. 230), which recalls David Prall’s concept of the *aesthetic surface*. (For a further discussion of the limitations of Prall’s concept, see Langer, 1953, pp. 54–59).

*gestalt*], because it involves *all* the relationships of its elements to one another, all similarities and differences of quality, not only geometric, or other familiar relations” (Langer, 1953, p. 51). In a painting, for example, “a visible, individual form [is] produced by the interaction of colors, lines, surfaces, lights and shadows” (Langer, 1957b, p. 128). A work of art is also like an image in being primarily a vehicle of conception, but a conception of “things inaccessible to language” (Langer, 1942/1957a, p. 265). Works of art “abstract from experience certain aspects for our contemplation. But such abstractions are not concepts that have names . . . Artistic expression abstracts aspects of the life of feeling which have no names” (Langer, 1962, p. 94). And in contrast to the privacy of a mental image, the artist’s insights are set forth, worked out, and brought to completion through their *embodiment in an object*; and in this way, Langer argues, they are made publicly available, publicly knowable, and, in all these senses, *objectified*.

An image, whether spontaneous or constructed, is always a vehicle of conception. And what a work of art presents, or formulates for our conception, is an image of some aspect or dimension of *conscious experience*, which Langer calls “feeling” and defines quite broadly to include *the entire gamut of subjective reality*, “woven of thought and emotion, imagination and sense perception” (Langer, 1953, p. 127), and extending from “the sensibility of very low animals [to] the whole realm of human awareness and thought” (Langer, 1967, p. 55).<sup>6</sup> All these subjective aspects of mental life—“the way feelings, emotions, and all other subjective experiences come and go” (Langer, 1957b, p. 7)—form an intricate dynamic pattern of tremendous complexity. “The ways we are moved,” Langer notes, “are as various as the lights in a forest” (Langer, 1957b, p. 22). Much of what we experience, furthermore, “defies discursive formulation, and therefore verbal expression” (Langer, 1957b, p. 22); and “no matter how keen our experience may be, it is hard to form an idea of anything that has no name. It has no handle for the mind” (Langer, 1957b, p. 7). Through works of art, however, Langer believes that we can have access to genuine knowledge of aspects of the life of feeling that are “verbally ineffable” (Langer, 1957b, p. 26) but can nevertheless be expressed by means of “form and color, tone and tension and rhythm, contrast and softness and rest and motion” (Langer, 1957b, p. 95) in some artistic medium. A work of art “formulates our ideas of inward experience, as discourse formulates our ideas of things and facts in the outside world” (Langer, 1962, p. 90); and the arts make the myriad forms of subjective reality “apparent, objectively given so we may reflect on [them] and understand [them]” (Langer, 1957b, p. 73). Art is indispensable as both a product and an instrument of human insight because

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<sup>6</sup> Langer’s use of “feeling” as a *generic term for conscious experience* has led to frequent misunderstandings and has been a major source of confusion in interpreting her work. Langer states unequivocally that she is *not* using the term “in the arbitrarily limited sense of ‘pleasure or displeasure’ to which psychologists have often restricted it” (Langer, 1962, p. 8), nor is it a synonym for *emotion* (probably the most common misreading of her use of the term), but is to be taken “in [the] widest possible sense” (Langer, 1962, p. 8), to refer to “what is sometimes called ‘inner life,’ ‘subjective reality,’ [or] ‘consciousness’” (Langer, 1957b, p. 112). William James, in *The Principles of Psychology*, discusses the difficulty of choosing a single general term “by which to designate all states of consciousness merely as such, and apart from their particular quality or cognitive function” (James, 1890/1983, p. 185). He judges “thought” to be “by far the best word to use” (James, 1890/1983, p. 186), but acknowledges the difficulty of extending the term to cover sensations; and he concludes that “in this quandary we can make no definitive choice . . . My own partiality is for either FEELING or THOUGHT. I shall probably often use both words in a wider sense than usual,” to refer to “mental states at large, irrespective of their kind” (James, 1890/1983, p. 186). Langer’s choice of the term “feeling” can be seen as an attempt to deal with the same problem.

it makes possible the formulation of the verbally ineffable patterns of subjective experience, “that elusive aspect of reality that is commonly taken to be amorphous and chaotic”; that is, art “objectifies the subjective realm” (Langer, 1957b, p. 26).

A literary work, for example, presents what Langer calls a *virtual history*—an image of human experience in the mode typified by memory, which represents “life as a realm of events—completed, lived, as words formulate them—events that compose a Past” (Langer, 1953, p. 306). Langer argues that actual experience, as it unfolds in the present, is a “chaotic advance” (Langer, 1953, p. 266), dominated by the exigencies of practical action, in which thoughts, fantasies, beliefs, and expectations are usually “fragmentary, transient and often indefinite” (Langer, 1953, p. 212); and that experience takes on form and character only retrospectively, in the process of recounting it to ourselves and to others—that is, in remembering and retelling. “Memory is a special kind of experience, because it is composed of selected impressions, whereas actual experience is a welter of sights, sounds, feelings, physical strains, expectations, and minute, undeveloped reactions. Memory sifts all this material and represents it in the form of distinguishable events” (Langer, 1953, p. 263), shaping experience “into a distinct mode, under which it can be apprehended and valued” (Langer, 1953, p. 262).

In actual memory, recalled events may include sights, sounds, smells, and tastes, along with kinesthetic sensations and complex emotional qualities. But because language plays such a central role in the formation of human memory, an arrangement of words alone—if carefully chosen and composed—can stand in for the more complex experiences of actual remembering, and narrative discourse can capture and convey much of the appearance of actual lived experience. In a literary work the people, things, events, and situations are “created by words alone” (Langer, 1953, p. 216). Yet the virtual events that compose the work, though simplified, are “at the same time much more fully perceived and evaluated than the jumble of happenings in any person’s actual history” (Langer, 1953, p. 212). Langer notes that “the ‘livingness’ of a story is really much surer, and often greater, than that of actual experience” (Langer, 1953, p. 292); and she adds: “We sometimes praise a novel for approaching the vividness of actual events; usually, however, it exceeds them in vividness” (Langer, 1953, p. 292). In sum, literary composition depends on the general cognitive capacities that underlie metonymic understanding, as well as on the formulative power of language, to create the semblance of “a reality lived and remembered” (Langer, 1953, p. 273), which is *virtual memory*, “or history in the mode of an experienced Past” (Langer, 1953, p. 279), expressing the “logic” of a particular sensibility, through a use of the resources of language alone. Literary art creates an image of lived experience in the mode typified by memory, and this is one reason that memory figures so prominently in Proust’s aesthetics.

Yet the semblance of “a history entirely ‘experienced’” (Langer, 1953, p. 264) is only the *mode* in which events appear in a literary work. Langer emphasizes that the “fabric of virtual events” (Langer, 1953, p. 228) created by literary composition need not be explicitly presented as anyone’s experiences, impressions, or recollections. Furthermore, the essentially *experiential character* of virtual events may not even derive from the characteristic mode of experience of a single human consciousness, but from a shared sensibility that might be common to the people of a particular time, place, and social setting—either actual or fictitious. A work like the *Odyssey*, for example, or *War and Peace*, may present “the very elaborate composition of virtual events filling . . . an extended, imaginary ‘social consciousness’” (Langer, 1950–51, p. 233).

In Langer's view, each of the great orders of art creates the semblance of a different aspect or dimension of conscious experience. Each of the arts "begets a special dimension of experience" that is "a special kind of image" of some aspect of subjective reality (Langer, 1957b, p. 81). Langer calls this the *primary illusion* of an art—"a special sort of appearance, in terms of which all its works are made" (Langer, 1957b, p. 144).<sup>7</sup> The primary illusion created by a literary work, for example, is "the appearance of 'experiences,' the semblance of events lived and felt" (Langer, 1953, p. 212), a *virtual past*, or *virtual history* "in the mode typified by memory" (Langer, 1953, p. 264).<sup>8</sup> The primary illusion of the plastic arts—in which Langer includes painting, sculpture, and architecture—is "*virtual space* in its several modes" (Langer, 1953, p. 102). And the primary

<sup>7</sup> The term *illusion* has frequently been used in art criticism to refer to the appearance that works of art present of being *detached or set off from the surrounding world of actuality* (Langer, 1953, p. 46). Langer states emphatically that this is *not* a claim that art is essentially "make-believe, deception, or escape from truth" (Langer, 1957b, p. 30), but rather that a work of art *functions like an image*. An image, in Langer's view, is a purely *virtual* object, something that exists "only for the sense or the imagination that perceives [it]" (Langer, 1953, p. 50). A visual image, for example, is "a purely virtual 'object'" because "its importance lies in the fact that we do not use it to guide us to something tangible and practical, but treat it as a complete entity with only visual attributes and relations. It has no others; its visible character is its entire being" (Langer, 1953, p. 48). Similarly, a painting "is there for our eyes but not for our hands, nor does its visible space, however great, have any acoustical properties for our ears. The apparently solid volumes in it do not meet our common-sense criteria for the existence of objects; they exist for vision alone. The whole picture is a piece of purely visual space. It is nothing but a vision" (Langer, 1957b, p. 28), "given only to the sense of sight" (Langer, 1953, p. 49). Although an object with artistic merit like a vase or a building is "there" for more than just vision, it "presents itself so emphatically to the eye that it acts like a vision" (Langer, 1957b, p. 42). In this way, "real objects, functioning in a way that is normal for images, may assume a purely imaginal status" (Langer, 1953, p. 47). The visual appearance of a vase, for example, "is so strikingly revealed that all one's interest in the object centers on its visual aspect," and "the object itself seems like a sheer vision" (Langer, 1953, p. 302). It "arrests one sense so exclusively that it seems to be given to that sense alone, and all its other properties become irrelevant. It is quite honestly there, but is *important* only for (say) its visual character. Then we are prone to accept it as a vision; there is such a concentration on appearance that one has a sense of seeing sheer appearances—that is, a sense of illusion" (Langer, 1953, pp. 49–50). Because the term "illusion" has so many misleading associations, however, Langer often uses the terms *semblance* or *apparition* to refer to the essentially *imaginal status* of a work of art.

<sup>8</sup> Langer argues that drama, which is often treated as a literary art, is in fact "as different from genuine literature as sculpture from pictorial art, or either of these from architecture" (Langer, 1953, p. 306). Whereas "literature projects the image of life in the mode of virtual memory," which presents us with "finished realities," or "life as a realm of events—completed, lived, as words formulate them—events that compose a Past" (Langer, 1953, p. 306), drama gives us "immediate, visible responses of human beings" (Langer, 1953, p. 306). "Drama, though it implies past actions (the 'situation'), moves not toward the present, as narrative does, but toward something beyond; it deals essentially with commitments and consequences" (Langer, 1953, p. 307). Every human act "springs from the past," but what makes an act important for the purposes of drama is that it is "directed toward the future, and is always great with things to come" (Langer, 1953, p. 306). In drama the future "is made before our eyes" by agents who, "consciously or blindly," are "makers of the future" (Langer, 1953, p. 307). "The theater creates a perpetual present moment" that is essentially *dramatic* because it is "filled with its own future"—a future that is created by "the ominous forward movement of consequential action" (Langer, 1953, p. 307). Drama creates "a virtual history in the mode of dramatic action" (Langer, 1953, p. 307) that Langer terms a *virtual future*. In the theater, the "illusion of a visible future"—the appearance of the future as already "embryonic in the present"—"is created in every play" (Langer, 1953, p. 311). The essential dramatic quality is this "peculiar tension between the given present and its yet unrealized consequent" (Langer, 1953, p. 311), which "makes the present action seem like an integral part of the future, howbeit that future has not unfolded yet" (Langer, 1953, p. 308). Literary works "project a history in retrospect, whereas drama is history coming" (Langer, 1953, p. 321).

illusion of music is *virtual time*, “an auditory apparition” of felt time (Langer, 1957b, p. 37), or “time as we know it in direct experience” (Langer, 1953, p. 112).

### 3. Language and the semblance of lived experience

The way an experience is formulated—the language that is used in remembering and retelling it—expresses its effect on our sensibility, for every experience leaves the mark of its appearance and emotional value on the choices of language we make in recounting it. The way language is used, Epstein notes, “conveys a network of significances by which a particular person . . . assigns meanings to individual elements of the world” and reveals “how a specific mind interacted with a specific world context” (Epstein, p. 229) to bring forth experiences whose distinct “savour and significance” (Epstein, p. 224) are captured and conveyed by the language used to formulate them. The things that are noticed and emphasized; the things that are left out or pushed into the background; the associated thoughts, feelings, and impressions that come to mind; the choice and order of words; the length, rhythm, and complexity of the sentences; the directness or indirectness of expression; the uses of verb tense and mood; even the sounds of the words themselves—which “can influence one’s feeling about what they are known to mean” (Langer, 1953, p. 258)—all these and many other factors bespeak a particular “apprehensive condition of the soul” (Langer, 1967, p. 118), a unique mode of thinking and feeling that enters into the very events that figure in the telling.

The way a language is used expresses a unique mode of thinking and feeling; but a language is also the creation of a social group, whose culture and history have shaped the “network of significances” carried by the language as it enters into the formation of every individual consciousness and provides “the mold of our individual experience” (Langer, 1953, p. 220). To paraphrase Epstein, the way language is used conveys a network of significances by which a particular history of use by a community of language users has assigned meanings to individual elements of the world, and reveals how that community has interacted with specific social-cultural contexts throughout its history. Hence, the meanings of a language exist independently of any particular language user. They have been built up over a long history of efforts by speakers and writers to develop and refine the resources of the language in the service of formulating the experiences of the community and its members; and the history of those efforts is embodied in an accumulated oral tradition or recorded in written texts that are available to anyone who understands the language.

Every language user draws upon this public fund of meanings in shaping and expressing his or her own sensibility; and the literary artist is someone with a heightened sensitivity to the possibilities given in the language for creating the semblance of a unique sensibility. Because language is an essential ingredient in the creation of every actual subjectivity—the individual consciousness, that is, of every actual person—language alone, by the power of metonymic understanding, can be used to create the semblance of the unique mode of apprehension that is characteristic of a particular sensibility, individual or collective, real or imaginary. In this way every literary work creates what Langer calls a “virtual subjectivity” (Langer, 1953, p. 257).

The art of literary composition, like all the arts, “makes [the logic of consciousness] apparent, objectively given so we may reflect on it and understand it” (Langer, 1957b, p. 73). The “objectivity” of a literary work lies in the public accessibility of the work itself, of other written

texts, and of a wider body of utterances that have become part of a history of meaning-making in which the language has played an essential part, and which is therefore potentially recoverable by anyone familiar with the texts. A passage of writing that reflects a sensitivity to the resources that have been built into the language by a history of use will convey those meanings to a suitably prepared reader because it will activate an entire network of implicit understandings, a network that has been laid down as a result of the reader's exposure to the uses of language embodied in other texts. "In this sense," Langer observes, "the [literary work] 'exists' objectively whenever it is presented to us, instead of coming into being only when somebody makes 'certain integrated responses' to what [the writer] is saying" (Langer, 1953, p. 211).

Epstein defines a work of art as "an ordered set of sensory surfaces" (Epstein, p. 230) that are carefully chosen and technically well-executed for the purpose of *evoking* in the beholder a background (or underlying network of associations) that is similar in important respects to "the whole tangled web of sensory, emotional, and appetitive experiences" (Epstein, p. 6) in the mind of the artist that commanded the creation of the work itself. What an artist tries to achieve in creating a work of art, Epstein believes, is a "transfer of consciousness" (Epstein, p. 228, n. 7) from himself to the beholder that allows the beholder to "partake in the consciousness of the artist" himself (Epstein, p. 227). Epstein seems to use the terms "evoke," "induce," and "convey" more or less interchangeably; but in Langer's theory there is an important distinction between "evoking" or "inducing," on the one hand, and "conveying," on the other. The former terms belong to a "stimulus-response" theory of art that Langer rejects; the latter implies a theory that is distinctly "cognitive" (Langer, 1962, p. 93; see also Langer, 1957b, p. 25; Langer, 1967, p. 111). For Langer, every work of art is "a perceptible form" (Langer, 1957b, p. 7) or "constructed image" (Langer, 1967, p. 94) in which the insights of the artist are given to perception or imagination *as aspects of the work itself*—they are embodied, "objectified," and appear as factors in the total semblance that is the work of art—and are therefore *conveyed* to the prepared perceiver, as a carefully formulated sentence conveys a thought to someone who understands the language in which it is expressed, rather than being "evoked" or "induced" in the beholder by the work, as Epstein proposes.<sup>9</sup>

A person is an artist, Langer observes, "by virtue of his intuitive recognition of forms [expressive] of feeling [i.e., of the logic of consciousness], and his tendency to project emotive knowledge [i.e., knowledge of the dynamics of subjective experience] into such objective forms" (Langer, 1953, p. 390). But what is thereby realized through the expressive possibilities of some artistic medium may transcend the artist's own past experience and may become for the artist himself, as well as for the beholder, an instrument of further insight and discovery. "Although a work of art reveals the character of subjectivity, it is itself objective; its purpose is to objectify the life of feeling. As an abstracted form it can be handled apart from its sources and yield dynamic patterns that surprise even the artist" (Langer, 1953, p. 374), allowing him to realize "possibilities of subjective experience" in his own work "that he has not known in his personal life" (Langer, 1953, p. 390).

It follows from Langer's theory that there is a dialectical relationship between art and imagination. The different dimensions of imagination that govern the patterns of conscious experience

<sup>9</sup> See Footnote 5 for a discussion of the difference between Langer's "perceptible form" and Epstein's "ordered set of sensory surfaces."

find their expression in the arts; and imagination serves the uniquely human need for constructing and elaborating the image-schematic conceptual representations that are essential for structuring perception, understanding, action, and feeling. Each of the great orders of art reflects a different aspect of the network of conceptual representations that frames and supports the human world.<sup>10</sup> The arts in their turn guide and shape the forms of human imagination, and hence the forms of conscious experience, which—like all forms that are mediated by society, culture, and history—are subject to historical development and change. What Epstein (following Zeki) refers to as the “constancies” (Epstein, p. 238) that find their expression in visual and narrative art are therefore better understood as “relatively enduring forms or patterns” that are themselves not permanent but change and develop over time.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Involuntary memory revisited: Memory and the intimation of artistic truth

What, then, is the significance of memory for the art of literary composition? Although there is no special class of memories that can give “a ‘true’ re-instantiation of an earlier experience” (Epstein, p. 217), there is a sense in which the kinds of memories that Proust calls involuntary can nevertheless tell us something significant about “what experience is ‘really like’” (Epstein, p. 219). Proust’s two kinds of memories probably mark the end points of a graded series of memory experiences, all of which are structured by conceptual processes, but which differ in the extent to which they highlight selections from the associative network in the background of experience. As more and more strands of the “tangled web of sensory, emotional, and appetitive experiences” (Epstein, p. 218) that make up the associative background rise to prominence in the act of recollection, the kinds of conceptual processes required to structure the memory images become more complex, and their reliance on analogical, nonpropositional forms of representation becomes more significant. The characteristic that makes these kinds of memories important to a literary artist such as Proust is not their *veridicality*—their historical truth, or the truth of factual descriptions to actual occurrences, however subjective or detailed—but their intimations of *artistic truth*—the insights they can offer into the depth and complexity of episodes of conscious

<sup>10</sup> One of the most promising directions for future research is suggested by Langer’s claim—developed at length in *Feeling and Form* (Langer, 1953)—that each kind of art is best suited to express a different aspect or dimension of conscious experience and its image-schematic conceptual underpinnings. Drawing and painting, for example, serve the processes of visual imagination; music reflects and organizes our sense of experiential time; literary imagination governs the retrospective formulation of lived experience in remembering and retelling through the use of the resources of language and narrative; narrative imagination shapes our conceptions of human action and the course of human lives, and elaborates the basic forms of historical understanding; and dance uses “the unbroken fabric of gesture” (Langer, 1957b, p. 10) to formulate our conceptions of powers, or centers of living force, whose actions arise as an expression of intention and will. I have discussed these and other examples further in a separate work (Dryden, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Langer argues, for example, that changes in the forms of visual imagination—which is concerned with aspects of the underlying network of image-schematic conceptual representations that are especially suited to visual presentation and elaboration—have been reflected in, and in turn been influenced by, changes in pictorial space that can be seen in the history of drawing and painting (Langer, 1966, p. 42; Langer, 1967, p. 87). Similarly, Katherine Nelson (2000, 2003) has argued that the dialectical interaction between forms of narrative imagination—which is concerned with the activity of imagining, or making conceivable, the structure of events, human actions, and longer histories—and forms of narrative discourse can be seen in the history of literature.

experience—the actual as well as the merely possible, however fantastic or unreal—and the incentives they can therefore provide to the process of artistic creation.

Experiences like Proust’s “*moments bienheureux*” (Epstein, p. 217) can provide the initial suggestion of an “idea” of feeling—a complex quality to be achieved—that the writer then tries to develop further in the composition of a literary work. The initial inspiration may be indispensable, but its promise can only be fulfilled at the conclusion of the artist’s labors, which for a writer involve the achievement of “a well-wrought style” (Proust, quoted in Epstein, p. 224)—that is, a mastery of the resources of language for the purposes of creating the semblance of lived experience. More generally, what the artist first glimpses in whatever inspires the labor of creation is the possibility of constructing an image or complex perceptible form that expresses, in some artistic medium, an insight into some aspect or dimension of what Langer calls “the logic of consciousness” (Langer, 1957b, p. 26) so that others, as well as the artist, can contemplate and understand it.

### 5. Postscript: Langer, art, and the scientific study of consciousness

Epstein’s work provides valuable support for the efforts of other writers—such as Bruce Mangan, David Galin, and myself—who have argued that the arts offer a wealth of untapped resources for exploring the phenomenology of conscious experience. But all of us have a predecessor whose contributions to this project deserve wider recognition. Susanne Langer explored the importance of the arts for the scientific study of consciousness during the 1950s and 1960s, in the course of developing a systematic and comprehensive theory of the arts and a conceptual framework for the biological sciences that she believed would support an evolutionary account of the nature and origin of human mentality and its expressions in language and culture.<sup>12</sup> In direct opposition to the behaviorism that dominated psychology during those decades, Langer believed that *consciousness* or *subjectivity* is the proper subject matter of psychology (Langer, 1962, p. 4), and that “a conceptual framework for the empirical study of mind” (Langer, 1967, p. 257), grounded in the biological sciences, is “the most pressing need of our day” (Langer, 1962, p. 25). Langer argued that if psychology had a set of working concepts adequate to the problems of “conceiving mind as a natural phenomenon” (Langer, 1967, p. xxii), the study of mind should lead “down into biological structure and process,” as well as “upward to the purely human sphere known as ‘culture’” (Langer, 1967, p. 32).

Perhaps her most unusual claim, however, was that the arts could provide insights into the phenomena of conscious experience that are available in no other way, and that a detailed study of works of art was therefore essential for developing an adequate science of “life and mind in

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of Langer’s life and work, see Dryden (1997a, 1997b, 2003). For a somewhat different perspective on Langer’s theory of art and its relationship to James’s account of the stream of consciousness, see Dryden (2001). One of the consequences of Langer’s theory of art and imagination is that the key to understanding the nature, origin, and functions of the arts lies in the evolutionary history of the human imagination. For a discussion of Langer’s account of the evolution of the human brain and its capacity for culture in the light of recent work in biological anthropology and evolutionary theory, see Dryden (2004; see also Dryden, 1999, for a discussion of the relevant work of Terrence Deacon, 1997).

nature” (Langer, 1967, p. xvii). Every artist, she believed, has implicit, intuitive knowledge about some aspect of subjective reality that is reflected in the works he creates; and although the artist is not a psychologist and has no special *scientific* knowledge of the reality that finds expression in his work, his intuitive insights are set forth, worked out, and brought to completion through their *embodiment in an object* and are therefore publicly available for study in the work itself. As “a purified and simplified aspect of the outer world, composed by the laws of the inner world to express its nature” (Langer, 1957b, p. 11), a work of art sets some “piece of inward life objectively before us” (Langer, 1957b, p. 24) so we can “contemplate and understand it” (Langer, 1957b, p. 90), and it does so “with a degree of precision and detail beyond anything that direct introspection is apt to reveal” (Langer, 1967, p. 69). In this way the arts provide a unique access to many of the psychological phenomena that “we are seeking to understand in the systematic concepts and language of science” (Langer, 1967, p. xx), provided we can become “intellectually at home in both realms” (Langer, 1967, pp. xix–xx).

Although Langer was highly regarded as a philosopher of art in the 1950s, her later work met with a mixed critical response when it first appeared and has been largely neglected ever since, especially in psychology and the biological sciences, to which she had hoped to contribute.<sup>13</sup> Yet I believe her work offers some of the resources that are needed to give a more precise characterization of the relationship between art and the “fringe” of conscious experience that Epstein has importantly brought to our attention; and the entire body of Langer’s writings, when taken together with more recent work in the psychological sciences, provides a basis for building on Epstein’s perceptive contribution by reinterpreting it as a special case of a more general theory of imagination, cognition, art, and consciousness. Finally, Langer’s work has much to offer in support of James’s overall vision of psychology, which has been taken up in recent years by a number of writers, including Epstein, who have begun to demonstrate its relevance to the study of the phenomenology and neurobiology of consciousness. James is now widely recognized as an ally and a contemporary. The same recognition, I believe, should be accorded to Susanne Langer; and it is my hope that Epstein’s essay—and the ongoing conversation to which he has made such a valuable contribution—will lead to a recognition, long overdue, of the significance of her work.

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<sup>13</sup> The reasons for this neglect are complex, and I have discussed them at some length elsewhere (Dryden, 1997a).

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