

From Symbolic Form to Symbolic Function:  
Ernst Cassirer's Relevance to Integral Thought  
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## **Introduction:**

At heart, Ernst Cassirer was a Kantian. He eschewed ontology and anything hinting at teleology in favor of his epistemological interests. To those embedded (knowingly or unknowingly) within the Idealist/Romantic tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Cassirer's near idolatry of the scientific age and rational thought may appear to be antithetical to the cause of reuniting our "fallen" humanity with an objectified Nature – an Other that is merely a reflective surface for our glowing awareness; or, worse, a commodity with which humanity may continue to feed its advancement into "infinite growth". However, I would argue that, due to Cassirer's penetration and insight into what Jean Gebser would term the mental structure of consciousness, he was able to lift the veil shrouding us from an awareness of our own paradigmatic thought forms. He achieved precisely what he had intended to avoid: a transparency of thought pointing to a more integral awareness of what it means to be human. So though Cassirer seemed tethered to the Kantian tradition, he was simultaneously pulled into the future by the complete arbitrariness of symbolic thought – science, like art, language, and myth to Cassirer is symbolic thought – and its relative "reality" or "truth" to the epoch in which it is dominant. With a slight modification in terminology, we can place Cassirer on the verge of thought held by such 20<sup>th</sup> century luminaries as Whitehead, Gebser, Teilhard, and Auribindo. I believe that his thinking is key to understanding and fortifying the stance held by these thinkers, especially Gebser. By changing Cassirer's terminology from symbolic *form* to symbolic *function*, which I believe is implicit in his work, his

whole philosophy begins to take on the incandescent quality of a truly integral thinker. Nowhere does this appear more grandly than in Chapter IX of Cassirer's "An Essay On Man" entitled "Art". In this paper I will attempt to elucidate some of the implications of Cassirer's thought toward transforming our relationship to the outside world from one of subject /object, to one of subject /subject. Further, I will show that it is through the *living* medium of *symbolic function* (as opposed to the more traditional Kantian conception of *symbolic form*) that we may begin to see the glimmerings of a process-oriented ontology through the crystalline epistemology of Cassirer's thought. I wish to also compare Cassirer's short chapter with a section of Jean Gebser's *The Ever-Present Origin*, specifically Part 2, Chapter 3, "The Nature of Creativity". Herein we find the same luminous commentary, the same poetic language; the suggestion of creativity as something boundless, something transcendent.

**Creativity:**

*"One must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star."  
- Friedrich Nietzsche*

Inexhaustible creativity is one of the great mysteries of our world and, it seems to me, one of the defining characteristics of what it means to be human. Though we can surely attest to the creative power of nature in its dazzling array of forms and sentience – the cosmos itself is a work of such creative power as to forever elude our grasp – humans seem to be unique in their ability to create forms from forms; to create new means of expressing their perception of beauty in a way that, subsequently, redefines the relationship between ourselves and the world –

between our inside and our outside. We also seem to have the unique capacity to not only reflect upon our own thinking (that is to know that we are thinking), but to analyze how we think and to question the very fabric of “reality”. In modern society we tend to relegate ontology and epistemology strictly into the realm of philosophy. Since Kant’s time, teleology has been sequestered into theology. Due to this intense categorization of experience, and of course the dual nature of the current epoch, we have developed a tendency to look back through the history of thought and judge only the “rightness” or “wrongness” of philosophical arguments. This perspective is akin to a tree looking back at itself as a seed, a sprout, and judging itself incomplete. If we allow ourselves to step back and take in the history of human thought as a process of fluorescence, a painting gradually taking form, a figure emerging from stone – a macro version of our own unique creativity – then a picture may begin to issue forth hinting at the magnitude of the human project.

By restricting my view to two small, but important, aspects of Cassirer’s and Gebser’s thought, what I hope to achieve is not only the luminescence of the content but also the aesthetics of thinking itself. For many centuries, the “truth” of philosophical treatises has been based upon Logic. As we approach a more integral framework (if that analogy can be used here, itself a spatial construct) we must transcend logic and attempt to include beauty. Beauty is a felt experience that somehow vanishes under the scrutiny of logical thought. I am by no means suggesting that philosophy is no longer in need of logic, but asking the question: how can beauty be included?

## **Gebser on Creativity**

In order to set the tone for the nature of this discussion I'd like to turn our focus first toward Jean Gebser's notions of creativity found in the chapter mentioned above. He begins the chapter with a statement no less powerful, grand, and sweeping than those found in great literature ("Call me Ishmael" from Moby Dick comes immediately to mind.) He states, "In creativity, origin is present. Creativity

is not bound to space and time, and its truest effect can be found in mutation, the course of which is not continuous in time but rather spontaneous, acausal, and discontinuous. Creativity is a visibly emerging impulse of origin which 'is' in turn timeless, or more accurately, before or 'above' time and timelessness. And creativity is something that 'happens' to us, that fully effects or fulfills itself in us." (Gebser, 313)

I would like to take some time to unpack this paragraph, the implications of which are profound and far-reaching. In the very act, or activity, of creativity origin is present. Right out of the gates we are faced with a paradox: is creativity an act that is performed or an activity within which one participates, or both? Gebser moves headlong into an 'answer' to the problem in the very next paragraph by stating, "Creativity appears to be an irrational process, although it is actually arational." It is therefore an entity/process defying rational thought – especially that of a mental/spatial quality implying some level of self and other. From this perspective we are forced into two somewhat opposing camps – psychology, which might posit creativity as arising through chemical processes in the brain, or theology, which may imply that we are simply participating in an activity forever outside of ourselves. (These examples are highly oversimplified. I am simply attempting to illustrate the pitfalls of the rational perspective as a path to transcending its own dualisms.) Gebser goes on to say, "Our concern is with origin and its manifestation, creativity,

which to the extent that it takes place in man is effected in the formation of consciousness.” (ibid) Earlier, Gebser said that *in creativity origin is present*, now we read that creativity is a *manifestation of origin*. Again, were one to approach the text from the rational mind, these statements may appear to contradict one another. The problem, though, is not Gebser’s conception of the phenomenon but the inadequacy of language to amply convey its integral nature. “Through creativity preconscious origin becomes the conscious present; it is the most direct, although rarest, process of integration, and, even when realized for only the span of fractions of a second, can never be lost.” (ibid) Permit, for a moment, an illustration: in memory, the past is present. If one allows oneself to feel into the atemporal quality of memory; if we notice our tendency to place memories into “time” by spatializing them as events – events once present, but now passed, we glimpse the mental structure of our consciousness. Notice this tendency and then transcend it. Feel those same memories as “now”. Though elusive to the realm of immediate sensory experience – sight, smell, touch, etc. – memories become a part of the conscious present. They occupy the same space, the same “time”. It is as if they simultaneously envelop one another without concealing or “standing in line”. They are diaphanous. Hence, clichés such as “I remember it as if it were yesterday” point to a truism about the act of memory that seems to be analogous to Gebser’s notions of the acausal co-presence of origin and creativity.

*“Creativity is not bound to space and time, and its truest effect can be found in mutation, the course of which is not continuous in time but rather spontaneous, acausal, and discontinuous.”* Is this not the most confounding aspect of creativity –

the infinite varieties of manifestations arising from finite palettes? Thousands of novels and poems from 26 letters, thousands of songs from 12 notes, myriad paintings from the color wheel, all pointing back to the *Idea* itself. Whence do these creations spring? The answer may be, often, from seemingly nowhere. The rational mind, with its tendency to historicize, attempts to trace causal efficacy to all acts of creation – that the new is either a product of the old, or a reaction to the old.

Though this is sometimes true, not all acts of creativity can be explained away in this fashion. As Gebser points out above *creativity's truest effect can be found in mutation*. It is in mutation, in the truly *new*, that mental attempts toward causal explanation lose their, shall we say, tumescence. As Gebser says, since creativity is “a potency or energy it cannot be grasped systematically and can at best be perceived systatically.” It is important to note the verbs that Gebser chooses – grasped and perceived. The term *grasp* connotes something concrete, ownership, having, possessing, which are all very mental ways of meeting the world. *Perceive* on the other hand, has a more ineffable spiritual quality; one that allows the presence of the subject and the object to stand within one another, each retaining its identity whilst mingling, merging one with the other – creating thereby an identity of identity and difference. Hence Gebser's conclusion that creativity cannot be understood systematically, but systatically. Through systems we understand phenomena through the lens of process, which is an admittedly integral lens; systasis is both process and effect, it is not integral but *integrating*. It is through this move that we begin to move away from *philosophical* arguments (phenomenological, ontological, epistemological, etc.) and toward an *Eteological*

approach – or Being-in-truth. We may find resonance in Gebser’s explorations of the nature of creativity with his ideas around the *eteologeme*.

“Every eteologeme is a ‘verition’, and as such is valid only when it allows origin to become transparent in the present. To do this it must be formulated in such a way as to be free of ego, and this means not just free of subject but also free of object; only then does it sustain the verity of the whole. This has nothing to do with representation; only in philosophical thought can the world be represented; for the integral perception of truth, the world is pure statement, and thus ‘verition’”. (Gebser, 309)

*Creativity is a visibly emerging impulse of origin which ‘is’ in turn timeless, or more accurately, before or ‘above’ time and timelessness. And creativity is something that ‘happens’ to us, that fully effects or fulfills itself in us.* Meister Eckhart said, “Whatever man is capable of thinking about God is not God. What God is in himself no one can discern, unless he be *moved into a light* that is itself God.” It seems that our error in attempting to think about creativity lies in seeing it as either a process or an effect. Eckhart, in his sermons, pointed to everything manifest as God, and yet, all of these things together were not God. God was both the manifestations and the creative force behind the manifestations. We will never see God in creation only, nor will we find God in the process behind creation; we will only find God by being moved into a light that is God. Notice in Gebser’s quote above – *Creativity is a visibly emerging impulse of origin which ‘is’ in turn timeless* – the use of quotation marks surrounding the word *is*. It seems that Gebser is pointing to the idea here that to posit *being-ness* upon origin is to immediately lose its essence. How might one attribute a quality of *being-ness* to a process of infinite becoming? Finally, we arrive at the last sentence, *“And creativity is something that ‘happens’ to us, that*



*fully effects or fulfills itself in us.*” Gebser makes very clear in this passage that creativity is not effected *by* us, nor is it merely effected *upon us* by some force outside of ourselves (as in the mythical notion of the Muse). It is a force, or an energy (a potency) that *fully effects or fulfills itself in us*. “It” is an aspect of us and we are an aspect of “it”.

Gebser goes on to discuss the nature and transformation of poetry and the transformation therein from the mythical to the mental worldview, specifically what elements were pressing toward consciousness over the past 2500 years. Short of recounting the whole chapter, which is beyond the scope of this paper, a nice summation can be found in the following paragraph:

“The shift in poetry manifest by these examples should be apparent by now: there is a detachment from memory that is the initial step toward the supersession of time. Memory is always time-bound; and what is even worse, it temporizes the timeless without transforming it into temporal freedom. The turn away from memory, on the other hand, is a turn toward freedom; the poetic emphasis shifts from the recollected past to the present. This is the import of Hugo Von Hofmannsthal’s remark, ‘Poetry as present. The mystical element of poetry: the supersession of time.’ (Gebser, 324)

Lest we misconstrue this as a denial of the past, as a shift into some kind of new age conception of the “now”, where “all is one”, we must stay mindful of Gebser’s emphasis upon diaphaneity – where the efficient modes of the magical, mythical, and mental structures remain intact yet transparent to one another in the present. Our focus here is upon the presence of origin in human creativity; origin manifesting itself in its multivalent unfoldings, appearing in our works with certain qualities or intensities latent within the incipient or emerging structure. Just as space came to the fore in the mental mutation over the past 2000 years, now time is the subject of “new” works of art and the source of great mystery in science. But it is the

*qualitative*, not the *quantitative*, aspects of time that are the subject of our contemplation. We are no longer held captive by the temporalizing of memory, nor do we wish to create from the dark realm of trance. We desire creation in the full light of day, to be conscious of the grandness of the event within which we participate and yet be aware of a sense of our own agency. Gebser quotes T. S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding",

*The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree  
Are of equal duration. A people without history  
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern  
Of timeless moments...  
History is now...*

Gebser goes on to remark, "These verses hardly require comment, but we ought to point out something implicit which is noted by the commentator of the poem, Raymond Preston; the thousand years of the yew are qualitatively identical or equal to the hour of the rose; time is not to be understood as measurable time or duration but as 'quality and intensity' – a conception that will no longer seem strange to us." (Gebser, 327)

This shift in the demeanor of our art Gebser describes as a "new obligation." "It is no longer an obligation of ordering the soul and thinking ... It is ... an obligation which belongs 'to the order of the spirit.'" (ibid) He concludes the chapter with the following remarks:

"There is today a change in man's creative relationship to the 'primordial energy' which is pressing toward consciousness, a change with respect to creativity itself which corresponds to the changing and mutating consciousness, as we have described it in the first section of this chapter. It is only this state of affairs ... which warrants our speaking of truly 'new' manifestations for they do not by any means proceed solely from the old consciousness structure and its source." (Gebser, 330)

From the Kantian perspective, these shifts in artistic forms would have been understood as manifestations of the mind's shifting relationship to nature - all of the activity being contained, as it were, within the activities of consciousness. This is the tradition from which Cassirer emerged. His scrutiny of the *symbolic forms* through which the human mind has come to understand qualities of time, space, and causality, led him inexorably to human creativity. Throughout most of his oeuvre we are confronted with an elegant yet static relationship of human to nature through the Kantian forms. There was a shift, however, in his chapter on Art in "An Essay on Man" that feels significant - a shift that points to something closer to Gebser's concept of systasis and moves away from his Kantian roots. It was reminiscent of a similar shift that took place in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century in the ideas of the German Idealists - an idea that may have been submerged by the prevailing Empiricism of the time, but one that has re-emerged, more vigorously than before, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cassirer, I feel, stood at that precipice of integral thought but was perhaps too allied to his predecessor to move fully through the veil of the mental mutation - which he saw as the crowning achievement of humankind. His great contribution, however, as I mentioned above was his penetrating insight into the mental perspective, which allows us to see clearly the paradigmatic quality of all symbolic forms - be it religion, science, or art. Cassirer, despite himself, created a pathway for an experience of Eteology - verition, or Being-in-truth.

### **Cassirer on Creativity:**

Though we all seem to understand beauty as an intrinsic part of being human, our understanding of the phenomenon of recognizing beauty has been more problematic. “Beauty appears to be one of the most clearly known of human phenomena. Unobscured by any aura of secrecy and mystery, its character and nature stand in no need of subtle and complicated metaphysical theories for their explanation. Beauty is part and parcel of human experience; it is palpable and unmistakable. Nevertheless, in this history of philosophical thought the phenomenon of beauty has always proved to be one of the greatest paradoxes.” (Cassirer, 1944, pg. 137) Prior to Kant, art had been relegated to a subset of logic – that through art we could not approach the pure intellect but only the “lower” sensuous functions of human knowledge – a *gnoseologia inferior*. Art could only be a step on the path toward the higher knowledge of which only logic was capable. Art, like language, was hence subsumed under the heading of *imitation*, or mimesis. “Language originates in an imitation of sounds, art is an imitation of outward things.” (138) But if art, poetry, and music were merely imitations of outward appearances (or the sounds of nature in the case of music) how then do we explain the emergence of the spontaneous creativity of the artist? How do we explain the shifting interpretations of form present in all of the arts?

It was Rousseau’s theory of “characteristic art” that marks the beginning of an upturn of the mimetic model of past centuries and a revolution in the status of art and poetry and their importance to the field of philosophical inquiry. “Rousseau rejected the whole classical and neoclassical tradition of the theory of art. To him

art is not a description or reproduction of the empirical world but an overflow of emotions and passions.” (140) However, from the lens of Cassirer’s symbolic forms, it is apparent that we have merely substituted one sign for another – art is a symbol for the empirical world, or art is a symbol for the emotional world – both of which end up in a kind of stasis which feels unsatisfying in understanding art as a dynamic process through which we engage a creative relationship between inner and outer. “In this case art would remain reproductive; but, instead of being a reproduction of things, of physical objects, it would become a reproduction of our inner life, of our affections and emotions.” (141) It is within this dynamic process of interpreting and expressing inner and outer form and their intimate relationship that we witness Cassirer grappling with the dualistic implications of Kantian thought; mainly that the inner world takes precedence over an outer world – an outer world of nature that can only be intuited, but never shown to exist in and of itself. If art were merely representative or imitative of the inner world of intuition, how then do we account for the essence of any great work of art? “What follows is only an external reproduction which is necessary for the communication of the intuition but meaningless with respect to its essence. But for a great painter, a great musician, or a great poet, the colors, the lines, rhythms, and words are not merely a part of his technical apparatus; they are necessary moments of the productive process itself.” (142). It is within this dynamic process of interpreting and expressing inner and outer form and their intimate relationship that we witness Cassirer wrestling with the deep schism between theories of language and science and those of art. He says, “Language and science are abbreviations of reality; art is an intensification of reality.

Language and science depend upon one and the same process of abstraction; art may be described as a continuous process of concretion.”(143) We can see this clearly in a scientific “explanation” of a phenomenon such as gravity, wherein the description takes on the form of an equation. Substance is reduced to atomic number and life is boiled down into a series of classifications. “But art does not admit of this sort of conceptual simplification and deductive generalization. It does not inquire into the qualities or causes of things; it gives us the intuition of the form of things. But this too is by no means a mere repetition of something we had before. It is a true and genuine discovery. The artist is just as much a discoverer of the forms of nature as the scientist is a discoverer of facts or natural laws.” (143) But the forms of nature that Cassirer is referring to through acts of creativity are not the static forms science reveals, but the dynamic forms that somehow come closer to the “reality” we experience in our moment-to-moment existence. He says, “It would seem as though reality were not only accessible to our scientific abstractions but exhaustible by them. But as soon as we approach the field of art this proves to be an illusion.” (144) He goes on, “When the scientist describes an object he characterizes it by a set of numbers, by its physical and chemical constants. Art has not only a different aim but a different object.” (ibid) One way we might illustrate Cassirer’s remarks is to actually examine a work of art! Below are three (of 30) paintings of the Rouen Cathedral by Claude Monet from 1892-93.



Monet was trying to convey the nuances and subtleties of the way sunlight played on the façade of the cathedral at different times of the day and during different seasons. Of the infinite possibilities, thirty of them became actualities. Monet takes us beyond the common features of our objective world, our mundane perceptions, and moves us into the realm of aesthetic experience. “In sense perception we are content with apprehending the common and constant features of the objects of our surroundings. Aesthetic experience is incomparably richer. It is pregnant with infinite possibilities which remain unrealized in ordinary sense experience. In the work of the artist these possibilities become actualities; they are brought into the open and take on a definite shape. The revelation of this inexhaustibility of the aspects of things is one of the great privileges and one of the deepest charms of art.” (145) Though the equations of science may tell us so, the Sun today is not the Sun of tomorrow. Even in our mundane every-day experience of the world we can see (and feel) that this is true. One need only to sit and watch a field of grass, the façade of a building, even a concrete wall, to see that from moment

to moment there is change. The play of light and shadow shifts and morphs, perhaps a slight breeze ruffles the plant life, clouds obscure the Sun and shadows disappear.

The world is no static entity that can be described by formula. The world is forever emerging as a dynamic fount of creativity. We come to a deeper understanding of our world by meeting its dynamic character with the same character within our own imagination or intuition. We meet the world, it is true, with the receptiveness of the sensual world, but we interact with the world with a constructive imagination. We meet the dynamic world with a correspondingly dynamic process in ourselves.

It seems that Cassirer is reaching past his Kantian roots into the more mysterious realms of Whiteheadian process philosophy. He seems to imply that we are no longer dealing with the static interplay of subject to object, rather that through our creative explorations of beauty and aesthetics we have stepped into the Heraclitean stream of change, what Cassirer now calls “living forms”.

“I may enjoy the mildness of the air, the freshness of the meadows, the variety and cheerfulness of the coloring, and the fragrant odor of the flowers. But I may experience a sudden change in my frame of mind. Thereupon I see the landscape with an artist’s eye – I begin to form a picture of it. I have now entered a new realm – the realm not of living things but of “living forms.” No longer in the immediate reality of things, I live now in the rhythm of spatial forms, in the harmony and contrast of colors, in the balance of light and shadow. In such absorption in the dynamic aspect of form consists the aesthetic experience.” (152)

Here Cassirer also begins to resolve the subject/object duality inherent in the problem of conveyance of beauty and form from art object (painting, piece of music, poem, sculpture) to the “passive” viewer. Beauty, he says, is not merely *perceived*. It



requires an active participation and a *constructive eye*. It is not possible to perceive beauty in a work of art without remotely participating in and recreating the creative act.

Cassirer balks, however, at the representation of Imagination posited by the Romantic theories of art; namely that beauty is conceived as a symbolic representation of the infinite. Here Cassirer insightfully recognizes the turn away from the finite world, the world of sense experience. Any theory of aesthetics must have both. Again and again, Cassirer lifts the veil to reveal the dualisms inherent in rational thought. From the Idealists follow the Realists – eschewing all claims to the transcendental power of the imagination and reverting once again to art as imitation. And so the pendulum swings. But in Cassirer one begins to feel the presence of something more steadfast – an energy in the liminal space between our inside and our outside, a communication between the soul and nature presenting itself as a world of forms, of beauty and allurement. In reading this chapter one cannot help but feel that nature and spirit are evolving together. Nature reveals itself to spirit through pure form; spirit reveals its interpretation of form through art, meanwhile creating new forms with which the whole system evolves into greater complexity. Cassirer ends the chapter by saying, “Behind the existence, the nature, the empirical properties of things, we suddenly discover their forms. These forms are no static elements. What they show is a *mobile order*, which reveals to us a new horizon of nature.” (168)

A new horizon of nature: is this not the infinite? Possibly, yet what Cassirer is recognizing is that with each step we take towards the horizon our environment

changes. It is a new world. The horizon though remains elusive, like an erotic tango, it moves back step for step. In reading Cassirer, one begins to wonder how it is that we really “know” anything at all. The truths that seem so self-evident to one paradigm seem naïve and deluded to the next. The only thing that stays constant is the shifting nature of the *forms*, or as I have chosen to label them, the *functions* through which we come to know the world and, reflectively, the world comes to know *us*. Cassirer urges us to move forward despite his conviction that we can never fully know the divine nature of the world. What we can know, if we pay attention, is the ever-shifting play of light and shadow – the dynamic life of forms that corresponds with a dynamic process in ourselves. The symbolic form here becomes a symbolic function – a living, evolving relationship between spirit and nature, each subject to each.

*“To make the external internal, the internal external, to make nature thought, and thought nature – this is the mystery of genius in the Fine Arts.”*

*~Samuel Coleridge*

Sources:

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