

Cassirer's Cultural Semiotics in Operation

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Abstract

In my paper, I will attempt to reiterate Cassirer's three stages of the development of the symbolic form, namely, mimetic, analogical, and symbolic, in the Peircean triad, which presents the emergent characteristic of the sign in the metamorphosis of the myth. This is to give a more specific representation of the transformation of the mythical object in the texts. Although there is no evidence of succession of Peircean semeiotics by Cassirer, the Peircean general law of sign is better explicate the metamorphic quality of the Cassirer's theory of myth. Finally, I will explain how the specific "original object", plays an important and central role in the construction of the mythical worldview.

Keywords: Cassirer's theory of myth, Peircean triad, Peircean semeiotics

(A) Cassirer's Theory of Myth

Cassirer's conception of myth can be understood in the careful reading of the second volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (herein-after cited as *PSF*), which provides his most extensive treatment of myth as a symbolic form. For Cassirer, every mythology is a sort of theory of myth. Every theory of myth ends by projecting its own self-image onto the concrete presence of myth, and thus sees in myth nothing other than its own objective reflection. The theoretical attitude can perceive and understand myth only by "reducing it to something other than what it immediately is

and signifies”, only by transforming it into a theory of myth and recognizing the image of itself. Cassirer’s transcendental phenomenological approach aims to establish not the unity of the contents of each of the cultural forms, but rather the unity of its structure. The aim of a philosophy of myth is thus to determine its universal “structural form”. However, this task is rendered all the more difficult as the distinction between content and structure that critical analysis must make is wholly foreign to the mythical attitude itself. Here, the ideal structure and the content that this structure creates are indistinguishable from one another. For in order to understand myth for what it is, it is necessary to enter into its own worldview, but to enter into its worldview is to abandon the theoretical perspective from which an analysis of the structure of this worldview would be possible. But, the worldviews of myth and of theoretical knowledge can not coexist in the same area of thought. They are mutually exclusive: the beginning of one is equivalent to the end of the other. Just as in the case of language, it would seem that myth can only be myth insofar as it denounces itself; thus to a certain extent ceases to be myth. Myth can only be approached through a myth of myth. Like all symbolic forms, myth proves to be a specific structural form of spirit. However, Cassirer speaks of mythical thought as “structural thinking” or of mythical space as “structural space” and so on. This is an expression he does not apply to the other symbolic forms. Lived myth appears to consciousness not as a

historically and culturally determined meaning, but rather as the very meaning of life itself. Cassirer notes that the myths of our own culture and our own times are too close to us to be placed at an ideal distance and analyzed. The mythical world is this initial domain of existential meaning that is lived by spirit as the meaning of its own existence; it is the “meaning of the being of *dasein*” (*seinssinn des daseins*).

All presence is always already mediated by the presence of the symbol, and every symbol is comprised of a sensuous presence and a non-intuitive meaning. Thus, every symbolic form is determined by the nature of rapport that it establishes between the signifier and the signified. It is this relation that determines the mode of presence of meaning or the mode of “seeing” that is constituted by this symbolic form. All theoretical forms of seeing the world are characterized by the fact that the distinction between the two is explicitly and consciously posited. The presence of the sign represents something other than itself. Both the words of language and symbols of science, accomplish this task according to different degrees of ideality. Here the sign is always taken as secondary to the reality that is represented. The sign is only a “re-presentation” (*vergegenwärtigung*), a means of rendering present a more original and authentic presentation (*gegenwärtigung*). This is why the system of signs constructed by theoretical consciousness possesses certain circularity, reversibility, and thus a certain relativity of meaning that is necessary to this particular mode of

representation and signification. In contrast, mythical intuition is always the awareness of an absolutely unique and concrete presence and reality. Here, there is no distinction between the sensuous image and its non-intuitive meaning. The mythical image stands before us as the concrete incarnation of the meaning it represents. It is so woven into our intuition of reality as to be indistinguishable from it. Insofar as the mythical image represents the immediate and concrete presence of spiritual signification—and thus the signification of immediate and concrete presence—it constitutes what we can call the *texture* of the real. Here “to be effective” (*wirksam sein*) is “to be real” (*wirklich sein*).

For Cassirer, that which lies beyond the sign cannot be known or experienced; it has never been, nor will it ever become the “object” of consciousness—this does not mean that it cannot be posited, nor that it cannot be present through its absence, nor does it mean that it cannot play an important role in the structure of spiritual meaning and life. Rather to the contrary, religion is defined precisely by that intuition of an ultimate reality beyond the sign. Without this intuition of something beyond the sign, the sign itself could not function. In the case of theoretical knowledge, we know that the sign is secondary to that which is re-presented. The sign thus functions to re-present some original and authentic presentation. When we want to directly approach this presentation, we find that it too represents something else, and so on. In

the end, pure theoretical thought recognizes that the meaning of any signifier is only its position in the system of signifiers that it has itself constructed. In the case of mythical consciousness, however, presence does not point beyond itself to another more original reality, but rather re-presents itself as a self-referential concrete presence. This does not mean that the distinction between the signifier and signified does not exist; only that it has not been explicitly posited.

The mythical image is not taken to re-present a meaning, but rather is the presence of meaning itself. In the mythical worldview, every appearance is always and essentially an incarnation. The means of representation cannot be separated or distinguished from that which is represented. In the experience of lived concrete presence, in the authentic effective presence that we take to be real, the moments of *gegenwärtigung* and *vergegenwärtigung* are fused into a single undifferentiated reality. Thus, although myth signifies one of the first steps beyond the “given”, its product at once resumes the form of the given. The domain of myth is thus the realm of the *imago*, which is ruled by a fusional logic of imaginary identification and misrecognition. In the context of myth, a more faithful translation of *vergegenwärtigung* might be “actualization” in the sense of rendering something present. Insofar as the mythical figure refers back to a previous past, this past is absolute and does not refer beyond itself. Here we cannot describe recollection as a

simple return of an event, as a faint image or copy of the former impression. It is not simply a repetition but rather the rebirth of the past.

The dialectical interplay between life and spirit defines Cassirer's theory of myth. Myth is equated with the dimension of meaning that he calls "expression" (*ausdruck*). Insofar as myth condenses into lasting configuration, as it sets before us the stable outlines of an objective world of forms, the significance of this world becomes intelligible to us only if behind it we can feel the dynamic of the feeling of life (*lebensgeföhls*) from which it originally grew. When Cassirer quotes Uexhüll in *Essay of Man*, Part Three "Myth as a Life Form, Discovery and Determination of the Subjective in the Mythical Consciousness" (Cassirer, 1992, p. 23), affirms that each animal perceives and reacts to the "world" of its species. In the world of the fly, there are only "fly things" and in the world of the sea urchin, there are only "sea urchin things". The animal fuses together with its world in such a way as to be one with it. It is this same sense of identity, this same feeling of life that is found in mythical thought. Here too the historical and conventional meaning of culture is immediately lived by spirit in such a way as to be one with it. In the same way that the biological organism lives out its structural plan (*bauplan*), the spiritual organism lives out its life in the structural differentiation of language. In fact, Cassirer even characterizes the mythical world as a "biological" one. Hence, this "feeling of life" implies an

awareness of life itself. It is here that myth and religion part company. For myth is never able to distinguish this awareness of life itself from its feeling of the form that life takes in actualizing itself.

In the process of applying the approach of critical philosophy to the various cultural forms is to establish the laws and categories governing each of the different modes of intentionality that constitute the life of spirit. Evidently we cannot directly inquire into the life of pure consciousness, but rather must begin from its objective manifestations and work our way back toward their conditions of possibility. In the case of mythical consciousness, as we have already indicated, the task is made difficult by the fact that “myth lives entirely by the presence of its object—by the intensity with which it seizes and takes possession of consciousness in a specific moment (*augenblick*)” (Cassirer, 1955b, p. 35). Through an analysis of the nature of the presence of the mythical object to consciousness, and in contrast to the nature of the theoretical and empirical object, Cassirer takes on the task of reconstructing the general laws and categories of mythical consciousness. It is interesting and important to consider *grosso modo* the essential dynamic and structural characteristics of mythical thought. It is thus necessary to see beyond the examples taken from early humanity and try to see the basic structures at work in our everyday lives today.

(B) The General Structural Law of Myth

The “law of conrescence or coincidence of the members of a relation” (Cassirer, 1955b, pp. 61-4) is the most general expression of the law that governs and structures all mythical thought. From this basic structural law all the characteristic qualities of mythical consciousness, the mode of presence of its object, and the logic that underlies its judgments and actions are derived. Mythical consciousness forms a synthetic unity in which all difference is reduced to the homogeneous and undifferentiated unity of real identity. From the perspective of mythical consciousness there can be no hidden meaning, no distinguishing between illusion and reality, between the image and the thing, the means of representation and that which is represented, between cause and effect. When and where mythical consciousness encounters difference, it negates this difference by identifying one content of consciousness with another, so that the difference “conresces” into a single configuration of consciousness. When the difference becomes so great that it takes on the form of a binary opposition, and thus can no longer be synthesized into a single configuration based upon resemblance however small and fleeting, mythical consciousness “hypostatizes” each of the antithetical positions as a concrete being existing independently of the other.

A number of characteristic features of mythical consciousness directly or

indirectly follow from this general structural law of mythical and imaginary fusion.

Firstly, the contents of mythical consciousness are always in a constant state of “metamorphosis.” Contrary to theoretical consciousness, which understands all specific events or happenings as the lawful manifestation of a universal rule of progression, mythical consciousness sees each particular event as the direct result of an equally specific and equally determined cause. Because myth continually reduces all difference to identity, anything can come from anything; anything can stand in temporal or spatial contact with anything. Mythical thinking knows only metamorphosis. Every effect is understood by myth as resulting not from a “cause” (*ursache*) in the theoretical sense, but rather from a specific “original object” (*ur-sache*). This concept of *ur-sache* plays an important role in the construction of the mythical worldview. As a result, everything comes from something, everything has a reason why, and thus there are no mere accidents. Myth seeks to explain the “why” of things and the mythical worldview is satisfied only once it knows why a particular event happens and not other, and why it happens when it did rather than earlier or later. Hence, we have the mythical concept of the *ur-sache*.

Another characteristic of mythical thought that follows from the general law of mythical thinking is the relation it posits between the whole and the part: the principle of *pars pro toto*. For the mythical view, there prevails a true indifference both in

thought and practice, between the whole and its part. The whole does not have parts and does not break down into them; the part is immediately the whole and functions as such. The part does not simply represent the whole, nor is it merely taken as the whole—rather, the whole dwells in its wholeness in each part. For this reason the fate of any one of the elements of the whole is intertwined with the destiny of the whole. Everything is part of the whole; the fate of everything is connected to the fate of everything else. It is this interwoven-ness of everything with everything, this primordial “belonging together” of all the members of a mythical relation, that is at the root of the purely mythical worldview (This is very closely linked to the concept of Uexküll’s concept of the *umwelt*). Thus, any two things, regardless of their spatial or temporal difference, can be fused together into a concrete relation based upon any superficial likeness between them. Myth traces the origins of the whole back to a simple and original thing (*ur- und anfangssache*). This *ur-sache* is nothing other than the mythical image of life itself. As for the mythical worldview everything comes from life and returns to life.

(C) Cassirer’s Three Stages of the Development of the Symbolic Form in Terms of the Peircean Triad

In this section of the paper, I propose to reiterate Cassirer’s three stages of the development of the symbolic form, namely, mimetic, analogical, and symbolic, in the

Peircean triad, which presents the emergent characteristic of the sign in the metamorphosis of the myth (See Fig. 1). This is to give a more specific representation of the transformation of the mythical object in the texts. Similarly, Umberto Eco states in *The Limits of Interpretation* (Eco, 1990, p. 52) that symbols in texts are paradigmatically open to infinite meanings but textually open only to the indefinite interpretations in his chapter on myths and texts. He also proposes an ideal process of unlimited semiosis, in which every content (Immediate Object) of an expression (Representamen) is interpreted by another expression endowed with its own content. However, this process is sketchy and rather simplified in his diagram (Eco, 1990, p. 53).

In Cassirer's law of development of language, *PSF* volume one, chapter two "Mimetic, Analogical, and Symbolic Expression" (Cassirer, 1955a, pp. 186-97), stage one is the mimetic or copy stage, that is, the word or verbal sign and the thing to which it refers had no real difference between them. The elements are connected by pure relational determinations. In the second stage, the transfer of signs takes place in analogical relation, that is, the analogical relationship of the signs. The context is communicated by a formal analogy between the sequences of contents designated. In stage three, the sign evolves from the analogical relation, that is, the elements of representation remains but the relation of similarity which conditions this

representation becomes more and more partial and indefinite. Thus, by re-illustrating these basic laws using the Peircean triad, a specific representation of the transformatory relationship in text involving mythical metamorphosis can be clearly presented. By examining Cassirer's law of development of language, we find that the same relationships in the three stages can be established in the analyses of the mythical texts.

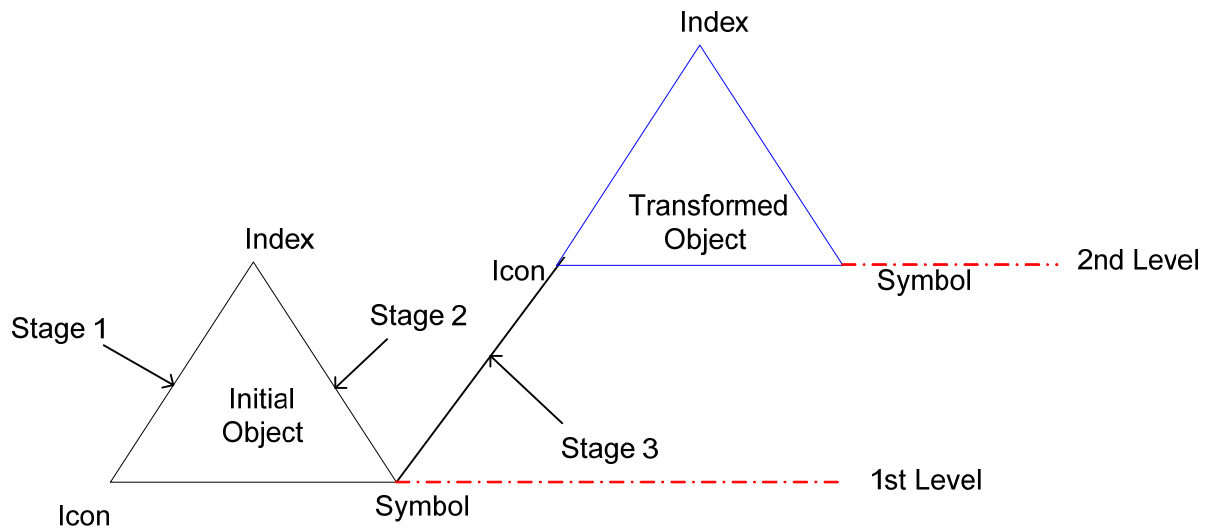


Illustration of Cassirer's law of development of language by the Peircean Triad

Fig. 1

Hence, this law of development of language can be a schematism and has become one of the illuminating conceptions of his entire work. It is not only an important principle for the understanding of *Aufbau der Sprache* (Structure of the Language), but also a connection of the development of language with other symbolic

forms, such as art, science, religion, and in this paper's context, myth. He points out that the development of language through the three stages makes it possible for speech to become the medium for the expression of conceptual thought and of pure relations. It is indeed the very *vieldeutigkeit* (ambiguity) of the verbal signs, which appears on the analogical stage of development, which constitutes the real virtue of that stage of development. It is precisely this that compels the mind to take the decisive step from the concrete function of indication or designation (*bezeichnung*), which characterizes the early stage of language, to the general and more significant function of "meaning" (*bedeutung*). It is at this point that language at the same time emerges from the sensuous husk in which it first embodied itself. The imitative and analogical expressions give place to the purely symbolic, and language thus becomes the bearer of a newer and deeper spiritual content. Of special importance in this connection is the application of this principle to space-time language, not only for the entire philosophy of symbolic forms, but more especially for Cassirer's treatment of symbolism in science. All language goes through these three stages of development, and space-time words are no exception to the rule. Language develops from copy to analogy and from analogy to symbol; that the function of language is not to copy reality but to symbolize it; and that, more and more, the symbolization of things gives place to the symbolization of relations. It is necessary to study the general theory of

symbolism as an adequate notion of the symbol and the symbolizing function, not only in the realm of scientific concepts but in the non-scientific realms of poetry, art, religion, myth, etc (Cassirer, 1955a, pp. 190-97).

The essence of Cassirer's philosophy of myth is that the language of the myth represents an original form of the intuition of reality. In consequence, the individual categories of mythical thinking have their own form and structure. Space, time, number, classes, all have different meanings in mythical thought from those of science and constitute, in their totality and interrelations, a "symbolic form" with its own immanent form and significance. This fundamental way of intuiting the world expresses an "organic" (nature inspired, from within) aspect of reality which escapes the physio-mathematical categories of science. Therefore, it is also the thesis that the myth is to be evaluated, not by norms taken from alien spheres, but in terms of its own form and structure as an original and primary way of intuiting reality. The development of myth exhibits stages parallel to the stages of language—from copy, through analogy, to symbol. An immanent dialectic drives thought on from copy to symbol. It is here that the question of the relation of myth to religion is raised by Cassirer. In his view, originally myth and religion (mythical and religious symbolism) were identical, or at least inseparable and interfused. It is impossible to make any study of religious symbols without study of their relation to myth. There is no positive

religion without these elements. The further we follow the content of the religious consciousness to its beginnings, the more it is found impossible to separate the belief content from mythical language; one has then no longer religion in its actual historical and cultural nature but merely a shadow picture and an empty abstraction. Despite this inseparable intertwining of the content of myth and religion, they are far from being identical. Neither the form nor the spirit of the two is the same. The peculiar character of the religious form of consciousness shows itself precisely in a changed attitude towards the mythical picture of the world. It cannot do without this world, for it is in the mythical consciousness that the immediate intuition of the meaningfulness of the world is given. Yet in the religious consciousness the myth acquires a new meaning; it becomes symbolic. Religion completes the process of development which myth as such can not. It makes use of the sensuous pictures and signs, but at the same time knows them to be such. It always draws the distinction between mere existence and meaning.

According to Cassirer, we know that the contents of myth and religion are the same, though their spiritual forms are very different. Thus, there is a close dialectical relation between the two, such that they are always found together. In keeping with the basic principles of Cassirer's own philosophy and methodology: for although each symbolic form is defined by its place in the whole and its relation to each of the other

symbolic form, each symbolic form must nevertheless be understood according to the criteria particular to its specific mode of symbolic meaning. Cassirer's emphasis upon the fundamental difference between myth and religion is of great importance. However, the same ambiguity which there appeared is present in another form in his philosophy of religious symbolism. It concerns what he calls the dialectic of the mythical consciousness. Cassirer's conception of the relation of myth to religion is not wholly unambiguous. Both art and religion make use of mythical language symbolism, which are *a fortiori* forms of truth. Myth is to be seen as an independent and permanent structural dimension of spirit possessing its own specific function within culture, and thus as having an equal status as a symbolic form.

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