

# The "Odyssey" of the Life and Work of Ernst Cassirer

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## Introduction:

In the first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer makes the following observation about the "style" of Heraclitus' work and thought:

...on the basis of Heraclitus' general world view, we can understand the fundamental form of his style, whose reputed 'obscurity' is not accidental and arbitrary, but the adequate and necessary expression of his thought. Heraclitus' linguistic style and his style of thought condition one another: the two represent in different aspects the same basic principle of his philosophy ... (PSF, I, p. 120).

We may apply Cassirer's observation here to Cassirer himself. Cassirer's general world view and his style are also an adequate and necessary expression of his thought, his linguistic style and the style of his thought also condition one another, the two representing different aspects of the same basic principle of his philosophy. The "life" of spirit, Cassirer taught, can only be seen in the "mirror of its culture," or what means the same thing, in the reflection of its "work" (*The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, p. 102). It can only be known in and through its objective manifestations that lend it its form and through this form its concrete presence and reality. Our access to the pure life of consciousness is thus always already mediated by the diverse forms of its externalized expression. This would lead to the total alienation of spirit if it was not for the fact that this "work, in whose enduring existence the creative process congeals, does not stand at the end of this path, but rather the 'thou,' the other subject who receives this work in order to incorporate it into his own life and thus transform it back into the medium from which it originates" (*The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, p. 110). Through an analysis of the myriad of objective manifestations of spirit, the philosophy of symbolic forms seeks to determine the ideal structure and function of the different forms that the life of spirit takes on in this reciprocal and dialectical process of externalization and internalization.

From this it is clear why Cassirer always spoke in and through the words of others, bringing to life the tradition of human thought and incorporating it into his own. The form of Cassirer's expression was a necessary consequence of his philosophical world view, and both were an adequate expression of his personality. It was, as Charles Hendel concludes, "his style of life and thought" (Hendel, p. 56). To read Cassirer is, as Julius Bixler described his lectures, to "experience thought itself in a living form" (cf. Krois). Finally, Bixler and Hendel's comments are echoed in Anne Appelbaum's more personal recollection of her father's "nature":

...it was always interesting [to listen to him]: he had a strong voice and spoke quite loudly when he quoted other people. The moment he spoke personally he almost whispered. That was his nature. It was funny to listen to. I thought, now I must hear. Now, Cassirer speaks. Now, one must listen (Anne Appelbaum, Recorded Interview)

In the following brief introduction to the life and work of Ernst Cassirer, it is only possible to provide a very basic overview of the most important landmarks in the remarkable "odyssey" of Cassirer's life as he himself once called it. As for the man himself, we can only catch a glimpse of him in the reflection of these works. We will find it in the style of thought that weaves these various historical facts together into the unique world view of the philosophy of symbolic forms.

## **1874-1892: Cassirer's Jewish Origins**

Born July 18, 1874 in Breslau Germany (today Wrocław Poland) Ernst Cassirer was the second of seven children. The Cassirers were a prominent and affluent family of Jewish heritage. Although Cassirer's family lived in Breslau, Cassirer himself spent much of his youth in Berlin visiting relatives, and in particular his cousin Kurt Goldstein whose work in neurology Cassirer would later employ in his own writings (cf. PSF, III, chapter 6). Cassirer's family and friends in Berlin will play an important role in shaping his life and in the development of his philosophy. Although Cassirer was Jewish, the philosophy of symbolic forms cannot be said to be a Jewish philosophy in any strict sense of the word. The question as to what implicit influence Cassirer's personal faith might have had on his philosophy remains as yet an open question. However, the fact that he was born a Jew would determine the general course of his life. It would, for instance, be a major factor in his friendship and loyalty to Hermann Cohen <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> to say nothing of the great number of Jewish thinkers who figure prominently in Cassirer's life and work. It would also be the reason why, despite his considerable reputation in Germany and throughout the world, he was unable to secure a post until after the First World War, at which time he was free to accept the position at the University of Hamburg <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> where he would discover The Warburg Library of the Cultural Sciences that was to be so crucial to his life's work. It was also why, at the height of his career, he would be forced to resign his post at the University of Hamburg to end his days a Swedish citizen living in exile, roaming from one temporary visiting post to another in the new world of America.

## **1892-1902: Cassirer's Student Years**

On the insistence of his father, Cassirer began his studies in law at the University of Berlin in 1892. Cassirer's interests, however, quickly led him to the study of German literature, history and in particular art history, before finally bringing him to philosophy. In these first few years, Cassirer moved from one university to another: from Berlin to Leipzig and then to Heidelberg, only to return finally to Berlin. It was in Berlin, while attending the Kant lectures of George Simmel, that Cassirer was first introduced to the work of Hermann Cohen. In a review of the current literature on Kant, Simmel cited those by Hermann Cohen as being without doubt the best works on Kant, but also the most difficult to understand. Cassirer immediately began to study Cohen's writings and after two years of intensive work set off to the University of Marburg where he quickly became one of Cohen's best students and closest friends. During his short stay in Marburg Cassirer also studied mathematics, biology and physics. It should be noted that Cassirer's knowledge of these subjects was not superficial, and it is said that he could hold his own with any specialist in these fields. In the course of his life Cassirer was able to keep abreast of the newest developments in mathematics, biology and especially physics.

After some consideration, Cassirer chose to write his doctoral dissertation on Leibniz. One of the reasons for his choice was that the "system" of Leibniz was not presented in one coherent and well-ordered monograph, but rather developed in bits and pieces in any number of different texts. As a result, the systematic unity of Leibniz' philosophy was hidden. What was required, was a reconstruction that would uncover the systematic structure in which each of the bits and pieces would take on their meaning. Throughout his work Cassirer would seek the "hidden harmony that is better than the visible harmony," as Heraclitus thought <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> Cassirer, in fact, often quotes this fragment from Heraclitus in his work. Two years later Cassirer presented the first part of this work, entitled Descartes' Kritik der mathematischen

und naturwissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis, and received his doctorate with the unusual grade of *summa cum laude*. The whole work was later published in 1902 as *Leibniz' system* and won second place in the very prestigious competition of the Berlin Academy: no first prize was awarded. It was during this period, at a wedding of a close friend, that Cassirer met his future wife, a distant cousin from Vienna, Toni Bondies. They were married the following year and would have three children.

From the beginning we see that Cassirer's interest are divided between mathematics, biology and physics, on the one hand, and literature, history and the arts, on the other. Throughout his life Cassirer will derive inspiration from both the sphere of the natural sciences as well as from the sphere of the cultural sciences, and it will be his life's work to establish the foundations and methodology of both, situating them within the unity of a *globus intellectualis*, while at the same time preserving their *differencia specifica*. The importance of Simmel to the young Cassirer should perhaps not be limited to the role of introducing Cassirer to the work of Cohen. In the fifth study of *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, as well as in the second chapter written for the fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer juxtaposes his own philosophy of spirit over against Simmel's philosophy of life. A careful reading of these passages shows that, despite his objections to Simmel's philosophical view, Cassirer nevertheless recognises that there is some merit to Simmel's position. Because he would never content himself with a dogmatic or one-sided answer, one of the most difficult problems Cassirer had to reckon with in developing his philosophy of symbolic forms was how "the transcendence of the Idea [could] be reconciled with the immanence of Life" ("Life' and 'Spirit,'" p. 866).

As for the importance of Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp to Cassirer's philosophy little need be said here. Cassirer would never abandoned the neo-Kantian perspective, and more specifically the perspective of the Marburg school. The philosophy of symbolic forms, as a "critique of culture," was for Cassirer explicitly a continuation and furthering of transcendental philosophy as it was elaborated by Cohen. This said, it is perhaps necessary to empathise that neo-Kantianism for Cassirer did not refer to any identifiable doctrinal content. Rather, it only referred to the methodology of transcendental philosophy. Thus, some forty years in *Determinism and Indeterminism*, Cassirer will write: "... my bond with the founders of the Marburg school is not loosened, and my debt of thanks with regard to them is not diminished, if it follows from the following investigations that ... I have arrived at substantially different results" (ID, p. 132). Cassirer was thus a neo-Kantian in form, but not in substance (Ferrari, 1995). This said, it should perhaps be added that the direction, if not the substance of Cassirer's philosophy nevertheless owes much to the "critical psychology" of Natorp.

## 1903-1919: The Berlin Years

Having completed his studies, Cassirer returned to Berlin where he felt most at home. It is not difficult to imagine that the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Berlin had a formative role in the development of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. For at the time Berlin was one of the main cultural and intellectual centers of Europe, and through his family and friends Cassirer was able to enter into its different worlds: the worlds of art, music and literature as well as the worlds of science, economics and politics. His uncle, Max Cassirer, was a well to do and influential businessman; his cousins, Richard Cassirer and Kurt Goldstein, were famous neurologists; Fritz Cassirer was a well known composer; Bruno Cassirer ran a publishing house for art and literature, and published Cassirer's ten volume edition of Kant; Paul Cassirer was an art dealer who introduced impressionism (Cezanne, Manet, Monet, Much, van Gogh) to Germany. It was in this context, immersed in all the different forms of culture, that Cassirer would develop his philosophy of symbolic forms.

Cassirer's economic situation was such that he was free to devote himself entirely to his philosophy. He immediately set to work on his famous study: *Das Erkenntnisproblem*. The first two volumes of this work, treating the period from Nicholas Cusanus up to Kant, appeared in 1906 and 1907. These works rapidly became, and have remained, standard references in the history of epistemology. It would be wrong, however, to assume that they are simply historical accounts of the problem of knowledge. Throughout Cassirer's philosophy, systematic considerations are interwoven with historical reflections: such that this apparent history of philosophy is in truth, even if only implicitly, a philosophy of history. None of Cassirer's so-called historical writings provide a classical treatment of facts and events. Rather, we discover in them a selective analysis of certain ideal moments in the unfolding of history that characterise and determine the specific *Weltanschauung* or "spirit" of a given culture or epoch over against another: to take Cassirer's own example, the culture of the Renaissance over against the culture of Middle Ages (cf. *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*).

Already in these two volumes of 1906 and 1907 we find, in his selection of examples, that human reason is not understood by Cassirer as monolithic in structure, but rather as being comprised of a mosaic of diverse cultural forces. We also discover in these early works Cassirer's critique of substantialism that will be worked out in *Substance and Function* (Ferrari).

In 1906 Cassirer presented his candidacy for *Privatdozentur* at the University of Berlin. The first volume of his *Das Erkenntnisproblem* was presented as his *Habilitation*. Following its acceptance Cassirer was required, as was customary, to give a public lecture. Although the choice of Berlin was dictated by Cassirer's desire to remain close to his family and friends in Berlin, it was not the easiest of choices. First of all because he was Jewish, but even more importantly because he was one of Cohen's best known students and there was a considerable antagonism between certain important professors at the University of Berlin, such as Stumpf and Riehl, and Cohen. Stumpf and Riehl thus relentlessly and dogmatically attacked Cassirer and his Marburgian conception of the *Ding an sich*. If it had not been for the intervention of Dilthey, who had attended the lecture, Cassirer most likely would not have received the *venia legendi* necessary for him to become a *Privatdozentur*. Dilthey is reported to have risen during the discussion and said: "I would not like to be a man of whom posterity will say that he rejected Cassirer" (Gawronsky, p. 17). The relation between Dilthey and Cassirer's philosophy has not yet received the attention it deserves. It is clear that their conceptions of

Geisteswissenschaften and their methods of history are related, even if there are important differences between the two. It is also not excluded that Dilthey's work has influenced Cassirer in some way.

The topic of Cassirer's public lecture was "Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff." Four years later in 1910 Cassirer would publish a full monograph on the same theme. Substance and Function is Cassirer's first clearly systematic work, and it is central to any understanding of his philosophy. The importance of this work, and the shift from a substantial perspective to a functional perspective, is still evidence in Cassirer's language in his *An Essay on Man* written over thirty-four years later. The principle aim of Substance and Function is to critique and transform the traditional interpretation of the concept which has been dominated by the classical notion of substance understood in the Aristotelian sense of *ousia*. Cassirer wants to replace this substantialistic conception of the concept by one based upon the functional relations of modern mathematics (which of course owes much to Leibniz). The objects of modern science are not the things themselves, but rather ideal relations, and their mathematical expression cannot be grasped in an adequate way by the Aristotelian concept of substance. The weakness of the traditional notion of concepts becomes evident when we consider for a moment the process of concept formation. According to the classical conception, the concept is an idea that contains the essential aspects or elements of an object. This idea is arrived at through a process of abstraction that negates the various accidental qualities. This approach is clearly circular in its reasoning: for in identifying what is accidental in order to arrive at what is essential to an object it presupposes that which it sets out to establish, namely the identity of concept that determines what something is. Every reference to the similarity existing between things already presupposes the function of the concept that relates them as being similar in kind. Cassirer thus interprets the concept in terms of the function relation of modern mathematics. From this perspective the concept is no longer seen as a copy of something in experience but rather as the law of formation that acts as the "invariant of experience."

The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms was first conceived, as Cassirer informs us in the Introduction to its first volume, "at the time of the investigations summed up in [...] Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff" (PSF, I, p. 69). The scope of Cassirer's investigation in Substance and Function was limited to the concepts of the natural sciences. However, in the course of his work, and engulfed in the various cultural spheres, it slowly became evident to him that the concepts of the natural sciences only constituted "one layer of meaning" and that it was thus necessary, as Cassirer wrote in a text of this period, to "conceive of the problem of knowledge and the problem of truth as the particular cases of the more general problem of signification" (*Erkenntnistheorie*, pp. 81 sq.). With this the project of the "critique of culture" was born.

In attempting to apply his findings to the more general problem of the cultural sciences, Cassirer realised that "general epistemology, with its traditional form and limitations" could not "provide an adequate methodological basis for the cultural sciences (Geisteswissenschaften)" (PSF, I, p. 69). Only after a "'morphology' of the spirit" (*ibid.*) had been achieved could the foundations of the cultural sciences be established. The term "morphology" here comes from Goethe and attests to the profound influence of Goethe on Cassirer's philosophy. It should be noted that during this period Cassirer was working, on the one hand, on his edition of Kant and in particular on his reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, and, on the other hand, on Goethe.

In 1914 Cassirer was invited by Harvard to come lecture as a visiting professor, but he declined the invitation in order to remain close to his family and friends <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> though no doubt also in order to continue his work. In the same year, Cassirer's *Das Erkenntnisproblem* won the Kuno Fischer Gold Medal from the Heidelberg Academy. Despite his growing international reputation, however, Cassirer was unable to secure a post as professor or even as assistant professor, and thus remained a Privatdozentur. During the first world war Cassirer worked in the War Press office in Berlin where he was able to follow the development of the war from various non-German perspectives in the different foreign newspapers. It is in this context that Cassirer wrote a short work called *Freiheit und Form*. A wonderful study that establishes the historical, and even dialectical, course of the concepts of freedom and form. The two thinkers that figure prominently in this study are: Goethe and Kant. The two are juxtaposed to each other, and in this juxtaposition we find the theoretical seeds of the philosophy of symbolic forms as a "critique of culture" and a "morphology of spirit."  
1919-1933: The Hamburg and Warburg Years

After the war two new universities were created in Germany: one in Hamburg, the other in Frankfurt. Being more progressive in nature and no doubt wanting to establish themselves, both immediately offered a position as full professor to what must have been the most famous Privatdozentur in all of Germany. Cassirer decided to accept the offer from the University of Hamburg, and so finally left his beloved Berlin. The choice would prove to be a good one: for just as Berlin, with all its diverse cultural forces, had been the ideal environment for Cassirer to have conceived his philosophy of symbolic forms, Hamburg, and in particular the Warburg Library for the Cultural Sciences, would prove to be the ideal environment for him to realize this project. Although Cassirer's work on the philosophy of symbolic forms was already conceptually well advanced by the time he arrived in Hamburg there was still a considerable amount of concrete research to be done. As destiny would have it, the Warburg library contained all the concrete material on art, myth and language that would be indispensable for this research. Cassirer immediately recognized in the structure of the library itself the reflection of his own philosophical perspective. All the concrete historical work of spirit was there, ordered and classified systematically according to the same internal logic of cultural forms that he was developing. Cassirer quickly became close friends with the library's director, the art historian Fritz Saxl, as well as Aby Warburg himself, and was soon one of the institutes most important contributors.

Cassirer also met a number of new and important colleagues in Hamburg. Among these was the art historian Erwin Panofsky, whose lectures Cassirer attended and whose work has clearly been influence by Cassirer's. Panofsky's famous essay of 1924, "Idea: Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der älteren Kunsttheorie," was inspired by and a direct reaction to Cassirer's 1924 lecture, "Eidos und Eidolon: Das Problem das Schönen und der Kunst in Platons Dialogen." Cassirer would also meet the psychologists William Stern and Heinz Werner, whose work on the psychology of language, and especially Stern's work on language and children, would figure prominently in Cassirer's own writings of this period. Stern and Cassirer organised together the twelfth congress of the German Society of Psychology which took place in Hamburg in 1931. Cassirer's own contribution to this conference, *Die Sprache und der Aufbau der Gegenstandswelt*, is perhaps one of Cassirer's clearest and most concise statements on his theory of language. It is also during this period that Cassirer would attend the lectures of the biologist Jacob Uexküll. In his later work Cassirer will draw a clear parallel between his own theory of "symbolic forms" and Uexküll's theory of "organic forms" (cf. *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, chapter two and chapter one of *An Essay on Man*).

The Warburg years were to be the most productive years of Cassirer's life. In the first two years, he published his *Einstein's Theory of Relativity* and the third volume of *Das Erkenntnisproblem* which focused upon the systems of philosophy after Kant up to and including Hegel. In his *Einstein's Theory of Relativity*, which contains a preface from Einstein himself, Cassirer demonstrates that the theory of relativity confirms the conclusions defended in *Substance and Function* concerning the nature of the concept and concept formation in classical physics. It is in the conclusion of this work that Cassirer mentions for the first time the project of the philosophy of symbolic forms:

It is the task of systematic philosophy, which extends far beyond the theory of knowledge, to free the idea of the world from this one-sidedness. It has to grasp the whole of the symbolic forms, the application of which produces for us the concept of an ordered reality, and by virtue of which subject and object, ego and world are separated and opposed to each other in definite form, and it must refer each individual in this totality to its fixed place (ETR, p. 447).

The first volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which dealt with language, was published in 1923. Its Introduction functions as the general introduction to whole project of the "critique of culture." The second volume, which focused upon mythical and religious thought, was published two years latter in 1925. In the same year, Cassirer published a small but important work entitled: *Language and Myth* in the series of the Warburg Library.

In 1927 Cassirer published his famous study on Nicholas Cusanus and the Renaissance, *Individual and Cosmos in the Philosophy of the Renaissance*. While the manuscript for the third volume was already completed by 1927, it was not published until 1929. During this time Cassirer continued to work on the final part that was to justify his philosophy of spirit over against *Lebensphilosophie* of Bergson, Simmel and Heidegger. However, by 1929 this final chapter had become a work onto itself and was to be the fourth volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. In the introduction Cassirer informs his readers about this last missing chapter, promising to publish it in a future publication. In 1931 Cassirer published "'Spirit' and 'Life' in Present Day Philosophy," however, he would never finish the planned fourth volume. The chapters and notes for this volume have recently been published in the first volume of his *Nachlass*.

It was also in 1929 that Cassirer met Heidegger in the famous Devos debate. Although the discussion primarily focused upon their different interpretations of the transcendental imagination and the schematism in Kant, the true source of the conflict between the two thinkers stemmed from a clash of philosophical and personal styles. Heidegger's reading of Kant is hermeneutic and even violently so; Cassirer's reading is much more traditional and classic. Heidegger's real target was neo-Kantianism in general and the philosophy of Cohen in particular which were for him effectively one and the same thing; Cassirer attempted, on the one hand, to defend Cohen, and on the other, to nuance the distinction between neo-Kantianism as a methodology and the philosophy of Cohen as a specific application of this method. At the heart of their differences were two radically different conceptions of philosophy and human existence, so much so that it is indeed difficult to see on what basis their confrontation could take place. Thus, the question as to which of their interpretations of Kant is more "correct" cannot be posed, let alone answered, without tacitly presupposing the philosophical world perspective of one or the other. Much of the literature on the Devos debate, unfortunately, has focused precisely upon this question, and thus upon the irreconcilable differences (personal as well as philosophical) between the two giants of German philosophy. However, beyond this polemic the more interesting question might be: what is, despite their differences, and perhaps precisely because of them, the positive rapport between their respective philosophical perspectives? What positive influence has each

excreted on the other? What, in a word, is the relation between Heidegger's Dasein and Cassirer's animal symbolicum? We cannot attempt to answer such questions here.

By the end of the twenties and the beginning of the thirties, Cassirer had reached the pinnacle of his academic career in German. In 1928 a struggle even broke out between the University of Frankfurt, who wanted to lure Cassirer to Frankfurt, and the University of Hamburg, who evidently wanted to keep him in Hamburg. Cassirer finally remained in Hamburg, and the next year was elected the first Jewish Rector of a German university. When one considers the political and social climate of the times this remarkable fact clearly demonstrates the high esteem in which Cassirer was held. His heavy duties as Rector did not hinder Cassirer from working, and in 1931 he published two new books: *The Case of Jacques Rousseau and the Platonic Renaissance in England*. The Summer of 1931 was spent by Cassirer in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris*, where he worked on his famous study *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* which was published the following year.

January 30, 1933 Hitler was elected chancellor of German and the Cassirers, like so many other German intellectuals of Jewish decent, prepared themselves for a life in exile. Cassirer was quick to understand the full significance of the events that followed Hitler's coming to power, and immediately requested a leave of absence for the next academic year. By March he and his wife had already left Hamburg, and by July (only five months latter) the University of Hamburg, the same university that had only a few years before fought so hard to keep him and then had made him rector, officially informed Cassirer that he had been retired from his post.

### **1933-1945: The years in exile**

The official letter from the University of Hamburg was but a simple formality, of no great surprise nor importance at this point, for it was already common knowledge that Cassirer had left Hamburg and had no intentions of returning. New offers had already arrived from the University of Upsala in Sweden, Oxford in England and the New School of Social Research in New York. After some reflection Cassirer accepted the invitation from All Souls College at Oxford and so left in 1933 for England. Cassirer's main reservation concerned the problem of language: for while he read English he could not really speak nor write it. However, within a few short months Cassirer was preparing and giving his lectures in English. When one compares the lectures from his first year at Oxford with those of the following year, to say nothing of those written at Yale some ten years latter, the constant and rapid progress in Cassirer's English is quite amazing. As phenomenal as this is, however, it is not really that surprising! To begin with, Cassirer possessed an extraordinary memory, and could quote from memory long passages from any number of works in literature or philosophy, in any number of languages <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> it is said that he even quoted from memory when he wrote. He also had a very good ear for music, which was one of his great passions. Finally, he was already a polyglot, having a in-depth knowledge of a number of languages including Latin and Greek. It is thus not so difficult to understand how it was possible for him to transform so quickly his extensive, though passive, knowledge of English into an active command of the language.

After two years at Oxford, Cassirer accepted a post at the University of Göteborg in Sweden. His 1935 inaugural address is very telling of Cassirer's state of mind during this period and of the direction that his philosophy will take in the years to come. In the rise of National Socialism Cassirer saw the clear expression of a profound crisis in western

rationality and of the "failure" of philosophy to achieve its intellectual and ethical vocation: "In the hour of peril," Cassirer says quoting Schweitzer (whom he had met while at Oxford), "the watchmen slept, who should have kept watch over us. So it happened we did not struggle for our culture" ("The Concept of Philosophy," p. 60). In a passage, as remarkable as it is rare, Cassirer, a Jew in exile, speaks of his own responsibility for this crisis:

I do not exclude myself and I do not absolve myself. While endeavouring on behalf of the scholastic conception of philosophy [...] we have all too frequently lost sight of the true connection of philosophy with the world. But today we can no longer keep our eyes closed to the menacing danger. Today the urgency of the time warns us more strongly and more imperatively than ever that there is once again a question for philosophy which involves its ultimate and highest decision. Is there really something like an objective theoretical truth, and is there something like that which earlier generations have understood as the ideal of morality, of humanity? [...] In a time in which such questions can be raised, philosophy cannot stand aside, mute and idle. If ever, now is the time for it again to reflect on itself, on that which it is and what it has been, on its systematic, fundamental purpose, and on its spiritual-historical past" (Ibid., p. 60).

If the world was being engulfed in madness, it could only be because reason, or more precisely its guardians, had failed to secure an adequate foundation from which this madness could have been checked. From this moment on Cassirer began to work harder than he had ever worked before, re-thinking and re-working his philosophy. Of the massive body of work that was produced during this period only four monographs were published during Cassirer's life time. In *Determinism and Indeterminism* (1936) the thesis that had been first developed in *Substance and Function* (1910) for the concepts of classical physics and then in *Einstein's Theory of Relativity* (1921) for the concepts of relativity theory was now applied to the concepts of quantum mechanics. It is interesting to note that this work ends with a chapter on ethics. Cassirer quickly mastered Swedish and wrote a work on the Swedish philosopher Alex Hägerström (Alex Hägerström) and another work on Descartes' influence on the seventeenth century and in particular on the Swedish queen Christine (*Descartes. Lehre  $\frac{3}{4}$  Persönlichkeit  $\frac{3}{4}$  Wirkung*).

Cassirer was, as I have said, clearly re-thinking his philosophy of symbolic forms at this time. However, in the summer of 1940 the course of history forced his hand. The Germans had invaded central Europe. The madness was growing and there was no longer any time for reflection. It was in this "dreadful moment in world history," as Toni Cassirer shall call it in her biography of her life with Cassirer, that Cassirer wrote in the space of four months! *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences* and the fourth volume of *The Problem of Knowledge*. The two works are concerned with one and the same problem, though from different perspectives. Both address the "failure of philosophy" since the "death of Hegel" to establish the "unity of science," and thus to establish the firm foundations of rationality. The former treats the crisis of reason from the systematic perspective of the philosophy of symbolic forms, the later from the more historical perspective of the tradition of rationality since Hegel.

Toni Cassirer's account of the summer of 1940 in her *Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer*, establishes both the existential context in which these two volumes were written as well as the important systematic function of *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences* in the overall structure of Cassirer's oeuvre. As this work is not widely available and had not been translated into English I shall quote the whole passage here:

A few days after Ernst finished his lectures we left Göteborg, where we had to leave behind the children and Peter, and put ourselves up in a wonderfully situated old manor whose accommodations had been converted for guests. It was near a small town, Alingsås, by a large lake about an hour from Göteborg.

Suddenly transported from the oppressive atmosphere of the city to the wonderful Swedish landscape, we breathed a sign of relief. The lake in front of our house was still frozen when we arrived, and we experienced in the next few days and weeks the opening of Swedish spring--a process the beauty of which hardly has its equal. We learnt then that in no situation is it possible to escape the impression of the awakening of nature. Although we encountered wire enclosures and patrols, although the air hummed with the noise of planes [and] each wagon that we met carried field equipment, although we listened anxiously to each broadcast, always prepared to hear suddenly announced that the Germans had entered Sweden, we enjoyed the nature surrounding us more intensely than ever before....

In these weeks everything that could happen politically happened, except that which was expected. Holland, Belgium were overrun, France had been conquered, and only Sweden escaped.... We no longer wondered at the shortsightedness of anyone; but to the horrible idea of the subjugation of the western countries for us the thought was added that all the German fugitives, who had been victims of political or religious persecution, had now come under Hitler's power. In this situation, Ernst suddenly decided to undertake a new work (eine neue Arbeit). In the morning he took a walk with me and told me about what he was working on, and that this new work actually signified the fourth volume of the symbolic forms.

The improvement of his physical state had filled him, in just such an incomparably dreadful moment in world history, with a new desire for life and work. I worried now mostly about my brother Walter and his young wife, who lived in Toulon, which as a naval port appeared to be in special danger.... After the invasion of Paris, Walter, who was always optimistic and positive, suddenly lost all vigour. Seriously ill with diabetes for many years and only kept alive through insulin, he had mastered his life wonderfully as a result of his happy character. Now he used the disease to escape the disaster. He was no longer prepared to witness the collapse of France and to see German soldiers turn up in Toulon. He refused to inject the necessary dose of insulin, and died two weeks later....

One week after our return to Göteborg, thus six weeks after our departure for Alingsås, Ernst had given the finished manuscript of the new book (des neuen Buches), which received the title *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, to a typist and a few days later began to write the fourth volume of the *Problem of Knowledge*, which he finished in November of the same year. This unusual pace was the first indication of the urgency which showed itself in his otherwise very quiet mode of working. He had always been a very fast worker without wanting to be or intentionally forcing it. However, the pace which he maintained from the time of the invasion of Norway up to his death had a completely new driving force. The effort to be "finished" had become [all] determining (Mein Leben mit Ernst Cassirer, pp. 269-271). These two works were written back to back in that "dreadful moment of world history" that had resulted from the failure of reason and philosophy to secure the foundations and unity of reason. When we read this quote without any preconceived knowledge of Cassirer's work it is rather evident that the "new work" which Cassirer mentions to his wife on one of their daily walks is the "new work" that was finished and given to the typist upon their return to Göteborg. *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences* thus "represented" or "signified" for Cassirer a return to that unfinished fourth volume the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, and as such represents the concluding chapter of his philosophy. (I have developed this point in further detail in the Introduction to the English translation of the *Logic of the Cultural Sciences*.)

In 1939 Cassirer became a Swedish citizen, and with the advantage that this entailed one of the inconveniences was that he was required by Swedish law to retire the following year. During the winter term Cassirer took advantage of the time to lecture on Goethe. These

lectures, along with the material for a book on Goethe, will soon be published in the Nachlass edition and will no doubt prove essential to our understanding of Cassirer's philosophy.

On May 20, 1941 the Cassirer left Sweden on the steamer *Remarren* destined for New York. Yale University had invited Cassirer to come as a visiting professor, and as Cassirer was no longer teaching he had accepted. The new world was full of old friends also living in exile: Panofsky, Einstein, Wind, his student Solmitz, the Gestalt psychologist Wertheimer, to mention but a few. But true to his nature Cassirer quickly made new friends and learned about new perspectives. Already on the dangerous voyage over (the *Remarren* was the last passenger liner to make the crossing until after the war) he had met and passed the time with the structural linguistics Roman Jakobson. It is not without some importance that positive references to linguistics structuralism immediately begin to appear in Cassirer's work (cf. "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics" and the chapter on language in *An Essay on Man*).

Despite his age and being in yet another new country Cassirer remained active and productive. Teaching and participating in seminars, he still found time to published numerous articles and write two books. *An Essay on Man* is more than a simple résumé of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. It is the product of a profound rethinking in the light of new knowledge and the realisation, as Cassirer expresses it at the end of *The Myth of the State*, that "human culture is by no means the firmly established thing that we once supposed it to be" (MS, p. 297). Cassirer's philosophy has clearly become a philosophical anthropology, the "critique of culture" has become a critique of the animal symbolicum. Both *An Essay on Man* and *The Myth of the State* were written in the same context of the crisis of reason as were *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences* and the fourth volume of the *Problem of Knowledge*. The first chapter of *An Essay on Man* begins with a section entitled "The Crisis of Man's Knowledge of Himself." At the end of this section we find Cassirer's thesis of the failure of philosophy to establish an "intellectual centre" that would unify the various domains of critical thought. Again Cassirer makes it clear that this failure "is not merely a grave theoretical problem, but an imminent threat to the whole extent of our ethical and cultural life" (EM, pp. 21 sq.). In *The Myth of the State* Cassirer furthers his analysis of the reasons for this failure through his study of the modern "technique of myth" employed by the architects of National Socialism. When reading these pages we should from time to time look up from the book at our own contemporary world. It is remarkable, if not frightening, to what degree Cassirer's analysis here can be applied to the methods of the mass media and advertising employed today.

The passage home having been cut off by the war, Cassirer found himself marooned in the new world. Although Yale University was able to extent its invitation for another year, it was unable to do so for a third. Cassirer was therefore invited to come to the Columbia University for one year. The following year he was to continue west to the University of California in Los Angeles. However, on April 13, 1945 Cassirer died of a heart attack on this way to the Columbia University Faculty Chess Club.

### **Conclusion:**

After his death the work of Cassirer was overshadowed by new movements in philosophy: though he would still be read by a great number of contemporary thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Eco to mention but a few. In the last few years, however, there has been a growing Renaissance in Cassirer studies. The vast majority of the secondary literature on Cassirer has been written in the last ten years; his unpublished writings are being edited by John Michael Krois and Oswald Schemmer in Berlin. A new revised and complete edition of Cassirer's published works is being produced in Hamburg under the direction of Birgit Recki, and a complete French edition is being prepared by Fabien Capeillères. Alas, Cassirer studies in the English world remain limited by the fact that many of Cassirer's most important works have yet to be translated and many of the current translations require serious revision. In 1993 The International Ernst Cassirer Society was created and its lists of member has been growing ever since.