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***Philosophy in a New Key* Revisited: An Appreciation of Susanne Langer**

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**Much of what we learn, even within academic disciplines, is picked up as general wisdom, as ideas that are “in the air”; such knowledge can be absorbed simply as a part of breathing in an intellectual atmosphere.  Certain ideas and concepts are acquired in more specific situations, in textbooks, discussion groups, or formal courses, only to have their sources forgotten once the “point” has been absorbed.  Just a small part of our knowledge retains traces from the moment of original encounter—we remember certain “crystallizing” experiences, for instance, an occasional lecture, a powerful poem, painting, or piece of music, a passage from the Bible or the Iliad, and, infrequently, some pages from a path-breaking work of scholarship, perhaps Sigmund Freud’s *On the Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.**

**In the early 1960s, I, like many other students of that time, encountered a book that had just such an enduring influence on me.  The book itself was physically unimposing: a thin Mentor paperback, its cover bordered with bands of gold and decorated with an odd montage consisting of a lyre, a dragon, and a Socratic figure.  But the book’s content was riveting, its messages memorable. As I turned its pages with mounting excitement, I felt myself confronting a set of issues that I had but dimly sensed before, posed in a way that made sense to me.  The work, *Philosophy in a New Key*, by philosopher Susanne Langer, led me to other books, including those by Langer’s mentor, Ernst Cassirer, and to other courses, including one given by Nelson Goodman, and eventually helped determine my major scholarly interest—the study of human symbolic activity.**

**I think Langer’s slender volume had an equally potent influence on dozens, perhaps hundreds, of other students.  And yet the author is not widely cited; she is ignored or disparaged by a significant number of philosophers, and, despite an imposing shelf of books, she never gained a permanent position at a major university.  These thoughts pervaded my consciousness as I returned to the book, several years after the initial encounter, to discover whether separation had diluted or reinforced the power it once held over me, and in the process to ponder the justice of the fate met by its author.**

**Writing in 1941, Susanne Langer surveyed the entire philosophical tradition, from the days of the pre-Socratic philosophers to the rise of science in the nineteenth century.  As she saw it, a whole set of issues—the central philosophical agenda of days past—had been invalidated by the emphasis on science.  The nature of truth, of value, of beauty, had been ruled “out of court,” the bifurcation of mind and body was no longer taken seriously; with positivism at the helm, there was tolerance only for hard, material facts and no niche for ideas, emotions, values.  Amid this impatience with anything immaterial, Langer spotted a paradox.  The very empiricists who scorned all matters of mind held in special regard a group of individuals (mathematicians) who worked with the most abstract, least tangible of all elements—numerical symbols.**

**Mathematicians were “special” because they made no claim to be illuminating the issues of real life or the structure of the physical world.  They dealt exclusively with another level of discourse—that of symbolic meaning.  It was this symbolic domain that began, at the end of the nineteenth century, to take hold of the philosophical community.  In fact, a dominant trend in philosophy at the time Langer was writing entailed an obsession with symbols, one as pervasive as earlier philosophers’ preoccupation with the senses of man and the raw matter of the physical world.**

**The new agenda, the recently cut key of philosophy, consisted of a concern with all manner of symbols-words, numbers, and other abstract forms—and with the various meanings that underlie our dreams, fill our imaginations, and draw us to treasure works of civilization, ranging from the Parthenon to the string quartets of Beethoven.  As Langer put it in*Philosophy in a New Key*, in an effort to contrast her vision of meaning with that of earlier times:**

**But between the facts run the threads of unrecorded reality, momentarily recognized, wherever they come to the surface . . . the bright, twisted threads of symbolic envisagement, imagination, thought-memory and reconstructed memory, belief beyond experience, dream, make-believe, hypothesis, philosophy—the whole creative process of ideation, metaphor, and abstraction that makes human life an adventure in understanding. (pp. 236-237)**

**Now these ideas, this new key, were already in the air at the time Langer wrote.  Few of the ideas she put forth in her work were wholly new.  Indeed, Langer takes great care to cite and pay tribute to a raft of predecessors: semiotician Charles Peirce; neurologist Kurt Goldstein; the students of language, I. A. Richards and Wilbur Urban; philosophers Rudolf Carnap and Ludwig Wittgenstein; her own professor, the great logician and metaphysician, Alfred North Whitehead; and, above all, the man who had some dozen years before completed a three-volume study of symbolic forms, the redoubtable epistemologist Ernst Cassirer**

**In fact, a trove of articles and books had been a prelude to this new key, but it would be a gross injustice to relegate Langer’s work to the level of “mere” popularization.  It was popularization, but it was much more.  In the tradition of the finest educational syntheses, Langer drew illuminating connections among works whose relationships had not yet been seen, avoided the perils of arid formulas and moist metaphysics, and placed the entire movement in a historical and philosophical perspective that had not yet been articulated.  Moreover—and here lies her claim to originality—Langer articulated concepts that clarified issues in a still uncharted philosophical region and raised questions that are still being pondered.**

**The basic argument of *Philosophy in a New Key* is disarmingly simple, and given the hindsight of today, it seems much less arresting than it was on publication or even at the time I first encountered it.  Langer posited a basic and pervasive human need to symbolize, to invent meanings, and to invest meanings in one’s world.  It was a property of the human mind to search for and to find significances everywhere, to transform experience constantly to uncover new meanings.  But the symbols wrought by the human mind were not all of the same sort and Langer found it necessary to distinguish two kinds.**

**Consider, as an example, the proposition “George Washington chopped down a cherry tree.”  Its meaning can be conveyed in two contrasting ways.  The first, called *discursive symbolism*, involves the expression of this idea in words or other kinds of “languages.”  One notes the meaning of each term, combines them according to accepted rules of syntax, and arrives at a commonly shared meaning.  Most familiar ideas and notions could be expressed in such coin.**

**Opposed to discursive symbolism is another, less understood variety, which Langer labeled*presentational symbolism*.  Here, an equivalent idea could be gleaned from a picture.  Such pictorial symbols do not yield meaning through a sum of their parts, for there are no reliably discriminable parts.  They present themselves and must be apprehended as a whole; moreover, they operate primarily through shades of meaning, nuances, connotations, and feelings (the appearance of the lad, the force of the blow, the ambience that day), rather than through a discrete, translatable message.  Any consideration of the meanings with which our lives are wrapped must take into account at least these two kinds of symbol, the meanings they bear, how they work, their special geniuses.**

**For most readers the distinction between these two forms of symbol was the key concept of philosophy’s new key.  In introducing this contrast, Langer identified an important set of similarities (both express meanings) and differences (they operate in fundamentally contrasting ways) between words or mathematics on one hand, and pictures, sculpture, and dance on the other.  She broached the possibility of analyzing feelings, emotions, and other intangible elements of human experience through the relatively public arena of symbol analysis.  Clearly, she had helped to solidify an appealing intuition, and by categorizing and analyzing it, offered others the chance to dissect it.**

**This aspect of Langer’s work has undergone considerable criticism at the hands of her colleagues in philosophy.  Because she offered no strict definition, it is difficult to identify examples of the two forms of symbolism with reliability or to be certain that there are only two such forms.  And, even more damagingly, Langer’s own examples were wanting.  Language itself can operate in a discursive or presentational way (compare a textbook with a poem), even as pictures may wear a different symbolic garb (compare a portrait with a map or diagram).  Critics with a more finicky, less intuitive approach than Langer’s have had a field day challenging this distinction.  Even those with a much more sympathetic eye have gone on to adopt more carefully worked out distinctions among symbol systems, such as those introduced by the philosopher Nelson Goodman.**

**Langer’s purpose, however, was less to glorify this distinction than to see where she could apply it.  So she sought to identify the origins of the various symbols that pervade the life of our culture.  In separate far-ranging chapters she examined the evolutionary beginnings of symbolic activity in the thought patterns of animals and young children; the cultural beginnings of symbolism in the realms of myth and ritual; and the heights achieved by presentational symbolism in such art forms as music.  These chapters are at best uneven.  Many analysts have despaired of accounting for the origin of myth or rituals because the possibility of verification is so slim.  Investigation of the symbol systems used by children and animals, barely broached in 1940, is now sufficiently advanced to render her empirical statements dubious.  An air of the treatises of the late nineteenth century, when authors felt compelled (and entitled) to comment on every aspect of the rise of civilization, is not entirely absent from Langer’s synoptic work.**

**But amid these somewhat disappointing chapters stands one that has exerted a tremendous influence on many individuals: Langer’s account of the significance of music.  Langer rightly sensed that music was a symbolic system but that it did not directly communicate either reference (for example, the sound of waves) or feelings (for example, the composer’s own sense of happiness or anger).  She proposed that what music presented was the “forms of feelings”—the tensions, ambiguities, contrasts, and conflicts that permeate our feeling life but do not lend themselves to description in words or logical formulas.  The composer presents in spaced tones his knowledge of the whole of human feeling life, and such nonarticulate symbols constitute the appeal and mystery of music.  In a passage that conveys the seductive appeal as well as the maddening ambiguity of her prose, the philosopher suggests:**

**The real power of music lies in the fact that it can be “true” to the life of feeling in a way that language cannot; for its significant forms have that *ambivalence* of content which words cannot have. . . . Music is revealing, where words are obscuring, because it can have not only a content, but a transient play of contents.  It can articulate feelings without becoming wedded to them.  The assignment of meanings is a shifting, kaleidoscopic play, probably below the threshold of consciousness, certainly outside the pale of discursive thinking.  The imagination that responds to music is personal and associative and logical, tinged with affect, tinged with bodily rhythm, tinged with dream, but*concerned* with a wealth of formulations for its wealth of wordless knowledge, its whole knowledge of emotional and organic experience, of vital impulse, balance, conflict, the ways of living and dying and feeling.  Because no assignment of meaning is conventional, none is permanent beyond the sound that passes; yet the brief association was a flash of understanding.  The lasting effect is, like the first effect of speech on the development of the mind, to *make things conceivable* rather than to store up propositions. (pp. 206-207)**

**Taking music as the prototype of the arts, Langer suggested that this knowledge of feeling life constitutes the perennial attraction of artistic symbols; herein lie the reasons we treasure those statements and works that to the logical empiricist have no meaning at all.**

**Langer’s concluding pages assessed trends in the world at the time of her writing.  At the start of the most awful war in human history, it is scarcely surprising that Langer painted a gloomy portrait of “the fabric of meaning” in her society.  She saw a world in which language was lauded above everything; where the inner life was disparaged, ignored, even destroyed.  Drawing on her own analysis, she emphasized the importance, the necessity of an existence in which various levels of meanings and ranges of significance were tolerated.  In place of “a philosophy that knows only deductive or inductive logic as reason, and classes all other human functions as ‘emotive,’ irrational or animalian,” she proposed “a theory of mind whose keynote is the symbolic function . . . the continual pursuit of meanings—wider, clearer, more negotiable, more articulate meanings . . .  the new world that humanity is dreaming of” (p. 246).  Were I her editor, I might have been inclined to tone down these passages, but as a reader, particularly one thinking back to his college days, I resonate to these sentiments.**

**In large part Susanne Langer’s work has accomplished its mission.  Her ideas about symbolism, about meaning in art as well as in science, about the nature of different symbolic forms, are common coin; one need no longer read the little Mentor paperback (now reissued at several times the original price by Harvard University Press) to find out about them.  Thus the book, reconsidered, has a historical importance—as one of that small set of pedagogical classics that has affected a multitude of students.**

**And yet the work retains a timeliness.  Langer’s graceful enthusiasm is engaging; the historical context in which the “revolution” is set helps place in perspective contemporary movements in the social sciences and the humanities; various distinctions introduced and various analyses offered constitute a genuine contribution to current discussions about human knowing.  Because Langer intelligibly linked the old and new traditions in philosophy, because she legitimated a scholarly interest in symbolism and the arts, and because she foreshadowed research in psychology and philosophy that continues today, her work still carries a message.**

**And what of Susanne Langer herself?  In succeeding years she went on to write an impressive set of books, volumes that plumbed with increasing depth the pivotal themes introduced in *Philosophy in a New Key*.  This effort culminated in *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, without doubt the most comprehensive attempt yet undertaken to establish a philosophical and *scientific* underpinning for aesthetic experience.  Langer has gone her own way in these works; no longer in any sense popularizing, she has carefully studied relevant humanistic and scientific texts and has not hesitated to tackle the grand topics—mind, feeling, art—that frighten so many of her colleagues in philosophy.  It is not surprising that she is more popular at small liberal arts colleges than at technologically oriented universities; more appreciated by old-fashioned humanists than by newfangled scientists.  And it is not difficult to understand why, anticipated by earlier philosophers and succeeded by more disciplined minds, Susanne Langer has never broken into the charmed circle of mainstream philosophers.  Yet this gifted philosopher, now nearing ninety, remains an inquiring mind in the best sense of the word—a scholar blessed with a powerful intuition, who knows no disciplinary bounds, who follows a problem wherever it will take her, and who has the gift of articulating the concerns of a generation of scholars and many generations of students.  That she cannot be catalogued may explain why she has escaped certain honors—even as it suggests why she may transcend her time.**

[**Langer main page**](http://www.anthonyflood.com/langer.htm)