

# REVISITING SUSANNE LANGER'S *PHILOSOPHY IN A NEW KEY*— AGAIN

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Howard Earl Gardner

Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (New York: New American Library, 1942).

Howard Gardner, "Philosophy in a New Key Revisited: An Appreciation of Susanne Langer," chap. 5 of *Art, Mind, and Brain: A Cognitive Approach to Creativity* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 48–54.

Scholars and critics of literature—as well as enthusiastic, if less garlanded readers—often talk about the importance of revisiting texts that once had significance for them. The teenage reader will likely react differently to *The Great Gatsby*, *Moby-Dick*, or *Huck Finn* than will the mature adult; and of course, those texts are well worth periodic reimmersion.

Except for scholars, readers are less likely to return to influential nonfiction works, even though classics like *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Silent Spring*, or *Notes of a Native Son* would clearly benefit from periodic revisiting. As it happens,

I have had the unusual opportunity to visit one such book at three pivotal times: as an eighteen-year-old in 1962; as a thirty-five-year-old in 1978; and now, on the cusp of eighty, at the start of 2023.

**Howard at 18:** I was a college freshman, with scant exposure to scholarly texts, let alone philosophical ones. In my “expository writing” course, I read Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*. Had it not been assigned by a demanding teacher, I probably would have skipped or skimmed it. Yet few books have had such a strong influence on my life and work. Langer not only explained what philosophy of language and mind (epistemology) had traditionally entailed. She convincingly introduced a new approach—the careful study of different kinds of symbols and signs, how they work (and sometimes fail to work), how they affect recipients. Most important, given my serious interest in music, she convincingly explained for the first time what is special about music. Many had contended that music is about ideas and/or feelings, but that explanation had never clicked for me. Langer developed a far more sophisticated claim: that music is about “the forms of feelings.” The structure and flow of musical pieces can powerfully capture and convey the landscape of our emotional lives.

**Interlude: Howard at 25:** Half a dozen years after reading Langer, I was a budding psychologist, interviewing for a job with Nelson Goodman, a rigorous analytic epistemologist. He asked, “What philosophy have you read?” When I mentioned Maurice Merleau-Ponty (a phenomenologist), Goodman groaned. But then when I added Susanne Langer, he brightened up, saying, “That’s another story.” Shortly thereafter, I became a founding member of Harvard Project Zero, a research group focused on the way art is experienced, learned, mastered, and taught. Langer’s and Goodman’s contributions were and remain both foundational and fundamental, fifty-five years later.

**Howard at 35:** A young researcher and sometime columnist, I wrote an appreciation of *Philosophy in a New Key*.<sup>1</sup> I described the difference between two kinds of symbols: *discursive symbols* are used in science, mathematics, and ordinary text; *presentational symbols*, employed in the arts and rituals, cannot be effectively translated into discursive symbols. While discursive symbols convey meaning sequentially, presentational ones convey meaning holistically. Accordingly, they cannot intelligibly be broken down—though, of course, they can be analyzed. Words like these are discursive, but were they part of a poem, they would gravitate toward the pole of presentation.

In my midlife primer on Langer, I positioned her work in relationship to other philosophers (ones that she had studied with as well as ones known only through their works). I reviewed critiques of Langer’s work (for instance, that it is

1. My appreciation is available online. See Gardner, “*Philosophy in a New Key Revisited*.”

difficult in principle to differentiate between discursive and presentational symbols) and conveyed her own lament that presentational symbols were becoming underappreciated. As I put it, “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.”

**Howard at 79+:** In one sense, Langer’s book is a period piece. Seeking to put “signs” and “symbols” on the epistemological map, she quotes many authorities. One has the feeling that she wants to please every scholarly reviewer. And of course, today, the field of semiotics—the study of signs and symbols—has blossomed: she would need hundreds of additional pages to “review the literature,” delineate the different approaches, and situate her distinctive contribution.

Moving from philosophy to psychology, Langer’s book is also dated in the latter field. Thanks to the work of many scholars—some inspired by Langer—we know a great deal more about the development of symbol-using capacities in human beings as well as animals. And again, thanks to Langer and Goodman, we know far more about the development of artistry, the ways in which artists work and communicate, and how audiences “decode” their works. Also, Langer wrote before the advent of abstract expressionist art (the New York School), the heyday of twelve-tone musical composition, much of modern and postmodern dance and poetry, and computer-generated artworks (including nonfungible tokens). Lest she appear “dated,” she would need contemporary examples and indeed to monitor the ever-changing contours of contemporary art.

Other anachronisms: almost all authorities cited by Langer are men, and she has no hesitation in writing about “primitive” persons, cultures, and eras. “Man” and “men” are used generically. To be fair, Langer was a female philosopher at a time when that was rare, and she was not allowed to teach at Harvard because of nepotism rules.

Finally, having now been in the “book business” for decades, I cannot avoid thinking about this book as might an editor. In current lingo, *Philosophy in a New Key* is somewhere in between a scholarly book and a trade book—what used to be called a “midlist book.” I love “midlist books,” but they are a vanishing breed. I have no doubt that, writing today, Langer could produce an excellent scholarly text that would be well reviewed in academic journals of philosophy, psychology, and the arts. But the timelessness of her book lies in the way that she depicts how artistic works and experiences engage the human mind—and, particularly, how they achieve their effects in music, still for me the most seductive and enigmatic of the arts. I might suggest a less academic title, though: “How Music Really Works.”

But for a book a year older than I am, even in the garb in which I first read it (see fig. 1), *Philosophy in a New Key* gets a high grade.

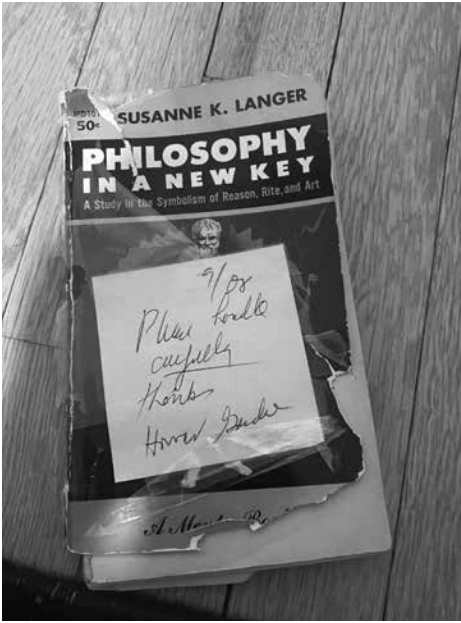


Figure 1. Gardner's original copy of Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*, purchased in 1961 (for half a dollar).

## References

Gardner, Howard. "Philosophy in a New Key Revisited: An Appreciation of Susanne Langer." In *Art, Mind, and Brain: A Cognitive Approach to Creativity*. New York: Basic Books, 1982. PDFSlide.net. <https://pdfslide.net/documents/an-appreciation-of-susanne-langer.html?page=1>.