

Philosophy in Review



John T. Lysaker, "Philosophy, Writing, & the Character of Thought"

Jeffrey A. Bernstein

Volume 43, numéro 3, août 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106160ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1106160ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Bernstein, J. (2023). Compte rendu de [John T. Lysaker, "Philosophy, Writing, & the Character of Thought"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 43(3), 30–32.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1106160ar>

© Jeffrey A. Bernstein, 2023



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

John T. Lysaker. *Philosophy, Writing, & the Character of Thought.* University of Chicago Press. 193 pp. \$25 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780226815855).

Lysaker's subtle and profound study will be maddening for conventional reviewers like myself insofar as it is comprised almost entirely of aphorisms, short aphoristic essays, and fragments. Far from proceeding linearly to a conclusion, it swings (in the manner of jazz drummer Elvin Jones), in paratactic style, around a number of core issues dealing with philosophical writing and how it emerges from different times and places. If there is a center around which this text swings, surely it is a silent one. Almost. For Lysaker takes, as his guiding star, Walter Benjamin's desire to be 'equal to [his] moment' (18, 124-129) in his similarly aphoristic *One Way Street*. It would not be going too far to suggest that Lysaker desires in his own work to be equal to the historical moment in which he writes. Lysaker's imperative to be equal to the moment makes it extremely difficult for reviewers to be equal to it. But we persist.

Lysaker holds that philosophical thought is a praxis bound up with writing (4). True, Socrates never wrote anything, but he did have his Plato who preserved his thought for the ages (1). How, then, shall we philosophers write? Lysaker swings between Romantic fragment, Krausian aphorism, Benjaminian aphoristic essay, Wittgensteinian self-dialogue, to name a few styles employed in the book. It is clear that he believes that the treatise form is not equal to the contemporary moment, but without 'declaring once and for all' that the time for them is past: 'The treatise no longer seems a live option for those who would philosophically essay a topic. As a mode of conduct, it appears to have grown old' (131). The key word here is 'essay'—if philosophy is supposed to travel distances in exploration, it may be that the treatise is to be tried and tested to fit that bill currently. Much as Benjamin (in *One Way Street*) evinces skepticism about large books, Lysaker believes that today's philosophy needs other forms.

Other forms, perhaps. But what is the space that determines philosophical writing? For Lysaker, again following Benjamin, it is the space of deliberation: 'Benjamin's example casts philosophical writing in terms of purposive action.... Taking philosophical writing in terms of purposive action does not elide issues of form, genre, or content.... Rather, it renders each a moment within a larger arc of conduct, contextualizing what is at stake in each point and opening those points to the interrogations of deliberation' (19). Philosophical activity, if it is anything at all, is deliberative writing. This holds for punctuation and logical operations as much as for ideas (19). And indeed, many of the titles of Lysaker's aphorisms or section headings are deliberately suited to his moment by referring to popular song titles/lines (either via replication or slight distortion)—e.g., 'We Gotta Remain In This Space' (43), 'Wise Up' (45), 'Message In A Bottle' (54), 'I Am You, You Are Me, And We Are All Together' (72), 'For No One' (74), 'Thick Unlike A Brick' (77), 'Hey You!' (82), 'Dancing Cheek To Cheek' (94), 'That's Me In The Corner' (118), 'Is There Anybody Out There?' (121), 'This Is Not My Beautiful House' (137), 'A Momentary Glimpse Of Reason' (150), and 'Who Walks The Line?' (158).

But Lysaker's musical footprint is not merely ornamental. Following Dewey, he holds that deliberative writing amounts to a concern with what the given practice will bring about: 'Many now



take their carbon footprint into account, particularly with regard to their cars, and with good reason... [I]t informs how they think about which car to buy, how much to use it, whether to carpool, and so on. And in that regard their deliberative stance is akin to Dewey's. They do not consider their desired ends in isolation from the actual consequences of their actions. Instead, they formulate and reformulate their ends as they learn about the consequences involved in their realization' (25). Lysaker believes that we should take a similar view regarding philosophical activity: 'A reflective, deliberative approach to praxis should anticipate and evaluate a wide range of likely consequences' (25). For example, not engaging with the work of women or people of color, Lysaker contends, has the unintended effect of rendering their work invisible (25-26). If philosophy has the task of being open to anyone who desires to put in the effort, the effects of one's writing have to be taken into account as a possible opening for new readers and thinkers. That philosophy has such scope is suggested in Lysaker's aphorism 'You Asked For It': "I wasn't talking to you." Does this pass in philosophy?' (95) It is perhaps for this reason that Lysaker is suspicious of esoteric writing, which he brands 'cryptography' (75).

Not only is philosophy open to anyone who is willing to put in the effort (which Lysaker formulates as LET—learning/energy/time [126]), it also remains open to philosophers themselves. Contrary to Hegel's dismissive claim that Schelling was 'pursuing a philosophical education in public,' Lysaker is an advocate for public education with roots going back to Socrates. In 'Knowing That I Don't Know,' Lysaker says 'If Socrates is an exemplar, acknowledging ignorance seems integral to philosophy. But more than that, and for one's public, one should not be afraid to learn in public' (80). This in no way means that the philosopher knows who their interlocutors are or even to whom they are writing: 'Writing for a secret addressee recognizes how one's words are accompanied by an open invitation to whoever might chance on them, that, like it or not, each unit of meaning involves a hand outstretched in a gesture of welcome...writing is thus always a sign of hope, even when it is pessimistic' (83). Whether they like it or not, philosophers are embedded in a public space. To engage in their practice in a public space signals hope; were it otherwise, why the need to write? What philosophers do (some better, some worse) is to engage their moment in various ways.

But what *is* 'our (mine, yours, Lysaker's) moment'? Where, in fact, are we? Lysaker puts the point baldly: 'In general, we no longer write and speak...with an untroubled sense that language and life occur on an ontological continuum... A kind of skepticism still haunts us such that all philosophical writing moves in the gaps between signs and signified, intention and action, appearance and reality, past and future, I and me and you (and we), part and whole' (167). Moreover, we all speak different philosophical languages and face a Babel-like situation when it comes to communicating with each other (168). Finally, our intellectual products (commodities?) belong as much to the market as they do to the classroom or study 'which exacts a toll on whatever can be done by way of genre and logical-rhetorical operations on which author and reader must rely' (168). What, then, can we do to be equal to our moment? For Lysaker, we can take into account thought's relation to itself (169), its relation to addressees. (170), and the historical situation that inevitably enfolds writer and reader: "*Historical situations* always stage communication" (170). These issues are the ones to be faced by any and all deliberative writers. Lysaker promises no solutions to how to deal

with them. In fact, in engaging his moment, Lysaker's book exemplifies what the attempt to be equal to it might mean. Anyone who worries about whether or how philosophy can be relevant to the times in which we live will want to study this book deeply. Its deliberativeness is matched only by the passion and force with which the questions asked are delivered over to readers.

Jeffrey A. Bernstein, College of the Holy Cross