

“My biggest responsibility to myself as a poet is to remain in the realm of the unknown. I do not write what I already know. My writing arises, and I am constantly surprised by it.”

In the late 1980s Gail Sher gave a talk to a group of innovative thinkers in business, the military, and the sciences on her experiments in non-conceptual poetic language. This essay is based on that talk, and draws on her years of Zen and Tibetan Buddhist practice as well as her training as a psychotherapist. In it she shows how her poetry emerges from what she calls the “linguistic unconscious.” The essay includes examples from other writers and artists, and concludes with an illustrative poem of her own.

Gail Sher is the author of *One Continuous Mistake: Four Noble Truths for Writers* (Penguin) the first of a widely-praised series of books on writing as a practice. Her most innovative writing, and the largest body of her work, however, is her poetry which she has been writing continuously for over 35 years. In addition to her own writing practice, she provides mentoring to writers, consultation to psychotherapists, and psychotherapy to adolescents and adults. For more information on her writing practice, including downloadable texts, visit www.gailsher.com.

*Poetry, Zen and the
Linguistic Unconscious*

Gail Sher



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For Brendan

CONTENTS

Introduction

1

A Linguistic Understanding

2

A Spiritual Understanding

5

A Psychological Understanding

10

An Ecological Understanding

12

(As) on things which (headpiece) touches the Moslem

13

Afterword

21

Publications, 1981-2016

25

Introduction

As a girl I studied piano with a teacher whose idea of “playing with weight” intrigued me. I became aware not only of the heaviness or lightness of my stroke but to sounds (and overtones of sounds) thereby subtly modulated. Delicate gradations became a focus of control. Today, as a poet, it is not much of a stretch for me (regarding words) to be primarily concerned with their relative weight within, and as, a charged environment.

In college I studied music, literature and linguistics. I won a Ford Foundation Fellowship to continue with linguistics, but found the subject too abstract. I craved immersion—plush Middle English—[*The Parliament of Fowls, Troilus and Creseide, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*]. Yes. Music of a different sort.

Later, I entered a Zen community. Music wasn't allowed. At first I experienced this as a deprivation. But as I settled in, I began to choose it. I followed the monastic schedule and didn't think overly much about

accomplishing anything. The spirit of “just doing”—just going along without attaching to ideas of gain or progress—became the foundation for my future work with words.

Still later, I discovered I needed to write and that I needed to do this outside of the Zen community. To survive the tremendous anxiety of not knowing what I was doing, a spirit of “just doing” came in handy. I would have “writing periods” instead of zazen periods. My vow was to attend them. I couldn’t attach to accomplishing anything because I had nothing in mind to accomplish. The absence of striving radically opened my mind and heart. Gradually this approach morphed into using language in such a way that it functioned not symbolically but synchronistically (as Jung would say). The new “meanings” my language carried (and concerns that it addressed) derived from what I called the linguistic unconscious.

A Linguistic Understanding

Although Suzuki-roshi told John Cage that he had nothing to say about music or art, Cage still felt Suzuki had led him to see music ‘not as a communication from the artist to an audience, but rather as an activity of sounds in which the artist found a way to let the sounds be themselves.’

Linguistics is the science of language—the study of the nature and structure of human speech. What I have discovered by entirely receiving what arises during my writing periods is that part of language based in the collective human psyche. It is a universal aspect of language rooted in a substrata of experience that goes beyond the individual's personal life. I have found that if I tap into this quality of a word, then anyone who listens to my work with the same acuity will be able to “understand” it.

The understanding is not semantic. It is not aligned to the particular signification we somewhat automatically attach to words. I use a word stripped of its semantic implications in order to highlight its relationship to vast galaxies of expression often overlooked. Humans are so programmed to use words according to what they “mean” that when the slightest loophole for “meaning” emerges, the mind instantly lights on this and doesn't see what else is there is.

It is important to note that the kind of interaction with language to which I refer is not the same as free association (a psychoanalyst who attended a poetry reading of mine once praised me for my “free association”). Free association is one's personal string of responses to an idea or image—a manifestation of one's unique personality or pathology. Jung pointed out that we can free associate to anything, including this morning's news, but the associations will invariably lead us to our personal complex of emotional/psychological issues. Like Freud, Jung uses

the term unconscious both to describe mental contents which are inaccessible to ordinary awareness and to demarcate a psychic space with its own character, laws and functions. Jung regarded the unconscious as a locus of psychological activity which differed from and was more objective than personal experience since it related directly to the instinctual bases of the human race. The personal unconscious (Freud's discovery) rests on the collective unconscious (Jung's discovery, though at the end of his life Jung preferred the term "objective psyche"—the psyche as it is—to "collective unconscious"). The ground from which my work arises and the means by which it communicates is what I call the "linguistic unconscious," and I think of it as a manifestation of the "objective psyche" Jung described.

Wayne Detloff, a Jungian analyst, describes a system that originated in Japan known as the Kototama principle. (Kototama translates as "word-soul.") Apparently, as the divine attributes of the emperor's traditional role were relinquished following World War II, certain secret traditions held by the royal family became available. The Kototama principle is linked with the *I Ching*, Shintoism and the *Kojiki*, and is said to date back 4,000 years.

According to the Kototama, the sounds are the most central essences, to which trigrams of the *I Ching*, numbers, elements, color, etc., are related. The sounds contain all the essential possibilities and

thus together form a complete matrix or 'mirror' for reflecting almost any content. These sounds are the basis for building words regardless of the specific language. To draw an analogy with chemistry, sounds make up words as the elements make up molecules. Thus, in our framework, the sounds are related in a deep, essential, elemental way to the archetypes.¹

The Kototama principle might explain John Cage's experience of seeing music as an "activity of sounds" in which the artist finds a way to let the sounds be themselves. It also intimates the linguistic unconscious.

A Spiritual Understanding

Dom Bede Griffiths, an Oxford-educated, English Benedictine monk who founded a monastery/ashram in India in 1955, writes:

. . . a Buddhist saying has it: 'We use words to go beyond words and reach the wordless essence.' Human language derives from the physical nature of man. 'It was the nerves and not the intellect which created speech.'

¹ Wayne K. Detloff, "A Study of Authors with Reflections on Language and Jung's Typology," *The Shaman from Elko: Papers in Honor of Joseph L. Henderson on His Seventy-fifth Birthday* (San Francisco: C.G. Jung Institute, 1978) 144.

The word Brahman is said to derive from the root *brh*, which means to swell or to grow. This seems to have signified originally the rising of the word from the depths of the unconscious, the growth into consciousness.²

In their critical introduction to the *Poems of Wang Wei*, Willis and Tony Barnstone say that the voices one hears in this eighth-century Chinese poet are those one hears in absolute silence. For Wang Wei, silence was both a personal discipline and the issue of his poetry. Indeed, in Wang Wei's poems there are three levels of silence. The first is the descriptive silence of the outer world. This quiet world is a precondition for the second silence that is spiritual, the silence of the mind. Which mind, purged of distractions, gives rise to the third silence, the silence of deepest meditation. "When thought stops, words halt, and we move through light toward absolute stillness."³

When words are filled with silence, our ordinary understanding of what is needed to convey meaning completely changes.

Some years ago I wrote a prose poem called "The Intimacy of the Silence." My subject was saturated

² Bede Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1982), 62-63.

³ Tony Barnstone & Willis Barnstone, trans., *Poems of Wang Wei* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1991) xlv.

language and how the writer uses silence to fill her words. She infuses them with her own kind of silence and this is what creates her “voice.” Examples of saturated language from writers I admire are in italics:

The Intimacy of the Silence

To saturate is to satisfy fully
to load to capacity
to fill completely
with something that permeates
an indistinct plentitude which is empty.

To saturate language
a writer must
silence herself
so that the word
pure passivity of being
is.

*She stiffened a little
on the kerb
waiting for Durtnall's van
to pass.*⁴

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Blanchot explains that
tone is not the writer's voice,
but the *intimacy of the silence*
she imposes upon the word.

*He was gazing earnestly
at the little boy.⁵*

The silence is still his.
He preserves himself
within the work.

*At night
she would doze off
with morphine
and my mother and Grandpa
each drank
in their separate rooms.⁶*

⁵ Lady Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji*.

⁶ Lucia Berlin, "Dr. H.A. Moynihan" from *Phantom Pain*.

Silence is felt as concentration.

*There she was perched,
never seeing him,
waiting to cross
very upright.⁷*

Movement within something enclosed.

A small action

or detail

with elaborate internal activity.

Logic is tension

and tension is transparent.

*He threw coffee on the fires,
staining the plastic-soft floor
deep cave brown.⁸*

Breakups in a contextual,

denotative or linguistic sense

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

⁸ Lucia Berlin, "Dr. H.A. Moynihan" from *Phantom Pain*.

do not affect
the stream of concentration
continuity
which pushes the skin of a word
so that
saturated
it will stand alone.

*Don't you notice
something rather different
about his eyes?*⁹

When silence is used to fill words, and the gaps between words, the ordinary understanding of what is needed to convey meaning entirely changes. Words stand alone. Sounds are (are allowed to be) themselves. Anything more weakens the message.

A Psychological Understanding

Heinz Kohut, an innovative psychoanalyst who came to the United States from Vienna during the Second World War, founded a new school within psychoanalysis called Self Psychology. (Self Psychology attaches greater

⁹ Lady Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji*.

significance to the effect of relationships upon our development than the effect of so-called innate instincts like sex and aggression—Freud’s concerns). Kohut was keenly aware that the work of a great artist reflects the central psychological problems of his era. In the following passage from *The Restoration of the Self*, Kohut directly addresses the issue of fragmented language:

. . . the emotional problems of modern man are shifting, and the great modern artists were the first to respond in depth to man’s new emotional task. Just as it is the understimulated child, the insufficiently responded-to child, the daughter deprived of an idealizable mother, the son deprived of an idealizable father . . . so it is the crumbling, decomposing, fragmenting, enfeebled self of this child and, later, the fragile, vulnerable, empty self of the adult that the great artists of the day describe . . . and that they try to heal. The musician of disordered sound, the poet of decomposed language, the painter and sculptor of the fragmented visual and tactile world: they all portray the breakup of the self and through the reassemblage and rearrangement of the fragments, try to create new structures that possess wholeness . . .¹⁰

¹⁰ Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977) 286.

Kohut points out that while the art of Henry Moore, O’Neill, Picasso, Stravinsky, Pound, and Kafka would have been unintelligible even a hundred years ago, today, precisely because of their intricate and nonsymmetrical order, we admire them for articulating the quality of our suffering.

An Ecological Understanding

Art, beauty and craft have always drawn on the self-organizing ‘wild’ side of language and mind.

—Gary Snyder

Gary Snyder claims that the fundamental nature of language is wild because “wild” is a name for the way that phenomena continually actualize themselves. Our ability to tune into that wildness—with greater and greater accuracy rendering it alive by depicting it in our self-reflections—ironically bespeaks of that very measure of health and wholeness, the lack of which so deeply concerns us. Our ability to stay present with the chaos may in the end be our salvation.

Although it might seem interesting to delve further into a theoretical exploration of my poetry, it would actually be unhelpful. My work is rarely intellectually based. In fact my biggest responsibility to myself as a poet is to remain in the realm of the unknown. I don’t write what I already know, therefore I don’t write from an idea or concept or from any other analytical place.

My writing arises, and I am constantly surprised by it.
Here is a poem I would like to share. It illustrates how the
linguistic unconscious arises in me.¹¹

*(As) on things which
(headpiece) touches
the Moslem*

(As) on things which
(headpiece) touches
the Moslem
In who claim
To hold
(to) be
form (dearest)

Or even some grabbing
to brace
(to) be
sectional protecting
jacket

Saw (too) to
cling here
chessmen
Red air chews

¹¹ In the original version of this talk, I read the poem to the audience. For readers of this essay I suggest reading the poem aloud, slowly.

yes

This queer
bare
mouth

Ignites the mother
beak

Or man on the dais
as its mother
stroked it

Mime is first

Part mint part
internal march
quantity

No guy

Nor flaps of
voice to part
this

So tentacles or
them

Retreat itself

Chant wrought
side

Is lewd or solicits lewd

The grit or
hear

Which comes
student

Vow & pick
here

Whereas derives
stallion inside

Exact were
larvae
also

Eat line
green on
love

The jut will
hoarse Christ
eventually

Renunciant line
excepts

A dent from
mouth

Hand & mung
born dark

Dram nun

To opens in a
lower room

Brittleness high
love

Bring the pull
strains graced
which vesicle

Like hills leave
to various hills

This time the
clasp food

Or anniversary of a polite
act

Being a toy building
from one kiln

Hex these
lake

The crock the
shepherd on
her own children
thankfully

The woolly flesh

Or part which
stampedes even music
basically

And elegance its
tenancy

Doer logs ferrying
cells

A rung or
yelling underneath
the honey

Tensile lowing
most young

Joins others I
the unguent
I

Tubers & iron
even to prepare
this

This elliptical
weaning or long
spaying sound

Wheels all right
this dark math
earth

Or widow's phone

As hover from the
elbows is something
growing

Bitterness as
monk

Pat on this

Taking one
ignite

Girl and no

Bond to gum

Intense from
now

The hoist pin

Dawns or
parson

Or go god

To swill
could

These pear and
sand year

Must sipping
thinks

Opaque strains
together to
clap

Tries august

Calf the inch

Lady wife

they fallen
birds

Crayons geese
its unkind
horse

This alert
dots¹²

¹² Gail Sher, *(As) on things which (headpiece) touches the Moslem* (San Francisco: Square Zero Editions, 1982).

Afterword

This essay is based on a talk I gave at the School of Management and Strategic Studies at the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute in La Jolla, California in 1989. Though the school no longer exists, it made a pioneering attempt to introduce its unusual audience (business executives, military officers, research administrators and scholarship participants from the public sector) to innovative ways of thinking and knowing.

I am indebted to Dr. Andrew Feenberg for inviting me to address this group. Where else could a poet grappling with the “linguistic unconscious” interface with generals and magnates from the business world? I was prepared for their skepticism, but shouldn’t have been surprised at their openness and receptivity: they were, after all, selected precisely for the creativity and non-conventionality they had demonstrated in their own fields.

Although I was not able to articulate then what I might say now about how I work as a poet, much of what I said remains true of my practice and understanding today:

- the Zen spirit of “just doing” (not knowing).
- daily writing periods instead of formal zazen.
- receiving what arises from levels of awareness that go beyond the personal to the collective.
- using words stripped of their conventional, semantic understanding.
- allowing the underlying “sound matrix,” the foundation of language, to manifest.
- using words to go beyond words.
- recognizing silence as both a “personal discipline and the issue of poetry.”
- saturating language with one’s own silence.
- fragmented language as an articulation of our psychological and social suffering, and an impulse toward its healing.
- chaos in language as a reflection of the wildness of nature itself.

Today I would simply say that I create space by making room for the mind to go to levels of understanding that language itself can’t get to. My words just barely don’t make sense. That creates a gap, a pause, and in the space of “not understanding” a deeper realization can occur.

My biggest responsibility as a poet hasn't changed: it is still to remain in the silence of the unknown.

GAIL SHER
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Poetry, Zen and the Linguistic Unconscious

WAS SET IN ADOBE GARAMOND, A DIGITAL
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GARAMOND (1499-1561) & THE ITALIC
TYPEFACES OF ROBERT GRANJON (1513-1589).

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