

Light(silence)word
by NORMAN FISCHER

1.

Light is mysterious. Both a wave and a particle, and therefore neither, light is a universal constant; neither medium nor content, light is strangely all-pervasive. Seeing anything is not so much seeing that things as seeing the light that falls on it; and it's not even the light that we see; we see only its afterglow. Light activates eye and consciousness only after it has disappeared, its faded radiance bouncing off objects. Uncanny in these ways, light is in almost all religious traditions associated with the divine, the supernal, with God, with Consciousness; so much so that it seems possible that light actually *is* consciousness or a form of consciousness, matter a coagulation of light, light's grosser form. In Heaven, in Nirvana, in Pure Consciousness (or whatever other ethereal realm anyone would conceive of) objects with all their stubborn messiness and grossness fade away and there is only light, sheer luminosity, in its pure state.

The word "Zohar," title of the great thirteenth century Spanish Jewish mystical text attributed to Moses de Leon, translates as "radiance." The Judaic scholar Daniel Matt has for some years now working on the definitive English translation of Zohar (the Pritzker edition, of which four volumes have so far been released by the Stanford University Press). Volume I of the text includes an introduction by Rabbi Arthur Green. What follows is my digest of the historical context of the text, as discussed by Green:

Kabbalah, though existent in various disorganized forms probably as early as the second century CE, remained a secret tradition until the twelfth century in Spain, when Kabbalistic works went public in reaction to the influence of the work of Moses Maimonides, the great Aristotelian physician and rationalist, probably the most influential rabbi in history. The whole of Judaism as it exists now, East and West, bears the Rambam's (as he was called) stamp. Inspired by Greek philosophy, as mediated through Islamic culture, Maimonides thought of God as an abstruse entity, logically necessary. Like Freud, (though of course, unlike Freud, not an atheist), the Rambam saw ancient Judaism as

essentially child-like, and felt that with him Judaism now came to its mature form as a path of religious contemplation and ethics. The purpose of Jewish observance, according to the Rambam, was not to honor or appease God (who, it seemed obvious to him, had no need of this) but to educate, tame, and improve human beings, so that we would be capable of coming into line with the divine plan, which foresaw universal goodness and the final perfection of the world.

The Kabbalists opposed this view so bitterly they felt compelled to go public to attack it. To them, the Rambam's concept of Judaism as a gradual path of human self improvement trivialized the tradition. In contrast, they saw Jewish daily observance as a desperately urgent mechanism for revolutionizing the cosmic order, which, in its fallen state, was perilously close to endlessly being lost, without possibility of redemption. For them God was not an impersonal philosophically necessary entity; God was intimately, even personally, wrapped up within the world and within human contemplations, actions, and language. Especially Jewish actions and language. So that Jewish religious acts were constantly crucially critical to the fate of the universe. The burden of the Kabbalistic mythology and practice is the mysterious and direct correspondence between the world below and the world above, between human action and the divine plan. Creation had gone terribly awry from the beginning; the divine sparks had broken through their vessels and plunged into the darkness of the world; it was up to Jews to raise the sparks up on behalf of the entire human race and the cosmic order. Where the Rambam and his followers were patiently and wisely hopeful, the Kabbalists were constantly urgently grasping at straws.

In discussing this historical background to the Zohar, Arthur Green writes: "to know God is a necessary condition of proper worship- on this the Kabbalists agree with the philosophers [ie. Rambam and his followers]." Of course the two camps differed radically as to the significance of the phrase "knowing God." The philosophers understood intellectual contemplation of teaching and creation as the path to knowledge of God; for the Kabbalists knowing God meant mystical union, achieved mainly through language-based ecstatic concentration practices.

The Kabbalists were obsessed with language. They were not interested merely in analysis, contemplation, and interpretation. Study for them was not an intellectual act. Instead, every word of text masked hidden depths that revealed operations crucial to the salvation of the world on a moment to moment basis; and every word was related not only to every other word of text but to everything else throughout the whole of the mundane and supernal realms. Things of the world were, in their essence also "words" (in Hebrew *devar* means both word and thing), because God had after all, in the most hidden of all parts of the bible, Bereshit ("In the beginning" the Jewish name for Genesis, and the main subject of the Zohar) created the physical universe exactly by uttering words. What was the nature of God-speech, God-word? And how did it relate to human speech, in which it lay hidden?

The Torah, it was said, was written in light. Every letter was light. And within this light all mysteries were contained. The book was the world, the world was the book. To those who then and now complain that the Torah is a primitive text, full of the violence and vindictiveness of a terrified people and a terrible God, the Kabbalists had little to say; they knew otherwise, but how could one explain, for without faith, spiritual practice, and intimate knowledge, what could be understood? They knew that certainly the Torah was not saying only what it seemed to be saying, what the black letters on white seemed to indicate, it was saying that and everything else, in multifaceted, ineffable ways. The words, the letters, were fire; the page was burning. (In an essay on Buber's vision of Chasidism, Kenneth Rexroth, who felt that the Bible was the most destructive text ever written, said that the Chasidim had managed to read the Bible in such a way that it said exactly the opposite of what it actually did say; Rexroth was seemingly both right and wrong about this). Behind every letter of the text, every infinite pinpoint of light, lay universe upon universe.

Long before the Kabbalists the rabbis of the Talmud saw the profundity of the biblical text, which they had fashioned into a substitute for the cult of the now-destroyed Temple. Judaism has for centuries been a cult of ritual action; it was now a cult of the book, into which all the mysterious efficacy of ritual action had disappeared. The Talmudists saw that the book therefore could not be merely what it seemed to be. Words could not merely be words. Each was subject to infinite interpretation, and there were infinite approaches to

interpretation. Within these infinite approaches, the tradition delineated four: Peshat, the plain meaning, what the text seemed to be saying in the surface; Remes, the level of linguistic correspondence and textual operation through which completely unexpected meanings could be derived; Drash, the vast literature of legends and stories that purported to tell incidents and details (many quite anachronistic and clearly manufactured to suit situations long lost to history) that had been left out of the highly elliptical original text; and Sod, the level of mystical vision, trance, dreams, visitations etc. (There are various interpretations and glosses on these four levels; the foregoing is my own, based on reading in various sources). Together the four (PRDS) spell the Hebrew *pardes*, garden, or Paradise.

Pardes

The trees bear fruit, the book

Binds

Like water brimming in the pitcher's

Poured out steady till no drop's left

By a firm hand, an outstretched arm,

The book bears them on through the storm

Tree tops twisting, stripped debris shattered

In the violent nights

Though the fruit's sweet lingers on the tongue

Like melody -

That's the plain meaning

Beyond that and embedded in it

Like seeds in a winter earth

(Officially only a thin layer

Atop a hard dark mystery below

Exactly as deep as the plow turns)

The meaning-fingers splayed forth

Like hairy roots laterally

Entangling other letters, heterodox tales, bits and strands

(The third level now)

Of lives, songs, opinions, certainties
Wild stories, rewordings, revisions
Attempts to harmonize or humanize
Upheaval, sickness, fierce mistaken force
The worm in the infinite, how sky
Reflects the turmoil of the sea
The soul's own sequential poisoning
In its reversing desire to crawl out
Of its own skin, like the famous snake
That spoke for it in the orchard
That had no hands to touch with, to grasp

Then the inner turning
The quiet of snow falling on rock and twig
With a hush beyond speculation and thinking
A meaning pressed only into breathing
Or illuminated by the speechless waters
That suck underground
Into the capillary rootlets opening beneath the feet
In the winding uncharted journey of footsteps
From one point of darkness to the next

The Zohar is a Kabbalistic commentary on torah but also a fiction, a novel, the adventures of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a second century rabbi from the Galilee, and his small band of disciples who offer the commentary in discussions that take place as they wander around the Holy Land meeting various people. They usually discuss sitting outdoors by a brook or in a garden. A feature of the text is their constant delight in one another and in the various interpretations that they espouse. Almost certainly there was in thirteenth century Spain a similar group of disciples surrounding Moses de Leon. A key theme of the Zohar is light, light and darkness: the disciples arose for study at midnight, a thin thread of light going out into the world emanating from their words and feelings. A "thread-thin ray of love" (Matt) that reverberates seven centuries later in Paul Celan's holocaust-inflected "thread-suns," thin light rays of hope, that leak out of books and words even still.

The symbolic edifice of Kabbalism is prodigious and esoteric and I don't know enough about it to say much here. Suffice it to say that the system references the stage by stage emanations from Ayn Sof, the beyond beyond the beyond, into this world below through many supernal stages, the descent of the ineffable through light that illuminates this world: physical light, but also the light of human divinity and human goodness which is a reflection of the divine. Ayn Sof (which means "without end") is beyond light and dark, it is endless formless unknowable indefinable, beyond being and nonbeing. Yet within Ayn Sof, for no reason, there occurs an impulse toward light. This impulse creates an energy that leads to the first of the ten Sphiroth (emanations) which is Keter, "crown," "circle," or Ayin, "nothing" (Ayn Sof being more nothing than nothing): a point of light that is completely surrounded by darkness, and this long before the world, even before what we call God (also an emanation of Ayn Sof) had come to be; a point of light that is, essentially, hidden. This becomes a key Kabbalistic theme, concealment, hiddenness. It led to theologies like those of the Marranos (Spanish secret Jews) and the Sabbatians (followers of the seventeenth Century "false messiah" who converted to Islam): to be a Jew concealed in the world is to manifest and imitate the concealed divine light. So that outward conversion to Islam or Christianity, while inwardly remaining Jewish, came to be viewed as the highest and mostly God-like of all paths!

In all this we can see germs of nearly all of avant-garde writing's chief themes: revolt against the polite, rational, Aristotelian order of things; focus on language not as conduit of communication but as infinitely suggestible medium that writes the world; concealment, hiddenness, obscurity, exile; intertextuality; resistance to closure and the univocal interpreting self. The world is hidden within language, words conceal rather than reveal meaning, meaning as meaning being essentially concealed, the not said contained in the said, the written writing the unwritten etc.

2.

The word "zen" is a Japanese transliteration of the Sanskrit word "dhyana" which means meditative absorption. The Zen schools of Buddhism emphasize meditative absorption above all else. A cursory, or even a deeper, look at Zen

literature and practice will surely suggest that language per se is not only irrelevant to Zen but that Zen is dismissive of, if not hostile to, language. A common early Chinese phrase to indicate the essential and unique position of Zen is usually translated "beyond words and letters." Language in Zen is "a finger pointing at the moon." In Zen it's silence, not language's constant noise-making, that gets to the heart of reality.

The most famous discussion of silence in Zen literature centers on a koan that is actually a quotation from the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa sūtra:

Vimalakirti asked Manjushri, "What is the bodhisattva's method of entering non duality?"

Manjushri said, "According to my mind, in all things, no speech, no explanation, no direction, and no representation, leaving behind all questions and answers - this is the method of entering nonduality."

Then Manjushri asked Vimalakirti, "We have all spoken. Now you should say, good man, what is a bodhisattva's method of entry into nonduality?"

Vimalakirti was silent.

Manjushri's explanation that explanation, speech, representation are all to be let go of apparently doesn't go far enough, for he is still talking. Vimalakirti goes one step better by saying absolutely nothing. In Zen, Vimalakirti's silence is referred to as "thunderous," and there is much discussion about its nature. Though the word silence might suggest a singular experience, in fact there are many possible silences: passive silence, silence of withdrawal, angry silence, confused silence, enigmatic silence, manipulative silence. My silence is not the same as yours. Vimalakirti's thunderous silence is taken as an ultimate sort of silence, a silence which expresses, without expression, the highest, most complete, most inclusive, form of truth, beyond which there is no other.

The Jewish tradition, so wordy in all ways, also has a teaching about such an all inclusive silence. When God gave the ten commandments on Mount Sinai the scene was, as depicted in the bible, noisy and dramatic: the smoking blazing mountain, the terrifying presence, the deafening noise, thunder, horns blaring, and so on. But the rabbis of the Talmud explained that this deafening noise

was actually a total and utter silence. They said that at the exact center of the noise was the most silent moment that had ever existed on earth: not even an animal stirred; there was no wind, and, most amazing of all, there was no human speech commenting on the silence.

Lest we frustrate ourselves in an effort to hear such a silence (are “silence” and “hearing” even compatible?) it will be good to remember two things: first, as John Cage famously discovered, it is impossible for a living human being to experience silence (there will always be, at least, the sounds of the breath and heartbeat); and second, that Vimalakirti’s silence is a “non-dualistic” silence, which is to say that it is not a silence opposed to noise, but, like the silence of the Talmudic vision of Sinai, a silence which defines not a particular object of listening (or absence of object) but instead points to something essential within any listening. It is a silence therefore which is not opposed to, or defined as different from, sound, and therefore language. It is the silence within rather than outside words and phrases. Like the vast spaces inside of atoms, without which what we call the “solid” world could not exist, silence makes words possible.

In fact the notion that language is in this sense beyond language (i.e. that it contains at its heart, of necessity, silence) is one of the chief insights and practice pathways of Zen. What is Zen koan practice, after all, if not the practice of discerning the silence within phrases; meditating, that is, not “beyond” phrases, but within and through them to meanings unrestricted by the apparent linguistic limitations of the words.

I think of koan practice as the practice of phrases. It is, on the one hand, the special province of the Zen school of Buddhism that has systematized it, and, on the other, a commonplace practice in all religions where scripture reading is conceived of as a meditative rather than an emotional or knowledge-based activity, and among poets and literary people who are attuned to the intuitive echoic possibilities of language. The practice of phrases consists of living with, being immersed in, meditating on, phrases, until they become large and strange and reveal themselves to us, which is to say, that through them we are revealed to ourselves. By phrases I mean literally phrases, words with meanings that are identifiable, explainable, conceptual; but phrases also

indicates the silence, the larger, ineffable space, that we will find in the middle of and surrounding any word and concept if we contemplate it long and deeply enough. Zen meditation (zazen) can be a method for this. It involves breathing with phrases, inquiring of them, taking them beyond conventional styles of understanding. So that instead of trying to gain mastery over the phrase by interpreting or explaining it, the practitioners feels the phrase deeply, both with and beyond conceptual apparatus.

In Zen there are various traditions and methodologies for working with phrases, some more organized than others. In the contemporary Zen practiced in the West there are several koan traditions, all influenced by the Japanese Rinzai school. These traditions are very well organized, with koan curricula, and proscribed ways of responding to koans in a fairly regimented format. In the Soto Zen that I practice, working with phrases is fuzzy and somewhat disorganized. There is no curriculum and no particular format. Soto Zen also includes a wordless method of working with phrases. This is Zen mindfulness, which is not mindfulness of something, but mindfulness of the silence, spaciousness, or emptiness that is always at the heart of experience (a key point is the insight that language/silence and experience/emptiness are equivalents; experience is a form of language; language is a form of experience). This is practiced using the breath or whatever is in front of you (a person, a task, a physical object) as the phrase, the koan. Life becomes the phrase, not in the abstract, but as it appears uniquely, wherever and whenever you are. You pay close attention to it, avoid pegging it down to an explanation or an evaluation, and you wait with intense inquiry to see what will be revealed. The idea is, the hope is, that everything will illuminate you, everything will open you up, everything will surprise you. Although of course in real practice this doesn't always happen, it is a direction, an aspiration. It doesn't matter how it turns out. The main thing is to keep up a continuity of practice. It doesn't make much difference whether you are practicing with whatever's in front of you, or whether you are using a literal phrase, like "who is this?" or "what is love?" that may have arisen from the issues of your life; or whether you are using a classical Zen phrase. The more you contemplate the phrase, and maintain your contemplation of it through your activity the more your practice can be continuous and the more will be revealed.

All this is to say that what at first may seem in Zen to be a bias against language in favor of "silence," or, in any case, activities (like meditation) that do not seem to be language-based, is in fact a view of language, a practice of language.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the writings of thirteenth century Zen Master Dogen, much appreciated these days by Western philosophers concerned with language. "The single most original and seminal aspect of Dogen's Zen is his treatment of the role of language in Zen soteriology. We moderns may pride ourselves on our acute language consciousness in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but Dogen was no less aware. He is similar to us in this regard..." (Hee Jin Kim, *Dogen on Meditation and Thinking, a Reflection on His View of Zen*, State U. of New York, 2006, p 59.) Dogen was the rare Zen Master who was as much a literary practitioner as he was a religious figure, and his text *Shobogenzo* (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye), a multi-volume work, is considered a key text in Japanese literary, as well as religious, history. In his writings, Dogen constantly excoriates those Zen adepts who are critical of language, pointing to "silence" or other extra-linguistic positions, as Zen's goal. Over and over, Dogen expresses his dissatisfaction with this essentially unsophisticated, dualistically unnuanced, and, in his view, religiously destructive, understanding. Like other Zen thinkers, Dogen saw language as the prison from which we seek freedom. But unlike them, he saw that the way out of this prison (from which there is no escape) is to be found within the prison itself. In other words, language's hold on us can be loosed only by language itself. For Dogen human beings must live within language, which is, as Heidegger put it, our "house of being," the constituent of essential humanness. The way out of the house is the full occupation of it, with awareness of its nature, so that in the end resistance is transformed into celebration. "The monastics of future generations will be able to understand one-taste Zen (ichimizen) based on words and letters if they devote their efforts to spiritual practice by seeing the universe through words and letters, and words and letters through the universe." (Kim, 60, quoting Dogen). "How pitiful are they who are unaware that discriminative thought is words and phrases and that words and phrases liberate discriminative thought." (62)

In his discussion of Dogen's view of Zen, Kim delineates seven literary techniques with which Dogen endeavors to deconstruct conventional Zen and Buddhist language, so as to turn restrictive pious understandings inside-out. Like the Chasidic masters, who make liberal use of linguistic slights of hands (reference to word-roots; gematria), Dogen employs strikingly post-modern operations to produce texts so dense that they are from time to time incomprehensible. The seven techniques are 1) transposition of lexical components (an almost mathematical mechanical shifting of words or phrases in repetitive sentences, so that all possible, if sometimes apparently nonsensical, syntactic combinations are played out); 2) semantic reconstruction through syntactic change (often making use of the differences in grammar between Chinese - into which Buddhist texts that Dogen read had been translated - and the Japanese in which he was writing, to yield unique meanings); 3) explication of semantic attributes (making often punning or counter-indicated use of the multiple meanings possible within Chinese ideographs); 4) reflexive, self-causative utterances (in which statements and their opposites are identified, or the bald assertion of non-sequiturs upon which arguments are based), 5) upgrading commonplace notions and using neglected metaphors (using obsolete meanings buried in contemporary words, leaning on ordinary expressions to yield surprising correspondences, emphasizing commonplace throw-away words); 6) use of homophonous expressions (not unlike Zukovsky's Catullus); 7) reinterpretation based on the principle of non duality (in which clearly dualistic statements in the tradition are interpreted as though they were not dualistic). Through these are other methods Dogen relentlessly deconstructs the Zen and Buddhist traditions - as he believed they had been meant to be deconstructed - for the purpose of restoring to language and ordinary everyday reality the potential, dignity, and sense of wonder he believed they deserved. Dogen's project as a writer and religious teacher was to work against the perennial distinction religion (and language) inevitably wants to make between "holiness" and "the everyday." He believed this erroneous distinction to be the root of all human anguish.

"Language thinking and reason constitute the key to both zazen and koan study within Dogen's praxis-oriented Zen. The koan's and zazen's function is not to excoriate and abandon the intellect and its words and letters, but rather to liberate and restore them in the Zen enterprise. In short, enlightenment is not

brought about by direct intuition (or transcendent wisdom) supplanting the intellect and its tools, but in and through their collaboration and corroboration in search of the expressible in deeds, words, and thoughts for a given situation (religious and secular.)” (Kim, 78)

3.

Where does all this leave language’s capacity to describe reality? And where does it leave the possibility of a soteriologically efficacious understanding? That is, recognizing the silence of words, are we left speechless? And recognizing the impossibility of going beyond words, are we doomed to mouth them to our continued distress and confusion?

In a world in which we are all “dim-sighted” (Dogen’s phrase) nothing could be more dim-sighted than to assert that one is not dim-sighted; and such an assertion could be none other than a projection of the very dim-sightedness itself. The way out of this trap would be to make use of the dim-sightedness (language, human perception) to see the nature of the very dim-sightedness, and in doing so, to proceed, with full appreciation of the process of becoming human - which always involves the practice of language.

It has often been remarked, and written about (I myself have written about it) that Jews frequently find themselves practicing in Buddhist centers, and that Buddhist centers are disproportionately Jewish. The foregoing understandings of language, light, and silence might provide a clue: that Jews (or at least some subset of Jews) have been spiritually and culturally immersed in language in a particular key: language whose tonalities bear the ineffable senses of light, of silence, of depth. Most modern Jews, long removed from traditional Jewish educational systems, can only dimly hear these tonalities, though they have become present, and perhaps have come out most strongly, in post modern literary expressions, which, as we have seen, seem to be so basically Jewish in character. But for the average Jewish person, the tradition’s riches are, so to speak, a closed book; deep and personal familiarity with Jewish texts and the sensibilities behind them have long been lost; and in any case it is likely that there never has been a deeply satisfying way of Jewish life and learning that

was not inherently incompatible with modern cultural life, which is to say with a Judaism that was not of necessity cut off from the dominant culture in which it found itself. It is an odd historical fact that Buddhist meditation practice, appearing as it does in the West all but divorced from its Asian cultural contexts, and therefore to some extent a tabula rasa, to be filled in with whatever soul-stirrings that may be vaguely felt by those who access it, carries echoes of those ancient Jewish tonalities, so that the essentially Jewish linguistic moves can be activated within the "silence."

Silence is no weakness of language.

It is, on the contrary, its strength.

It is the weakness of words not to know this.

(Edmond Jabes, *Book of Shares*, 31)