

Gail Sher interviewed by James Maynard,  
Curator of the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo,  
Emeryville, California, March 19, 2018

JM: Well, to begin today, this is Jim Maynard, Curator of the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo, home of the Gail Sher Collection, interviewing Gail Sher at her studio in Emeryville, California on Monday, March 19, 2018.

Gail, we are having this conversation at what I think is a very interesting point in your writing career, in that you have recently been consciously reflecting on your development as a poet and reissuing some early work, while also, simultaneously, producing new writing, which I know you do on a daily basis. I think this provides us an excellent opportunity to talk about your poetry and poetics, as they may have changed over time to where you are today.

After studying music for several years, followed by undergraduate and graduate work in English and Middle English, and then 11 years of practice between Tassajara and the San Francisco Zen Center, you made the conscious choice to focus your attention on writing. Your first published poems appeared in the magazine *Credences* in 1981, followed a year later by your first

book, *From another point of view the woman seems to be resting.*

Since then you have published a total of 37 books of poetry and several works of prose, including in 2016 *Poetry, Zen, and the Linguistic Unconscious* and *Reading Gail Sher*. Both of these, and especially the latter, provide your readers with a remarkably useful set of contexts for exploring your work and its “habitats,” as you say. And my questions here today in many ways depart from these two texts.

In *Reading Gail Sher* you describe your work in retrospect as taking shape in four phases: Radical Language Experiments, 1982 to 1997, Asian-Influenced Work, 1997 to 2008, the Wisdom-Mind Collection, 2009 to 2013, and Late Work, 2014 to present. When discussing the first, you write that early on you realized that your “concerns” as a writer were “of a poet, not a novelist, short story writer, or essayist.” And that you “came to understand that [you were] a poet because [you thought] like a poet.”

What I wanted to ask you first is, what does it mean to think like a poet?

GS: Poets care about language. That may sound simple, but it's a life's preoccupation. So when I hear anything, even you reading that introduction, I hear the particular choices of words, like you used "depart" in an interesting way a few sentences ago. And there will be rhythms that are particular to who you are as a person and onomatopoetic inflections that typify who you are and where you're coming from. And that's what I hear.

And then later I'll go back to the import of what you are saying, which is what most everybody else would hear. It's like a giraffe is oriented in the world in a very different way from a lion. And I'm like a giraffe, in the sense that I just don't function, I don't receive my experience in the same way as other people. And it's a constant problem.

JM: Well, the word that keeps coming up for me, and I think I'll come back to a couple of times in these questions, is attention, which I can't hear the word attention without also hearing the word tension inside of it. So based upon what you just said, then, how would you say poetry, then, differs from prose or fiction or nonfiction?

GS: Well, I can't speak for poetry in general because I don't think all poets come from the same place. And I'm not saying this place is a better place to come from. I'm

saying I can't help it. It's just like who I am. But it differs in the sense of a novelist is thinking about character development and ethics and who is going to fall in love with whom, and who is going to reject whom, and how subtly all of these things take place in society. None of those things are my concern.

In fact, in my poetry I have to bend over backwards to leave the story out so that people will pay attention to the language.

JM: That brings me to my next question in terms of thinking about language, in hearing it first before understanding, as all good giraffes do.

GS: Right.

JM: I know from early on you were very actively engaged with music, having played piano and harpsichord and having studied music theory and composition. How do you think these experiences may have shaped this thinking about poetry and, in particular, your own reimagining of Eastern literary and musical forms from your Asian-influenced work?

GS: I actually formally gave up music when I was a Zen student at Tassajara, so that I could use all of my

musical ability for writing. And I believe that I do do that. And it's only been in the last few months that I've taken up a musical instrument, but it's also only in the last few months that I've consciously ended my career as a poet. And in order to emphatically do that—because I did that once before and it didn't work; I ended up writing yet another poetry book—so I decided to write a novel.

I used to hate poetry. And, in fact, I distinctly hated poetry and all I read was novels and literature that wasn't poetry. And so when I took up writing, my idea was to be a novelist. And I only had to learn later by default that my interests just weren't that of a novelist. And so now you're probably wondering, "How can I write a novel then?" Well I hired a tutor and I'm taking lessons.

JM: So have you found yourself, then, inverting what you just said?

GS: No. What I'm actually finding is that the lessons are completely boring, and I can't do anything that they're really asking. And I've got it down to sort of the way they've got it organized. And so I just flip to the back page and I read what the assignment is, and I hand them not the assignment, but I hand them what I've written

already in between when they read my work the last time until I'm going to turn in this batch.

They really want my next chapter and I'm really sending them an array of pieces that sporadically cover, basically, what this story is going to be about. It is not really a story, actually.

JM: So how do you feel having so long tried to suppress that narrative in your radical language, to now be jumping in that side of the pool?

GS: Here's what I really think. I think that the best novels are actually poetry anyway, but they're not language-based poetry. They're more maybe rhythm-based poetry or meaning-based poetry, which I have never written. So in a way, you could say I'm just writing a different type of poetry. But this is not my passion. I better stop and say something else. And this may be because you haven't gotten to the Wisdom Mind part yet.

JM: My next question.

GS: Okay. Well, I'm going to answer that question right now. That's really important. It's why I can stop. It's why I can officially say I've done everything I set out to do as

a poet and I don't need to do it anymore. What I set out later to do as a poet, when I realized that it was my job and it kind of fell to me to do, uniquely, because of my, not only Zen background, but even more particularly Tibetan Buddhist background, I became aware that other languages like Tibetan and Sanskrit have the ability to convey wisdom in such a way that English can't.

For example, in Tibetan there are 15 words for love, and in English there's like one. So I set for myself the poetic task of enlarging English. So I feel like what I've accomplished as a poet, primarily, is stretching the English language. And the way I've done that is by leaving meaning out, but using language so that it implies a meaning, that it makes you think there's going to be one there any second.

So if you sit with a very open mind, almost like a meditative mind, and read my Wisdom-Mind poems, you will find yourself going beyond the language into some other place. And that other place could be a wisdom-based place which is beyond language; whatever it is that's beyond language. And that's what I've strived to do. And by the time I got to *The Twelve Nidanas*, I felt like I had done that exponentially.

*The Twelve Nidanas* takes place on about five different levels. And I felt like I was never going to do it any better than that. And there are a number of books leading up to *The Twelve Nidanas*, and there's one that follows it that's sort of a coda [*Mingling the Threefold Sky*]. I felt like I don't need to do this anymore. This is really, really hard. And the pitfalls are, since it doesn't quite make sense, it can also sound like nonsense, or it can sound silly or something like that. And that's not what I was after.

So I had to toe this really careful line to neither be silly nor nonsensical, and also not quite make sense, so that the reader would make his own sense, but beyond language sense.

JM: This always reminds me of, I think you find it in both Eastern and Western discourses that there is this long-time animosity between poetry and philosophy. That poetry makes a kind of experience possible. That philosophy wants to valorize and describe.

GS: Yes, that's right.

JM: But in describing it it cuts it off from its life force.

GS: That's right. Because wisdom can't be described in language. Wisdom goes beyond language. So that's where my way of being a poet can do that. If you were like a novelist you wouldn't be able to do that, or if you were a regular poet who talked about anything. Really, I'm not talking about anything. I'm making something happen for the reader by the way I use the language. So I'm distinctly not talking about anything.

So when I stopped writing that kind of poetry, the first thing I wrote was *Sunny Day, Spring*, which is way more prose-like. But what I loved about that book is that I said to my friends, "So it's 113 pages and it doesn't say anything." And so I was very happy about that. But then later I was still determined not to write poetry.

And then I wrote *Mary's Eyes*, which, actually, I'm very fond of that poem, and it is a poem. And it took a year-and-a-half to write those 22 measly pages. But it's unique in a completely different way from my other poetry.

JM: Just hearing you speak now I'm reminded, too, of the great Cage line, "I have nothing to say and I'm saying it."

GS: Right, right. Yes.

JM: This notion of interrupting the mind's habitual activities of sense-making, that, for me, when I talk about that as a reader, both your attention and your use of tension, that's the tension.

GS: That is the tension, right.

JM: This demarcation between making sense, but deferring it, and kind of going back and forth.

GS: Exactly.

JM: So this space for wisdom that can be possible through language, do you think of it as a non-conceptual type of knowing?

GS: Yes.

JM: It's hard to talk about outside of its performance, but could you say a bit more about that space?

GS: Well, that space, what got me started on that was the 12 years I spent, or 11 years or whatever it was at Zen Center sitting a lot of zazen and feeling at the end like, ugh, this is a total waste, basically. And then later I had a glimmer, actually. When I was at Zen Center I actually

had a glimmer of, "Oh! I know what this is about. This is about the body. The body is what is understanding here. If there's anything to be understood you do it with your body."

I had flickers of that when I was at Zen Center, but nothing like that was ever talked about, and so I never dwelt on it. But later I realized for absolute sure that it was the body that understood Zen practice, and that I actually had gotten everything. I actually had gotten everything. And I feel that was later confirmed, and I won't go into that story. You asked me how Zen practice and Tibetan Buddhist practice informed . . .

JM: Uh-huh, and just to hear you talk more about this, what I think of as kind of a non-conceptual or non . . .

GS: It's not conceptual. My first glimmer into non-conceptual came with the understanding that it was the body that got this kind of knowledge. And then my second, not just glimmer, but in depth round of it came with Tibetan Buddhist spiritual practice, which is very emphatically non-conceptual. And there's a huge portion of it that's just simply rote practice. Like to do the *ngondro*, which in Tibetan Buddhism you aren't even given your first anything until you complete what's called the *ngondro*.

And each lineage has its own *ngondro*, so there are different *ngondros*. But the *ngondro* that I was given has five practices that you repeat 100,000 times.

JM: Wow.

GS: That's a lot. It took three-and-a-half years. These are called preliminary practices, before you even get to the first real practice. And so throughout all of that, and then also finally getting to the real practice, one gets a feel for where this wisdom lives. And it's that that I was working with in the Wisdom Mind series.

JM: Do you think there is a connection in any way for yourself between writing and Buddhism and psychotherapy? Is that too much of a leap to make?

GS: I would say the connection is there, but it goes from Buddhism to psychotherapy, and Buddhism to writing. I don't know that it goes full circle like that. Buddhism, definitely, informs my psychotherapy practice, absolutely 100 percent. More so than any theoretical model or this and that. It's informed *me* and *I'm* the tool for psychotherapy and that is how I work.

And so not everybody likes me and so be it. But the people who do really do and their lives really change for

the better, and I see it every day. And Buddhism informs writing in the way we've already talked about, like this whole Wisdom Mind thing. I don't know if there's like a circle there.

JM: But it sounds like Buddhism is the key.

GS: Buddhism is the key. But I've practiced Buddhism at least 40 years pretty intensely. So you can't be that intense about something and not have it be in your blood. It's the way I live, really.

JM: That kind of study must re-hardwire your brain and your attention patterns.

GS: It does, even to this day, when I'm not doing formal practice anymore. I made a conscious decision to just accept that writing was my way. And poetry is a Way with a capital W. And so I finally came to peace with that.

JM: Thinking about poetry as a Way, I've heard many writers talk about their feelings, however sometimes vague, that all of their books, no matter how different they may be from one another, are somehow all part of an overall or overarching continuing project that they see taking shape through different parts or fragments. As

we talk here today, do you have that sense of your own trajectory as a writer, or do you think of these four phases as distinctly separate periods of your work?

GS: No. I definitely have the sense of them building, and then culminating with the Wisdom Mind series. And I feel like that book, *The Twelve Nidanas*, is the culmination of my writing practice, plus the one right after that [*Mingling the Threefold Sky*]. And from there, I decided to just have fun after that. The only book that I would put in a serious poetry category after that is *Mary's Eyes*. The others ["Late Work" 2014-2016] were just fun and I'm doing fun now.

JM: I'm quite fond of *Mary's Eyes*. I think through the language there is a real construction of a space for contemplation in that book that I find quite powerful, actually.

GS: Thank you.

JM: Almost in an artistic sense, in that there is something almost dramatic about it. It's as if you're creating a stage for something to happen, for something to take place, a performance.

GS: Yes, I was. That voice is different from all my previous work. And that's what I'm so pleased with, that it is distinct, and that I felt it was successful. But it took everything out of me, and so I'm writing a novel now.

JM: And here's a question that I've actually wanted to ask you about for a long time. I've always been struck at how across your work these 37 years I keep coming back to use of parentheticals. And in *Reading Gail Sher* you say the “parentheses don't contain, they shield.” And then quote Kathleen Fraser on their ability to destabilize a text. Could you talk a little bit more about your use of these parentheticals in all of your work as both sheltering and disrupting something.

GS: Correct. And, interestingly, for the very first time in my whole writing career, in my novel, I'm not using parentheticals at all. And every time I'm tempted to, I go, "No, no. It's not right." Isn't that interesting? It's interesting to me. I think parentheticals were right all the way from my very first work. I bet you, when we discover that first piece, whatever it is.

JM: We'll track it down.

GS: I bet you're going to find parentheticals there.

JM: Well, I read them all so differently. Sometimes for me, as a reader, they give a multivoicedness to the text, as if there's a different voice speaking. Sometimes they have a tendency to shift the point of view from an interiority to an exteriority.

GS: Yes, correct.

JM: And sometimes they seem to shift things altogether in terms of register and tone and voice.

GS: It does all of the above, yeah. I know. That's why I'm shocked it's not happening in this book that I'm writing now. It's not happening.

JM: Well, I'll be curious to see how the novel ultimately ends up. In addition to always being interested in your use of parentheses, from the first time I read it my absolute favorite line of yours from *Poetry, Zen and the Linguistic Unconscious* is the following: "My biggest responsibility to myself as a poet is to remain in the realm of the unknown."

GS: Yes.

JM: "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." Now, I have to admit as a long-time reader and enthusiast of Robert Duncan's, this seems where you and Duncan are almost sitting in the same chair together. And this, certainly, I think, has many indications for thinking about the Buddhist element you've been talking about, as well as the psychotherapeutic, but could you talk about writing as a process of discovery?

GS:

Oh, yes. That is what it is, which adds another dimension to everything I said about the Wisdom Mind series because it is about the unknown. And even in doing it, you're dealing with that every single day. I don't have this difficulty anymore because I've been doing it for so long, I think. But I know for my students the hardest thing is to keep them not knowing because they want to know. "We have to have a plan for this and we need an outline and we need da-da-da."

And then I tell them, "No, no. Just stay where you are and just see what happens." And they'll say yes, and then the next time they come in they'll forget they said yes and they'll go back to, "Well, but you know, I can't figure out . . ." But it takes place on a whole lot of levels. There's that level of what's going to happen next, so to speak. But there's also the level of just the

mystery of language and your psyche and “allowing” in silence and allowing space for anything to happen.

Not to mention, a skillset that's developed over many years. And then you put all that together in a set period of time on a regular basis and something does happen. *Mary's Eyes* just happened though it took a long time. Something does happen. I almost can say that it's just impatience at this point that keeps me from—I'm sort of almost tired of sitting there. And I'm still sitting there--and more is happening.

JM: Duncan has a great line for it. He calls it the intellectual adventure of not knowing.

GS: That's right. That's good.

JM: But it's difficult.

GS: It's very difficult. It's like the artist's blank page.

JM: Well, I think of Dickinson's “I dwell in possibility,” or Keats's “negative capability.”

GS: Yes, negative capabilities, exactly.

JM: This is something that poets and artists come back to quite a bit.

GS: Right.

JM: I'm hoping we've got time for just a few more. I know we've been talking a lot about more theoretical considerations and your approaches to poetry and language. And I wanted to take a minute or two to talk about what your practice might have looked like in the past or now. You've talked a bit about exercises and activities as a way of preparing oneself to write. But for yourself, how does a poem begin?

GS: Oh. It doesn't begin. The whole thing is a process and you just start wherever it happens to come out. And then it keeps coming out day-after-day as you're sitting in your writing practice. And then you go back at a certain point with a different state of mind, with an editing state of mind. And you start finding where the energy is in the language. And then you throw everything else away that's not those parts that are marked with energy.

And then from there, you start building a piece. And it's actually the writing that does the writing. The writing puts together the piece. The writing tells you, if you

listen, "Oh, I don't need to come last. I need to come first." Like, "Oh! Really? Well, let's see." And then it either works or it doesn't. But usually it does if the language is saying so. And that's completely how I -- I never know what the piece is until it's the piece. I actually am the last to find out.

JM: That sounds very different to me than other Buddhists' approaches, which I think sometimes put the emphasis on first word, best word. As if that extemporaneous outpouring is somehow purer.

GS: Yeah, no. No. I totally disagree with that. In fact, I would go so far as to say that, unless it's crafted, it's not writing. Because who wants to read that kind of junk that just comes out? It's just junk that comes out.

JM: My last question. I think we've been talking about this a couple of different ways, but I'll end with this. It's another line of yours that I really am quite fond of. You've written that poetry is dangerous. Do you want to say anything at the end here about the dangers of poetry for hapless readers like myself?

GS: Well, I don't remember saying that. (I'm still back on the last thought, actually.) This idea of if it's not crafted it's not writing. The craft part of it is what identifies the

voice. And so when I'm crafting, I don't even know when I first start what voice this poem is going to assume. And then as I'm crafting, the voice identifies itself, and then it takes over. And so then it tells you what's allowable to be in this piece and what isn't, and what's going to be first and last, and so forth.

So the only danger would be forgetting to let the poem write itself. Then you could fall into the trap of thinking that you know what the poem is. And as soon as you do that, you fall into your mind. And regular mind is not as powerful as wisdom mind. This is my beef with academics.

JM: Get in line.

GS: Yeah, I'm sure. What's most important to know can't be known with the mind. And so it's all just chatter, really. So that's why I feel my poetry is so important, because I'm using language to get beyond language, which is where all the important stuff is.

JM: The way I've interpreted that remark of yours, to go back to this notion of Wisdom Mind, and I think it's in *Reading Gail Sher*, you say, "Poetry is dangerous, after all." It's our vulnerability before language.

GS: Yes, exactly.

JM: Language has the capacity to change us, or to become a transformative experience. It isn't premeditated; it can't be controlled.

GS: It's raw, and it's really like being naked. And so that is vulnerable.

JM: Well, Gail, thank you very much. This has been an absolute pleasure to speak with you today. And I can't thank you enough for your time and your generosity.

GS: Well, thank you. It's been my pleasure, too.