

# ZEN AND WRITING: ANGLO-AMERICAN INTERPRETATIONS, REVOLUTIONARY POSSIBILITIES: A REVIEW ARTICLE

Sue Hum

Natalie Goldberg. *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life*. Bantam Books, Inc. 1990. 256 pp.

Natalie Goldberg. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* Rpt. 1986. Shambhala Productions, Inc. 1996. 192 pp.

Mark Lawrence McPhail. *Zen in the Art of Rhetoric: An Inquiry Into Coherence*. State University of New York Press. 1995. 220 pp.

Traditional academic definitions of literacy focus exclusively on the cognitive perspective. In order to be characterized as literate beyond the simple skills of reading and writing at a functional level, to be intellectually well-developed is to participate in abstract thought. Literacy education is characterized undeniably by the relationship between the mind and the text. Often considered subversive agents to textual production, biological functions and processes require discipline and restriction. In order to separate mind from body,

literacy practices minimize and even repudiate the body, destroying it physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Much contemporary work in the teaching of writing encourages a conceptual shift to the notion of literacy as an embodied practice. Challenges to Western notions of literacy, which underscore abstract, rational, and product-centered norms, include feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism. In general, normative literacy standards continue to emphasize analytical and empirical prose as legitimate intellectual endeavors. Highlighting the over-reliance on rule-governed observation and provable phenomena, many educators have defended writing projects which work out of epistemological paradigms that value personal experience, collaboration, paradox, and flux. The continuing popularity of Natalie Goldberg's works on Zen and writing, along with a number of recent publications relating Zen and writing, suggest that Zen may represent another challenge to Western notions of literacy.

If literacy is a set of culturally defined techniques for producing, explaining, and performing individual relationships to texts, then there are advantages for developing an embodied notion of literacy as witnessed in the following work: Peter Elbow articulates the differences between writer-based, reader-based and text-based prose in order to create a legitimate space for using personal voice(s) in English Studies; undermining the dominance of the singular autonomous author, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford argue that a collaboratively written text is no less intellectually rigorous than that of a single authored text; Lester Faigley describes the contradiction between modernity and postmodernity, showing how writing teachers encourage dialogue and process in the classroom but evaluate their students' products as finished, stable, and accurate reflections of students' learning; and, building on Paulo Freire's ideal of education as emancipation, bell hooks develops a model of engaged pedagogy, which addresses students' alienation from their home cultures. Quality education is always political as it must address the subject's position within educational

institutions. The contested nature of literacy education includes a redefinition of the protocols surrounding the role of the personal, the contributions of community to authorship, the relationship between process and product, and the ways in which language reproduces structures of oppression and inequity.

Studies on the relationship between Zen and writing suggest ways of bridging the gap between a body-based process of writing and a textualized, abstract vision of literacy that serves as a mechanism of social stratification and economic control. Revolutionary emancipatory possibilities for revising the underpinnings of discourse can be found in Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (1986) and *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life* (1990) and Mark Lawrence McPhail's *Zen in the Art of Rhetoric: An Inquiry into Coherence* (1995). Influenced heavily by Zen, both authors offer insights into the interrogation of Western discursive and literacy practices. A poet, fiction writer, and teacher, Goldberg is primarily concerned with the creation of mental and spiritual spaces for individual writers to unearth their creative energy and potential. An associate professor of communications at the University of Utah, McPhail advances an intellectual, academic project, using Zen to rehabilitate the conflict-prone, oppressive tendencies of Western discourse. Questioning the assumptions of Western discourse, he advocates for discursive practices that are less agonistic, hierarchical, dualistic, and cerebral. Both authors discuss the possibilities contained in an embodied literacy predicated on kindness and compassion. Although they interpret Zen for the Western audience, readers interested in learning more about the philosophy, its precepts, and its koans and poetry will most likely be disappointed. Instead of a "pure" overview of Zen, Goldberg and McPhail envision the revolutionary possibilities for developing alternate discursive forms, literacies, and pedagogies.

Before an examination of the contributions of Zen to Western literacy practices, a historical overview of the philosophy is essential. During the first century C.E., Zen emerged as the interaction between Chinese and Indian

thought. Working from the Chinese prejudice against abstract philosophy, Confucian emphasis on familial ties, and Taoist devotion to practical worldly matters, Zen demands complete democracy, all members engaging in manual labor and the utilitarian ways of life. Zen disciples must be both economically and politically minded. Unlike monasticism that encourages detachment from worldly affairs, Zen's special form of monasticism requires service to the community (Suzuki 4). While rooted in the practicalities of daily life, enlightenment or *satori* means moral, intellectual, and spiritual emancipation. Emancipation or freedom in the inner life results from self-being (religion of *jizai*) and self-reliance (religion of *jiyu*). In addition, enlightenment is both verbal and actional. Verbalism acknowledges that experience and expression cannot be separated while actionalism recognizes that disciples learn by doing. In challenging the hegemony of Western discourse, the study of Zen can focus attention on the revolutionary possibilities of democracy, community, and a balance between verbal and actional enlightenment. These foci become the foundation for an embodied literacy, revising Western discursive practices which tend to prioritize abstract intellectualism and universal agency, separating mind from body. Enlightenment in Zen comes from not thinking too much; imagine a pedagogy built on the following conviction: "If you want to see, see right at once. When you begin to think, you miss the point."

*Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind* resist the Western expectation of linear, rigidly structured, sterile prose. Goldberg uses themes, a total of sixty-five "chapters" in *Writing* and sixty-two in *Wild*, where "each chapter is designed to be its own whole" (*Writing* 4). In *Writing*, Goldberg recommends that readers "relax as [they] read and absorb it, as by osmosis with [their] whole body and mind" (4). If readers are looking for practical, specific, recipe-like guidance for writing creatively, many kernels of truth and wisdom can be gleaned from the vast array of activities, ranging from discussions about writing implements; writing venues (recommends restaurants and

laundromats); writing practice, invention exercises and strategies (encourages timed writing, notebooks, story telling circles, commonplace book for topics, four-hour writing marathons); revision and editing (counsels toward detail orientation, working with verbs, syntax, sentence and prose structure); writing workshops; and reading aloud. Teachers interested in developing a Zenist pedagogy for the writing classroom may, however, find *Wild Mind* more beneficial as Goldberg includes “try this” sections—exercises and strategies developed from her experiences and history as a writer. In both texts, she locates the personal securely at the center; hers is a project that privileges writer-based prose. Teachers seeking concrete strategies in accordance with the seventeenth century Zen poet Basho’s dictum “Every day is a journey, and the journey itself, home” will find Goldberg’s texts both liberating and invaluable.

Judith Guest, who writes the foreword to Goldberg’s *Writing*, identifies her project as “giving people permission to think the thoughts that come and to write them down and make sense of them in any way they wish. . . . Writers do not write to impart knowledge to others; rather, they write to *inform* themselves” (xii). However, *Writing* grants more than permission for creative development. It does more than break down the barriers that separate writers from creativity. Readers must not mistake Goldberg’s primary focus on individual creativity as a tendency toward solipsism. Instead, Goldberg’s definition of writing and writers requires that her disciples relocate themselves firmly in the world; she quotes Simone de Beauvoir,

In order to be an artist, one must be deeply rooted in the society” (*Wild* 187). Worldly connectedness draws from compassion and non-aggression: one of the main aims in writing practice is to learn to trust your own mind and body; to grow patient and nonaggressive. . . . Ultimately, if the process is good the end will be good. You will get good writing. (12)

The same message is repeated in *Wild Mind*. In order for writers to succeed, their creative acts cannot be evaluated hierarchically:

Failure is a hard word for people to take. Use the word kindness then instead. Let yourself be kind. And this kindness comes from an understanding of what it is to be a human being. Have compassion for yourself when you write. There is no failure—just a big field to wander in. (227)

Goldberg's refusal to participate in the destructive processes of judgment extend to her unwillingness to define "good writing." Resisting the linear stability of Western prose, Goldberg employs fragments, anecdotes, witticisms, and aphorisms in order to share her own history, experiences, conflicts, and fears. Her project then is to share publicly and politically her vision of writing in the world. Privileging process, Goldberg recommends that writers let process penetrate their lives, offering example after example of how that transformation might occur (*Writing* 3). Because process informs, because process and journey are home, Goldberg likens it to "fighting tofu," where neither discipline nor ego gives birth to a writer. Instead, the process—nebulous, uncertain, indeterminate—is the writer. In addition, process must be rooted in daily practicalities. To illustrate what she means, she offers the following "try this":

Make a list of words you really like. It doesn't matter if you know the meaning of the word or not. . . . Feel the dignity and integrity of each word you write down. . . . Words are the building blocks of writing. Be present with all of them. . . . It is good to examine words and feel their dignity inside us like a breath or a heartbeat. (*Wild* 194–95)

Goldberg reconnects writers with their craft, encouraging a careful tooling of words, illustrating the Zen philosophy

explained by poet P'ang-yun: "Miraculous power and marvelous activity – Drawing water and hewing wood!"

Following Zen's teaching that all action must be simple, utilitarian, and natural, Goldberg offers very little proof or justification that her methods work. Her unspoken assumption is that readers, like disciples, must follow, practice, and learn by faith in order to achieve mental and spiritual transformation. The result of this transformation is a world view that privileges the values of humble compassion, ceaseless flexibility, disciplined patience, and constant reflection. It is this world view that gives birth to writers. It is this "uneducation" that Goldberg encourages so that writers can unlearn the destructive and debilitating preconceptions of Western literacy and their relationship to it. Unlike the predominant Western notion founded on product and production for external edification, writing is the process in which the writer develops a more peaceful harmonious existence in the world. Goldberg's approach to this process of uneducation can be witnessed in her definitions of writing:

Writing is so simple, basic, and austere. . . . Write when you write. (*Writing* 24)

Writing is a visual art! Yes, and its a kinesthetic, visceral art too. (*Writing* 50)

Writing, too, is ninety percent listening. You listen so deeply to the space around you that it fills you, and when you write, it pours out of you. (*Writing* 52-53)

Writing is the act of burning through the fog in your mind. (*Writing* 86)

Writing is very lonely. . . . anything you do deeply is very lonely. (*Wild* 130)

[T]he underbelly of writing is facing that inertia, sitting in it, staying in it and not running away. This gives you a dead-center power. (*Wild* 147)

While these quotations may highlight what seems to be an “Eastern sensibility”—a pure but vague experience resulting from an Eastern ontology—readers must realize that what Goldberg offers is an interpretation, an undertaking that is influenced by Zen. Literacy, envisioned by Goldberg, must involve the bodily functions—the unavoidable, rebellious element that cannot be eliminated, divorced, or concealed in textual production.

In exploring the relationship between Zen and the artist and/or writer, the writer must pay attention to internal coherence. Meaning and discernment are not a result of something added from the outside. Instead, writers develop strategies, disciplining themselves to a life of *kono-mama* or *sono-mama* or the “isness” of a thing. According to the Zen masters, the world is full of wonders and miracles when the writer’s mind abides in “its isness and free from intellectual complexities and moralistic attachments of every description; [when the writer] surveys the world of the senses in all its multiplicities, it discovers in it all sorts of values hitherto hidden from sight” (Suzuki 17).

Thus, connected with the ideal of process is the belief that writers neither disseminate great Truths nor speak *for* humanity but dialogue *with* a community. According to Goldberg, “it’s much better to be a tribal writer, writing for all people and reflecting many voices through us, than to be a cloistered being trying to find one peanut of truth in our own individual mind. Become big and write with the whole world in your arms” (*Writing* 80). Besides repudiating transcendent and universal Truths, Goldberg shatters the Romantic notion of the writer ensconced in an ivory tower, advising that writers “kill the idea of the lone, suffering artist. We suffer anyway as human beings. Don’t make it any harder on yourself” (81). Always practical and concrete, advising writers to “learn to write about the ordinary” (100), Goldberg relocates the writer’s subjectivity by offering seemingly contradictory pronouncements:



[Writers] think writing gives us an excuse for being alive. We forget that being alive is unconditional and that life and writing are two separate entities. (*Writing* 57)

You never leave who you are. If you are a writer when writing, you are also a writer when you are cooking, sleeping, walking. (*Writing* 84)

Being a writer is a whole way of life, a way of seeing, thinking, being. It is the passing on of a lineage. Writers hand on what they know. (*Wild* xiv)

A writer's subjectivity is neither stable nor unitary but paradoxical and fluctuating, writing an eternal journey of self-understanding.

Such general statements do not help writers who struggle with putting words on paper. Similarly, teachers who struggle with helping student writers tap into their creative potential are equally at a loss. Besides "try this" exercises, Goldberg admits that "there are no good maps for the journey of a writer; each one goes it alone" (218). As explanation, Goldberg offers a retrospective on *Writing Down the Bones*: "I tried to write *Bones* eight years before I actually wrote it" (*Wild* 16) and the project took "one and a half years to write, not counting twelve years of teaching writing workshops and developing writing practice" (177). Reluctant in presenting rule-governed dicta for writing, Goldberg identifies seven essentials and controlling themes: "keep your hand moving"; "lose control"; "be specific"; "don't think"; "don't worry about punctuation, spelling, and grammar"; "you are free to write the worst junk in America"; and "go for the jugular" (3-5). Goldberg works inductively, beginning with an experience and working her way to praxis. Before she comments on syntax, Goldberg offers numerous "try this" activities. In keeping with the Zen belief that conceptualization in language makes the world static and dead, she exhorts that

our language is usually locked into a sentence syntax of subject/verb/direct-object. . . if we think in the structure

subject/verb/direct-object, then that is how we form our world. By cracking open that syntax, we release energy and are able to see the world afresh and from a new angle. (*Writing* 62)

She concludes by sharing sample poems written by mentally retarded women living in a residence at Norhaven. In Zen, the enlightened live in the present and are mindful of the “isness” of experience.

In defining the primacy of life in rudimentary details, Zen requires that writers pay attention to their daily experiences; meaning does not come from the outside. Daisetz T. Suzuki maintains that the “door of enlightenment-experience opens by itself as one finally faces the deadlock of intellectualization” (15). In Zen, enlightenment is hidden in the concrete mundane minutiae of daily existence. Enlightenment is both verbal and actional. First, contrary to the general assumption that Zen distrusts language, enlightenment involves the understanding that humans sustain their individual and group existence through language: “experience and expression are one” (6). However, Zen recognizes that some experiences remain “unnamable” and “ungraspable.” Zen differentiates between dead words—those which no longer pass directly and intimately on to experience and are cut off from the living roots—and living words—those which are concrete and personal and harbor a disruptive force, breaking down and dislodging assumptions (7-8). When writers conceptualize and contain experience through language, words become dead, static, reductive.

Second, Zen recognizes the futility of verbal instruction and conceptual presentation; enlightenment is the outgrowth of inner self-reliance and not external additions and verbal lectures (10). Thus, Zen pedagogy focuses on practical lessons surrounding the dictum “teaching by action, learning by doing.” The Zen master cannot awaken a disciple’s mind. Only the disciple alone can negotiate the tensions between living words and *satori*. This principle can be perceived in Goldberg’s

advice on style: "Style requires digesting who we are. It comes from the inside" (*Wild* 12-13).

Subverting the distinction between conscious and unconscious, Goldberg encourages the cultivation of a "wild mind" that is attentive to language on the "level of dreams, on the subconscious, through its music, sound, breath, texture" (*Wild* 191). Although Western psychoanalysis interprets the "wild mind" as the unconscious mind, Goldberg finds this definition limiting and intellectualized. Contrasted with the "monkey mind" or "conscious mind," that which is always curious, always inquisitive, but always busy trying to gain control and order, writers must be unhampered by senses and intellect, focusing simply on the "isness" of things. Using Zen, Goldberg proposes that process acquire prominence in the writing. Teachers, working compassionately and patiently, must create spaces so that student writers can cultivate their "wild mind." When writers "listen too much to [their] monkey mind," they "tend to get swampy, thick with sludge, when [they] write" (82). The principle of "isness" is rooted in impermanence and flux. Through Zen, Goldberg encourages writers to strive to "have an intimate connection with the world and on top of it to know about its passing. . . . We know about impermanence, but it does not drive us into a hole" (75-76). An embodied literacy involves intuition, patience, and flexibility.

More overtly political and ideologically transparent, *Wild Mind* critiques American society, describing how writers are thwarted from speaking their mind. Distinguishing between stalkers who deal with the world through perception and dreamers who proceed by inward vision, Goldberg identifies American society as "a stalker society [where] dreamers in our society often feel like victims or develop stalker characteristics to survive" (23). *Writing* and *Wild* suggest ways to create spaces so that writers can uncover their creative potential, counteracting the limiting, destructive influences of Western discursive practices. Sometimes, writers are unable to find a rhythm, to achieve clarity and perseverance in American society "because the basis of capitalism is greed and dissatisfaction" (155). An embodied literacy must therefore

include subverting the oppressive and inequitable nature of education. It must also interrogate the tension between teaching writing for the sake of students and teaching writing for the sake of societal progress. Emphasizing the present, Goldberg maintains that ethical engagement by teachers must involve the practice of “being real” (200).

Another critique of Western literacy practices is contained in *Zen in the Art of Rhetoric*. In his dissertation, McPhail examines the relationship between rhetoric and racial interaction, demonstrating how the rhetoric of negative difference helps perpetuate racism. Attempting to undermine the agnostic nature of discourse and to develop a non-argumentative alternative, McPhail turns to Zen Buddhism and a number of other Western philosophers for his foundation. In *Zen*, his project is to develop a discourse which underscores empathy, love, and coherence that envisions a non-violent pedagogy. He begins by drawing attention to the problems of essentialism and negative difference. Essentialism is defined as the striving for certainty, discovery of essences and final truths, and the reduction of language to dualism. Negative difference involves name-calling; oppositional, divisive reasoning; and static classification through linguistic labels. Such inclinations in Western discourse result in intellectual and moral impasses and prevent interlocutors from rehabilitating discursive practices in order to promote a more just socio-political superstructure. By describing his reactions to Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind*, McPhail illustrates the destructive nature of essentialism. McPhail realizes that to argue with Bloom in the manner that depicts him as Other is to lose because the critic participates in the same destructive game by using the similar discursive strategies, amounting to complicity: “Individuals can respond to oppression without recognizing their complicity in its perpetuation fails to consider the political and linguistic complexities which circumscribe systems of domination” (68). Both essentialism and negative difference work from the presumption that “*there must be winners and losers, in which someone must be right and someone*

wrong” (59, author’s emphasis). In addition, this particular tendency, when translated to the level of pedagogy and, to a greater extent, within the institution, is characterized by linguistic practices that emphasize social control, preserving existing hierarchical structures and socio-economic arrangements. Current discursive practices do not allow for revolutionary possibilities. For example, discursive habits surrounding issues of race and racial interaction remain problematic and divisive. Described in more detail in chapter three, McPhail explores the problem of individual and group complicity which reinscribe the status quo’s repressive systems.

Criticizing individuals who fail to “consider the political and linguistic complexities which circumscribe systems of domination” (68), McPhail explains that for language to have truly revolutionary and generative possibilities, individuals must work from a rhetoric of coherence: “rhetoric as coherence is less concerned with rejecting the essentializing consequences of classification than with reconstructing the system of classification” (90). Rather, “a rhetoric of coherence will allow us to renegotiate the risks of interaction and perhaps transform our classificatory systems so that we might emphasize similarity and affirmation” (91). Instead of looking to Zen, McPhail turns to Western philosophers and concepts—dissoi vs. logoi, Socrates vs. Sophists, and Lyotard vs. Habermas—to build a framework for democratization in dialogue. Calling for a transformation in teaching, McPhail describes how a non-argumentative rhetoric must involve four Buddhist dicta: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (152). McPhail believes that a careful and mindful attention to the above dicta affords the possibility of emancipatory plurality (128).

Chapter five begins with the Zen koan “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” McPhail responds that “an actively non-argumentative discourse does not reject argument: it simply represents a choice not to argue” (128). Tempered with justice, McPhail’s actively non-argumentative discourse emphasizes similarities rather than differences in order to create common places wherein human interaction can be

transformed and a generative social praxis can be realized (143–44). The result is a pedagogy of non-violence, founded on the principles of discipline and compassion. After analyzing the contributions of Martin Luther King and Gandhi, McPhail turns to the martial art karate-do where “the essence of the art is mutual cooperation” (164). Using the physical art of karate-do as an analogy to the verbal art of rhetoric, McPhail encourages the development of discursive strategies which teach self-protection but also promote harmony and peace through understanding and empathy (165).

Readers without a general familiarity with postmodernism, contemporary philosophy, classical rhetorical theory, and communication studies may find McPhail’s text a challenge. Neglecting the Zen principle of simplicity and particularity, McPhail’s project is better understood as a theoretical ideal. Those adept in translating theory into praxis may enjoy the questions McPhail raises. His primary contribution—a non-argumentative discourse underscoring a non-violent pedagogy—is worthy of further examination and discussion in academic circles. When Mary Rose O’Reilley asks in *The Peaceable Classroom*, “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?,” she offers specific examples, the result of a life-long endeavor toward personal accountability in the classroom and in society. Similarly, Lad Tobin struggles with the “difficult cases,” students who are resistant, distrustful, arrogant, or just plain nasty. Working from a model of engaged pedagogy, Tobin shows how he must acknowledge and address his students’ resistance without simply dismissing them because they give him “dirty looks” (see “Car Wrecks”). Both O’Reilley’s and Tobin’s work illustrate McPhail’s desire for answerability—moral, spiritual, intellectual, and ethical accountability that acknowledge the needs of individual students within an inequitable education system. The importance of addressing the immediate or here-and-now, emphasized in Zen, must be rewritten into writing pedagogy and literacy praxis. Not only should teachers be accountable to educational institutions and society in general,

they must be personally answerable to their students on a daily basis. An attempt to subvert a continued focus on product in the classroom is seen in Liz Mandrell's irreverent approach toward grades and grading.

In Zen, the relationship among language, enlightenment, and daily life must be accompanied by wisdom (*prajna*) and compassion (*karuna*). These two qualities go together: compassion without wisdom may be misdirected; wisdom without compassion can result in isolation. Both Goldberg's and McPhail's works have suggested ways in which teachers can tap the potential of Zen to develop an embodied literacy. However, much of the scholarship surrounding Zen and its relationship to writing has focused on three sites—creative writing (meditation helps writers liberate their muses and strengthen their creativity), teacher education (mindfulness encourages teachers to transcend their limitations in order to develop a more reflective pedagogy); and rhetoric (way of being or *Tao* develops a non-argumentative discourse emphasizing empathy, love, harmony, and coherence). These Anglo-American interpretations, coupled with an audience largely unfamiliar with the teachings of Zen, minimize the revolutionary possibilities for redefining literacy so that it predicates compassion, mindfulness, and emancipation. In Zen, mindfulness comes from constant engagement with wisdom and compassion at the smallest level of daily existence. Any assumption of success may result in what Zen Buddhists describe as the phony sense of identity or *avidya*, meaning ignorance from focusing one's consciousness on one thing to the exclusion of many other things is wrong-headed. Imagine a pedagogy that might emerge if one worked from the cognitive and spiritual position expressed in the following koan: "every wave on the ocean is the whole ocean waving."

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