

LANGUAGE AND LONGING IN JOY KOGAWA'S "OBASAN"

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There is a silence that cannot speak.

There is a silence that will not speak.

Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone.¹

W

HAT DOES IT MEAN to attend a voice by embracing its absence? And why does a novel that finds such adequate language for a story of suffering persistently question the adequacy of words? Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* has rightly been celebrated for its power as a political speech act, as a strong protest against the treatment of Japanese Canadians in the years of and following the Second World War. What has received less attention is Kogawa's pervasive concern with the act of speech itself. Naomi's individual drama is closely caught up in her linguistic anxiety, which comes to serve as a synecdoche for her estrangement — from others, from her cultural origins, from the absent mother who preoccupies her thoughts, from her past.

Reasons for Naomi's distrust of words are not hard to find — some commonplace, others particular to the circumstances of Naomi's upbringing. Revelations of the kind the novel builds toward — the private aftermaths of the Nagasaki bombing — we are accustomed to think of as "unspeakable." And the printed words — newspaper clippings — in Aunt Emily's file about the working conditions of the Japanese Canadians in the beet fields of southern Alberta — "Grinning and happy" — are far removed from the child Naomi's ordeal on the Barkers' farm. Not only do the official accounts in print — all that were available to Aunt Emily, removed in Toronto from the actuality of the suffering in Granton — misrepresent Naomi's experience, but Naomi herself cannot find words to tell Emily: "I cannot tell about this time, Aunt Emily. The body will not tell" (196). It is not just that to find words is to retrace the pain; language seems to yield only a shallow evocation of intense experience. Furthermore, these commonplaces about what language cannot adequately express are characteristically the rhetorical servants of the writer's adequate expression. Speaking of something as in-

expressible has the effect of intensifying what is expressed. For the skilful writer, deprecating the adequacy of words is more often a strategy for expression than an admission of failed expression.

Direct references to inexpressibility are by no means Kogawa's sole resource for emphasizing this pervasive concern. The struggle to hear and the struggle to speak are not merely the *content* of the poem whose opening lines I have quoted above. The *style* of the poem and — equally — the style of many sequences of the novel itself bespeak an effort at speech. The characteristic style is poetic and imagist rather than novelistic or discursive. The images of the poem progress with a dreamlike fluidity through association, with the linkages not fully articulated for the reader. Neither is the connection between the first and second sentences made explicit:

There is a silence that cannot speak.

There is a silence that will not speak.

The reiterative structure of the short sentences places emphasis on the difference between “cannot” and “will not”; but the reader, without the guidance of logical indicators, is left to determine whether two silences are being distinguished or whether an initial formulation of an elusive proposition is being reformulated. Also notable are the universalizing use of the definite article (“the dreams,” “the speech,” “the word,” “the stone,” “the sealed vault,” “the seed flowers”), “the speech” and “voice” attributed to no specified speaker, the disembodied “I” (Naomi? Kogawa?): the language of the poem is indeterminate and, perhaps, for the reader, indeterminable. The writer's words, as tracks of the writer's meaning, are almost as elusive as the voice and words pursued in the writing: “The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words, when they fall, are pock marks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream.” Some might attribute the pictorial and disjunctive qualities noted here to Kogawa's poetic vocation, or to her Japanese cultural and linguistic heritage, and consider that a sufficient explanation. But Kogawa can and does vary her style, easily managing — for example — a direct and colloquial style in the diary entries of Aunt Emily. This suggests that variations in style within the novel are motivated by the desire to achieve particular rhetorical effects. In the poem Kogawa creates for the reader a model of reading analogous to the experience with words that is being described; that is, the style acts out the content.

Kogawa's use of Japanese in the novel further dramatizes her protagonist's sense of language as isolating and alienating. Early in the novel, Naomi's discomfort with a new school year at Cecil Consolidated and her estrangement from her students are expressed through linguistic difference:

“Miss Nah Canny,” he [Sigmund] says.

“Not Nah Canny,” I tell him, printing my name on the blackboard. NAKANE.

“The a’s are short as in ‘among’ — Na Ka Neh — and not as in ‘apron’ or ‘hat’.”
Some of the children say “Nah Cane.” (5-6)

The macaronic quality of much of the dialogue — mixing English and Japanese phrases — portrays Naomi as a linguistic amphibian, living in two verbal worlds, comfortable in neither. Naomi’s movement between the two languages renders both languages opaque to her, distracting her attention in many instances from any immediate sense communicated by words to their pronunciation or phraseology:

In love? Why do you suppose we use the preposition “in” when we talk about love? . . . What does it mean to be “in” something? (6)

In the “Japanese English” which Stephen and Naomi spoke as children the relationship between words and objects was complicated and confused: Stephen “called margarine ‘Alberta’, since Uncle pronounced Alberta ‘aru bata’, which in our Japanese English means ‘the butter that there is’” (13). This confusion of tongues motivates, in part, Naomi’s longing for a “living” or “freeing” or “wordless word,” a purer language in which the broken mosaic of speech is repaired, just as the diversity and transience of human languages — the argument of Babel — have led most civilizations to imagine a primal and perfect language. In Christian tradition, it is the language spoken at the beginning of time when Adam named all living creatures and the language to be spoken at the end of time when, as the passage from Revelation which Kogawa quotes as her epigraph announces, the saved will be given “a white stone / and in the stone / a new name written. . . .” It is the language which bodies forth the original Logos, the Word of which human words are the broken shards.

BUT THERE ARE MORE SPECIFIC REASONS for Naomi’s privileging of what is known without words over what is made known by words, reasons pertaining not to the universal quest for lost origins but to her private quest for lost origins. Naomi’s thoughts recur persistently to the mother she has so little information about. The remembered quality most cherished in the lost mother is her knowing without words, her accepting without words. Naomi’s memories are of unmediated communication. What has been lost with the loss of the mother is the silent knowing, which shields

what is hidden most deeply in the heart of the child. She makes safe the small stirrings underfoot and in the shadows. Physically, the sensation is not in the region of the heart, but in the belly. This that is in the belly is honoured when it is allowed to be, without fanfare, without reproach, without words. (59)

Words signify reproach and separation; but the child that Naomi remembers is inseparable from the mother Naomi remembers:

I am clinging to my mother's leg, a flesh shaft that grows from the ground, a tree trunk of which I am an offshoot — a young branch attached by right of flesh and blood. . . . The shaft of her leg is the shaft of my body and I am her thoughts.
(64)

Naomi longs to recover the sensation of her mother's immediate presence; and it is as a falling off from this original and fundamental security of her childhood that she measures and defines the qualities of her world after her mother's disappearance.

One can understand Naomi's reconstructed version of her early childhood security in a wordless world from two perspectives, one culturally specific, the other universal. Naomi remembers her mother as the epitome of "Japanese motherhood," the embodiment of an ethical and social code of behaviour that is part of the heritage lost in the dispersal of the Japanese Canadians. This code is characterized by a precedence of deeds over words, or by a decorum of appropriate gesture. The needs of the child are honoured and supplied before they are spoken, so that in Naomi's recollection of her early home: "When I am hungry, and before I can ask, there is food. If I am weary, every place is a bed" (56). Not only are deeds of service performed without the stimulus of words, but whatever deeds are performed pass without words or signs of praise or blame. This ethic is most fully illustrated in the episode where Naomi endangers the new chicks by placing them in the cage with the hen. When, to the child's alarm, the hen attacks the chicks, Naomi's mother reacts to save them "without a word and without alarm":

All the while that she acts, there is calm efficiency in her face and she does not speak. Her eyes are steady and matter of fact — the eyes of Japanese motherhood. They do not invade and betray. (59)

By contrast, Mrs. Sugimoto's "glance is too long"; in the language of eyes she passes judgment, holding a mirror before the child of her shame. Within this value system, language impugns the integrity of action.

Yet while this myth of loss is embedded within a specific cultural and historical context, we can also see it as a depiction of a universal psychological drama. Naomi's memory of a direct wordless possession of her mother — articulated in the image of the flourishing tree — resembles the Freudian myth of a pre-Oedipal world of plenitude, before the child is conscious of the differences that are to define its subjectivity and individuality. In its general outlines, Kogawa's representation of the myth of separation from the mother perhaps approximates most closely to Jacques Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud via Saussure and structural linguistics. Lacan rewrites Freud's account of the Oedipus complex in terms of a structuralist

or post-structuralist conception of language. In this version the crisis of separation from the mother's body coincides with entry into the symbolic order of language. Language, in this view, is conceived as an unending process of differentiation and deferral, in which each term has only a relative and negative value. One precondition of the sign is that it is not what it represents, that it presupposes the absence of the object it signifies. Hence to enter into a world of relationships mediated by language is to enter into a world of endless yearning, where words and substitute objects always register a lack.²

To recover knowledge of her mother, the adult Naomi has only words, pictures, and other substitutes. These substitutes are devalued in the novel as signs of the lost presence that, like the "icebreaker questions that create an awareness of ice" (225), themselves create an awareness of absence. Of the oppositions that provide the structure of the novel, that between the wordiness of Aunt Emily and the silences of mother and Obasan is as prominent as the opposition between the absence and presence of the mother. (Naomi studies the family picture taken in 1933, searching for resemblances between the two Kato sisters, Aunt Emily and mother, and finds none.) Emily, the "word-warrior," regards written language as the political means of restoring the property and dignity that were stripped from the Japanese Canadians in the Second World War; moreover, her lumpy parcel contains in a grey cardboard folder the private letters in a language Naomi cannot read that provide her only means to answer the persistent question, "Why did my mother not return?" (26). Yet Emily's naïve claims that words can render the truth about the past are always attended by the writer's irony and Naomi's skepticism. Emily exhorts Naomi to "Write the vision and make it plain. Habakkuk 2:2," yet her bold imperative is rendered in handwriting "as wispy and hard to decipher as the marks of a speed skater on ice" (31). Repeatedly, as Emily avouches the transparent truths of her words, the writer emphasizes the evident opacity of the signifiers. For Naomi, Emily's words are, like the words of the proem, only

White sound. Words, when they fall, are pock marks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream. (Proem)

The more fervently Aunt Emily presses Naomi into the wordy world, the stronger becomes her sense of alienation from it: the "words are not made flesh" (189).

O

BASAN'S POSTURE OF SILENCE supplies the alternative in Naomi's adult world to Emily's loquaciousness: "How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone" (32). Yet the novel presents an antithesis not only between the distortions of words and the inviolability of silence but also

between two kinds of silence. Whereas the mother's silence was understanding, Obasan's silence is inscrutable: "Obasan gave me no answers. I did not have, I have never had, the key to the vault of her thoughts" (26). Obasan's place within the patterned set of relationships articulated by the novel is more complex and ambiguous than Emily's. Measured against the wordless communion with the mother, Obasan's silences and her oblique, indirect, evasive responses to questions frustrate Naomi. They construct an impenetrable barrier against communication. Furthermore, set against the remembered warmth of the mother's body, Obasan's affection is undemonstrative: a "hug would startle her" (27). For the most part, Naomi feels Obasan's silence and demeanour as lack or absence, a measure of what she has lost with her mother's silent presence. Yet this strict opposition is not consistently operative within the novel, for Naomi seems to honour Obasan's silences above Emily's words. She works more diligently to decipher Obasan's silences — though she never succeeds — than she does to decipher Emily's words. At times, Naomi's imagery articulates her confidence that Obasan's stony silence shields a more authentic language: "Obasan's language remains deeply underground" (32). The imagery here is reminiscent of that which represents the narrator's quest for the "living word": "If I could follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice, would I come at last to the freeing word?" (Proem).

Yet if Obasan's silence is found to be as empty as Emily's words, it is not because her silence is different in kind from the mother's, but because of the relationship Obasan herself occupies in Naomi's psychic language to the mother. Strangely enough, even while Obasan's qualities are usually cast in a negative light when set against the mother's, one cannot fail to recognize in Obasan qualities that are virtually identical to those attributed to the flesh-and-blood mother. Obasan, in fact, embodies the ethics of "Japanese motherhood" as fully as Naomi's mother. One of the many illustrations one can point to occurs during the train trip to Slocan, when Obasan, seeing the solitary young woman with a "tiny red-faced baby" recognizes "hurt and a need for tenderness" (112-13). Obasan supplies her need, proffering a gift of fruit — without a word — and delivering to her the old woman's makeshift gift of a diaper. Naomi remains aloof from the gift-giving, unwilling to deliver the gifts herself. Obasan tries to impart this system of value to the children by her own example, but as Naomi comes to understand what is expected of her, she registers impatience and feels constricted:

We must always honour the wishes of others before our own. We will make the way smooth by restraining emotion. Though we might wish Grandma and Grandpa to stay, we must watch them go. To try to meet one's own needs in spite of the wishes of others is to be "wagamama" — selfish and inconsiderate. Obasan teaches me not to be wagamama by always heeding everyone's needs. That is why she is waiting patiently beside me at this bridge. That is why, when I am

offered gifts, I must first refuse politely. It is such a tangle trying to decipher the needs and intents of others. (128)

This expression of frustration is accompanied by nostalgic thoughts about the child's lost home. One can perhaps explain why the child's reactions to two manifestations of the identical code — in the mother's actions and in Obasan's actions — are discontinuous. First, the code was ideal while it served the narcissism of the child, before any differentiation of the self and the other emerged to constitute the required behaviour as self-denial. Second, it becomes apparent that this code does not, as was first supposed, bypass the complications and ambiguities that beset language: "to decipher the needs and intents of others" requires the mediation of language, even if the signs to be deciphered are physical gestures or signals other than spoken words. What seemed perfect in the mother comes to seem curious in Obasan. Obasan's self-denial and her refusal to join in Emily's words of accusation and blame ("gratitude only" is her response to every suffering inflicted by the arbitrary government decrees) win our admiration for her nobility and dignity; and yet we see these same qualities, reflected through Stephen's eyes and, to a lesser extent, through Naomi's eyes, as diminishing and victimizing her, making her seem a fond and foolish old woman.

Only because Obasan stands in as a substitute for the mother in Naomi's psychic language do her qualities have a negative value: "even with Obasan's warmth and constant presence, there is an ominous sense of cold and absence" (68-69). The disturbing realization to which Naomi comes in the novel is that whatever lack there is in Obasan's silence is a lack that was always already there: "Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" (243). This realization emerges when the "wordless word" (241) of her mother's martyrdom — "Do not tell" (242) — finally reaches Naomi through the long-delayed mediation of the Grandmother's letters from Nagasaki. Her mother's "Do not tell" is juxtaposed in the adult Naomi's mind with her suppressed memory of what the child "forever unable to speak . . . forever fears to tell" (243) — the ugly story of her sexual violation by Old Man Gower and the still more horrifying awareness of her own pleasure and complicity in that violation ("I clamber unbidden onto his lap. His hands are frightening and pleasurable" [65]). This juxtaposition leads the reader to recall how even the initial account of her mother's silent knowing had to be supplemented:

There is nothing about me that my mother does not know, nothing that is not safe to tell.

Except . . . Old Man Gower. (60-61)

The Gower episode is carefully placed in the narrative sequence of events, immediately before the account of the physical separation of the mother and child when the mother's ship leaves the Vancouver harbour bound for Japan. Hence

when we go back to the apparently definitive point of loss in the novel — the mother's leave-taking — it turns out not to be the point of loss. The point of loss appears instead to be the problematic episode of the child's seduction by Gower.

AT THIS POINT, the narrative sequence of those crucial episodes delineating the child's initial relation to and separation from the mother demands attention. The interposition of the Gower episode between the representations of wordless possession and of physical dispossession suggests a chronology of events which might lead one to identify Gower's interference as the cause of the child's loss. Before Gower: knowledge between mother and child is antecedent to words. After Gower: the silence hides a secret betrayal. But this formulation presupposes that Naomi's memory delivers an objective version of the early childhood events, unfolding in chronological order, while Kogawa instead invites the reader to regard the adult Naomi's search for lost beginnings as a highly subjective reconstruction: "All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past" (25). Naomi's effort in Chapters Nine through Eleven to recreate her origins, to shape through memory and imagination the story of her home life with her mother, is stimulated by an old photograph: "In the picture I am clinging to my mother's leg on a street corner in Vancouver" (47). Concluding Chapter Eleven and immediately preceding the account of Naomi's physical abandonment by her mother are two contradictory versions of the tree image I have mentioned earlier, the one interpreting the physical adherence of child to mother represented in the photograph as ideal unity, the other interpreting it as clinging parasitism:

I am clinging to my mother's leg, a flesh shaft that grows from the ground, a tree trunk of which I am an offshoot — a young branch attached by right of flesh and blood. Where she is rooted, I am rooted. If she walks, I will walk. Her blood is whispering through my veins. The shaft of her leg is the shaft of my body and I am her thoughts.

But here in Mr. Gower's hands I become other — a parasite on her body, no longer of her mind. My arms are vines that strangle the limb to which I cling. . . . But the secret has already separated us. . . . My legs are being sawn in half. (64-65)

What Kogawa's use here of the present tense and her immediate juxtaposition of conflicting versions of the mother-child relation signal is not temporal and causal sequence — before and after Gower — but the adult Naomi's competing interpretations of that one old photograph that provides such a tenuous link to her early life.

What we find in Chapter Eleven then is a story and a counter-story, or a preferred myth of origins and unassimilated story elements that pull against it:

the consoling story of a pre-linguistic paradise in tension with a supplement that threatens the consolation of the story. The violence which the Gower supplement threatens to the preferred story seems to be played out obliquely in some of Naomi's nightmares, as in the dream of Chapter Six where an idyllic scene peopled by those with "no language" (28) or with a "language [which] has been forgotten" (30) is disrupted by violent images of dismemberment.

The action of *Obasan* is Naomi's rewriting of her past:

The past, as Augustine said, does not exist, but our editing of the past, our imaging, our violence upon it — these are the most powerful of our activities, and our destinies turn on the strength, the direction, the anguish, and the wisdom we draw from or against those versions of reality.³

In Kogawa's words, the present alters the past: specifically, the mother's silence after Nagasaki alters the quality of her silence in Naomi's childhood: "Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction" (243). After the long-delayed "telling" of Nagasaki, after Naomi has absorbed the hurtful betrayal of the "no telling" (232), Naomi relinquishes the original myth of a pre-linguistic paradise. This revision of the past privileges speech over silence, language — with all its inadequacy — over a delusory wordless security. Furthermore, this new version of the past must alter Naomi's present. At the end of the novel Naomi leaves Obasan in the silence of her grief to revisit the spot she had come to year after year with Uncle. As she leaves, she slips on Aunt Emily's coat, perhaps a sign that she will enter Emily's (and Kogawa's) wordy world, that the new story of her past enables a new and richer story of her present.

NOTES

¹ Joy Kogawa, *Obasan* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1981), Proem. All further references to this work appear in the text.

² See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977). For Lacan's discussion of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, see especially "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud," pp. 146-78. Anika Lemaire, in *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Macey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 1-64, reviews some of the developments in structural linguistics and theory since Saussure that bear on Lacan's views.

³ Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), p. 19.

