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Learning to Read the Mother Tongue: On Sandra Gilbert's *Blood Pressure* · Kevin Clark

. . . there is a memorable interval between the spoken and the written language, the language heard and the language read. The one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish, and we learn it unconsciously, like the brutes, of our mothers. The other is the maturity and experience of that; if that is our mother tongue, this is our father tongue, a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be born again in order to speak.

Henry David Thoreau, "Reading"

. . . since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries male writers may have thought linguistic culture to be holding linguistic anarchy at bay because they have had to translate the "high themes" of the classics into what they fear is a low language whose very accessibility might seem to vulgarize those themes.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar,

No Man's Land: The War of the Words

IN PERHAPS HER BEST book of poems, Adrienne Rich claims only to dream of a language common to women. I believe that Sandra Gilbert's poetry has begun to realize that language. As Gilbert and prose co-author Susan Gubar recognize, the predominantly patriarchal language of literary art attempts to establish and preserve the high seriousness of that art. In our century such a language has favored a formal, often grave tonality, what M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall have termed "elegiac fatalism." Certainly there are exceptions to this voice, but most English language poetry of the last hundred years is marked by threnody, emotional armoring, a predilection for the morose and melancholy, and a repudiation of any language more colloquial, female, or even *youthful* than itself. Beyond all else the adult male writer must seem "mature," beyond childhood. He must forsake the "mother tongue," a language which editors have counseled against in serious writing, and certainly in poetry. Consciously or not, women have struggled to adopt the long-reigning idiom of the "strong," clearly adult male in order to succeed in the literary community.

Women, including Rich, have had to learn to mimic the voice of the other. Sandra Gilbert's new voice is controversial because it doesn't always sound like poetic voice "should" sound.

In her third book, *Blood Pressure*, she has achieved in verse what she has intimated in her critical writing: poetry written not in a "low" language but in a language more closely approximating that of adult women speaking to each other (and often out of earshot of men). It is a language unafraid of the childlike and the whimsical. And she does so without sacrificing the kind of sure-handed resolve good poetry demands. But it's not the type of resolve Adrienne Rich demonstrates. Rich's poetry is marked by a muscularity of diction, a flexed decisiveness, a willfulness. Rich presents herself as a kind of paradigmatic feminist resistance fighter. The power of her verse emerges as much from her resolute tone as it does from her insight. And while this tone is not always as elegiac as, say Auden or Eliot or the Pound of the *Pisan Cantos*, it often mourns the non-existent social ideal which cannot be as it fearlessly affirms the limits of patriarchal influence, especially in *The Dream of a Common Language*.

But as brilliant as Rich's poetry is, it is a hardened poetry, almost warlike in its relentless insistence. Rich keeps her guard up. Rarely does she show the kind of vulnerability that can add to the psychological complexity of a poet's voice. Gilbert's work, on the other hand, has evolved to a confident exploration of women's interpersonal problems with men, an exploration wherein men are not necessarily the collective, monolithic, and only problem inhibiting female potential. Make no mistake: Men *are* highly problematical in Gilbert's world; patriarchy *is* the central obstacle to happiness. But Gilbert has become specifically concerned with the way women have been complicitous in the granting of power to men, and in *Blood Pressure* she is especially convincing about the way heterosexual women award sexual power and control to men. Such a subject is interesting in itself, of course, but Gilbert's verse now takes the risk of sounding both womanly and anti-modernist in tone, a risk Rich could only dream of. Where Rich has had to assume the oppressor's language in order to become the paradigm, Gilbert turns to a more natural language, the "mother tongue," in order to speak to women about overcoming their own weaknesses.

Such a language is risky because it challenges the established way of writing poetry. Male and female poetry editors and anthologists — particu-

larly those in the academic traditions—have been weaned on the high modernist idiom. Gilbert's three books of poems signify an evolution toward a more authentically female voice than most of her female contemporaries. The deep image mysticism of *In the Fourth World* (1979) and the memorable ire of her daguerreotype poems in *Emily's Bread* (1984) have given way to the often piercing but usually hopeful poems of *Blood Pressure*. In these poems, she disdains the arcane Eliotic contextual framework which has shaped so much of modernism and which serves to prevent "vulgarization" of the genre. Rather, Gilbert renders her tone by employing myth, fairy tales, "distaff" metaphors, and—importantly—a language liberally marked by "y" adjectives. In fact, the most commanding group of poems in her book are the first eight (under the heading of "The Love Sequence") in which she employs the Hans Christian Andersen tale of the Snow Queen in order to describe and remedy the illusions of love which seem to sabotage the lives of so many women. She is updating the story of Gerda, the girl who is out to save her friend Kay from the fatally icy snare of the Snow Queen.

Gilbert suggests that many women privilege love to the extent that they over-idealize the male objects of their affection. Her contemporary adult Gerda mythologizes herself, believing she's supernaturally alluring, because she needs to believe that Kay will love her. But *this* Kay, crystallized by the cold and inhuman Snow Queen, the dangerous female competitor, cares little for Gerda, who has foolishly duped herself into believing in Kay's essential goodness. In "How You Fell" we see the process of Gerda's self-delusion. As a young girl she was convinced she would come to "marry // the master of the plantation, command the fountain that gushed wine." Like so many young girls, Gerda was infected by the potential of her own power to feel and inspire love: "Love would rain on you like geranium balm." Against all logic, she was convinced she could entrance the "just" Kay:

You knew he'd enlisted under a blank banner, knew
he was missing crucial fingers, knew
he was the agent for somebody else.
But it didn't matter, you stayed put,

you baked in the cave of change,
your hair dampened, your
secret organs hummed with love.

But when Gerda comes out of her cave, Kay tells her how little she really mattered, and Gerda feels “sticky and thick with love / like the broken windowpane the witch painted over with sugar.” In its use of the childhood myth as well as its dreamy, ironically girlish voice, its accessibility, its reference to “secret organs” and “sugar,” Gilbert’s language suggests that of young women speaking to each other. But rather than the deceptively sweet and improbable aspirations of girls, the language underscores the self-deception of women.

Thus, Gilbert’s female idiom is sometimes happily direct and sometimes gently ironic. Through the first six poems of the sequence, Gerda is powerless, mesmerized by the idealized images of herself and Kay. Most female readers will find the relentlessly girlish overtones of this section immediately recognizable: seductive, comfortable, familiar, reassuring. Such a voice can be good, but it is also the voice of a world which can be too assuring, a world where certain personal mythologies can be so distorted that they do not remotely correspond to the circumstances of the real world. This linguistic world, almost exclusively female, has been off-limits to modern and contemporary poets. Because it is female (i.e. perceived as superficial, irrelevant, even vulgar), because of its intimations of childhood, the arbiters of literary standards have rejected its components as viable poetic tropes. Here, in “The Last Poem about the Snow Queen,” Gilbert eschews the cerebrally elegiac tone of so many contemporary poets:

You said you were ready, you’d be careful.
Smart girl, you wore two cardigans, a turtleneck,
fur-lined boots, scarves,
a stocking cap with jinglebells.
And over the ice you came, gay as Santa,
singing and bringing gifts.

This is not the language of the adult male, the grown-up too often made distant from his childhood by a compelling and pervasive synthesis of

forces arranged against sentimentality. Indeed, the prevailing twentieth century voice is so fearful of sentimentality that the voice of childhood is almost entirely eradicated.

I'm not suggesting that poets should adopt a childish poetics complete with Mother Goose rhymes and simplistic tales of pre-Disney derring-do. What I *am* suggesting is that in her new, more honest and womanly voice Gilbert is radically unlike most of the influential male—and female—writers of the century. By using fairy tales and a female phraseology that borrows from the language of children, particularly that of girls, Gilbert is generating an unconventional and alluring voice, as she does here in “What He Hates / What He Loves”:

You strip away your silky blouse, your
frilly bark, soft armor.
Nude as a peeled tree, you stare
at your pink-white body: swollen,
female, pulpy where it should be dry,
open where it should be closed . . .

That's what he hates the most!
More than the mushy breasts, the tender belly,
he hates that swamp inside you . . .

Here, young Gerda of the fairy tale is transformed into a grown woman who is hurt when her friend Kay, now a grown man, is not attracted to her. Note the prevalence of “y” adjectives: “silky,” “frilly,” “pulpy,” “mushy.” Nowhere in serious modern and contemporary poetry can be found as frequent an application of such words ordinarily associated with the language of early youth.

There is an irony in the fact that so many women are in effect renaming themselves in order to eliminate the subordinate connotation of names ending in “y” sounds. Surely, in a culture where women aren't necessarily taken seriously, they are correct: “Katherine” is more commanding than “Katie,” “Susan” more than “Susie,” “Elizabeth” more than “Libby.” Likewise, most modernist writers, particularly men, assiduously avoid adjectives ending in “y” because the sound can suggest a child's percep-

tion, a diminutiveness, i.e. a powerlessness. But Gilbert understands the irony. She doesn't back away from such usage. She is not afraid to admit and demonstrate that most people, particularly women, carry elemental linguistic tropes out of our youth into our mature linguistic habits, refining them but never entirely eradicating them. Men may drive them into disuse, into the unconscious, but they remain. Women are more likely to use them in everyday speech. Is there any reason women writers should find such language off-limits? As Pound said in a 1915 letter to Harriet Monroe, poetry should be ". . . nothing—nothing that you couldn't, in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, actually say."

"Y" words thus appear with astonishing regularity throughout *Blood Pressure*. The following can be found in the first section alone: "sticky," "snowy," "flabby," "noisy," "prickly," "icy," "witchy," "muddy," "springy," "mossy," "lumpy," and those from the above poem—"silky," "frilly," "pulpy," and "mushy." Gilbert employs these words because she intuitively feels that the child's key images help to form the underpinning of the adult's conceptual framework and world view, particularly when the adult's psyche is under pressure.

"The Love Sequence" is best read as a unified sequence of poems which dares to retain much of its childlike ambience even as Gerda grows to realize her folly. In "The Cure" she is felled by the cruelly indifferent axe of Kay's glance. Eventually, "far down, among the stumps and tufts," Gerda learns the truth, and thus learns how to reject the object of her love: "A fine dust of dislike rubs through your pores." Finally, she becomes self-reliant:

You get on your feet slowly, you're as strong as anyone now,
at last you can stand up for yourself:
you've become a natural marvel, a beautiful pink nettle.

Even your mother would scream
if she touched you.

Her furious strength is fueled by knowledge. Kay is a creep who loves the beautiful and finagling Snow Queen. This realization leads to a kind of undeluded fatal resignation. But life is mercurial and knowledge is inconstant. By the end of the sequence, Gerda transforms into a poet who hasn't

quite remembered the lessons she'd learned. In "The Return of the Muse" the poet is transfixed by the male muse:

You always knew you wrote for him, you said
He is the father of my art, the one who watches all night,
chainsmoking, never smiling, never satisfied.

Soon his resistance to her poems, like Kay's indifference to Gerda, fuels her perseverance, just as Gerda kept on until she was bludgeoned. Only now, the concluding indeterminacy of the sequence suggests that creativity depends on the poet's awareness of her dependence.

You gave birth to enormous poems.

He looked embarrassed and said how bad they were.
They became beasts, they grew fangs and beards.
You sent them against him like an army.

He said they were all right
but added that he found you, personally,
unattractive.

You howled with love,
you spun like a dervish with rage, you
kept on writing.

Gilbert's "army" of metaphors sent forth like the plot of a fairy tale renders an understanding of the complexity of the female psyche which belies the traditional established perception of the "female" poetics, thought to be "low" and "brutish" as Thoreau suggests, rather than "select" and "significant." Gilbert's approach to adulthood retains the complexity and richness Thoreau no doubt desired, but it differs radically in its method by joining adult perspective and language to moments of childhood phraseology.

In a high modernist context, to sound youthful in poetry is to sound immature. Most male writers are like most of the male sex: while being forced to grow up into a culturally endorsed version of manhood, they have held to the language of early youth. Boys kill their linguistic child-

hood in order to become men. Girls retain links to the language of their childhood in order to become women, primarily because the culturally endorsed version of womanhood has made motherhood nearly compulsory. And because men have had to demonstrate worthiness by becoming thick-skinned providers, they have denied most of the emotional vestiges of childhood which are viewed by both men and women as signs of weakness in men. Thus, there has been little room for the tonal vestiges of childhood in literature. In writing and living, women's domains of love and motherhood have traditionally been perceived as inferior to those of men, in part because women's domains have valued children and the psycho-emotional residuum of a woman's own childhood.

I'm not contending that high modernist verse is itself inferior. I'm an admirer of the idiom, and I recognize that it applies to the most significant poetry in American history. I only contend that it is limited to an attenuated band of human emotion and that it has become nearly the only permissible idiom. Eliot's voice is a continuing legacy. Yet in an odd way the dolorous allure of his poetry could be traced to his escape from the things of children. As his biography suggests, his poetic voice emerges from a kind of mourning, not simply for the end of a perfectly civil society (which never truly existed) but more likely for the end of a rich childhood characterized by the attentions of his mother and sisters, attentions which would fall threateningly outside the behavioral requirements of adult masculinity. Nevertheless Eliot's poetry is redoubtable not because of its recondite allusions but because of its modernist sweep—and because of its sophisticated “adult” tones. Children are incapable of elegy. And patriarchal writers are certainly not without sentiment; but more often than not the chief component of that sentiment is mourning. In the attenuated emotional world of literary men, loss—if considered in manly tones—is permitted. Surely, mourning is a legitimate state of mind to ratify in poetry; but mourning is not the only state worth validating in the written arts. A decade ago, Robert Hass had it right when he wrote in “Meditation at Lagunitas” that “All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking.” Ten years later, Sandra Gilbert is trying to change that. Any good literary work must certainly take up a problem, but that work doesn't have to weep without weeping like a lost generation Frederic Henry who leaves the hospital and walks tearlessly into the rain.

Blood Pressure is reminiscent of the mid-career albums of singer Joni

Mitchell. Mitchell's artful vocals were innovative, outside the boundaries of the pop music idiom. They usually were about women's perceptions of love. Young men would say they liked them. But it was young women who played the albums repeatedly, because Mitchell's voice was distinctly female, the voice of a woman speaking to women. Now Gilbert seems to have achieved a similar type of female-centered language. It takes courage to risk such a youth-embracing female voice, because in the past that voice has been associated with nothing less than powerlessness. Gilbert eschews the armored, often discursive and elegiac sobriety of her twentieth-century foresters and contemporaries. She has come to write this way, especially in "The Love Sequence," because she is primarily addressing other women, not men. Furthermore, her Snow Queen poems are finally a poetry of gain, not loss, iconoclastically positive in outlook. They are drastically out of step with the "mature" prevailing idiom. In these poems and others in *Blood Pressure*, Sandra Gilbert asks us to learn an old language in order to read in a new way.