

THE SONG OF THE SELF: Language and Gestalt Therapy

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Laura Perls once asked her students “What is Gestalt therapy?” After listening to their varied replies, she said “Gestalt therapy is an experiential, phenomenological, holistic, organismic, existential psychotherapy.” Because Gestalt therapy encompasses so much, attempts to address the theory satisfactorily encounter enormous obstacles. Many of us believe that Paul Goodman set forth an excellent model for Gestalt therapy and have worked within it over the years. And we believe that this model is best set forth in *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*. This is a formidable problem that I must address at the outset.

Meaning is not a fixity. It does not exist encoded in the words of any single book. It is a function of the dynamic interaction between the reader and the read, at the contact/boundary itself. Meaning is the ever-shifting, infinitely various figure that emerges from the destructuring of what is read, what is heard, or what is observed — what is experi-

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enced. Without this destructuring, “meaning” would remain an alien introject, dead clumps of authority exerting a leaden weight on the liveliness of true understanding.

Nevertheless, words mean what they mean as well as what each of us tries to tell them to mean. Otherwise, understanding would be impossible and communication pointless. Contact, for example, has a specific meaning to Gestalt therapists and is ill-used when we say “make contact with me.” And so for other words in the Gestalt therapy lexicon, such as boundary, resistance, excitement, frustration, — each of us can compile a hate list of misused words by careless Gestalt therapists.

How can we reconcile the desirable plasticity of language, its discovering/inventing function, — often with elements of personal risk — with our knowledge of and loyalty to our own established principles of theory, our own understanding of meaning? Perhaps this is the underlying question addressed by this paper.

Gestalt therapy theory is a unitary theory; all of its parts are so intimately connected that to understand one, one must understand another and so on in a kind of loop. To begin anywhere is to begin in the middle and out of context. To hold any one aspect up for examination, extracted from the whole, is to add a certain distortion. Perhaps this is true for many theories. Nevertheless, for expediency and teaching, I propose the following basic concepts: organism/environment field, contact-boundary, contact, creative adjustment, and the self. Language can be understood with reference to these core concepts.

The organism/environment field is the world where human beings, human animal organisms, live. It is a unity, undivided by colloquial notions of mind, body, inner, outer, biological, emotional etc. Experiencing occurs at the “slash” in that compound word “organism/environment”; it is the contact-boundary, the “specific organ of awareness of the novel” (Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951, p. 259). Awareness occurs here. It is the place of Being, the clearing, the horizon, of the existential phenomenologists. This “place” is of the organism and of the environment; it is the meeting. It is the “where” of contact. Contact is the central notion of

Gestalt therapy. In fact, it is fair to state that Gestalt therapy is the psychotherapeutic modality that attends only to contact making (and its interruptions) in the therapy session.

Contact is awareness and motor response of the field, the forming of a figure of interest against a ground in the organism/environment field (Perls, et al., p. 231). It is the integrative process by which the organism lives, perceives, experiences, nourishes itself, thrives — “and in general,” it is, “every function that must be primarily considered as occurring at the boundary in an organism/environment field.” (Perls, et al., p. 373) Its aftermath is growth. All contact is creative adjustment. It is the finding, making, and creating of solutions to the ongoing needs of the organism. It is the adjusting to the parameters of the field, the limitations or opportunities in the world-as-found.

The self is the functional structure of experiencing. It is the system of contacts themselves. Unlike the Cartesian self, the self in Gestalt therapy is constituted by contact(s). Goodman named only three “special structures “ of the self: Id, Ego and Personality functions (Perls, et al., p. 378). Yet he suggested there are others. Very briefly, the id is the organismic background of need, appetites, urges, including those unfinished from previous interrupted or weak contacts. The ego is the function which “orients and manipulates” the self, solves the problems of living. It is the doing and the being of the organism, the biting, chewing, tasting, swallowing. It is the learning. It is the speaking. The personality function is the “verbal replica of the self,” “a rhetorical attitude.” It is who we say we are. It contains the aftermath of previous contacts as memory. It is what was learned. It is what was said. It provides a sense of continuity over time, a stable personal identity.

In the beginning, in Gestalt therapy metapsychology, there was/is contact. This must be so in any experiential theory since, by definition, all we are concerned with is awareness. Language developed as an aftermath of social contact.

Language, whether spoken or written, whether by word or sign, whether by sound or gesture, by its very existence, posits the social field. The act of communication declares that there is another to communicate to. The making of an

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utterance implies a separate self from an other (Kristeva, 1981, p. 41). Otto Rank, in *Art and Artist*, suggests that speech is a creative achievement and as such represents man making himself independent of that which exists (Rank, 1932, p. 240). In Gestalt therapy, speech is grounded on an individual's awareness of (o)r faith in the existence of an other person from whom one is separate. There can be no speaker extracted from a one-spoken-to. But since the self is a phenomenon of the organism/environment field, there can be no self-other split. Words do not bridge an abyss between self and object, or between subjects, but are themselves evidence of the social contact-boundary, of the unity of the field. As a contact-boundary activity, speaking is internal and external simultaneously, that is, at once, a unity of subject and object.*

Language is always about something. It always has meaning (Goodman, 1971, p. 3 ff.). Words both represent something else (as signifiers) and have Being-in-themselves. Words do not merely describe a legal right, the proper recitation of them creates a right. Consider the words, "I do," in a marriage ceremony, for example.

Language is an attempt at describing experience. As such, it must always fall short. Just as no theory of human experience can be as rich, or as complete, as the experience it seeks to describe, no communication can carry the essence of the experience it attempts to be about. Goedel's Theorem has application here. No system can be understood without reference to a higher system. Husserl's notion of the unthought thought likewise is relevant here as it suggests the phenomenological epistemologists' understanding of the limitations of cognition

In Goodman's anthropology, the social bond existed prior to the use of language as a tool. Pre-verbal outcries and utterances, the grunts, gasps, sighs, whimpers, the primitive sounds which are still the drum beats of our animal nature,

* See Berman, Art, *From the New Criticism to Deconstruction*, 1988, University of Illinois Press, p. 73, paraphrasing Heidegger, "If the self is inextricably interwoven with the environment, language becomes external and internal simultaneously."

evolved as the need emerged for greater differentiation of the already existing contact. Words as tools were developed to communicate greater complexities of meaning along with the more primary sounds. As human beings proceeded in their social development, from Eden to Babel, and as posture became more erect with our sensory organs less attuned to the closer sensations of the earth, language became increasingly more abstract, more experience-distant, and meanings more complex and abstract. Words eventually accumulated the capacity to replace experience altogether, to be “instead of” rather than “along with” that which they describe. In psychoanalytic language, this process is part of the mechanism by which the primary process is tamed by the secondary process, so that civilizations may thrive and the work of the adult world can be done.

At this extreme, where language’s contact-making capacity diminishes, it can become neurotic verbalizing. The speaker is no longer plastically using words to be in-the-world, to create and invent meanings and relationships, but as static instruments of a neurotically split self. Verbalization, then, is less a tool for discovery of new experience and more a means to perpetuate the status quo. As with all interruptions of contact, this protects the sensitive contact-boundary from an excess of danger or frustration. And this, Goodman argues, has been an inevitable and even a necessary consequence of the development of the social fabric. With the increasing complexity and diversity of society, the need for a common code of shared meanings was required.

Isn’t this the significance of the Tower of Babel: human beings were punished for getting too close to God and sentenced to a chaos of misunderstanding. In the biblical story, humans tried to reach God by building of a tower to heaven; this was an effort toward contact. God intervened, interrupted contact, and propelled humanity toward a babel of confusion. To prevent the frustration of confusion, human’s compile dictionaries, instruct one another in the inherited meanings of their language. Nations organize around language units and defend their “national security”; personal identities are maintained through loyalty to a “Mother Tongue.” From the harmony of the builders of Babel, man-

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kind has become the balkanized chaos of world conflicts. And to equilibrate the tensions in a field where individual expressions endanger social harmony, we speak words which quietly attempt to replace those socially impossible actions. “Talking about” replaces “doing” as an acceptable sublimation.

In Goodman’s model, this is the evolution of language as a developmental theory as it corresponds with the increasing differentiation and complexities of the organism/environment field. And this is as true for individual human development as it has been for the development of the human race. An infant is born into a world of language; awareness emerges in a field of pre-existing language use. As the infant’s own field becomes more complex, her pre-verbal utterances are shaped by successive contacts. Outcries are replaced with learned words. These become the tools of interpersonal functioning. They are inherited as artifacts of previous contacts; our native tongue is the souvenir of all who spoke it before us. It contains relics of our social past. The child learns this heritage through experiment, play, and introjection.

This process can be restated with a different emphasis. The infant is born into a field which includes the parent. Interactions at this primitive contact-boundary are dominated by gestures and all the pre-verbal utterances and sounds of cooing and gurgling we recognize as baby-talk. The parent understands this wordless language, participates in it, encourages its successive development into formal language. And as the contemporary analysts and self-psychologists claim, this parent serves a vital further function in mirroring to the infant through this empathic understanding of the child’s language and establishing his rudimentary sense of self. As the child develops, and as his field becomes increasingly complex, from dependence on a single nurturing parent, to the larger social family unit, and then outward to the community, so does his language capacity and requirement develop — from child-speech that is understood only by the immediate family, to facility in the common code understood by the community.

This sequence or development away from the idiosyncratic and intimate language of the infant/nurturer field to the more generally comprehensible and public language of

society, stated extremely, is the sequence from the playful creativity of a child's inventions with sounds to the dry flat prose of a technical manual, for example, where ambiguity is unacceptable. (add the intimate private language of lovers: a well-integrated person would be able to use language at all these levels as the circumstances required)

In Gestalt therapy, words have two aspects relevant to this discussion. They may be instruments or tools in the contact process. Secondly, they may assist in the interruptions in the creativity of that process. The latter is words of stone, the former, words of fire.

"When speaking intervenes in the world and shapes experience," Goodman writes in *Speaking and Language* "it often is, or is taken as, a direct action in the environment . . ." (Goodman, 1971, p. 19). We can see from this phrase, that this is the manner by which words make and invent experience. These are the aspects of language as contact function. Contact is a process which has been schematized and simplified as containing certain stages, each possessing distinct experiential properties: fore-contact, contacting, final contact, and post contact.

Let us look at language from the point of view of each of these sequences of grounds and figures.

In fore-contact, the figure is the Id of the situation, the given, whether it be a present appetite or urge, environmental stimulus, or the unfinished tensions from previously incomplete contacts. I suggest that this must include the pre-verbal sounds, outcries, sub-vocal speech (Perls, et al., 1951, p. 322) that dwell in the physiology of the word: its breath (or breathlessness), its sounds, its tones and overtones.

In contacting, the self becomes more active as the possibilities of the field become figural. The self orients and manipulates, distinguishes, chooses, rejects, moves towards what is desired. This is the ego functioning. Here, words are tools for organizing the field, words for asking, defining, cajoling, pleading, convincing, stating, making, declaring, and of course, creating. And to the extent that the self is fully engaged in contacting, words are fully alive. The figure they help form is bright, clear, graceful, flexible. "I am saying my say, speaking to you."

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And now, deliberateness can relax to the spontaneous sequence of final contact — the experience of integration and unity of perception, motion, feeling. And here, words are most alive, plastic, shining, clear, and richly connotative. Meaning, on various levels, passes from the speaker to the hearer. There is communication. What is said is heard. The understanding of the listener reaches out to the words of the speaker. The Thou has heard the I.

In post-contact, there is a flowing together of organism/environment. There is the peace of fulfillment, of satisfaction. There is silence. There is a meeting. An I-Thou unity.

And so in the ideal circumstances of contactful speech, words of fire. I will argue that it is an important attribute of Gestalt therapy that we attempt to establish these ideal circumstances in the session.

Obviously, speaking may also be part of the sequence of figure/grounds that includes losses of ego functioning resulting in weaker figures, less fluid sequences of figure/ground — the speech of the neurotic verbalizer, words of stone. In such instances, words in some manner function to protect the surface membrane of the contact-boundary from an excess of either danger or frustration. However, the original danger and frustration no longer exist, but the verbalizer is not aware of this.

These interruptions of contact are confluence, interjection, projection, retroflection, and egotism. All of these phenomena also have normal, non-neurotic manifestations. I am concerned here with aspects which lead to interruptions in the creativity of the organism: principally, the unaware interruptions. When there are interruptions, there is rarely if ever a single loss of ego function operating; typically, all are at work, interweaving and supporting one another, one emerging as figure to another as background. What is common to all is that in various degrees, the person spoken to is rarely apprehended as a Thou, but as an It, in Buber's sense. To the extent that contact is incomplete, what is unfinished remains unfinished as background tension for subsequent figures.

Language which suggests confluence is dull lifeless verbiage, seemingly cutoff from the grounds of the speaker, on the one hand, or the wildly unpredictable fury of hysterical discharge on the other. Neurotic confluence is an unhappy state where the ground is demanded as against any possibility of differentiation, yet there is no concrete experience of functional ground. In speech, where confluence is figural, the speaker may often pepper his language with “we’s,” casting a broad cloak over differences in his world so as to establish a sense of oneness. The tone of speech may appear to be warm, yet often, this warmth flakes off to suggest the cold ice of bottomless despair, protected by the pseudo-warmth of the language.

The language of introjection is all too familiar to us. The words spoken do not seem belong to the speaker. What is said is spoken from the alien identifications that have not been integrated into the self. They may be the words of impersonal authorities — as a student crammed for an exam regurgitates the authorities gulped down. Or it may be the words of parents or other powerful and threatening tyrants, incompletely pacified by incorporation in the process of introjection. One of the red-flags of introjection is the passive appeal to authority or habitual “I should” references. The rhetorical tone of possible introjection might include a sense that the speaker is trying to be convincing, thereby hinting at the background conflict the introjection is attempting to ignore.

Projection also has observable traces in language. In this interruption of contact, the self disowns a part of itself and experiences it as part of the environment. And so, in speech, we may hear the distancing phrases of “There is,” “It seems” “You know” etc. The speaker may notice “a heaviness in the room,” or perceive hostility on friendly faces. The listener to speech where projection may be figural may have the sense that the speaker is not talking to him at all. (Since the speaker is more than likely to be speaking or responding to his own projections and does not even notice that he barely notices the listener at all.)

When retroflection is the figural loss of ego functioning, the speech typically carries evidences of the physical

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tension of the person. He may hesitate, or actually seem to struggle to get to a point. Words chosen may be rarefied abstractions. Sentences may be circuitous mazes where speaker and hearer may seem to get lost. The speaker may punctuate his speech with self-critical asides, "I don't know," "This may seem stupid," and of course, he may conspicuously apologize for things of which the hearer has not the slightest idea. His words may sound pinched, tension laden, or perhaps so soft and withheld that one can barely sense the talker is talking.

And in egotism, the speaker will be so absorbed in the loveliness of his own speech, the taste of his own words, that in itself is the excuse for his speaking. Communication is the annoying justification for his peacock display of what he thinks is his own intelligence, etc.

What I have just described are only a few possibilities of the way in which language may reflect losses of ego functions. Of course, there are certainly many ways contact may be interrupted without the use of any words. But this is not my focus here.

In our model, where we distinguish contact from its interruptions, it is tempting to think in terms of an either/or situation. Either there is contact, or there is not. Such a misunderstanding has led Gordon Wheeler in his recent book, *Gestalt Reconsidered*, to criticize this model and propose his revisions to correct that error. Wheeler suggests that these interruptions shape whatever contact is made, so that there are contacts of various kinds, (Wheeler, 1991, p. 116) to serve particular functions of the organism. So, he declares, there may be contacts with a "heavy reliance on introjection . . . well suited to certain goals and processes and ill-suited to others."

Wheeler is, of course correct; but we do not need his correction. It is clear in Goodman, and to us, that all interruptions serve as creative adjustments; "Neurotic behaviors are creative adjustments of a field in which there are repressions." (Perls, et al, p. 447). And since there are always repressions in the "human condition"; where social harmony is "quite desirable" (Perls. et al., p. 318) there is always contact with some aspect of loss of ego functioning.

In his concluding chapter of *Speaking and Language*, Goodman writes, "I have suggested that the wisest method of exploring language is to analyze how it operates in actual concrete situations. . . . This is similar to the literary analysis of particular works; and as in literary criticism, conversation and discourses fall roughly into genres, such as small talk intimate talk, gang talk, public exchange of information, talk of different social classes, poems, journalism, dialogue, neurotic verbalizing, scientific exposition, etc." (Goodman, 1971, p. 227. He then proposes the value of a kind of literary analysis of these genres. I am particularly intrigued by this concept of neurotic verbalizing as a kind of literary form.

Just as the artist creates as if to insist on his own immortality as against the clear knowledge of certain death, so does the neurotic verbalizer use language to make time stand still: to interrupt the process of contact. When contact is complete, there is a letting-go, a kind of pathos (Perls, et al., p. 422). Neurotic repetition is a holding back from this final surrender. And petrified in the fossil of neurotic verbalization is the moment of dangerous spontaneity interrupted and repressed by inhibition (Perls, et al., p. 293).

Let us look at this more closely. What I suggest here is that if we examine neurotic verbalization with the same kind of attention we bring to poetry, understand its various creative devices as inherently poetic in nature, we will be able to revivify this fossil and restore living breath to the imprisoning words.

Every speaker is like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, each with a tale to tell, and each looking for the willing wedding guest who, by listening to him, will free him from the burden he carries. Speaking is a physical act, alive in the chest, throat, lips, tongue, and palate of the speaker; and reflected in his eyes, his expression, his gestures. In verbalized speech, there is the always evidence of the unfinished; we need only shake the words to hear it rattle. In every sound uttered in speech, we may hear, if we listen well, evidence of a pre-verbal outcry, a song waiting to be sung through words of contact.

In Gestalt therapy, we create an artificial situation for our patients. We establish grounds of safety so that there may

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be a special form of contact, therapeutic contact. It is true that all contact is therapeutic and that is the glory of our method. But let's be real. The world is dangerous. And unpredictable. So that the ideal circumstances of spontaneous creativity, fluid figure formation, contact where the background truly empties, for example, is, frankly, utopian. Yet, in the relationship between therapist and patient, we can try to establish a safer environment. We as therapists, DO listen. Our patients may rely on our best efforts in this regard. And we listen with a special kind of attention to the structure of the moment so that our interventions make reference to privileged understandings.

When we listen for evidences of interruptions of contact, we are listening for the private language of the individual. We are listening for his poetry. The literary critic Harold Bloom compares poetry to psychic defenses in his essay "Breaking the Form" (Bloom et al., 1988, pp. 1 - 37). He suggests there are two kinds of figures of speech in poetry that I think are relevant here: metonymy and synecdoche. Both of them are a form of naming, according to Bloom. "Metonymy is a mode of repetition . . . but synecdoche is an initial mode of identification. A metonymy names, but a synecdoche begins a process of un-naming" (Bloom, et al., 1988, p.11).

This is very dense stuff. Synecdoche is from the Greek, "taking up together" and is defined as a figure of speech in which the part stands for the whole and this something else is understood within the thing mentioned, as in "give us this day our daily bread" (Cuddon, J.A., 1991). It thus opens to another dimension of meaning. Metonymy is also from the Greek, meaning name change. It is defined as a figure of speech in which the name of an attribute or a thing is substituted for the thing itself, for example, the crown for the monarchy. As a poetic device, it has a more narrow connotation. Bloom further suggests that metonymy is akin to obsessive repetition, while synecdoche hints at disorders of psychic drives. In synecdoche we see an opening in meaning from one level to another. We see a part standing for and opening up potential meaning to a larger unstated whole. I suggest that what we listen for in the verbal productions of our patients is

this synecdoche, the trope, or turn of speech which begins a process of un-naming. When we listen with such an ear, to quote Richard Kitzler, “Words are people.”

In a usual encounter in Gestalt therapy, the patient speaks about something. This is the content and we are trained to acknowledge it, yet, respectfully look beyond it. Words carry the accumulation of individual contacts as part of the formed personality of the self as well as the inherited learning in the history of word use. Each word has specific meaning to the individual alone as well as bears the common code. Every learned word is an artifact of previous social and personal uses. Each word is a here-and-now historical record of the individual. It is a private personal utterance. And it is proof of membership in the community of this language.

This is what we listen for, with the content as background. In the developing dialog of the therapy process, through the exchanges between therapist and patient, there will emerge a language unique to this process, with its own understandings and conventions. It will develop first through the un-naming where the surface meanings of words are flaked off and the unfinished yearnings beneath them allowed to emerge.

It will emerge through the therapist’s supportive challenge of the speaker as he notices the tropes, the evidence of the background unfinished situations pressing forward: “what do you mean by X,” “I noticed when you said Y, your voice dropped,” “Can you speak to M as if she were here, in that chair?” “Could you try to say that sentence again, softer, louder, faster, slower, after a breath?” “What was your experience when you said Y” “Could you try replacing your words with physical gestures and tell me that story again?”. This list can continue as each of you recalls your own ways to attend to the moments of a session.

Eventually a new language will emerge as the familiar neurotic verbal structures are deconstructed; it will be the language of therapeutic contact where what was lost is now regained. It will be a process of re-naming.

This new language of therapeutic contact parallels the early idiosyncratic language of the infant/nurturer field,

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where the freedom and innocence of the child's play assisted its learning and development.

It is a restoration of that primitive private language unique to the contact-boundary of the speaker/hearer. And as such, it is a return to the plastic creativity of speech where sounds are the language of the self. With its own music and personal rhythm, meter, breath, and perhaps, rhyme, it is the song of the self in contact.

It is the speech of Adam, the language of Eden.

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