

Sydney Goins

Chinese Philosophy

P. Rohan Sikri

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Goblet Words within Transformative Literature

Abstract

Goblet words act as bridges between the Zhuangzi and the internal life of the philosophical reader. Interiority (the inner character or nature; subjectivity) is activated through metaphorical language. The psyche is opened and accessed and by active participation and personal agency, is transformed. For this process to occur, the reader must completely absorb and fully comprehend the material. There must be time for contemplation and within that notion, there must also be an application to the external world or the internal life. The reader can not skim through or glance over goblet words in transformational texts in order to transform. The reader must sit with it, so they can get it. Goblet words are timeless chalices, aiding in the longevity of myths and stories and allegories. I will explore the complex meaning behind Zhuangzi's goblet words through the interpretations of two scholarly texts (mainly Youru Wang's "The Strategies of 'Goblet Words': Indirect Communication in The *Zhuangzi*)

Introduction

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our inform Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise
 As Lightning to the Children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind—
 —*Poem 1129*, Emily Dickinson

The late nineteenth century poet, Emily Dickinson, secluded herself from Victorian society and wrote poems in a dark room all day, and when she died, her sister found her life's work and published them. That is how Dickinson earned her fame. In one of the most well-known poems, the subject matter revolves around truth and how one should tell it. Should it be through direct or indirect communication? By interpreting the diction of “superb surprise” and “Lightning to the Children eased”, the surprising truth will shock (not transform) naive, unlearned minds. The solution is to tell the truth slanted. To tell the truth slanted is to tell the truth in a full circle and allow the truth to come full circle. This technique of slanted truth-telling is utilized in her poem itself, creating a meta-truth telling. How does this relate to Zhuangzi and goblet words? Chuang Tzu utilizes lyricism in his philosophical text; he writes in a verse style. He delivers radical truths through goblet words. This is also confirmed by the restrictions of dissenting opinions in China at the time. Goblet words were a means of breaking free of rigid thought structures and limited perspectives. Indeed, most poetry—Eastern or Western, Modern or

Ancient—delivers hard truths through imagery, diction, and above all else, metaphor. My thesis is that Zhuangzi's philosophy allows for personal transformation— through goblet words within literature.

I. The *Zhuangzi*

Of my words, nine in ten are metaphorical (yu yan 寓言), seven in ten are from weighty sayings, but all these are simply 'goblet words (zhi yan 卮言),' like the water that daily fills the cup, harmonized with the natural (he yi tian ni 和以天倪) ...[Goblet words] may be carried on into the region of the unlimited, and employed to the end of our years...Things indeed have what makes them so, and what makes them allowable. There is nothing which is not so; nothing which is not allowable. But without the 'goblet words' that daily fill the cup like water, and without the harmony with the natural, who can have in his possession these qualities for long?

With Burton's interpretation, the *Zhuangzi* argues for indirect communication through the use of metaphor, which is more natural and in harmony with human thought. Metaphor does not become outdated or archaic with the influx of time or ongoing stream of ideas. This detachment from definite meaning grants the words to adapt and become timeless. Metaphor is not limited. Metaphor is a vessel meant to carry the philosophical reader into a new realm of ideas without mental barriers or judgement. The new ideas creep in slowly without the philosophical reader's conscious knowledge. Even if knowingly exposed to radical ideas, how can the philosophical reader fully grasp them without forgetting? The ideas must sink down, down into the philosophical reader's psyche below their level of awareness and then, they can fully grasp and remember these transformative ideas. How is this done?

As stated in the Abstract, it is done through the application to one's external environment or internal world, but before this can even take place, the philosophical reader must be given time to apply. Through this process, the philosophical reader is transformed. Goblet words are one means of transformative discovery.

II. Transformative Literature

In "Goblet words, dwelling words, opalescent words—philosophical methodology of Chuang Tzu," Kuang-Ming Wu describes "Chuang Tzu's' goblet words" as "words requesting us to change, to be judged and transformed, so that we become as nothing, absolutely nimble and flexing with things. A goblet is an empty vessel that tips itself as it accommodates wine, a funnel that lets through anything that comes in." (2) Wu associates the emptiness of the goblet with the emptiness of the philosophical reader's mind, but does the philosophical reader's mind need to be empty? It should be open as a gate in order to connect the impending ideas with already known ones or else they will not stick to the philosophical reader's psyche. Furthermore, Wu exemplifies the use of goblet words in a passage from the works of Henry David Thoreau, another nineteenth-century writer and a leading American transcendentalist:

Quiet parlor of the fishes, pervaded by a softened light as though a window of ground glass, with its bright sanded floor the same as in summer; there a perennial waveless serenity reigns as in the amber twilight sky...

Through this vivid imagery, the philosophical reader's mind is accessed through a psychic opening, similar to the opening in the frozen pond. The philosophical reader bears witness to the beautiful sights of this natural scene and transcends their consciousness. This was

the purpose of American transcendentalism, to develop one's consciousness through the appreciation of and detailed attention to nature.

Literature (and the goblet words within) allowed transcendentalists to share their naturalist ideas without saying it directly. The philosophical reader arrives in the scene without any prejudices or inhibitions to this school of thought. Direct, Aristotelean rhetoric is thrown aside for the vivid imagery and goblet words. Indirect communication grants the writer or philosopher the power to share their ideas without any mental blockages from the philosophical reader. Now, the philosophical reader must play their part—with personal agency and through active participation.

III. Indirect Communication

In Youru Wang's "The Strategies of 'Goblet Words': Indirect Communication in the *Zhuangzi*," the concept of goblet words is fully explained as an umbrella term for modes of discourse. In "Chapter 27, the *Zhuangzi* provides its own characterization of Zhuangzi's three modes of discourse—dwelling words (yuyan), double-layered words (chongyan), goblet words (zhiyan)—which are very useful for our understanding of his strategy of indirect communication." (196) These words overlap and blend together: dwelling words and double-layered words function within goblet words. The philosophical reader can interpret dwelling words as those words that require more time to process and accept, and double-layered words are those words that contain multitudes of meaning. These fall within the context of goblet words. Wang examines the strategic and pragmatic nature of goblet words, indicating the structural depths of indirect communication.

IV. Saussure's Structuralism

Saussure, a Swiss linguist, developed the Structural Linguistics—or Structuralism. Through this literary and philosophical theory, one can begin to understand the world and themselves through the lens of linguistic structures, such as the interconnectedness of signs or ideas. Words (especially goblet) reflect the world. A third order mediates between abstract ideas and concrete reality, but all “orders” are fixed and stable. Goblet words may also act as a sort of mediator, but they are inherently active, not passive. Goblet words do reflect external *and* internal worlds, but both of these places are fluid and ever-changing. Interiority and exteriority both are revolving doors of ideas and these ideas, themselves, change over time. Goblet words may also act as a sort of mediator, but they are inherently active, not passive. The personal agency of the philosophical reader is the key to its activation. Indirect communication gives way to the transformative effects of philosophical texts and literature.

V. Derrida's Deconstruction

Wang also notes the nuance of goblet words: “Indeed, denegation and paradox are good examples of Zhuangzi's goblet words.” and further explains, “The use of denegation and paradox in the Zhuangzi has great appeal as a result of the postmodern attention to the study of various linguistic-philosophical strategies, especially the strategic link between deconstruction and negative theology.” (197) Post-Structuralism was a critical response to Structuralism, noting the flaws in stable ideas and stable exteriority and stable interiority.

Within the era of Post-Structuralism, Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction further destabilized the foundations of Structuralism further. He contends that the philosophical reader must read *against* a text's objective meaning (because there is none) as a grand reveal of its

arbitrariness. Derrida negates objectivity *and* subjectivity through the inventive and conceptual use of *différance*, which is neither a word or concept. The term changes within its context, similar to goblet words. However, goblet words are not always empty, non-essential concepts; the interiority of the philosophical reader fills them up before emptying those thoughts back out again.

The concept of “goblet worlds” and material goblets both have shiny, gold exteriors and interiors themselves. Wang confirms this relationship in that “the notion of ‘goblet words’ suggests that words function like a goblet that tips when full and rights itself when empty.” (197)

VI. *Tian*

Wang further elaborates on the circular nature of goblet words and how the Zhuangzi “understands this as the operation/balancing of nature (*tianni*) and advises us to stay with the axis of *dao* and to respond to endless changes, that is to awaken us from our fixation on limited views or perspectives, allowing us to be nimble and flexible with things.” (198) The success in circuit lies in the slanting of truth through goblet words. If these goblet words are not in conjunction with the exterior world and heaven (*tian*), then the philosophical reader can not sustain them within their interior structures. In the Mengzi, heaven *Tian* is a neutral cycle of change and goblet words must work in accordance with it.

Furthermore, Wang states that “so he used ‘goblet words’ for endless changes, “double-layered words” for authenticity, and “dwelling words” for breadth...Although his words are irregular and paradoxical, they deserve consideration.” (199) Goblet words reflect the exteriority of heaven, so it will stay within internal structures. This indirect strategy of discourse (rather than direct language) allows for the philosophical reader to detach themselves from

limited points of view, since both goblet words and *tian* are harmonizing forces. Through the destabilization of the philosophical reader's interior structures, a better balance and perspective is reached.

VII. Active Communication and Transformation

Even with “the most often used modern Chinese translation of *communicate* or *communication* is *chuanda*, which catches the meaning of conveyance or transmission.” (Wang 200) When one communicates, one transmits or conveys their ideas, but the Zhuangzi defines communication as sharing and participation. Communication is not a passive force. Goblet words even follow the Way (*dao*), but direct and forceful communication negates *dao*. Ordinary language can not access the Way. The Zhuangzi insist on this notion.

Wang further stipulates that “the primary concern of Zhuangzi's discourse or communication is about each individual's existential-spiritual awakening or transformation, that is, how one becomes an authentic person, or a person of *dao*: ‘There must first be an authentic person before there can be any genuine understanding.’ ” (201) Goblet words assist in the transformation of the philosophical reader, but that person must inhabit a place of truthfulness—a place where all sides of the person is expressed and known.

Therefore, the transformation of the philosophical reader occurs when the individual knows themselves, good and bad. I would argue that the point of Zhuangzi's philosophy is the transformation through the goblet words within literature. Literacy and critical thinking skills equate to transformation. The Zhuangzi may claim the action can only be taken by the reader alone. This entails personal agency. Each philosophical reader derives their own meaning from the goblet. The author (the philosopher) and the message (the goblet) are the other two

components of communication. The philosopher— who has created this breadth of meaning, this knowledge, this goblet—empowers the philosophical reader and enables their transformation. Once again, the fluid and ever-changing nature of goblet words mimicks the interiority of the philosophical reader and the external world (this includes *tian*). Since individuals contain multitudes and from those ever-shifting ideas, a friction is created: denegation and paradox. Goblet words breathe nuance. Goblet words function with the same nuance within the philosophical reader's psyche, so the philosophical reader can disappear into the goblet's well of multitudes and viewpoints.

Since Zhuangzi holds the view that language is a means or a tool, and that language is conventional, it follows that all speeches—discursive or figurative—are nothing but borrowing and/or using language to achieve pragmatic goals. In this sense, discursive language is no different from non-discursive language. This view obviously frees Zhuangzi from a hierarchical confinement of discursive/figurative language and helps him to explore an alternative way of using language. (Wang 203)

Language is pragmatic, and therefore, a tool for both the philosopher and philosophical reader, alike. The *Zhuangzi* acts as a deconstructionist, breaking through the binary confinement of discursive/figurative language with goblet words. The communication strategy liberates philosophical readers from these coded languages and releases their minds into an original creativity that the transformed philosophical reader can only achieve. Goblet words return the idiosyncratic nature back to the philosophical reader. The individual is free to wonder in an adaptable environment. Goblet communication may not be a flippant catalyst for transformation, but the words are echoes and reminders for an individual's future self. The past perspective and

present situation of the philosophical reader affects the derived meaning from the goblet words and its provocative discourse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the goblet words within literature have the ability to transform the philosophical reader, disintegrating the interior structures and building them all anew.

Word count: 2471

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