

## THE SPIRIT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE



“John Wulsin’s collection will inspire high school English teachers, new or seasoned, and will charm poetry lovers of any age. Starting with his subtle, engaging introduction to the sounds of poetry, readers will find abundant riches here. Biographical sketches show how poets help to create the culture and consciousness of their particular historical times. A mix of approaches to the poems themselves shows how the ‘spirit of language’ dwells in the ‘lyrical activity’ of various groups of poets—the Rosicrucian and Neo-Platonic ‘metaphysical’ poets, the British Romantics with their supernatural capacities for perceiving nature, and finally the American Romantics with their insistence on newness and singularity. To open Wulsin’s book is to open the door of a lively classroom.”

—GERTRUDE REIF HUGHES, Professor Emerita, Wesleyan University, author of *Emerson’s Demanding Optimism*

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THE SPIRIT OF THE  
*English  
Language*

A PRACTICAL GUIDE  
for Poets, Teachers & Students

*How Sound Works in English & American Poetry*

JOHN H. WULSIN JR.

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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	ix
PART I	
1 <i>A Language Is Born</i>	1
2 <i>Old Anglo-Saxon</i>	6
3 <i>Evolving English and Evolving Adolescents</i>	12
4 <i>The Norman Conquest</i>	20
5 <i>Chaucer's Middle English</i>	26
6 <i>The Language Wakes up, Renewed</i>	37
7 <i>Elizabethan English and Shakespeare</i>	43
8 <i>Expansion and Contraction: Shakespeare and the "King James" Translation of the Bible</i>	65
PART II	
9 <i>Lyric Activity in Metaphysical Poetry: John Donne</i>	81
10 <i>The English Epic: Milton</i>	101
11 <i>The Eighteenth Century and Blake</i>	116
12 <i>Wordsworth</i>	136
13 <i>Coleridge</i>	151
14 <i>Byron</i>	171
15 <i>Shelley</i>	182
16 <i>Keats</i>	198
17 <i>Elizabeth Barrett Browning</i>	215
18 <i>Robert Browning</i>	232
19 <i>Tennyson</i>	244
20 <i>Gerard Manley Hopkins</i>	262
21 <i>Eleventh Grade (Ages 16-17)</i>	278
PART III	
22 <i>Alteration of the Early American Mind</i>	293
23 <i>Poetry in American Prose: The Novel</i>	306
24 <i>Whitman</i>	312
25 <i>Emily Dickinson</i>	327
26 <i>Contemporary American Speech</i>	338
27 <i>Twelfth Grade (Ages 17-18)</i>	356
28 <i>Speech and Drama in High School</i>	362
29 <i>Conclusion</i>	365
WORKS CITED	369

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TO ROSAMOND FOSTER REED WULSIN  
FOR HER GIFT OF THE MOTHER TONGUE



## INTRODUCTION

**M**OST OF US remember the thrill of pretending to write, probably at home while playing school. We pretended that our scribbles and signs meant something, had meaning, and were important. The next stage of our relationship to the mysterious activity of writing is savored in Waldorf, Steiner education in the first grades, as children experience revelations through attention to each letter of the alphabet, to its shape, its story, its character and its flavor. It may be that mountains become an M, a fish becomes F, a king K, a bear B, as a story engenders large gestures in a drawing that later distills into the actual shapes of letters. Children experience consonants as distillations of the outer world, while the teacher helps them experience the vowels as reflections not of the outer world, but as mirrors of moods, or attitudes of soul. Thus, a story that evokes protectiveness may lead to the letter O. A story of openhearted wonder may foster the “ah” sound of the letter A, as boys and girls open their arms wide in awe at the rising Sun. For children at this stage, the whole alphabet resonates with multidimensional connotations that echo forms of the outer world and feelings of the inner world.

However, as we learn to read more fluently, we also begin to read through the signs, or letters, to the content suggested by the letter group, or words. Increasingly, we read through the words on the page to the meaning, and we hear through the sounds in our ears to the meaning. The more we become conscious of the content of stories, the more we become unconscious of the language itself, the medium in which the stories live. Although literature expands our awareness of the human condition, we can dreamily lose ourselves in literature, the stories of others. By contrast, certain self-awareness is quickened through attention to

language itself. We awake by pulling back some of our focus on the message and by looking to the language of the story.

Thoreau remarked that, to know something in nature—a woodchuck, for example—one must look out of the side of one’s eye. This book is an attempt to understand the spirit of the English language. We will look at stages in the story of English and American poetry, from the ninth century’s Old Anglo-Saxon in *Beowulf* through the nineteenth century’s “primal/modern” language of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Along the way, we will take a slanted glance at, or a slanted listen to, language itself, as the evolving nature of the language suggests the evolving consciousness of the English-speaking peoples.

As a longtime teacher of teenagers, I have included reflections on the relationship between the evolving stages of the English language and the developmental stages of adolescents. How might our understanding of evolving English become a key to helping adolescents in their development? Or, how can the spirit of the English language best help adolescents in their development? My focus, based largely on my experience as a Waldorf teacher, is from the context of a Waldorf curriculum. Waldorf education, initiated in 1919 by the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner in Stuttgart, Germany, is an independent form of education devoted to teaching children in ways consistent with their stage of development. There are currently more than a thousand Waldorf schools worldwide. These reflections on adolescents should be of value to any teacher of adolescents. The reflections on the language of adolescents should be of interest to the general reader, as well, since in certain ways adolescents are most sensitive to new activities of language and, hence, to new activities of the spirit of the language.

## THE STORY BEHIND THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

As an experienced teacher of poetics to adults in a four-year training in the art of movement called eurythmy (in which the artists strive to embody objectively the sounds of speech and music

through gesture), I have lived with this question: How can we tell the story of the work of the spirit of the English language? At its best, education strives to serve the mysterious evolution of each student's individuality, ideally in ways appropriate to each stage of development. Each class and each school has a particular character. Each ethnic group has a particular character. The same is true of each language. Linguists pay attention to the structure and behavior of the body of the language. Through attention to the sounds of the language, we can become more aware of the activity of the individuality, of the evolving "spirit," of the English language.

The impetus of this book is an exploration to better understand the activity of the spirit of the English language. Other books have laid the groundwork, including McNeill and Lehrer's *Story of the English Language*, which articulates part of the gesture, helping us understand in lay terms the major developments of accents, phrasing, patterns, and meanings have in evolving English language. Linguists have noticed, with brilliant accuracy, certain changes in sounds and syntax over time, generally not presuming to articulate implications of such changes. Owen Barfield's *History in English Words* explores the evolving English language through the way words change meanings over centuries and reflect changing consciousness in the peoples using them. Faulkner-Jones' *The English Spirit* comes closest to being a trailblazer for the present book, which tracks the activity of the spirit of the language through the activity of the sounds in poetry, in and through sequential stages of the evolving language. How can we, in our rational, skeptical age, even imagine gleaning the work of the spirit of a language?

The ancient Greeks spoke of muses, the guiding spirits of the various arts, especially the literary arts. The epic poets start, "Sing in me, O Muse." Behind Delphi's temple stands Mt. Parnassus, where Apollo presided over the nine muses, including Calliope, muse of epic poetry; Erato, muse of love poetry; Euterpe, muse of lyric poetry; Melpomene, muse of tragedy; and Thalia, muse of comedy. The human writer experienced being a vessel through which the gods, spiritual beings, could find expression.

In a parallel stream, Dionysius the Areopagite, the Greek early Christian, elaborated ancient Hebrew traditions by articulating nine spiritual hierarchies with differentiated tasks: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, kyriotetes, dynamis, exusiai, archai, archangels, and angels. Contemporary esoteric streams of various traditions continue to recognize the validity in such characterizations. Rudolf Steiner (1865–1925), scientist, philosopher, educator, and scientist of the spirit, discerned that, whereas an angel attends to an individual, archangels work in groups of people, especially in the activity of human language.

Most people today do not speak (and hence do not think) in such terms; we nevertheless use the term “spirit of the times,” or “the spirit of the age.” There is also the term “folk spirit,” or spirit of a people. Imagine, as the ancient peoples experienced clearly, that a spiritual being presides over, orchestrates, and informs the various activities, the shifting and evolving, of a language. For the purpose of this book, we will imagine a spirit of the English language, at least as a way to focus on ways that the evolving language works.

The German, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, French, Spanish, Italian, English, and English-speaking “American” peoples all have distinct characteristics. Their languages, even when related to one another, nevertheless have distinct characteristics. Even though the Teutonic languages tend to be more rooted in sensory experience, the German language has become more capable of philosophical conception than the Scandinavian languages. Moreover, although the “Romance” languages, with their Greco-Roman base, may naturally support more abstract explorations than do the Teutonic languages, French is notably more intellectual and Italian more sentient. It is fascinating to discern differences in the ways more than twenty nations use Spanish as their common language in Latin America. Argentinean Spanish is more lilting, rising at the end of a line, whereas Mexican Spanish almost sings in a more regular, steady, rhythmic cadence. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean languages share some origins, yet they have evolved quite distinctly.

Consider the evolution of language as Europeans began to colonize different parts of the world. How have English, French, and Portuguese altered in various African countries, while serving as the “common” languages for many different local languages? How is the French spoken in Niger of the Sahel desert distinct from that spoken in coastal, central Cameroon? How does the Portuguese of Angola differ from that of Brazil? How does the spirit of the English language work differently, with different folk, in different lands, in Australia, South Africa, Canada, the United States, and in different parts of the United States? This book will focus specifically on the activity of the spirit of the English language in England and in the early United States of America.

As language evolves over time and in relation to place, consciousness evolves; as consciousness evolves, language evolves. In the effort to recognize the implications of evolving language in relation to evolving consciousness, I will at times use several ensuing terms coined by Rudolf Steiner.

The first is “sentient soul” consciousness. This can be characterized by the traditional stage in early adulthood when a young person leaves home and village to go off and know the world, perhaps as a soldier or sailor. This stage is symbolized by the warrior, the lover, passion, impulsiveness, and living strongly in one’s feelings and in the elements, the winds, the sun, the storms. Think of the Vikings as a culture that embodied this stage; they followed the winds and their swords in almost all directions, to explore, pillage, and settle. While this characteristic role has not been so true for women until recently, moving as a young spouse to a new family, often a new locale, and quickly being immersed in the primal experiences of motherhood perhaps has parallels to the wandering warrior in the world. We can characterize such a relationship to life and the world as sentient soul consciousness. One lives vigorously in the senses, strongly experiencing one’s likes and dislikes. One finds one’s way in the world through wishes, desires, and will. When one’s youthful forces are most developed and when the adult consciousness is just emerging, one lives in sentient soul consciousness.

Rational soul consciousness is the second stage. In the late twenties and early thirties, one's youthful forces start to recede. No longer do we ride the teeming tides of life, acting, reacting, responding, loving, and hating. Whereas we formerly relied on vitality, to some degree we are forced to become more conscious, to consider, take a step back and reflect, discern laws and principles, and make sense of the seeming chaos of life. Greater responsibilities weigh upon our shoulders. Examples of the rational soul include pre-Socratic Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus, Thales, Plato, and Aristotle, as well as the vast perspective of Homer's epics. Other examples are Roman law and the rational order of Roman armies as they built roads through wilderness, extending their web of organized culture. Consider the medieval Christian philosophers Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and Duns Scotus, and efforts by the Nominalists and the Realists to rationally articulate the nature of reality. The pursuit of the rational soul in "right thinking" could also lead martyrs to die for their beliefs. By contrast, the shadow side of identifying with one's thinking could lead to being willing to kill another for "wrong thinking," as in the Inquisition. All of these examples of the actively reasoning consciousness can be referred to as the rational soul.

The rational soul is less motivated by what one likes or dislikes, and more motivated by ascertaining what is good or evil, right or wrong, true or false, just or unjust, and essential or non-essential. During the late twenties and early thirties, a person becomes more involved in abstracting the underlying principles from the teeming life surrounding the laws that apply on various levels of life. We exercise reason and practice judgment and discernment in the rational soul stage of consciousness.

It is more difficult to describe the third stage, the spiritual soul, experienced in the next stage of life, the late thirties and early forties. Often following or including a mid-life crisis, this stage involves inwardly stepping back further from life. One may separate from family, change work, or move to a new location. Whether primarily outer or inner, one often discovers a new quality of detachment, enabling one to see things more in their own

right. For example, in a person's evolution as a teacher, one may go through a primary stage in which the main challenge is to make things happen and vitalize one's students. This is the sentient soul stage. The focus shifts and one becomes preoccupied with mastering the subject. Finally, as master of the classroom dynamic and the material, the teacher becomes newly free to focus more wakefully on what is happening with each student and the essence of the educational task. The ability to see the other's individuality objectively goes hand-in-hand with one's ability to see the natural world as it is, independent of one's feelings or preconceptions. This is the spiritual soul stage. Faulkner-Jones, in *The English Spirit*, has written that "the spiritual soul springs from union of sense observation and creative imagination" (23).

The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century artists Dante, Giotto, and Chaucer mark the threshold of a newly emerging consciousness. Dante the poet tells the story of Dante the pilgrim in the folk language of his Tuscany. His autobiographical, individual focus is new, as is the elevation of folk language. Giotto's capacity to render perspective in painting is new. Chaucer's threefold blend of Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and French words is new; rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter is new in English, as is his attention to physical particularities reflecting soul traits. The historical periods of the Renaissance and the Reformation saw the birth of artistic perspective; understanding of the heliocentric universe; Shakespeare's plays and poems; geographic exploration of the New World; and the birth of natural science based on weight, measure, number, all of which show great shifts in Western culture. In general, this new consciousness suggests increasing ability to objectify reality by separating from one's likes and dislikes, judgments, and even beliefs. Considering the long scope historically of the development of the rational soul faculties, c.800 B.C.E. to c.1400 C.E., humanity is still in the early stages of unfolding the many dimensions of this spiritual soul or consciousness soul.

## TO READ WITH AN EAR

My intention with this book is essentially to offer focused attention to the ear; it is thereby an effort to glean the work of the spirit of the language. Biographical sketches for students, practitioners, and teachers of poetry accompany perspectives on the evolution of consciousness through the examples of poetry. Even with all my brilliant schoolteachers and world-renowned professors, I was not aware of much emphasis on the ear and the ways that sounds work. In my experience of poetry and in my teaching of poetry, I have struggled to become more conscious of the experience of the ear, outer and inner. I have become increasingly convinced that such close reading for sound-awakened listening is a crucial antidote in this era of constant, numbing cacophony.

The contemporary poet Carolyn Forché once told high school students at the Green Meadow Waldorf School that, in the poetry classes at her university, she could detect which students had watched television the night before. The rhythms in their writing were neither those of the experience they were trying to evoke nor those of their individual voice. The absolutely recognizable rhythms dominating the young writers' work were those conceived and produced by mass-media moguls in Manhattan and Hollywood, imprinting the minds of millions, stereotypically, like so many fast-food plastic cartons. Carolyn Forché was able to work only with those who could listen freshly and, hence, possibly uniquely.

George Orwell warned about the dangers of state powers controlling consciousness by contracting people's vocabulary. How comparable, and perhaps even more deeply insidious, are the dangers when corporations dictate and contract the rhythms through which we experience life as we subject ourselves to excessive media influence. These rhythms affect how we breathe, how our hearts beat, and how we can feel. Modern women have declared, "Take back the night." Modern ecologists, echoing the Romantic poets, have declared, "Take back the wilderness." Let us declare, "Take back the silence for the sake of the word, so we can listen."

I offer an introductory listen rather than a “look” into exemplary, symptomatic pieces of poets’ works, hoping to glean and hear from the poets who are able to work with language, the spirit of the language, as it evolves. None of these readings presumes to be an exclusive way to read or hear a poem.

I approach these “close listenings” 1) as an exercise to heighten my awareness; 2) as, I hope, a catalyst to help others read poetry with a more attentive ear; 3) as, especially, a catalyst for teachers of young people, since becoming more conscious of the musical work of each syllable can be crucial to self-development and to listening to the music of others’ language; and, 4) ultimately perhaps, as ways to sit at the feet of the spirit of the English language, in intimate tutelage, allowing it to better inform and eventually inspire us.

## BIOGRAPHIES

The biographical sketches have been gathered and composed with a two questions in mind: 1) What is the relationship between the emerging individuality and the development of the poet? Hence, each biographical sketch begins with a glimpse of the person’s life around the age of twenty-one, the time traditionally when one’s individuality begins to take responsibility in life. 2) How might the poet’s life reflect and contribute to the activity of the spirit of the English language?

It is possible to read this book like a telescope, with an interest in the large picture of the activities of the spirit of the English language. It is also possible to read this book with a microscope, intently focusing on the way particular sounds work in each line of poetry. One can also find interest in the activity of the spirit of the language in the lives of the poets, in gleaning a generally evolving story of English poetry, and in reacquainting oneself with a taste of the poetry. I hope that, over time, readers will come to read this book in all these ways, engendering macro-, mid-, and micro-listening.

### ON THE SONNET

If by dull rhymes our English must be chained,  
And like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet  
Fettered, in spite of pained loveliness,  
Let us find out, if we must be constrained,  
Sandals more interwoven and complete  
To fit the naked foot of Poesy:  
Let us inspect the Lyre, and weigh the stress  
Of every chord, and see what may be gained  
By ear industrious, and attention meet;  
Misers of sound and syllable, no less  
Than Midas of his coinage, let us be  
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;  
So, if we may not let the Muse be free,  
She will be bound with garlands of her own.

KEATS, April 1819