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Independent scholar

Mags Webster

***Writing through ... from ... to ... underneath ... over ... in between ...
negotiating the force field of the unworded in the braided thesis mode***

Abstract:

Words aloud the page, aloud the dab and dash of a pen, the swish of wrist, the nib is avatar, the ink is silent virus, moldwarp burrowing along, just beneath the surface, there I am, trying to slip between the nib and that which would be scratched out from my fingers, hand and arm. Trying to eke the groove of thought, its carve through language skin. Creative and critical writing hold in tension between them a force field that is essentially implicit and unworded. It is here that my practice-based and theoretical research, concerned with how a contemporary poetic practice might thematically and artistically engage with the unsaid and the unsayable, seeks to play. My focus is on apophasis, the rhetoric of denial and negation, which since classical times has been a means of using language to deal with what lies beyond language. Taking a braided form, this paper reflects on the process and experience of producing a blended thesis in order to explore, through an apophatic lens, the implications of collapsing the distance between creative and critical modes to write into and out of the force field of unwordedness.

Biographical note:

Mags Webster is an independent researcher based in Western Australia. Webster's most recent poetry collection *Nothing to Declare* was shortlisted in the 2021 Prime Minister's Literary Awards. Her first, *The Weather of Tongues* won the 2011 Anne Elder Award for best debut collection. Webster completed a PhD in Creative Writing from Murdoch University in 2020, and an MFA in Creative Writing from the City University of Hong Kong in 2014. Her poems, reviews, academic papers and personal essays have appeared in anthologies and journals in the UK, Australia, Asia and America.

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Poetry, braided thesis, apophasis, creative practice

Introduction

Poetry asks, What can be said?
– Kevin Brophy (2003, p. 157)

White space, pauses between words, where imagination breathes, life-power tunes its tympani. White makes sense of sound, where I break off and you appear. You step into white, demand the room to move, and I step back. You forward, I step back. White space, black marks. White says silence, black says sound, together we are played, we're emptied, filled, become the copula that's never been. Then I step back and you step forward, then you step back and I step in. Black vibrates the white. Staves and fences, sheets and snow.

As a poet, I habitually make use of myriad modes of writing, reading, questioning and thinking opened up by poetic and critical approaches. I have challenged myself to explore ideas in unusual ways, and in unusual combinations or arrangements of language. By the time I embarked on my doctoral research in 2015, I had become intrigued by poetry's pursuit of and capacity for articulating "the unsayable". I increasingly suspected that imperfection, brokenness and incompleteness were often the undernarratives, the engines, of the most powerful of poems, beliefs and ideas, and that this power depended on an engagement with language precisely when language seemed most acute, most challenging and most risky. I wanted to explore – creatively and intellectually – what it meant to tip into space, void, erasure, to acknowledge and revel in the fact that with language and expression, boundaries are never fixed: the margins between what is declared and what parries declaration are blurred and constantly in flux. I wanted to investigate how other people – poets, philosophers, and theologians – had grappled with this slipperiness of language, and addressed the challenge of using words to deal with what lies beyond words. To do this, I used a practice-led method to research apophysis, a centuries-old philosophical and rhetorical approach using negation and "saying away", developed as a means of writing and speaking about phenomena beyond knowledge and articulation, and how – for a poet – it might help mediate the intimate relationship between language and the ineffable.

According to scholar Nigel Krauth (2011; 2018), the composition and presentation of a creative writing-based thesis can be "conventional, open and radical" (2018, p. 2). The "conventional" model indicates that creative work and thesis be kept separate, the "open" implies that alternatives to the conventional approach are tolerated; and the so-called "radical" invites exegesis (or dissertation) and creative work to be integrated. The success, in creative, theoretical and epistemic terms, with which this integration is effected is part of what guides the examiner's assessment. Applying a creative-critical mode, this paper reflects on the rationale, process and experience of producing a thesis [1] that adopted Krauth's third "radical" position:

The integrated creative writing submission is descriptively styled a *woven, plaited, blended, merged, mixed, collaged, cut-up, fragmented, composite or combined* submission. (I could add *montaged, medley-ed, mosaiced, pastiched, disruptive, disconnected, nonlinear, fictocritical* ... and still be talking about it.) This type of

submission weaves exegesis and creative work together by a systematic means, in a manner similar to the plaiting of strands, the splicing of strips, or the laying of mosaic pieces. (Krauth, 2018, p. 5; emphases in original)

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“A strange speech and a hard language”

Poetry’s what’s left between the lines –

a strange speech and a hard language,

It’s all in the unwritten, it’s all in the unsaid ...

And that’s a comfort, I think,

for our lack and inarticulation.

– Charles Wright (2001, p. 94)

I am following *via negativa* into poetic language and thought. Here, I must see by not-seeing, know by not-knowing; here, my capacity to remain in “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Keats, 2005, p. 60) will be tested.

But herein also lies a paradox, as I perceive it. As a practice-based researcher within an academic framework, how do I reconcile my creative process (where, most often, uncertainty is the only certainty), with the “reaching after fact & reason” implicit in the rigorous textual and theoretical analysis required to inform and accompany my creative task? On the one hand, I must embrace Negative Capability; yet on the other, it seems I must also reject it. And there is another paradox implicit in this task, which Octavio Paz articulates: “without ceasing to be language – sense and transmission of sense – the poem is something that is beyond language. But that thing that is beyond language can only be reached through language” (1987, p. 12).

Poet Charles Wright suggests poetry is special precisely because it *can* communicate and express “what’s *left between* the lines” (p. 94; emphasis added), as well as what the lines themselves gesture towards. In offering an aesthetic and textual challenge to “lack and inarticulation” (p. 94), poetry, as a performative medium – “concerning language as an action or event, rather than simply as a structure of meanings” (Eagleton, 2007, p. 167) – also enables the poet to expose the rack and shift of language as it butts up against that inarticulation. I can make my fluency (or lack of it) part of the pace of the poem, of how it performs on the page: how it looks and how it sounds. And yet, as Gaylene Perry notes: “Writing is a verbal mode ... but it’s also non-verbal. It can be seen as visual, performative, aural and tactile, and perhaps other – perhaps modes that have not yet been named” (2008, p. 8).

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Outside the saying of it

not mine not mine this body finite
 flat-lined clings to tilt of slip
 to tilt of slip & shift &
 time belongs where longing is
 invisible drift horizon-twined
 no sound no skin this body finds
 the here unknown unreadable unlined
 the not-beyond belongs near-far
 the air more rarefied all-where is undefined
 not every-there is mapped aligned
 this no-body is rift & rim is primed
 between horizon-lines where rim is lip & brims
 with the un word able
 is limbic is alembic still it brims
 but does not spill distils the distant makes
 the now here mine dispels the instant to the outer
 edge of time unseen unheard unsaid
 the nowhere of unending borderline perimeter
 of shift & sign this body shivers limns its longing
 overlaps its lines *not mine not mine*
 this body/mind so limitless so finite

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Apophesis and the speaking of what is not

*No is a thousand yesses
 in the code of emptiness.
 – Rumi (2004, p. 302)*

Apophasis (ἀπόφασις) is a classical Greek word with a complex, and, from its earliest appearance in texts around five hundred years BCE [2], constantly evolving meaning. It has been used by philosophers, mystics, poets and theologians in both East and West since before Platonic times to “speak of” concepts or phenomena that have customarily either resisted language or been perceived to transcend knowledge of subjects, such as the nature of God,

death, being or existence. As originally used by Plato (circa 429–347 BCE) and refined by his student Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the word apophasis “simply meant ‘negation’ ... used ... to mean a negative proposition, a denial” (Franke, 2007a, p. 1). Michael A. Sells interprets apophasis as “un-saying or speaking-away” (1994, p. 2). Although the etymology of apophasis is unequivocally linked to the words for saying, *phanai* and *phemi*, it has most often been practised in written form.

Speaking/writing “away” from a subject does not necessarily enact the opposite of speaking “about” it. Apophasis “can imply something that is in fact present despite the absence or inadequacy of a name for it ... or present *as* an absence” (Gibbons, 2007, p. 19; emphasis in original). Apophasis draws attention to what *might* be said, if only there were words to say it. With language, we are constantly toggling between what we can say or know, and what we cannot, often using negation – “I cannot tell you what it is, but I can tell you what it’s *not*” – as the linguistic bridge between. In its simplest form, apophasis ensures that everything outside and in excess of “is not” is still in play. It is predicated, grammatically speaking, on the propositional – “it is not the case that” – rather than the conditional: “*if* it is not the case that, then this” negation. Importantly, despite the seeming definitiveness implied by propositional negation, apophasis can only perform and offer a conclusiveness that, even when taken to its logical limits, remains ultimately inconclusive and open. Thus, while it might appear to set up a dialogic, dualistic structure between presence and absence, “is” and “is not”, apophasis in fact generates a third space, that of the unsaid, which calls up a dynamic “forever”, in which the known interrogates the unknown in conversations that are never closed.

And apophasis has other ways of being expressed that resonate with contemporary sensibilities, for it occurs not only in language but also in concept. Apophasis would seem to help us capture, or at least signal, moments where meanings, emotions and mysteries evade articulation. In literature, these moments are better served by a slippage or fracture of language; in visual art by what might appear as emptiness; and in music by silence. Any artwork of any genre that renders – literally or implicitly – silence, absence, blankness, space or light or dark as a component or theme provokes interpretations that are apophatic in nature. Whenever we are invited, or feel compelled by reading a poem or by listening to a piece of music, to slip through the spaces or silences to focus on the un-wordedness that lies beyond, we are responding to a resonance that is profoundly apophatic. Indeed, William Franke notes, the unsayable conditions the very impulse of human utterance:

What we most strongly and deeply think and believe, what we passionately love or ardently desire, inevitably escapes adequate articulation. It is always more, if not completely other, than what we are able to say ... Nevertheless, at the same time, this very deficiency of speech ... forms the starting point for rich articulate discourses ... about what cannot be said. (2014a, p. 23)

In being a signal or an indicator of ineffability, apophasis is playing its part in revealing rather than describing. In all modes of writing, the apophatic grammatical constructions are available for use: conditional or interrogative, propositional or hortative. Poetry, however, demands

more, from the poet and from language. Poetic language must signal and somehow give voice to what it cannot describe except through the lyric of itself: the linguistic unreachability of the writer's subject and/or everything that cannot be said about it. Somehow, a poem must become the lyrical assertion of language's undoing.

As my thesis aimed to show, apophasis also enables the poet to ask more of both poetry's elasticity of form and torsion of language, as well as its formal constraints: to curve, unsettle and realign the tensions and pliancy of poetic language and structure "in order to let what is *other* to language break out or break free" (Franke, 2007b, p. 41; emphasis added). For the "other" to language, haunting and modulating everything that language can do or say, is everything language cannot say. Like apophasis, poetry is "something that is language and at the same time something that denies language and goes beyond it" (Paz, 1990, p. 8). Apophasis does not make poetry about ineffability easier to write; but I found it could help to broaden, deepen and extend the poetic and lyrical scope available to the poet.

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What sort of poet does apophasis make of me? A poet of pause? Poet of hesitation? Poet of loss? Of distance? Is apophasis an enactment of language meeting the limits of knowing? Given that poetry customarily touches on uncertainties and ambiguities, why should I, as a poet, need apophasis?

Will apophasis enable me to *increase* what cannot be said? Will it create a space, a deliberate moment when what poetry is not saying and how it is not saying it adds up to what is being said beyond the words? Poet Alice Notley says "I think words are among us and everywhere else, mingling, fusing with, backing off from us and everything else" (2010, n.p.). I tease myself into starting, to pretend, up until the last minute, and beyond the last minute, that something else is happening, which is nothing to do with writing or making sense or beauty or even words – these are not words, these black curves and angles appearing on the page – these are not words, don't lose your nerve, keep going, this isn't really *you* writing, these are just disembodied fingers typing, it's the pen, it's the pen that's writing, that's scratching a living across the page, it's not you, not you. I keep this up until I am dispossessed. I am nobody. Then I start to relax. It is such a relief to cede responsibility.

I am layering my voice into time. Words making out-words and on-words; I am lowering voice into lines, the voice underneath is not what I said, is not what I thought. Nor is thought what I thought. My writing stays silent, writes itself off, but I'll break into silence in order to speak, to say beyond saying, write beyond writing. Words outwith words, before tongue, before naming. Take me to place-from-beyond-all-words-come...

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The grapple and plait: weaving the thesis

When it came to thinking about how I would compose my thesis, I arrived at a choice which, at the time, I did not realise might be termed “radical” (Krauth, 2018) [3]. This option did not feel radical to me. In fact, it was not so much that *I* chose, more that the creativecritical mode chose me, and I was inspired by the hybrid theses of other creative arts scholars, people who continue to do important work inside and outside the academic setting [4]. Their example strengthened my conviction that the creative arts can bring unique perspectives to scholarly research, as well as push the boundaries of what a doctorate might be. I aspired to position my work – aesthetically, intellectually and emotionally – with theirs. Without being explicitly aware of the political underpinnings of the braided form, which invites techniques of disruption and lyricism capable of holding more than one perspective or story, I was nonetheless reaching for “narrative and poetic structures that resist linear development, that resist offering neatly packaged, watertight answers to complex, relational questions” (Howe, 2019). I neither wanted, nor was able, to format my curiosity, research or poetry into a conventionally linear narrative system, nor felt that my hybrid, creatively-based thesis, if judged worthy, deserved any less status in the scholarly sphere than a so-called non-creative, conventional model.

Moreover, creative content emerged concurrently with the critical enquiry during my research journey. I was unable to separate my thinking and responses into critical and creative threads, and, in any case, I realised that to have done so would not have served the project’s topic or research aims. If my process and thinking could shift between critical and creative modes, why not my thesis? This would reflect a research method whose creative component – a selection of original lineated and prose poems, lyric prose passages and poetic asides – was not supplementary to but deeply interwoven with the critical enquiry, which itself pivoted on the slipperiness of language.

The braided approach seemed the most natural, logical and productive way of representing my deepening acquaintance with and progressive immersion in the complexities of my research topic, and the critical and creative body of work that emerged from that endeavour. And as philosophers from Plato to Derrida have argued, we experience language, poetry and ineffability as fluid, contingent, ambiguous, resistant to reification, generative in terms of meaning, emotion and interpretation. That is why they are at once so alluring and yet so difficult to grapple with conceptually, critically and creatively. The performative quality of both apophasis and poetry – their capacity to expose and enact poetic making as well as poetic meaning – was fundamental to my thesis’s key aim: to contribute to practice and scholarship by exploring how apophasis may inform a contemporary poetics that seeks to grapple with the unsayable. So, because I was approaching the task as both a reader and critic of apophasis *and* as a writer and poet harnessing apophasis as concept and practice, the creativecritical approach gave me the scope to demonstrate more than one perspective on the value of apophasis in poetic engagement with the unsayable. I was directing my research towards an artistic, poetic end: a natural way of showing my “results”: the core outcomes of the research, the critical writing and

analysis, being unable to offer an artistic and aesthetic demonstration of poetic apophysis (and thus carry out the aims of the thesis in full).

The terms “practice-based” and “practice-led”, and the status of creative practice or creative writing as an academic discipline, especially in the UK, United States and Australia, have been widely debated [5] and I do not propose to discuss them further in this paper, except to note the following description of the practice-led method as “not research into, or about, creative practice, but research *through* creative practice” (Green, 2006a, p. 5; emphasis in original) resonated strongly with me. The method implied is pliable, responsive; it works with and through that flexibility, whereby the practice may dictate a change of emphasis or direction as uncertainty evolves into discovery. Observing and reflecting on the dynamics of this change of emphasis – *how* this malleability of form interacts with, affects and informs process – is constitutive of new knowledge, though the significance of its impact may only become apparent as the process itself evolves. As scholar Andrew Cowan notes: “this knowledge will only become evident after the work has left us. The problem, always, is how to live with the uncertainty this engenders, and how to resist reaching after the formulations and consolations of other discourses” (2011, pp. 10–11).

Also relevant to me was scholar and fiction writer Tess Brady’s description of the bowerbird approach enabling the creative researcher “to write on a range of issues and yet ... not [be] an authority in any of them” (2000, p. 2). My research led me into the disciplines of philosophy and theology, rhetoric and linguistics, aesthetics, Eastern and Western spiritual practices, and mysticism. In searching for the apophatic, I visited art galleries and attended music and performance events. The substance of both the critical and poetic writing arose from the same sources: from questions, possibilities and ideas thrown up by literary, philosophical, theological and scholarly texts, and by the work of various artists and musicians whose artistic aims and influence resonated with my own project.

Accordingly, my thesis evolved as a single work reflecting “a complex, back-and-forth interaction between the practice and its conceptual framework or articulation” (McNamara, 2012, p. 8). The overall conceptual framework was the poetic enquiry into apophysis; my interweaving of the poetic and critical explorations carried out during the process served to animate the literary and conceptual possibilities of apophysis. In every chapter, the creative content – lineated and prose poems, and passages of reflective, lyric prose – appeared at intervals between, and was occasionally interwoven with, the critical writing, illuminating and embodying the aims of the research.

Taking a creativecritical approach enabled me to illustrate and illuminate the research in terms of its method and process as well as focus and aim. The concepts and the material I worked with – language, poetry, ineffability and apophysis – presented a particular challenge as subjects for reflection. Putting these elements together as a braided thesis, and the modal shifts I deployed in doing so were intended to demonstrate the research process and outcomes from a performative as well as a scholarly perspective. The thesis reflected not only on the situated phenomenon of apophysis but also on its *enactment* in experimenting with its conceptual and

artistic significance for contemporary poetic practice. I explored how form and lineation, subject matter, vocabulary and figurative language could be supported or informed by apophysis in poems directed towards the acknowledgement of the moments familiar to many of us when we sense or/and experience a breakdown of language. The interplay between lucidity and ambiguity as characterised by different modes of writing reinforced language's propensity for fracture *and* flexibility when verging on the ineffable.

The known, partnered with the unknown. Limits, partnered with infinity. Yet I was not trying to argue for binaries; rather, I was trying, in my writing, to inhabit the interstices, to make use of the flux and slip of language as it borders the ineffable. I view apophysis as a means, not of overcoming the unsayable, but of engaging with it. I am not looking for perfection; I want to explore the flaw, the glitch, the catch of breath, and work out ways of expressing them on the page. In trying to surmount the difficulty of finding words for the inexpressible, I can either choose to fall silent, or find ever more inventive and oblique strategies to land on a description or image.

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In that space between waking and sleeping this is what I become: both and neither. Hypnagogic, I am conscious of a longing: a pull towards writing, a tension between, from, through words. The longing is inarticulate, it cannot speak, it needs me to be its voice. It needs me to collude on a creative language: one to be made of my words and its signature.

Writing is spade-work, job never done, clichés springing up like weeds. Days where English is untranslatable into poetry, and language and I are immiscible. It feels like there's resistance, not only from me fumbling for words, but also the words themselves rejecting me.

I think of the artist J.M.W. Turner, allegedly tied to a ship's mast during a storm, so that later, at the easel, he might know how to approach its particular fury of colour. Odysseus, tied to the mast so that he could survive the song of the Sirens, because he *had to know* what they sounded like. Me, tied to the mast of my longing, convinced I will be allowed to see into the heart of the storm, or that the Sirens will sing up the numinous just for me.

This creative language demands I ignore lines, syntax, punctuation; ignore the taunt of perfection (especially that), diction, just blurt out, be bold, be untidy, inarticulate, messy, wordy, prolix, whatever, break the sound barrier from not-word to word. Not-thought to thought. Marry them together. It also demands I be attentive to lines, syntax, punctuation: that I give consideration to structure, metre and form. Will it be spondee, iamb, dactyl? Alexandrine or zuhitsu?

Lastly, I surrender to the understanding that, whatever the poem means (or just as important, doesn't mean), meaning will be the element of the writing over which I have least control. I

must be technician, psychic, adventurer, composer, lackey, stenographer, organ-donor, dreamer, engineer, critic, surgeon, mimic, psychologist, child, raconteur, pedant, alchemist. And eventually, perhaps, poet.

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Harbouring known and unknown

For my thesis, a lyric prose passage (such as the one immediately above) enabled me to privilege creative over critical response, to show how I anticipated or recapped – as if (almost) thinking aloud – the processes of questioning, or reflecting on, ineffability that I undertook in the process of research. In some cases, the prose passages could also foreshadow how my perceptions might move from the sentences and paragraphs of prose towards poetry. For example, I might concern myself with how my ideas were shaped by technical considerations for my poetic work: “spondee, iamb, dactyl? Alexandrine or zuhitsu?” I might isolate a sentence scrap or a word sound as the initial graft for a poem.

If I could not leap straight to poetry, the syntactical structure and sequence of sentence-based prose gave licence to ponder how to engage with “the metaphysics of the quotidian” (Wright, 1988, p. 97): day-to-day occurrences that hovered in the substrate of my attention. How to describe a blackbird’s song? What does freshly mown grass *actually* smell like? Usually mundane, often insignificant, these are the phenomena that familiarity often renders perplexingly difficult to describe. Like the artist Turner, who needed to go into the depths of a sea squall in order to bring it onto canvas, I had to place myself at the centre of a moment, a memory or an experience.

But in life, as in art, there are occasions when prose feels too even, too unexcitable: when I am stricken by emotion for or in response to another; when almost undone by the rawness of grief or love; when seized by ideas and impulses for which, ultimately, there may perhaps be no so-called right words. And yet prose necessarily walks me to a threshold where only poetry can then tip me over into the fierceness of an imaginative encounter with these feelings. In other words, prose’s more sedate register and pace [6] allows me to prepare a ground that poetry will detonate. With prose, I prod and palpate the surface of deep or disturbing emotions, which I may be able to intuit but struggle to express. With prose, I mark the site; with poetry I make the incision, draw blood and excise.

The enfolding of these different modes of writing into the thesis had temporal, spatial, rhythmical, kinetic, visual, material and musical effects, all of which helped animate language as a complex practice harbouring known and unknown, said and unsaid, presence through absence and perceptibility through imperceptibility. While the structure moved between the poetic and the prosaic, enacting changes in pace as well as material, I wanted some “moments” (I think of these phenomena in largely temporal terms) somehow to represent the effect of that

tremor between known and not-yet-known and to invoke a sensation of recognition in the reader. The moments could be poetic in nature and form, or lyric prose that informed a subsequent exploration in poetry ... or into the unmapped whiteness of the page. So, as well as presenting modes of writing that engaged with and questioned the ineffable, I structured my thesis in such a way to suggest and to dramatise language's inscription at the point of its potential breakdown, and the writer's attempt to deal with a sometimes sudden, or at other times gradual, pitch from articulation towards inarticulateness. Some of the strands in the thesis appeared more neatly "woven," others could be read as loosened, unfinished or in disarray. There could be holes in the selvage. The juxtaposition and patterning of different modes of writing mimicked the versatility of language, and the shifting interstices between language and the unsayable. These shifts performed patterns recognisable from speech; or patterns exposing layers only writing could elucidate. Sometimes, a smooth segue from expository to poetic writing occurred, as if theory's explanation could only inch forward before poetry crystallised what pages of prose could not. Sometimes the abruptness of the juxtaposition between poetry and prose enacted flail (and fail) of words at the most critical point. As we know from speech, the slips between saying and unsaying may be eloquent, but not necessarily elegant. Sometimes the poetic voices in my creative work appeared to interrogate conventions of language. Diction could be lucid or disjunctive, spare or elaborate. Poetic personae might explicitly execute apophasis through refusals and denials, or negation might be implied. Sometimes the poetic content appeared to address a specific occurrence or subject by veering away from what was addressed. Some poems suggested an evaporation or disintegration of language, visually enacted on the page.

Taking the creativecritical approach meant I also wove passages of lyric reflection about my research journey into the thesis, alongside the poetry and alongside the critical writing. Here, the intention was to show the "how" as well as the "what" of investigating apophasis and its application to poetic language; and how the research process offered encounters with creative spaces that remained productively flexible and open. I found these creative spaces were better navigated through reflective prose, and occasionally through poetry. I used sentences to guide me towards fragmentation, and when unable to forsake one for the other I could, in a prose poem, braid them together. The woven approach facilitated a demonstration of how different modes of writing affects how apophasis is embodied and articulated, and how, in turn, that mode influences the myriad ways we might interpret and understand apophasis and its poetic renderings of the ineffable. Finally, there was an aesthetic purpose in presenting my research as a braided thesis: to offer the reader a vivid, restless and sometimes startling engagement in this creative and theoretical encounter with poetry, apophasis and ineffability.

§

What is it about whiteness and white that makes sense for a poet exploring how to draw closer to the unsayable?

Whiteness. Obliterating, sense-scouring whiteness; the spatial negation of absence on absence, uniformity neutralising infinity, isotropic, unnavigable, unplottable. The “hanging white silence” (Webster, 2011, p. 61) of the North Sea haar, blotting out miles of coast with its cold salt breath; smothering sound, vision, erasing the landscape’s serifs of hedge and gate and homestead. White, white-out, snow with its reverberations of *no* and *know*, the blanch and flinch of winter, slow glaciation of rhythm, muffling of pulse.

Words, cooling under the skin of ice; frost, interjecting its consonants, crystalline against the vowels of snow. Snow and ice, agents of effacement *and* preservation, for just as they can annul the contours of a landscape, stupefy life and render distance unintelligible, so can they arrest decay. Archived inside crevasses are words-in-waiting, a pre-verbal etymology. Carcasses, harboured in the cryonic oubliettes of the Earth’s deep freeze, move inexorably upwards, surface-bound in search of naming. As ice unclasps mammoth – literally “earth-horn,” “earth-stag” – so we excavate the shape that we call elephant.

The colour of nothing, the void, the blank, oblivion. Silence is the colour of chalk, distemper, tallow, wax, ivory, eggshell, lily, limewash, marl, bone, dove, vanilla, sugar, linen, marble, ash, steam, cloud, moon, milk, pearl, alabaster, putty, flour, nacre, lustre. Sounds powder into silence.

And yet whiteness *says*. Heavy with symbolism, in some cultures the expression of purity, in others, of mourning. Evocative of the withdrawal or absence of person or signs and markings; conversely, however, an absence may bespeak a meaning that is all the more powerful. In Chinese landscape painting, white space is not empty, but solid, dynamic. If it does not signify “cloud, mist, sky, water or smoke” (He, 2005), then white space represents *qi*, the life-force or energy of the artwork and the scene it depicts. *Qi* comes from the artist’s interaction with the subject, and vice-versa (He, 2005).

In *Moby-Dick: or, The Whale* Herman Melville devotes a whole chapter to Ishmael’s attempt to explain the nature of “the rather vague, nameless horror” (2003, p. 204) the whale evoked, having his protagonist confess: “It was the whiteness of the whale that above all appalled me” (p. 204). The chapter is notable for the (lyrical) battle that Ishmael experiences in trying to explain just why that should be so; what it is about that whiteness that is so appalling. He diverts into various examples of approximation; yet a precise description of what so disquiets him remains beyond the grasp of language. It eludes the control of words, is indefinable, unutterable; and this very ineffability intensifies the horror. In the absence of any firm conclusion, Ishmael ventures to suggest that white is “not so much a color [sic] as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors ... there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows” (p. 212) and he asks, is this “a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?” (p. 212).

White’s “dumb blankness, full of meaning” (p. 212), however, offers up the perfect foil for a poetic exploration of language and unsaying. White holds both the negative and positive of itself. White is the colour of hesitations and silences. The page is full of this whiteness, waiting

for the words and lines and markings that will make them visible, give them context; what Chinese calligraphers call “designing the white” (He, 2005). When Dickinson observes that “Nothing” is the force / That renovates the World –” (1970, p. 650), she invites the reader to the brink of the page, to witness the metaphor of this apokatastic transformation when the afterness that is the word meets the beforeness of the whiteness; a whiteness of silence that duels with words to give it shape.

White is a contradiction of itself: both a covering, and a nakedness. White animates, white insulates, white liberates, white withholds: “packed round your word is the snow” (Celan, 2001, p. 65). The colour of nothing, and the colour of everything. All colour, blurred into the inverse of colour.

Many poets use whiteness or snow to suggest a silencing, loss or some sort of erasure or resignation. “First snow – I release her into it – / I know, released, she won’t come back” (Phillips, 2004, p. 28) writes Carl Phillips in “White Dog”. In Mark Strand’s poem “White”, the speaker recognises that “the silence where I find myself / and what I make of nothing are white” (1978, p. 8). In his poem “The Park Drunk”, Robin Robertson depicts an alcoholic waking up to a winter morning that seems to take on the characteristics of the poetic voice’s unspoken turmoil:

What the snow has furred
to silence, uniformity,
frost amplifies, makes singular:
giving every form a sound
an edge, as if
frost wants to know what
snow tries to forget.

(2006, p. 3)

Other poets intimate that snow or whiteness are receptive surfaces, awaiting the mark of another consciousness, like Ted Hughes’s “The Thought-Fox”, which “sets neat prints into the snow” (1982, p. 13).

For Edmond Jabès, white, colour of both shroud and page, is antagonistic and must be subdued. He writes that white “is so aggressive that in order to be read words have to attack it head on, syllable by syllable, letter by letter” (1991, p. 32). White is not safe, not pure. White is duplicitous. Part dazzle, part dullness, white is defiant, a space that may or may not become a word. And if there is no word, does white enact an absence of saying? White as unsaying, the empty space encircled by O, the hole at the end of zero.

The poetry of Paul Celan often uses snow or whiteness as a way of embodying (as Franke notes) “almost anything as covered over, whited out, and, in effect, ‘frozen’ by the language that describes it” (Franke, 2014a, p. 121). Celan writes “You lie amid a great listening, / embushed, enflaked” (2001, p. 329). White is the colour, the sound and the symbol of that

listening, and accordingly, in Celan's poetry, we hear a silence, the resonance of aftermath, shock-still, palled and appalling.

Glyn Maxwell suggests: "a poem, any poem, arises from the urge of a human creature ... to break silence, fill emptiness, colour nothing with something, anything" (2012, p. 22). Yet what can be done with writing, a silent language, when syllables and letters will only talk soundlessly back to and out of the page? For Monica Carroll however, the page/space is vocal, pro-vocative, a phenomenon that could be thought of as "speaking back", for, as she submits: "space is more than an absence of black marks. It is a mark of its own, namely, the mark of space" (Carroll as cited in Strange, Hetherington and Webb, 2014, p. 88). For speakers in the poetry of Jabès, white – "color of absence of color [sic]" (Jabès 1991b, p. 32) – is "an unbearable color, that of the threshold – the page – and the shroud – the same page" (p. 41). Louise Glück says: "I love white space, love the telling omission, love lacunae, and find oddly depressing that which seems to have left out nothing. Such poetry seems to love completion too much, and like a thoroughly cleaned room, it paralyzes activity" (1994, p. 29).

A seethe of Latin and Old Norse, I despair and appeal to the gods of etymology. They answer as best they can. "Page" comes from *pangere*, to fasten. Now all I can see is threatening whiteness, icefields and crevasses. I feel everything from the clamour of empty to the crystallisation of lack, and yet in this void there is no noise, nothing apart from the crack of the glacier within me, inching its chill. Call myself a writer? It should not be so hard to fasten words on a page. But once again words parry and the page resists. Maxwell says: "intelligent use of the white space is all you've got" (2012, p. 11). If I am to believe that is all I have, is it enough?

§

Whiteout

it calls me
 to be surface
 soft hail
 hush-burn
 into skin
 I blanch solidify
 am glazed
 with quiet
 blind the skies
 dumb hills

into horizon

so long

under I've been

seismic

fraught

but I can

not can *not*

ignore this

tender

anaesthetic

slick chill

icing me up

cell by cell

till I am crystal

still

it makes me

surface makes me

feel it stop

me feeling

§

Towards the Un-word

My thesis did not aim to provide unequivocal answers or proof of theory. Rather it aimed, through its discussions, creative asides, original poems and appraisals of other poets' work, to present material and argument prompting further debate and research. Many times during its writing I was unable to find the right words; and sometimes – especially during the early stages – I was unable to find any words. However, the research taught me that finding the right words is neither the point nor the substance of apophysis. Apophysis helps open up a conceptual space

resonant with everything that has not been and perhaps cannot be said; and though its purpose might be ostensibly to define things in terms of what they are not, apophasis offers multiple possibilities and interpretations for what things might be. If I use apophasis to grapple with perceived limitations of language implied by the ineffable, the openness and conditionality implicit in apophasis suggests that I need not be necessarily forestalled by any shortage of options for poetic expression. Making poetic subject matter out of the restlessness and mutability of language, silence, extremity and the unknown gave licence to explore a new way of approaching, understanding and presenting this material. What other mode than the creativecritical could have given me the flexibility and space? The sense of excitement and risk?

My words were both raw and leavened with time. They retained the rawness of first sight, first reading, first stroke of the pen or the key, and yet long thinking, slow scholarship, hesitation, rephrasing and rejection have also leavened them. Each word a beat, marked out by the instant it takes to read it or say it, by compulsive intervals of breath and comprehension. Instant means now. Each pause scored by punctuation, paragraph, page break. Writing arrests time, turns into it, measures it out in the moments while words are being committed to paper, and while they are being read. Then time turns on writing, erases it. Words not-being-read are not alive. Words not-being-written are not alive. The word burns out of *now* then burns out, passes into silence. Language steals from silence. It plunders silence; it creeps out from it, but then is sucked back.

Sound is precipitation, trace, interruption. “Nothing” is the something in which “something” is suspended. In human communication, the non-verbal is as, if not more, enlightening than the verbal. But is silence just absence of sound or something more? Can I make silence speak for me, and if so, how? Being a writer is about trying to use silences as effectively as words. This whole beautiful experience has been about reaching for things beyond my reach. That will always be beyond my reach; unthinkable that I should ever draw level with them, for if that happens it will mean I have nowhere further to go.

Onward, onward, humans in time. We all hold time within us, each cell is a small life, something that has come into being precisely to vanish. Like words that leap into being and then, uttered, are gone, consigned to foremath, aftermath, timelessness, back into the silence, into exaltation.

§

Untitled Study of Silence

e.e. says (*inquiry before snow*)

but i imagine

an icy gloss floating halfway out from churning wake a contra)

puntal orbit squeeze of altitude neither absence nor existence
 thisness that was here before a “here” was here beginning and concluding at the
 when’s where-ending perfect ouroboros

Ishmael says *dumb blankness, full of meaning*

Aha! Because of Melville’s *ghastly whiteness*
 I gnaw the paradox of *visible absence* *concrete of all colours* rehearse
 the atheism of sound the bell that drowns see ghost-whales
 grazing scrim of supernova gauzy seams of krill pricking out new
 constellations ancestor and embryo of trace

***the mother of speech* says Merton**

so I cry Mother, mother
 you are vanishing point the point beyond the point indeed the whole point
 of this vanishing every disappearance fills the void with fire-soul glow
 clouds shred into ellipse riff impatient silver so we hide
 the moon to make it safe instead we make it lonely

***khamush, khamush* says Rumi**

that music washes
 through me tastes of star anise and heart-meat cypress stops my mouth
 concocts *a secret medicine* rephrases fissures born of wreckage and repair
 titrates into an Erlenmeyer flask tick tick of water
 loosened herbal oils a pastel hush the numb-tongue

***I emerge from it to speak of it “says”* Beckett**

and I put my ear to low
 red earth seven fugitive stars a cyclone-shaved horizon tune to
 languages past counting sky’s argument of thunderhead vague cirrus trawling herring shoals
 of bone the ache of oak and elm white rain
 cascades of isobars the itch of thorn on sandstone always open

***le poème tu, aux blancs* says Mallarmé**

playing instrument
 of echo’s breath umbilical for speech the soft surprise of grassa knot unravelled on a
 page that sings converses hears invisible things

seduces gods who claim it for their own is world in which we kneel is hoard
of all that can be said that can be grieved

all we dread (as Dickinson says)

and I select
the long chill soak of Aftermath melt of chromosome to rhizome sweet Litany of slow
Decay arrow prayers denial in *lorem ipsum* isotropic waste no depth perception
spider belaying from
trembling web treble clef suspended in a pentangle

§

Notes

- [1] Webster, M. “*Words Fail But Meanings Still Exist*” – *Exploring The Relationship Of Apophasis To Poetic Practice*. PhD Thesis, Murdoch University. Murdoch Research Portal.
- [2] See Franke (2007a, 2007b, 2014a) and Sells (1994) for a broader discussion on the provenance of classical apophasis.
- [3] Indeed, braided writing is not a radical, recent form, but an ancient one, as Brenda Miller notes: “Seneca, Bacon, Sei Shōna-gon in the tenth century, Montaigne ... all could be said to write essays ... [that] did not necessarily follow a linear, narrative line” (n.d., p. 2).
- [4] See Bolitho (2003); Carroll (2016); Curran (2007); Falzon (1997); Fenton-Keane (2008); Hansen (2005); Kelen (1998); Loveless (2004); Ryan (2011).
- [5] See Candy (2006); Cosgrove (2008); Brook and Magee, eds. (2012); Webb 2012; Webb and Melrose (2014); Skains 2018; Cowan (2020).
- [6] I do not think, however, that prose is inferior to poetry. I agree with Eagleton that “the distinction between the two is ripe for dismantling” (2007, p. 26) and that there is “hardly a device thought of as ‘poetic’ which some piece of prose somewhere does not exploit. Prose may be lyrical, introspective and brimming with delicate feeling” (p. 26).

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