Deakin University

Ruby Todd

‘In losing we have something to gain’: Examining the analogous movements of ‘mobilising’ absence in literary language, authorial impulse, and elegiac writing

Abstract

*Just as absence mobilises the linguistic sign, so the felt experience of absence, through personal loss on the part of the writer, mobilises writing. While each of these ideas has been well-documented separately within their respective literatures, the fact of their correspondence, and its implications for the thinking of absence within creative writing studies, warrants further discussion. Engaging with the work of select thinkers within semiotics, literary philosophy, and psychology, this paper examines the operations of the analogous movement between the operations of the linguistic sign as a structure motivated by absence, and the phenomenon of generative loss in the experience of creative writers. Throughout, it draws from Roland Barthes’s elegiac meditations on literature, loss and writing following the death of his mother, in *Mourning Diary* (2009). This paper suggests that just as writers are mobilised by absence to write, so do they in turn self-consciously mobilise the narrative and aesthetic powers of absence for their own literary ends. Interrogating the relations between these movements offers a means toward further understanding the particular aesthetic force of much elegiac literature, as it bears on our motivations, processes and felt experiences as writers and readers.*

Keywords: elegy, absence, poetics, Roland Barthes, mourning

Now I am dead you sing to me
 The songs we used to know,
 But while I lived you had no wish
 Or care for doing so.
 – Thomas Hardy (2010 [1917])

Introduction

‘I don’t want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it’, wrote Roland Barthes in 1977, on the subject of his beloved mother’s death. Then, qualifying this admission of fear, Barthes concedes: ‘although as a matter of fact literature originates within these truths’ (Barthes 2012: 23). This reflection is one of many recorded in haphazard fragments on index cards, during a three-year period of deep mourning which lasted until Barthes’s own death in 1980, and which together constitute his posthumously published *Mourning Diary* (2009). Arguably, everything Barthes wrote following his bereavement – whether published posthumously or while he lived – is drawn from and pervaded by the force of his mother’s absence. Whatever his misgivings about the enterprise, ‘making literature out of it’ appears to be exactly what Barthes did, with great drive and vision. This late output of death-haunted philosophical

work, which includes *Camera Lucida* (1980), arguably constitutes Barthes's most powerful work.

Ultimately, these writings stand as a palpable demonstration of Barthes's own intimation that the 'truth' of loss is intimately connected somehow to the germination of writing, the 'origin' of literature. As a writer who, in the grip of loss, was seized by heightened capacities of creative production, Barthes is of course not alone. In the immediate aftermath of, and for some time following, his wife Emma's death in 1912, Thomas Hardy was driven to write much of the work on which his reputation as a poet now rests, experiencing himself as being creatively 'in flower' (Tomalin 2010: 2). More recently, Joan Didion speaks of sitting down to write of the experience of her husband's death 'a day or two or three after the fact', producing her grief memoir *A Year of Magical Thinking*, to be followed by *Blue Nights*, a memoir of losing her daughter (Didion 2006: 3). To quote Mark Doty, speaking of the loss of his partner to AIDS: 'What does a writer do, when the world collapses, but write?' (Doty 1997: 263).

The experience of these and countless other writers suggests that the phenomenon of felt absence, through personal loss, mobilises writers to the act of writing. Moreover, it might be said that just as writers are mobilised by absence to write, so do writers themselves self-consciously mobilise the narrative and aesthetic powers of absence for their own literary ends [1]. However, the structural and aesthetic operations of absence, on the level of linguistic signification and poetic language itself, have also long been a subject of critical commentary, across the fields of linguistics, aesthetic philosophy and deconstruction. Just as the felt experience of absence, through personal loss, seems to mobilise and be mobilised by writers, so does absence 'animate' or mobilise the linguistic sign – as the work of diverse thinkers infers. In their respective critical literatures, then, the prevalence and import of these two phenomena are well established (if not uncontested). It is, rather, the fact of the correspondence between these movements of absence, and its implications for the thinking of absence within creative writing practice and research, that warrants further discussion.

In view of contributing to such discussion, this paper, drawing from the personal and critical insights of Barthes and other thinkers, traces the structural correspondence and interplay between the discrete movements of 'mobilising' absence – within the practice of elegiac writing, the elegiac text, and the structures of language itself. Specifically, I will identify and analyse the ways in which these movements of absence, when galvanised by a writer like Barthes in attempting to put words to felt absence, foregrounds the powerful aesthetic and narrative effects of both negation and metonymy, in language and writing [2]. These effects can be understood as emerging from the effacement or distance of the object to which linguistic signification, literary language, the felt experience of loss, and its writing variously refer. I argue that this converging movement of negation upon negation, on the levels of language and the felt experience of absence, which elegiac writing enacts, constitutes at once its strange negative power and its paradox as a form, experienced not only through its reading, but through its writing. In doing so, I suggest that closer attendance by creative writers to the intimate, fertile and reflexive interrelations between writing and absence across the levels of structure, form, process and felt experience, may generate creative and critical insights into their own practice and poetics. Such insights may also prove productive to creative writing research, concerning the ways in which the diverse operations of absence in language and felt experience bear upon the generation and reception of elegiac writing.

Mobilising absence: language

Before considering the modes in which felt absence, in the personal experience of a writer, bears upon the practice of elegiac writing [3] and the form and effects of the resultant text, it is important to recognise how absence already bears on the structures and operations of language itself – first, on the level of the linguistic sign, and additionally, on the level of literary signification.

The production of meaning via linguistic signs is itself a process necessarily mediated by absence. To cite theorist Kevin Hart, a basic tenet of that which we call a ‘sign’ is something that ‘is what it is in the absence of its animating presence’ (Hart 2000: 12). As recognised by Ferdinand de Saussure, these signs operate as semantic markers that stand in for the external concepts they signify. That is, there exists no intrinsic union between the word ‘tree’ as a signifier and the concept of a tree as its signified, or, indeed, with the real tree itself, in the world, which exists externally to the sign as its referent. Words do not embody what they signify, but rather depend on their estrangement from the real presence of the signified in order to create the illusion of presence. Similarly, the signifier does not represent a pre-existing concept, but rather, a concept whose meaning depends on its relation to other words. As Saussure explains: ‘Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others’ (Saussure 1959: 114).

Speaking of the system by which meaning is produced by the interrelation of linguistic units, Saussure emphasised the relational and differential nature of meaning as produced by signs, and the operation of values in this system over ideas. That is, he asserts how in producing, exchanging and comprehending patterns of linguistic signs, speakers, writers, thinkers and listeners find not ‘pre-existing ideas’ but rather

values emanating from the system. When they are said to correspond to concepts, it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not. (Saussure 1959: 117)

Saussure’s above assertion that linguistic concepts are ‘defined ... negatively’, by ‘being what the others are not’ highlights the inescapably negational nature of language in the lexical and semantic rifts and absences by which the operations of its sign-system is structured. Nowhere is this negational structure of language more vividly elucidated than in the work of Maurice Blanchot. In his essay, ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ (1981), Blanchot discusses absence as being at once a phenomenon by which the experience of writing is structured, and by which meaning and literature is made possible through its animation of literary or, more specifically, poetic language. Blanchot’s conception of the negation at work within literary language must be understood in contrast to the functional negativity that operates on the level of everyday language. In the case of everyday language, the interconnected linguistic structure of the signifier, signified and referent, or, as expounded by Haase and Large, ‘the word, the concept and the thing’ work to deliver meaning via the disappearance of the ‘thing’, the real-world object to which the concept refers in the material mark of the word (Haase & Large 2001: 27). Literature thus emerges as the realisation and foregrounding of that which in ordinary language is bypassed in the relay of a message (or concept). That is, ‘it is not

the message, but the medium that is important, and this medium can only be understood as that which resists, interrupts or suspends the message' (Haase & Large 2001: 29). While, in everyday language, the delivery of the concept is achieved through the negation of not only its real-world referent but also of the material word that represents it, in literary language, ostensibly the referent and its concept are negated while the word itself is foregrounded. Accordingly, literary language, suggests Blanchot, 'observes that the word cat is not only the nonexistence of the cat, but the nonexistence made *word*, that is, a completely determined and objective reality' (Blanchot 1981: 44).

That is, within the sphere of literature, words emerge as autonomous entities of intrinsic value beyond their everyday function of relaying meaning. Consider, for example, the radical strangeness of encountering familiar language transformed in poetry, where tropes such as metaphor and metonymy create an entirely different frame of reference to that of literal language, most particularly in the movement of poetry to foreground the materiality of language and dislocate the delivery of its apparent signified, maximising the distance between word and concept and the absence of the referent. As George Steiner says, '[t]he truth of the word is the absence of the world' (Steiner 1991: 96).

From the onset of modernism in the late nineteenth century in the West, can be traced an increasing awareness on the part of writers as diverse as Gertrude Stein and Stéphane Mallarmé, of the self-referential nature of language; the way in which words refer to other words, rather than to the world. As aphorised by Steiner, this shift in aesthetic consciousness under modernism entailed a fundamental 'break', 'between word and world' (Steiner 1991: 93). With this shift came a spirit of play and exploration, in which emerged a writing which foregrounded its own materiality and formal structures, reflecting back on its own processes in a reflexive style which celebrated the power of abstraction and the primacy of words unmoored from their real-world referents. For Blanchot, this movement of literature to disrupt the everyday referentiality of language, constituting an 'unmooring' between words and the world which is extant in ordinary language yet only truly 'felt' in literature, is epitomised in the experimental poetry of Mallarmé. Speaking of Mallarmé, Steiner discerns a revolutionary shift, that of modernism itself, which acknowledges that 'non-reference constitutes the true genius and purity of language' (Steiner 1991: 96). In Mallarmé, words are revealed in a strange freedom of reference that pronounces their aesthetic properties, through the assembly of heterogeneous phrases and images, at times breached or foregrounded by the blanks of the page, which don't immediately 'match up', arising often as if by coincidence. Mallarmé's famous long and typographically complex 1897 poem, 'Un Coup de Dés' ('A Throw of the Dice'), exemplifies the potential of such devices to trouble or circumvent the meaning-circuit of the sign, prompting abstract associations and cognitive leaps, while drawing attention to the autonomous properties of words referring not to the world but to themselves and each other in the aesthetic freedom of a poem on a page. In this wild space, outside the frame of everyday utilitarian language, words range as if left to their own devices, and the possibilities for meaning itself seem unbounded. In this way, the negation that literature enacts exceeds the negation of everyday language, in which the absence of the thing or referent is supplemented by the presence of the concept. Literary language can thus be seen as operating via 'a double absence', an absence which literature calls us to experience and attend to, rather than circumvent (Haase & Large 2001: 30-31).

It is this particular quality of absence which lends literature its primacy and strangeness, as a dominion 'outside' the order of ordinary social structures of language and law. The operation of this literary absence is also inherently

supplementary, as something that at once adds and replaces. As I will discuss, the supplementary movement of this absence is both complicated and intensified when the absence in question is not that of (literary) language alone, but also of the writer's own felt experience, in a corresponding structure mobilised by absence. In this case, it is the felt experience of absence personally felt by the writing subject, whose writing is mobilised by and directed toward that absence. In one way, this double movement constitutes the amplification and cross-indexation of what Blanchot calls 'the torment of language', whereby this torment 'is what it lacks because of the necessity that it be the lack of precisely this' (Blanchot 1981: 45-6).

For Blanchot as for Mallarmé, the way in which, manifestly, 'a cat is not a cat', creates the possibility of literature; poetic meaning depends on negativity, on the condition of words being 'torn apart by equivocation', 'falsified by misunderstanding' and 'imbued with emptiness' which 'is their very meaning' (Blanchot 1981: 30-31). The 'realm of the imaginary' over which the writer presides is total, suggests Blanchot, and in fact

it is the world, grasped and realized in its entirety by the global negation of all the individual realities contained in it, by their disqualification, their absence, by the realization of that absence itself, which is how literary creation begins. (Blanchot 1981: 36, my emphasis)

Further, writing enacts the 'illusion' of primal, originary creation, 'seeing and naming' 'each thing and each being', 'from the starting point of the *absence* of everything, that is, from nothing' (Blanchot 1981: 36, emphasis in original). Literary language effects the presentation of its signifieds (or generates meaning) not 'by causing whatever it portrays to be present, but by portraying it behind everything, as the meaning and the absence of this everything' (Blanchot 1981: 37). This vital negativity in literature also encompasses death, that radical event that incites writing in answer to its threat of nothingness. Referencing Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Blanchot suggests that literature is concerned with 'that moment when 'life endures death and maintains itself in it' in order to gain from death the possibility of speaking and the truth of speech' (1981: 41). In this way, literature can constitute a premonitory reckoning and encounter with the otherness of death, which in attending to the negation of life, speaks of life itself, of that which death imparts to life and by which life is necessarily defined, the very things that also give rise to literature, and afford its urgency and power. Blanchot illuminates the negational power of language in his example of the act of naming involved in enunciating the phrase, "'This woman'":

For me to be able to say, "This woman" I must somehow take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being. The word is the absence of that being... (1981: 42)

Placing the problematic gender politics of this particular example to one side, Blanchot here proposes that the nature of language is to negate being in order to speak it, in order to make it 'live' in its passage from the world into words. The act of naming is by its nature violent, Blanchot suggests, for in naming we necessarily negate the singularity of what we name, supplanting a particular, inimitable, irreplaceable real thing (*this* rose, *that* woman) to a rhetorical designation transferable to any number of other comparable things; we create an idea autonomous from the real, particular thing, a generality capable of infinite transferal. In this way, language can function to reduce and to totalise,

and is implicated in the sphere of ethics. Expounding further the above example, Blanchot asserts that:

[W]hen I say “This woman”, real death has been announced ... my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence... (1981: 43)

As such, Blanchot declares that ‘when I speak: death speaks in me’ (1981: 43). In this way, the power of language to summon images and ideas hinges on the negation of the real things it refers to, on the distance and difference between words and the world that language depends upon and maintains as it speaks ‘what is’ only by speaking ‘what is not’. As Mallarmé observes: ‘I say: A flower! And, out of the oblivion ... there arises, musically, the very idea in its mellowness; in other words, what is absent from every bouquet’ (Mallarmé 2007: 210).

Felt absence mobilising the writing-act

In correlation to these energising and animating operations of absence with respect to language and literary creation, is the notion that a writer’s own ‘felt absence’ or emotional experience of loss (whether physical or symbolic) might be instrumental in propelling them to the act of writing. While the difficulty of quantifying such a subjective and interior experience precludes any totalising hypotheses, the question of absence or loss as a mobilising force for writing has been a productive one for many theorists and writers, with implications for further understanding a myriad of attendant concerns, including the psychology of mourning, the creative impulse, and the endurance of elegy. As Julia Kristeva notes in her wide-ranging, and itself elegiac study, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1987), ‘loss, bereavement and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten it and spoil it’ (Kristeva 1989: 9). Equally relevant here is Jaques Derrida’s understanding of writing as supplementary, in its promise to recapture immediate presence via its effacement and negation in language, which is itself supplementary (Derrida 1997: 142). Exemplifying the paradoxical animating force of absence, Derrida quotes the writer Jean Jacques Rousseau (1782) speaking of his mother: “‘I only felt the full strength of my attachment when I no longer saw her’” (Derrida 1997: 152). As Derrida highlights, it is only ‘when the mother disappears that substitution becomes possible and necessary’ (1997: 152-3). Such sentiments suggest writings of ‘felt absence’ on some level perpetuate the negations by which they are structured. For Rousseau, the act of writing appears to have indeed been mobilised by his own complex experience of absence, serving to supplement and, at times, to paradoxically exceed the experience of presence.

Nowhere does this possibility of loss or absence-as-trigger for writing find more traction than in the elegy, that most ancient and enduring literary tradition of lamentation, in which the elegist turns to language to testify to the irremediable absence of a lost loved one. Of crucial significance here is the way in which the structure of writing, mirroring the situation of the subject grappling with an irremediable loss, has no recourse to its referent other than through the representational structures of language; through linguistic signs and literary tropes such as metonymy and metaphor, the operations of which depend in different ways on their remove from tangible, real-world objects. As Watkin notes, ‘writing can never call up the mimetic, reflective or transparent powers of traditional representation because its referent is permanently absent’,

an observation of especial relevance to elegy (Watkin 2004: 8). This paradoxical relation between the materiality of a text of loss and its wellspring in absence, and the animation of literary language by effacing the referent, is central to elegy's formal and affective power, and also to its inevitable failure to restore or redeem the absence to which it speaks.

Barthes's *Mourning Diary*

That the real experience of absence on the part of a writer can also mobilise the act of writing is a truth resonating throughout Roland Barthes's late works, all of which emanate from his mother's death. Forming a kind of index to all these writings are the raw, fragmentary and private entries of *Mourning Diary*, begun on the day following his mother's death in 1977. Nowhere is there to be traced a more nuanced or direct dialogue by a writer with himself on the experience of felt absence and its implications for writing. In it, like any mourner, Barthes implores the universe, wrings his hands, wracks his brain, finds himself in disbelief at an event, a death, both inevitable and irredeemable – and confronts the spectre of his own death, at once the living death borne by the eradication of life's meaning, and the real death awaiting us all. He questions the viability of his ongoing life and work. In the desolation of felt absence, although riddled with doubt about the viability of 'making literature out of it' (Barthes 2012: 23), Barthes reinvests in writing as a means of being able to justify and to bear going on living in his mother's absence, describing writing in almost religious terms as his only hope of redemption:

Confusion, defection, apathy: only, in snatches, the image of writing as "something desirable," haven, "salvation," hope, in short "love," joy. I imagine a sincerely devout woman has the same impulses toward her "God". (Barthes 2012: 59)

Capturing everything from the sensory minutiae of a bakery transaction to instances in which he is reduced to tears, each entry in *Mourning Diary* is permeated by the memory of his mother's presence and the persistent feeling of her absence; by the question of what is to be made now of life without her:

February 12, 1978

Snow, a real snowstorm over Paris; strange.

I tell myself, and suffer for it: she will never again be here to see it, or for me to describe it for her. (Barthes 2012: 93)

This 'questioning of torment' recorded by Barthes in *Mourning Diary* constantly returns to the subject of writing, and the possibility that his loss might finally yield to a redemptive great work, dreamed of as an apotheosis on the levels of both life and literature, converging around the idealised figure of his mother (Howard 2012: 259-60). Barthes called this project 'Vita Nova' after Dante's 13th-century poetic narrative of love and longing for his beloved Beatrice. Concurrently, Barthes considers the ethics of thus redeeming or transforming through art the radical event of the death of one as sacred and singular as his mother. Even as he articulates his misgivings over such an intention or act, Barthes self-consciously detects his critical and creative faculties conspiring toward this end, and in this movement recognises himself as retaining desire and lust for life and the pleasures of his work in a manner unchanged from before, as if his being were not sufficiently altered by his being condemned to now live forever in his mother's absence. Despite Barthes's self-professed 'fear of making literature out of it', in *Mourning Diary* he routinely discusses the effects of his mother's death on his emotions and on

his thoughts with an explorer's inquisitive eye, a writer's eye (Barthes 2012: 23). The entries of *Mourning Diary* in fact ceaselessly affirm his instinct and desire to 'make literature' out of his mother's death, and work through the implications of this event for his future writing. Ultimately, *Mourning Diary* reads as a notation of evolving thought, an effort toward transmuting the confounding absence of a beloved into a meaningful, and to some degree, consolatory, work. Three passages (among many) reveal the extent to which the question of writing was implicated in the experience of grappling with his mother's absence:

Always (painfully) surprised to be able—finally—to live with my suffering... But—no doubt—this is because I can, more or less ... utter it, put it into words. My culture, my taste for writing gives me this apotropaic or integrative power: I integrate, by language. (Barthes 2012: 175)

[W]riting transforms for me the various "stases" of affect, dialectizes my "crises". (2012: 105)

Depression comes when, in the depths of despair, I cannot manage to save myself by my attachment to writing. (2012: 62)

For Barthes in the grip of mourning, writing is thus conceived of as a potentially transformative medium, a vehicle by which to render the loss and absence of his mother bearable through the absorption of activity and the redemptive quest for meaning in the face of death's despair. To write is to access the 'integrative power' of language, of poetic signification, in loss and absence. This correlation of writing with redemption and positive transformation is echoed in the supposition: 'no doubt I will be unwell, until I write something having to do with her' (Barthes 2012: 216). Instinctively and in desperation, Barthes at once searched for a means of justifying daily existence without his mother, while searching also for a new way of writing that would attest to an altered world. His answer to this two-sided question was one and the same: in the vision of 'Vita Nova' that was planned but never completed, and in the constellation of other writings, including *Camera Lucida* (1980), which were completed during his mourning.

As the case of Barthes so vividly exemplifies, it is incumbent upon us as writers to recognise that, just as the experience of loss and felt absence might mobilise writing, so do we self-consciously mobilise the narrative and aesthetic powers of absence for our own literary ends. Speaking of this paradoxical productivity of loss in the lives of writers, Hélène Cixous boldly acknowledges how, as writers, 'in losing we have something to gain. Mixed loss and gain: that's our crime' (Cixous 1993: 11). Here, Cixous relates these paradoxical 'gains' of loss to her own experience, explaining that '[t]he first book I wrote rose from my father's tomb' (1993: 11). Barthes's compulsion to write about absence in spite of the impossibility of signifying the other, an enterprise that exhausts itself in realising a failure that is from the outset guaranteed, is the compulsion of every elegist. The radical experience of loss and felt absence begs even non-writers to rise to the impossible challenge of trying to 'make sense', or at least attest to its enormity, in language – the otherness and unknowability which divides us from death and makes it so confounding is at once why it exceeds our ability to signify it, and why we desperately try anyway. For the professional writer this challenge is intensified. Their habitual activity and vocation is intrinsically implicated in what is foremost a personal crisis. For one who, like Barthes, in a great sense lives in order to write, the radical occasion of loss in the sphere of private life and the reckoning with felt absence which loss entails is a transformative experience of encountering the

other and the very negation by which language is structured and animated. The reckoning with loss is also a reckoning with the limits of language. In this light, it is not surprising that the personal experience of loss has so often led to works of formal, narrative, and affective power.

Blanchot ultimately suggests that the redemption of literary negation lies in the materiality of poetic language itself. Speaking of the melancholy power of literary language to summon the exquisite particularity of a single flower only by effecting that real flower's disappearance and maintaining its infinite distance (echoing Mallarmé), Blanchot at once exults and laments, for at such distance to real presence, 'what hope do I have of attaining the thing I push away?' (Blanchot 1981: 46). His answer lies in the supplementary presence of language itself, in its materiality, its tangible, sensuous form as a 'thing', celebrated in the rhythm and rhyme of poetry, or as beheld in the shapes of letters on the page. The wonder and 'obscure power' of the word is 'as an incantation that coerces things, makes them *really* present outside of themselves' (Blanchot 1981: 46, emphasis in the original).

This absence by which literary language is given life is amplified in the literature of loss, in writing whose subject is also absence. Within this frame, the materiality of literary language, of words in themselves, is thrown into greater relief when what those words refer to is a referent already absent in the world, even before it is negated in language. When Roland Barthes turns to language to speak of his dead mother, we feel the poverty of that language, its inability to 'speak her', but also its unlikely power of summons, the 'glimmer' of his mother's truth, the presence of her absence, under the weight of Barthes's grief and effort to recover her in words. Such literary efforts to signify loss and absence gain in affective intensity via the foregrounding of language under pressure to signify, when the singular absence each word strains toward is exactly what disappears in their movement.

In this way, a writer's own felt experience of signifying felt absence can hypothetically, as a metonymical movement, be compared to that of the linguistic sign, on the level of the immediate writing-act, and also in the poetics of the resultant text. In the movement of literary signification, a signifier/word is foregrounded via the animating negation of both its signified/concept and referent. In the movement of signifying felt absence, the writing subject works to signify the absence of the referent/lost other via the objects in the world around them that remain present. The rudimentary diagrams below (see Figure 1) illustrate these metonymic correspondences, which will shortly be discussed further. However, it is important to note that there are additional operations which bear on and complicate the metonymic correspondences posited here. For example, within the elegiac text, the lost other is implicated in multiple metonymic relationships, additional to its relationship with the writer/elegiac speaker (in the diagram on the right). This includes the lost other's contiguous referential relationship to the discrete signifiers (a snowstorm; a flower) invoked by the elegist to signify their presence-in-absence, as well as its more expansive metonymic relationship to such phenomena on the imaginative level of narrative, through prosopopeia, for instance [4]. However, examining these additional operations further is beyond the scope of this paper, which is chiefly concerned with exploring the felt experience of writing loss, in view of further understanding the aesthetic force of elegy.

Figure 1: Structural movement of linguistic sign (above), in relation to experiential movement of writing 'felt absence' (below).

An analogous movement: *The metonymy of loss*

In conceiving of this analogous movement between language and elegiac writing, I have drawn from William Watkin's application of psychoanalyst John Bowlby's work on grief and loss (referred to by Watkin as an 'environmental model' of loss), in view of elegiac literature. Building upon the object relations theory of Melanie Klein, Bowlby's understanding of loss, broadly termed 'attachment theory', is explained by Bowlby as pertaining to '[a]ttachment behaviour [which] is conceived as any form of behaviour that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual' (Bowlby 1980: 39). Further, more than previous theorists, Bowlby emphasises the fundamental importance of what he describes as 'a mourner's urge to act – to call for and to search for the lost person', an urge that leads the mourner to 'engag[e] in those very acts, fragmented and incomplete though they may be' (Bowlby 1980: 28). Moreover, Bowlby contends that the strength of human attachment is such that, while at times, in mourning, 'the effort to restore the bond' might 'wan[e]', 'usually it does not cease' (1980: 42) [5]. In the words of a widow cited by Bowlby, '[m]ourning never ends: only as time goes on it erupts less frequently' (1980: 101). In discussing studies on the bereavement experiences of widows and widowers, Bowlby notes that 'half or more ... reach a state of mind in which they retain a strong sense of the continuing presence of their partner' (1980: 96). Bowlby notes that, while such a sense of the lost one's presence might also be experienced through dreams, or through the mourner's performing of activities linked to their memory of the deceased, frequently, in the experiences of the subjects of these studies:

[T]he [deceased] spouse is experienced as located somewhere specific and appropriate. Common examples are a particular chair or room which he occupied, or perhaps the garden, or the grave. (Bowlby 1980: 98)

In this way, Bowlby's attachment theory stresses the relation of the subject of loss to diverse objects present within their environment, rather than to the lost object alone, 'an environment of subjective presence but also of objective loss' (Watkin 2004: 186). That is, for Bowlby, loss is experienced through the subject's diverse relations with objects around them, through which the subject retains proximity to the object that has been lost (Watkin 2004: 187). This relational structure allows for the mediation of loss and the radical otherness of absence by the subject via their metonymic interaction with objects or 'things', 'parts' that 'stand in' for the unfathomable totality of loss, circumventing the alterity of absence and the difficulty of facing it 'head-on' (Watkin 2004: 186).

In applying the principles of Bowlby's attachment theory to select examples from the literature of loss, Watkin offers insight into the diverse elegiac structures at work within such texts and outlines a means by which to both identify ethical modes of writing about the other, and to conduct ethical readings of such texts. Analysing novels by Ian McEwan, Douglas Copeland and Dave Eggers, Watkin observes that:

[L]oss does not happen in a dialectic scene between subject and object in an artificial pastoral realm, but is what happens dynamically between subjects, other subjects, lost object and present object in a living, metonymic environment of proximity and distance. (Watkin 2004: 177)

Approaching loss through the intermediary of objects that metonymically figure as partial to the overwhelming 'whole' of absence is at once necessary and problematic. On the one hand, doing so risks reducing the lost other to a collection of phenomena left behind (be they inanimate things or the thoughts, memories and emotions of the living) which in reality do not and cannot represent them, denying their alterity and agency while being lured ourselves into false emotional investments in objects which cannot and should not provide us with the certainties we desire. On the other hand, how can we avoid conceiving of such an unquantifiable and confounding an experience as loss, and its attendant absence, in relation to the physical phenomena of our everyday world and the phenomena of our own minds and emotions? For these are the very things through which our lived experience is structured, constituting the environment in which we also experience loss. Watkin writes:

[T]o speak of the proximate of loss – the closeness of the corpse, the unknowability of the other, the rent fabric of the environment – is to speak of the everyday world of things. (Watkin 2004: 176)

As Watkin pointedly asserts, 'metonymy refers to the proximity of things to things, or signs to signs, not of signs to things' (2004: 191). The movement of literary signification, and the effort to make sense of loss in mourning, correspond through metonymy in the sense that the real thing - the external referent of the word or elegy - is in both cases always being negated or deferred, mediated by proximate yet contiguous signifiers or things which at once bring us closer to and withhold the referent, or lost other.

In his efforts to express the experience of his mother's absence in words, Barthes also turned to objects, the inescapable everyday world of things that

remain behind after loss. In prosaic note-form, eschewing any overt troping, Barthes observes these phenomena around him with stupefied attention to the endurance of the ordinary world, after his mother has departed it. His reflections in *Mourning Diary* are cross-indexed by wide-ranging references to his own books and those of Proust (Barthes 2012: 157), Dante (74), a story by Tolstoy (209); to Biblical verse; the music of Souza (47); an interaction at a bakery store (37); a cocktail party (214); the family house at Urt (20); the weather in Paris (93); photographs (143); the state of his apartment (35); a film which mentions a 'rice-powder box' that evokes his childhood with his mother (112); a 'dreary' coat and scarf ensemble that his mother would not approve of (99); swallows in flight (159); his mother's 'pink Uniprix nightgown' (34); her grave site (241); a dream in which he sees her smile (243); Cézanne's watercolours (134); a trip to Tunisia (58); conversations with friends (71). In the absence of his mother, everything surrounding Barthes, his 'metonymic environment', seems to speak of her, emphasising the ways in which he himself and the world are now diminished without her. The stupefying materiality of the world is foregrounded in the absence of his mother, the testamentary weight of objects by turns imbued with pathos or indifference, signifiers displaced from concept and thing, parts displaced from the whole. Such objects signify only the absence of his mother and the impossibility of signifying her presence, just as in literary language the referent and its concept are negated while the word itself is foregrounded. In this sense, Barthes's work of writing his mourning involved translating one kind of signifier into another.

The effort of expressing in language a deeply felt sense of loss throws into strange relief Blanchot's observation that, 'when I speak, I recognize very well that there is speech only because 'what is' has disappeared in what names it' (Blanchot 1993: 36). The desire to recover absence in writing is always an enactment of failure, when the presence we long to recover in language is *just what we negate* in writing it. In the absence of Barthes's mother, the material weight of not only the world and its objects, but the words that refer to it, are magnified:

August 18, 1978

The locality of the room where she was sick, where she died, and where I now live, the wall against which the head of her bed rested where I have placed an icon—not out of faith—and still put flowers on a table next to it. I have reached the point of no longer wanting to travel in order to be here, so that the flowers here will always be fresh. (Barthes 2012: 191)

Yet, as writers like Barthes show us, the effort to write of the difficult persistence of felt absence in our lives can yield to literature of power and value, which in failing to reach the referent, testify to 'the eternal torment of our language when its longing turns back toward what it always misses, through the necessity under which it labors of being the lack of what it would say' (Blanchot 1993: 36).

Echoing Blanchot's above articulation of the paradoxical 'necessity' of poetic language to negate the very presence it 'longs' to manifest, Cixous posits writing as a means of 'succeeding in avowing the unavowable' (Cixous 1993: 53), while Marguerite Duras suggests that writing involves 'the telling of a story, and the absence of the story' (Duras 1991: 27). All these sentiments point to the way that not only literary language, but elegy as a form performs its own failure to say the unsayable, while somehow still leaving something behind that attests to the truth of presence-in-absence. Blanchot's narrator in *Death Sentence* (1978), speaks to this notion of paradoxical remainder in telling a story when he professes that '[o]ne thing must be understood: I have said

nothing extraordinary or even surprising. What is extraordinary begins at the moment I stop. But I am no longer able to speak of it' (Blanchot 1978: 30). Correspondingly, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe suggests that what poetry 'recounts and says is that from which it wrenches away as a poem', and in this context describes 'nothingness' as 'that against which and through which there is presence' (Lacoue-Labarthe 1999: 20). Like Blanchot, Lacoue-Labarthe is grappling here with the strange way in which it is through the failure of language and literature to manifest the real, in its negating of the other and in its being negated by that other, that it paradoxically verges toward truth, toward presence, and toward the other. What remains 'at the moment [the words] stop' or the poem 'wrenches away' is what exceeds our ability in language to testify to the other's absence, an excess generated by a negation which the movement of elegy recalls and redoubles. In elegy, the mobilising effects of absence in language and the world are foregrounded by its additional negation, on a narrative level, of an already-lost other – a movement exemplified in the mythical moment of Orpheus's turn from Eurydice – the moment in which, after defying the gods by turning back to look at her emerging from the Shades and thus condemning her to a second death, Orpheus turns his back and relinquishes her once more, before elegiacally singing of her in heavenly music that only Eurydice-in-absence could move him to create.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate the structural correlation and interplay between the paradoxically mobilising effects of absence in language, and the felt experience of writers – which converge in elegiac literature – as a means of further understanding its strange aesthetic force. This is a power of absence, at once formal and affective, bearing on the experience of both a text's writing and its reading. This structural correlation between the absence of the real thing in the world to which a word refers, and the absence of a lost other to which the elegist in writing refers, are each animated by movements of metonymy and negation. By negating the world, these movements of absence work together to foreground the materiality and immediacy of the text. This discussion has proceeded from a belief that closer consideration – by writers in view of their own processes, and researchers in view of elegiac literature more broadly – of the strange synchronicity between the operations of poetic language and the authorial impulse, would likely suggest further avenues for thinking the semiotics, poetics and ethics of writing in the elegiac mode, and interrogating the aesthetics of reception in reading elegiac literature.

Few writers have been as fiercely direct as Cixous in naming and examining the creative fruitfulness potentiated by personal loss. Particularly because this loss is so often borne by a loved one's actual death, to admit such a truth feels shameful, because to 'make use of' such a loss in writing that brings creative joy (and possibly financial profit) presents as so unseemly. What insights, beyond the frame of writing as catharsis or therapy, might we have to gain as writers, by interrogating more frequently and more boldly, the strange and productive relationship of painful loss to fervent creative production? What are the challenges, responsibilities and implications of the writerly 'gains' we might elicit from such loss? If we put loss 'to work' in writing, what do we owe that loss? Recall Hardy, 'in flower', and Barthes's frequent tone of melancholy underpinned by the kind of urgency and ardour which admits of creative ecstasy even during the deepest mourning. In view of the intimate structural and poetic connections between the urge to write loss and the structures of language itself, asking such questions of ourselves as writers and

readers might yield surprising and useful answers, for creative writing practice, poetics and research.

Notes

[1] There is of course, a crucial attendant question here, the ethical question of what we owe the other of/to whom we write, which lies beyond the scope of this paper. [return to text](#)

[2] For the purposes of this discussion, metonymy is taken to include the operation of synecdoche. [return to text](#)

[3] This paper refers to ‘elegy’, as a literary tone or mode operating across diverse works of poetry and prose. [return to text](#)

[4] Thank you to the anonymous referee whose generous and insightful suggestions helped in clarifying this, and other points in my discussion. [return to text](#)

[5] This view challenges Freud’s conception of ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ mourning as a more bounded experience, as explained in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917), although he significantly modified this conception in later work, such as ‘The Ego and the Id’ (1923). Watkin also contrasts Bowlby’s conception of mourning as metonymical proximity to loss, with the notion of metaphorical distance from loss, in reference to elegies which trope and totalise the lost other in the effort to recover from loss (Watkin 2004: 190). [return to text](#)

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Ruby Todd is a writer of prose and poetry, with a PhD in Creative Writing and Literary Theory from Deakin University, where she teaches. Her current research investigates the connections between elegy, ethics and ecology.

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text@textjournal.com.au**