Josie Arnold

The liminal and apophatic voice of the writer in/as autobiography: a subjective academic narrative

Abstract

In this paper, I engage with Roland Barthes' The grain of the voice (1985) to move into a discussion of the apophatic or liminal unknowable voice of the scriptor. The narrative of self claims a reality rather than a fictionality. Yet in a text proclaimed as an autobiography, there are multiple authorial voices available for the reader to obtain, just as there are multiple prisms that readers bring to the text itself. Critical elements emerge in the writing and the reading of an autobiographer. This paper does not accept the contention that a 'subject writer' engages an 'object reader' in the recorded life that aims to seduce the reader. Rather, it proposes the production of a liminal voice that is apparent to the reader, but unknowable for the writer. It looks at how the subjective self reveals itself through performance rather than self-analysis that is a type of translation of self on to the page. The Greek words 'apophasis' and 'liminal' are investigated in relationship to the proclaimed autobiographic text. The apophatic is shown as a way of indicating what is both said and kept away from saying yet indicated in the text, the liminal as being on the threshold of the expressed text. Both challenge views of textuality and discourse to deal with Roland Barthes' idea of the 'death of the author as god' that enlivens the role of the reader. The subjective academic narrative is the methodology I describe, apply and exemplify.

'Theory must lead to practice, and at every point in theory there must be the thought of practice' (Barthes 1985: 203)

Introduction

I am using the words 'apophatic' and 'liminal' here because they open up for me a consideration of what I would like to identify as a 'sous-voice' in writing autobiography. Apophatic reading means to me, in the context of this paper, that we enter into an engagement with the text that is both allusive and elusive. The liminal is the space that describes something that is between the known (where we are) and the unknown (where we are entering). The liminal is a threshold that, in the context of this paper, places both the writer and the reader between states of certainty.

Reginald Gibbons (2007: 19) states that the Roman poet Catullus saw apophasis as an allusion that denies what is mentioned. Such a denial is textually available and is able to be detected by the reader quite directly. Applying this to autobiographical writing, I suggest in this paper that such an allusion is an authorial voice that can be detected by the astute reader, not the

'authoritative' voice the author seems determined upon as a translation of her or his subjective performative life on to the page. It performs, as it were, a sous-voice that brings forward a grain of the voice (Barthes 1985) that is not necessarily unintended by the writer, but that is nevertheless essentially unknowable to her or him. In this way it may be described as both apophatic and liminal. Just as the apophatic is mysterious, so too the liminal exists in the space that is the entry into the idea: the threshold.

In Melbourne's grainy but upwardly-mobile Smith Street, only lately the haunt largely of the drugged and/or downtrodden, I was dining with friends. Opposite the Japanese restaurant, I saw in a second-hand bookshop window this book: Roland Barthes' *The grain of the voice*. I lusted after it. I demanded to read it. At my request (maybe demand), a friend who teaches in that area bought it for me that week for the princely sum of \$10, and I devoured it.

What I found in reading this book was once again the opportunity to walk around another's mind and to be set off on a path that I might not otherwise have seen, much less taken.

Barthes speaks of his four 'regimes' as a writer: I, He, You, and RB (1985: 216). These are all consciously perceived and understood-to-be voices that he produces as a writer and recognises as a reader of his own work. It is, perhaps, yet another 'voice' that engages my attention: that which we as readers bring to our inner ear from what we read that comes out of the text. Yet, it would seem, this voice is an unintended echo of the scriptor's voice and an unintended relationship with the listener/reader from both the scriptor's and readers' positions.

In his lecture on transcription, 'From speech to writing', Barthes offers us the opportunity to question whether or not speech is 'embalmed' when it is turned into writing. In doing so, he reminds us that speech is not 'innocent', but is itself interred(?) in cultural influences' (1985: 3-7). Furthermore, he asserts that as 'all the watered silk of our image-repertoire, the personal play of ourself; speech is dangerous because it is immediate and cannot be taken back ... scription, however has plenty of time' (1985: 4). He further considers speech as having eruptions that expose the thought behind what we are saying as part of saying it: he calls these 'expletives of thought' that are 'often sparing' in writing (1985: 4).

In discussing the liminal and apophatic in relationship to autobiography, I am reading both with and against the text of the identified and identifiable self. The relationship of writing and inscription is important in autobiography, as it claims to be the guaranteed voice of the author herself or himself. Autobiography almost always reads as a seductive speech-situation in which private discourse occurs between the autobiographer (a self and cultural voyeur), and the voyeur-reader. This is what makes the autobiographic genre particular: it is also the most elusive and illusory reality, as all autobiographies rely upon unreliable memory and particular views of the personal, interpersonal and cultural landscapes.

Reading autobiography as the voyeur-reader, it is all too easy to be seduced (traded?) by the dominance of the authorial voice/experience/ownership. The identification of the unspoken presence of the sous-voice that can only be seen/heard through the readers' prisms/sensitivities works against this formalised reading without denying its power. This sous-voice speaks in the threshold between the known and given that the author offers, and the unknown but felt that the reader may feel echoing somewhere below the stated. It is both

able to be inferred by the reader, not implied by the scriptor, and so apophatic; and a point of entry, and so liminal.

Methodology: subjective academic narrative

Over the late 20th and early 21st centuries there has been a growing realisation on the part of scholars that there is no need to establish a dichotomy between concrete conditions and abstract knowledge. It became commonplace to understand and read/write everything (architecture, dress, health, culture, science, for example) as a 'text'. In this way, Roland Barthes (1977) confronted the authority of the writer and disrupted the accepted mode of authorship to declare famously that the author as god was dead and that no text of any kind could come to life without the active interpretations of individual readers coming from particular times, places and cultural environs.

From this we have the interesting paradox of the 'writerly-reader', the person who co-authors the text by bringing it to life through the act of reading. Thus the established 'authority' of such quantitative domination of research that came about through the Cartesian binary is challenged, and even dismissed. In writing autobiography, we are in effect reading our lives to produce a text to be read by others who are enlivened by it and who bring it back to life through the act of reading.

Such attitudes to textuality and discourse are not confined to literature. For example, James Aurell proposes that postmodern approaches by historians 'result in more self-conscious autobiographies which are, paradoxically, often more revealing of the epistemological nature of life writing, historiographical tendencies, and of the very nature of the very nature of authorial intervention itself' (Aurell 2006: 434) than are traditional 'constructionist' approaches that claim an objectivity by the very concerns noted of a fear of 'loss of objectivity', and a fear of the impact upon their standing as historians of 'the blatant exposure of their ideological tendencies, religious beliefs, or political opinions' in autobiography (Aurell 2006: 436-37). Aurell goes on to disagree with this attitude, saying that autobiographical detail should not devalue historians' works. Rather, he posits that:

our knowledge of the historians' past through his or her personal narrative gives us multilayered insights into the processes and perspectives that governed the writing of that text ... by stressing the act of writing, we understand how even professedly unbiased accounts are subject to the rules of narrative and the experiential positions of writers. (Aurell 2006: 437)

Taking 'textuality and discourse' as a generality even further, Jacques Derrida indicates that everything in a culture is a construction and can be most fruitfully understood when it is 'read against' or 'deconstructed' to show its constituent parts. His work is extremely influential in opening up challenges to societal and cultural givens and norms. The influence of Derrida can be seen in the problematisation of certainties and/as traditional academic discourses (Derrida 1978). Mary Midgely sees part at least of the problem of a false binary between concrete and abstract ways of knowing as being due to the inappropriate application of Enlightenment ways or 'imperialistic ideologies' of validating knowledge to aspects of being, thinking and knowing that are other aspects of knowledge and ways of knowing altogether (Midgely 2004: 21).

Following these ideas and also Gregory Ulmer's idea of a 'mystory', I bring to this reading for/of the apophatic and liminal voice in autobiography my personal observations and reactions as well as my academic reading and thinking. Ulmer (1985) identifies a 'mystorical' approach to thinking and research. A 'mystory' puts under erasure all claims to fact/authenticity in writing. It shows all writing to be both personal and mysterious (my story and mystery) whatever its claims to authenticity and depersonalisation. It reveals the academic text to be sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical. It questions the dominant analytico-referential model of knowledge. At the same time it accords with much late 20th and early 21st century thinking about the self, the culture and even the world as a text to be constructed and read.

Thus the idea of a 'mystory' moves us outside the traditional boundaries of academic knowledge. Jane Gallop discusses how, for Jacques Derrida, the purpose of the 'exorbitant' in academic theorizing is revealed by the word's own etymology. It comes from the Latin 'ex' meaning 'out of or from' and 'orba' meaning the 'usual route'. Hence the 'exorbitant' is not boundaried and held in submission by the usual. It is something that pushes the boundaries of the known to enable extension (Gallop 2002: 9). For Derrida, the purpose of the 'exorbitant' in academic theorizing is revealed by the word's own etymology. It comes from the latin 'ex' meaning 'out of or from' and the 'orba' meaning the 'usual route'. Hence the 'exorbitant' is not boundaried and held in submission by the usual. It is something that pushes the boundaries of the known to enable extension (Gallop 2002: 9).

Reading Barthes' *The grain of the voice* in a way that pushes boundaries towards my interpretation is unsafe: it is 'exorbitant'. The manner in which this paper is written is through the prism of what Jane Gallop (2002) has termed 'anecdotal theory'. This also pushes accepted knowledge boundaries: this, too, is 'exorbitant'. Writing in this way contributes to anecdotal theory in practice. This is an attempt to have a theoretical perspective that engages and enriches in an 'exorbitant' manner, and not to have a theoretical perspective that leads to barriers of academic language, intent and research boundaries related more to the natural sciences than to life stories: 'our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play of language, since dynamic rather than fixed forms seem more to our liking' (Gallop 2002: 1).

Gallop proposes that 'anecdotal theory' is a feminist activity that enables non-patriarchal ways of thinking and doing academic work. It aims to 'tie theorizing to lived experience ... anecdotal theory must be ... the juncture where theory finds itself compelled - against its will, against its projects - to think where it has been forced to think' (Gallop 2002: 15).

Indeed, Gallop forces us to consider theory itself as an act of power that disempowers others. bell hooks agrees: 'I am constantly amazed at how difficult it is to cross borders in this white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal society' (hooks 2006: 6). It is not, she avers, an act of will, but social privilege that enables such border crossing; it relies upon material, educational and cultural advantage that privileges individuals. Her aim is to establish how borders can be crossed by others (the 'non-us' of 'them and us') who enact multicultural and colonized backgrounds of repression so that there is freedom of movement available to all who desire to enact it.

My own conceptual methodological attitude has formed within this academic debate about knowledge, the idea of 'the subjective academic narrative' as underpinning my academic writing. An understanding of the personal nature of

all 'stories', whatever genre or structure has impacted upon all forms of knowledge. Barthes states that:

There is a very dangerous ideological prejudice that must be dealt with, the belief that literature *lies* and that knowledge is divided between disciplines that tell the truth and others that are, then, considered disciplines of fiction, amusement and vanity. 'Literature' does not tell the truth, but truth is not to be found only where there are no lies (there are other sites for truth, if only the unconscious): the opposite of lying is not necessarily telling the truth. The question must be shifted: what is important is not to elaborate and disseminate knowledge about literature (in 'literary histories') but to show literature to be a mediator of knowledge ... It's banal to say that knowledge has a relation to science, but science is plural today: there is not one science, the old dream of the nineteenth century has collapsed. (1985: 237)

Reading and discourse and/as liminal and apophatic

Perhaps both the liminal and the apophetic are best demonstrated in religious discourse. Religion looks at holy spaces outside the everyday that are the threshold of the unattainable presence, and utilises allusive ritual as more than bonding: it also enters into the elusive mysteries themselves. It is the place of engagement between the god/s and women and men; it is the space between the things of this world and the other/next.

For example, in discussing the creation myth of the Makiritare Indians, Heatherly Bucher states that there are two forms of language: the sacred and the profane. The sacred 'is governed by strict ritualistic rules and is relayed in a strange language very different from everyday speech' (Bucher 2001: 29). Such stories are not directly autobiographical in the western sense, but they do bring people together, by constructing identity overtly and also through the reading of each individual of this text that situates the people within the luminous state of knowing and not knowing (Bucher 2001: 30). Ritual, then, that is present and known without explication, is a space in which we might develop an understanding of these ideas.

Bucher discusses how the postmodernist attitude to textuality and discourse is explained by Maurice Blanchot as 'the work' that is beyond the text itself (Bucher 2001: 31). He describes it as an intimacy between the writer and the reader. This is the intimacy that I am exploring in reading this particular book of Roland Barthes. This sous-voice 'grain of the voice' has not been identified in Barthes' writing in this book, but I can/ have identified it as a reader. Thus Barthes has led me as a reader from a known space that he identifies as a scriptor into another space between the known and what might be.

It is in this area of intimacy that we may begin to understand the apophetic and the liminal that I am proposing as another 'voice' of the writer made available through the aware and sensitive prismatic reading of the reader. This reader is open to the intimate details that form the sous-voice of the autobiography in a way of knowing/reading that is not available to the writer. I suggest that this sous-voice is in what Bucher calls 'the space between the reader and the writer' (2001: 31), and which I see as made visible by the reader rather like adding lemon juice to discern the secret writing of spies or children.

So I am suggesting that, as it is the reader who brings the text to life, the reader may identify a sous-voice that is not available to the writer as writer or as reader of her/his own work. Any text is inert until it is co-constructed with the reader, the text and the scriptor in a transmogrifying state. By this I mean that the reader makes the text anew on the basis of what is there, what is brought to it, and what is found hidden within it. The reader is not the original scriptor, but neither is the text the authorial document: it is remade anew at each reading for/by each reader.

When Caitlin Farren engages in trying to discover some authentic self or selves in writing autobiographically, she find herself and hence her voice to be multiple voices, 'the product of countless influences, micro and macro, explorable and mysterious' (Farren 2005: 42). This identification of voice, I propose, is still within an authorial reading. The liminal and apophetic sous-voice that I am proposing in this paper is not.

Every autobiography is a construction from unreliable memory, but this is not the sous-voice or the liminal space. In his discussion of self-schema, Peter Clements investigates the unreliability of memory in autobiographical writing:

memory recreation is such a complex phenomenon that exact recreation in the sense, say, that we can call up a piece of work stored in a computer and it will always be exactly as we last left it is impossible ... we remember events as we would like them to be remembered, perhaps showing ourselves in the best light, perhaps making more of our contribution, perhaps altering the record to enhance our own role. (Clements 2001: 31)

Reading for acceptance of the liminal and apophatic voice discerns and reveals this, but its task is something other than identifying the unreliability of memory. Rather, perhaps, it enables the insinuated and implied to be identified by/with the reader.

Autobiography as currency

Barthes (1985) describes books as a currency. This metaphor might best be taken in a literal Keynesian sense (Skidelsky 1983) so as to mean that books circulate widely at different values at different times. That is, they are only able to be utilised by a non-authoritative reader because the sense of the author controlling the readers is unacceptable. How currency is used depends upon the skills of the person using it, not upon the value given to it by the government, as inflation and deflation so sadly exhibit. The metaphor Barthes supplies here also challenges the view of the book as holding materials that must be valued: this is readily illustrated by the chained Bible in mediaeval churches, but can also be seen in most libraries, particularly reference libraries.

In looking at the body of work of an author, Barthes further disrupts the authorial grasp over the text: a writer 'must consider his past texts as if they were the work of another, which he takes up, cites, or deforms as he would a multitude of other signs' (1985: 128). The cultural and personal constructions of self are indivisible, they rely upon the acceptance of the text as a tissue of quotations rather than a series of givens. Thus in autobiography we may meet the constructed self, we may act to deconstruct it from our readerly position that is co-writerly, or we may act to reconstruct it from our own prismatic viewpoint.

Barthes says that 'there is an 'infinity of narratives in the world' (1985: 49). These lead to our stories being told as autobiography in print, which is somewhat different from speaking our stories. There is a need to identify self and to understand self by writing to contextualise the now from the past to the future. Autobiography permits a journey into self not only through one's own prism and experiences, one's own construction of self, but also through reflecting upon this as it relates to others involved in the autobiography as well as to those who may read it. For autobiography is not innocent: it wants to make an effect. It certainly takes us to people and places that we might never otherwise even know existed.

Perhaps autobiography is intrinsically what Barthes calls 'apparently naïve and actually quite devious' (1985: 50). An aspect to consider here is how the autobiographer addresses the people and times of the past from the present to influence people from past, present and future. Perhaps this is a devious and manipulative act rather than a collaborative one. We might also consider how the autobiographer might use the autobiographic text as a place to relieve psychic pressures rather than to accrue self-knowledge and insight. The author is privileged in autobiography in a very direct fashion.

Many autobiographical writers state that they are recording their lives so that the truthful reconstruction of a time, place and people, and the true personality of self, may be recorded. Yet, as Barthes states, we are all constructed through and by our cultural underlying ideologies. For him, 'Ideology permeates all of society, even language; it has no territorial privilege granting judgement from some point outside itself' (1985: 109). If there is no anterior position, then it is impossible to reconstruct one's life in a disinterested manner.

In a sense the liminal and apophatic are spaced between the currency and the purchase. They offer us another way in which to develop understandings of the constructions of a text by the unconscious and subconscious elements that the writer brings to it, and the reader discerns through her or his own subjective self.

Autobiography and/as objects of desire

How do autobiographies place themselves as objects of desire for a reader? Part of this is surely the work of self-voyeurism that the author undertakes, but further, it is this desire to find out other's secrets that the reader carries into the text. Barthes says that 'one should read in desirous anticipation of what a text will be' (1985: 112).

Paradoxically enough, Barthes speaks with great authority about his four 'voices' as though that 'desirous anticipation of what a text will be' has already been anticipated by the scriptor and already directs the reader. The sous-voice, however, inserts itself between the self and the desire for both scriptor and reader, or, more properly perhaps, 'the readerly-writer'. Yet the reader may not see the text as an object of desire for the sous-voice to reveal itself to/through herself or himself. Rather (as the proliferation of reality shows and MyFace entries may reveal) a 'subjective' autobiographic genre seems to appeal and convince more than 'objective' social reality presented as knowledge through social 'givens', statistical analyses and data collections.

This is true of self as a lived autobiography, too. It is particularly apposite when we draw together the lived experience with academic knowledge. Narrative nonfiction is something that many thinkers state is the basis of all academic writing, whatever genre it claims to be (Ulmer; Midgely; Gallop). Barthes says

that he wants to write 'within what I have called "the novelistic without the novel", the novelistic without its characters: a writing life which could perhaps rejoin a certain moment of my own life' (1985: 130). In doing so, he disputes genre and thus opens up possibilities for research methodologies to develop as narratives, auto-ethnographies, or what I call 'the subjective academic narrative'.

The narrative framing of autobiography establishes the angle of perception and gives a certain reality to the described social and personal conditions of the times it describes. Barthes says, 'if the level of perception is changed, so is the object' (1985: 134). For VS Naipaul, there is a sterner reality wherein the novel is such an intrinsically European form and voice, shaped by imperialism, industry, mass literacy and so on, that in India it 'could deal well with externals of things' but would too often 'miss their terrible essence' (Naipaul 2003: xiv). Perhaps it is in autobiography that we most readily reach the 'terrible essence' of the human condition, 'terrible' in this sense being 'aweful': full of/exciting awe. A line from the Magnificat (Luke 1: 46-55) in the Gospel comes to mind: 'terrible as an army dressed in battle array'.

Autobiography: pleasure and pain

Facing the blank page is both satisfying and terrifying. It is satisfying because one thinks that the inscriptions thereon are important, and terrifying because one is challenged to make those important inscriptions. Writing is a lonely and often thankless task as publication is far from assured, even for well-established writers. It is, as Barthes describes it, both hard and lonely work: 'To write is a pleasure, but a difficult pleasure at the same time because it must span zones of very hard work, with the risks that that entails: the longings and threats of idleness, the temptations to abandon work, fatigues, revolts' (1985: 344). While autobiography mines the self and does not depend upon the imagination in the same way as literary fiction, it does have the added burden of self-revelation within a context that directly names and involves family, friends, colleagues, workplaces and institutions. I am adding to that burden in identifying a sous-voice that is unable to be controlled self-revelation.

Most writers describe their work as 'giving birth'; I myself have given birth to three children and over 50 books. I do agree that there is a valid comparison here, although I would rather not give birth to over 50 children. It interests me that this birth comparison also comes regularly from men who do not physically give birth. Barthes expresses this thus: 'Writing is creation, and to that extent it is also a form of procreation. It's a way of struggling, of dominating the feeling of death and complete annihilation. ... when one writes one scatters seeds' (1985: 365). I see inherent in Barthes' scattering seed the idea of coming to birth, growth and fruition.

Such seed-scattering is done by publication and, when it is autobiography, it is done for multiple reasons that include drawing the reader into the illuminated and confessed subjective experience. If this is confessional then, as Gill expresses it, such a 'confession' is a 'shared rather than private act: it is a reciprocal process, a form of dialogue, and a writerly/readerly exchange ... it appropriates a number of deliberate and effective strategies in order to ensure that it obtains a reading' (Gill 2001: 90). I think that this is so for the publication of autobiography, which is a rich vein for publishers to mine because the readers are drawn into the other's experience and hence expand their own.

We are all storytellers by virtue of being human beings. We write because we have become a highly literate society and because writing enframes the voice within another more general and less temporal construct. We also write because we must: because we have something that we want to say. Günter Grass says that writers are 'required by their profession to exploit themselves'; after writing his many novels he hoped 'to have cleaned the system out, written oneself empty' (Grass 2008: 292). Autobiographers have many reasons to write, but this description seems to me to be a very fitting one.

The apophatic and liminal space, however, is rather more like the Aegean stables: it cannot be 'cleaned out' because it is not a work of the subjective self. Indeed, the consciousness of the sriptor is replaced by the attention to echoes, insinuations, the unsaid, the said that is unintended: all of these 'readings' that the reader may identify.

Writing self into being

What are some of the issues of writing yourself into being through autobiography? Is one of them a sense of style? If so, how might this be considered in a subtextual unconscious 'sous-voice' such as the one I am identifying/pursuing? Barthes says that 'style is a beginning of writing, in that it is a rejection of *écriture*: to accept style means that one refuses to consider language as a pure instrument of transmission, and that is the beginning of writing' (1985: 139).

Yet voice in writing is both this and more than this, for we adapt our sriptors' voice so as to perform for an ideal audience. Caitlin Farren says: 'my many I's, the different aspects of my personality/personalities that emerge at various times, are illustrated in the fact that I communicate differently depending on the social situation' (2005: 41). This is a conscious adaptation, but there is much in a writer's voice that comes forth, as it were, out of our control.

Farren refers to this when she says that 'from birth, my society, community, and genes have helped to form what I now refer to as my personal voice. In this way, it is not entirely personal, but instead a mirror of the world' (2005: 41). The disclosure of the self that she identifies as part of the act of autobiography is more than this conscious realisation. As we read, we are aware of meeting a scriptorial voice that introduces aspects of the writer that do not strike the ear and the eye as being intentional or even known. That is to say, the complexity of reading is enhanced rather than simplified when we begin to look at the various regimes identifiable in writing; this is particularly so in autobiography, which claims a particular personal transparency of the writer.

As readers we all need to address 'the question of whether one can learn to read or not to read or to not read or to reread texts outside of academic and social conditioning' (Barthes 1985: 141). 'The reader is not passive' (Morgan 1999: 338). Again, this is particularly so of autobiography as it confronts the linear critical consciousness that underpins the teaching of reading and the physical construction of western texts in what Barthes calls 'scientificity'.

While the conscious writer may well outplay this 'scientificity', is it possible for the writer to outplay her or his unconscious self in this sense of voice that I am investigating here? Barthes affirms that writing always has the potential to be a revolutionary act: 'the main problem - for me at least - is to foil the signified, thwart the law, baffle the father, frustrate repression - I don't mean explode it, but to *outplay* it' (1985: 145). However, a conscious act of outplaying the known does not identify the unconscious voice as a powerful attribute of the

writer's work. Perhaps this revolutionary aspect of textuality and discourse for the writer - and hence for the reader who after all brings any text back to life from its inert status upon a shelf - is best identified in the 'illegible' book: 'the death of the book would correspond to the exclusive reign of the readerly, legible book and the total defeat of the "illegible" book' (1985: 147). If this 'illegible' book transcends the givens, then looking more deeply into voice may contribute to its revolutionary attributes. The point that Barthes is making is related to outplaying the givens. This also relates to what I call the unconscious voice, which is available to the attentive reader.

These revolutionary aspects are familiar to writers, and well expressed by Naipaul when he says that 'To write was to learn. Beginning a book, I always felt I was in possession of all the facts about myself; at the end I was always surprised' (2003: 67). For me, this perfectly describes the reader as well as the writer: we are always surprised about what we learn about ourselves after we have read a book.

As a writer and reader in the academy, I see the methodology of the 'subjective academic self' as also in a liminal space between the known and accepted academic 'voice' and the ways in which narrativity may be employed in academic nonfiction.

Autobiography & enculturation

Roland Barthes' 'regimes of writing' are themselves subject to enculturation. This is also true, of course, for all textuality and discourse whether from the scriptors' or the writerly-readers' perspectives. Barthes says that: 'We are all, especially when we write, *interpretable* beings, but it is the other, and never ourselves, who possess the power of interpretation' (1985: 192).

It is clear that autobiography arises from external as well as internal influences and insights. Take, for example, our everyday streets as an influential text: 'we have a right of access to texts that are not printed as texts ... by learning to read the text and fabric of life, of the street' (Barthes 1985: 149): that is, the relationship of built spaces with social practices influences autobiography and writerly voice. The streets form a text that is available to us all to read, yet we almost always take them for granted. Yet they, as cultural metanarratives, have much to inform us. When we apply techniques of critical literary and cultural analyses, streets provide an urban discourse of many-layered complexity.

Streets are both objects of desire and promises of ways to reach our objects of desire. Framed architecturally, they are placarded with relentless messages. They stream cars that we would love to own alongside those that we do and those that we despise. They embed cultural notions and values. Demographics are dominated by the streets and dominate them in turn. When we visit foreign streets, we become aware of ourselves in different ways. This is particularly so when these streets are in countries that are outside our cultural and social knowledge, for, as Barthes says: 'Culture is a fate to which we are all condemned' (1985: 153). The fate of culture is pertinent to the lack of cultural literacy as it occludes our vision of other cultures unless we erase these givens.

Grass provides a clear example of the implications of this when, in young Nazi re-education camp after the war, he is shown black-and-white pictures of Bergen-Belsen, Ravensbruck:

I saw the piles of corpses, the ovens; I saw the starving and the starved, the skeletal bodies of the survivors from another

world. I couldn't believe it.
 'You mean Germans did that?' we kept asking.
 'Germans couldn't have done that.'
 'Germans don't do that.'
 And among ourselves we said, 'Propaganda. Pure propaganda.'
 (2008: 195-96)

At the same time as reading this as a genuine general belief in German culture articulated by Grass, I as a reader also identify a self-regarding plaintive sous-voice rather than one recognising what has happened in his own culture and society.

'I think we are victimized by cultural stereotypes' (Barthes 1985: 354). Autobiography provides us with the possibility of transcending such a fate of cultural condemnation. Through exercising critical consciousness, we may find a space that enables us to speak/read from outside our cultural constructedness. This requires hard work: 'it's one thing to become aware of ideology, to dissect it is another: subtlety and intelligence are required' (Barthes 1985: 160). Furthermore, such a critical consciousness may enable us to identify more than the sounds of the voice; more than the apparent, the given. This requires an acute readerly ear for, as Barthes says: 'we rarely listen to a voice *en soi*, in itself, we listen to what it says' (1985: 183). In this paper, I am proposing that while we can listen to the writerly voice *en soi* as well as to what it says, the *en soi* is also the place of threshold and inference for the sous-voice to identify itself/be identified.

In autobiography, the writer is making claims to historical veracity via personal insights dredged from unreliable memory, some of which may be able to be cross-checked through documents, interviews or other historical or personal publications. As Barthes says: 'For a writer, nothing is more difficult than obtaining a precise idea of his own role and image: your image comes to you only in fragments, and it's almost impossible to know precisely what happens to the work you do' (1985: 202). If this is so for writing that does not claim its autobiographical nature, whatever its genre-claims, how much more so must it be for autobiography?

Autobiography is/as pleasure, pain, and bliss

I myself as the scriptor of a memoir have been subject to the reader quite directly. I found great pleasure in writing myself into being after my publisher, Gary Eastman of Dove Communications, asked me in 1985 to write an autobiography on growing up as a Catholic girl. The pain came later. Once *Mother superior, woman inferior* (1985) was published, I had nowhere to hide from the various people who were entranced by it. Therein lay pleasure. But there were some people, some within my own family, who were affronted by it. Therein lay the pain. Barthes states that:

Pleasure is linked to a conscience of the self, of the subject, which is assured in values of comfort, relaxation, ease - and, for me, that's the entire realm of reading the classics, for example. On the contrary, bliss is the system of reading, or utterance, through which the subject, instead of establishing itself, is lost, experiencing that expenditure which is, properly speaking, bliss. (1985: 206)

For me there is perhaps a weak remnant of bliss in having written a classic tale of a fatherless and poverty-stricken 1940s childhood and 1950s girlhood in

Australia.

Those within my family were quick to point out that I had certain 'facts' completely 'wrong'. Defensively, I was just as quick to say that this was my story and if they had another viewpoint then they could write their own. The ways in which we apprehend and construct our individual worlds are both individually multiple and culturally enclosed. We construct narrative sequences and build in our own beginnings and endings (Fishman 1981: 25), but this sense of authorial control is always under challenge by the very transience of the self, the very pressures of time, space and history: 'there is no relationship of resemblance between the signifier and the signified ... significance is the regime of meaning' (Barthes 1985: 209).

Perhaps the most painful pleasure occurred for me as an autobiographer when readers who knew me personally and/or professionally assured me that I had been 'terribly brave'. What did they mean? What had I said that I had not recognised as bravery? This is what I have called the 'sous-voice': that which the author demonstrates but cannot read. That sous-voice told a story about my story about my life that was quite different from what I then saw as my realistic memory trail. Writerly-readers read my sous-voice (that which is not available to me) as well as what I was actually writing and they found what I was saying to be much more revelatory about me than I had envisaged, planned, or represented as self. This, I think, exemplifies my own experiences of the liminal and apophatic in autobiographic texts/discourse.

This utterance of self is seen by Barthes as something that cannot be predicated upon language and expression:

Linguistics ... and ... other human sciences ... are incapable of putting into question their own type of utterance, their own mode of discourse ... utterance is affected by ... ideology and the awareness of ideology, and the unconscious and an awareness of the unconscious. (1985: 212)

Perhaps the writerly-readers always make the autobiography their own, just as they always make the text subject to the prism of their own life experiences, times and culture. Barthes reads to 'deform the book for my own purposes' (1985: 221). Is every act of reading an act of deformation that can lead to reformation just as deconstruction leads to reconstruction? If the reader is the co-writer, then the book is not as intended by the author; but surely that does not lead to deformity of the text? Rather, for me, it leads to an enrichment that takes the text into new domains and times.

Autobiography/literature as fictional truth

When people write overtly about themselves, the rather discriminatory and negative term of 'confessional writing', which Joanna Gill states is 'immensely popular' (2001: 82) is too often applied. Gill says of confessional writing that it contains 'the compelling dialectic between fascination and revulsion, sympathy and horror, guilt and relief; the desire to look coupled with the reluctance to know the truth' (2001: 81).

Is autobiography a 'confessional text', or does it participate in the basic thrust of all writing: fictional truth? This is, of course, more apparent in the genre of fiction, but once we dispose of this as discrete and see all writing as both factual and fictional, then we can enable autobiography as a 'fictional truth'. Autobiography, although claiming to be 'realistic', is as fictional as all other

forms of writing. Does it participate in what is currently termed as the 'emotional pornography' (Gill 2001: 82) of confessional writing which is inherently and somehow merely termed as voyeurism alone?

While all writing is a story, we have enabled a freedom from 'reality' through the assignment of 'fictional' to literature. I believe that fiction does embrace truths that are an inherent aspect of the human condition because such truths are incapable of being dealt with from a 'realistic' viewpoint. These may embrace death, relationships, hatred, anger, and all of those aspects of self we might identify in *Frankenstein* or *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. After all, 'rationality cannot work properly without emotion' (Turner 2008: 41).

Umberto Eco has a very interesting take on this. That is, that 'the universe of literature' serves a moral function through allowing an externalised yet intimate and personal examination of truth. He states that:

the wretches who roam around aimlessly and kill people by throwing stones from a highway bridge or setting fire to a child ... turn out this way ... because they are excluded from the universe of literature and from those places where, through education and discussion, they might be reached by a glimmer from the world of values that stems from and sends us back again to books. (Eco 2006: 4)

Send more criminals or would-be-criminals to libraries from babyhood: a neat and cheap policing.

Autobiography and/as voyeurism

Much is said about the relationship of writers to readers in textual production; but the real influence is the publisher and hence what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944) have nominated as 'the culture industry' with its 'iron system'. Barthes assumes that publishing somehow automatically follows the writing, but this is not so. Publishers' lists are determined by committees that take into account sales performances. For Barthes, there is an unrealistic power of the text itself: 'There is nowadays a kind of peremption or suppression of the traditional writing genres, but this protean situation has not been closely followed by the publishing business, which still needs and relies on traditional classifications' (1985: 327). Barthes seems to think that merely to write a text is to have it published and hence made subject to genre. Publication is more elusive than that, and genre has serious commercial applications underpinning publication. Classification is central to sales. The bookshop is detailed by categorisation that enables the readers to buy what they like to read as well as to browse the labelled shelves beyond their usual reading. Were this not so, how could a bookshop enable sales?

Gill supports this in her study of emotional texts or 'confessional writing'. She sees these 'new confessional memoirs' as being commercially crafted to meet a public interest/demand:

the texts themselves knowingly, and skilfully, anticipate, engage with and finally assuage the anxieties of their readers in order to ensure their own successful reading ... such memoirs are not the outpourings of 'naked emotions' but rather are supremely crafted with the reader's pleasure - and thus continued reading - in mind. (Gill 2001: 82)

In considering such texts, Gill states that we do not read them as voyeurs into another's pain and suffering, but are 'reading a textualization, a mediation, a narrative of experience, and our attention is solicited in strategic and self-conscious ways ... our presence is, in every sense of the word, authorized' (2001: 83). Thus voyeurism is allayed through invitation. In the context of this paper, this does not involve only the exteriorised self: it also involves the revelation of what I have called the 'sous-voice' which cannot be 'authorized' as it is not overtly available to the writer but arises from the ear, experiences, feelings, insights, critical capacities, cultural background (etc) of the reader. It is the result of careful and close reading, but it is also more than that.

Reading and writing are intertwined, but it is seldom noticed sufficiently that the glue that holds them together are the interdependent culture industries of publishing and book selling, so Gill's comments are extremely apposite. 'When one writes, one thinks a good deal about how the text will be received' (1985: 330).

This is surely particularly so of autobiography. Barack Obama's autobiographical text is a good example of this. I found his sous-voice to be one of dissidence, anti-white supremacy and even for black power. It is not something that he would broadcast today as president of the United States of America:

Later, I would realize that the position of most black students in predominately white colleges was already too tenuous, our identities too scrambled, to admit to ourselves that our black pride remained incomplete. And to admit our doubt and confusion to whites, to open up our psyches to general examination by those who caused so much of the damage in the first place, seemed ludicrous, in itself an expression of self-hatred - for there seemed to be no reason to expect that whites would look at our private struggles as a mirror into their own souls, rather than yet more evidence of black pathology. (Obama 2004: 193)

This passage stands on the threshold of the revelation of his black anger. It states this openly, but flags that sub-tone, the liminal and apophatic, of the entire text. It was in hearing Obama's beautifully modulated and presented actual voice on the radio that I became interested in writing this paper, as I found that I heard repressed anger, longing and uncertainty as his unspoken but very present sous-voice. Reading the page did not disappoint me in this realisation.

For some, finding one's voice as a writer seems then to mean finding the notes that will strike the ear of the ideal reader. Naipaul says that 'no writer, however individual his vision, could be separated from his society ... fiction ... functions best within certain fixed social boundaries' (2003: x-xi). Yet Naipaul's own writing exists in a postcolonial moment where he is separated from his own social and cultural background in time and geography.

Conclusion: the sub-voice in autobiography

Edith Turner speaks of liminality as 'dreams of how things might be, the getting inside of another's personality' (2008: 26). The autobiography aims to do this for the writer as well as the reader. In revealing the existential paradox of being, such placing of self upon the page can never be seen as an act of rationality alone, or perhaps of rationality at all. Rather, autobiography in a

liminal sense walks the rim of the opposing forces of paradox and in doing so produces energy. I have proposed that this creative energy is enhanced rather than lessened by the reader discovering the 'sous-voice'.

Perhaps this 'sous voice' that I have suggested here is an example of the text itself being under erasure. In this sense, the reader is always a translator of the writer's text so that a space is created for a readerly-writing. Autobiography may well situate readers and writers within a borderland between socially accepted situations and their own gender, race, income, experiences and perceptions (Lape 1998; Velasco 2004). This liminality is a lived cultural experience of being on the threshold. The liminality of voice in autobiography that I have entertained in this paper is the unknown and unknowable sub-textual voice of the scriptor that the reader finds within the text.

In this paper, I have proposed that a sous-voice exists in texts and is derived by the reader of the text and not known/unknowable to the writer. I address this as liminal and apophatic: the space between the inside and outside; the known and the unknown. Autobiography and memoir, which I will treat as one, are deeply informative texts that claim a veracity and an acknowledged space as a truth not available to texts proclaimed to be fictional or based upon other forms of research. Yet autobiography provides a complex interplay between self, other, time and place within the text - the personal landscape intersecting with the cultural landscape - and just as complex a relationship between the writer and reader within and even beyond the given text. This is true whether or not the autobiographical text claims this scholarly ambition and it is this concept of a sous-voice that I wished to introduce into this paper.

In writing/reading/writing Roland Barthes' book *The grain of the voice* (1985), I am not attempting to provide a persuasive structured argument about autobiography ... or, indeed about Roland Barthes' book itself. This paper uses my reading of this book as a point of departure for *my* narrative about reading this book and reacting to it. This will satisfy some readers and distress others.

List of works cited

Adorno, T and M Horkheimer 1944 *Dialectic of enlightenment*, <http://marxists.anu.edu.au/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm> (accessed 12/10/09) return to text

Arnold, J 1987 *Mother superior; woman inferior*, Melbourne: Dove Communications return to text

Aurell, J 2006 'Autobiography as unconventional history: constructing the author', *Rethinking History* 10.3: 433-49 return to text

Barthes, R 1977 *Image-Music-Text* (trans Stephen Heath), London: Fontana/Collins return to text

Barthes, R 1985 *The grain of the voice*. Interviews 1962-1980 (trans Linda Coverdale), London: Jonathan Cape return to text

Bucher, H 2001 'The act of storytelling and gender dynamics in "Kawashawa": A study of the Watunna, the Makiritare creation myth', in EH Nelson & MA Nelson (eds), *Telling the stories: essays on American Indian literatures and cultures*, New York: Peter Lang Inc, 29-38 return to text

Clements, P 1999 'Autobiographical research and the emergence of the fictive voice', *Cambridge journal of education* 29.1: 21-32 return to text

Derrida, J 1978 *Writing and difference*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul return to text

Eco, U 2006 *On literature*, London: Vintage return to text

Farren, C 2005 'A different voice, a different autobiography: letting my authentic voice speak', *Human architecture: journal of the sociology of self-knowledge* 3.1-2, Fall 2004/Spring 2005: 41-47 return to text

Fishman, J 1981 'Enclosures: the narrative within autobiography', *Journal of advanced composition* 11.1-2: 23-29 return to text

Gallop, J 2002 *Anecdotal theory*, Durham NC: Duke University Press return to text

Gibbons, R 2007 'On apophatic poetics', *American poetry review* 36.6, Nov/Dec: 19-23 return to text

Gill, J 2001 'Someone else's misfortune: the vicarious pleasures of the confessional text', *Journal of popular culture* 35.1, Summer: 81-93 return to text

Grass, G 2008 *Peeling the onion*, London: Vintage Books return to text

hooks, b 2006 *Outlaw culture*, New York: Routledge return to text

Lape, NG 1998 "'I would rather be with my people, but not live with them as they live": Cultural liminality and double consciousness in Sarah Winnemucca Hopkin's *Life among the Piutes: their wrongs and claims*', *American Indian quarterly* 22: 258-62 return to text

Midgely, M 2004 *The myths we live by*, Oxon and New York: Routledge return to text

Morgan, S 1999 'Prison lives: critical issues in reading prisoner autobiography', *The Howard journal of criminal justice* 38.3, August: 328-41 return to text

Naipaul, VS 2003 *Literary occasions. Essays*, London: Picador return to text

Obama, B 2004 *Dreams from my father*, Melbourne: Text return to text

Skidelsky, R 1983 *John Maynard Keynes. Hopes betrayed 1883-1920*, London: Macmillan return to text

Turner, E 2008 'Exploring the work of Victor Turner: liminality and its later implications', *Suomen Antropologi: journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 33.4, Winter: 26-44 return to text

Ulmer, G 1985 *Teletheory: grammatology in the age of video*, New York: Routledge return to text

Velasco, J 2004 'Automitografias: the Border paradigm and Chicana/o autobiography', *Biography* 27: 313-37 return to text

Keywords: autobiographical narrative; the writer's voice; threshold insights; subjective academic narrative

Dr Josie Arnold is the inaugural Professor of Writing at Swinburne University of Technology. She has taught for 45 years and has had over 45 books published in a number of genres including poetry, film, drama CD-ROM and curriculum. She is currently writing a series of magic games-based books for pre-teenagers. Her research is focussed upon the practical implications of critical and cultural theories. As both a writer and an academic, she is engaged in research into culture and globalisation, and has published on cyber issues. She is particularly interested in how teachers might utilise electronic deliveries to enhance teaching and learning.

Since 2002, she has set up for the online University the Master of Arts (Writing) and a Practice Led Research PhD following an artefact and exegesis model. She currently works with PhD candidates, and applies her pedagogical as well as writing and academic skills to such supervision. A recipient of several university teaching awards and an inaugural Carrick award, she still finds teaching a most rewarding occupation, seeing students as the future.

TEXT

Vol 14 No 1 April 2010

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au