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Going By 'The Way of Dispossession': Apophasis and Poetry

Abstract:

Taking the form of a lyric essay, this paper reflects on innate synergies between apophasis and the poetic process, situated within a discussion of writing and dispossession, and points out the inherent (and for a writer) apparently insurmountable irony at the heart of apophasis. Apophasis is the term for the rhetoric of negation. It is derived from the Greek words *phanai* "to say" and a prefix *apo* "which in this use means "away from" (Gibbons, 2007). For many centuries, writers across the disciplines of philosophy, theology and poetry have traditionally used apophasis when attempting to "speak of" concepts or phenomena that either resist language or lie beyond human knowledge, such as the Divine. I engage with the issue of being "lost to and for words," both from a phenomenological and poetic perspective, and I reflect on how coming up against the limits of language is, for the poet, at once desirable and problematic. Drawing from ancient and contemporary literary and theological texts such as *The Mystical Theology* by Pseudo-Dionysius, the poetry of Rumi, and the writings of Alice Notley, among others, I argue that being "lost to and for words" is a form of dispossession, though of whom, and by what, is open to conjecture. I propose apophasis as a useful framework within which to survey this conundrum, describing how it offers to a writer the potential for surprising and unexpectedly rich poetic and critical outcomes.

Biographical note:

Originally from the UK, Mags Webster is a PhD candidate at Murdoch University. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing (poetry) from City University of Hong Kong, a BA with First Class Honours in English and Creative Writing from Murdoch, and BA (Hons) in English and Drama from the University of Kent. Her poetry collection *The Weather of Tongues* (Sunline Press) won the Anne Elder Award in 2011.

Keywords:

Poetry—apophasis—language—practice—unsaying

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession (Eliot, 1974, 201)

A sheet of silver foil being shaken: the sudden sound of rain. There is a storm coming through. I have been writing for nearly an hour and my words are making neither sense nor non-sense.

I am here, alone, but hearing the hum of the computer, the burble and tick of the fridge. A bird outside, pouring its song into the afternoon, a plane overhead, scoring the storm clouds. The wind: sibilant, insistent, invisible. The gloss and shiver of leaves, making the wind visible. I, a system of vein and skin, tidal, pulsing. The chitter of the keyboard. Despite all this, there is a kind of silence. It is the one within my mind; the one that is between me and whatever comes from me.

Vowels are spaces, consonants are the sharp bits on which the sound (of meaning) snags. Whatever falls through between the word and the person writing, it catches here.

What is it that falls between the word and me?

It's without definition. Is it Nothing?

If so, what words could ever match it? Already complete and perfect in its space and infinitude, Nothing will evade any attempt I make to describe it. Were I to interpret spaces and emptiness, ascribe subjective meaning to something I perceive as resistant to words, what would I write? If I could explain why the unseen is more powerful than the seen, what would I say?

A car starts up. The dog across the road, sensitive to weather, issues a staccato of barks. The world presses in, kinesphere of light, movement, sensation and sound.

Yet despite all that, just now I belong to Silence, Stillness; I belong to Nothing. I am both lost for words and lost to words. It is unsettling, and because I think of myself as a poet, I cannot prevent myself from forcing words to redeem me.

I start building a lexis, a means of making form from this abstraction:

*negativity desert contraction unknown hidden unwritable mute negations omissions
blanks disappearance secret unwritten cancellation without unspeakable denial
lacunae doubt uncertainty withdrawal caesura unsaid loss unsayable nothing*

Maybe I am raising a wall of tropes?

*desertion nothingness silence void nullify emptiness absence rejection dispossession
erasure outwith subtraction scarce apartness space contradiction invisible evasion
censored ellipse aporia gap abyss infinite no annulled nought missing lack fragment 0*

Or constructing a hide?

*-less un- non- dis- nameless beyond reversal ambiguity abandon tacit distant deferral
anonymous solitude descent recursive dumb unutterable ablation erosion whiteout
lost withheld escape unknowable privation zero*

From the Silence and Stillness and Nothing of me, these words. A white page slowly being covered with black signs. Neat little chains of words obediently following one after the other across the snowfield of the screen.

*deletion redact diminish vanishing hollow dissolve separated wilderness vacant still
... bare gap infinity ice interval — forsaken obliterate concealed snow*

My fingers working, my mind not really, for how can my mind really be able to tell my fingers what to do, and sure enough, I type *finders* instead of *fingers* but that is right, they *are* finders, they are finding the letters and the words which will press up against the tips (the lips) of my hands. Where do the words come from? Why do they come? Nothing I write seems relevant. Which is more blank, the white screen or I?

I call myself a poet. But am I entitled to? I seem to spend most of my time avoiding poetry. The Scottish poet Don Paterson remarks that 'you are only a poet when you are writing a poem. Poetry describes an act, not necessarily a permanent disposition' (Paterson in Baker, 2006, 154). Fair enough, but I keep coming back to

poetry; it's where I feel language is most acute, most challenging, and most risky. If writing keeps me alive, poetry is heartbeat.

But when my heart is not beating, I write other, safer things. Essays, articles, papers where I am required to write well, fluently, to make some sense and yet, more and more, the temptation is to say—nothing. To tip into space, void, erasure. I am increasingly less interested in making words say what they always say, what they are “supposed” to say, and in the way they've always been made to say it. I find the “unsayable” so much more alluring.

Is it because I suspect that in the gaps between said and unsaid, written and unwritten, there might be the most beautiful and ineffable language yet? Language that (for now) is tantalisingly beyond my reach, and may always be?

Every poem, for me, is an attempt to write into the impossible. I fear that all the walls and hides I might construct from syntax and technique, and all the words I might use to putty the cracks in my knowledge and aptitude will never quite satisfy, will never reach far enough into the unknown. Of course, this fear and inadequacy does not stop me trying. I realise that in this compulsion—and this failure—I am far from alone.

Over many centuries, a whole rhetoric has developed for attempting to deal (in language) with what lies beyond language. In the spiritual and secular traditions of both East and West, poets, mystics, philosophers, supplicants, pilgrims—writers of all kinds—have followed a *via negativa* as a means of drawing closer to saying and writing the unsayable. They have practised ‘going by the way of dispossession’ (Eliot, 1974, 201) in order to possess that which they do not possess—be it wisdom, serenity, union with the Divine—their version of the beloved, whatever it might be.

This rhetoric of negation, which operates by defining things in terms of what they are not, is called apophasis. A Greek word, literally translated as ‘un-saying, or speaking-away’ (Sells, 1994, 2), it first appeared in Platonic and Aristotelian teachings, later evolving to embrace ‘what is beyond words—and indeed beyond the limits of language altogether’ (Franke, 2007, 2), such that ‘there is increasingly a tendency today to recognize the implicit presence of the unuttered and even the unutterable as a necessary presupposition underlying every utterance’ (Franke, 2007, 9). In an early, non-secular context, one of its greatest examples is attributed to an anonymous sixth-century Syrian monk, who adopted the pseudonym Dionysius the

Areopagite (often contracted to Pseudo-Dionysius), and who wrote a highly influential five-chapter apophatic text called *The Mystical Theology*, in which he refers to God thus:

He is none of the things that have no being, none of the things that have being. None of the things that are known know him for what he is ... he has no name; we cannot know him; he is neither darkness nor light, error nor truth (Dionysius in Wolters, 1978, 217)

And this illustrates the irony and impossibility at the heart of apophasis. When writing about the unsayable, one cannot avoid discussing what *can* be said about it. Even the white space between words “says” something. The un-writable therefore is always—inevitably—written. Logically, (another irony, “logically” being derived from *logos*, the Greek word for “word”) the only pure apophatic “statement” is silence.

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Like many writers I feel ambivalent about words, I know they don't work, I know they aren't it (Notley, 2010)

§

It feels inevitable that I must fail and fail again with language. If language is ‘the finest achievement of culture’ (Bragg, 2003, x), then poetry is often revered as its apogee: language ‘alchemised into literature’ (Bragg, 2003,14).

‘The poet speaks on the threshold of being’ asserts Gaston Bachelard (Bachelard, 1994, xvi). If this be true, then that threshold is attained only through a shadowy citizenship of the awkward crawlspace between the underworld of human experience and the glassy surface of intellect and discourse. Words are what the poet uses to crack the veneer, but as American poet Alice Notley notes, they are an imperfect medium. All they can do is represent traces of the negotiation with the numinous and the unknown: a poem. The poet’s lot is an obsessive navigation of what T.S. Eliot described as the ‘frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist’ (Eliot, 1953, 55). This is uncharted territory; this is the space with neither waymarks nor navigational aids. I am at the “‘limit of completion,”

represented on the map by a dotted line' (Fox, 2007, 265). It's where the map runs out.

And in making a poem, I am seeking the disruption, the restlessness of language; I am deliberately putting pressure on the fault line between emotions and words. Not only that, I am challenging myself to be apophatic in both content and approach: grammatically, syntactically and conceptually. Out of all the literary genres I consider poetry to come closest to bridging the gap between the sayable and unsayable:

What isn't available is always what's longed for,
It's written, erased, then written again (Wright, 2003, 40)

writes the American poet Charles Wright. It's *because* it is impossible to say that I want to say it. So negation—apophasis—is a way of reaching towards this impossibility. As I've observed elsewhere, 'though its purpose might ostensibly be to define things in terms of what they are *not*, apophasis offers multiple possibilities, multiple interpretations, for what things *might be*' (Webster, 2015). However, speaking "away" from something is not necessarily the opposite of speaking "about" it. It's tempting to think of negation—saying "it's not"—as a way of closing things down, but I would contend that the opposite is true, and this is what the mystics also knew: far from closing down meaning, apophasis opens it up.

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dispossess: dislodge, oust, disseise, expel, banish, rid, cast out (*OED*, 2015)

§

'What kind of language can I use to speak the impossibility of language?' asks the scholar William S. Allen, (Allen, 2007, 208), adding: 'what has happened to me in speaking of language is nothing less than a dispossession of my self' (Allen, 2007, 209).

I've arrived on the threshold of this inquiry after a year or more of apophasis—a year of literal "unsaying" in the pure sense, poetically. Silence. No writing. No "speaking". I don't even know if I have the words. Some experiences

seem unwordable. This is not writer's block: it feels different. I know the words are there, but I am experiencing them as a choked dumbness rather than an elective silence. I haven't been describing things in terms of what they are not, because I've not even been describing. If I have tried, the spaces have ended up making more sense than the words.

What is this? As a writer, my medium is words. When I sense they are there, yet still I cannot access them to write what I want so badly to write, is language dispossessing me? It feels like language has abandoned me, and yet surely this is not possible? It cannot be language's failing; it must be mine. It's much easier therefore to tell myself that I have been dispossessed, so I can gloss my inability with "words fail me" rather than "I've failed". Yet I still wonder, are there words—really—to fit everything I might try to say? Or is asking this just a tactic to displace my fear? My apprehension that—far from a paucity of words available to me—the real problem is that I don't have anything to say. Despite arguing that the "unsaid" is the *sine qua non* (a wonderfully apophatic term) for the "said", I apparently don't have the serenity and courage to hold that belief.

I go into a silence. I wait. I go further, into stillness, a void. The underworld.

Dispossession. Dis-possession. Dis is another name for the underworld.

The great surrealist poet Federico Garcia Lorca once said that 'one returns from inspiration as from a foreign country. The poem is the narration of the voyage' (Lorca in Maurer, 1980, 74). He also said 'One must set out. And this is the dangerous moment for the poet' (Lorca in Maurer, 1980, 72).

Yes it is. Nearly every time I approach the page. I have to trick myself into starting, to pretend, up until the last minute, and beyond the last minute, that something else is happening, which is nothing to do with writing or making sense or beauty or even words—these are not words, these black curves and angles appearing on the page—these are not words, don't lose your nerve, keep going, this isn't really *you* writing, these are just disembodied fingers typing, it's the pen, it's the pen that's writing, that's scratching a living across the page, it's not you, not you.

I keep this up until I am dispossessed. I am nobody. Then I start to relax. It is such a relief to cede responsibility.

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I think words are among us and everywhere else, mingling, fusing with, backing off from us and everything else (Notley, 2010)

§

“One must write about possession in order to write about dispossession”. That’s me talking, not Eliot. I’m meddling with the sanjuanist sentiments of ‘East Coker’ for the purposes of this exploration into writing and dispossession.

Being a writer, speaker or thinker—being human—means engaging with words. I am possessed by language, just as much as I am dispossessed by it. Language inhabits me. In that sense it possesses me. I do not want it cast out. But do I possess language? Posing this question makes me realise that rather than thinking of language as a social and shared phenomenon, I usually tend to focus (at least initially) on what language means to and for me alone, rather than its function in the world at large. Perhaps this is because first I have to have my own conversation with language; only then I will be able to write out of it.

I use language to communicate, convey information, emotion, make myself understood, I utter sounds and make marks; I also make silences and spaces. I name things, identify them, I in turn am named. I talk of “using” language, as if I control it, but it is (arguably) axiomatic that language also uses me, it works in and through me. I use it but I can never feel that I own it. Especially when I am writing a poem, it seems for a time that language owns me. I am its instrument. How it plays me, yet rather than resisting, I practise surrendering to the feeling of being played. ‘The music of being human’ (Duffy in Patterson, 2009)—which is poetry—cannot happen without the poet. To extend this metaphor, I am confident that a poem is born of an antiphonal process, a duet, if you will.

A philosopher like Martin Heidegger might observe that I am not undergoing an experience *of* language, but an experience *with* it ‘...by entering into it and submitting to it’ (Heidegger, 1971, 57). A writer like Barry Lopez might say: ‘No one can fathom what happens between a human being and written language’ (Lopez, 2011, 13). And what might a poet—especially a great mystic like Rumi—say?

This is how it always is
when I finish a poem.

A great silence overcomes me,
and I wonder why I ever thought
to use language (Rumi, 2004, 20)

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I don't believe that the best poems are just words, I think they're the same as reality; I tend to think reality is poetry, and that it isn't words. But words are one way to get at reality/poetry (Notley, 2010)

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In moments of “reality” or extreme emotion and crisis, is it not preferable to remain speechless? As Allen observes ‘sometimes the suffering is too great and the words cannot be written; sometimes there is only destruction and failure’ (Allen, 2007, 110). Perhaps some events should not be trespassed by words, but honoured by silence. When confronted by reminders of our own finitude: ‘death, loss, or trauma’ (Allen, 2007, 5) we perhaps should be thankful rather than resentful of the distance afforded by inarticulacy. Samuel Beckett, whose passionate, apophatic monologue *The Unnamable* represents dispossession in action, is reported to have remarked: “If you really get down to the disaster, the slightest eloquence becomes unbearable” (Beckett in Knowlson, 1996, 439). Maybe they are merciful, all those times when we don’t know what to say, or to write, sometimes because we believe ourselves unable to find the words, but often because what we attempt to express lies beyond our capacity—and perhaps even the capacity of words—to express it. When we are dispossessed of language, and, in retrospect, come to be glad of it.

But dispossession (like apophasis) is a challenging word to define. One can be dispossessed “of” or “from” something, or “by” something or someone. The most common usage (past and present) of dispossession relates to land and property (though one may also be dispossessed or rid of a demon). If, as Eliot suggests, my poetic habitat is in the borderlands between meaning and words, then—even if it is where I spend most of my time—I feel I do not possess the right to any title there. This territory is owned by nobody, and thus belongs to everyone.

Perhaps the only place where I can take seisin¹ (or freehold) is of the place where I will write: the page. Yet even here, I am often evicted. When I am seized by the desperation (but not the readiness) to write, that very desperation results in me being dispossessed or disseised (such a wonderful homonym for diseased and deceased). In me, poetry forms the membrane between interior human and exterior human. A poem is when what I feel becomes what I say (I feel), and yet still language has the power to feint, to deflect what I want to say.

Yet this apparent failure can point to deeper revelation. If I do not have the language to “say”, if what I want to be delivered of lies beyond language, then my inability and silence maybe “says” more than any words ever can. For intrinsic to and arrested by this failure is collective as well as personal experience. It “speaks to” what it means for a human to feel (and be silenced by) grief, love, anger, fear, euphoria, longing, desire, hate, disgust, contempt, compassion, ecstasy. If it is true that words—and the people who use them—fail all the time, then arguably it is the unspoken—the inarticulable—which forms a major part of human experience.

Vowels are spaces, consonants are the sharp bits. What falls between me, the writer, and you, the reader, catches here. It's Nothing, and yet it is Everything. I'll keep stravaiging the edgelands between meaning and language, possession and dispossession, in an attempt to say why. I'll keep attempting to take seisin of the page. And I'll keep trusting that perhaps my failure is less about being unable to find the words, and more about being unable to find them *yet*.

Ted Hughes once observed that ‘poems belong to readers—just as houses belong to those who live in them & not to the builders’ (Hughes, 2007, 349).

What belongs to me—possesses me—is the desire to write, and the freedom to refuse to write. That is all. When I have finished writing, what I have written I no longer possess—if indeed I ever did—for as far as the poem is concerned, title and deed then transfers to you, the reader.

Endnote

¹ 1875 K. E. DIGBY *Introd. Hist. Law Real Prop.* i. 40 The proper meaning of the word ‘seisin’ is possession as of freehold; i.e. the possession which a freeholder has (*OED*, 2015)

Research Statement

Research Background

“Going By The Way of Dispossession: Apophasis and Poetry” is situated within a creative and theoretical exploration of the centuries-old rhetorical tradition of negation—known as apophasis—and its relevance within contemporary discourse. As a mechanism for speaking about what lies beyond word, or what resists linguistic expression, apophasis has been deployed across philosophy, theology and poetry (Franke 2014, 23). It is evidenced in many texts by Western and Eastern philosophers, poets, writers and mystics, and in other artforms such as music and conceptual art. In “speaking” about “what cannot be said,” the pertinence of apophasis extends beyond academic and artistic contexts to reach into contemporary, vernacular discourse and communication.

Research contribution

“Going By The Way of Dispossession: Apophasis and Poetry” is a lyric essay which brings poetic and prose techniques to bear on a discussion of apophasis and its relationship to the idea of dispossession. This paper takes the form of a lyric essay, one that draws on the impulse and work of a range of poetry, to examine these ideas. The discussion thus reflects on, and plays with the tension between, saying and the unsayable, as that is variously negotiated in the arts of both prose and poetry.

Research significance

In pushing language to the extremes of what is ‘sayable,’ poetry has a natural affiliation with apophasis. Apophatic tropes in literature have been explored critically and poetically. However, the linguistic, spatial, temporal and artistic relationships between poetry and apophasis—and how apophasis may actually inform the poetic process—has not sufficiently been explored in creative, process-based terms, nor has an account of its scope and effects been filtered through sustained inquiry into the medium of poetry and lyric essay. In combining prose and poetry, the critical and the creative, this paper is not only reflecting on the situated experience of apophasis, but also actively employing it.

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