

**“Words Fail But Meanings Still Exist”:  
Exploring The Relationship Of Apophasis  
To Poetic Practice**

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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## Abstract

Since classical times, apophasis, the rhetoric of negation, has been harnessed as a means of writing about and addressing the ineffable in philosophy, literature and theology. This thesis is concerned with the dynamic relationship between poetry and ineffability, and specifically with how apophasis may inform a contemporary poetics that seeks to grapple with the unsayable. Arguing that language becomes more potent as poetic material when pushed towards engagement with the ineffable, the thesis thus investigates how poets might use the principles and techniques of apophasis to push at aesthetic and expressive boundaries. In order to trace the historical development, changing meanings, and interpretative possibilities of apophasis as concept and as practice, this thesis considers the writings, from ancient times to the present day, of key philosophers (such as Jacques Derrida); theologians (such as Dionysius the Areopagite); and poets (such as Rumi and Charles Wright), with a particular focus on apophasis in the work of poets Emily Dickinson and Paul Celan.

The thesis takes a braided form: toggling between critical and creative writing to reflect a mode of research whose creative component—a selection of original poems, lyric prose passages, and poetic asides—is deeply interwoven with the critical enquiry. The enfolding of different modes of writing has temporal, spatial, rhythmical, kinetic, visual, material and musical significance, which can animate language as a practice harbouring the known and unknown, said and unsaid, presence through absence, and perceptibility through imperceptibility. Moreover, by using critical and creative writing to demonstrate how poetry is the ideal medium in which to push at these boundaries, the thesis also identifies poetry as a way of knowing that is emotionally, intellectually, and aesthetically valuable.

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One day when I was studying with Schoenberg,  
he pointed out the eraser on his pencil and said,  
“this end is more important than the other.”

(John Cage 1973, 270)



## PROLOGUE: Enough to Shake the Mountain

[Poetry] is the most complete sort of human language that one could imagine – though what constitutes language, ironically, is exactly its incompleteness.  
(Terry Eagleton 2007, 22)

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

A writer's work necessarily includes incomplete pieces or projects. I have electronic folders full of aborted poems: folders named "The Disappointment of Previous Drafts". "Scraps". "Failures". "The Undead". Once, I would have been tempted to blame these failures on not being able to find the right words. I would have made language's instability and occasional unavailability as the scapegoat for my own lack of confidence—and insight—into how poetic language can work.

Sometimes I can revive the undead and breathe life into the corpse. I can apply a clinical approach—nip and tuck a verb here, shave off an adjective there, transplant those stanzas—and, if I'm lucky, these interventions restore blood flow and the black marks and spaces start to become more sinewy, more responsive to each other. The clinical approach restores ink and words. Ultimately what I seek, however, is not ink and words, but lymph and vapour. The intake of breath while the thought is still forming. How do I put *that* on the page?

Because in the midst of this frustration with language, I have always suspected that for a *real* poet, inarticulacy can be far richer poetically: that imperfection, brokenness, incompleteness can be sources of creative possibility and tension. Why else would the speaker in a poem by Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), a key poetic influence on my research, insist:

To tell the Beauty would decrease  
To state the Spell demean –  
(Dickinson 1970, 692)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations and numberings of all Dickinson's poems are taken from the 1970 Faber and Faber version of *The Complete Poems*.

These opening lines of poem # 1700 (undated) assert that language is not enough to capture what poetry is capable of expressing, despite the speaker's best efforts: "My Will endeavours for its word / And fails" (Dickinson 1970, 293). And yet, for the poem's speaker, the outcome for this descriptive 'failure' is not disappointment, but

A Rapture as of Legacies –  
Of introspective Mines –  
(Dickinson 1970, 293)

This, I understand, is far *better* than words: a revelatory, transcendent yet inarticulable experience. It is a source of ecstasy and richness that any words, arrived at too easily, might obscure and yet, towards which, through its declared inadequacy, the poem is able to gesture. Thus, without diminishing the mystery of the poem, the concluding lines reinforce the message of the poem's opening: that to "state the Spell" would indeed "demean" it. The Spell's supernatural particularity can only be expressed through the declaration that it is inexpressible.

To engage with Dickinson's work is to appreciate poetry's limitless capacity to address the intangible and the unknowable; and that caprice and daring with poetic language and form can court and expand upon these enigmas without demystifying them. And so, inspired by poets like Dickinson, I have wanted to explore ways in which I might abandon my dependence on finding the 'right words' in favour of learning how to swim "a Syllable-less Sea" (Dickinson 1970, 692), and poetically to embrace what cannot be said.

As well as engaging with poets past and present, the research for this project has directed me back towards classical and medieval times, to consider theology and philosophy alongside poetry. Over the course of this research, I have become convinced that imperfection, brokenness, and incompleteness are so often the undernarratives, the engines, of the most powerful of poems, beliefs and ideas: and their power depends on an engagement with language precisely when language seems most acute, most challenging, and most risky. I understand now why imperfection, brokenness and incompleteness are so often vital to writing that attempts to address subjects, experiences, and emotions that elude language.

Writing keeps me alive, and poetry is heartbeat.

But when my heart is not beating so well, I have customarily written other, ‘safer’ things. Essays, reviews and papers for which the parameters seem somehow clearer: I am required to write fluently, to make some sense, to offer rigorous and reasoned evidence. And yet, when engaged in the (arguably) more circumscribed mode of prosaic writing, I can become aware of a temptation to allude to—nothing. To tip into space, void, erasure, to acknowledge and revel in the fact that with language and expression, boundaries are never fixed: the margins between what is declared and what parries declaration are blurred and constantly in flux. Increasingly, in any type of writing, I find the pursuit of the ‘unsayable’ so much more alluring, both creatively and intellectually.

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? Is it my level of competence with language that limits utterance? Or is it my desire to speak lyrically of things language cannot adequately convey? To *write* lyrically of things language cannot adequately convey.

Speech. Voice, words and grammar, sound and inflection, elements from which I craft meanings. And when, in speech, I find these elements inadequate, or reach the limits of my vocabulary and craft, I can ‘fill in the gaps’ with a pause, a shrug, or a roll of the eyes. Much may be revealed by evasiveness or emphasis, in hesitation over a word, or a lapse into silence; and this evasiveness is often so much more eloquent than spoken words would be.

As a writer, my materials are black marks and white space. I cannot get the page (or the screen) to gesticulate, nor will it take on the imprint of my facial expression nor resonate with the tone of my voice. However powerfully phrased, a paragraph cannot indicate aggression in the jut of a chin. It seems I have no choice but to use language in order to write beyond language, to write into and out of wordlessness. Yet my vocabulary draws on naming and on sounds. How do I subvert the very language necessary to explore not only where language may break down, but also when, by virtue of that breach, it might suggest proximity to the ineffable?

Is it like writing about night without referring to moon or stars, or darkness? About ocean, but not naming water, nor waves or salt? About deserts, but never sand or ice or solitude; of insomnia without mentioning sleep?

Yet imagine the horror of having a word for everything.

Of never having gaps, lacunae or hesitation; never needing metaphor. Never searching for a poetic voice that speaks a language beyond language. Of never discovering, either as a writer or a reader, the myriad ways in which poetry can point towards what cannot be said?

Conjuring beauty and meaning from the rupture and disjunction of language, poetry is all the more eloquent in inarticulacy; beautiful in homeliness; uncanny in ordinariness; and precise in imprecision. When language seems inadequate or rudimentary or broken, poetry can take that fracturing, and mould it into a meaning that does not hide the fissures. Egyptian poet Edmond Jabès (1912–1991) writes about the “[v]iolence of the white page, all the harder to subdue for being silent” (Jabès 1991b, 32); and yet he also suggests that it takes only “one step in the snow ... to shake the mountain” (Jabès 1991c, 24).

What might that first step look like?

## §

Different latitudes here  
air more rarefied

cannot carry sound  
no ears

ossicles are icicles

No breathing no breath to speak  
lungs do not hold oxygen

lungs hold only enough for life  
do not have lungs

words brim but do not spill  
no mouth  
I am all rim

The pout around proud flesh

Silting up becoming crystalline inside  
I wake with frost on me  
The thaw takes longer, daily.

But rim is lip and lip spills words

The brain discharged of sense and meaning

No brain

Rim is lip

Little black fences across a snowfield

What is the taste of words  
Why can't I taste my words  
I hold them in my mouth  
Why can't I taste them

Hearing does not need a sound  
Only silence

My nib a nematode in ice

Who decides on the horizon who draws the limit of the Earth, its vanishing  
Who says, who says? That this is it, no further.

This is the end because I say so

Not everything is mapped there is unknown

What if I thaw  
Will silence cease?

Will keening leach from me

Will I become all sound

Will every pore pour

Will this be kenosis

Trying to read the snow line

But these lines are unreadable

Crump of boot in face of snow  
Full. Stop.

What's an empty stop?

Bubbled in my kinesphere

Cleave means split and cling

And that is what I do, I cleave

I cannot turn this into words

Where the light is leaking out

§

Above is (one of) my attempts to subvert Jabès' so-called "violence" of the white page, and turn it into a field of snow. These unvarnished fragments and phrases are from my work-in-progress files, one of the undead: unedited, reproduced exactly as found. The beginnings of what did not turn into a poem in its own right, yet gave pieces of itself to other poems, some of which appear in this thesis. To me, these lines read not so much like making prints on snow; more like trying to find my way through a whiteout. Pressing through substance-less substance with my whole self, knowing direction only through one foot (one word?) being placed ahead of another.

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 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?

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 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?

Every poem, for me, is an attempt to write into the impossible. I know 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 me, will never reach far enough into the unknown. I used to be afraid of this sense of my inadequacy, but that fear never stopped me trying. ‘Failing’ to find words never lessened the compulsion to search for them, and in this compulsion—and this ‘failure’—I am far from alone.

But wait. *Failure?*

If I fall quiet, is my muteness really failure? When I sense that there is more to ‘say’, but I do not know exactly what that is, let alone how to say it, is silence the only logical recourse? Poetic silence is rich and deep and shocking, yet must I always defer to the absence of words, represented by a blank, ‘silent’ page? Or can I try to find alternatives to ‘speak’ for me, make my stutters and silences and hesitations shape the unsayable? Make what I cannot say play off what I *can* say? Work harder with language, and make language work harder? I can respond to the invitation of the open page, the inscrutable screen, the snowfield: the space where any number of interpretations or utterances may suggest themselves. I can discover that when a poem shows the withholding of words, interrupts itself, chokes off, a drama plays out in the rupture that is more than the sum of the poem’s words.

One of my favourite contemporary poets, Jorie Graham, writes this:

After fresh snow I'll go up to the attic and look out.  
My looking is a set of tracks—the first—  
a description of the view  
that cannot mar it.

...  
Such solitary work,  
this breaking ground  
that will only reclaim itself.

(Graham 1980, 46–47)

This excerpt from the poem “Self-Portrait” can be read either as an *ars poetica* or a love poem to the mystery of living, of a snowbound “terrain impregnable” (Graham 1980, 46) that only writing can navigate, and then only partially. Yet as Graham intimates, the act of putting words to something that is neither made of nor asks for words (here the view of the white outside her attic window), will change or desecrate it, just as footprint holes will leave marks in pristine snow. The snow will allow tracks to be made, then ultimately will erase them. Each gain, each new sign of progress, will be as if it never happened, and yet will be forever changed:

Such solitary work,  
this breaking ground  
that will only reclaim itself.

(Graham 1980, 46–47)

Such a profound analysis of a poet's process: in which the poet knows that all the harrow and till of producing a poem, the effort of words' incursion into the untouched and unspoken will be, to the reader—to all but the poet—invisible. Each set of tracks, each line, holds within it the pause, the pace, the necessary lifting of the foot between steps, between thoughts, between words. The poem itself treads lightly. Graham's snow is the great silence, marked and momentarily damaged by the words (footprints) that come after the fact of the snowfall; yet the whiteness has the power to remake itself, to redact the words, and offer itself again for a fresh marking. This snow becomes more than words: a whiteness appearing to be what it was *before* it was and yet, under its fresh surface, are buried the tracks and their coverings: palimpsest of saying and unsaying.

§

**“How to Disappear”**

go out into snow      offer

your tongue

to the vanish    and blur

let flakes

melt    like vows

un      saying

go further      still

when you hear

nothing      but whiteness

and    s

*no*

w

efface your own

name

annul

every tr

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## CHAPTER ONE: Offering a Tongue to the Vanish and Blur

Poetry's what's left between the lines—  
a strange speech and a hard language,  
It's all in the unwritten, it's all in the unsaid ...

And that's a comfort, I think,  
for our lack and inarticulation.

(Charles Wright 2001, 94)

### Introduction: “An Edge that Never Arrives”<sup>2</sup>

I am a poet: my artistic material is the “strange speech and ... hard language” (Wright 2001, 94) of words and poems. Increasingly, in every poetic endeavour I undertake, I hunger to transcend—or even to wipe out—my material, in order to create something that, despite being made of words, might somehow reach past and exceed them. For me, language becomes all the more alluring and potent as poetic material when pushed as far as possible towards a confrontation and engagement with the ineffable.

What drives me to write, and especially to write poetry, is a longing to express what seems to be beyond expression: that which draws from “space that is extra-linguistic and non-cognitive—those silent zones a poem can ... swarm from” (Disney 2014, 381). Even my interest in other poets is motivated primarily by the degree to which their poems are able to grapple imaginatively and poetically with notions of silence, absence, the unsaid and the unsayable, and by how much a restless, searching preoccupation with “what's left between the lines” (Wright 2001, 94) pervades the poetic, non-poetic and reflective musings within their writing.

The urge to express something that seems to be beyond words is not, however, the preserve only of poets and poetic writing, but something that touches us all. Just about everything we can and do say is shaped and conditioned by what we leave out, withhold, hint at, do not, or cannot say (Franke 2014a).

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<sup>2</sup> “Now, on days when I have too much work to do or the world outside is covered, as this morning, in snow, I walk on a treadmill facing a glass wall looking out over treetops into a canyon. I walk, in other words, toward the edge of a cliff, only a few feet in front of me, an edge that never arrives” (Coles 2017a).

In everyday speech, for example, I often spontaneously (and usually unselfconsciously) allow an apparent emptiness or ‘un-wordedness’ to mediate my interactions with others: many conversations are punctuated with silences and hesitations, aborted interruptions, tongue clicking, throat clearing, intakes of breath. These non-verbal vocalisations happen so frequently and naturally that I (almost) never stop to consider if they may actually be standing in for what I cannot say, will not say, or even do not know *how* to say.<sup>3</sup>

While the contrarities of spoken language may happen involuntarily and almost unnoticed, I am often struck by how I become more aware of language—spoken and written—seeming to fall short when I am, for example, gripped by moments of intense, personal experience, or confronted and confounded by the mystery of others’ experiences and actions. These may be the times when I struggle to find words that can connect with and express my most deeply held (or deeply feared) emotions, values, and identities, or that might give consolation and recognition for another’s experience. They are the times when I am likely to confess to being lost for words, or perhaps, more accurately, lost ‘for want’ of words.

Yet poetry is neither lost for words nor lost for want of words. As a richly expressive literary art form, poetry emerges from and articulates the alchemical relationships between unknown and known, the sensory with the imaginative, the pre-verbal with the languaged. When description and representation seem impossible in words, poetry works with words in order to capture that impossibility. Poetry skims close to the limits of language precisely because poetry’s first language *is* the unwritten and unsaid. Poetry’s second language is what appears on the page.

It is hardly surprising then, that the moments when we find ourselves in need of words, yet rendered apparently incapable of articulation are often those moments that cause many of us (poets too) to reach for poetry. As contemporary American poet Charles Wright (1935–) suggests in the lines above quoted from “Poem Almost Wholly in My Own Manner”, poetry may indeed sometimes be a “comfort” for a “lack and inarticulation” (Wright 2001, 94). We may turn to poetry when we need words to capture moments of heightened emotion; to commemorate human rites of passage; or when we need a powerful description of non-human phenomena, such as the landscape or the elements, to stand in for what we cannot otherwise say. In times

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<sup>3</sup> See Connor (2014) for a fascinating examination of non-verbal vocalisations in the human repertoire.

of personal or collective hardship or joy, at occasions of ceremony, ritual, welcome or valediction, we perhaps come to realise how much we depend on poets the calibre of Dickinson or Bashō, or Rumi or Li Po to express what we cannot. Whether we need statements for a public occasion or solace for a private agony, or even to express the awe of the extraordinary in the ordinariness of the everyday, poetry may provide something of what we yearn for.

Yet, as Wright's lines suggest, poetry is also something much more powerful and important than a handy phrase for an awkward moment, or as mere substitution for extremes of experience or emotion, for poetry is capable of representing and articulating "the unwritten ... the unsaid" (Wright 2001, 94). It makes the un-worded and the un-wordable its very purpose, giving voice to those worlds of emotion and experience that seethe within and around each of us, challenging our powers of articulation and comprehension.

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), a poet whose work I consider later in this thesis, made the striking observation that poets are "occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist" (1953, 55).<sup>4</sup> If I were to suggest a catalyst for this research, it was this statement. It caused me to wonder how, if Eliot were correct, poets might navigate those frontiers. In a shuffling 'between-ness' fringing what can and cannot be articulated, what is known and unknown, it appears Eliot is positing permeability (frontiers in the plural) rather than a single rigid demarcation between the known and the unknown: locating within human consciousness an inherent slippage (and slipperiness) of feeling and experience that looks to language (however imperfect) for anchorage.

Accordingly, this thesis argues that poetry is able to encompass and give voice to both the words *and* the silences; to articulate phenomena that are too complex and multitudinous to be captured or contained solely by verbal means, and yet which reverberate within and spill out from pauses and sharp intakes of breath. As Wright suggests, poetry is special precisely because it *can* communicate and express "what's *left between* the lines" (Wright 2001, 94; emphasis added), as well as what the lines themselves gesture towards. In offering an aesthetic and textual challenge to "lack and

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<sup>4</sup> I acknowledge that Eliot's observation can be read as problematic in some ways—how can meanings be said to 'exist'? Although 'meaning' is not fixed, but depends on whom we are, and where, when, and how we hear, speak and read language, his statement is nonetheless important.

inarticulation” (Wright 2001, 94), poetry, as a performative<sup>5</sup> medium—“concerning language as an action or event, rather than simply as a structure of meanings” (Eagleton 2007, 167)—also enables the poet to expose the rack and shift of language as it butts up against that inarticulation. I can make my fluency (or lack of it) part of the pace of the poem, of how it performs on the page: how it looks and how it sounds. And yet, as Gaylene Perry notes: “Writing is a verbal mode ... but it’s also non-verbal. It can be seen as visual, performative, aural and tactile, and perhaps other – perhaps modes that have not yet been named” (Perry 2008).<sup>6</sup>

Since classical times, apophasis (ἀπόφασις),<sup>7</sup> has been harnessed as a means of writing about and addressing the ineffable. William Franke, a leading authority on the history, role and function of apophasis, and on the development of a “philosophy of the unsayable”,<sup>8</sup> notes that the literal interpretation of the word apophasis reads “... as “away from speech” or “saying *away*” (*apo*, “from” or “away from”; *phasis*, “assertion,” from *phemi*, “assert” or “say”)” (Franke 2007a, 2; emphasis in original).

The use of apophasis has spanned many disciplines, chiefly theology (or more precisely negative theology or *via negativa*),<sup>9</sup> poetry and philosophy, disciplines in which, as Franke points out, “the revelatory and the rhetorical belong absolutely together as the common matrix of the oldest and most fundamental modes of expressing humanity across cultures” (Franke 2018).

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<sup>5</sup> In his 1955 Harvard Lectures, J. L. Austin was the first to use the term performative in relation to theorising language utterances: “the issuing of an utterance is the performing of an action” (1962, 6). More than 40 years later, Slinn (1999) acknowledges Austin’s work on the performative as establishing an understanding of “an interrelating complex of performer, act, audience and context” (1999, 61), and argues for poetry’s continued importance to understanding the relationship between text and social context, observing: “A performative engages the real through the double process of performing its own meaning while reaching outside its linguistic content into context or the process of production” (1999, 64). Moreover, says Slinn: “poetry depends on a form of double utterance, by both poet and reader” (1999, 71). See also Houen (2011), and Pelias (2005) and Rubenstein (2003) for discussions of the performative in relation to textual practice, scholarship and pedagogy, and negative theology respectively.

<sup>6</sup> While the performative aspects of both poetry and apophasis are alluded to in the thesis, it must be noted that the performative is not the focus of this study. An investigation into how the performative functions in poetic apophasis could, however, offer rich material for another research project.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of the origins and etymology of the term apophasis. See Chapter Three for an overview of the use and developmental path of apophasis through various modes of thinking and writing across the centuries.

<sup>8</sup> See Franke 2007a, 2007b, 2014a.

<sup>9</sup> Negative theology uses “language which pivots around denials about God and a rhetoric of absence ... negative theology can be used creatively to explore affinities with an intellectual environment in which negation – as difference, absence, otherness – is frequently judged to be more interesting than affirmation” (Davies and Turner 2002, 1). See also Mortley (1981, 1982). Negative theology remains the topic of much contemporary theological and scholarly academic debate, see Boesel (2009); Brown and Simmons (2017); Franke (2014a); Ticciati (2013).

Stemming from my enduring fascination with poetry's relationship to the ineffable,<sup>10</sup> or, as I shall often call it, the unsayable, this thesis draws on the principles and techniques of apophasis to explore how language may be recast and given voice through a poetry that seizes on and amplifies the notion of the unwritten and unsaid. I hope to show many ways in which it is possible to regard a so-called inarticulation not as lack, but as a rich poetic resource. Poetry *can* perform a saying of the oblique and unsayable; and this thesis aims to show how poems can offer a conduit for writers and readers to address an edge of saying and knowing that hovers tantalisingly close while eternally beyond reach, holding in tension all the unknowable-ness and unsayable-ness of our existence. To co-opt a phrase about walking from American poet Katharine Coles (that I find also completely applicable to writing and language), this is “an edge that never arrives” (Coles 2017a), contingent upon context and the keenness of our perception. If the edge itself is perceptible, there is a beyond-edge that is not perceptible, *and yet we know it to be there*. This edge, this poetic betweenness of the sayable and unsayable, is where knowing meets the unknown.

The known, partnered with the unknown. Limits, partnered with infinity. Yet I am not trying to argue for binaries; rather, I am trying, in my writing, to inhabit the interstices, to make use of the flux and slip of language as it borders the ineffable. I view apophasis as a means, not of overcoming the unsayable, but engaging with it. I am not looking for perfection; I want to explore the flaw, the glitch, the catch of breath, and work out ways of expressing them on the page. In trying to surmount the difficulty of finding words for the inexpressible, I can either choose to fall silent, or find ever more inventive and oblique strategies to land on a description or image. The poem—constructed of these words and spaces that interact and overlap—becomes ice-like, capable of bearing only a certain weight of phrase. Yet the poem can only come into being through this process: that is, the calibration between restraint and pressure, stability and collapse, and the relationship of these to the structure beneath. Poems are made of this fretwork; they are made of this ‘fret’ work, enacting the dynamics of their making.

Franke makes the radical assertion that when “language is exposed in its inability to express” (Franke 2014a, 135)—what one might be tempted to call language's ‘failure’—language displays “its greatest, perhaps its only genuine,

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<sup>10</sup> In Chapter Two I discuss ‘the ineffable’ in more detail.

expressive power” (Franke 2014a, 135). The implication here is that language shows its true drama and dynamism—its full performative range—when linguistic fluency is most under pressure, and language is thrown into relief by hesitation, evasiveness, ambiguity, aposiopesis and stammer. And, by invoking a lexicon of negation and denial, “in which unnameability is not only asserted but performed” (Sells 1994, 3), apophasis can provide a framework for language’s “inability to express” (Franke 2014a, 135), and can perform, explicitly or implicitly, the myriad dynamics of a ‘saying away’.<sup>11</sup>

Franke’s analysis articulates a paradox of great potential for poetic exploration and development, for it implies that true eloquence and expression does not depend on a need to find the right words. Rather, it suggests that for writers, the expressiveness implicit in language’s “inability to express” (Franke 2014a, 135) can be realised through a creative response to any linguistic absence or impediment, and the compulsion to circumvent or represent these obstacles in ever more imaginative literary ways.

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What is the taste of words? If we hold them in our mouths, why can’t we taste them, feel them? Crunch consonant, the eel of diphthong, roll the ovum vowel? How can speech—expletive—outcry—just be tremor of air? Slash of sound and instant, then gone, is made and unmade in the moment of its utterance. Is thought silent? In our heads, unspoken?

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of performative apophasis, see Franke (2006), and Sells (1994). Drawing on Sells, Baker (2008) discusses performative apophasis in relation to historiography and Foucault’s *Madness & Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1988); and Baker (2007) also discusses performative apophasis as a theoretical lens for approaching learning disabilities.

### **Thesis Focus and Aims: Exposing Language in its Inability to Express**

The performative quality of both apophasis and poetry—their capacity to expose and enact poetic making as well as poetic meaning—is fundamental to this thesis’ key aim: to contribute to practice and scholarship by exploring how apophasis may inform a contemporary poetics that seeks to grapple with the unsayable.

To carry out this aim, the thesis focuses on an analysis of the concept, practice, and the interpretative possibilities of apophasis as it appears in the writings of key poets, philosophers, and theologians, and especially in the work of Dickinson and European poet Paul Celan (1920–1970). Accordingly, the thesis also focuses on how apophasis might shape poetry and poetic practice by interweaving my own creative work throughout. The creative work (lineated and prose poems, lyric prose passages and asides) is not however supplementary but dynamically entwined with the critical writing. Indeed, given that the critical writing and analysis in this thesis is unable to offer an artistic and aesthetic demonstration of poetic apophasis (and thus carry out the aims of the thesis in full), the creative work represents the core outcomes of the research.

By investigating how apophasis informs a creative literary medium, this thesis thus aims to reframe a perceived ‘failure’ to find the ‘right’ words as instead an opportunity to push at aesthetic and expressive boundaries. It aims also to argue for poetry’s position as the ideal medium with which to push at these boundaries, thus contributing to an “emerging epistemology of poetics” (Burr 2010), which identifies poetry as a way of knowing that is valuable emotionally *and* intellectually (Hetherington 2012; Magee 2009; McLoughlin in Harper 2013; Webb 2009a, 2010, 2012). Because the research topic is qualitative,<sup>12</sup> the thesis tenders analysis and creative experimentation as ways of provoking critical reflection and discussion, rather than positing any blueprint for the making or interpreting of apophatic texts.

Accordingly, this thesis presents an investigation, executed through poetic and critical modes of writing, into classical and contemporary understandings of apophasis in both secular and theological contexts. Drawing on this investigation, I

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<sup>12</sup> Neuro-scientific studies are, however, being conducted into the effect of poetry on the emotional receptors of the brain. See Zeman, Milton, Smith, and Rylance (2013); Wassiliwizky, Koelsch, Wagner, Jacobsen, and Menninghaus (2017).

examine how my study of apophasis helps me compose and approach my own practice and poems. Taking a creative standpoint that is secular rather than theological, I offer poetic responses to and reflections on the various textual, aesthetic, conceptual, and theoretical manifestations of apophasis that arise from my research sources. My creative work is directed towards imaginatively exploring metaphors for the ineffable, and investigating what poetic techniques might be effective in invoking what may lie beyond words, or that which is resistant to my powers of articulation.

Accordingly, I experiment with poetic structure, and engage with the concepts and practices of silence, temporality, absences, and emptiness as proxies for the unsayable. I discuss how poetic dialogue with these proxies may in turn push back at and test my faculties of language and poetic technique. I also use my practice to experience and explore how a poet may be challenged by—and may delight in—devising creative ways of both deflecting and building upon the rupture between what can and cannot be said.

As a poet, my interest in the potential of apophasis to extend a facility with the writing and appreciation of poetry—*especially* in the context of the inexpressible—is sparked by contemporary concerns. These concerns include, not least, the applicability and place of an apophatic poetics to combat what American poet Tracy K. Smith calls today’s “glib, facile, simplistic and prefabricated language by which we as consumers are constantly surrounded” (Smith 2018): the argot of social media. My research arises from an interest in what this type of language, depending on exchanges involving “opting in, talking back, liking us on Facebook, leaving a review, sharing, retweeting, etc” (Smith 2018), might signify for our capacity to propose and defend ideas, develop complex arguments, advocate ethical positions, differentiate fact from fiction, and simply to listen. When combined with certain contemporary cultural tendencies to valorise empirical data, positivist-based certainties,<sup>13</sup> and the seductive immediacy of securing these as facts to explain the world, the growing prevalence of this glibness might encourage a rejection of the poetic, uncertain, mysterious, figurative, the complex, and the ambivalent in favour of the one-dimensional and literal.

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<sup>13</sup> See discussions on “attention hacking” and manipulation of the media via Internet channels (Marwick and Lewis 2017); how “belief echoes” of misinformation are created and perpetuated (Thorson 2016); and the sociological impacts of “fake news”(Goyanes and Lavin 2018).

What happens to our imagination and creativity if everything must be demystified or defined, or if we do not allow ourselves to linger over what cannot finally be explained away? What happens to our ability to discern and use metaphor, irony, exaggeration, indirectness and, perhaps, to distinguish veracity? What happens to the pleasure we take in using poetic and lyrical language: our daring, the pushing of artistic and imaginative boundaries in reading and writing and debating and narrating? How do we retain the ability to listen or look out for verbal or grammatical cues to the withheld, the contradictory, the concealed, and the unsaid: to pause and hover over the feints and omissions behind which, perhaps, the truth often lurks? How do we cope with ambiguity?

Set within the broader context I have just described, my research inquiry is prompted not by what I am capable of articulating in my poems, but by a sense that I might reach beyond this capability—this edge bordering known and unknown—by pitting myself against everything that seems inarticulable or that I cannot name. Each intellectual, creative, emotional, and technical demand I make of myself as a poet and as a researcher is aimed at learning and striving for how I might converse with the limits of language. And when I flounder—for of course, these limits cannot be overcome even if I renounce words and silence the poet of myself—my efforts are then redirected to producing a poetic rendition of “this common human experience of butting up against the limits of language” (Franke 2014a, 23).

I cannot aspire to “the ultimate apophatic expression [of] silence, a silence that stretches in tension to ... what cannot be said” (Franke 2007a, 2; ellipsis in original), because I do not wish to silence myself, poetically. Yet what I do want is to achieve in my poetic work “an imagining by means of the negative, an entry *into* negative or empty or hidden or invisible spaces or paradoxically opposite points of thought and feeling” (Gibbons 2008, 39; emphasis in original) which may lead to “a poetics of the absent and the invisible, of meanings apprehended through what is missing” (Gibbons 2008, 40).

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Stillness. Then you seem to move. It's how you lie in wait, a wedge of words on page ... no slant rhyme, waltz of dactyl, apse of lines. Tonight you dress as concentrate, spondee, glut, a cluttering of dots and markings. You're autumn, fallen onto snow. Aura of apostrophe, held within a grid of lines, you are edged, justified. Were you three-dimensional, the uncontainable (and are you not?) you'd be a small teak box, rectangular, inlaid with ivory. Or lacquered, Trappist-tight yet tactile, tissue-thin yet depthless. Yet when I hear you spoken, you are torque of line, seduction, mitre joint. Your marquetry makes ears perceive what eyes do not.

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### **Form and Approach: the Grapple and Plait**

As a practising poet as well as a researcher, I make use of myriad modes of writing, reading, questioning, and thinking opened up by poetic and critical approaches. The form and content of this thesis thus reflects a toggling between these different modes. Importantly, such toggling highlights the interdependence of the critical and creative endeavours that have characterised the method and process throughout.

My poetry has not been conceived or developed as stand-alone work but as the outcome of my investigation into and experimentation with the ways apophasis may be performed in and understood through poetic writing. The critical analysis of apophasis for this thesis has entailed an exploration into how it has been deployed in diverse scholarly, spiritual, and literary contexts, from classical to contemporary periods. Thus, the substance of both the critical and poetic writing arises from the same sources: from questions, possibilities, and ideas thrown up by literary, philosophical, theological, and scholarly texts, and by the work of various artists and musicians whose artistic aims and influence have resonated with my own project.

Among the disciplines and practices I have investigated are philosophy and theology, rhetoric and linguistics, aesthetics, Eastern and Western spiritual practices,

and mysticism. I have visited art galleries, attended music and performance events. My reading has broadened well beyond the fields of literature and poetry in order to acquire, as Australian scholar and fiction writer Tess Brady puts it, “a working rather than specialist knowledge, not in one area but in a range of areas and disciplines” (Brady, 2000).<sup>14</sup> This approach Brady likens to “a bowerbird that picks out the blue things and leaves all the other colours” enabling the creative researcher “to write on a range of issues and yet ... not [be] an authority in any of them” (Brady 2000).<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, a flexible and alternative approach to thesis structure has been the best way of bringing topic and aims together with a variety of research sources and the diversity of concomitant responses. A flexible approach has also enabled the shaping of all these elements through the different modes of critical and creative writing engendered by this research: modes which enable the exploration of the nature, techniques, effects and value of apophasis in grappling with the uncertainties, aporiae and paradoxes that beset and constitute so many experiences of the world.

Accordingly, rather than following the more conventional two-part structure of creative and critical artefacts, I present this thesis as a single work that interweaves critical and creative writing within a unified form. This approach reflects the thesis process and production as a mode of ‘practice-based’ research—“a complex, back and forth interaction between the practice and its conceptual framework or articulation” (McNamara 2012)—whose creative component is deeply integrated with, rather than separated from, the critical enquiry.<sup>16</sup> In this thesis, the overall conceptual framework (McNamara 2012) is the poetic enquiry into apophasis; and my interweaving of the poetic and critical explorations carried out during the course of this research serves to animate the literary and conceptual possibilities of apophasis.

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<sup>14</sup> For example, investigations have encompassed the following: visual, conceptual and land art (see Bernier 2014; Cage 1973; Fox 2012, 2008, 2005; Govan 2011; King 2005; Kosky 2002; Ross 1994; Townsend 2004; Viola 1995); music (see Chapin and Clark 2013; Gann 2010; Kostelanetz 2012; O’ Driscoll 1997); exploration and mountaineering literature focusing on ice-bound destinations such as the Arctic, Antarctic, Andes and Himalaya (see Coles 2017b; Fox 2007; Lopez 1986; Macfarlane 2003; Shackleton 1999; Simpson 1988); nature writing discussing how land features mould vernaculars ancient and modern (see Dyer 2016; Jamie 2005; Lopez 2011; Mabey 2006; Macfarlane 2015, 2013, 2008; Macfarlane, Donwood and Richards 2013; Proulx 2012; Tredinnick 2009, 2005; Young 2012); and studies of noise and silence (see Cain 2013; Grabher and Jessner 1996; Kage 2017; Laird 2011; Levarie 1977; Maitland 2009; Miller 2007; Prochnik 2011). A variety of doctoral theses examine the use and effects of apophasis on the work of various writers, for example the medieval mystics (Berindeanu 2001); Australian ‘mystical’ poets (Davidson 2008); Dostoyevsky (Zhernokleyev 2016); Baudelaire (Wu 2012); Rumi (Stepien 2015); nature writing (Whyde 2017).

<sup>15</sup> In Brady’s case these issues related to ecclesiastical history, cartography, medieval manuscripts and archaeology.

<sup>16</sup> See Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of practice-based and practice-led research.

This approach, combining and interweaving the perspectives offered by poetry and dissertation respectively, is known as a woven or braided (Krauth 2018) thesis.<sup>17</sup> The method of presentation I adopt for my research reflects my intention to situate the thesis alongside the work of other creative arts scholars who have produced exemplary hybrid theses, and who continue to do important work inside and outside the university setting.<sup>18</sup> Their example has strengthened my conviction that the creative arts can bring unique perspectives to scholarly research, and push the boundaries of what a doctorate might be.

While Chapter Two contains a more detailed discussion of how the woven approach serves the aims and focus of this thesis, here I briefly describe how braiding shapes the reader's engagement with the thesis layout and presentation. In every chapter, the creative content—lineated and prose poems, and passages of reflective, lyric prose—appears at intervals between, and is occasionally interwoven with, the critical writing, illuminating and embodying the aims of this research.

The decision to present my research as a braided thesis is, at the risk of sounding quixotic, not really a decision as much as—to me as a poet–researcher—the most natural, logical and productive way of representing my deepening acquaintance with and progressive immersion in the complexities of this research topic, and the critical and creative body of work that has emerged from that endeavour. My research is directed towards an artistic, poetic end: this is how I show my 'results'. Because I approach this task as both a reader and critic of apophasis *and* as a writer and poet harnessing apophasis as concept and practice, this approach demonstrates more than one perspective on the value of apophasis in poetic engagement with the unsayable.

Yet there is another important reason for presenting my research in this way.

I have been neither inclined nor able to separate my thinking and responses into critical and creative threads, and in any case, to have done so would not have served the topic or research aims of this project. As poet and scholar Jen Webb (2020) points out: “in creative research practice the whole project is one unit, with different operations running through it ... there should not be an intellectual separation at all”. I am exploring poetry's relationship with apophasis, and in so doing touching on the intimate relationship between language and the ineffable. And as philosophers from

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<sup>17</sup> See Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of the braided approach.

<sup>18</sup> See Bolitho (2003); Carroll (2016); Curran (2007); Falzon (1997); Fenton-Keane (2008); Hansen (2005); Kelen (1998); Loveless (2004); Ryan (2011).

Plato (circa 429–347 B.C.E.) to Derrida (1930–2004) have argued, we experience language, poetry, and ineffability as fluid, contingent, ambiguous, resistant to reification, generative in terms of meaning, emotion, and interpretation. That is why they are at once so alluring and yet so difficult to grapple with conceptually, critically and creatively.

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**“What I Might Say”**

*after Rumi*<sup>19</sup>

Tonight, I could be a fig tree, a resinous bed of mint,  
a field of grapevines. Small and shivering leaves.

I could be bamboo, muttering to myself. Plaiting the edge  
of a dried lake bed, waiting for the axe.

Rosemary, self-seeded among succulents. A trespasser,  
not hiding my spikes, hoping you’ll let me stay.

The jewel spider, deep within the bezel of your eaves.  
Guarding the threshold, ready with my silk.

Even belladonna in a ghostly dress, eyes unseeing, wide.  
Circling the outside of your house, breathing through its cracks.

I long to be herbs in your fist, a lacquered eggplant, lemon.  
A naked garlic clove, its fever numbing in your mouth.

Instead, while we sleep, I deepen under you. Become  
uneasy water, an upturned boat, its mooring caught.

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<sup>19</sup> This poem is inspired by Rumi’s poem “Unmarked Boxes” which begins:

Part of the self leaves the body when we sleep  
and changes shape. You might say, “Last night  
I was a cypress tree, a small bed of tulips,  
a field of grapevines.” (Rumi 2004, 272)

### **Apophasis: the Lens of The No**

While I provide a more nuanced examination of the meaning, provenance, application and effects of apophasis in the following chapters, here I wish to outline the three key ways in which apophasis provides the unifying lens for this research project.

Firstly, a selective overview of the provenance and development of apophasis as practised by various theologians, philosophers, poets, and artists throughout the ages enables this thesis to establish, from a critical perspective, the principles, effects, and extent of this rhetorical practice, and its connection with ineffability and the unsayable, in order to build context for a deeper interrogation of the work of selected poets, philosophers, and theologians.

Secondly, understanding and analysis of apophasis from a critical perspective enables the close reading necessary in considering the ways in which the work of selected writers, and chiefly that of Dickinson and Celan, has engaged with ineffability. Appraising Celan's and Dickinson's respective oeuvres through an apophatic lens opens up a way of critiquing their work that, on the one hand, specifically considers the unsaid and, on the other, throws into relief two distinct stylistic and conceptual approaches to apophasis. By providing a vital unifying perspective without narrowing the range and approach of these two highly original poets, the lens of apophasis can nonetheless reconcile and provide a coherent framework for grappling with the otherwise diverse style and impulse of their work.

Thirdly, apophasis provides the opportunity for this thesis to present practice-based, artistic responses to the unsayable, providing a conceptual and literary framework within which poems are interwoven, and which themselves play with the theme of ineffability. In order to support that creative endeavour, this framework also enables the shaping of a poetic and conceptual approach that draws from, interrogates, and reflects on, in poems and in lyric prose passages and asides, the expressive possibilities opened up by apophasis.

Pushing poetry closer to the unsayable inevitably means contending with linguistic and conceptual limits; yet, viewed through an apophatic lens, these limits need not be regarded as setbacks or barriers so much as opportunities and incitements to poetry. Apophasis asserts and affirms uncertainty. Poets who address the challenge of the ineffable are grappling with issues that evade or exceed human self-consciousness or experience. These issues, by their very nature, can only be spoken of

and contextualised on a hypothetical basis ... using words that, even at best, cannot measure up. However skilled and experienced they are, poets and writers cannot take it for granted they will always find what they might consider to be the ‘right’ words.

Yet if we regard writing solely to be a question of finding the right words, not only do we risk limiting language’s power and possibility but potentially, also our own expressive and aesthetic capacities. An understanding of apophasis can lead to a deeper and richer engagement with language at the very point where language falters and frays.

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

But herein also lies a paradox, as I perceive it. As a practice-based researcher within an academic framework, how do I reconcile my creative process (where, most often, uncertainty is the only certainty), with the “reaching after fact & reason” (Keats 2005, 60) implicit in the rigorous textual and theoretical analysis required to inform and accompany my creative task? On the one hand, I must embrace Negative Capability; yet on the other, it seems I must also reject it. And there is another paradox implicit in this task, which poet Octavio Paz (1914–1988) articulates:

Without ceasing to be language—sense and transmission of sense—the poem is something that is beyond language. But that thing that is beyond language can only be reached through language.

(Paz 1987, 12)

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### **Structure of Thesis: Chapter by Chapter**

Chapter Two sets out to examine the relationship between apophasis and ineffability in the context of my research. It also argues for the significance of poetry in exploring what apophasis can achieve as an encounter with and a response to ineffability. Yet understanding how apophasis works is not only important to this thesis from epistemological and hermeneutic standpoints, but also from a material, compositional one. Therefore I go on to make the case (citing pertinent influences from the fields of creative writing and practice-led scholarship) for the thesis' presentation in braided form, as a means of enabling and enacting this poetic and critical exploration of apophasis and its literary and conceptual possibilities.

With Chapter Two outlining the theoretical and compositional orientation for this thesis, Chapter Three provides the setting for a more detailed examination of the development and significance of apophasis, via a selective survey of texts by medieval religious mystics through to twentieth-century philosophers, and then to the work of key poetic figures from the early Middle Ages to the present day. This examination of the provenance and patterns of apophasis through various disciplines, cultures and historical periods offers an insight into this rhetoric-in-practice that reveals the valuable insights of scholarship concerning ineffability, negative theology (*via negativa*), mysticism, negation, philosophy, and the arts that imbricate apophasis. While this survey cannot be exhaustive, its aim is to show how the exercising and value of apophasis have never belonged exclusively to either theological or secular contexts, but instead have been interwoven throughout both.

To illustrate how the work of very different poets may be treated to very different apophatic 'readings' (and thus be modelled for different treatments in a contemporary context), Chapters Four and Five are concerned respectively with analyses of the work of the two major poetic influences on my research, Dickinson and Celan.

In Chapter Four, I suggest that Dickinson is arguably the greatest apophatic poet writing in English. I examine a small selection of poems from her oeuvre to support my assessment that Dickinson's mode of enquiry, her purposeful engagement with poetic language, is a probing of the unlanguage side of being and belief. As

such, Dickinson's work provides the foundation for building a contemporary apophatic poetics. Not only does her poetry offer superior examples of apophatic technique and content that continue to resonate with (and challenge) modern readers, I suggest that her work resonates also with the theological instruction of medieval apophatic texts. In making this claim I show how, from both poetic and technical perspectives, connections to traditional religious apophatic texts can helpfully be made in order to inform and enrich a secular and contemporary poetic approach to grappling with the unsayable.

The poetry of Celan that I discuss in Chapter Five presents the opportunity for an alternative reading of poetic apophasis. As I show, drawing on my own and others' critical assertions as well as evidence from the poet's own reflections on the matter, Celan's attitude to poetic language is itself apophatic: for, by denying that the language of his poetry is 'poetic' or metaphoric, Celan instead insists that the language of his poems must be considered literal. For Celan, the closer to the limits of language that poetry comes, the sheerer and tauter that language must be. In Celan's work, we witness how this master of the pressurised poetic pushes a poem towards the ultimate apophatic 'statement' of silence.

The final chapter draws together the diverse strands of my research into a summary and analysis of my creative and critical explorations into the development and use of apophasis as a practice for addressing poetic ineffability. I achieve this by presenting the chapter as a concentrated braid of the thesis as a whole: its interweaving of creative and critical writing. The purpose here is to tighten the torque of language's slippages and overlay between different modes of expression, and to reaffirm the creative possibilities of the apophatic within poetic language. Perhaps most important of all, I use these modes to reflect on the ways this research has developed a creative and critical poetics of apophasis, contributing to a more expansive understanding of poetry as the most challenging yet arguably most rewarding of literary forms of dealing in language with what lies beyond language.

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### “Whiteness and the Page: a Meditation”

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

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

Whiteness. Obliterating, sense-scouring whiteness; the spatial negation of absence on absence, uniformity neutralising infinity, isotropic, unnavigable, unplottable. The “hanging white silence” (Webster 2011, 61) of the North Sea haar, blotting out miles of coast with its cold salt breath; smothering sound, vision, erasing the landscape's serifs of hedge and gate and homestead.

White, white-out, snow with its reverberations of *no* and *know*, the blanch and flinch of winter, slow glaciation of rhythm, muffling of pulse.

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

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

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

In *Moby-Dick: or, The Whale* (1851/2003) Herman Melville (1819–1891) devotes a whole chapter to Ishmael’s attempt to explain the nature of ‘the rather vague, nameless horror’ (Melville 2003, 204) the whale evoked, having his protagonist confess: “It was the whiteness of the whale that above all appalled me” (Melville, 2003, 204). The chapter is notable for the (lyrical) battle that Ishmael experiences in trying to explain just why that should be so; what it is about that whiteness that is so appalling. He diverts into various examples of approximation; yet a precise description of what so disquiets him remains beyond the grasp of language. It eludes the control of words, is indefinable, unutterable; and this very ineffability intensifies the horror. In the absence of any firm conclusion, Ishmael ventures to suggest that white is “not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors ... there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows” (Melville 2003, 212) and he asks, is this “a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?” (Melville 2003, 212).

White’s “dumb blankness, full of meaning” (Melville 2003, 212), however, offers up the perfect foil for a poetic exploration of language and unsaying. White holds both the negative and positive of itself. White is the colour of hesitations and silences. The page is full of this whiteness, waiting for the words and lines and markings that will make them visible, give them context; what Chinese calligraphers call “designing the white” (He, 2005). When Dickinson observes that ““Nothing” is the force / That renovates the World —” (Dickinson 1970, 650), she invites the reader to the brink of the page, to witness the metaphor of this apokatastic transformation when the afterness that is the word meets the beforeness of the whiteness; a whiteness of silence that duels with words to give it shape.

White is a contradiction of itself: both a covering, and a nakedness. White animates, white insulates, white liberates, white withholds: “packed round your word

is the snow” (Celan 2001, 65). The colour of nothing, and the colour of everything. All colour, blurred into the inverse of colour.

Many poets use whiteness or snow to suggest a silencing, loss, or some sort of erasure or resignation. “First snow—I release her into it— / I know, released, she won’t come back” (Phillips 2004, 28) writes contemporary poet Carl Phillips in “White Dog”. In Mark Strand’s (1934–2014) poem “White”, the speaker recognises that “the silence where I find myself / and what I make of nothing are white” (Strand 1978, 8). In his poem “The Park Drunk”, Robin Robertson depicts an alcoholic waking up to a winter morning that seems to take on the characteristics of the poetic voice’s unspoken turmoil:

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

(Robertson 2006, 3)

Other poets intimate that snow or whiteness are receptive surfaces, awaiting the mark of another consciousness; like Ted Hughes’ (1930–1998) “The Thought-Fox,” which “sets neat prints into the snow” (Hughes 1982, 13).

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

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

Contemporary poet Glyn Maxwell suggests “a poem, any poem, arises from the urge of a human creature ... to break silence, fill emptiness, colour nothing with something, anything” (Maxwell 2012, 22).

Yet what can be done with writing, a silent language, when syllables and letters will only talk soundlessly back to and out of the page? For scholar Monica Carroll however, the page/space is vocal, pro-vocative, a phenomenon that could be thought of as ‘speaking back’, for as she submits: “space is more than an absence of black marks. It is a mark of its own, namely, the mark of space” (Carroll in Strange, Hetherington, and Webb 2014, 88). For speakers in the poetry of Jabès, white—“color of absence of color” (Jabès 1991b, 32)—is “an unbearable color, that of the threshold—the page—and the shroud—the same page” (Jabès 1991b, 41). Poet Louise Glück says:

I love white space, love the telling omission, love lacunae, and find oddly depressing that which seems to have left out nothing. Such poetry seems to love completion too much, and like a thoroughly cleaned room, it paralyzes activity.

(Glück 1994, 29)

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

## §

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**“Whiteout”**

it calls me  
    to be surface  
soft hail  
    hush-burn  
into skin  
    I blanch      solidify  
am glazed  
    with quiet  
blind      the skies  
    dumb hills  
into horizon  
  
so long  
    under      I've been  
seismic  
    fraught  
but I can  
    not      can *not*  
ignore this  
    tender  
anaesthetic  
    slick chill  
icing me      up  
    cell      by cell  
  
till I am crystal

still  
it makes me  
surface makes me  
feel it stop  
me feeling

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## CHAPTER TWO: Apophasis and the Speaking of What is Not

*No is a thousand yesses  
in the code of emptiness.*

(Rumi 2004, 302)

### **Introduction: Breaking out of and into Silence**

In this chapter I engage in a more comprehensive critical exposition of the concept and practice of apophasis, examining various definitions and interpretations of the term, and referring to key texts and practitioners in preparation for a broader survey of apophatic texts in Chapter Three. I also discuss the relationship of classical apophasis to the concept of ineffability, and signal caution over the myriad understandings of ‘the ineffable’, the better to explain how poetry is particularly suited to exploring what apophasis can achieve as an encounter with and a response to poetic ineffability.

This discussion of the interconnectedness of apophasis, ineffability and poetry then opens up into analysis of why the braided thesis model—which demonstrates the interdependent processes and outcomes of a single research undertaking in the creative arts—is particularly appropriate for exploring and presenting the effects of apophasis on creative practice.

## What is “Apophasis”?

Apophasis is a classical Greek word with a complex, and, from its earliest appearance around five hundred years BCE,<sup>20</sup> constantly evolving meaning.<sup>21</sup>

As originally used by Plato (circa 429–347 BCE) and refined by his student Aristotle (384–322 BCE), the word apophasis “simply meant “negation” ... used ... to mean a negative proposition, a denial” (Franke 2007a, 1). Aristotle’s qualification in Chapter 6 of *De Interpretatione* (350 BCE / n.d.) is that: Ἔστι δὲ εἷς πρῶτος λόγος ἀποφαντικὸς κατάφασις, εἶτα ἀπόφασις: or “an affirmation is a positive assertion of something about something, a denial a negative assertion” (Aristotle n.d., 3).<sup>22</sup>

According to poet and scholar Reginald Gibbons, apophasis combines “a verb for “to say” (*phanai*) and a prefix (*apo*) which in this use means “away from, down from, far, from””(Gibbons 2007, 19). Scholar of Islamic history and literature Michael A. Sells interprets apophasis as “un-saying or speaking-away” (Sells 1994, 2). Although the etymology of apophasis is unequivocally linked to the words for saying, *phanai* and *phemi*, it has most often been practised in written form. Thus, as far as my thesis is concerned, apophasis should be understood to refer, unless otherwise stated, to its written form, and to its original classical interpretation.

Speaking/writing ‘away’ from a subject does not necessarily enact the opposite of speaking ‘about’ it.<sup>23</sup> Apophasis “can imply something that is in fact

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<sup>20</sup> See Franke (2007a, 2007b, 2014a) and Sells (1994) for a broader discussion on the provenance of classical apophasis. See L. R. Horn (1989, 1–96) and Horn, ed. (2010) for a discussion of the Aristotelian context of apophasis.

<sup>21</sup> According to contemporary poet and translator Lena Kallergi, the word apophasis has undergone more linguistic evolution to become in Modern Greek “apophase”. Kallergi (2020a) notes: “It is actually a very common word, “apophase”, both in spoken and written language, and it means ‘decision’ (to make a decision, a court decision. etc). ... In order to talk about apophasis as you use it here, in Modern Greek we use the term ‘apophatic language’. So, the adjective ‘apophatic’ has replaced ‘apophasis’. ‘Apophatic’ never means ‘decisive’, or anything like that, in Modern Greek. For ‘decisive’ or other concepts that have to do with decision, we use ‘apophasistikos’ and other similar words (apophasistic, as it would be in English).”

<sup>22</sup> I am using E. M. Edghill’s (n.d) translation of Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione*. κατάφασις: cataphasis or kataphasis, *kata-* being an intensifier preceding the word *phanai*, which in this context can be understood as ‘toward’.

<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note the difference between apophasis and the Greek word for speechless, *aphatos*. In contrast with the privative *a* (or alpha privative, which signifies lack or absence) in *aphatos*, the prefix *apo-* (away) in *apophasis* is not signifying an absence or lack of saying, but rather a kinetic, directional movement implied through the action of ‘saying away’ from saying (see World Heritage Encyclopaedia n.d.). The state of speechlessness *aphatos* implies an originary absence of speech; however the *apo-* (away) in *apophasis* implies a movement *towards* an absence of speech (see Mortley 1982 for a discussion of the privative *a*). Kallergi (2020b) comments that in Modern Greek:

present despite the absence or inadequacy of a name for it ... or present *as* an absence” (Gibbons 2007, 19; emphasis in original). Apophasis draws attention to what *might* be said, if only there were words to say it.<sup>24</sup>

Classical apophasis—literally ‘saying away’—has been used by philosophers, mystics, poets and theologians in both East and West since before Platonic times to ‘speak of’ concepts or phenomena that have customarily either resisted language or been perceived to transcend knowledge of subjects such as the nature of God, death, being, or existence. With language, we are constantly toggling between what we can say or know, and what we cannot, often using negation—‘I cannot tell you what it is, but I can tell you what it’s *not*’—as the linguistic ‘bridge’ between. This is a use of apophasis at its most rudimentary. To the kataphatic, affirmative proposition ‘is’ apophasis says ‘is not’. To statements that an entity has a particular property or ontology, apophasis poses refutations, although importantly, apophasis never denies the possibility that such an entity may still possess or be everything *except* what has been negated.

In its simplest form, apophasis ensures that everything outside and in excess of ‘is not’ is thus still in play. It is predicated, grammatically speaking, on the propositional—‘it is not the case that’—rather than the conditional: ‘*if* it is not the case that, then this’ negation. Importantly, despite the seeming definitiveness implied by propositional negation, apophasis can only perform and offer a conclusiveness that, even when taken to its logical limits, remains ultimately inconclusive and open. As scholar Raoul Mortley suggests, apophasis brings into play “a non-specific affirmation. Not-Y means everything but Y” (Mortley 1986a, 137). Thus, while it might appear to set up a dialogic, dualistic structure between presence and absence, ‘is’ and ‘is not’, apophasis in fact generates a third space, that of the unsaid, which calls up a dynamic ‘forever’, in which the known interrogates the unknown in conversations that are never closed.

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“*aphatos* is also used to mean not only something that is not said but also something that is impossible to be said, so there is also a sense of impossibility there. What is *aphato* can never be uttered.”

<sup>24</sup> It is important not to mistake apophasis for the rhetorical device of *paralipsis* with which it is commonly confused in popular commentary, particularly in relation to the rhetorical style of President Donald Trump (see Blanchfield 2016; Brunstrom 2016; Kostarelis 2017; McManus 2016; Roller 2016; Webster 2019). Paralipsis, or preterition, as it is sometimes known, is “the device by which a speaker draws attention to a topic by claiming not to speak of that topic ... [and is] a narrower term than apophasis” (Greene, Cushman, Cavanagh, Ramazani, and Rouzer 2012, 997).

And apophasis has other ways of being expressed that resonate with contemporary sensibilities, for it occurs not only in language (via the words of denial or negation) but also in concept, through “words that negate themselves in order to evoke what is beyond words” (Franke 2007a, 2). Apophasis would seem to help us capture, or at least signal, moments where meanings, emotions and mysteries evade articulation. In literature, these moments are better served by a slippage or fracture of language; in visual art by what might appear as emptiness; and in music by silence.

Any artwork of any genre that renders—literally or implicitly—silence, absence, blankness, space, light or dark as a component or theme, provokes interpretations that are apophatic in nature. Whenever we are invited, or feel compelled by reading a poem or by listening to a piece of music, to slip through the spaces or silences to focus on the un-wordedness that lies beyond, we are responding to a resonance that is profoundly apophatic. Indeed, as Franke again notes, the unsayable conditions the very impulse of human utterance:

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

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

Will apophasis enable me to *increase* what cannot be said? Will it create a space, a deliberate moment when what poetry is not saying and how it is not saying it adds up to what is being said beyond the words? American poet Alice Notley says “I think words are among us and everywhere else, mingling, fusing with, backing off from us and everything else” (Notley 2010, n.p.). I tease myself into starting, to pretend, up until the last minute, and beyond the last minute, that something else is happening, which is nothing to do with writing or making sense or beauty or even words—these are not words, these black curves and angles appearing on the page—these are not words, don’t lose your nerve, keep going, this isn’t really *you* writing, these are just disembodied fingers typing, it’s the pen, it’s the pen that’s writing, that’s scratching a living across the page, it’s not you, not you.

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

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

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## Saying through Unsayings: the Relationship of Apophasis to Ineffability

We cannot talk of apophasis without considering its relationship to ineffability and the unsayable. Apophasis enables discussion of phenomena that are considered to be ineffable, unsayable: outside of language or beyond expression.

There are relatively few specialist definitions of ineffability.<sup>25</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ineffability is “the quality of being ineffable: unspeakableness” (*OED Online* 2018). Ineffable (the adjective) is defined as:

That [which] cannot be expressed or described in language; too great for words; transcending expression; unspeakable, unutterable, inexpressible ... [t]hat must not be uttered; not to be disclosed or made known ... [t]hat cannot be uttered or pronounced; unpronounceable. (*OED Online* 2018)<sup>26</sup>

Even some of the words in this dictionary definition are resonant with poetic and interpretive possibility: they bespeak the ineffable.

For example, in some of its renderings, ‘unspeakable’ holds a taint of distaste, a hint of bitterness on the tongue. And what might it mean, poetically, to ‘unspeak’ a word, or hear ‘unspeech’?

‘Unutterable’ holds a sense of language shimmering to its limits, only to disintegrate into a voicing, which, while non-verbal, is yet urgent and charged and breathful (and which might be parlayed into poetic writing as word fragments, ellipses, and caesurae). What about the onomatopoeic thrill of saying unutterable out loud? The *uh* sounds of un- and utt- feel like effortful inarticulacy: they require a ‘pushing out’ action that involves chest and diaphragm and gut, as if retching.

‘Inexpressible’: language transmuted into speech or writing is externalised, exhaled almost from the body (and the sibilance of the *x* and double *s*, together with

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Kelly (2014) gives perhaps the fullest definition: “The word “ineffable ” literally means “unspeakable,” but the two words are fringed in different auras of connotation. “Unspeakable” suggests the forbidden, even the monstrous—unspeakable practices, unnatural acts; but “ ineffable ” suggests a divine power too great for words. In the seventeenth century, “ ineffable ” was sometimes used in a quite literal manner, as a synonym for “unpronounceable”: a writer on the Chinese language, for example, noted that certain single brush strokes represented ineffable letters. But throughout the history of the English language, “ ineffable ” has typically been used as a word of mystification, appropriate to the sacred matters beyond the range of language. In Hebrew, the name of God was represented by a sacred formula that could only be written, never spoken: the tetragrammaton, traditionally given in English as “Jehovah.” Through such taboos, the notion of cannot-be-pronounced easily shades into the notion of must-not-be-pronounced” (n.p).

<sup>26</sup> “ineffable, adj. and n.”. *OED Online*. December 2018.

the stress on *press* makes explicit this outward movement). Words and breath become sound; on the page, inscriptions and white space enter part of the visual sphere; and language becomes haptic and animate, capable of reaching out and touching in all senses that touch can be experienced and felt. In/expressible: words are dynamic, they ex-press, emanate outward. Their purpose and action is not just denotative, not solely literal, but libidinal, vivid, sensuous, and evocative.

“Too great for words; transcending expression” (*OED Online* 2018) conveys the sense that ineffability involves a lofty or profound ‘something’, which language is too commonplace, shallow or lowly to express. It also implies that ineffability possesses an aura—a glamour even—of transcendence, indicative of other-worldly, non-human or extra-ordinary phenomena; hence a value is ascribed to ineffability such that “if concepts are applied it [sic], it will be denatured and seem other than it is” (Scharfstein 1993, 188).

The axiological characteristic of ineffability can be traced back to the Neoplatonists. In *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles* (circa 515–529 CE /2010), Syrian philosopher Damascius (circa. 462–538 CE) re-examines Neoplatonic philosophies concerning the derivation of all being, life and intellect from a single (sublime) and ineffable cause: “the One beyond being” (Ahbel-Rappe in Damascius 2010, xiv). In considering how to broach any discussion of “the One beyond being”, Damascius writes:

That which is beyond knowledge in any respect is *superior* to that which can be apprehended in knowledge, so that which is beyond every form of intuition *must be more sacred* ... and its wonder is spoken of through its very ungraspability by means of our conceptions. (Damascius 2010, 75; emphases added)<sup>27</sup>

Philosopher Ben-Ami Scharfstein, who has written extensively on ineffability, reasons that “when we call highly valued experiences *ineffable*, we mean to praise them, just as we use the word *beautiful* to praise things that please us most by their appearance. *Ineffable* is often the most effective superlative we can use” (Scharfstein 1993, 188; emphases in original). In one sense, Scharfstein is incorrect: grammatically speaking, ineffable is not a superlative. In another sense, however, he

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<sup>27</sup> For a detailed exposition of Damascius’ philosophical approach, see Sara Ahbel-Rappe’s (2010) introduction and notes to her translation of *Damascius’ Problems and Solutions concerning First Principles*.

is suggesting an idea resonant with the poetic and critical explorations in this thesis: associating the *notion* of the superlative<sup>28</sup>—of something signifying ‘more than’, or “surpassing all others” (Hoad 1993, 473)—with ineffability. Yet, drawing on Scharfstein, I would suggest it is more useful from a poetic perspective to associate the notion of *extremity* with ineffability. Extremity more explicitly encompasses the axiological value of ineffability: it caters to the panegyric superlative as characterised by Scharfstein and, importantly, at the other end of the scale, a more Beckettian assessment, whereby “if you really get down to the disaster, the slightest eloquence becomes unbearable” (Beckett in Knowlson 1996, 439). Either extreme can be considered singular; and can be rendered poetically to signal the presence of something, which, while beyond words, can be intimated through the quality of its exceptionality. In some poetry, an example of this rendering would be manifested by the so-called inexpressibility topos.<sup>29</sup>

Human experience cannot always be anchored to and by language: for example, the complexities and contradictions of this are well documented in trauma theory.<sup>30</sup> And indeed, there may be good reasons why certain experiences are beyond

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<sup>28</sup> Superlative, adj. and n.: “expressing the highest or a very high degree of a quality or attribute; of, relating to, or designating such a form or degree” (*OED Online* 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Inexpressibility topos is a term coined by Ernst Robert Curtius (1953) to signal “emphasis upon inability to cope with the subject” (1953, 159): in other words, saying that words cannot say. Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) made use of the inexpressibility topos in his epic poem *Divine Comedy* (*Divina Commedia*) (1320/1921), which traces the journey of the Soul from Hell to Heaven via Purgatory. Written in Italian circa 1308–1320, the *Commedia* has multiple examples where we see how Dante, presented with the obligation of writing about imaginative realms and persons no human has experienced or met, engages with the issue of ineffability, and the poet freely admits to the difficulty of overcoming ineffability. Peter S. Hawkins (1984) defines the inexpressibility topos (sometimes called the ineffability topos) as “a straightforward declaration that what the poet is about to tell us cannot, in fact, be put into language” and offers this example from Dante’s *Paradiso* Canto I:

Trasumanar significar *per verba*  
 Non si poria; però l’esempio basti  
 a cui esperienza grazia serba

The passing beyond humanity may not be set forth  
 in words; therefore let the example suffice  
 any for whom grace reserves the experience

(Hawkins in Hawkins and Schotter 1984, 8)

Shira Wolosky (1995) asserts that “the inexpressibility topos ... is among the most pervasive and least examined motifs in Western letters” (1995, 1) adding “as the inexpressibility topos suggests, the assertion of what language cannot say is a traditional means for designating an ultimate realm beyond formulation. Negation and transcendence are thus closely allied” (1995, 3). For further discussion of the inexpressibility topos, see Anne Howland Schotter in Hawkins and Schotter (1984, 28–29).

<sup>30</sup> See for example, Leigh Gilmore (2001): “Crucial to the experiences of trauma are the difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it ... the consensus position argues that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language not only fails in the face of trauma, but is mocked by it and confronted

expression. To the experience of what physically *cannot* be said (the ability to articulate is blocked as a result of trauma) could be added what *must* not be said (censorship for political, cultural or ideological reasons); what *ought* not be said (because of taboo, or resulting from self-censorship for cultural, ethical or personal reasons), or even “that which *does not want* to be expressed” (Grabher and Jessner 1996, 354; emphasis in original). There is also the spiritually and ontologically ineffable: what is beyond knowledge, into which discussions of divinity and God might fall. Indeed, Scharfstein argues that instead of speaking of ineffability, singular, we should instead speak:

... of the many ineffabilities—neurological, synesthetic, musical, logical, philosophical, and religious, personal, familial, and tribal, childish and adult, normal, abnormal, and outright pathological—that make our speech less regular and more human. (Scharfstein 1993, 219–20)

Inherent in Scharfstein’s claim—that we should ‘speak’ of ineffability or ineffabilities—is the phenomenon that renders my research project exciting, intriguing, bewildering and compelling: the dizzying paradox of using language to deal with what lies beyond language, and how apophasis may facilitate that aim. This paradox—arguably experienced by writers and poets as particularly acute—characterises and heightens the allure of the ineffable and unsayable.<sup>31</sup>

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with its own insufficiency. Yet even as the view that one cannot speak about or represent trauma prevails, language is asserted as that which can and must heal the survivor and the community. Thus language bears a heavy burden in the theorization of trauma” (2001, 132).

<sup>31</sup> My poetic approach to ineffability and unsayability is not predicated solely on things being withheld from verbalisation because they are (according to one of the *OED*’s definitions of the word unsayable) “controversial, offensive or frightening” (*OED Online* 2018). While I do acknowledge absolutely that there are conditions under which these predications would and do apply, and would thus motivate valuable poetic exploration by others, my research is not primarily concerned with investigating the circumstances under which things should not or must not be said because of some taboo.

## The Irresistible Aporia

The challenge that scholars and poets face is that even to discuss ineffability is to engage with the aporia at the heart of using words to talk about what words cannot say. As Franke observes: “it is only through language that what is radically other to language can be evoked” (Franke 2014a, 74). This challenge appears irresistible: witness the volume of scholarship and creative work available on various aspects of the ineffable, what it is and how to address it.

Texts from the Western tradition (Franke 2007a), which focus on the nature of being and existence, and from the Eastern tradition, focusing on nothingness and emptiness (Liu and Berger 2014), can be traced back to pre-Christian times. Such texts attest to a universal fascination with the ineffable and unsayable, and the metaphysical, ontological and theological questions that enquire into phenomena beyond human experience or knowledge.

But does the nature of being beyond experience or knowledge place these phenomena beyond articulation? Damascius ponders “how the Ineffable is said to be completely unknowable: for if this is true, how can we undertake to write these [speculations] about it?” (Damascius 2010, 74).<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, Canadian poet and philosopher Jan Zwicky asks, for example: “is there anything that is genuinely ineffable? If so, how is it possible to think about it or to understand it?” (Zwicky 2012, 197), adding that “we keep trying to communicate, or articulately wishing that we could” (Zwicky 2012, 198).

Zwicky’s questioning is valid. With words as their material, writers have the means of addressing all manner of things, even the issue that some things are beyond words. Indeed, pitting oneself against the inarticulable, and using words in an attempt to overcome it, is one of the joys of writing. And more broadly, grappling with the ineffable and the unknowable is also a way of engaging with the experience of being human: as Dickinson writes in a letter to her cousins (dated 1876): “the unknown is the largest need of the intellect” (Dickinson 1959, 307). Zwicky goes on to hypothesise, however, that it is the *meanings* of certain experiences that are ineffable,

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<sup>32</sup> While questions revolving around issues such as the relationship between unknowability and ineffability may appear outside the scope of this research, I touch on them briefly because such issues typically arise in any discussion of how to understand and address ineffability, and as such will be encountered by any researcher exploring apophatic approaches to the ineffable.

and that the experiences themselves are not inarticulable, claiming: “this would explain why we seem to be able to say so much about the experiences themselves, while continuing to insist that they are indescribable” (Zwicky 2012, 199).

Philosopher Keith Yandell goes further than Zwicky, asserting that “there [are] no totally aconceptual ineffable experiences” (Yandell 1975, 179), suggesting that even the most abstract and apparently indescribable phenomenon cannot escape language, however fumblingly we may put language to it. And indeed, one of poetry’s many strengths as an aesthetic, verbal medium comes from its capacity to address and make artistic use of this very fumbling with concept, the better to express the gaps between what can and cannot be said and known. Anne Chalmers Watts argues that:

Defined in its pure form inexpressibility centers on language, not the speaker: the point is not that the speaker fails, though the speaker does, but that any tongue fails ... inexpressibility explicitly calls into being the gap between language and all that is not language, whatever that may be. (Watts 1984, 27)

Scholar Silvia Jonas, who has written at length on the metaphysics of ineffability, maintains that “one of the main phenomenal characteristics of ineffable experiences is a feeling of meaningfulness: ineffable experiences often seem to afford some kind of insight” (Jonas 2016, 73).

This last comment from Jonas would seem to be in tune with Scharfstein’s intimations that ineffability is perceived to have value precisely because it confounds ordinary measures of expression; yet it is also in conflict with Zwicky’s (and Yandell’s) assertion that these experiences cannot themselves be ineffable, since we *are* able to conceptualise and thus describe them. And what is to be made of Watts’ comment that the speaker’s ‘failure’ is secondary to the failure of language when dealing with inexpressibility? Such disparate perspectives serve to illustrate the contradictions besetting attempts to come to terms with ineffability.

Damascius, however, prefers paradox to contradiction: he gives assurance that things may be “both ineffable and communicable” (Damascius 2010, 73),<sup>33</sup> and this assertion is echoed, centuries later, in the ambivalent claim that “words say that [sic] words cannot say” (Watts 1984, 26). Or as philosopher Robert E. Innis puts it: “language emerges out of the unsaid, moves toward the to-be-said, and passes

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<sup>33</sup> For further relevant debates on ineffability in the secular sphere, see Hawkins and Schotter, eds. (1984); Ho (2006); Knepper (2009a); Spackman (2012).

beyond, as well as beneath, the said and the sayable to the unsayable” (Innis 2008, 107). Though words cease, recede or break down as they near the unsayable, language—animated by writer, speaker, reader or listener—remains active and interactive. Poets are acutely sensitised to the fact that it is impossible to draw near to a notional approximation of the limits of language without first negotiating the force-field that *is* language.

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I know your other self—unbuttoned, fey, unproseable—a drift of silk, ragroll of frost on glass. Clasped by rooms of ice, you wear your architecture lightly, you are perpetual melt. But suited, straight-seamed, you’ve become inscrutable.

A cup of blossoming tea. Osmanthus, pregnant stillness first, leaf-shy—what *is* this—then a tentative expansion. Panicles detaching one by one, ballast of aroma, kissing surface steam before a fall, fattening with flavour. Pollen into oily iridescence. Life in life-lapse, slow to quicken, fraying into stasis. Molecule by molecule, awakening of attar, stillness, flare of petal, then repose. Time blooming. Time astringent. Tension unconditional.

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### **Negotiations and Dare: the Affinity of Poetry with Apophasis and Ineffability**

Poets regularly practise a negotiation with and through language to find a way to language's extremities: to approach an edge where words cease or recede. Motivated to convey the unsayable, poets push at the limits of poetic language to make a very special kind of poem: one that may elicit complex associations or emotions out of (and between) the lines to which it is earthed. Arguably, this is to be expected: even if not explicitly trying to grapple with ineffability, poets routinely explore and exploit language's expressive and communicative versatility so as to crop, pare, and distil language; not, however, in order to shut language down, but rather to unmoor and emancipate it, to crack it open and release its pith. For in grappling with ineffability, poets have to work with and around the fact that words are able to say *that*—but not necessarily *what*—words cannot say. Time and again, as Franke suggests, “language shows itself ... as the gateway to the mystery of the unsayable beyond language” (Franke 2014a, 64).

Poet Octavio Paz (1914–1988) observed that: “modern poetry ... is at once the destruction and the creation of language, the destruction of words and meanings, the realm of silence, but at the same time, words in search of the Word” (Paz 1990, 5). Scholar Jaime Alazraki, enlarging on Paz's paradoxical statement remarks that: “the poet is condemned to words but must transcend them” (Alazraki 1976, 41), noting how a poet's bondage to words may be characterised as “an absurd undertaking and yet inevitable” (Alazraki 1976, 41). As if expanding on this notion, Watts notes:

Great poets ... have learned a verbal craft and need not use inexpressibility lightly. They often dare its profundity and let its paradox intrude on the medium of their art ... making inexpressibility introduce, provide the excuse for, more words. (Watts 1984, 27)

In the hands of accomplished poets, words will be subjected to intense pressure and pushed to the extremes of what is sayable. In crafting their work, poets have any number of tools at their disposal to achieve this in both structural and semantic ways: abrupt line breaks, sudden endings, ellipses, parataxis, grammatical devices such as anthimeria (where a noun may be co-opted as a verb), digressions and ambiguities. All of these can allow the poet to capitalise “on silences becoming

audible in the tearing of language and the rending of sense” (Franke 2014a, 80). For poets, the seemingly impregnable barrier of ineffability is but an incitement to find ways of making words and spaces collide and combine to produce a written artefact that hints at more than it can ever actually say.

The remaking and renewal of poetry each time it is read also replays and reasserts whatever poetic language is able to say, as well as how it is able to say it (or not say it). Poetry perpetuates the experience it describes or alludes to at the same time as refreshing this experience, as Watts explains:

High poetic words continuing against an inexpressibility of loss thus grant the speaker and reader a way of keeping—not directly keeping what was lost, but of keeping the unalterable fact of loss itself and the whole experience of it, beyond where language can ever touch, seize, embody, or conclude the reality of such loss. (Watts 1984, 28)

Inexpressibility, mediated through notions such as absence, emptiness or loss (as Watts suggests), *can* be explored in poetry. It can be explored, for example, in the pattern of how words interact with or break off from each other, how syntax or grammar can flow or conflict. Technically and figuratively, inexpressibility can be explored apophatically in poetry: through denial, through the admission that what can be said only reads as a stand-in for what cannot.

Apophatic vocabulary draws attention to “the gap between language and all that is not language” (Watts 1984, 27). Poetry can magnify this attention. By working with and into that perceived short-fall or lack, poetry makes the incompleteness and perceived inadequacy of language articulate, perform, and resound with what cannot be said. I am not suggesting, however, that poetry makes this incompleteness of language complete, for that would be to imply that everything can be ‘said,’ and we can feasibly reach a point in language where all possibilities of articulation, exploration, and discourse have been exhausted. Instead, I seek to highlight how a sense of language’s incompleteness, captured imaginatively and/or concretely in the form and content of a poem, can indicate to both writer and reader that what has *not* been said in the poem may be the source of its deepest emotional and poetic import and significance.

Apophasis facilitates the destabilisation and dissolution of language in ways that flow towards and around the unsayable. In being a signal or an indicator of

ineffability, apophasis is playing its part in revealing rather than describing. In all modes of writing, the apophatic grammatical constructions are available for use: conditional or interrogative, propositional or hortative. However, poetry demands more, from the poet and from language. Poetic language must signal and somehow give voice to what it cannot describe except through the lyric of itself: the linguistic unreachability of the writer's subject and/or everything that cannot be said about it. Somehow, a poem must become the lyrical assertion of language's undoing.

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

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**“Indent”**

to an edge      in hope I  
won't return

to type          that space  
may simulate      a marginal

alignment      write  
to white        displace asides

inside a        shift escape  
belay the en and em

I only ever      want to feel  
more snowness

in my self  
a softened kern

parentheses uncracked      my  
shoulders      set to lower case

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### **Through ... From ... To ... Under ... Over ... In Between: Weaving the Thesis**

According to scholar Nigel Krauth (2011; 2018), the composition and presentation of a creative writing-based thesis can be “conventional, open, and radical” (Krauth 2018). The “conventional” model indicates that creative work and thesis be kept separate, the “open” implies that alternatives to the conventional approach are tolerated; and the “radical” invites exegesis (or dissertation) and creative work to be integrated. The success, in creative, theoretical and epistemic terms, with which this integration is effected is thus part of what guides the examiner’s assessment.

This thesis represents Krauth’s third, “radical” position, whereby the practice (poetry) is interlaced with other forms of writing. Krauth details the “radical” approach thus:

The integrated creative writing submission is descriptively styled a *woven, plaited, blended, merged, mixed, collaged, cut-up, fragmented, composite or combined* submission. (I could add *montaged, medley-ed, mosaiced, pastiched, disruptive, disconnected, nonlinear, fictocritical* ... and still be talking about it.) This type of submission weaves exegesis and creative work together by a systematic means, in a manner similar to the plaiting of strands, the splicing of strips, or the laying of mosaic pieces. (Krauth 2018, 5; emphases in original)

As mentioned in Chapter One, the woven model this thesis adopts falls within a practice-based or practice-led approach to research. It should be noted that both of these terms—practice-based and practice-led—are contested,<sup>34</sup> as is the status of

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<sup>34</sup> Wide-ranging (and ongoing) discussions of perceived similarities or differences between practice-led and practice-based research have been taking place in Western universities (see especially Brook and Magee, eds. (2012), and Cosgrove (2008)). These discussions have been happening in parallel with debates about the composition and assessment criteria of the creative arts higher degree by research (HDR). See for example *TEXT* Journal Special Issues 3, 6, 7, 8, 14, 15, 22, 27, 30, 40 and 44 for a wide range of discussions on practice, research, and supervising, examining and producing creative arts doctorates in Australia. The most appropriate term or description for a research method involving creative practice is thus contested (see Brook 2012; Webb 2012; Skains 2018). Scott Brook (2012) notes the interchangeability between the terms “‘practice-led’ and ‘practice-based’ research, with ‘artistic research’, ‘performative research’ and ‘creative research’, all of which produce a shared space of discussion between stakeholders within which rhetorical and conceptual distinctions harbour the potential for disagreement” (Brook 2012). Brook adds “‘practice-led research’ ... has become the dominant term in Australia” (Brook 2012). Webb and Melrose (2014) characterise practice-based research as “a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of practical knowledge at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice ... evidenced in the creative work” (2014, 136). According to Linda Candy (2006) the practice-based model “is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice” (2006, 3), and as such it includes creative artefacts alongside “a substantial contextualisation

creative practice or creative writing as an academic discipline, especially in the UK, United States and Australia.<sup>35</sup>

Lelia Green (2006a) notes that the term practice-led research is to be understood as “not research into, or about, creative practice, but research *through* creative practice” (Green 2006a, 5; emphasis in original), with the corollary that outcomes of creative practice might be regarded as research outputs. Though the practice-based method sets out from a position of uncertainty (in common with all other research), that uncertainty is often sustained (as it needs to be) throughout the practice-based project. The method is pliable, responsive; it works with and through that flexibility, whereby the practice may dictate a change of emphasis or direction as uncertainty evolves into discovery. Observing and reflecting on the dynamics of this change of emphasis—*how* this malleability of form interacts with, affects and informs process—is constitutive of new knowledge, though the significance of its impact may only become apparent as the process itself evolves. As scholar Andrew Cowan notes:

This knowledge will only become evident after the work has left us. The problem, always, is how to live with the uncertainty this engenders, and how to resist reaching after the formulations and consolations of other discourses. (Cowan 2011)

Cowan’s comment about the necessary uncertainties that are part of generating knowledge through practice-related research bring to mind Brady’s suggestion that creative arts within the academy can be “at the cutting edge of the new, opening up enormous opportunities for those restricted by the traditional academic discourse” (Brady 2000). Moreover, I share Brady’s desire to embrace and develop

a model which celebrates the creative, privileging its discourse. The model turns its back on the safety of description and definition. Like the creative

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of the creative work” (2006, 3). A key aim of practice-led research is concerned “to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice” (2006, 3).

<sup>35</sup> For extended discussions of such debates, see for example Brophy (2007); Dawson (2004); Harper (2018, 2014, (ed.) 2013, 2008); Moxley in Donnelly (2010); Owen (2006); Peary and Hunley, (eds. 2015); Strange in Strange, Hetherington and Webb (2014); Vanderslice (2011); Webb and Melrose (2014). Cowan (2020) reports, however, that in the UK at least the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the UK’s system of assessing the quality of research in the nations higher education institutions “now recognises the research status of creative writing as being self-evident” (Cowan 2020) adding that “‘research is defined as a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared’ (REF2021 2019a: 92). This core definition applies to all outputs, regardless of discipline” (Cowan 2020).

product it is not safe, not comfortable, not predictable. And while it might engage with aspects of literature surveys, research methodology and findings, it does so in an open-ended manner, picking and choosing and embracing incompleteness. (Brady 2000)

What particularly resonates in Brady's statement is the reference to incompleteness, unpredictability, and lack of safety or comfort inherent in this non-conventional model. To me, these have always been the conditions in which creative risks are taken. Coles hails Dickinson as "among the most intrepid explorers in American literature" (Coles 2017a) despite the fact that "[Dickinson] rarely left her room" (Coles 2017a). Coles notes:

In much literary work, true perception occurs in extremity, when we have opened ourselves to the wilderness that surrounds us even here; when we have approached as closely as we can to the not-yet-known, which can be experienced only in its unmediated presence. (Coles 2017a)

While Coles' statement may be referring to the heightened engagement with the exterior world that can be provoked by arriving at the threshold of the unexplored and "the not-yet-known" there is, I argue, a parallel for the interior world: for responding to the creative provocation of arriving at the extremity of the mind and imagination.

In taking a plaited or woven approach to presenting critical and creative work, I am able to illustrate and illuminate the research in terms of its method and process as well as focus and aim. The concepts and the material I work with—language, poetry, ineffability, and apophasis—present a particular challenge as subjects for reflection. Putting these elements together as a braided thesis, and the modal shifts I deploy in doing so are intended to demonstrate the research process and outcomes from a performative as well as a scholarly perspective. The thesis is thus reflecting not only on the situated phenomenon of apophasis but also on its *enactment* in experimenting with its conceptual and artistic significance for contemporary poetic practice. This process entails exploring how form and lineation, subject matter, vocabulary, and figurative language can be supported or informed by apophasis in poems directed towards the acknowledgement of the moments familiar to many of us when we sense or/and experience a breakdown of language.

Moreover, the interplay between lucidity and ambiguity as characterised by different modes of writing reinforces language's propensity for fracture *and* flexibility

when verging on the ineffable. Implicit in this mercurial property of language must be a consideration, or at least an acknowledgement, of the differences and the similarities of language's utterance in spoken *and* in written terms.

In other words, the thesis straddles what it means to produce a *written* artefact that attempts to distil into poetry a fraying of language that does not belong exclusively to writing, but happens also in speech. I therefore conflate the terminology of the oral—saying, speaking, uttering, and vocalisation—with that of the inscribed, so that when I 'talk' of 'saying' and 'unsaying' I articulate these actions in writing.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> That being said, I do not engage in a debate about the pre-eminence of spoken over written language or vice versa. The hierarchical relationship of writing to speech—which one is the dominant mode of language—has historically been the locus of debate: in one of his most noted works, *Of Grammatology* (1997), Jacques Derrida famously took issue with Ferdinand de Saussure's (1959) privileging of speech over writing. See Free (1990) for a discussion of the positions taken by Derrida and Merleau-Ponty with regard to Saussure's theories. Nor do I attempt to explain the differences that emerge creatively and critically when investigating and interpreting inarticulacy and ineffability as a written rather than spoken event. Rather, my concern is with how apophasis helps to strengthen poetry's capacity to express what could, in spoken language, drift away slowly into silence, or be severed into sudden speechlessness. Or which might never actually be spoken in the first place.

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

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

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

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

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

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

And eventually, perhaps, poet.

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### **Weaving the Thesis (cont.)**

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

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

There are occasions when prose is too even, too unexcitable: when I am stricken by emotion for or in response to another; when almost undone by the rawness of grief or love; when seized by ideas and impulses for which ultimately, there may perhaps be no so-called right words. And yet prose necessarily walks me to a threshold where only poetry can then tip me over into the fierceness of an imaginative encounter with these feelings.

In other words, prose’s more sedate register and pace<sup>37</sup> allows me to prepare a ground that poetry will detonate. With prose, I prod and palpate the surface of deep or disturbing emotions, which I may be able to intuit but struggle to express. With prose, I mark the site. With poetry, as with the poem below, I make the incision, draw blood, and excise.

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<sup>37</sup> I do not, however, wish to diminish the power of prose and suggest it is inferior to poetry. I agree with Eagleton (2007) that “the distinction between the two is ripe for dismantling” (2007, 26) and that there is “hardly a device thought of as ‘poetic’ which some piece of prose somewhere does not exploit. Prose may be lyrical, introspective and brimming with delicate feeling” (2007, 26).

It is in this way that the enfolding of different modes of writing into the thesis has temporal, spatial, rhythmical, kinetic, visual, material, and musical effects, all of which can animate language as a complex practice harbouring known and unknown, said and unsaid, presence through absence, and perceptibility through imperceptibility.

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**“Pacific”**

at this instant only    always

she is contronymic    feel

her as she cleaves    those little

clenches spell release    re-pleat

the surface-underneath    for she

is gill-grab    roar and hiss

Pacific    but is far from

peaceful    she withholds relief

is sounded    depthed

is made of gasp and raw

throat fricative    of weather-temper she

brews anarchy    from royal blue

insists all salt-sere land

unhitch and topple to a tidal

redesign    o she an

o cyan

your blue    the language of

the dragging moon    lunatic and contrary

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### **Weaving the Thesis (cont.)**

While this thesis moves between the poetic and the prosaic, enacting changes in pace as well as material, I want some ‘moments’ (I think of these phenomena in largely temporal terms) somehow to represent the effect of that tremor between known and not-yet-known, to represent “an edge that never arrives” (Coles 2017a). As a creative writer I look for and am most animated by those moments when the edge shimmers with possibility; and thus I am motivated to invoke a similar sensation in the reader. These moments may be poetic in nature and form, or they may be lyric prose that informs a subsequent exploration in poetry ... or into the whiteness of the page, the “limit of completion” (Fox 2007, 265) where the map runs out.<sup>38</sup> In capturing such moments, I am also following the example of other creative researchers who, in their theses, “transgress boundaries between literary categories, or blur distinctions between them, or seek to find new spaces for writing in the interstices” (Krauth, Webb, and Brien 2010).

So as well as presenting modes of writing that engage with and question the ineffable, the arrangement of this thesis also seeks to suggest and to dramatise language’s inscription at the point of its potential breakdown, and the writer’s attempt to deal with a sometimes sudden, or at other times gradual, pitch from articulation towards inarticulateness. In other words, some strands of this thesis may appear more neatly ‘woven’, and some may be read as loosened, unfinished, or in disarray. There may be holes in the selvage. The juxtaposition and patterning of different modes of writing mimics the versatility of language, and the shifting interstices between language and the unsayable. These shifts may perform patterns we recognise from speech; they may perform patterns that expose layers only writing can elucidate. Sometimes, a smooth segue from expository to poetic writing may occur, as if theory’s explanation can only inch forward before poetry crystallises what pages of prose cannot. Sometimes the abruptness of the juxtaposition between poetry and prose may enact flail (and fail) of words at the point they are most critical. As we know from speech, the slips between saying and unsaying may be eloquent, but not necessarily elegant (a point that recalls Brady’s aspirations for incompleteness and

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<sup>38</sup> In *Terra Antarctica: Looking Into the Emptyest Continent*, scholar William L. Fox (2007) refers to: ““the limit of completion,” represented on the map by a dotted line” (2007, 265). Nothing has been mapped beyond this point.

unpredictability). Sometimes the poetic voices in my creative work may appear to interrogate conventions of language. Diction may be lucid or disjunctive, spare or elaborate. Poetic personae may explicitly execute apophasis through refusals and denials, or negation may be implied. Sometimes the poetic content may appear to address a specific occurrence or subject by veering away from what is addressed. Sometimes poems may suggest an evaporation or disintegration of language that is visually enacted on the page.

Taking the braided approach means I also weave passages of lyric reflection about my research journey into the thesis, alongside the poetry, and alongside the critical writing. Here, the intention is to show the ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’ of investigating apophasis and its application to poetic language; and how the research process has thrown up encounters with creative spaces that remain productively flexible and open. Sometimes these creative spaces are better navigated through reflective prose, sometimes through poetry. I can use sentences to guide me towards fragmentation; and when I am unable to forsake one for the other I can, in a prose poem, braid them together. The woven approach facilitates a demonstration of how different modes of writing may affect how apophasis is embodied and articulated, and how, in turn, that mode influences the myriad ways we might interpret and understand apophasis and its poetic renderings of the ineffable. To this end, while drawing particularly on Franke and other scholars’ work to highlight the rich range of focus on apophasis in academic disciplines, I also make reference throughout the thesis to the presence of apophasis in everyday contexts; and I show how, in its productive rendering through creative mediums such as poetry, apophasis can enrich and extend our creative, emotional, philosophical and poetic relationship to what language can and cannot say.

Finally, there is an aesthetic purpose in presenting my research as a braided thesis: to offer the reader a vivid, restless, and sometimes startling engagement in this creative and theoretical encounter with poetry, apophasis, and ineffability.

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Words aloud the page, aloud the dab and dash of a pen, the swish of wrist, the nib is avatar, the ink is silent virus, moldwarp burrowing along, just beneath the surface, *there I am*, trying to slip between the nib and that which would be scratched out from my fingers, hand and arm. Trying to eke the groove of thought, its carve through language skin.

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**“The Apophatic in Art: a Meditation”**

You unseen cathedrals  
you rivers unheard,  
you clocks deep in us.

(Celan 2001, 111)

I.

July 2017. I am in the South Quire aisle of London’s St Paul’s Cathedral, witnessing. I witness (with more than my eyes and ears) the flame, the wet, the windblast and the sand of Bill Viola’s intense four-screen video artwork *Martyrs* (2014). I channel the seven minutes of each film cycle (featuring the mortifications of the body via the four elements) through my own body, which seems already to be ahead of itself (or maybe more accurate to say, ahead of myself): braced for the onset of heat, suffocation, the scarification of the wind, the weight of water. Then, as the elemental furore in each video recedes, my senses relax their grip and release me, like a sphincter, into a different space of mind. Am I experiencing the “formal feeling” of Dickinson’s poem # 341 (Dickinson 1970, 162)? Have I sought out the disquiet and tumult of these artworks, hoping that a decorum, a solace, perhaps a redemption will eventuate? These videos contain such contradiction of violence and beauty, which in me becomes a conflicted fascination. The symbolic suffering is somehow so graceful (both in depiction and in sentiment, being grace-full), the imagery at once simple and sophisticated, the build-up of tension perfectly choreographed. Behind and below me

thousands of footfalls are pilgrimming the aisles and shadows of this massive building, but they could be the cohorts of a different century for all my awareness of them. *Martyrs*. In truth, all of us who keep vigil at the foot of these screens are martyrs too: for if we dig into its Greek and Latin etymology, the word ‘martyr’ originally means ‘witness.’<sup>39</sup>

## II.

September 2017. I walk into the James Turrell Skyspace *Within without* (2010) installation in the gardens of the National Gallery of Australia, in Canberra, and in this bell jar of light and shade, I become other: part of the curve of brick, the slice of air, shimmer of water, a harp of dust-motes in sun, the silence, the listening. And I become not just other than myself, but also something else besides, which manifests while I am there, and evaporates on my leaving. Yet paradoxically whatever takes shape within the artwork—this ‘supra’-other, this ‘extra’-other, this other-me-of-the-artwork—is experienced as a paring back, a reduction. It is as if by becoming less corporeal, I somehow become more nakedly human, skinless, super-sensate: and I do not have words adequate to describe it or explain how. Yet, what I have just written illustrates the natural tendency to slip into a “poetic and paradoxical” (Scharfstein 1993, 188) language in order to convey an ineffable experience.

## III.

December 2018. Someone’s talking to me “take your shoes off ... put your belongings in this box ... can be a little intense ... people see lots of colours ... button to press if you’re worried ... about twenty minutes” and I climb up the steps of a white sphere. Inside is the smooth white eggness of curved wall, and a tilted circular platform upon which I lie. I have only just made it in time for my experience in Turrell’s *Unseen Seen*, having got lost in the intestinal gloom and disorienting walkways and vaginas of MONA.<sup>40</sup> I’m grateful for a lie-down. I can still hear what’s going on, not only outside this extra-large golf-ball of an installation, but also inside my head, and I wish I couldn’t. I’ve brought myself to Hobart for Christmas, hoping to climb out of a seasonal cognitive and emotional deep freeze. This artwork feels so different to the Canberra one. Although it’s a deliberately immersive experience, I don’t become part of the artwork. The artwork doesn’t care that I am there. Or maybe I don’t care that I am there. I am a pair of eyeballs upon which to dance. The sphere is

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<sup>39</sup> The Greek word *martyreo*: “I bear witness” (MacCulloch 2014, 65).

<sup>40</sup> Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania.

an eyeball on which to dance. What is dancing are blizzards of light, galaxy upon galaxy fizzing my retinas, and shutting my eyes makes no difference. I keep waiting for oblivion to begin. I emerge from the sphere, feeling old.

IV.

The young woman in the white coat escorts me down a corridor to a door (or is it an opening in a curtain?). My mind's not processing things very well. Perhaps it is the medication. "I'll leave you with —" she says. He has a beard, if I remember correctly. Which must mean he also has a face. I'm instructed to walk along a corridor, one hand touching the wall to my left and then I will come to a chair, and I will sit on this chair. Did I mention that everything, after the beard and the door, is total, opaque blackness? It feels really home-like, somehow. The chair is comfortable. More rest. I don't even have the energy to wonder what is out there in the dark, I'm not even interested in imagination. I try out my senses one by one, but whatever I smell, hear, taste, feel and see in the dark is now forfeit to memory. I am in the perfect conditions to meet God. Turrell calls this the *Weight of Dark*. Weight, Wait. There is no difference to me. If we could see apophysis, is this what it would look like? I always imagine apophysis to be white, blank, snowed. Whatever white is before everything other than white gets to it.

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### CHAPTER THREE: Apophasis in Theology, Philosophy, and Poetry

Our deepest experiences are wordless. There may be image, but there are no words to describe the gap between seeing and saying, for example. The labor of poetry is finding ways through language to point to what cannot be put into words.

(Charles Simic 2015, 23)

#### **Introduction: “That Emptiness / Becomes What We Most Want”<sup>41</sup>**

In order to establish the complexity, effects, and significance of apophasis in texts that grapple with ineffability and the unsayable, this chapter offers a selective overview of the provenance and development of apophasis, as practised by theologians, philosophers, and poets, principally from the West.

This chapter does not offer a detailed historical study of all aspects of apophasis and its practitioners, for other scholars have already provided such rich and comprehensive surveys.<sup>42</sup> Instead, I focus on the writers and texts that, for the purposes of this thesis, best illustrate the development of the literary and interpretive uses of apophasis across different disciplines. In particular, I aim to demonstrate how the deployment and value of apophasis have never belonged exclusively to either religious or secular contexts, but instead have been interwoven throughout both.

Indeed, in his two-volume comparative study of the Western apophatic tradition, *On What Cannot be Said* (2007a, 2007b), Franke has identified the difficulty of singling out the key practitioners of apophasis. Franke rightly suggests that “few, if any, great writers or artists, in whatever genre or discipline or form, do not at some point reach the limits of the possibilities of their linguistic or expressive means” (Franke 2007a, 4),<sup>43</sup> and they thus resort to some sort of apophatic approach to negotiating those limits.

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<sup>41</sup> From “You Are Yourself the Animal We Hunt” (see p.92 of this thesis).

<sup>42</sup> For a comprehensive and detailed outline of the rise of apophasis in early Greek and Christian literature, see Mortley (1986a, 1986b). For the development of Western and Eastern apophatic traditions see Sells (1994).

<sup>43</sup> A discussion of apophasis could fruitfully focus on, for example, the writings of Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), see Beckett 1990a, 1990b, Knowlson 1996; the art of Mark Rothko (1903–1970), see Rothko 2006, Waldman 1978; James Turrell (1943–), see Adcock 1990, Kosky 2012; Bill Viola

Therefore, in compiling this overview in a way that best serves the thesis, I have adopted three broad criteria for selection. The writers I discuss in this chapter are included either because their work has an important bearing on how we understand the development and use of apophasis; or because they have used apophasis in language or sentiment in a way that broadens critical and creative understanding of the concept, and how I might apply that understanding in my poetry; or because the specific topics they have chosen to address are relevant to this research project.

Accordingly, my discussion first addresses the general evolution in the understanding and use of the term apophasis in theology and philosophy, from the medieval period to the twentieth century. I focus my discussion on arguably the two most widely known examples of apophatic theological texts in English: the fourteenth-century vernacular translation of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* (circa 400–500 CE/1978) and *The Cloud of Unknowing* (circa 1350–1400/1978). These texts have an important bearing on how to understand the development and use of apophasis in traditional religious writing.

I go on to discuss how the work of philosophers Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), and specifically their respective interests in deconstruction, language and interpretation, offer insights that support the aims of this research project, and provide a pertinent contemporary context for a secular treatment of apophasis.

Having broadly outlined theological and philosophical (or religious and secular) frameworks within which apophasis can be seen to emerge, I then turn my discussion to an overview of the role and development of apophasis in poetry. To provide an exhaustive account of all of the poets who have used apophasis in their work (whether self-consciously or not) would be impossible in a single thesis; therefore, I touch briefly on the work of five from different cultural backgrounds and historical periods: Rumi (1207–1273), John of the Cross (1542–1591), Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), T. S. Eliot (1888–1865), and Charles Wright (1935–).

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(1951–), see Bernier 2014, Townsend (ed) 2004, Viola 1995; or Marina Abramović (1946–), see Abramović 1998, Richards 2010; the music and writing of composers John Cage (1912–1992), see Cage 1990, 1973, Kostelnatz 2002; or Philip Glass (1937–), see Glass 2016, Kostelnatz and Fleming (eds) 1997; the ecclesiastical architecture of John Pawson (1949–), see Morris 2010, Pawson, Haug, Hörwick, Morris, and Stötzer 2019, Sudjic 2005. The work of all these artists shares a pared-back aesthetic invoking notions of space, emptiness, silence, and absence that, bereft of adornment, open up a contemplative fullness of possibility and 'language' way beyond any material presence.

By connecting the work of these poets, I examine how apophasis may be poetically rendered and explored by the writer irrespective of whether the poems spring from or examine secular or religious concerns. My aim is to show how apophasis can inform poems whatever their provenance: whether they arise from an explicitly religious or mystical impulse (as with the work I discuss by Rumi and John of the Cross); whether they are poems that draw from a non-religious and more experimental inspiration (as with the work I discuss by Mallarmé); and whether they are poems that appear to perform a more deliberate blending of the spiritual and the secular (as with the work I discuss by Eliot and Wright).

This overview prepares the way in subsequent chapters for deeper analyses of apophasis, focusing on diction, subject matter, poetic technique, and syntax in the work of two very different poets who are the key poetic influences on my research, Dickinson and Celan.

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The words in this thesis are both raw and leavened with time. They retain the rawness of first sight, first reading, first stroke of the pen or the key, and yet long thinking,<sup>44</sup> slow scholarship, hesitation, rephrasing, and rejection have also leavened them. Each word a beat, marked out by the instant it takes to read or say it, by compulsive intervals of breath and comprehension. Instant means now. Each pause scored by punctuation, paragraph, page break. Writing arrests time, turns into it, measures it out in the moments while words are being committed to paper, and while they are being read. Then time turns on writing, erases it. Words not-being-read are not alive. Words not-being-written are not alive. The word burns out of *now* then burns out, passes into silence. Language steals from silence. It plunders silence; it creeps out from it, but then is sucked back.

Sound is precipitation, trace, interruption.

‘Nothing’ is the something in which ‘something’ is suspended.

In human communication, the non-verbal is as, if not more, enlightening as the verbal. But is silence just absence of sound or something more? Can I make silence speak for me, and if so, how?

Being a writer is about trying to use silences as effectively as using words.

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<sup>44</sup> Author Hilary Mantel notes, “I’m a long thinker and a fast writer” (2016).

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**“A Covering for The Self”**

*after Rumi*

you are spoken  
for every word  
a thorn every  
touch the opening  
of a cold rose

night becomes  
animal eyes turn  
to ocean tongue  
to hunt separated  
from you I need to

feel what you  
are seeing what  
you are tasting

to give to myself  
the you I most want

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## **From The Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century: Patterns of Apophasis in Theology and Philosophy**

### *1. Knowing through Unknowing: the Early Religious Mystics*

As discussed in Chapter Two, the original use of apophasis (first encountered in the writings of Plato and Aristotle) was as a straightforward negative proposition. However, as I shall show, apophasis evolved over centuries to become “a negative that is not straightforward” (Gibbons 2007a, 19); in other words, a rhetorical device and philosophical stance that facilitated an increasingly nuanced mode of addressing questions of ontology and theology.<sup>45</sup>

This refinement in the use and understanding of apophasis began in the third century with the early Neoplatonists such as Plotinus (205–270 CE), and his student Porphyry (circa 232–304 CE).<sup>46</sup> As Christianity spread from the Middle East across to the West in the first centuries after the death of Christ, apophatic rhetoric proved to be an effective and appropriate way of engaging with speculation about God (and God’s presumed non-beingness, or above-beingness).<sup>47</sup>

The first notable example of an apophatic theological text dates from around the fifth century: the *Mystical Theology (De Mystica Theologica)*, reputedly the work of a Christian mystic known as Dionysius the Areopagite (circa 400–500 CE).<sup>48</sup> Dionysius’ work is important for my research as it signals the beginning of the development of a mode of apophatic theological writing and thinking, known as negative theology or *via negativa*, which by the Middle Ages became widely adopted

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<sup>45</sup> Franke (2006) elaborates on this point: “There is a strong temptation to interpret apophasis as being only about discourse, since then we can say definitely what it is about. But this sells it short, for then apophatic discourse is presented as having no bearing upon extralinguistic reality, no ontological import. While apophasis makes no particular ontological claims, its negations do bear upon what has traditionally been treated under the rubric of ontology. This realm is redefined by apophasis as the open space into which discourse opens at the limits of what it is able to articulate—as what it cannot formulate and determine in terms of itself. So beyond its necessary self-critical moment, apophatic discourse is all about this something other, other than itself, other than discourse altogether” (2006, 67).

<sup>46</sup> For details about the lives and work of Plotinus and Porphyry, see O’Meara (1995) and Johnson (2013) respectively.

<sup>47</sup> See Mortley (1986a, 1986b).

<sup>48</sup> Also known as Pseudo-Dionysius, this mystic was “probably a Syrian monk of the late fifth or early sixth century” (Wolters 1978, 201) or “an Athenian companion of St. Paul” (Sells 1994, 34). *The Mystical Theology* was among a number of texts reputedly written by Dionysius.

by Christian religious mystics<sup>49</sup> throughout Europe. There was also a simultaneous development of apophatic literature in Jewish and Islamic mysticism.<sup>50</sup>

In the late fourteenth century, the *Mystical Theology* was translated<sup>51</sup> into English and published under the title of *Dionise Hid Divinite* by an anonymous cleric. This cleric was possibly also the author of the second early apophatic text important to my thesis, *The Cloud of Unknowing (The Cloud)* (circa 1350–1400/1978). Despite their didactic purpose to instruct the devout in the ways of coming closer to God, both of these English-language texts are written with a refreshingly direct and humorous voice. Both are threaded with passages that are unmistakably apophatic, acknowledging the inadequacy of words to prepare the way for and describe the mystical experience of knowing God. The (translated) Dionysius writes: “Not only do we find that words are inadequate, but everything we say seems fantastic and utterly irrational” (Dionysius 1978, 215).

For these early Christian scribes, the recourse for this inadequacy of words is to use apophasis—negation—as a way of signalling the extent to which ‘knowing’ God depends upon the renunciation of all the customary aids to the intellect, such as

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<sup>49</sup> Such as the French beguine Marguerite Porete (d.1310); German cleric Meister Eckhart (1260–1328); and the Spanish Carmelite monk, John of the Cross (1542–1591). Union with God was both spiritual endeavour and ultimate aspiration for the medieval mystics (see Underhill 1990). The nature and history of mysticism is discussed in a variety of authoritative studies: see Harmless (2008); Horne (1995, 1977); James (1902, 379–429); McGinn (1991); Mortley (1978); Underhill (n.d., 1990, 1915). The two (general) explanations of mysticism I have found to be of most value in understanding the texts and motivations of the mystics are Horne (1977) and Mortley (1978). Horne suggests that mysticism cannot lend itself to a single definition, because writers have approached the subject in a variety of ways: as firsthand accounts of mystical experiences or visions; as authors of devotional manuals telling how to live the mystical life; and as theologians and philosophers trying to assess its meanings. With regard to what a ‘mystical vision’ might comprise, Mortley helpfully suggests that mysticism is premised on a “transcendent experience, going beyond language and reason, and beyond the boundaries of normal experience, which gives the individual a sense of unification with a higher reality, and complete certainty” (1978, 1). Descriptions of this type of experience, as well as treatments from the other categories as defined by Horne are certainly evident in the mystical texts of most value and relevance to my research.

<sup>50</sup> Sells (1994) notes that: “the 150-year period from the mid-twelfth to the beginning of the fourteenth century constitutes the flowering of apophatic mysticism. Almost simultaneously, the apophatic masterpieces of the Islamic, Jewish, and Christian traditions appeared” (1994, 5).

<sup>51</sup> According to Wolters (1978), the *Mystical Theology* attributed to Dionysius was translated from its original Greek into Latin by John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century, and then into English in the fourteenth century by an unknown author, possibly a priest from the East Midlands in the UK, who may or may not have been the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The argument that the English versions of these two texts are closely linked, perhaps by the same hand, is compelling, given that the author of *The Cloud* draws heavily on Dionysius’ earlier writings, even referencing Dionysius directly: “that is why St Dionysius said, “the most godlike knowledge of God is that which is known by unknowing”” (anon. 1978, 145). For ease of reference, any quotations from the translation of *Mystical Theology* are attributed in this thesis to the text’s source author, Dionysius.

the senses, and upon rejection of any human (and thus, by implication, limited and inferior) levels of knowing and understanding.<sup>52</sup>

This performative aspect of the apophatic approach (the text not only talking of saying away, but also enacting that saying away) as illustrated in the *Mystical Theology* and *The Cloud* ensures that “when we attribute something to [God], or deny any or all of the things which he is not, we do not describe him or abolish him, nor in any way that we can understand do we affirm him or deny him” (Dionysius 1978, 218). In other words, the medieval reader is being cautioned that ‘saying’ anything about God is ultimately self-defeating, since in the presence of God, or even in talking of God, Dionysius suggests, words serve precisely to remind us—eloquently, by their very inadequacy—exactly how ineffectual language is when applied to concepts of the Divine. Significantly for the aims of this thesis, however, far from rendering this impasse or inadequacy as a failure, apophasis in these texts enables an expansiveness: it points to the pregnancy of space rather than the privation of absence; it indicates a sense of the openness, the unwritten-ness or unsaid-ness of fullness beyond words.

Thus, the *Mystical Theology* and *The Cloud* acknowledge the impossibility, not only of talking about God, but also of *not* talking about God; for even to reference this impossibility is to mention it. Much more than a system of rhetoric used to oppose or cancel out an assertion, these early theological texts show how apophasis underpins a whole theological, philosophical, and indeed poetic method or attitude based on negation that can address “what is beyond words—and indeed beyond the limits of language altogether” (Franke 2007a, 2).

Two and a half thousand years after it first enters the philosophical lexicon, however, the term apophasis is less in evidence, with twentieth-century European philosophers tending instead to use instead the term “negation.”<sup>53</sup> Yet in its use and

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<sup>52</sup> Thus, counsels the *Mystical Theology*, seeing and knowing God (who is beyond all seeing and knowing) is contingent upon “not seeing and not knowing” (Dionysius 1978, 212). Dionysius acknowledges that “when we are entering the darkness that is beyond mind, not only do we find that words are inadequate but that everything we say seems fantastic and utterly irrational ... there will be nothing one can say of it, for it is wholly united to that which is beyond all speech” (1978, 215). As scholar Denys Turner (1995) explains: “It follows from the *unknowability* of God that there is very little that can be *said* about God: or rather, since most theistic religions actually have a great number of things to say about God, what follows from the unknowability of God is that we can have very little idea of what all these things said of God *mean*. And, strictly speaking, that is what ‘aphophasic’ asserts, as one can tell from its Greek etymology: *apophasis* is a Greek neologism for the breakdown of *speech*, which, in the face of the unknowability of God, falls infinitely short of the mark” (1995, 20; emphases in original).

<sup>53</sup> Philosophers such as Heidegger (2010, 1971); Sartre (1958); Weil (2002); and Wittgenstein (1974, 2010) debate the concepts of absence and presence, some in the context of their Christian faith, some

effects, negation is consonant with apophasis in both the original Platonic sense, and also as a means of facilitating theoretical engagements with “the overwhelming fascination of the Nothing” (Franke 2014a, 34). By now, however, negation/apophasis is employed as part of a discourse concerned less with divinity and more with secular matters, particularly the instability of language, and its precarious relationship to being, meaning, interpretation of text, and to the non-verbal.<sup>54</sup> Debate around these instabilities and their implications become a focus for postmodernism, a philosophical movement loosely understood as a collective questioning and rejection of certainty across a range of social and cultural discourse.<sup>55</sup> Apophasis’ role in this questioning and rejection has been, Franke suggests, to:

emphasize the breaking and shattering of all meanings as that which opens language to intimations of what lies beyond its possibilities of saying. Where discourse ruptures, meaning spills out and spreads without bounds, and in this sense becomes infinite. (Franke 2014a, 32)

For scholars Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (1996), apophatic denial and negation enable the subversion and undoing of spoken language. As Budick and Iser note, “what allows the unsayable to speak is the undoing of the spoken through negativity” (Budick and Iser 1996, xvii). Furthermore, they argue that in a text, apophasis “is a process of transforming positions which gives dynamic presence to the absence of otherness ... it constantly lures absence into presence” (Budick and Iser 1996, xiv). As such, the negativity of apophasis “is not negative ... [for] while continually subverting that presence, negativity, in fact, changes it into a carrier of absence of which we would not otherwise know anything” (Budick and Iser 1996, xiv). Budick and Iser’s assertion is significant, suggesting as it does that negation’s ability to undo language becomes the means of indicating and animating what it is that language denies.

To consider how apophasis can be spoken of as “a carrier of absence” (Budick and Iser 1996, xiv) that “allows the unsayable to speak” (Budick and Iser 1996, xiv), I now draw on the work of Derrida and Gadamer, two key figures in twentieth-century

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from an agnostic or atheist perspective. From the middle of the twentieth century onward, Agamben (1991); Blanchot (1995); Derrida (2001, 1997, 1996, 1995, 1992, 1982); Gadamer (2004); Marion (2012, 2008); and Sontag (2002) take different positions on language, interpretation and negation.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Text’ may be construed as something not restricted to worded artefacts but as anything capable of being ‘read’.

<sup>55</sup> See Jameson (1982); Lyotard (1984); and McRobbie (1994).

continental philosophy. Neither Derrida nor Gadamer are regarded as postmodernists, though deconstruction and hermeneutics, the key theories for which they are respectively known, have contributed to and shaped many postmodernist debates about semiotics and the stability and interpretation of text. Despite the influence and legacy of their work on the thinking of the late twentieth-century and beyond, Derrida and Gadamer apparently did not agree with each other's approach. Witness their differences as played out through a debate billed as "a head to head confrontation between deconstruction and hermeneutics" (Keane and Lawn 2016), orchestrated in 1981 at the Goethe Institute in Paris.<sup>56</sup>

Yet it is through considering these differences that, in certain respects, Derrida and Gadamer offer valuable insights, as far as this thesis is concerned, into how to approach and read apophasis in secular contexts. Thus I will first draw out the respective elements of Derrida's and Gadamer's work pertinent to this discussion, and then consider the implications for this project of their differences in approach.

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<sup>56</sup> See Swartz and Cilliers (2003) who note: "Many commentators perceive of this encounter as an "improbable debate," citing Derrida's marginalization, or, in deconstructive terms, deconcentration of Gadamer's opening text as the main reason for its "improbability""(2003, 1–2). See also Michelfelder and Palmer (1989), di Cesare in Kean and Lawn (2016), and Kennedy Schmidt (2014) for accounts of and perspectives on this encounter.

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Light chasing dark chasing light, cascading across latitudes. Dateline fracturing the hemispheres. Fissures where night is not-day, day is not-night, the only certainty being that on the other side of the globe, the reverse will be happening. The movement of the planets creating a ripple of stasis where things are only *both* and *neither*, and can never be more—or less—than *is* and *is not*. Dawn and twilight: the stammer in a sentence that is repeated over and over, hour by hour. No parole. No parole? A sentence without words?

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I become fascinated by what comes *before* ‘is’ and ‘is not.’ Why am I not satisfied with the rhetoric of yes and no, why do I have to reach further? I acknowledge that yes and no are important, but perhaps, as Notley (and maybe Derrida, and maybe Plato, and maybe all of us) remarks: “I am ambivalent about words, I know they don't work, I know they aren't it. I don't in the least feel that everything is language” (Notley 2010, n.p.).

It's a strange thing for a writer to admit, but the closer one comes to words, the more one practises the craft and attempts to perfect the art of writing them, the more one becomes obsessed by reaching beyond them. The more one aches to reinvent, to subvert, and to transcend, language.

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**“You’re the Fish”**

*after Rumi*

inside my chest,  
a provocative

sweetness, but you  
give nothing. You

shine, knowing  
no human can

reach you. My pen  
uproots, tonight no

words come.  
I’ve lost mouth,

hand, head—  
my way to the page

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## 2. Text as Carrier of Absence: the Work of Jacques Derrida

Of the philosophers involved in an apophatic line of enquiry, perhaps nowhere is the rupturing of meaning and language discussed more thoroughly than in the work of Derrida.<sup>57</sup> Despite being a self-professed atheist for much of his life, Derrida finds it useful to apply the principles of negative theology and apophysis to his thinking on deconstruction,<sup>58</sup> presumably as the best means of trying to refer, in language, to aspects of this approach—such as *différance* and the *trace*—that are extra-linguistic.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, deconstruction itself is “an event” (Derrida 1988, n.p.), which appears to imbricate language and communication as part of a wider ontology: “What deconstruction is not? everything of course! What is deconstruction? nothing of course!” (Derrida 1988, n.p.). Yet in teasing out these concerns revolving around the behaviour of language and meaning, Derrida turns to an apophatic lexicon that, rather than affirming what something is, describes that concept (as far as description is possible) by stating what it is not.

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<sup>57</sup> Hobson (2012) comments: “Jacques Derrida is known still as a controversial and difficult philosopher, though his first work was published thirty-five years ago. Part of this reputation may be occasioned by the very extent of the interest his work has aroused: not just in philosophy or literary criticism, but in related academic disciplines” (2012, 1), adding “where for an English or American philosopher it makes sense to speak of ‘improving’ arguments, Derrida will not separate them from the words in which they are expressed; they are localized with writer, chapter and verse, they cannot be prised out of their linguistic and historical location” (2012, 4). Royle (2009) observes: “Derrida’s work has consistently provoked anxiety, anger and frustration, as well as pleasure, exhilaration and awe. One way or another he seems to get under people’s skin. He questions everything. He refuses to simplify what is not simple. He works at unsettling all dogma” (2009, ix).

<sup>58</sup> In “A Letter to a Japanese Friend” dated 1983, Derrida (1988) ‘explains’: “Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject, or even of modernity. It deconstructs itself ... The word “deconstruction”, like all other words, acquires its value only from its inscription in a chain of possible substitutions, in what is too blithely called a “context”. For me, for what I have tried and still try to write, the word has interest only within a certain context, where it replaces and lets itself be determined by such other words as “écriture”, “trace”, “différance”, “supplement”, “hymen”, “pharmakon”, “marge”, “entame”, “parergon”, etc.” (1988, n.p). Olivier (1988) contends that: “deconstruction is not so much a philosophy or school of thought, as a specific way (“strategy”) of reading, a practice with regard to texts and by implication to institutions” (1988, 288). Swartz and Cilliers (2003) maintain: “the “meaning” of “deconstruction” is perpetually shifting – there cannot be a single, unalterable definition of deconstruction” (2003, 2–3).

<sup>59</sup> See especially Derrida’s chapter on *différance* in *Margins of Philosophy* (1982, 3–27). Derrida himself acknowledges that the “detours, locutions and syntax” that he uses to address *différance* “resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology” (1982, 6), yet he is adamant that *différance*—“neither a word nor a concept” (1982, 3)—is not negative theology. He explains that *différance*—though it resembles negative theology—exists in language before any rhetoric of being or non-being—any vestige of theology, negative or not—can be enacted.

In an important essay, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials” (*Comment ne pas parler: dénégations*), Derrida writes: “what *différance* [sic], the *trace*, and so on “mean”—which hence *does not mean anything*—is “before” the concept, the name, the word, “something” that would be nothing” (Derrida in Budick and Iser 1996, 9). In other words, *différance* is not tied to meaning, negative or otherwise, because it is outside language and outside ‘meaning’;<sup>60</sup> *différance* “derives from no category of being, whether present or absent” (Derrida 1982, 6). Yet, while scholar John D. Caputo cautions that “*différance* is not God” (Caputo 1997, 2), *différance* does appear to be ineffable; and as with God’s ineffability, if *différance* is to be spoken of at all, it requires apophasis to address and mediate it. Derrida’s use of apophasis to make the argument for language’s instability is therefore significant. Indeed, in discussing “The Apophatic” in Derrida’s work, Caputo notes that: “Derrida was understandably fascinated with the syntactical strategies and discursive resources of negative theology” (Caputo 1997, 1).

Derrida’s challenge to positivism,<sup>61</sup> and to a binaristic model of thinking, highlights language’s ambivalence, evasiveness, and indirectness, especially in poetry.<sup>62</sup> As I have mentioned more than once, it can be tempting, when talking of ineffability, to speak of language’s efforts to grapple with this complexity in terms of

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<sup>60</sup> See the following works by Derrida: *Margins of Philosophy* (1982), *Acts of Literature* (1992), *On The Name* (1995), *Of Grammatology* (1997), and *Writing and Difference* (2001). Frank Kermode, critiquing Derrida’s theories, states that *différance*: “cannot properly be thought of as negative at all; it is outside negativity as it is outside everything” (Kermode in Budick and Iser 1996, 75).

<sup>61</sup> Positivism is described as a “philosophical system developed in the nineteenth century by Auguste Comte which starts from the assumption that all knowledge is based on positive and observable facts, and therefore, directly or indirectly, on the findings of the physical sciences. Hence, in particular, a system that rejected metaphysics and other a priori speculation” (Matthews 2014, 311). Positivism insists on the separation of the perceiver and the perceived, such that perceptions may empirically be proved or defined through objectivity. Positivism thus depends on a binary logic such as true/false, inside/outside, yes/no; yet what apophatic writers are addressing does not operate within binary logic. Jerzy Giedymin (1975) describes positivism as “empiricism in the extreme form of either phenomenalism or physicalism, i.e. the reduction of science to statements about directly observable facts and the elimination as meaningless of any sentence that is neither analytic nor empirical, e.g. of metaphysics” (1975, 276) adding, “one refers to any philosophy as positivist or containing positivist elements if it strongly emphasises the antispeculative attitude in both scientific theorising and in philosophy, the ideals of caution, clarity and precision, the preference for scientifically solvable and practically useful problems” (1975, 276–277).

<sup>62</sup> Jen Webb’s (2009b) examination of *différance* in the context of representation offers, on the one hand, a useful explanation of why it is relevant to the open-endedness of ‘unsaying’ and, on the other, a helpful rejection of the temptation to adopt a binary logic when discussing positives and negatives in language. Like many things, language is not either/or, but both/and. According to Webb, *différance* is “a term that is both sameness ... and difference” (2009b, 59). Moreover, *différance* shows how language is “not only structured in terms of difference, it is also about deferral. Meaning cannot be finalized; it is always deferred, its end point held over from utterance to utterance, context to context. It never actually delivers, but only defers, presence” (2009b, 60).

failure or inadequacy. Yet as we can see from Derrida's work, and also from the discussion surrounding the use of apophasis thus far, such talk of failure, lack and inadequacy would be reductive, for it would abjure language's mercurial properties and the capacity of apophasis to extend the reach and the potential of words and of space. Derrida's theories are notoriously difficult to understand. Caputo remarks that Derrida is a philosopher who is "taken with aporias and impasses, who thinks that you are getting somewhere only when you are paralysed and it is impossible to advance, only when there is no plannable, programmable way to proceed" (Caputo 1997, xxvii). Yet Derrida's thinking is pertinent to this thesis, not only in what it addresses as far as the instabilities of language and meanings are concerned, but also in the ways Derrida uses words and negation to address these complexities.

Whether deployed by a philosopher or a poet or a mystic, negation's power to challenge or cancel out beliefs or so-called certainties reflects the enigmatic answerlessness of our ontologies and experiences: an answerlessness that filters through and conditions theological, secular and post-secular concerns. In their introduction to a collection of essays recontextualising approaches to language in post-modern Christianity, scholars Oliver Davies and Denys Turner suggest that "negation ... has captured something basic to the spirit of the times, reflecting reality as process, which is disjunctive, fissured and ultimately resistant to any schematisation" (Davies and Turner 2001, 2).

Our lived experiences of the world, of language, meaning and being are not smooth and fluent, but mutable, disjointed, prone to interruption, and contingent upon circumstance, mood, and surroundings. Neither can these experiences be definitively articulated, however tempting it may be to try.

## §

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**“You are Yourself the Animal We Hunt”**

*after Rumi*

too full to talk about the world, you  
are like the ground, entirely thorn, tasting your  
self through my eyes, night-glints, the astonished rose

too full to talk about the spoken-word, you are the cold  
and dark of a cave, the animal we hunt, a covering  
for the self, no need to touch the opening if

I became empty, separated myself, that emptiness  
becomes what we most want, ocean-light, the opening  
too full, no need to talk      to touch      the world

astonished

§

### 3. *Text as Carrier of Meaning: the Work of Hans-Georg Gadamer*

The aim of hermeneutics,<sup>63</sup> “the concrete process of understanding as the task of explicating and assessing our interpretation of texts” (Keane and Lawn 2016, n.p.), appears to point towards the possibility of a meaningful articulation of text.

Hermeneutics offers a nuanced and wide-reaching philosophical pathway into considering “the nature of lived interpretation itself” (Keane and Lawn 2016, n.p.) and, as such, interpretation remains open and incomplete. Textual interpretation, moreover, is contingent on the language of that text, not just in the words used, but in the form, spaces and arrangements of those words relative to the page.<sup>64</sup>

Along with Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1986), Hans-Georg Gadamer is regarded as one of the leading modern hermeneutic philosophers. In *Truth and Method* (2004), examining “the phenomenon of understanding and of the correct interpretation of what has been understood” (Gadamer 2004, xx) Gadamer observes how “language often seems ill suited to express what we feel ... [t]he fact that our desire and capacity to understand always go beyond any statement that we can make seems like a critique of language” (Gadamer 2004, 402). Especially when in “the overwhelming presence of works of art” (Gadamer 2004, 402), he suggests, “the task of expressing in words what they say to us seems like an infinite and hopeless undertaking” (Gadamer 2004, 402).

*Seems like* a hopeless undertaking, but not *is* one. Gadamer is suggesting that language’s expressive and interpretive nuances—the way language can say things, however incompletely—throw into relief what cannot be said, and thus invokes myriad interpretive possibilities. As scholar Nicholas Davey notes:

Language for Gadamer is always more than what can be stated within it ... [l]anguage does not therefore stand opposed to a realm of the unsayable. To the contrary, it is language that allows the unsayable to have its place in a given speech world. (Davey 2006, 181)

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<sup>63</sup> When asked the question: “what is hermeneutics?” scholar Lawrence Kennedy Schmidt (2014) says: “I usually just say that it means interpretation. Sometimes I continue by adding that hermeneutics concerns theories for correctly interpreting texts. “Hermeneutics” and “interpretation” are derived from the same Greek word. While “hermeneutics” is not a common word in English, “interpretation” is” (2014, 1). For discussions of hermeneutics, its development and application, see also Keane and Lawn (2016).

<sup>64</sup> The poetic technique of Mallarmé’s “Un Coup de Dés”, discussed later in this chapter, is pertinent to this point.

Davey's reference to Gadamer's position—that language “allows the unsayable to have its place”—reinforces the creative possibilities of a poetics of apophysis. While language may sometimes appear to reach a notional limit, it never truly does because, according to Gadamer, any apparently “hopeless” attempt to express the inexpressible only serves to “incentivise further hermeneutic involvement” (Davey 2016, n.p.); yet this hermeneutic involvement can never be complete. As Davey suggests, “the incompleteness of any interpretation ... opens us to the possibility that there is always something more or something else that can be said” (Davey 2016, n.p.).

As a way of reflecting ‘on the nature and ubiquity of language’ (Keane and Lawn 2016, n.p.), in hermeneutics ‘there can be no “last word”’ (Keane and Lawn 2016, n.p.). In other words, hermeneutics keeps texts open: open to myriad interpretations, resistant to final understanding. Thus the hermeneutic approach does not seem antagonistic to Derrida's deconstructivist theory, as far as the mutability of text is concerned. And yet reports of the 1981 Parisian ‘encounter’ between Gadamer and Derrida highlight how disparate each philosopher considered the other's thinking in relation to their own.

While a detailed analysis of this encounter is outside the scope of this thesis, there seems to be a consensus that it was “epoch-making”, even though “both participants and witnesses were unanimous in speaking of the event as a conversation between deaf people” (di Cesare in Keane and Lawn 2016, n.p.). That, however, appears to be the only consensus, for certainly the two philosophers did not arrive at any other. Schmidt's analysis of the exchange notes:

Derrida does not argue that Gadamer's theory of interpretation, which involves a dialogue with the text and coming to be in agreement, is wrong. Rather, he presents the proper way to interpret a text, which is a deconstructive reading where the interpreter demonstrates that the supposed unity and thesis of the text are undercut by the text itself. (Schmidt 2014, 168)

What is more pertinent from the perspective of this research, however, is Derrida's memorial address to Gadamer (delivered in 2003 and published 2004), which refers to the 1981 exchange as “something other than a misunderstanding” (Derrida 2004, 4). Derrida adds “my interior dialogue with Gadamer, with Gadamer himself, with

Gadamer living, and living still, if I dare say, will not have ceased since our Paris encounter” (Derrida 2004, 7).

It is a remarkable eulogy, in which Derrida chooses to honour his friend by focusing on Gadamer’s interpretation of a poem by Celan,<sup>65</sup> erstwhile colleague of Derrida and a friend of Gadamer. Derrida says re-examining—and essaying a “worried interpretation” (Derrida 2004, 9)—of Celan’s poem, and also of Gadamer’s own interpretation of it is an attempt for him (Derrida) “to address Gadamer himself, himself in me outside myself ... to pay homage to him ... on a path that would cross his” (Derrida 2004, 9). Derrida praises Gadamer’s interpretation of Celan’s poem for leaving “a series of questions undecided, undecidable, on the threshold” (Derrida 2004, 13) and adds that: “far from stopping interpretive reading, these questions open and liberate the very experience of reading” (Derrida 2004, 13). In other words, the poem “remains an abandoned trace ... [i]t errs ... from one referent to another and [is] destined to survive, in an “infinite process,” the decipherments of any reader to come” (Derrida 2004, 14–15).

The works of Gadamer and Derrida, concerned as they variously are with the multiple textual possibilities, contingencies and meanings of language brings another layer of complexity to the question of how a poetics of apophasis might enrich the grapple with ineffability. While it is misleading, as I have already suggested, to talk of language in terms of failure, is it also misleading, given the work of Derrida and Gadamer, to talk of language as having ‘limits’ when considering its poetic uses? Gadamer’s ideas would seem to bear out the view that, as a work of language, the poem contains both the sayable and unsayable, and as such offers myriad interpretive possibilities. Derrida’s work suggests that, with the constant deferral and slippage between the writing of the word and its interpretation, language can never capture meaning completely, and meaning anyway is always contingent. These are the conditions for which apophasis is ideally suited. By backing away, denying, contradicting certainty, apophasis offers the conditions within which poetry can make art of causing language to experiment, push, deflect, capsize and fragment. In other words, poetry’s ability to be “a carrier of absence of which we would not otherwise

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<sup>65</sup> Celan’s untitled poem begins “Paths in the shadow-break / of your hand” [“Wege im Schatten-Gebräch / deiner Hand”] (Celan 2014, 6). Gadamer examines this poem in “*Who Am I and Who Are You?*” and *Other Essays* (1997).

know anything” (Budick and Iser 1996, xiv) is powerful precisely because that absence is thrown into relief by what the poem, however obliquely, does say.

To examine how apophasis may function within poetry, I now turn to poetry itself. While informed by vastly different cultures and time periods—from the medieval to the present day, from the Middle East by way of Europe to the United States and Australia—the work I reflect on below is important to this thesis in showing the varying ways in which apophasis has been productively employed in approaching the inarticulable.

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Someone—something—is whispering.

“You believe this is about you, but it is not,” a Voice says. “You believe you are silenced, but you are not. Here in the whiteness, you are neither soul nor angel, nor have you imagination or opinion or reason or understanding; nor are you reason or understanding. You are none of the things that have no being, none of the things that have being. None of the things that are known know you for what you are ... you have no name ... you are neither darkness nor light, error nor truth,” says the Voice.

“All of this has been written before. None of this has been written before. This is a gift without end.”

“Be your own God,” says the Voice, “be at the beginning of words and at their end. Press between them. Make notes—not of music, but of silence. Say (... *scratch of my pen, nudge of muscle, the smear of my skin to page...*): “writing is silent language, speaking out loud.” Say (... *my fist ploughs from spine to edge and back again...*): “I am vivid in this silence.” Sing (*I lift up my head*): “I give life to words, on and beyond the page. And I celebrate this wordlife.” Sing again: “I am made of words, I am nothing but words, and words of love begat me.””

Tense myself between expansiveness and finitude. Breathe. Breathe. My flesh is a bridge into words. Reach for them, belay to a line. *Meanings are weights that time attaches to a word. Meanings are weights that time attaches to a word.*

Lean into these meanings, get the hang of the vowels, the drag and clutch of consonants. Fall from the bridge. Time and attachment—clasp-hooks of the eternal—will always catch me. Hurtle into and out of, further than ever before. Fall through the words of myself. Let nothing fasten me. Let everything release me.

§

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**“Tonight the Wind”**

*after Rumi*

Tonight the wind has the only  
words. Your hand a provocative  
fish, knowing that sweetness no ocean  
can reach. Your mouth a pen that puts  
its head to the page of my chest. Your knee—  
is sea grasses, trees. Human is guest inside  
the same husk. You’re the nothing I’ve lost,  
the nothing I come with again and again.

§

### **Poetic Apophasis: from Mysticism to the Present**

To furnish some context for the discussion that unfolds in this section about poetic apophasis, I refer again to Franke's (2007a; 2007b) assertion that it is difficult to isolate the signature practitioners of apophasis, given that so many works of art encounter and indeed deliberately court the limits of expression. There are some periods of history when apophasis is less easily discernible in poetry, and others when apophasis is more evident.<sup>66</sup> The poets I have chosen to discuss (chronologically) in this chapter employ techniques that advance an overall understanding of how apophasis has operated in poetry in different contexts and historical periods, either through vocabulary, sentiment, topic or a combination of those elements. Importantly for this thesis, the work that I have elected to discuss indicates how broadly apophasis has, in past and contemporary contexts, been applied to enable the poetic exploration of spiritual and secular themes. My overview begins with the thirteenth-century poet Mowlana Jalal al-Din Rumi.

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<sup>66</sup> For a number of centuries after the late Middle Ages, and with the exception of the work of John of the Cross, the explicit use of apophasis and negation cannot readily be traced in European poetry or mysticism. In England, the Metaphysical poets such as John Donne (1572–1631), George Herbert (1593–1633), Richard Crashaw (circa 1613–1649), Andrew Marvell (1621–1678), and Henry Vaughan (1621–1695) if not explicitly using the rhetoric of apophasis in their poems, were at least participating, as Gibbons notes “in the kind of *thought* that is apophatic” (Gibbons 2007a, 20; emphasis in original), with their poems focusing on matters pertaining to the limits of human knowledge, and the human struggle to reconcile the material, sensual world with spiritual and religious experience. As such, the Metaphysical poets were dealing with the ineffable, and thus contributed to the overall development of apophasis in literary art, if not for the rich metaphoric and lyrical poetry they produced, certainly for the way in which their work influenced and set precedents for later poets such as Eliot (Baldick, 2015). With the rise of Romanticism, poets such as William Blake (1757–1827), John Keats (1795–1821), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) and William Wordsworth (1770–1850) were variously preoccupied with the notion of the sublime, the concept that evokes the excitement of thought and emotion in response to extraordinary, inexpressible experience. These poets' work, even if not directly employing the concept of apophasis, nonetheless drew on the awesome presence of landscape or the terrible beauty of nature as a proxy for the ineffable, and a vehicle for directing attention towards that which transcended language or understanding.

### 1. *Rumi and the Evasive Lyricism of Apophasis*

Born in what is now Afghanistan, Rumi lived for most of his life in what is now Konya, Turkey. While his grandfather had been Christian (McKinney 2004), Rumi grew up in the Islamic faith, and was the founder of the Mevlevi order of Sufism,<sup>67</sup> the “Whirling Dervishes” (Franke 2007a). McKinney (2004) notes that Rumi lived during a time of “great intellectual ferment in the Islamic world, largely as the result of the recent introduction ... of important scientific and philosophical treatises” (McKinney 2004, 39) derived from Greek and Syriac origins. It was also a time of considerable conflict between faiths: the Catholic Crusades to liberate the Holy Land, authorised by the Pope, had meant the eastern Mediterranean had been a theatre of war for the preceding two hundred years. The Crusades continued during Rumi’s lifetime, compounded by the threat of Mongol invasion from the north (France 2005). Indeed, some scholars (Ohlander 2008) consider the Mongol invasions to be a trigger for the rise in Sufism.

Rumi’s personae as both mystic and poet—identities entwined and inseparable in this writer’s life and literature—stem from his Sufism. Shihadeh (2007) identifies two distinct disciplines in Islam: mysticism (Sufism) and theology. Although both disciplines share a common purpose and goal—to know God—they differed in execution: “*kalām* theologians, for instance, engaged in tireless hair-splitting debate and analysis, while Sufis often expressed themselves enigmatically and typically recommended recollection (*dhikr*) and silence, rather than debate” (Shihadeh 2007, 3). This analysis is certainly true of Rumi’s work, which qualifies as an influence for this thesis, and an inspiration for my creative work thanks to the lyricism and perspective of his profoundly apophatic poetry.

Until his late thirties, Rumi pursued life as a family man and a respected professor of religious sciences (Harmless 2008), until an encounter with sage Shams

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<sup>67</sup>According to Harmless (2008), Rumi wrote over 60,000 lines of Persian-language poetry about God. For a brief yet comprehensive exposition of Rumi’s name, life, background, and the tenets of Sufism, see (Harmless 2008, 159–188). While Rumi is a central figure in Persian mysticism, Harmless cautions us not to assume Rumi represents all Sufis: “The Sufi mystical tradition is vast and varied, as wide-ranging and complex as the Christian mystical tradition ... Rumi’s approach, while brilliant and striking, is only one. It highlights some features of Sufism and ignores others” (2008, 185). As Ohlander (2008) notes, “Sufism is a complex of social, religious, and cultural trends subsumed under the rubric of what is generally identified as a fundamental institution of Islamic mysticism following the Mongol invasions of the 7th/13th century: the Sufi order” (2008, 1). See also Westerlund (2004) for a discussion of Sufism and its origins.

al-Din Tabrizi, “an old vagabond” (Harmless 2008, 168) led to a passionate friendship between the two men, which distracted Rumi from his domestic and professional routines and catalysed an extraordinary outpouring of poetry. These poems “were composed and executed as chant accompaniment to sacred dancing by dervishes” (Franke 2007a, 235), dervish literally meaning “doorway” (Barks in Rumi, 2004). Though the men’s friendship lasted many years, it appears that Shams eventually disappeared, leaving Rumi distraught. Yet such was the extent to which the younger man identified with the elder, Rumi started to use Shams’ name rather than his own as the traditional signature (it is a convention in Persian poetry for the author’s name to appear within the poem, close to the poem’s end) for his poetry.

For those of us unable to read Rumi’s work in the original Persian, the translations of his texts by the American poet Coleman Barks are likely to be the most familiar versions in English.<sup>68</sup> Barks comments that elements of Sufism depend on a “composite attention felt as a presence ... Rumi says it is a state of awareness best spoken of in terms of what it is not” (Barks in Rumi 2004, 261). Thus is apophasis foundational to Rumi’s poetics, linguistically and thematically:

This we have now  
is not imagination

This is not  
grief or joy.

Not a judging state,  
or an elation,  
or sadness.

Those come

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<sup>68</sup> These translations are controversial: Harmless (2008) cautions that while Barks’ achievement is remarkable, “Barks, who cannot read Persian, has faced criticism both from native speakers and from scholars. He has been chided for excising or downplaying the Qur’anic echoes and Islamic themes that pervade Rumi’s poetry and for giving him a vague, “new age” feel” (2008, 173). It is also claimed that he “sometimes abbreviates things and glosses over the traditional themes and over technical theological terminology in an effort to make Rumi accessible to a modern audience” (2008, 328). According to Harmless, once Barks had worked through earlier translators’ efforts and had recast Rumi’s poetry into the argot and tone of contemporary American free verse, the Persian mystic “overnight ... became late-twentieth-century America’s best-selling poet” (2008, 173). Indeed, extracts from Barks’ translations have become ubiquitous as sayings and epigraphs commonly chosen to stand in when ordinary words will not do. Translations of poems such as “The Guest House” (Rumi 2004, 109), “The Diver’s Clothes Lying Empty” (Rumi 2004, 51) and “Two Kinds of Intelligence” (Rumi 2004, 178) are among the most popular of Rumi’s works, used in diverse settings from weddings and funerals to popular music. “Kaleidoscope”, a track from Coldplay’s album *A Head Full of Dreams* (2015) features an extract from “The Guest House” read aloud by Coleman Barks.

and go.

This is the presence  
that doesn't.

(Rumi 2004, 261)

Rumi animates here, in the language of this poem, the notion of how the cataphatic (affirmative) so often depends on the apophatic. Rumi first uses denial—"This is not / grief or joy"—to whittle down to an assertion—"This is the presence"—yet Rumi still avoids defining what "the presence" is. Later in the poem, he writes:

When grapes turn to wine  
they're wanting  
this.

(Rumi 2004, 262)

But Rumi does not say what "this" is. Thus the whole poem defines a frame, *is* a frame, for what evades the expressible; but because the inexpressible—"this"—is not defined, the frame itself cannot help but shift.<sup>69</sup> The mystic merges with the poet in the acknowledgment—and indeed celebration—of the supremacy of the ineffable. As we shall see with the work of John of the Cross, Rumi shows how apophasis does not, and can never, signify a straightforward denial; yet Rumi's writing also displays examples of some of the more teasing and evasive poetic options available to the poet through apophasis.

By the sixteenth century, mysticism is increasingly dominated by the intense spiritual visions and personal revelations that form the basis of the writings of Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582),<sup>70</sup> and Jakob Böehme (1575–1624),<sup>71</sup> and perhaps the best known of these later mystics—because of his poem *The Dark Night (La noche oscura)* (ca. 1578/1991) and his subsequent prose work of the same name (1584–85/1991)—John of the Cross.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ian Almond (2004) compares the literary and spiritual contributions made by Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240), a contemporary of Rumi, with the work of Derrida, focusing on "the positive value that both deconstruction and Sufism give to confusion" (2004, 41). Almond concludes: "Derrida, far from confusing the text, is simply showing how the text is already confused in itself. Deconstruction is a revelatory operation, not a stimulatory one. The 'essential drifting of the text' precedes any theoretical intervention – texts are always already drifting" (2004, 47).

<sup>70</sup> See *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Ávila* (1976).

<sup>71</sup> See *The Signature of All Things and Other Writings* (1651/1969).

<sup>72</sup> See *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross* (1991).

## §

Canadian poet Tim Lilburn writes:

Poems are ... the speechlessness of things ripening, pressing, into language. The poet contributes attention, permeability, a courageous leisure in which transfixity may occur; the poet combs out the lines until they come as close to shining as he can make them ... writing is mostly this craning quiet. (Lilburn 2007, 42)

Poems begin with indistinct feelings, or something overheard, or observed.

The texture of grass, the first in-drawn breath on disembarking from a plane in another country, how light sears or slants depending on latitude.

The tidal aftermath of an emotional encounter, a dream that a dawn shower cannot rinse away. A piece of paper with nothing written on it.

A moment that is—or was—and is yet to be captured and interpreted by language. An utterance that is waiting for the poet to pare it back, to discover what it needs to say or not say.

Something that is not born of language yet belongs to it. Something that will be made of silence as much as words, of unsaying as much as saying; that will make use of language in order to suggest far more than language can ever say.

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## 2. *John of the Cross and the Performance of Apophasis*

In John's writings can be identified an apophatic approach not only traceable back to Dionysius, but also looking ahead to the twentieth century, notably in the work of another poetic influence on my research, discussed later in this chapter, T. S. Eliot.<sup>73</sup>

John (his Spanish name was Juan de Yepes y Alvarez) was born into a middle class family in an era of great exploration and wealth for Spain, thanks to discoveries of gold in the New World and the colonisation of South and Central America (Vilches 2010). The explosion in capitalism and the rise of a credit economy resulting from these discoveries, however, caused unintended social and financial instability in Spanish society.<sup>74</sup> Thus a tension between imperial, ecclesiastical, and social growth formed the backdrop to John's life and works.

John grew up in the Castile region of Spain, becoming a Carmelite monk at the age of twenty-one. When he was in his late thirties, Juan's association with controversial Carmelite reformist Teresa of Ávila led to a nine-month imprisonment in Toledo. While incarcerated he composed some of his best known poems, including the *Spiritual Canticle*, which was a reworking of the biblical *Song of Songs*, and the poem *La Noche Oscura*, expressing ideas that underwent further exploration in later writing. A few years after his escape he wrote the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*<sup>75</sup> centring on his belief in the necessary purgation of the sensual and spiritual aspects of the soul—self-denial in other words—in order to draw closer to God (Franke 2007a).

In the following lines quoted from Book One of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (the *Ascent*) (1581–85/1991), John shows how the juxtaposition of contradictory statements can perform an apophatic gesturing towards an inarticulable aspiration. In John's case, this aspiration is spiritual and devotional:

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<sup>73</sup> And also the twenty-first century where John's influence is also specifically referred to in the work of video artist Bill Viola (1951–), notably his piece *Room for St. John of the Cross* (1983). See Bernier (2014, 11–23) for a discussion and images of this artwork.

<sup>74</sup> Vilches (2010) notes: "This new economy created the most advantageous opportunities for profit and the swift accumulation of wealth. It also created keen anxiety, because people confronted a wave of conceptual and social change that they perceived as confusing, threatening, and unrelenting. The rapid growth of the new credit economy coincided with a rampant escalation of prices. People could not understand how the value of gold and silver could ever fall when the whole country was reveling [sic] in a shower of gold. Their confusion and anxiety increased as credit money expanded, inflation ruled society, and the value of the national treasury declined" (2010, 31).

<sup>75</sup> This includes *La Noche Oscura del Alma* (*The Dark Night of the Soul*).

To come to enjoy what you have not,  
 You must go by a way in which you enjoy not.  
 To come to the knowledge you have not  
 you must go by a way in which you know not.  
 To come to the possession you have not  
 you must go by a way in which you possess not.  
 To come to be what you are not,  
 you must go by a way in which you are not.<sup>76</sup>  
 (John 1991, 150)

In this extract, the poet’s dramatisation of difficulty is vivid. Each alternate line works as a counterpoint to the line preceding it, as if to suggest an effortful, indirect trajectory, mimicking the backtrack and detour of a difficult climb, or the retracing of an obscure path.

While the negations in John’s lines quoted above recall the labyrinthine and seemingly paradoxical logic of Dionysius’ lines from the *Mystical Theology*,<sup>77</sup> this adjustment from a didactic (as in *The Cloud* and in the *Mystical Theology*) to a more demonstrative, personal tone is noteworthy for the development of a modern-day apophatic poetics. The exhortations of John’s speaker have much in common with the lyric “I” in poetry, which situates a poetic voice at the centre of a subjective experience or, as poet and scholar Craig Dworkin suggests, a poetic voice expressing “the emotional truth of the self” (Dworkin n.d.). Turner maintains that John’s “harrowing descriptions” (Turner 1975, 230) of the sufferings of the “dark nights of the soul” appear “uncannily similar to what a person will give from the inside of the experience of depression” (Turner 1975, 232). Because John is *writing* a first-person account of the struggle of the soul’s inadequacy in the presence of God, and of the soul’s path to union with that which is beyond words, he is in effect using language—with all its attendant resources and limitations—to dramatise and amplify this struggle. For the mystic, apophatic writing, infused with circuitousness and

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<sup>76</sup> Para venir a gustarlo todo,  
 no quieras tener gusto en nada.  
 Para venir a poseerlo todo,  
 No quieras poseer algo en nada  
 Para venir a serlo todo  
 no quieras ser algo en nada.  
 Para venir a saberlo todo,  
 No quieras saber algo en nada.

(San Juan de La Cruz n.d.)

<sup>77</sup> “We pray to be raised up in this ... darkness, and, by seeing nothing and by not knowing, to see and know in this very absence of sight and knowledge him who is above all seeing and all knowing” (Dionysius 1978, 212).

contradictions, with negations and effortful explanations is thus an avowal and enactment of the frustrations, rigours and ecstasies of devotion and the soul's journey towards God. In John's work we see how an apophatic mysticism fuses theology with a more emotionally immediate lyric poetry, expressing a sense of intellectual and moral progress achieved through a process of denial that foreshadows the work of Dickinson (discussed in Chapter Four) and Eliot (discussed later in this chapter).<sup>78</sup>

The poet whose work I introduce next, however, employed an apophatic outlook in a more explicitly secular sphere, and in a more detached voice. The final two decades of nineteenth century gave rise to Symbolism,<sup>79</sup> a poetic movement of French origin, which broke with the traditional rhyming conventions of the Romantic poets, in favour of free verse, more experimental structures such as prose poems, and indirect and allusive expression. Stéphane Mallarmé is perhaps the most respected proponent of this movement.<sup>80</sup> His signature exploration of what poetry at that time was *not*: the extraordinary, fragmentary poem “Un Coup De Dés Jamais N’abolira Le Hasard” or “A Throw Of The Dice” (1897/2006), offers a striking example of how form may contribute to an apophatic treatment of poetry.

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<sup>78</sup> Eliot, meanwhile, offers a modified version of these lines in the ‘East Coker’ section of *Four Quartets* (1940):

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
    You must go by a way wherein there is not ecstasy.  
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.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
    You must go through the way in which you are not.

(Eliot 1974, 20)

<sup>79</sup> See Peyre (2010) and Bruns (1974) for a discussion of Mallarmé's poetics.

<sup>80</sup> While Mary Fleischer (2007) argues that “the duality of language versus the inexpressible was a constant for the symbolists” (2007, 10), Franke (2007b) does not include Mallarmé in his apophatic canon, contending that while “there is no denying the apophatic thrust of Mallarmé's poetic project” (2007b, 38), “there is for [Mallarmé] no realm of the beyond, no beyond of language” (2007b, 39).

### 3. *Stéphane Mallarmé's Choreography Of Fragment*

Mallarmé's explorations of language and form influenced not only Modernist poetry, but also literary theory (Pearson 2010).<sup>81</sup> He started writing poetry as a boy, memorialising in poems the early loss of his mother, his sister, and his friend Harriet Smythe. While Mallarmé's life was punctuated by illness, physical and depressive, and by a lack-lustre career as a teacher, it was dominated by his compulsion to write poetry, and in particular to produce a great work: "some single work, however multi-volumed, that would 'sum' everything up" (Pearson 2010, 216). If this 'everything' encompassed the shifting and expanding borders of geography, knowledge and artistic expression occasioned by an age of exploration, empire building and scientific discovery, then the political, social and economic climate of post-Industrial late nineteenth century Europe was its embodiment. Perhaps there is no better way of expressing this unsettled and expansive landscape than Mallarmé's fragmentary "Un Coup De Dés" (Mallarmé 2006, 139–181).

Spread out over many double pages like a musical score, "Un Coup De Dés" controls the pace of the eye and mind, through lineation, syntax, typography, and (the absence of) punctuation; the tidal ebb and flow of lines and spaces mimics the marine imagery of the poem and, furthermore, the seemingly chance trajectories of a dice being thrown. With "Un Coup De Dés", Mallarmé appears to be experimenting with an apparent randomness of line and typography and language in order to evoke the effect of a handful of words and phrases thrown purposefully yet carelessly onto the page, and perhaps to reflect the dice-throw effect of random thoughts darting through the human mind. Indeed, the poem's final line makes explicit this dynamic: "Tout Pensée émet un Coup de Dés" (Mallarmé 2006, 159), or "Every Thought emits a Dice Throw" (Mallarmé 2006, 181).<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Among the poets influenced by Mallarmé, Roger Pearson (2010) numbers Paul Valéry (1871–1945), Francis Ponge (1899–1998), Yves Bonnefoy (1923–2016), and members of the experimental France-based OuLiPo group. Pearson adds "From Rilke to Celan in German and, in English, from Eliot and Pound to Wallace Stevens and Tom Paulin, Mallarmé's linguistic courage has continued to prompt poets to 'purify the dialect of the tribe'" (2010, 217). The literary theorists influenced by Mallarmé (Pearson 2010, 217) include Blanchot (1907–2003), Jakobson (1896–1982), Barthes (1915–1980), Foucault (1926–1984), Derrida (1930–2004) and Kristeva (1941–).

<sup>82</sup> See Pearson (2010, 193–200) for a fascinating analysis of "Un Coup De Dés" and its initial publication in 1897.

This ground-breaking poem offers an insight instructive to this research project, in its straddling of two apophatic modes. On the one hand, the poem shows how poetry may be language-rich, enigmatic, aphoristic, interactive with the dimensions of the page, and mercurial in its word-play:

UNE CONSTELLATION  
froide d'oubli et de désuétude  
pas tant  
qu'elle n'énumère  
sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure  
(Mallarmé 2006, 159)<sup>83</sup>

Yet on the other hand, the poem illustrates a 'saying away' enacted not so much in words as in spaces, omissions, hesitancy and evasion, enacted through a fragmented choreography of line and line indents:

EXCEPTÉ  
à l'altitude  
PEUT-ÊTRE  
aussi loin qu'un endroit  
(Mallarmé 2006, 158)<sup>84</sup>

Fragments, as poet and scholar Kevin Brophy points out, suggest a piece of writing is "not tied to reaching for a conclusion, [is] open to endless complications or nuances" (2003, 90). Importantly, "the fragment always suggests there is more that might have been said" (Brophy 2003, 91). "Un Coup De Dés" shows how expressiveness need not solely depend on the presence of words, but can be manifested through the apophatic gestures of negation and erasure to make a pattern of space and language that stands in for what can be said, and hints at what cannot.

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<sup>83</sup>

A CONSTELLATION  
cold with neglect and disuse  
not so much  
that it fails to number  
on some vacant and higher surface  
(Mallarmé 2006, 181)

<sup>84</sup> EXCEPT  
on high

PERHAPS  
as far away as a place  
(Mallarmé 2006, 180)

While Symbolism as an aesthetic and literary movement was still flourishing in Europe in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, outside of literature the brutal force of imperialism, and the social, economic, and geo-political unrest that would catalyse the Great War of 1914–1918 (Berghahn 2014) were being increasingly felt. This was the period into which T. S. Eliot was born. World War I and its aftermath would inspire and inform some of his greatest poems, among them *The Waste Land* (1922).

#### 4. T. S. Eliot and the “slip, slide [and] perish” of Language

Eliot was born in 1888 in St Louis, Missouri, into a family of staunch American Unitarians.<sup>85</sup> He studied at Harvard, Oxford and in Paris, and by his late twenties, had settled in England, and married an Englishwoman. At the age of 38 Eliot became an Anglo-Catholic: joining a high form of Anglicanism, which while splintering from the Catholic Church at the Reformation, still retained roots in Catholicism. Barry Spurr concludes that Eliot’s conversion resulted from his

intensifying personal suffering in a failing marriage, a sense of cultural dissolution in the Great War, the failure to find consolation in philosophy and wide reading in such as the eastern religions, and a long-standing disillusionment with Unitarianism and Protestantism in all its varieties. (Spurr 2011, n.p.)

Yet this “disappointment and despair” (Spurr 2011, n.p.) led to Eliot’s finest poetry, notably his later work, such as “Ash-Wednesday” (1930), and the *Four Quartets* (1943).<sup>86</sup> These poems draw on both the Symbolist and Metaphysical poetic traditions, and also on the mystical writings of John of the Cross. They are preoccupied with time, belief and with “the disintegration or disembodiment of verbal

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<sup>85</sup> A fairly puritanical sect that subscribed to a “threadbare theology” (Spurr 2011), predicated on belief in God as one entity, rather than the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

<sup>86</sup> Raine (2006) notes that the *Quartets* were Eliot’s “last poetic work ... written from 1936 to 1942. The first, *Burnt Norton*, grew out of lines in *Murder in the Cathedral* and first appeared in *Collected Poems 1909–1935*. This was followed by *East Coker* in 1940, *The Dry Salvages* in 1941, and *Little Gidding* in 1942” (2006, 95). Spurr (2016) notes that the *Four Quartets* are “an extended philosophical meditation on time and timelessness that is only intermittently specifically Christian in reference (but then explicitly so, in its emphasis in the Anglo-Catholic way, on the doctrine of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh)” (Spurr in Freer and Bell 2016, 2). Glenn Hughes (2011a) gives a detailed account of the structure and content of the *Four Quartets*, describing them as “a meditation on existence, time and eternity, death, history, tradition, language, and divinity. The titles of the four poems are place-names related to the poet’s personal experiences and to his family’s past” (2011a, 90).

logic” (Sherry 2003, 180) where “poetry draws its force in proportion to what ... cannot be said” (Sherry 2003, 180). Numerous critics have commented on the *via negativa* implicit in Eliot’s later works.<sup>87</sup>

However, even in the drama of his earlier poetry can be detected Eliot’s interest in the dynamism of what language *does* as well as what language *is*. Witness the verbal awkwardness of the persona in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1911): “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (Eliot 1974, 16).

This neurotic wrangle with indecisiveness in Eliot’s speakers, characterised by their difficulties with direct speech has by a quarter of a century later transmuted into the temporal and textual abstractions concluding “Little Gidding” (1942), the final section of the *Four Quartets*, where “every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning” (Eliot 1974, 221), leading to “a condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)” (Eliot 1974, 223). We see that the preoccupations of Eliot’s work have matured from the difficulties of language as expressed by a poetic persona’s passionate declarative negation into a more mystical appraisal of language’s effects and influences: a meditation on and poetic dialogue with language’s fluid and contradictory nature. As with the texts of Dionysius and *The Cloud* author, language is the means through which “words say that words cannot say” (Watts 1984, 26). Indeed, scholar and poet Craig Raine suggests that with *Four Quartets*, Eliot “remakes the tradition of religious mystical poetry in English” (Raine 2006, 98). Philosopher Eric Voegelin (2004) calls the *Four Quartets* “the spiritual autobiography of a Christian poet. As the history of a Christian soul they are a meditation; as the work of a poet they are an incantation” (Voegelin 2004, 34).

The following extract from the fifth section of the first of the quartets, “Burnt Norton” (1936), where the “spiritual autobiography” (Voegelin 2004, 34) begins, eloquently captures the slippages, fragility, and tension between language and meaning, time, and ‘truths’ that lie at the heart of all human utterance:

... Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.

(Eliot 1974, 194)

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<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Hay (1982); Moody (1994); Spurr (2004); Wolosky (1995).

There is an instability conveyed by “slip, slide, perish”, a frustration implicit in the anaphoric “*will not stay in place / will not stay still*” (Eliot 1974, 194; emphases added). Even though language, suggestive here of a structure that, subjected to intolerable pressure, breaks up and disintegrates, its fracturing and displacement becomes central to the words’ function as animating meanings that language cannot fully contain: can neither fully hold in, nor fully hold back. The apophasis implicit in Eliot’s poetry acknowledges and makes use of language’s “potency to gesture toward what it is insufficient to articulate, but nevertheless indicates as lying beyond itself” (Franke 2014a, 64). Eliot’s poetic voice suggests as much, when in the same section of “Burnt Norton” it declares:

... Words, after speech, reach  
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness ...

(Eliot 1974, 194)

While in the first extract above, the poetic voice may be hinting at the sonic decay of the spoken word into silence, by invoking “the form” and “the pattern” in the second extract (these lines in the original poem precede the first extract quoted), the poetic voice brings into focus the arrangement of language through writing, through poetry, and as materiality.

Tellingly, in “East Coker” and “Little Gidding” particularly, Eliot quotes from the texts of John of the Cross, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and Julian of Norwich.<sup>88</sup> Is the poetic voice here signalling to the reader that, for the ideas being explored in *Four Quartets*, this is as far as conventional language can take us? Yet we know (because the lines in “Burnt Norton” tell us) that while we may notionally reach the limits of language, there are no such barriers to meaning: meanings will continue to seed and multiply through the fissures between words, and by words slipping, cracking open and giving way to silence.

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<sup>88</sup> For a more detailed analysis of these allusions, see Spurr (2004).

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“Outside the Saying of It”

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

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ineffable—become creaturely, roaming at large just beyond the page. His poetry unleashes words to converse with words; language as the object of enquiry as well as the means of asking the questions. In “A Short History of the Shadow”, he writes:

Each word, as someone once wrote, contains the universe.  
The visible carries all the invisible on its back.  
Tonight, in the unconditional, what moves in the long-limbed grasses,  
what touches me  
As though I didn't exist?  
What is it that keeps on moving,  
a tiny pillar of smoke  
Erect on its hind legs,  
loose in the hollow grasses?  
A word I don't know yet, a little word, containing infinity,  
(Wright, 2003, 38)

It is as if, sensing shadowy word-presences hovering beyond the limits of his pen, Wright uses as bait the words he has already managed to capture in the hopes of enticing their companions out into the open and into the poem. Tellingly, the poet situates “A Short History of the Shadow” in “the unconditional”, a locus with associations of grammar and verb form, yet has the speaker suggest his own presence is conditional almost to the point of absence. What is more, the sensation of being touched by “what moves in the long-limbed grasses” seems contingent upon the speaker's virtual non-existence, or at least, the speaker's apprehension that this is how he ‘appears’ to the toucher. What all of this gestures towards—‘this’ being the play between the “what is” and “what's not”<sup>93</sup> (Wright 2003, 29) and that apophasis is able to accommodate so well—is the osmosis into another layer of articulation. This articulacy is conditioned by the unknown and represented by “[a] word I don't know yet”, which then leads on to the (seeming) impossibility of a small word which can hold, or hold back, infinity. For is not *hold back* another meaning for contain? If we recall the writings of some of the writers already examined, this “little word”—unbounded by knowledge, beyond language—might be the name of God. What it may be for Wright's speaker, Wright does not say.

In this progression made possible by increments of ‘no,’ Wright's poem demonstrates the opportunity that apophasis offers the poet. Declaring limitations: “as

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<sup>93</sup> Mentioned in another Wright poem of the same period, called “Night Rider.” The line reads: “Nothing prepares what is for what's not” (Wright 2003, 29).

though I didn't exist" and "a word I don't know yet" seems, paradoxically, to enable transcendence of those limitations, in both mode and content. Instead of a moonlit backyard in Virginia, we see the poem open out onto infinity. Instead of shadows cast by the leafless trees, we see "the shadow of flesh" (Wright 2003, 39), and that insubstantial shadow is the "one part of us that's real" (Wright 2003, 39). Instead of the movement of creatures in the dark grasses, the speaker is "watching the nouns circle, and watching the verbs circle" (Wright 2003, 39). In this poem, mediated through sight, language is the proxy for infinity; language is the proxy for what lies beyond description.

As I have already mentioned, the setting for a Wright poem is often the backyard, usually around the time when day blurs to night. Twilight—"the half hour, half-light, half-dark, when everything starts to shine out" (Wright 2003, 78)—is also the period before nightfall when, as light fades, a person's capacity to see and observe paradoxically gets clearer.<sup>94</sup> Detail is sharpened before darkness erases it; and in a Wright poem, a similar effect is wrought, as if the ideas not perceptible or audible during the clamour of daylight now receive definition, and may come forward to be spoken.<sup>95</sup> In his poem "Looking Around", Wright suggests

It's only in darkness you can see the light, only  
From emptiness that things start to fill,  
(Wright 2003, 3)

In Wright's visual imagery, light and darkness are taken up and transformed into an ambivalence of the either/or and the both/neither represented by the interstitial moments of dusk and dawn.

Even the way that Wright scores his poems, with liberal use of the hemistich (half line), points toward a moment full of temporal glitches in which anything may

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<sup>94</sup> As James Atlee (2012) explains: "if you sit in a garden as dusk falls you will notice the colour leaching out of the flowers; the eye's sensitivity to greens and blues is enhanced, while its sensitivity to red decreases, a reversal of daylight vision is what known as the Purkinje Shift" (2012, 71).

<sup>95</sup> This awareness connects Wright's work to the *via negativa* of the religious mystics. John of the Cross and Dionysius used tropes of darkness and light to illustrate that knowledge and 'sight' of the Being "beyond all seeing and all knowing" (Dionysius 1978, 212) can only come from entering a "supreme and dazzling darkness" (1978, 212), or by the soul enduring the spiritual darkness of deprivation "both as to understanding and both as to sense" (John of the Cross 1952, 95). Saunders (2019), framing a poetics of absence, suggests that *via negativa* or apophasis equates to "'the unsaid' in poetry, which is composed of taciturnity/white space/rest & release as much as of sounds/marks on the page/word-work; and which therefore expresses itself through pauses, white space" (2019, n.p).

be said. A Wright hemistich hovers, unmoored, in the middle of the page, as if its pace is dependent on the poet's slow rumination and arrival at a thought, as here in the poem "Summer Mornings":

The scars of unknowing are on our cheeks,  
those blank pages.  
(Wright 2003, 58)

The arrangement of Wright's poems prompts a halting in the reader, as the eye belays from the end of one line to the beginning of the next, or, as Wright puts it: "from one imagistic spark to another" (Wright 1988, 139).

From a negative way—as in *via negativa*—of seeing with regard to subject matter, Wright goes further, embodying these 'sightlines,' as it were, in the structure of his poems. The reader is thus invited to adopt a similar stance, a similar way of intuiting what lies between the fractured lines.

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**“My Body Won’t”**

write for me            reels

                                from the nib

refuses to charge

to conduct into words

its bicker

of tissue and skin

wherever I am

it is    not

it shears me

from ribcage    from

socket and finger

tip        now

it sits pulsing

                                panting            incanting

its rhymes

into air’s passive

                                hang

starts to glow I feel

heat from wherever  
I am the hand

is still  
moving it grabs

for the pen  
inks the page

but nothing alights  
no body's in

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### **Conclusion: ‘My Pen / Uproots’** <sup>96</sup>

In this chapter I have offered a selective overview of apophasis as harnessed in the different disciplines of philosophy, theology and poetry, in different periods, and for varying purposes: didactic, devotional, literary, philosophical. By first exploring the development of apophasis in non-poetic religious and secular writing, via the texts respectively of Dionysius and the author of *The Cloud*, as well as in the work of Derrida and Gadamer, I have been able to show how apophasis not only provides a vocabulary for grappling with the unsayable, but also informs a philosophical or religious stance predicated on what cannot be said. Given this linguistic and ontological manifestation of apophasis in non-poetic writing, what then may be the implications for the use of apophasis in contemporary poetic practice?

Classical apophasis, as I have pointed out, originates from a categorical is/is not paradigm of positive and negative and, as this chapter has attempted to show, the more distanced apophasis has become from this original paradigm, the more nuanced and varied its modes and interpretation in literary, theological or philosophical discourse concerning what cannot be said emerge as possibilities. If engagement with the ineffable is confined to language’s propositional (and oppositional) statements of ‘is’ and ‘is not’, then the limits of language are necessarily delimited, depriving language of its contingency, its conditionality, and ambiguity. There would also be no ‘outside’ of language or, as Derrida notes, “‘before’ the concept, the name, the word” (Derrida in Budick and Iser 1996, 9) for *différance* or *trace* to ‘exist.’

Through discussing the work of the poets featured in this chapter, my aim has been to show how, from medieval to contemporary times, apophasis has been important to poetry that grapples with ineffability, or which seeks to interrogate notions of loss, faith, spirituality, or the unknown. While an aesthetic impulse and purpose in the writing of poetry may be taken for granted, my aim has also been to show that, whether poems are written for theological or philosophical reasons, or to blur boundaries between the two, apophasis enables poets to push further towards the limits of language. In pushing towards these limits, an apophatic approach invites various ways—as Pearson, discussing the influence of Mallarmé’s poetics on

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<sup>96</sup> From “You’re the Fish” (see p. 87 of this thesis).

subsequent writers and thinkers suggests—of discovering how: “notions of failure and impossibility have proved especially and paradoxically rich” (2010, 217).

Yet, as I have also attempted to show in discussing the various influences on my research in this chapter, the concepts of failure, inadequacy and limits, when applied to the breakdown of language at the threshold of the ineffable are reductive unless they can be seized upon, re-interpreted and subverted. Apophasis is a means with which this reframing of such perceived contradictions can be effected. In the following chapters I discuss in depth how this takes place in the work of the two key poetic influences on my research, Dickinson and Celan respectively.

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Once said by me and once read by you, words cannot be unsaid or unread. Having shimmered between us, been heard, they cannot be unheard. Something happens that reframes the space, a touch given by one and felt by another. This exchange may be face-to-face and vocalised, as with a speaker and listener, or it may be mute, as with a text and a reader. An exchange may be tacit; yet this does not reduce its dependence on language.

Martin Heidegger wrote: “Everything spoken stems in a variety of ways from the unspoken, whether this be something not yet spoken, or whether it be what must remain unspoken in the sense that it is beyond the reach of speaking” (Heidegger 1971, 120). The suggestion here, as I interpret it, is that before any utterance or sentence can be made, its ‘negative’ has already taken place. On this basis, language springs from silence, from the pause before the word. Silence is not text, but it is part of text. Silence enacts the absence of words. Yet, as Sara Maitland, who has written at length on the phenomenon, and whose Christian faith is central to her work, says:

Silence may be outside, or beyond the limits of, descriptive or narrative language but that does not necessarily mean that silence is *lacking* anything. Perhaps it is a real, separate, actual thing, an ontological category of its own: not a *lack* of language but other than, different from, language; not an *absence* of sound but the presence of something which is not sound.

(Maitland 2009, 27–28)

## §



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“Untitled Study of Silence”

**e.e. says (*inquiry before snow*)<sup>97</sup>**

but i imagine  
 an icy gloss floating halfway out from churning wake a contra)  
 puntal orbit squeeze of altitude neither absence nor existence  
 thisness that was here before a ‘here’ was here beginning and concluding  
 at the when’s where-ending perfect ouroborous

**Ishmael says *dumb blankness, full of meaning***<sup>98</sup>

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

***the mother of speech***<sup>99</sup> says Merton

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

***khamush, khamush***<sup>100</sup> says Rumi

that music washes

<sup>97</sup> Poem #40 “silence” (cumplings 1973, 712).

<sup>98</sup> *Moby-Dick or, The Whale* (Melville 1851, 212).

<sup>99</sup> (Merton 2007, 19).

<sup>100</sup> “Five hundred odes conclude with *khamush*, silence” (Barks in Rumi 2004, 17).

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

***I emerge from it to speak of it*<sup>101</sup> ‘says’ Beckett**

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

***le poème tu, aux blancs*<sup>102</sup> says Mallarmé**

playing instrument  
of echo’s breath umbilical for speech the soft surprise of grass a knot  
unravelling on a page that sings converses hears invisible things  
seduces gods who claim it for their own is world in which we kneel  
is hoard of all that can be said that can be grieved

***all we dread*<sup>103</sup> (as Dickinson says)**

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

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<sup>101</sup> *The Unnamable* (Beckett 1915, 411).

<sup>102</sup> “Crise de Vers” (Mallarmé 1897, 247).

<sup>103</sup> Poem #1251 (Dickinson 1970, 548).

## CHAPTER FOUR: Exploring the “Neighborhoods of Pause”<sup>104</sup> in the Work of Emily Dickinson

To disappear enhances –  
(Dickinson 1970, 533)<sup>105</sup>

### **Introduction: “no Notice – no Dissent / No Universe – no Laws –”<sup>106</sup>**

In Emily Dickinson, “our greatest rhetorician of loss” (Cameron 1979, 151), we have arguably the English language’s greatest apophatic poet. Indeed, “what major poet has thought her way more deeply into absence, emptiness and ungraspable infinitude than Dickinson?” (Gibbons 2007, 20). Through its relentless (and fearless) jousting with the unknown—“the largest need of the intellect, though for it, no one thinks to thank God ...” (Dickinson 1959, 307)—Dickinson’s work threads apophasis through a poetic blending of the secular with the spiritual in order to probe emotional, ontological, and intellectual mysteries. The scope of Dickinson’s work, poetically, thematically, and syntactically, presents interpretive possibilities too numerous to address in this thesis. Yet by focusing on a selection of Dickinson’s poems in order to identify just how apophasis threads her work I propose to show the breadth of influence of Dickinson’s poetry as it pertains to this research project.<sup>107</sup> In the course of this discussion, I weave in some original writing that responds, poetically, to this apophatic reading of Dickinson’s work.

My purpose in interweaving my own poems in this chapter is not to set up any comparison with Dickinson’s style and approach, for her work is inimitable. That singularity of style and approach, however, is precisely what makes Dickinson’s work relevant to a contemporary poetic exploration of apophasis. Her poetry sets up a hermeneutic challenge that opens up rather than resolves interpretive possibility. In other words, a Dickinson poem presents a particular type of difficulty that Franke, discussing apophasis in Dickinson’s poetry, observes: “is not so much in the poem

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<sup>104</sup> Poem # 1159, circa 1870 (Dickinson 1970, 517).

<sup>105</sup> Poem # 1209, circa 1872 (Dickinson 1970, 533–534).

<sup>106</sup> Poem # 1159, circa 1870 (Dickinson 1970, 517).

<sup>107</sup> A preliminary exploration of some of the apophatic themes of Dickinson’s poetry appear in the critical thesis I wrote as part of a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, submitted to the City University of Hong Kong, 2014. This chapter extends, but does not draw directly on, the path traced in the Master’s thesis.

itself as in what it points out beyond itself and allows to be sensed or fathomed, rather than comprehended” (Franke 2008b, 68). It is this intangible quality of depth and intensity that render Dickinson’s poems so instructive for a project examining poetic apophasis. The sparer the structure, the wider the subject scope; the terser the diction, the more complex the relationship of word to space; the shorter the poem’s length, the more expansive the meaning. The poems I present attempt to respond to Dickinson’s example, an example I explore in the following ways.

I begin this chapter with a brief historical context for Dickinson’s work, describing in very broad terms the social and familial circumstances within which she wrote her poetry and correspondence, and how those settings might support an argument for detecting apophasis in the ontology and technique of her writing.

I then offer an apophatic reading of a selection of Dickinson’s poems,<sup>108</sup> using different poems to highlight specific arguments, relating to the following three concerns which I believe of value to building a contemporary apophatic poetics.

First, I offer observations on how apophasis is manifested in Dickinson’s poetic subject matter, imaginatively and intellectually oriented as it is towards the fragmented, unseen, invisible, intangible, and unknowable parts of human experience. My aim is to show how, by focusing on concerns including eternity, infinity, death, God, and the obscure inner workings of the mind, Dickinson’s poetic subject matter demands language be stretched to its syntactical and lexical extremes before it tips over into silence, or into the ineffable.

Accordingly, I then focus my discussion on just how the syntax and diction in Dickinson’s poetry performs this stretching of language, and sustains the unsaying of apophasis. I look at the use of negation by Dickinson’s poetic speakers; and I examine how her poems hover and inhabit the margins of a linguistic and topological disintegration in terms of their treatment of time. I suggest that by refracting, condensing, and projecting, through syntax and setting, the temporal in her poetry, Dickinson’s poetic voices are able to do something for which, usually, there could be no words: to report back from, or anticipate, scenarios and subject matter (like death) that are outside of direct human experience, if not apprehension.

Finally, I trace a connection in Dickinson’s work back to the apophasis of early theologians, in order to tease out elements of that connection relevant to the

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<sup>108</sup> For a remarkable insight into Dickinson’s original bundles of poetry, called fascicles, see Cristanne Miller (2016).

present discussion. Because her poetry rarely lends itself to semantic transparency, the apophasis in Dickinson's work (as I read it) veers more towards a mystical Dionysian apophasis rather than reliance on the propositional non-affirmatives of negation as practised by Plato and Aristotle.<sup>109</sup> Yet, though some critics argue that Dickinson's poetry is akin to the work of a mystical poet,<sup>110</sup> I do not share that view, and consider an examination of this debate, though fascinating, to be outside the scope of this thesis. However, as I discuss, I do consider that Dickinson's work has some parallels with negative theology that are useful to the present discussion, in particular, the adaptive potential of the principles of negative theology "to be used creatively to explore affinities with an intellectual environment in which negation—as difference, absence, otherness—is frequently judged to be more interesting than affirmation" (Davies and Turner 2002, 1).

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<sup>109</sup> See Chapter Two.

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, Dressman (1977); Hughes (2011b); Oates (1987); Wolosky (2000).

### **“Home is a Holy Thing”:<sup>111</sup> Historical Context of Dickinson’s Work**

Dickinson’s literary achievement is, by any measure, extraordinary. The size and scope of her oeuvre, the range of her vocabulary and the complete originality with which she subverts the rhythm and form of the traditional hymn structure<sup>112</sup> mark her out as a unique poetic talent. Moreover, she produced this work in an era when her life experience, while privileged, was attenuated by the somewhat restrictive social, political, religious, and domestic conditions considered appropriate for an unmarried woman in a conservative, Calvinist family in nineteenth-century Massachusetts in the shadow of the American Civil War of 1861–65.<sup>113</sup>

Yet far from being constrained by these social conditions and the expectations they place on her, Dickinson turned them to her advantage. Indeed, she even intensified them by voluntarily shunning face-to-face contact with the world. At the age of only twenty-four she writes in a letter to her friend Abiah Root: “I dont [sic] go from home, unless emergency leads me by the hand, and then I do it obstinately, and draw back if I can” (Dickinson 1971, 118).

As a voracious consumer of books, journals, and newspapers, Dickinson’s vocabulary and range of knowledge are encyclopaedic. So many of her poems inhabit a metaphysical topos that privileges the subtleties of the inner life over the outer, the afterlife over the present, and yet so often these highly conceptual matters are cast in material and quotidian terms. In Poem # 1159 (circa 1870) Dickinson merges the abstract with the concrete to articulate apparently hypothetical realms:

Great Streets of silence led away  
To Neighborhoods of Pause –  
Here was no Notice – no Dissent  
No Universe – no Laws –  
(Dickinson 1970, 517)

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<sup>111</sup> Letter [L59] to Austin Dickinson, 25 October 1851 (Dickinson 1971, 71).

<sup>112</sup> Known also as “common meter” (Miller 1987, 141), this consists of tetrameter (four metrical feet per line) alternating with trimeter (three metrical feet per line). Helen Vendler (2012) comments that “Dickinson’s verse was, in the past, sometimes considered amateurish because it is for the most part constructed within a single frame, the “childish” four-line stanza of hymn meter: 4 beats, 3 beats, 4 beats, 3 beats, with a single rhyme-sound linking lines 2 and 4” (2012, 4–5).

<sup>113</sup> For more details on Dickinson’s life, family and the period in which she wrote, see Gordon (2010); Pollak (2003). For studies focusing on the effect of the Civil War on Dickinson’s work, see Barrett (2007); Miller (1989, 2012); Salska (2009); Wolosky (1984).

I say ‘apparently’ hypothetical realms, for in some ways, under Dickinson’s design, such realms are rendered as concretely as any of their physical counterparts. The “Great Streets” and “Neighborhoods” invoked by the above stanza form the topography of Dickinson’s poetic concerns, based on a nullification of any parameters—“no Notice – no Dissent / No Universe – no Laws –”—of any identifiable world order. These are locales where the only certainty is uncertainty, and the only thing that can be relied on is a lack of reliability.

Meanwhile, in the midst of, and attempting to mediate this situational instability, is language; and it is, moreover, poetic language with its heightened emphasis on structure, syntax, and ambiguity. Apophasis threads words, sounds, spaces, silences and hesitations; denials, diversions, ellipses, apostrophes and negations, mapping out the thoroughfares, impasses, short-cuts, crossroads and detours of Dickinson’s poetic cosmologies. The absence of titles, the short lines, unresolved riddles, dashes, and mercurial syntax in Dickinson’s work also show vividly how language, even when articulated in tight patterns of poetic metre and form, can manifest a brokenness that points to unseen domains of the inarticulable that hover over each halting utterance.

## §

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“(After)”

every spider  
has winched itself  
eave to eave

there is a time  
for the fly  
to be silenced

after  
every fly  
has been silenced  
floors

begin to speak

after  
every  
floorboard  
has had its say

there's only  
the sound

of your tread

I can never tell

if you're walking away

or towards me

every night

(after)

tensing for

your arrival

or departure

I begin to think I can hear

the effort

of silk          unspooling

from the spider

the arrowhead

of the fly

wounding the silk

the sound

of something

dying away

like

footfalls

§

### **The Apophatic in Dickinson’s “subjects that resist”<sup>114</sup>**

Dickinson’s poems are bound together by their interrogation of humankind’s greatest ontological, theological, and existential questions about the nature of being, the existence of God, and life after death: interrogations that often look to everyday phenomena—the flowers or creatures of the poet’s garden for example—to expose some intimation of mortality. Dickinson’s poetry seems consistently to gesture towards what remains either out of sight or beyond speech, through the hint, the oblique, the aside. While the linguistic mechanisms of apophasis (such as negation and denial) are not always overt in her poetry, an apophatic spirit can be detected through all of her writing. Even in letters, Dickinson reveals a leaning towards the tacit and the withheld: “saying nothing, My Aunt Katie, sometimes says the Most” (Dickinson 1971, 219) Dickinson writes to Mrs. Joseph A. Sweetser in 1874.

The apophasis in Dickinson’s poems is fuelled in the first instance by the fact that they thrive on “subjects that resist” (Dickinson 1970, 605): subjects that can neither be contained within a poem’s scope, nor indeed, sometimes by language. The biggest subject of them all is the unknown, which is by nature resistant to language, and is explored by Dickinson’s speakers in many poems.

To illustrate my point, I will use Poem # 1417 (circa 1877).<sup>115</sup> As with every Dickinson poem, this one can be read or interpreted in a number of ways; however, my discussion focuses on the apophatic elements of my interpretation:

How Human Nature dotes  
On what it can’t detect.  
The moment that a Plot is plumbed  
Prospective is extinct –

Prospective is the friend  
Reserved for us to know  
When Constancy is clarified  
Of Curiosity –

Of subjects that resist

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<sup>114</sup> Poem # 1417, circa 1877 (Dickinson 1970, 604–605).

<sup>115</sup> This poem post-dates by a few months Dickinson’s letter of August 1876 to cousins Fannie and Louise Norcross, where the poet makes this telling remark: “the unknown is the largest need of the intellect, though for it, no one thinks to thank God” (Dickinson 1959, 307).

Redoubtablest is this  
Where go we –  
Go we anywhere  
Creation after this?

(Dickinson 1970, 604–605)

This poem circles issues of the unknown, and questions the wisdom of knowing too much. The first two lines are perhaps the least ambiguous: making a statement about the mind's attraction to the unknown. Yet the question of what this unknown might be pitches the reader straight into trying to unravel the poem's intriguing riddle, thus enacting the sentiments of its opening statement.

The “Plot” of the third line of the first stanza could be interpreted as the plot or structure of a story and, because the word “plumbed” follows immediately, also as the grave. The elements of a narrative can be plumbed (the story pored over to its conclusion), and at burial, the coffin with its occupant plumbs the depths of a grave: the story of life reaching an end. In both cases, a conclusion or resolution, a ‘knowing the end of the story’ is implied.

Yet, if human nature dotes on what it cannot detect, then once the fleeting revelatory moment is reached, the speaker suggests, the human subject also finds coming to the end of the story ultimately a disappointment. And coming to the end of the story is counterproductive, for knowledge and resolution destroys the anticipation, the thrill—“Prospective”—that animates the desire to keep searching in the first place. If the speaker is intimating that knowledge is ‘dull’ are they also implying that knowledge is ‘death’ to an inquisitive, insatiable life-force? Yet, returning to the Plot/grave analogy, surely one of the biggest mysteries is what happens after death? Yet in the final line of the first stanza, the speaker is implying that once one is intimate with the grave, this mystery becomes “extinct”—not just comfortably solved—but *extinct*; not dead so much as totally died out, wiped out, erased. So yes, by this measure, it is possible to consider that the speaker is suggesting death is knowledge, and knowledge is death.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> In an earlier piece, Poem # 1331 (circa 1874), which toys with the idea of suspense as “the Gnat that mangles men” (Dickinson 1970, 577), Dickinson observes:

Wonder – is not precisely Knowing  
And not precisely Knowing not –  
A beautiful but bleak condition  
(1970, 577)

If we wish to preserve this life-force, this hunger for knowing, the speaker counsels, perhaps we should consider “Prospective” more as a friend who holds us back a little, in order to make the journey to knowledge a little more leisurely and pleasurable, rather than something to be conquered. Inevitably, we will reach the end of the story: the end of *our* stories. In our coffins, we will eventually plumb our own Plots, and thus be “clarified / Of Curiosity –” (Dickinson 1970, 605). For by the last stanza, it does seem that the poem has pulled the focus fully onto the mystery of death and the possibility of an afterlife: the most formidable, redoubtable, resistant subject of all, and the one to which we are all subject:

Where go we –  
Go we anywhere  
Creation after this?

(Dickinson 1970, 605)

By finishing with this question about life after death, posed by Dickinson’s speaker on our behalf, the poem comes full circle, triggering again that human compulsion to know the unknowable: “Where go we – / Go we anywhere?” (Dickinson 1970, 605), thus reinforcing the sagacity of the poem’s opening lines.

Thus Dickinson’s subject matter is shaped by a paradox profoundly apophatic in character: a strong dynamic of withdrawal and denial alongside a creative responsiveness to uncertainty, and a passion to keep reaching for, probing, and desiring exchange with the unknown.

What, however, of Dickinson’s poetic diction: the register, syntax and style of her language?

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In the light of Poem # 1417 it is a little easier to appreciate why Dickinson might have paired the terms “beautiful” and “bleak”.

## §

Do poets have to break out of words in order to break *into* them? What happens when, rather than accumulating definitions of what something *is*, and determining—accreting—its shape in concept and consciousness, I instead attempt to pare away from it everything that it is *not*. But is this even possible? How do I decide what something is *not* unless I can first decide what it *is*?

Could this ‘mystery’ be reframed as something I am venturing to think of as ‘ab-sense’? A deliberate homonym for absence—as in *from* sense, *out of* sense, *away from* sense—that, while it may be abstruse is not at all abstract? ‘From sense’ makes possible multiple interpretations: it can mean ‘out of’ sense, or ‘away from’ sense. Likewise ‘out of’ sense can mean ‘run out of’ ‘away from’ sense, or ‘made from’ sense. It’s like fractals of language except that unlike mathematical fractals, which repeat identical patternings, linguistic fractals have modified meanings, and keep modifying, altering, slipping, decaying...

## §

### “[H]er sundered Things”:<sup>117</sup> Dickinson’s Diction and Syntax

Scholar Thomas Gardner suggests that contemporary poets who wish to follow the example of Dickinson’s “world-opening celebration of limits” (Gardner 2006, 6)—the limits of language, emotion and thought—must somehow “explore ways of awakening language to what it is unable to master” (Gardner 2006, 178). Indeed, Dickinson’s work demonstrates that when language buckles and decays, its poetic power is enhanced rather than diminished.

In her attitude to language, Dickinson maintains an ambiguity, challenging any limiting either/or interpretation. This is a writer who can invoke a “cool – concernless No –” (Dickinson 1970, 132) in her poetry (Poem # 287, circa 1861), and also invest such passion in declaring, in a letter to Otis P. Lord (circa 1878): “[D]ont [sic] you know that “No” is the wildest word we consign to Language?” (Dickinson 1971, 246). This implied resistance of the dualistic, in order to maintain the openness of language and interpretation is not only one of the most powerful attributes of a post-Platonic apophasis, but also something at which Dickinson excels.

While a poem such as haiku, studied at length, holds the sense of a little door unlocking a big space, Dickinson’s most enigmatic poems do not necessarily unlock. The more one looks at even the shortest of Dickinson’s poems, the more abstract and evasive they become; and yet, despite the ambient uncertainty swirling around the subject matter, the poetic voice in them is so sure, so authoritative. In Poem # 1251 (dated 1873), the speaker remarks:

Silence is all we dread.  
There’s Ransom in a voice —  
But Silence is Infinity.  
Himself have not a Face.

(Dickinson 1970, 548)

This is #1251 in its entirety: just four lines, four statements in effect. It offers three concrete nouns—a Ransom, a Face and a voice—yet the most definitive statements, involving the copula “is,” relate to the abstract nouns of Silence and Infinity. The key to the poem lies in these two authoritative statements: “Silence is all we dread” and

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<sup>117</sup> Poem # 607, circa 1862 (Dickinson 1970, 298).

“Silence is Infinity.” The other two lines depend on these for some measure of sense-making. Dickinson’s speaker seems to be asserting that one can obtain some return or benefit—a “Ransom”—from hearing a voice, or from using a voice to speak. Speech and listening take place in ‘real’ time, so we can ascribe a temporal as well as communicative value to both acts. With Silence, however, there can be no such gain, no such ‘purchase,’ for Silence is not beholden to time, but is mighty and infinite. Thus, in offering us no verbal response that we can pin to a moment, however fleeting, the faceless Silence/Infinity withholds any clue or evidence that we exist in relation to it, or even that we exist at all.

Yet how can Dickinson personify Silence/Infinity as “Himself” and yet this ‘self’ not have a Face? God said to Moses in the Book of Exodus 33.20: “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live” (*King James Bible* 1953, 90). Perhaps “Himself” is another name for the ultimate unnameable: God?

The jolt of this sudden switch in logic, as well as in syntax (‘He’ would surely be more grammatically correct than “Himself”, likewise the singular ‘has’ rather than Dickinson’s use of the plural “have”) swells the interpretive challenge as well as the metaphysical ambit of this poem into something far more expansive than four short lines can contain. While abruptness of syntax or ungrammatical language is typical of much poetry, to see these techniques so blatantly deployed in just nineteen words totalling twenty-six syllables is unusual and audacious. The brevity and density of the poem accentuates the ungrammaticality, which in turn accentuates the ambiguity of its content. Concluding with the apophatic statement “Himself have not a Face” (Dickinson 1970, 548), these four lines, condensed and gnomic, epitomise Dickinson’s poetics:<sup>118</sup> “words as manifestations of presence. Words as adjacencies to presence. Words as ropes flung over impossible spaces, caught and held firmly at the receiving end, their origin, by definition, unknown” (Cameron 1979, 187).<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> See Harold Bloom’s (1994) analysis of poem #761 for a similar response to Dickinson’s ability to condense so much into so few lines.

<sup>119</sup> Commenting on Dickinson’s use of syntax, Miller (1989) observes: “[T]he poet leaves out several auxiliary verbs, pronouns, articles, and repeated words that are syntactically recoverable under the rules of ordinary language use. Recoverable deletion rarely causes problems in meaning ... [t]he more interesting spaces or gaps in Dickinson’s poetry, however, are nonrecoverable; they cannot be filled in with any certainty by simple reference to grammar and common sense. The text they stem from cannot be recreated from the evidence in the poem and, in fact, there is no evidence that a complete text could ever have existed, even in Dickinson’s mind. Recovering the missing words or phrases in these cases does not involve an act of recovery per se but speculative interpretation of the poem” (1989, 225).

This analysis by scholar Sharon Cameron's describes the complex linguistic architecture, not just of the poems themselves, but of the spaces Dickinson makes them span. Dickinson's "math of the missing" (McHugh 1993, 3) is calculated imaginatively through a performative and intellectual reckoning with the "deficiency of speech" (Franke 2014a, 23) through deflection, circumlocution, and fragments. The following phrases I have selected show how one end of an idea may be fastened, only for its other end to pitch out into answerlessness: "The Object Absolute – is nought –" #1071 (Dickinson 1970, 486); "Unto the Whole – how add?" # 1341 (Dickinson 1970, 580); "The Finite – furnished with the Infinite –" # 906 (Dickinson 1970, 428).

For poets engaging with apophasis as a means of grappling with poetic ineffability, these examples dare us to approach our poetry in the knowledge that language is not secure, that statements can be at their strongest and most startling when contradicting themselves, and that a poem's power resides not so much in what it pins down linguistically, as what the combination of words and spaces releases emotively, musically and intellectually.

## §

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**“What Stays with Me”**

is motorcycle  
    slicing into night  
is sternum

paired with spine  
    is sideways stare  
is question

masked as dare  
    is peppermint tea  
half-gulped

is salt & truffle,  
    tongue-rough  
pelt of hair

frantic jazz of fingers  
    latch of jaw  
to back of neck, sweet

serpentine of sweat,  
    the paper-throated  
buck of breath, a mesh

of curls & wet  
    too many  
cigarettes

& yet, & yet  
    you tighten  
to me, skin

still slick  
    from a thousand  
kisses, vows

& passionate lies  
    such ginger in  
this startled tilt

a seasoning  
    we can't wash  
off, we recoil

from its taste  
    yet crave each  
famished mouthful

§

### ““No” is the Wildest Word”:<sup>120</sup> the Apophasis of Dickinson’s Negations

As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, because Dickinson’s poetry rarely lends itself to the (apparent) interpretive transparency of a definitive statement, Dickinson’s poetic voices do not often adopt the classical apophasis of Plato and Aristotle, namely unequivocal phrases of negation, denial and refusal. And when they do, such statements cannot be taken at face value. Moreover, even if negations are not explicitly stated, undercurrents of denial and refusal, along with a vocabulary conditioned by a poetics that draws strongly on apophatic conviction and convention, flow throughout Dickinson’s work.

To illustrate this point, and show how Dickinson makes apophatic denial manifest in her poetry in different ways, I offer several examples of negation in the poet’s work. The first example shows as explicit a grammatical negation as Dickinson is likely to offer, in Poem # 559 (circa 1862):

It knew no Medicine –  
It was not Sickness – then –  
Nor need of any Surgery –  
And therefore – 'twas not Pain –

It moved away the Cheeks –  
A Dimple at a time –  
And left the Profile – plainer –  
And in the place of Bloom

It left the little Tint  
That never had a Name –  
You’ve seen it on a Cast’s face –  
Was Paradise – to blame –

If momentarily ajar –  
Temerity – drew near –  
And sickened – ever afterward  
For Somewhat that it saw?

(Dickinson 1970, 271–72)

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<sup>120</sup> From letter [L562] to Otis P. Lord about 1878: “Dont [sic] you know you are happiest while I withhold and not confer – dont you know that “No” is the wildest word we consign to Language?” (Dickinson 1971, 246).

The concern of this poem, as with so many of Dickinson's, apparently circles around something—in this case “It” and “Somewhat”—emotionally or spiritually transformative that comes momentarily into the subject's or speaker's possession, then is lost. The poem eulogises the experience of ‘seeing’ this “Somewhat” by describing the physical decline in the countenance of the ‘seer’ in the aftermath of “It” being glimpsed and lost. It is not clear whether the speaker is observing the physical signs in another countenance, or looking in the mirror at their own. The veracity and trustworthiness of vision as a means of knowing are themes that Dickinson regularly explores, and which this poem tempts me to probe; however, I defer that discussion to later in this chapter, when I examine the links between Dickinson's work and Dionysian apophasis, and examine how perception is treated in Dickinson's famous Poem # 986 “A narrow Fellow in the Grass”. For now, however, I confine myself to observing the specific ways in which Poem # 559 uses negation.

The first stanza shapes a process of elimination in increments of no and not in an attempt to identify “It”. The speaker cannot assign this phenomenon a name other than “It”; and thus “It” has to be inferred by the reader to be the mysterious cause of an apparent ailment and physical wasting. The closest the speaker comes to naming “It” is as the “little Tint” that appears on a corpse's face, and which paradoxically “never had a Name”. The poem employs grammatical negation, and, in the implied subject matter of Death and the fleeting glimpse of afterlife (here described as “Paradise”) the addressing of the ineffable. The whole poem is a linguistic, poetic, temporal, and notional voyaging around what cannot be said.

Poem # 1563, dated circa 1883 (quoted here in its entirety) is perhaps more typical of Dickinson's work in that the poem veers close to, yet glances off negation:

By homely and hindered Words  
The human heart is told  
Of Nothing –  
“Nothing” is the force  
That renovates the World –

(Dickinson 1970, 650)

The core apophatic spirit of Dickinson's work, which the poem articulates, especially in the last two lines, is unmistakable. Clearly, the “Nothing” in this poem is not the absence of everything; rather it is the catalyst for everything, nameable and

unnameable. Dickinson's "Nothing" is active, potent, and dynamic. It is not static. "Nothing" is both the arena and the impetus for constant flux.<sup>121</sup>

Denials, refusals and renunciations regularly appear as part of the apophasis orienting Dickinson's work. An extract from Poem # 1123 (circa 1868) gives an example of denial:

A not admitting of the wound  
Until it grew so wide  
That all my Life had entered it  
And there were troughs beside

(Dickinson 1970, 504–5)

And in this extract of Poem # 686 (circa 1863), of refusal:

They say that "Time assuages" –  
Time never did assuage –  
An actual suffering strengthens  
As Sinews do, with age –

(Dickinson 1970, 339)

One of the aspects so interesting about Poems # 1563, # 1123 and # 686 quoted above, is the way the poetic voice in each connects these denials, negations and refusals to some act of utterance or saying (or to a play on or doubling of those forms of speaking) that is then undone: the "homely and hindered" words that *tell* the heart of "Nothing" in Poem # 1563 (Dickinson 1970, 650; emphasis added); the "not *admitting* of the wound" (Dickinson 1970, 504–5; emphasis added) as in the denial or ignoring of it, causing it to become a kind of monstrous mouth that then swallows the speaker's life and more. The affirmative statement that begins Poem # 686: "They *say* that "Time assuages" –" (Dickinson 1970, 339; emphasis added) is slapped down by

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<sup>121</sup> Wolosky (2000) comments that: "redemptive power, the possibility of renewal, is in this poem at once asserted and denied. The "Nothing," perhaps the most radical, as also the most ancient terms for mystical devotion, here may be positive or negative. The poem thus balances at an edge peculiar to negative mystical language, at once claiming and disclaiming a metaphysical dimension as directing experience in the world. Yet the metaphysical is not abandoned -- or rather, the consequences of metaphysical abandonment remain dire. And the poem in its way performs what is its own acutest hope. It realizes its metaphysical yearning (as also its metaphysical despair) within the familiar realm of the temporal and the linguistic. Renovation, if it will come, will come within the immanence of "homely gift" in our immediate, ordinary world; and through "hindered Words," the imperfection which Wallace Stevens calls paradise, where delight "lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds." The metaphysical is experienced, if at all, within the mutable, through an endless and ongoing effort to frame value in language, as the articulation of meaning" (2000, 20).

the speaker's emphatic "never" in the second line. The assertion of negative propositions and withdrawal or renegeing of positive propositions are a regular feature of Dickinson's work, enacting what critic Judith Farr (1996) notes, and others have convincingly concurred,<sup>122</sup> to be: "a central trope of [Dickinson's] poetry ... having by *not* having, satisfaction in renunciation" (Farr 1996, 10).

Dickinson's vocabulary is expansive.<sup>123</sup> Rather than the poems' relying on these obvious powers of articulation, however, the true potency of Dickinson's poetry is realised through her speakers' suggestions, evasiveness and allusion. Indeed, the poetic impact of her work is to drive home the impossibility of knowing: as if the only valid and sensible way of approaching the world can be through posing questions, eliminating certainties, making suppositions, and not expecting answers. Plaited as they are with parataxis and idiosyncratic punctuation, and apophatic phrasing—negations, denials, refusals, renunciations—Dickinson's poems invoke and reinforce the sense that "the poem's very failure to say what it strives to say may harbor its most powerful significance" (Franke 2008b, 70).

Yet I would suggest that there is an element of Dickinson's use of language that is more important, from an apophatic perspective, than how denials and refusals play out in Dickinson's poetry: namely how Dickinson's syntax and diction effects a dynamic interaction between her poetic speakers and the conceptual spaces opened up her poetry's treatment of time.

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<sup>122</sup> See Bloom (1994); Burbick in Farr (1996); Cameron (1979); Mahoney (2015); Pollak in Farr (1996); Wolosky (1984); Wilbur in Farr (1996).

<sup>123</sup> According to the online *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* (n.d.), the poet's collected poems contain over 9,275 unique words and nearly 100,000 word occurrences (see <http://edl.byu.edu/faq.php>). William Howard (1957) provides a commentary on Dickinson's vocabulary as compared with poets such as Emerson and Keats, noting: "it is not in the words she uses but in the way in which she uses them that Emily Dickinson is most original" (1957, 248).



you will read  
 the present *was here*  
*once* (what was  
 once the future)  
 & *still am* past  
 a future once  
 (pre-verbal)  
 not-known written  
 from silence  
 future silence  
*was here*  
*once* & *still*  
 a future tense  
 written into (space is future)  
*am* still written (past tense)  
 into place (place is—pre-tense—  
 past) and I will I  
 will I ever  
 leave the page  
 will the future take  
~~my place~~ when  
*was here*  
*once* & *am*  
 have left  
 when I have left will I  
 have left I will  
 have left  
 will ~~the page~~  
*still* will ~~the page~~  
 still will  
 the p—age

§

### **“Forever – is composed of Nows –”:<sup>124</sup> Time in Dickinson’s Poetry**

Dickinson’s work gives insight into how apophasis can be rendered poetically through the modulating of temporal constructs: the placing of time (past, present, future) in her poetry either through the means of tense and vocabulary, or through the setting of the poem. After all, apart from language, what is more complex, slippery and unstable, than time? And again, apart from language, what is more crucial to our understanding and articulation of—and bafflement with—all our experiences, than time? Dickinson’s poems show how the situating and describing of experiences—whether as reactions to past events, current ordeals or anticipated anxieties or reliefs—may be governed as much through temporal as linguistic logic, and often through a merging of both. Cameron, discussing temporality in Dickinson’s lyrics, makes this interdependence explicit by suggesting that: “[i]n the search instigated by longing, language is by definition a back-tracking through the space left in the wake of presence, in the hopes that it might rediscover its source” (Cameron 1979, 190). Time dictates, and through myriad subtleties of language—including the temporal work done by participles, gerunds and verb tenses—Dickinson hints at the when, where and what of time’s dictation.

And not only the dictation but also anticipation, for Dickinson makes use of the flash-forward, or prolepsis, to project into the future. Some of her most famous poems, for example, are the ones in which Dickinson’s speakers experience and reflect on their own deaths.

The examples of prolepsis that are most often quoted are Poem # 280 (circa 1861) “I felt a Funeral in my Brain” (Dickinson 1970, 128); Poem # 465 (circa 1862) “I heard a fly buzz” (Dickinson 1970, 223); and the one I will now discuss in greater detail, Poem # 712: “Because I could not stop for Death” (Dickinson 1970, 350).

In this poem, written around 1863, the speaker is already dead, and is being chauffeured to their grave— “a House that seemed / a Swelling of the Ground –” (Dickinson 1970, 350)—by Death, the courteous undertaker. On the way, they pass landmarks of childhood, such as the school, and then “the Fields of Gazing Grain” (Dickinson 1970, 350), awaiting a harvest that the speaker shall never see, and perhaps symbolising also the harvest of life and its fertility that the speaker shall

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<sup>124</sup> Poem # 690 circa 1862 (Dickinson 1970, 307).

never now experience. Apart from “the Setting Sun”, there is no hint of any milestone being passed on this last journey that could connect to a long life and old age. So the speaker can be assumed to have been still quite youthful at death.

To examine specifically how time is handled in this poem, I consider the first and last stanzas, starting with the first:

Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality –

(Dickinson 1970, 350)

Was the speaker otherwise occupied? In a hurry to be somewhere else? Taken by surprise? Trying to get away? Whatever the speaker was doing before the beginning of this poem, the reader has to acknowledge that “because I could not stop” an unwritten and thus unspoken event was already in train when Death “kindly stopped.” We can infer that the speaker’s death was thus sudden and unexpected, a supposition congruent with it being the death of a younger person. Yet there is no escaping Death, as the speaker seems ruefully?—acidly?—to admit, because “He *kindly* stopped for me –” (Dickinson 1970, 350; emphasis added). No carriage can be big enough to accommodate Immortality (which is indivisible from Time) *and* Death, yet this one does. How can this be so? No wonder then, by the last stanza, the speaker says:

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads  
Were toward Eternity –

(Dickinson 1970, 350)

Several temporal shifts are at work in this poem. The tenses used in the first five of its six stanzas are the simple past, “I could not”, “he stopped” and the past perfect “I had put away”. Yet this concluding stanza, starting “Since then – 'tis Centuries” (present tense) swerves the whole poem away from the sense that the journey has taken place in the recent past.

This abrupt reassigning of timeframe is reinforced by the present tense “Feels shorter” in the second line. Yet we were assuming the speaker was relating discoveries and experiences still fresh in the memory: that the schoolchildren were at

recess, the precise moment when it began to get chilly. The “then” that we recognise as the beginning of the poem is now centuries ago, and the moment we entered the poem (*after* the moment of death), is not the moment at which we leave it. Compounding this dizzying contraction of time is that, for the speaker, the centuries have passed so much more quickly than that first day in the carriage with Death, when “We slowly drove – He knew no haste”, and “I first surmised the Horses’ Heads / Were toward Eternity –”. Yet the temporal distortions in this stanza show how Immortality and Death can coexist in the same space. This speaker’s account of death’s aftermath acknowledges the passing of time, yet the poem shows that the speaker’s *experience* of death is eternally current—immortal—and will remain so. In death, one is preserved by the memory of the living, and if that is not possible, one is nevertheless memorialised by the unalterable fact of having been: thus, one can be said to be immortal. As Cameron notes, “all time converges upon the poem in whose one space splintered temporal fragments lodge and totalize” (Cameron 1979, 257).

Dickinson’s treatment of time in this poem brings to mind T. S. Eliot’s observation about the ever-shifting “frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist” (Eliot 1953, 55). Right at the moments *when* those meanings and words diverge, Dickinson stretches the imaginative and expressive capacity of language, and our cognitive and hermeneutic powers, literally to the limits of what we, as humans, are capable of knowing, imagining or describing. Yet proximity to these limits does not necessarily mean an arrival at clarity or coherence, either in what is left on the side of ‘saying,’ or yet in what that ‘saying’ points towards beyond itself. This, however, is partly the point; as Franke notes: “precisely the impediments to expression become [Dickinson’s] central message in telling ways, for they tell obliquely of a “beyond” of language” (Franke 2008b, 62). And not just of language. By placing a poetic voice into the afterlife, Dickinson echoes what Dante did with the *Divina Commedia* (n.d): making the protagonist narrate a posthumous experience. Yet, unlike Dante, Dickinson does not have her personae resort to the inexpressibility topos<sup>125</sup> to fade out or obscure a moment of celestial concord or revelation; for that very moment is what Dickinson is most interested in, and she makes her speakers defy time specifically in order to articulate this post-conscious, post-mortal experience. Speculating about the speaker/soul’s post-life journey is

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<sup>125</sup> For an explanation of the inexpressibility topos, see footnote on p 54, Chapter Two of this thesis.

important, but apparently not as important as having the speaker/soul articulate *their* experience of that journey.

Another means of having a speaker negotiate with temporality by inhabiting and concretising a hypothetical space or mindset is through Dickinson's use of the conditional tense. This is Poem #1668 (undated):

If I could tell how glad I was  
I should not be so glad –  
But when I cannot make the Force,  
Nor mould it into Word,  
I know it is a sign  
That new Dilemma be  
From mathematics further off  
Than from Eternity.

(Dickinson 1970, 680–81)

Dickinson's use of the second conditional<sup>126</sup>—"If I could tell how glad I was" (Dickinson 1970, 680–81)—ordinarily would signal that the situation being imagined either does not, or could not exist, or is unlikely to occur. Yet this hypothetical is not a barrier to Dickinson's speaker, who seems to be suggesting that if the emotion, or "Force", *could* be captured and contained in language, then how could that emotion be considered exceptional?<sup>127</sup> The struggle to put words to the emotion seems, for the speaker, to be the catalyst for an (ineffable) emotional encounter of a higher order. When the speaker "cannot make the Force / Nor mould it into Word", this cognitive and linguistic difficulty is interpreted by the speaker not as a setback, but a sign instead they are on the brink of some "new Dilemma", and some exciting new unknown to probe. Moreover, had the speaker been able to fit "Word" to "Force" in the first place, this "new Dilemma" might never have presented itself. As critic Joan Burbick notes, recalling Farr's comment on Dickinson's "satisfaction in renunciation" (Farr 1996, 10): "Dickinson's speakers often embrace a posture of self-denial for which they are rewarded. Only by not-having does that which is desired "gain" in value" (Burbick in Farr 1996, 81).<sup>128</sup> Or, if we were to consider this from a Dionysian

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<sup>126</sup> "Second conditional (also called the would-condition): involves a past tense verb form in the conditional clause, and would in the main clause, e.g. If I saw them, I *would* tell them" (Aarts, Chalker and Weiner 2014).

<sup>127</sup> See Chapter Two of this thesis for Scharfstein's (1993) comments on the ineffable as a form of superlative.

<sup>128</sup> Poem # 1700, undated, discussed in the Prologue of this thesis expresses similar sentiments:

perspective (echoed by John of the Cross), the reward of knowledge is gained only through renouncing everything that is known.

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You make me stop. You make a sacrament of silence. I think of churches, Book of Common Prayer, language made from liturgy, olden echo, tongue of lolling bell. You say: “I am pause, negotiation, notch in your way forward. The opening no key can fit, the padlock and the door.” You say to me (so tolerant of my ignorance): “I am deliberate. Am denser than a verse. I am the caesura of breath, a ripening sigh, the moment before speech. I am strange yet so familiar: see, no spidery of line, I do not wear my lace outside, yet I am every bit a lyric. I am compressed, decanted, am intense. Not fleet, I am a stillness.” You make me reach beyond, explore the almanac of meanings beyond any moment’s meaning.

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To tell the Beauty would decrease  
To state the Spell demean –

(Dickinson 1970, 692–3)

§

**“Misericordia”**

hair, burnt-pasture-bracken-brown . height, your fingers, long . your voice .  
not deep, not high, just musical enough to blur inside my muscle . memory .  
sunday mornings, worship in the church of us . dark bloodied wine . deep  
tissue, antiphon of breath and sweat . skin of secret skin . the willing . to my  
lips . hands a chalice cupping me . how should i disremember this . recant  
what i desire . deny the harrowing of hell . this slow and perfect burning .

§

### **The “departing light”:<sup>129</sup> the Dionysian Dynamic in Dickinson’s Work**

At the beginning of this chapter, I referred to the potential for apophasis “to be used creatively to explore affinities with an intellectual environment in which negation – as difference, absence, otherness – is frequently judged to be more interesting than affirmation” (Davies and Turner 2002, 1).

To me, the intellectual environment to which Davies and Turner allude is precisely the environment that Dickinson’s speakers probe. Part of the apophatic power of Dickinson’s work lies in the fact that her writing confounds the senses just as regularly as it invokes them. Dickinson’s writing seems to summon a hermeneutic that requires we suspend our habitual default to the bodily senses, or at least, reduce our reliance on them. As such, I detect a tendency of Dickinson’s poetic speakers to display an apparent quasi-Dionysian mistrust of the bodily senses as a means of apprehending or comprehending the unknown. One of her speakers (in Poem # 939 written circa 1864) claims: “What I see not, I better see – ” (Dickinson 1970, 440), and much of Dickinson’s work makes explicit the distinction between the physical capacity to see, and an inner conceptual/imaginative vision.

This challenge to the reader’s powers of percipience recalls the apophatic message of Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*, which suggests that the ability to see and know God depends not on earthly senses, but on the perceptive—and receptive—capacity of the soul. Absence of vision and knowledge is but a means for one to see and know what, or who, is “above all seeing and all knowing” (Dionysius 1978, 212).

Texts such as the *Mystical Theology* suggest that whatever we humans recognise as sight and knowledge will have little bearing on the supernal experience that may await, nor on our progress towards this experience. My aim is not to suggest that Dickinson’s work is deliberately following that of Dionysius with regard to this approach, though given this poet’s keen intellectual curiosity and assiduous study she may well have been aware of negative theology. I would suggest that, while the epistemic and ontological concerns, not to mention the additional poetic dimensions, of Dickinson’s work are broader than those of the mystical texts, the mystics’ caution regarding sight and knowing can usefully be read into her work.

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<sup>129</sup> Poem # 1714, undated (Dickinson 1970, 696).

My aim is simply to point out that this trope relating to the acquisition of a higher order of knowledge through the denial and rejection of bodily senses, used to such good effect by Dickinson's speakers in order to reinforce the difficulty of acquiring said knowledge, has its origins in traditional theological apophatic thought.

The world with its griefs and joys, as filtered through Dickinson's prismatic gaze, thus takes on a unique cast in her poetry. Her poetics offer an object lesson in the oblique glance, and the poetic and apophatic possibilities of glancing *off* a subject as well as fleetingly glancing *at* it. Poem # 1714 (undated) notes:

By a departing light  
We see acuter, quite,  
Than by a wick that stays.  
There's something in the flight  
That clarifies the sight  
And decks the rays.

(Dickinson 1970, 696)

By losing or abandoning illumination, the speaker of this poem seems to be saying, we learn to hone a keener perception, and perhaps receive, as compensation for being left in the dark, a sharpened inner vision. I read this poem as a parable of loss, detecting in the words "quite" and "something" a hint of weary acknowledgement that the wisdom gained—that very perspicacity without which the speaker could not make the declaration that is the poem—does not quite make up for the radiance forfeited in the making of that wisdom. This poem thus encodes a double loss while seeming only to refer to one. Great poems (and especially Dickinson's poems) seem to serve as lenses that we can be tempted to position and reposition as we imagine the poet perhaps might have, continually refocusing and adjusting the depth of vision to capture what may be hidden in plain sight.

To illustrate these points about Dickinson's approach and its connection to the apophatic tenor in Dionysius, I turn to her well-known Poem # 986 (circa 1865) about the snake: "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (Dickinson 1970, 459). This is a fine example of how Dickinson blurs the edge between the material and the abstract. Like all of Dickinson's poems, this one can be read and interpreted in myriad ways; however, I want to focus on this poem for the perspectives it prompts regarding what we think of as 'seeing,' and how Dickinson skews and plays on those perceptions:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass  
Occasionally rides –  
You may have met Him – did you not  
His notice sudden is –

The Grass divides as with a Comb –  
A spotted shaft is seen –  
And then it closes at your feet  
And opens further on –

(Dickinson 1970, 459)

The two opening stanzas above invite me to look over the shoulder of the poem's speaker as if, with them, I am discerning a presence through contours—"A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (Dickinson 1970, 459)—or becoming aware of what 'we' (the speaker and the reader) are looking at through its movement: "Occasionally rides –" (Dickinson 1970, 459). We are 'seeing' this creature through the *effects* of its presence, rather than perceiving it directly: the grass parting obediently like hair at a comb's angle, only to close and then part further on, showing the trajectory and direction of the snake's progress, and hinting also at the inexorable speed, precision and fluency of its ride in the sibilance of "Grass", "shaft" and 'seen.'

Paradoxically, though we may 'spot' the "spotted shaft" mainly by how the grass behaves, the poem hints that more often the snake will have spied us first: "His notice sudden is –". Who is then the watcher? Who is the watched? What is 'real'? If we cannot trust our sight—the sense many of us most commonly rely on—what can we trust? Yet this is the world as conjured by Dickinson, in which trust and reliability are only relative, contingencies in a domain where only the uncertain is certain, and what appears to be so may not be. Indeed, in the next stanza, the speaker recalls an experience that confirms this paradigm of deceptiveness and illusion:

Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot –  
I more than once at Noon  
Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash  
Unbraiding in the Sun  
When stooping to secure it  
It wrinkled, and was gone –

(Dickinson 1970, 460)

Full noon, direct sunlight, and "more than once": and yet the barefooted boy repeatedly comes so close to danger. The implication is that even his keen young eyes

cannot see the whip for what it truly is; for if they had, he would surely never have come so close to take his life (and Death) in his hands. For Death, embodied by the snake, is in this poem: unspoken; disguised; perceived yet not seen. Or, for the speaker, there is a more disturbing possibility: a disjunction between his sight and his mind. With this report of how he mistakes the snake for something else, we may infer this is what he ‘saw.’ Yet the speaker actually says he “thought” he passed a “Whip lash,” and this thought puts in doubt not his vision, but his mind.

For the speaker, shaken by this near miss, all snakes are now *the* archetypal snake. At the conclusion of the poem, we understand that the speaker, now an adult, is constantly on the lookout for this archetypal snake and what it represents, just as some may nervously watch for Death. Perhaps, for the speaker, the snake *is* Death. Yet, as the speaker intimates at the end of the poem, nobody can ‘see’ Death coming. All we can do is intuit a “sudden notice” when Death brushes past us, and we experience “... a tighter breathing / And Zero at the Bone –” (Dickinson 1970, 460). The apophatically-charged word “Zero” in the last line of the poem ascribes a collapsing, negative value to something solid, a hollowing-out of the bone’s ability to support flesh and sinew. It is expressive of the adrenalin-filled reaction, a weakness at the knees, perhaps, engendered by encountering a snake at close proximity. But again, a double meaning suggests itself. Might not this physical disintegration, coupled with “a tighter breathing,” rehearse just what happens to us when we actually die?

This poem shows how, even when her poetic speakers discuss phenomena that no living human can know, Dickinson succeeds in offering an unsettling sideways glimpse over the edge at an afterlife, or eternity; and because her language is deceptively simple, Dickinson dares readers to be literal—the snake—and lateral—Death—in our interpretive approach to her poems. For it is only by adopting both dispositions that we can begin to accommodate the multiple directions of Dickinson’s poetic outlook and the multiple layers of her poetic introspection. Indeed, Franke argues that an “intensely dense, discriminating, hair-splitting hermeneutics ... aiming at always greater precision, is not always called for nor necessarily conducive to letting Dickinson’s poems happen and have their most clear and intense effect” (Franke 2008b, 68). Engaging with a Dickinson poem often means forgoing the expectation that reasoning and deduction will uncover meaning; in fact, just as with sensory perception, it is perhaps better to forgo expectation altogether. Dickinson presents a poetic rather than a rational logic; whatever understanding or insight we

garner from her poems may come from the suspension rather than the application of reasoned analysis. A focus on understanding and knowledge may, in any case, limit our ways of approaching Dickinson's poetics, which demand—and importantly discomfit—visceral and intuitive as well as cognitive responses.

§

§

“Soundings”

Not cold, but still deep-wintered, locked  
in season-slip. Leaves spread dead skies

on the ground. Tree roots, taking soundings  
of the earth, search for utterness, what it feels like

when we die, hemisphere recoils from hemisphere,  
the air begins to eat us and our bodies, wafered

on its tongue, dissolve. Universe is closing in, time  
pulling with its slipknot. *Respect is earned* my mother

always said. That night, she held my hand like trees  
hold onto wind, already letting go, her life attenuating

to the moment of its breaking. Sheering, leaf-like, through  
the great withheld. Yes, I hear you, Mum. *Age does not*

*mean wisdom*. Behold my surface, ice-like, angled  
slant-side-on to which my words are laminate, inanimate

the tension underneath the meaning, moan of non-disclosure.  
*Remember who you are*, my mother said, which meant

*Remember who I am, and don't disgrace me*. So I  
forgot, and did. *Age does not mean wisdom*. I hold my

self like trees hold onto wind, already letting go.  
Not cold, but still deep-wintered, locked in season-slip.

§

**Conclusion: “not precisely Knowing not –”<sup>130</sup>**

Human beings live in the subjunctive mood, as well as in the indicative one.  
(Terry Eagleton 2007, 160)

This chapter has attempted to draw out and highlight features of Dickinson’s poems that are salient to an apophatic reading of her work. Tilting with ambiguity, skewing the truth, hinting and teasing, in terms of subject matter, nothing is off limits in Dickinson’s writing, and yet—because she probes further into the fabric of the unknown with the needle of her intellect in search of more to be said, if it *could* be said—she extends those limits and then subverts them. With this confidence and daring in limning the unknown and the unknowable, while retaining total control over her poetic medium, Dickinson offers a powerful and expansive example to a poet exploring apophatic strategies in poetic practice. With an approach that is as expansive in content and technique as it is succinct in style, Dickinson invites the reader to acknowledge that, in the metaphysics of human experience, there is much that language cannot fully explain or encompass. Dickinson’s whole mode of enquiry, her purposeful engagement with poetic language, is to probe the unlanguage side of being and belief.

Acting as a fulcrum between “... not precisely Knowing / And not precisely Knowing not – / A beautiful but Bleak condition” # 1331 (Dickinson 1970, 577), Dickinson’s poems hover and energise the thermals and vibrations of what might lie at the extremities of articulation. These poems offer that momentary experience of “an edge that never arrives” (Coles 2017a).

Whether looking outward at the world, or at the interior workings of the mind, Dickinson’s poetry animates and suspends the tremor between known and not-yet-known (or may-never-be-known) just long enough for an attentive reader to apprehend that the poetry is glancing, not only off and towards the unsayable and unfathomable, but also beyond. Dickinson’s poems are not just words, lines, and spaces. They are shape, flex, kinesis, stasis, sound, amplitude, distance, and dash. Her poetry carves a materiality—a sense of presence—from the immensity of a surrounding immateriality. As I have attempted to show, this immateriality should not

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<sup>130</sup> Poem # 1331, circa 1874 (Dickinson 1970, 577).

be confused with absence or emptiness, however, for that would be to ascribe a flat, one-dimensional a character to Dickinson's poetic complexity.

Using poetic diction and form in the way she does to joust with the unknowns of the intellect and extremity of emotions places Dickinson's work in constant proximity to the ineffable, and is thus, as I have shown, a prime example of poetic apophasis in both language and approach. Apophasis not only offers her poetic personae a means of expressing their fascination with the Nothing "that renovates the World" (Dickinson 1970, 650) but also provides a potent frame of reference for these poetic explorations to take place. Apophasis widens the scope of Dickinson's poetry, with speculations and conjecture that, ultimately unanswerable, leave spaces no poetry is able to fill. These spaces, however, represent the unwordedness that poetry is uniquely fitted to gesture towards.

While she wrote around 1800 poems (that we know of), and numerous letters, a typical Dickinson poem is generally recognised to be short, condensed and concise. As I have already indicated earlier in this chapter, the shorter the poem, the more challenging it is to interpret. Likewise, as I have suggested, through her seemingly abrupt leaps of logic or syntax, forays into the conditional tense, or poems using prolepsis where, extraordinarily, her speakers seem less conflicted by the impossible act of *reflecting back* on a hypothetical future than they are in dealing with the present. In her poetry, Dickinson realigns and reconstructs perceptions of time in ways that pitch the reader into hypothetical yet quasi-real situations. Hypothetical, because the reader reasons that these situations can neither humanly be known or articulated. Believable, because while Dickinson's poetic personae are constantly questioning, they manage to articulate their questions and the circumstances that provoke the questions with precision and confidence.

Yet for all this confidence and articulacy displayed by her poetic speakers, there is apparent evidence, from her letters, that Dickinson understood only too well that there are emotional circumstances in which words will not suffice, and are better withheld. In correspondence [L899] with Dickinson's sister-in-law's sister, Martha Gilbert Smith, around 1884 after Smith's little daughter has died, Dickinson wrote: "To attempt to speak of what has been, would be impossible. Abyss has no Biographer – Had it, it would not be Abyss –" (Dickinson 1971, 305).

Dickinson is saying, as did Edgar in Act IV scene I of *King Lear*,<sup>131</sup> and as did Beckett,<sup>132</sup> that if one can describe the condition and circumstance of the unspeakable, then it is not unspeakable.<sup>133</sup> The very worst is thus bereft of words to word it, and by noting in relation to the child's death (above), that "Abyss" *cannot* have a biographer Dickinson indicates that these limits are being breached.

Yet the breaching of these limits seems to be the key motivation for Celan, the poet whose work I examine in the next chapter.

While Dickinson's work displays the lyricism and teasing obliqueness that in Poem # 1129 (circa 1868) amply performs one of her poetic personae's most famous dictums: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant –" (Dickinson 1070, 506), Celan's work, as I shall discuss, takes a radically different approach, seeming to push not only poetic language to its extremes but also apophasis itself.

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<sup>131</sup> "And worse I may be yet. The worst is not / So long as we can say 'This is the worst'" (Shakespeare 1951, 518).

<sup>132</sup> "If you really get down to the disaster, the slightest eloquence becomes unbearable" (Beckett in Knowlson 1996, 439).

<sup>133</sup> Likewise, if something ineffable can be described, then it is stripped of that sense of extremity, or an exceptional quality of transcendence (see Scharfstein 1993, 188).

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Raoul Mortley (1986b) writes: “the negative is virtually a trick. It appears to dismiss or annul a concept while allowing it to remain visible in the linguistic presentation” (1986b, 252). I cannot escape from the ultimate irony that I am using words to discuss what cannot be said, as well as to ‘unsay’ anything that might be said. When attempting to limn negativity in terms of content or modality—things that appear to be beyond speech or expression, or how they are expressed—this stumbling block is compounded by the way in which language works and in the vocabularies available to me. ‘Nothing’ becomes a ‘something’ because it ‘manifests’ in words. In poetry, absence or silence in a poem can be represented by white space.

Over again I try to translate myself, write out of myself as secret waters, erasure under the khamazeen. A sundial at midnight, every shadow storied; every story shadowed. I am layer upon layer of moment. I test each fibre, taste it, plasma and iodine, yet nothing will work to the surface to let me speak. Language irrigates me, silvers into schools of movement too rapid for utterance.

§



§

**“Elegy for the Unsayable”**

a voice

—of loosening mauve—of citrus with a twist—of tears—of violent white—a lambent patch of arctic snow—a wash of lilac—streak of pearl—of clove—of dandelion—a frosted clock—mad bat-light—snail—of polished oak—of trembling lip—a tattered rose—my gasp caught in the pages of a book—of whispered silk—a thigh—a desperate note—wordless tongueless—reddened wild—of lace—of merlot mixed with rum—a stain that would not go—

a smile

—of rain—long summer grass—of guayacán—of melting ice—of seaweed—truffle—turpentine—of baby starlings—worm-fresh earth—of frankincense—and methadone—a middle C—me as Madame Bovary—at Compline—leather coat—of vinyl under needle—bellow of an orphaned calf—of almonds—Simmel cake—of Marstons Pedigree—a fold of skin—a hip—a razor held to long grey hair—garlic inches from the press—celeriac—like scratch of nib—indelible ink—like waiting in a silent queue—of swollen eyes—a memory that would not go—

a touch

—like fallen leaves—and kiwi fruit—of edge and angle—compass point—of sunburn—gentle laughter overhead—a ransacked house—of Hammer-horror purple—keys forgotten once too often—wax—of deadly nightshade—anagrams—a caprioska—Mars trine Pluto—body heat—of one plus one does not add up—dear Banquo’s ghost—the taste of mint—a pinch of too-tight clothes—distortion in a mirror—aftermath of break-up sex—of air guitar and bric-a-brac—and too much chlorine in a pool—the rooftop after fatal fall—of Marilyn Monroe—and peach—an ache that would not go—

a taste

—of rosemary—and cirrus cloud—or watercress—and candlelight—of sillage from a perfumed scarf—a door that could not close—of dance-floors paved with broken plates—and the peat-bog breath of a whiskey glass—mixed from chamomile and piss—of Black Watch plaid and brimstone—and the gradient of cheek to breast—of lipstick scrawled across a sheet—ten loud Hail Marys in a row—of codeine mixed with alcohol—a bitterness that would not go—

a laugh

—like coffee grounds—the twitch of cat-tails purr of dog—of flightless fish and drowning birds—and 1950s black-and-white films—or Audrey Hepburn as a nun—the slow demise of the Christmas tree—and last week’s paper still unread—and an orgasm that never quit—its distant singing—Psalm 19—much louder than a wrecking ball—quieter than a daisy chain—like *Life On Mars*—and mostly made of Catherine wheels—means the door that never opens now—and an echo that simply will not go—

its name

—is stitched into my ribs—all fifteen syllables—is Horsehead Nebula—is tripping up the stairs—is wasp within a jar—is last seat on the bus—is nothing like I’ll hear again—is blister—teacup—Rose Pouchong—is *Bleak House*—Nordic noir repeats—is British *Vogue*—is loosened clothes—my skin torn round a fingernail—is footprints on a frozen lake—is hacked from forest-loneliness—always the first hit of champagne—heliotrope—is caviar—is mouth pressed lightly to my neck—is hand on waist—quickenning heart—is blunt and sharp and afterglow—was and still is simply love—

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## CHAPTER FIVE: The “Text-Voids” of Paul Celan

deep in the glowing  
text-void,

...

hear deep in  
with your mouth.

(Celan 2001, 361)<sup>134</sup>

### Introduction: “What’s no more to be named”<sup>135</sup>

With the poetry of Paul Celan, we are confronted by the apparently insurmountable gulf between the speakable and unspeakable, and how language—particularly apophatic language—may represent that gulf at the same time as attempting to overcome it. This most challenging of twentieth-century poets (even his name is an anagram)<sup>136</sup> shows how a poetic practice might apprehend a connection between the said and the unsaid, addresser and addressee. It suggests how a poetic practice might operate in order to witness and to participate in an exchange “pointing into the open and void and free” (Celan 2001, 410), an exchange which can neither be concluded nor closed down even when flensed of even the smallest excess, the words framing the exchange ever sparer and more compressed.

The acts of witnessing and exchange are central to Celan’s work: and his poetic personae use language as a representation of witness and exchange. Poetry may be the literary medium that can maintain and survive, for longer than any other, an unwavering gaze at the most difficult of experiences; poetry is the genre through which language, coherently or incoherently—for incoherence may ultimately be the

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<sup>134</sup> tief im glühenden  
Leertext

...  
hör dich ein  
mit dem Mund

(Celan 2001, 360)

I am using translations by John Felstiner from *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (2001), Pierre Joris from *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry* (2014) and Rosmarie Waldrop from *Collected Prose* (1986).

<sup>135</sup> From “An [sic] Eye, Open” [“Ein Auge, Offen”] (Celan 2001, 117).

<sup>136</sup> Celan’s original name was Antschel, and the Romanian spelling of that name is Ancel. See Bekker (2008).

only reasonable response—can best bear witness. And poetic language is the mode through which the act of witnessing is communicated, for as Celan himself says: “a poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, heartland perhaps” (Celan 2001, 396).

Celan’s extraordinary relationship with and handling of words displays how a poet, in dealing with what *can* be said against the mightiness of what cannot, is able both to flex and shape poetic material until it shears off from its “Now-no-more back into its Ever-yet” (Celan 2001, 409), thus achieving a temporal and linguistic dislocation that draws attention to what the poems stop short of saying. Critic George Steiner comments, in reading Celan’s poetry, “[a]t certain levels, we are not meant to understand *at all*, and our interpretation, indeed our reading itself, is an intrusion” (Steiner 1972, 45).

In this chapter I discuss how Celan’s poetic approach enriches the structural and linguistic options available to a poet engaging with apophasis in poetic language. As I read it, Celan’s work throws up two main (and related) considerations for exploring poetic apophasis in a contemporary poetic practice. One consideration relates specifically to poetic technique: what Celan does to and with words, and how that influences an apophatic reading of Celan’s work.

The other consideration, again connected to language, is more concerned with understanding the implications of Celan’s radical and uncompromising philosophy concerning poetic language, chiefly his insistence that poetic language is non-metaphorical (Celan in Wolosky 1986). Quoting Celan’s declaration<sup>137</sup> that “that language is not an abstract concept of speech, but language become reality ... mindful of the boundaries established for it by language, of the possibilities laid open for it by language” (Celan in Wolosky 1986, 208), scholar Shira Wolosky argues that Celan’s attitude to language is linked to traditions of Judaic and (specifically) kabbalistic linguistic mysticism, in which “language is reified, granted an ontological status” (Wolosky 1986, 198).<sup>138</sup> This conjecture leads Wolosky to a logical, yet still

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<sup>137</sup> From Celan’s famous speech, “The Meridian”, given in 1961 on the occasion of being awarded the Georg Büchner Prize.

<sup>138</sup> Wolosky (1986) argues: “in Judaic tradition and mysticism ... it is language which is granted an elevated status” (1986, 197), adding that “such reification of language is persistent throughout Celan’s work, and indeed, is implicit in his whole linguistic model” (1986, 198).

somewhat startling conclusion that “Celan’s ... is a poetic which cannot be identified with an attempt to represent the ineffable” (Wolosky 1986, 208).

While I do not propose to enter into a discussion of Judaic mysticism, which is outside the scope of this thesis, it is however worthwhile considering, in the light of Wolosky’s claim, how much of a bearing this reification of language, as manifested in Celan’s work, might have on a project examining apophasis in the context of poetic ineffability. The work of every other poet discussed in this thesis, including that of Dickinson, has been read and analysed because of its ability to gesture towards what lies beyond language, whether that is God or the unknown. If we are to be mindful of Celan’s declared attitude to poetic language, and of Wolosky’s conclusion in relation to this attitude, we cannot approach and ‘read’ Celan’s work in the same way as the other poets studied here.

Accordingly, having outlined a brief historical context for Celan’s writings, I then attempt to set out a framework, drawing directly from Celan’s poetry and prose, for how to approach his work in the light of such non-metaphorical use of language, and how it might impact on a notion of poetic ineffability.

Having established a framework, I then look in more detail at the techniques employed by Celan in his poetry, in order to highlight these elements for their usefulness to developing a contemporary poetics of apophasis. I discuss Celan’s diction, his reworking of selected German vocabulary into neologism, and how this singular handling of language is preserved in its translation into English; I discuss his poetic speakers’ propensity for compound words (what Celan dubs “Wortaufschüttung” [wordaccretion]<sup>139</sup> (Celan 2014, 16 and 17), and the effect of this telescoping (Joris in Celan 2014) effect on the structure and tone of the poems.

In this chapter too I fold in a selection of my original poems that respond to Celan’s example, while in no way claiming to copy it. As I shall indicate, the content of Celan’s work is shaped (arguably) by his unique circumstances. The technique, tone and voice within his work however, are directed towards engaging with poetic content that hovers at the margins of what can be said. Celan’s work, in broaching the unspeakable, *and* bringing that unspeakability into his poems, shaves language to its sheerest extremes. I begin by offering a brief description of the historical context for Celan’s work.

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<sup>139</sup> For example, “Wortaufschüttung” (Celan 2014, 16) literally means “word” (wort) “deposit/landfill/embankment” (aufschüttung), though Joris translates it to “wordaccretion” (2014, 17).

**“[T]he place is not nameable”:<sup>140</sup> Historical Context to Celan’s Work**

The work (and life) of this “poet of the mouth and eye that fill with dirt” (McHugh, 1993, 116) shows how language—according to Celan, the one ‘real’ thing remaining in “the midst of the losses” (Celan 2001, 395)—truly happens “at the writer’s expense” (Jabès 1991a, 24).<sup>141</sup> For Celan, who killed himself at the age of 50, this relationship to language and its expressive power, which he is at pains to describe,<sup>142</sup> is occasioned to a large degree by the Holocaust; for the poet, the losses sustained during this event are both personal and collective.

Celan’s earliest poetry dates from the early 1940s, when the poet was in his early twenties. A Romanian-born Jew, domiciled in France for most of his adult life, Celan chose to write poetry in German, his mother tongue, his mother’s mother tongue and “his mother’s murderers’ tongue” (Felstiner in Celan 2001, xxi–xxii). Both of Celan’s parents perished in the Nazi death camps, and it is this tragedy, together with the wreckage of the emotional, cultural and geopolitical legacy of the Shoah that is generally, though not universally, agreed by critics of Celan’s work to underwrite most of his poetry and prose.<sup>143</sup>

Celan scholar and translator Pierre Joris notes how, by the 1960s—the last decade of Celan’s life—Celan’s poems “were pared down, the syntax grew tighter and more spiny, and his trademark neologisms and telescoping of words increased, while the overall composition of the work became much more serial in nature” (Joris in Celan 2014, xl). By this late stage in Celan’s career, there is little ‘flesh’ on the

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<sup>140</sup> From the poem beginning “I Hear, The Axe Has Flowered” [“Ich Höre, Die Axt Hat Geblücht”] (Celan 2001, 335).

<sup>141</sup> Franke’s work on the apophasis in the work of Paul Celan and Edmond Jabès (who were contemporaries and friends) is particularly instructive to my appraisal of Celan’s work: see the chapter on Celan in Franke 2007b, and also Franke (2014a; 2012; 2008a; 2005).

<sup>142</sup> See Celan’s prose works, translated by Waldrop (1986).

<sup>143</sup> See, for example, Klink (2000): “In the critical reception of Celan there has been some attempt to appropriate his poetry entirely to the Holocaust, as though the poems were not in themselves exemplary poems but exemplary of the kind of poem which could only be written in response to the Auschwitz. But Celan’s practice locates him in the company of other poets—so-called difficult poets, like Mallarmé and Hart Crane—who situate their poems close to a symbolic source of meaning, poets who carry their very existence into language should be understood as contending with ontological issues which include and exceed those raised by the Holocaust” (2000, 1–2). Also Joris in Valentine (2015) notes: “There is a strong refusal in Celan to let his writing become simply a repository for a narrative of the Shoah, in a profound contrast to most Holocaust writers, a major part of whose endeavor has been to dwell again and again on the past in order to chronicle with as much accuracy as it they could muster the events of their lives during those fateful years ... This decision not to dwell on those years and the horrors they gave birth to — no matter the shadow they throw on the rest of his life — informs the stance of his writing for the next quarter-century.” (2015, n.p.)

poems, only the bones show; there is effectively nothing to soften the bleakness and disturbing angularity of what must be spoken in order to allow what cannot be spoken to come through. The Celan poem thus becomes scaffold, skeleton, supporting structure for the ragged gaps and gasps of the unsayable.

By the 1960s Celan was also in the throes of a debilitating mental illness that would lead to his premature death: his later poems could be read as expressions of the crippling blight on his mind, while the poems written earlier in his career certainly draw from the horrors of the Jewish experiences in the Second World War.<sup>144</sup>

While I do not intend to discount or ignore the psychological and historical factors that affected Celan's writing, for the purposes of this thesis I want to focus on describing how, in his extraordinary use of language, Celan's work—even when read in translation—offers rich and instructive examples of poetic approaches, in terms of content and emotion, diction and structure, to apophasis.

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<sup>144</sup> Which, one might reasonably speculate, may have caused or worsened Celan's mental health problems. Perhaps author and critic Paul Auster, an admirer of Celan's work, is right when he observes: "these poems are more than literary artifacts. They are a means of survival" (Auster 1983, 105). Joris' introduction to his translation of Celan's later poems (2014) discusses Celan's biography; likewise Hugo Bekker's examination of Celan's early poems (2008) includes a preface describing Celan's life.

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“Being Close”

to earth is fallen, purple among other plums, fleshed apart by sugar-narco'd  
wasps persuasion of decay Being close is naked scrapings under swing,  
child's heels braking soil, hinging toes to flight, the metronome of seasons,  
mud and dust and dew, wormcast ziggurats, the chrysalis of moon Close is

summer grasses, stacked hay bales, burned-out fireworks, first frost punking  
lawns of starling armies, apples cidering the compost, autumn's pattern-  
backed spiders, reddened, berry-mouthed, ache in the gut, the taint of what  
must be untasted

Being close is early mornings, turning face to sun, persuasion, not to lose the  
yearning, only earth-being close and small and naked first then fallen, fleshed  
apart and tasted        reddened        berry-

aching, mud and dust and dew, autumn's russets stacked in ziggurats, the  
moon a metronome, soiled in sugar frosting, stars decay to starlings  
swing        rasped from its hinge        then    flinging  
          fallen                            broken

...        ...        we have fallen        closer burnt apart        decades ransomed  
broken-morninged        we the welt that's left        unhealed        assoil  
our ache        our yearning        worked into the earth        the soil that folds  
a taint                            back into

sugar    cider    worms that plumb our flesh                            mouths that eat us closer

§

**Language: the One ‘Real’ Thing “in the midst of the losses”<sup>145</sup>**

Celan’s work treats language “as figure rather than instrument” (Wolosky 1995, 4). The poet comes to his material—words—with an attitude that reflects the conflicted nature of that material, mediated as it is through the unspeakable. This is not an ineffability that owes itself to the unknowable so much as the rout of language caused by events that defy description. Language, however maimed and compromised though it is for Celan, can and must bear witness, because Celan’s poetics depend on this conviction that language is what survives, tempered by the indescribable:

You are still, are still, are still  
a dead woman’s child,  
vowed to the No of my longing,<sup>146</sup>  
(Celan 2001, 63)

In the above lines, from “In Front of a Candle” [“Vor Einer Kerze”] originally published in the 1955 collection *From Threshold to Threshold* (*Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*), the speaker identifies the child three times, (a poetic inversion of the Apostle Peter’s denial of Christ)<sup>147</sup> as if this repetition can imprint the truth, or wring the fact of the child out of the words. The act of witnessing—of seeing, hearing, experiencing—must be completed through representation, in this case, poetry.

Derrida, citing Celan’s work in “‘A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text’: Poetics and Politics of Witnessing”, suggests that “all responsible witnessing involves a poetic experience of language” (Derrida 2000, 180). The witness (the person observing, who we understand as the poetic speaker, the ‘I’ of the poem) is petitioning the reader to

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<sup>145</sup> “Reachable, near and not lost, there remained in the midst of the losses this one thing: language” from “Speech On The Occasion Of Receiving The Literature Prize Of The Free Hanseatic City Of Bremen” (Celan 2001, 395).

<sup>146</sup> Du bleibst, du bleibst, du bleibst  
einer Toten Kind,  
geweiht dem Nein meiner Sehnsucht  
(Celan 2001, 62)

<sup>147</sup> Peter’s thrice-repeated denial that he knows Christ, predicted at the Last Supper, is recounted in all four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) of the New Testament (*King James Bible* 1953).

believe something at which the reader was not present. In other words, the reader is witness of the witness.<sup>148</sup> Derrida clarifies that:

The addressee of the witnessing, the witness of the witness, does not see for himself what the first witness says he has seen; the addressee has not seen it and never will see it. This direct or immediate non-access of the addressee to the object of the witnessing is what marks the absence of this "witness of the witness" to the thing itself. This absence is therefore crucial. (Derrida 2000, 189)

Celan co-opts language as a witness. In a speech delivered in 1958,<sup>149</sup> Celan refers obliquely to the Holocaust in order to suggest that language survived “in spite of everything” but “it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through frightful muting” (Celan 2001, 395). The result was that language underwent its own apophatic experience: this nullification “gave back no words for what happened” (Celan 2001, 395). Despite this, says Celan, language did endure, for “it *passed through* this happening” (Celan 2001, 395; emphasis added). The resilience of language: surviving in order, on the one hand, to give agency back to the writer, and on the other, to exact a toll from that writer because of the terrible narratives that demand, somehow, to be written.

The conventions of poetry so often involve figures of speech such as metaphor and simile, but Celan—contemptuous of the “Metapherngestöber”, which John Felstiner, a respected translator of his work, translates as “metaphor squall” (Celan 2001, 277), and Joris as “metaphor-flurry” (Celan 2014, 89)—regards these figures as obfuscations of language which get in the way of “Truth itself” (Celan 2001, 277).

Responding to a 1958 questionnaire sent by a Parisian bookshop to a number of writers and philosophers about their work in progress, Celan remarks that: “poetry is by necessity a unique instance of language” (Celan 1986, 23). It is reasonable to conclude that the language to which Celan is referring is the same as that which “passed through this happening” (Celan 2001, 395) and survived, to become, for Celan, the instrument by which he attempts “to speak, to orient myself, to find out where I was and where I was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself” (Celan

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<sup>148</sup> This would seem to contradict the poetic speaker in Celan’s “Ash-Aureole” [“Aschenglorie”] who says “No one / bears witness for the / witness” (Celan 2001, 261) “Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen” (2001, 260).

<sup>149</sup> On the occasion of receiving the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen, 1958.

2001, 395–396). Thus, as scholar and translator of Celan’s prose Rosmarie Waldrop explains, for Celan a poem is not static upon a page, but *Atemwende*, a word coined by Celan to describe (and not metaphorically):

[T]his death-in-life when our breath is taken away, yet turns and re-turns ... [j]ust as, on a smaller scale, the constant *Atemwende* we know, the constant alternation of inhaling and exhaling, allows us to practise the encounter with both air and its absence, the condition of our life and the ‘other’ which will eventually end it. (Waldrop in Celan, 1986, ix)

As scholar James K. Lyon notes, “for Celan ... the primary concern of language is no longer to create a world of symbol or metaphor” (Lyon 1983, 46). The poet himself insisted that the “black milk of daybreak” (Celan 2001, 30) alluded to in his early and perhaps best-known poem “DeathFugue” [“Todesfuge”] “is *no longer* a figure of speech or oxymoron. It is *reality*” (Celan quoted in Kligerman 2007, 129; emphases in original).<sup>150</sup>

Various scholars have commented on the poet’s denial and rejection of metaphor (Kligerman 2007; Lyon 1983; McHugh 1993; Steiner 1972; Waldrop 1986), attributing this denial to the fact that Celan felt assigning metaphoric status to his poems would be to obscure or perhaps even soften or lyricise the horror of the events to which they allude. Waldrop, however, hints that this conjecture, reasonable though it may be, still does not really get to the heart of Celan’s relationship with poetic language. In the introduction to her translation of Celan’s collected prose—a modestly sized collection, prose being “too noisy a medium” (Waldrop in Celan 1986, viii) for a poet “whose poems moved ever closer to silence” (Waldrop in Celan 1986, viii)—Waldrop comments that the poet “refuses to talk ‘technique’” (Waldrop in Celan 1986, viii), adding that language and poetry “was not a game for him, not experiment, not even ‘work’” (Waldrop in Celan 1986, viii). In an introduction to a

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<sup>150</sup> Steiner (1972) observes that: “Celan himself often expressed a sense of violation in respect of the exegetic industry which began to gather around his poems” (1972, 45). Joris (2015) notes: “Celan had witnessed how his most famous poem “Deathfugue” was open to misuse as its lushly lyrical musicality made it an very pretty and easily hummable tune while its rich verbal metaphoricity allowed some badly intentioned critics to deny it’s [sic] obvious link to the historical horrors of the Holocaust by claiming these images to be just surreal productions of the poet’s mind. Celan realized that he needed a new language, one in which, as he put it, metaphors, images, tropes can be lead ad absurdum, while the language gets greyer, more object-related, or is he wrote poetry’s language now needs to be “more sober, more factual. It distrusts beauty. It tries to be truthful.... The language wants to relocate even its musicality is such your way that it has nothing in common with the ‘euphony’ which more or less blithely continued to sound alongside the greatest horrors”” (Joris in Valentine, 2015).

book of essays by Gadamer on the subject of Celan's work, scholar Gerald Bruns comments: "Celan is explicit that poetry is non-aesthetic, that is, it is not a work or process of art" (Bruns in Gadamer 1997a, 19).

In fact, through the 'saying away' from "all tropes and metaphors" (Celan 2001, 411) performed by Celan's speakers, Celan the poet radically renounces poetic language. As Wolosky elaborates, in Celan's poetry, "the concrete, the particular, the temporal—the immanent world of human activity—all these are insisted upon as the sphere of language and the mode of creative endeavour" (Wolosky 1986, 209).

In a later analysis discussing what she terms Celan's linguistic mysticism, Wolosky clarifies this point by noting how, in Celan's work, language works in relation to silence:

Language is the focal, pervasive image in [Celan's] work, which explores the borders of language as they verge upon the limits of expression. In Celan, however, the territories of language and silence shift from metaphysics as such to more specifically historical questions. (Wolosky 1995, 267)

Wolosky's reading of Celan's work is premised on the assumption that, for Celan, the ineffable does not lie beyond the temporal realm of history, nor the temporal and material world. Implicit in this claim is that there is nothing that language cannot say. Celan's work challenges the notion of the ineffable as a phenomenon beyond the reach—or not made—of words. Importantly for this thesis, Celan's work mounts this challenge not through prolixity, but through its opposite, resulting in compressed, skeletal yet electrifying poetry. Imagine the feeling of diving to a great depth, how a human body reacts to hydrostatic pressure. Then imagine the human is language, the ocean is silence. Celan's poems purport to show us (literally, according to the poet) how language can behave, the closer language veers to silence.

Yet even in this so-called literal showing, Celan's work cannot avoid offering a visual metaphor. If language *is* literal, it can enact its own disintegration and, as shown in the following lines from an untitled poem published in the 1967 collection *Breathturn*, this disintegration enacts a visual metaphor:

Your question—your answer.  
Your song, what does it know?

Deepinsnow.

Eepinnow.

E — i — o.<sup>151</sup>  
(Celan 2001, 251)

According to Wolosky, this disintegration is the radical, and necessarily literal, act that Celan's poetry proposes. Perhaps this disintegration can only be enacted, however, once Celan has retrieved language from the wreckage of "that which happened" (Celan in Felstiner 2001, 395) and reshaped it into his broken poetry. The speaker in one of his poems, again untitled and from *Breathturn* (1967) asserts:

No one  
Bears witness for the  
witness.  
(Celan 2014, 64)<sup>152</sup>

Except that, as suggested earlier, when we as readers experience afresh the ruination of language and of the 'I' situated in the poetic aftermath that Celan's speakers present, in some ways perhaps we *do* bear witness for the witness.

Over Celan's 30-year writing career, it is possible to trace a gradual movement, linguistically and stylistically, towards a starker poetics in his work. By subjecting language to an ever-increasing torsion, Celan builds a sense of pressure and friction in his poetry, accentuated not so much by what the poetic lines actually declare so much as what manages to escape through the warping of their phrasing. Commenting on Celan's radical linguistic technique, Lyon explains that: "Celan's work with unfamiliar words, or with familiar words estranged through new combinations, did indeed push back the boundaries of contemporary poetic language" (Lyon 1986, 62).

Yet, as we know, according to the poet himself, the manipulation of the German language in Celan's work is apparently no artistic or lyrical affectation, nor is

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<sup>151</sup> Deine Frage—deine Antwort.  
Dein Gesang, was weiss er?

Tiefinmschnee,  
Iefimnee  
I — i — e.  
(Celan 2001, 250)

<sup>152</sup> Niemand  
zeugt für den  
Zeugen.  
(Celan 2014, 64)

it wordplay executed to attract critical attention or praise. More radical in its implications for a poetics of apophasis, however, is Celan's attitude to his poetic material, an unfiltered use of language that the poet insists is non-metaphorical and entirely literal (recalling Wolosky's observation about the kabbalistic attitude to language). In another response to the 1958 questionnaire already referred to above, Celan is open about his views on poetic language which, "notwithstanding its inalienable complexity of expression, is concerned with precision. It does not transfigure or render 'poetical'; it names, it posits, it tries to measure the area of the given and the possible" (Celan 1986, 16).

By offering a sense of how poetic language *qua* language can engage with what lies beyond words—yet according to Celan, not beyond the world—Celan's example has important implications for how a poet may frame an apophatic approach in poetry. To understand specifically what this example might involve, the next section examines Celan's poetic technique and use of language in more detail.

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## “Wake”

no mayday *why* aborted flight capsizing sky  
 raw fumes an overbite of cliff collapse of granite sickly whinge  
 of tin *don't let me disappear* something limping  
 from the wreck plugs its snout into the screams  
 sniffs out a secret meat & feeds *no* something bristle-  
 backed & stiff with ticks coughs out of me  
 it takes my hand & then an ear I do not miss them  
 much a sudden rupturing of sleep the quilt a punished  
 lung my brain cats-cradling spasms cramps can't shut  
 my mouth can't feel a tongue yet know it's tasted poison  
*mirto* blue-black bitterness drink its bruise half-hoping  
 like cures like same root as myrrh same rasp of pepper  
 gunpowder same dreams of deserts knives  
 blood-berry mouthfuls Cabernet barefoot ladies broad  
 of beam tomato soup coloured hair & I wake up with mould on me  
 releasing spores into the air a vapour trail I've ripened through a night  
 of waking sleeping waking running  
 distance I don't ever want to speak bereft of everything but *No*  
 too big a word to fit this no one search I don't ask to be found  
 but *why* no rescue *bitch* how do I name this death  
 that shocks me back to life each time to wake up  
 parched throat furred with bees they say that thirst  
 like this can kill in just four days I drink & drink  
 to nothing sluices out of me I'm drought that cannot break  
 and now the freeze to pack-ice-dryness crazing makes me crystalline  
 my carcase chined the thaw takes longer daily I petrify become the slip  
 the hurtle and the smash that made this crash-test  
 bed our wake our wake up my undying

## §

## A Per(Version) of Language: the “German Outside of German”<sup>153</sup> in Celan’s Poems

Noting that Celan uses German (the language of his parents’ murderers) for all his poetry, Lyon remarks on Celan’s “unique word material” (Lyon 1983, 50), consisting of obscure archaisms, specialist terms, and elaborate compounds (Lyon 1983). These linguistic idiosyncrasies notwithstanding, it is still absolutely possible for a non-German speaker to appreciate in Celan’s work how poetry can be a vivid merging of words and space that performs a dance *and* a dialogue with the unlanguage.

Lyon claims that: “from a list of [Celan’s] vocabulary reduced to its component parts one could hardly recognize this poetry as belonging to the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Lyon 1983, 50). Strikingly, the effect of this “German outside of German” (Bruns in Gadamer 1997a, 17), as will be shown in the following example, is not compromised by its translation into English.

In the following lines,<sup>154</sup> published in Celan’s 1963 collection *The No-One’s Rose* (*Die Niemandrose*), Celan makes wordplay with the name of the almond tree (the scent of bitter-almond is associated with the hydrogen cyanide used in Zyklon B):

Almond tree, Talmundree.  
Almondream, Dralmondream.  
And the Allemandtree,  
Lemandtree.

(Celan 2001, 160)

There is a singsong, mesmeric quality to the rhythm of these lines, a sort of tumbling, iterative, waltzing motion set up by the repetition of the first four dactylic metrical feet; and then a pause (as if in a dance) for the “And the ...” before the rhythm picks up again with “Allemandtree”. Allemand is the French word for Germany, and so Felstiner’s rendition into English is much more of a clever trans-creation than translation, preserving the poetic voice and the riff of the rhyme structure from Celan’s original:

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<sup>153</sup> Bruns in Gadamer (1997a, 17).

<sup>154</sup> From the poem titled “A Rogues’ and Gonifs’ Ditty Sung at Paris Emprés Pontoise by Paul Celan From Czernowitz Near Sadagora” [“Eine Gauner und Ganovenweise Gesungen zu Paris Emprés Pontoise von Paul Celan aus Czernowitz Near Sadagora”] (Celan 2001,160).

Mandelbaum, Bandelmaum.  
Mandeltraum, Trandelmaum.  
Und auch der Machandelbaum  
Chandelbaum.

(Celan 2001, 159)

Sounding deceptively like a nursery rhyme, these lines use lilting language to gloss unspoken atrocities.<sup>155</sup> Their musicality recalls the camp orchestras created by the SS, and how these prisoner ensembles were ordered to play music as unspeakable horrors played out around them.<sup>156</sup>

Thus in Celan's poems, a German that belongs to the aggressor—the language that “passed through this happening” (Celan 2001, 395) and that was changed and deformed by that happening—emerges in its subsequent deformity (even when musically rendered) as the aggressor *against* itself. Jed Rasula notes Celan “*executed* the language from within ... [w]ith Celan, the German language itself becomes the means of its own disembodiment. In his hands, more and more of the language simply goes up in smoke” (Rasula 1983, 115; emphasis in original).

Rasula's striking suggestion that, at the hands of Celan, the German language is its own means of extermination, shows how Celan offers another approach to the apophatic in the form of a *literal* saying away, whereby language is witnessed in the act of undoing itself. Derrida notes that

in [Celan's] poetic German, there is a source language and a target language ... an extraordinary crossing ... of cultures, references, literary memories, always in the mode of extreme condensation, caesura, ellipsis and interruption. (Derrida 2005, 99–100)

As shown in the following lines, taken from an untitled poem again published in *The No-One's Rose* (1963), Celan's speaker identifies with language, makes it a “fellow-star” complicit in the experience of being threatened, persecuted, at risk of annihilation. Speaker and language are the only recourse—and the only resource—left to bear witness, and so the speaker, already implicated in the act of writing and witnessing, calls on language also to hold itself to account:

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<sup>155</sup> See also Steiner's (1972) comments in relation to the musicality of “Deathfugue” in the footnote on p. 171 of this thesis.

<sup>156</sup> See Fackler (n.d).

Who awakened? You and I.  
Language, language. Fellow-star. Earth-cousin.  
(Celan 2001, 187)<sup>157</sup>

This poem fulfils its purpose as “language become form of a single person” (Celan 2001, 409) that “wants to reach an Other, it needs this Other, it needs this Over-against” (Celan 2001, 409). Celan’s work is scattered with constant recastings of language about language: “the ensilenced Word” (Celan 2001, 79); “hoofsayings” (Celan 2014, 47); “blueblack syllables” (Celan 2014, 49) “wordspoor” (Celan 2014, 13); “speechfog” (Celan 2014, 305); “the written hollows itself” (Celan 2014, 67); “bone-Hebrew” (Celan 2014, 54). There are also constant references to mouths, tongues, teeth and jaws, and to the ways in which these apparatuses of speech may be exercised in performing an inexhaustible repertoire of saying: barking, asking, singing, hollering, harping.

As Celan himself says, a poem “becomes conversation—often despairing conversation” (Celan 2001, 410) in which “what is addressed takes shape only in the space of this conversation, gathers round the I addressing and naming it” (Celan 2001, 410).<sup>158</sup> This attitude is pragmatic, for if there is no ‘I’ in the poem, then how can the poem address a ‘you’? While the ‘I’ being present in the poem happens at enormous cost to Celan in terms of his mental health and his life, in terms of his poetry we see how Celan turns on the full force of language’s capacity to bear witness to and be mouthpiece for the real, even when that language must shatter in order to do so.

Accordingly, Wolosky notices “there are many, many Celan texts which refuse the power of language to render a coherent image of reality” (Wolosky 1995, 178), explaining that it is the coherence that is at stake, rather than reality. According to Wolosky, Celan’s work

is not a poetry of failed representation but of interrupted discourse. The words fracture, the syntax slants, the ellipses penetrate in recognition of the founding of language in exchange, interchange, address offered and received, and also in response to the foundering of language when such interchange becomes ruptured (Wolosky 1995, 178).

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<sup>157</sup> Wer erwachte? Du und ich  
Sprache, Sprache. Mit-Stern. Neben-Erde.

(Celan 2001, 186)

<sup>158</sup> The intensely dialogical nature of Celan’s poetics have been discussed in Davies (2002); Klink (2000); Stamelman (1987a); Wolosky (1995, 1986).

Wolosky's analysis offers a way into examining how the "foundering of language" is performed in Celan's work: how Celan's poetry deliberately maims language (here the German language) in order to break silence and push words "toward what hurts and haunts the word" (Franke 2007b, 13).

It would seem that one way of hurting the word may be to distort it: for Celan's work is known for its extraordinary re-shaping and torque of language.

§

§

**“If You Will Not Let Me Come I Shall of Course Arrive”**

and this time not politely

viral fire a tautening of rip

and sear a thing to flap and crackle at

the wind I know is waiting for me

something to defy diagonals of rain stale humours

draining ungazetted alleyways the late-night

stumblings of happenstance candying of lip

and lash a hitch of knee to hip

I will be the overlap and flash

of fish scales on the slate the spray of garnet from the gill

the grit beneath the clouded undead eye

slow despairing creep in countless tanks

before the squally steaming flush of claw

and carapace instead of learning how

to cross the river I will be the water'sway

vivid urgent biting riverbank

from indecisive feet the harbour

with its restless rim of neon chyme of churning

hull and wake guzzler of detritus and of light

I will match the backed-up traffic lurch

for lurch it dares me to outsnarl it scale

the horizontals and the verticals to drive

direct no longer masquerading as

a passenger and I will worm the marble

of the shopping malls the restaurants

of gloss and gold I'll swing

veneered in velvet and in crystal  
chanderliered with gilt a weapon-heavy

fragile brightness whisperer of dust  
and mould and I will not arrive politely  
this city is like carbon-paper history  
cross-hatched with loss it's written  
through to bone that's trying hard  
to heal itself beyond the ache of writing  
I'll not let you edit me

your little splinter me  
that will not quit its needling will not  
give up fierce being rid of me  
means working me to surface  
acknowledging I leave my meaning's  
mark so small and yet I'll break  
your skin excision's never simplified

I still bear the radicals a cutting I did not elect  
and yet I petalled for the blade that knew  
me perfectly how deep and wide to go before  
the twist I am palimpsest  
of mendings fit for use but tender at the selvage  
crooked stitching nearly stopped the demons  
crossing not before you got in first

§

### **“Animal-bloodsoming words”:<sup>159</sup> “Wortaufschüttung” in Celan’s Work**

Even before we attempt to analyse a Celan poem, our attention is drawn to its form and materiality, and the realisation that the poet’s language is already carrying a heavy freight; for Celan’s “German outside of German” (Bruns in Gadamer 1997a, 17) is a deeply considered (per)version of the language: structurally and visually, idiomatically and symbolically.

German nouns, adjectives and verbs are commonly constructed as compound words: for example, ‘der Fallschirmspringer’—an amalgamation of three words Fall (fall/drop), Schirm (cover/umbrella), Springer (jumper)—means ‘parachutist.’ Celan imitates and draws attention to this Germanic mode of construction by plundering the German vernacular to create new compound words. Joris notes that Celan’s poetic language, “though German on the surface, is a foreign language even for native speakers” (Joris in Celan 2014, lxx).<sup>160</sup> Celan’s poetic voices co-opt and manipulate the language of the oppressor, and reconfigure it in ways designed to shock or shame. As Celan himself remarked, in a letter to his wife Gisèle Lestrangé: “the language with which I construct my poems has nothing to do with the one that is spoken here or elsewhere” (Celan quoted in Kligerman 2007, 124).

The impression emerges that when every word uttered by Celan’s poetic voices seems to come at such enormous cost, the poet has found it perhaps more effective to bolt words together in a compound construction, such that the lead word seems to pull its associates after it in a kind of slipstream. While these compound words mimic the grammatical convention of the German language, Celan twists this convention into powerful neologisms and “Wortaufschüttung”.

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<sup>159</sup> “Latewoodday” [“Engholztag”] (Celan 2014, 33).

<sup>160</sup> Joris (2015) notes that “[Celan] creates a German language that is very distant from any spoken language. Nor is it the classical German literary language. Now, for contemporary American poetics the language of poetry as close as possible to the spoken, colloquial language of today – this is true at least since William Carlos Williams’ work of the 1920s onward. Celan likes to create his own vocabulary, something done easily in German where you can construct new words from existing words or parts of words and come up with very new composites using for example prefixes or postfixes that normally wouldn’t be found with the words in question. Also, German technical and scientific terms are composite forms of common German words—in English these words are often based on Greek roots; in Celan’s—often combinatorial—use of such terms those common word-roots shine through and create multiple levels of meaning that tend to disappear in English; for example in formations like “rauchdünn” (smoke-thin) one hears the common expression “hauchdünn” (paper-thin; literally, breath-thin). Celan’s abundant use of specialized vocabularies and their interweaving with frequent neologisms poses problems even for the naive reader—and a fortiori for the English language reader” (Joris in Valentine 2015).

Celan's practice of re-forming language is far from unprecedented in poetry: poets have always invented new words,<sup>161</sup> often by joining common words together in unexpected combinations, to make so-called 'portmanteau' arrangements. Few poets, however, have sustained the density and frequency of neologisms across their work in quite the way Celan does, seemingly with the purpose of making language turn on itself. As I have already indicated, Celan revises and subverts the Germanic convention; combines noun with verb, adverb or adjective; yokes abstract noun to concrete noun; and doubles up adjectives to make outlandish, often troubling, yet deeply compelling combinations:

LATEWOODDAY under  
 netnerved skylleaf. Through  
 bigcelled idlehours clammers, in rain  
 the blackblue, the  
 thoughtbeetle

Animal-bloodsoming words  
 crowd before its feelers.<sup>162</sup>  
 (Celan 2014, 33)

Celan's poetic compression in this untitled poem originally published in the 1967 collection *Breathturn (Atemwende)* and quoted here in full, is masterful. In the first one and a half lines we have a wood of deciduous trees; a canopy comprising leaves that are broad enough to filter the late afternoon light; patterns of veins clearly visible in each leaf; enough density of leaf so that, for one looking upwards, they pass for a sky. All this in just four 'words.' In the second stanza appears a classic Celanian reference to "Animal-bloodsoming words" (Celan 2014, 33), in which the speaker casts language as agent, co-protagonist, mobbing the thoughtbeetle.

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<sup>161</sup> See the work of Lewis Carroll (1998); Ogden Nash (1994); Gerard Manley Hopkins (1986); Ted Hughes (2003).

<sup>162</sup> ENGHOLZTAG unter  
 netznervigem Himmelblatt. Durch  
 großzellige Leerstunden klettert, im Regen,  
 der schwarzblaue, der  
 Gedankenkäfer.

Tierblütige Worte  
 Dränegen sich vor seine Fühler.  
 (Celan 2014, 32)

The poetic repercussions caused by Celan's word constructions are intriguing and contradictory. On the one hand, this practice apparently serves to increase the number of inventive phrases in the Celanian lexicon and thus the expansion of their wider meaning; yet on the other, by depriving component words of their customary autonomy, this practice performs a visual contraction of language that seems cumulatively to effect a dismantling and undermining of words and their independent significance. While I suspect this latter outcome to be more relevant to Celan's poetics, with regard to the reification of language, the bolting together of words highlights another contradiction. It may appear that these compound words deliver a more immediately accessible image—"latewoodday" and "skyleaf" are so direct and economical—and thus may seem less effortful for the poem's speaker to usher into being (the first part-word easing the way for the rest), yet the length and complexity of these compound words do nonetheless arrest the reader's eye. The difficulty of their pronunciation causes the tongue to stumble. Moreover, combining two or more monosyllabic or disyllabic words has a rhythmic impact on the ear, sometimes smooth, sometimes irregular.

Celan's use of compound words thus seems simultaneously to promote fluency and unevenness, accretion and dismemberment of language, resulting in a shorthand and intensely imagistic impact. When viewed through an apophatic lens, these compound wordphrases seem to achieve a constant 'presencing' of language: a drawing of attention to language's powerful malleability. Aggregating sequences of nouns and adjectives into new descriptors means that the poet can patch up any apparent shortfall in language ... with language. No seamless, invisible mending this, but a suturing of word to word that both shows the joins and threatens to rip them wide apart.

For a poet exploring apophasis, it is interesting to speculate about the effect of experimenting with a similar compound word technique for an original poem in English. This is not necessarily with the intention of using the English language as an aggressor against itself in order to make a faux-Celan 'English outside of English' poem, unless such an intention would best serve the poem's aims. Rather, I am thinking about how trying out unusual combinations of words might foster a sense of awkwardness, or unease; or of labouring for invented terminologies that can exist only as a performative overwriting of the unsayable.

Under these circumstances, an unusual neologism or compound word would immediately draw attention to itself, not necessarily because of its musical elegance (as in a Hopkins-esque “couple-colour” or “dapple-dawn-drawn”)<sup>163</sup> but because of its unwieldiness. Aggregates of ‘slant-words’<sup>164</sup> could serve as approximations or indications of things that cannot directly be said. Examples to try could include a clustering of words or sounds that evoke an onomatopoeic or homonymic association with something else; repeated vowel sounds that reverberate through a poem as echoes of themselves, like a bell tolling; or perhaps the sibilance and trip of consonantal wordplay. Approaches that can suggest the straining of language for expression, or a circling around whatever is trying to be said. When taken in the context of an apophatic poem, these near-misses may perform a more accurate expression or representation of the inexpressible, manifesting as language in the process of being repelled by, or itself repelling the force of ineffability.

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<sup>163</sup> See “For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow” from “Pied Beauty”; “... dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon” from “The Windhover” both by Gerard Manley-Hopkins (Manley-Hopkins in Gardner 1972, 787).

<sup>164</sup> My co-opting of the term ‘slant-rhyme’ in which poetic lines come close to rhyming but in fact are not exact or ‘perfect’ rhymes.



until the stars            released small seeds  
(swerved down/  
                                 in slants/  
                                 of flame ///)

*but we didn't run*

and now the sound of us        is building  
(it is) roar        like burning

*we still don't run*

down here (is where) the rust / ling grows  
we get hungry            restless            strong  
we kindle        our monstrosity

you'll know us            by the fuel we make

*(you've been warned to run)*

*but we will be too quick*

you'll read what's        being written off  
in ash            in dust            in white-hot snow

§

**Conclusion: “Nobody’s voice, again”<sup>165</sup>**

In Celan’s work we have an example of how apophasis—a rhetoric that deliberately makes use of denial—may yet be the best means of expression towards that which, even if it seems indescribable, must never be denied. Wolosky attests that in Celan’s writing, “apophasis ... asserts some radical, even originary break, but one that retains a kind of positive force” (Wolosky 1995, 253). In Celan’s poetry, apophasis is a vehicle for the unspeakable to find some means, however broken or deficient, of being ‘spoken.’ It is also a way of showing, through that deficiency and brokenness, the inadequacy of language to frame the magnitude of an atrocity such as the Holocaust, and, consequently, emphasising that magnitude:

What’s no more to be named, hot,  
hearable in the mouth.

Nobody’s voice, again.<sup>166</sup>

(Celan 2001, 117)

These anguished lines, from “An [sic] Eye, Open” [“Ein Auge, Offen”], published in Celan’s 1959 collection *Speech-Grille (Sprachgitter)*, vibrate not so much with a propositional negation as with a hortatory one. Nobody’s voice *should* ever again have to sound the name of this. Nobody’s mouth (or mind) should even have to shape a name for an atrocity like this. So, in contrast to an apophasis that strives to grapple with subjects beyond language and knowledge (as in the mystical tradition), this is apophasis that recognises an ineffability inherent in a reality that is only too human in its inhumanity: a hideous reality that threatens to defeat language and defy articulation, a monstrousness that must be rejected. As Auster notes, in Celan’s work: “the unspeakable yields a poetry that continually threatens to overwhelm the limits of what can be spoken” (Auster 1983, 102). And yet language, the broken survivor of

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<sup>165</sup> From “An [sic] Eye, Open” [“Ein Auge, Offen”] (Celan 2001, 117).

<sup>166</sup> Das nicht mehr zu Nennende, heiss,  
hörbar im Mund.

Neimandes Stimme, wieder.

(Celan 2001, 116)

this reality, is also the ultimate witness of that reality, as well as the means of rejecting the horror of what has happened.

As demonstrated by Celan, language's forms and possibilities are at first dictated and constrained—damaged even—by terrible realities, but then, at the hands of the poet, have to break beyond them to embody more possibilities and additional forms, including the ultimate apophatic 'statement' of silence. But this is a silence arrived at through the actualisation of language “set free under the sign of a radical individuation which, however, remains as aware of the limits drawn by language as of the possibilities it opens” (Celan 1986, 49).

Thus, in the sheering off and withdrawal of words, into what Celan called “the non- or not-poem” (Joris in Valentine 2015) ultimately both poem and poet may disappear from the page. It is almost as though Celan's poetry becomes progressively starved of breath, such that the poems are the tortured and effortful exhaling of diseased (or poisoned) lungs. As such, Celan's poetics seem to enact a movement towards what the poet himself suspects is the true *telos* of a poem: “showing a strong bent toward falling silent” (Celan 2001, 409).

But just as language “went through” (Celan 1986, 34) the Holocaust, yet could “resurface, 'enriched' by it all” (Celan 1986, 34), this disappearance of words and poet turns out to be an erasure without expiration. For in Celan's work, both poet and poem re-emerge, as if with a new intake of breath—*Atemwende*—causing oxygen to flow back into the compromised lungs. Celan's poems move through apophysis towards a transformational and infinitely eloquent presence “deep in the glowing / text-void” (Celan 2001, 361).

## §



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**“Salt & Sulphur”**

Die-back weighs the trees  
with carotene and tungsten,  
wing-beats overhead are heart-  
heard, grasses tinder night-death's  
burning edge as crows  
annunciate the birth of day

Earlier, your knife  
unseamed me, metal  
pressed to keratin, the clam  
I carried within unclean  
You broke its seal of darkened  
gold, unslipped me, caused

the coursing out of viscera,  
my tongue-stunned  
self was shucked, evicted,  
could not make the words  
to find another home,  
to push beyond parentheses

of shell But I am naked now  
and raw, I walk the shoreline  
breathing salt and sulphur,  
undertaker's glow  
upon my skin, all utterance  
is refuse, tidal matter

disengaging Water will  
not hold me in, there is  
is no lap of absolution,  
I am no longer  
welcome, lose me  
in the ampersands

of drift-wood, bury me  
in the broken lines  
Inadequate this bi-valve  
life, two halves  
once rhyming, one  
now fouled forever

hanging

§

## CHAPTER SIX: Inventory of Aftermath

Poetry is an image of the truth that language is not what shuts us off from reality, but what yields us the deepest access to it. So it is not a choice between being fascinated with words and being preoccupied with things. It is the very essence of words to point beyond themselves; so that to grasp them as precious in themselves is also to move more deeply into the world they refer to.

(Terry Eagleton 2007, 69)

### §

A sheet of silver foil being shaken: the sudden sound of rain. There is a storm coming through. Today I have been writing for nearly an hour and my words are making neither sense nor non-sense. I am a system of vein and skin, tidal, pulsing. I lift from the page and listen. *Is any part of my body silent?*

[which part doesn't blush with sound or whirl or thump or bubble doesn't  
speak out loud though mouth and tongue are muted language  
is a skin I cannot censor it I am un-inked and underworded  
but this dialogue is frantic a messaged air, my breath transacts  
between a membrane and a stem what part of me is not a  
fabrication even sweat is eloquent and that I kneel says all  
the argument of bone with ground I am the speech of star articulate  
the universe's archive mineral is me I spell the alphabet of atom  
code of all life held within my every cell sleep thrums with my awakening  
a thousand tiny deaths a second every tissue's ebb becomes  
another's birthing cry]

I don't want to answer questions, I want to disappear deep inside the asking of them, breathe different oxygen, suffocate perhaps, if necessary. All in search of the perfect word or perhaps the perfect space, the perfect absence—there is not a line I could

write that could be wide enough or deep enough to express this craving... *Do I crave the unsayable?*

[yes it is my church a space of lyric kyrie my need as obdurate as  
marble warm as waxflesh candle flames carve keyholes in the dark  
around me this my wound it festers when I most  
wish it would heal and when it heals I will not let it be this need  
is sutured into me is the taproot reaching deeperfurther  
it is me looking back at me it holds my gaze  
inclines its neck it does not smile till I do then it  
looks away looks back at me in stupor? doubt? or disbelief  
? there is a sort of grieving as if somehow I'm found wanting  
just a flicker then... it's gone]

I am here, alone, talking to the page. 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. *Is language my music?*

[my body is an avatar of sound honey from the clarinet interval of  
breath and reed soft pedal pianissimo the gap between  
the hammer and the key the pacing of a Pärt  
sonata all the bars that constitute a Cage the tango  
dancer's elevated *gancho* bees that raid the last figs  
of the season hum their hip-hop drunkenly the semibreve that  
slows the blood magpie requiem at midnight spangled gargle in  
the half-toned light swallows on a stave of wires  
comma'd dot dot dash]

The wind: sibilant, insistent, invisible. The gloss and shiver of leaves, making the wind visible. The chitter of the keyboard. A car starts up. The dog across the road, sensitive to weather, utters a staccato of barks. Sounds are like fumes in the afternoon air, they coil and vanish. *Is 'nothing' before, during, or after myself?*

[nothing places me in echo chamber under under underness in  
drowning darkness Olber's Paradox played out in soundlessness  
nigredo of the senses call me Caliban I am forever *de*  
*profundis* word-gorge cluster like bacteria voracious they grow fat  
and polysemic husband meaning greedily they wait until brimful  
well a little paratactic first and as their juice comes in less shy  
they fizz up through their skins then rot back into nothing]

Despite all this loudness, silence within my mind; the space between me and whatever comes from me. The world presses in, kinesphere of light, movement, sensation and sound. *And negative space, intake of breath?*

[it is written I have read it from your hairline to the fracture of your  
nose speech marks bruise the corners of your eyes I have  
remarked the sharpness bracketing your cheeks elliptical your lips  
how you have made yourself opaque you think you are unreadable but  
I am fluent in withheld words you a  
spatchcocked book]

Do these words come from the emptiness that was there in the big before, not after? The pen empties itself of ink so that I can empty myself of words. The pen is only full because I am. What if the pen dries up, what if there has never been any meaning? What if there are no words? What if there is no ink, only lymph, only residue of breath? *If this is unspeech, whose do I want to hear?*

[yours (just you, just you) right now outside the page  
looking down at this you reading silently within your head  
perhaps your lips essaying shapes of every word  
each space a rim over which to peer or cling to ask what  
could be there why did she leave a a a syllable's last  
quiver ful ? ]

*Who suffers from word-lack?*

[anyone who fears it    followers of followers    the mountains that were  
once too high    the inside of the void    those who most desire    their  
voices to be    heard    those who least expect to be ignored  
students of Pythagoras    decanted into clamour after  
lustrum    five years' abstinence from speech    a work of  
art that must be parsed    poems filleted for 'meaning']

I am lost for words and lost to words. Every poem is aftermath: the imprint of a moment, an impulse, an idea, now vanished, only words and spaces as its trace. *Will I tire of this?*

[always    never    what is the world without    the sound of breathing  
rain?    I see wind devouring shivered trees    my skin tunes    to the point  
where touch and sound are one    when my ears cannot hear    my  
body cannot stop    itself from listening    so I may only taste  
what silence really is    and that will happen    when I can no  
longer hear it    yet even then    there will not be    quiet    my corpse will be  
chaotic with the song of hatching    of eating teeth    I will  
become my own    reverberation time    destined to disintegrate  
before    the chords of me decay]<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Inspired by Cosottini (2015).

### **Toward the Unword: Writing Apophasis, the Reader, and Poetic Practice**

As I intimated in Chapter One, this thesis does not aim to provide unequivocal answers or proof of theory. Rather it aims, through its discussions, creative asides, original poems and appraisals of other poets' work, to present material and argument that can prompt further debate and research, and encourage a greater familiarity with apophasis and its effects on contemporary poetic practice, and through that, to develop a contemporary poetics of apophasis.

This greater familiarity with apophasis matters because, in a world where the sayable—information, knowledge, facts, and by implication, certainty—are apparently prized, apophasis has the capacity to draw attention to myriad examples of what is not known, not said, remains uncertain and yet is just as significant to human development, culture and experience. As my research has endeavoured to show, poetry, especially when using apophasis, is a literary genre uniquely fitted to give voice to these uncertainties, because poetry, as Eagleton points out in this chapter's epigraph, "is an image of the truth that language is not what shuts us off from reality, but what yields us the deepest access to it" (Eagleton 2007, 69). Through the work of Dickinson and Celan and others, this thesis has argued that, far from being abstractions, uncertainty and ineffability—as contexts for the articulable—are very much a necessary part of a lived reality and that, thanks to apophasis, access to this reality is paradoxically most immediate when least direct.

When I began exploring how apophasis might help me engage poetically with the notion of ineffability, I knew it would not be possible for a poem to *overcome* the limits of language. Yet this research process has demonstrated how an apophatic poetics can constantly defy and redefine those limits. I do not make claims for my writing as a revelation of trauma, or a breaking of taboo, or even an expression of dissent. I do not write as a self-consciously political act. I write because I seek to push at the limits of expression, impelled by Eagleton's comment that: "poetic language attains its pitch of perfection when it ceases to be language at all. At its peak, it transcends itself" (Eagleton 2007, 139–140).

The more I write, the more I expect to fall short, both in my capacity for and my expectations of language, because through practice, the boundaries of competency and knowledge are constantly being extended. But, as I hope the creative work in this

thesis shows, this inadequacy is not the limitation it appears to be. It need not signify lack or clumsiness, but instead an opportunity for the poet to push for alternative and more original ways of using words and space; to view any impasses in vocabulary as an invitation to shift perspective, and consider approaching the poem with a wider, more allusive sensibility in both form and diction. Or alternatively, to execute a narrowing in on metonymic detail, or play with the idea of synecdoche, when the whole is not articulable. These are but some examples of how poetry can make use of an apophatic turn.

Many times during the writing of this thesis I have been unable to find the right words; and sometimes—especially during the early stages—I was unable to find *any* words. However, this research has taught me that finding the right words is neither the point nor the substance of apophasis. Apophasis helps open up a conceptual space resonant with everything that has not been and perhaps cannot be said; and though its purpose might be ostensibly to define things in terms of what they are not, apophasis offers multiple possibilities and interpretations for what things *might be*. If I use apophasis to grapple with perceived limitations of *language* implied by the ineffable, the openness and conditionality implicit in apophasis suggests that I need not be necessarily forestalled by any shortage of options for poetic *expression*.

Each session of writing has acted as the proving ground for structural integrity, how my words and spaces might marry language with the ‘unspoken’, and for me to learn how an apophatic poetics “sees with language as well as with human eyes ... and it refuses to settle for readily available concepts about anything in the world” (Gibbons 2008, 42). Each poem draft has been the test-bed for ideas, language, and phrasing; and even if my poetry falls short (artistically, aesthetically, technically), engaging with ineffability has pushed my capacity to its (current) limits. As with the potential in well-exercised muscles, those limits, I hope, will keep expanding. If I have made breakthroughs in my understanding, it has been mostly by dint of trying to determine what things are *not* (and not yet) rather than what they are.

Yet if “Perception of an object costs / Precise the Object’s loss” (Dickinson, 1970, 486) as Dickinson writes in poem # 1071, then perhaps, if description were possible, it would serve only to drag the extraordinary into the ordinary, and cause what is numinous to vanish. Happily for the poet, however, the fact that description appears impossible is no impediment to the attempt. The poet or the philosopher will still grasp for words to articulate (or not quite articulate) what is beyond words and

extremity, to awaken language “to what it is unable to master” (Gardner 2006, 178). Poetry, as Brophy suggests in an interview with Paul Magee, can be “a diary of the otherwise inexpressible, of what can *only* be expressed in this way” (Brophy in Brophy and Magee 2010; emphasis added). For the person who is writing, the endeavour and its inevitable failure to breach the ineffable may lead to modes of construction and choices in diction that otherwise would not have emerged; and by offering literary and philosophical models for grappling with the ineffable, apophasis can help to expand the range of imaginative, technical and semantic considerations available to the poet.

If these efforts in using language to capture what lies beyond language evoke spontaneous intuitive and emotional associations in the reader, then the text effectively is unleashed; for these associations will proliferate beyond the page for each individual, potentially enhancing the poetic mystery as much as they deepen it, and thus enabling that reader to read—and read into and beyond—what is unwritten. This multilayered and complex engagement evoked in the reader, ostensibly by words and spaces arranged by another person is, indeed, “intelligent use of the white space” (Maxwell 2012, 11).

We share and connect not only through what we state, but also through what we impute through the recursions and feints and denials of our exchanges: and what is negated or left out can become a powerful expression of an (unstated) indicative. Apophasis plays on the relational nature of language, as an open, communicative exchange, or “a creative, on-going process of joint action between people” (Penman and Turnbull in Penman 2012, 55). Celan once famously stated: “I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem” (Celan 1986, 26). A handshake<sup>168</sup> is a silent gesture—“a joint action” (Penman and Turnbull in Penman 2012, 55)—between two people: the symbol of first contact, connection, re-connection, or parting. In that unspoken moment, whole relationships are forged, changed or destroyed.

The exchange crystallised by a handshake—the encounter between two in a specific circumstance—cannot be replicated; and to extend Celan’s analogy, a poem

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<sup>168</sup> This thesis was largely completed before the Covid-19 pandemic became established in the first half of 2020. The connotations of a physical handshake have, in the last few months, become complex. Yet equating a poem with a handshake, as Celan does, is arguably now even more apt. In the absence of physical contact, and with ‘social distancing’ practices widespread and ongoing, consideration of poetic language—indeed languages of all types (and how we use them)—is ever more crucial in transmitting our emotions, ideas and intentions.

will never be read in the same way twice, even when read by the same person. However, contrary to the momentary contact of a handshake, the poem's availability, its quiddity, endures on the page. Yet the poem's lastingness does not equate to fixity, especially when written with an apophatic register, which opens up rather than closes down the possibility of further interpretation. Apophasis might be said to employ the semantics of subtraction, but by creating an open-ended suggestiveness, apophasis adds and multiplies rather than subtracts. Poems are not static, and, as argued in this thesis, neither is the field for poetic action and interaction: the page. Poems, reaching out to their readers, are emblematic of encounters that are "at once a buoyancy and a steadying" (Heaney 1995).

### **This 'Beyond' of Language**

In this thesis, I have aimed to show, through reflecting on the work of other writers and through my own poetic practice that, irrespective of its provenance, apophasis is not fettered to antiquity or any specific academic or spiritual discourse, but adaptable to, and indeed inspiring for, contemporary applications across different artistic disciplines. I have attempted to offer an extended study of apophasis, as viewed through a selective history of its practice, and to show, through various modes of creative and critical writing, how apophasis is a useful mode through which to interrogate and draw closer to the addressing of experiences and emotions that resist language. Making poetic subject matter out of the restlessness and mutability of language, silence, extremity, and the unknown has given licence to explore a new way of approaching and understanding this material, presenting it as a braided thesis, into which I weave theory, practice and reflection, and offer original insights into an area of writing craft, namely poetry.

While most readers of this thesis may be scholars, it is axiomatic that we are all implicated in a wider conversation to which this thesis also belongs: a conversation about the significance of what is being said through *not* being said. A conversation that acknowledges the language we use and encounter in our daily lives is often—most usually—inarticulate, fragmentary and disjointed. Inarticulacy and disjunction might imply a troubling defect in language and communication, and yet, as this thesis has attempted to show, we need not view it as such, or at least, need not be discomfited by it.

In a world that regularly challenges our capacity to make sense or to understand, inarticulacy and hesitation may be the most productive modes of engagement, of ‘making sense’. The feeling of being tongue-tied may be the most meaningful and sincere response to interactions that cause joy or agony, or to relationships and situations that confound our desire for certainty. The encounters that tip over into the realm of the unsayable are the ones most likely to challenge many of us to invent new vocabularies, phrases, and euphemisms in order to articulate the effects of these experiences, even if we cannot adequately describe the experiences themselves. Yet these are situations that continue to provoke and invigorate artistic, philosophical and ontological responses among thinkers, scientists, artists and poets. Poetry that offers a language to engage with language’s disintegration at the extremities of knowing or feeling is a poetry vital to the world.

Thus, this thesis claims its place within another important debate about the value of poetic language and poetic thinking in the contemporary western world. This debate is inspired by writers such as Toni Morrison (1931–2019), who argued that “language can never ‘pin down’ slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable” (1993). It is also inspired by poets such as Tracy K. Smith who insist that “the language of poetry is a radically re-humanizing force ... helping to inoculate us against the catchy, inescapable, strategically biased language of the market, firing away at us from every direction in its ceaseless ploy to be the only language” (2018). And it is inspired by critics like Sebastian Smee, who warns that:

Today, being human means being distracted. It is our new default setting. We are almost all living in a state of constant distraction. In the meantime, our deepest feelings are being flushed out, forced to the surface, dissolved in the endless chatter of our heavily mediated environment, trampled underfoot in the rush to be heard, and seen. (Smee 2018, 55)

Without continued attention to the potency of ineffability and an exploration of the impact it has on various modes of communicating, do we not risk debasing our capacity to interact meaningfully with others across a variety of moral and cultural domains upon which humankind—and humanity—depends: politics, philosophy, ethics, the arts, sciences, and economics? Do we not risk turning away from literature, and from poetry, to the detriment of our ability to create, entertain, engage and reflect

through language? Do we risk rejecting the things we have to work harder at to understand, and consequently the opportunity to learn from them? Do we risk eroding our capacity to deliberate, debate, and defend our perspectives in a world where information and misinformation is, via social media, now so easily available? Now more than ever perhaps, it is important to contribute meaningfully to the discourses affecting our lives.

And this confidence implicates poetic language, because, as Mary Kinzie offers, “poetry is the preconditional state of language, not its late and shiftless offspring” (Kinzie 1993, ix). In other words, *pace* Plato,<sup>169</sup> poetry—“a kind of phenomenology of language” (Eagleton 2007, 21)—is a visceral and affective resource. Not only does it help our emotional and spiritual selves engage with the world, but it also helps us connect with and recognise those emotional and spiritual elements of our “inner lives” (Smee 2018, 3) in the first place: the metaphysical quick that makes us unique, that is “rich, complex and often obscure, even to ourselves, but essential to who we are” (Smee 2018, 4).

Indeed, apophasis is not only of value as a “quasi-epistemic paradigm for criticism, as well as for language-based disciplines and practices” (Franke, 2007b, 2) but also, as Franke argues “a newly emerging logic, or rather a/logic, of language in the humanities ... [which] can help us learn to read in hitherto unsuspectedly limber and sensitive ways” (Franke, 2007b, 2). So apophasis has the potential to deepen our engagement with and appreciation of every occasion where meaning reaches beyond words, and we attempt in vain to find language adequate to our purpose.

Some of the most resonant poetry ever created—among it work by poets discussed in this thesis—owes its genesis to the apophatic impulse and intention, precisely *because* poetry, more than any other literary genre, comes closest to (not) being able to say the unsayable.

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<sup>169</sup> In Book X of *The Republic* (375 BCE/2012), Plato dismisses poetry as one of the imitative arts, appealing only to ignorant people: “The poet is like a painter who, as we have already observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling ... In like manner the poet with his words and phrases may be said to lay on the colours of the several arts, himself understanding their nature only enough to imitate them; and other people, who are as ignorant as he is, and judge only from his words, imagine that if he speaks of cobbling, or of military tactics, or of anything else, in metre and harmony and rhythm, he speaks very well – such is the sweet influence which melody and rhythm by nature have” (2012, 363). Plato concludes “the imitative poet who aims at being popular is not by nature made, nor is his art intended, to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he will prefer the passionate and fitful temper, which is easily imitated” (2012, 369–370).

As this thesis has attempted to show, through creative and critical modes of writing, poetry comes closest, yet always *not close enough*. It is the unbridgeable gap between what can and cannot be said that lends an exquisite tension to the creative act of writing a poem, and provides an ache in the reading of it, evokes an unnameable, pleasurable longing for something that is hinted at but eludes definition.

This is our human condition. As Plotinus (205–270 CE) noted in the *Enneads V* (circa 250 CE) life means “we are in agony for a true expression; we are talking of the untellable; we name, only to indicate for our own use, as best we may” (Plotinus in Franke, 2007a, 53). Centuries later, it seems this agony still challenges us, and still makes way for a passionate engagement with language and the ineffable.

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**“Gecyndboc: A Book of Beginnings”**

*You think you are dreaming the book. You are its dream.*

(Jabès 1991c, 27)

*I am imperfection. My beauty comes from breakage, I am webbed with fractures, lines and spaces spanning voids. I am emerald and jade.*

*I choke on the root of need to speak. Did language watch me arrive?*

*Sounds wash through, erase me into spore of dreams, the ripening of daytime’s secret bruising. They untongue me, flow me back to origin, to beforetime.*

*Darkness is a vernix on the universe. Here in embryo of word no utterance is human.*

*I am made of invisible ink, must sear from the stricken match, observe the spreading scorch, recognise my slow disintegration.*

who I who I? small ask from the silence, word I don’t yet know, nor say, nor spell. is this my name? heard once, now gone, a scratch in cursive, rash incursion, rhymes the timpani of listening, hammer utter, ring of stirrup, anvil, shrill the innermost ear. I am fact of flesh, accedie of synapse, puttering ellipse.

am being languaged into being, I noun to verb, I sound to hearing, speech to speaking, smell to breathing, sense to sensing. yet I tensed. if language is the flower of mouth, I’m fallowed low, tongue knotted root, gob-earthed, deep double-dug. all water bitter, must turn self to wine, find true North, learn to name the name of me.

*Bright stones ride through air, bright stones ride as thrown, though they own air, the right ones hide, their throats wear tones of rough, they stun the throw, slide bones through hair, rope rites and brighten, toughen brides to whitened stone, owe no bite, no stare, none better, no.*

I am elemental, weather reinterprets my naked country, storms will not stop their raw bells. ice carves contoured sheets of blank denial, rain translates in 4/4 time, fault-lines morph from cloud to quicksand, glaciers draft my present into endnotes from the past. white hides veins, sierra-slippage, staunches valleyed wounds, the snowlines

are unreadable, make anagrams of time. cross-hatched, bone-weave, I am haunch of altiplano, parsed by fossil, glossed by print of ancient foil. distance powders the infinity, in me swims such static and desire, thoughts deep in a brain, they bubble up clash sunlight, brusque beneath me, sand smart, *must not fight this rip*.

who I? name, tell me who I? word, tell me who I? princess of the spring who pilfers seeds from pomegranate's womb and eats, becomes forever Queen of Shades, of seven seeds, sob stolen shallow, skia swerve me, right, left, hide. I Persephone? one who thinks all understanding underground, so she wait till dark and dive. her voice sings up the underworld. such spiral strangeness. can it be my voice?

*The deepest hid is sighted first, the sigh that thirsts, a might that seeps, is blighted, thirty ides are cursed and weep, the tide is mirth delighted, restless, neep, its hideousness is shed, the earth is wight, it nurses, keeping sight averted, sleeps, is needy, reaps a terse denial, its hurt is ceaseless.*

tiny bees, words fly out, sting me, one by one, track pollen pattern yellow as Malvolio. when lines extract mine own from unknown, do you and I prose-ache you, poem? sound to mouth to naked page, stroke pen in slow circumference, unlettered uttermost, a chase of ink full-bleed to margin. sense the shape our absence makes.

I've read that *eye goes blind when it wants to see why*. Seven bones to swivel, orb to scoop each orbit. I've read that *eye is a sieve*, mine cannot sift, no power to filter. unseeing, I. undermutter has me trapped, a willing prisoner, I, skim ribs of ships, break up on nameless shores. hair flicks to fish, to foaming skies. the seabirds

have no need of names, they know that sun both warms and kills, air is what to swim in, water where to feed. song is life forced from throat, must be sung till silenced. why should I seek my name?

*The scars of unknowing are on our cheeks, the scars we know we are, the dark of asking checks each knowing, speaks the easy, heels our vowing, known to hours of armies, reeks of ambergris, wings are scarce, its masks are cheap, the after passes over, weakness narrowing art is longing, aftermath is scar and knowing.*

night-dragon eats the moon, tears into Tranquillity then gulps from Sea of Rain. a quarter blind, poor moon fills up with blood. why? should I need my name? I remember learning: Rosemary (long green feather leaves), Scorched Carpet (moth), nudibranchs are sea slugs (smocked in paisley). octopus rolls marble of its eye, eight busy brains articulate.

what was my name? in desert, Judas Tree bloomed pink, was tree of bees, promiscuous bees, making free with mouths of flowers, I felt the honey wetten in me, this was never wilderness, it was bewilderness. did I begin with B? I search myself in ancestry of words, see planets circling days of week, find silver deep in argument, bristles in abhorrence.

*I've lost the way to my mouth, lost out to the sway of other, either month may roster me, the albatross of mothering, I've waived my loss to weigh the outmost, glottal pout to ether, cost the muscle, mayhem maybe, worse, the host to mouth I've lost, the hostage I am utmost, mother. Mother.*

am I unuttered word on page? white in poem unwritten? a fragment, paragraph-bereft? make sense? or absence? when does sentence end? with dash, or choke with question-noose-mark? cannot stop me asking, what if nothing's something more than silence? cannot halt this word-flirt-wounding. quiet has giant wings, its flight the soft

of cloud, depth the length of breath, the stealth of rainbow. sample curve of Earth, till no more flex in me, try to use the deep ear of my chest, but heart is deaf, doesn't hear God's seven laughs, the oars of Ra, the Hounds who flush the dead from heaven, just goes on pounding deaf, deaf, deaf. I am lisp of *vox ignota*, this is noon, the panic silence, syllables flash-flood the empty, serif into splinter, only words will break me

out of me. hands are full of nothingtime, my face a moon-full dial of lines and date, a mourning cloak attracted to the flame I stutter deathwards reach the rim of me, make language I will only understand when I have ceased to speak it. Break into words. Hear my clamour-tongue release its anthem, muscle makes me musical, my fingers

quill their manifesto, these are not the words I wanted, these are not the names I knew, but Reinvented. Changed from present to conditional I cannot be redacted. I am nameless, thus am known to all, am condiment and sustenance, the savour of the underknown, saturate this space with all that can be told, fill the blanks that follow

*when*, adopt the prosody of diphthong and of diaphragm, aggregate of throat and gerund, oxygen of preterite and lung. Every word, spring-loaded, breaks the safety, breaches plenty, births me. I emerge to caesura of speech, to melt of amphibrachs, I know that air is what I swim in, water's where to feed, that sun will warm me till it

kills, and life is song forced from the throat, the roar of it boils through me

*lifetime burning in every moment, life word time foment in burning, nomine sancti, reverie of yearning, ice and votive wry in fighting, libel very burble, I mime a kerning wild in torment, urn momentum, eyrie rife in verbal hurting, I'm in mourning, every numen turns to lies, I'm burning life in time, I'm mining every word, no moment more than meaning*

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This whole beautiful experience has been about reaching for things beyond my reach. That will always be beyond my reach; unthinkable that I should ever draw level with them, for if that happens it will mean I have nowhere further to go.

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

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