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## **Inbetween writing: philosophy and catachresis**

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When I was doing a degree in literature some years ago and researching women's writing, I came across Rachel Blau DuPlessis's article 'For the Etruscans' ([DuPlessis 1987](#)), and with it a whole new way of thinking about text. It was published, innocently enough, in a conventional (*pace*, editor Rick Rylance) book of LitCrit, but from its opening paragraphs was clearly doing something else, and going somewhere else, away from the norm. I looked for the conventions of academic English and found instead: Sentence fragments. Loose ideas. FORMATTING designed to \_\_\_\_\_claim *attention*. Exclamation marks! All this in an article on women's writings that obviously belonged to the 'criticism' genre, that was itself highly literary in a postmodern sense, and at the same time was intruded upon (contaminated?) by disjunctures, shards of autobiography, blind alleys, and worst of all, personal comments.

Now this was not, of course, the first time I'd come across critical writing that didn't fit obviously into its genre, or that incorporated something so personal, something so poetic, within an academic framework. But I'd not previously found anything that so promiscuously juxtaposed such unsympathetic genres, and that nonetheless maintained a clear narrative and argumentative thread. I'd not previously found something that offered me the prospect of writing theory or criticism in another way, a way that reflected *my* voice rather than fitting an academic template.

So what was different about this writing? When I recite its specificities it sounds rather ordinary: it consciously incorporated a narrative (rather than a detached, a scholarly) voice; it consciously relied on interior monologue; it was circumlocutory, antiphonal, polyvocal, packed with tangents and interruptions and explanations; it was dependant on the visual support of layout and format. Still, it retained an intellectual rigour, gave me quotes that said the sorts of things I needed for my next third-year literature assignment, and spoke from a world I inhabited, the world of a mother attempting to work and to work things out, while being constantly harassed by her family responsibilities. In the middle of a discourse on Woolf and Nin, for instance, DuPlessis is suddenly interrupted by the things that were then interrupting me: '*Crash. MOM! WHAT! "You never buy what I like! Only what YOU like!"*' (DuPlessis 1987: 259). In short, DuPlessis' world as reflected in her writing was my world too, in a way that wasn't true for other pieces I read by writers like J. Derrida, or J. Kristeva, or C. Belsey, or T.S. Eliot.

Subsequently, of course, I learned that this article wasn't all that unique, but part of a recognised body of genres. Rae Luckie calls them the 'outsider'

genres and lists among their forms *autocritography*, *fictocriticism*, *fiction theorique*, *theory-fiction*, *critifiction*, *paracriticism*, *research fiction* ([Luckie 2001](#)). What enchanted me at the time, though, was not the finding of an appropriate name for the form, but the form itself, its combination of passion and rigour, and the destabilising effect of a kind of catachresis in the work. This was a writing that beckoned me, a writing that drew me in, a writing that urged me to give myself over to it. And though I wasn't necessarily fully in sympathy with its politics, DuPlessis' article gave me pause, and caused me to reconsider my relation with words. This, I think, was critical for me as a writer who is also an academic, because in that identity it is so easy to become trapped in a particular straitjacket - *now I am a thinker and now I must write in an objective and lucid yet not 'writerly' way; now I am a writer and must think in story and language, must be rigorous yet not too philosophical*.

What I wanted to work out was whether it is possible to achieve satisfaction as a writer when writing for an academic audience. What I wanted to work out was whether it is possible to produce work that is always and peculiarly *mine*, work that could pick up the creative aspect of my writing identity, rather than remaining imprisoned by the conventions of the academy. Because the creative and critical are most definitely divided modes and, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us:

... the split between poetry and philosophy [the split that emerges out of Platonic thought] testifies to the impossibility, for Western culture, of fully possessing the object of knowledge (for the problem of knowledge is a problem of possession, and every problem of possession is a problem of enjoyment, that is, of language). ([Agamben c1993: xvii](#))

If as academics we reject or forget the pleasures of language in the interests of 'being serious', we must lose something. That something, Agamben argues in the same place, is effective representation, because philosophy is 'a word that has all seriousness and consciousness for itself but does not enjoy its object because it does not know how to represent it'. If we continue to separate poetry and philosophy, then we lose the potential offered by each: Agamben again writes, 'every authentic poetic project is directed toward knowledge, just as every authentic act of philosophy is always directed toward joy'.

Knowledge and joy. Such a bold claim for an academic to have made of either mode of writing. But in fact most of us probably agree that these modes are much closer than library shelves or academic syllabi would have us believe. This opens up the possibility of a writing that is different, a writing that might satisfy by allowing us to play with language while we wrestle with ideas; writing, in short, that offers the liminal potential that I glimpsed in DuPlessis' work. It is an approach, or technique, that I consider is worth pursuing because though I still rarely come across it (except from a few eccentric people writing strange paragraphs in otherwise semi-orthodox work - people like Maurice Blanchot or Jeffner Allen or Walter Benjamin) I am always captured by it. That may be because I'm a sucker for packaging; but I suspect it's because this form of writing combines two powerful logics, two powerful truths: the logic and truth of philosophy, grounded on a carefully constructed argument and measured evidence; and the logic and truth of poetry, grounded on recognition of a shared internal world, and the concrete possibilities of language. In any case, it works (I think) because it uses two strategies particularly well: it ruptures generic boundaries and so commands attention; and it skilfully deploys catachresis to capture and convince its readers.

This is not an article about genre as such: that is another argument altogether which I don't address here, except to note that the dynamism and mutual permeability of genres is increasingly recognised and acknowledged by academic and literary writers, though not as often by publishers in their practice. (The editors of critical-theoretical journals, in my own and my friends' experiences, grow agitated if they receive something that isn't unambiguously criticism or analysis, and inclined to respond with comments like, *Why don't you try Meanjin? That's the sort of thing Meanjin prints*; and of course *Meanjin* or the other 'border' journals will very often avoid such 'odd' or 'outsider' pieces too, wanting less theory, more story, in fact more anything but what is being offered.) This isn't surprising; genres are how we organise thought and narrative, and how we promote and sell journals, so any editor is likely to go only so far in allowing confusion or disjunction to disturb their publication.

Besides, the careful division of writing into genres, and particularly into the meta-genres of literature, criticism and reportage (inter alia) comes out of a long history in the west of splitting writing between 'inspired' (creative) and 'rational' (critical) forms. Despite the obvious association with the taxonomical principles applied by the natural sciences, this is not just a nominological or typological exercise, but in fact produces a 'landscape' of linguistic value. Genres can therefore act as 'agents of ideological closure' (O'Sullivan et al. 1994: 128), requiring work to be read in a particular frame of mind, and to produce particular meanings - and, of course, to be published in particular settings. If as academic writers we allow the inspired form to intermingle with the rational, we are effectively countenancing a kind of writerly immorality, the promiscuous mixing of genres.

The work I'm interested in discussing here, the work that started me off on this train of thought, is precisely that - promiscuous writing - because of its catachrestic nature. Catachresis is defined as 'the incorrect use of words', but I prefer to use it in the traditional rhetorical sense of transference. That is, I define catachresis not as 'the incorrect use of words', but the 'incorrect' use of words, the extravagant application of words to craft implied metaphors that, by virtue of their unconventional nature, convey images and ideas with great effect. In Max Black's terms, we use metaphor-as-catachresis because it allows 'the use of a word in some new sense in order to remedy a gap in the vocabulary ... [it] is the putting of new senses into old words' (Black 1962: 33).

DuPlessis' work is characterised by this 'incorrect' use of words and sets of words to put new sense into old words (or, in this case, into an old genre). In its unexpectedly figurative style, in its reliance on the kind of tropal logic that isn't privileged in academic writing, it flaunts itself as *language*, rather than as transparent, objective communication. In its mishmash of movement and word, it gives the lie to the fantasy that we write first as trained minds and not as human beings juggling what are often messy, overlapping and confused lives. But what her writing most particularly flaunts is metaphor. This, the stuff of poetry that first lures us in and then directs us somewhere else, is not a privileged style in academic writing.

Why don't academics like to (be seen to) use explicitly metaphorical language? Because metaphors are not clear statements of ideas or empirical evidence; nor do they focus on the construction of a coherent argument. Rather, they are transformative. We use metaphor - and its subform, catachresis - not for transparent communication, but to direct attention away from the 'vehicle' toward a topic, and thereby redirect, or transform, our readers' understanding of that topic. Unlike conventional academic writing

which is meant to keep attention on reason and logic, the sort of writing I'm concerned with here is closer to the principle of liminality. It carves out a transitional space between language as meaning and language as a 'thing in itself'. And it offers the possibility of transformation by the use of metaphoric and/or catachrestic language.

It could be argued, of course, that there is no difference between metaphoric and strictly communicative language - that all language is metaphor, that metaphor simply *is* language. This is certainly the position Nietzsche takes up:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and; anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions - they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. ([Nietzsche 1873](#))

Following this line, we can argue that there is no 'linguistic outside'; we only have access to the material world through language, and hence can never speak actuality, can never speak literally. We can only *refer* and *infer*, so our 'reality' is necessarily framed within systems of analogy and association. Decades of work on theories of communication and semiosis have demonstrated this; and the ancients had come up with the very same notion:

The definition of language as a sign is not, as is well known, a discovery of modern semiology. Before its formulation by the thinkers of the Stoa, it was already implicit in the Aristotelian definition of the human voice as *semantikos psophos*, 'significant sound'. (Agamben c1993: 125)

That is to say, language is metaphoric - or, specifically, figurative rather than literal - at base.

This may sound like cheating: I can't, surely, say that metaphors are catachrestic and then, without missing a beat, insist that metaphors are at the base of all linguistic utterances? But in fact both statements are valid if we accept the idea that metaphors have a life cycle:

Creative and alive in the first phase, a word belonging to one conceptual domain is extended to another domain ... in the subsequent phase the metaphor is sufficiently familiar for the interpretive path to become established and less complex; in the third phase the metaphor is described as being already 'tired', indicating that a direct link is formed between the two domains; in the fourth and final phase the metaphor is extinct and one can no longer trace the metaphorical origin of the expression. ([Fiumara 1995: 16](#))

So in their first phase, metaphors are indeed catachrestic: thoroughly and obviously figurative, fundamentally decorative, belonging to another domain. Subsequently, through social use, they move in a metamorphic manner to become something that is gradually incorporated into literal language, until it is dead as metaphor - they retreat to transparency. 'Jumbo jet', for instance, was purely metaphorical when first used to refer to awfully big aeroplanes. We can trace a process of taking the vehicle (elephant = an awfully big creature) to direct our attention to the topic (jumbo = the size of the plane),

and thereby transforming our sense of the topic-object: it's big; it's a bit scary; it can be comfortable as are childhood memories of Babar; and it can fly, like Dumbo. Over time it has moved from being a catachresis ('How can a large flying machine be like a huge mammal?') through the stage of evoking an 'of course!' from audiences, till finally it's just the name of a kind of aeroplane. There is life cycle, then, in which the metaphor moves from being an instrument of enchantment to an instrument of clarity and then finally - at their death - a moment of literality. And this must be the case for all linguistic communication. We never, in language, call up the thing itself, only a referent for it, and in the course of linguistic life the referent comes to stand in, 'literally', for the thing. So we can argue that all instances of language use are metaphoric, though some are overtly and even flamboyantly so, while others (depending on the point in the life cycle at which they appear, and the context in which they are used) obscure their metaphoric nature under a figurative death.

Given this, I'd like to look briefly at how metaphors tend to be regarded in western thought. Whatever we may know and acknowledge about the relationship between linguistic meaning and metaphor, we still (writers, communicators, and theorists of writing or communication) make a discrete category of metaphor in its first phase of life, when it is bright and sparkling and designed to transform thought and image rather than communicate transparently. In doing so, we quarantine it off from more serious and more referential forms of writing - that is, from metaphor in its dead state. We can identify this quarantining process in that metaphor *as such* is more likely to be part of a creative writing than a communication course. We see it again in the tendency to associate metaphor with figurative writing (poetry, novels: *made up things*) rather than philosophical writing. And of course figurative writing is still treated as an inferior form of communication in much philosophy or cultural studies publishing, an attitude that descends directly from people like Thomas Hobbes or John Locke, who associated it with 'false argument'. Hobbes, for instance, associated metaphor with 'senseless and ambiguous words' and wrote that therefore reasoning with metaphors is like 'wandering amongst innumerable absurdities' ([Hobbes 1651](#)). Locke, with a similar disdain, insisted that:

... all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats. ([Locke 1690](#))

To ensure 'good use' of language, they insist that writing should be clear and unadorned, univocal, to the point, and not given to drawing associations and relations that aren't unambiguously proven by the body of the narrative. The writing they distrust is the writing your mother warned you against: words that can't be trusted, that lead you up blind allies; writing that is 'elusive', 'a drifting meaning' ([de Certeau 1986: 202-3](#)); and worst of all, writing that informs our experience of reality by capturing our imagination, though it neither does, nor can, present reality to us. Such writing is, in the neoclassical view, and the view of those who still insist we can and should communicate clearly, writing that cheats.

Of course the neoclassicists and their descendants are themselves cheating a little, since they use metaphor extensively in their writings (it was Hobbes, for instance, who thought up the idea of *the sword of Leviathan*). And indeed they must cheat: writers do it all the time, whether writing fiction or theory, because - Nietzsche insists - 'The drive towards the formation of metaphors is

the fundamental human drive, which one cannot for a single instance dispense with in thought, for one would thereby dispense with man himself' (Nietzsche 1873). Whether we see ourselves first as poets or as philosophers, and however much we may value the rational, we constantly use the inspired mode in our work. We talk about communicating, for instance, in highly metaphorical terms, as 'making someone see'. Our elaboration of the whole world of intellectual history depends on a visual metaphor, with the word 'theory' itself coming from the Greek word *teorin* (to see). All the same, we place metaphor in general and symbolic (creative) writing at that end of the (academic) writing continuum which has low modal value - or little apparent transparency to 'reality'. In philosophical or academic terms, creative writing has the lowest modality, and hence the lowest truth claim, because it has the least apparent transparency. This means that those of us who are also academics, and yearn to write in that liminal space between philosophy and poetry, always risk the 'contamination' of the creative - and its low modality - when read by academics, and risk the 'contamination' of the critical - and its insistent reason - when read by creative writers.

Those of us who are creative as well as academic writers, and who choose to engage with style as well as logical argument, may well feel aggrieved by this sort of judgment. Certainly it's worth taking the neoclassical criticisms about over-adornment seriously, to ensure we use metaphor advisedly; but we can justify our use of it in academic writing's own terms. Aristotle wrote, 'It is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh' ([Aristotle 1924: 91](#)), and whether we are writing in creative or theoretical mode, freshness (originality) is valued. So we can, and must, use metaphor; and we may lay claim to its critical as well as its figurative value.

It is important, though, to use figures with care, not just because overadornment is irritating and may well confuse our argument or image - we are, after all, the descendants of that great minimalist, Ernest Hemingway - but also because figurative writing carries with it a great power. Techniques like catachresis easily capture our readers, because though such language may be less accessible of interpretation than either conventional academia or conventional fiction, it surprises and attracts readers. These forms may thus be doubly powerful because doubly communicative, offering a back as well as a front door to the prisonhouse of language. Because it doesn't obey the conventions of either academic or creative writing, it isn't subject to the interpretive rules of either field: but nor is it easily dismissed, because its imagist power means such writing can convince. Gemma Fiumara writes:

Metaphors can ... be arresting inasmuch as they compel as well as invite us to enter their figurative ground in order to grasp them. In fact the copular 'is' which could be described as creating connection may as easily involve an 'abuse' which entraps the interlocutor. Metaphor both opens and forecloses. Its radically perspectival nature - its capacity to create perspective through incongruity - can also turn into a restrictive perspectivism. (Fiumara 1995: 134)

That is, we should by all means use 'promiscuous' (liminal) writing to break the straitjacket of academic objective logic and to push language in its creative as well as its logical mode; to capture our audiences more intensely; to be more overt about the interface between our academic and our emotional identities. But we need, then, to be very sure that our narrative logic and our argumentative logic are sound. Although writing that consciously seduces, or that aims to inform without sticking to the generic rules may at first blush appear untrustworthy, it is still making a series of truth claims, and still has a

number of ethical and epistemological obligations. At the same time, it offers the sorts of pleasures that are independently provided by both main genres of fiction and critique: the pleasure of poetry, the pleasure of logic and knowledge, and the pleasure of language *as* pure language, as play. In Bakhtin's terms, 'It is as if words had been released from the shackles of sense, to enjoy a play period of complete freedom and establish unusual relations among themselves' ([Bakhtin c1984: 423](#)). If we remain aware of the potential abuse of metaphors, especially in the first phase of their life cycle, in their consciously decorative figurative way, then we should be able to exploit all its possibilities, to write more consciously, less lazily, less reliant on metaphor alone or transparency alone to make a point, and more alert to the need to find not just the right word but the right accent for each piece we produce.

How might this work in practice? I noted above that a metaphor is the extension of a word or phrase from one conceptual or discursive domain to another. What this points out is that a given word may be used in virtually any sentence, virtually any text. But its meaning and social value will change radically, depending on the context of that use. 'Inspiration' conveys one thing for scientists, another for philosophers, another again for artists, because each group occupies a different discursive domain, with different hierarchies of value. The critical thinker Volosinov used the same concept in discussing the power of language to produce and reinforce ideas about reality and truth:

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e. with the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus various classes will use the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes the arena of class struggle. ([Volosinov 1973: 10, 23](#))

His point is that the whole community, regardless of class or other social markings, uses the same language. But while the words may be identical, their articulation varies depending on who is using the word; and that articulation - or accent - signals who is speaking, and whether anyone (important) is likely to listen to them. We can extend back into our own domain this concept of varying accents in the same sign, and its corollary of varying modes or values of its expression: just as there are accents that, particularly in Volosinov's mid-twentieth century world, shaped people and their utterances as being of a particular type and having particular value, so too each genre may have or demand its own accent. Think of the accentual difference demanded by a poem versus a philosophical piece, and what happens if the poem or philosophical piece is printed in the wrong place, or if it has the wrong mix of accents. DuPlessis' article does precisely this, because the sudden intrusion into a critical text of family discourse, poetry, reflection and introspection ruptures the argument, and undermines the power of the academic domain to secure meaning: out-of-place, or disobedient writing, disrupts the ability of discursive domains to restrict the flow of language, to 'stabilize, freeze, suture language to a univocal meaning' ([Hall 1993: 15](#)). DuPlessis wrote:

What holds civilization intact? The presence of apparently voiceless Others, 'thoughtless' Others, powerless Others against which the Law, the Main, the Center, even the Diffusions of power are defined.

Throughout the ages the problem of woman has puzzled people of every kind ... You too will have pondered this question insofar as you are men. From

the women among you that is not to be expected, for you yourselves are the riddle. [Freud]

A special aptitude for cryptography. The only ones barred from the riddle. Ha ha. His gallantry is hardest to bear. Not to think about the riddle is to remain the riddle. To break with what I have been told I am, and I am able to? am unable disabled disbarred un sous-développé, comme tu dis, un sous-capable ... What happens at the historical moment when the voiceless and powerless seek to unravel their riddle? ... ANS.: We are cutting into the deep heart, the deepest heart of cultural compacts. They have already lost our allegiance. Something is finished.

Now did I go downstairs, now did I cut up a pear, eight strawberries, now did I add some cottage cheese thinking to get some more or even some ricotta at the Italian market so that I could make lasagna so that when B comes back from New York he would have something nice and so I wouldn't have to cook again for days ... now did I and do I wonder that there are words that repeat in a swaying repetitive motion. Deliberately breaking the flow of thought, when it comes to change, and with food, with dust. With food and dust. (DuPlessis 1987: 276)

The writing itself is Bakhtinian in that the words are 'released from the shackles of sense'; it's metaphor; it's poetry of a kind; it's feminism; and it's philosophy of a kind. But at any event, it is capable of capturing my attention, and if it doesn't necessarily change my mind, at least it transforms for me the possibilities of thinking, and of writing. Because above all, metaphors are transformative. They allow us to find connections, associations and transitions among the various aspects under which we live by focusing our attention, directing it toward a topic, and transforming our interpretation of that topic by the force of the metaphoric vehicle used.

Kundera says, 'The novel's [text's] *raison d'être* is to keep "the world of life" under a permanent light and to protect us from "the forgetting of being"' ([Kundera 1988: 17](#)). If we're going to make works that have that effect - of problematising the world, of protecting us from the 'forgetting of being', and of bringing into attention that which has been hidden in silences - then it's worth paying careful attention to what language actually is, and to how we understand the world, truth and the making of meanings. The production of works that insist on their materiality and refuse transparency, and the production of works that can seduce by the enchantment or promiscuity of their shape and context can lead readers to pause, at least, and to be worked upon in ways that more 'realistic' and more obedient texts may never achieve.

We cannot read such work in a straightforward manner because it keeps calling attention to itself; we are required to ask, continually, 'What's going on here?' And so the sort of writing that started me off on this train of thought in fact offers an alternative approach to writing, for readers and writers. Because it is multiaccentual, polyvocal and circumlocutory, and because it refuses obedience to discursive domains, it offers a chance of unsuturing language from just one preferred or privileged meaning or use. In this way it allows us as writers to straddle the borders of the genres and, hopefully, to do what we do best - use language to craft a world of imag/e/ination and/or argument that is fresh, convincing and delightful to readers. And at the same time, and again hopefully, because of its promiscuous appearance it will be less likely to claim the high ground of authenticity, and so will fail to impose its will on readers. All it will do (hopefully) is point to some issues which are worthy of attention, but which cannot be subject to just one way of seeing. In short, when we



undertake 'promiscuous' writing, when we write across genres and domains, and when we deliberately use catachresis not as a point of rhetoric or adornment but as a way of articulating the unarticulated and the inarticulable, we may be able to unstitch language from discursive domains, and hence make visible (or audible) the silences in our cultures and in our knowledges.

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