Alabaster: the Grain of the Voice and Semblance

Dr Dominique Hecq

Swinburne University of Technology

Abstract

Lacan's writings show how an unconscious and decentred discourse parallels conscious narration and imbues it with the voice of the Other. A decentred and tropical discourse enables Barthes to write autobiography in the guise of fiction. Barthes’ work foregrounds the discourse of the Other while also deconstructing the text.

'Alabaster' embeds poetry in a Lacanian matrix at a point in time when I lost my mother tongue. The oedipal connotations of the words 'embed' and 'matrix' are obvious, as is the fact that Lacan's formulation of the Law refers to the constituting agency of the Father. What happens, then when the speaker's filiation shifts to another language and when the form she chooses is poetry rather than the straightforward prose that has the imprimatur of the Law?

'Alabaster' combines poetry and theory to scrutinise the lining of the voice at the moment of learning to speak again in another language and uncovers paler shades of white in the guise of a semblance.

Halfway through 1994, I believed the worst of the year was over. We lived in a rented house in the inner suburbs of Melbourne. It was a changeable house. Sometimes it felt safe as a church, and sometimes it shivered and cracked apart. A sloping slate roof held it down, pressing heat on us in summer, blowing cold in winter. What bounded the house was skin. Walls of cream gristle called crépi.

It was June 30th, an ordinary crisp winter day. Sunshine and magpies everywhere. After lunch, I took the children for a walk. His hands barely reaching the pram's handle, my first-born insisted on pushing his baby brother. Along the Merri Creek, there were egrets and ibises and ducks. Some turtles and tiny frogs. We sang duck songs and frog songs. I made up a magpie story as we passed a whole family of them. We bought quinces on the way back and I baked an upside-down quince cake. I was almost getting serious about planting winter vegetables, cornflowers and the last bulbs of irises, jonquils and ranunculaes before nightfall when I decided against it.

Nights close early in June. Everything seems to stand still, bleak, even gloomy by five. I bundled the children inside the house, drew the curtains and flicked on the lights. It felt safe despite the cold air curling at our feet.

When I turned off the light well after bed-time, I looked through the window. The roses looked dead but for a few white buds on their maimed limbs.

Why is white white?
Chalk, rice, zinc
Crystal falls
Limestone graves

Phosphorus
Lightless body
Alabaster

I woke up in the night, chilled as the whites in a Dutch still-life painting.

A still-life belongs to time, and we to this stillness.

In his cot,
my baby's face was white wax
as if smothered by the moon itself.
His lips were black.

'Alabaster' is the third chapter in *Hush*, an autofictional memoir of cot death. I want to focus on this particular chapter because it highlights the generic hybridity of the text, namely the passage from prose to poetry and brief incursion into literary theory. What I call my flight into poetry came out of the blue as if to cover up the anxiety produced by the obscene fact I had to tell. Ironically, it produced a letter which invokes some 'lip of the hole in knowledge' (Lacan, 2001 [1971]: 14). This flight into poetry constitutes a semblant in the sense that it makes use of the signifier that covers over the hole in the real through the function of the letter while at the same time locating a relation to jouissance. For Lacan, a semblant is an object of enjoyment that is both seductive and deceptive. As such, the signifier is the semblant *par excellence* (Lacan, 2001 [1971]: 14; Lacan, 2006 [1971-72: 14), for it sustains the field of desire through fiction, as a defence against jouissance. Because the semblant covers a hole, or plugs it, the semblant comes to the place where something should be but isn't, and where its lack produces anxiety. I will focus on 'Alabaster' with reference to Roland Barthes' intellectual autobiography in order to explore the difference between prose and poetry as semblants in relation to the field of the Other. In particular, I will seek to explain how the semblant relates to the concept of voice.

A still-life belongs to time, and we, speaking beings to the stillness that encompasses the experience of the unconscious. Thus every text contains repressed material that structures a never-ending dialogue with the Other. But if all discourse, including autobiography, is fiction (Lacan, 2001 [1971]: 19), then poetry - a text that is written too fast to think, may be said to be a fiction that foregrounds unconscious disturbances in the field of the Other. It does so by projecting what we call a voice. To be more precise, it draws attention to what Roland Barthes has called 'the grain of the voice in discourse (Barthes, 1977). Such a discourse unveils the present absence of the Other by calling the reader's attention to it via signifiers, but also via blanks that stand in for silences. I want to argue here that writing poetry foregrounds the unconscious by shifting registers from the imaginary to the symbolic. Further I will argue that writing poetry in a language other than one's mother tongue gestures towards the letter and thus foregrounds a hole in knowledge due to a radical break with the mother tongue. The reason why I say that the register that takes precedence in this case is the symbolic, not the imaginary, refers to my own experience of writing 'Alabaster': resorting to poetry was an act that prevented the unravelling of the subject. Thus the second language may be said to function as prosthetic tongue qua symbolic anchor and the medium of poetry as...
double semblant. The semblant in this case covers and covers up nothing, that is to say, it covers the void left by the loss of the primary object and it also covers up the fact that the name -of-the-father is a semblant (Lacan 2006 [1971-72]: 15).

For Lacan, the act of writing entails the reliving of a process by which an affective charge is released from its generating sources. The writer, and eventually the reader, directs this charge, imbuing it with the real that both brings it into being and attracts it. Fiction, autobiography and poetry therefore make it possible to link the conscious and unconscious registers which, in turn, constitute the discourse of the subject. The writer's need to repeat, rather than simply remember repressed material, illustrates the need to reproduce and work through painful events of the past as if these were present. Like psychoanalysis, writing repeats the displeasure of what never took place during that time-event usually referred to as the primal scene, or repeats the trauma of what took place at a particular point in time. Fantasies of desire, incest, castration, death, and repression re-enact not what took place, but rather what did not. Fantasies of reparation brought about by mourning, on the other hand, re-enact both what did and did not take place. These scenes are replayed and re-enacted on the stage of discourse as writers make up their personas, put on their masks, sharpen their pens and perform their rituals. This discourse of the subject is a discourse of desire: 'we write with our desire,' says Barthes, 'and I have never stopped desiring' (Barthes, 1975: 98). What the desiring subject seeks is to retrieve some lost object, which is primarily the mother. However, because language manifests the presence of the mother tongue, writing does recover an absence. When one writes in another language, though, one denies this absence in an omnipotent gesture of self-creation, perhaps the ultimate narcissistic act, as one pretends to be both father and mother of oneself. Perhaps here is some indication as to how suppléance comes into being as a stand-in for the ego, for in this light, writing is more than a crutch; it is the ego itself (Lacan 2005 [1975-76]: 152). In other words 'Alabaster' may give us a clue as to how the ego comes into being through a knotting of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, for the text performs the knotting of the three registers, as opposed to Barthes's autobiographical text, which merely uses visual cues to highlight their disjunction.

Barthes alludes to the mother tongue as the language with which he has an incestuous relationship: 'The French language is for him,' he says referring to himself in the third person, 'essentially the umbilical language' (Barthes, 1975: 119), perhaps fully aware that he has just cut off this umbilical cord by using 'he' instead of 'I'. For Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes is an event of the body: it is Barthes striving to reconstitute an identity out of the textual fragments that compose it. By using the third person pronoun, Barthes is, in fact, writing the symbolic Other. The fragments that constitute his autobiography are indeed connected by the impersonal pronoun 'he', thus flaunting both the incestuous intermingling of his body with the mother tongue and his desire to disentangle from it. The fragments of text are the body of the text (Roland Barthes) without the father and beyond the Law, yet bearing the mark of the Law through the use of the third person: 'The fragment,' says Barthes, 'implies immediate jouissance: it is a fantasy of discourse, an opening of desire' (Barthes, 1975: 89). This gap in the text, this interstice of silence, is the focus of desire unable to speak its name, and the presence of the alien third pronoun signals the symbolic cut the writer Barthes performs upon his text in an attempt to ward off the mother's desire, thereby performing the paternal function and inscribing himself in the Other's discourse.

This wilful symbolic inscription is further evidenced by overt references to Lacan's work. Barthes uses a photograph of himself as a baby in his mother's arms with the caption 'The mirror stage: "this is you"' (Barthes, 1975: 25) Opposite from a drawing of the human
circulatory system titled *Anatomie*, Barthes' caption reads: 'To write the body. Neither the skin, nor the muscles, nor the bones, nor the nerves, but the rest: a clumsy id, fibrous, fluffy, and frayed, the cloak of a clown' (Barthes 1975: 182). The text is, literally, the body of the Other that struts and frets on the stage of language while being aware and in control of its own performativity.

Barthes' writing, in addition to its theoretical thrust, has a fictional component firmly embedded in the metonymic axis or register through the use of the third-person narration. This has the effect of drawing the narrative away from the real and thereby from the hole in knowledge. In contradistinction, the excerpt form 'Alabaster' I opened this paper with, shifts the register away from the literal towards the metaphorical. It might thus be said to be even more overtly fictional, and although it also struts and frets on the stage of language, it is not consciously aware of its theoretical thrust, but rather performs it through disturbances of language in a kind of *bricolage* that links the real, the symbolic and the imaginary through the letter 'o'. But the thrust is towards poetry and knowledge, and paradoxically reveals something about the truth of the subject via a symptom we call voice.

My voice died out in my scream.

Life goes on, they say. Life goes on leaving me - a hiatus.

I became the copula between life and death.
An object with no voice.

*Mère* echo ooo ooo ooo

'Literature is like phosphorus', Barthes says in *Writing Degree Zero*. 'It shines with its maximum brilliance at the moment when it attempts to die.'

For Barthes, literature is always already a posthumous affair.

And so he tricked himself to write out the white into brilliance -

White paint comes from many things - chalk, rice, zinc, quartz, alabaster, lead. Vermeer made some of his luminescent whites from alabaster and quartz - in lumps that took the light into the painting and made it dance.

White is white because it reflects light off.
The price white pays for this sheer purity is that it absorbs no light into its own body - and for lead white, this means its own heart is black.

And so I tricked myself to write out the white into glitter from the black of my heart.

Chalk, rice, zinc
crystal falls
Limestone graves
Phosphorus
Lightless body
Alabaster

From my limestone grave, a foreign voice came out.

*In-crypted, I wrote myself out into a make-believe.*

For the impossibility of saying nothing. Of not saying anything. Of not saying. Of saying.

For the sheer possibility of putting death to death.

*Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes and *Alabaster* re-enact ongoing acts of desire in which the name-of-the-father is deconstructed and reconstructed in the service of the author's ego. Both texts invite the reader to read them as fiction: 'All this must be viewed as spoken by a character in a novel', says Barthes in his epigraph on the inside cover of *Roland Barthes*, a crucial statement, as he repeats it later (Barthes, 1975: 123) while *Alabaster* sets up the writer herself as mere 'make-believe'. Thus each work projects the discourse of the Other as fiction into the text where the play of characters, pronouns, and signifiers foregrounds the Other's presence. Barthes' autobiography is written in the third person, whereas *Alabaster* interweaves biographical events and imaginary happenings that blur the boundaries between the two, yet clearly establishing the presence of the Law in the field of the Other in the prose passages. But the presence of the Law is not a given in this particular text as the flights into poetry performatively demonstrate and as the citation from Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero* attests. Indeed, the citation functions as a desperate call for the name-of-the-father in an attempt to fend of the jouissance attached to the world of the mother and to echoes of the mother tongue encapsulated in the bilingual pun 'mère echo' as well as in the nonsensical repetition of the phoneme 'o'. The citation may be said to cut across some ambient noise or noisy silence--the world of the mother, the noise that covers the dark presence of *Das Ding* nonetheless made manifest in ringing echoes.

It is, I believe, to silence these funereal echoes that I intuitively changed tack during the writing process. On the brink of some inevitable void, I abandoned the sense of prose for the 'sense blank' of poetry. I drew away from sense to play with the whiteness of words and with the blanks on the page, the blanks themselves functioning as stop-gaps to meaning. I moved away from the metonymic axis of language to approach with extra care some truth I sensed to be inscribed along its metaphorical axis. It strikes me as utterly ironic that this shift occurred by way of free associating on the word 'white'. This flight into poetry was valuable. It uncovered 'nothing' and thereby it produced self-knowledge. It also enabled me to avoid the crippling anxiety that foreshadows an encounter with the real of madness. It may indeed have prevented such a horrific encounter. Thus Jacques-Alain Miller is right when he says that the function of semblants is 'to veil nothing' and also to make this nothing into something (Miller, 1997: 7). This definition of the semblant highlights its double function, which is of veiling and of drawing our attention to this veiling.

As Hervé Tizio reminds us, however, a semblant occurs in a discourse. It takes the empty place that allows the element that is found there to take the place of the agent. The discourse is founded in place of the semblant (Tizio, 2009), because it is the agent that specifies the way jouissance is treated. In every discourse, the semblants are supported in different ways and each has its foundation: S1 appears as the semblant of command, S2 as the semblant of
knowledge, objet (a) as semblant of jouissance. Thus each one has a status as important as that of the other. However, these semblants are different by way of their specific relationship to jouissance. Thus semblants can manifest through the different forms of rejection or deferral, as Lacan shows when he says that jouissance 'is not challenged, is not evoked, is not tracked down, is not elaborated, other than through a semblant' (Lacan, 1998 [1972-73]: 85)

That is, no doubt, a paradoxical formulation, because this place of the agent is in all cases marked by the impossibility to act on what escapes discourse. One must not forget that a discourse is a mechanism that finds its main application on jouissance, which is to say that it has a civilising function, but that it cannot render this kernel conscious, which, although foreclosed, and therefore real and unconscious, struggles for articulation. We are dealing with some other umbilicus of discourse, the one Freud discovered in dreams as resistant to interpretation: it is the letter as support of the signifier. To be more precise, it is the letter in its phonetic guise, or the phoneme as grain of the voice. It would thus seem that both the use of a foreign tongue and the medium of poetry in 'Alabaster' function as semblants. The question is what nothing do these cover?

Ironically, in the light of the role of the mother, in the definition of the imaginary order, and in the attempt to define the self in terms of what it means to be a mother, there is no mention of any maternal tradition in 'Alabaster'. There is an eloquent silence here in terms of the genetic family connection which the piece seems on the surface to be seeking. The comparisons are all based on the connections between inanimate objects and components of voice though, as well as on the shared activity of writing. On closer inspection, the lack of any mention of the physical maternal connection would seem to undercut the familial link which, of necessity, requires women to give birth to succeeding generations. This deconstructs the familial connection I was trying to construct, or at least reconstruct in some absurd teleological gesture, and puts more stress on the shared activity of writing as an imaginary bond. However, on inspection, that activity is, in fact, dissimilar as opposed to similar, a point underlined by the admission that 'I' is a 'hiatus', a 'copula between life and death', a 'make-believe' in the making. Here is an index of the progression from the imaginary to the symbolic, as willed images of similarity are deconstructed by the very linguistic matrix through which they are expressed. The Other with which the I of the text will define herself has changed radically from the context of the family evoked in the opening paragraph, with its evocation of acts of nurturing, to the more lettered context of a poet, with her literary productions. The thrust of the writing is from blood relations to semblant, from sang rouge to sang blanc.

As in 'The Grain of the Voice' (Barthes 1977 [1973]) the voice is here multi-layered. However, it is not experienced in the throat as 'pulsional incidents', as 'the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony' (Barthes, 1977 [1973], 71-82).in the throat, but in the ear: 'ooo' repeated three times. As a trope, the repetition of the phoneme 'o' has a more sinister ring. Indeed, instead of signalling the jubilant experience of speaking, it signals that death is lurking somewhere in the background. Death is not evoked by any process of reification which equates one thing with a signifier, rather it is brought about by the voice, specifically by the voice speaking to itself, and repeating the vowel 'o' like a mantra in three sets of three. It is the phonetic properties of the letter as spoken by the voice which evokes here the deathly quality of the mother tongue. In Lacanian terms, the voice, of course, is a symptom of what is left over from speech, an uncanny object that exceeds symbolisation. In other words, it is a thing without a body, for it also exceeds speech's
capacity to make sound meaningful (Dolar, 2006: 15). But what the voice in the fiction that is poetry in a second language insists on is the gap between the repetitive, reminding nature of desire and the warning, the death that will finally close the gap that desire produces. The difference is in the excess, the irrational element that makes the presence of the voice all the more mysterious. The voice appears to be intensely personal and yet as Barthes reminds us in his own work, even in the consistency of its message it expresses nothing of its message (Barthes, 1977 [1973]: 182). What it expresses is the real of trauma with all its deathly intonations and connotations.

The voice here belongs with death. The voice is both inside and outside. It accompanies an anxiety that warns against the death of the subject. The speaker is attempting to escape the truth of the chilling desire or thrill produced not by the message, but by the voice without trace or body. The anxiety about the source of the voice is predicated on a logic similar to what Lacan calls 'the agency of the letter', or the repetition of the signifier 'Remember you must die' that continues to insist - traumatically hectoring and reminding 'me' despite her attempts to confer meaning on it (Lacan, 2006 [1955] : 356). What the semblant covers is nothing. However, the anxiety this nothing gives rise to is the anxiety that surrounds the truth of death. It is the truth of being as make-believe, of life as artefact bought on tick.

At least this is, it seems to me, what writing means when the writer's filiation shifts to another language and when the form she chooses is poetry rather than the straightforward prose that has the imprimatur of the Law. For the writer, though identified with the dead one, does not assume the place of death, only the place of the cadaver. If I were to write in my mother tongue, the story would be different. It is the impossible. It is the ultimate blank. The incandescent fusion with the *mère mortifère*, not the *mère echo / mere echo*.

Why is white white?

Chalk, rice, zinc
crystal falls
Limestone graves

Phosphorus
Lightless body
Alabaster

By way of conclusion, though both texts discussed above are fictions of sorts, one stays firmly embedded in the imaginary by relying on the scopic drive while the other shifts to the invocatory drive, thus highlighting two different ways of relating to the signifier and to the letter, and thereby to *jouissance*. Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes invokes the gap between expectation and desire, reality and fantasy, speech and writing. 'Alabaster', on the other hand, invokes this gap with regard to its intimate proximity to the lip of the hole in the real. Here, the voice is not simply the medium of linguistic communication, but rather an enigmatic object of desire that resists symbolisation. The voice as an object of desire is thus revealed as the layering of that which produces articulated speech; it is an index of the gap at the intersection of the real and the imaginary must be filled by the symbolic for reality to be constituted by way of writing. The narrative drive is shaped by a questing that attempts to match the known with an unknown. If it is true that this text was written to put death to death, then writing in English may simply be a means of avoiding the sorrow, uncanny anxiety and
fascination incited by its real presence, and writing poetry, the very last resort before subjective dissolution.

REFERENCES


