

Reginald Gibbons

On Apophatic Poetics

## 1.

In earlier columns, I have been looking at different kinds of poetic thinking; most recently (March/April 2007), I have sketched my understanding of contemporary Russian "Metarealist" poetry. In this column, I will look further into a mode of poetic thinking that is especially prominent in some Russian poets of the twentieth century (a century in which I think we are still living, poetically), but which can be found elsewhere, too--the apophatic. (Isn't a large part of the pleasure of reading poetry from an elsewhere in time, culture and language the encounter with other kinds of poetic thinking? Even within English, because of historical explorations, past and current imperial occupations, and far-flung linguistic legacies of English-speaking peoples, different poetic mentalities can be seen in anglophone poetry written in Africa, the Caribbean, India, Australia and New Zealand, and elsewhere--and for other reasons, even in different geographical and cultural zones within the United States.) What follows is an account of looking for the apophatic, while trying at the same time to learn how to recognize something that is not, shall we say, a default poetics in English, and yet can be found in English, to varying degrees. Our main guides, though, will speak from elsewhere, because only in reading elsewhere have I begun to see what is apophatic in the poetic traditions (decisively plural) that are our own.

Here is an everyday sense of the apophatic, from the writer Verlyn Klinkenborg, who notices that his familiar Korean market on a street corner in New York City has closed. He reports that in a store that no longer exists except as an empty space, he knows exactly where everything he usually buys, everything that is no longer there, can be found. Klinkenborg writes of how we retain "vanished places; apartments we moved out of years ago, dry cleaners that went out of business, restaurants that stopped serving, neighborhoods where only the street names remain the same. [...] --places we knew almost by intuition until they vanished, leaving behind only the strange sense of knowing our way around a world that can no longer be found." If we add to all the local worlds which, in the midst of constant change, cannot be found, the continuing reality of what is beyond our grasp even in what is really present, what we cannot very easily grasp or evoke for ourselves except by contrasting it with what we can, then we might have a sense of an everyday apophatic. But the apophatic poetic mentality is more difficult to grasp or evoke.

## 2.

Among the famously witty poems of Catullus (ca. 84 BCE - ca. 54 BCE), number 43 (*Salve, nec minimo puella naso*) makes use of the rhetorical figure called apophasis, which is an "allusion to

something by denying that it will be mentioned" (*American Heritage Dictionary*). I might say that the following poem is very short, not to mention its being apophatic. But now I have mentioned it. To extend the definition beyond where a small dictionary takes it, we can add that apophasis can also be a negation used to formulate what cannot be stated in any positive terms--especially Christian theological utterances such as that of Dionysius, who lived about 400 years after Christ, that God "has no body nor form nor image nor quality nor quantity nor mass." Dionysius' statement means that such words as "body," etc., have no application to God. He is denying that God can be described.

*Apophasis* is in fact a Greek word that means a denial; the word combines a verb for "to say" (*phanai*) and a prefix (*apo*) which in this use means "away from, down from, far from," or in other words, "opposed to." The apophatic is not simply negation, however. When Lincoln says with somber grandeur in his Gettysburg Address that "in a larger sense, we can not dedicate--we can not consecrate--we can not hallow--this ground," he means just that; his negatives are straightforward. Yet at the same time he is expressing what he wishes were possible: dedication, consecration, and hallowing of a field where many soldiers agonized and died. The apophatic is a negative that is not straightforward, and can imply something that is in fact present despite the absence or inadequacy of a name for it--such as the nature of God--or present *as* an absence, like meaningful negative space in a sculpture. But in poetry the negative space is linguistic.

The opposite of "apophatic" in English is "cataphatic," which is another Christian theological term, but more western than eastern; it too comes from a Greek word, in this case *kataphainô*, which means "to make visible." A cataphatic mentality names and even catalogues, whether it names things of this world, as poetry does, or, in a theological realm, as in the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, it names objects of meditation intended to enable a worshipper to approach God and a life of Christian virtue. An apophatic mentality responds to what is missing, or invisible; and in a theological realm, attends to the uncompassable, infinite nature of God, which cannot be evoked by positive aspects or attributes. The implications for poetry can readily be seen in the contrast between an active, Adamic, cataphatic artistic impulse to name the visible world, and a meditative, apophatic artistic impulse to proceed by indirection, evoking the invisible or the not quite conceivable.

But let's begin with the apophatic as a device of rhetoric, not as a thoroughgoing mentality. In Ezra Pound's translation (1916) from Latin of the famous short poem by Catullus, the apophasis is a matter of expression, first, and only secondarily of thought; yet Pound takes it further than did the Roman poet:

All Hail; young lady with a nose  
by no means too small,  
With a foot unbeautiful,  
and with eyes that are not black,

With fingers that are not long, and with a mouth undry,  
And with a tongue by no means too elegant,  
You are a friend of Formianus, the vendor of cosmetics,  
And they call you beautiful in the province,  
And you are even compared to Lesbia.  
O most unfortunate age!

The young lady evidently has a big nose, ugly feet, pale eyes, stubby fingers, lips forever wet, and a habit of using crude language--but none of this is said directly. (By the way, isn't it a pleasant poetic turn from the literal images of nose, foot, eyes, fingers and mouth to the metonym of tongue, meaning not the literal tongue but her way of speaking?) I won't mention the glee of both Catullus and Pound at verbally insulting a young woman. (See what I did, there?)

The Spanish poet St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) makes decisively theological use of the apophatic in his "Coplas hechas sobre un éstasis de harta contemplación" ("Verses written on an ecstasy of full contemplation" or "meditation"). In my close but unavoidably interpretive translation, the poem begins this way:

I went into a place where I did not know,  
and remained unknowing,  
transcending all knowledge.  
I knew not, in the place I had entered,  
but when I saw myself there,  
without knowing where I was,  
I understood great things.  
I won't say what I felt,  
since I remained unknowing,  
transcending all knowledge.

Even to the point of not using visual imagery, this poem represents an apophatic state of mind, drawing no doubt on that strain in Catholic theology, present already in St. Thomas Aquinas. In

the thought of Dionysius, the way of knowing God can only be an "unknowing," because God is above or beyond all human categories of knowledge. As a refrain of the two last lines of each stanza, this poem uses variations on the concept of unknowing (in Spanish, expressed as variations on "no saber"). It describes senses that do not sense, understanding that does not understand, darkness that is light, and an unknowing that goes beyond knowledge as it approaches God. As Dionysius describes the "Darkness of Unknowing," in the little book *Mystical Theology*, which was brought into Renaissance currency through later writers, the human being "renounces all the apprehensions of his understanding and is enwrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible," in order to attain a mystical union with God, the "wholly Unknowable."

To return to a secular instance of poetics that seek to apprehend that which is not, which is absent, or that which is not visible, we can look at sonnet 130 of Shakespeare, who--somewhat like Catullus in his use of apophatic *rhetoric*, but with a soft heart for ordinary looks that fall short of beauty--goes beyond negative comparisons in the first ten lines by lightheartedly composing his description of his lover out of the negative opposites of the terms he might have been expected to use to praise her with conventional idealizing. Shakespeare's counterintuitive couplet, by posing the negative to all the previous comparative negatives, asserts a positive:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red:  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound.  
I grant I never saw a goddess go:  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

In his sonnets (published in 1609), Shakespeare also plays several times on Horace's "exegi monumentum" (III.30) by constructing verse "monuments" not to himself, as Horace (65 BCE-8 BCE) did, but to love and lovers (in sonnets 17, 18, 19, 55, 60, 63, 65, 81, 101, 107), as when he ends the generously good-humored sonnet 18 with a serious couplet about the poem itself: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." Horace's conceit, take up again by Shakespeare, is that an immaterial poem that lives in the voices and memory of generations will--or at least might--outlive the stuff of tangible monuments--which Shakespeare, too, evokes: "Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rime" (55). That is, the gesture of such poems is to evoke the stone and metal of great monuments by their absence (absence out there, where once they stood but now are fallen, and absence here, on the page where lie the modest little marks of print. In place of those tangible monuments this poet offers the intangible poem that truly exists or "appears" only when someone recites, remembers or reads it, yet which might outlive the durable, hard, cold monuments of metal and stone. The emphasis on the absence and transience of what is expected to be durable, as opposed to the near nothingness of human breath itself, which is invisible and fleeting, is a kind of apophatic conceptual play.

The famous last stanza of "The Garden" (1681), by Andrew Marvell, negates what is real in order to create an image of what can only be compassed in thought; or perhaps it cannot be compassed in thought, either:

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,

Withdraws into its happiness:

The mind, that ocean where each kind

Does straight its own resemblance find;

Yet it creates, transcending these,

Far other worlds, and other seas;

Annihilating all that's made

To a green thought in a green shade.

That is, having described a real garden earlier in the poem ("real" in the sense that the poem offers us not a physical sensation, since the poem itself is not a real garden, but rather a mental image of a real garden, or at least of an idealized fictional one), Marvell then abolishes the "real" garden in favor of an ideal and perhaps eternal one that the human mind can grasp in the way the human seeks the divine. But the "green thought" is without explicit qualities, and thus is a kind of negative.

John Donne, although writing considerably earlier than Marvell, already goes beyond rhetorical or

conceptual play on the apophatic to insist in his poem "Negative Love" (published 1633) that the greatest love cannot be portrayed by what can be named, or rather, cannot be portrayed because it cannot be named:

I never stooped so low, as they  
Which on an eye, cheek, lip, can prey,  
Seldom to them, which soar no higher  
Than virtue or the mind to admire,  
For sense, and understanding may  
Know, what gives fuel to their fire:  
My love, though silly, is more brave,  
For may I miss, whene'er I crave,  
If I know yet what I would have.  
If that be simply perfectest,  
Which can by no way be expressed  
But negatives, my love is so.  
To all, which all love, I say no.  
If any who deciphers best,  
What we know not, ourselves, can know,  
Let him teach me that nothing; this  
As yet my ease, and comfort is,  
Though I speed not, I cannot miss.

I think this means something like the following: In love, I never stooped so "low," Donne says (and we never get to "high"--only to a level that's "higher" than low, which Donne also rejects) as to invest my belief in the physical body (eye, cheek, and lip suggest liveliness, beauty and desire)--never so low as those who "on an eye, cheek, lip, can prey"--a pun on "pray," that is, worship of the merely human. And only seldom did I stoop even to admire most the virtue and mind of the beloved--precisely because sensuality, on the one hand, and understanding, on the other, already

know what "gives fuel to their fire." My love, even though it is humble or feeble ("silly"), is nevertheless braver than love based on what the lover knows of his beloved's physical and spiritual being. Let me miss my target (as if I were love's arrow) when I love, if I already know what it is in the beloved that I most want. Or of the sense of "miss" includes "lack," then may my wanting something specific only guarantee that I will lack it, for my wanting of something specific and already known does not enlarge my spirit. If what is most perfect is that which can in no way even be expressed except by saying what it is *not*, then that is what my love--my beloved, and my way of loving--are. To anyone who loves all that can be known, I say no. If someone who is best at deciphering can know what we do not know--ourselves--then let him teach me that unknown, that "nothing." So even though I am slow in my flight toward love, I am easy and comfortable and comforted in my slowness because I cannot miss my target, which I am defining as that which cannot be hit. In other words, let my knowing of what is beyond all else--love; or God; or both--be by means of not knowing; let it be an unknowing.

We notice that unlike Shakespeare, Donne does not catalogue negatives--for negatives too are positives in that being namable they evoke in spite of the "not." (As Freud said in another context, there is no "no" in the unconscious.) This is what gives Shakespeare's sonnet 130 its humor--rather than negating the lovely positives to which his mistress is lovably inferior, he has already evoked them in the reader's or listener's mind by naming them. One could compose a kind and flattering poem by saying that one's beloved is as beautiful as sun, coral, snow, roses, perfumes, music--but Shakespeare argues that it's only "false compare" to name such things as likenesses for the real qualities of an imperfect--that is, human--lover; going further, Donne says, on the other hand, that it's no good to name them even to negate them, because the beloved cannot be described. (When put that baldly, the sense of the poem clearly tends away from the human and toward the divine.)

The structure of Donne's poem groups the lines into two sets of equal size, each set built on the different rhymes sequenced in the same way. (In some editions, each of the two sets of lines is syntactically one sentence.) Each set is a unit of thought. In the first, Donne names the positives that he does *not* seek, and he is happy to *miss* what he can know. (I think of Randall Jarrell's "A Sick Child" who says, "If I can think of it, it's not what I want.") In the second half, Donne is more discursive in presenting his paradox (i.e., he uses no visual images at all), and ends by saying that that which he pursues with the slowness of not knowing, he cannot miss.

If we take Donne's poem as a metaphor for spiritual life, too, then we can see how, beyond rhetorical devices, it participates, as does the poem by St. John of the Cross, in the kind of *thought* that is called apophatic. This is evidently no surprise to scholars, since Christian theology includes both cataphatic and apophatic approaches to the divine, and Donne studied theological works that consider this opposition, such as Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-1274). Drawing on the much earlier theologian Dionysius, Aquinas proposed, as a kind of complement to the mostly cataphatic Catholic thinking about God, a "*via negativa*," a meditating on what God is not. Like the poem by St. John of the Cross and poems by other Catholic mystics, Donne's poem veils its treatment of God as a poem to a human beloved; so God is not named in the poem.

Thus theology inflects poetics in this poem; however, the implications of Donne's poem for poetic thought may be more accessible to us if we set it within the context of a certain strain of poetic thinking that sets out, whether in secular or religious terms, to articulate precisely that which eludes articulation--just as negative or apophatic theology speaks of the divine even though it takes the divine to be precisely that of which we cannot speak. (Wittgenstein's familiar maxim, which has been translated from German in various ways--such as "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"--is a kind of philosophical aside that we can take as secular and poetic; it has often been cited by poets and by antipoets; yet its truth value is dubious, since there is a very great deal of theology, philosophy and poetry which, in opposition to the silence that Wittgenstein urges, makes from the very struggle to articulate "that of which one cannot speak" a valuable attempt to speak at the very limits of language.)

### 3.

Poetry in English, perhaps like poetry in general, can scarcely proceed without naming; naming is part of the particular spirit of English; and naming is cataphatic and Adamic--no matter how signifiers differ from language to language, naming seems to add to the very being of what it names. Naming also often presents to the mind's eye (and other senses of the imagination) aspects of that which the poet evokes. The English language names with variety and gusto, inventiveness and rich sound. English is omnivorous of nouns, and gobbles them from other languages, too: rodeo, hashish, avocado, satori, raccoon, mantra, ukulele. Such words are among the innumerable traces of the imperial history of the English language that I mentioned above. They have come to serve all speakers of English, and they "home" to English not only from conquered and explored places but even from earlier conquering and exploring in other imperial languages. (The now English words in my list derive in fact from Spanish, Arabic, Nahuatl, Japanese, Algonkian, Sanskrit, and Hawaiian.) No less an authority than Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) commented on the sheer appetite of the English language for words that name; he wrote that Russian, by contrast, does not have this trait. "No language resists more strongly than Russian the tendency toward naming and utilitarian application," he says in his essay "On The Nature of the Word." Given such a utilitarian appetite in our very way of thinking--we who speak English--and given the pragmatism, love of contest and of profit, and anti-intellectualism that characterize so much of American culture, we can't be surprised that apophatic poetic thinking has never established itself as essential to our poetry, the way it did in the Russian language.

Apophatic thinking might enter American poetry in three ways: as a mode of thought that although rare might be considered more or less indigenous to English by around the time of the Renaissance (hence my examples from Shakespeare, Donne and Marvell); through the importation back into England and America of the work of anglophone poets from cultures at the edge of the empire that England once ruled, militarily or culturally, and in which America stands, culturally and militarily, where the apophatic mentality, for reasons of history and culture and belief, is already a part of poetic thinking; and through translation.



(It's not that the scarcity of apophatic poetic thinking in English is a defect; it is simply a difference. As I hope I implied at the beginning, the interesting thing for any poet, it seems to me, is to open up in one's own language resources of poetic thinking from elsewhere; according to Dick Davis, in his essay "All My Soul Is There: Verse Translation and the Rhetoric of English Poetry," this very process has been decisive in most of the innovation in the whole history of English poetry.)

In American poetry there is at least one great poet of apophatic thought, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), and another of the apophatic gesture, Wallace Stevens. What major poet has thought her way more deeply into absence, emptiness, and ungraspable infinitude than Dickinson? And in them, she has found something that is there. When she describes despair or depression, she often works in negatives (see Franklin poem number 355). I am far from being the first to call her apophatic, and I mean only that this is one of the ways, not the only way, she thinks. "Prayer is the little implement / Through which Men reach / Where Presence -- is denied them" (623). She sometimes touches on absence and that which cannot be known when she evokes paradoxes of scale ("An hour is a Sea" [897]; "Forever -- is composed of Nows" [690]) that bring into view what cannot be grasped--the mind or the coffin that contains infinity; the ocean that is smaller than the brain. (As Marvell wrote in the poem above, "the mind, that ocean.") That which is missing fills her poems. That which cannot be described, she evokes indirectly by negatives, especially in her many poems about consciousness, mind, thought and God. At times she characterizes consciousness with awe, and at other moments she regards it as an affliction: "No Drug for Consciousness -- can be --," she writes; the "Alternative," which is "to die[,] / Is Nature's only Pharmacy / For Being's Malady --" (887). "I saw no Way" (633). The soul is defined by "its Caverns and its Corridors" (877)--that is, by its empty spaces--just as "The Brain has Corridors" (407); "The missing All, prevented Me / From missing minor things" (995). This poem too is apophatic (1004; the third line can be read "which, were it uttered, would discourage..."):

There is no Silence in the Earth -- so silent

As that endured

Which uttered, would discourage Nature

And haunt the World --

Dickinson describes how someone lost to us is perceived as greater, lost, then when present (1045); she defines the pleasure of hearing music in terms of its marking the withdrawal of "Ecstasy's *impediment*" (1511; my italics); and she writes "I would not paint -- a picture -- / I'd rather be the One / It's [sic] bright impossibility / To dwell -- delicious -- on --" (348). She calls God "Bright Absentee!" (367)--conflating two possibilities: that there is no God; and that there is, but that absence is His nature.

And from a number of possible citations from the work of Wallace Stevens, I'll just mention (or in

this essay I should say: I won't even mention) the obvious lines in which he uses the negative to evoke what cannot be evoked otherwise, describing the "listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" ("The Snow Man").

An instance of the poetically apophatic brought into English from the ex-imperial anglophone realm can be found in the work of the Indian poet Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004). In his "Heart of Ruin," one of the poems from his English-language sequence *Jejuri* (1974)--a poetic account of a pilgrimage to the town of that name, where there is a cult of the god Khandoba--he evokes a ruined temple. Kolatkar makes no poetic declarations of belief; indeed, he seems a skeptical participant in pilgrimage, one who notices paradox and anthropological curiosities. But in "Heart of Ruin," after describing the fallen roof of a ruined temple of the god Maruti, and a stray dog and her puppies living within that ruin, Kolatkar concludes:

No more a place of worship this place  
is nothing less than the house of god.

Ruin and the presence of a dog, not of a god, evoke the holy and a divine presence that seems to be made possible *by* ruin and absence. Kolatkar does something similar in "Manohar" when his companion of that name looks inside a building he presumes is a temple only to discover it is a cowshed. "It isn't another temple," Manohar says in the poem; by his negation, though, the poem says that it is. The absence of divinity, both poems imply, is divinity.

Another example is more of a gesture, when in "The Priest's Son" Kolatkar makes similar use of a humble "scanty patch of scruffy dry grass / burnt brown in the sun," a small site of empty ugliness; but in this case Kolatkar then gives the reader what I think is a cataphatic image that is the positive opposite of the negative emptiness, a colorful opposite of the brown grass; an opposite in physical scale to the hills; and as life, as opposite of death; transience opposed to permanence. And so the emptiness and absence which the poetic self perceives, out of skepticism ("do you really believe that story[?]") are filled with belief by what a believer, the boy, notices. Here is the poem in its entirety:

these five hills  
are the five demons  
that khandoba killed  
says the priest's son  
a young boy  
who comes along as your guide  
as the schools have vacations

do you really believe that story  
you ask him  
he doesn't reply  
but merely looks uncomfortable  
shrugs and looks away  
and happens to notice  
a quick wink of a movement  
in a scanty patch of scruffy dry grass  
burnt brown in the sun  
and says  
look  
there's a butterfly  
there

And from works translated into English, here are a few examples that have passed into shared literary culture or are available now:

The well-known idea of Michelangelo (1475-1564) about sculpting as a freeing of the figure that is already in the marble can be found in one of his poems, "Si come per levar," in which he says (I translate loosely) that it is "by *removing* the hard, alpine stone [that] one puts a living figure" into it (my italics). This too comes from theology, for Dionysius writes:

Unto this Darkness which is beyond Light we pray that we may come, and may attain unto vision through the loss of sight and knowledge, and that in ceasing thus to see or to know we may learn to know that which is beyond all perception and understanding (for this emptying of our faculties is true sight and knowledge), and that we may offer Him that transcends all things the praises of a transcendent hymnody, which we shall do by denying or removing all things that are--like as men who, carving a status out of marble, remove all the impediments that hinder the clear perceptive of the latent image and by this removal display the hidden statue itself in its hidden beauty.

Charles Baudelaire's sonnet "Obsession" (1861) seems written to illustrate the apophatic; the first

three lines of the sestet create an emptiness, and the last three paradoxically fill it with an apophatic image of what cannot be seen. My close translation:

How you would please me, O night! without those stars  
Whose light speaks a language that's already known!  
For I seek the void, blackness, nakedness!  
Yet darknesses are themselves the canvases  
Where leaping from my eye by the thousands,  
Live vanished beings with a familiar gaze.

Zbigniew Herbert (1924-1998) writes in his poem, "Study of the Object," that "the most beautiful is the object / which does not exist." He opens "I Would Like to Describe" with a kind of exercise in rejecting cataphatic thinking (like the first quotation, translated by Czeslaw Milosz and Peter Dale Scott):

I would like to describe the simplest emotion  
joy or sadness  
but not as others do  
reaching for shafts of rain or sun  
I would like to describe a light  
which is being born in me  
but I know it does not resemble  
any star  
for it is not so bright  
not so pure  
and is uncertain  
I would like to describe courage  
without dragging behind me a dusty lion  
and also anxiety

without shaking a glass full of water  
or to put it another way  
I would give all metaphors  
in return for one word  
drawn out of my breast like a rib  
for one word  
contained within the boundaries  
of my skin  
but apparently this is not possible

In Yannis Ritsos (1909-1990) I find this short poem, "A Wreath":

Your face was hidden in the leaves.  
I cut the leaves one by one to get near you.  
When I cut the last leaf, you were gone. Then  
out of the cut leaves I wove a wreath. I didn't have  
anyone to give it to. I hung it on my forehead.

And these lines from his poem "Afternoon" (both poems translated by Edmund Keeley):

[...] Behind the windows  
stand those who are missing, and the jug full of water they didn't drink.  
And that star that fell at the edge of evening  
is like the severed ear that doesn't hear the crickets,  
doesn't hear our excuses [...]

In the poems of *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise*, by the contemporary Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (b. 1941), many passages, including perhaps the whole of his long poem "The Hoopoe," seem to me--as I try to learn how to see this--to make much of the apophatic. Yet I don't know if Darwish would agree in general with the Syrian-born poet Adonis (b. 1930), who in his prose

afterword to the poetry collection *The Pages of Day and Night* (translated by Samuel Hazo), writes, "The Arabic language has nothing more to tell us. Rather it has become a language of silence, or rather it tends to reduce expression to silence. Its orbit is muteness, not diction. [...] The light [that poetic investigation] may cast on the unknown only enlarges the unknown's dimensions, announcing its depth and extremity as if the light were transforming itself into night." It's very likely that beyond my knowledge, there may be a historical argument that a Platonic and Plotinian sense of the apophatic entered Arab culture through the preservation by Arabs of portions of Greek antiquity. The Russian poet Ilya Kutik, who has been my own guide into the realms of the apophatic, sees Adonis's sense of the apophatic as unsurprising in one who was formed in an area (now Syria) that willy-nilly inherits among its traditions, however faintly, traces of Byzantine culture. From Adonis's analysis of the influence of Islam on Arabic poetry in his *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, I infer that his apophaticism is not religious but existential. (Adonis argues passionately for the beauty and freedom of mind of pre-Islamic poetry, and for the modern Arabic poet's need to recover some of that ancient poetics.)

In Andrei Voznesensky's poem "A Graveyard Within: To the Memory of Robert Lowell" (1977), the portrayal of Lowell, and the way Voznesensky (b. 1933) characterizes grief itself, is based on the apophatic--not as a rhetorical device but as the evocation of that which cannot be imagined except in language. (A caveat that must be very brief in this context: when I say there is something that cannot be imagined except in language, I do not at all intend to echo the postmodern claim of some that there is no thinking outside language. Overwhelming scientific evidence, and one's own experience, attest to how much of our thinking is prelinguistic, and how flexible, rapid, efficient and imaginative that thinking is. And at the same time, I argue--as in an earlier column--that our being-in-language is where poetry makes many of its discoveries, in its dance with language, precisely for the sake of that which can be thought of in no other way, however deeply it is based on experience and ideas that may be prelinguistic.)

An apophatic poetry would almost be able to bring into the form of a visual image that which cannot be seen--to discover not what was "covered" but what was present yet unvisualizable. That which cannot be seen, because its existence is not visible; the idea that cannot be translated cognitively into an image; that aspect of reality that is an absence, that happens by not happening; those images that can be summoned to suggest their opposites; and other such apparent impossibilities can be imagined. I do not include the surreal, which so often plays off what can be visualized but is not imagined deeply--hence Wallace Stevens' parodying of it with the image of the clam playing an accordion (in his "Adagia"); in other words, visualizing in itself is not imagining. Rather, the greater feat of imagination, the apophatic, is to conceive of what is both impossible to see *and* real, or of what can be seen only in words, not with one's physical eyes. That is, Salvador Dalí's images are visual; but apophatic poetry can achieve images that are visible only to a power of imaginative sight--not merely to "the mind's eye" but to the mind's ear and, so to speak, the mind's mind. (One could raise the question of why poetry should pursue such images. But for now, let's assume that it is worth doing.) As Stevens said--and also Antonio Machado, who seems to me almost a sort of materialist mystic--surrealism invents rather than discovers.

Hence, in the poem by Voznesensky that follows, which I have translated with Ilya Kutik, Lowell's *being*, and his artistic accomplishment, are *discovered* in this sense in several images of what cannot be seen but can be imagined in a quasi-visual way, such as a violin that does not exist but which is the one instrument, so Voznesensky feels, that plays the music of Lowell's being. Lowell's stature (in both senses) is represented *not* by his standing *under* a notch in a wall to measure his own height against that of the very tall Peter the Great but by his *entering*--this is impossible--that notch, that little "void." And then the notch-void rings like a telephone vibrating with a call that no one can make, or answer. Then Lowell's cemetery is presented as internal absence, since Voznesensky imagines it not only as a place of burial but also as a buried place; and because Voznesensky then imagines Lowell's tombstone as a bookmark or "post-it" in a buried *book* in a buried cemetery of books, he writes that he cannot find Lowell, who would be the *page* of that book (how fitting for a poet) that the "post-it" had marked. All of these are apophatic images of that which is present and very real to the poetic self in the poem but can only be apprehended through qualities that are absent. (Kutik and I have tried to represent a little of the notable casualness of diction in some of the lines.)

You came in through my Peredyélkyno gate  
Tilting your head to the left a little--cheek to one shoulder--  
As if holding a violin that's invisible.  
Now the violin has vanished. But I've got to hear it!  
Peering myopically, you stepped into Peter the Great's wood hut.  
Inside's a notch two meters high chopped by an axe.  
To measure your own height, you entered that notch--  
The void left behind by the stature of Peter.  
How this void, instead of the body it lacks, is ringing!  
Under the violent notch stands a new shadow.  
In the graveyard the maples have shed their leaves.  
And the violin one can't get hold of is moaning.  
Deep in the woods, an internal graveyard is itself interred.  
Your mother and father--and where are you?...  
From the ground someone has pulled all the post-its

And now it's impossible to find the right page.  
How's it going, Robert, in your new nowhere?  
We all carry our own graveyards within us.  
Now what name do you have--whistling  
Through the all-encompassing void, a pestle for ennui?  
Your former name lies flat on a gravestone.  
At last you've booked your way out of our labyrinth.  
What's up, shadow--you under the notch in the hut?  
I'm bringing you some of Pasternak's rowan berries.  
(But they won't help Robert.)

An absent presence addressed as the "shadow" of the last stanza, Lowell is absent to yet another degree, in the ambiguity of the final play of pronouns in Russian; because of the way English handles pronouns, Kutik and I can only achieve some clarity by using the second-person "you" and the third-person proper name "Robert." Since the degree to which this poem makes meaning out of the sounds of Russian cannot be reproduced in English, we are left with only a few analogous effects of sound in the translation, and the sequence of images. The violin is suddenly made to exist in the imagination not by being described but by Voznesensky's evocation of that gesture of Lowell--the head held to one side. Making us see the invisible violin, Voznesensky then takes it for real and says that it's the music from this violin that he must hear. Another example from the end of the poem--the reason Voznesensky brings the rowan berries to the notch in the hut is that the notch, itself an absence of wood, "remembers" the man who stood in the place of the absent Peter the Great, and who had metaphorically "entered" the notch itself. But wherever Lowell is now that he is dead--perhaps he is nowhere at all, for he cannot be found even in the cemetery of his own book--the berries cannot help him. These berries from Pasternak's bushes are visible and tangible and thus are only for the living.

---

This is the first of two columns on the apophatic. My profound thanks to Ilya Kutik for bringing John Donne's poem to my attention, and for his extensive counsel regarding this essay, which represents not my attempt to characterize his thinking, but my own struggle to understand my own, now that it is in the process of expanding because of my pursuit of the apophatic. Thanks also to Elizabeth Gray for introducing me to the poems of Arun Kolatkar.



Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*. Translated by Catherine Cobham. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.

Adonis, *The Pages of Day and Night*. Translated by Samuel Hazo. Marlboro, Vermont: Marlboro Press, 1994.

Dick Davis, "All My Soul Is There: Verse Translation and the Rhetoric of English Poetry," *Yale Review* 90:1, 2002.

Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology*, translated by C. E. Rolt. London: S. P. C. K., 1940.

John Donne, *The Major Works*, edited by John Carey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*. Translated by Czeslaw Milosz and Peter Dale Scott. New York: Ecco Press, 1968. These translations are also included in *The Collected Poems 1956-1998*, translated and edited by Alissa Valles. New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2007.

Verlyn Klinkenborg, "The City Life: Remembered Spaces." *The New York Times*, July 17, 2007.

Arun Kolatkar, *Jejuri*. Introduction by Amit Chaudhuri. New York: New York Review Books, 2005.

Osip Mandelstam, "On the Nature of the Word," in *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*. Edited by Jane Gary Harris; translated by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979. See especially p. 121.

Yannis Ritsos, *Ritsos in Parentheses*. Translations and introduction by Edmund Keeley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

## SECOND PART:

-----

In my last column (November/December 2007), in which I offered a number of examples of the apophatic in poetry, I did not especially emphasize that this mode of thought, which seems to derive in the main from Platonism and then from eastern Christian theology, is in fact mystical. To give just one very striking example here: in Pavel Florensky's study *Iconostasis*, he writes that the iconostasis inside the Russian Orthodox church, which is interposed between the worshipper and the altar, hiding the altar from sight, makes it possible to *see mystery* by *blocking the view* of the altar. He writes, "destroy the material iconostasis and the altar itself will, *as such*, wholly vanish from our consciousness as if covered over by an impenetrable wall. Thus "a temple *without a*

material iconostasis erects a solid wall between altar and temple; the iconostasis *opens* windows in this wall, through which we see (those of us who can see) with is permanently occurring beyond: the living witnesses to God. To *destroy* icons means to *block up* the windows." (Il italics my own.)

In another earlier column, about Russian Meta-realism, I tried to describe what might be called a secular word-mysticism that the Russian language makes possible for its poets in a way that the English does not for us. It is perhaps a secular mysticism, if that is not a complete contradiction in terms, which is of greatest interest to me in this essay--a poetics of the absent and the invisible, of meanings apprehended through what is missing, of things seen by means of what is interposed between them and us, even of a sense of union with meaning that cannot be represented as an image of what is present (or even union with a determinate absence of meaning?); the apophatic is not a seemingly surreal play with signifiers that would frustrate or thwart or in a way seek to avoid meaning or postpone it. The apophatic is a meaning that is present, represented poetically by what is not present. Apophatic poetics would not, it seems to me, be an ultimate poetics, nor could it offer any sort of salvation spiritual or poetic, if it is simply another kind of poetic thinking, as I am arguing. (But it is related to a theology that is of course wholly concerned with ultimate things and with religious salvation; or with spiritual enlightenment and the overcoming of human suffering, in the case of its similarities with religious doctrine and practices in South Asia and the Far East.) The most important element of this mode of thought as poetic thinking might be what is confirmed by that Meta-realist practice of following one word to another that it--as can be said in Russian--"loves." (I wrote of this in my earlier essay on rhyme.) If words themselves evoke other words, in the process of composition, then the poet will be following not a visual but a verbal impulse, and the image that arises may enact a kind of freedom from the visual and the visible. One might say that the romantic love that is portrayed or evoked in Shakespeare's sonnet 130 and that becomes conceptual and theological in Donne's poem "Negative Love," can become a linguistic trope that is at the very heart of what poetry is, of how poetry thinks.

A similar compositional process can be found in English, too, even if not so often as in Russian. In the 1960s, Robert Duncan described this mode of composition, and in one formulation wrote (in 1969) concisely that "the word, its sounds and meanings, may be 'recognized' by the poet, but the word itself initiates all possibilities." Confirming Duncan specifically, Denise Levertov wrote of "the poetry of linguistic impulse," describing how "the absorption in language itself, the awareness of the world of multiple meaning revealed in sound, word, syntax, and the entering into this world in the poem, is as much an experience of constellation of perceptions as the instress of nonverbal sensuous and psychic events. What might make the poet of linguistic impetus appear to be on another tack entirely is that the demands of his realization may seem in opposition to truth as we think of it; that is, in terms of sensual logic. But the apparent distortion of experience in such a poem for the sake of verbal effects is actually a precise adherence to truth, since the experience itself was a verbal one." And from this particular kind of linguistic alertness in poetic practice comes the possibility in any language that the apophatic image is often one which--because it represents the absent or invisible--is not a visual image but rather an image that can only be apprehended in words.

If in Greek and Russian Orthodoxy there is a theology of "darkness hidden by the abundance of light" (Vladimir Lossky), that is, of a transcendent God ultimately hidden from human understanding by His understandable or perceivable qualities, then for poetry, even at its most secular, there is an opportunity to articulate our apprehension of the invisible, the irrational, the absent-felt-as-present--all that is usually hidden (this is the mystical paradox) *by* its visible qualities, *by* its very nameability. The Adamic is avoided; something opposite the Adamic can be practiced by poetic expression--we might put different names to it, or none.

The naming of the world is not a mystic experience for the namer; quite the contrary, it is a categorization that can substitute the name for the real thing. In Wordsworth's first, 1799 version of his autobiographical *The Prelude*, which he completed when he was only 29, he already had grasped this problem that when the poet is confronted with the experience of nature, especially, the Adamic impulse to name and categorize can obliterate perception of what is real. Long before there was a word for this treating the

idea as if were a real thing ("reification," derived from Latin *res*, "thing"), Wordsworth wrote "[o]f that false secondary power by which / In weakness we create distinctions, then / Believe our puny boundaries are things / Which we perceive, and not which we have made" (lines 250-54).

Wordsworth, with a decidedly mystical experience of nature, nevertheless does a lot of describing. Almost the whole of *The Prelude* in its three surviving versions is cataphatic--positively descriptive. Yet again and again Wordsworth tries, and even succeeds, in articulating a human apprehension of more than can be described taxonomically or simply by means of concrete detail in his surrounding mountains, valleys, cliffs, rivers, lakes. The impulse to express what can scarcely be articulated is powerful in Wordsworth, and to this day it remains so in poetry, whether religious or secular; but the apophatic mode of thought goes beyond what Wordsworth does, since specifically it proceeds by negatives, not description of the visible world. Poetry that thinks apophatically makes the invisible visible by its absence or by creating mental images that are not visual but are available in the imagination.

The apophatic may not be the primary element of the poetry of Odysseus Elytis (1911-1996), but it seems essential to his poetic thinking. Trusting his translators to have caught at least some of this, since I know no modern Greek, I notice that in Elytis's prose piece "Open Papers" he writes with a typical sense of how strong opposites can evoke and turn into each other (as what is present may evoke what is absent), or may even fuse, while not ceasing to be opposites:

Being in the least degree poetic, I loved to the greatest degree Poetry, in the same way that, being in the least degree "patriotic," I loved to the greatest degree Greece. [...] Contrary to those who try hard a whole life long to "construct" their literary likeness, I mean to destroy it at any time and at any moment. [...] Here's why I write. Because Poetry begins there where death has not the final word. It is the end of one life and the commencement of another the same as the first, except it goes very deep, to the extremest point that the soul can track, to the frontiers of the contraries where Helios

and Hades touch. The endless course toward physical light which is the Word, and the Uncreated light which is God. Because it fascinates me to obey him I know not, who is my entire self, not a half-self that goes up and down the streets and "is registered in the records for males of Town Hall."

It is right to give to the unknown the part that belongs to it; here's why we must write. Because Poetry unteaches us the world, such as we found it: the world of deterioration, wherein a certain moment comes for us that is the only road surpassing deterioration, in the sense that death is the only road to Resurrection. [from parts 4 and 9]

So the end of one life and the beginning of another is the point where both worlds are the same; the self one is and lives is the self one does not know; "uncreated," "unknown," and "unteaches" seem active opposites, not mere negations of the word following the prefix "un." (Might "Uncreated light which is God" have been translated "not-created"?)

In "The Garden Sees" Elytis mentions a Byzantine icon-painter, "a Panselinos who paints as though God does not exist / and proves exactly the opposite." If the garden "hears the sounds from the colors," then the perceived (garden) is now the perceiver, and it is perceiving (hearing) what cannot be perceived (colors as sounds). If "the writing stops // wants you to eat the fish bone and throw out the fish," then the new writing will begin with our perceiving of what we usually do not usually perceive, and doing what we usually do not do, till "your hand copies / the Inconceivable."

In "What One Loves," Elytis expands bounteously on the song by Sappho in which she wants to see the absent girl or young woman Anactoria. In a note, Elytis's translators provide in a note a close translation of the stanza of his source-text from which he takes the title of his poem:

Some say a cavalry company, some  
name soldiers, some would call ships  
earth's fairest thing, but I say  
it is what one loves most.

But here is Jim Powell's translation of the whole short poem:

Some say thronging cavalry, some say foot soldiers,  
others call a fleet the most beautiful of  
sights the dark earth offers, but I say it's what-  
ever you love best.

And it's easy to make this understood by  
everyone, for she who surpassed all human  
kind in beauty, Helen, abandoning her  
    husband--that best of  
men--went sailing off to the shores of Troy and  
never spent a thought on her child or loving  
parents: when the goddess seduced her wits and  
    left her to wander,  
she forgot them all, she could not remember  
anything but longing, and lightly straying  
aside, lost her way. But that reminds me  
    now: Anactória,  
she's not here, and I'd rather see her lovely  
step, her sparkling glance and her face than gaze on  
all the troops in Lydia in their chariots and  
    glittering armor.

Sappho's poem is first opposes to concrete things (soldiers on horse or on foot or on ships) an idea (what one loves most), to answer the question of what is most beautiful. Her own answer turns out to be... someone who is absent. Elytis's poem in response is a catalogue on this principle. He begins in prose, then under each heading he writes in lines what cannot in fact be put into his travel bag--because it is elsewhere, because it belongs to someone else, because it cannot be contained, because it cannot be transported, because it is lost in the past, because it cannot be visualized:

I emptied and refilled my travel bag. "Only what's necessary," I said. And it was enough for this life--and for many others yet. So I set myself to listing them one by one:

CRETE

Sealstone with representation of chamois (Heracleion Museum)

The Prince of Lilies (Knossos)

THERA

Kore (fresco)

EGYPT

Portrait of a Woman (Ouserat, tomb no. 51)

Young Man with Antelope (Menna, tomb no. 69)

HOMER

dark water

gleaming entry wall

an endless bright aether burst forth

ARCHILOCUS

with their souls in the arms of the waves

SAPPHO

long night

And so on, through many more objects, places, lines of poems, images from poems, musical works, the catalogue of what *cannot* be put into the travel bag moves from ancient Greece through the Italian renaissance to other painters, to classical and modern

composers, and to one or two lines each from poets of England, France, Spain, Greece, Ireland, Italy and the United States. The bag will have in fact "nothing" in it. Thus apophatic thinking is enacted by what is rhetorically a very concrete naming.

By contrast, Wordsworth's attention is rhetorically cataphatic--that is, positively descriptive--in all three surviving versions of *The Prelude*, as he describes numerous places, things, events, and occasionally persons, on which he focuses the memory of his perceptions in order to illustrate and memorialize his access to spiritual (he often uses the term "intellectual") experience, and his experience of spiritual growth. For poets writing in English, such descriptiveness is second nature, because of the nature of English.

Wordsworth writes of his formation, when a child (in the first version, 1799), "Thus day by day

my sympathies increased, / And thus the common range of visible things / Grew dear to me." I present this contrast not at all to question the ultimately spiritual quest that Wordsworth portrays in his autobiographical poem; rather, I want to make Elytis's method clearer by contrast. Both poets are writing of inner life by touching on outer things--but Wordsworth's outer reality is very present to him visually, while Elytis's is made of things absent, invisible, or impossible or perceive directly ("*souls* in the arms of the waves"?).

## 2. On metamorphosis and metaphor

In trying to approach an understanding of the apophatic as a way of poetic thinking, I offered in my last column some commentary on poems by Catullus (translated by Ezra Pound), Shakespeare, Marvell, Donne, Dickinson, Arun Kolatkar, Baudelaire, Andrew Voznesensky, and others. Now I want to understand how the apophatic arises so distinctly in Russian poetry; I base this part of my commentary on my work with Ilya Kutik, the contemporary Russian poet who was one of the founders of the school or movement called Meta-realists. I will end with work by Joseph Brodsky. But first I will look at how poetry and theology can on this topic be related to each other, even though such a line of thought is sometimes discomfiting to me (about which I will say more, below). This is all nothing if not elusive; yet it beckons, I think, as a way of poetic thinking that adds, or can add, more space--and more movement in that space--to the ways in which we who are native speakers of English tend to think poetically.

Why should the apophatic be illustrated at least in part by the Orthodox (Greek and Russian) heritage of thinking in negatives? Kutik holds that even the most secular modern Russian poets inherit and use a language that is saturated by both rhetorical and poetic apophasis. To me, the question is larger, and is about the underlying relationship of metamorphosis, metaphor and ideas of there being two worlds--one human, one divine; one physical, the other spiritual; one temporal, the other eternal. I have perhaps misunderstood--because it is so difficult to learn a new way of thinking, of perceiving--when Kutik has patiently explained to me that to the Meta-realist poet,

who draws on the Russian heritage of the apophatic, there is only one world, containing both visible and invisible realities. I would parse the possibilities as these: what is visible and known, what is visible and unknown, what is invisible and known, what is invisible and unknown or unknowable. The belief that everything that is, exists in only one world is not only theological; it is perceptual and could even be scientific; it can certainly be of interest to the poet who is scrupulous about how the world might be described, evoked, and imagined. The apophatic poet especially, because of his or her mentality as a being-in-language, creates linguistic expression of that which can scarcely be expressed. What can scarcely be expressed, because it cannot or can scarcely be apprehended, might well be expressed in terms of something that can more easily be apprehended, especially through vision, the perceptual mode on which we most rely.

For example, to speak of consciousness is to speak of the spiritual, in the largest sense: that which pertains to our inner life, what we might call by a metaphor: our mental breath of life. (The

ancient Greeks considered one of the seats of thought and feeling to be the midriff, the *phrênes* [plural], perhaps meaning the lungs, or a configuration of lungs and diaphragm. That is, they clearly associated breath with thought and feeling. As far as I can tell, this is not a metaphor.) And as we know now, after more than a hundred years of psychoanalytical investigations and neuroscience, we can be supremely conscious yet unable to explain consciousness--let alone the unconscious, that realm of instinct, intuition, forgotten experience, desire, fear, predisposition to specific attentions of which we never become consciously aware, and other aspects of

mind. That entire realm, real but not fully discoverable, is a place of seeming separateness from conscious thought, as if it were another world. I have suggested that the apophatic in poetry is so elusive it can scarcely be grasped, when in fact, as we have seen in the poetic examples, above, the grasping can be articulated; to think apophatically is to try to grasp (my apologies for this inadequate dead metaphor), or perhaps evoke (an etymological metaphor--the word derives from Latin *vocare*, to call, so it means not to describe or even necessarily name something but to call it toward us) something that can be experienced or understood only in words that exploit linguistic and imaginative opportunities of the negative and the absent. And such exploitation of a linguistic possibility is most intense in poetry--in the work of some poets (but not by any means all). I don't mean to sidestep theology, which too must grapple (again a metaphor, without which it is hard to describe this experience of language, but at least it is a metaphor familiar from the tale of Jacob and the angel) with language in order to move it as close as possible to what is impossible or nearly impossible to articulate. As I know little of theology, but regarding poetry I have more experience, I think I can ask: Does all poetry work with and against language in this way?

No. Looking at the mass of work of our time, we can readily see that all poetry does not work in this way. And while an apophatic poetics might even, as in the simply-phrased work of Yannis Ritsos (to judge from translations), find a more transparent (again a metaphor) language than I am thinking of, yet I am reminded by the difficulty of the apophatic, of the difficulty of language in general. Geoffrey Hill

eloquently describes this in his essays in *The Enemy's Country: Words, Contexture, and Other Circumstances of Language*. He quotes Dryden's criticism of Ovid, which was that "as his Verse came easily, he wanted the toyl of Application to amend it" (6). (For "amend," read the word we use for this process: "revise.") Hill goes on to say that the poet "is competing with the strengths and resistances and enticements of the English language. To fail to effect the essential negotiations with its fecund recalcitrance, its seeming complaisance, is to labour into otiosity" (9). How aptly Hill points to both a "fecund recalcitrance," which requires the poet to wrestle, grapple, etc. with what English does and can do, and as well to a "seeming complaisance," which is equally fatal because it leads the poet into what we may deprecate with the name "verse" (whether metrical or free)--phrases, ideas, perceptions that come too easily, that belong already to familiar thought-ways, and that often show up in poems that are the gesture of a psyche and a will that wants to be socially, artistically and ideologically accepted (which is not necessarily the same as wanting to be understood). This is why Hill also says that "in the art of poetry, it is so often the effortless that impedes" (8).



So to find a way of articulating absence, of creating verbal ways of *perceiving* that which is but is invisible, that which is here but is unperceivable by the bodily senses, is not only a matter of apophatic poetics but also simply an aspect of the poet's work in general.

From personal experience that is not at all mystical we know that there are invisible certainties, uncanny events, memories enhanced with unforeseen insights, and experiences for which there are no positive or I might say positivistic descriptors. If as Lossky writes, apophaticism "is, above all, an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God" (38), then we might say that an apophatic poetics is a mentality that sees with language as well as with human eyes, that adds a perceptiveness of the absent and invisible to its capacity for description of the visible and concrete (a capacity at a very high level in the English language). An apophatic poetics would convey that which can scarcely be known, by refusing to use even what we might call "advanced" poetic "concepts"--paradox, surreal images, oddities of idiom, among the easier of such concepts; semantically rich phonetic figures, plays on word morphology, rhythmic expressiveness, among the more difficult. (An apophatic poetics does not practice any one poetic style. But it is not likely to be mistaken for much of what is now current as "neo-surrealism," or most of what has long been current as mainstream autobiographical lyric, or most of what has become academically enshrined as "language" poetry?) (Do I really mean "enshrined"? I think I do.) The apophatic is not a style or method but a mentality, a mode of perception.

And although secular persons--I am one--might think about poetry mostly in secular terms, the fact is that poetry, like dance and visual art and music, began--and begins still?--in a spirit of wonder and awe, or a kind of spiritual anger; in a practice of supplication, propitiation, and worship (in joy or fear or both); and in the thrall of apparently supernatural powers with their own wills and intentions (whether for what we call good or what we consider ill). Poetry then develops, in anthropological terms, into a seemingly infinite variety of expressions of the human spirit, the human experience, the human community--including delight in the sensuous, autobiographical narrative and episode, and political and philosophical utterance in poetic form, with moods ranging from the profoundly compassionate to the zealously violent, from the tragic to the nonsensical. Poetry and religious belief are entangled on the ground of consciousness. The identity of the living human creature with an immortal soul that inhabits not only this world but also an afterworld is perhaps one *metamorphosis* among many *metaphors*. In the human imagination, that is, in consciousness, something becomes what it is not: a beautiful young lover is a new red rose; a great ancient stone of such oddity of aspect, of such mystery of origin, that it has an aura of utter uniqueness becomes the navel of the world; states of trance, vision and power become headdresses, masks with antlers, pictographs of ecstatic hair.

And in any case, metamorphosis is firmly based on our own experience: we grow and change both physically and mentally or spiritually if we are lucky enough to reach a maturity that allows us, like Wordsworth, to think back over how our own inner life was formed. All around us we see real metamorphoses out of which folklore makes ancient and still compelling tales--eggs that become reptiles or chicks, and chicks that become birds; caterpillars that become butterflies; seeds that become flowers that become fruit. Meanwhile metaphor, a supremely human act, is at the

heart of

cognition, so much so that we are scarcely conscious of it. Metaphors themselves undergo metamorphoses, from acts of clear and concise perception and of thinking outside logic (although not always outside reason), to their "dead" (a metaphor, in this case) state as clichés that can only be brought back to life, it seems, by a poetic use of language.

No one else, however, can see the journey that the shaman describes having taken. His leap from a treetop into... this same world, in which now he alone can see spirit creatures, is a kind of poetic act. It is mimed or evoked or invoked or enacted through language that is poetically charged, so that words bring to us far more meaning than they have in our daily usage, especially because of the way poetry packs them close against one another, and reveals their own affinities for each other. I have heard Kutik say when speaking of how Russian poetry plays on sound, morphology, and grammar, that meaning is created partly when the words themselves find the other words they themselves seek. For poets, then perhaps only through labors of composition focused on such sudden, inspired or gradual, crafted compression of sound, word-forms, and grammatical and syntactic turns, does the poem achieve a poetic meaningfulness; and there are profound pleasures of being deep inside this compositional process, and then in following, as a reader, what it has made happen.

Lossky the theologian seeks "the perfect way" to God; but poetry is not religion, any longer, and it seeks a human, imperfect way--what in the mystical theology deriving from Dionysius is called "created being." But on the merely human path, too, there are encounters with the seemingly ungraspable, with that which is very present but cannot be seen directly. Even the utterly secular Russian writer Daniil Kharm's (1905-1937) found that in Stalin's Soviet Union there was ample call for the writer to attend to what was invisible, or what--like a human being--could become invisible at the whim of state power (this piece is called by the color of the notebook in which it was found, "Blue Notebook, No. 10," composed in 1937):

There was once a red-haired man who had no eyes and no ears. he also had no hair, so he was called red-haired only in a manner of speaking.

He wasn't able to talk, because he didn't have a mouth. He had no nose, either.

He didn't even have any arms or legs. He also didn't have a stomach, and he didn't have a back, and he didn't have a spine, and he also didn't have any other insides. He didn't have anything. So it's hard to understand whom we're talking about.

So we'd better not talk about him any more.

In a poem entitled in English "Notnow," Kharm's writes:

That is This.

That is That.

This is not That.

This is not This.

What's left is either this, or not this.

It's all either that, or not that.

What's not that and not this, this is not this and not that.

And there are twenty-three more lines in this vein, including "We watched but did not see." Reading Kharm's prose works, all of them very brief, one comes to see how the censorship and mortal danger to nonconformists of the post-Revolutionary and then Stalinist years in the Soviet Union could focus the mind very acutely on what may not be said, what may not be done, what may not even be thought. The apophatic becomes political. Words change places with their opposites not in search of meaning but under the political pressure that annihilates meaning, so that "peace" means "war," what is a lie is called the truth, and so on--measures exerted by political regimes from ancient Rome to contemporary America, but especially and thoroughly imposed under Stalin.

#### 4.

I have been attempting for some time now to learn how to see in poems an apophatic gesture, or responsiveness, or habit of mind. As I read, though, I forget to look; I see

what the poem shows me that I can perceive according to the way in which I am already accustomed to perceiving; I do not see that which I am not used to perceiving. Occasionally I notice something that to me seems apophatic in poets as different as Kolatkar, Ritsos, Donne, Dickinson, Vozhnesensky, Elytis, Darwish. But I feel the strain of descrying the apophatic much more than if I were trying to learn a species of bird or tree that I had never before discriminated from others. I am trying to recognize a species of thought, and to do that, I must do much more than take to a different stretch of the woods with guidebook in hand. I have to free myself from a perceptual stance that remains habitual, even though I have deliberately practiced new moves, and even though this stance cannot have been innate. It's a stance I had not fully realized I had taken, since little experience in contrast to it has given me the freedom I need in order to bring it to consciousness, where I might make it more receptive. I read poems, look at art, listen to music, and listen to everyday language, partly in order to keep my stance adaptable and attentive. Yet perhaps I don't succeed very well.

To my habitual, English-language way of seeing the world partly by means of the words I use, my attempt to take a new stance, so as simply to recognize the apophatic, feels more than awkward.

Maybe my difficulty really only shows how stiff I am imaginatively. I've always been aesthetically restless, as I have mentioned before, but that doesn't mean that unwittingly I haven't been--to continue with the metaphor of one's body for one's thinking--far less aesthetically flexible than I had thought. In his "The Last Train Has Stopped," Darwish writes, "Where can I free myself of the homeland of my body?" Exactly. Or at least dance differently in and through my body (which is what speaks). I find there is indeed a difference between the dancer and the dance--after all, the dancer may be able, even if only just barely, to imagine a dance that remains beyond his abilities.

In his "Excerpts from the Byzantine Odes of Abu Firas," Darwish also says, addressing an echo: "Take me with you to my language, I said." I want to say to the poems in which I find an apophatic opening, "take me with you to the thought I too have, but don't know that I have." No--take me beyond a "thought" to a way of thinking. Isn't this one of the great things that poetry is able to accomplish? "Take me with you to my language," I say to the poem I myself am writing. "Take me with you to my own thought, to what I am feeling." In the poetic dance with language, it's the dancing that invents the steps. One of the steps I seem scarcely ever to have danced, and never knowing that I was dancing it, is the apophatic step.

One of the closest approximations in contemporary American poetry to Russian apophaticism might be in the work of the Russian poet who made for himself a second poetic home, however oddly constructed, in American English--Joseph Brodsky. While Brodsky's poetry, especially what he wrote in English, can seem superficial, meandering, and linguistically very awkward to native speakers of English. And in fact most American readers of poetry do not hear Brodsky's poems in English as idiomatic; they are like poems written in English words by the rules of some other language. But perhaps we can see the artistic impulse behind some of what he was doing. Now, although among Brodsky's many essays there is none on apophaticism, nevertheless he writes things like this: "Poetry has a certain appetite for emptiness, starting, say, with that of infinity" ("An Immodest Proposal"). American poetry, though, he says, is "rich and extremely lucid in detail," and "is a relentless nonstop sermon on human autonomy; the song of the atom, if you will, defying the chain reaction." (This is an image he uses also in his late poem "Anthem," which he wrote in English.) The microcosmic individuality of the single atom, and the enormous wealth of detail in American poetry, are at an opposite extreme from the palpable emptiness and absence that apophaticism can articulate, and for which poetry, as Brodsky sees it, has an appetite. Stevens writes about a "they" that represents most of us Americans:

They said, "You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are."  
The man replied, "Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar."  
And they said then, "But play, you must,

A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar

Of things exactly as they are."

And fighting them (us), at the end of that lengthy poem, Stevens is still insisting on the value of "The moments when we choose to play / The imagined pine, the imagined jay." But in his poetics, Stevens is hardly unambiguous, and this apparent stance could be argued--for some would hold that the ordinary and the real are at the heart of poetry in English in general, because of the particular genius of the English language and the poetic mentalities (plural again) that it permits and nurtures; yet such argument among

us is unlikely to take a further step toward the paradox of the imagined absence, the presence that is invisible, the visual image of what does not exist or of what is unreal yet does exist.

In Brodsky's "Elegy: For Robert Lowell" (1977)--the first poem that he wrote in English, and perhaps the best of them all--he sometimes writes as if with Russian poetics. He likes to avoid rhyme words that are the same part of speech (as when in part III he half-rhymes the verb "graze" with the noun "grease," and the adjective "flat" with the noun "flag"). For example, beginning his evocation of Lowell's funeral with a porcupine--as if to offer for himself a poetic totem animal to respond to Lowell's skunk (which had come to him in response to Bishop's armadillo), Brodsky makes use of chiming words that to ears trained in English can seem imprecise rhymes are an element of poetic composition, not an ornament (see my earlier APR on rhyme); that is, after he uses the word "needles" at the end of line 4, he finds the word "needless" for the end of line 6--adding one more "s" and producing a completely different meaning. In stanza two, from "People's" he finds his way, or language does, to "pebbles," a surprising move, as he would have seen it, rather than a less-than-half-rhyme:

In the autumnal blue

of your church-hooded New

England, the porcupine

sharpens its golden needles

against Bostonian bricks

to a point of needless

blinding shine.

White foam kneels and breaks

on the altar. People's  
eyes glitter inside  
the church like pebbles  
splashed by the tide.

Then the apophatic element is in the opposition of "a lot, / a lot of Almighty Lord, / but not so much as a shred / of your flesh." And again, in absence: "When man dies/ the wardrobe gapes instead." In the second part of the poem, his images of language can't really be visualized:

On the Charles's bank  
dark, crowding, printed letters  
surround their sealed tongue.  
A child, commalike, loiters  
among dresses and pants  
of vowels and consonants  
that don't make a word.

"That *don't* make a word" is the negative that evokes what it says is not. Late in the poem he writes of death,

It might feel like an old  
dark place with no match  
to strike, where each word  
is trying the latch.

Again, the negative: "no match"; and the image of the immaterial and invisible--the word--trying to become a material key (to a door that does not in fact exist). He then writes of "the invisibility of / lingering soul."

So how *does* Brodsky see poetry?--evidently, from a perspective that is not only natural to speakers of Russian but also very elusive for speakers of English. While Brodsky's taste in American and English poetry is somewhat rear-guard, in that he favors traditional metrics and rhyme--and he especially praises Hardy, Frost, and Auden--his taste in Russian poetry is for the formerly avant-garde difficulty which in Marina Tsvetaeva and Osip Mandelstam had to wait a

few generations to be appreciated by readers. In Tsvetaeva he notes especially her way of writing by ear--opening words up as if they could hear and speak to each other, based on their sounds; and in Mandelstam he describes the "acceleration" of consciousness and image and feeling that is produced by Mandelstam's "oversaturated" poems, arising out of an oversaturated existence, and resulting in highly individual work, leaping rapidly through sequences of metaphors, and facing toward the idea of a world civilization.

Brodsky's own "In Memory of Clifford Brown," a late poem (written in Russian in 1993, published in 1995 in Brodsky's own translation), is structured by the rhetoric of apophasis in its entirety:

It's not the color blue, it's the color cold.

It's the Atlantic color you've got no eyes for...

It's not a regular ice floe, meltdown-prone...

It's not a guileless tune that chafes in the darkness...

It's not a simple space, it's a nothing [...]

But how is the use of this device different in quality from the use of any other structuring rhetoric, such as anaphora (a rubric under which this poem could also be filed)?

1

When I asked Ilya Kutik about this, he replied, "The apophatic in Brodsky is mostly a way of speech from the vantage point of 'absence'--not 'presence.' He speaks from the 'point of view' of 'emptiness' all the time." The apophaticism of Russian Orthodoxy, which so saturates the Russian language, is available as a poetic resource to a Jewish poet, too. In Vladimir Lossky's *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, there is a statement we might consider for its applicability to poetry; he writes: "If in seeing God one can know what one sees, then one has not seen God in Himself but something intelligible, something which is inferior to Him" What if we were to think, "If in seeing an object--an inanimate thing, a place, a person, an event--one can know what one sees, then one has *not* seen it in itself but something intelligible, which is inferior to the thing." Or, if we were to imagine what we do not see in itself--not only the material object like the wardrobe that is now the absence of a man, but also the immaterial image of alphabet letters gathering on the banks of the Charles River.

Since it is vitally important to our ability to survive, to attain some human freedom, and to help others to survive and be free, that the power of reason, the ability to understand, to make intelligible to ourselves, not be denied, even in poetry (Brodsky himself says this at different moments), what *would* be the role in human life of a kind of poetic thinking that did not accept the apparent reality of what one sees and experiences? Or, to put this question more fairly, what would be the value of a poetic thinking that also--not exclusively--knew that what it could

articulate even with difficulty was only part of reality, not the whole of it? (And I posit this without in the least meaning that the part that remains to be seen is in any way supernatural.) Yes: one can see a crime, and know enough of it, fortunately for human beings, to condemn and prosecute him who has committed it; yes, one can see an act of love, and know enough of it to praise and cherish her who has committed it. One can see an inanimate thing or a place and

so cherish the value of its presence both literal and symbolic that one approaches it linguistically with rich and playful detail--as Brodsky himself shows in discussing Thomas Hardy's poem "The Darkling Thrush" (in his essay "Wooing the Inanimate").

But my point all along has not been to *oppose* the apophatic negative definitions and evocations that one sees in Russian poetry to the particulars and positives of American poetry and indeed of the English language, but to set them in relation to each other. Brodsky writes that

in the process of composition a poet employs--by and large unwittingly--the two main modes of cognition available to our species: Occidental and Oriental. (Of course both modes are available whenever you find frontal lobes, but different traditions have employed them with different degrees of prejudice.) The first puts a high premium on the rational, on analysis. [Elsewhere, Brodsky characterizes English as an analytic language.] In social terms, it is accompanied by man's self-assertion and generally is exemplified by Descartes's "Cogito ergo sum." The second relies mainly on intuitive synthesis [elsewhere Brodsky characterizes Russian as a synthetic language], calls for self-negation, and is best represented by the Buddha. In other words, poetry offers you a sample of complete, not slanted, human intelligence at work. This is what constitutes the chief appeal of poetry, quite apart from its exploiting rhythmic and euphonic properties of the language which are in themselves quite revelatory. ("An Immodest Proposal")

I sense that apophatic poetic thinking in Russian poetry exists to answer the artistic and spiritual problem of discovering what exists but remains unknown. This does not seem to have been a pressing philosophical or theological issue in poetry in English. To return to my purpose in exploring this topic: what if it were such an issue? And what, in its place, would we say is the pressing philosophical or theological or even political issue in poetry in English? Or at least, in poetry in American English? Or in American poetry written in English or Spanish? Can we use apophatic poetic thinking as a kind of lever that will enable us to move what we are looking at, when we look at American poetry, in order to see it from a different angle?



My profound thanks to Ilya Kutik for bringing John Donne's poem to my attention, as well as the poems by Odysseus Elytis, and theological works by Pavel Florensky and Vladimir Lossky, and Erwin Panofsky's *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*.

Joseph Brodsky, "An Immodest Proposal" and "Wooing the Inanimate," in *On Grief and Reason: Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995. See pp. 198, 204, 206, 312-335.

Robert Duncan, "Notes on Poetic Form," in *The Poet's Work*, ed. by Reginald Gibbons. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

*The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*, translated by Jeffrey Carson and Nikos Sarris. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

Geoffrey Hill, *The Enemy's Country: Words, Contexture, and Other Circumstances of Language*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky, *The Man with the Black Coat: Russia's Literature of the Absurd*. Edited and translated by George Gibian. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1987. Also see *Oberiu: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism*. Edited by Eugene Ostashevsky. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006.

Denise Levertov, "Some Notes on Organic Form," in *The Poet's Work*, ed. by Reginald Gibbons. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976. See p. 25.

Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art History*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.