
Sophie Fenella Robins

This essay is about *Pieces of Me for You*, an autobiographical performance I performed at BRINK Festival at Central School of Speech and Drama (University of London) in 2012. My practice is predominantly performance poetry, which essentially means that I write poetry to be performed. I write to and for the spectator/listener with a constant mindfulness of how the words will sound when performed. I speak as I write, silently mouthing the words to myself, feeling the shape of them on my tongue, and I write in anticipation of the moment of performance; because it is in that moment that my words become meaningful. Above all, my practice is driven by the obligation to which Samuel Beckett (1970) refers, that is, the obligation to express the inexpressible, and the feeling that it is the writer’s duty to do so (105).

Beckett brought silence to the stage when faced with the obligation to express the trauma caused by World War II, and he created elliptic dialogues to show the limitations of words. My work in performance poetry has been driven by an objective to break these limitations, to find ways around words and create texts that are performative acts of expression. These performative texts evoke feelings that are too intense for words, materialise memories that evade literal description, and create metaphors for past experiences too painful for full articulation. For Beckett, silence and elliptical language were the best tools to express the ineffable, for me writing performatively and performing poetry express what words alone cannot express. In this essay I use the method of performative writing within a critical framework, informed by the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, C.G Jung and Sigmund Freud on the unconscious. Using the writings of Beckett, Freud, Jung and Merleau-Ponty I will argue that metaphorical writing realises the ambiguity, subjectivity and ineffability of the unconscious.

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ing a practice that uses performance poetry to narrate personal experience, and represent the ineffability of dreams, memories and repressed emotions, including grief, has led me to the conclusion that the performer is able to show ineffability. Furthermore, writing as performance evokes the quality of an ineffable experience, emotion, or vision so that it becomes a felt experience that can be shared with an audience.

Expressing the Ineffable: an Introduction

B. ...I speak of an art turning ... in disgust, weary of puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road.

D. And preferring what?

B. The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express

(Samuel Beckett, 1970: 103)

A writer may turn to poetry with a desire to artfully name the world and make others see the world in different ways. However, there are certain subjective feelings, emotions, experiences and images that are unnameable, but are expressible without words, and that is the ineffable. Expression can be a struggle, a struggle driven by an obligation to express the ineffable, even though that is a paradoxical task. How can the ineffable, of which its very nature resists, nay evades, words, be expressed in language? How can writing become more than a description, and in this becoming evoke ineffable experiences, that are crucial to the narration of personal experience? And finally how can writing performatively re-evoke an ineffable experience? These are the questions that inform my investigation into the fulfilment of the paradoxical task to express the ineffable in performance poetry.

The obligation to express the ineffable can be satiable by saying nothing, by saying any random metaphor that comes to mind, or by speaking (or writing) in such a way that saying (and writing) become doing. I write to do the doing verb, to write, to perform, and make something happen. According to Della Pollock to write performatively is to write to make something happen. For Pollock performative writing should bring about social, political and cultural change (76), whereas for me performative writing brings the feeling of ineffability into being. I write to perform ineffability, not describe an ineffable experience. Writing performatively (performative writing), reveals that expressing the ineffable is a performative act, and in the doing of the act, ineffability becomes visible to the spectator/reader. Above all, the outsider status of the ineffable, within written discourse, is preserved via performative writing whether metaphorical, evocative, or metonymic, because the ineffable is insinuated but never explicitly ‘present’. The ineffable
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lurks on the peripherals of language, experienced through evocation, rather than mimetic words.

Furthermore, the interplay between reader/writer is fundamental to the construction of meaning in my work, in the same way that the interplay between performer/spectator constructs meanings in performance. I write to create possibilities that become meaningful at the moment of reception, be that reading, listening, or witnessing; strands of meanings emerge from the stream of possibilities inscribed within the text. Pollock is reluctant to prescribe a normative style or form to performative writing, but she does outline informal suggestions for how the reader may find a way into the non-genre that is performative writing.

First, there is the principle of rendering absence present, through metaphors that evoke intangible worlds (Pollock, 80). I use performative writing to evoke the intangible, and un-locatable, world of the unconscious. I have chosen to re-evoke the ineffability of events from my own autobiography, because I feel those experiences are personally significant events, and are crucial to my practice. Conversely, Pollock identifies the need to make writing speak as writing, and of drawing attention to writing as writing, and thereby revealing what it cannot be (76). The performative writer makes a stylistic decision to write words that are self-referential substitutes for something they can never be, and to make absent what metaphoric writing attempts to make present (81). Being self-consciously metonymic by making the gap between linguistic symbols and their significations visible, which “dramatizes the limits of language” (82). The sign takes on the role of the thing it represents but it never loses its identity as a sign, like the actor who takes on the role of a character, without losing their identity as an actor. I write to create textual substitutes for personal experience. The gap between the word and the (subjective) feeling, the sign and the signified, the act and the description is the paradox at the heart of expressing the ineffable in writing.

I have drawn on psychoanalytic theory for my work on the ineffable, and argue that the ineffable lurks beneath the surface of words like a textual unconscious. Indeed the unconscious and the ineffable correlate, because an unconscious experience is fundamentally an experience that evades explicit verbal articulation. Now, what exactly do I mean by the ineffable, and what is its relation to performance poetry? The ineffable is an intense feeling that feels unfamiliar because it transcends language; no word fits; words only skim the surface of feeling, and seem to leave something out. Moments of ineffability are daydreams that cannot be fully remembered, indescribable feelings, unfamiliar images, and a conscious recognition of the inexplicability of the unconscious. Ineffability is the quality of unspeakableness, the feeling of not being able to speak, of not being able to find the word, or when the unmentionable overwhelms consciousness. When images override words, and when your mother tongue seems like a foreign language. The “umms” and “errrrs,” wordless pauses, the moments when someone asks you what you’re thinking about, but you’re not sure how to describe those thoughts, so
you say “nothing”. Moments when retinal images appear, (in between a blink), and vanish before you have time to look directly at them. The moment when remnants of a dream leak into consciousness, then flicker before finally fading. The desire to grasp, cling on to, and retrieve those fading feelings is the desire to express the ineffable. Acting upon this desire performs the ineffable.

Performing the ineffable is a means to channel speechlessness through body and voice, and express the unutterable through a style of performance poetry that is profoundly metaphorical, and articulates emotion without literal description. The ineffable is beyond speech, and so ineffability (the quality of the ineffable) can only be expressed and articulated without speech, in the gaps in between speech, by silent gestural evocations made after an exclamation, or by indirect metaphors that refer to something without explicitly naming anything. Ineffability appears in the cracks of language; the performance poet is able to make these cracks visible.

When Silence Speaks

*I open my mouth and I try and I try*

*But no words came out*

(The Moldy Peaches, 2002)

When words fail there is silence, when words cannot be spoken there is silence and when the language of the ineffable overrules all others there is Silence.

There is a fundamental frustration at the heart of Beckett’s oeuvre, a frustration with the writer’s obligation to express the ineffable, a frustration that amounts to a state of existence in which saying nothing is the only way of saying anything. Beckett’s work sits in the wider cultural frame of the post-traumatic state that most of the world was plagued by after World War Two. A generation of writers were suddenly confronted by the new and unfamiliar task of writing about and recording the horrors of genocide, to ensure that future generations would memorialise those horrors. However, in the face of genocide, injustice and the suffering of an entire religion words are mere facades for a vortex of emotion that is linguistically void. Beckett brought silence to the stage after the war, a silence within which characters live in the shadows of trauma. His characters speak elliptically, sporadically uttering words to break the silence but they do so cautiously, reluctantly, because silence seems to be the best way to express what cannot be said. Constructing a sentence is no longer possible, because they are faced with something too terrible for words, and so they are silent, and are resigned to a linguistic paralysis triggered by the paradoxical obligation to express the ineffable.

Silence.
However, there are different kinds of silence in Beckett’s work. I want to look at two of them: a) the silence of a post-traumatic state and b) the silence of a linguistic void. In *Come and Go* (1984) three women personify a life of habitual silence and stillness, and their stifling, still, silence activates the linguistic void at the heart of the ineffable. The play begins with the question “when did we three last meet,” answered dismissively by the character Ru who pleas “let us not speak” (194), as if the formulation of an answer is far too arduous an act to engage in. The question is left unanswered because the reply is not an answer; it is a refusal, a refusal to answer and a plea for wordlessness. And so the answer cancels itself out at the moment of utterance. Ru only speaks because she would rather say nothing; she would prefer to be silent. Ru’s reply is followed by the stage directions “Silence. Exit Vi Right. Silence,” a silence in which nothing happens there is no movement, no speech, there is only the sound of the moment amplified by the three women’s stillness. After a minute or so Vi moves and the silence is broken by the sound of her moving feet, once she has vanished into the shadows at the edge of the stage that same silence comes again, and the women return to sitting in the still, silent, silence, that is the soundtrack of trauma.

There are many questions left unanswered in this play, who are these women? How do they know each other? How old are they? The later is left un-answered by Beckett’s (1984) instruction that the character’s ages are specifically “undeterminable” (193), which suggests that the question of their age is purposefully unanswerable. These unanswerable questions evoke the ineffability of inexplicable events, for which the only answer is silence. Therefore, the questions in *Come and Go* that are only answered by “Silence” (194) have a timbre of inexplicability which communicates a post-traumatic state that cannot be put into words. The second kind of silence (silence b) is described by Leslie Kane as “The Void the Nothing, the ultimate language of the self that is unattainable” (105). This notion of silence as an unattainable language resonates with my previous point that silence communicates a condition of unanswerable questions. The term unattainable implies that there is something longed for, perhaps an answer, which cannot be attained. Furthermore, the fact that Kane uses capital letters suggests that this ‘Void’ deserves capitalisation because it is so significant, which implies that it is of some importance, and is thus perhaps symbolically equivalent with the name of a place, for example, possibly London. The Void is the place where ineffability resides, a place of verbal absence, a place that words fail to explain or describe because, in the face of trauma, they are nothing but empty shells, which conceal an emotion beyond words. Therefore, Beckett fulfilled the writer’s obligation to express the inexpressible by replacing words with a linguistic void that expressed nothing verbally, which ironically revealed the abundance of emotion felt after the war.

The expression of the ineffable in silence was the inspiration behind my own exploration of speechlessness in *Pieces of Me for You*. At one point I attempted to read extracts from my journal to the audience. I repeated this section five times, and on the first run my attempt to convey speechlessness
ironically resulted in the inability to speak. I had left this moment relatively unplanned so as to heighten my feeling of nervousness, and to increase the probability of me ‘choking’, messing up, getting stage fright, and subsequently not being able to speak. I stared at the page and opened my mouth, but all that came out was a flux of stuttering spluttering stammering ‘errrs’ and ‘umms’. Moments of pause were juxtaposed by these spluttering stammers, and there emerged an elliptical lyrical sequence, which communicated my inability to speak. The lyricism of this moment is most clear when performed. However, in order to show the versification of this section I will now attempt to translate it for the page.

OK

So

Ok

So

I’ve got this story to tell ............
Well...

It’s

Kind

Of

About....

Ummmmmmmmmmmmmm

It’s about ,

Errrrrrrrrr

ERRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR

Ok,

So

I’ve got this story to tell it’s kind of about.....

.................................................................
I forced myself to speak against my will and my words felt too loud, too big, bigger than me. The obligation to speak to all those people watching, waiting for me to say something, anything, was an obligation far greater than I could handle, and so I had to force myself to speak UP. Soon after nervousness began to set in and my voice faltered, my hands began to sweat, my throat was dry, and my voice became weaker, until finally I could say no more. I remember looking at the words on the page and thinking they looked alien, foreign; they felt unfamiliar on my tongue. I stared at the audience and felt disassociated from them, as if I was in a world where I could not communicate with others.

In retrospect, this moment compares to Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of amnesic aphasia in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as the loss of the power of expression by speech is itself a kind of ineffability. In the case of amnesic aphasia words lose something that normally belongs to them “the name is no longer useful, it says nothing, it is bizarre and absurd” (199). The presupposition that in certain states words say nothing suggests that in this state the subject is unable to relate to words, and so they seem like meaningless false expressions of thought. When I uttered the line, “I’ve got a story to tell,” in *Pieces of Me for You*, saying the words felt like a lie because, really, truly I did not want to tell my story. The words I uttered did not express my thoughts. “What then does language express if it does not express thought? It presents, or rather it is, the subject’s taking up of a position in the world” (199).

Therefore, when speech fails because the subject cannot formulate or relate to words they take up a position of disassociation from the world—a position from which they are unable to relate and converse with others. This feeling is best shown by a moment during *Pieces of Me for You* when I was overwhelmed by an image of my father on his deathbed. After the performance I reflected on this moment in my journal.

There were moments when I felt like I could no longer speak, not because I forgot my lines, but because I was overwhelmed by an image that my mind had conjured in association with a word. I was flooded by images of my father on his deathbed. I could not control it, I choked. And that time felt more solemn, more morbid, than any of the other times. I didn’t feel like I could move my arms from the wall, I spoke each word as if I was vomiting great lumps of concrete. I couldn’t stop staring at the image in my mind and I could barely utter the next word. (Journal entry 24/06/12)

I felt disconnected from my bodily position in the present moment. Momentarily, I lapsed into the world of memory and this momentary lapse resulted in a state of speechlessness. The examples that I have outlined from *Come and Go* and my own performance are examples of when silence overrules speech because of a lapse in conscious awareness of the material world, a refusal to perform the task (or obligation) at hand and an inability to express thought to others. A desire to disassociate oneself from the world by
not speaking is an approach to the expression of the ineffable in which the artist chooses to say nothing, not out of protest, but because nothing is all they can say. The ineffable is after all beyond words, and those who have an ineffable experience may feel so overwhelmed by the very ineffability of their experience, or emotion, that they resign themselves to saying nothing.

**Without Words, With Images**

*Words will always be saying too much or too little… Oh to be silent! Oh to be a painter!*  
(Virginia Woolf, 1988: 166)

It was the end of January, the trees were bare and the air was still on the top of Primrose Hill. The trees arrested by the stillness stood with their leafless branches silhouetted against the sky, like a mesh of black wires, jutting, stabbing, poking and fragmenting the grey white sky. I was struck by their stillness; they looked like they were in pain, paralysed like statues frozen by Medusa’s stare. I felt overwhelmed by a compulsion to write about what I saw, to describe this image and let my pen express my subjective perception. Pen in hand I froze, I could not think of a word to write, no word seemed to bridge the gap between what I saw and what I felt. The dark branches silhouetted against the English winter sky looked too… too… too… I felt feverishly frustrated by my insatiable desire to write, I could not think of a single word that would describe the image, there was simply no name for the peculiar quality of what I saw. No words would capture the vividness of the branches, the vibrancy that seemed to silence thought, to arrest consciousness and catch my eye in such an unfamiliar way. Yes what I saw was just a tree but what I perceived through the lens of my own subjectivity, was a nameless quality. Why couldn’t I write? How else could I express what I saw? How else could I release subjectivity? I gave up, and without thinking I put my pen and paper back in my bag and picked up my camera.

The photographs seemed to silently mirror my perception, and bring the subjective feeling which the branches aroused within me to the surface. Therefore, the subjectivity of my perception became expressible without words, and the camera satisfied my desire to share my vision with the rest of the world. In the words of Merleau-Ponty (1964), I had released the image so that it “no longer existed [within me] like a shadow, dream or persistent delirium” (20). I could now show what I saw to other people, and express the wordlessness that I could not overcome, through the medium of photography. Looking at the photographs made me feel calmer, as though I had released something that was bubbling inside of me, something that I was desperate to share. Before taking the photographs, I was unsure of what I wanted to express because there was nothing to express in the medium most familiar to me (writing).
The experience that I described at the beginning of this chapter shows a moment when I could not find the proper name for the quality of what I saw, which epitomises an ineffable experience that is also uncanny. When I looked at the trees in Primrose Hill the name ‘tree’ did not capture the peculiar way in which the branches looked frozen against the sky, more had to be said. However, rather ironically, I found that nothing could be said because my subjective perception was ineffable. I could not find the proper name for
the way in which the branches appeared to me. I wanted to reconstruct this experience in a performative setting to re-evoke the ineffable quality of those branches, and share this namelessness with the spectator. And so I projected the photographs that I took on Primrose Hill in the studio, to trigger an uncanny experience in which the process of naming is disturbed. I invited my mentor Antonia Batzoglou into the studio to see if the images had a similar effect on her. Batzoglou said that at first she did not know what the photos were of, and it took her some time to realise that they were trees. Therefore, for an instant she did not know the proper name for what she saw. Subsequently, the photographs effectively evoked the ineffable feeling of namelessness.

In his critique of Cézanne’s painting, Merleau-Ponty (1964) describes this way of seeing the world without names with a sense of longing for a primordial world, he writes,

Cézanne’s painting … reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself. This is why Cézanne’s people are strange, as if viewed by a creature of another species… it is an unfamiliar world in which one is uncomfortable. (16).

The inhuman nature of the unfamiliar world depicted by Cézanne’s paintings evokes a world pre-man, and the language he developed. I believe that the base of inhuman nature that Merleau-Ponty refers to is a world that is not only pre-man, it is also pre-words, and a world of pre-words is peculiarly unfamiliar. The unfamiliar feeling of seeing an image (or painting) that does not resemble the reality familiar to us, because of the way that the artist has framed an object/image unsettles the relationship between an object and its name. For example, when I took the photographs I zoomed in to make the branches look more like abstract patterns than branches. I also pointed the camera towards the sun so that there was a high contrast between the branches and the sky which meant the photographed branches did not look their normal brown colour, they looked like black silhouettes. The photographs defamiliarised the everyday tree to evoke an uncanny disturbance of names, and the inability to perform the poetic act of naming that I experienced when faced with an unfamiliar image. The unfamiliar is un-nameable and the un-nameable is ineffable, thus by framing the tree in an unfamiliar way, I evoked feelings of ineffability through an unspoken language of images. However, my decision to be silent, say nothing, and use instead images to evoke the ineffable felt like I had betrayed my loyalty to the art of writing. The writer must find ways around words, and try and fill the gaps left open by nameless experiences, and so I turned to metaphor and metonym to try and fill the ineffable gap that lurks beneath personal experience, the gap I struggle to articulate it.
That … Called the Unconscious

You must say words, as long as there are any
(Samuel Beckett, 1975:132)

The driving objective of ‘Pieces of Me for You’, was to turn the subjectivity of my personal experiences into qualities evocable in performance poetry. I wanted to turn my dreams, memories, fantasies and all the intangible experiences that are associated with the unconscious, into performative textualities. The texts I created invited the spectator to actively interpret a layer of meanings that rests beneath the text, the layer of subtext and connotations that lie waiting to be bought to the surface. I wanted to make multivalent words; sentences that shift, change shape, and re-form to reflect the principle of open interpretation at the heart of my investigation into the unconscious. I wrote to understand my unconscious experiences, to re-evoke the quality of unconsciousness, and make tangible the allusive remains of dreams and fantasies that persist in consciousness.

The unconscious is relatively ungraspable, because it is always beyond conscious reflection, but still I try to grasp it, to understand it, to define it and record my experiences of it. The nature of an unconscious experience is inherently subjective thus the task is not to create a universally recognisable depiction of the unconscious, the task is to bring a version of the unconscious into being through writing, and create a material textual unconsciousness, brought to life in performance. Jung (1995) was haunted by the unconscious realm of the psyche that was for him a profound psychical reality, and for whom the vividness of his ‘inner’ experiences posed a problem of description, that he felt scarcely able to cope with (9-11). The problem for Jung was his inability to give an objective account of his life, because of his favour for inner experiences over outward events. A problem solvable by a way of writing that is driven by a freedom from the obligation to give objective accounts of events. Writing creatively about an unconscious experiences will preserve the fundamental subjectivity of that experience, thus come as close as possible to the ‘true’ nature of the experience itself. Jung (1956) asks, “How are fantasies made and what is their nature? From the poets we learn much and from the scientists little” (25).

A certain peculiar feeling evoked by a daydream, a fantasy or a dream, can arouse a desire to inscribe that feeling in order to re-evoke it, and perhaps understand it. I was confronted with that exact desire after a peculiar fantasy I had on a train:

With my headphones in and my face pressed against the window I let my eyes flicker open and shut as the pastoral English landscape flashed by like a retracting film reel. In between open and shut eyes, somewhere in between the train window and the insides of my eye lids I saw a girl who looked like me but who was not me. She was crying from all the grief that she had ever felt and with each sob she moved her body like a ballerina. She began to dance in a way that I knew to be impossible, half flying half falling; she seemed to be collapsing under her own weight. I was the choreog-
I decided to create a performative text that re-evoked the otherworldly quality of the dancer’s rhythm, and the hazy confusion of being somewhere in between waking and dreaming. I used automatic writing, a technique associative with what Jung (1956) refers to as fantasy thinking, a kind of thinking that “turns away from reality and sets free subjective tendencies guided by unconscious motives” (18). The key to automatic writing is to write without consciously thinking about what you are writing, allowing your mind to wander from the present moment into memory, the imagination and let fantasy guide your thoughts.

When I first used automatic writing to narrate my fantasy I began by lying down, breathing deeply and trying to clear my mind. I then let my hand create words without thinking about what the words meant, or why I wrote them. Half my attention was on the pen in my hand, and the other was on the image of the girl in the forest. I let my eyelids droop, and my mind conjure the stuff of daydreams and fantasy. I wrote without thinking, only half-aware, only half-conscious; I wrote unconsciously to evoke unconsciousness. What emerged was a lyrical text entitled *Wilderness* (see appendix A). The text is fragmented and repetitive; images of “a figure beneath the tree” appear momentarily, and then disappear like a glimpse of a daydream. The feeling of collapsing under a great weight is realised by the repetition of the line “got to get back up again can’t stop there” as if through repetition the strength to stand up will somehow be found. The repeated phrase “hush now breathe easy” evokes the sound of trees blowing in the wind, like a plea for tranquillity from Mother Nature. Furthermore, the repetition of the pronoun ‘you’ shows that the speaker is speaking to someone, and that someone is of course the girl in the forest. The narrative seems distracted, and skips impatiently from one image to the next never staying with one for too long, never going into detail, never explaining. The same image returns again and again, as I hastily try to remember something that has been forgotten, remembering, re-membering, repeatedly remembering but constantly glancing forward, with half a gaze, at what comes next. Writing by distraction, writing distraction; the textual epitome of a daydream or fantasy, which are unconscious experiences.

In order to write the unconscious and thereby create a textual materiality for the unconscious, the relationship between sign and signifier should change from sign – signifier to sign-signifiers, and this is something that I believe to be achievable in the act of performing a text. The word (sign) should signify a plurality of significations that refer to possible qualities of the unconscious rather than one unified whole. I have found repetition in performance poetry to be a method of breaking a word’s normative signification, which uncovers a plurality of possible meanings.

Furthermore, opening up a word through repetition extends the signification of the word to the point of collapse, or death. In Merleau-Ponty’s
(2012) analysis of amnesic aphasia, he argues that when a word is repeated for too long it becomes useless, “it says nothing, it is bizarre and absurd … it has altered itself like an inanimate body” (199). The term ‘inanimate body’ speaks of death and dying, and therefore implies that repeating a word over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over again, exhausts the world until it dies, and all that is left is an empty shell that signifies absence. This is the death of signification. When repeated the word still exists, but it exists like a lifeless body. The corpse signifies the absence of the living body, and a word subjected to the fatal effects of repetition also becomes a signifier of absence, a shell of what was once living, a sign that fills in an empty space. There are certain qualities of dreams, memories and fantasies (all unconscious experiences) that cannot be narrated by words, because they are somehow too physical or too vivid to be described. Therefore, within a textual unconscious there is an absence, the absence of what evades words. I wanted to make this absence visible in performance, and so I used repetition as a method to extend words to the point of collapse and reveal words as signs that are, at times, nothing other than signifiers for a quality indescribable by words, a quality that is textually absent.

Even without the altering affects of repetition the term unconscious already signifies an absence. Situated in the prefix ‘un’ there is a linguistically negative space that Christopher Hauke describes as “like a negative entity, a not-something, an absence” (205). The prefix ‘un’ has a similar effect to the non-descript adverb ‘there’ in Wilderness, because ‘there’ also signifies absence. ‘There’ is repeated many times in Wilderness but it is not clear where ‘there’ is, and so ‘there’ could essentially be anywhere. Every time I said ‘there’ I pointed to a different place in the room to heighten the ambiguity of where ‘there’ was, and with repetition this ambiguity was emphasised. The anywhere-ness of ‘there’ cancelled out the signification of the word so that the place referred to became nowhere in particular. ‘There’ became nowhere, an absent place. Similarly, the term unconscious signifies the absence of consciousness and occupies the negative space that the prefix ‘un’ creates, which is also a place of absence. Subsequently, in this context, signifiers of absence are metonymic substitutes for the textual absence of the unconscious, which is a way of inscribing the unconscious so that it can be represented in language. Because my work is autobiographical and the unconscious is present (indirectly) within personal experience, I felt some obligation to acknowledge its presence within my own life story. The unconscious exists like an allusive undercurrent that runs beneath personal experience, and in the narration of personal experience this undercurrent can be referred to by metaphors and metonyms.
Filling the Void

A Language by which one may approach the ambiguity of the unconscious is the language of poetry.

(Dorothea Olkowski, 60)

To write ambiguously is to write without asserting a definitive answer, or explanation, but to allude to an answer by describing what a certain quality of the answer is like, through metaphor. A metaphor does not state what something is, it describes what the quality of something is like, and in the performative act of metaphorically describing something, that quality comes into being. Metaphorical descriptions preserve the allusiveness of unconscious emotions (implicit but never explicit), in a performative representation of a personal experience. Performing metaphor materialises repressed memories and emotions that exist within thought in what Jung (1980) calls the “personal unconscious.” Repressed emotions, memory, or desires can be referred to metaphorically by the performance poet’s way of speaking.

When I performed the poem ‘Plastic’ a poem about being teenager (see Appendix B), I emphasised the word “peeling” in the line “peeling back mirrors”, so that it sounded like ‘peeeeeeeeleeling’. Peeling back mirrors is a metaphorical description of my teenage obsession with appearance and the excessive amount of time I used to spend on my make-up, which was implied by the excessive amount of time I took to say the word ‘peeling’. Therefore, my way of speaking performed the emotional memory that the metaphor signified. Those days when I would wake up extra early for school just so that I could spend the required full hour trying to make my pubescent self look like a woman, failing, trying again, and again. That headache, puffy eyed feeling I woke up with every morning, the gut wrenching frustration of getting my mascara wrong that … feeling I felt when I was a teenage girl, that … feeling that I can’t quite tell. The text connotes hidden emotions that are not directly referred to but are implied by tone, and these hidden emotions depict an unconscious layer in personal experience that is also indirectly present in memory. Therefore, in performance poetry feelings that words leave out, or are left out from the text, are evocable through tone of voice.

In my practice, the interplay of performer and spectator rather than reader and writer are where the production of meaning lies. I write in light of the spectator, with an awareness of their role in the creation of meaning. And so, I create possibilities, there is never a right or wrong, nor a final product, the ‘meaning’ evolves with every spectator’s individual response. During my rehearsals, I tested the interpretative openness of Wilderness by asking a fellow student Melissa Booth, to articulate her interpretation of the text. Her interpretation formed simultaneously with my performance, new themes and motifs emerged that had never occurred to me, and a whole layer of subtext came to light. The text reminded her of her first year of university, being apprehensive, and falling in love for the first time. Booth’s interpretation also uncovered a painful emotion that I associate with my father’s death, one of struggle, and of weight, an emotion that I have tried to forget. Forgot-
ten memories of emotional states (such as grief), lodged in the unconscious can be interpreted by a psychoanalytic analysis of the images that emerge. Booth interpreted the image of a steep hill to symbolize a painful struggle, thus she uncovered an unconscious emotion within my textual-memory. This emotion was metaphorically signified and thus was present in the un-said sub-textual layer of the text, which Booth’s interpretation brought to light.

The revelation that Booth’s interpretation revealed a hidden emotion that I did not narrate explicitly, leads me to my next point that metaphor is a way to express emotional trauma. In an interview I held with the poet Martin Figura, he told me that poetry is a way of “saying the un-sayable” (Robbins). A traumatic experience is hard to put into words. The act of describing trauma can re-arouse the emotions initially felt, and thus the act of describing can be as painful as the experience. The emotional weight that I experienced in the wake of my father’s death is something that I find difficult to speak about, and so I employed metaphors that indirectly implied this emotion, which ironically turned out to be my method of telling. The immensity of the emotional weight of grief is something that I find un-expressible in written words, (even in bold the word looks small and insignificant). I wanted to make this physical intensity visible and so in the next stage of my rehearsals with Booth. I asked her to use her personal interpretation of the text as a platform for improvisation. She expressed this feeling of weight by sliding, slowly, painfully, across the floor, moving her body arduously, laboriously flinging her legs into the air, and then falling to the floor as if her limbs were made from concrete. Her cheek pressed against the floor she looked stiff, distorted, heavy.

Inspired by Booth I began to develop my own movements that expressed feelings I struggle to describe. At one point during Pieces of Me for You I placed all my weight onto the wall, and allowed by body to slide down to the floor as slowly as possible, until my legs ached. At another point, I held my arm straight out before me for as long as I could, to try to make it so heavy that it would eventually fall off. From these explorations into the body’s way of signifying underlying emotions, I realised that incorporating movement into performance poetry is a means to express the ineffable.

When the Mind Wanders and Words Fail, the Body Stays and Prevails

In my own practice I have found that a simple wave of the hand, or stretch of the arm, can add emphasis to the end of a verse like an exclamation mark, and that in performance poetry gesture is like punctuation. Punctuation controls the way in which a sentence is read; in spoken word, the poet’s hand can affect the way words are spoken. Performance poets tend to use their hands while they perform, reaching out with one hand to the audience, the other hand firmly clasped on the microphone. A hand is like a marker for every stress and slack in the line; each time the slack falls so does the hand, and when a stressed syllable is uttered, a hand raises, undulating with every peak and trough in the text. Moving back and forth, a hand steadily and sys-
tematically measures the beat. Gestures gesticulate slightly after the word is spoken and act as an accompaniment to the voice. However, what happens when this accompanier to the spoken word is no longer merely an accompaniment? The hand stops, pauses for slightly longer than expected and instead of stillness the poet’s whole body moves, shakes, changes, and with one sweeping action the body breaks away from the versification of the poem and expresses what the words do not.

In order to contextualise what I mean here I will now analyse a moment in Kate Tempest’s performance ‘Best Intentions’. Kate Tempest is a poet, playwright and rapper whose performances are never far from heart wrenchingly profound. In a performance at the Lizard Lounge she began by methodically gesticulating with one hand while the other clutched the microphone, her hand moved like a metronome obediently following the rhythm of her speech. Then she uttered the line, “Fuck it whatever has come to pass, I hope that you like me are sure, that the love was always real and the intention always pure.” Her hand falls to her side, she cocks her head back, and her body shakes as she finishes the verse facing the ceiling. For an instant, she stays like that and says nothing, but her body is screaming, shaking, sweating, and in this moment it is her body that articulates the feeling of pain and longing that resonates in the poem. Her body speaks.

The language of the body speaks louder than words when the ineffable is being expressed. Those times when you are too tired to say anything but something has been asked of you so you raise your head, speak with your eyes, and let your body say what words cannot. When the possibility of speaking seems like an arduous battle and when the mind is so tired that it is barely conscious, these are the times when the body speaks in the tongue of the ineffable. The research that led up to *Pieces of Me for You* was directed by an interest in the effect of repetition on the mental state of the performer. The duration of the performance was three hours; however the performance consisted of the same thirty-minute sequence repeated six times. After the third or fourth run, I started to feel a peculiarly contradictory feeling that I was simultaneously awake and asleep, awake and dreaming, in a word day-dreaming, but this was daydreaming in a higher degree than ever before. I was not always conscious of the moment at hand and in these moments when I became un-conscious of my surroundings my body physically realised an unconscious experience. When it was over I wrote the following words.

*I couldn’t stop staring at the image in my mind and I could barely utter the next word.*

*Did I speak?*

*I don’t know.*

*Too much to express in such little sporadic words.*

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1 A video of the performance is available online: [http://youtu.be/VrkE2ww5_X4](http://youtu.be/VrkE2ww5_X4)
Every time it felt completely different it was like being stuck in time, remembering, re-remembering, and re-remembering again. Trying to express something, failing, trying again, still not good enough try again and again until you can go no longer and you resign yourself to the fact that words continue to fail, continue to not say enough.

I said things in ways I had not said before, I sped up, slowed down, paused without deciding to. There’s not enough time to pre-plan these slight changes during performance, and I cannot explain why I did it.

I remembered things I thought I had forgotten…

Sometimes I wasn’t sure if I had said anything at all. I felt outside of myself.

When you repeat the same thing again, and again you fade in and out. At times I wasn’t aware of what I was doing, of what was going on around me, of who was there. It was like a dream.

(Journal Entry, 25-06-12)

The fact that I remembered things I thought I had forgotten (certain images from my childhood) correlates with Freud’s view of the unconscious as a dwelling place of repressed memories. Therefore, I conquer that in this moment I accessed the unconscious. In many ways it could be said that I was performing unconsciously. I went into autopilot mode, at one point I remember not knowing if I had said my line because I was not consciously aware of speaking. My performance in Pieces of Me for You was an unconscious experience, whereby I accessed repressed memories, felt less self-conscious, and thus became more confident as a performer.

Merleau-Ponty (1968) sees no dichotomy between body and mind; therefore, from his perspective every experience is a bodily experience. “Our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them” (137). Following this logic, if the subject experiences an instance of unconsciousness, that experience is bodily. While the performer is un-conscious they are still visible and framed in performance as a performer who is performing, thus the daydreaming performer physically expresses unconsciousness and makes unconsciousness visible and tangible. “Every movement of my eyes—even more every displacement of my body—has its place in the same visible universe… conversely every vision takes place in the tactile space” (133). In other words, what is visible is also always tangible because the visible occurs in a tactile space, and what is seen can also be felt because a vision is not isolated from the body. The body never leaves its position in the world (while it is living and even then after death its position is not lost rather it changes from present to absent). When I lost conscious awareness of the tangible, I was still visible. However, my momentary absent-mindedness of my visible/tangible presence meant I acted without conscious awareness, thus my performance...
physically realised unconsciousness. Therefore, un-consciousness is a moment in which the seer drifts from the moment at hand and slips into the realm where daydreams happen. The realm we go to when someone tells us we have a faraway look in our eyes and we reply, “sorry I was miles away.” This realm does not have a location nor is it apart from the location of the body, because the body is always still physically there. This place is like a glitch in conscious experience. And in this glitch the body experiences unconsciousness.

Un-consciousness is primarily a felt experience, and like any felt experience the totality of that feeling cannot be described by words. Words stand in for feelings, substitute feelings, but are not the feelings themselves. Subsequently, those moments of unconsciousness were communicable, (not by words because the experience is ineffable) by the physical language of the body: the way I stood, slightly stooped, eyes slightly glazed, with a look of deep contemplation, unresponsive to what happened around me, hands still and my body exuding a surreal tranquillity. My gesture (or lack thereof) and posture showed an ineffable experience to the spectator. The spectator’s perception of the experience shown by the performer’s body is not the same as having a firsthand experience of unconsciousness, but it is a way in which the ineffability of unconsciousness is expressible without words.

No Words Left, Yet More to Express

*I can’t go on, I’ll go on*  
(Samuel Beckett, 1975: 132)

How can the ineffable be expressed in words? … By treating a word like it is the first step in a flight of stairs.

A metaphor answers for that which cannot be answered for, by rendering the absent (the answer) present, and bringing the answer into ‘being’ through representation. A metaphor represents an answer by being like an answer, a version of an answer. Subsequently, by the same logic the ineffable can be made effable through the creation of associates and substitutes such as gestures, images, metaphors and performative metonymic writing.

I feel that I expressed the ineffable during *Pieces of Me for You* by finding ways of expressing memories, emotions, visions and feelings without words and with words, but in a way that *MADE* the word speak more than it said… By performing words, and expressing the feeling that resides beneath the surface of the word through tone, gesture and silence. There is no doubt that the experiences I have described are highly personal. However from Merleau-Ponty’s perspective no personal experience is purely solipsistic, and every subjective experience is intersubjective, to the extent that I know that you are subjectively conscious of the world, because I am subjectively conscious of the world. Therefore, it is possible that others will have a similar experience to me.
I can only now send out invitations to enter that textual void, that terrain of verbal nowhere, that speechless silence that echoes with the sound of feelings too profound for words. Enter with tools that pluck, pick at, sculpt, break, smash and then re-form words until they seem, momentarily, to resemble what lives in the textual abyss. The 'its,' 'that's' and 'things' that refer to some-thing that is not a thing, but can only be called a thing because there is no-thing else to call it by. The sound that a sharp intake of breath signifies, gut wrenching-ness, the seemingly meaningless repetition of a word for want of a better word, clenched fists, bitten lips, squinty eyes, blinking eye lids, drooping shoulders, restless breath. Broken down sentences, beaten down resolutions to say nothing, feverish attempts to say anything and impatient impulses to do something that come in the face of an obligation, nay a desire, to express the ineffable.
Appendix A: Wilderness

Hush now
Hush now
Hush now
Breathe easy
There where the wind blows
There where the sky goes
The where the flowers grow
There where old skin dies
Before it knows
There you are
See
See how we are
See how we are now
So changed
So altered
Man handled
Back then there was no time for breath
No time for breath when running up hill
Hopeless and distressed
But see how the wind blows
See how the flowers grow
See how old skin dies
Before it knows
Turn away now
Leave it for another day now
Brush the dust off
Brush the dust of old bones away
Leave it for another day
Minds altered
Minds that turn
Minds that learn
Never to listen
Minds that learn
To build bars around hearts
Back then there was no time for breath
No time for
Pause
No time for unembarrassed smiles that listen to tears
But hush now
Hush now
Breathe easy
There’s another day ahead
Another mountain ahead
Back and back
No time for forward
Back and back
Feet heavy
Back and back
But hey now
Hey now
Breathe easy
Hush now

Skin stretches
And there the marks are
There beneath the façade
There the day turns
There is the place
To never learn
Too quiet
Too quiet
Speak up little girl
Speak up
Never shuts up
Fallen down
Winds blow easy
Got to get back up again
Can’t stop there
Striving
Breathing
Believing
For us
All for us
Got to get back up again
Can’t stop there
But for you
Only for you
Try only for you
Strive only for you
Fill lungs with air
For you
Got to get back up again
Can’t stop there
Appendix B: Plastic

I spent my adolescence,
Wondering what it felt like to be a woman,
I turned to moulded depictions,
That were the epitome of femininity.
And I used plastic as my tool to grow,
I turned natural happenings into plastic depictions.
I sat for hours peeling back mirrors,
Scrutinising skin
With no thought for
...
I spent days testing out glamour,
Performing surgery with a pair of untrained hands.
And looking back
Thinking about it now,
I can see that there was always too much,
Too much,
And always never enough.
When walking down the street I felt disproportionate,
I thought I was separate, separated, perhaps even dislocated.
I would go home and throw thoughts at mirrors.
I came up with theories that shattered life plans.
I dived into honey coloured palettes,
Dreamt up candy floss canvases.
Plastered myself with tools built for crafting,
And I made a decision to stop laughing.
Those days haven’t left much behind but still plastic shines,
And sticks to the skin like the insides of my thighs in a hot car,
Looking back it all looked smooth,
Liquid plastic fluid like mouse,
But when it dries it snaps,
Shatters.
I turned down favours from diamond eyes to stare ideally at midnight skies.
I let friendly hands clutch at emptiness,
I made templates for behaviour that I stuck to like biblical teachings,
I was my own preacher,
I constructed a daily routine to obey,
Made ten commandments,
That all ended in the same way:
Live and let play.
But please believe I’m not trying to deceive
I found peace in describing days in half filled sentences.
Every day I inscribed parts of my mind onto private pages,
And looking back with wiser eyes, that are still not wise, but are wiser than
the little girl who hid behind a woman’s disguise,
Looking back with these eyes,
I can see,
I can perceive,
that it was all just,
It was all just,
Plastic.
References


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