

Ineffable Poetics

Negotiating Exile and Literary Self-Expression via Wittgenstein's City Metaphor

Sophie Fernier

McGill University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Amidst the collected aphorisms in 'Philosophical Investigations' (1953), Wittgenstein famously offers a metaphor comparing language to an imaginary city in which meaning is created against a background of shared experiences between speakers, forming the manifold 'houses' and 'neighborhoods' of familiarity and understanding at the level of ordinary communication. Within such an imaginary city, inhabitants are said to share a certain 'form of life' which enables them to understand each other. This paper reflects upon the limits of this metaphor in the context of exile. The immediate environment that people then relocate into 'co-exists' with a lingering past form of life, which may have involved hardships and traumas that diverge from the lived-experiences of residents in their new community. When the discrepancy is too great, beyond merely fostering a sense of alienation, the very condition upon which 'ordinary communication' is predicated in Wittgenstein's metaphor is lost. The 'ineffable feeling' that presents itself in such contexts can be illuminated by referring to what literary theorist Maurice Blanchot calls 'the disaster': a superlative notion of chaos penetrating the fabric of experience, as exemplified by wars or concentration camps. Characterized by the absolute dissolution of one's subjective experience of space-time as a coherent sequence and continuum, the disaster invokes nothing but silence. This paper argues that in such contexts, poetic modes of expression can shed light on how to negotiate the tension between traumas of catastrophic magnitudes and the longing to communicate such experiences in words. Taking Dunya Mikhail's poetry anthology 'The Iraqi Nights' (2014) as its case-study, this paper suggests that in the context of geographical displacement, poetry can be re-imagined as a metaphorical 'sanctuary' between Wittgenstein's metaphorical city and the ineffable realm of 'disaster.'

KEYWORDS

Ineffability, Poetics, Wittgenstein, Blanchot, Exile

INTRODUCTION

Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

The above metaphor stands out amidst Wittgenstein's collected aphorisms because it captures a radical shift in his thinking from that which we find in his former work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922). Unlike the *Tractatus*, there is no longer precisely *one way* for linguistic expressions to be meaningful. Meaning is understood to be a pluralistic phenomenon, derived

from the lives of language-users rather than abstract models. The metaphor of ‘language as a city’ is used as a means of conveying this radically different insight; language is conceived as a metaphorical city space because, for the later Wittgenstein, linguistic competence is embedded within what he calls a ‘language-game’, i.e., speakers understand each other on the basis of flexible and localized contexts, just like the changing environments of a real city. In other words, meaning is ‘part of an activity, or of a form of life’ ([1953] 2010, §23). Urban spaces display varied settings and residents, and remain in flux: in the same sense, the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ houses Wittgenstein describes represent theoretical emerging ‘hubs’ within which new linguistic uses and language games gradually arise. The notion that linguistic meaning is embedded within a site of shared experiences between people carries two implications. First, it involves the concept of a set geographical space in which individuals partake in similar activities and lifestyles across a prolonged period of time. Second, such a ‘city’ also carries the abstract meaning of representing a ‘microcosm’, in which residents form a sense of being a members of a community. Both ideas are related on the basis of having a similar form of life, i.e. being able to relate to each other on the basis of a shared history and collective identity.

This paper problematizes Wittgenstein’s metaphor in the case of displaced persons forced to abandon their previous ‘form of life’ in order to survive, and the implications that this carries for language. The past of displaced individuals is often colored by great suffering and instability. Merely relocating to a safer place is not sufficient to ‘exchange’ one form of life for another: pre-existing hardship and traumas can continue to exert an influence, even when people are physically removed from their previous environment. Within one and the same displaced person, two forms of life can be said to ‘co-exist’: one that is informed by their immediate surroundings and community, the other an inner ‘whirlwind’ of experiences produced by their previous space. Individuals in exile do not simply ‘exchange’ one ‘form of life’ for another, and adopt that of their new community. The linguistic corollary to Wittgenstein’s metaphor represents a challenge in such a context. If successful communication is predicated upon peoples’ ability to relate to each other’s background of experiences, an ‘outsider’ is severely disadvantaged. Beyond the personal sense of deracination involved in relocation, people who have escaped the threat of death or grievous harm may find that communication can only be partially effective at best; they may struggle to share, or make their experience understood. There might be a sense that ‘something is left unsaid’ in relation to one’s own history, which fosters a sense of alienation.

The notion that something is ‘ineffable’ or ‘beyond words’ is not uncommon in emotionally-charged contexts of trauma. This can be illuminated by appealing to Maurice Blanchot’s concept of ‘the disaster’, which connects ideas of trauma, language and spatiality that can help understand

the magnitude of what people experience under extreme circumstances. For Blanchot, the ‘disaster’ is of such intensity that it involves the subjective fragmentation of time and space, which in turn erodes a coherent sense of ‘self’ that would allow for linguistic communication.

Despite involving unspeakable atrocity, the desire to articulate experience remains, if only for the hope of interpersonal connection that it could provide. The second part of this paper focuses upon how the limits of ‘ordinary language’ can be circumvented by looking at the special ‘expressive power’ of poetry (that allows us to touch on or express/convey this space of ‘disaster’ or ‘ineffability’). Using Dunya Mikhail’s recent poetry collection *The Iraqi Nights* (2014) as a case-study, it provides an analysis of how to navigate certain ‘ineffable’ experiences of trauma by turning to creative language. As a refugee who has left Iraq, Mikhail’s writing touches upon the kinds of experiences that affect displaced persons. Building upon her work, this paper suggests that looking at notions of poetic license and periphrasis can ‘expand the horizons of the possible’ when the shared past or background of experience required for mutual understanding is lacking. Poetic expression, by encouraging a renewed sense of linguistic ‘agency’ through a creative departure from conventions of ‘ordinary’ speech, might allow for at least partial explorations of ineffable subjects via an individual’s freedom to use indirect locution as their preferred form of expression. Both aspects contribute to re-imagining poetry as a metaphorical ‘sanctuary’ in-between Wittgenstein’s metaphorical city as a site of meaning, and the disasters that force individuals into exile.

DISASTER: THE RUINS OF MEANING

When all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster. Ruin of words, demise writing, faintness faintly murmuring: what remains without remains (*the fragmentary*).

– Maurice Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*

If for Wittgenstein meaning is pluralistic, represented by familiar spaces in his imagined city, Blanchot’s notion of ‘disaster’ is the complete opposite. Blanchot is concerned with everything that meaning is *not*: notions of ultimate destruction, ruin and fragmentation—the complete and absolute dissolution of language. Disaster is never explicitly defined, as Blanchot chooses instead to advance by allusions, hinting toward a superlative notion of absolute horror. Whilst synonyms can be used, such as ‘tragedy’, ‘catastrophe’, or ‘devastation’, none can adequately convey the disaster’s magnitude. The concept of disaster stands for a kind of haunting experience falling at an extreme beyond thought and expression. Given the depth of imagery and intertextuality in this book, it is not surprising that a wide range of interpretations can be offered, with different areas of focus.¹ For the purposes of this paper, the discussion focuses upon the sense in which disaster

places a being ‘outside’ of any possible coherence. The disaster involves the dissolution of all notion of space and time, which represent the two axes upon which we can make sense of experience, and intelligibly articulate it in words. It is in that sense that it can be paradoxically said that ‘there is no future for the disaster, just as there is no time or space for its accomplishment’ (13).

Atemporality and limitless space

Time is generally experienced as having a ‘direction’: with each sunrise starts a new day, before progressing into nighttime. To speak of ‘day and night’ in such a way is the most commonplace sequence we are accustomed to, the one which separates states of wakefulness from sleep. The range of the disaster, however, removes us from any sense of temporality or historical situatedness: ‘such is the disaster: the night lacking darkness, but brightened by no light’ (13) explains Blanchot. Instead, it involves a sun which ‘would attest not to the day, but to the night delivered of stars, multiple night’ (15). This antithetical reversal is profound: the passage of time ceases to hold any meaning, and anyone attempting to write about the disaster is described by Blanchot as being ‘the daytime insomniac’ (103), which suggests that in disaster, there is no meaningful rhythm to life. In a somewhat playful manner, not unlike Epicurus, Blanchot describes the disaster as follows: ‘when the disaster comes upon us, it does not come’ (13). This chiasmic description is reminiscent of *Letter to Menoeceus*, in which death is conceived as an event occurring outside of all events: ‘death means nothing to us’, as Epicurus explains, ‘because so long as we are existent death is not present and whenever it is present we are non-existent’ (Epicurus and Strodach 2013, §124). In the Epicurean materialistic worldview, death marks the cessation of all sensation, the necessary condition for anything to affect us. Likewise, for Blanchot, the disaster marks the end of a meaningful chronology which would allow us to understand the disaster’s magnitude. Disaster involves a ‘time that is deranged and off its hinges’ (Blanchot, 17), lacking any integrity in relation to the past or future, simultaneously a looming ‘threat’ of futurity and a deep, ‘immemorial past’ (pp. 13, 29, 60 and 64).

In a phenomenological sense, this aspect of disaster could be related to the disappearance of coherent time-perception, as well as of external contexts against which time can be measured. Primo Levi, for instance, suggests that the experience of time becomes unstable in Auschwitz. In moments of complete despair, Levi writes, ‘it did not seem possible that there could really exist any other world or time other than our world of mud and our sterile and stagnant time’ (Levi [1947] 1988, 136). In removing individuals from their way of life, disaster disrupts the very fabric of experience: thus, if for ‘living men, the units of time always have a value’, for those who are incarcerated, ‘hours, days, months spilled out sluggishly from the future into the past.’ Upon

return or rescue into a place of safety, the disturbance remains so profound that it becomes difficult to exhaustively convey to others what exactly such a fundamental cognitive deviation feels like, unless they have shared the experience. Regarding the kinds of torture and humiliation in concentration camps, Levi remarked that ‘our language lacks words to express this offence, the demotion of a man’ (21).

Blanchot himself mentions Auschwitz to explore the corollary notion that the disaster involves the loss of spatial intelligibility. It represents the way in which the disaster is a kind of ‘limitless space’ (13), in which reigns a unique kind of horror and ‘where extermination in every form is the immediate horizon’ (72). The oxymoronic notion of ‘space without limits’ runs contrary to our most basic sensory experience in which everything has some form of physical boundary. Yet, the disaster blurs everything. In the case of warfare, for instance, it becomes unclear who count as combatant or non-combatant forces, especially when weapons of mass destruction are involved. Likewise, the damage caused by military attacks is not limited to man-made structures such as cities or villages, but also implicates the biosphere of which they are a part. Some weapons can jeopardize surrounding flora and fauna, nearby bodies of water, or involve the bio-accumulation of poisonous substances in non-human animals. With the dissolution of such boundaries, any coherent notion of ‘self’ vanishes in disaster: we encounter the ‘absence of the world [...] withdrawn from all self-presence’ (50). Spatial understanding is required to make sense of an ‘I’: it forms the very basis of seeing oneself as being an individual, recognized by others as an entity with a particular body and shape. In such a context, it becomes unclear where one’s body ends or begins, or the distinct location it occupies. The simultaneous dissolution of time and external structures involve something akin to an ego death, threatening ‘an other than I who passively become[s] other’ (30).

Blanchot’s work is useful in providing an extension to Wittgenstein’s metaphor, which does not account for the challenge represented by radical discrepancies in lived-experiences. A notion of ‘disaster’ can clarify the sense of confusion and alienation carried over into peoples’ lives, regardless of their immediate situations. In the context of traumatic displacement, the circumstances that force people out of their homes might never be ‘fully’ understood by others, given their radical nature. However, how to interpret what it means exactly for something be ‘beyond words’ is naturally an open question. The rupture implicated in Blanchot’s disaster, and the kind of incommensurability it involves, could very well be interpreted as posing a ‘metaphysical’ challenge to linguistic expression. A few scholars have explored related ideas when conceptualizing what ineffability involves;² however, for the purposes of this discussion, the term is understood independently of any specific ontology, and of whether things are

‘metaphysically’ inexpressible or only ‘relatively’ so. Instead, it focuses upon the kind of psychological or emotional dimension involved in feeling ‘speechless’ in response to trauma. Philosopher Ben-Ami Scharfstein suggests that the more highly we prize a certain kind of experience, the more inclined we feel to call it ineffable, insofar as the concept allows us to ‘protect certain cherished experiences from being explained or, rather, *explained away*’ (Scharfstein 1993, 188). If *we do* attempt to use language in relation to prized experience, it often becomes ‘poetic and sometimes paradoxical, meant less to explain than to point, less to solicit logical analysis than to indicate the undesirability of logic’ (206). This point suggests that what might be ‘ineffable’ in one manner of using language could be at least obliquely ‘touched upon’ or ‘gestured at’ linguistically through another. In this case, we will pay attention to how poetry operates as a mode of expression distinct from ‘ordinary’ speech, and hence why it is so often used as means to help navigate the realities of exile. Whilst Scharfstein does not take on this project himself, as it falls beyond the scope of his work, I will now question what such a notion of ‘indirect’ poetic telling is.

Since displacement problematizes the notion that one’s ‘form of life’ is solely produced by one’s immediate surroundings and, as Blanchot showed, the magnitude of some disasters can be so profound that it becomes inexpressible under the notion of a ‘shared’ meaning, it is worth exploring poetic modalities and what makes them so seemingly suitable for expressing such experiences/why they are so often appealed to in conveying such ideas. Thus, the next section focuses on the overlap between poetic language and the lived-experiences of displacement, with the broader aim of reflecting upon what kind of different ‘expressive resources’ poetry allocates us to touch upon a range of feelings and memories otherwise described as ‘ineffable’.

‘INEFFABLE’ POETRY

We cross borders lightly
 like clouds.
 Nothing carries us,
 but as we move on
 we carry rain,
 and an accent,
 and a memory
 of another place
 – Dunya Mikhail, *The Iraqi Nights*

Born in the city of Baghdad in 1965, Dunya Mikhail worked as a journalist and translator until she was forced to leave her homeland due to safety concerns from Iraqi authorities. Amidst threats of censorship for what was considered to be ‘subversive’ writing by the Iraqi government, she first fled to Jordan, before settling in the United States in 1996. *The Iraqi Nights* is her third poetry collection and takes on the theme of *The One Thousand and One Nights*. Following her own experience of war, her work addresses the topic of displacement through the figure of Scheherazade, who saves her own life through storytelling. Mikhail’s poetry highlights the kind of duality involved in geographical displacement: in a 2015 interview with Dr. Sobia Khan in *World Literature Today*, Mikhail states, ‘my poetry has two lives, like any exile’ (Khan 2015, 11). Her work relates to the notion discussed by this paper that some forms of life are said to ‘co-exist’: having moved somewhere else, the impact of her past experiences remains. Although now an American citizen, Mikhail’s poetry continues to reflect the anxieties and hopes of an Iraqi: ‘trying to have one life for the exile is like a word in dictionary: it occupies one space but has other meanings and connotations. The here is an occasion that reminds us of there.’ To physically leave a city, in this case, Baghdad, does not in itself create a rupture from the fears, concerns, or memories associated with it. On a fundamental level, Mikhail suggests that ‘something deeper’ lingers after crossing borders, shaped by the accumulation of experiences.

Her book represents the very spirit of what it means to write ‘the remains of the disaster’ in Blanchot’s sense of the term: the sort that might only be alluded to via a ‘slippage of sense’, or the latent undertone of one’s writing. Comparatively speaking, there is an interesting mirroring range of diction in both of their works. Echoing the ‘ruins’ of Blanchot’s disaster, the imagery of physical destruction appears across various scenes in multiple poems, from ‘wrecked cities’ (Mikhail 2014, 1.8), ‘rubble’ (1.6) or imagining a world away from the ‘shelling of cities’ (1.28), setting an atmosphere of chaos which reminds us that in times of absolute terror, neither life nor ‘overt’ linguistic communication can occur. Like Blanchot, Mikhail juxtaposes various temporalities: the kind of disaster she hints toward blurs the boundaries between ‘contemporary’ Iraq and its mythical or prehistoric past. Both ‘human’ time and a time ‘outside’ of time are interwoven via references to mythical figures from both the Middle East, such as Scheherazade, Gilgamesh, or Aladdin, but also Greek mythology, via Orpheus, Pandora, Rapunzel or as recent as Perrault’s Cinderella. The very same heterogeneity is applied to geographical locations, which are often lumped together to form a single horizon. The reader experiences a progression of poetic sequences which form a surreal space, with titles such as *The Old Olive Tree*, suggestive of a biblical setting, alongside *Footprints on the Moon*, a place beyond earth itself. Unlike the common usage of the imaginary, which seeks to impart a sense of extraordinariness to daily life, Mikhail’s poetry operates in the reverse fashion, aiming to foster the hope that ‘every moment / something

ordinary / will happen / under the sun' (1.29–32). Against the hostile reality of war, Mikhail's poetry re-negotiates lived experience to envision the opposite of the disaster, such that the sun might someday again 'attest to the day', to return to Blanchot's symbolism that the disaster is akin to a 'night without darkness' (Blanchot 1986, 50).

The exact manner in which two 'forms of life' co-existing can create the sense that something is left 'unsaid' in ordinary interactions is captured by Mikhail's poem, *Choices*. The speaker, presumed to be in a grocery store, is asked if they would prefer a paper or plastic bag. The mere question alone suffices, by way of association, to trigger the speaker's memory and induce a momentary return to a place of limited freedoms, whereupon their inward wish is that 'I'd had such a choice / in more pressing matters / long ago' in a different country that 'cared less / about our choices / or what kind of bags we used' (1.3–9). By showing how memory can project one's awareness into a different time and place beyond the immediacy of one's immediate surroundings, Mikhail 'displays' the manner in which disaster hinders communication after exile. The question 'what kind of bag would you like?' is closed, in that it only has two available answers in such a setting. Yet to a person who experiences mental fragmentation following geographical displacement, it acquires a different connotation in relation to their past. To provide an answer which would capture the appropriate depth of one's inner emotional response would be met with confusion by an interlocutor. Insofar as previous 'forms of life' can always resurface through memory, and in so doing eclipse the presence of another, such moments display how the 'inner landscape' of trauma co-exists with one's immediate situatedness, and perhaps why speakers may not understand each other fully. In the metaphor of language as a city, meaning is the byproduct of a shared geographical space: Mikhail's poetry relates how two horizons intersect within one and the same speaker, and impede linguistic expression in as 'ordinary' settings as going to the supermarket. Although it would be impossible to capture all of the reasons why people are inclined to use poetic modes of expression over other kinds of creative mediums, Mikhail's work provides the stepping ground to initiate a discussion regarding the 'special' difference between 'poetic' and 'ordinary' ways of speaking. The next section suggests that a distinction can be drawn on the basis of certain freedoms afforded by 'poetic license', in particular that allowed by the use of periphrasis.

The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics defines poetic license as originally referring to 'the freedom allowed the poet to depart in diction, grammar, or subject matter from the norms of prose discourse or, later, from poetic 'rules' (Greene et al. 2012, 4th ed., 1057). The notion of how such a license is applicable can be conceived in terms of different 'scopes'. The first concerns the kind of freedoms taken by individuals to depart from commonplace diction and functions of 'ordinary

language' in their writing. The second is embedded within the kind of 'social configuration' of poetry as a genre, which involve certain trends, movements, and ideas regarding what constitutes 'the lyric'. From the perspective of being a historically-situated practice, we can speak of the 'license' to critically reflect upon and depart from what constitutes poetic 'canonicity', or re-evaluate what certain poets and their respective 'movements' have come to mean from an academic or social perspective (see e.g. Perloff (1990), for a collection of essays questioning ideas surrounding what constitutes 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' lyric). It is the first 'scope' that is relevant to this paper, in the sense of an individual's autonomy from the expectations found in 'ordinary language'. In Wittgenstein's city metaphor, speakers seek interdependent 'meaning validation' in shared spaces, which involves several implicit rules. Freedoms taken by an individual poet to 'transcend the limits of the language to explore and communicate new areas of experience' (Leech 1969, 36) depart from some expectations, either in relation to the syntax or semantics of a text, or to certain 'conceptual holds': for example, notions of dialect, register or historical period. Such departures can create ambiguity, in the sense that a multiplicity of meanings can exist in simultaneity, beyond the denotative power of words. While in ordinary contexts this very ambiguity is generally considered a distraction from a message or a stylistic defect, 'both ambiguity and the wider concept of multiple significance are manifestations of the many valued character of poetic language' (205). Insofar as exiled individuals face a dualistic 'form of life', poetic language both mirrors and celebrates the very same linguistic multiplicity.

One basic rule of interaction which regulates ordinary communication is the principle of economy of expression: to say only what needs to be said in the specific context, to eliminate the need for excessive information or speech. In other words, our directness of locution is an integral part of what makes speech 'successful'. In the case of traumatic exile and disaster, however, the memories and emotions of a displaced person may resurface in contexts where they cannot be adequately expressed without appearing disconnected from the demands of a situation, as Mikhail's poem *Choices* highlighted. Likewise, the lived experience of Auschwitz can be so profoundly life-altering that it feels impossible to 'say enough' and successfully capture just how radically different something like time-perception becomes, as discussed by Primo Levi. However, poetic language is free to depart from such a rule of 'adequacy' of context: a poet can instead choose to use circumlocutions meant to animate the imagination rather than abiding by implicit conversational maxims. The term for such manner of expression is 'periphrasis', which denotes the roundabout way of referring to things, objects or states by means of several and different words. It involves, in a sense, a superfluity of expression in which semantic meaning is conveyed via unnecessary length where a simpler expression would work: e.g. 'the writer of this sentence' instead of 'I'. In its figurative modality, periphrasis might *also* include elaborate

metonymical descriptions where closely related attributes stand in lieu of the name for what is meant, or synecdoche, where a part is made to represent the whole of an object or concept. To write in such a way can in a sense be described as ‘oblique’ reference: while bringing attention to an idea, it does so by highlighting something in relation to it, or a part of it, rather than the thing in itself. Periphrasis, beyond providing a heightened imaginative appreciation of what is being described, can thus be conceived as kind of ‘mediation’ between speaking and remaining silent: a poet communicating by way of circumlocutions invokes ideas by ‘hinting’ at them, rather than through direct naming.

Mikhail navigates her own experience in Iraq by using periphrastic language in this way. In *Song From Another Time*, instead of overtly denoting the feeling of grief, the speaker’s pain is displaced into a ‘small piece of paper’ (l.6) upon which a song is written. At first, the speaker desperately attempts to crumble it up and throw it away, symbolically representing the desire to repress a difficult memory. Yet the speaker will inevitably ‘peel the paper open / [...] whenever I remember / one of my dead friends’ (l.8–11). Neither specific feeling nor song lyrics are ever made explicit in the poem, but the roundabout manner in which one’s sense of infinite grief can be ‘transposed’ into an object exemplifies how poetry allows for the *suggestion* of a great depth of feeling while simultaneously leaving itself unspoken, in the sense of remaining ‘beyond’ denotation. Another example can be found in Mikhail’s *The Story*, the first installment of the section of poems entitled *Personal History*. The poem begins with the speaker’s wish to ‘whisper’ (l.1) their experience of certain significant events that make up the totality of a ‘life story’, but finding it impossible, this life story is symbolically ‘displaced’ onto other objects. These then serve as synecdochical imagery to ‘display’ traumatic fragmentation, and the impossibility of complete self-expression. The story is thus in turn ‘condensed in the cup / on the table / as I waited for flight 65’ (l.2–4), then ‘coiled in the gate’ (l.5), before being ‘curled up / in the stamp / in the passport’ (l.10–12). The poem eventually reaches a climax when the story is personified with ‘the key’ used to enter an apartment, ‘alone’ (l.22), suggestive of the alienating nature of abandoning one’s home for a new one. This circumlocutory structure serves the purpose of metaphorically ‘by-passing’ the demands of ordinary communication, in which certain experiences are difficult to articulate given their intensity, and due to falling ‘outside’ of certain norms relative to one’s community. For someone who has lived in warzones, where the death of friends has become a common event, writing poetry can help indirectly communicate what such a form of life can look like to someone whose range of experience differs. Such departures from habitual means of ‘saying’ or ‘showing’ ideas, while still being located *within* language itself, nevertheless involve an exploration that goes beyond ways of speaking that characterize ordinary communication. In that sense, poetry can be said to ‘expand the horizons of the possible’ when it comes to the things we already do

with words. Furthermore, the ‘omitted parts’ in the narrative whole and discursive content in Mikhail’s poetry can offer further reflection regarding how poetry can be conceived of as a metaphorical ‘haven’ between the public, ‘ordinary’ function of language and traumatic experiences that otherwise feel impossible to share.

Rethinking poetry as sanctuary

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream.

– Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

The disaster is in a sense, ubiquitous, in that it cannot be eradicated. At the time of writing, Blanchot’s work was primarily concerned with concentration camps, and the mass-scale industrialization of death that they entailed. Mikhail’s work discusses the realities of war or censorship in Iraq, both past and current. Both atrocious circumstances, they are produced by political dynamics that can plunge the world into chaos for human beings at any moment. They remind us that anybody could be forced into a life of displacement, and become a refugee. Yet even if one imagines a world in which wars, armed conflict and systemic oppression would come to an end, ‘disaster’ and ‘exile’ will not cease. To speak of disaster is not only limited to chaos between people(s): in colloquial language, we also speak in terms of ‘natural’ disasters. The threat of ecological or environmental exile looms ahead, and it is not difficult to imagine a future where environmentally-driven displacement will be magnified. For example, rising temperatures involve global sea-level rises; each day, more people become at risk of being displaced from coastal cities, the lands that were once ‘homes’ and ‘forms of life’ of their own submerged by water. In the case of nuclear disaster, a once inhabited area only becomes safe once radiation breaks down—such timelines are counted in years that far exceed life-spans of individual humans. The kind of ‘familiarity’ implied in Wittgenstein’s metaphor can come to a brutal end, at times without forewarning. Individuals who survive must negotiate new forms of life in exile, with the heavy burden of traumas that can be ‘outside the norm’ in their places of relocation. Language that itself ‘departs’ from expectations can help at least partially reflect the significance of what being exposed to certain radical experiences entails. In the same manner that a lighthouse stands between land and water, poetry can thus be re-imagined as a kind of linguistic ‘sanctuary’ between the disaster, which silences and victimizes, and the expectations of shared experiences within a linguistic community.

The term ‘sanctuary’ implies a notion of ‘safe space’: paradoxically, poetries of exile and violence are often the very opposite, arousing painful feelings via deliberate re-exposure to traumatic

circumstances. There does exist, however, a sense in which poetry can be conceived as holding a ‘healing’ dimension. In relation to experiencing oneself as being ‘atrophied’, per Blanchot’s notion that disaster is ‘withdrawn from all self-presence’, a certain agency can be retrieved, albeit only linguistically. Philosopher Simon Critchley for instance, holds that poetry ‘illuminates the surface of things with imagination’s beam’, such that ‘in poetry, the makings of things are makings of the self’ (2008, 10). It does not mean that poetry becomes a passively inward state in which one can shut their eyes to the to ‘the dark and bloody violence of the world, trying to imagine another world’ (88)—rather, it involves an imaginative transfiguration meant to ‘increase our feeling for reality’ (89) by highlighting that which is otherwise ignored in everyday activity. Furthermore, from the standpoint of a reader, expanding one’s vision to include a range of experiences that might otherwise be inaccessible carries a humanistic import, particularly in a pedagogical setting. Although the disaster is, in one way or another, inevitable, at least some of the types of tragedies discussed in this paper could be remedied by encouraging such exposures.

CONCLUSION

This purpose of this paper has been to offer a critical reflection upon Wittgenstein’s metaphor connecting the notion of a ‘city’ to that of human language. The idea that meaning is predicated upon a certain similarity of experience presents a challenge in the context of exile. In such cases, what counts as ‘familiar’ is not solely based upon one’s immediate surroundings, but coexists with a previous ‘way of life’ from which a displaced person becomes divorced via relocation. In a climate of displacement, there exists a wide range of discrepancies in lived-experiences between speakers occupying one and the same geographical city, some of which include profoundly traumatic past experiences. The intrinsic intensity of such experiences can be explored via Blanchot’s notion that the ‘disaster’ in such contexts involves a kind of ‘dissolution’ of space and time, and it is this rupture from the coherence of one’s outer reality which creates the sense that some radical experiences cannot be adequately conveyed in language. However, as we have seen, the tension of what can be described as ‘beyond words’ and our desire to communicate may be negotiated by looking into how poetic modes of expression operate. Taking Dunya Mikhail’s work *The Iraqi Nights* (2014) as a case analysis, this paper reflected upon the ways in which poetry helps preserve the integrity of ‘ineffable’ disasters while ‘hinting at sense’, so to speak, aided by the freedom of a poet’s license to depart from ordinary language through the use of periphrasis or circumlocutory expression. In terms of Wittgenstein’s metaphor, where the city represents the center of shared experience, and the ever-present threat of disaster, which destabilizes all possibility of familiarity, poetry can be conceived as a metaphorical sanctuary. Such a ‘linguistic refuge’ allows for the formation of new and creative modes of self-expression

that can generate newer perspectives that might otherwise not exist between speakers. As Rimbaud describes in *A Season in Hell* (1873), through poetry may lie an inkling of sense in our desperate attempt to understand the ‘incomprehensible’: ‘what was unutterable, I wrote down. I made the whirling world stand still’ (1976, 232).

REFERENCES

- Adorno, Theodor W. 2004. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. London: Routledge.
- Bennett-Hunter, Guy. 2014. *Ineffability and Religious Experience*. London: Pickering & Chatto.
- Blanchot, Maurice. 1986. *Writing of the Disaster*. Translated by Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Critchley, Simon. 2008. *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*. London: Routledge.
- Epicurus, and George K. Strodach. 2013. *The Art of Happiness*. London: Penguin.
- Greene, Roland, Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani, Paul F. Rouzer, Harris Feinsod, David Marno, and Alexandra Slessarev. 2012. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hart, Kevin. 2007. ‘From the Star to the Disaster.’ *Paragraph* 30 (3): 84–103.
- Jonas, Silvia. 2016. *Ineffability and Its Metaphysics: the Unspeakable in Art, Religion, and Philosophy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Khan, Sobia. 2015. “‘My Poetry Has Two Lives, like Any Exile’”: A Conversation with Dunya Mikhail.’ *World Literature Today* 89 (5): 10–13. <https://doi.org/10.7588/worllitetoda.89.5.0010>.
- Kukla, André. 2005. *Ineffability and Philosophy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Leech, Geoffrey N. 1969. *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*. Harlow: Longman.
- Levi, Primo. 1988. *If This Is a Man: And, the Truce*. Great Britain: Abacus.
- Mikhail, Dunya. 2014. *The Iraqi Nights*. Translated by Kareem James Abu-Zeid. New York, NY: New Directions.
- Newman, Arthur. 1983. ‘Poetic License for Appreciation of Human Universality.’ *The Social Studies* 74 (5): 188–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1944.11019737>.
- Perloff, Marjorie. 1990. *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Rimbaud, Arthur. 1976 *Complete Works of Arthur Rimbaud*. Translated by Paul Schmidt. New York, NY: Harper Colophon.
- Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. 1993. *Ineffability the Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Schuster, Joshua. 2014. ‘How to Write the Disaster.’ *Minnesota Review* 83 (1): 163–171.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2002. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by David Pears, and Brian McGuinness. London: Routledge.
- . *Philosophische Untersuchungen = Philosophical Investigations*. 2010. Translated by Anscombe G. E. M., Hacker Peter M. S, and Schulte Joachim. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

¹ See Hart (2007) for a comparative analysis between Blanchot’s motif of the star with Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption* (1921) and Schuster’s review (2014) through the lens of contemporary ecology.

² See Kukla (2005) regarding the conceptual coherence of ineffability or mysticism, Bennett-Hunter (2014) working within contemporary philosophy of religion, and Jonas (2016), who has developed a metaphysical framework for ineffability in terms of non-propositional knowledge.