Languages of Love: The Formative Power of Religious Language

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How we are to understand the formative and informative processes of language? At one level, language is understood as a medium for communicating knowledge through propositions that form or represent cognitive understanding and so can be defined as informative. The concern of this article is to explore the scope of this notion of linguistic and conceptual informing and to consider what it overlooks. I argue that straightforwardly propositional, descriptive and cognitive accounts of language leave out a great deal that properly belongs to language, namely the poetic, aesthetic and affective. I consider the distinction between the propositional statement and the poetic utterance initially through a discussion of the cognitive and affective modes of understanding. The argument explores a number of contexts in which language is primarily affective and formative, from Yoga Sutras to medieval Christian monasticism, in order to consider the varieties of affective and formative language. I argue that forms of devotional speech intended to form the person (the soul of the practitioner) are significantly affective as well as cognitive, forming the speaker in ways that are seldom considered in the context of more rationalist views of language. I then explore how a more poetic, aesthetic or affective kind of language can be seen shaping, or re-orienting desire. Finally, I argue that the theological understanding of negation (apophatic theology) can be helpfully applied to both the negation of our cognitive understanding (of God), as well as our desire (for God) and show the educational significance through considerations of formation.

INTRODUCTION

The question I wish to raise in this article is how we are to understand the formative and informative processes of language. At one level, language is understood as a medium for communicating knowledge through propositions that form or represent cognitive understanding and so can be defined as informative. The concern of this article is to explore the scope

of this notion of linguistic and conceptual informing and to consider what it overlooks. This concern invites an expansion of the notion of the cognitive, a project that, at least among educational theorists, goes back to Louis Arnold Reid. I accept Reid's point that 'cognition' 'is often interpreted in far too limited sense—mainly to cognition of facts or concepts expressible in propositional language' (1973, p. 66), and would add that, since Reid's writing in the early 1970s matters have not much improved, at least within general educational discourse. To some extent, the influence of theories of language on educational theory has moved on with the widening influence of post-structuralism (Hodgson and Standish, 2009; Peters and Burbules, 2004). Yet, language still remains widely understood in reductive terms; as basically a means of communicating knowledge. The corresponding view of education as the transmission of this knowledge using the tools of language is a common-sense one. Here we can observe how conceptions of language interact with educational theories: transmission from learned to ignorant correlates with a view of language as a tool for communication through propositions. But in the wake of philosophers like Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Derrida, it has become difficult to maintain the view of language as simply a communicative tool (Caputo, 1997; Whiting, 2010; Williams, 2017). Rather, language provides the conditions for the world and the self to be understood, disclosed and formed.

In this article I take up these complications of language by showing that straightforwardly propositional, descriptive and cognitive accounts of language leave out a great deal that properly belongs to language as it is used, drawing attention to what is broadly defined as language's poetic, aesthetic and affective qualities. In the context of education, the acts of communication and representation, and the event or 'miracle' of understanding (Gadamer, 1988, p. 69), can neither be simply causally connected, nor entirely disconnected. I consider the distinction between the propositional statement and the poetic utterance initially through a discussion of the cognitive and affective modes of understanding. My argument explores a number of contexts in which language is primarily affective and formative, from the chanting of Yoga Sutras in the context of modern Yoga practice, to medieval Christian monasticism and mystical theology, in order to consider the varieties of affective and formative language. I argue that forms of devotional speech intended to form the person (the soul of the practitioner) are significantly affective as well as cognitive, forming the speaker in ways that are seldom considered in the context of more rationalist views of language.[1] I then explore how language could be said to form desire. Just as a rationalist kind of language might be said to form the cognitive self, so a more poetic, aesthetic or affective kind of language can be seen shaping, or re-orienting desire. Finally, I argue that the theological understanding of negation (apophatic theology) can be helpfully applied to both the negation of our cognitive *understanding* (of God), as well as our *desire* (for God[2]). This is educationally significant because both what we think we know, and what we think we desire, need to be made and remade through the formation of the self since what we think we know and what we think we desire are never matters that are finally settled. I begin with words from the 13th

century Flemish mystic Hadewijch of Brabant, words which deliberately play with the linguistic distinctions outlined above.

SPEECH AS A FORM OF LOVE

> O love, were I love
> And with love to love you, love
> O love, for love grant that love
> May know love wholly as love (Hadewijch, 1981, pp. 49–52).

On the cusp of the rational and systematic theological discourse of Aquinas, the mystic Hadewijch expressed love (*Minne*) as the ground of both divine being and human action: God is the object of love, the act of love, and the source of love. This poetic rendering of love reveals an intimate relation to language itself, mixing adoration, understanding and edification. Her poetry implies a pedagogical form in which transmission of things known is far less significant than the effervescence of love itself.

Yes, she wishes to communicate with the reader, but her first reader is God, and so the terms are laced with praise. Such poetic speech finds its way into mainstream theological discourse. According to Copleston (1991), the systematic theology of Aquinas takes religious language to be concerned to awaken reverence, rather than transmit information. Jean-Luc Marion has made similar arguments of Augustine: 'Saint Augustine does not so much speak *of* God as he speaks *to* God' (2012, p. 9). Religious texts, creeds, prayers and doctrines are spiritual exercises and practices with edificatory, formative, pedagogical and theological intent. A view of language as basically a set of propositions that are more or less descriptively accurate, or that attempt to represent the totality of the world in concepts that are narrowly cognitive, in contrast to affective, is here associated with education as transmission. What does this affective dimension of language, evident in the aesthetic, poetic and the religious, do to our understanding of education? This article will focus particularly on religious language as a liturgical form that is affective, even erotic,[3] discourse that attempts to orient the reader, listener, speaker and writer in ways that present-day discussions of education tend to overlook. Perhaps the most obvious form of language working to orient the mind/soul of the speaker is illustrated through the concept of the invocation.

THE INVOCATION TO PATANJALI

> Yogena cittasya padena vacam
> Malam sarirasya ca vaidyakena
> Yopakarottam pravaram muninam
> Patanjalim pranajaliranato'smi
> Abahu purusakaram
> Sankha cakrasi dharinam
> Sahasra sirasam svetam
> Pranamami patanjalim (BKS Iyengar Yoga, n.d.)

What possible interest could one have in a sequence of words from a foreign language? Whether or not one grasps their meaning, these words are thought to have power. According to Sanskrit tradition, these words convey more than cognitive ideas expressed through propositions. I regularly attend Iyengar Yoga classes in my home town of Glasgow which often begin with this invocation to *Patanjali*, an Indian sage believed to have lived around 400CE, best known for having compiled and commented upon a classic text on Yoga, the *Yoga Sutras*. This chant is part of the more advanced classes so most of the students in the class are regular practitioners and 'know' the invocation well. I very much doubt many of the students 'know' exactly what the words mean, but the chant means something to all of us present even if, like myself, we don't know precisely how the words translate. The ritual performance seems to prepare the gathered students in various ways, encouraging a commitment to be in the present, leaving behind the cares that might otherwise follow us in to the practice. From time to time, the teacher will—almost apologetically—call the invocation a *prayer*, adding 'but not in the normal sense of the word' hoping to ensure that the practice is inclusive of those who are inclined to be skeptical of formal religious practices and rituals, those that sociologists are accustomed nowadays to term *spiritual but not religious* (Mercandante, 2014). My teacher will often emphasise that the invocation is intended to offer thanks for the developed form of the practice we are about to undertake. Long before the attitude of gratitude became the latest self-help trend that can change your life (Hart, 2015), a grateful orientation was seen as a good preparation for forms of spiritual practice, prescribed by Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist traditions (Carmen and Streng, 1989). For many practitioners the invocation to Patanjali is not only preparation but is also part of the practice itself because it follows a sequence of basic postural alignments and a certain attention to various parts of the body and the breath. Geeta Iyengar, daughter of the Iyengar founder B. K. S. Iyengar, and renowned practitioner and teacher in her own right, gives the following reason for the invocation: 'We chant so that at the very beginning that feeling of sanctification comes from inside, with the feeling of surrendering oneself, because nothing can be learned in this world unless you have the humility to learn'.[4] How does the performance of this chant work upon and form the yoga student?

Through some kind of surrender and gratitude to the sages, there seems to be an intention to attenuate the sense of autonomous subjectivity, to suspend the everyday sense of subjective identity that can inhibit the (trans)formative potential. But how exactly can chanting words originating from a different time and place help here, especially when those engaged in the chant do not understand the very words they chant? Perhaps this form of influence is no more (or less) mysterious than that of music. Through its affective power, chanting, like music, can be said to move the soul.[5] After all, many of us have been moved by the experience of singing (or listening to) music in languages unknown to us. That affective response does not seem to require subjective cognition. Similarly, we do not seem to need to process or understand the 'content' of the invocation. The content might appear to be unimportant or arbitrary. Put more starkly, we might as well be chanting

gibberish since the students don't really understand the terms anyway. Many contemporary Indian practitioners of Yoga would be in the same boat in this respect, since the invocation is written in a form of ancient Sanskrit that can only be interpreted by relatively few scholars. There is also the context and framing provided by the teacher that help the students to avoid feeling discombobulated. One might take the 'content' of the chant to be significant not because of its effect on the subject engaged in the chanting (which has been interpreted as part of a modern inward turn (Taylor, 1992)), but because it refers to that which is beyond us: namely God. The context of (post)modern spiritual practices folds together an orientation to something beyond us, that we hesitate to call divine, with a subjective orientation which might not be that far from Jungian ideas of *individuation*. I would suggest that the appeal to transcendence can be experienced through the romantic theological terms as encouraging something like a 'feeling of absolute dependence' (Schleiermacher, 1999, p. 132).

To the (post)modern quasi-religious and/or spiritual practitioner, for whom spiritual practices may be personally enriching, but who has misgivings about hierarchy, authority, tradition and God, the idea of reciting traditional prayers in an unknown language might seem odd. And yet here we are: legs crossed, spine lifted, chanting away. An examination of the theory of Sanskrit might go some way to explain how the words and the chanting have power in themselves. Of course, to properly consider a theory of Sanskrit would itself be a huge undertaking, well beyond my competence and scope. And we must keep in mind the purpose of these auto-ethnographic observations from the Yoga class: to point to the different possible understandings of the role of language in formation, and the example of the yoga invocation which illustrates how we (Western practitioners of yoga in this example) are engaged with language in different ways. The philosopher Shlomo Biderman has argued that Sanskrit language is primarily *tonal* rather than *semantic*: like music it expresses meaning in its tone. In other words, its meaning is to be heard rather than understood cognitively; it is a 'collection of sounds, a kind of sublime musical mold' (Biderman, 2008, p. 90). As the language and culture of India developed, from the ancient Vedic texts dating back 4,000 years through the linguistic, philosophical and religious literature (epics like the *Ramayana* as well as a wide range of Classical Sanskrit Literature), Sanskrit language gave richer and wider expression to the tonal and semantic elements. I do not mean to overdraw the difference between tonal and semantic content, as though we could ignore cognisable content and speak only of the pure affect or performance. The most poetic texts in Hindu tradition are about something, even if that thing is a poetic construction. So the cognitive and affective are never entirely distinct. I tentatively suggest (and will elaborate later) how sacred or liturgical languages often inhabit similar tensions between cognisable understanding, and tonal or aural affect. While it may be simplistic to map this semantic/tonal distinction onto a cognitive/affective duality, it can help us to make some sense of the phenomena of kinds of understanding that go beyond cognitive understanding. It is certainly true that liturgical discourses are many and varied, existing in most if not all major religious

traditions. For instance, different Christian traditions retain different sacred languages, from the Ecclesiastical Latin of the Roman Catholic Church, to the Koine Greek of the Greek Orthodox Church. The question of whether the use of the ecclesiastical forms emphasises the tonal over the semantic is ultimately a complex empirical one, influenced by changing theological, historical and cultural circumstances, and is beyond the scope of this article. All I hope to establish at this point is some general understanding of the use of a variety of forms of language that are not primarily to do with cognition, or transmission of cognisable content, but place significance on forms of affect in the broadest sense. This has to be established because so often it is assumed that thought and language are basically forms of cognition, either arising together, or one taking priority over the other (e.g. Fodor, 1975). We then tend to place the affective into the realm of feeling, and distinguish this from language. This example of the post-modern-spiritual-but-not-religious yoga student has illustrated something recognisable about the common usages of language: that we are often engaged in affective speech in order to form or transform. I turn now to Christian Monasticism to extend these observations.

LITERACY IN MEDIEVAL CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM

It is certainly audacious to juxtapose the modern Western Yoga practitioner who (de)forms the sacred terms of Sanskrit, with the monastic culture of Europe's Middle Ages. Although the connection is speculative, certain texts, and the practices of reading and speaking they describe, point to the tension between the cognitive and affective experiences of language that make comparison not entirely unwarranted. But some cautionary considerations must be set down. First, it should be admitted that the cognitive/affective distinction is likely to be a result of a modern production of subjectivity, and that if it existed at all in the Medieval monastic context, was likely to be conceived quite differently (Dupré, 1993). Nevertheless, I believe that juxtaposing these relations to language can be helpful in showing a general condition that language seems to have. Second, these examples are only generally exemplary and indicative: other, possibly better, examples from various histories and cultures could be selected to make the general point. Obvious alternative examples that could be developed include the Classical Arabic of Quran, the Biblical Hebrew of the Hebrew Bible and the Pali of Theravadan Buddhism. Third, I admit to relying largely on Jean Leclercq's fine study of Monastic culture, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* and so my account is somewhat tentative and limited by its narrow scope.

Leclercq's text is itself wide-ranging so I will focus on the earlier part of the book, the formation of monastic culture. We are treated here to a narrative of the development of a distinction between monastic and scholastic trends in medieval Europe, a narrative framed by the differing emphases and concerns within the monastic cultures of St. Benedict (c. 480–c. 547 CE) and St. Gregory (c. 540–604 CE). Leclercq himself attempts to maintain the precarious equilibrium between 'the two constants of monastic culture: on the one hand, the study of letters; on the other, the exclusive search

for God, the love of eternal life, and the consequent detachment from all else, including the study of letters' (Leclercq, 2011, p. 22). In the Rule of St. Benedict, the life of the monk is disciplined and organised around various activities, including *lectio divina*: 'divine reading'. Whereas to the modern mind the reading of texts is associated with decoding or finding meaning in order to gain some kind of knowledge, often in cognisable forms, here the reading practices of the Benedictine and Cistercian monks foreground what Duncan Robertson calls 'reading experiences' (Robertson, 2011) in which reading is not just a matter of getting information for some particular purpose (e.g. reading a recipe to cook). These reading experiences have a formative influence through the different elements of *lectio divina*: reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation.[6] This form of encounter does not draw meaning or understanding through narrowly epistemic or propositional forms, such as through dissecting the terms, structure or argument of the text, but by patient 'rumination' on the text. Leclercq goes further by explaining reading as 'assimilating the content of a text by means of a kind of mastication which releases its full flavour' (Leclercq, 2011, p. 73).[7] The Cistercian monk Arnoul of Bohériss puts it as follows: '[w]hen he reads, let him seek for savour, not science' (cited by Leclercq, 2011, p. 73). While it would be an overstatement to see in this a rejection of cognitive understanding and the traditions of scholastic interpretation that make this *lectio* possible, here reading is understood to be not principally a cognitive act, or if it is, it expands the general conception of cognition (Reid, 1973). Leclercq goes on to point out that Benedictine reading is likely not to have been of the silent sort, but to have been expressed through the movement of the lips, leading to a holistic view of reading as much more than acquiring a piece of knowledge from a text, that is, as a kind of meditation:

> . . . to meditate is to read a text and to learn it 'by heart' in the fullest sense of this expression, that is, with one's whole being: with the body, since the mouth pronounced it, with the memory which fixes it, with the intelligence which understands its meaning, and with the will which desires to put it into practice (Leclercq, 2011, p. 17).

Through vocalising the text, its formative power is exercised. Through ingesting the words, the soul is nourished. We speak colloquially of feeding the mind, or chewing over ideas, and so these consumptive metaphors do not belong only to *lectio divina*. But the metaphors seem to emphasise the embodied holistic formation of the reader, that goes well beyond simply the transmission or acquisition of propositional content.

Leclercq moves on to discuss the influence of a period of monastic renewal in the Carolingian period, between the late 8th and early 9th centuries CE, a period in which Latin was used to reinforce unity within the Holy Roman Empire. Latin was established not only as an important form of political and religious communication, but itself shaped the nature and to some extent the experience of religious life itself by being a sacred language, *lingua sacra*: a language not only to express and explore theology, but oriented to the place above; to worship God. Thus, Latin was not just

the vehicle in which orthodox religious ideas could be communicated, but provided the conditions for theological discourse and even thought itself by being the medium in which orthodoxy could be established: 'to think Christian doctrine otherwise than in Latin involved the danger of introducing into it inexactitudes, or even errors' (Leclercq, 2011, p. 41). To understand the Gospel and to remain orthodox, seemed to require competence in Latin. The context is important since before Charlemagne established the Carolingian empire in 800 CE, Latin was not spoken or understood by much of the clergy, never mind the laity: 'Clerics were, all too often, *idiotae*, that is to say, men who knew only their own language. If they knew neither how to write nor how to speak Latin, how could they understand the Gospel?' (Leclercq, 2011, p. 41).

Leclercq considers the relatively obscure figure of Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel, a Benedictine monk who lived in Northern France and taught that a way to reach heaven is through the learning of grammar, specifically the ecclesiastical Latin of the Church, for by this means is proper knowledge of the Trinity possible through Scripture. For Smaragdus the real purpose of learning Latin is less to be able to read, than to be admitted into heaven, 'one day to enjoy eternal happiness' (quoted in Leclercq, 2011, p. 45). If we can see the (trans)formation of the soul through learning Latin, then literacy brings with it a soteriological force. Rather than wait for the Gospel to be translated into the vernacular (which precipitated the Reformation some 700 years later[8]), the student must be 'translated' into, or by, the *lingua sacra*. The general point that Leclercq brings to attention is that language is always formative as well as informative. Leclercq acknowledges that the orientation and procedure differ between the scholastic and monastic approach to reading: 'the objective of the first is science and knowledge; of the second, wisdom and appreciation' (Leclercq, 2011, p. 72),[9] but he nonetheless recognises that, ultimately, we find ourselves unable to decide between language as on the one hand devotional-monastic and on the other hand discursive-scholastic. Here we should note Leclerq's broader concern to complicate any simple dichotomy that is set up between the life of the monk and the life of the scholar. Taking this thesis further, I would speculatively suggest that a choice between devotional-monastic and discursive-scholastic is 'undecidable'. This undecidability is not the result of an ambiguity that can be resolved through research in monastic or scholastic theology, but is an ambivalence intrinsic to the intractable question of the relationship between language and the world that is 'made present'. By 'making present' I include the possibility that language is creative, actually bringing-forth the world, as in the opening of John's gospel: 'In the beginning was the word . . . ' (John 1:1).[10] As I shall argue later, language does not fail in the face of this undecidability, but can be said to announce and articulate it, not through the forceful logic of the proposition, but through the poetic theology of the self-subverting utterance which paradoxically appeals to what cannot be contained by the terms of reference. In other words, paradox is not the failure of language, but is an essential expressive mode, even if it appears to fail standard propositional logic. John Behr relates a striking episode from the Early Church which encapsulates

this point. When St. Ignatius of Antioch was being taken to Rome to be martyred for his faith, he wrote to fellow Christians to implore them not to intervene in his fate (through bribing authorities or other means):

> It is better for me to die in Christ Jesus than to be king over the ends of the earth. I seek him who died for our sake. I desire him who rose for us. Birth-pangs are upon me. Suffer me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to die (Behr, 2013, p. 3).

Behr's commentary draws out the paradox: '"Do not wish me to die"... by finding a way to get me out of my coming martyrdom! "Do not hinder me from living"... by stopping me from being martyred!' (Behr, 2013, p. 3). For Behr these statements (and the similar paradoxes to be found in the gospels) are intended to help us to *become human*: the words of Ignatius are intended to be formative, for we can only discover our humanity by giving it up willingly. For Behr the corpus of Patristic theology is itself fundamentally pedagogical, seeking to form the reader not just through reason, but through passionate and affective persuasion.

If rational analysis is intended to persuade the reader through good reasons, then other kinds of literature might be said to persuade the reader in other ways. Indeed, I have suggested that the concept of *persuasion* could be replaced by *formation* since certain texts, particularly religious texts, intend to not only persuade the intellect, but more broadly to form the person.[11] Thus, texts employ affective devices in order to be formative not only of what the reader knows and understands, but also what s_he desires and loves. To explore the nature and operation of the way language works upon the desires of the *affective subject*, I turn to Augustine.

THE FORMATION OF DESIRE

The tensions between different conceptions and traditions of reading, reflect and enact the ongoing tensions in the theological tradition between the *desire for* God and the *knowledge of* God. We have no straightforward answer to which, knowledge or desire, should come first: does reading help us to know God, or to love God? This question is expressed in exemplary form by Augustine in *The Confessions*. Augustine asks 'whether a man is first to pray for help ... and whether he must know you before he can call you to his aid' (Augustine, 1961, p. 1) going on to wonder that '[i]f he does not know you, how can he pray to you?' This expresses an undecidable theological conundrum: how we can love, obey, or pray to that which goes beyond understanding. The problem for Augustine is that the object of our devotion could be (and perhaps often is) nothing divine. And yet we can only really come to know God through a leap, a commitment of faith and love, even though we are not entirely sure what it is that we love. Love may be a primal human energy, but for Augustine, it is also an energy that must be disciplined, so that we can learn to love rightly:

> [l]iving a just and holy life requires one to be capable of an objective and impartial evaluation of things: to love things, that is to say, in the

right order, so that you do not love what is not to be loved, or fail to love what is to be loved, or have a greater love for what should be loved less, or an equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally (Augustine, 1997, I. pp. 27–28).

For Augustine, rightly-ordered love entails, as Joseph Clair puts it, both intellectual and affective movements, 'first an impartial evaluation of things within the hierarchy of being, and, second, a corresponding alignment of one's affection in accord with the relative merit of the thing itself' (Clair, 2018, p. 37). But for Augustine this always entails what looks like a paradox: '[w]hat you at present long for, you do not yet see: by longing, though, you are made more capable: so that when that has come which you may see, you can be filled' (Augustine, 2008, 4.6). If only loving the 'wrong' thing really did help us to love the 'right' thing! Though it seems we can at least be made ready to recognise it when we see it. The paradox of love can be resolved, or perhaps deferred, by another paradox: the paradox of learning. The right ordering of love is possible when we allow what we orient our love towards to be not solely directed by the self. In other words, we cannot direct our own love or our own learning, since by definition to love or to learn is an act entailing a kind of openness or submission to the other. As Kenklies argues, in education we must 'desire' alienation, to become something without knowing exactly what it is we will become (See Kenklies in this Special Issue). So desire does need to be directed or reoriented even though, in a certain sense, it is guided by that which is the ultimate object of desire.

THE NEGATION OF DESIRE

The presupposition of much theology is that human (finite) knowledge of God is always incomplete. A correlate condition is that the love for God is always misdirected (sin, as the failure of desire, is 'missing the mark'[12]). There is a connection between the subversion of our cognitive knowledge of God through conventional *apophatic* theology, and the subversion of the desire for God through a less conventional but also influential negation or apophasis of desire (see Sells, 1994; Turner, 1998).

This apophasis of desire has already been briefly discussed in reference to Augustine for whom desire is oriented to and by God, and yet needs to be disciplined. Beyond Augustine, modern theologians have also drawn attention to the dangers of taking objects of desire as ultimate when, in fact, they are preliminary. Paul Tillich, for instance, describes the 'demonic temptation' of taking something to be infinite, or ultimate, which is, in fact, finite, or preliminary (Tillich, 1953, p. 140). We require, then, detachment or negation of that which is not ultimate. In that sense, the education of desire entails forms of negation: showing that the object of desire is not quite what it appears to be, or that it is preliminary to something and therefore must be left behind.[13] This *negative education* is not to be avoided, but is central to understanding education. Although negation as a dimension of education

has received some attention by scholars (Clarke and Phelan, 2015; English, 2012), its role remains far from generally acknowledged.

The reason that knowledge and desire miss the mark is that they are shaped by the limitations of our experience of the world. Thus, our human projection, of either knowledge or desire, must be delicately balanced with something else: namely the given, or revealed; what human beings 'put in' to their search for God must also be 'taken out'. Although complex and delicate, the relationship between projection and revelation is played out in the field of language itself, particularly the field of religious and mystical language. Drawing on the mystical tradition of figures like Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart, the theologian Peter Rollins sees the key insight of the mystic as his understanding of language (Rollins, 2006): that cataphatic annunciation and apophatic negation operate together to bring God (or what is ultimate) into language. This means that what we can say about God is neither *true* nor *false*, but is better understood as a performance of something, a relation that may be *practiced* through language even though it cannot be captured or contained by language. Indeed, the incapacity for language to capture God does not silence the theologian or mystic (even falling into silence is often announced!), but often demands an effusive response since there is always so much more to be said. Rather than seeing the 'limits of language' to speak of God's nature as a restriction on God talk, we apparently never tire of speaking of God, something testified to by the verbosity of theological and mystical discourses. This is not because so much is known about God, but because knowledge is only formed and glimpsed through *discursive practices* and so the more we speak the more glimpses we have, and the more our relationship with God exceeds only our projections. But this also entails understanding language as far more than discursive, propositional or cognitive. Similar arguments are developed by Jean-Luc Marion, another modern theologian who has been a leading figure within what is known as the theological turn in phenomenology.

The fundamental insight of Marion, and this theological turn, is that a fully worked out phenomenological reduction—a pure attention to things as they show themselves—reveals an excess that is simultaneously present and absent: that what is given in the phenomena shows there is more to give. One important methodological component of this approach is of particular interest here, namely that what is projected by human subjectivity can be seen working with, rather than against, 'givenness' or revelation. In other words, there is a cooperation between the projections of human subjectivity, and the revelations that this subjectivity 'receives' (Marion, 2002, 2018). One central way in which this cooperation can be interpreted is through linguistic or discursive practices, and here we are able to connect with the central argument of this paper: the role of language in the formation of the self.

Again, theological language is conceived less as descriptive of something, than as a *practice* of speaking and unspeaking. As we have seen, such practices of religious language seek to orient or form the soul in different ways. Pseudo-Dionysius, writing in the late 5th century, opens his text *Mystical Theology* with a prayer. The form of pre-modern theological writings,

to begin with some kind of spiritual invocation or prayer, is more than a matter of mere convention or style. Although little is known of the author's context (partly because Pseudo-Dionysius was mistaken for St. Dionysius the Areopagite who was converted by St. Paul) the text addresses God in paradoxical ways designed to orient (or to confirm the orientation of) the soul of the reader:

> Trinity! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness!
> Guide of Christians in the wisdom of heaven!
> Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
> up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture,
> where the mysteries of God's Word lie simple, absolute and unchange-
> able
> in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
> Amid the deepest shadow they pour overwhelming light on what is
> most manifest.
> Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen they completely fill our sightless
> minds
> with treasures beyond all beauty (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987, p. 135).

Denys Turner has commented that this prayer takes the form of what he calls the self-subverting utterance, where, for instance, darkness can be brilliant, and silence can be hidden (Turner, 1998, p. 21). It is in the self-subverting utterance, says Turner, that we find the natural medium of theological language. The structure of apophatic theology, which demands that our cognitive concepts of God are discarded or subverted, is taken further in Turner's suggestion of a correlate apophatic anthropology, which entails the apophasis of desire: our desire is to be subverted. As I have already argued, the negation of our conceptual knowledge of God and the negation of our desire for God are related. Michael Sells similarly pursues the connections between the negation of the knowledge of God, standard apophasis, as it might be called, with a less conventional, and indeed more inclined to heresy, apophasis of desire, in the mystical theology of Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart (Sells, 1994, chapters 5, 6 and 7). Here even 'good works' become the object of negation, for even the desire to please God sullies the purity of the act. It was her radical negation of the desire for the good that resulted in Porete being burned at the stake in Paris in 1310 (Sells, 1994, p. 116) and arguably resulted in judgement by the inquisition that some of Eckhart's statements were heretical or at least 'theologically rash' (Ashley, 2009, p. 69). We must lose everything for God, even our love of God.

But what does it mean to subvert human desire and how does poetic or religious language enable this? Let me first say more about the logic of this apophasis of desire. Note that apophasis refers to the breakdown of speech which, in the face of the utter unknowability of God, falls infinitely short. Correcting what he sees as an imbalanced impression of mystical theology, Turner points out that apophasis is not something that stands alone (as a way, or *via negativa*) but can only meaningfully operate in cooperation with

its logical equivalent, *cataphasis*: the verbose element of theology, where language for God is affective and effusive more than descriptive or conclusive (Turner, 1998). This means that we must speak of God in order to then subvert what we can say. Similarly, we must (or we do) love, but that love must also be subverted as its impurities are burned away. From this point of view, the moniker 'negative theology' is a pleonasm, a term which seems to concede that 'theology', without its negations, is a legitimate exercise in discursive positing that belongs as a tradition in its own right. With this assumption about language, we are inclined to suppose that language fails us, though it seems more likely that it is we who fail language. The popularity of mystical and negative theology in contemporary discussions of religion perhaps suggest something of our failure to grasp mainstream theology (Lewin *et al.,* 2017). It seems our over-determined conception of religious language encourages the appeal to negations as a special category within theology, thereby reinforcing the idea that mainstream theology is something like speaking of God (the cataphatic without apophatic). Theology *is* speaking of God, but *cataphasis* and apophasis cooperate to form theological languages of saying and unsaying, practices of speech which also explore, expose and transgress the nature of language itself. Through this paradoxical dialectic, the practices of the transgression of language, are simultaneously the fulfilment of language, and so words don't fail us, rather, as Heidegger puts it, they are the efforts 'to bring language as language to language' (Heidegger, 2003, p. 242). How are these cataphatic and apophatic linguistic practices translated into the realm of desire and what is lost in that translation?

In the form of the hidden or given libido, desire seems to precede us, having gone before, opening the world, revealing that which is of meaning to us. Thus, we always already find our desire committed to something, never quite catching desire until it already stirs. Still, we certainly have occasion and reason to interrogate desire. In the pursuit of the beloved, we can, from time to time, wonder whether we actually seek what we think we seek. We consciously take up our desires for things when we feel there is an issue: when we suspect we desire something we ought not to, or we need to educate desire for a particular thing. At another level this is paradoxical since it is all within the operation of desire itself, something we do not stand outside.

Just as the failure of language to represent God (or anything else) is simultaneously the possibility and fulfillment of language—for it accomplishes this failure through the play of saying and unsaying—so the failure of desire to love God (which is built into the structure of desire itself) is simultaneously the possibility and fulfillment of desire itself. Language and desire are both fulfilled by their transgressions and breakdowns. Is there a difference in the way negation works in relation to knowledge and the way it works in relation to desire?

We can negate a concept by showing that it does not include all that it should, or includes things it should not. But how do we negate desire? Teachers seem unable to form desire directly. If education has a role in the formation of desire is can only be a negative one, pointing out that the habit,

passion or will misses the mark. And yet any negation of desire would seem contradictory, since it is predicated on a fundamental condition of desire. Does education support appropriate sublimation, helping us negotiate the expressions of desire acceptable to public life? Is education able to draw attention to something more fundamental: the unsatisfying nature of all objects and pursuits of desire? The Platonic notion that desire is born of dissatisfaction, as a product of contrivance and poverty, is at the root of Christian Neoplatonism, that I find both seductive and repellent. The object of desire is, in a sense, unattainable, but a recognition of this might help us see desire as a practice: of attaining without containing, enjoying without coveting, having without owning. An attachment to the object of desire that must be detached, requires a shift of attention since the fundamental energy of desire is the ground of both attachment and detachment.

CONCLUSION

The question raised by this paper is how we understand the formative power of language. This question has been explored firstly, by examining how a general idea of linguistic informing leaves out a good deal that is central to how language works, and secondly, by considering how conceptions of language interact with educational formation in the broadest sense. It has not been my intention to deny that, at one level, language is a medium for communicating knowledge through propositions that form cognitive understanding. But the concept of cognitive understanding has been expanded by Reid to include aesthetic understanding. I have attempted to go further than this, by exploring a range of different linguistic contexts, from the chanting of Yoga Sutras to *Lectio Divina* to other contemplative practices of theologians and mystics. My selections have, of course, been partial and rather idiosyncratic rather than comprehensive and systematic, and really this subject matter deserves a more complete analysis. But the nature and influence of language remains one of the most complex and wide-ranging subjects imaginable. Within these limited interests, my point has been to show that language forms and informs us in a variety of ways. The use of theology to develop this argument is, in a sense, purely formal or incidental, though I suggest it also provides exemplary illustrations of the varieties of linguistic formation. The limits, breakdowns, transgressions and negations of speech are not failures of language, but operations of it, and these operations have educational significance insofar as they seem to work formatively. From chanting to praying, we often don't quite know what we are saying, or who we are speaking to, leading us to question the assumption that language is essentially informative. Yet there is so much more to consider in the idea that language is formative and its relation to the 'informative'. That the poetic, aesthetic and mystical forms of speech have power does not yet provide a detailed account of how these kinds of speech really form us. Hence this article invites further consideration of what remains 'unsaid' herein (and the related question of the role of silence in speech). My argument could be also developed further by examining how fundamentally *negative* or *alienating* education has to be, and one indication I have highlighted is that religious

languages have considerable resources for drawing out a theory of negation as an important part of language. While this most obviously applies to that which goes 'beyond language' (i.e. God) I hope to have suggested that the structure of negation applies to 'understanding' in the broadest sense because understanding entails a relationship between the projections of the understanding subject, and the conditions in which understanding operates: the givenness of things. The ways that theologians have conceived of the negation not only of what we know, but also of what we desire, seem to have direct and profound implications for educators who understand their role to be forming as well as informing.

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NOTES

1. There is third term that belongs to theories of mind. As well as the cognitive (thoughts) and the affective (feelings) there is the *conative* which is defined as the drive to act upon thoughts and feelings. Although the term has been influential, even appearing in Maslow's 'A Theory of Human Motivation', it has almost entirely fallen out of the lexicon of terms to describes the different aspects of the mind.

2. God is here deliberately 'bracketed out' though one wonders whether this is at all possible. I say this as someone who understands himself in common-sense terms as a 'secular individual' with no particular theological intentions. I am persuaded, though, that theological language is probably unavoidable to a certain extent, partly since it has been so historically influential for human beings thinking about what really matters to them, and attempting to articulate that. I am inspired here by Ben Morgan's remarks: 'we may not want to use the word God when we describe who we are or what we care about, but historically, religious habits have been a way of taking the individual outside him- or herself and of giving expression to a sense of agency beyond his or her control' (Morgan, 2013, p. 3).

3. Christian mysticism often employs 'erotic' language to orient the reader (Jantzen, 2003). The concept of mystical knowledge is complex and beyond the scope of this article though does seem to complicate any simple boundaries between knowing that is intellectual from a union that is drawn through erotic imagery.

4. This explanation of the invocation to Patanjali is adapted from an interview given by Geeta at RIMYI (Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute) in 1992 during a Canada intensive Yoga programme. The interview was conducted by Margo Kitchen and videotaped by Heather Malek. It was transcribed and edited by Judith M. in consultation with Marline Miller, and adapted by Francis Ricks.

5. One might seek a categorical definition for language as distinct from noise, or music. I resist providing a systematic account of language in this way precisely because I want to suggest that defining language solely in terms of carriers of meaning too easily invites a reduction of language to the communication of propositions. This may mean that the term *language* is used metaphorically, but even saying this seems to suggest that there is a literal meaning to language which I do not accept. The borders of language are indistinct.

6. See also Benner, 2010; Harrison, 2007; Robertson, 2011.

7. Although *Lectio Divina* begins with reading, it is said to be less a practice of reading than of listening to the inner message of the Scripture delivered through the Holy Spirit (Benner, 2010, pp. 47–53).

8. In the later Middle Ages movements, such as the Brethren of the Common Life in the Low Countries, the Hussites in Bohemia, and Lollardism in England gained wide appeal teaching that Christians should live simple, modest and moral lives. They all also emphasised the use of the vernacular language, rather than Latin, so that the unlearned could have as much access to the

teachings of the Christian faith as the learned. These groups were important in providing the conditions for the Reformation.

9. Leclercq's broad intention is to complicate the dichotomy between the scholastic and the monastic. Such a dichotomy seems to have more than a passing resemblance to the more contemporary and yet still ancient opposition between faith and reason (Alston, 1998; Copleston, 1952), where contemplation requires a synthetic attitude of faith in contrast to critical analysis which seems more typically aligned with ideas of reason (at least since the Enlightenment). For Leclercq, our understanding of both scholastic and monastic communities is obscured by such a cleavage, a point that generally reflects the theme of this Special Issue.

10. This idea could be associated with the ancient Greek term *poiesis* which refers to a kind of human making, or creation, from which our term poetry is derived.

11. Persuading the intellect is itself included in the concept of forming the person. Forming the person entails a broader form of influence.

12. The new Testament concept of 'sin' originally developed from the Greek concept harmatia, which refers to the idea of missing the mark in archery. Hamartia: (Ancient Greek: ἁμαρτία) Error of Judgement or Tragic Flaw. 'Hamartia'. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014. Accessed: 28 September 2014.

13. Although the idea of being drawn out by something that is unknown has been discussed widely by theologians, it also appears in many secular forms. Consider, for instance, Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a*, an unattainable object of desire. The filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock employed and popularised the *Macguffin plot device*, an undisclosed goal or motivation that shapes the actions of protagonists despite never being revealed to the viewer. Moreover, the category of the ineffable, though characteristically religious, is also often used to refer to aesthetic and moral encounters and intuitions.

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