‘Boat of Letters’

and the Poetics of Reticence:

A Creative and Critical Thesis

EVE GRUBIN

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

June 2023

Abstract

In poetry, the unsaid is vital to the production of meaning. In order to investigate the theoretical framework of this claim and its practical application, my research comprises a critical component, The Poetics of Reticence, and a research-led creative practice, a collection of poems, Boat of Letters. The critical study introduces and explores the idea I have coined 'the poetics of reticence', a new term in the field. I argue that narrative gaps are central to the poetics of reticence. The creative practice exhibits and challenges that poetics.

Boat of Letters collects poems that build on my instinctive understanding of reticence and stand in relation to the theory I lay out in my critical thesis. The theory emerged from the poems I have read. The collection includes poems that are obviously reticent as well as those that may at first appear to be non-reticent. I intentionally experiment with both approaches in order to test my theory that the unsaid lies at the heart of poems.

The Introduction to The Poetics of Reticence includes a memoir of my development as a poet in relation to reticence, defines key terms and concepts, and provides an outline of the subsequent four chapters. The first chapter, a literature review, 'Critical Approaches to Reticence,' offers an overview of scholarly debates on this subject and evaluates critical texts about reticence. The second chapter 'A Methodology of Reticence', presents my methodology, which combines both conceptual and textual analysis. Here I apply a Levinasian theory to my argument in order to illuminate the notion that withheld information in a poem represents the speaker's vulnerability and otherness. This chapter includes a special section on Emily Dickinson whose work is explored as a test case to support my theory. In the third

chapter, 'The Ethics of Reticence', I maintain that narrative gaps invite the reader to accept the vulnerability and ultimate inscrutability of the poem and to turn inward and confront and develop the self, leading to a sense of responsibility. Dickinson is discussed here again, but this time through the lens of this chapter's concerns regarding ethics. The fourth and final chapter, 'Writing Boat of Letters', sheds light on how the poetics of reticence functions in contemporary poetic practice from the point of view of a poet. I reflect on my own work in this chapter, supporting my assertions in the previous chapters, through an analysis of my writing practice. This last chapter offers an intimate and practice-based answer to my research question: how does reticence produce meaning? In the Conclusion, I review my findings and discuss how my research can extend to further investigations.

Dedication

Infinite thanks are due to my parents and sister and brother

And to Zecharya and Azriel, our darling boys,

for the beauty of their reticent and non-reticent love

And to my husband, Stewart Brookes, who matches the silver reticence and solid calm

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my supervisors, Dr Meg Jensen and Dr Siobhán Campbell, for their creative and scholarly insights. I also owe debts of gratitude to Dr Patricia Phillippy who believed in me at the beginning stages of this thesis.

I am pleased to acknowledge Techne AHRC funding and the other support they provided while writing this thesis at Kingston University. I'm also grateful for funding from the Techne Training Group (the Study Support and Work Placement Fund) which covered travel to the US to conduct research at the Emily Dickinson Museum, Amherst College's Dickinson Archives and Harvard's Houghton Library.

Many thanks are due to Ken Ehrenberg who provided valuable feedback; Marc Michael Epstein for crucial PhD advice; Terri Gordon for her lessons in French feminism; Sandra Jacobs for her guidance; David-Hillel Ruben for his wise words; Leya Landau for her encouragement along the way; So Meyer for their sharp eye; Rick Millington who encouraged the academic side of me and for his sharp-witted and profound comments about Dickinson; Hannah Raymond for her assistance; Emma Claire Sweeney who inspired me to begin this process and for her consistent positive energy; Tamra Wright for kindly giving me a short course on Levinas in Mr Baker and for her ongoing support; and to Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg for the stimulating conversation about my topic when we met in Jerusalem.

With grateful thanks to poetry friends Amy Gottlieb, Kathryn Maris and Cheryl Moskowitz—I could always detect your applause.

Contents

Part One

Boat of Letters: A Collection of Poems

Acknowledgements for

Boat of Letters

The following poems, some in earlier versions, appeared in the pamphlet *The House of Our First Loving* (Rack Press, 2016): 'A Boat of Letters', 'The Great Oven Debate', 'The Sound of Giving', 'White Window', 'The House of Our First Loving', 'A Definition', 'Belief', 'Gentle and Middle', and 'Unfinished'.

The following poems, some in earlier versions, appeared in the pamphlet *Grief Dialogue* (Rack Press, 2022): 'Grief Dialogue', 'Near', 'Mother to Daughter I', 'Mother to Daughter II', 'Mother to Daughter III', 'Glimmer', 'What Surprised Me', 'This Is What Happened', and 'The Laws'.

These journals and anthologies published the following poems, some in earlier versions: *The American Poetry Review*: 'Allay', 'Bone of My Bone', 'The Garden of Earthly Delights', 'The Laws'.

A Book of Uncommon Prayer: An Anthology of Everyday Invocations (Outpost): 'White Window'.

Lubavitch International: Republished 'Allay', originally published in *The American Poetry Review*.

The North: 'Darling, I Used to Dance at These Parties'.

Paper Brigade: 'Revelation'.

Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal: 'Keep Not Knowing'.

Poetry Daily: 'Unfinished'.

Poetry Review: 'A Boat of Letters', 'The Great Oven Debate', 'American in England', and 'Grief Dialogue'.

PN Review: 'A Definition', 'Unfinished', 'You Knew Who I Was'. ('You Knew Who I Was', my translation of the Yehuda Halevi poem, was shortlisted for the *PN Review* Translation Prize, 2021).

San Diego Poetry Annual: 'Snakes and Ladders' (Winner of the Steve Kowit Poetry Prize, 2021).

SWIMM Every Day: 'Longing'.

Thank you to the 2021 Ivan Juritz Prize judges for choosing to long-list a selection of poems from this collection and thanks to Will Eaves for his words of commendation.

Thank you to Dorianne Laux for choosing 'Snakes and Ladders' as the winner of the Steve Kowit Poetry Prize, 2021.

For their advice on these poems, I am grateful to Stewart Brookes, Siobhán Campbell, Geraldine Clarkson, Amy Gottlieb, Meg Jensen, Hannah Lowe, Kathryn Maris, Cheryl Moskowitz, and the North West Poetry Group.

In memory of my mother (ז"ל)

ברכה בת ישראל הירש

Table of Contents: Boat of Letters

I

Grief Dialogue

Grief Dialogue

What do you long for when you climb the ancient stair?

I long for the smile under my father's beard, for the early photos.

What do you desire when all thought is done?

I desire the beauty tucked into the slant of the poem.

When you lost your watch what was left?

A few turquoise stones, a broken clasp.

When you lost her what was left?

I longed and was angry and then dull, roosting
in hidden places.

Did the starlight seep through?

I felt I was caught in the traplight.
The rain had squirrels and slugs in it.

What about your steep, your heart?

I begged. It was a prayer, a filling up.
The wind beat me down, and I grew anyway.

Near

They say she is near.
The hall lamp unlit.
I can't hear an answer in these walls.

Every morning.
Why was she taken so quickly?
Without notice.

Gifts: gold dishtowel, oven mitt,
drawings of robins and irises.
No longer come. Done.

She had been a train moving towards me, her sounds
distant under the bridge.

Now I am the train. Moving into fields of rain.

Mother to Daughter I

When I finally left

it was not an alternate world I entered.
It was reality.

The wind I entered was the reality of your wind.
Not the cold against your ear,
not the dry leaves blowing their sentences
around your shoes,
but a sweeping into.

When you take the bread,
when you cover your eyes before the candles,
I, no longer I, am embraced.

Unseen
salt-scented night.

Mother to Daughter II

My body was a small station
and you the engine clicking in the damp.

I was a beer cellar holding your sharp liquid,
dark L-shaped spice.

Your dew was heavy with my garden.

Mother to Daughter III

Remember our moon-hair,
the knots in your dream-brush?

Glimmer

When you were alive, a heft
kept you far from me.

Now I surround myself with you.

Dishtowel hanging in the pearly kitchen.

The large watercolour: flecks of light
between plant leaves.

Drawings of ducks and lilies.
No visible sun, no moon.

On the wall, a photograph under heavy glass
of you as a young woman, looking down,
shy smile, wide forehead,

turtleneck sweater covering your neck and shoulders,
a soft 70s headband holding back dark hair,
window of white behind you,
and the glimmer of an earring.
Every time I walk the stairs.

What Surprised Me

I only began to know my mother after.

Deep green scent.
Thousands of triangles.

Who had she been?
I never could see her when I saw her.

The Torah is plural:
seen and hidden (written and oral).

When she was here, her letters were black,
hidden, opaque.

I did not know her ivory soap
and red balloons.
Her falconry and maple-like leaves. Her hidden.
How she was driving through tunnels and into the open.

Allay

The mass of curtains failed
to block out the light which insisted.

I was railing against.

Matching a physical pain,
a how-could-this-have-happened pain,
my silences shouted into the wooden floors.

The curtains were against me,
and I was protesting,
wanting to seal and bar.

A man had a dream:
Grandfather Jonah spoke to him from the withheld:
Learn this Talmud tractate.

The dreaming man woke,
leaned over the pages
with his learning partner, the Aramaic
pressing against the Aramaic,
letters pulsing under thousands of letters.

The tractate: a Jewish man blocked on the road
by the Roman who demanded
to see inside his bag. The forbidden item:
strips of tefillin curled
in black boxes, ready for morning prayers;
he held his bag close, but it was
pried, wrested, and then, when opened, doves,
jonahs, showed their yellow beaks,
the birds pushed themselves, spread their thick wings.

Weeks later the dreaming man and his wife
named their baby Jonah.

Why, after learning the story,
and its afterstory, did the against urge
dissipate into a sadness not minding
the failing curtains,
letting the world in?

This Is What Happened

She was settling under dirt and stones,

something cooed overhead.

Its wings brushed
low hanging leaves
and landed on top of the grave,
bobbing among wet sticks.

The pigeon kept moving forward
and held its head in place until its body caught up.

A certain light scattered through this movement
although the sky was a grey sheet.

I could feel her sanity running through me
like a river running though dry land.

She had settled. Now she was everywhere.

The Laws

The shroud must be hand-made.
Pockets are forbidden. The material may be cotton or linen.
Sentiment does not govern these laws.

The women had washed and bathed her body.
This is required.
They did not talk during the preparations. This is also a law.

The watchers sat with her during.
They sat and recited the requisite words at dark
and at noontime.
They continued speaking them, ancient and brief, at sunrise.

The manner of respect is governed by religious tradition
rather than personal whim.

I did not attend gatherings.
I said no blessings.
These are not choices.

I stood at the podium facing the people.
I turned to where she lay, asked her to forgive me
as is the custom.
I heard a voice crying in the room.

Then they lowered her into the earth
and a mound rose above the surface of the ground.

I tore my shirt. Someone helped
by pulling a razor through the material just above my heart.
I walked between two rows of people. They offered
traditional words of comfort.

The laws provide a place.

I washed my hands. Said blessings,
ate bread and eggs without salt.

I wore the wounded shirt.
How do I say this? I could barely breathe
for the streaming inside me.
I sat on a low chair—
This too because of the laws.

II

The Book of Love

Darling, I Used to Dance at These Parties

It was the 90s in New York, and we'd put on music
in a friend's apartment, in Brooklyn or Manhattan,
something cheesy: Madonna or George Michael,
and I sensed that everyone was joined,
that there was a great love in the world and beyond,
the hugeness almost threw me down.
I no longer understood why I was dancing,
why I was. I sat down for a moment
to re-direct what went loose. I looked
into the dark room, the movement
of shadows, not able to hold the physics of the music
in my mind. I could almost hear another song, waiting,
a dancing that would one day contain me,
notes of laws I did not yet follow,
linked to a text and words beneath that text.
I saw your soft, felt your strong,
which I would not know for years, on my back,
your lake-eyes, brown and still.

A Boat of Letters

arrives, and I lie down in its white wet,
ink prints on my cheek, feet, and dress.
Last night I dreamt my husband
held me like a forceful wind
as I strained forward to hear
a group of girls sing soft, unclear,
in our doorway.
I pushed towards them. They seemed far away.
He was strong, and I struggled.
Boat of letters, filled to the brim,
take us to your wild inky swamp
where leaves hang down like muted lamps,
where we can write and read; and with each opened letter
let there be an answer, a surprise, something delightful!

Bone of My Bone

Do you remember?
You stood in the kitchen doorway.
I said the words.
You blushed, looked relieved,
closed your eyes.

Remember? You wanted
to go down on your knees on the red carpet.
I wasn't ready.

But on the lake
in the boat,
in the middle of my city,
you asked me.

You asked without thinking about how our first child
would wake every three hours,
each night, for two years,
and how each time we went in to hold him.

You asked without thinking about how our next baby
would be born early, very early.
You asked the question.

You did not dwell on the disputes
we would have
about that book or that movie,
which weren't about a book or a movie.

We were floating, choosing
the birth-room,
choosing you whispering into your prayer-book,
the midwives holding my shoulders.

Do you remember remembering
what would happen? We were floating.
You rowed. The soft grain
of the wooden oars in your hands.

The House of Our First Loving

Blue evening window.

Books stacked on the table tilting towards the silver lamp
like a person leaning into a taller person.

An empty chair, a blue mixing bowl.

Listening for steps crunching the snow.

Faint ringing of keys.

Cold streaming from coat, hands.

Brown unfamiliar bedsheets.

Branches scrape the windowpane.

Snakes and Ladders

Our five-year-old son and I lean
over squares on the playing board

while our older son reads *Twenty-Five Easy Steps*
to Becoming Ancient Greek.

A virus is breathing over Earth
and you stand on a high stool in the garden,

place leaves and branches on top of our sukkah.
I move my piece

five spaces, just missing
the head of the snake, its thin tongue blue and forked.

Cracks between the wood floorboards
contain dust, darkness. And the shelves

hold books we love. What will happen to us?
Where will we be next year, many years from now?

On the table rests the box our son built, containing
small labelled secrets he crafted from clay.

The rain has returned, pulling
the night down like a curtain around our house.

I hold the die in my hand, its light weight shifting
with uncertainty, the cool soft corners offer hope.

You crouch, then step down carefully onto the mud,
your hands wet with blessings.

I look at the box: wood and painted gold.
The moulded clay angels

sit on the lid, stretch
their clumsy wings towards each other.

Chopsticks, glued to each side,
serve as poles for the faithful to grasp and lift.

The Book of Love

We don't always speak
what's on our minds. This is groundwork

for longevity in a marriage.
Yet there are difficulties.

Love your God with all your heart,
Rambam wrote. He meant: love with the forces

of the body. Physical actions
completed regularly serve as stimuli.

The prayer the Shema makes us think
about love after waking

and before sleep.
Even more constant is the law of circumcision:

the mark a body carries as a reminder
of the covenant at every moment.

In a marriage, it's also the forces
of our bodies that recall love:

the mouth withholds
words of disrespect. The hand offers soup.

Cheek against neck— a necessary balm.
And our limbs stretch out across the field of the marriage-bed.

In the foreword to Rambam's book,
the translator describes his struggle:

Hebrew words assimilated into English
are better not translated,

yet this leads to inconsistencies.
There seems to be no good way

of solving this problem.
This last sentence is followed by white space.
Just saying.

The Poetics of Reticence

There is no vessel; there are no oars.
Silence is praise.

Not with her fingers. She can move him
with the emptiness between them.

No sounds of creaking in the night.

The waters are empty.
A steeped stillness in the pitch.

'Not by force, not by might, but by my spirit'.

No stars, no wind.
The dark is clean, unspeaking.
Nothing can be seen.

The Wife

After making the list, I sit him down, show it to him:
bank deposit, curtains, phone call to the builder….

He wants us to watch a movie.
I want to look at the calendar, to plan.

When I close my eyes, he kneels in the garden.

He bends over the grass and the rocky soil,
creating a deep wide space for the dianthus between his knees.

I move forward to the next task, hold a pencil, pick up the phone.

When I close my eyes again
he is planting the dianthus,

pollen is falling, weightless.

Question

Why do you need to tell your husband to take off his coat?

Revelation

Inside the book are many books.

*

My husband leans into his workbench, sands wood.
Shavings scatter around his feet, dust his arms.
He drills perpendicular to the wood,
making holes for nails.

He hasn't unpacked his suitcase yet,
which lies open on our bedroom floor.

*

Rabbi Yishmael taught acceptance.

*

In the books lie contradictions
which are answers
and those answers are questions
with answers in other books.

*

A familiar voice is saying to me, *Come sit on the couch,*
let's watch something.

*

I know if I mention the suitcase he will pick it up
and place it in his study, which
is filled with papers and suitcases and boxes.

*

Books sit solid on the shelves.
The questions they hold are silent.

*

Rabbi Akiva taught to embrace restraint.

*

Then someone tried to help. *Fun*, they said.
I didn't understand and asked, *What do you mean?*
They clarified: *Just have fun!*

English Vernacular Minuscule

After you broke the glass with the heel of your wedding shoe,
I took your hand.
I had not yet learned about English
vernacular minuscule.
Or about palaeography.
I had not heard you call the lower curve of a 't',
'turned-down' or 'hooked at the tip'.
I did not know that 'left branch' describes
the first line of the 'x' and refers to a 'long stroke extending
well below the base-line'.
Or that ligatures depend on surrounding letters.
I knew nothing of Gothic 'biting':
when two adjoining and contrary curves
(a 'd' followed by an 'o', for instance)
overlap, sharing a stroke.
I had not learned about palaeographer Erik Kwakkel
who popularized the term 'kissing':
two letters that are close but don't share parts;
they are pushed up tight with no gap between them.
I didn't know that when two graphemes join
in a single glyph there is potential for stylistic re-imaginings,
for inventive, elegant variations.
I was only aware of your smile rushing into my palm,
a glass shattering inside a white cloth napkin
and people singing and reaching towards us.

Longing

Walking through a London summer:
warm and breezy, two women

drift by, one saying to the other:

I have always wanted to do two things:
learn to play the electric guitar and

the other desire lost
among voices and the space

between their mouths and my blue skirt
trembling around my ankles.

I cross the bridge, men and women talking

language into cell phones, moving towards
their destinations as if by rote,

their longings unknown,
sharp, pressing into the ground, your longing

hovering somewhere between my fingers,
mine in the heat just above the pavement.

Advice

found inside a box with a newly purchased table

Dear Customer,

At first, you'll find this structure stiff.
And on the surface there are knots.

However, its elements react to time
and the edges soften.

In cold, dry periods, the elements contract
leading to small cracks.

The reverse is true in humidity: expansion occurs.
This may result in unevenness.
When this happens, blow on lightly.

The colour will also change with time.

This structure is fragile and can split easily;
however, the elements are sturdy:
the material could build a bridge
or heat a home.

The first layer is moist.
Inside it is darker, harder: this is the heartwood.

You may need to occasionally tighten the joints.
More often, you will need to loosen.

Gentle and Middle

The most terrifying number is the number
of times I give you my hand when I forget you

until I unforget you.
The most terrifying name is my dream

of forgetting you, the most terrifying pages
are the ones so difficult to turn.

A third century rabbi said, *The forty-two lettered Name is given only to those who are devout, gentle, middle-aged, free from a temper, sober, and not insistent on their rights.*

The most terrifying number is marriage.
The pages are heavy, I can barely lift one leaf inside the book—
is it the black letters, heavy with speech?

The most terrifying name is in the letters
containing several Divine names,
names of gentle and middle, names of forgetting rights, free

and unforgetting you….

Marriage

The earth opened its mouth,
swallowing Korach with his followers

after they built bricks of certainty,
a wall of knowledge against Moses,
against his stammering.

Moses was the single blue thread fluttering
across a white garment.

They wanted the whole garment blue.

Korach and his followers gripped the fire-pans.
The earth took them easily.

It Was Late

It began as I washed the dishes.
He sat on a chair between the fridge
and the kitchen table. My hands were soapy wet,
sponging the pots and plates and glasses.

It was late.
When did it begin? Before I started washing
or just after?
We were going on little sleep, tired after a day
that had promised rain.
The fridge hummed.
And I was telling him

I started this poem some years ago and just now
discovered it.
What was the argument?
I can't remember how it ends.

Anniversary

Adam's punishment was thorns, thistles.
Eve's was desire.
Marry your thistle to my breath,
your thorn with my night.

There are answers.
They hover above the yellow taxis
circling my far city.
The lights from buildings blink in the water.

The mud is dry in our winter garden.
Wisdom pulses in the cracks.

Reticence is all around us: night, breath and thorn.
Desire softens the thistle,
and tomorrow's breeze will push
against the green fence you built,
breathe into the relenting leaves.

Love Poem

Fill me with this fresh language,
with unfamiliar inflections, with the slanted
sounds of words.

Hear *sticky toffee pudding* for the first time.

Say *cling film* for saran wrap; *plaster* for band-aid.

Let me hear *pram*, *skirting-board*.

Show me *dustbin*, *beetroot*, and *cooker*.

Let me bask in *cotton wool*, *crisps*, and *dressing gown*.

Say *hoover* for vacuum cleaner; say *inverted commas*
and *letterbox* and *jumper*.
Say *candyfloss*.

Fill me with possibility and half murmurs,
with *cloakroom*, *fancy dress*, and *carriages*

in this wet and numerous land.

The Hike

Too much beauty on the way.
Not enough time to finish.

American in England

What is the name of the thing
you push in the supermarket?
They call it something here.
I try to talk about cars – the places
in the back or front: they say 'boot' for one,
I am stuck on *trunk*.
What is the American word again
for the part in front?
A Jane Austen fan, I thought I would enjoy
saying 'pram' and 'carriages' and 'torch',
but I find myself stepping back, timid.
'Lorry' for *truck*, 'rubbish' for *garbage*,
'acclimatised' for *acclimated*; will I ever switch over,
step into the language of this new life?
Even more difficult are the words I do use which
here mean different things:
'quite' is often 'somewhat' instead of *very*,
and 'subway' is 'underground tunnel' instead of *train*.
And then there are the nuances:
'interesting' means 'I don't like you',
and 'Nice day, isn't it?' means 'I'd like
to talk to you – will you talk to me?'
I am mute and stuck, forgetting
their terms and my own words
which shrink under the rug, hide
in the dusty corners and inside the drawers,
and fade into the pillows and into our conversations
after we switch the light off,
the letters of the words mingling and falling asleep
on our tongues.

The Great Oven Debate

Imagine an oven constructed from layers of clay,
sand placed between each layer.

Is the oven a whole vessel?

Rabbi Eliezer says: broken shards.

The heavenly voice declares he is right.
He is wrong, say the sages, and
The Torah is not in Heaven.

How can Rabbi Eliezer be wrong and right?

Darling, when we argue perhaps I am right
and wrong.

I don't want to hold tight to one truth.
I want to hold all of the truths in our arms at once.

A positive commandment:
bless after eating food only if satiated.

Satiate me with our combined truths.

Let the clay coils be broken
and whole.

Soften our truths with sand.

In the night's blackest centre,
rest against the contradictions swimming in our pillowcases
and dream contrasting dreams,

a single blessing together at dawn:
the hour the moon stands in the sky with the sun.

Unfinished

My husband has trouble finishing things.
When he washes the dishes

he leaves at least one pot in the sink and a few pieces of silverware.
He says that my writing about this

may constitute *lashon hara*, speaking negatively about others.
'Not finishing things is *zecher l'churban*,' he adds,

a way of remembering the destruction of the Temple
which stood in Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago.

Now he's in the other room making the bed, which will look lovely
except for an untucked corner, a pillow askew,

surprising for a man who can't bear
a slanted piece of paper on my desk.

Yesterday, he almost
finished his article on Aelfric's use of Latin in Old English prose,

and he began one of the tasks on his list of things to do.
Who needs finality when unfinishing creates a longing

for what has not yet happened?

White Window

It is night. A red horse among the trees.
Suddenly, many horses
gather on a hill. *What are these?*

*

Something moves inside me, stops, leaps
when I hear him slam
the car door and walk towards my white window.
I forget our quarrel, his hand on
the door handle. The ringing of his keys.

*

Let the books on our shelves rest in an ordered chaos,
the chaos leaving spaces of light.
Let us hold our hands up to the light.
the light reflecting off our fingernails,
its glow reminding us of the beginning.
Let us begin a thousand times
an hour; keep us nimble, awake,
a quiet fire.

*

Sleeping pasture.
Field-drenched rain.
Mud.
My gentle horse lowering his head, dark, wet eyes.

*

All the birds have gone to sleep.
Our bird dreams through the night's sleeves
about blame and sadness,
wordless.

*

Let our wildness be warm, circling like foxes in the night streets.
Let the night shine on the hill. Let us be
without doubt, without certainty,
loving best what we can't see.

III

Keep Not Knowing

The Garden of Earthly Delights

My body has a lake in it, pink fountains
and globes and horses drinking.

My soul has a lake in it, pink fountains
and blue glass and horses drinking.

Am I afraid to own a body?
Cracked egg, night-city, ears holding a knife.

Am I afraid to own a soul?
Far birds in the open.

What is more frightening?
Crowds of naked bodies in daylight?
Or silence inside a womb of isolation?

What if the divine were made visible?
Wet music, wild decency.
What would the world be?

A Definition

The Torah was given
over a span of forty years.

The words we have today,
and the marks appearing over letters, are the same
as when first made.

We find the oral law
in spaces between words.
Opinions took place in those windows.
And we learn from the questions,
spreading our hands beneath an infinite roof.

We try to practice the laws we were given
and we give back.

We pray, grateful or angry, longing,
attempting to know the invisible
without which—

The Sound of Giving

When the sound of giving spoke in the desert,
no sound arrived after the first.

The people stood or lay down on the cool sand,
felt no reverberations.

A desert is not the bottom of a well,
nor a building, nor the walls
of an enclosed room.
A desert allows sound to be swallowed, known.

True sound entered them
the way Jonah entered the fish: breathing being inside breathing being.

Belief

In the children's book, the kitten
wants to know what's under the sea.

He needs truth.

And the fish told the kitten
how all the land is one land
under the sea.

Once you prove God's existence,
you disprove it.

Even using the word God might create doubt,
open up a lack
of faith because of the certainty
in the Name.

With the permission of the distinguished people here let us bless
and thank

the presence

and not prove:
an unthought known.

The cat's eyes were shining
with the secret of it.
And because he loved secrets he believed.

Taste

The human ear can't distinguish an echo
from the original sound

if the delay is less than one-fifteenth of a second.

No one detected an echo that day
the Torah was given.

The sound:
a single sugared note unmelting at the back of our throats.

Goodbye

There's no word for it in Hebrew,
and it's never used in the Bible except
when someone says, "Go towards peace."

I say, "See you soon" or
"We'll talk" or "Email me."

Israelis say, "l'hitraot," meaning "see you later,"
or they say "shalom," which more often means "hello" and "peace."
If they have to say it, they use a string of three languages
—Hebrew, Arabic, English—
as if to not claim any of them: "Oz, yalla, bye."

Joseph's goodbye to his father was a coat drenched with red life.
How does one tell Jacob—who had mourned
for twenty years with ash in his throat—
that his son is still alive?

Jacob's granddaughter sings the too sweet news to him slant,
playing the harp, its strings denting her strong fingers,
her voice, almost silent in its depth,
undoing the violent goodbye: *your son's still breathing body*...

Spinoza

How could he understand Judaism
when he never stepped on his grandchild's toy
in the middle of the night?

The Prayer

Each Sabbath we recite:
The soul of every living being...

The medieval rabbis argue
about the authorship of this prayer.

Were our mouths as full of song as the sea…

Rashi writes that Saint Peter composed it.
But why would Jews say a prayer written by a disciple of another religion?

Were our tongues as full of joyous songs as the sea is of waves…

Rashi explains: Peter, who wrote the poem,
was a double agent.

Were our lips as full of praise as the breadth of the heavens…

Peter never believed in the new creed.

Were our eyes as brilliant as the sun and the moon…

He created a division between Judaism and Christianity
so Jews would understand the difference.

Were our hands as outspread as eagles of the sky…

So few laws were included
that Christianity no longer resembled Judaism.

Were our feet as swift as hinds, we still could not thank you sufficiently…

The *Sefer Chasidim* derides Peter while calling him a saint
for saving Judaism from being swallowed by Christianity.

You redeemed us from Egypt and liberated us from the house of bondage…

A fast is mentioned in classic Jewish sources -- St. Peter's yahrzeit,
the anniversary of his death. Might the fast be commemorating the saint?

Who is like You?

Translation Song

Wine kiss
Friend, give me math-love

Vivid honey-perfume
Your scent is filled with integrity

I rushed into the palms
I searched for your Torah, my electrons spinning

My beloved is a sack of myrrh lying between my breasts
I whispered additional apologies

My beloved is a cluster of henna
Forgiveness multiplied

Our bed is leafy
You added more numbers to my numbers

My beloved hides in the orchard
You are my neutron, an apple-tree surrounded by barren trees

I sat under shade, breathing in the scent
Sweet Torah fruits, a sequence growing without bound

Refresh me with cakes and apples
Sustain me in my exile, keep me symmetrical

I am sick
Aching with love, my exponents are complex

Desert darkness enveloped me as I slept in the tent
I wait for your circumference

Sometimes I am a dove in the crevice of the rocks, hidden by the cliff
I thought my geometry would always be alone

You leapt over hills
Your voice redeems my finite fields

Teacher

In memory of Chris Iijima (1948–2005)

What am I afraid of?
You have fallen down.
Broken flower.
Broken moon.
We walk with your shadow like the night.

Don't worry. Don't worry.
Don't worry about being alone.

You are our keeper,
our grammar book, our seven samurai, our teacher.

We are your almonds, your bouncing commas, your words
waiting to be done.

We walk with your 'words
to the wise folks', your political rage,
your unstrung guitar.

Don't worry, don't worry.
Don't worry about living a life on your own.

Broken moon, broken
flower, sunburst.
What am I afraid of?

We are your awkward pens. You are our Spanish, our intelligence,
our backpacks heavy with mercy.

We are walking with your beauty, walking without
you like the night.

Reading

The essential words
That most express me are not in my own writings
But in those books that don't know who I am.
– Jorge Luis Borges

When I finish a novel, hold its steaming in my hands,
I stare over the edge, listening.

The pages are soft and the letters sting.

*

The unread books on my shelves are filled with lingering
around streetlamps, longing on couches, a sudden turn.

*

Once, a friend said about Gwendolyn in *Daniel Deronda:*
'I wonder how she is doing now!'

'I'd like to read boring books,' Elizabeth Bishop wrote,
'old, long, books.'

*

I won't touch the new novel. Not yet.
Wouldn't that be faithless?
Unsettle the just finished book?
Loosen the bonds with those who are now carrying me?

Child

Each year when April came

I knew you,
a shadow on my collarbone,

before you were born.

Vibration of bees in the shade of the thick leaves,
a hovering inside the breeze.

Ache behind the hem of my skirt, a flutter

on the arch of my foot
as I walked past swings in the park, the wind pushing them.

April.
You finally appeared, given.
Your hectic arms, your worry.

How am I worthy of this fatigue?
This worry?

You Knew Who I Was

You knew who I was before making me.

Now, a kernel of your spirit lies inside, protecting.

If you pushed me, could I stand?
If you blocked me, could I move forward?

What can I say when my thought is in your hand?

What can I do if you don't help?

I begged you. Please answer. Cloak me.

Please stir me.
Wake me to bless your name.

Translation of a poem written in Hebrew by Yehuda Halevi (*c.* 1075–1141)

The Phone Call

'The Unmetered Connections Department'
the woman said when she answered the phone.

What at first sounded like
a convoluted four-word jumble

became an intricate ten-syllable wire sculpture,
a series of musical notes, complex, clumsy,

non-iambic, experimental, the words a challenge
yet, when grasped, the Latinate abstractions

intellectually satisfying, the almost Miltonian sounds
compelling with their hard consonants and quiet vowels.

When I heard her say,
'The Unmetered Connections Department,'

I thought, I would like to work just one day
for the Unmetered Connections Department.

There, I wouldn't have to write or talk about poetry.
If I worked for the Unmetered Connections Department

I could answer the phone: 'Hello,
this is the Unmetered Connections Department',

and ask the question
many times a day, the one she asked me,

simple, generous, kind:
'How can I help you?'

Restraint

When the woman was angry with her husband
she wrote about it
in a journal and included the date.
When she was angry with her son, she wrote it down.

The woman did not tell them about the journal.
She did not tell anyone.

No one saw the words in her hand.

The words are blood beads, blooming from the pages.

The words are jasmine rain.

The pages are white feathers pressed into mud.

The pages are white feathers suspended above grass.

Love

Each colour of the rainbow
holds a shade of anger.

The Dyings

My mind walks to where they are not.

The leaves fall on stones,
the rain.

They were once so *here*.

Can I say it?
They no longer live. Now,
they are not sleeping.

Their notness is here, and their notness
is also gone from here.

I can still see her, almost.

It's an outrage.

The snow burns.
The snow carries me.
The leaves are shredding inside me.

Keep Not Knowing

Through the curtain's gauzy white: rectangles of light.
I am tired of avoiding. Tired of being tired.

Rabbi Tarfon said, 'Jonah entered the fish's mouth
as if he were entering a synagogue'.

I worked hard. Wrote a book.

A pearl suspended inside the fish provided noon sun
allowing Jonah to see through the fish's eyes into the ocean.

*

The baby's cry pierces the wall.
I sink up out of the blue dream
as you stagger across the earth's surface, your tall
shadow, your confident stumbling

along the equator from east to west,
the length of several degrees of longitude
in your pyjamas. I sink up to the treetops,
dreamless.

Yesterday, we talked about the shade
of a certain blue mentioned in the Torah.

Was it the blue of our son's lips after a bath?

Or the blue of redemption?

Or the dark blue of the sky
the night we walked across the sands, the seas all around us.

*

After Rabbi Akiva died, wisdom no longer existed.

When our baby arrived,
night deepened, opening
into the blacker night living inside the night.

After Rabbi Eliezer died, the Torah hid itself.

Little ears and shoulders brought shudders of awe, vibrations
of not-knowing.

After Rabbi Yosi Katanta died, there were no saintly people left.

The baby's rhythms of goodness beating like distant drum patterns.

After Ben Azai died, there was no one living who learned unceasingly.

Learning sprouted into head-fuzz, into the translucent
hardness of fingernails.

After Rebbi died, humility ceased.
Rabbi Yosef said, 'Don't teach that humility ceased. I'm here!'
They said to him: 'But if you claim that, then you are not humble!'
Rabbi Yosef replied: 'I must tell the truth—this is the Mishnah,
which is always truthful'.

The new wrinkled breath tells us: 'Keep not knowing
something important, and know you don't know it.'

*

The room green-lit dark.
Hands speaking to my hair, my back.

We lay down, the place was narrow,
as if a bridge.

'Don't listen to what I say. Listen to what you see.'

*

How should we manage the child who won't sleep?

The School of Akiva is mystical, apocalyptic, radical, uncompromising,
paradoxical, sweeping.

The School of Yishmael is critical, rational, dry, measured,
balanced, patient.

Which approach should we take?
Rabbi Akiva's or Yishmael's?

Let him cry? Pat him? Hold him? Feed him?
Uncompromising? Patient?

*

Summer. We sit with her on a bench, paint peeling
off each strip of wood,
watching our son play in the sandbox, the sun
speckling his back through the maples.

Several empty swings, suspended from chains,
attached to the same metal frame, are in gentle motion
as a breeze pushes through them.

Children place buckets under streaming water
and pour it over their feet, webs
of runnels cross the sand.

She shows us the necklace on her neck
a friend brought to her from Africa.
Small wooden animals—tiger, zebra, lion—
strung around the chain, and she says, 'I didn't want
to wear this necklace, I was afraid the animals would come out.'

The shadows are moving under the empty swings.

*

The baby's back arches before naptime,
hands flailing, screams penetrating the walls,

The sages argued about the creation of humans:

'It would have been better
if humans had not been created'.

When holding the yellow hose on the hottest day,
toes slipping in the wet grass, mud under nails,
squeals, eyes squinting,
splashing my feet with water.

The sages also said, 'It is better that humans were created'.

*

You stand in a passage.
No noise, no guides.

You walk towards me as if swimming.
Not by force or fraud.

You present him whole, an unbroken vessel.

And I begin to look for larceny, for a contrived thought.

Fixing what is not broken will break it;
still, I reach out, bring down love a notch.

*

When she began to not be here
a pain blossomed from the no-hope.

She is turning now, my prayer
leaves no scar.

She will become.

She is done with waiting, waiting
for the bus to arrive on the busy White Plains road.
Done with waiting for the flowers to open so she can paint them.
Done with waiting for the voices.

It is good to mourn, and good
knowing that I can hold who she is becoming
against my memory of her.

*

The child's even breath. Glory.
A cloud rests its hand over the room.
Tree-hush.

The animals in the books have quieted.
I remember their sounds:
moo, baa, oink, neigh.

We were uncompromising. We were patient.
Now, I am left. What do I say?

*

My voice is small in the lake of this room,
waves of dry rain pass over me.

Jonah saw Israel's path under the Red Sea,
and he saw the Temple's foundation.

I hear my listening heard,

lean into the night to be held,

strike a match and fail,

open darkness with dark.

Part Two

The Poetics of Reticence: A Critical Essay

Introduction: Strategic Quietness

The unsaid is a crucial element in poetry. I illustrate this notion by engaging with my experience as a poet and as an academic, exploring the following question: how does the unsaid (silences, white space, gaps) generate meaning? Through a discussion of the scholarship and an analysis of my own writing process, I propose that what I term 'the poetics of reticence' is a product of narrative gaps and the unwritten emotional response to those gaps. The following chapters investigate the inner workings and impact of the poetics of reticence.

This aspect of poetics is dear to poets across cultures and various time periods. Adrienne Rich argued that 'what isn't named is often more permeating than what is'.[1] In her essay 'Disruption, Hesitation, Silence', Louise Glück wrote, 'I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power: often I wish an entire poem could be made in this vocabulary'.[2] In a letter to her aunt, Emily Dickinson wrote that 'Saying nothing, My Aunt Katie, sometimes says the Most'.[3] John Keats famously put it this way: 'Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard / Are sweeter'.[4] Kristina Marie Darling writes persuasively about the thirst for absence and for the traces of presence in the white space of a poem, when she discusses how 'It is in these liminal spaces – the glowing aperture, the tentative sigh, the pause for breath – that the rules of language no longer hold, and

---

1 Adrienne Rich, 'Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity', in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose: 1979–1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), pp. 100–123 (p. 112).

2 Louise Glück, 'Disruption, Hesitation, Silence', in *Proofs and Theories* (New York: Ecco Press, 1994), pp. 74–87 (p. 78).

3 Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), J 408, 1874, p. 521. This single line was the introduction to a poem Dickinson sent to her aunt. Subsequent footnotes to Dickinson's letters are cited in the form: *Letters*, the number of the letter in Johnson's edition (e.g. J 408), date of letter, and the page number.

4 John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. by Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), pp. 207–208 (p. 207).

anything becomes possible.'[5] Stéphane Mallarmé even attributed metaphysical status to 'the very silence of the poem [. . .] its blank spaces'.[6] Jean Valentine viewed silence in poetry as richer than words: 'The kind of silence I want to talk about is so much more full than language, so it's hardly holding anything back; it's that you cannot give it voice because voice is so much less.'[7] For Valentine, it is language that says little and reticence or silence that is 'full'.

Memoir

When editing my poetry collection *Morning Prayer* for publication, I too longed for textual silence.[8] Or at least reticence. I noticed that the poems became more dynamic, generating energy, when I removed words from them. For instance, when editing the concluding poem, 'Afterwards, Eve', something told me that I should cut off the last line mid-sentence. I would not have been able to articulate the reason, but I instinctively felt that the white space after the poem ended transmitted more information than language could have provided. Here is the seven-line poem, 'Afterwards, Eve':

> I can't remember
> what this brush between my legs is for.
> I used to know. And the purpose
> of these breasts, of this
> tongue, this palm.

---

5 Kristina Marie Darling, 'Silences in Poetry', *Ploughshares* (2018) <https://blog.pshares.org/silence-in-poetry> [accessed 30 September 2022], para 13 of 13.

6 Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crisis in Poetry' (1896), trans. by Bradford Cook, in *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry 1800–1950*, ed. by Melissa Kwasny (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), pp. 151–159 (p. 157).

7 Catherine Barnett, 'Little Light on the Road: An Informal Primer on Reading Jean Valentine, in Six Brief Sections' in *Jean Valentine: This World-Company,* ed. by Kazim Ali and John Hoppenthaler (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2012), pp. 11–17 (p. 15).

8 Eve Grubin, *Morning Prayer* (New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 2005).

It had something to do with.

Now I want.[9]

At the time of this edit, I was not conscious of why I cut the last line. For me, and for many poets, the writing and editing comes from an unconscious place. However, I wanted to know: why is the unsaid so vital to the production of meaning?

In the years since completing *Morning Prayer*, I have published dozens of poems and two pamphlets and read thousands of works by other poets and have become increasingly gripped by the above question. This thesis, both the poems and the critical essay, grow out of my intellectual and creative curiosity about the role of the unsaid, white space, silences, gaps. Reticence, the term I prefer and will define in the pages to come, seems to energize a poem when handled by a skilled poet. When I began my research, I did not fully understand the multiple reasons why white space exerted such potency. I did not understand the mechanics or rhetorical strategies that underpinned it, but I felt its power in my bones. And on the page.

When I was studying for my MFA in poetry at Sarah Lawrence College, my teacher Marie Howe told me a story which validated my experience with editing 'Afterwards, Eve'. When she was working on her poem 'What the Angels Left', she brought it to her teacher, Stanley Kunitz.[10] He studied it for some time and then crossed out the last two lines. She railed against him, arguing that the last lines artfully articulated the metaphor, captured the healing from the grief imagery in the previous lines, and clarified the narrative. Later, however, she found wisdom in Kunitz's edit: the wordy explanation at the end obscured meaning while the white space in its place

[9] Grubin, 'Afterwards, Eve', *Morning Prayer*, p. 49.
[10] Marie Howe, 'What the Angels Left', in *The Good Thief* (New York: Persea, 1988), p. 4.

communicated meaning. But she herself could not explain how that process had occurred.

One thing I did understand was that words were not enough, or as T. S. Eliot's Prufrock puts it, 'It is impossible to say just what I mean!'[11] In addition to reflecting Prufrock's frustration, Eliot was confessing the fact that many poets feel their primary medium fails them. What can a poet do when they cannot say just what they mean? When words fail? In order to address these questions, I began to look to the work of other poets for answers. Mary Oliver, in her essay about writing poetry, provided a clue regarding the role of reticence in the production of meaning:

> Modesty will give you vigor. It keeps open the gates of prayer, through which the mystery of the poem streams on its search for form. Just occasionally, take something you have written, that you rather like, that you have felt an even immodest pleasure over, and throw it away.[12]

Like Oliver, I too found that employing 'modesty' in the writing process opened my poems to a power beyond my control as a poet, as if a light from another source were allowed in when 'modesty' was employed. In a private conversation with the American poet Galway Kinnell, he similarly suggested to me that he thought the sounds, meanings, and rhythms taken out of a poem in the revision process haunted the page like ghosts – shades of their presence could be sensed, reverberating off the words still present in the poem. The act of cutting, of editing, of employing modesty can, perhaps counterintuitively, be so powerfully generative that it may feel almost magical or supernatural to the poet. While the metaphor of the supernatural may be appealing, it

---

[11] T. S. Eliot, 'The Long Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', in *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962), pp. 3–7 (p. 6).

[12] Mary Oliver, *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), p. 99.

does not fully illuminate the inner working of this poetics, nor does it allow for the poet to feel in control of their own writing. Kinnell's proposition and all of my musings above reflect a belief in the presence of absence, in the power of the unwritten. Even so the question remains: how can meaning be found when it is not there?

It is a daunting concept: that meaning somehow emanates from nothingness. In particular, the poetry of Jean Valentine, another of my teachers at Sarah Lawrence, taught me that while poets seem to almost unanimously find the greatest possibility in the silences of poetry, the white space around words can also be unnerving. This poem of hers, 'I came to you', captures this dual crisis where both language *and* reticence fail to comfort:

> I came to you
> Lord, because of
> the fucking reticence
> of this world
> no, not the *world*, not *reticence*, oh
> Lord Come
> Lord Come
> We were sad on the ground
> Lord Come
> We were sad on the ground.[13]

This poem cries out with rage and with a longing for revelation. Reticence can be painful; at least it is in this context. There is an ache for some response from God, for openness, for knowledge. For the transparency of language. But then the speaker seems

[13] Jean Valentine, 'I came to you', in *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems, 1965–2003* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p. 8.

to realize, as can be seen from the words 'no, not the *world*, not *reticence*, oh' that the language in the crying out is not the right language. The speaker means something else. It is not the 'world' that she is complaining about and it is not 'reticence' that is the source of her anguish. But then what is it? More longing comes from that question. But there is no more rage. Just sadness (as can be seen from the repetition of 'We were sad on the ground'), which represents a kind of transformation and revelation in the poem. This reading suggests that Valentine's account of reticence is ambivalent and shows a frustration with both reticence *and* language. Similarly, in this thesis, while acknowledging the failure of language, I will not romanticize silences, which can also leave us bereft in some instances. The white space on the page can at times betray us even as it holds endless possibilities.

This critical essay aims to navigate the tensions between words and silence, language and white space, the revealed 'world' of lexical choices and the reticence that is hidden in between. My hope is to both embrace and critically investigate this poetics. I will do this by grounding my argument in scholarly criticism, and I will offer a methodology for studying the typology which, I argue, makes up a poetics of reticence.

The Word 'Reticence'

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet chides Mr Darcy when he fails to converse with her: 'One must speak a little you know [. . .] It would look odd to be entirely silent'.[14] Words are necessary, Elizabeth suggests, at least for the sake of decorum. They are also necessary to highlight the silence. Words are applied around those silences; this tension between space and language generates meaning. Jane Hirshfield wrote, 'What is left unexpressed can affect the reader perhaps even more strongly than what has been explicitly stated, precisely because it is has not been already taken into conscious

[14] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 90.

account. Lyric poetry rests on the pivot point of said and unsaid.'[15] This pivot point is the poetics of reticence.

My research introduces the term poetics of reticence to the literary field: in the four chapters of this critical essay, I deliberately choose the word 'reticence', with its emphasis on *withholding* as opposed to *negation* – rather than cognate words like 'silence' or 'white space'.[16] My reading of reticence is of a strategy which restrains feeling or information but in doing so offers greater depth of meaning. Such reticence, I will argue, is at the core of the generation of meaning in poetry. The word 'silence', by contrast, may imply annihilation, dumbness, stifled suppression, and a complete stop. Poetry in my reading seems less infused with a poetics of silence (when seen this way) than with a more nuanced infusion between language and space, sound and complete quiet.

The roots of the word reticence are multiple, borrowing from French and Latin ('réticence' in French and 'reticentia' in Latin), and can be defined as: 'avoidance of speech'.[17] I am interested that the definition admits to the word's sense of eluding language rather than extinguishing it. The stress is on holding back or keeping away from too much wordiness, perhaps for a purpose. Plutarch wrote in his *Moralia*, as translated by Philemon Holland in the sixteenth-century, 'Many times iwis [certainly], a smile, a reticence or keeping silence, which otherwhiles [occasionally] may well expresse a speech, and make it more emphaticall'.[18] Plutarch's observation that withheld words can 'expresse' more 'emphaticall', than if the words are explicit, recognizes the power of

---

15 Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), p. 46.

16 I occasionally use words such as 'silence' when appropriate although I always return to the word 'reticence'.

17 'Reticence', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/164263> [accessed 30 September 2022].

18 Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. by Philemon Holland (London: Arnold Hatfield, 1603), quoted in 'Reticence', *Oxford English Dictionary* [online].

reticence. When purposefully passing over the point in order to emphasize that very point, one is employing reticence, which can be understood as an effective rhetorical tool that makes use of absence in the midst of language for effect.

Plutarch also wrote that we must always remember the 'praises bestowed on reticence' as well as 'the solemn, holy, and mysterious character of silence'. Plato, he reminds his readers:

> commends… pithy men, declaring that they are like skilful throwers of the javelin, for what they say is crisp, solid, and compact. And Lycurgus, constraining his fellow citizens from their earliest childhood to acquire this clever habit by means of silence, made them concise and terse in speech. For just as the Celtiberians make steel from iron by burying it in the earth and then cleaning off the large earthy accumulation, so the speech of Spartans has no dross, but being disciplined by the removal of all superfluities, it is tempered to complete efficiency; for this capacity of theirs for aphoristic speech and for quickness and the ability to turn out a neat phrase in repartee is the fruit of much silence.[19]

Reflecting on the 'holiness' of reticence and the 'dross' of superfluous speech is not new for writers as can be seen from Plutarch's discussion of reticence and the other ancient figures who valued the 'mysterious character of silence'. An appreciation of reticence can be found even further back in history: the rabbis of the Talmud wrote simply, 'One who adds, detracts.'[20] And they wrote, 'Silence is a protective fence for wisdom.'[21] Both

---

19 Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. by W. C. Helmbold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1939), p. 6.

20 *Talmud Bavli: Tractate Sanhedrin. Volume 1*, trans. by Asher Dicker and Abba Tzvi Naiman (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1993), 29a.

21 *Pirkei Avos: Ethics of the Fathers*, ed. and trans. by Menachem Davis (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2002), 3. 17.

of these ancient epithets are another way of saying that creating spaces around language increases meaning.

When it comes to poetry, reticence is how meaning is produced. Poet Thom Gunn has written that 'strategies of evasion [. . .] contribute to what makes a poem successful'.[22] These evasions exist in order to avoid making direct statements. Poets withhold words and employ devices in their place in order to express a point more emphatically as Plutarch suggested. The literary techniques at a poet's disposal (for example, symbol, irony, anaphora, rhyme, metaphor, and so on) provide the evasions that make poetry successful and are a part of the reticence, the holding back of emotion and narrative, which create energy in language. For example, in Meg Jensen's study of posttraumatic writing, she argues that in order 'to highlight the importance' of a tragic event, the modernist novelist Virginia Woolf uses 'reticence of language' in a poetic passage from *To the Lighthouse*.[23] Jensen claims that the 'reticence of language' in Woolf's novel 'signals the importance' of the tragedy being represented. Allowing reticence, rather than revelation, to signal the significance of an event is a powerful device, and one that can be found in poetry through the use of narrative gaps. Poets, I argue, place a veil over the emotions and events in a narrative, which ironically heightens the presence and significance of those events and emotions. The word 'reticence' aptly describes this process.

I have also chosen the word 'reticence' because it is rich with cultural associations, in particular for women writers. The word is loaded, and its overtones

---

22 Thom Gunn, 'Thom Gunn: The Art of Poetry No. 72', interview by Clive Wilmer, in *The Paris Review*, 135 (1995) <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1626/the-art-of-poetry-no-7thom-gunn> [accessed 3 October 2022].

23 Meg Jensen, *The Art and Science of Trauma and the Autobiographical: Negotiated Truths* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 154. The passage Jensen refers to is from Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt, 2005), p. 194: 'Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.'

challenge, and therefore deepen, my argument. Early and Victorian American and English women writers, and perhaps to some extent women writers even today, were expected to be reticent in their person, lifestyle, and certainly in their writing if they dared to pick up the pen. It has become 'commonplace in feminist criticism' to claim that women managed the pressures to be reticent by supressing or twisting their writing.[24] Feminist scholars have argued that reticence in the work of women writers can be found in poems that are oddly indirect or even like puzzles.[25] Critics such as Elizabeth A. Petrino and Shira Wolosky, and especially Joanne Dobson in *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence*, among others, argue that Emily Dickinson participated in a community of women writers with shared strategies of reticence who submitted to reticence or code under pressure.[26]

Women poets *did* have to write under patriarchal pressures, and many conformed to expectations. Dickinson also wrote under these pressures. However, in the case of Dickinson, I argue that her 'slant' approach was not merely a result of patriarchal forces.[27] Rather, Dickinson's gaps and her distinctive reticent style, vibrate with 'bolts of melody' and are an articulation of her full-throated poetic voice. Jason Fargo describes this concept of reticence as artistic power opposed to societal pressure; he does so aptly in his piece about the reticence in the work of the visual artist Jasper Johns and in the poetry of Frank O'Hara. Fargo argues that the intense restraint in the

---

[24] Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller, 'Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop and the Rewards of Indirection', *New England Quarterly*, 57 (1984), 533–553 (p. 533).

[25] Alicia Ostriker, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking', in *Signs*, 8 (1982), 68–90 (p. 69).

[26] Joanne Dobson, *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Elizabeth A. Petrino, *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America 1820–1885* (Boston: New England Press, 1989); Shira Wolosky, *Major Voices: 19th Century American Women's Poetry* (Jerusalem: Toby Press, 2003).

[27] Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. by R. W. Franklin, 3 vols (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 'Tell all the truth – but tell it Slant – ', Fr 1263, vol. 2, p. 1089. Subsequent references to Dickinson's poems are cited in the form: *Poems*, first line, and then Franklin number (e.g. Fr 1300), volume number, poem number, page number and line number, all referring to Franklin's edition.

work of these two gay men was a deliberate artistic choice and not the result of pressures to hide their homosexuality. Fargo wrote, 'Quietness is not oppressive, like the closet. It is a strategic quietness, with paradoxical power'.[28] In other words, silence, or a narrative gap in a text, is not necessarily the result of restriction nor a sign of powerlessness although it might start out that way. Rather, the poetics of reticence unlocks the thunder in a work of art.

As will be seen from the diverse range of poems and criticism used to argue that reticence in poetry generates meaning, it is clear that I am positioning this concept of reticence as ahistorically present in poetic form. At its core, all poetry – no matter the time or place from which it was written – benefits from reticence. However, certain historical periods and regions do lend themselves to poetry that gains its power, specifically from a poetics of reticence; for example, as mentioned above and thoroughly explored in subsequent chapters, one can see how Dickinson's work emerged in nineteenth-century Calvinist New England where women's reticence was a value. Dickinson turned this value on its head by employing a poetics of reticence which ironically radiated all of the taboos that society repressed in women, such as sexuality, rage, and ambition. Reticence in poetry also emerged with a particular intensity in the poems by twentieth-century European Holocaust survivors and in the work of later poets who attempted to write about the Holocaust. As I will discuss, a heightened poetics of reticence is sometimes the only way in which a poet can write about trauma, especially a trauma on that scale. While the poetics of reticence has particular resonances in certain periods and places in history, ultimately my argument suggests that a poet's use of the unsaid can be found in poems from any place and any time.

---

[28] Jason Fargo, 'How a Gray Painting Can Break Your Heart,' in 'Art and Design', *The New York Times*, 16 January 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/01/16/arts/design/jasper-johns-memory-of-my-feelings.html> [accessed 30 September 2022].

In order to consider the ways in which reticence generates meaning in poetry I undertake investigations across four chapters arranged as follows: Critical Approaches to Reticence; A Methodology of Reticence; The Ethics of Reticence; and Writing Boat of Letters.

The Four Chapters

Chapter One: Critical Approaches to Reticence

In this chapter, I review work by critics who have discussed the impact of gaps, white space, or silences on a poem's meaning. I show that although the subject has not been widely discussed by scholars, there are a number of studies that do attempt to look at the unsaid in poetry. The chapter is divided into the sections: 'Limited Theories', where I draw on critics Paul Fussell, Christopher Ricks, and Constance W. Hassett; 'Reticence as Obedience', where the key scholars I engage with are Alicia Ostriker, Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller, Joanne Dobson, Elizabeth A. Peterino, Paul Breslin and Merrilees Roberts; 'The Limits of Language', where I discuss works by Michel Foucault, Clodagh Brook, William Franke, and Thomas Gould; and 'Narratology', where the work of Brian McHale, Rachel Blau Duplessis, David Malcolm, Wolfgang Iser, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Robyn R. Warhol, Robert Alter, Erich Auerbach, Leona Toker, Janice Stout, and Meir Steinberg among others is particularly useful to my developing discussion of the poetics of reticence. While the approaches discussed in these sections only look at one aspect of reticence, my methodology allows for multiplicity of meaning, opening up the door to numerous theories about reticence in poetry. In the subsequent chapters of this thesis, I engage with, challenge, and build on the work of all of the critics examined here. This discussion provides a background for my argument that the scholarship is in need of a more complex and thorough definition of poetic reticence and an analysis of how it is deployed by poets.

Chapter Two: A Methodology of Reticence

The second chapter of this thesis introduces my methodology. I argue that the poetics of reticence can be defined as narrative gaps, which is the white space left on the page representing unspoken significant information. That significant information includes narrative and the emotions responding to that narrative. My methodology involves applying a Levinasian theory to an understanding of how reticence works in poetry. French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas described what he called the 'face-to-face' encounter between 'Self' and 'Other'. I argue that Levinas's model provides a key to unlocking the mystery of how reticence functions in poetry. For Levinas, the Self's encounter with the Other (another person) is a privileged phenomenon. The encounter reveals little about the Other who both intentionally and unintentionally hides their complexity and their 'truths' (their stories and emotions) because they are vulnerable to objectification. The Self's realization of this defenceless quality in the Other prohibits reducing the Other to Sameness while, at the same time, instils a sense of obligation to the vulnerable Other, who can never be fully comprehended.[29] Levinas sees the Other as containing Divine sparks (which are infinitely complex and incomprehensible). In fact, the face of the other, which is finite, for Levinas, paradoxically is the place where God, or 'the Infinite Other passes'.[30]

What Levinas saw as an encounter between people, where the Self experiences the 'Vulnerability' and 'Otherness' of the other, I reframe as the dynamic between the Self as reader and the Other as the poet's linguistic presence (the speaker) in the poem. I argue that the narrative gaps which make up a poetics of reticence vibrate with vulnerability and otherness creating a forcefield of meaning in a poem. I delineate this

---

[29] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), pp. 95, 98, 119.

[30] For Levinas, the infinite divine inside every person is a reflection of the God who appears in traditional belief and of (Jewish) scripture, not a conceptual God of philosophy or ontotheology.

methodology as I apply it to close readings of poems from various periods in order to reveal the inner architecture of the poetics of reticence. Poetry by Elizabeth Bishop and Charles Reznikoff, two poets noted for their reticence, are particularly useful as is an analysis of lines from William Shakespeare for the opposite reason: Shakespeare, known for the abundant use of language in his work challenges my theory that reticence is at the core of poetry; yet I discuss how even in poetry of copiousness, reticence is at work. As I analyse poems in order to describe the poetics of reticence through a Levinasian lens, I bring the criticism explored in Chapter One to my discussion to further illuminate my formulations, critically reflecting on the place of my arguments in relation to contemporary scholarship on the complex connection between narrative gaps and the creation of vulnerability and otherness in poetry. I test my ideas by using them to read poems in this chapter which I end with a special focus on the work of Emily Dickinson whose poems, known for their reticent poetics, generate an especially rich and nuanced discussion of my research question.

Chapter Three: The Ethics of Reticence

In the third chapter, 'The Ethics of Reticence', I argue that, following on from Levinas's theory, the poetics of reticence (in the form of narrative gaps) invites the reader to respect the vulnerability and mystery of the poem and to look at their own inner life, leading to a sense of responsibility. These gaps are signs of fragility and otherness not to be penetrated by the reader. I suggest that these gaps are invitations to tread lightly, to not insert outside stories into the silences, and to not 'dominate' the text by attempting to fill in the gaps. I engage with the scholarship of Leona Toker, Stanley Cavell, Meg Jensen and others to develop this theory about the ethics of reticence as I explore and apply my theory to poems written about trauma.

Chapter Four: Writing Boat of Letters

For the final chapter, 'Writing Boat of Letters', I explore my own manuscript of poems with an interest in drawing on the arguments made in the previous three chapters. The collection of poems is divided, by subject, into three sections: 'Grief Dialogue', which chronicles a grown daughter's experience of her mother's death; 'The Book of Love', a series exploring the possibilities and complexities within marriage; and 'Keep Not Knowing', poems that ask questions driven by a daily engagement with Judaism and its laws. Each section combines poems with narrative gaps with those that seem narratively complete. I deliberately test both methods to explore the principle that meaning stems from a poem's silences. Boat of Letters answers, contravenes and considers the theory I lay out in the thesis about the poetics of reticence.

All of the poems, whether perceptibly reticent or not, imbue white space with meaning. Each poem deliberately engages with emotionally charged subject matter (loss, marriage, spirituality), but much of the charge takes place outside language. This process tests my theory by raising the following questions: how do poems produce meaning

when significant information does not appear in the text? How do poems produce meaning when this information does appear?

In this final chapter, I demonstrate how my decisions about strategies, language and form confirm the arguments I posit herein: that the poetics of reticence is a product of narrative gaps and the unwritten emotional response to them. I further posit an answer to my research question (how does reticence produce meaning in poetry?) through an analysis of my own work, exploring my poetics and revealing my process, and illustrating how reticence functions from the point of view of a poet. This chapter sheds light on an aspect of my research which could not be fully understood through critical scholarship. A poet's voice is ultimately needed.

Chapter One: Critical Approaches to Reticence

While the power of the unsaid in poetry has been acknowledged by scholars, it has not been subject to a great deal of debate or scrutiny. This is partly because literary critics are predisposed to examine linguistic expression. Steeped in language, such scholars tend not to give equal weight to the white space in and around the poem. By focusing on the blank spaces and the studies that explore them, I aim to highlight and examine the textual status of those spaces, and in doing so, to trace the context for, and development of, the poetics of reticence.

There are two key references for the term 'poetics of reticence': Paul Breslin's review of the poetry of American poet James Merrill, 'Closet Necessities: James Merrill's Poetics of Reticence' in *Poetry*, and the recent monograph S*helley's Poetics of Reticence: Shelley's Shame* by Merrilees Roberts (both of which I will discuss later in this chapter).[1] In other studies, the word 'reticence' is used only occasionally, while the terms 'silence', 'gaps', or 'white space' are more common. As argued in the introduction, 'reticence' is better suited to my purposes, as it suggests a withholding, a stepping back from language, thus it speaks more faithfully to the dynamics between white space and the words of a poem. It is also a challenging word, and rich with implications, as I shall demonstrate, when it is applied to marginalized groups, especially the writing of women.

This chapter is divided into four sections: *Limited Theories*, *Reticence as Obedience*, *The Inadequacy of Language*, and *Narratology*. The critics I cite are those whose accounts of reticence represent the core contemporary approaches to this topic and are therefore most relevant to my argument.

In the first section, *Limited Theories*, I discuss how some critics have presented either limited or very generalized theories regarding silences in poetry. I draw on the works of key

[1] Paul Breslin, 'Closet Necessities: James Merrill's Poetics of Reticence', *Poetry*, 179 (2002), 343–352; Merrilees Roberts, S*helley's Poetics of Reticence: Shelley's Shame* (London: Routledge, 2020).

literary critics including Paul Fussell, Christopher Ricks and Constance Hassett to discuss their theories about silences in poetry. The second section homes in on one approach to this poetics, *Reticence as Obedience*. This idea, so prevalent in the literature when silences in poetry are discussed, and vital to the accounts of reticence formulated by scholars, will be examined through the criticism of Alicia Ostriker, Lynne Keller and Cristanne Miller, Joanne Dobson and others. As I will illustrate, this reading of poetic silence is closely linked to studies on women's writing and reticence as it has been understood in these works. I will then examine, in *The Inadequacy of Language* section, work by scholars such as Clodaugh Brook, William Franke and Thomas Gould who discuss how silences in poetry signal the limitations of language and ultimately the inadequate nature of words. The final section reflects on *Narratology*, the study of narrative in literature. Here I will explore and problematize the differing accounts of scholars such as Brian McHale, David Malcolm, Robyn R. Warhol, Robert Alter, and Leona Toker on the role and value of narrative gaps, which is central to my own theory: that such silences are crucial to the generation of meaning in poetry.

Limited Theories

In *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, the influential book on poetic form first published in 1965, Paul Fussell devotes only a few pages to the white space around a poem.[2] In those pages, he acknowledges that the non-textual parts of a poem have some significance, and in the passage cited below highlights his interest in the spaces between stanzas:

> [T]he white space between stanzas means something. If nothing is conceived to be taking place within it […] the reader has a legitimate question to ask: Why is that white space there, and what am I supposed to do with it?[3]

[2] Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1965), pp. 155–158.
[3] Fussell, p. 155.

Fussell goes on to offer a theory: white space generates questions. He argues that the reader pauses in the white space with those questions, which then find their answer in the following stanza. For example, he observes that in Robert Bridges's poem 'I Praise the Tender Flower', the first stanza pays tribute to a rose blooming in the speaker's garden.[4] The space after the stanza 'implies the question, "What else is to be praised in the same terms and structure as the flower?"' The second stanza, he explains, answers this question when it describes a 'gentle maid'.[5]

While I concur with Fussell that 'the space between stanzas means something', I contend that the white space produces answers, not just 'questions', and that in fact, answers can be found more often in the unsaid than in the actual text of the poem. I will demonstrate that *words* in a poem can get in the way of meaning. The white space holds solutions.

Another example of a limited theory focus can be found in Christopher Ricks's chapter on William Wordsworth in his study *The Force of Poetry*.[6] Ricks argues that the 'white space' after Wordsworth's line endings function as pregnant gaps communicating meanings that have to do with time.[7] While Ricks's investigation of Wordsworth's poetry leads to one specific conclusion, his theory is more expansive than Fussell's. White space is seen by Ricks as 'potent though invisible': it is not just a reflection of the reader's questions to be answered in the lines that follow, but rather an 'invisible but active' gap, fertile with meaning.[8] Ricks analyses Wordsworth's deliberate use of 'the white space at the end of a line' which represent a 'suspension between linguistic life (the words) and linguistic death (empty silence)'.[9] Ricks maintains that the white space following Wordsworth's line endings mimic timelessness. The unsaid in Wordsworth's poems, Ricks argues, represents an 'abyss' or deferral before the final abyss.

---

4 Robert Bridges, 'I Praise the Tender Flower', in *The Shorter Poems of Robert Bridges* (London: Bell, 2007), pp. 55–56.
5 Fussell, p. 158.
6 Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 89–116.
7 Ricks, p. 98.
8 Ricks, p. 97.
9 Ricks, p. 99.

Ricks's argument here dovetails with my own because of his focus on the white space as an active participant in poetic meaning and one that contains infinity. However, Ricks's infinity refers to time while mine refers to multiple meanings. In addition, his sole methodology is a close analysis of Wordsworth's poems. It is unclear if Ricks is arguing that white space is potent in the way he describes only in the case of Wordsworth. He doesn't mention if this argument extends to other poets as well. My own approach, by contrast, while it includes close analyses of individual poems, brings to bear a reframed phenomenological model that delineates how white space functions across the entire field of poetics.

Another, more general, theory about reticence in poetry is presented by Constance W. Hassett in her article, 'Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Reticence'.[10] Hassett's conclusions are not as specific as Fussell's and Ricks's hypotheses, and boil down to: 'in Rossetti's poetry, conspicuous avoidance is pure gain'.[11] What is interesting about her account, however, and valuable for my purposes, is that she uses the word 'reticence' specifically to describe Rossetti's 'laconic style' which she argues 'is the result of a deeply private dialect between verbal evasion and aesthetic control'.[12] Hassett is attempting to get to the heart of reticence which, in her view, is not silence but rather an employment of evasion and strategic control that forms a 'distinctive style' and where 'withholdings have the feel of potential communications'.[13] Reticence, in her account, is a 'hovering between expression and non-expression'.[14] Hassett's description of reticence is therefore useful as it develops a complex understanding of this literary strategy and differentiates it from the other more familiar terminology, such as white space or gaps or silences.

[10] Constance W. Hassett, 'Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Reticence', *Philological Quarterly*, 65 (1986), 495–514.
[11] Hassett, p. 496.
[12] Hassett, p. 497.
[13] Hassett, p. 511.
[14] Hassett, p. 511.

Reticence as Obedience

Many critics argue that reticence in the work of women writers can be found in poems that resemble puzzles or codes. Alicia Ostriker, for example, has written that 'throughout most of her history, the woman writer has had to state her self-definitions in code form'.[15] Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller put it this way: women wrote (and perhaps continue to) under a 'guise of obedience'.[16] In other words, scholars argue that women writers have had to submit to reticence under pressure. Critics such as Joanne Dobson in *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence*, argue that women poets of the nineteenth century wrote under patriarchal pressures and therefore had to eliminate anger, sexual feelings, and ambition in their work if they wanted to succeed as writers without condemnation.[17] In order to excel, as Elizabeth Petrino argues, 'women writers used silence, deferral, and coded rhetorical gestures'.[18] Reticence, for nineteenth-century women writers, these critics suggest, is a response to patriarchal pressures.

It is true that many women writers have written under pressure and as a result have had to avoid certain language and themes. As Janice Stout has observed in *Strategies of Reticence*, a study that focuses on works of fiction by women writers, 'There can be no doubt that silence, as a form of imposed repression, has been a major part of women's experience historically […] the privileging of male roles in patriarchal societies means that women are conditioned, if not directly enjoined, to limit their speech'.[19] However, Stout goes on to argue that her 'emphasis is on silences and reticence' in the writings of women fiction writers 'as consciously or unconsciously chosen strategies for effect'.[20] Her book looks at 'reticent style as rhetorical strategy' in the works of four chosen women writers.[21] Similarly, I am interested in how reticence

---

15 Ostriker, p. 69.
16 Keller and Miller, p. 533.
17 Dobson, p. 6.
18 Peterino, p. 4.
19 Janice Stout, *Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), p. vii.
20 Stout, p. ix.
21 Stout, p. 3.

is selected by poets as a deliberate style for its potential to activate meaning and power. I argue that there were and are women writers who chose the poetics of reticence from a place of strength rather than from one of submission. Poets from all time periods grapple with expectations from the dominant culture – some submit and are obedient, avoiding or cleverly hiding certain subjects and meanings, while others use reticence as a tool to unlock the power in their poems. I argue that the marginalized poets who use reticence as a rhetorical device do so out of a knowledge of how this technique generates meaning.

Paul Breslin states in 'Closet Necessities: James Merrill's Poetics of Reticence' (one of the few studies that makes use of my preferred terminology) that at first Merrill hid his homosexuality and the identities of lovers in his poems out of shame but later his reticence became the place from which the power of the poems emanated.[22] Merrill wrote about his early years as a poet:

> I never doubted that almost any poem I wrote owed some of its difficulty to the need to conceal my feelings, and their objects. Genderless as a figleaf, the pronoun 'you' served to protect the latter, but one couldn't be too careful.[23]

While Merrill does admit here to submitting to reticence from the pressure of shame in response to cultural homophobia, this obedience to cultural pressure changed later on in his career – yet his poetics of reticence remained intact for other reasons: Breslin goes on to observe that 'Not until the Seventies were Merrill's love poems fully "out", but by 1962, Merrill had begun to make reticence into a principle of his art, not just a tactic of sexual camouflage.'[24] In this case, in other words, reticence was not a sign of obedience; rather, Breslin suggests that the poetics of reticence became a 'principle' of the poet's art, the generator that produced the meaning emanating from the poems.

One other work that employs the term 'the poetics of reticence', is Merrilees Roberts's book which, like Breslin's essay, argues that reticence, while it may initially be born of shame, can be the

---

[22] Breslin, p. 348.
[23] James Ingram Merrill, *A Different Person: A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1994), p. 141.
[24] Breslin, p. 351.

source of meaning in a poem. In *Shelley's Poetics of Reticence: Shelley's Shame*, Roberts shows how a link can exist between reticence and shame. Her argument includes an analysis of Shelley's reticent poetics demonstrating that it comes from the poet's anxieties about the nature of aesthetic self-representation. This anxiety, embodied in reticence, is transferred to the reader and provokes interpretive responsibility, she claims, a kind of awakening of the reader's ethical discretion. She writes that 'shame is a crucial theme in Shelley's major poetry because it allowed him to express a particular form of self-alienation' and she further asserts that his poetics of reticence serves a purpose in relation to this shame: 'the function of Shelley's reticence is that it's a corrective dynamic'.[25] Breslin and Roberts suggest that while obedience or shame may lead to reticence, the poetics of reticence can transcend both of these sources and become the seat of a poem's power. Roberts's argument is the only one I found that offers a systematic methodology to describe the function, purpose and effects of the poetics of reticence. Nevertheless, as her conclusions are centred around one poet, they are of limited use unless they can be developed and applied to a wider field of work, as I aim to do in this thesis.

The Inadequacy of Language

In the 1960s, with the growing popularity of post-structuralism, interest grew in studying the unexplored parts of texts, and some critics began to address the elements of poetry that do not contain language. Critics such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault argued that language is not enough to communicate meaning and claimed that words undo meaning just as they seem to construct it. Silences in texts interested post-structuralists because they viewed language as a non-transparent medium without an essential connection to the 'truth' and so, for them, it made sense to look beyond language. Jacques Derrida noted, 'I don't want to say or cannot, the unsaid, the forbidden, what is passed over in silence, what is separated off… — all these should be interpreted'.[26] Although Derrida and others were interested in interpreting the

[25] Roberts, p. 61.
[26] Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 12.

gaps on the page, ultimately, since the post-structuralist project was to show how language unconsciously cancels out the messages seemingly present in a text, they also argued that silences annul meaning. Since their mission was to challenge the assumption that texts are self-sufficient structures with inherent value, they also saw silences as eradicating or swallowing up meaning.

Post-structuralist philosopher Foucault went as far to say that, in the end, there is no real difference between language and silence:

> Silence itself—the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies.[27]

Since 'discourse' is Foucault's term for the many ways society wields power over its members, when he writes that there is no boundary between silence and discourse, he suggests that silence is also a part of the oppressive system that will not allow truths to be communicated – if such truths even exist. He goes on to write that silences 'are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses'.[28] For Foucault, silence is another form of language, an element to deconstruct, a place to find emptiness – silence, like words, is a slippery medium from which meaning cannot be found or communicated.

The problem with this rather nihilistic approach when it comes to poems, is that it does not take into account the fact that poetry both embraces the post-structuralist view and transcends it—poets who employ the poetics of reticence successfully, *know* that language and silences are limited and work from that knowledge. The poetics of reticence involves strategies that address the inability of language to communicate. The critics I discuss below have argued that central to the poet's goal is embracing the notion that all aspects of a text are insufficient;

---

[27] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 27.

[28] Foucault, p. 27.

however, these critics also illustrate that a strategic use of silence produces what Mark Dow has called the 'tip of the tongue phenomenon' which is 'this feeling of knowing something we cannot put into words'.[29] The infinite well of ideas, emotions, and messages that exist within a text, I will argue, may remain inaccessible to the reader yet can be sensed palpitating under the surface.

Clodagh Brook argues that this 'tip of the tongue phenomenon' (Dow's phrase, not Brook's) can be experienced when reading the work of the Italian poet Eugenio Montale. She writes in *The Expression of the Inexpressible in Eugenio Montale's Poetry: Metaphor, Negation and Silence* that the use of silence is 'an act of revolt against an impoverished linguistic medium'.[30] In other words, silences are used by the poet to respond to what cannot be communicated with words. Brook goes further, saying that 'silence is not simply the absence or suspension of speech […] but is a multi-faceted phenomenon with expressive power in its own right'.[31] Silence holds and communicates expression, Brook claims, and this is done 'through the syntax of the poems. It is given a voice in the spaces between the words, and in the space which envelops the poem, thus functioning in a concrete way in the text'.[32] For Brook those spaces in a poem are as 'concrete' as the words.

In *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, William Franke complicates Brook's discussion about silence in poetry when he observes that silences can exist not just in gaps but in words themselves. And Franke complicates Foucault's assertions about the white space in a text: like Foucault, he argues that there is no boundary between language and white space but while Foucault concludes that this lack of division between the two results in the notion that silence is just another form of the oppressive opaque 'discourse', Franke observes that silences are everywhere in a poem—even *inside the words,* and that these silences approach unsayable truths

[29] Mark Dow, 'Meter, Feeling, Knowing: A Conversation with Nigel Fabb', *PN Review*, 263 (2022), 47–51 (p. 49).
[30] Clodagh Brook, *The Expression of the Inexpressible in Eugenio Montale's Poetry: Metaphor, Negation, and Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 145.
[31] Brook, p. 145.
[32] Brook, p. 151.

about the sublime, the Divine and the beginnings of time itself.[33] Franke argues that engaging with the texts he analyses can be an experience that opens thought to the inconceivable. By exploring the limits of language, he argues that what lies beyond language is apophaticism – a religious practice which approaches the Divine by what may not be said. In Franke's readings of poems by Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan, he contends that the texts embody just such apophaticism. He writes, 'Jabès breaks language into its elements in order to liquidate, vaporize, pulverize, and immolate it' and that 'words reveal the infinite nothingness that is their secret, silent essence. It is this, their absence, that is God'. [34] While Franke uncovers the silent depths within language in his readings of these poems, it is not clear if he finds this process within poetry in general or just in the work of certain poets such as Jabès and Celan.

Thomas Gould's argument in *Silence in Modern Literature and Philosophy* is aligned with Franke in that he argues that silences are central to modern literature. However, Gould focuses on the idea that poets strategically place silences in order to accept ineffability.[35] In his argument, he alternates between the idea of silence as absolute absence of meaning to silence as the potential for a new ethical approach. He writes that silence is an obstacle to knowledge and that it 'is an absolute absence, a negativity to which we are denied access'.[36] Gould's view of textual silence is similar to Foucault's approach where ultimately silence is seen as just another oppressive element which shuts us out. However, Gould also writes, in contradistinction to Foucault, that silence has the potential for 'resistance against assertive, interlocutive "fascism"' and that it ultimately implies the 'possibility of an alternative community of ethics'.[37] According to Gould, silences in the work of a few modern poets both shut down and create openings: they simultaneously obstruct and germinate.

---

33 William Franke, 'The Singular and the Other at the Limits of Language in the Apophatic Poetics of Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan', *New Literary History*, 36 (2005), 621–638 (p. 625).
34 Franke, *The Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).
35 Thomas Gould, *Silence in Modern Literature and Philosophy: Beckett, Barthes, Nancy, Stevens* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 18.
36 Gould, p. 19.
37 Gould, p. 21.

Narratology

Post-structuralists like Foucault and other critics such as Brook, Gould, and Franke who make the inadequacy of language central to their arguments about silences, do not offer a clear and specific definition of how this rhetoric functions universally in poetics. I would like to now turn to evaluating criticism which does attempt to break down texts in this way: narratology.

Narratologists have created methodologies to look at how narrative gaps operate in literature and it is crucial to review them and apply their conclusions to my theory. However, while there is, understandably, a wealth of scholarship on narrative in fiction, very few investigations have been done on narrative in *poetry*. Narratologist Brian McHale has written, 'Contemporary narrative theory is almost silent about poetry. In many classic contemporary monographs on narrative theory, in specialist journals such as the one you are now reading, at scholarly meetings such as the annual conference of the International Society for the Study of Narrative, poetry is conspicuous by its near-absence.'[38] David Malcolm similarly observes that 'the absence of extensive consideration of verse in narratological studies is surprising, as narrative and verse constantly intersect'.[39] Malcolm does not offer reasons for this lack but simply writes, 'Verse gets a raw deal from narratologists'.[40] I would like to add that narrative *gaps* in verse get an even rawer deal. There are only a handful of scholarly works on such gaps in poetry. I will review them here.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that poetry depends on 'spacing' in its production of narrative meaning. She writes that poetry creates a 'meaningful sequence by the negotiation of gaps (line break, stanza break, page space)'.[41] While Blau DuPlessis does discuss how the meaning of a poem is developed by 'line terminations […] which are basically defined by white

---

38 Brian McHale, 'Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry', in *Narrative*, 17 (2009), 11–30 (p. 12).

39 David Malcolm, 'Ellipsis, Narrative Gaps, and Their Functions in Contemporary British Poetry: A Narratological Approach' in *Tekstualia*, 4 (2018), 67–79 (p. 72).

40 Malcolm, p. 69.

41 Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), p. 209.

space', her argument focuses on the idea of units and segments more than narrative gaps. Blau DuPlessis is a poet and a critic of poetry but not of narrative. It is difficult to find critics who are experts in both narrative and poetry. McHale hypothesizes that the scholarly blind spot on narrative poetry exists because 'some scholars specialize in narrative; others specialize in poetry; few specialize in both'.[42]

David Malcolm, who does specialize in both poetry and narrative, is one of the few who have looked closely at narrative gaps in poetry. In 'Ellipsis, Narrative Gaps, and Their Functions in Contemporary British Poetry: A Narratological Approach', Malcolm looks at the employment of narrative ellipsis (which he defines as gaps) in the work of several contemporary British poets. He narrows his focus to contemporary British poets because, he contends, British poetry has a strong narrative tradition – but he also suggests that his conclusions can be applied to poetry from any period. Malcolm writes that 'narrative reticence' is 'meaning bearing'.[43] This use of reticence, he argues, achieves a great deal and produces one or more of four possible effects: when crucial information is left out of a poem the situation being written about is universalized; foreground is achieved; emphasis is placed on the unspeakable; and narrative is destabilized.[44] Breaking down the impact of narrative gaps in poetry in this way is unique and feeds the development of my argument in the next chapter.

In their book *The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry*, narratologists Peter Hühn and Jens Kiefer do not focus on any of the elements that Malcolm highlights when examining the unsaid in poetry, but rather they underscore the role of silence in developing the plot of a poem.[45] This focus on 'narrative desire', as Peter Brooks calls it, perhaps comes out of their background as academics accustomed to studying fiction.[46] Hühn and Kiefer argue that the gaps in a poem's

---

42 McHale, p. 12.
43 Malcolm, p. 75.
44 Malcolm, pp. 77–78.
45 Peter Hühn and Jens Kiefer, *The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry: Studies in English Poetry from the 16th to the 20th Century*, trans. by Alastair Matthews (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005).
46 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 4.

narrative, drive the engine of narrative progression. By contrast, John Shoptaw, neither a poet nor a narratologist, but a poetry critic, posits that when a gap in a narrative of a poem opens up, the reader must make the meaning to bridge that gap, to heal that breech. The gap provokes meaning-making, he argues. We, the readers, intercede in these gaps.[47]

This territory that Shoptaw covers is already discussed by the reader-response critics who began their work in the 1960s. Reader Response critics such as Wolfgang Iser noted that 'the structure of a text brings about expectations, which are interrupted by surprising unfulfillment, producing gaps, which require filling by the reader to create a coherent flow of the text'.[48] Iser and other principle reader response critics (Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, and Hans-Robert Jauss) view the reader as essential in creating the text's meaning: they see the reader as the one who completes the narrative's implications when confronted with gaps in the text through his or her own interpretation.

This reader-response reading is in line with Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's theories about gaps in her book *Narrative Fiction*; while Rimmon-Kenan breaks down various kinds of withholding into separate categories, her ultimate emphasis is on the idea that a gap in a narrative 'enhances interest and curiosity, prolongs the reading process, and contributes to the reader's dynamic participation in making the text signify'.[49] This filling-in process is understood as automatic. In *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* in his section on 'The Literary Work as a System of Gaps', Meir Sternberg persuasively articulates how this process takes place:

> [T]he literary work consists of bits and fragments to be linked and pieced together in the process of reading: it establishes a system of gaps that must be filled in. This gap-filling ranges from simple linkages of elements, which the reader performs automatically, to

[47] John Shoptaw, 'The Music of Construction: Measure and Polyphony in Ashbery and Bernstein' in *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Susan Schultz (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), pp. 211–257.

[48] Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach' in *New Literary History*, 3 (1972), 279–299 (p. 298).

[49] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1983), p. 130.

> intricate networks that are figured out consciously, laboriously, hesitantly, and with constant modification in the light of additional information disclosed in later stages of the reading.[50]

While critics have described how the reader might instinctively make connections and bring unsupplied information to spaces in a literary work, it does not take into account the fact that the poet's intention is not always for the reader to discover a piece of missing information. In fact, the poet themselves might not be aware of what has been left out. Or perhaps the poet does not want the reader to discover something or that's not the point at all. I argue in the following chapters that the reader is obliged to accept the otherness of a poem and the alterity of its speaker when confronted with snippets of a narrative. Sometimes the gap is there to encourage an acceptance of an ultimate mystery, a perspective much more in line with the 'limits of language' critics discussed in the previous section.

Since there is so little written about narrative gaps in poetry, I will turn to a few valuable writings on narrative gaps in fiction that have helped me in developing my own ideas and methodology. Leona Toker argues in *Eloquent Reticence: Withholding Information in Fictional Narrative*, for instance, that gaps carry *more* information than words. She makes a case for the following: gaps function to thwart the reader's expectations of anticipated parts of the narrative which alerts us to our own assumptions and attitudes thereby pointing us inward to look at ourselves.[51] Ultimately, she posits that gaps in narrative information hold up mirrors to the reader. Just as Levinas describes the face-to-face encounter as a phenomenon with an overarching ethical dimension (as mentioned in the introduction and discussed further in forthcoming chapters), Toker argues that the gaps in a text produce a self-critical moment of ethical significance within the reader.

---

[50] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 186.
[51] Leona Toker, *Eloquent Reticence: Withholding Information in Fictional Narrative* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993).

Stout, whose work I mentioned above in the 'Reticence as Obedience' section, examines reticent style as a rhetorical device in her book *Strategies of Reticence*. She discusses strategies of reticence within the context of women's fiction and argues that although reticence in women's writing cannot be completely divorced from societal repression of women's voices, women writers (at least the ones represented in her study) are 'rhetorical strategists' who turn reticence 'back on their repressors as a weapon'.[52] This approach to narrative gaps challenges the feminist studies on reticence by critics such as Dobson mentioned above, who argue that women writers have had to put their heads down, so to speak, and resort to codes (because of patriarchal expectations) to communicate meaning. Stout argues that women writers who employ reticence through narrative gaps turn obedience on its head: they find power in reticence and take this ancient rhetorical tool and use it to generate meaning.

Finally, Robyn Warhol's sharp analysis of narrative gaps cannot be ignored. Warhol, a feminist narrative theorist, responding to and resurrecting Gerald Prince's 1988 article 'The Disnarrated', is interested in what narrators (in fiction) 'explicitly omit'.[53] Prince argues that narrative must be viewed as an act or process, as a situation-bound transaction between two parties that includes omissions. Warhol, responding to Prince, breaks down this process of omissions into categories. Warhol emphasizes the fact that writers use gaps as a strategy – the omissions are explicit and consciously intentional, she argues. Three of her five categories of omission are relevant to my argument: omissions of parts in a narrative when those parts: 1. cannot capture the ineffable (and including them would counteract doing so); 2. are taboos; 3. are traumatic. In Warhol's account, such omissions highlight the inadequacy of language to achieve full representation. Sometimes the moment transcends illustration in words. Although Warhol only looks at fiction, her stress on the writer's intentions, and the way she breaks down

[52] Stout, p. 20.

[53] Gerald Prince, 'The Disnarrated', *Style*, 22 (1988), 1–8; Robyn R. Warhol, 'Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film', in *A Companion to Narrative Theory,* ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 220–231 (p. 222).

the different reasons for omissions, has been useful to the development of my own ideas on the poetics of reticence.

While all of the critics mentioned above have informed my research, scholarship on biblical narrative has provided a special slant which has fed my understanding and piqued my interest in a way that no other field of criticism has done. This scholarship is particularly significant because of the historical importance of the Bible as a source of poetic inspiration.[54] Many writers in the Western world have had some contact with the Bible. The textual reticence imbibed from the Bible filtered into much of Western poetry to varying degrees. (It may surprise some readers that the Bible is a reticent text, as I will illustrate below). In this way, biblical poetics permeates much literature, even recent works written by writers who are themselves unfamiliar with the Bible but who have read the works of the canonical writers to whom it was important.

In order to appreciate how the narrative reticence of biblical poetics functions it is helpful to be aware of the fact that ancient traditional readings of the Bible place a high value on the white page. For instance, the midrash (rabbinic exegetical commentary) in the Talmud states that: 'The Torah which the Holy One, Praise to Him, gave to Moses, was white fire engraved in black fire.'[55] The rabbinic discussion around this midrash emphasizes that the 'white fire' is essential to appreciating the meanings of the Hebrew Bible.[56] Tradition understands this as suggesting that the black fire contains hints, whispers of meaning, which can be found only in

[54] Although the biblical literary influence is ubiquitous in much of western literature its influence does not touch many cultures and peoples in the western world who come from and value other traditions.

[55] *The Jerusalem Talmud. Second Order: Mo'ed: Tractates Mo'ed: Tractates Šeqalim, Sukkah, Roš Haššanah and Yom Tov*, ed. and trans. by Heinrich W. Guggenheimer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 6. 1, 49d, p. 150.

[56] *Torah* (תורה) refers to the *Five Books of Moses*. The tradition is that God 'spoke' the Torah to Moses so he could write it down and share it with the 'children of Israel' and it would be passed down for future generations. The Talmud (a central text of Judaism) is the ancient commentary on the Torah compiled and written down in Aramaic, from the second to the sixth centuries, which records once oral stories and rabbinic arguments about laws.

the white fire.[57] The Hebrew Bible relies heavily on omissions when producing meaning and does so in a way that makes what is not said communicate in tandem with what *is* said.

Robert Alter argues in his chapter 'Characterization and the Art of Reticence' that emotions and narrative are communicated in biblical writing through the 'vehicle of reticence'.[58] What is left out is essential. While Alter characterizes this poetics as a 'vehicle', James Kugel calls this aspect of the Bible's poetics 'blanks'.[59] Both critics argue that biblical texts communicate messages in their narratives chiefly through silences. Their argument is that meaning can be found in the lacunae; this observation is corroborated by the rich midrashic tradition which includes ancient stories, messages, laws and meanings that come out of what is not being said in words.

Erich Auerbach describes biblical texts as evincing the 'suggestive influence of the unexpressed'.[60] He argues in 'Odysseus's Scar' that in the Akeida (when God seems to ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac)[61] 'psychological details throughout the story […] remain dark, only hinted at'.[62] In other words, the text offers scant information about the narrative and offers no information about what Abraham or Isaac might have been feeling in response to the skeletally described sequence of events. This is startling for a story that is so clearly charged with emotion. Over thirty years earlier, Abraham received God's promise that he will have descendants through his wife, Sarah: 'I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sands on the seashore.'[63] But it is not until Abraham is one

---

[57] This particular midrash, found in Midrash Rabbah, values the white fire, the space on which the black words are written, over the words, as the white fire represents the secret meanings of the Torah which are paradoxical, infinite, and invite limitless years of study.

[58] Robert Alter, 'Characterization and the Art of Reticence', *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books 1981), pp. 143–162 (p. 151).

[59] James Kugel, 'On the Bible and Literary Criticism,' *Prooftexts* 1 (1981), pp. 217–236 (p. 230).

[60] Erich Auerbach, 'Odysseus's Scar', in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 3–23 (p. 23).

[61] The 'Akeida' is the traditional term, literally meaning 'binding' in Hebrew, referring to Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac after the Divine seems to command it and before the angel intervenes.

[62] Auerbach, p. 15.

[63] *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), Genesis 22. 17. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible in this thesis are from the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*.

hundred years old that his now elderly wife (aged 90) will finally, miraculously have their first child. Thirty-seven years after the birth of this longed-for son, the Akeida takes place.[64] Abraham is told by this same God to offer up his son, Isaac, which seems to be a commandment to sacrifice him. The text is silent about any events surrounding this announcement. And the confusion, rage, anguish and despair anyone would have felt in response to these circumstances is not mentioned or referred to. Nor is any other feeling he might have had, such as spiritual ecstasy or guilt or relief or gratitude or depression or suicidal grief. Rather the text simply states:

> And He said, Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.[65]

The only emotion insinuated in this dreadful command is in the first mention of 'your son' and then the emphasis on 'favored' and the addition of his name ('Isaac'), and finally the information that he loves him. In this way the text hints at much unspoken emotion. As Auerbach writes, the text is 'fraught with background'.[66] The rabbis of the Talmud pick up on the hints and narrative gaps and quote from ancient midrashim that describe the conflicting emotions of Abraham. These commentaries speak to the silences and describe his determination or pain or confusion in conflicting midrashim. The existence of these midrashim is a testament to the untold stories hidden in the text, the gaps, its reticence. In the biblical text though Abraham responds to the command in the following manner:

> So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him.[67]

---

64 Most scholars calculate that Isaac was thirty-seven years old at the time of the Akeida but this age is disputed by others.
65 Genesis 22. 2.
66 Auerbach, p. 15.
67 Genesis 22. 3.

The text continues to be scant and devoid of emotional language – there are only snippets of the narrative. We are told a bare minimum and not once in the short narrative which takes place over a period of three days is emotion mentioned, and there is very little description. Auerbach points this out, comparing it in contradistinction to the language of Homer's *Odyssey,* which he argues is the embodiment of controlled, logical and detailed storytelling. Comparing these two seminal texts Auerbach argues that Homer fills in gaps and represents 'phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts'.[68] Ultimately, Auerbach contrasts these two works, arguing that *The Odyssey* makes 'us forget our own reality for a few hours' while the Bible's reticent style allows us to look at ourselves and 'fit our life into its world'.[69] In other words, the poetics of reticence generates meaning, even ethical and relational meaning, drawing on our humanity and even offering messages on how to live.

While the critical approaches on the role and value of reticence I have examined in this chapter are valuable, none offer an inclusive theory that can be used to generate new understandings of poetry in all its forms. As the next chapter will show, scrutinizing the poetics of reticence through a Levinasian lens, enables me to develop the work begun by the critics I have examined here in order to open up a multitude of possibilities in the reading of poetry. '[S]ilence is Infinity' Dickinson wrote.[70] Silence around language can hold boundless and even contradictory truths. My approach, therefore, offers a theory that can absorb contradiction and multiplicity, but at the same time, provide a much-needed organizing principle. As I will illustrate, my account of poetic reticence reframes Levinasian phenomenology thereby drawing out the specific mechanisms from which such reticence functions in poems and generates meaning. As Jason Fargo wrote, 'Make your absence its own presence'.[71] Reticence, as we shall

---

68 Auerbach, p. 11.
69 Auerbach, p. 15.
70 *Poems*, 'But silence is infinity – ', Fr 1300, vol. 3, p. 1126, line 3.
71 Jason Fargo, 'How a Gray Painting Can Break Your Heart,' in 'Art and Design', *The New York Times*, 16 January 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/01/16/arts/design/jasper-johns-memory-of-my-feelings.html> [accessed 30 September 2022].

see, ultimately does just this. The poetics of reticence allows absence to blossom into presence – this reflects our human intuition that meaning lies just out of our reach: it is there, you can almost know it fully, even when it seems absent. The following chapters accept that intuition and continue to investigate the mechanics of the poetics where meaning glows in the spaces between words.

Chapter Two: A Methodology of Reticence

In Chapter One, I discussed the work of critic William Franke who argues that reading poems by poets who are particularly reticent in their poetics becomes an encounter with infinite complexity.[1] In this chapter, I introduce Emmanuel Levinas's phenomenological hypothesis where a similar process occurs.[2] In the first section of this chapter, *Emmanuel Levinas*, I describe the philosopher's 'face-to-face' encounter theory, and I reframe it, arguing that the key concepts of his theory can be applied to poetry and can illustrate how a poetics of reticence produces meaning in poetry. In the second section of this chapter, *The Poetics of Reticence*, I apply my methodology, bringing Levinas's concept of a 'face-to-face' encounter to readings of a selection of poems that were written before Levinas's time and ones contemporaneous to Levinas's post-World War Two philosophy. My methodology of applying Levinas's philosophy to analysing these poems uncovers the inner architecture of the poetics of reticence, showing how a reader's encounter with narrative gaps generates a sense of vulnerability and otherness. My close reading of poems includes, first, a brief look at lines by William Shakespeare—normally known for his abundance and rich verbosity of language, Shakespeare's work yields surprising support for the notion that reticence generates a poem's vulnerability and otherness; second, a poem by Elizabeth Bishop, whose poems are widely known for their reticence, and as a woman poet, her work has a special relationship with reticence which yields a nuanced understanding of the term; and third, a particularly reticent poem by the modernist American poet Charles Reznikoff who comes out of a movement which is particularly well-suited to a discussion of the poetics of

[1] Jabès and Celan (whose work has been studied in detail by Franke, see p. 96 above) were Jewish poets writing after World War Two, attempting to respond to Adorno's statement, discussed later, that one cannot write poetry after the Holocaust.

[2] Like Jabès and Celan, Levinas was also Jewish, writing after World War Two and responding to Adorno's statement.

reticence. I devote the last section, *Emily Dickinson and the Poetics of Reticence*, to the work of the nineteenth-century American poet whose work has long been noted for its reticence.

Emmanuel Levinas

My methodology, a reframing of a well-known structure devised by the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, offers an explanation for how the poetics of reticence functions in poetry and why it is so effective. Levinas's postulation, the face-to-face encounter between 'Self' and 'Other', is the foundation for my methodology.[3] Levinas contends that when you, one, a person (the 'Self'), encounters another person (the 'Other'), two elements are detected by the 'Self': the vulnerabilities of the 'Other' and the immeasurable mysteries of the 'Other'. During this encounter, the 'Self' has an epiphany: the Other's vulnerabilities and mysteries are not only recognized, but they demand 'infinite responsibility' from the 'Self'.[4]

Building on Levinas's approach, I argue that poems transmit vulnerability and otherness through gaps in their narrative. I bring Levinas's theory to the experience of reading – a reader's 'face-to-face' encounter, if you will, with the poem. In my reframed dynamic, the self is the reader and the other is the poet's linguistic presence (the speaker embodied in the text) in the poem. I argue that the narrative gaps, which make up a poetics of reticence, pulsate with vulnerability and otherness, creating a forcefield of meaning.

One function of narrative gaps then is to suggest vulnerability. When a poet removes the language which is an emotional response to a narrative, a tension arises: the absence of the expected response to a narrative event suggests that the feelings involved are too much (too painful or joyful or angry or some other overwhelming emotion) for words to bear. Levinas's theory implies that the other's vulnerability is sometimes embodied in their attempts to hide (through blushing, posturing or even lying) their inner emotional world as some people might

---

[3] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, pp. 95, 98, 119. Levinas's 'rapport de face à face' is normally translated as the face-to-face encounter.

[4] Levinas, *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 74.

do: this 'hiding' is evidence that fragile emotions exist within the other.[5] Poetry is also filled with hiding and 'blushing' manifested in the form of narrative gaps and the absence of direct emotional language surrounding the unspoken narrative. For Levinas, the other is vulnerable and 'uncomfortable'. The proof of this is that some might try to veil their inner life when in the presence of other people (and sometimes even when alone) – they might put on airs and affectations, hiding truths that are buried inside.[6] In the same way, a poem postures because it hides bits of narrative and the emotional response to those hidden narratives. A poem might pose and posture (as a person can do) with its gaps followed by literary strategies such as litotes, half-rhymes, or metaphor. In other words, meaning is communicated through an attempt to hide a narrative; often, another more complex set of meanings is suggested in the process.

Hassett, whose criticism I introduced in the first chapter, makes a similar argument when discussing Christina Rossetti's poetry. She writes that Rossetti

> by insisting vividly on what is not felt, not said, not revealed, not narrated […] engages the reader while she herself appears to disengage. Operating like an absent-presence, she directs attention, orchestrates experience, and invulnerably annotates our shared vulnerability.[7]

Hassett argues that Rossetti's approach of withholding draws the reader in and that it is the seeming invulnerability of the text which, ironically, illuminates the vulnerability of the human condition. In other words, hiding emotions somehow activates an understanding of our collective fragility. Hassett's observation dovetails with my claim that the poetics of reticence signals vulnerability. When emotion runs deep, the resulting vulnerability leads to reticence. As Marianne Moore wrote, 'The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence; / Not in silence, but

---

5 Roger Burggraeve, 'Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other: The Vision of Emmanuel Levinas on Moral Evil and Our Responsibility', trans. by Jeffrey Bloechl, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 30 (1999), pp. 29–45 (p. 31).

6 Burggraeve, p. 32.

7 Hassett, p. 512.

restraint."[8] Inherent in reticence lies the suggestion that the 'deepest feeling' may be too overwhelming to utter directly, if at all.

The Poetics of Reticence

Before speculating about the narrative gaps in Shakespeare, Bishop and Reznikoff's work, I would like to clarify my position on reticence from my point of view as a poet. Poets, for the most part, do not consciously remove narrative snippets from their poems. Leona Toker, when writing about fiction, calls the literary strategy of removing narrative from a text, 'manipulative withholding'.[9] The word 'manipulative' suggests a deliberate attempt to make an impact. While I do argue that the poet's employment of gaps is deliberate, I prefer the phrase 'intuitive withholding' as the employment of a poetics of reticence is not always a conscious process. I would say that poets *intuitively allow* rather than 'manipulate' the withholding of narrative events in order to generate meaning.

But are all poems narrative? You cannot have narrative gaps without narrative. While not all poetry is explicitly narrative one can find a snippet of an event or story in even the most rigorously anti-narrative poems. A single abstract word, surprisingly, can tell a piece of a story. For example, in Galway Kinnell's three-line poem 'Prayer', which withholds almost all narrative information, the abstract language (no images, no storyline) still suggests a story:

> Whatever happens. Whatever
> *what is* is is what
> I want. Only that. But that.[10]

The title of the poem 'Prayer' offers a glimmer of narrative and may be taken, in its most traditional meaning, to refer to a person speaking to God. The abstract language that follows can be understood as words of request or gratitude. But the nonfigurative and unsensuous words

---

8 Marianne Moore, 'Silence', in *Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p. 91.
9 Toker, p. 3.
10 Galway Kinnell, 'Prayer', *Collected Poems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), p. 343.

'whatever', 'what', 'is' (repeated three times in a row), and 'that' along with the deliberately awkward phrasing seem to obstruct any way into a story. The words that have a bit more meat on them ('happens', 'I', 'want', 'only' and 'but') give the poem a kick and offer narrative flickers; however, they provide very little information. Slight hints of a story behind the poem still leave any narrative opaque, but the language and line-break choices give a sense of a voice stopping and starting, thinking through their desires ('I want') no matter what 'happens', suggesting a multitude of possible stories. But the narrator's 'want' remains mysterious and their unwillingness to reveal the narrative suggests vulnerability. The restraint suggests a fragile person who holds their stories and emotional responses close. Although information is sparse, a reader can pick up on a narrative hovering in the background of the most abstract poems. And where there is narrative, there is always emotion attached to it. Poetry 'takes its origin', William Wordsworth wrote, 'from emotion recollected in tranquillity'.[11] Wordsworth was implying that an event or sequence of events that stirred up emotion recalled later 'in tranquillity' can become a poem. And this process can take place in seemingly non-narrative poems such as Kinnell's.

The intuitive withholding found in Kinnell's spare poem also occurs in the work of Shakespeare, a poet known for his sheer ampleness of language. Finding reticence in seemingly non-reticent work is sometimes a stronger indicator of the power of the unsaid than in concise and obviously reticent texts. This aspect of Shakespeare's work has rarely been the focus of scholars, with critics tending to focus on Shakespeare's abundance of words and his stylistic plenitude. During his time, this cornucopia of language (or lack of reticence) was held up as paramount. Ben Jonson observed that 'language most shewes a man: speake that I may see thee'.[12] Because of the sheer abundance and diversity of words and the meaning's dependence on rich language in Shakespeare's work, scholars have mostly made that abundance their focus and have not noted Shakespeare's reticence.

---

[11] William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems and Prefaces* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965) p. 460.

[12] Ben Jonson, *Timber: Or Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter* (1640), in *Works*, ed. by C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, 8 (Oxford: University of Oxford), pp. 555–649 (p. 625).

Philip C. McGuire was one of the first to study Shakespeare's reticence in *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare's Open Silences*, where he argues that the playwright deliberately inserts silences in the text of the plays in order to awaken the audience to the vulnerabilities of particular characters. For example, McGuire points out that Hippolyta's silence after her initial short speech at the beginning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might suggest her fragility because of an inner emotional conflict surrounding the man she intended to marry.[13] A similar dynamic takes place in Act 5, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*: when the Duke proposes marriage to Isabella, she does not reply.[14] This is a gap in the narrative. Her silence could be understood as her acceptance of his proposal. Equally, her lack of speech might be read as a refusal.[15] The fact is, there is no definitive answer. It is a moment of anti-climax and produces many questions unanswered in the play, including: will the Duke marry the play's heroine? How does she feel about his proposal? Ultimately, the moment highlights the vulnerability of the (non-)speaker: she is put on the spot by a powerful man who might misread her (the withholding can be an assent or vice versa): he can easily insert his narrative into the silence and dominate her. It is a moment rich with meaning because of this gap.

And the poetics of reticence soars in *King Lear* when the king asks his daughters to describe what qualities he has that they admire in exchange for a piece of his kingdom: two of them use rich, multi-syllabic, complex and decorative language, and the third, Cordelia, simply responds with one word: 'Nothing'.[16] This plain and guileless word beside the copious speeches that proceeded it is striking. The reticence is not expected. Rather than noticing that her lack of words is a commentary on the insincerity of her sisters' language-filled speeches, the narcissistic

---

13 Philip C. McGuire, *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare's Open Silences* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 2.
14 William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), V. 1.
15 Leandra Lynn, 'When Words Fail: A Possible Interpretation of Isabella's Silence in *Measure for Measure*', *Shakespeare and Beyond* (6 October 2017) <https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2017/10/06/measure-for-measure-isabella-silence/> [accessed 3 October 2022].
16 Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I. 1.

Lear misreads Cordelia's reticence, and rages. In fact, her non-response signals her feelings (loving, loyal, grateful) about her father. She makes herself vulnerable with her lack of language, and she becomes mysterious, other, to her father. But this daughter's 'nothing' is the key to the healing at the end of the play. Shakespeare seems to suggest in *King Lear* that saying too much can call authenticity into question. And that ultimately, redemption may lie in 'Nothing', in reticence.

In order to further deepen our understanding of how both vulnerability and otherness function in the poetics of reticence it is apt to analyse a poem of the modern American poet Elizabeth Bishop whose use of reticence has long been praised and discussed. Charles Simic's essay 'The Power of Reticence,' for example, champions the reticence in Bishop's poetry.[17] And Octavio Paz wrote similarly of 'the enormous power of reticence' as 'the great lesson of the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop'.[18] Kathleen Spivack observed that Bishop wrote 'elliptically' and that in her work 'what is most important is what is not said'.[19] Contemporary Irish novelist Colm Tóibín describes his experience when first encountering Bishop's poems:

> It was the reticence that hit me […] with considerable emotional force. I found something in the space between the words, in the hovering between tones at the ends of stanzas, at the end of poems themselves […] which made me sit up and realize that something important was being hidden.[20]

Tóibín attributes being 'hit', snapped to attention, being 'made' to 'sit up' to 'the reticence' and clarifies that 'something important was being hidden' suggesting that if nothing was hidden, he may not have paid attention.

---

17 Charles Simic, 'The Power of Reticence', *New York Review of Books*, 27 April 2006 <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2006/04/27/the-power-of-reticence/> [accessed 3 October 2022].

18 Octavio Paz, quoted in Heather Treseler, 'One Long Poem', *Boston Review*, 17 August 2016 <https://bostonreview.net/articles/heather-treseler-elizabeth-bishop-foster-letters/> [accessed 3 October 2022], para 1 of 18.

19 Kathleen Spivack, *With Robert Lowell and His Circle: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Stanley Kunitz, and Others* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2012), p. 97.

20 Colm Tóibín, *On Elizabeth Bishop* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 105.

While it is widely acknowledged among critics that the power in Bishop's poetry comes from reticence, many feminist scholars have argued that this same reticence in her work arises from patriarchal pressures. The claim is that Bishop, like many other women poets, was clever enough to use the required feminine modesty to her own advantage. Indeed, Keller and Miller in their article 'Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop and the Rewards of Indirection' argue that oppression leads to reticence in these women's poetry. They maintain that ideological restrictions placed on certain groups such as women can be manifested in the absences in their texts.[21]

It is ironic that reticence can be seen as being born out of oppression because it can also be the very thing that empowers a poem: reticence is what generates meaning. When both narrative and emotional responses to that narrative are removed, the poetics of reticence activates vulnerability and otherness, and a forcefield of energy is produced. Many feminist critics implicitly support the view that absences signal subjugation. Keller and Miller, for example, argue that women writers use reticence or 'indirection', as they call it, to shield against the pain that society would rather have them not admit: 'as the poet directs attention away from herself or portrays herself indirectly, she protects herself against her own extreme emotion'.[22] However, this indirection may be the very thing that allows such poems to hit, to use Tóibín's words, with 'considerable emotional force': the reader can become aware of the mysterious vulnerable human in the reticent text as the speaker hides from 'extreme emotion' by avoiding certain narratives—the reader has the opportunity to sense those narratives buried in the white spaces between words.

While analysing the following poem, 'One Art', by Bishop I will argue that readers are invited, by the poetics of reticence, to become aware of the fragile and ultimately unknowable human. The poem's central approach is that the speaker hides from 'extreme emotion' by employing narrative gaps:

---

21 Keller and Miller, pp. 533–553.
22 Keller and Miller, p. 536.

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
So many things seem filled with the intent
To be lost that their loss is not disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster. [23]

[23] Elizabeth Bishop, 'One Art', *The Complete Poems: 1927–1979* (New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), p. 178.

Although 'One Art' is an elegy, often read by or for the bereaved at funerals, the subject that draws mourners to it is only barely alluded to: the expected part of the narrative – the language (i.e., 'sad', 'grief', 'tears') and narrative behind that language of mourning – does not appear in the poem. The bulk of the villanelle, five three-line stanzas out of the six stanzas (the last is comprised of four lines), argues that loss is *not* a difficult event to manage. Even more extraordinary: the type of loss is downgraded for most of the poem to losing items, time, experiences, and places. It is counterintuitive. Why would musing over moderate losses be the way to bring home the impossibility, the 'disaster', of the ultimate loss (of a beloved)? And the only information the speaker offers about the person she has lost, the only clues we are given, is in the last stanza: 'the joking voice,' 'a gesture I love'. And these phrases, this information about the story behind the poem, although touching, are seemingly personal yet vague, specific yet elusive.

There are only four words that hint at the hidden narrative in this nineteen-line elegy: 'lose' / 'lost', 'miss', 'disaster', and 'love'. In each case, Bishop devalues the emotion in the word thereby exposing the vulnerability in the poem as the reader realizes that the speaker cannot acknowledge the pain that she feels. Bishop avoids using 'lose' and 'lost' in relation to the beloved until the end, and even then, when the 'you' is mentioned for this first time in the last stanza, the narrator insists that it is not 'too hard' to 'master' losing 'you'. The word 'disaster' is only used to say what loss is not (until its final usage in the last word of the poem), and the word 'love' is used quietly to not state that the narrator loves the beloved but to home in on a seemingly insignificant detail: it is 'the gesture' that is loved. The language of pain or rage is replaced by understatement and a placid, reasoning tone ('isn't hard', 'seem', 'accept'); detached diction ('shan't,' 'art,' 'to master,' 'practice'); and a 'the lady doth protest too much, methinks' attitude of denial ('the art of losing isn't hard to master').

This flat language that covers up a story and undercuts emotion is the very thing that signals the speaker's vulnerability. 'One Art' is a poem of loss and emotional devastation. Yet the

narrative behind that devastation does not appear in the poem. 'Pain –', Dickinson wrote, 'has an Element of Blank – ', suggesting that not only is there a numbing element in the midst of anguish but that the act of writing about the subject effectively must include a 'Blank'.[24] Neither emotional words nor a clear narrative can be found in Bishop's controlled poem. The penultimate words '(*Write* it!)', which includes the quirky parentheses, italics and exclamation point, are the closest the poem comes to bursting with grief before the final admission that something catastrophic has happened: 'disaster'. However, the story behind the disaster is never revealed. The speaker's otherness remains intact, and their vulnerability is palpable.

W. H. Auden wrote that in Robert Frost's work, 'one is aware of strong, even violent, emotion behind what is actually said, but the saying is reticent, the poetry has, as it were, an auditory chastity'.[25] Similarly, Bishop's words are chaste when it comes to even the most 'violent' of emotions. The poem, to use Dickinson's image and language, is a 'reticent volcano'.[26] There is a sense that it could explode with emotion at any time (it begins to bubble over in the penultimate line), but the poem is mostly dormant. The pain in the poem's gaps can seep into the reader's unconscious, and the reader can subliminally empathize with the human instinct to avoid pain. What we know unconsciously becomes a part of us, enters deeply into us.

While the gaps draw us closer to the poem through the empathetic process described above, they simultaneously have the opposite effect: they create the distance of respect and awe. What is not articulated in 'One Art' puts the reader in a position to accept the alterity of its speaker. When confronted with only snippets of a narrative about loss, there is a growing understanding that the speaker can never be fully understood. These gaps prompt an imagined ideal reader to step back, to accept not knowing and to turn inward. When the last words appear 'like disaster', the prompt is not to *know* about the disaster that the poem alludes to; rather, the

---

[24] *Poems,* 'Pain - has an Element of Blank -', Fr 760, vol. 2, p. 719.
[25] W. H. Auden, 'Robert Frost', *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), pp. 353–357 (p. 354).
[26] *Poems*, 'The reticent volcano keeps', Fr 1776, vol. 3, p. 1519.

use of the word 'like' hides the facts of the narrative and encourages readers to look inward at their own experience of loss and misfortune. Not telling a full story is what creates this rich interchange between text and reader, this sense of the speaker's vulnerability and a respect for the ultimate otherness of the text.

Bishop's poem is one of a hidden subject, scant information, narrative danglings, and repetition. In a villanelle, the same lines repeat themselves throughout in an orderly pattern, which gives a sense of narrative circling, rather than a sequential moving forward towards a logical resolution. The poem's reference to losing time and two cities suggests that it is also about the repetitiveness of loss, using the villanelle form for its encompassing traumatic repetition, and making that repetition – rather than a specific loss – its subject. Most striking is the lack of information about the story: how was the 'you' lost? Was it the result of a break-up? Death? If so, how and why did the break-up or death happen? Was the person male or female? A child or adult? A family member, friend, lover?[27] None of these questions are answered. Very little narrative information (lover, name, female partner, death to suicide or being left) is provided by the poem. Instead, the reader must accept the narrative abyss. The poem suggests that the teller of this tale, on some level, does not even know the whole story. How can she? It is impossible. Only gaps can hold the infinite possibilities.

Accepting the unknown is challenging for any reader. As mentioned above, in Levinas's model of the face-to-face phenomenon, otherness is positioned as a mobilizing feature in an encounter between 'Self' and 'Other'. Bishop's poem enacts this process. In the face-to-face meeting, the 'Self' soon realizes there is a dearth of knowledge available about the 'Other' during this encounter. The 'Other' does not and cannot show the depths of who they are. Levinas writes that 'the Other is invisible', indicating that the countenance of the 'Other' cannot reveal

[27] The little that we do know of Bishop's biography and its connection to this poem suggests that it may have come out of the loss of her partner Lota de Macedo Soares to suicide (although, arguably, it could have been written at a later date when her partner Alice Methfessel left her).

the depths and complexities of who he or she is and often intentionally conceals him or herself.[28] The 'Other', Levinas argues, is so much more than his or her appearance, which is why he uses the word 'invisible' to describe the 'Other' – the 'Other' can never really be seen. It is impossible to get to the essence of a person. He goes on to argue that although the 'Other's' infinite complexity is invisible, they are susceptible to being reduced to merely their appearance.[29] One can easily objectify or simplify a person or a poem. But like a person, the poem is also 'invisible': narrative gaps, in poems like 'One Art', signal the poem's otherness and inscrutability. Levinas wrote that the 'Other' is 'irreducible to his appearing', meaning you can never successfully reduce another person into an object: a person is literally infinitely complex.[30] A similar experience of the 'Other' can be found in a reader's experience of a poem. For Levinas, this occurs in any face-to-face encounter: when the self becomes aware of the vulnerability and mystery of the 'Other', a dynamic of respect emerges.[31] In my model: the reader interacts with a text of vulnerability that is ultimately unknowable.

I now turn to a poem by modern American poet Charles Reznikoff to further explicate my argument; this poem's brevity suggests an adamant reticence. This poem was born out of the Objectivist movement, the mission of which was to bring highly-condensed language and images to poetry in order to describe an idea or story in the form of a compressed narrative. In other words, narrative information and language describing the inner life in response to that narrative in poetry was seen by the Objectivists as an obstacle to meaning as opposed to a window.

Attracted to law, Reznikoff, the Jewish child of two survivors of pogroms, was particularly drawn to the non-dramatic parts of courtroom narrative testimony: the reticent

---

28 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by William Large (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) p. 6.

29 Margrit Shildrick, 'Levinas and Vulnerable Becoming', in *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), pp. 87–102.

30 I write 'literally' infinitely complex because Levinas argued that a human being contains a part of the Divine. Since one of the definitions of the Divine is infinity he argues that then a human being's essence is also infinite.

31 Daniel Fleming and Terence Lovat, '"Self-Other" or "Other-Self-Other"? A Conversation between Bonhoeffer and Levinas on Vulnerability', *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Australasian Journal of Bonhoeffer Studies*, 1 (2013), 133–149.

moments. Eliot Weinberger has observed that 'what Reznikoff liked about courtroom testimony […] was that what matters is the facts of the case, what the witnesses saw and heard, not the witness's feelings about, or interpretations of, those facts. It was his ideal for poetry'. Reznikoff, whose aim in writing poems was to remove narrative links and also the emotionally charged language in response to the hidden narrative, is useful in explicating my definition of the poetics of reticence.[32]

Indeed, Reznikoff's work reflects the aphorism he made famous: he often quoted the medieval Chinese poet Wei T'ai who wrote in his *Random Notes on Poetry* that, 'Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling, for as soon as the mind responds and connects with the thing the feeling shows in the words; this is how poetry enters deeply into us.'[33] One of Reznikoff's best-known poems, seemingly pure description, just two lines, reflects this belief about poetry: that reticence conveys meaning.

> Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies
> a girder, still itself among the rubbish.[34]

This miniature poem is rigorously reticent in its refusal to reveal emotion or narrative. The poem calls attention to the limits of language and the unknowability and vulnerability of human life. The poem can be interpreted metaphorically as being about a survivor, intact, mentally and physically, amidst the ruins. But that narrative, and the emotion surrounding that narrative, does

---

[32] Reznikoff was a member of the Objectivist movement, which was committed to removing emotional language and complete narratives from poetry and embraced the philosophy that describing the objects in the world with razor sharp clarity will reveal emotion and ideas.

[33] A. C. Graham roughly translated this quotation in an epigraph to his *Poems of the Late T'ang* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2008). This oft quoted aphorism by the Song Dynasty writer cannot be found in direct translation from the Chinese although many scholars have paraphrased the *ars poetica* statement as Reznikoff did. For example, Jiaosheng Wang, paraphrases Wei T'ai ideas as 'poetry should be exact about the thing described, but refrain from directly expressing the feeling it is intended to convey. In this way the reader may be left to imagine for himself, and enter into the poet's inmost thoughts' (Jiaosheng Wang, 'The Complete *Ci*-poems of Li Qingzhao: A New English Translation', *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 13 (1989), i-122 (p. viii).

[34] Charles Reznikoff, 'Among the heaps of brick and plaster lies', *The Poems of Charles Reznikoff: 1918–1975*, ed. by Seamus Cooney (Boston: David Godine, 2005), p. 107.

not appear in the language of the poem. Words are withheld. While the poem is a complete grammatical sentence that includes nouns, verbs, prepositions, adjectives and participles that arrange visual, structural and semantic relations, the poetics of reticence is at work. Reznikoff's work for a legal publishing house, writing summaries of court records for legal reference books, led to poems that turned the flatness of legal writing on its head. Despite its apparent banality, the poem resonates emotionally not just because of its sharp focus on and appreciation for ordinary objects in the world, but the two words 'still itself' shine with a quiet drama, a whisper of emotion. The richness of these two innocuous words tremble in their reticence: both in sound (notice the assonance of the 'i's and the alliterative 's's and 'l's) and in their double meaning (the words can indicate both 'still being itself' and also 'just as inanimate as the other objects'). This moment is where the vulnerability, and also the otherness, in the text lives. This gap, this absence of emotional narrative replaced by a seemingly bland declaration, allows these two words, which contain the faintest trace of feeling, to sing of the fragility and otherness of the human being.

The narratives gaps in the form of the pauses created after the two line-breaks and the minimal punctuation have an impact. T. S. Eliot wrote that, 'Verse, whatever else it may or may not be, is itself a system of punctuation'.[35] The pauses and hesitations directed by the line-breaks, like punctuation marks, determine how the poem is read and even how the reader breathes: the white space commands the reader to breathe when it appears after the end-stopped line when the poem ends and instructs the reader to hold their breath when it appears after an enjambed line ('and plaster lies'). A line-break can create an intake of breath, a sense of expectation or a moment of calm. Line-breaks elicit either inhales or exhales: breathlessness or relief. In this way, reticence causes empathy and identification with the speaker; but this connection comes into question when the narrative gaps in the poem suggest an inability to communicate, to tell, as

[35] Eliot, 'Questions of Prose: To the Editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*', *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 September 1928), p. 495 <https://muse.jhu.edu/document/0384> [accessed 3 October 2022].

Reznikoff's concise poem does. The reader must then contend with these gaps which ask the reader to step back.

It is not surprising that American poet George Oppen said that this is the poem that returned to him again and again as he lay trapped in a foxhole during World War II among the wounded and dying.[36] The emotions hidden at the poem's centre are the unnamed emotions of a survivor, alive, 'still' himself: intact. That seemingly flat word 'still' could evoke emotions such as relief, guilt, and gratitude. But I would argue that if any of these words had appeared in the poem, the reader would not have been aware of vulnerability and there would be no sense of otherness, and the emotional impact of the poem would have been weaker. The dynamic that the poem creates invites the reader to engage with the vulnerability and otherness whereby a forcefield of energetic meaning is established.

Emily Dickinson and the Poetics of Reticence

Any poetry critic knows that it would be apposite, if not obligatory, to turn to Dickinson's work when analysing how silences operate in English language poetry. This aspect of Dickinson's poetry has been widely recognized and studied by scholars and has, in fact, been practically 'memorialized', as Sharon Cameron has put it.[37] Look at the first line of one of Dickinson's most well-known poems: 'My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun –'.[38] From the beginning, the speaker holds back information: who is speaking? There is no 'I' yet and since Dickinson did not title any of her poems, there is no clue above the first line. The identity of the speaker can only be found in the white space before the poem begins. And just when the poem seems about to say where the speaker's life 'stood', a dash intervenes. Then we are faced with a new image: 'a Loaded Gun', the first letters capitalized, perhaps suggesting reticently that the words are names or something else significant. And then another dash is inserted. Significant information about

[36] Weinberger, p. 16.
[37] Sharon Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 3.
[38] *Poems,* 'My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun –', Fr 764, vol. 2, p. 722.

emotional narrative and unspoken events reverberates in the gaps between and after and before words. Lyndall Gordon writes that 'the silences surrounding almost every word' in Dickinson's poems create a sense of danger and that 'with each dash something nameless is breaking through the crust of words; as though language were a crater, unsafe and stirring'.[39] In this poem, the sense of danger is magnified by the 'Loaded Gun', which might at any moment explode. Adrienne Rich wrote when analysing this poem that 'It is always what is under pressure in us, especially under pressure of concealment – that explodes in poetry'.[40] Dickinson's poetry enacts this process described by Rich: Dickinson puts pressure on narrative, keeping vital information concealed, which creates an explosive energy in her poems.

Gordon's observation that Dickinson's language is often 'nameless' is reflected in the fact that the hidden was a significant part of the poet's poetic project. Dickinson began a well-known poem 'Tell all the Truth – but tell it Slant –', suggesting that 'Truth' must in some way be concealed or told 'Slant'.[41] Dickinson's work is ideal when exploring my theory about the poetics of reticence as she employed poetic 'concealment' on a high level, whereby meaning is produced in the narrative gaps, in the holding back of significant information. Indeed, Nancy Sherman has gone so far as to call Dickinson 'the prophet of reticence'.[42]

The reticence in Dickinson's work parallels the phenomenological experience described by Levinas that I discuss above. Her work always hides something, just as a person in Levinas's 'face-to-face' encounter never allows herself to be fully known. While critics such as Megan Craig and Magdalena Zapędowska have written lucidly about a similar philosophical outlook they see between Levinas and Dickinson, I part ways from these critics as I am analysing Dickinson's work from another angle. While these critics are interested in how Levinasian phenomenology

---

[39] Lyndall Gordon, *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds* (London: Virago, 2010), p. 8.

[40] Adrienne Rich, 'Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson', in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 157–184 (p. 162).

[41] *Poems,* 'Tell all the Truth – but tell it Slant –', Fr 1263, vol. 2, p. 1089.

[42] Nancy Sherman, '"Eligible to Burst Forth": Whitman and the Art of Reticence', *Massachusetts Review*, 33 (1992), 7–15 (p. 7).

appears in Dickinson's poems, I allow the Levinasian 'face-to-face' encounter to serve as a model for the reader's experience of poetry and in this case, a Dickinson poem.[43] Dickinson's narrative gaps highlight otherness and vulnerability, and in turn, open up the poem to a complexity with endless interpretations about the human condition beyond understanding. Susan Howe's description of Dickinson's poems is especially striking: 'Narrative expanding contracting dissolving'.[44] Dickinson's poems evoke the awe and wonder that Levinas describes in his 'face-to-face' encounter, through her use of gaps where dashes or white space sometimes take the place of expected narrative information. Her work serves as a test case for my theory of reticence, leading to fruitful findings about its generative power.

A close reading of Dickinson's letters suggests that she was aware of the power of reticence and insightful about the insensitivities that come from language that tells too much. She seems to have consciously chosen to restrict her use of emotional language in her letters and to only offer snippets of narratives. A letter she wrote to a friend after the sudden death of her beloved eight-year-old nephew, Gilbert (Sue and Austin's third child), is indicative of Dickinson's proclivity towards restricting language. She writes, 'I hesitate which word to take'.[45] One can see that she is conscious of this holding back. Hesitation and reticence go hand in hand. Susan Howe has written that Dickinson 'audaciously invented a new grammar grounded in humility and hesitation. HESITATE from the Latin, meaning to stick. Stammer. To hold back in doubt, have difficulty speaking'.[46] Hesitation is built into Dickinson's poems and letters, but she *does* then 'take' words. She takes them 'slant' when writing to her sister-in-law about her nephew's death which is made even more affecting by all that she does not say. Suddenly, this moment, out of nowhere, appears in the letter:

---

43 See Megan Craig, 'The Infinite in Person: Levinas and Dickinson', in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, ed. by Jed Deppman, Marianne Noble, and Gary Lee Stonum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 207–226; Magdalena Zapędowska, 'Citizens of Paradise: Dickinson and Emmanuel Levinas's Phenomenology of the Home', *Emily Dickinson Journal*, 12 (2003), 69–92.

44 Susan Howe, p. 23

45 *Letters*, J 873, late 1883, pp. 802–803 (p. 802).

46 Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985), p. 21.

> 'Open the Door, open the Door, they are waiting for me', was Gilbert's sweet command in delirium. *Who* were waiting for him, all we possess we would give to know—Anguish at last opened it, and he ran to the little Grave at his Grandparents' feet.[47]

Rather than attempt to tell the story of her nephew's illness and death, she employs narrative bits, uses metaphor rather than a visual description of his dying ('ran to the little Grave'). This loss, which by all evidence may have been more shocking and painful than any other in Dickinson's life, is conveyed with profound reticence both in its scarcity of emotional language and in its lack of any clear narrative. And it is through this lack that her vulnerability is communicated, her helplessness in the face of grief. And it is the lack of full narrative, the parts she does not include, which protects her dignity, communicates the idea that perhaps trying to tell a story in full cheapens the event and the people involved. When reading Dickinson's poetry, it is useful to hold on to the above line from her letter and to use it as a kind of mantra, silently chanting at the back of our minds: 'I hesitate which word to take'.

Indeed, Dickinson was so hesitant about telling full stories, so sensitive to the emotions and stories that language fails to reflect, that when she read about the death of the husband of her dear friend, Elizabeth Holland, she wrote to her, '[I] read the words but know them not'.[48] We cannot 'know' anything from words. A poetics of reticence was Dickinson's answer to this problem. This understanding of the inadequacy or even vulgarity of words can be seen in another letter to a friend describing how someone comforted her when her own father passed away: 'One who only said "I am sorry" helped me the most when father ceased – it was too soon for language'.[49] This is another mantra to keep in mind when reading Dickinson's poetry ('it was too soon for language'): ever present in her poetry is a sense that language is 'too soon' which is why her poems are replete with narrative gaps.

---

47 *Letters*, J 873, late 1883, pp. 802–803 (p. 803).
48 *Letters*, J 729, October 1881, p. 712.
49 *Letters,* J 730, October 1881, pp. 712–713 (p. 713).

Dickinson's use of narrative gaps for poems of trauma or despair is especially striking. American poet Brenda Hillman has written that 'Emily Dickinson is our first molecular biologist of pain'.[50] Hillman suggests with this metaphoric observation that there is perhaps no other poet who has plumbed the intricacies, varieties, and after-effects of human pain to the degree and with the mastery that Dickinson has done. Here is one of those poems dated 1862, a year when she wrote over three hundred poems, almost a poem a day; a year when men were being killed in the Civil War by the thousands; a year when emotional pain was a common subject in the work of American poets, especially women poets.[51]

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions 'was it He, that bore,'
And 'Yesterday, or Centuries before'?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –[52]

---

[50] Brenda Hillman, *Emily Dickinson: Poems* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1995), p. xii.

[51] Poems by nineteenth century women poets were replete with stories of the death of mothers in childbirth and the death of children (both common occurrences). These stories of despair were so widespread in poetry and works of art that the phenomenon was termed 'the cult of death'. See Carol M. DeGrasse, "'That Dark Parade": Emily Dickinson and the Victorian "Cult of Death'" (unpublished master's thesis, University of Texas at Tyler, 2017) <http://hdl.handle.net/10950/574> [accessed 20 November 2022].

[52] *Poems,* 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes –', Fr 372, vol. 1, p. 396.

The first three words before the initial comma promise a description of the experience '[a]fter' pain, yet these three words, abstract yet seemingly simple, raise questions: what does it mean to talk about the experience after pain? Isn't the 'after pain' a part of the pain? Isn't the afterwards *also* pain? When does pain begin and when does it end? Where is its middle? Introducing the concept of time in relation to pain complicates any discussion of the experience and calls attention to what is not being said: the narrative that describes what happened *during* this period does not appear. To use Levinas's terminology discussed earlier, the poem's 'countenance' appears before the reader, yet the poem's story is 'invisible'. The 'shameless gaze' of the reader leaves the poem vulnerable to being reduced to its external features. And the reticence around the actual 'pain' suggests to the reader that perhaps the speaker is not capable of visiting that place again. The absence of such language announces fragility.

There is another absence which may also be registered unconsciously by the reader. A word might have appeared before 'great pain', which would have emotionalized the pain. That word is 'My.' Without a 'my' or even a 'the' before 'great pain', the implied experience is de-personalized. There is an assumption that this happening after pain is universal and not specific to a particular individual. Because the 'countenance' of the poem hides this word, a distancing takes place. Again, this suggests emotional fragility. It also emphasizes the ultimate unknowability of the speaker. The reader might guess that the speaker experienced this (otherwise she would not be writing about it and would not be able to describe it), but the speaker's unwillingness to claim the experience as her own reveals the profound privacy and thus deep feeling (along with shame, possibly) behind the event.

The third word in the poem, 'pain,' is the only word that seems to offer a clear window into the emotion that took place before. Therefore, it stands out, pulsing and radiating onto the abstract language, metaphoric images, and formal diction that follow. If we are to read the word 'pain' as representing internal 'agony' it is surprising that it is the only word in the poem that could be considered emotional; surprising because why not use other words to describe this

experience so central to the poem? This lone four letter, one syllable word takes a prominent place as third-in-line in the order of the poem's words; and it is exposed: proud, yet alone; communicating, yet obscure; unmasked, yet not entirely knowable. This solitary emotional word represents the speaker's vulnerability shining quietly. But this nakedness hides itself as soon as it is shown; it will not appear again and no word like it will be seen in the poem.

Another way of looking at it is that the word is not as exposed as it seems. It is really a word that suggests an absence (of narrative) rather than a presence of emotion. It hints that something has been lost. The pain or story once experienced is lost to language. Derrida wrote about 'the concept of trace', how only a trace of the past can be found in language and 'a particular present remains hidden or absent'.[53] In other words, as Dickinson scholar Sharon Cameron has written, 'pain is a trace of lost presence, the record of its having been'.[54] In Dickinson's terms, 'Ashes denote that Fire was – '.[55] This suggests that the narrative is missing. Pain is simply the ash. Cameron posits that in the case of this poem, 'What remains is a true blank, the genuine space at the thought of which despair raves—and around which words gather in the mourning that is language'.[56] The absence of narrative is ironically at its most reticent with this single seemingly emotional word: 'pain' reflecting the fact that something is gone; it embodies absence. It is the ash that disintegrates in your fingers leaving a grey trace of what was. And the words that gather around it mourn because they can never begin to approach the pain of loss, which is what is hidden at the poem's core. The reader can become aware of the mourning inherent in the language, which 'raves' around loss. What could be more vulnerable?

The first words of the poem seem to introduce the business of the poem (there is no title to help us).[57] A speaker is about to describe something that occurs after pain, but at the same

---

[53] Jacques Derrida, *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology,* trans. by Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: University of Northwestern Press, 1967), p. 73.

[54] Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) p. 169.

[55] *Poems,* 'Ashes denote that Fire was –', Fr 1097, vol. 2, p. 955.

[56] Cameron, *Lyric Time*, p. 156.

[57] Dickinson did not title her poems, a strikingly reticent choice.

time, as I have shown, there are already questions and gaps, absences at work. What follows these words is a caesura visually represented by the comma, but a punctuation mark placed here is not entirely necessary; therefore, its presence suggests that the poet wishes the reader to pause, to breathe, to ready herself. But to ready herself for what? Something shocking, overwhelming, emotionally penetrating? What follows is so anti-climactic that it *does* function as a surprise because it is so *un*-intense: 'a formal feeling comes – '. The reader is now gripped in a phenomenological dynamic where they can observe the formality of the diction while they have the opportunity to realize, at the same time, that this formality appears because of the 'uncomfortable' vulnerability of the speaker who just used the word 'pain' and now leaps away from it as if remembering the fire to which it refers.

The adjective 'formal' used to describe a 'feeling' is not the word one would expect, especially after reading the word 'pain' a few words before. And what does it mean for a feeling to be 'formal'? As Suzanne Juhasz argues, '"Formal feeling" is really an oxymoron, for the feeling of no feeling'.[58] As soon as emotional language is introduced in a Dickinson poem (in this case, 'pain'), the emotion within that word is annulled. The 'feeling' becomes distant rather than intimate. This distancing ironically creates an intimacy between poem and reader. As Juhasz writes, 'This particular version of formal feeling comes after great pain; it is the self-protective response of the mind to a severe internal wound.'[59] This gap, this embodiment of self-protection, both creates an intimacy between speaker and reader and distance. We can both feel the vulnerability yet remain apart, un-merged: we are being kept at arm's-length.

The anti-narrative along with language of formality or anti-feeling continues throughout the poem. The 'Nerves' are called 'ceremonious' and 'like Tombs'. The 'Heart' is 'stiff', and the feet are 'mechanical'. The after-pain experience is referred to as the 'Hour of Lead'. This diction appears in other Dickinson poems about despair. In her poem that begins 'From Blank to Blank

[58] Suzanne Juhasz, *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 80.
[59] Juhasz, p. 81.

— ', which is also about the after-pain experience, she describes 'Mechanic feet' which the speaker must push in order to move forward.[60] Her poem that begins 'I stepped from plank to plank' echoes this mechanical movement after a great suffering as well.[61] And she describes this blank-ness most explicitly in her poem that begins 'Pain – has an Element of Blank – '.[62] Here she clarifies, that pain itself is blankness or absence. The self-protective blankness is the vulnerable human.

The last lines of the poem abandon the formal diction, but no emotional word (such as 'pain') returns: we are simply given metaphoric narrative snippets. There is a discussion of memory, and a metaphor (for the after-pain experience) of fatal hypothermia is given. The emotion elicited here is especially raw because of the dash; the poem enacts a drama where the reader leaps to imagine the worst. The speaker tells us that there might be a memory of this experience but only if 'outlived', which implies that the pain was at least partially a physical illness. Or if it is a psychic pain, then the poem is indicating that a part of the self has died along with the loss or anxiety experienced. But what experience is being 'Remembered'? The pain before or the 'formal feeling' after the 'great pain'? Dickinson's use of the dash, a mark or punctuation point, may offer a clue. In the last line there are four such marks. I would like to propose that this mark is a stand-in for parts of the narrative that is left out. First (the agony and convulsing of) 'Chill', then the 'Stupor' (grief and weeping), then the 'letting go' (of the pain). This reading implies the opposite interpretation of the reading above: the poem ends with not the death of a part of the self but rather a rebirth, a letting go of pain, a cold, fresh cleansing and an opening into possibility. The fact that the poem can be read in completely opposite ways is typical of Dickinson and shows that filling in the gaps is not going to lead the reader towards any final understanding of the poem. Scholars and lay readers alike might attempt to fill the gaps with final interpretations or biographical explanations (a proclivity I discuss in subsequent

---

60 *Poems,* 'From Blank to Blank', Fr 484, vol. 1, p. 497.
61 *Poems,* 'I stepped from Plank to Plank', Fr 926, vol. 2, p. 853.
62 *Poems,* 'Pain – has an Element of Blank', Fr 760, vol. 2, p. 719.

chapters) but as Brenda Hillman writes, 'While the temptation is to seek precise biographical sources' for her poems 'the appropriate response is awe'.[63]

The use of dashes to hide emotion and draw in the reader is ubiquitous in Dickinson's poems where, as Lyndall Gordon has written, 'the brevity of her provisional statements, sustained by the long pause – the interrogative wait of her dash […] tugs us to participate'.[64] While the dash does ask the reader to 'wait', I would not emphasize that readers always have to 'participate'; rather, the dash invites the reader to step back and ponder the abyss behind that dash. Reticence is embodied in Dickinson's use of those 'dashes' (we don't really know what to call her handwritten slashes, lines, strokes, marks, hooks, tears…) that appear in most of her poems and have been translated into dashes when printed. There are multiple explanations for the dashes but one aspect of their impact is clear: they create both intimacy and detachment. The reader is surprised, taken aback, by where they are placed in the line but also curious, pulled in. They create a relationship. Gordon writes, these 'dashes, pushing the language apart, create spaces for the reader to fill'.[65] However, there is not necessarily an imperative to 'fill' the gaps.

The last stanza of 'After great pain' contains six dashes. The four dashes in the last line (intended to recreate a scene dramatically whereby the person is attempting to write letters, but his or her hand failed there?) are all inserted in places that are not grammatically correct. Through wordless sound, Dickinson compels the reader to take notice, to pause unnaturally, reflecting a fragmented state as well as the speaker's breathlessness as they freeze to death or almost death or come back to life. We become aware of the silences from which language erupts. This emotional reticence can only function in an interplay between speech and quietness, words and white space – without both in place, multiple meanings could not be accessed. We need to know that the speaker is 'letting go' but the dash that follows hides that which is being let go of.

---

[63] Hillman, p. xv.
[64] Gordon, p. 141.
[65] Gordon, p. 141.

The words in the poem are bound to the speechless dash and to the white space at the end of the page. The vocabulary of silence, as eloquent and full as it is, is not enough. Language is necessary. However, language, with all of its lush ability to convey layered and paradoxical messages, is also not enough, it is actually 'so much less', as Valentine has said.[66] The poetics of reticence depends on both language and silence.

Dickinson's poetry, filled with narrative silences, anticipates modern poetry in its use of the radical withholding of narrative information. The first four lines of one of her poems begins,

> She died – *this* was the way she died.
> And when her breath was done
> Took up her simple wardrobe
> And started for the sun –[67]

The first line promises to tell us 'the way she died' but that information seems to be skipped over because the next line tells us about after 'her breath was done'. We are not told the mode or manner in which death happened. This is typical Dickinson – chunks of expected, even guaranteed, narrative information is removed in almost every poem. But meaning can be found in the narrative reticence. Is Dickinson suggesting to the reader that the moment of death is so private, so intimate, that silence is the only appropriate manner in which to portray it, a silence that is almost sacred? It is a moment of invisibility that cannot and should not be illustrated with language. In her poem that begins 'I heard a Fly buzz—when I died', Dickinson writes that the people around the dying person were waiting 'For that last Onset—when the King / Be witnessed—in the Room—', an invisible King that will not be seen, yet is expected none the less.[68] The poem does not mention the King again but rather ends 'I could not see to see—'. John Milton wrote in the seventeenth century that it may be 'Not lawful to reveal' the secrets of

---

66 Barnett, p. 15.
67 *Poems,* 'She died – *this* was the way she died.', Fr 154, vol. 1, p. 193.
68 *Poems,* 'I heard a Fly buzz – when I died', Fr 591, vol. 2, p. 587.

another world.[69] Milton was concerned that it is not spiritually or ethically permissible to speak of things that we are not supposed to see. Unlawful (unethical) or not, Dickinson's removal of the next step in the narrative ladder asks the reader to accept not seeing. We will never know if the dash is covering up something the speaker does or does not 'see'.

The Dickinson dash often functions in this way. In her poem that begins 'There is a pain – so utter –', it is clear that she is writing about a deep internal wound.[70] The first line startles not in its employment of 'pain' but with the insertion of the dash where one would expect both language describing the pain and then a reference to how the pain was caused. The dash forces the reader to pause, hesitate, to take an unexpected breath. This is an example of an invented grammar where the dash is the narrative gap hiding stories and truths and activating meaning.

The other startling moment in the line is the placement of the word 'utter', usually an adjective (meaning 'complete' or 'entire') placed directly before a noun. Here, there is the placement after the dash and the 'so' followed by another dash and then the abyss of the white page following that dash, leaving it hanging at the end of the line. The story behind the pain lies under those dashes and in the white space at the end of the line. Narrative is swallowed up by the caesuras, the dashes, and the white space. Dickinson states this herself in the next line: 'It swallows substance up – '. And here, the word's other meaning ('utter' can mean 'speak') is revealed with this line. And 'so' can suggest either 'to such a great extent' or 'therefore' depending on how the lines are interpreted. Dickinson is saying two things at once: first, that one can feel a pain to such a great extent, so complete, that it takes away all meaning; or second, that when pain is described or *uttered* directly (along with the stories that go with it) its 'substance' cannot be communicated (when too much narrative is used to describe pain, meaning disappears). Following these dual interpretations, the third line 'Then covers the Abyss with Trance – ' suggests two views: first, that the substance-less life or meaninglessness after pain is

[69] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Alistair Fowler (New York: Longman, 1971), p. 275.
[70] *Poems*, 'There is a pain – so utter – ', Fr 515, vol. 1, p. 524.

experienced conceals further meaninglessness ('the Abyss') with a stupefied daze; or second, that the 'Abyss' that should have been a part of the utterance is covered by a 'Trance' or numb disconnection because the narrative around the pain was uttered. In other words, pain described too completely with too much narrative does not communicate.

Dickinson suggests that covering up or hiding narrative by creating gaps is the most important aspect of poetry in her poem that begins

> I dwell in Possibility –
>
> A fairer House than Prose –[71]

Typically, Dickinson does not name the thing for which she is creating a metaphor. But in this case, at least one option is quite clear: the 'House' stands in for 'poetry'. The 'House' or poetry, Dickinson suggests, offers 'Possibility'. But why is poetry 'fairer' than 'Prose'? The answer begins to emerge in the third and fourth lines of the poem:

> More numerous of windows –
>
> Superior – for Doors –

What is the element which allows poetry to be the 'fairer' Snow White to its queen stepmother, prose? Poetry surpasses prose for Dickinson because of its 'numerous' and 'superior' *openings*. When she began another poem 'They shut me up in Prose', she suggests that prose is a place that is closed, even locked.[72] It does not have the same spaces and gaps as poetry. What makes poetry distinctive, for Dickinson, are its 'windows' and 'doors'. The openings in writing are as necessary as the openings in a house. The poem ends with the lines,

> The spreading wide my narrow Hands
>
> To gather Paradise –

---

71 *Poems,* 'I dwell in Possibility –', Fr 466, vol. 1, p. 483.
72 *Poems,* 'They shut me up in Prose', Fr 445, vol. 1, p. 467.

Poetry, with its gaps and silences, is a dwelling place of such otherworldly scope that Dickinson compares it to eternity: 'Paradise'. The possibilities for meaning in the poetics of reticence is endless. As we shall see in the following chapter these endless possibilities include ethics. The next chapter will explore how an ethics of reticence emerges from a poetics of reticence.

Chapter Three: The Ethics of Reticence

While the previous chapter introduced my methodology, including touching on Levinasian ethics and how I apply it to a poetics of reticence, this chapter homes in on the ethics of reticence. I am interested in how an ethics of reticence emerges from a poetics of reticence. Although I am writing about poetry in this chapter, I am indebted to the work of Leona Toker who has shown how narrative reticence in fiction has a special ethical significance for the reader. I apply some of her theories to poems by Paul Celan, Jessica Greenbaum and Dan Pagis among others in order to develop my argument. In the first section, *Intuitive Withholding and the Unspeakable*, I demonstrate the role of ethics in this poetics when writing about trauma. I argue that complete narratives are not compatible with poems about trauma. In fact, narrative gaps are essential in such poems. They invite the reader to accept the vulnerability and ultimate inscrutability of the poem and by extension another person. This process leads to an ethical dynamic between reader and poem. In the second section, *Forgoing of Domination*, I develop this discussion and emphasize that the poetics of reticence puts the reader in a position to step back, to not 'dominate' the text by attempting to fill in the gaps or complete the poem's meaning but rather to respect its vulnerability and otherness. Instead of penetrating its fragile unknowability the reader, with the help of the poetics of reticence, has the opportunity to turn inward and confront and develop the self, leading to a sense of responsibility towards the vulnerable other. Reticence gives the reader a chance to become aware of obligation. This is the ultimate aim of this poetics: to lead the reader towards self-reflection and away from judgment and domination.

Intuitive Withholding and the Unspeakable

The poetics of reticence and its ethics is acutely well suited to poems with traumatic subject matter. A special emphasis on the use of reticence can be found in poems of trauma where what

Jensen calls the 'fragmentations of posttraumatic memory' take place.[73] Fragmented speech in some of the poems I will analyse in this chapter come out of the traumas of the First and then the Second World Wars. The Western world was a different place after these wars, and poetry needed to respond radically to a new broken world. As poet Cecil Day Lewis wrote, 'Post-war poetry was born amongst the ruins.'[74] And the poetics often reflected the fragments of ruins. 'The absence of any logical coherence' shocked readers, but the 'incoherence of language', its defenders argued, kept poetry in touch with contemporary life. Traditional poems that did not employ fragments 'could not respond to the altered character of life in the twentieth century'.[75] Ezra Pound urged poets to 'make it new' and to 'break the pentameter'.[76] T. S. Eliot's linguistic fragments in 'The Waste Land', written in the shadow of World War I, reflected a traumatized world in narrative snippets:

> I think we are in rats' alley
> Where the dead men lost their bones.
>
> 'What is that noise?'
> The wind under the door.
> 'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'
> Nothing again nothing.
> 'Do
> 'You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
> 'Nothing?'[77]

---

[73] Jensen, p. 165.
[74] Cecil Day Lewis, *A Hope for Poetry* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 163.
[75] B. N. Venugopala, 'Post War Disillusionment and English Poetry', *International Journal of Language & Linguistics*, 1 (2014), 21014–21019 (p. 21018).
[76] Pound used the phrase as a title of an essay collection, *Make it New* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934); Ezra Pound, 'Canto LXXXI', in *The Pisan Cantos*, ed. by Richard Sieburth (New York: New Directions, 2003), pp. 95–100 (p. 95).
[77] Eliot, 'The Waste Land', in *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962), pp. 37–55 (p. 40).

Eliot's vision of the trauma of a broken world could only be embodied in poetry with unhinged phrases, words withheld, stories mentioned but incomplete, surrounded by 'Nothing'.

Writing after World War Two, poet Paul Celan embraced the intuitive withholding of language and the unhinged phrase. Celan, the Jewish Romanian Holocaust survivor, wrote autobiographical poems in German about the Holocaust: his world collapsed when the war began, he was sent to a camp which he survived, and his mother was shot in another concentration camp. In 'Todesfugue' ('Death Fugue'), sentence structures first merge together:

> Black milk of morning we drink you at dusktime
> we drink you at noontime and dawntime we drink you at night
> we drink and drink

while later sentences break apart and trail off:

> we drink and drink
> there's a man in this house your golden hair Margareta
> your ashen hair Shulamite he cultivates snakes.[78]

The fragmentation of this poem reflects Andreas Huyssen's theory of 'the unassimilability of traumatic memory'.[79] And if it cannot be assimilated then how can it be communicated? The speaker of the poem addresses 'Black milk', disturbing words –- a nurturing and wholesome image is given an artificial colour (of decay, poison, death?) and repeats the same word 'drink' five times in the first three lines without punctuation. Later the repetition of 'drink' followed by the image of a man and the golden and then ashen hair are not developed. A trauma has occurred which is not narratable because trauma obliterates narrative knowledge. It creates a

---

[78] Paul Celan, 'Todesfuge' ('Deathfugue'), trans. by Jerome Rothenberg, in *Paul Celan: Selections*, ed. by Pierre Joris (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2005), pp. 46–47 (p. 46).

[79] Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 127.

boundary around what is narratable. As Warhol writes, there is a 'silence that results from trauma'.[80] It can take a lifetime to absorb the fact of a loved one's death or perhaps loss is never fully absorbed, understood by the self. Therefore, a single poem about the Holocaust or the sudden death of a beloved must contain narrative silences in order for the reader to trust the speaker. An easy flow of narrative, Frank Kermode has written, 'makes false sense by means of a false realism'.[81]

The idea in this poem that language cannot portray the Holocaust can be found in philosopher Theodor Adorno's well-known dictum: 'To write poetry after the Holocaust is barbaric'.[82] Some critics interpreted this literally and either accepted or argued with it. But most have understood this literal response to Adorno's proclamation as simplistic and have taken Adorno's provocative assertion as a challenge: poets cannot write as they did before; something must change if words are not to seem 'barbaric'. As Anna-Verena Nostoff has articulated:

> to write poetry after Auschwitz means to write from within a *differend* – a radical chasm between the signifier and the signified that one neither ought nor could overcome via writing or aesthetic means in general. Yet, poetry […] has to respond to the ungraspable (i.e., the Holocaust); it cannot simply avoid doing so. It permanently has to speak whilst knowing that it will never reach the addressee; that it must fail in speaking.[83]

In other words, a sense of failure, a vulnerability, needs to be built into a poem about a traumatic event. Valentine wrote that 'Saying what can't be said, period, is what I'm interested in. What literally can't be said.'[84] Saying what is impossible to say can come in the form of narrative gaps. It is as if narrative gaps are a humble admission that the words are unable to depict the memory,

---

80 Warhol, p. 224.

81 Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 15.

82 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Samuel Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), p. 34.

83 Anna-Verena Nostoff, 'Barbarism: Notes on the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno', *Critical Legal Thinking*, 15 October 2014 <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2014/10/15/barbarism-notes-thought-theodor-w-adorno/> [accessed 7 October 2022].

84 Valentine, p. 16.

meaning, message, or story. This noble failure of language becomes particularly acute in texts that deal with trauma where, as Warhol puts it, 'the experience cannot be captured into narrative'.[85] Jensen has written that when a poet writes about a traumatic experience they 'enact a series of rhetorical swerves […] distancing the speaker from that suffering'.[86] As Freud in 'On Transience' wrote, 'the mind instinctively recoils from anything that is painful'.[87] This instinctual recoiling can be found in poetry. When a moment is too painful and transcends representation 'textual negotiation', as Jensen puts it, takes place and the poetics of trauma (which is a poetics of reticence) is triggered.[88]

Fragmentation and other strategies of narrative withholding can be found conspicuously in 'The Yellow Star that Goes with Me' by contemporary American poet Jessica Greenbaum. From the moment the poem begins, withholding takes place, preparing the reader for the upcoming series of sentence fragments. Greenbaum hints at the subject in the title (in the words 'Yellow Star') and in parts of the poem itself but never names it. While the poem is about the Holocaust, and more specifically, the trains to and experiences in the death camps, neither are openly acknowledged. Greenbaum is telling the story of the Holocaust by not telling it. Or rather, she is telling the story of a Jewish woman (the narrator) who is both trying to remember and trying to forget that the Holocaust happened. I quote the poem in full below:

> Sometimes when I'm thirsty, I mean really dying of thirst
> For five minutes
> Sometimes when I board a train
> Sometimes in December when I'm *absolutely freezing*
>
> For five minutes

[85] Warhol, p. 225.
[86] Jensen, p. 176.
[87] Sigmund Freud, 'On Transience', in *Character and Culture*, ed. by Philip Rieff (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 148–151 (p. 149).
[88] Jensen, p. 176.

Sometimes when I take a shower

Sometimes in December when I'm *absolutely freezing*

Sometimes when I reach from steam to towel, when the bed has soft blue sheets

Sometimes when I take a shower

For twenty minutes, the white tiles dripping with water

Sometimes when I reach from steam to towel, when the bed has soft blue sheets

Sometimes when I split an apple, or when I'm hungry, painfully hungry

For twenty minutes, the white tiles dripping with water

As the train passes Chambers Street. We're all crammed in like laundry

Sometimes when I split an apple, or when I'm hungry, painfully hungry

For half an hour, sometimes when I'm on a train

As it passes Chambers Street. We're all crammed in like laundry

It's August. The only thing to breathe is everybody's stains

For half an hour. Sometimes when I'm on a train

Or just stand along the empty platform

It's August. The only thing to breathe is everybody's stains

Sometimes when I board a train

Or just stand along the empty platform—

Sometimes when I'm thirsty, I mean really dying of thirst [89]

[89] Jessica Greenbaum, 'The Yellow Star that Goes with Me', *Inventing Difficulty* (New York: Silverfish Review Press, 1998), p. 13.

This poem, a pantoum, is a poem of profound, even extreme, reticence. Greenbaum is not an avant-garde poet, but the post-modern movements, such as Language poetry, and their poets (such as Barbara Guest, Charles Bernstein, and Susan Howe) opened up possibilities for all contemporary poets, Greenbaum among them, to employ their radical strategies when needed. This is one of those strategies: a quick allusion to a subject without further development on that subject. As I said, the subject of the poem is only alluded to in the title with the reference to the 'Yellow Star'.[90] And the subject is touched on in some of the words: 'train', 'shower', and 'steam' and even more subtly with the choice of the Manhattan subway stop 'Chambers Street' (this phrase may resonate subliminally in the reader as the gas chambers). The story at the poem's centre is not articulated but only given a quiet glance, if at all. Rather, the poem is filled with fragmentary references to the speaker's contemporary New York life of discomforts ('thirst,' 'freezing', 'hungry', 'crammed') and solaces ('towel', 'soft blue sheets,' 'apple'). There is a slight sense of something horrible, although 'dying of thirst' is a common hyperbolic, even clichéd, way of referring to thirst in contemporary parlance as is the word 'freezing' when cold or the phrase 'painfully hungry'. The poem's surrender to the failure of language evokes extreme vulnerability and otherness simultaneously.

Greenbaum's poem suggests, through the aggressive absence of narrative and complete sentences, that what lies in the blank spaces is too terrible to name. 'One of the functions of ellipsis or gaps in narrative is to put an emphasis on the unspeakable', Malcolm writes.[91] For Malcolm, a poem dealing with unspeakable subject matter, 'achieves its disruptive and disturbing effect, *inter alia*, through the absence of narrative, the elision of surrounding *histoire*'.[92] Trauma lies in elisions, not in words. Poems written with such heightened narrative reticence (with the subject hidden and with unfinished sentences) alert us to what cannot be narrated, and to gaps

[90] The yellow star refers to the badges Jews were made to wear during various periods by Christians and Muslims. The badges marked the Jews as outsiders and were often seen as badges of shame. They are closely associated with Nazi Germany where they were often the prerequisite before the death camps.
[91] Malcolm, pp. 77–78.
[92] Malcolm, p. 77.

that cannot be filled. Not naming the ordeal highlights it, draws attention to its pain as if it were an open wound that must not be touched.

The wounds are deep in the poem, the abyss is vast, and the information given is scant. Information, linear narrative, the expected sequence of events in the poem, are not only hidden from view, but the information and narrative snippets that do appear repeat themselves. Jensen writes of texts where one can see 'traumatic memory as fragmented, shifting, unreliable, outside of time and struggling to be contained within rigid spatial and temporal frames'.[93] As I mentioned above, Greenbaum's poem comes in the form of a modified pantoum, a form that incorporates repetition of words and phrases. These repetitions block any sense of a logical sequence of events, which suggests no resolution, no way of rationally understanding the poem's 'story'. The poem distrusts sequences and logical order and leaves gaps and tears in the chain of events. Although Greenbaum introduces moments from the speaker's life, snippets which reference an understory not spoken about ('train', 'the only thing to breathe is everybody's stains', 'dying of thirst', 'painfully hungry', 'Chambers', 'shower', and 'steam'), very little information about the speaker is given. And the fact that she can barely speak about the subject she alludes to points to her vulnerability, a sensitivity around the topic, and reveals very little. An empty space, an otherness is present in the poem.

This unknowing and vulnerability is brought out by the poem's use of aposiopesis, a formal strategy wherein a sentence is deliberately broken off and left unfinished, giving an impression of an unwillingness to continue. This strategy has the capacity to create agitation. Aposiopesis is especially frightening. It raises questions: why can't the narrator finish her sentences? What isn't she saying? Is there something not being told that is too painful to bear? This breaking off from speech points to unfathomable areas we cannot and will never know.

[93] Jensen, p. 188.

Forgoing of Domination

While I argue that the power of the poetics of reticence comes from a reader's 'face-to-face' encounter with the text whereby meaning is generated from the vulnerabilities and otherness activated by the gaps, there is a body of criticism that focuses on a similar approach (but different in crucial ways) that has specific ethical ramifications. The reader response critics, who began their work in the 1960s, have written in much the same vein as Janice Stout who argues that 'authorial silences invite the participation of the interactive reader […] in the creation of meaning'.[94] While readers do participate in meaning when engaging with the gaps in a text, a poem's gaps do not necessarily need to be filled. A poet may withhold information, creating gaps, in order to ask the read to accept that there are areas too vulnerable or literally impossible to appear in words, never to be known.

Furthermore, withheld language or 'the containing of the voice' as Stanley Cavell calls it, amounts to 'foregoing of domination'.[95] Just as in Levinas's face-to-face encounter, where the 'Self' feels a sense of obligation towards the 'Other', when a reader encounters narrative gaps, their ethical self, their sense of obligation may be activated. The lack of emotion in the narrative and the vulnerability which emerges from this lack, seeks to engage the reader by activating their sense of obligation. And the otherness of the poem, its private withheld quality that comes out of what is not being said in the narrative, pushes the reader to dig, to think, to trigger respect for the infinite and unknowable meanings and truths imbedded therein.

Rich seems to present a balanced view of this issue, arguing that readers bring their own stories to poetry while at the same time bringing an interest in the other that is different from them. She wrote that 'We go to poetry because we believe it has something to do with us. We also go to poetry to receive the experience of the *not me* enter a field of vision we could not

---

[94] Stout, p. 5.
[95] Stanley Cavell, 'Politics as Opposed to What?', *Critical Inquiry*, 9 (1982), 157–178 (p. 176).

otherwise apprehend.'[96] The problem with Rich's analysis is that it assumes the reader will 'apprehend' the 'field of vision' (normally inaccessible to a reader) the poem presents. Rich suggests that poetry offers a 'dream of a common language' between reader and poet.[97] Rich's emphasis on a kind of compassionate bond over common experience between reader and poet is analogous to the reader response critics who argue that strangers can bring their own stories to gaps in a text. In fact, like Rich, these critics see writers as depending on readers doing so. As Wolfgang Iser has written,

> No tale can be told in its entirety. Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. Thus whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in gaps left by the text itself.[98]

But what Rich and Iser do not mention is that while we, as readers, might 'bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections' to a work of literature, we can also experience a limit on what we apprehend. This experience of being shut out or limited allows a reader to accept *not* knowing and to respect the intentional and unintentional withholdings in a text.

Stout discusses how writers implement these silent moments for effect in narrative fiction, a technique she calls 'drop to silence'.[99] Although Stout's focus is on fiction, this technique can also be found in poetry. 'Drop to silence' is effective partly because of its tacit design. For instance, Jane Austen often sets up the proper conditions in the plot of her novels so that the readers can self-reflect, thereby producing a work that encourages both reader involvement and also acceptance of mystery. For example, this 'drop to silence' is used after the Bennet family receives the malicious letter from Mr Collins about Lydia Bennet's disgrace in

---

96 Rich, 'Someone Is Writing a Poem', in *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: Norton, 1993), pp. 84–91 (p. 85).
97 Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1977* (New York: Norton, 1978).
98 Iser, p. 285
99 Stout, p. 40.

Pride and Prejudice.[100] For a modern reader, this moment may not seem traumatic but it would have been recognized as such by Austen's readers. The Bennet family is convulsing from the reality that their daughter has been taken away by and is living with a man who has not married her. This puts the other daughters at risk on many levels. The Bennet family is vulnerable. They only have daughters and they are poor. In the middle of their shame and fear, they receive a spiteful letter from one of their daughter's former suitors. The letter is read by the main characters, and the reader participates in that reading. It is a cruel letter intended to wound. In the space after the last lines of the letter, Austen does not describe responses by the characters nor does the narrator of the novel comment on the letter. This narrative gap or 'drop to silence' allows a space for the reader to respond with her own idiosyncratic outrage (disgust, indignation, blame, amusement or any combination of these); the reader can bring her specific and complicated emotional world to the moment. It is a rich moment because, as Toker argues, gaps can actually carry *more* information than the text. She makes the case that gaps function to thwart the reader's expectations of anticipated parts of the narrative which alerts us to our own assumptions and attitudes thereby pointing us inward to look at ourselves. Gaps in narrative information, she posits, can serve as reflectors. Perhaps this is why Louise Glück wrote, 'I do not think that more information always makes a richer poem'.[101] Just as Levinas describes the face-to-face encounter as a phenomenon with an overarching ethical dimension, Toker argues that the gaps in a text produce a self-critical reorientation of ethical significance within the reader. The reader is thus compelled to accept the unknown and look inward at their own reactions, and in the case of this moment in *Pride and Prejudice*, to such issues as humiliation, imbalance of power, shame, disappointment and more. The reader is not told how the characters reacted – the

[100] Lydia Bennet is the daughter in the family who is not sensible, chooses a man unwisely, and acts impulsively, allowing herself to be seduced by him in hopes it will lead to marriage. The letter from Collins is sent as a form of revenge (Elizabeth Bennet refused his marriage proposal) and is intended to humiliate the family over this affair. See Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), pp. 252–253.

[101] Glück, p. 78.

only thing the reader *does* know is their own reaction: the gap closes the door on knowledge but there is a mirror on the back of that door.

Poetry is filled with such mirrors. And these mirrors produce the moments in which the reader can grow ethically. For example, the use of aposiopesis and fragmentation in Celan's poem discussed earlier generates vulnerability and thwarts the reader's attempt to fully follow and understand the characters, the story, the emotion of the poem—there is nowhere left for the reader to turn but towards themselves. Fragmentation (narrative gaps) establishes the ethical dimension that Levinas (in philosophy) and Toker (in literature) describe: the self /reader cannot dominate the text because of its fragility (vulnerability) and also because of the awe produced by its otherness. This is especially true in poems about trauma, such as Holocaust poems, where the reticence is inviting the reader to give space, step back, respect. The reader can only return to their own inner life, find their own associations, and take responsibility for never fully knowing the vulnerable other who is infinitely complex.

For Levinas, it is the *lack* of comprehension that leads to the ethical relationship where the 'Self' feels obligated towards the other. Levinas argues that everyone outside of ourselves is unique and infinitely complex and the 'Self' is inherently responsible for others. He said in an interview with Philippe Nemo, 'I am responsible for the Other without waiting for his reciprocity. . . Reciprocity is his affair. . . .It is I who support all' and he goes on to quote from *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others'.[102] Responsibility in this account is not reciprocal but rather, imbalanced. Levinas claimed that this asymmetry is 'the very basis of ethics,' as it demands from everyone equally to be 'more responsible than everyone else'.[103] The significance of our responsibility, according to Levinas, is

[102] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, (pp. 98–99). When Levinas quotes *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is likely that he translated the line himself from Russian to French and knew it from memory, therefore an edition of Dostoevsky's novel cannot be cited.

[103] Levinas, quoted in Richard Kearney, 'Dialogue with Emmanuel Lévinas: Ethics of the Infinite', in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 46–69 (p. 67).

magnified by the uniqueness of the 'Other'. He wrote that 'the essence of responsibility lies in the uniqueness of the person for whom you are responsible'.[104] Every person is unique, inimitable. The 'Other' is not only unique, according to Levinas, but also infinite. Levinas argues that the relationship between the 'Self' and the 'Other' is analogous to that between the human intellect and God.[105] The 'Other' is infinitely complex to the 'Self'. He wrote, 'Infinity […] is not a concept. The infinite is the radically, absolutely, Other'.[106] If the 'Other' is unique, cannot be grasped, is limitless in his or her alterity, then our responsibility for them is limitless as well.[107]

The reader, in a sense, can bear a sense of responsibility for the suffering in the poem if understood in this way. This sense of responsibility, for Levinas, emanated from an acknowledgement of the alterity of the 'Other', the limitless complexity, the gaps in people's stories and the humbling acceptance that each gap is an abyss containing infinite mystery. Emily Dickinson described this phenomenon in a letter with the line: 'To attempt to speak of what has been, would be impossible. Abyss has no biographer –'.[108] In other words, narrative void reflects an absent author, or rather an author that cannot be known. A sense of otherness permeates the speaker. You will never fully know the speaker nor every message contained within the poem. A reader might pick up on a trace of presence, glimmers of meaning, but there is a limit. And this limit to what can be spoken is what generates meaning.

A poem 'The Unknowing' in my first book emphasizes the limits on what can be told and attempts to capture the idea that a reader cannot fully know a poem, the speaker, or the full story behind the poem:

---

[104] Raoul Mortley, 'Emmanuel Levinas', in *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 11–22 (p. 16).
[105] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 47–60.
[106] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 54.
[107] Kajornpat Tangyin, 'Reading Levinas on Ethical Responsibility, in *Responsibility and Commitment: Eighteen Essays in Honor of Gerhold K. Becker*, ed. by Tze-wan Kwan (Waldkirch: Edition Gorz, 2008), pp. 155–172 (p. 158).
[108] *Letters*, J 899, about 1884, p. 822.

When I tell
some look at me, their eyes widen,
they back away, smile
and nod, backing away,

some come close wanting
to hear more, they step in
and stare the way a man
approaches pornography, his hands
are numb, nothing
can stop him now from his movement
towards a body he will never come
to know.[109]

This poem suggests that when one has something to 'tell' another person, there are a multitude of possible responses. The example of a response given in the poem is one where the other person seems to want to shirk their responsibility for receiving this telling of information (not disclosed in the poem). There does not seem to be an acknowledgment of the alterity or vulnerability of the other in this encounter. Vulnerability is amplified by the lack of information supplied in the poem, and a sense of otherness infuses the speaker since we know nothing of her story. The second stanza reads like the flip side of the first stanza: the response is also one where the receiver does not feel responsible for the 'teller'; however, this time they want to dominate, 'wanting to know more', to fill in the blanks, rather than respect the vulnerability and otherness of the speaker. And this is done in way that seems threatening as they are in fact compared to a man who is in a trance approaching a body of someone they don't know and wish to objectify.

[109] Grubin, *Morning Prayer*, p. 40.

The scenarios described in the poem reflect the encounters a reader might have with a poem. The poem considers the relationship between reader and poet to be an ethical process.

Greenbaum's poem also considers an ethical process between reader and poem: the subject gap in 'The Yellow Star that Goes with Me' ignites a process of internal meaning making in the reader. We are reminded, by the absence of any sustained Holocaust narrative, that there are narratives not mentioned – banal, excruciating, paradoxical, impossible to fathom. No one will ever know these stories, a fact that, to use Jacques Derrida's phrase, 'can make us tremble'.[110] There are millions of untold stories. It is a challenge to accept this fact and one that holds great moral weight and creates a sense of awe. An arrogant domination can accompany a denial of the abyss of unknowing. As Levinas argues, with too much understanding comes judgement and domination. With acceptance of not knowing, comes responsibility and transcendence.

Contemporary American poet Charles Bernstein spoke recently in response to the Black Lives Matter movement with this Levinasian perspective. His words support the importance of resisting the urge to relate, to fill in gaps, to know, to bring your own story to the stories of others:

> We may be 'all in this together', depending on what that means. Whatever the common menace, our outcomes will never be the same. Deep below our difference is not interconnection but incommensurability. Human is not so much shared as contested. Empathy and solidarity are crucial investments but acknowledging our uncommonness alongside our commonness grounds struggles to resist hegemony of the universality.[111]

Bernstein argues against the cliché that assuming interconnection will lead to peace and empathy. Rather, he argues that the inverse is true: focusing on our 'commonness', exclusively, leads to

[110] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London & Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 79–153 (p. 82).

[111] Charles Bernstein, 'the International Literature Festival Berlin asked me for a micro-video addressing racism, nationalism, and the possibility of co-existence' (Facebook video, posted June 26, 2020) <https://www.facebook.com/charles.bernstein/videos/10156911929881330/> [accessed 7 October 2022].

domination, hegemony and control. He embraces the unsentimental acknowledgement that we can never fully know each other and that 'our outcomes will never be the same'. We see this outlook at work in poems by the late contemporary Black American poet, Lucille Clifton. In her poem 'why some people be mad at me sometimes', she seems to be making a similar argument:

> they ask me to remember
> but they want me to remember
> their memories
> and i keep on remembering
> mine.[112]

In this poem, the speaker describes an experience where her narrative gaps, so to speak, are being filled by others and more than that: these others insert their own stories into her gaps. The speaker revolts against this dominating force and asserts that she has her own 'memories' or stories, not theirs. As she emphatically declares this message, she uses the lowercase 'i' which highlights the speaker's humility and vulnerability. The poem suggests that its speaker is Black with its use of the slang ('be mad at me') that hints the memories may be, at least in part, the traumas of slavery and racialized oppression; but it is notable that this brief poem is completely abstract and includes no images or stories – the speaker has closed the door on stories for now. She is too vulnerable. And the reader can only turn to her own 'memories' when confronted with the blank space after 'mine', standing alone in the poem's last line.

This vulnerability found in not telling stories and the reader's inward turning in response can be kept in mind when looking further at the poem by Greenbaum discussed a few pagers earlier: the speaker continually begins sentences without finishing them, which creates spaces for the reader to wonder and reflect. For example, 'Sometimes when I'm thirsty' is repeated within the pantoum structure. Depending on the reader, there is a tendency to either try to finish the

[112] Lucille Clifton, 'why some people be mad at me sometimes', in *Blessing the Boats* (Rochester: BOA Editions, 2000), p. 38.

sentences for the speaker but also to accept that we will never know what she was going to say. For most readers, both can take place to varying degrees. It is apt to mention here that Emily Dickinson wrote, 'To fill a Gap / Insert the Thing that caused it – '. [113] These lines describe the human urge to create wholeness when confronted with a gap. However, Dickinson moves beyond this insight in the following lines: 'Block it up / With Other – and 'twill yawn the more –'. The gap will not only remain when filled with 'Other' but it will be ripped open further. A trauma narrative needs to be fragmented in order for the reader to go through the process of learning that their attempts to fill the gaps in the poem are useless. Dickinson's analysis is in line with Levinas who argued that filling up, with assumptions, fantasy, or associations, what one does not know or understand about another person, trying to make their narrative whole, is at best, futile, and at worst, a violation. Dickinson, like Levinas, seems to suggest here that imposing otherness, something alien to the gap, will create more of a chasm. And like Levinas, the idea she espouses is that it is simply not possible to make something whole after it is severed. The rupture is so profound that the yawning gap becomes a great void which can never be filled with something 'Other'. A gap in a poem, like loss or trauma, is a force. You cannot just get rid of it. Dickinson ends the poem, 'You cannot solder an Abyss / With Air – '.[114] The void is there to stay. Even non-physical etherealities ('Air') such as time or thought cannot fuse the chasm. The chasms in Greenbaum's poem are gaping. And those gapes create the poem's dynamism. They exist less as opportunities to 'solder' or fill 'With Other' but rather as opportunities that challenge us.

Sentence fragments such as these, rather than only allowing the reader to relate by inviting a filling in of the gaps, also offer the opportunity for the reader to do the opposite: they draw our attention to our separateness, alert us to our own alterity, inviting us to look inward.

---

[113] *Poems,* 'To fill a Gap', Fr 647, vol. 2, p. 634.

[114] Note that Dickinson included a variant to the phrase 'solder an Abyss' which reads 'plug a Sepulcher', which suggests that poem is also about loss. See Susan Kornfield, 'To fill a Gap', *the prowling Bee*, 4 December 2018 <http://bloggingdickinson.blogspot.com/2018/12/to-fill-gap.html> [accessed 7 October 2022].

Toker writes that 'gaps in the *fabula* information open upon mirrors'.[115] In other words, gaps in a trauma narrative are the very places where the reader gains recognition of the self. When we go through the process described above, we are left with ourselves and our own traumas as a separate entity, alone, and distinct. Just as we can never fully know or understand the narrative in front of us, we will also never be fully understood and known. In Greenbaum's poem, the absence or near-absence of essential narrative information compels us to look into a void, an 'element of blank,' to use Dickinson's words.[116] When we accept the 'blank' rather than filling it, what we see is ourselves. As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, 'when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you'.[117]

The reader's expectations are thwarted when confronted with this fractured and repetitive surface. Toker writes, 'our own attitudes, formerly unconscious or taken for granted, become the object of our attention'.[118] Ironically, it is the gaps that carry more information than the text – when they repeat in unexpected places and break away from what we anticipate (a clear subject, finished sentences) we are alerted to our own assumptions.

Perhaps reticence also has this enormous power, and narrative reticence in particular, because with the intentional withholding of narrative information, the author allows us to experience a sense of our own fragmented self. We construct our lives as a logical sequence of events, but we do not experience them this way. Narrative reticence reflects experience. And this process is 'spiritual' because there is an awareness of the human inability to grasp the narrative of our lives. George Steiner wrote, 'speech so marvellously fails us, that we experience the certitude of the divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours. What lies beyond man's word is eloquent

---

[115] Toker, p. 5.

[116] *Poems,* 'Pain - has an Element of Blank -', Fr 760, vol. 2, p. 719.

[117] 'Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein'. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft* (Leipzig: Naumann, 1886), as trans. by Mark Conrad, 'Nietzsche and the Importance of Translation', 7 May 2014 <https://marktconard.com/2014/05/07/nietzsche-and-the-importance-of-translation/> [accessed 7 October 2022].

[118] Toker, p. 7.

of God'.[119] Divine eloquence is only sensed in a poem as a result of the intentionally created broken surfaces made by the writer. When narrative is fractured, the reader becomes aware of how little we know of narrative, even our own narratives. This creates a sense of humility, wonder, and awe. 'Nothing' is humbling and encourages an ethical stance. And it is the place from which healing grows. As mentioned earlier, Dickinson wrote, 'Nothing / is the force that renovates / the World –'.[120] Renovation is only possible when you are aware of what is broken, of the cracks in everything. That's how the light gets in.[121] When you accept the cracks and your own lack of control then you cannot judge or dominate.

Dominating the gaps in a poem, jumping in and trying to fill them, can actually be an unethical act. An example of this is how Dickinson's poems have often been read. Dickinson's surprising silences, often found in her unexpected dashes (together with her apparent reclusivity later in her life and the fact of her sex) have led many readers to rush and fill the gaps with pathologizing mythologies.[122] For instance, John Cody argues that psychosis is the source of her great poems. And Lyndall Gordon explains the sudden breaks and dashes throughout her poems by arguing that the poet had epilepsy.[123] Rather than approaching a poetics of reticence with the respect and awe it demands these reductive and simplistic readings are dominating and presumptuous.[124] Dickinson's unusual poetics was understood for decades as eerie, bizarre, and neurotic rather than emanating from the deliberate choices of a writer at the peak of her powers. Louis Untermeyer, the influential anthologizer of poetry, wrote that she was 'abnormally reticent' and Ted Hughes referred to the gaps, often replaced with a mark like a line, as 'her eccentric

---

[119] George Steiner, 'Silence and the Poet', in *Language & Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), pp. 36–55 (p. 39).
[120] *Poems*, 'By homely gifts and hindered words', Fr 1611, vol 3, p. 1413, lines 4–5.
[121] Leonard Cohen, 'There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in' (from 'Anthem') in *The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen* (London: Omnibus Press, 2009), pp. 18–19 (p. 18).
[122] John Cody, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
[123] Gordon, 'Snarl in the Brain' in *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds*, pp. 114–136.
[124] See Paula Bennett, *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), which de-pathologizes Dickinson and critical notions of feminine creativity. It serves as a corrective to studies that feed off her unusual poetics and the early misrepresentations of Dickinson's personal life.

dashes'.[125] This condescending language might be emerging from (along with misogyny) the demands that narrative gaps put on readers. Anxiety arises from those demands. This anxiety leads to attempts to control a text with answers to unanswerable mysteries. Susan Howe corrects these kinds of readings when she wrote that Dickinson, 'explored the implications of breaking the law just short of breaking off communication with the reader'.[126]

During an internship at Smith College thirty years ago as a researcher for American literature scholar Richard Millington, I came across an article arguing that bulimia could explain the gaps found in many of Dickinson's poems. And then I began to discover other articles that referred to her as an eccentric and lovesick hermit, a rejected spinster, anorexic and agoraphobic.[127] I felt interested because I wanted to understand her, but I also felt disturbed. I went to my mentor and asked him what he thought of the articles. Millington responded with these six words: 'Emily Dickinson was a rigorous intellectual'.[128] I don't think he said anything else. What I learned from this moment was that there is a danger that reticence might be penetrated with reductivity. And that a reader doesn't have to fathom everything about a text. Marianne Moore wrote about Dickinson, referring to her practice later in her life of speaking to some people behind her door or listening to music being played downstairs from her bedroom:

> Music coming from under a window has many times been enhanced by its separateness; and though to converse athwart a door is not unusual, it seems more un-useful to discuss such a preference than it would be to analyse the beam of light that brings personality, even in death, out of seclusion.[129]

---

[125] Ted Hughes, 'Introduction', in *Emily Dickinson: Poems Selected by Ted Hughes* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), pp. ix–xvii (p. xi).
[126] Susan Howe, p. 11.
[127] See Maryanne M. Garbowsky, *The House Without the Door: A Study of Emily Dickinson and the Illness of Agoraphobia* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989), the book that came out of the article I stumbled upon.
[128] Personal conversation with Richard Millington at Smith College, Northampton, MA, summer 1991.
[129] Marianne Moore, 'Emily Dickinson' [review of *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Mabel Loomis Todd], *Poetry*, 41 (1933), 219–220 (p. 220).

Moore is suggesting that it may be more beneficial to engage with the 'beam of light' which shines from the gaps in Dickinson's poetry rather than fixate on the poet's desire for privacy. As Elizabeth Petrino writes of Moore's comment, 'Moore normalizes [Dickinson's] willful refusal to be easily understood'.[130] Respecting a poet's desire to withhold leads to respect for the other. It is an ethical act.

This relationship with gaps can be understood more deeply when analysing a radical version of aposiopesis which can be employed even more assertively in a poem than in the examples I have given thus far. I mentioned Adorno's well-known comment ('One cannot write poetry after the Holocaust') in order to foreground the relationship between silence and trauma. Narrative aposiopesis is a way of answering Adorno's challenging statement. It is a concession: the poet responds, 'Yes, Adorno, I agree, one cannot. Therefore, that *cannot* will be built into my poem in the form of silence'.

Dan Pagis wrote a poem, which illustrates this idea. Pagis, the Romanian-Israeli poet who survived a Nazi concentration camp, is most known for this compressed poem he wrote in Hebrew. The title, 'Written in Pencil in a Sealed Railway Car', is a narrative snippet, which provokes questions: why is the car sealed? Where is the person going and coming from? Why a pencil? There is a sense of questions and of foreboding amidst a restrained eight-word title (four words in the original Hebrew), and the reader is gripped in a plot before the body of the poem is read. And the poem does not provide answers to the questions raised by the title. Here is the poem in the full original and in translation:

כתוב בעפרון בקרון החמום

כאן במשלוח הזה

אני חוה

עם הבל בני

[130] Petrino, p. 3.

אם תראו את בני הגדול

קין בן אדם

תגידו לו שאני [131]

Written in Pencil in a Sealed Railway-Car

Here in this carload

I am Eve

with Abel my son

If you see my older son

Cain son of Adam

tell him that I [132]

The gaps in this poem are radically employed. The poem itself is condensed and even more so in the original Hebrew where almost every line contains fewer words than the in the English translation. The pauses and silences are potent. The relationship between words and white space is tense, dynamic, transcendent, and multi-faceted. Both the words and the silences are equal in their function to tell a story. The narrative is within the words and also outside of the boundaries of the words. The said and the unsaid in tandem offer snippets of information: there is the biblical Eve; there is a modern Eve, the fictionalized character who wrote these urgent words in pencil in a sealed railway car; there is the poet who is a Holocaust survivor (if that fact is known by the reader); and there is the 'real' woman, a ghost, behind this narrative which has the feel of a documentary poem. This multiplicity of speakers creates a sense of infinite possibility and an inability to grasp at any one way of reading the poem.

We will never know more about 'Eve'. The poem does not allow more knowledge. Warhol calls this kind of writing 'Unnarrated', a term she invented which refers to writings 'that

[131] *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, ed. and trans. by T. Carmi (New York: Penguin Books: 1981), p. 575.
[132] Dan Pagis, 'Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car', in *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*, trans. by Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 29.

explicitly do not tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrator's refusal to narrate'.[133] However, this poem goes beyond Warhol's definition because the reader senses that the narrator, the fictionalized character, *wants* to narrate. Not only does she begin to tell a story (her name, the names of her two sons, where she is) but she attempts to communicate something else in the final line to a reader as can be intuited from the command, 'Tell'. What is painful here is that we are not able to receive her desire to tell, to relay a message. The telling is not consummated. This silenced communication could have been anything: facts about where she is, a confession, life-saving information, a statement of anger or sorrow, or 'I love him'. The gaps create a strong bond between the reader and text as we attempt to fill them. Gerald Prince argues that 'narrative must be viewed as an act or process, as a situation-bound transaction between two parties'.[134]I would take this further and argue that our transaction with the text is an ethical event where the reader and speaker are 'bound' together, almost as if the reader is obligated to the speaker in some way. The reader could imagine the possibility that the speaker *chose* to end her words after 'I', no longer wishing to communicate or perhaps stopping because she was just lost in thought. The poet assumes the reader knows the biblical story of the first brothers where one kills the other. It is plausible that the mother's speech has been cut off simply because 'Eve can't think what to say to her other son – his transgression is too great and words fail her, as the mother of one son who kills another, and parallel to that, perhaps fail the poet too'.[135] However, the drama behind the poem and the realities of war, Jewish history, and sealed railway cars points the reader's imagination elsewhere: the silence tells of violence.

This is, however, a poem. It is not the fictionalized narrator but the poet who refuses to tell us what (fictionally) happened, or rather, the poet dramatizes a story by employing aposiopesis. He does not just dramatize one story but many stories. Stories which we will never

[133] Warhol, p. 221.
[134] Prince, p. 7.
[135] Jacqueline Saphra, 'The Plot Inside the Poem', *Poetry School* (2016) <https://poetryschool.com/new-courses/the-plot-inside-the-poem/> [accessed 7 October 2022].

know. A more radical poetics of reticence, embodied in this poem, includes the message that even narrative gaps are not enough. The white space that follows language represents the voices of those who literally cannot speak. And the fact that the fragment has been 'written in pencil' highlights that even this person's partial story can be easily erased, forgotten, the ultimate vulnerability.

When we are presented with a poem such as Pagis's that brings the reader to the edge of an abyss, we have to accept that we will never know the details of that abyss. And when we cannot know something, we cannot appropriate or dominate it. The gaps in narrative, moreover, Cavell's 'forgoing of domination', the inability to know how the narrative ends, suggests that there are an infinite number of narratives, past, present and future. The self-critical awareness that emerges from this process is a kind of freedom from the co-dependency that comes from being gripped by narrative. Realizing this allows us to let go of the poem's plot, disentangle ourselves from it and look inward.

Every poem has narrative gaps. No poem can tell everything that happened. And every poem is vulnerable. Some poems call attention to those gaps and others do not. However, in all cases, to put it in Levinasian terms, just as 'the face', as he calls it, or the 'Other', is not reducible to complete comprehension or appropriation, neither is a poem. The 'Other' is greeted or received without becoming fully known. The following riddle (originally in Yiddish) is ascribed to the nineteenth-century polish rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern, better known as 'the Kotzker Rebbe': 'If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you!'[136] The riddle is a comic yet gravely serious warning to the 'I' against merging with the other, against inserting the narrative of the 'I' onto the other's narrative. The

[136] The Kotzker Rebbe did not publish books and this quotation has been passed down orally. However, the saying can be found in works about the rabbi. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (Toronto: Collins Publishers, 1973) p. 144. Most recently, the quote appears in a popular song, 'Just Be Yourself', composed and sung by Avraham Fried. See #JBY, 'Just Be Yourself – Avraham Fried and Zemiros Choir' [YouTube video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-HvhT8OPs0> [accessed 7 October 2022].

rabbi's saying encourages an acceptance of a separate perhaps never to be fully known 'you' and implies that doing so allows both the 'I' and the 'you' to thrive. This approach to relationships and to poetry – resisting full comprehension – is an ethical stance. It puts the reader's powers into question. As Diane Perpich has argued in *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 'to be ethical in Levinas's sense is to know that ethics is in danger'.[137] Pagis's poem reminds us, with its extreme use of narrative gaps, that our relationship with any poem is ethical in this way. As we receive the narrative and un-narrative from a speaker in a poem, we become aware of our responsibility towards the silences. The meaning of the poem depends on us – how will we receive this information and non-information? – which puts ethics in danger. It commands us and calls for a response.

Emily Dickinson and the Ethics of Reticence

As discussed, Dickinson poems withhold narrative. It seems that Dickinson the woman also withheld certain narratives from her own life such as social activities in her later years. She also withheld the narrative of marriage. In her thirties, the upper-class New England poet elected, at the height of the Civil War in the 1860s, a seemingly reticent life. She chose to stay at home with her family, publish only about a dozen poems, and as she got older, she received occasional visits from selected close friends, celebrated editors and writers, and the man she loved, Judge Otis Lord. But Dickinson's reticence – the gaps in her poems and her reticent lifestyle—together with the fact of her sex and her genius, has created an appetite for objectification and even denigration. Early critics overemphasized her unusual poetry and lifestyle. Thomas Johnson wrote in his introduction to her *Letters* that her friends 'felt sympathy for her pathetic situation' and that her feelings left her 'emotionally naked'.[138] These comments reflect a common assumption that her spinsterhood and meagre attempts to publish were 'pathetic' and that the strong emotions found in her poems and letters were embarrassingly 'naked'. Critics attempt to

[137] Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 230.
[138] *Letters*, p. xv.

dominate the gaps in Dickinson's poems as well as the gaps in her life. I would like to suggest a different approach.

While it is true that Dickinson rarely left her house in the last decades of her life, it is important to note that there have been male writers, whose work matched Dickinson's gifts, who have not received similar accusations from critics. Nathaniel Hawthorne took his meals alone in his room away from his family members for twelve years until he married at age 38, William Blake expressed highly unorthodox beliefs and lived eccentrically, and Henry David Thoreau shunned human contact for a full two years to write. They all lived equally unusual lives and wrote on a similarly radical plane.[139] For example, like Dickinson, Thoreau never married or had children and seems to have enjoyed solitude even more than Dickinson: he sought out and lived for a long period in complete isolation. Dickinson, by contrast, never lived alone. She lived with her parents and siblings, running the household, until the marriage of her brother and death of her parents, after which she lived with her sister for the rest of her life. She remained in daily contact with her brother and sister-in-law, along with their three children, who lived in the house next to hers. Sue Dickinson was Emily Dickinson's primary literary advisor and Dickinson asked her for feedback on more poems than any other correspondent. The letters show that their relationship was close, intense and intimate. Some critics have argued, most persuasively Martha Nell Smith, that the two conducted a romantic relationship. [140] For one known as overly reticent and a 'recluse', Dickinson was extremely connected to people.

Her reclusivity is both real and exaggerated. She travelled in her twenties accompanying her father to Philadelphia and Washington DC, on his business as a congressman, and to close friends and cousins, such as the Hollands and the Norcrosses who lived in other parts of New England. Although she became more selective in her friendships and rarely left her house in the

[139] Women of her time often kept inside for long periods, especially if they were caring for the sick (Dickinson's mother was an invalid) or were relied upon for keeping house (the prominent Dickinson family had servants but were not wealthy enough to relieve Emily and her sister Vinnie of much of the housework).

[140] See Martha Nell Smith's *Open Me Carefully* (New York: Paris Press, 1998) and *Rowing in Eden* (Austin: University of Texas, 1992).

final decade of her life, her voluminous correspondence shows her strong and sustaining relationships with friends, including prominent literary figures.[141] She wrote in a letter, "My friends are my 'estate"'.[142] Dickinson's sister Vinnie wrote, 'Emily is always looking for the rewarding person.'[143] Her romantic relationship with Judge Otis Lord, who she also received in her home during the last decade of her life, has been well documented in the letters between them.[144]

The response by early readers and critics to the gaps in Dickinson's poetry and biography has been to fill them with pathology and morbidity.[145] Thoreau's self-imposed years of solitude which led to his manifesto, *On Walden Pond*, have been largely seen by scholars as a 'legitimate strangeness' for a genius, as Adrienne Rich has argued.[146] Dickinson's personal life and unusual poetics, by contrast, have been seen by many as eerie, bizarre, and neurotic rather than emanating from the deliberate choices of a writer aware of her powers and who placed poetry at the centre of her life. See Paula Bennett's *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*, which de-pathologizes Dickinson and critical notions of feminine creativity.[147] It serves as a corrective to studies that feed off of the early misrepresentations of Dickinson's eccentricities; they blow up her idiosyncratic poetry and lifestyle into a full-scale presentation of a poet whose work was even born out of illness.

While Dickinson's personal reticence has been overemphasized by critics of her work, neither should it be ignored. In 1869, Higginson, the editor of *The Atlantic* and prominent man of letters who mentored Dickinson for many years, and who became the first post-humous editor

---

[141] See *The Networked Recluse: The Connected World of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Marta Werner (Amherst: Amherst College, 2017), which, while acknowledging her increasingly reclusive behaviour, emphasizes Dickinson's voluminous correspondence with friends and editors and writers.
[142] *Letters*, J 193, late August 1858?, p. 338.
[143] Rich, 'Vesuvius at Home' (p. 163).
[144] As the love letters between Emily Dickinson and Judge Otis Lord attest, their romantic relationship took place during the last decade of Dickinson's life.
[145] See Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller, Martha Nell Smith, *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993). This book thoroughly analyses the Dickinson critics who seek to look for psychodrama as a source for Dickinson's unusual lifestyle and poetics.
[146] Rich, 'Vesuvius at Home' (p. 167).
[147] Paula Bennett's *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990).

of her books, asked her if she would come to Boston to meet him, and she replied, 'Could it please your convenience to come so far as Amherst, I should be very glad, but I do not cross my father's ground to any house or town'.[148] We might never know why Dickinson chose not to cross her 'father's ground to any house or town' at the end of her life and only receive family and a few chosen visitors. As the poet Steven Cramer wrote, 'What we don't know about Dickinson fills many books'.[149] Some biographers and critics have argued that she stayed at home because the Reverend Charles Wadsworth broke her heart. Others such as Lyndall Gordon argue that she suffered from epilepsy and was ashamed to be seen. And recent feminist critics such as Martha Nell Smith have brought forth evidence that she was involved in a passionate romantic relationship with her sister-in-law and felt compelled to hide herself because of this affair. [150] Still others posit that she suffered from loneliness because of her lack of engagement in any romantic connections.[151] We can be sure of one fact: Emily Dickinson wrote poems. Inserting the above narratives into the unknown can be understood as intrusive and presumptuous. Christopher Benfey argues that:

> As a consequence of her reticence, it has been easy for her many and diverse admirers to invent their own private Emily: Emily the fierce feminist; Emily the pliant lover; Emily the 'voice of war'; Emily the prophet of modernism; Emily the guardian of old New England; and so on. But it is the reticence itself that tells us most about Emily Dickinson. Dickinson was out to purge her own language of deadness. This is what she meant when she asked Higginson whether her verse was 'alive.'[152]

---

[148] *Letters*, J 330, June 1869, p. 460.

[149] Steven Cramer, 'Emily Dickinson: I cannot live with You', *The Atlantic*, April 14, 1999 <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/1999/04/emily-dickinson-i-cannot-live-with-you-poem-640/555098/> [accessed 1 November 2022].

[150] See Martha Nell Smith who makes a strong case for this theory in *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson.*

[151] See George Frisbie Whicher's preface in his biography *This Was a Poet* (Amherst College Press, 1992) where he writes that 'her love poems were…never outwardly expressed'. Whicher formed this opinion before the Otis Lord letters came to light.

[152] Christopher Benfey, 'Emily Dickinson and the American South' in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Wendy Martine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 30–51 (p. 46).

As readers become distracted by Dickinson's reticence they insert their own stories into her biography and how they would like to understand her or use her to promote their agendas; they might forget to step back and observe the poetry from a distance, give it space, honour its vulnerability, its otherness, its 'aliveness'.

Some of the largely unfounded narratives about Dickinson, and even the ones that may be closer to the truth, can also be seen as violating; I argue that readers dominate texts by penetrating the silences with their narratives. I would also like to suggest that some are insistent that their interpretation of Dickinson's decision to separate herself largely from society is the correct one. This obsession with Dickinson's reclusive lifestyle sometimes overshadows an interest in her work. When nineteenth-century American Literature professor Richard Millington was asked by his students why Dickinson was a 'recluse' he responded: 'You would probably spend a lot of time alone too if you were the smartest person in America.'[153] This quip is based on the one thing we do know about Dickinson: she wrote extraordinary poems and letters.

There is a simple (and perhaps boring to those who are keen to sensationalize her life) explanation for why, at least partly, Dickinson chose to withdraw from much of society: it is possible that in order to produce the nearly 1800 poems, and even more letters, Dickinson needed her room, her desk, quiet.[154] We know of her gratitude to her father who gave her permission to absent herself from her household duties in the mornings so she could write. A poem from 1858 is dedicated to him with these words: 'To my Father – to whose untiring efforts in my behalf, I am in - debted for my morning hours – viz – 3AM – 12PM. These grateful lines are inscribed by his affectionate Daughter.'[155] The high value Dickinson placed on this timetable permitted to her can be seen in the comment she made to her niece, Martha Dickinson, when the girl once visited her aunt's writing room: after turning an imaginary key in the door,

---

[153] Personal conversation with Richard Millington, visit at Smith College, Northampton, MA, 16 August 2002.

[154] About 1,000 extant letters written by Dickinson (to over 100 recipients) are in print although 1,000 is probably one tenth of what she actually wrote. We know that many were destroyed by her sister when she died (it was a custom of the time to destroy letters upon the recipient's death).

[155] *Letters*, J 198, 1858, p. 344.

Dickinson said to her, 'Matty: here's freedom.'[156] Perhaps the thought of crossing her father's ground felt like it could lead to an abandonment of the freedom given to her. She would be neglecting the precious routine she was allowed in her house and her priority: writing.

Howe argues that the 'facts of an artist's life will never explain that particular artist's truth. Poems and poets of the first rank remain mysterious. Emily Dickinson's life was language and a lexicon her landscape. The vital distinction between concealment and revelation is the essence of her work.'[157] Dickinson's interest in this 'vital distinction' between what is hidden and what is revealed shoots like a lightning bolt throughout her work and its sparks light up the white space around her words. Readers have the opportunity for a rewarding, ethical, and self-reflective experience if they focus not on what is hidden and not on what is revealed but on the distinction between those two phenomena. Dickinson's personal reticence doesn't have to be the centre of Dickinson's studies. For instance, when looking at her poem that begins, 'I saw no Way – the Heavens were stitched – ' / I felt the Columns close –' we might draw our attention to the wondering about not being able to access 'the Heavens' yet at the same time feeling their 'Columns', which are a part of the Heavens.[158] Hiddenness and revelation appear simultaneously in these lines and raise questions such as: how can we feel both spiritually blocked and connected at the same time? The gaps in these lines are gaping – there seems to be something missing after 'no Way', and we are not told about the reader's emotional response to this inner experience. Rather than digging into the poem's gaps for answers, the reader can face her own gaps and, for example, look at her own relationship with spiritual blockage and connection. Lyndall Gordon has written of Dickinson's work: 'I want to propose that her poems work when a theorem is applied to a reader's life. It is a mistake to spot Dickinson in all her poems; the real challenge is to find ourselves. She demands a reciprocal response, a complementary act of

[156] Rich, 'Vesuvius at Home', p. 265.
[157] Howe, p. 27.
[158] *Poems*, 'I saw no Way – the Heavens were stitched – ', Fr 633, vol. 2, p. 623.

introspection.'[159] The reciprocal response that Dickinson's work can provoke leads to a kind of relationship with the poem where ethical responsibility is triggered – the poem's vulnerability and otherness ignites this. This is what Dickinson's poems are asking us to do. Whether that invitation is accepted is up to the reader.

In this chapter I have argued that narrative gaps create an ethical occasion for the reader who is invited to accept the vulnerability and ultimate inscrutability of the poem. The poetics of reticence gives readers the opportunity to turn inward and confront and develop the self, leading to a sense of responsibility. In the next chapter I will illustrate how, from my point of view as a poet discussing my own poems and writing process, this poetics is formed so the reader can have the chance to experience the ethics of reticence dynamic.

[159] Gordon, p. 111.

Chapter Four: Writing Boat of Letters

In this chapter, I reflect on the work in my collection of poems, Boat of Letters, with an aim to investigate the relationship between the thesis and my own poetic practice. I have argued in the previous chapters that the poetics of reticence is made up of narrative gaps. I define narrative gaps as the withholding of significant information from a poem such as an event in a sequence or a moment in an emotional narrative. This withholding leads to a dual Levinasian tension (vulnerability and otherness) producing a richness of meaning and depth. Here I further substantiate the claims I made in the previous chapters and explore my research question (how does reticence produce meaning in poetry?) via an examination of the use of reticence in my poems. In the previous chapters, I approached the poetics of reticence both as a poet and as a scholar, but the following pages offer a self-reflexive critique of my writing practice. My examination of reticence in my work is three-fold: I will do close readings of a few key poems from Boat of Letters; I will apply my methodology (narrative gaps filtered through Levinas) to my examination of the collection; and I will conduct these readings with an interest in sometimes drawing on my previous exploration of the work of Dickinson and other poets – by doing so, I aim to uncover the connections between the reticence I identify in their poetry and that in my own work. This exploration is generative of new knowledge as I use the analysis of my poems as a conduit for emerging insights about their composition. I will discuss decisions I made about the technical aspects of the poems (line-breaks, shapes of stanzas, repetition, abstractions, images) and in doing so survey and reflect on the intentions and motivations (both conscious and unconscious) behind my writing process. In this way I aim to offer a personal and practice-based response to my research question. This is done in three distinct sections: *Discussing Reticence in Practice*, *Methods of Withholding*, and *Transgressions Against Reticence*.

Discussing Reticence in Practice

My writing is intimately intertwined with my reading, and I have received my strategies of reticence from poems I have read. I identify with the lines by Polish poet Adam Zagajewski that rejoice in this aspect of the artist's process: 'Poems from poems, songs / from songs, paintings from paintings'.[1] In other words, art generates art. And poems breathe out the language, rhythms and reticences absorbed from poetry. Poets revel in the transfer of other poems into their own work. T. S. Eliot put a cynical edge on this fact of a poet's practise when in his 1920 essay on Phillip Massinger he wrote, 'Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.'[2] Eliot is implying that when a poet takes from other poems they must make the spoils their own in order to be considered (by him) accomplished. Harold Bloom pushed this approach further when he developed his theory in *The Anxiety of Influence* that 'The meaning of a poem can only be another poem', and argued that poets are anxious, jealous and conflicted about the impact of poems they have read on their work.[3] However, I take my cue from Stern and Zagajewski in this area, and not from Bloom or Eliot: not all poets experience conflict as their reading is absorbed and reborn into their own work. As Jorge Luis Borges wrote with humility and awe in his poem 'My Books': 'the essential words / That most express me are not in my own writings / But in those books that don't know who I am'.[4] I celebrate the moments in my poems that come from simply imbibing the poems that most 'express me,' and I honour the received strategies of reticence that appear in Boat of Letters.

Writing about reticence is not unusual for poets, many of whom offer a great deal of 'wisdom' on the subject as Lisa Mazzei argues in 'A Poetic of Silence'. Mazzei writes that poets

---

1 Adam Zagajewski, 'A River', in *Tremor: Selected Poems*, trans. by Renata Gorzynski (Farrar, Straus & Giroux,1985), p. 19.

2 T. S. Eliot, 'Philip Massinger', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), pp. 112–130 (p. 125).

3 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 95.

4 Jorge Luis Borges, 'My Books', in *Poets Translate Poets: A Hudson Review Anthology*, ed. by Paula Deitz (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), p. 368.

remind us that 'the use of silence not as a tool, not an extra,' is 'an essential element in an understanding of meaning and voice'.[5] Mazzei goes on to argue that many academics 'miss' the essential element of silence in texts, or at least have not paid enough attention to this area, a gap that I address in the first three chapters. In this chapter, I address another gap: I have not found any writings by a poet who thoroughly discusses the use of reticence in their *own* poetry. While poets have often written about the power of silences in poetry, they rarely apply their analyses to their own work. This may be because many poets tend to prefer discussing poetry by others -- this is what feeds them. Or perhaps on some unconscious level some poets feel they will jinx the magic if they look too closely at the mysterious ingredient (reticence) that fuels their poems. I can identify with both of these reasons to hesitate, and I too was reluctant to write this chapter until I was convinced of its necessity to elucidate my argument. In this chapter, I will discuss my thoughts on reticence in relation to my creative process, and in doing so I offer a previously unexplored area of research: a poet's account of the reticence in poems in her own poetry.

Many poets speak adamantly about reticence, but they rarely use the 'I' when doing so; this can be seen in the quotations in previous chapters from Adrienne Rich, Louise Glück, Thom Gunn and others. As I mentioned above, poets frequently discuss the role of silences or gaps or spaces in poetry. British poet Glyn Maxwell in his book *On Poetry* contends that:

> Poets work with two materials, one's black and one's white…[D]on't make the mistake of thinking the white sheet is nothing. It's nothing for your novelist, your journalist, your blogger. For those folk it's a *tabula rasa*, a giving surface. For a poet it's half of everything. If you don't know how to use it, you are writing prose.[6]

Here Maxwell argues that blank space is essential for poets, an absolutely indispensable element. Yet he doesn't discuss this idea in terms of his work. American poet Coleman Barks takes this

---

5 Lisa Mazzei, 'A Poetic of Silence', in *Inhabited Silence in Qualitative Research: Putting Poststructural Theory to Work* (New York Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 57–69 (p. 61).

6 Glyn Maxwell, *On Poetry* (London: Oberon Books, 2012), p. 11.

idea further but again, not in relation to his own poetics. He has noted that 'words are not important in themselves, but as resonators for a center', suggesting that language is merely on the periphery of meaning – it reverberates from the 'center' which is the silence inside the poem.[7]

Importantly, however, I have found only limited references in which poets reflect on their own use of reticence. One example, discussed in the Introduction, is American poet Jean Valentine who confirms that for her, the location of meaning resides within silences: 'If I could, I'd write in silence'.[8] Valentine implies here that she submits to language only because she *has* to and not because it is the crucial communicator of meaning. American poet Jane Hirshfield brings this same idea to a recent work that seems to explore her own writing process. She meditates on what Maxwell's 'white sheet' might mean to the poet writing the poem (the speaker uses 'I' and 'me') in the first few lines:

> I keep a white page before me.
> Each time one
> is marred with effort, striving, effect, I turn to another.[9]

These lines enact and are about the page on which its words appear as its construction calls attention to the white space at the end of each line. The space after the first line, for example, creates an awareness of the 'white page before' both the poet and the reader. In the next, the 'one' page is similarly highlighted. In the third the reader is told that when this white page is 'marred' with words she must turn to 'another.' In this poem, therefore, Hirshfield may be suggesting that words, that print, and language, are sometimes a blight and that the unmarred white page, the poem's underbelly, is the centre from which meaning emanates. This emanation, moreover, occurs out of the dynamics between a poet's two materials: 'effort' (words) and the

---

7 Coleman Barks, 'On Silence', in *The Essential Rumi: New Expanded Edition*, trans. by Coleman Barks with John Moyne, A. J. Arberry and Reynold Nicholson (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 17.
8 Barnett, p. 16.
9 Jane Hirshfield, 'Corals, Coho, Coelenterates', *The American Poetry Review*, 49 (2020), 13.

'one' page (silence). Hirshfield's poem suggests that the poetics of reticence is the dynamic that emerges when those two materials are skilfully handled by a poet. In the following sections of this chapter, I will demonstrate how narrative gaps, and transgressions against these, operate in some of my key poems. A poem, as I shall illustrate, is not a poem without reticence.

Methods of Withholding

I want to begin by looking at a poem that is at the centre of Boat of Letters. The poem, 'The House of Our First Loving', appears quite literally at the book's centre.[10] I see the poem as the belly of the book or the spine, the foundation that holds the rest together. It is a wisp of a poem that contains more levels of meaning than is at first apparent, and it distinctly embodies the narrative gaps explored in the poems and discussed in this thesis.

> Blue evening window.
>
> Books stacked on the table tilting towards the silver lamp
> like a person leaning into a taller person.
>
> An empty chair, a blue mixing bowl.
>
> Listening for steps crunching the snow.
>
> Faint ringing of keys.
>
> Cold streaming from coat, hands.
>
> Brown unfamiliar bedsheets.
>
> Branches scrape the windowpane. [11]

[10] The collection includes three sections: 'Grief Dialogue' contemplates the loss of a mother; 'The Book of Love' considers the complexities of marriage; and 'Keep Not Knowing' asks spiritual questions.

[11] Eve Grubin, *The House of Our First Loving* (Rack Press, 2016), p. 8. This poem can be found on p. 30 (in Boat of Letters) of this thesis.

The title of this poem reflects the methodology of this thesis. Its language both offers and withholds snippets of narrative: the image of a 'House' where two or more people experience their 'First Loving'. These words raise narrative questions: who are these people and what is their relationship to each other? If there is a first loving, is there a second? A last? Is this love ongoing? Is it a couple? If so, the couple has a home ('The House'), there is a warm connection between them ('Loving'), and it is the beginning ('Our First') of their love. While this language from the title sets up narrative expectations, the first line of the poem doesn't address these questions or themes directly nor does it offer much in terms of a story. The line is simply an image in the form of a fragment (it does not form a complete sentence): 'Blue evening window'. This opening fragment functions as a kind of objective correlative where the two adjectives and noun together contain emotion without naming it. While the emotion has not yet been fully developed, described or clarified, the language here hints at sadness ('blue') and coming darkness ('evening'). The mention of 'window' after these words implies that the speaker is inside a 'House', looking out into the blue beginnings of evening, perhaps lonely, perhaps contemplative. This line contrasts slightly with the title, which seems to promise loving and connection and more than one person ('our'): after the word 'Loving' the reader is given an opening line that insinuates a forlorn moment of solitude. However, the word 'window' also suggests anticipation, perhaps hope. Is the speaker looking out, waiting for someone or something? The seeds of a narrative are planted in these three words although the storyline is barely detectable.

My reading of poems by contemporary American poet Saskia Hamilton has led to lines like 'Blue evening window' where great trust must be placed in the communicative power of simple images. Hamilton has been called a poet of 'discipline, distance, or restraint'.[12] In her essay on 'Forms of Reticence', she discusses how poems hold reticence in various forms; her

[12] Raymond McDaniel, 'Fatal Affliction: Saskia Hamilton's *Divide These*' [review], *Boston Review*, 1 November 2005 <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/raymond-mcdaniel-divide-these-hamilton-fatal-affliction/> [accessed 12 October 2022], para 1 of 9.

own works experiment with forms of reticence.[13] 'Not Known' for example, begins with the line, 'Seventy lakes below'.[14] Like my 'Blue evening window', these three words offer a seemingly simple image. And also like my image, they are a fragment, the first line of the poem, followed by a full stop and then a stanza break. Placing images such as these in beginning of the poem and surrounding them with white space gives them prominence and puts pressure on the reader to consider their importance. In Hamilton's poem the narrative is 'not known' yet but the opening image could be a metaphor or a part of a story. Placed as it is before any revealed narrative allows the image to do rich work: 'Seventy lakes below' suggests depth, multiplicity, an inward look into the self, perhaps into the lakes of the soul; these words contain a message about the wealth and beauty of the inner life and its mysteries. The fact that the speaker is not saying anything directly about her inner life produces an aura of vulnerability. Why does she feel compelled to speak in metaphors? Is she so unconscious of her emotional state? Is she uncomfortable with it? In addition, the narrative is inchoate. She could have begun, 'I am on an airplane and I see seventy lakes below'. The fragment sets up a sense of the inscrutability of this vulnerable speaker.

If the narrative had been explicit (i.e. non-reticent) in either of these poems (in Hamilton's 'Not Known' or in my 'The House of Our First Loving'), how would that have changed the poems? It is useful to do the following exercise: imagine the opening lines in my poem read, 'Lonely in the house before nightfall, I look out the window, / the sky is blue turning dark, waiting for my love'. The narrative is exposed in these lines. Where the line in the actual poem is like a ceiling beam covered and painted, the line from the exercise reveals the ribs and raw wood underneath that beam. As I argue in this thesis, when a poem hides the raw wood of emotion and the ribs of complete narrative, a sense of vulnerability and otherness are produced. The speaker in the line from the exercise reveals a narrative, telling the emotional story ('lonely')

[13] Saskia Hamilton, 'Forms of Reticence,' *American Poet: The Journal of the Academy of American Poets*, 8 September 2009 <https://poets.org/text/forms-reticence> [accessed 12 October 2022].
[14] Hamilton, 'Not Known', *Divide These* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2005), p. 16.

of the narrator. This emotional story telling indicates that they know what they are feeling and suggests that they accept the emotion and are thus able to manage it. In 'Blue evening window', the emotional story is submerged and has not reached the level of consciousness. It might be unknown to the speaker, and it might be unmanageable. The speaker cannot name the emotion because it is either buried or too painful or both. A sense of vulnerability emerges from a poem where the emotions seem unconscious or feelings difficult to manage. I argued that by building on Levinas's 'face-to-face' encounter, vulnerability is produced in poems where emotions aren't named in a narrative. This poem reflects Levinas's discussion about how the Other 'hides' signs that fragile emotions exist.[15] The hiding in the poem is also a sign that fragile emotions exist. Vulnerability emanates from poetry where the emotional part of a story is concealed.

Other parts of the narrative are also concealed in 'The House of Our First Loving'. In comparison with some of my other poems, here the story is particularly obscure. I have absorbed this obscuring strategy from Dickinson's poems where the narratives are almost always completely masked. For instance, her poem that begins with these four lines, 'There's a certain Slant of light, / Winter Afternoons- / That oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes –' offers hardly any information about what happened to the narrator that led to the oppression and 'Hurt' and 'Despair' she refers to here and later in the poem.[16] We are told that the slant of light on winter afternoons hurts the speaker but this information leaves many questions unanswered: is the speaker projecting her own sadness onto the light? Is her perception of that light influenced by her internal world? Or is her description of that light perhaps a portrayal of her interior landscape? While there is an intimacy and vulnerability in Dickinson's use of metaphors for emotional distress, the lack of narrative ultimately renders the speaker an enigma.

My poem, while offering very little in terms of a story, is somewhat narrative compared Dickinson's. There are hints in the title and first line of a possible narrative that looks something

---

15 Burggraeve, p. 31.

16 *Poems*, 'There's a certain Slant of light,' Fr 320, vol. 1, p. 338.

like this: a couple, new to their 'First Loving', live in a 'House', and perhaps one member of the couple, who speaks in the first person although 'I' is never used, alone, looks out of the evening window, waiting. Or is someone outside looking up at a blue window? Some of the lines that follow provide more information that the person is inside rather than outside with further snippets such as, 'Listening for steps crunching the snow' and 'Faint ringing of keys'. Fragments such as these offer a skeletal story line. There are major gaps. Description is lacking. What does the person look like who is about to enter the house? Does the couple speak to each other? The short poem is rich with images and narrative implication but much is unknown or almost everything is uncertain. This lack of linear flow and the blanks in the storyline produce blind spots. The reader is not allowed fully in. Levinas argues there is a dearth of knowledge about the Other in a 'face-to-face' encounter just as here the mystery of the Other (in this case, the speaker's linguistic presence) throbs with unknowing. The poem never fully resolves any of the questions the gaps in the poem produce.

Both the vulnerability and the mystery of the speaker and the world described deepen as unexplained images, rich with emotional associations, tell fragments of a larger unknown story; however, despite the gaps, or actually *because of* the narrative lacunae, the reader is left with a forcefield of energetic meaning where opposites pull against each other creating an aura of vulnerability and mystery: loneliness ('blue evening', 'empty chair') and connection ('a person leaning into a taller person'); physical ('hands', 'bedsheets') and abstraction ('unfamiliar'); warmth ('Loving') and harshness ('scrape'). It is a poem of physical affection, solitude, wildness, and privacy. It suggests a background abundant with narrative and raw emotion yet the story and the language of feelings are barely present in the poem.

This same process, where there is a rich but unspoken narrative in the background, to varying degrees, can be found in all of the poems in Boat of Letters, most recognizably in poems such as 'Grief Dialogue', 'Near', 'Question', and 'Restraint' where narratives are obscured. The poem 'Question', for instance, includes only one enigmatic line (or two if you count the title).

The brevity of the title, the fact that it is only one word, gives weight to it, implying that the poem could present a 'question' of great significance. It also provokes potential curiosity in an imagined reader, who knows nothing except that they expect a question to be asked. The expectation of a question of substance is met with a diminutive sentence. The body of the poem is a thirteen-word question in a single line: 'Why do you need to tell your husband to take off his coat?'[17] This can be read as a prose poem because it is not clear if the line-break is deliberate. Or perhaps it is a one-line poem with a line-break, intentionally placed. Since it is not broken into two or more lines, either form is possible. The reader will never know, creating further uncertainty. This uncertainty is magnified by the fact that the poem really contains two questions, not one: the 'why' question to the self and the question asked of the husband. This double question imbedded in a diminutive poem is rich in emotion and narrative: the contrast between this richness and the lack of any full narrative produces a forcefield of meaning.

The question seems trivial. But surrounded by white space, giving it apparent significance, gives this triviality a comic edge. A spouse interrogates themselves (the 'you' presumably addresses the self) about their own behaviour, a potentially worthy practice, but the subject of concern seems inconsequential: that they are asking their husband to take off his coat. Yet there is something serious imbedded in the sentence. This snippet from the narrative of a couple's life seems petty yet the self-interrogation in the question and the word 'need' give this shred of narrative a certain heft: is the spouse trying to control the husband? Is there anxiety behind the 'need' to ask him to take off his coat? Is the request a demand? An order? Why this co-dependence? Why this over involvement in a spouse's personal choices? Perhaps the coat is keeping him warm or comfortable. Why this merging where perhaps there should be boundaries? The thirteen-word line, seemingly comic at first, produces stimulating questions which begin to tell a story of emotional narrative significance. The fact that the poem says so

[17] The poem 'Question' can be found on p. 34 (in Boat of Letters) of this thesis.

little speaks to the vulnerability of the linguistic presence: conceivably, it is embarrassing for the speaker to say more as further elaboration could reveal additional controlling tendencies. The poem offers so little in way of narrative, while potentially producing an array of informed questions, and sends a message: the people in this poem can never be fully known. The poem quiets itself, shielding its protagonists. However, the line, isolated, alone and stark sits defenceless, unprotected by the buffer of language.

I bring this technique of isolating lines, surrounding them with white space, as opposed to allowing lines to push up against each other, in poems such as 'Grief Dialogue' and 'Restraint'. 'Grief Dialogue' has the structure of an interview, and in this case, the self's interview with itself, not unlike W. B. Yeats's 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul'.[18] Questions are asked and answered; except for a few couplets, this is done in single lines stanzas:

What do you long for when you climb the ancient stair?

I long for the smile under my father's beard, for the early photos.

What do you desire when all thought is done?

I desire the beauty tucked into the slant of the poem.

When you lost your watch what was left?

A few turquoise stones, a broken clasp.

When you lost her what was left?

I longed and was angry and then dull, roosting
in hidden places.

[18] W. B. Yeats, 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul', in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933): A Facsimile Edition* (New York & London: Scribner, 2011), pp. 4–8.

Did the starlight seep through?

I felt I was caught in the traplight.
The rain had squirrels and slugs in it.

What about your steep, your heart?

I begged. It was a prayer, a filling up.
The wind beat me down, and I grew anyway. [19]

These nine single line stanzas and three couplets swim, detached from other lines, on the page. They are exposed, as if a spotlight is shining on them, rendering them perhaps more vulnerable than lines in a poem with no stanza breaks. They don't have the company of other lines pushing close to them, providing a cushioning effect against difficult subject matter. These lines are laid bare. Yet they rarely offer any sense of an emotional narrative by naming the emotions involved (exceptions are 'grief' in the title and 'angry' in the eighth line). The emotional information is scant. And the poem offers no coherent narrative of grief and loss. Emotions and the story behind those emotions are both mostly hidden.

If the poetics of reticence produces meaning, and vulnerability and wonder emanate from such poems, then 'Grief Dialogue' is an example of this. While the lines are exposed and defenceless, they do not communicate directly about the 'grief' mentioned in the title. Rather, they engage in a dialogue that is at once concrete and metaphorical. As in Dickinson's poems about loss where one or two emotional words (such as 'pain' or 'agony') are surrounded by a metaphorical anti-narrative, this poem produces a sense of disquiet because the speaker cannot bear to tell her story or use the words that one would expect to hear about a grieving inner life. There is a muteness about the poem where so much—a storyline, a reason, an explanation, direct emotional description—is being held back. Dickinson's poem which begins with the line

[19] Grubin, *Grief Dialogue*, p. 3. This poem can also be found on p. 15 (in Boat of Letters) of this thesis.

'The Soul has Bandaged moments' is similarly evasive in terms of its narrative, and its linguistic choices do not describe emotions.[20] Dickinson's first line for instance evokes an inner wound that needs protection suggested by the word 'bandaged'. Similarly, 'Grief Dialogue' uses metaphors to conjure emotion ('I was caught in the traplight. / The rain had squirrels and slugs in it'), in this case, fear and shame.

'Restraint' employs some of the same methods of withholding as 'Grief Dialogue' but it is also a poem *about* methods of withholding. As I was becoming more conscious of the poetics of reticence, both as I was writing this manuscript and researching the critical essay, I began to write poems that directly address the vitality of the unsaid. Like Dickinson's 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—', as well as numerous other poems which consider 'slant' or reticent telling of truth, 'Restraint' is aware of the meaning of silences around words.[21] The poem begins:

> When the woman was angry with her husband
> she wrote about it
> in a journal and included the date.
> When she was angry with her son she wrote it down.
>
> The woman did not tell them about the journal.
> She did not tell anyone.
>
> No one saw the words in her hand.

These first three stanzas set up the tension that the poem attempts, and fails, to resolve. What happens when feelings, such as anger, are not brought out into the light? Is it heroic to avoid pushing such feelings onto those we love? Did the woman's silences preserve intimacy with her husband and son or did they damage intimacy? Did reticence communicate something, create

[20] *Poems*, 'The Soul has Bandaged moments – ', Fr 360, vol. 1, p. 385.
[21] 'Restraint' can be found on p. 64 (in Boat of Letters) of this thesis.

connection in a way that would have been impossible if her anger had been expressed? The poem 'answers' these questions in the end with these last one-line stanzas:

> The words are blood beads, blooming from the pages.
>
> The words are jasmine rain.
>
> The pages are white feathers pressed into mud.
>
> The pages are white feathers suspended above grass.

These vulnerable, exposed lines, like the lines in 'Grief Dialogue', are heavy with emotion yet contain no language of emotion. They also abandon the narrative that sets off the poem thereby creating a gap in the storyline. These metaphorical lines take the place of the narrative suggesting 'what happened' while not clearly disclosing the dénouement. The 'words' that the woman never spoke are 'blood', implying that the language she did not use, or simply did not voice when angered, represents pain. But the unspoken words are also 'blooming', which suggests that not saying them cultivated something beautiful. Not only might the unspoken blossom but reticence may also be the very thing that life thirsts for to grow and live: 'rain'. And in this case the rain has a pleasant unseen quality: it is jasmine scented. Reticence has an ethereal quality, it is something one wants to breathe in. In this poem, the woman's 'restraint', when it comes to language, creates a pleasing invisible atmosphere.

The last lines of the poem embrace contradiction: the delicate 'pages' ('white feathers') on which the woman wrote her never-told words are both sullied and divine: they are 'pressed into the mud' and they also miraculously float in the air. Her repressed words have been trampled on, they have been mistreated, but reticence makes those same words celestial, like angels hovering above the earth ('suspended above grass'). It seems to me that these paradoxical images represent a dual concept about telling it slant. 'Restraint' can mean a crushing of communication; it can also mean connection, authenticity, transcendence. If the poem is a parable or a metaphor, then the paradox embodied in it suggests that spoken and unspoken

words in poetry *both* fail to impart truths. Dickinson wrote that 'the human heart is told' by 'hindered words'.[22] Words are obstructions to truth because they are words yet they are all we have to tell the truths of the 'human heart'. In the same poem, as quoted earlier, Dickinson writes, '"Nothing' is the force / That renovates the World—"'[23] suggesting that nothingness generates vitality. This paradox leads to the notion that the poetics of reticence, a dance between language and the white space, is what produces meaning.

Transgressions Against Reticence

Transgressions against reticence occur in some my poems. Often, there are no glaring narrative gaps, and the speaker seems to tell a seamless story using words that describe emotion to drive the narrative ('love' and 'hope' are used, for example). However, reticence is still at work and, in fact, these transgressions illuminate the reticence that does exist in the poem. Sometimes poems where reticence seems to be lacking are fuelled by what is not being said as much as, if not more than, poems that are obviously reticent. For this section I have deliberately chosen two poems that are representative of about ten poems in my collection that seem to challenge my thesis. These poems appear to be complete narrative, in terms of the sequence of events they relate and the emotional story they tell, transgressing the poetics I discuss in the previous chapters.

My poem 'Snakes and Ladders' for example, conveys core messages through the unsaid despite the conventional narrative structure (clear depiction of family scene). When I wrote this poem, and write poems like it, I have Stanley Kunitz's vision for poetry in mind: 'I dream of an art so transparent that you can look through it and see the world'.[24] I probably was also unconsciously thinking about Dorianne Laux's poem 'On the Back Porch' when writing this poem which embodies what I think Kunitz had in mind. In lines 6–10 Laux writes: 'Inside my

---

22 *Poems*, 'By homely gifts and hindered words', Fr 1611, vol. 3, p. 1413.
23 *Poems*, 'By homely gifts and hindered words', Fr 1611, vol. 3, p. 1413, lines 4–5.
24 Stanley Kunitz, 'The Art of Poetry: No. 29', interview by Chris Busa, *The Paris Review*, 83 (1982) <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3185/the-art-of-poetry-no-29-stanley-kunitz> [accessed 12 October 2022].

house are those who love me / my daughter dusts biscuit dough. / And there's a man who will lift my hair / in his hands, brush it / until it throws sparks'.[25] The narrative and the emotions involved in that narrative are clearly laid out: a woman's family makes dinner while she goes out to the back porch and waits 'until what I love / misses me, and calls me in.' While it may seem like one is looking through a transparent veil into a peaceful family scene in Laux's poem and in mine, there are hidden stories and messages between the words, messages that sometimes oppose the poem's language. In my poem, for instance, the language seems to describe secure attachment and safe connection between family, but the silences convey anxiety about those attachments. This tension is sometimes explicit but more often implicit. Here is 'Snakes and Ladders' in full:

> Our five-year-old son and I lean
> over squares on the playing board
>
> while our older son reads *Twenty-Five Easy Steps*
> *to Becoming Ancient Greek*.
>
> A virus is breathing over Earth
> and you stand on a high stool in the garden,
>
> place leaves and branches on top of our sukkah.
> I move my piece
>
> five spaces, just missing
> the head of the snake, its thin tongue blue and forked.

[25] Dorianne Laux, 'On the Back Porch', in *Awake* (Cheney: Eastern Washington University Press, 2007), p. 43.

Cracks between the wood floorboards
contain dust, darkness. And the shelves

hold books we love. What will happen to us?
Where will we be next year, many years from now?

On the table rests the box our son built, containing
small labelled secrets he crafted from clay.

The rain has returned, pulling
the night down like a curtain around our house.

I hold the dice in my hand, its light weight shifting
with uncertainty, the cool soft corners offer hope.

You crouch, then step down carefully onto the mud,
your hands wet with blessings.

I look at the box: wood and painted gold.
The moulded clay angels

sit on the lid, stretch
their clumsy wings towards each other.

Chopsticks, glued to each side,
serve as poles for the faithful to grasp and lift.[26]

[26] Grubin, 'Snakes and Ladders' in *San Diego Poetry Annual* (2021–2022), p. 140, and the poem can also be found on p. 30 (in Boat of Letters) of this thesis.

The description of this family moment is transparent – the narrator plays a board game with her son while the other son reads a book and the husband builds a sukkah in the garden.[27] The story of this moment is laid bare in simple, grammatically correct sentences. The poem, recounting a lazy family scene, with allusions to an uncertain future, is not obscure and it does not in any obvious way seem to conceal any steps in the narrative. It is not aggressively reticent; in fact, it seems to transgress the poetics of reticence. However, the poetics of reticence is at work.

An example of a moment in the poem where reticence seems to lapse appears when the word 'love' is used in the 13th line: 'the shelves / hold books we love.' This line seems to explicitly tell the story of the speaker's emotional narrative as it contains such a familiar and large word to describe how a mother and wife feels about her family. Yet there is a distance which might not be immediately apparent. In this line she is not talking about her family; she is talking about books. And she doesn't write 'I love' but rather 'we love', which creates a certain aloofness from the self. This hiccup, this bump or projection of her love for her family, coming from 'we' rather than I, and onto the books (which she also apparently loves) is a form of reticence: it is a way for her to not say directly how she feels about her family. And this *not-saying* is what creates a forcefield of energetic meaning in this poem with its seemingly narratively and complete lines. In addition, the use of the word 'love' here also calls attention to the lack of such language elsewhere in the poem. This same approach takes place in Dickinson poems that employ emotive language (as discussed in Chapter Three); for instance, when Dickinson begins a poem, 'After great pain, a formal feeling comes –', the word 'pain' is used and then no such language appears in the poem again. The poem is reticent about the speaker's emotional narrative after the word 'pain' is used. This lack of emotional narrative coming after 'pain' causes the sounds and silences after that word to sting and sing with that word's message and meaning, much more so than if any more emotions were named in the narrative. The spaces between words – the

[27] A sukkah is a temporary hut constructed for use during the week-long Jewish festival of Sukkot (which takes place after the Jewish New Year Rosh Hashana and holy day Yom Kippur). It is common for Jews to eat, sleep and spend time in a sukkah during this week.

narrative gaps – created by the absence of the emotional storyline bathe in the word 'love' and glow with its meaning without using the word or even similar words again.

The poem also contains a tension around the word 'love' because of how it contrasts with a sense of darkness, a narrative that hovers underneath the poem's surface. The title of the poem, which refers to a commonly known board game, includes a hint –'Snakes'–towards what lies in the poem's silences. While the first few lines seem innocuous in their language and description, the mention of this inauspicious animal registers ill-omen. If the reader did not consciously pick up on this hint then it will become clear in the fourth line of the poem: 'A virus is breathing over Earth'. While this line holds menacing information, the mention of a threat ends there and leads to a mild, even grounding, next line: 'and you stand on a high stool in the garden'. The alarming image of the virus is breezed over and sharply contrasts with the observation of a 'you' (presumably the speaker's beloved), suggesting that the speaker cannot dwell on the what is 'breathing over the Earth' for too long. The speaker is both strong enough to acknowledge a threatening reality but also vulnerable as she does not wish to spend time with the material just presented. This is the first place where the poetics of reticence creates a charge in the poem.

When the speaker mentions that the 'Cracks between the wood floorboards / contain dust, darkness', again a sense of foreboding is conveyed. The mention of darkness leads to the question: what lies in the darkness? Unknown stories from the past and how those stories have impacted this family? An uncertain future? The poem does not speak to this line nor does it answer the questions that the statements about the darkness raise. Again, this breezing over suggests that perhaps the speaker is too fragile to spend time with those moments of darkness. It also seamlessly creates a gap in the narrative: the reader doesn't learn any more here about this family and what lies in the darkness of their lives. The gap implies that this family cannot ever be fully known. The family represents an 'other' which will remain mysterious, unspecified, even mythic.

Other poems in my collection similarly transgress the poetics of reticence. For example, 'The Phone Call' is apparently narratively complete.[28] It describes a phone call to a bureaucratic workplace. It is a tongue in cheek poem where the narrator notices the abstract and convoluted name of the place and clearly enjoys the nonconcrete language: 'the Unmetered Connections Department,' (a phrase mentioned five times in the short poem). While the story is a complete narrative where the speaker makes the call, enjoys the abstract words, has a brief fantasy about working there, and then has an exchange of words with the woman who answers the phone, reticence is at the core of this poem. On the surface, it seems that the reader is being told all of the story and that nothing is hidden, but upon closer inspection what makes the poem both, hopefully, funny and moving is what is not being said. For instance, the reader does not know why the speaker has the need to call this place nor is it revealed what this place services. Rather, what is highlighted, is the joy in language (even for nonpoetic and non-imagistic words) and the fact that a fantasy world exists alive inside her, a rich inner life. All other information is in the dark. This is a speaker the reader cannot fully know. This unknowing creates a charge especially since it contrasts with the ostensible openness of the poem.

The narrative seems especially gap-less when the word 'help' appears in the last line of the poem that can be read as either bland, common and familiar or emotionally rich and urgent. Placing a potentially intense word that tells the story of the speaker's feelings at the end of the poem transgresses the poetics of reticence – however, in this context, the word is turned on its head. It is used by the woman who answers the phone in the common way and is felt by the speaker as intensely emotional, even loving. 'How can I help you?" becomes not the question one asks a stranger on the phone who needs something fixed, but rather words of comfort from one vulnerable human to another.

[28] 'The Phone Call' can be found on p. 63 (in Boat of Letters) of this thesis.

The poems in this collection come out of my in-depth understanding of the poetics of reticence as I define it. The robust two-part method (academic essay and manuscript of poems) of this thesis offers a multi-directional look at my research questions surrounding the value of reticence in poetry. As this chapter has shown, the critical essay presents the argument and the poems embody and articulate that argument. Levinas's 'face-to-face' encounter (and the other scholarship that I link to Levinas's postulation) informed my writing as it gave me the opportunity to reflect upon how a poem can appear both vulnerable and other and how these combined qualities are what make up a meaningful poetics of reticence.

While the first chapters of this thesis develop a theory about how reticence works in poems and why it is such a powerful manner of writing, this chapter supports that practical application of that theory. While writing and editing I was conscious at every step of the powers of textual restraint. I was also interested in what happens when this power is subverted. My fascination with narrative gaps, therefore, informs every poem in Boat of Letters whether they employ silences or undermine them. As I argued above, in some poems, these gaps and withholdings are glaring. In others, they are barely perceptible. The former (poems which most clearly embody my definition of the poetics of reticence) generate meaning through vulnerability and otherness. The latter (poems that transgress against this poetics) uphold my argument at a deeper level: my transgressions against reticence only serve to highlight what is not being said. Both approaches test my theory that the unsaid lies at the heart of poems. Reticence communicates.

As George Steiner put it, 'The poet seeks refuge in muteness'.[29] This 'muteness' can be a kind of spiritual haven for poets. Steiner went on to write that where 'the word of the poet ceases, a great light begins'.[30] I have shown in this thesis how 'light begins' when a poet 'ceases' to reveal aspects of narrative or emotion. Dickinson wrote of the moon, 'Match me the Silver

[29] Steiner, p. 40.
[30] Steiner, p. 41.

Reticence-- / Match me the Solid Calm'.[31] I experienced this longing for the shining of reticence as I wrote my own poems for this collection. A calm gleaming is born when narrative or emotional language ceases. Reticence ultimately offers a sense that unknowns lie beneath the poem, lit up, intimate but inaccessible, vibrating under the limits of language.

[31] *Poems*, 'This that would greet – an hour ago – ', Fr 879, vol. 2, pp. 819–820, lines 7–8.

Conclusion: Summary and Possible Further Investigations

Summary

This thesis has illustrated, both through my own praxis and through my critical discussion of poems and scholarship, that reticence is vital in poetry. But discussing the power of reticence in poetry is not especially new to scholarship, as can be seen by the various critical studies cited in the first chapter. And the numerous quotations from poets throughout this thesis further demonstrates the importance of reticence to poets and poetry. The contribution that my research brings to the field is the 'why' and the 'how'. *Why* is reticence so central--why is it so important to poets and readers? And *how* does it operate on the technical level? As for the *how*: my findings show that narrative gaps are the crucial element in this poetics without which meaning could not be generated. And that these narrative gaps signal vulnerability and otherness. When a reader notices and responds to these signals, a forcefield of energetic meaning emerges.

The development of my theory about the ethics of reticence addresses the *why*—at that moment of a reader's connection to a poem's vulnerability and otherness, the reader has the opportunity to step back, feel a sense of responsibility for the vulnerable other and then turn inward and look at their own inner life. My interest in this process can be found in one of my own early poems, from my first book, written at a time when I intuitively felt the power of reticence but had not yet considered or researched (or had even thought of the term) 'the poetics of reticence'. Here is the poem in full:

> What Happened
>
> I wish I never saw those movies
>
> of blood and rocks and cut screams and unopened hands.

The one with the Australian girls who imagined their own kingdom

and lived in it, who chase the woman

through certainty's forest and beat her with a bag of rocks

until her head is blood. The images of drama do not reveal,

the images deceive, just as words create

an opaque covering, telling 'what happened'

which isn't what happened;

what happened is impossible, not here.

My story only gets in the way of my story,

gets in the way of your knowing what

happened. All these words are getting in the way.

Look at the white slivers between words, not what the letters spell,

Rather, what they frame:

see the shape inside each letter—the lit tent.

What they spell is the rock, the blinding scream.

Where is the story?[1]

[1] Grubin, *Morning Prayer*, p. 39. This poem has been revised by the poet since its publication. The poem printed here is the revised version.

Written before I was fully conscious of the concepts discussed in this thesis, this poem is interested in the ethical relationship between poem and reader: it is thinking about how when stories are told, whether in a movie or a conversation or in a poem, words get in the way of 'what happened'. Leaving out information invites the reader to respect the evasive vulnerable speaker, and when the poem ends with a question, it seems to be asking the reader: where is *your* story? This gives the reader of the poem the opportunity to contemplate their own narratives, history and inner life.

Although this thesis focuses on poetry, the power of reticence can extend to other fields of communication. There is a Yiddish aphorism said after hearing an interesting speech or after reading something engaging: 'Tzu shvgein kumst nisht' (to silence it doesn't come close). In other words, language does not measure up to silence. This saying both supports and challenges my thesis. On the one hand, I argue that silences are vital and necessary – language fails every time it attempts to get close to meaning. On the other hand, this thesis is made up over 30,000 words: I use language to prove that the use of language is not sufficient! How can this thesis be successful if my argument depends on the very medium I am using to communicate that this medium cannot communicate meaning?

My method has been to incorporate the idea that words do not measure up to silence (or, as the cliché goes, 'silence is golden') into the thesis. In the Introduction, I make it clear that originally my understanding of the power of reticence was intuitive. I explain that I did not have the words to explain this intuitive knowing although I was undoubtedly interested in reticence as can be seen from the poems published in my first book such as 'Afterwards, Eve', discussed in the introduction, 'What Happened' examined above, and 'The Unknowing' analysed in Chapter Three. Although I subsequently dived into a research project that produced many words of explanation and a praxis to support the academic essay, the initial experience is formidable: the wordless instinct that silence speaks is what this thesis is based on.

I kept this approach in mind when reviewing the scholarly literature on the subject in the first chapter—I came to the scholarship with my instinctual knowing about the significance of silences in poetry, but as I reviewed the literature I understood that silences are not 'better' than words but rather that the dynamic between words and silences is what generates meaning. This is the poetics of reticence. Silences are as necessary as words. Each of the scholars in this chapter deepened, complicated and developed my predisposition towards a poetics of reticence. Critics such as Fussell and Ricks noted the value of silence in specific poems and each proposed a theory for their usage. But their focus and the theories they generate are often limited. Feminist critics such as Ostriker and Dobson, for example, analyse silences in poetry by women in ways that complicate my argument yet unlike my hypothesis, they see the silences as an oppressive rather than an expansive force. The 'inadequacy of language' critics such as Franke and Gould acknowledge, as I do, that words are insufficient or even deceptive; and the narratologists, such as Warhol and Toker, most of whom analyse fiction and not poetry, are aware of the impact of narrative gaps, the essential element in the poetics of reticence. While these critics have made significant contributions, I argued that further investigations are needed to address questions such as: what elements are built into a poetics of reticence? I spoke to this question in Chapter two, applying Levinasian philosophy to my theory that vulnerability and otherness are key components of this poetics.

But I did not stop there. Questions remained about the reader's relationship with this poetics. What opportunities does the vulnerability and otherness in a poetics of reticence offer the reader? With the help of Leona Toker, who writes about this process in novels, I describe how I see the narrative gaps in poetry as invitations to the reader. Readers might take the invitation to respect the otherness and vulnerability imbedded in the poems. And ultimately readers have the opportunity to look through the blank space of a poem and into their own inner life making the reading of poetry a potentially threatening but rewarding experience.

American poet Lucille Clifton often said, 'I comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable'.[2] The poetics of reticence can comfort a reader: they don't have to feel alone in their own vulnerability and sense of otherness; on the other hand, this poetics can 'afflict' in that it is not always easy to acknowledge personal fragility and look into one's own otherness, the unknown parts of the self. Here my thesis comes full circle: the wordless instinct that silence speaks described in my introduction rests silently inside the reader if the reader lets it. The reader's final work can be, not with the words on the page in front of them or even with the blank spaces, but with the inaudible revelations inside themselves.

The fact that this thesis is based on the crucial vitality of reticence in poetry is found most perceptibly in its practice-based structure. Boat of Letters is inextricably linked to the academic essay. Where the essay can no longer communicate with words, my poems can take over. As discussed in the fourth chapter, the poems reflect the understanding that words are not enough. Words cannot come close to capturing in language the subjects of the collection – the words need to exist in relationship with a careful attention to the white space around them. This is how the poems are able to handle the subjects which are divided into three sections: 'Grief Dialogue' (a grown daughter's experience of her mother's death); 'The Book of Love' (exploring the possibilities and complexities within marriage); and 'Keep Not Knowing' (asking questions driven by a daily engagement with Judaism and its laws). Each section combines poems that are obviously reticent (narratively fragmented) with those that are apparently non-reticent (seemingly narratively complete).

I intentionally experiment with both approaches in order to test my theory that the unsaid lies at the heart of poems even when reticence is not immediately evident. The poetry collection emerges in relation to the theory I lay out in my academic thesis. It generates

---

[2] Quoted in Hilary Holladay, 'No Ordinary Woman: Lucille Clifton', *Poets & Writers*, April 1999, republished online 4 Mar 2021 <https://www.pw.org/content/no_ordinary_woman_lucille_clifton?article_page=2> [accessed 6 November 2022], p. 2, para. 2. Clifton attributes the saying to 'an old preacher'; its documented first appearance in print was in a 1902 American syndicated newspaper column by Finley Peter Dunne.

responses to, transgressions against, and reflections on my definition of the poetics of reticence. All the poems, whether perceptibly reticent or not, imbue white space with meaning as they deliberately engage with emotionally charged subject matter (loss, marriage, spirituality). This process tests my theory by raising the following questions: how does power emanate from loaded content when anticipated emotional language and narrative tropes are not present? How does power emanate from such content when linear narrative and emotional language seem to be in place? The formal aim of the manuscript is to make silences around text central regardless of the poem's style, in order to explore the dynamic manner in which reticence communicates. These poems, although not wordless, foreground the white space, and whisper: *words do not measure up to silence*. The poems hold this paradox: words are needed to create the silences around them. The findings gained from these poems and their interaction with the academic essay informs the field of contemporary poetics: understanding reticence by considering its vulnerability and otherness and seeing it as an ethical dynamic is entirely new way of approaching this poetics. This new understanding will have a practical impact on the ways in which poetry is taught, read and understood.

Possible Further Investigations

Boat of Letters, its relationship with this academic essay, and the chapters themselves reorient thinking around the many fields of study explored or touched on in this thesis including Biblical Poetics, Emily Dickinson, and 19th Century Women Writers and where these disciplines overlap. The poetics of reticence lies at the crossroads of these three disciplines. I will devote the next pages of my Conclusion to discussing how my findings about the connections between these three fields of study can lead to further scholarship about the poetics of reticence. This exploration paves the way for a deeper understanding of the source of the poetics of reticence, further illuminating why and how it functions in poetry. There is more scholarship to be done on the observations that follow.

Dickinson wrote in a letter to Judge Otis Lord, ' "no" is "the wildest / word we consign / to Language".'[3] The wildness in the resounding 'no' reverberates in and around the dashes and silences throughout Dickinson's writings, which along with her biography, provides rich material for developing my theory about the poetics of reticence. While this thesis is not solely about Dickinson, the chapters are bathed in her thinking: I quote often from her poems and letters throughout, and I focus, in particular, on her work and biography in the last sections of the second and third chapters. One of the aspects of Dickinson's studies that interests me, and needs further investigations, is the scholarly fascination with the anomalousness of her reticence, both personal and textual. No one wrote with such lush reticence during or before her time. And no female poets we are aware of lived with the kind of reticence she did – indeed, many 19th century women writers actively published and lived relatively public lives as writers considering the time in which they lived.[4] As discussed in Chapter Two, this fact about Dickinson's biography (her unwillingness to publish many poems during her lifetime and her withdrawal from much of society towards the end of her life) has been approached from various angles by critics. Her reticence has been played with, distorted, made larger and smaller, and has been demonized and angelized. Her first editors (Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd) tried to 'de-reticence-ize' her work to make it more palatable when they published her first book posthumously. And Todd over-emphasized Dickinson's reclusive qualities (for her own personal gain) when she went on tour to talk about Dickinson's life and work and give readings of the poems (exaggerating and inventing stories about this aspect of Dickinson served Todd in various ways).[5] Later, Todd's exaggerations turned into full blown pathologizing of Dickinson by critics such as John Cody as discussed in Chapter Three.

---

3 *Letters*, J 562, 1878, p. 617.

4 See Jean Petrovic, *'For Myself, For My Children, For Money': Selective Biographies of Early American Women Writers* (London: Eccles Centre for American Studies, 2010) <https://bl.iro.bl.uk/concern/books/34f5c28b-d438-4116-9787-6228ba4b3f63> [accessed 13 November 2022].

5 Mabel Loomis Todd, the wife of an Amherst College astronomy professor, was the open mistress of Dickinson's brother, Austin, who lived next door to Emily Dickinson. Austin was also the husband of Dickinson's closest friend, Sue Dickinson, her most important poetry confidant and probably a romantic partner at one point. It

More work needs to be done analysing how many feminist critics, starting in the 1980s, have tried to combat these pathologies by de-emphasizing Dickinson's reclusiveness and trying to prove that her reticent poems shared much in common with the 19th century women poets writing around her. This is Dobson's argument in *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: the Woman Writer in Nineteenth Century America*. The agenda of critics such as Dobson and others such as Elizabeth Petrino and Shira Wolosky is to resurrect and honour the poetry of Dickinson's female contemporaries. In doing so, they want to show that Dickinson shared the same limitations, subject matter, and even stylistic choices. 'Dickinson's poetry emanates', Petrino writes, 'from an artistic and intellectual sensibility born of her native New England and shared with other women, a recognition of whose own artistic achievement has been long overdue.'[6]

Accomplished poets such as Lydia Huntley Sigourney, Elizabeth Oakes Prince Smith, Frances Sargent Locke Osgood, and Alice Carey are held up beside Dickinson, sharing 'a feminine community of expression which mandated personal reticence'.[7] Such critics attempt to reduce the dissimilarities between Dickinson and her female contemporaries. Wolosky admits in her introduction to *Major Voices: 19th Century American Women's Poetry* that she chose the versions of Dickinson's poems for the anthology that were most like her contemporaries ('restoring' an earlier editor's bowdlerized spellings) in order to, 'lessen rather than increase the impression of Dickinson's idiosyncratic differentiation from other women writers'.[8] My thesis has only begun to suggest that this agenda has created a blind spot to Dickinson's unique reticence – I am interested in seeing additional research into this aspect of the study of reticence.

---

suited Todd to cast Dickinson as a reclusive eccentric for three reasons: first, it created a mystique around the poet which garnered more book sales for Todd and speaking engagements; second, it gave an explanation for why Dickinson refused to ever meet Todd in person (the real reason was perhaps out of loyalty to Sue), which is an embarrassing fact for an editor of the poet; and third, Todd hoped to receive an inheritance promised by Austin and it did not help her in court that her lover's sister declined to meet her for all of those years, potentially indicating that she may have been against the inheritance.

6 Petrino, p. 22.

7 Dobson, p. 34.

8 Wolosky, *Major Voices*, p. 362.

Dickinson seemed to enjoy societal expectations of female reticence in her dress and lifestyle choices yet she questioned patriarchal assumptions in her poems. This dichotomy raises questions about her complicated relationship with her culture. I would be interested in seeing further studies on the connections between Dickinson's reticent lifestyle, 19th century expectations of female reticence, and her reticent poetics. Dickinson stayed at home most of her life caring for her invalid mother and applying herself to her domestic duties including tending the garden and baking bread and cakes embracing the stereotypical feminine and reticent lifestyle. Dickinson and the women of her time were shaped by the kinds of ideas found in advice books for women given by fathers to daughters and husbands to wives. The social performance of reticence as required by women of Dickinson's class during her lifetime did not come naturally to all women and sometimes had to be carefully studied.[9] For example, Dickinson's mother, when a bride, brought with her to her new house in Amherst the popular, small white volume by Reverend John Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady*, which espouses reticence of manner, thought, and action in women, including what she chooses to write. Bennett warns women not to write anything grander than 'letters' (and in fact honours this term by featuring it in the title of his book) and writes that 'a passion for poetry is dangerous to a woman'.[10]

Dickinson, who was raised on the ideals championed in Bennett's book, was perhaps slyly responding to this particular directive on womanly reticence when she began a poem: 'This is my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me – '.[11] Here, her message might be: since *poetry* written by a woman may not be considered reticent, here is a 'letter' instead. In fact, it has been argued that her often cryptic and metaphoric letters and the many poems she included in them

---

[9] See William Buell Sprague, *Letters on Practical Subjects to a Daughter* (Albany NY: Pease, 1851), which upheld the value of reticence in women, a book which Dickinson's father inscribed and gave to her in 1852; see also Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (London: Parker, 1854), a long narrative poem that espoused the selflessness, modesty and reticence of the ideal wife, a book inscribed by the poet's brother Austin and given to his wife Sue in 1857.

[10] Reverend John Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady: on a variety of useful and interesting subjects: calculated to improve the heart, to form the manners, and enlighten the understanding. 'That our daughters may be as polished corners of the temple.'* (Hartford: Hudson & Goodwin, 1824), letter 28, p. 121.

[11] *Poems*, 'This is my letter to the World', Fr 519A, vol. 1, p. 527.

were a form of publication for her. She slyly adopted the advice in Bennett's book – she wrote letters 'to the world' (editors, writers, family and friends) consistently from her teenage years until the weeks before her death and received as many if not more than she wrote: so her line 'That never wrote to Me –' can't be literal. That dash after the 'Me' is hiding the truth. As Mark Ford has written, 'It is not possible to overestimate the postal system in Emily Dickinson's life'.[12]

Dickinson turned Bennett's advice on its head: she complied with his guidance but her letters were probably not what Bennett had in mind when encouraged this form of writing for women: these letters were letters of ambition, many sent to the great editors and writers of her day; they were letters of sensuality and romance with both men and women; and they were often as radically reticent as her poems; in short her letters are masterworks of literature. They contained all of the non-reticent aspects of emotional, sexual, and career-ambitious life that were considered off limits for women writers whose intellect was not supposed to be too developed. Women were expected to keep the power of any intellect they might possess to themselves. Jane Austen, albeit in late eighteenth century England, satirized this attitude in Northanger Abby when she wrote, 'A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can'.[13] In some ways, Dickinson's choices met society's expectations: she formally published very few poems during her lifetime, stayed at home, looked after the sick, and helped keep house. However, she has been denigrated for these same behaviours suggesting that genius women writers can't win the approval whatever they do. John Crowe Ransom condescendingly called her that 'little home-keeping person'.[14] Rather than being praised for stepping into the expected duties of women she was belittled by many critics. Her first serious academic editor, Thomas Johnson, wrote in his introduction to his edition of her *Letters* that Dickinson's feelings were so 'intense' that they were a 'handicap that she bore as one who lives

[12] Mark Ford, 'Saint Emily', in *This Dialogue of One* (London: Eyewear Publishing, 2015, pp. 71–90 (p. 82).
[13] Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 99.
[14] John Crowe Ransom, 'Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored', in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Richard Sewell (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), pp. 88–101 (p. 89).

with a disability'.[15] The early twentieth-century American literary critic and poet R. P. Blackmur wrote of her 'private and eccentric… relation to the business of poetry. She was neither a professional poet nor an amateur; she was a private poet who wrote indefatigably as other women cook or knit'.[16] Perhaps these demeaning remarks about Dickinson from major poets and critics came about because of the combination of her reticence and genius. The narrative gaps in her *po*ems defy the standard version of her culture's key sites of meaning, and even later poets and critics found her gaps and silences, her personal and textual reticences threatening.

Dickinson's reticence was complex because she took the reticence expected of women writers and transformed it into an art of power. Through her poetics, she invented a semiotic form of writing that disrupted the symbolic (patriarchal) conventions of logical grammar, syntax, and narrative expectation, and, in doing so, foreshadowed post-modern poetry. But many feminist critics argue that Dickinson was writing in subversive code in response to oppression. Much work needs to be done investigating how critics such as Joanne Dobson who, in *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence*, argue that Dickinson suffered, like her female peers, from patriarchal pressures and that this explains the gaps in her poetry. Dobson also maintains that the women poets of the time, including Dickinson, had to be 'reticent' in their writing and eliminate anger, sexual feelings, and ambition in their work if they wanted to excel as writers without condemnation. It is difficult, however, to see where Dickinson censors the above taboos in her poems. This is the poet who began a poem with the line: 'My life had stood a loaded gun'.[17] And another with 'Wild nights – Wild Nights! / Were I with thee / Wild nights should be / Our luxury!'[18] And another with 'He put the Belt around my life – / I heard the Buckle snap – '.[19]

---

15 *Letters*, p. xv.
16 R. P. Blackmur, 'Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact', in *Selected Essays*, ed. by Denis Donoghue (New York: Ecco Press, 1986), pp. 171–197 (p. 195).
17 *Poems*, 'My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun', Fr 764, vol. 2, p. 722.
18 *Poems*, 'Wild nights – Wild nights!', Fr 269, vol. 1, p. 288.
19 *Poems*, 'He put the Belt around my life – / I heard the Buckle snap – ', Fr 330, vol. 1, p. 353.

Ambition, anger, and sexuality bristle in Dickinson's poems. Her poems are reticent but not traditionally reticent.

I would like to see more comparisons, in terms of reticence, with the popular women poets around Dickinson who were writing poems in stark contrast to the ones mentioned above. Although Dobson and Wolosky have done studies on this subject none have approached these poets through the lens of a poetics of reticence as I would do. For example, it is illuminating and striking in this context to look at the work of Lydia Sigourney, who experienced unprecedented popularity and success for a woman poet, next to Dickinson's poetry. Sigourney begins 'On the Death of a Sister While Absent in School', one of her well known poems:

> Sweet sister! Is it so? And shall I see
> Thy face no more? And didst thou breathe
> The last sad pang of agonising life
> Upon a stranger's pillow? [20]

This poem's uninterrupted flow of narrative, its absence of taboo, and its lack of attendance to white space are typical of poetry by women (and men) from Dickinson's time. Even Sigourney's strongest poems such as 'Indian Names' maintain these conventional qualities of decorum.[21] It seems that Sigourney and her peers were allowed to express their rage around social issues such as Native American rights and abolition of slavery. Many critics allowed this of women. But women writers remained reticent about the taboo subjects (sexuality, anger outside of social issues, ambition), all of which Dickinson wrote directly about, and their poetics lacked the gaps and silences we find in Dickinson's work. Many scholars argue that the reticence (modesty) in the poetry by women of this period resulted from 'psychic conflict and anxiety'.[22] They include Dickinson in this assessment. Inherent in this theory is the suggestion that neurosis led to

---

[20] Lydia Sigourney, 'On the Death of a Sister While Absent at School' in *Major Voices: 19th Century American Women's Poetry*, ed. by Shira Wolosky (New Milford: Toby Press, 2003) pp. 72–73 (p. 72).
[21] Sigourney, 'Indian Names', pp. 39–40.
[22] Dobson, p. xiii.

Dickinson's stylistic choices. Therefore, the feminist critics come full circle, back to the original editors and writers who over emphasized her eccentricities (Todd) and invented pathologies (Cody).[23]

Even when not focusing on her personal reticence, critics have traditionally seen Dickinson, as mentioned before, as an anomaly, separate from literary influence and thinking about her society and culture. Thomas H. Johnson wrote in his introduction to her *Letters* that 'she did not live in history and held no view of it, past or current'.[24] Johnson's influential assessment of Dickinson's seeming reticence about politics and culture has influenced subsequent biographies and only recently have critics such as Wolosky begun to demonstrate how invested Dickinson was in thinking about the great issues of her day such as women's place in society, slavery, the Civil War and other significant issues of her cultural moment.[25] But this early criticism persists and is just another way of making her into an eccentric anomaly. The way out of this is to investigate what *intellectually* influenced her unique poetic reticence. In 1985, Susan Howe wrote that 'the way to understand her writing is through her reading. This sort of study, standard for most male poets of her stature, is only recently beginning'.[26] Critics have begun to write about Dickinson's reading and the influence it had on her work. These critics find sources (the Brontës, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dickens, Eliot, Keats, hymns) for her word choice and metre. But no critics have found a source for her unique reticent poetics. Explorations must be done into this question.

Explorations must especially be done into the Bible's influence on Dickinson's work. Dickinson quoted from the Bible in her letters and poems more than any other text. While we know that Dickinson read and re-read her own Bible, given to her by her father in 1844 when she was fourteen years old (the 1843 edition of the King James Version published in Philadelphia

---

23 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar draw on Cody's theories and even seem to support them in their chapter on Emily Dickinson in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

24 *Letters*, p. xx.

25 See Wolosky, *A Voice of War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

26 Susan Howe, p. 24.

by J. B. Lippincott), her contact with the text of the Bible was not merely this one book.[27] Her family home contained at least nineteen different Bibles, not all the same editions and some with slightly different translations.[28] In addition, Dickinson would have heard the Bible quoted and misquoted in church, by family members and friends, in school, in sermons in her home (ministers often visited the Dickinson home), and from quotations in other reading materials (religious literature, novels, articles, and poetry). Although the Bible influenced Dickinson's work, as perhaps no other text did, an academic essay cannot scrutinize a single version of the text assuming it was the one from which her poetry stemmed. While always quoting from the edition that was Dickinson's personal Bible it will have to be kept in mind that this edition might not have always been her source. A number of critics who have done studies on Dickinson and the Bible – most notable among them Roger Lundin, Jack Capps, and James McIntosh – all agree that biblical influence (the Bible's lexicon, images, stories, and rhythms) can be found in her work. However, no scholarship has thoroughly analysed and discussed the Bible as the key source for her renowned reticent poetics.

It was not unusual for nineteenth century poets to bring their knowledge of the Bible to their work. In fact, it was expected, especially from women writers. But while Dickinson's peers brought the themes and language of the Bible into their poetry, often rewriting entire biblical stories, Dickinson, while she also brought the themes and language of the Bible to her poems, took the reticent *style* of the Bible into her poems. Research needs to be done on how she drew on the reticence of the biblical text, establishing her distinctive reticent style. While her peers read the Bible as a text of seamless storytelling with instructive teachings, Dickinson detected and was influenced by what Auerbach has called 'the lacunae' of the Bible.[29] And it is clear from

---

[27] *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments: Translated Out of the Original Tongues and with the Former Translations Diligently Compared and Revised* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1843). All of the Dickinson family Bibles can be viewed in the Emily Dickinson Collection at Harvard's Houghton Library: https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl.hough:4906292

[28] Roger Lundin, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

[29] Auerbach, p. 11.

Dickinson's letters that Dickinson was aware of the Bible's 'lacunae'. She writes in a letter to her friend Joseph Lyman of her admiration for the Bible's 'fathomless gulfs of meaning' and its 'hints'.[30] Exploring her understanding of and interest in how the biblical text worked and how a similar style – fathomless gulf and hints – can be found in her poems may provide a key to the source of Dickinson's poetics.

I would like to see more studies done on how Dickinson's reading of the Bible may have formed the basis for her use of narrative gaps. Noticing a connection between her work and the Bible's gaps raises questions about the nature and origins of the poetics of reticence. It also refutes the myth that Dickinson's unusual poetics was an anomaly and not based on any available literary source. Joanna Russ argues in *How to Suppress Women's Writing* that women writers such as Dickinson have been denigrated by being called an 'anomaly'.[31] This allegation, that her unusual poetics came out of nowhere, detached from any literary tradition, has been made against Dickinson effectively demoting her as a poet. Illustrating that biblical reticence was the source for her narrative gaps puts her work firmly within a tradition. Showing the connection between her gaps and the gaps in the Bible challenges the notion that the reticence in her work had biographically neurotic origins: i.e. the repeated claim that Dickinson felt compelled to repress emotion in her writing by those who prefer the tendency to pathologize her.

A rigorous study needs to be done looking into links between 'the Bible's reticent style' and Dickinson's poetics starting with James Alan Redfield's analysis of the unsaid in the Bible and then connecting his observations to studies of Dickinson's reticent poetics.[32] Dickinson wrote about her interest in specific 'fathomless gulfs' in the Biblical text; for instance, she wrote in a letter to a friend about the biblical Eve: 'You know there is no account of her death in the

---

30 Richard B. Sewall, 'The Lyman Letters: New Light on Emily Dickinson and Her Family', *Massachusetts Review*, 6 (1965), 693–780 (p. 769).

31 Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), p. 81.

32 James Alan Redfield, "Behind Auerbach's 'Background': Five Ways to Read What Biblical Narratives Don't Say", *AJS Review* 39 (2015), 121–150 (p. 124).

Bible'.[33] Her mind instinctively moved towards the 'gulfs', gaps, and textual 'holes' and this can be seen in her work as I illustrated in earlier chapters. Her work is not dissimilar to the Jewish rabbinic approach to the Bible which free associates and makes connections, uncovering and writing stories which are not explicit in the text. Richard Ellis argues that, 'She brought to her poetry an associative, non-hierarchical, expansive mindset much more characteristic of the rabbinic interpretive tradition than of the conventional Christian tradition in which she was raised'.[34] And the sometimes jolting rhythms in Dickinson's work are reminiscent of the stammering in the Hebrew Bible discussed in the narratology section of this thesis. The fact that Moses who narrates and speaks throughout much of the biblical text is known for having a stutter may not have been lost on Dickinson. He says in Exodus, 'I have never been a man of words ... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue'.[35] Levinas wrote about this fact in the following way: 'The Torah is so suspicious of any rhetoric without a stammer that it has as its chief prophet "a man slow of speech and slow of tongue".'[36] As quoted in an earlier chapter Dickinson often called attention to her withholding of words; for example she wrote in a letter, 'I hesitate which word to take'.[37] And as I also discussed earlier, Howe suggests that the quality of hesitation in Dickinson's work is akin to the Latin definition of the word: 'to stick. Stammer. To hold back in doubt, have difficulty speaking'.[38] Like Moses, the meanings in Dickinson's words are communicated through sticking, stammering and doubt.

Any scholar attempting a study on the Bible as a source for Dickinson's reticence would have to look at which bibles she read and ask questions about the differences between the translations from the Hebrew and Greek Bible and if the poetics were very different. In addition,

---

33 *Letters*, J 9, 12 January 1846, pp. 23–25 (p. 24).

34 Richard Ellis, 'A Little East of Jordan: Human-Divine Encounter in Dickinson and the Hebrew Bible', *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 8 (1999), 36–58 (p. 45).

35 Exodus 4. 10.

36 Levinas, 'Revelation in the Jewish Tradition', trans. by Sarah Richmond, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 190–211 (p. 197). Quoted in Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Moses: A Human Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 123.

37 *Letters*, J 873, late 1883, pp. 802–803 (p. 802).

38 Susan Howe, p. 21.

issues around translation would need to be addressed; for instance, Robert Alter argues that the King James translation of the Bible smooths over many of the gaps in the Hebrew original but that even the King James translation cannot cover them up completely. With this in mind, any scholarship should bear in mind that readers who confront the gaps in the biblical text have the opportunity to respond in the way I claim readers might when encountering any text which features a striking poetics of reticence: readers can step back with an awe at the vulnerability and otherness which such a text emits and look into those 'fathomless gulfs' of meaning and then turn to their own inner work. In 'Revelation and the Jewish Tradition', where Levinas examines the unique style of the Hebrew Bible, he writes that biblical reticence allows the reader to participate in its meaning: 'The reader', Levinas maintains, is 'in his own fashion, a scribe'.[39] Levinas argues that the Hebrew Bible relies heavily on omissions when communicating meaning and does so in a way that makes what is not said communicate in tandem with what is said urging the reader to look inward and 'fashion' their own stories.

Looking into whether Dickinson's narrative gaps were at least in part due to her understanding of the Bible's reticence could not only deepen and complicate Dickinson studies and criticism on nineteenth century women poets, but also illuminate scholarship on the poetics of reticence. The fact that an ancient and spiritual text could be a source for this poetics, and tracing Dickinson's poetics back to this text, may lead to profound understandings about reticence in poetry.

The Poet and the Biblical Text

In order to illustrate this connection between poetry and biblical reticence, and to show how future scholarship might study this connection, I will conclude this thesis with an analysis of a passage from the Hebrew Bible alongside one of my own poems, 'The Laws', from Boat of Letters. My poem and this passage are both of particular relevance to my argument due to their

[39] Levinas, 'Revelation in the Jewish Tradition', *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) ed. Sean Hand, p. 194.

striking narrative gaps; looking closely at them offers a productive space to begin to explore the links between poetics and what James Adam Redfield has termed the 'holes in the Bible's narrative fabric'.[40] More work can be done by scholars, drawing connections between the 'holes' in the Bible and in poetry. Here is an example of the how studies might approach this subject: when describing the fatal encounter between Cain and his brother Abel, the Bible states:

> 'Cain said to his brother Abel … and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him.'[41]
>
> וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל־הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיְהִי בִּהְיוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיָּקָם קַיִן אֶל־הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ׃
>
> (Vayomer Kayin el Hevel achiv, vayehi bihyotam basadeh, vayakom Kayin al Hevel achiv vayahargehu.)

The question raised by the phrasing of this verse in Hebrew – and which is highlighted by the ellipsis in the JPS translation above – is why does the text trail off after 'Cain said to his brother Abel'? There is a lacuna there. Something is missing. We are not told what Cain said to his brother. The King James translation smooths over this gap in the Hebrew original by translating *vayomer* (וַיֹּאמֶר) as 'talked', even though it is the past tense of the verb 'to say': 'And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.'[42] The change is significant because the verb 'to talk' can be either transitive or intransitive, but 'to say' is always transitive.[43] When the word 'say' is used, words must follow to complete the thought (something which is equally true in both English and Hebrew). Yet in this case, the text breaks the rules of Hebrew grammar: no words follow the

---

40 Redfield, p. 123.

41 Genesis 4. 8.

42 Genesis 4. 8 in the King James Version: The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha in the Authorized Version (Glasgow: Collins, 1954).

43 See Philologos, 'Not Abel to Hear Cain's Words', *Forward*, 7 October 2009 <https://forward.com/culture/116226/not-abel-to-hear-cain-s-words/>, para. 7 [accessed 13 November 2022].

transitive verb. Although the narrative gap is more striking in the Hebrew original, a sensitive reader can pick up on the hint of a missing conversation even in the King James version as the text mentions that they 'talked' but we are not told what was said. Also, most King James versions use the colon (see above) after 'brother' indicating that it was the 'talking' that provokes Cain to murder Abel.[44]

Rabbinic commentaries, whether they be ancient, medieval, or modern, have drawn attention to this 'gulf' in the text. For instance, the highly-influential eleventh-century commentary by Rashi (the acronym by which Solomon ben Isaac is commonly known) supplied a missing detail from the text as: Cain 'entered with him into words of quarrel and contention, to find a pretext against [Abel] to kill him'.[45] Rashi's understanding is that Cain began a conversation with Abel with the intention of quarrelling in order to later rationalize the murder. Writing in the thirteenth century, Ramban (the acronym of Moses ben Nachman, also referred to as Nachmanides) speculated that 'Cain said to Abel, "Let us go out to the field," and there he secretly killed him', suggesting that Cain simply asked his brother to come out to a place where he could commit his crime.[46]

The midrashim in Genesis Rabbah (most likely written down between 300 and 500 CE) offers a range of inventive possibilities for what Cain might have said to Abel, including Cain initiating a quarrel about which of them would inherit the spot where the Temple would be built or about which of them would marry Abel's twin sister (not mentioned in the Bible). Perhaps the most creative suggestion in Genesis Rabbah centres on the notion that Cain and Abel divided the otherwise unpopulated world between them. Under this agreement, Cain took all the land, and Abel took all the movable property. Cain then says to Abel, 'What are you doing walking on

---

[44] Recent editions of the King James translation have replaced the colon with a semi-colon which covers up the gap further and smooths the narrative.

[45] *The Torah with Rashi's Commentary: Bereishis/Genesis*, ed. and trans. by Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg, The ArtScroll Series (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1995), p. 43.

[46] *Ramban/Nachmanides: Commentary on the Torah. Genesis,* trans. By C. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing, 1999), p. 80.

my land' You have no permission. Abel responds, 'What are you doing wearing my clothes? You have no permission'. Abel shouts 'Strip!' and Cain replies 'Fly!'.[47] These and the numerous other interpretations of this biblical moment are often not compatible with each other, and yet are all accepted by the tradition. The same is true for the other narrative gaps in the Bible when the text is studied in this manner and where multiple often contradictory meanings exist simultaneously and are given equal status. Therefore, when studying the rabbinic responses to a textual gap, there is a sense that the gap in question contains an infinite well of meanings, paradoxical, oxymoronic and all equally true.

Gaps such as this one resonate deeply and produce so many contradictory commentaries perhaps because of the vulnerability and othernesss they project. In this case, whatever words Cain said – or almost said – led to the first human murder. Revealing the origin of this murder (a conversation between brothers?) may be too painful to relate; thus it is a vulnerable moment in the text. And leaving a blank after 'Cain said to his brother Abel' creates a sense of otherness: ultimately what happened is a mystery; the reader can never fully know these characters and what goes on in the mind of a person about to kill his brother.

This example of the poetics of biblical reticence is brought home by the fact that it is the *spoken* words (what Cain seemed to be about to say) that are hidden. The text embodies the idea that words get in the way of meaning. The reader does not need a definitive answer to what Cain said. There are multiple possibilities, and in the end, no conclusive answer. The reader can accept this moment of nothingness alongside infinite contradictory meanings all of which generates a respect and awe for the text.

The Dan Pagis poem 'Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car' discussed earlier in this thesis, builds on the Bible's interest in shutting down spoken words in a vulnerable moment.

[47] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis, Volume 1*, trans. by H. Freedman, 3rd edn (London: Soncino, 1983), p. 187.

But this time, in Pagis's poem, which mentions Cain and Abel, it is Eve's words that are deleted. Here is the poem again:

> Here in this carload
>
> I am Eve
>
> with Abel my son
>
> If you see my older son
>
> Cain son of Adam
>
> tell him that I [48]

Eve's words are in the white space after language terminates. As discussed in Chapter Three, there are limitless options for what she may have said or wanted to say. We can make educated hypotheses, but the otherness is adamant: we will never know her words. And the vulnerability is crushing. In this context, it is difficult not to think of Dickinson's words about the biblical Eve from her letter to a friend mentioned above: 'You know there is no account of her death in the Bible.' This 'gulf' in the text seems to have been felt as keenly by Pagis who relocates the first woman to a heart-rending modern setting, yet his account of her death is not an explanation or description. It is empty. Her words are not only not recorded in his account, they are broken off mid-sentence.

This inquiry into fractured language in the biblical text and in poetics has been a long-time interest of mine and it is an area that is ripe for further studies. My own poetry employs these types of breaks. Here is an example from 'The Laws'—the first nine lines of the poem are quoted below:

> The shroud must be hand-made.
>
> Pockets are forbidden. The material may be cotton or linen.
>
> Sentiment does not govern these laws.

[48] Pagis, p. 29.

The women had washed and bathed her body.

This is required.

They did not talk during the preparations. This is also a law.

The watchers sat with her during.

They sat and recited the requisite words at dark

and at noontime.[49]

The poem, which describes the Jewish religious laws following a death, begins abruptly: the first line ('the shroud must be hand-made') does not, so far, have a context as the subject (the death of the speaker's mother) has not yet been introduced. And the title of the poem is not particularly helpful in this respect. A narrative gap looms even before the poem begins. Immediately, the reader might sense the vulnerability and otherness present. There is a suggestion of a loss (the word 'shroud' is used) and the rest is mystery. But then the poem continues with clear short, grammatically correct sentences. It is only in the first line of the third stanza that a jolting narrative break takes place within the poem itself: 'The watchers sat with her during.' With that full stop after 'during', the reader enters a distinct realm. A realm of wonder. The proposition, 'during', which introduces a point in time does not lead to words about the time it promises to announce. Much like the transitive 'and he said' in Genesis's story about Cain and Abel, nothing follows 'during'. Perhaps because words cannot describe what happened 'during'. The speaker is too vulnerable to bring words to that moment; silence is needed, at least momentarily. And the reader can experience not knowing in that pause.

There are multiple possibilities of meaning in the space that follows 'during' just as the meanings are manifold in the Cain and Abel story as can be seen in the numerous conflicting

[49] Grubin, *Grief Dialogue*, pp. 11–12. 'The Laws' can also be found on p. 24 (in Boat of Letters) of this thesis.

rabbinic commentaries. The reader will never know what happened 'during'. Perhaps what Cain 'said' in Genesis and what happened 'during' in my poem reach beyond human understanding and reason. John Keats wrote that 'I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the hearts affections and the truth of imagination'.[50] Narrative gaps allow readers to follow Keats's example and be certain of nothing but what they love and what they imagine, phenomena that occur within the self. The reader is put in the dark by the poetics of reticence, but they have a way out of darkness. The last lines in my last poem ('Keep Not Knowing') in Boat of Letters speak to this idea. When the reader looks into the darkness of a poem, they can access meaning by recognising the darknesses alive inside themselves:

> I hear my listening heard,
> lean into the night to be held,
> strike a match and fail
> open darkness with dark. [51]

[50] Keats, p. 257.
[51] These lines from 'Keep Not Knowing' can be found on p. 72 (in Boat of Letters) of this thesis.

Bibliography

#JBY, 'Just Be Yourself – Avraham Fried and Zemiros Choir' [YouTube video] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-HvhT8OPs0> [accessed 7 October 2022]

Adorno, Theodor W., *Prisms*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Samuel Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983)

Alter, Robert, 'Characterization and the Art of Reticence', in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 143–162

Auden, W. H., 'Robert Frost', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), pp. 357–353

Auerbach, Erich, 'Odysseus's Scar', in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 3–23

Austen, Jane, *Northanger Abbey* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994)

Austen, Jane, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Books, 2014)

Barks, Coleman, *The Essential Rumi: New Expanded Edition*, trans. by Coleman Barks with John Moyne, A. J. Arberry and Reynold Nicholson (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 17

Barnett, Catherine, 'Little Light on the Road: An Informal Primer on Reading Jean Valentine, in Six Brief Sections', in *Jean Valentine: This-World Company*, ed. by Kazim Ali and John Hoppenthaler (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), pp. 11–17

Benfey, Christopher, 'Emily Dickinson and the American South', in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 30–51

Bennett, Rev. John, *Letters to a Young Lady: on a variety of useful and interesting subjects: calculated to improve the heart, to form the manners, and enlighten the understanding. 'That our daughters may be as polished corners of the temple'* (Hartford: Hudson & Goodwin, 1824)

Bennett, Paula, *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990)

Bernstein, Charles (June 26, 2020), 'the International Literature Festival Berlin asked me for a micro-video addressing racism, nationalism, and the possibility of co-existence' (Facebook video) <https://www.facebook.com/charles.bernstein/videos/10156911929881330/> [accessed 7 October 2022]

Bishop, Elizabeth, *The Complete Poems: 1927–1979* (New York: The Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983)

Blackmur, R. P., 'Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact', in *Selected Essays*, ed. by Denis Donoghue (New York: Ecco, 1986), 171–197

Breslin, Paul, 'Closet Necessities: James Merrill's Poetics of Reticence', *Poetry* 179 (2002), 343–352

Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1973)

Borges, Jorge Luis, 'My Books', *Poets Translate Poets: A Hudson Review Anthology*, ed. by Paula Deitz (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013)

Bridges, Robert, *The Shorter Poems of Robert Bridges* (London: Bell, 2007), 55–56

Brook, Clodagh, *The Expression of the Inexpressible in Eugenio Montale's Poetry: Metaphor, Negation, and Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

Burggraeve, Roger, 'Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other: The Vision of Emmanuel Levinas on Moral Evil and Our Responsibility', trans. by Jeffrey Bloechl, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 30 (1999), 29–45

Cameron, Sharon, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979)

——, *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)

Cavell, Stanley, 'Politics as Opposed to What?', *Critical Inquiry*, 9 (1982), 157–178

Celan, Paul, *Paul Celan: Selections*, trans. by Jerome Rothenberg, ed. by Pierre Joris (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2005)

Clifton, Lucille, 'why some people be mad at me sometimes', in *Blessing the Boats* (Rochester: BOA Editions, 2000), p. 38

Cody, John, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971)

Cohen, Leonard, *The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen* (London: Omnibus Press, 2009)

Conard, Mark T., 'Nietzsche and the Importance of Translation', author's blog, 7 May 2014 <https://marktconard.com/2014/05/07/nietzsche-and-the-importance-of-translation/> [accessed 7 October 2022]

Craig, Megan, 'The Infinite in Person: Levinas and Dickinson', in *Emily Dickinson and Philosophy*, ed. by Jed Deppman, Marianne Noble, and Gary Lee Stonum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 207–226

Cramer, Steven, 'Emily Dickinson: I cannot live with You', *The Atlantic* (April 14, 1999) https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/1999/04/emily-dickinson-i-cannot-live-with-you-poem-640/555098/ [accessed 20 November 2022]

Darling, Kristina Marie, 'Silences in Poetry', in *Ploughshares* (2018) <https://blog.pshares.org/silence-in-poetry> [accessed 30 September 2022]

DeGrasse, Carol M., '"That Dark Parade": Emily Dickinson and the Victorian "Cult of Death"' (unpublished master's thesis: University of Texas at Tyler, 2017) <http://hdl.handle.net/10950/574> [accessed 20 November 2022]

Derrida, Jacques, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000)

——, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 79–153

——, *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology,* trans. by Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: University of Northwestern Press, 1967)

Dickinson, Emily, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, 3 vols, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998)

——, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958)

Dobson, Joanne, *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence: The Woman Writer in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989)

Dow, Mark, 'Meter, Feeling, Knowing: A Conversation with Nigel Fabb', *PN Review*, 263 (2022), 47–51

DuPlessis, Rachel Blau, *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006)

Eliot, T. S., *Collected Poems: 1909–1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963)

——, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962)

——, 'Philip Massinger', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), pp. 112–130

——, 'Questions of Prose: To the Editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*', *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 September 1928, p. 495 <https://muse.jhu.edu/document/0384> [accessed 3 October 2022]

Ellis, Richard, '"A Little East of Jordan": Human-Divine Encounter in Dickinson and the Hebrew Bible', *Emily Dickinson Journal*, 8 (1999), 36–58

Fargo, Jason, 'How a Gray Painting Can Break Your Heart,' *New York Times*, 16 January 2022 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/01/16/arts/design/jasper-johns-memory-of-my-feelings.html> [accessed 30 September 2022]

Fleming, Daniel, and Terence Lovat, '"Self-Other" or "Other-Self-Other"? A Conversation between Bonhoeffer and Levinas on Vulnerability', *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: Australasian Journal of Bonhoeffer Studies*, 1 (2013), 133–149

Ford, Mark, 'Saint Emily', in *This Dialogue of One* (London: Eyewear Publishing, 2015), pp. 71–90

Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978)

Franke, William, *The Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014)

——, 'The Singular and the Other at the Limits of Language in the Apophatic Poetics of Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan', *New Literary History*, 36 (2005), 621–638

Freud, Sigmund, 'On Transience' in *Character and Culture.* ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1963), pp. 148–151

Fussell, Paul, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1965)

Garbowsky, Maryanne M., *The House Without the Door: A Study of Emily Dickinson and the Illness of Agoraphobia* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989)

Gilbert, Susan, and Sandra Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000)

Glück, Louise, 'Disruption, Hesitation, Silence', in *Proofs and Theories* (New York: Ecco Press, 1994), pp. 74–87

Gordon, Lyndall, *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds* (London: Virago, 2010)

Gould, Thomas, *Silence in Modern Literature and Philosophy: Beckett, Barthes, Nancy, Stevens* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Graham, A. C., *Poems of the Late T'ang* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2008)

Greenbaum, Jessica, *Inventing Difficulty* (New York: Silverfish Review Press, 1998)

Grubin, Eve, *Grief Dialogue* (London: Rack Press, 2022)

——, 'Snakes and Ladders', *San Diego Poetry Annual* (2022), 140

——, *The House of Our First Loving* (London: Rack Press, 2016)

——, *Morning Prayer* (New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 2005)

Gunn, Thom, 'Thom Gunn: The Art of Poetry No. 72', interview by Clive Wilmer, in *The Paris Review*, 135 (1995)

Hamilton, Saskia, 'Forms of Reticence', *American Poet: The Journal of the Academy of American Poets*, 8 September 2009 <https://poets.org/text/forms-reticence> [accessed 12 October 2022]

——, 'Not Known', *Divide These* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2005), 16

Hassett, Constance W., 'Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Reticence', *Philological Quarterly*, 65 (1986), 495–514

Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *A Passion for Truth* (Toronto: Collins Publishers, 1973)

Hillman, Brenda, *Emily Dickinson: Poems* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1995)

Hirshfield, Jane, 'Corals, Coho, Coelenterates', *American Poetry Review*, 49 (2020), 13

Holladay, Hillary, 'No Ordinary Woman: Lucille Clifton', *Poets & Writers* (April 1999, republished online 4 Mar 2021) <https://www.pw.org/content/no_ordinary_woman_lucille_clifton?article_page=2> [accessed 6 November 2022]

The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha in the Authorized Version (Glasgow: Collins, 1954)

The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments: Translated Out of the Original Tongues and with the Former Translations Diligently Compared and Revised (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1843)

Howe, Marie, *The Good Thief* (New York: Persea, 1988)

Howe, Susan, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1985)

Hughes, Ted, *Emily Dickinson: Poems Selected by Ted Hughes* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004)

Hühn, Peter and Jens Kiefer, *The Narratological Analysis of Lyric Poetry: Studies in English Poetry from the 16th to the 20th Century*, trans. by Alastair Matthews (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005)

Huyssen, Andreas, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003)

Iser, Wolfgang, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History*, 3 (1972), 279–299

Jensen, Meg, *The Art and Science of Trauma and the Autobiographical: Negotiated Truths* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

The Jerusalem Talmud. Second Order: Mo'ed: Tractates Šeqalim, Sukkah, Roš Haššanah and Yom Tov, ed. and trans. by Heinrich W. Guggenheimer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014)

Jonson, Ben, *Timber: Or Discoveries Made Upon Men and Matter* (1640), in *Works*, ed. by C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, Vol. 8 (Oxford: University of Oxford), 555–649

JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh, 2nd edn (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999)

Juhasz, Suzanne, *The Undiscovered Continent: Emily Dickinson and the Space of the Mind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983)

Kearney, Richard, 'Dialogue with Emmanuel Lévinas: Ethics of the Infinite', in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 46–69

Keats, John, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. by Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959)

Keller, Lynn, and Miller, Cristanne, 'Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop and the Rewards of Indirection', *The New England Quarterly*, 57 (1984), 533–553

Kermode, Frank, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979)

Kinnell, Galway, *Collected Poems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017)

Kornfield, Susan, 'To fill a Gap', *the prowling Bee*, 4 December 2018 <http://bloggingdickinson.blogspot.com/2018/12/to-fill-gap.html> [accessed 7 October 2022]

Kugel, James, 'On the Bible and Literary Criticism,' *Prooftexts* 1 (1981), 217–236

Kunitz, Stanley, 'The Art of Poetry: No. 29', interview by Chris Busa, *The Paris Review*, 83 (1982) <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3185/the-art-of-poetry-no-29-stanley-kunitz> [accessed 12 October 2022]

Laux, Dorianne, *Awake* (Cheney: Eastern Washington University Press, 2007)

Levinas, Emmanuel, *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998)

——, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985)

——, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981)

——, 'Revelation in the Jewish Tradition', trans. by Sarah Richmond, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 190–211

——, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by William Large (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)

Lundin, Roger, *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004)

Lynn, Leandra, 'When Words Fail: A Possible Interpretation of Isabella's Silence in *Measure for Measure*', *Shakespeare and Beyond* (6 October 2017) <https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2017/10/06/measure-for-measure-isabella-silence/> [accessed 3 October 2022]

Malcolm, David, 'Ellipsis, Narrative Gaps, and Their Functions in Contemporary British Poetry: A Narratological Approach', *Tekstualia*, 4 (2018), 67–79

Mallarmé, Stéphane, 'Crisis in Poetry' (1896), trans. by Bradford Cook, in *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry 1800–1950*, ed. by Melissa Kwasny (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), pp. 151–159

Maxwell, Glyn, *On Poetry* (London: Oberon Books, 2012)

Mazzei, Lisa, 'A Poetic of Silence', in *Inhabited Silence in Qualitative Research: Putting Poststructural Theory to Work* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 57–69

McDaniel, Raymond, 'Fatal Affliction: Saskia Hamilton's *Divide These*' [review], *Boston Review*, 1 November 2005 <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/raymond-mcdaniel-divide-these-hamilton-fatal-affliction/> [accessed 12 October 2022]

McGuire, Philip C., *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare's Open Silences* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985)

McHale, Brian, 'Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry', *Narrative*, 17 (2009), 11–30

Merrill, James Ingram, *A Different Person: A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1994)

Midrash Rabbah: Genesis, Volume 1, trans. by H. Freedman, 3rd edn (London: Soncino, 1983)

Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alistair Fowler (New York: Longman, 1971)

Moore, Marianne, 'Emily Dickinson' [review of *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Mabel Loomis Todd], *Poetry*, 41 (1933), 219–220

——, *Complete Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984)

Mortley, Raoul, 'Emmanuel Levinas', in *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 11–22

Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft* (Leipzig: Naumann, 1886)

Nostoff, Anna-Verena, 'Barbarism: Notes on the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno', *Critical Legal Thinking*, 15 October 2014 <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2014/10/15/barbarism-notes-thought-theodor-w-adorno/> [accessed 7 October 2022]

Oliver, Mary, *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998)

Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson, ed. by Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith (New York: Paris Press, 1998)

Ostriker, Alicia, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking', *Signs*, 8 (1982), 68–90

Pagis, Dan, *The Selected Poetry of Dan Pagis*, trans. by Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

Patmore, Coventry, *The Angel in the House* (London: Parker, 1854)

Perpich, Diane, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008)

Petrino, Elizabeth A., *Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women's Verse in America 1820–1885* (Boston: New England Press, 1989)

Petrovic, Jean, *'For Myself, For My Children, For Money': Selective Biographies of Early American Women Writers* (London: Eccles Centre for American Studies, 2010) <https://bl.iro.bl.uk/concern/books/34f5c28b-d438-4116-9787-6228ba4b3f63> [accessed 13 November 2022]

Philologos, 'Not Abel to Hear Cain's Words', *Forward*, 7 October 2009 <https://forward.com/culture/116226/not-abel-to-hear-cain-s-words/> [accessed 13 November 2022]

Pirkei Avos: Ethics of the Fathers, ed. and trans. by Menachem Davis (New York: Mesorah Publications, 2002)

Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. by Philemon Holland (London: Arnold Hatfield, 1603)

——, *Moralia*, trans. by W. C. Helmbold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1939)

Pound, Ezra, *The Pisan Cantos*, ed. by Richard Sieburth (New York: New Directions, 2003)

——, *Make it New* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934)

Prince, Gerald, 'The Disnarrated', *Style*, 22 (1988), 1–8

Ransom, John Crowe, 'Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored', in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Richard Sewell (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963), pp. 88–101

Redfield, James Alan, 'Behind Auerbach's "Background": Five Ways to Read What Biblical Narratives Don't Say', *AJS Review* 39 (2015), 121–150

'Reticence', in *The Oxford English Dictionary* [online] <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/164263> [accessed 30 September 2022]

Reznikoff, Charles, *The Poems of Charles Reznikoff: 1918–1975*, ed. by Seamus Cooney (Boston: David Godine, 2005)

Rich, Adrienne, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: Norton, 1993)

——, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose: 1979–1985* (New York: Norton, 1986)

——, 'Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson', in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 157–184

——, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1977* (New York: Norton, 1978)

Ricks, Christopher, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith, *Narrative Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1983)

Roberts, Merrilees, S*helley's Poetics of Reticence: Shelley's Shame* (London: Routledge, 2020)

Russ, Joanna, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983)

Sewall, Richard B., 'The Lyman Letters: New Light on Emily Dickinson and Her Family', *Massachusetts Review*, 6 (1965), 693–780

Shakespeare, William, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974)

Sherman, Nancy, '"Eligible to Burst Forth": Whitman and the Art of Reticence', *Massachusetts Review*, 33 (1992), 7–15

Shildrick, Margrit, 'Levinas and Vulnerable Becoming', in *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), pp. 87–102

Shoptaw, John, 'The Music of Construction: Measure and Polyphony in Ashbery and Bernstein', in *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Susan Schultz (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 211–257

Sigourney, Lydia, *Selected Poetry and Prose,* ed. by Gary Kelly (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2008)

Simic, Charles, 'The Power of Reticence', *New York Review of Books*, 27 April 2006 <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2006/04/27/the-power-of-reticence/> [accessed 3 October 2022]

Smith, Martha Nell, *Rowing in Eden: Rereading Emily Dickinson* (Austin: University of Texas, 1992)

Spivack, Kathleen, *With Robert Lowell and His Circle: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Stanley Kunitz, and Others* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2012)

Sprague, William Buell, *Letters on Practical Subjects to a Daughter* (Albany: Pease, 1851)

Steiner, George, 'Silence and the Poet', in *Language & Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 36–55

Stern, Gerald, *Early Collected Poems: 1965–1992* (New York: Norton, 1992)

Sternberg, Meir, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985)

Stout, Janice, *Strategies of Reticence: Silence and Meaning in the Works of Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Joan Didion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990)

Talmud Bavli: Tractate Sanhedrin. Volume 1, trans. by Asher Dicker and Abba Tzvi Naiman (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1993)

Tangyin, Kajornpat, 'Reading Levinas on Ethical Responsibility, in *Responsibility and Commitment: Eighteen Essays in Honor of Gerhold K. Becker*, ed. by Tze-wan Kwan (Waldkirch: Edition Gorz, 2008), pp. 155–172

Tóibín, Colm, *On Elizabeth Bishop* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016)

The Torah with Rashi's Commentary: Bereishis/Genesis, ed. and trans. by Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg, The ArtScroll Series (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1995)

Toker, Leona, *Eloquent Reticence: Withholding Information in Fictional Narrative* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993)

Treseler, Heather, 'One Long Poem', *Boston Review*, 17 August 2016 <https://bostonreview.net/articles/heather-treseler-elizabeth-bishop-foster-letters/> [accessed 3 October 2022]

Valentine, Jean, *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems, 1965–2003* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004)

B. N. Venugopala, 'Post War Disillusionment and English Poetry', *International Journal of Language & Linguistics*, 1 (2014), 21014–21019

Wang, Jiaosheng, 'The Complete *Ci*-poems of Li Qingzhao: A New English Translation', *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 13 (1989), i-122

Warhol, Robyn R., 'Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film', in *A Companion to Narrative Theory,* ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 220–231

Weinberger, Eliot, 'Poet at the Automat: Eliot Weinberger Writing About Charles Reznikoff', *London Review of Books*, 37 (2015), 15–16

Wordsworth, William, *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965)

Wolosky, Shira, *Major Voices: 19th Century American Women's Poetry* (Jerusalem: Toby Press, 2003)

——, *A Voice of War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984)

Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse* (New York: Harcourt, 2005)

Yeats, W. B., *The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933): A Facsimile Edition* (New York: Scribner, 2011)

Zagajewski, Adam, *Tremor: Selected Poems*, trans. by Renata Gorzynski (Farrar, Straus & Giroux,1985)

Zapędowska, Magdalena, 'Citizens of Paradise: Dickinson and Emmanuel Levinas's Phenomenology of the Home', *Emily Dickinson Journal*, 12 (2003), 69–92

Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb, *Moses: A Human Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016)