

A Poem's Gap¹

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Abstract: The essay "A Poem's Gap" engages with the relationship between philosophy and poetry. It keeps them apart on the basis of poetry being a meaningless game to be enjoyed on its own grounds. Yet in a reading of a famous poem by Emily Dickinson, the essay also shows how the poem as a text that carries a (philosophical) meaning or a lesson (about life) emerges out of the poem's meaningless game. By interpreting Dickinson's poem as a scene of seduction without which there is no poem, and consequently no (philosophical) meaning, the essay refers to the famous Socratic debate, since it is the poem's seductive quality that the philosopher mistrusts. Finally, the essay demonstrates that Dickinson's poem is exemplary in that it stages the manner in which a reader gets hooked on art.

Keywords: Poem; meaning; seduction; being nobody; Emily Dickinson

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A poem must be an impossible prayer. Before this prayer can reach beyond itself, invoke without delay whatever or whomever may hear it and come to its encounter, yield to the words and silences, the sounds and pauses that withdraw into its singular ellipsis, it seeks to be shared and establish a complicity with its reader. Its address doubles and precedes itself, as if it had to make a detour, and in this movement it is no longer obvious whether it will, eventually, address what lies beyond itself, in the manner a possible prayer seems to do. But in what sense is this impossible prayer still a *prayer*? It is still a prayer because, in its address, the poem must dispossess me, its reader, of a proper name. It must place me in the same position from which it originates. This is how the poem comes about: by ceasing to advertise itself or to put forward names that trigger the automatism of recognition. But why does the poem need to be an *impossible* prayer, looking for me, its reader, as one who will be complicit with it from the start? Why does the poem whisper its seductive, shy, daring, ingenuous words into my ear, with a hesitating voice? Why does it look for company rather than venture outside straight away? Why does it introduce a fissure, the gap of a humorous, cheeky, and child-like turn, into its call for an unknown reader? Does it need to be reassured, make certain that we understand each other before the exposure takes place and the address takes flight? Must there be a bit of ease to let the unknown both in and out, the other to whom the poem is addressed and the otherness that hides within the folds of this address? "I am Nobody! Who are you? / Are you – Nobody – too? / Then there's a pair of us!"²

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1 The authors wish to thank Jared Stark for his comments, which helped them to clarify their thoughts and improve their essay.

2 Dickinson, 116. The poem dates from 1861.

Thus the poem speaks and thus it gets me hooked, no matter how its words and silences, its sounds and pauses end up striking me when I am no longer a kindred soul but the other who may hear them or not. Each time I get hooked by a poem, we remedy each other's solitude, the solitude of an address. Conversely, each time I feel addressed by a poem and begin to listen to its prayer, that is, to trace and retrace the figure of its address, its ellipsis, I can only do so because there is already "a pair of us" and the joy of such communion. A pair of nobodies! The poem approaches me ahead of its address, as it were, boldly and groping in the dark. As it senses my wavering presence, it begins to pull me into its circle and deprive me of my name with its first assertion and its first query. Will I be willing to allow such nudity? Its second query is a charitable one: "Are you – Nobody – too?" The constitution and exchange of complicity captured in the first few verses of Emily Dickinson's poem does not result in reasons for feeling addressed by it, reasons to do with its words and silences, sounds and pauses, reasons related to the elliptical figure they draw, or to the poem's singularity. If such reasons exist, and if I try to elucidate them, the poem also comes before them, preempting and preparing my attempt, getting me hooked. "Are you –" In every address of art, there is a poem, a series of secret advances that free me from defined meanings or names and make me turn like a trope. Dickinson renders this poem explicit.

The poem does not even ask who I am or what I want or need. It has already assigned me, as its reader, a (non-)place and a (non-)identity, that of being or becoming nobody. A few words into the reading and the poem is already dispossessing me of everything that seems irrelevant to its operation. In a way, the poem puts an end to the problem of its solitude even before it is read. It legislates the conditions for experiencing it: the suspension of my own identity, my own history – identity and history that I won't recover without at the same time losing the poem. The poem seems immorally violent towards its readers. It does not ask for my consent; it forces me, its reader, to dispossess myself of what I am and returns me to a place where I have never been – the place of the affirmation the poem needs me to be. The "yes" that Dickinson's poem takes for granted between the second and third lines ("Are you – Nobody – too? / Then there's a pair of us!"), this "yes" that I find myself having uttered without having done so, this passive, or active, or in any case immemorial complicity with the poem, has taken away the floor beneath my feet and replaced it with a different one, as in a syncopation or a gap. And what if I am not or will not or cannot be nobody? What if being nobody is not the position my solitude seeks or needs? What if my solitude is something else and mine a different madness? What if I have already lived without record, lacking an identity and banned from language and understanding? What if I needed first to be somebody in order to read and understand the poem and say "yes, I am Nobody too"? Why doesn't the poem take all this

into account? The choice the poem leaves me is hard and unfair. Either I reaffirm the poem's reasons and say – telling a lie I can hardly believe: “yes, I am nobody” – or else the poem excludes me and expels me from the circle into which it tries to pull me. The choice the poem leaves to the reader is not, in reality, a choice: the reader will have become nobody because of a decision that he or she will have made in a syncopated time, far from the self-deceiving scene of reading, far from anyone's world and history and identity. “Dont tell! they'd banish us – you know!”, the poem's fourth line reads. The poem seizes us, its readers, with its boundless hospitality. It involves us in its anarchic complicity, compels us to accept the terms that it takes for granted (“you know”) and that we ignore and will continue to ignore.

Invoking a supposed innocence on the reader's part would obviously be abusive. The reader approaches a poem on his or her own terms and reasons. As a reader, I assume that there is something in what I call a poem that has a meaning, a meaning that I can understand, or sense, and with which the poem can capture me in unpredictable ways and for unpredictable reasons. The reader is also preoccupied with remedying his or her solitude by abusing a poem that cannot elude the hunger of reading. The poem pays a high price for complicities that the reader will simply treat as artifice. It exposes itself, with unparalleled impotence, to the infinite risks of reading. The mere existence of readers, and the mere occurrence of reading, may inscribe the poem within worlds that are not the ones it may have initially sought. The poem is a profoundly solitary artefact on which readers may inflict violence far worse than the violence its unbounded hospitality inflicts on them. Readers can always turn their backs on a poem and leave it talking to itself, operating nakedly, overtly, stupidly, dispossessed of the means to seduce. They can always abandon the poem's explicit and implicit reasons to the indiscretion of their understanding, which inevitably hurts the poem's intimacy and denies its irremediable solitude.

Or perhaps the poem endures no matter what. No poem could delude itself to the point of ignoring the radical risk of reading. Could there be a poem that would forget that solitude has no remedy? Could there be a poem released from being an impossible prayer? And how could I deny the imminence of unforeseen meanings that the violence of my reading disseminates? How could I deceive myself to the point of forgetting that all reading presupposes the immemorial and syncopating desire to take nothing for granted, the desire, and the chance, to be nobody? The poem's and the reader's reasons seem thus to converge.

The first verses of Dickinson's poem, with their bold interrogation and exclamation marks and the guarded pauses that punctuate their impertinence, were written to be spoken by a voice, as if to prove a common place: one must hear a poem to fully appreciate it. The poem resembles a nursery rhyme that, in its initial stanza, lacks proper rhymes but includes assonances ("you" and "too"). It inhabits a world beneath the world of adulthood, an invisible world of small and wonderful creatures, a naïve, not a sentimental world. Adults, however, respond to such naïveté. The French philosopher Alain Badiou, for example, appears to share in the poem's search for complicity by endorsing its ingenuousness.³ He assumes that the poem's voice receives an affirmative answer to the second question it raises ("Are you – Nobody – too?") and that, after a short and perhaps slightly apprehensive wait, this answer fills it with contentment and allows it to continue, soaring into a newly found alliance ("Then there's a pair of us!"). Badiou also assumes that the poem's voice is a human one and that its insistence on anonymity addresses itself to a "generic humanity", a humanity whose members are all treated as equal, or a humanity that cannot become an object of knowledge since such an approach would turn nobodies into somebodies. And though Badiou mentions cultural heritage – the echo of Ulysses's cunning in the active usage the poem's voice makes of the pronoun "nobody", providing it with a majuscule and transforming it into a paradoxical proper name, or into the sign of a "somebody" that undoes itself – the philosopher does not proceed to exploit the erudition he attributes to the poem. His identification of nobodies – of a pair of nobodies and of pairs of pairs of nobodies – with a "generic humanity" is meant to resolve the paradox of Nobody, into which he does not delve. In short, Badiou remains a rather naive reader, caught by the poem's apostrophe. And thus his interpretation presents not much of a surprise to other readers. It seems to be accurate in its literalness, as if the poem were a straightforward affair and lend itself willingly to its translation into a political process: the liberation from self-centered individualism and the destruction of the "identitarian fetish" result in the establishment of a community that Badiou does not hesitate to call "communist". Yet if the naivety inherent in the poem, inherent to such a degree that it is impossible to distinguish between its spontaneous and its artfully staged manifestation, showcases a dimension without which poetry, and art in general, would be of no consequence, namely the dimension of an impossible prayer, or of getting hooked on a voice, then no reader, no participant in art, can ever be naive enough. There is a "poematic"⁴ naivety that outdoes all naivety.

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 3 See Alain Badiou's lecture 'Comment vivre et penser en un temps d'absolue désorientation?', held on the 4th of October 2021 on a theatre stage at Aubervilliers, France.

4 Jacques Derrida coins the neologism "poematic" [*poématique*] in his essay '*Che cos'è la poesia?*'

To be dispossessed by a poem and to become a nobody means that ultimately it must prove undecidable whether a reader gets hooked on a poem or whether a poem gets hooked on a certain reading. What we have is a pair of hookers who are also punters and cease to advertise their services as they come across each other: “Are you – Nobody – too?”

There seems to be a disagreement about the fourth line of Dickinson’s poem. It says: “Don’t tell! they’d banish us – you know!” But in her manuscript, Dickinson adds the more subtle and sneaky word “advertise” below the phrase “banish us”.⁵ She even underlines it. Is she signalling a preference? Badiou does not seem to be aware of this option and goes for the banishment,⁶ giving it a lot of political weight. Perhaps it is not a matter of philology, of decisions that a reader or editor need to take and justify, but of sheer playfulness. The hooking relies on it. Naivety – I don’t know anything because I am in the know – can afford an additional element of self-reflection. The voice can abide written traces that elude vocalisation, the scene or the exchange can withstand sleaziness and admit a seductive tone, and the poem can have its own unavowed reasons, which seem legitimate for as long as they intensify the playing. Yet the reader must not to admit that he or she is hooked. Why? Because being-hooked, on which everything depends, is just an irrelevant surrender to a silly little poem and its playful voice. As soon as it is advertised and becomes something, nothing depends on it anymore.

To be hooked by the playful voice of the poem, that is to play the poem’s game, amounts, as with any other game, to following rules. Adults, young people and children know very well that, in order to enjoy a game, one has to know how to play a game. “You know!” No game is possible if it has no rules and if players do not know and accept them. The unscrupulous player may invent or reinterpret them, but that only shows that he or she needs them to achieve his or her unscrupulous goals. The game does not prevent the players from cheating, but the players need to know how to cheat. “Don’t tell! they’d advertise – you know!” Cheating is part of the game. The rules of a game are, like all rules, productive: they establish values and determine ways of doing and acting. They open horizons of possibility and uncertainty, of risk, loss, and salvation. The rules of the game give meaning and stability to the behaviour of the players who play it. The game is the infrastructure that alleviates the players’ solitude.

(Derrida, ‘*Che cos’è la poesia?*’, 296). It is used here in the general sense of “something relating essentially to a poem”.

5 A reproduction of the manuscript of Dickinson’s poem can be found online at the following address: <https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/emily-dickinson/11> Franklin replaces “banish us” with “advertise”.

6 In a previous version of his interpretation (Badiou 2018) Badiou quotes the corrected verse (“advertise” replaces “banish us”) – yet in this version, too, he does not mention that the uncorrected verse reads differently.

We know that games hook their players, but they do not gobble them up, and they always expel them in the end. Whether we lose or win, no one stays in a game to live. A game does not allow one to care about life. And games do not care about life either. They do not pursue a dialectical relation with life, they do not even need to know that there is a life outside the game, even though everyone in the game knows that there is life outside. Nor is the game interested in establishing a parallel reality. A game is not a play that represents life and addresses itself to readers, viewers, or auditors who know how to neutralise the game's artifice or its grammar. A game is not some kind of being or reality. Nor is the game a practice of experimentation or a form of exploration. That is to say, the game does not play with us or with the world. The game simply does not care. It lets things be.

The secret of the poem's frivolity, of the silliness that makes it perfectly impotent as well as infinitely resilient, lies in its carelessness. Meanings that readers of a poem who do not play its game assign to it from the outside are indifferent to it. They are useless when it comes to playing the game, or when it comes to cheating. The problem that philosophy has with the poem can be understood as a problem with its game. It is not that philosophy, in order to understand the poem's reasons, must become childish or juvenile. There is no age for enjoying a game. Yet it so happens that philosophy is not interested in games but in the meaning at play in them. The problem that philosophy has with poems is that a poem's game – its operation as a poem and the rules that this operation entails – places a primordial barrier in the way of any attempt to do anything with the poem other than play, while philosophy knows that a poem is not only a game but also, and vitally so, a prayer that invalidates presuppositions. The problem with philosophy is its own naivety: it believes, for example, that the poem's game naively conceptualises reality – “the thing here is, therefore, that”⁷ – as if the poem could ever conceptualise things when only sciences and philosophy and the languages we inhabit can do so. To conceptualise things is to “neutralise” the poem's game. This is what we do unwittingly, for instance, when we listen to the poem as a narrative and are careful not to fall for it or not to play along with it. If we fall for it, we cannot highlight or advertise the poem's lesson, the possible worlds it creates, or how it deepens our understanding of reality. To enjoy a story – to relate to it in such a manner that it can broaden the world, subvert given orders, denounce the false and the unjust, bring something new to life – we must learn not to take

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7We are freely translating an expression from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, I, 1371b 6. The passage is well known and is worth to recall: “And since learning and admiring are pleasant, all things connected with them must also be pleasant; for instance, a work of imitation, such as painting, sculpture, poetry, and all that is well imitated, even if the object of imitation is not pleasant; for it is not this that causes pleasure or the reverse, but the inference that the imitation and the object imitated are identical (ἀλλὰ συλλογισμὸς ἔστιν ὅτι τοῦτο ἐκεῖνο), so that the result is that we learn something” (Aristotle 1926, 125).

what it says seriously. Neutralising the poem's game makes room for fiction, which is precious for our social survival and a more genuine and important business perhaps than all our science and thinking.

However, we cannot play and enjoy a game unless we take its rules seriously, and in so doing trivialise the real weight of things. When we assume that the poem seeks our complicity, when we assume that it humorously knows what we need and do not need to know to enjoy it, we are already in the process of neutralising its game and transforming the arbitrariness of its rules into the plausible rules of a possible reality. We see more at stake in the game than its sheer playfulness. In particular, we see life at stake, and if there is one thing that philosophy and the sciences and our languages take seriously, it is life. Life seems impossible without presupposing solid boundaries between the real and the unreal or between reading and playing. The poem supplies the semic or asemic infrastructure from which we extract vital meaning to keep life, and history, alive. And we forget – for it is irrelevant to life – the poem's playfulness. The poem does not care about life. From Aristotle's interpretation of mimesis to Kant's free play of the faculties, Schiller's play drive, and Heidegger's or Gadamer's concepts of the work of art, philosophy treats the poem's game as a vital mediation to fulfil or consummate meaning – “freedom”, “morality”, “truth”, “being” – even though we know too well that the poem's productive and unpredictable machine fills life and history with unexpected effects and with inadmissible, impossible meanings.

That Dickinson's poem plays a game is obvious since it does not really speak to us. Nor does it speak to anyone else. It does not even speak to anyone in general. The impossible prayer that so radically and implausibly dispossesses me of my life and of a reason to live asks nothing from me. A game is never interested or concerned with the one who plays it. The poem's game suspends the poem's and the reader's complicity. It suspends everything but the undecidable and undecided game of a silly voice. This is how the poem creates a radical distance that we can perhaps neutralise but in no case negotiate. From the start, it releases us from our naivety, that is to say, from the unaffordable cost of being the poem's readers. The poem executes its voracious and creative operation in the most absolute insignificance, like a dead person stripped of her solitude.

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The second and last stanza of Dickinson's short poem reads: "How dreary – to be – Somebody! / How public – like a Frog – / To tell one's name – the livelong June – / To an admiring Bog!" This stanza does not add anything to the first stanza. It repeats it and can be taken as another instance of the poem's sheer playfulness, or of its absolute insignificance. But its repetitive character can also be understood to explicate, unfold, paraphrase, or illustrate a meaning, the meaning of a "generic humanity", for example. If so, the second stanza must be read as a powerful underscoring of a meaning that the reader should bestow upon the poem and export into his or her own life. The second stanza helps turn the poem from a game he or she has played, in a naïve and complicitous manner, or in the manner of someone hooked, into a lesson learned from a poetic address to which the reader has been attentive.

From the point of view of the conceptualising effect of repetition, without which the two stanzas could not convey a lesson, the poem's humorous vein affirms itself one more time. For what is a lesson if not an admiration? The poem wishes to be admired, not by frogs, to be sure, but by you, the reader whom it has stripped bare. Yet do you, the reader who has learned a lesson, remain nobody, or do you become somebody? Do you become nobody for the first time? Are you a frog now, feeding on a maddening repetition and telling your name "the livelong June"? Or are you the opposite?

If the poem entertains a double relationship with itself and with you or me, then its playfulness calls for the very conceptualisation it precludes, and it is in the gap between the two that the poem leaves us hovering, exposed to reasons that will never be sufficient, or private or public enough to be fully grasped, whether by a reader or by the poem itself. This is why readers are always torn between the desire to stay with the poem's playfulness, fascinated by an absence of solitude that transports them even beyond their complicity and naïvity, beyond their having been hooked, and a desire for philosophical or conceptual interpretation and appropriation fueled by a playfulness that they must also renounce when they attend to the important and serious business of the concept, or of thinking. With her poem, Dickinson places us on the edge of this gap.

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