What Remains Unsaid: The Poetics of Silence and Resistance in Emily Dickinson and J.H. Prynne

"ما لم يُقَل: شعرية الصمت والمقاومة في أعمال إميلي ديكنسون و ج. هـ. برين "

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Abstract

This article explores the poetics of silence and resistance in the works of Emily Dickinson and J.H. Prynne, arguing that silence functions not as mere absence but as a dynamic, subversive force. Drawing on affect theory, negative capability, and poststructuralist linguistics, the study examines how both poets employ silence to challenge dominant norms of language, authority, and meaning-making. Dickinson's fragmented syntax and idiosyncratic punctuation embody a subtle resistance to patriarchal and theological constraints, while Prynne's dense, opaque language interrogates the commodification of discourse and its ideological frameworks. The article positions silence as a transhistorical aesthetic strategy—an ethical and epistemological refusal of interpretive finality. By juxtaposing Dickinson's nineteenth-century lyricism with Prynne's experimental late-modernist poetics, the study reframes poetic obscurity as a form of resistance that transforms communicative practice and destabilizes cultural assimilation. In this light, silence is not inert but emerges as a productive space for inquiry, critical engagement, and transformative political possibility.

Keywords: Silence, Poetics, Resistance, Opacity, Affect.

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المستخلص

تستكشف هذه المقالة بشكل معمق مفهوم الصمت بوصفه أداة جمالية ومقاوِمة في أعمال الشاعرة الأمريكية إميلي ديكنسون والشاعر جيه إتش برين، حيث لا يُنظر إلى الصمت على أنه غياب للكلام أو المعنى، بل كقوة ديناميكية قادرة على تحدي السائد وتفكيك البُنى اللغوية والثقافية. من خلال توظيف نظريات مثل نظرية التأثير، والقدرة السلبية التي صاغها كيتس، واللسانيات ما بعد البنيوية، تفحص الدراسة كيف استطاع الشاعران إعادة تشكيل حدود اللغة والمعنى عبر استراتيجيات الصمت والغموض. تكشف المقالة أن ديكنسون استخدمت التراكيب النحوية غير التقليدية وعلامات الترقيم بوصفها أدوات لمقاومة السلطة الأبوية والدينية، بينما لجأ برين إلى لغة غامضة ومعقدة تنتقد الخطاب المؤدلج وتسليع اللغة. كما تطرح المقالة الصمت بوصفه إستراتيجية تتجاوز الزمان والمكان، تخلق فضاءً للتساؤل والتفاعل المعرفي، وتشكل مقاومة للتأويل النهائي. في مقارنة تجمع بين غنائية ديكنسون وتجريبية برين الحداثية، تعيد الدراسة النظر في الغموض كقيمة شعرية قادرة على إحداث تحول سياسي وثقافي.

الكلمات المفتاحية :الصمت، الشعرية، المقاومة، الغموض، التأثير.

1. Introduction

Silence in poetry is often misread as absence, deficiency, or the failure of language. Yet across literary history, silence has emerged as a complex aesthetic and ideological gesture—less a retreat from meaning than a refusal of conventional articulation. This paper explores the poetics of silence as a transhistorical phenomenon, examining how poets deploy fragmentation, syntactic suspension, and lexical opacity not to erase voice, but to reconfigure the conditions of voice itself. By engaging in a comparative reading of Emily Dickinson and J.H. Prynne—two poets separated by centuries yet united by a radical commitment to indeterminacy—this study investigates silence as a textual strategy that unsettles assumptions about voice, agency, and intelligibility.

Emily Dickinson's elliptical, punctuationally experimental poetry has long been read through lenses of interiority and gendered resistance. Her fragmentary style and typographical hesitations perform a critique of the patriarchal constraints on female speech and epistemology. A century later, J.H. Prynne's avant-garde poetry deploys semantic obscurity and syntactic dislocation to challenge the institutional structures of language itself, responding to a late-capitalist world increasingly saturated with bureaucratic and commodified speech. Both poets use silence not as negation but as generative absence—an expressive force that dwells in ambiguity, suggesting meaning without asserting it.

This study frames poetic silence not as lack, but as excess—of affect, of critique, of uncontainable thought. Grounded in affect theory, negative capability, and poststructuralist theories of language, the paper traces how silence functions both aesthetically and politically. Ultimately, by bridging Dickinson's 19th-century lyricism and Prynne's late-modernist experimentalism, this article proposes a new model for reading poetic silence as a transhistorical discourse of resistance.

1.1 Literature Review

The study of poetic silence has grown significantly across literary criticism, intersecting with feminist theory, philosophy of language, and

affect studies. In Dickinson scholarship, critics such as Cristanne Miller (1987) have analyzed how her innovative syntax and use of punctuation resist patriarchal norms of expression. Alicia Ostriker (1986) similarly interprets Dickinson's reticence as a strategy of empowerment within a male-dominated literary culture. More broadly, feminist criticism has framed silence not simply as repression, but as an intentional rhetorical stance.

For J.H. Prynne, critical attention often centers on the difficulty and opacity of his work. Reeve and Kerridge (1995) argue that Prynne's dense poetic structures constitute a resistance to ideological assimilation, while Middleton (2005) emphasizes how his language tests the limits of institutionalized discourse. The political dimensions of this obscurity connect Prynne to broader modernist and postmodernist traditions of fragmentation and disjunction.

Theoretically, this study builds on Sara Ahmed's affect theory (2004), Keats's concept of negative capability, and Derrida's notion of différance. While affect theory allows for a reading of silence as emotional surplus, poststructuralist linguistics foreground the instability and elusiveness of meaning, situating silence as central rather than marginal to poetic function. This paper contributes to this growing field by offering a comparative, transhistorical reading of silence as both aesthetic practice and mode of resistance.

2. Theoretical Framework

To understand silence in poetry as a meaningful, resistant force rather than a void, it is essential to establish a theoretical constellation that moves beyond traditional semiotic readings. This framework integrates **affect theory**, the Romantic notion of **negative capability**, and poststructuralist **philosophies of language** to examine how poetic silence functions not as an absence of meaning, but as a critique of meaning-making itself.

2.1 Affect and Silence: The Residue of Feeling

Affect theory, particularly as articulated by Sara Ahmed, emphasizes the circulation of emotion not merely within subjects, but across social and textual surfaces. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Ahmed suggests that emotions "stick" to bodies and words, producing intensities that exceed rational articulation. Applied to poetic silence, this suggests that what is not said may generate more emotional and epistemic charge than overt expression. Silence becomes the residue of affect—what language cannot contain but also cannot ignore. This approach reframes textual ellipsis or fragmentation not as absence, but as affective saturation, where the unspeakable reveals more than the spoken.

2.2 Negative Capability: Dwelling in Uncertainty

The Romantic concept of **negative capability**, famously coined by **John Keats**, is another foundational lens. In his 1817 letter, Keats defined negative capability as the ability "of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (p. 277). This formulation has enduring relevance for poets like Dickinson and Prynne, whose works resist closure, coherence, and interpretive stability. Both cultivate poetic spaces where silence is not failure but a form of capacious unknowing—a deliberate suspension of resolution. Negative capability legitimizes ambiguity as a mode of knowledge, which is essential when interpreting silence not as absence, but as a presence too complex to name.

2.3 Philosophy of Language: Limits, Trace, and Deferral

Poststructuralist thought further enriches this discussion by foregrounding the **limits of language**. **Ludwig Wittgenstein's** dictum—"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (Tractatus, 1922, p. 189)—positions silence as the boundary of what can be known and expressed. Yet in poststructuralist terms, this boundary becomes fluid. **Jacques Derrida's** notion of the *trace* and *différance* displaces meaning into perpetual deferral, suggesting that meaning always escapes full capture. For Derrida (1982), silence is not outside language but internal to

its structure—every utterance is haunted by what it does not and cannot say. When applied to poetic form, silence is thus not the opposite of language but its condition: meaning arises precisely through what remains unsaid.

Together, these three frameworks position silence as a complex, multivalent force. Affect theory frames it as an emotional surplus, Romanticism as epistemic openness, and poststructuralism as a structural necessity. This triangulated approach allows for a nuanced interpretation of Dickinson and Prynne as poets who deploy silence not as a gap, but as a mode of resistance, critique, and potentiality.

3. Emily Dickinson: Silence and Gendered Reticence

Emily Dickinson's poetics of silence emerges not merely from her famously private life, but from a deliberate stylistic and epistemological strategy. Through dashes, ellipses, syntactic fragmentation, and lexical ambiguity, Dickinson creates a poetic language that resists clarity, confesses without fully revealing, and gestures toward meaning without stabilizing it. Far from indicating absence or indecision, these silences function as resistant forms—acts of reticence that interrogate patriarchal, theological, and linguistic authority.

3.1 Form as Refusal: The Dash and Ellipsis

Emily Dickinson's distinctive use of the dash has often been interpreted as a rhythmic or emphatic device, but it also functions as a mode of formal resistance—interrupting syntax, suspending meaning, and ultimately denying closure. In "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –", for instance, the dash fractures declarative certainty:

> My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –
> In Corners – till a Day
> The Owner passed – identified –
> And carried Me away –

(Dickinson, 1960, p. 211)

Here, the dash halts grammatical flow and semantic continuity, producing ambiguity around agency, identity, and control. Is the speaker a passive object or latent force? The silence introduced by the dash compels the reader to dwell in uncertainty—an enactment of Keatsian negative capability. The unspoken becomes the space of interpretive labor. The line between subject and object remains suspended in the textual gaps. As critic Susan Howe (1985) argues, Dickinson's form often "spells out fragments that carry the force of withheld conclusions" (p. 12), foregrounding absence as a site of meaning.

This technique is not isolated to a single poem. In "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –," the dash complicates the speaker's final moments:

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away

What portion of me be

Assignable – and then it was

There interposed a Fly –

(Dickinson, 1960, p. 360)

The dash here not only interrupts the anticipated solemnity of death but inserts a mundane image into the metaphysical space. The fly is not explained; its presence lingers as a visual and sonic disruption. The dying moment is suspended—not dramatized through revelation, but deferred into uncertainty.

Dickinson's resistance to closure parallels what John Keats termed *negative capability*—the capacity "of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats, 1958, p. 193). The dashes perform this ethos typographically. They enact a refusal to stabilize meaning, allowing multiplicity rather than asserting authority.

Moreover, in "Tell all the truth but tell it slant –", Dickinson thematizes this oblique approach to truth:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant –

Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise

(Dickinson, 1960, p. 506)

The dash after “slant” suggests an intentional pause—a moment of redirection. Here, form mirrors content: the truth must be approached indirectly, and the dash models this rhetorical slant. Dickinson thus uses typographical form not merely to enhance poetic rhythm but to critique the very expectation of fixed meaning in lyric expression.

Dickinson’s dashes are not ornamental but integral to her poetics of refusal. They function as formal enactments of uncertainty, emphasizing absence, ambivalence, and interruption. Through them, Dickinson constructs a poetics that resists the finality of closure and invites the reader into a space of ongoing interpretive engagement.

3.2 Gendered Reticence and Epistemic Modesty

Emily Dickinson’s strategic use of silence operates not merely as a poetic device but as a form of gendered resistance. Writing within a 19th-century cultural context that associated femininity with modesty, invisibility, and domesticity, Dickinson transforms silence into a mode of epistemological subversion. Rather than accepting silence as symbolic of female passivity, she reclaims it as a deliberate withholding—a refusal to conform to norms that equate speech with power and publicity with value.

In “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” Dickinson stages a dialogue between two self-declared "nobodies":

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d advertise – you know!

(Dickinson, 1960, p. 288)

What appears to be whimsical modesty masks a sharp critique of social structures that reward visibility and self-disclosure. The speaker's exclamatory urgency—"Don't tell!"—renders silence a form of intimacy and resistance. To be "Nobody" is not to be erased, but to opt out of a system that prizes spectacle over authenticity. Literary scholar Sharon Cameron (1979) notes that "Dickinson's reticence is not a failure of communication but a form of it" (p. 120), suggesting that silence operates as an intentional and communicative stance.

This epistemic modesty recurs in other poems that withhold definitive claims about selfhood or knowledge. In "This is my letter to the World," Dickinson again addresses the tension between the private self and public reception:

> This is my letter to the World
> That never wrote to Me –
> The simple News that Nature told –
> With tender Majesty
>
> (Dickinson, 1960, p. 347)

Here, the speaker frames her work as a solitary dispatch to an indifferent audience. The poem expresses both a yearning to be heard and a cautious detachment from communal judgment. The "letter" is not a declaration, but a gentle offering, couched in the humble phrasing of "simple News." The poet does not demand to be read or understood; she asks only for fairness from "Her Message," distancing herself from the egoistic assertiveness that might be expected of a public intellectual voice.

Furthermore, Dickinson frequently couples silence with metaphors of veiling or indirection. In "A narrow Fellow in the Grass," she builds suspense through what is not said:

> But never met this Fellow
> Attended or alone
> Without a tighter Breathing
> And Zero at the Bone –
>
> (Dickinson, 1960, p. 359)

The visceral final line—"Zero at the Bone"—is preceded by no explicit declaration of fear or danger. Instead, the speaker's physical reaction stands in for meaning, refusing explanation. The power of the poem resides in its restraint. Dickinson's silences, elisions, and indirect phrasings invite readers to experience rather than merely understand—a mode of epistemology that privileges emotional truth over declarative certainty.

Through such formal and thematic choices, Dickinson articulates a poetics of refusal rooted in gendered experience. She appropriates the societal expectation of feminine quietude, turning it into a critique of epistemic arrogance and a celebration of alternative ways of knowing. As Cristanne Miller (1987) observes, "Dickinson's poetry resists closure, both formally and philosophically, offering instead a humility before the unknown" (p. 83). In this light, silence becomes neither submission nor evasion, but a radical reimagining of voice.

3.3 Theological Hesitations: Silence and the Divine

Dickinson's engagement with theological themes also relies heavily on silence. In "He fumbles at your Soul" (Dickinson, 1960, p. 157), God's intrusion is marked by violent, ambiguous force, yet no definitive theological resolution is offered. In other poems, such as "There's a certain Slant of light", divine presence is suggested but never named:

> There's a certain Slant of light,
> Winter Afternoons –
> That oppresses, like the Heft
> Of Cathedral Tunes –
>
> (Dickinson, 1960, p. 121)

The silence in this poem is tonal as much as textual—a metaphysical pressure that cannot be directly articulated. The poem ends not in revelation but in withdrawal, the final line echoing absence: "When it goes, 'tis like the Distance / On the look of Death –" (Dickinson, 1960, p. 160).

Dickinson's use of poetic silence—through form, theme, and tone—functions as a kind of epistemological rebellion. Her poetry resists not only the formal conventions of her time but also the ideological structures that govern speech: gender norms, religious dogma, and linguistic authority. In her work, silence is not a void but a deliberate force—a refusal that becomes a mode of knowledge.

4. J.H. Prynne: Semantic Obscurity and Political Withdrawal

If Emily Dickinson's silence is elliptical and affectively intimate, J.H. Prynne's poetics embraces silence of another kind—one forged in lexical density, syntactic disruption, and semantic opacity. Prynne's poetry, particularly in *The White Stones* (Prynne J. H., 1969) and later collections such as *The Oval Window* (Prynne J. H., 2018), enacts a radical withdrawal from conventional meaning-making. His poetry refuses clarity not as an aesthetic game, but as an act of intellectual and political dissent. Silence in Prynne's work is embedded within language itself—it resides in the ungraspable nature of his lexicon, in the refusal of syntactic closure, and in the reader's sense of disorientation.

4.1 Lexical Density and the Obstruction of Immediate Meaning

One of Prynne's most defining techniques is his use of abstruse diction that resists immediate comprehension. Consider the opening lines from *The White Stones* (Prynne J. H., 1969, p. 10):

> So it is not now the outer form, but the real
> change that is grown into us, from the spindle to
> the spine.

This passage operates in a semantic twilight. The referents remain elusive; grammar points but does not fix meaning. Such linguistic opacity is not accidental but strategic. As critic Peter Middleton observes, "Prynne's poetry tests the limits of reading, exposing how much is already excluded by institutional and ideological control over language" (Middleton, 2005, p. 112). Silence, in this sense, is not merely the absence of speech but the presence of unreadability—a deliberate distancing of the poem from consumerist legibility.

4.2 Syntax and Disruption: Meaning as Political Refusal

Prynne's disrupted syntax and anti-lyrical tendencies also foster silence. Sentences often begin and disintegrate, leaving readers with fragments that frustrate expectation. In *The Oval Window* (Prynne J. H., 2018, p. 45), the lineation and enjambments produce an almost opaque verbal terrain:

> Admit again the cure which
> needles must enter: by means of
> the thread, delayed

The phrase "Admit again the cure" suggests submission, but what follows resists syntactic integration. The reader is forced into interpretive hesitation. According to N.H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge, this fragmentation is Prynne's critique of "the seamless discourses of political and economic power," where language becomes a tool of governance and erasure (Reeve & Kerridge, 1995, p. 87). Prynne's silences, embedded in the breakdown of syntactic expectation, defy the commodification of speech and resist instrumental reason.

4.3 The Ethics of Difficulty and the Silence of the Reader

J.H. Prynne's poetry demands heightened ethical attention to language, not through clarity but through resistance. His work obstructs ease, slowing the act of reading to near-stasis and transforming interpretation into a form of critical labor. This enforced difficulty generates silence—not as a lack of content but as a rupture within the reader's cognitive experience. Faced with linguistic density and semantic uncertainty, the reader is drawn into a space where comprehension falters. Yet, this failure is not inert; rather, it creates an ethical opening.

Drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of *listening*, we can understand this space as one of active receptivity. Nancy (2007) distinguishes listening from mere hearing, defining it as an attentiveness to *resonance*—to that which vibrates beyond direct comprehension. Listening, he writes, is "the opening of a subject to the outside, to what interrupts it and traverses it" (p. 21). Prynne's poetry, in this sense,

cultivates a readerly silence that is alive with attention rather than absence. It does not eliminate meaning but disperses it, refusing closure and inviting a sustained encounter with linguistic excess.

Take, for example, the opening lines of "Refuse Collection":

> The soil turned over retentively, grain by grain,
> the order of objects reversed
> for the taking back. No signal
> more than emulsion fracture
> under partial light, and loose binding.

(Prynne J. H., 2015, p. 147)

Here, sense is deferred at every turn. The syntax is fragmented, the referents unstable—what is "taken back"? What is the "emulsion fracture"? The poem offers no narrative anchor. Rather, the reader encounters language as sediment—layered, resistant, and unyielding. In this obstruction, Prynne enacts what N.H. Reeve (1999) describes as "a refusal to console the reader with interpretive familiarity" (p. 58). The poem becomes a site not of recognition but of patient uncertainty.

This poetic silence differs markedly from minimalist traditions or visually coded reticence. Prynne rarely employs ellipses or blank space to evoke quiet; instead, his silence is produced through saturation—layers of scientific jargon, archaic lexicon, fractured syntax, and unexpected juxtapositions that strain the reader's interpretive faculties. The opacity becomes the message. As critic N.H. Reeve (1999) notes, Prynne's language "requires not decoding but a different form of reading, one that listens to the possibility of meaning without expecting its arrival" (p. 58).

Another example, from "Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform", intensifies this deferral:

> The stricture pends
>
> and not in plain attire condones remorseful mineral
>
> slurped off glinting brackets of compound interest…

(Prynne J. H., 2015, p. 214)

Here, economic, sartorial, and mineralogical vocabularies collide. The enjambments and slashes disorient any attempt to fix meaning. The reader is pushed not to decode but to inhabit the tension of partial knowing. This textual silence—produced not by absence but by saturation—becomes an ethical space: one that confronts the limits of language and cognition without collapsing into nihilism.

Prynne's silence is thus profoundly different from Dickinson's elliptical interiority. Dickinson's dash invites the reader into an intimate pause; Prynne's semantic density overwhelms, turning language itself into a kind of noise so thick it becomes unreadable. In both cases, however, silence is a poetic ethic—a refusal to reduce language to commodity or closure.

In this way, poetic difficulty becomes a mode of ethical and political critique. By resisting the commodification of language into digestible insight or poetic epiphany, Prynne challenges the reader to remain within the discomfort of unknowing. The silence, then, does not belong to the poet or even the text—it resides within the reader's halted interpretive flow. If Emily Dickinson's silence is elliptical and inward, shaped by dashes and deferrals, Prynne's is the cacophony of excess—a textual noise so overwhelming it crosses into silence.

Ultimately, this ethical poetics rejects the presumption that literature must yield. It aligns with Charles Bernstein's assertion that "difficulty is not an obstacle; it is a material means for engagement with the social real" (Bernstein, 2011). In embracing the silence of unresolution, Prynne calls for a deeper listening—one that honors ambiguity as a space of moral and intellectual encounter.

5. Comparative Synthesis: Silence as Transhistorical Resistance

Though Emily Dickinson and J.H. Prynne write from radically different cultural and historical positions—Dickinson from the 19th-century domestic interior of Amherst, Massachusetts, and Prynne from the late-20th-century experimental avant-garde—their poetries are bound by a shared investment in silence as a critical and aesthetic mode. For

both, silence is not a deficit but a deliberate act: a presence articulated through form, structure, and readerly disorientation. As such, silence becomes a mode of resistance—against transparency, closure, and the presumption of stable meaning.

Dickinson's silence frequently emerges at the intersection of gender, theology, and epistemology. Her use of the dash, syntactic suspension, and tonal ambiguity interrupts normative linguistic flow, disrupting conventional patterns of understanding. As Cristanne Miller (1987) notes, Dickinson's syntax "delays or prevents completion of the thought," thus opening space for multiplicity and withholding (p. 45). This stylistic deferral operates within a broader feminist poetics. Alicia Ostriker (1986) describes such tactics as part of a "poetics of indirection," in which fragmentation and ambiguity offer a form of rhetorical self-preservation and power (p. 15). In this light, Dickinson's silence can be read not as reticence but as subversive agency—a refusal to participate in theological certainties or patriarchal rationalism. Poems such as "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –" enact this refusal vividly, where the final line trails off—"And then the Windows failed – and then / I could not see to see –"—leaving the reader in an unresolved, affectively charged silence (Dickinson, 1960, p. 109).

Prynne's poetics, by contrast, do not rely on visual markers of silence such as ellipses or dashes. Instead, his silence emerges through *semantic saturation*—an overloading of the poem's surface with specialized terminology, fractured syntax, and referential ambiguity. As Reeve and Kerridge (1995) observe, Prynne "constructs a text that evades appropriation," refusing incorporation into "dominant discursive economies" through his resistance to legibility (p. 103). In poems such as "Acquisition of Love", meaning is not merely withheld but scattered, fragmented, and displaced across technical and philosophical registers:

> ...by coarse collation
> affectingly confirmed. There is
> no tractable model—just the indices

of drift and coercive letdown.

(Prynne J. H., 2015, p. 496)

This poetic density produces a silence of another kind—one that forces the reader into a space of interpretive hesitation. Unlike Dickinson's textual quiet, Prynne's is a clamor so complex it collapses into a void of comprehension. Both modes, however, destabilize the reader's expectations and resist interpretive mastery.

Affect theory offers an additional lens through which to examine their shared aesthetic. Sara Ahmed (2004) reminds us that "emotions accumulate over time, creating impressions that stick" (p. 11). In both Dickinson and Prynne, silence is not merely formal but affective: it lingers, provokes, unsettles. Dickinson's poetic reticence often generates emotional residue—grief, awe, spiritual unrest—especially in her meditations on death and divinity. Prynne's opacity elicits a different affective palette: confusion, intellectual frustration, or critical vigilance. In either case, the reader is compelled not just to interpret silence but to feel it, embodying the very limits of language and affective intelligibility.

Philosophically, both poets confront the outer edges of language. Dickinson anticipates Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1922) proposition that "what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" (p. 27). Her refusal to finalize meaning suggests a poetic intuition of these linguistic boundaries. Prynne, more explicitly, engages a Derridean framework, where meaning is never fully present but constantly deferred—a process Jacques Derrida (1978) terms *différance* (p. 22). Silence, in Prynne's poetics, is the trace left by this perpetual deferral.

In comparing Dickinson and Prynne, what emerges is not a unified aesthetic but a shared ethical orientation. Silence, for both, becomes a means of disrupting hegemonic discourses—whether religious, gendered, political, or epistemological. Their poetry resists the commodification of meaning, challenging the reader to engage language not as a vehicle for clarity but as a site of struggle. In this way, their work offers a form of transhistorical resistance: silence as an aesthetic strategy and as a moral

stance, urging us to rethink the conditions under which meaning becomes legible at all.

6. Conclusion

To read silence in poetry is to engage with what resists articulation—what emerges in the spaces between words, in the hesitations of syntax, and in the opacity of expression. In the works of Emily Dickinson and J.H. Prynne, silence is not a passive absence but an active poetic strategy. It functions as a form of resistance, interrogating the authority of linguistic transparency and disrupting dominant epistemologies. Though these poets differ in historical context, formal method, and philosophical lineage, their work converges in a shared commitment to unsettling the limits of what language can—ethically and politically—do.

This study has argued that silence in their poetry is not a lack but a force: a rhetorical and affective presence that exposes the fissures in systems of knowledge and representation. Dickinson enacts this through syntactic fragmentation and elliptical modesty, often shaped by her gendered position within 19th-century cultural constraints. Her use of the dash and her refusal of closure destabilize interpretive certainty and privilege multiplicity. By contrast, Prynne's semantic density and discursive disorientation enact a more abrasive form of resistance, pressing language to its limits and challenging interpretive mastery. Despite their different methods, both poets articulate silence as a critique of domination—whether theological, patriarchal, or late-capitalist.

Framed through affect theory, Romantic negative capability, and poststructuralist thought, this transhistorical reading positions silence as an aesthetic ethic—a refusal to stabilize meaning and a provocation to engage with the unresolvable. In this context, both poets render silence a site of critical intensity. As Sara Ahmed (2004) notes, affect "sticks"—and in these works, silence adheres to the text as an emotional and epistemic residue (p. 11). Dickinson's silence resonates with grief, awe, or reverence; Prynne's with disorientation, vigilance, and resistance. In both cases, meaning is not delivered but deferred, inviting the reader to

dwell in ambiguity and encounter the limits of language as ethically charged terrain.

In an era of accelerated communication and discursive excess, the poetics of silence acquires renewed urgency. Dickinson and Prynne remind us that what is withheld may carry more ethical weight than what is proclaimed; that resistance may reside not in amplification, but in interruption. Future scholarship might extend this inquiry beyond the Anglo-American lyric to explore how poetic silence operates across cultures, genres, or digital media landscapes. In doing so, we continue to ask: what is the cost of what we cannot say—and what is the power of refusing to say it?

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