



**UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU**

This is a self-archived – parallel-published version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details. When using please cite the original.

AUTHOR	Tynan Avril
TITLE	What Absence Doesn't Say: Revisiting Reticence, Interpretation, and Ethics
YEAR	2024
DOI	10.2307/jj.22212189.16
VERSION	Author accepted manuscript
CITATION	Tynan, Avril, and Helena Duffy. "What Absence Doesn't Say: Revisiting Reticence, Interpretation, and Ethics." <i>Trauma, Ethics, Hermeneutics: Essays in Honour of Colin Davis</i> , NED-New edition, Modern Humanities Research Association, 2024, pp. 181–97. <a href="https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.22212189.16">https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.22212189.16</a> .

## Chapter 11

### What Absence Doesn't Say: Revisiting Reticence, Interpretation, and Ethics

Avril Tynan, University of Turku

#### Secrets...

Across Colin Davis's impressive *œuvre*, the textual spaces of absence, enigma, and ambiguity have been a constant focus of his critique of narrative's ethical demands. Since his early publications on Elie Wiesel, Davis has shown meaning to be disrupted, dissipated, or hidden within the structure of the text itself.<sup>1</sup> Davis argues that narrative, acting as a device to demonstrate the shattering of identity, faith, family, and significance that the Shoah produced, is often unintelligible, interrupted, and obscured. Although he maintains that Wiesel's texts retain an extraordinary effort to establish 'structural harmony' and a 'carefully ordered account of the breakdown of order', Davis identifies what he calls the 'dissipation of meaning' in works such as *La Nuit* (1958) [Night], *Le Testament d'un poète juif assassiné* (1980) [The Testament], and *L'Oublié* (1989) [The Forgotten].<sup>2</sup> There is a curious tension, he argues, between the author's narrative attempts to understand the Shoah and the knowledge that understanding is not possible.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on the caesura, lacunae, and absences of narrative, Davis argues in *Elie Wiesel's Secretive Texts* that Wiesel's narratives are demonstrative of a profound attempt to preserve the inexplicability, incoherence, and meaninglessness of the Shoah. He indicates the importance of absence and silence in Wiesel's texts as a means of inhibiting interpretation and the intolerable reduction of impenetrable knowledge to conventional structures of meaning. Meaning, he contends, is not to be transmitted but rather to be interminably sought by both the reader and the author, not at

---

<sup>1</sup> Colin Davis, 'Understanding the Concentration Camps: Elie Wiesel's *La Nuit* and Jorge Semprun's *Quel Beau Dimanche!*', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 28.3 (1991), 291–303; *Elie Wiesel's Secretive Texts* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Davis, 'Understanding the Concentration Camps', pp. 293–94.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

the behest of a ‘hermeneutic freedom’ that inheres in never-ending interpretation but rather through the foreclosure of interpretation itself.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter I argue that narrative gaps and absences may not incite interpretation so much as impede its implementation. Against Freudian approaches to literary theory that gesture to the interminability of interpretation, I follow Davis in suggesting that narrative gaps may instead call for ‘an end to interpretation’ that is couched in an ethical sensitivity to the narrative’s secrets *as secrets*.<sup>5</sup> Although Freud notes, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, that the analysis of a dream will always be more substantial than the dream itself and that ‘over-interpretation’ is necessary to elicit the full range of meanings, I draw on recent theories of interpretation to argue that the reader’s desire to ‘fill in the gaps’ is rooted in the need to make sense of senselessness and, as has been well documented, is a common feature not only of literary realisation but of everyday life.<sup>6</sup> Freud writes that ‘it is in fact never possible to be sure that a dream has been completely interpreted. Even if the solution seems satisfactory and without gaps, the possibility always remains that the dream may have yet another meaning’.<sup>7</sup> What troubles me in this claim, however, is the ethical limit of any and all hermeneutic work, a concern to which Davis has repeatedly returned, most notably in *Traces of War*, through his circumspect contestation of interpretation as the infallible illumination of meaning.<sup>8</sup> Building towards what I have elsewhere called an ‘interpretative humility’, I suggest that narrative absence is not always a call for interpretation or an appeal to the reader

---

<sup>4</sup> Davis, *Elie Wiesel’s Secretive Texts*, pp. 175–81 (p. 175).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>6</sup> Ellen Spolsky goes so far as to argue that bridging gaps in understanding is ‘the daily business of all human minds’: *Gaps in Nature: Literary Interpretation and the Modular Mind* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 2. See also Jerome Bruner, ‘Life as Narrative’, *Social Research*, 54.1 (1987), 11–32; *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); ‘Self-Making Narratives’, in *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self: Developmental and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. by Robyn Fivush and Catherine A. Haden (New York & Hove: Psychology Press, 2013), pp. 209–25; Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récit. Tome 3: Le Temps raconté* (Paris: Seuil, 1985); *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990); H. Porter Abbott, *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), pp. 92–94.

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1900], trans. and ed. by James Strachey (New York: Basic, 2010), p. 297. Davis incorporates an analysis of *The Interpretation of Dreams* into his development of a traumatic hermeneutics (TW, 29–34).

<sup>8</sup> Davis makes a similar argument in relation to cinema in *Silent Renoir: Philosophy and the Interpretation of Early Film* (Cham: Springer, 2021).

to fill in the gaps of meaning and coherence.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, narrative absences may be meaningful in themselves as silences, secrets, and gaps that obscure, frustrate, and dispel meanings. The problem, to which Frank Kermode alerts us, is that literary scholars have the ‘wrong kind of eyes’ for such reading, trained instead to privilege the ‘superiority of latent over manifest sense’ as proof of belonging to some sort of intellectual elite.<sup>10</sup> The paradox, as Kermode articulates it and as Davis corroborates in a number of his Kermode-inspired readings, is that interpretation is always the hallmark of those who do not (yet) understand and who will never understand: ‘Only those who already know the mysteries — what the stories really mean — can discover what the stories really mean’.<sup>11</sup>

To refrain from interpretation means accepting what Kermode suggests is at the root of any interpretative endeavour, that is, accepting the failure to understand in advance of any attempt to understand. For the literary scholar, such an admission of failure even before attempting to demonstrate what Kermode refers to as a sort of spiritual interpretation that would grant admission into the elite circle of a text’s veritable insiders runs contrary to every institutional tool and teaching. To acknowledge not only that a certain element of a text remains uninterpretable but, more importantly and problematically, to refrain from any interpretative work before casting such a ruinous conclusion is anathema to the task of the literary scholar. Yet at stake in this chapter is precisely such a demonstration of the need to resist interpretation in order to preserve the secrets of the Other. Turning from post-war French literature, which has been the staple of Davis’s own theoretical criticism throughout his career, to experimental British literature and the role of interpretation in the critical medical humanities, I show how interpretation carries ethical consequences when it serves to obscure a narrative gap that is to be understood not as an anticipatory repository for ‘positive content’ but as a space of silence and secrecy that is not simply uninterpretable but should not

---

<sup>9</sup> Avril Tynan, ‘Overreading Illness: Interpretation and Narrative Absence’, *Storyworlds*, 11.2 (2019), 27–52.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Kermode, ‘Secrets and Narrative Sequence’, in *On Narrative*, ed. by William John Thomas Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 79–97 (p. 96); *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 2. Davis draws primarily on Kermode’s *The Genesis of Secrecy* in his second monograph, *Elie Wiesel’s Secretive Texts*. Following Kermode’s literary analysis of interpretation from the gospels to what Kermode claimed was the mythic, modernist structure of Henry Green’s *Party Going*, Davis argues that Wiesel’s structural and semantic infusion of secrets into his narratives simultaneously drives interpretation at the same time as it dooms it to failure.

<sup>11</sup> Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, p. 3.

be interpreted.<sup>12</sup> The implications of such an approach have consequences not only for interpretation theory writ large but for literary readings of absences that are particularly common in vulnerable contexts of forgetting and trauma to name only the two most prevalent. Interpretative humility compels us, as readers and critics, to think twice before excavating meaning from narrative gaps, not as a recourse to an inattentive suppression of the secrets that otherwise intrude into narrative sequence and constitute the yoke of literary authors' hopes for underreading, but as a means to preserve the inalienable uncertainty of the Other's experience by encouraging the reader to face up to narrative absence as that which does not await interpretation but stalls it.<sup>13</sup> This is not, in other words, another attempt to articulate the now well-trammelled roads of interpretative impossibility, particularly where questions of trauma and the Shoah arise, but a more sensitive endeavour to formulate a need for reticence in the face of the unknown and the unknowable. Rather than demonstrating how interpretation is not possible, I show here how the reader must sometimes accept that interpretation is to be attentively resisted. Against the prolific influences of psychoanalytic and deconstructive theories of interpretation that encourage the unremitting interpretation of the text, I show that the narrative gap is not necessarily a vessel for undisclosed meaning to be filled in by the reader but is instead already the overt disclosure of the absence of meaning.

### **...and lies**

In his concluding remarks to a 1991 issue of *New Literary History* titled *Institutions of Interpretation*, Wolfgang Iser notes that the answer to the implicit question of 'why we interpret' is itself undermined by hermeneutic uncertainty: 'Do we interpret because we have to grasp what is given, or do we produce the need to understand by the very act of interpretation?'<sup>14</sup> Whichever the answer, he argues that 'one of the reasons for the necessity of interpretation is tied to the fact that texts are always meant to mean something. Whenever language is used, meaning is to be expected'.<sup>15</sup> In the following discussion, I outline and challenge how the instrumentalisation of interpretation as a means of soliciting and eliciting meaning from text may be ethically problematic if it fails to anticipate how texts may be intentionally ambiguous, incomplete, or incoherent. When interpretation takes place without limits, it accounts not only for an understanding of the text but carries the potential for

---

<sup>12</sup> Davis, *Elie Wiesel's Secretive Texts*, p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> See Kermode, 'Secrets and Narrative Sequence'.

<sup>14</sup> Wolfgang Iser, 'Concluding Remarks', *New Literary History*, 22.1 (1991), 231–39 (p. 239).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

misunderstanding too, for the generation of false meaning from meaninglessness. In other words, if interpretation is a tool for the generation of meaning then incomprehension is incompatible with interpretation. What we need, therefore, is a means of stalling or resisting interpretation and of learning to accept that some gaps are better left unfilled and unfillable.

In Iser's phenomenological approach to reading, he argues that the realisation of a literary work is the result of a dynamic process between reader and text. Equipped with the 'raw material' of the text, the reader imaginatively interweaves and interprets both written and unwritten elements to bring the passive material into existence.<sup>16</sup> Above all, Iser highlights the importance of the text's indeterminacies and gaps that act as catalysts for the reader's creative participation in the construction of the literary work:

One text is potentially capable of several different realisations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled.<sup>17</sup>

Textual absence is, for Iser, an intentional tool employed by the author to incite the reader's imagination, drawing them into the work as a co-participant in the creation of meaning. Narrative gaps, in this formulation, are an invitation to imagine, to supplement the text in the deconstructive tradition, simultaneously complementing it and compensating for what it lacks.<sup>18</sup> Emphasising the text's illusive objectivity and lack of permanency, this approach to reading grants the reader the power to determine meaning through interpretation. As Iser suggests: 'If fiction stubbornly refuses to reveal the sought-for meaning, then the reader will decide what it has to mean'.<sup>19</sup> Yet granting the reader such indomitable authority over a text's meaning raises the spectre of mismanagement, misappropriation, and misunderstanding. As Wayne C. Booth has noted, there is no way of controlling the work of interpretation or of guarding against the possibility that readers end up 'pursuing their own interests unchecked by intentions'.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History*, 3.2 (1972), 279–99 (p. 283).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967).

<sup>19</sup> Wolfgang Iser, 'Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction', in *Aspects of Narrative (English Institute Essays)*, ed. by J. Hillis Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 1–46 (p. 41).

<sup>20</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 19.

In *The Aims of Interpretation*, a collection of essays on the correlation and competition between meaning and significance in the theory and practice of interpretation, E. D. Hirsch demonstrates the ambiguity and instability of literary interpretation. Following his claim in *Validity in Interpretation* that ‘meaning is an affair of consciousness not of words’, Hirsch demonstrates that the meaning of a text is a highly individualised and subjective knowledge arising from the sign-system that invariably differs between different interpreters and between interpreters and the intended meaning of the original author.<sup>21</sup> Significance, on the other hand, refers to the value produced by any textual meaning and varies between times, places, and persons. Both of these concepts, however, inhere in the human relationship to the text, because the text in itself has no meaning and thus no significance for society: ‘We, not our texts, are the makers of the meanings we understand, a text being only an occasion for meaning, in itself an ambiguous form devoid of the consciousness where meaning abides’.<sup>22</sup> The risk, of course, is that any text, which has ‘no meaning except that which an interpreter wills into existence’, may therefore mean ‘whatever we construe it to mean’ with little or no congruence to the author’s intended or original meaning.<sup>23</sup> The greatest problem, for Hirsch, is not only that no reader can know for certain that they have understood the intended meaning of the author but that the author themselves can never know the absolute extent of their own intended meanings. The author realistically cannot convey all the meanings they had in mind when they wrote the text; but more significantly still, they cannot know all of the meanings they may have had in mind and which may or may not have made their way into the text, whether by intent or by accident.<sup>24</sup> If a reader claims to know more about the text than the original author, to be aware, in other words, not only of conscious meanings but of unconscious meanings that inconspicuously infiltrated the final text, the reader’s interpretation does not constitute de facto a ‘better understanding’ of the intended meaning but rather a distortion or falsification, a ‘misunderstanding of the author’s meaning’.<sup>25</sup>

Such misunderstanding is exactly what Davis cautions against in his readings of Wiesel’s fiction, which ‘faces the challenge of [...] transmitting a message that it does not

---

<sup>21</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

<sup>24</sup> Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

know how to formulate'.<sup>26</sup> The author's intended meaning — an inconclusive and 'continuing desire for the restitution of the union of event and meaning' — is thus unknown, not unconsciously so but consciously flagged as utter meaninglessness that disavows the sorts of carnal or spiritual knowledge that might redeem the Shoah through literature or art.<sup>27</sup> To curb the rendering of contentious and inappropriate meaning, Davis concludes that Wiesel's works disclose 'not the content of the secret, open to interpretation and verification, but the secret as such; or even [...] the eclipse of the secret, its vanishing from the consciousness of its bearer'.<sup>28</sup> Nothing is hidden in the text precisely because this nothingness is never known by anyone, including the author. Any attempt to understand the secrets of the text will always, in Hirsch's formulation, constitute a misunderstanding because the original meaning was never known to begin with. To claim to understand, in such cases, will always constitute misunderstanding, a wild distortion that finds in the text something that was never there to be found. In Davis's reading of Wiesel's Holocaust texts, interpretation fails, not because it is not possible — on the contrary the reader is capable of endlessly interpreting the text's secrets — but because interpretation is futile: 'Wiesel's fiction describes the paralysis of the intellect rather than the joyous liberation of meaning. [...] The disclosure that the text would not deliver its secrets in fact brought an end to interpretation'.<sup>29</sup> To disclose these secrets is only to fabricate a lie that supplants the space of a narrative gap with a claim to know something, to know more than the author, or anyone, can ever know.

The challenge of course is that readers, and especially literary scholars, are institutionally trained to 'pry into secrets' and respond to a text with suspicion and scepticism.<sup>30</sup> The imposition of meaning where no meaning is to be found can have detrimental effects on understanding when it facilitates, all too easily, a desperate misunderstanding to compensate for the academic fear of meaninglessness. What is needed instead is a form of interpretative humility that resists the temptation to fill in narrative gaps in order to create meaning at the expense of intention. Such reticence to interpret would continue to value narrative as an effective means of communication but would also acknowledge and value the persistence of narrative gaps as spaces of incommunicable and

---

<sup>26</sup> Davis, *Elie Wiesel's Secretive Texts*, p. 182.

<sup>27</sup> Davis, 'Understanding the Concentration Camps', p. 294.

<sup>28</sup> Davis, *Elie Wiesel's Secretive Texts*, p. 184.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>30</sup> Kermode, 'Secrets and Narrative Sequence', p. 84.

ungraspable meaninglessness. Narrative gaps need not incite readers to narrative creation but alert them instead to the limits of understanding that shape the encounter with the Other.

### **Mind the Gap**

In *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable*, H. Porter Abbott challenges Iser's espousal of the gap as the experiential crux of the reader-text dynamic to argue that there is a corresponding if contradictory advantage to not filling in narrative gaps: 'If narrative comes alive as we fill in its gaps, it also gains life by leaving some of them unfilled. In the art of narrative, less can be more'.<sup>31</sup> Yet the all-too-human desire to (re)construct order and meaning may lead to the reader's 'amending' the text if the gap continues to resist closure.<sup>32</sup> When faced with an egregious gap — a gap that cannot be filled by the reader but must be filled if the narrative is to be resolved or completed — he suggests that 'the most accurate readings [...] will leave this gap as empty as its author most definitely left it'.<sup>33</sup>

This is hard. The interpreting mind, like nature, abhors a vacuum. But if you stifle the interpretative imperative (which in instances of egregious gaps means stifling the narrative imperative), the act comes with its own reading [...]: that is, that there is wisdom in accepting with a full cognitive embrace the fact that there are things we simply do not know and cannot know.<sup>34</sup>

By resisting the temptation to fill in the gaps of narrative, Abbott argues that the reader gains an uncomfortable but important experiential knowledge of how it feels to be immersed in the unknown. Moreover, he suggests that authors may deliberately exploit narrative gaps as epistemological and experiential tools of the unknowable so that 'readers [...] can be made not only to know that they don't know, which is a matter of understanding, but also to be immersed in the condition of unknowing, which is a matter of experience'.<sup>35</sup> In refusing to accommodate the reader, narrative gaps can no longer be converted into dynamic spaces of interaction and intersubjectivity but instead place intentional limits on the hospitality of the Other in the text.

---

<sup>31</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 98.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114–15.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

This, precisely, is what Davis argues is at stake in Wiesel's works. Where fiction resists the disclosure of secrets, it is in order to stave off the aggressive intrusion of interpretation that would 'bring comfort' by reducing intolerable and inexpressible experience to 'familiar structures'.<sup>36</sup> Dirk G. Lange, elaborating a 'hermeneutics of silence', argues that readers are uncomfortable with silence 'and will quickly seek to build a house — a hermeneutic — to contain it and explain it'.<sup>37</sup> The egregious gap on the other hand, an unmistakable silence in the text, is *unheimlich*: unhomelike and unfamiliar. Through such a formulation, narrative gaps do not constitute spaces at which the reader enters the text but, conversely, indicate spaces in which the reader is not welcome, into which the reader must be unwilling or unable to enter. Narrative gaps thus better alert us to the limits of understanding, delineating the bounds of narrative communication and the sanctity of secrets.

Such a theoretical approach to the resistance of interpretation has important consequences for the ways in which readers approach narrative gaps. In literary trauma theory, for example, gap-filling has become endemic to the performative working through of trauma, not as a creative enterprise of construction — although such claims abound in criticism of psychoanalysis, including in the Wolf Man's verbal attack on Freud — but as an uncovering of latent stories.<sup>38</sup> In the example of the train crash in *Moses and Monotheism* in which 'someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident', Freud emphasised the lapse of time before symptoms of the shock appear.<sup>39</sup> He termed this temporal delay an 'incubation period' or 'latency' and argued that it was an essential symptom of traumatic neurosis.<sup>40</sup> Influential in the arguments of Cathy Caruth, Freud's notion of latency became foundational to an understanding of trauma as that which can be diagnosed only after 'the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return'.<sup>41</sup> This psychoanalytic framework privileged the presence of absence: for trauma to *be* it had to *be absent* in anticipation of a latent return. This event-based model of trauma was instrumental in galvanising contemporary literary discussions that seek to guide

---

<sup>36</sup> Davis, *Elie Wiesel's Secretive Texts*, pp. 182, 184.

<sup>37</sup> Dirk G. Lange, 'Hermeneutics of Silence', *Worship*, 79 (2005), 523–35 (p. 534).

<sup>38</sup> See Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 525–54.

<sup>39</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* [1939], trans. by Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1955), p. 84.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>41</sup> Caruth, 'Introduction', p. 7.

interpretation towards the discovery of latent meanings, particularly in texts that focalise extreme events of human suffering.

Following the two World Wars, interest in trauma and the representational challenges of traumatic experience emerged as a problematic field of exploration as tensions arose between what could be termed ‘traumatic’, and therefore unrepresentable, unimaginable, and unspeakable, and narrative itself which demonstrated a level of mastery over the experience. For Judith Butler, in *Undoing Gender*, trauma, like a secret, is resistant to narrative structure and sequence and is not to be found in narrative itself but precisely as that which evades narrative.<sup>42</sup> In the works of Caruth, and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Butler notes that trauma is defined by its impossibility of representation and recollection, embodied in ‘the *gap* that disrupts all efforts at narrative reconstruction’.<sup>43</sup> If one is to discover the reality of a traumatic event the psychoanalyst cannot resort to empirical evidence at the level of narratable and representable history but ‘will have to become a reader of the ellipsis, the gap, the absence’.<sup>44</sup> Such reading of narrative gaps as repositories of latent — but always already manifest — meaning has deeply distorted the ways in which literary scholars approach texts today. Davis himself asks in *Traces of War*, as he elaborates a ‘traumatic hermeneutics’ that approaches a text or film as simultaneously performing and prohibiting the representation of trauma, how we can mediate between interpretation, underinterpretation, misinterpretation, and overinterpretation if trauma is only recognisable through its absence:

How do we distinguish between signs which are absent because there is nothing for them to signify and signs which are absent because what they signify is too dark, repressed and unknowable to be given manifest form? A person or text which does not appear traumatised may be, quite simply, not traumatised; or they may be so profoundly traumatised that they cannot acknowledge it. (*TW*, 30)

Influenced by poststructural trauma theory, narrative gaps have become symptomatic of latent narrative presence, not only in the workings of trauma, but in the interpretation of texts more broadly. One need only think of the extensive commentaries on notorious narrative gaps in works of postwar French literature to see how interpretative focus often shifts away from

---

<sup>42</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 153.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153, my emphasis.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

narrative and towards the egregious gap with the expectation that it will yield a particularly traumatic secret.<sup>45</sup>

In his work on Camus and Semprun, Davis probes the ethics and efficacies of interpreting narrative secrets. In his extended commentary on Felman's reading of Camus's *La Chute*, he argues that Felman misses 'something of the work's elusive core' by filling in the narrative's gap.<sup>46</sup> He challenges her assumption that what happens on the bridge is indeed a suicide and that the narrator's trauma, of which the text bears the markers of absence, stems from his failure to witness this event. 'By doing so,' Davis argues, '[Felman] attempts to disambiguate a work that continues to frustrate any demand for clarity' and obscures the text's 'reluctance to yield its final secrets'.<sup>47</sup> In other words, she summons meaning from meaninglessness and claims to disclose a secret that cannot be revealed. Drawing on Derrida's reading of Freud's analysis of his grandson's so-called 'fort-da' game, Davis argues that the 'secret' of literature may not be any particular referent or latent content but precisely the lack of any stable or definite meaning, origin, or destination.<sup>48</sup> In his readings of the works of Jorge Semprun who, like Wiesel, survived the Shoah — albeit under remarkably dissimilar circumstances — Davis argues that despite the prodigious loquaciousness of his works, the author displays a curious 'reticence' in his novels that 'leave one with a sense that

---

<sup>45</sup> The 'missing' of the event on the bridge in Albert Camus's *La Chute* (1956) [The Fall], the parenthesised ellipsis in Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) [W, or the Memory of Childhood] which marks a rupture between Chapters 11 and 12, and the break in Jorge Semprun's *Le Grand Voyage* (1963) [The Long Voyage] that separates two unequally weighted sections of the narrative have all been the subject of speculation and acclaim. See for example Felman, 'Camus' *The Fall*, or the Betrayal of the Witness'; Brett Ashley Kaplan, "'The Bitter Residue of Death": Jorge Semprun and the Aesthetics of Holocaust Memory', *Comparative Literature*, 55.4 (2003), 320–37; Sally M. Silk, 'The Dialogical Traveler: A Reading of Semprun's *Le grand voyage*', *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 14.2 (1990), 223–40; Ian James, 'Death, Memory, Subjectivity: Perec's *W, ou le souvenir d'enfance*', in *Amnesia: Private and Public Memory in Public French Culture*, ed. by Peter Collier, Anna Magdalena Elsner, and Olga Smith (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 29–39; Paul J. Schwartz, 'The Unifying Structures of George Perec's Suspended Memoirs', *International Fiction Review*, 12.2 (1985), 71–73; Peter Wagstaff, 'Utopia and Autobiography: Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*', *Utopian Studies*, 8.2 (1997), 87–103.

<sup>46</sup> Colin Davis, 'What Happened? Camus's *La Chute*, Shoshana Felman and the Witnessing of Trauma', *French Forum*, 36.1 (2011), 37–53 (p. 39).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 51.

<sup>48</sup> Colin Davis, 'What Fiction Doesn't Say: Reticence in Semprun's Novels', in *Writing and Life, Literature and History: On Jorge Semprun*, ed. by Liran Razinsky (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 41–55 (p. 54).

something remains unsaid, but that this “something” cannot be identified’.<sup>49</sup> In one of his fictional works, *Netchaïev est de retour* (1987) [Nechayev is Back] Semprun creates a cacophony of repetitions that do not, Davis argues, mask an originary source of trauma or inspiration for the novel but instead point to a necessarily ‘ungraspable [...] secret that propels and eludes narration’.<sup>50</sup> The novel’s secrets remain secretive, delineated but never discovered. Following Davis and Abbott, I contend that narrative gaps may resist interpretative efforts in order to indicate the limits of understanding and communication. Narrative gaps need not delineate a negative space to be filled in with positive content but might more constructively be understood as spaces in which ‘some thing or word should be but isn’t *and won’t ever be*’ and, I should add, never was to begin with.<sup>51</sup> Recognising the inviolability of the narrative gap leads to a more sensitive understanding of another’s experience as unknown and unknowable. Turning now to the methodologies of narrative medicine, I argue that the growing expectation for narrativity in the field instrumentalises interpretation as a way of filling in the gaps of patients’ stories but overlooks how the silences and absences of narrative may be informative in themselves as spaces of incoherence and incomprehension.

### **Narrative Medicine’s Narrative Gaps**

Despite his work on trauma and memory, Davis’s mappings of a traumatic hermeneutics and of the problematics of literary interpretation have thus far remained confined to the limits of postwar francophone literature. Yet his mediation of gaps and absences as spaces of narrative reticence and literary secrecy has much to contribute to other fields engaging with interpretative theories, methodologies, and practices. In particular, revisiting narrative medicine through the lens of Davis’s work may help to illuminate the ways in which the interpretation of silence and absence must be guided by an attention to the alterity of the Other.

Narrative medicine is an interpretative practice. Following the ‘narrative turn’ in biomedical discourses that dominated the latter half of the twentieth century, narrative medicine is attentive to the ways that experiences of illness and disease are interwoven with

---

<sup>49</sup> Some of the differences between the experiences of Semprun and Wiesel were discussed by the two survivor-authors in a televised conversation in 1995. Jorge Semprun and Elie Wiesel, *Se taire est impossible* (Paris: Mille et une nuits/Arte, 1995); Davis, ‘What Fiction Doesn’t Say’, p. 54.

<sup>50</sup> Davis, ‘What Fiction Doesn’t Say’, p. 55.

<sup>51</sup> Abbott, *Real Mysteries*, p. 3.

structures and stories of power and privilege. Challenging the reductionist, mechanised approaches of evidence-based medicine, narrative medicine encourages healthcare providers to listen to, understand, and interpret the stories of their patients in order to provide more effective, humane, and ethical care.<sup>52</sup> At the heart of this narrative practice is a methodology rooted in a process of close reading ‘in which the reader [...] pays attention not only to the words and the plot but to all aspects of the literary apparatus of the text’, including rhythm, syntax, imagery, and word choice.<sup>53</sup> Rita Charon describes close reading as the ‘signature method’ of narrative medicine, encouraging the reader or listener to pay close attention to ‘*all* that is contained in the patient’s words, silences, metaphors, genres, and allusions’ and, specifically, to question ‘what has been left out of a text’, ‘that which is present by inference or effect or silence alone’.<sup>54</sup> In Charon’s close reading, the patient’s narrative always means more than it says.

Narrative medicine places great significance on the habits of close reading as a ‘means of crossing the gap of unknowingness between individual and another’.<sup>55</sup> In the process, narrative gaps are identified and interpreted as salient but secret elements of the patient’s story that risk inhibiting and hindering caregiving practices if they are not adequately detected and deciphered. The role of the clinician is to find and fill in these gaps as symptoms of underlying or unspoken but interconnected experiences awaiting interpretation:

The trainee comes to realise that, until told or written or in some way represented, events remain unheard, unconfigured, and therefore imperceptible. Such unformed chaotic experiences will not allow themselves to be known. But once configured by language or image or composition, once form has been conferred onto the unformed, the chaos is discernible both by those who witness it and those who hear accounts of it. Once represented, the chaos is at least potentially comprehensible. It will then have been recognised.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. vii.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>54</sup> Rita Charon, ‘Close Reading: The Signature Method of Narrative Medicine’, in *The Principles and Practice of Narrative Medicine*, ed. by Rita Charon and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 157–79 (p. 107); *Narrative Medicine*, pp. 116, 115.

<sup>55</sup> Charon, ‘Close Reading’, p. 168.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

By privileging narrative communication in the clinic, gaps are deemed to be antagonistic to the medical encounter. That which cannot be put into words — whether the words of the patient or of the clinician — remains chaotic and incomprehensible, antithetical to the production of mutual understanding that would contribute towards diagnosis and treatment.

I contend that narrative medicine has much to gain from a stronger appreciation of the value of narrative gaps. In opposition to the ways in which narrative medicine has attempted to highlight gaps in patient narratives as negative spaces to be filled by the clinician's interpretations, the clinician may benefit instead from acknowledging the patient's narrative gaps as spaces of impenetrable difference. Indeed, narrative medicine's approach to the narrative gap has already been criticised on the grounds that it espouses an Iser-inspired imaginative engagement with unfamiliar people, places, and possibilities that claims to offer an active experiencing of the Other's world.<sup>57</sup> Scholars such as Jeffrey Bishop, Ann Jurecic, and Anne Whitehead challenge narrative medicine's claim to cultivate empathic medical practitioners.<sup>58</sup> Literary narratives, they argue, and particularly fictions, have been instrumentalised as purely positive, cognitively-enlarging 'tools' in service of the training of an innate empathetic skill.<sup>59</sup> Inspired by affective approaches to empathy, they demonstrate that those advocating for the reading of literature in medical education often trivialise the intersectional differences that constitute any individual experience of disease or illness.<sup>60</sup> They do not reject the potential of literature in medical practice; instead, they suggest that literary fiction may be more constructively understood as an ethically valuable tool if it can shape the limits of empathy and understanding by encouraging us to look out for, and even to imagine, the multiple ways in which we experience the world differently to others. Literary fiction may therefore be valuable for the workings of narrative medicine not because it allows the reader to enter into the 'home of the text' but because it can help to identify differences, disruptions, and disturbances.<sup>61</sup> Although I do not deny that narrative has a valuable role to

---

<sup>57</sup> Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, pp. 111–12.

<sup>58</sup> Jeffrey Bishop, 'Rejecting Medical Humanism: Medical Humanities and the Metaphysics of Medicine', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 29.1 (2008), 15–25; Ann Jurecic, 'Empathy and the Critic', *College English*, 74.1 (2011), 10–27; Anne Whitehead and Angela Woods, *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Anne Whitehead, *Medicine and Empathy in Contemporary British Fiction: An Intervention in Medical Humanities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017). Cf. Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, pp. vii–viii.

<sup>59</sup> Jurecic, 'Empathy and the Critic', p. 11.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid; Whitehead, *Medicine and Empathy in Contemporary British Fiction*.

<sup>61</sup> Charon, *Narrative Medicine*, p. 112.

play in countering the empirical thrust of modern biomedicine, I suggest that narrative interpretation would benefit from a reticence or humility in the encounter with the Other that would map and observe differences rather than similarities. By adopting an interpretative humility in the face of narrative gaps, the practitioner acknowledges and preserves the limitations of understanding that which is incontrovertibly Other, inaccessible, and unknown.

Turning now to a work of experimental fiction that varies in thematic and generic ways from the sorts of literary works Davis chooses to address, I demonstrate how filling in narrative gaps can result in an extraordinarily erroneous misunderstanding of the text that has grave ethical consequences. Although the text in question presents narrative gaps in a very specific way and cannot be considered uncritically as an avatar of all literature in general, the analysis alerts us to the possibilities and limitations presented by both interpretation and its restraint. While narrative can help us gain a deeper understanding of situations and actions that differ in multifarious ways from our own, narrative gaps have a similarly valuable role to play in demonstrating the limits of experiential and empirical understanding.

### ***House Mother Normal***

Published in 1971 by B. S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal* follows the eclectic, fragmentary, and episodic style of the experimental British author's earlier works, including *Albert Angelo* (1964) and *The Unfortunates* (1969), both of which share with the later work a tangible incitement to the reader to engage with the text.<sup>62</sup> While *The Unfortunates* is composed of twenty-seven unbounded sections designed to be read in any order, *Albert Angelo* is typographically designed for readers to cut holes at the bottom of certain pages, so that from page 149 the reader catches a, albeit misleading, glimpse of the events to come on page 153.<sup>63</sup> *House Mother Normal*, following these irreverent authorial decisions, similarly deploys unstable narrative form and typography to disrupt the reading experience and illustrate different perspectives and the entanglements of interconnected and overlapping subjects and stories. Yet the graphic narrative gaps that punctuate the metafictional work reveal, albeit by virtue of an exaggerated and highly stylised manner, how our drive to fill in

---

<sup>62</sup> Some parts of this section have been previously published in Avril Tynan, 'Mind the Gap: From Empathy to Erasure in Narrative Fiction', *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 14.3 (2020), 353–69.

<sup>63</sup> This novel is known for having holes cut in the pages, but modern editions have either replaced this complex typographical demand with the outlines of a blank box (Picador, 2013) or simply a large blank space (New Directions, 1987). Readers may decide to cut the holes for themselves although the text itself does not give these instructions.

the gaps may lead not to the recovery of latent narrative stories but to the re-covering of the Other's experience with false misunderstandings and claims to know more than we really do. Where the reader is presented with gaps in this narrative, they would do well to attend to these inaccessible and uncomfortable spaces with restraint and humility. Such reticence in the face of narrative gaps would not claim to generate understanding of the Other's experience but would instead remain cognisant of the incoherence and meaninglessness that precludes understanding. Although it is certainly true that *House Mother Normal* presents characters — vulnerable older persons, many of whom have dementia-related diseases — through highly unusual stylistic choices that are not typically present in literature in general, its overdramatisation of the ethical demands of (non)narrative interpretation highlight the need for reticence in the face of literature's secrets.

*House Mother Normal* details the events of a single evening in a care home for elderly patients whose activities are organised under the tyrannical and absurd jurisdiction of the House Mother. Told from the perspective of each of the eight patients in turn, the evening's social activities — 'dining [...] singing, working, playing, travelling, competing, discussing, and finally being entertained' — are recounted through fragmented narratives and variously interspersed with inner monologues of earlier memories and snippets of dialogue and interaction with other patients and the House Mother.<sup>64</sup> Preceded by a clinical list of quantifiable facts, including name, age, and CQ count — 'the total of correct answers which were given in response to [...] ten classic questions', including 'Where are you now?' 'What day is this?' and 'What year is it?' — each patient's monologue covers exactly twenty-one pages, and each line of each page corresponds to the same moment in each of the other monologues (*HMN*, 6). Each monologue, therefore, can be read individually, but takes on a more complex and relational meaning when supplemented by the monologues of others.<sup>65</sup> Page 17 of Charlie Edwards's monologue, for instance, corresponds to the same moment of 'Tourney Time' — in which mobile patients 'joust' with those in wheelchairs holding wet mops — as page 17 of Sioned Bowen's monologue, and their conversation becomes intelligible to the reader only once these two pages are read in parallel:

---

<sup>64</sup> B. S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal* [1971] (London: Picador, 2013), p. 6 (hereafter referenced as *HMN* in the main text).

<sup>65</sup> Patrick Parrinder, *The Failure of Theory: Essays on Criticism and Contemporary Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987).

*Right, Mrs Bowen,  
sport now. You won the tourney last time,  
didn't*

*you? You can do it again!*

*Thanks, Ivy.*

*Take the soggy mop.*

*Oh, this is a right  
lark!*

*(HMN, 45)*

*Yes.*

*Yes, Charlie, I can.*

*Here's my mop. What's she soaked it in this  
time?*

*Smells like what you were mixing, Charlie.*

*Lark is right, Charlie. (HMN, 133)*

Because the patient monologues are broadly arranged in increasing order of age and decreasing order of physical and mental ability — the first patient, Sarah Lamson, is 74 and has a CQ count of 10, while the last patient, Rosetta Stanton, is 94 with a CQ count of 0 — the narrative becomes increasingly fragmented, chaotic, and nonsensical. The two final narratives, by George Hedbury and Rosetta Stanton, are dominated by blank spaces interspersed with individual words scattered incoherently across the pages, and Rosetta's words are also, with the exception of a final passage, in Welsh, adding to the incoherence of the narrative for most readers.<sup>66</sup> Through the '3-D reading experience' incited by the layering of narratives, the blank spaces in each monologue — and particularly in the monologues of George and Rosetta — do not appear to evacuate meaning from the text but rather to create meaning by providing an 'invitation' to the reader 'to attribute consciousness to a character'.<sup>67</sup> In order to make sense of these later patient narratives, the reader relies upon the information provided in the preceding six entries, understanding that the single word in the

---

<sup>66</sup> Nicolas Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B. S. Johnson* (Nottingham: Paupers' Press, 2000); Nicholas Jones, "'He would be working at the Welsh books": B. S. Johnson and the Two Literatures of Wales', in *Re-Reading B. S. Johnson*, ed. by Philip Tew and Glyn White (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 189–201; Vanessa Guignery, *Ceci n'est pas une fiction: les romans vrais de B. S. Johnson* (Paris: PUPS, 2009). I agree with the observations made by Tredell and Hodgson that Rosetta's name purposefully evokes the historic value of the Rosetta Stone and that her seemingly erratic babbling is suggestive instead of a primordial linguistic kinship rather than its breakdown. See Andrew Hodgson, *The Post-War Experimental Novel: British and French Fiction, 1945–75* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 138–39.

<sup>67</sup> Lars Bernaerts, 'Minds at Play: Narrative Games and Fictional Minds in B. S. Johnson's *House Mother Normal*', *Style*, 48.3 (2014), 294–312 (pp. 297–98). See also Guignery, *Ceci n'est pas une fiction*, p. 189.

centre of George's page 16, for example, 'moving', relates to his nonconsensual participation in the wheelchair jousting that is narrated in greater detail in earlier accounts (*HMN*, 154). Yet, while this effect has been lauded by some as a means of generating a sense of community and intersubjectivity — particularly when an individual faces such structural vulnerabilities as those present in old age and care home settings — I have argued elsewhere that filling in these narrative gaps effaces the boundaries that separate oneself from another and extracts meaning from meaninglessness.<sup>68</sup> While I was previously concerned with the reader's empathic engagement with the narrative, I am concerned here more broadly with the ways in which narrative gaps provoke the reader to enter into the text and with how filling in these gaps leads to an insensitive ventriloquism of the Other.

Although dementia is only explicitly mentioned among the pathologies listed before Gloria's and Rosetta's entries, the notable expansion of narrative blanks in the monologues of both George and Rosetta suggests a linguistic and cognitive degeneration common to dementing diseases. Without narrative to orient oneself in the text, the reader must refer back to the collective, intersubjective 'texture' of minds provided by preceding accounts.<sup>69</sup> The reader is expected to (re)construct sense from nonsense, assembling the fragmented dialogues and overlapping stage directions into a 'readable text'.<sup>70</sup> In so doing, however, the reader elides the value presented by the narrative gaps themselves that have, as Abbott described it, an experiential significance in helping the reader to "feel" the author or protagonist's lack of mastery over experience' and reminding us of the limits of our knowledge.<sup>71</sup> In reading George's monologue — in spite of the difficulties it presents to a reader — through cross-reference to the monologues of others, the reader negotiates the vast textual blanks by moving back and forth through the spaces of the novel, layering alternate meanings and interpretations to construct a multivocal and multiperspectival account. By assuming similarities and mutual intelligibility between different accounts of the same event, the reader fills in the gaps that interrupt George's narrative. Yet, by allowing ourselves to fill in these

---

<sup>68</sup> Tynan, 'Mind the Gap', pp. 353–69. See also: Vanessa Guignery, 'Ethics and Experimentation in B. S. Johnson's *House Mother Normal*', in *The Ethical Component in Experimental British Fiction Since the 1960's*, ed. by Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), pp. 50–70; Andrew Motion, 'Introduction', in B. S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal* (London: Picador, 2013), pp. v–ix (p. vii); Bernaerts, 'Minds at Play'; Philip Tew, *B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

<sup>69</sup> Bernaerts, 'Minds at Play', p. 306.

<sup>70</sup> Tew, *B. S. Johnson*, p. 240. See also Guignery, *Ceci n'est pas une fiction*, p. 177.

<sup>71</sup> Abbott, *Real Mysteries*, p. 18.

gaps, we assume George's understanding to be fragmented by his narrative delivery, rather than at the point of understanding itself. 'Moving', for example, may not signify George's interpretation of 'Travel Time' but may simply refer to an observation of a moment in time that conveys no understanding of the reasons behind this particular experience: it is not necessarily George, in other words, who makes the connection between 'moving' and the events of the evening but the reader. In filling in the gaps of his narrative, the reader imposes a causal reasoning upon experiences that may be, for the experiencing subject, no more than incoherence and unintelligibility.

As the overlapping pages demonstrate, one person's narrative experience is another person's narrative gap; but the experience is no less real for either. The structural incentive in *House Mother Normal* to interpret these gaps through recourse to preceding and subsequent narratives immaculately demonstrates the common assumption that narrative lack is always symptomatic of a memory or experience that is waiting to come, or come back, to narrative. The ethical perils posed by the reader's interpretation of narrative gaps can be seen most explicitly in the final patient monologue, that of Rosetta Stanton, whose erratic Welsh interventions culminate in a moment of sudden clarity, before descending into total silence (*HMN*, 175–76; 177–81). Supplemented by the monologues of other patients, Rosetta's English-language intervention suggests a brief cognisance of her surroundings during 'Travel Time'. Fellow patient Ivy Nicholls asks a seemingly rhetorical question:

*How are you, Mrs S?*

No answer. I've never heard her speak since I came here. CAN'T HEAR A THING, CAN YOU, MRS STANTON? (*HMN*, 65)

But Rosetta's inner monologue contradicts Ivy's explicit silencing of her nonverbal cohabitant:

I am  
terrible, Ivy.

Now I can every  
word you say I am a prisoner in my  
self. It is terrible. [...]

Let me out, or I shall die (*HMN*, 175–76).

Yet, this coherent narrative is followed shortly by absolute silence, and Rosetta fails even to pick up the final line that is repeated on page 21 of all seven patient narratives, including George's, 'No, doesn't matter'. In line with the remarks of several commentators, Rosetta's complete unresponsiveness in this final page appears to indicate not only a loss of narrative competence, but a loss of consciousness and ultimately of life.<sup>72</sup> Assuming Rosetta's death somewhere between her narrative clarity and her failure to reprise the concluding sentence, the reader realises that filling in the gaps of her remaining monologue has in fact been an act of postmortem ventriloquism, attributing meaning and narrative order to a worldview that no longer exists.

It is worth noting that Johnson himself was dismissive, even contemptuous of his readers' attempts to interpret his works. In discussing the writing of *House Mother Normal* and *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry* (1973), he scorns the reader's desire to interact imaginatively with the text:

For readers it is often said that they will go on reading a novel because it enables them [...] to exercise their imaginations, that that is one of the chief attractions for them, that they may imagine the characters and so on for themselves. Not with my novels; it follows from what I have said earlier that I want my ideas to be expressed so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left. Indeed I would go further and say that to the extent that a reader can impose his own imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure. I want him to see my (vision), not something conjured out of his own imagination. [...] If he wants to impose his imagination, let him write his own books.<sup>73</sup>

Although Johnson also made several statements to the contrary, this passage demonstrates the extraordinary task the reader has been set. Faced not only with the narrative text which deserves and arouses readerly interpretation, but also with typographical temptations in the pages densely populated with silences, absences, and gaps the reader is challenged to remain distant, diffident, and humble. Rosetta's textual gaps gesture not to any latent content that

---

<sup>72</sup> Guignery, *Ceci n'est pas une fiction*; Jones, "He would be working at the Welsh books".

<sup>73</sup> B. S. Johnson, 'Introduction to *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?*', in *Writers on Writing: The Best of 'The Review of Contemporary Fiction'*, ed. by John O'Brien (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999), pp. 64–77 (pp. 75–76).

may be painstakingly revealed but rather to a narrative that was never there and never will be, opposing the poststructural temptation to excavate from absence endless resources of meaning. And while Johnson's remark makes no claim to an ethical value for his reader in avoiding this temptation to imagine and interpret, this is precisely what is at stake in deploying reticence or reluctance in the face of these narrative gaps. Interpretation of Rosetta's narrative gaps is certainly possible — indeed it seems to be encouraged by the structure of the novel and is invariably undertaken by the reader — but, as I have shown, it is irresponsible; what is articulated by these gaps is not a latent or covert narrative but the overt disclosure of the absence of meaning.

### **Interpretative Humility**

The task of the literary scholar is, we are told, to chase down the meaning of texts through interpretation; but meaning is not always to be found, and the encouragement of perpetual interpretation risks compensating a lack of meaning, sense, and coherence with erroneous misunderstandings, all the while congratulating the scholar on a remarkable textual discovery. As Davis's analyses demonstrate, texts may embody 'a *dislocation* of meaning that leaves their sense precisely *unlocated, unlocatable*' and, if accurately detected and conserved, will paralyse the reader's processes of interpretation.<sup>74</sup> Understanding, he argues, is not always possible and endless attempts to draw meaning from meaninglessness encroach upon the subjectivity and alterity of the Other's experiences and intentions. Faced with an egregious gap, the reader must acknowledge that the absence of narrative does not necessarily imply an invitation but warns against imposition: here is the point where one may need to stop, observe, feel, and hear the gaps of the Other not in order to interpret them but in order to encounter the obscure meaninglessness and lack of understanding that distinguishes oneself from another. This is not to say that all absences must be invariably shunned by the reader as antithetical to comprehension and meaning but rather to realise the limitations and potential misconceptions roused by a hermeneutic freedom to go on interpreting indefinitely. Contemporary readers of all works, and particularly of those that deal with vulnerable, troubled, or contested subjects and themes must be attentive to the need for reticence, caution, and humility in their interpretative endeavours, particularly in the face of narrative gaps, and to remember that interpretation is not always welcome, especially when it is unnecessary, incongruous, and unethical.

---

<sup>74</sup> Davis, 'What Fiction Doesn't Say', p. 55.

