Yuqing (Eva) Cao
ADV 9673 Proseminar in NARRATIVES: Word and Image as Narrative Structure
Professor Edward Eigen
21 December 2023

Book Review - Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading

【Ausgungspunkt – the Genre】

Traditionally viewed as the expression of the solitary voice, enigmatic and often unreadable for outsiders, lyric poetry has been defined and redefined throughout the ages leading to paradigm shifts that reveal the intricate relationships of the "lyric I" with society/culture/ outside world. What is the lyric and what is the New Lyric Studies? Just to pinpoint some of the most canonical lyrical poet and theorists---in Worthwords' poetics, the "lyric I" walks alongside the sciences, revealing universal truth in nature and expressing the overflow of powerful collected in tranquility, the simple and the rustic. In the modern age of Baudelaire, the lyric "I" is released onto the street, enters life and hunts for the lively energy of a "life caught unawares" --- it is a collective experience, full of impressions preserved by memory—a protection against the shock effect produced the urban vitality. The crowd lives onward within the poet like a phantom, etched in his subconscious. For Adorno, the "lyric I" could only find his/her solitary voice through being a part of the whole. The lyric poem's essence is essentially social, revealing how the authentic human expression dominates the social aspect of the lyric. When reading Emily Dickinson, Virginia Jackson comes from the scholarly tradition of the New Lyric Studies, revealing how the "lyric I" is inseparable from the materiality of the poem itself, since the whole meta-process of criticism, printing and spreading of lyric poems give it a new identity. The book

Dickinson's Misery's greatest contribution is to reveal the hermeneutical cycle of "the very protocols of poetic analysis the critic has at his or her disposal are the same methods that shaped scholarly understanding of the lyric genre". (Barrett,6) With the logical binds of lyric reading demystified, one is more emancipated to create readings of Emily Dickinson's lyrics that closes the chasm between the poetical intent and text.

According to the scholar Stephen Burt, New Lyric Studies has been supported by historically oriented theorists of genre such as Alastair Fowler and classics of deconstruction as in Paul de Man, while being objected by critics who see the totality and continuities of the New Lyric and the genres and subgenres of poetry before the 20th century such as "the narrative ballads, hymns, odes, cradle songs, epigrams, poems of seduction, funeral elegies etc.". (Burt, 433) Historically, lyric readings are rooted in the Romanticism, but has gradually been popularized by Anglo-American scholarship, especially the New Critics in the 20th century. The unique nature of such self-expressive narratives that largely involve "absence, incompletion, self-cancellation, and inaccessibility—as other's interiorities are in some sense always inaccessible" (Burt, 434) meant that the lyric poetry that's being presented as lyric poetry are largely created by the so-called lyric reading. Compared to other genres such as novels or the dramatic genres, the lyric appears to be less historically contingent on the surface, as the narrative often seek to explore the interiorities, while floating above historical and social banalities. Virginia Jackson points out that instead of being merely a "new antique", or a "distressed genre", the lyric is in fact, formed through the reading practices or literary criticism of the 19th and 20th century. In other words, lyric poems do not appear, or exist as lyric. They become lyrics. The dichotomy lies in the two words "being" and "becoming". This hermeneutic cycle that's summarized by Virginia Jackson as in "the reading of the lyric produces a theory of

the lyric that then produces a reading of the lyric. Lyrics are made historically" (Jackson, 54) echoes the viewpoints of Paul de Man, "no lyric can be read lyrically", and "nor can the object of a lyrical reading be itself a lyric". (Jackson, 67)

How does this affect the relationship between the "lyric I" and society? If the genre itself is ontologically intertwined with lyric reading, this would mean that the lyric I's relationship with society, culture and the outer world is defined not only by the poet's solitary voice but is already processed by the printing press and modern scholarship. What we have access to, is not the lyric voice in its purest form, but something that already been identified, classified, and interpreted. "Dickinson's enduring role in the history depends on the ephemeral quality of the texts she left behind. By a modern lyric logic that will become familiar in the pages that follow, the only apparently contextless or sceneless, even evanescent nature of Dickinson's writing attracted an increasingly professionalized attempt to secure and contextualize it as a certain kind (or genre) of literature--- a lyric social imaginary." (Jackson, 53)

I see Virginia Jackson's thesis in this book on the logical bind of lyric reading scholarship as an "alienation effect". The critical distance that one wishes to keep while approaching texts is virtually nonexistent, as the "very protocols of poetic analysis the critic has at his or her disposal are the same methods that shaped scholarly understanding of the lyric genre." (Barrett, 3) With such awareness, new methodologies of deconstruction and unravelling seem more prudent to be applied towards the reading of Emily Dickinson, compared to the ones that 19th and 20th century scholarship is familiar with.

The structure of the book is as follows, in the first two chapters, Virginia Jackson revolves around the key term "Dickinson undone", illustrating the editorial interventions, the multimedia narratives of lyric that involve letters, gifts, variant words etc. that resist

classification, all under the framework of a theoretical mapping of the lyric genre, focusing on the time periods of the 19th and 20th century. In her close readings, Jackson focuses on the poetic intention, form, and content of the texts, as well as the chasms between intentions and text. Chapters 3 and 5 are pivotal passages that I will be elaborating upon. Chapter 3 introduces the third person or the third position addressee into the conversation, thus deconstructing the imaginary ideal of the "lyric I" suspended in isolation, narrating from a "non-place". Chapter 5 both challenges and redefines the so-called female sentimentalism, that has also experienced its own paradigm shifts, from a valued sensibility during Romanticism, to a sign of weakness and pathology in the modern world. Virginia Jackson uses Dickinson's own lyric as a retortion against the male critic's advice, asking the poetess to "grow up. Contribute to culture".

Philosophically, Virginia Jackson has also poignantly recognized the effacement of identity and transcendence within Dickinson's verse, illuminating how the lines move above and beyond first intensities of grief. Yet instead of having the intense affect collected in tranquility, following the "male" tradition of Wordsworth, Dickinson has her own approach to efface the identity, calmly approaching the chasm of painful experiences as well as prophesizing her own fate in the poem "My Life had stood-a Loaded Gun---" Dickinson both removes herself from the cliched imagery of the suffering poetess as the nightingale with the thorn pierced into the heart, and distances herself from biases against sentimentality. Despite the processes of lyrical readings and misreading, her lyrics have a life of its own, and holds its own dignity.

My methodology is to do close readings of chapters 5, 3, 1 and 2, incorporating both reviews of Jackson's deconstructed readings of Emily Dickinson's lyrics and own readings.

[Close Readings]

Chapter Five – Die ewige Weibliche zieht uns hinan

In the final chapter, Virginia Jackson shoots the arrow straight at the heart of the issue of lyric poetry, or "the literature of Misery", leading back to the book's title *Dickinson's Misery.* The attitude towards the sentimental has greatly shifted from the later 18th century to the 20th---transforming from a term of "high ethical and aesthetic praise", to the "actual principle of evil that's beyond pathetic weakness". Such paradigm shift is intertwined with biased interpretations of gender, in a manner that designates sentimentality as a female weakness. The issue at stake has been delineated in the following quote, "Ironically, it has seemed too personal to be included as a type of 'cultural work.' The oversight seems especially odd when one considers the fulcrum of the sentimental as the principle of vicarious identification. There is nothing more sentimental than sentimental poetry. There is therefore no symbolic production more symptomatic of nineteenth-century America's double logic of power and victimization than the poems widely considered, then as now, too full of personal feeling to testify to anything more important than themselves." (Jackson, 215) Virginia Jackson did not attempt to elevate Dickinson from the now stigmatized sentimental lyricism but has instead asserted that Dickinson's reading is inseparable from the "female sentimental lyricism" and the reading that has developed around the genre.

The word "female sentimental lyricism" paints a picture in and of itself. Virginia Jackson has alluded to the word play between "genius" and "genuine" and pointed out that the interesting semiotic relations points to the similarities that's shared between the two elements---effervescent energy, intellectual impatience, and the capacity to mirror others. In other words, the ability to mirror and express the genuine affect, is itself, a type of genius. Samuel Bowls has associated such genius to the female gender in his *When Should We Write*, depicting the

literature of misery, most often created by gifted women who are full of thought and feeling, but are often poor, lonely, and unhappy. “They give us their heart’s blood” “There are those indeed who so far triumph over their own personal experience as to mould them into priceless gifts to the world of literature and art.” Going back to the tradition of Wordsworth, Bowl instructed that the solution to this misery is through “growing up”, and to have the powerful feelings “recollected in tranquility”. Bowl is posing a certain hierarchy between different modes of narratives, arguing for the superiority of the cultural production over the more “genuine” overflow of powerful emotions. The word “grow up” is rather condescending, suggesting back to the cliché that sentimentality is associated with naivete and crude intellectualism, ignoring the fact that the heart/head, passion/intellectualism dichotomies have always circulated the literary and artistic world, regardless of gender. In fact, the central argument in Geoffrey Bullough’s book *Mirror of Minds* on lyrical narration is that “The history of literature cannot be explained by the history of philosophy or psychology…many other factors are involved as art reflects the form of things in the mind’s distorting mirror.” (Bullough, 120) Even in the Renaissance, male poets have admitted the condition of being human inherently involved irrationality and sentimentalism---"That vain animal, who is so proud of being rational. The senses are too gross, and he’ll contrive. A Sixth to contradict the other Five” (Bullough, 117) Poetry is the vessel that carries the scattered images, the disassociated sensibility, and irrationality. In fact, Alexander Pope’s “Lulled in the countless chambers of the brain, Our thoughts are linked by many a hidden chain. Awake but one, and lo, what myriads rise! Each stamps its image as the other flies….” resonates with Emily Dickinson’s “Your thoughts don’t have words every day. They come a single time. Like signal esoteric sips Of the communion Wine.” The motif of exploring the dissonances in man’s body and mind, the pathless and dangerous wanderings of the

consciousness, and the attempt to reconcile the free-wandering fancies of life with its inherent miseries could be traced throughout the narrative histories from the Renaissance to Shakespeare's attitude of the mind, the passions, and associations from Dryden to Wordsworth, immortal longings in the 19th century, and the highly individualized imageries of modern poetry. Bowl asks women to grow up, for the sake of "culture", but perhaps it is exactly "culture' itself that leads to misery---the awareness for the chasm between reality and ideal, and between embodiment and representation. "In Dickinson's lines, the charm and delight of Morning's artistic representation cannot be extricated from the determining pain of personal experience; the subject of Dickinson's poem cannot, as Bowles would have it, put the distorting affect of the 'first intensity' of grief behind her. Instead, midnight collapses into dawn, suffering into representation, morbid reaction into diurnal action, and self into text: Misery, how fair." (Jackson, 224) Night itself becomes the zone to release the collective unconscious, the primitive memory, and the codes of misery. Pain and laceration become the punctum, the intelligence. Being able to capture the "first intensity" means being able to create something that possess life. Grab Medusa's head and transform the lively subject matter into stone so that it could be presented? Here lies the paradox---the attempt to capture life, to eternalize it also kills life in various degrees in the process. The poetic language of misery is situated exactly at the site of border zones, the ambiguous and intermediate space that exits between or at the edge of identifiable domains, the strange no man's land. Language is the very dimension in which human life moves, that brings the world into being, "I shut my eyes and the world drops dead; I lift my lids, and all is born again." (Sylvia Plath. A Mad Girl's Love Song). How to speak about misery, the unspeakable affect is a fundamental quest itself. Communication or silence, speech or aphasia? If one is only aware of the Truth under its commonsense representation or judgement

making, then the understanding of the human condition will forever be incomplete. There is thus, something prophetic in the female sentimentality and writings as they bear witness to an object or an experience, which cannot be describe except as an interruption, as a cessation of discourse, as a moment of transgression or transcendence, as round trips, back and forth, between "me" and "you", between "you" and "me".

"Thus, the misery in the literature of misery may be a symptom less of the experiences of poor, lonely and unhappy women than of the rhetorical difficulty of pointing to an experience or identity before it becomes a metaphor. On this view, the 'ahistorical' situation of the lyric---its association with extreme privacy as well as its aspiration to the more than merely personal---is exactly the problem for writers of sentimental verse." (Jackson, 218) This quote from Jackson brilliantly captures the real issue at stake, that transcends gender stereotypes. The misery lies in the difficulty and heaviness of creation, art, and expression. The imagery of the "poor, lonely and unhappy women of talent" is still situated at a worldly and earthly level and could thus only frame a secular situation. What matters more, is the Chasm, and the difficulty of narration. Experience must be internalized and incorporated by the subject, before meaning could be disclosed. The inherent tension of lyric expression is as such "The textual subjection of this subject, is them, by the last line, both a testimony to the authenticity of her pain and an acknowledgement that lyric testimony will inevitably be read as only the figurative performance (rather than the historical experience) of that referent". (Jackson, 222) Only in the sentimental lyric could one find an objective correlative for one's own life, yet the artistic testimony is always already fading. Is it thus politically trivializing to write lyric poems that document private narratives? Sometimes the answers could be found less often in political speech but are present in ostensibly aesthetic forms and most ahistorical texts---the lyric.

Back to Bowl's didactic instruction for poetess to "grow up", Virginia Jackson has used Dickinson's poem "This Chasm, Sweet, upon my life, I mention it to you, When Sunrise through a fissure drop. The Day must follow too" as an argument against the condescending views of seeing female sentimental lyric as inferior." (Jackson, 219) The natural reversal of day and night has been doubly reversed by the poetic logic. The new day apparently already contains the power to heal the old wound, but the "healthful" is never the end goal. The day will again fade back into the fissure, following nature's inherent logic. The "proper representation" or superficial healing is thus short-sighted and only sees one half of the momentum.

Another example where Dickinson seeks to transcend and efface the caricatures of the poetess, and the stereotype of suffering woman as the nightingale with thorns impaled into their chest while singing heartbreakingly beautiful songs is her line "Whose Cheek is this?" Rather than identifying with the personification of female suffering, Dickinson has pasted the *Primer* nightingale separated to a sheet of flower alongside the poem "Whose cheek is this? What rosy face has lost a blush today? I found her---pleiad---in the woods And bore her safe away----" (Jackson, 232) By presenting the cheek to Susan, Dickinson is effacing the identity of the flower, the nightingale, and the suffering poetess. One way to understand this is to juxtapose the poem The Rhodora by Emerson. The lyric of Dickinson's does not fall into the same category of positing the flower as a subject matter to contemplate upon. "The flower's charm was not wasted on the earth and the sky, or on poetry", it is an existence, in and of itself. (Jackson, 231)

In some sense, Dickinson, perhaps wished for her life to parallel that of the flower, being an existence in and of itself, but she has also already predicted her own fate in the following lyric, "My Life had stood---a Loaded Gun---In Corners---till a Day The Owner passed---identified---and Carried me away". The "gun" plays multifold roles----being the interpreter, the

interpretation, the performance and the interpretant. I see her talent and sensibility as a loaded gun that's always already prepared, and sufficient with intensity. She herself has foreseen how her verses might have been used in the scholarly world of criticism. Yet the gun is always in a state of "potentially" being used, or understood. In the Conclusion, Virginia Jackson ends in a rather pessimistic tone, stating that for Emily Dickinson to escape the very fate that she herself has oracle, "she would have needed to write not only outside the lyric, but outside the history that modernity has passed and identified so it can carry us away." (Jackson, 237)

Chapter 3

Chapter three is a pivotal chapter that focuses on the stances of address of Dickinson, weaving together readings of her epistolary narratives and poems, under a framework, or the so-called stances of address that 20th century scholars have identified. Critical readings of the lyric by John Stuart Miller as well as post-structuralist rereadings have often neglected the figure of address, or the specific addressee, and thus Virginia Jackson has reintroduced the stances of address into the discourse on lyrical narration. With this introduction, the crucial element of a third person and a third position could help readers reevaluate one of the most fundamental questions in the history of the theory of lyric poetry --- the relationship of the poet, the speaker of the poem (the "lyric I"), and society/culture/the outside world – including the respective unity or disunity among those three elements. The inclusion of a third perspective would mean a shifting of position regarding questions such as perception of the phenomenal world, of the relationship between the personal and the political, the self and the anti-self, Man is a social animal/Man is a society individualized, as well as the tension between private experience and public language. The notion of the lyric poem as a private and self-sufficient stance is thus challenged. The well-

established image of Emily Dickinson is that of an emphatically private creature who follows a law unto herself, who has habitually concealed her mind. This is indicated in the manner of publicization of her original genius in the 'Literary World'--- Here surely is the record of a soul that suffered from isolation, and the stress of dumb emotion, and the desire to make itself understood by means of a voice so long unused that the sound was strange even to her own ears. (Jackson, 5) This may delineate the social persona of Emily Dickinson but has greatly ignored the community formed through talent and poetic exchange. There might not be a particular "you", which opens the possibility for Howells to declare, "Emily Dickinson, c'est le moi." (Jackson,15) Language is the perfect element in which interiority is as external as exteriority is internal. Through poetic exchange, Dickinson has, to some extent, achieved the integration of life with poetry, also leading to the potentiality of being something more, something else, than reproducing and reaffirming the logic of representation. "To write is certainly not to impose a form or expression on the matter of lived experience, but is instead a matter of becoming, a mode of existence that does not attain a form, such as identification, imitation, or Mimesis, but to find a zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferentation, where one can no longer "be distinguished from a woman, an animal, or a molecule". (Deleuze, 178) The methodology employed here is a series of insightful close readings of lyrical correspondences between Dickinson and Susan, Samuel or Mary Bowels, very often focusing on a pivotal phrase or line within the poem, a certain "punctum". Jackson also emphasizes that modern readers wouldn't be able to find an intersubjective confirmation of the self in Dickinson's lyrical writings, as her intended audience falls outside the traditional categories of historical addressee/theatrical audience etc. "The contemporary literary criticism has no language for it. But it is there, in the

writing." (Jackson, 118)

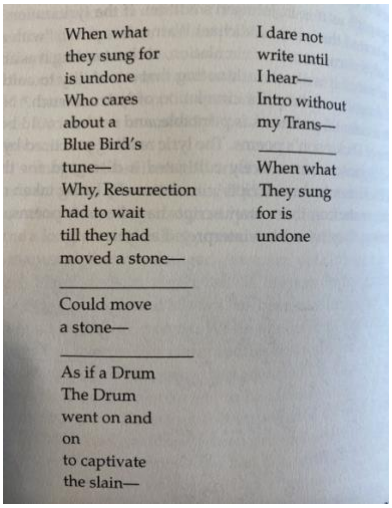
Chapters 1&2

The first two chapters revolves around Jackson's central thesis, that "the century and a half that spans the circulation of Dickinson's work as poetry chronicles rather exactly the emergence of the lyric genre as a modern mode of literary interpretation. From the mid-19th through the beginning of the 21st century, to be lyric is to be read as lyric---and to be read as lyric is to be printed and framed as a lyric." (Jackson, 6)

Jackson then moves on to the notion of viewing poetry as an anthropomorphic project, which bridges the abstract of the lyric to its material and historical contingency. "The cultural work of lyric is the work of individuation under intersubjective terms. The human images because of representational practices rather a prior referent. Only in this way can human subjectivity be viewed in historical terms." (Jackson, 190) Such statement is supported by the porty of Dickinson herself. A bluebird or a nightingale's tune would always already have been a lyric poem for Dickinson, gifts, insects, flowers attached in gifts and letters…How do we recognize a lyric poem when we see one?

BLUEBIRD'S TUNE

Written on a split-open envelope, addressed to her sister vinnie



When what
they sung for
is undone
Who cares
about a
Blue Bird's
tune—
Why, Resurrection
had to wait
till they had
moved a stone—

Could move
a stone—

As if a Drum
The Drum
went on and
on
to captivate
the slain—

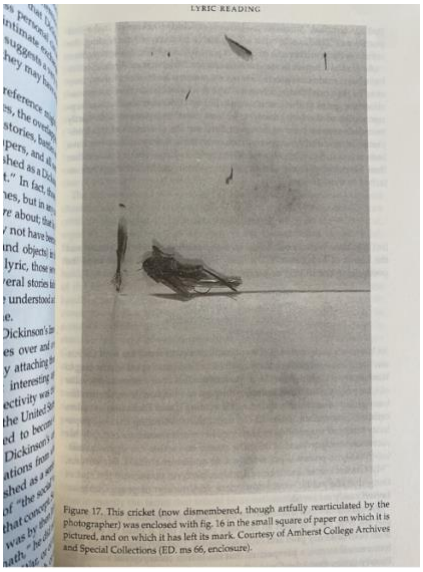
I dare not
write until
I hear—
Intro without
my Trans—

When what
They sung
for is
undone

Dickinson's preoccupation with the trope of birdsong aligns with the tradition of inhuman lyricism turned to poetic type by the romantics, and "fossilized" by Victorian poetics. In some ways, the lyrics of Emily Dickinson are often compared to other art forms---a trompe-l'oeil painting, or a birdsong, with impossible rhymes, interrupted stanza. "More bird than human rather too human to be bird."

CRICKET

She sends collected objects like letters, including objects with or within writing; like the pressed flowers, dead insects, assorted clippings, illustrations.

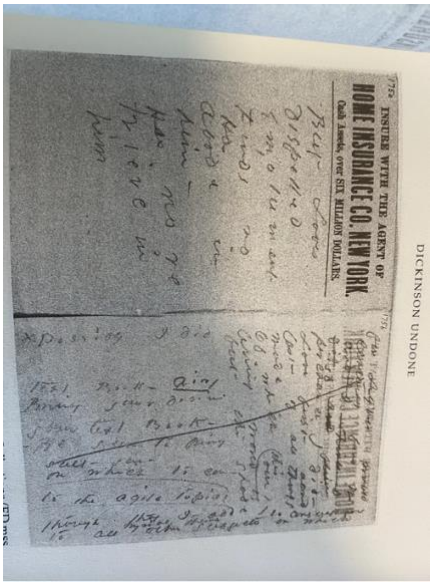


LYRIC READING

Figure 17. This cricket (now dismembered, though artfully rearticulated by the photographer) was enclosed with fig. 16 in the small square of paper on which it is pictured, and on which it has left its mark. Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED. ms 66, enclosure).

LETTERS

A worksheet, a variant, a fragment, an unfinished poem



LEAF

A 1851 letter to Austin, a leaf pinned to a slip of paper inscribed “We will meet again and heretofore some summer morning.”

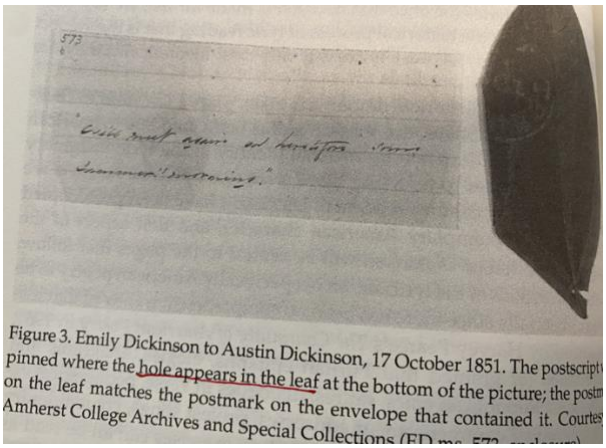


Figure 3. Emily Dickinson to Austin Dickinson, 17 October 1851. The postscript pinned where the hole appears in the leaf at the bottom of the picture; the postm on the leaf matches the postmark on the envelope that contained it. Courtes Amherst College Archives and Special Collections (ED ms. 573

[Reflections]

The methodology of Virginia Jackson is fundamentally close reading, media, and poetry analysis, which gives rise to a series of assertions on the nature of the lyric. Her theoretical readings of lyric theory of Mill and de Man are scattered and interwoven within her own statements. I agree with the scholar Faith Barrett’s critic that her analysis of the 20th century

reception of lyrical poetry is mostly based on scholarship that's more focused on European Romanticism rather than American poetry, in particular, that of the New Critics and post-structuralists. Another paradox observed by Barrett is that Jackson frequently voices dissent with the views of Mill, yet the theories and models of the lyric that's formulated by Mill is often quoted by the other scholars that she's citing. I do not agree, however, with Barrett's argument that Virginia Jackson is overly polemical in her stance of lyrical analysis due to her rather narrow selection of scholarship. Instead, I see her intervention this polemical edge as highly illuminating---not repeating existent lyrical theories, her creative readings have allowed new possibilities to approach the genre of the lyric, seeing through the various modes of cultural transmissions, and reaching towards the core. Her readings of Dickinson's poems are also idiosyncratic, being a unique "one" among the infinite possibilities of "third person addressees", embracing both the rather formalist readings of the poetic forms, while being able to use her interpretations to support her theories of the genre of the lyric, reading both historically and theoretically. Lastly, I would argue that this book is more of a probing, rather than an entirely defined or crystallized thesis, as poetry itself lies in the zone of proximity and indiscernibility. Jackson has demonstrated brilliantly how scholarly language could probe into this poetic zone, illuminating what's hidden outside the orbit of human awareness or attention.

"They are endlessly awaiting it."

Like a literary detective, Virginia Jackson has come to seek it.

Works Cited

Jackson, Virginia, and Virginia Jackson. *Dickinson's Misery*. 1st ed., Princeton University Press, 2005, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400850754.

Barrett, Faith. *"Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*." The Emily Dickinson Journal, vol. 15, no. 1, 2006, pp. 100-103,107. ProQuest, http://search.proquest.com.ezp prod1.hul.harvard.edu/scholarly-journals/dickinsons-misery-theory-lyric-reading/docview/216510178/se-2.

Bullough, Geoffrey. *Mirror of Minds; Changing Psychological Beliefs in English Poetry*. University of Toronto Press, 1962.

Olkowski, Dorothea. 1999. *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation*. London, University of California Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. "Lyric Poetry and Society." *Telos (New York, N.Y.)*, vol. 20, 1974, pp. 56–71.

Wordsworth, William, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. 1798. *Lyrical ballads: with a few other poems.*

Burt, Stephen. 2016. "*What Is This Thing Called Lyric?"* Modern Philology 113 (3) (February): 422–440. doi:10.1086/684097.