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Understanding the Unfathomable in Suicide

Poetry, Absence, and the Corporeal Body

KATRINA JAWORSKI AND DANIEL G. SCOTT

Suicide is studied more than ever. Suicidology now claims to know what the signs are likely to be and is confident about recommending responses in order to prevent it. Yet something about the finality of suicide remains unfathomable in everyday life. This is best exemplified by the sudden wave of shock, disbelief, and numbness that sets in after a loved one has suicided (Fielden, 2003; Maple, Edwards, Plummer, and Minichiello, 2010). This wave is a naked, raw moment made more intense by the invisibility of suicide: an act not witnessed. This punches a hole in the fabric of one's family and is incomprehensible initially. The absence that suicide engenders remains. It is a lacuna or a gap, made up of the disjuncture between what can and cannot be said of suicide at that moment when the news begins to sink in. Despite the factuality of death, something about suicide remains ungraspable, unsayable (Kuhn, 2002). Why is this so? What happens in those moments when incomprehension sets in, when silence begins to mark the intelligibility of suicide? How can we speak of this incomprehension without mystifying suicide? Why is suicide unfathomable at the phenomenal level, particularly for those who remain behind to grieve and remember? How can we analyze it without distancing the analysis from the way people grieve for suicide in everyday life?

Perhaps the problem relates to how suicide begins to be rendered fathomable the moment it is registered as incredible, unbelievable, unfathomable. Jan Zwicky, a Canadian philosopher and poet, begins the second edition of
Lyric Philosophy by arguing that “how we say is fundamental to what we mean” (Zwicky, 2011, p. i). For Zwicky, this is no easy philosophical claim, nor is it a game of words; she is well aware that form – namely, style and methodology – matters as much as content. And this is where poetry comes in. Poetry refracts lyric and sequential thought as it bears witness to that which makes its presence known in form and style (Zwicky, 2011). How do we study this presence? Zwicky suggests that we focus not on structure in poetry but on what resonates, because “resonance requires acknowledgement of other axes of human experience than the logico-linguistic … acknowledgement of the relevance of these axes for the logico-linguistic” (p. 172). This, we think, is crucial to paying attention to the unfathomable in suicide, and to sense-making at the heart of suicide.

A word of caution should be issued before going further. This chapter may not resonate well with those in the field of suicidology whose conceptualization of suicide depends on structural positivist methodologies and methods, which are largely influenced by the cause-and-effect relationship and arguably frame what we know of suicide (Law, 2004; Range and Leach, 1998). Our use of poetry and resonance will not produce concrete truths or certainties presumably offered by statistics. To piggyback on Foucault’s (1972, p. 17) response to his critics, some approaches to research on suicide are best left to others. This is by no means an excuse. The central assumption guiding this chapter is that suicide cannot be entirely contained by the logic of language. Suicide arcs across human experience, along other axes of understanding and interpretation, which means it is necessary to explore it in other ways. Specifically, we want to study suicide outside the framework of causality, hoping this will offer ways of thinking differently about the finality of suicide. Our intention is to see how analysis can travel through “connections of images, similarities in overtone and structure … that is at once clear and resonant; in which clarity can assume the form of resonance” (Zwicky, 2011, p. 48 [original emphasis]). And in so doing, our intention is to help us understand philosophically how we make sense of suicide, especially when a lot of suicide involves the absence of logical explanations and requires us to face the possibility that something about suicide can never be explained fully.

So how do we study suicide outside the framework of causality? We draw on theories as methodological tools to think through ideas of suicide rather than about them. Rather than using theories to prove something, we use them as tools to unpack meanings and assumptions about suicide (Foucault, 1991). Specifically, we draw on resonance to rethink time, body, and absence...
of suicide. Of course, our use of theory will not take away the pain and sorrow of those who are left behind to grieve and remember the dead. Something at applied practice levels must take place to respond directly to the needs of those who are grieving. Yet even at applied levels, ideas are always presumed, shaping how we act and respond towards those who grieve. Thus, it is important to take a closer look at how meanings and assumptions shape our understandings of suicide, and here, poetry is the site of our analytical labours. We approach the task of analyzing poetry with care, for our aim is not to distance the analysis from the way people grieve suicide in everyday life or to distance our readers from what we want to share. In wanting to use resonance to study what poetry tells us about absence in suicide, our desire is to create an analysis that resonates with our readers.

Proposing resonance as a philosophical method, Zwicky, who is also a concert violist, explains resonance in physical terms as sympathetic vibrations, where the sonority of a sound sets off vibrations in other objects. In other words, resonance is about things echoing between themselves. Here echoing functions as a “root metaphor” in that sonority, metaphorically speaking, composes the basis for us to grapple with the unfathomable in suicide (Zwicky, 2011, p. 33). To clarify further, Zwicky explains resonance as “perception informed by emotion” that is “neither random nor unintelligible” (p. 45). Thus, poetry’s capacity to include emotional overtones and the intensity of experience may induce “emotional resonance”; in this way, poetry becomes “one among several ways of coming to clearly understand or perceive something” (p. i). For us, this kind of resonance refers to the ability to feel something without having the words to describe it. While individual and personal, the ability to feel something is also collective and multiple. What resonates with one person may not always do so with another. Importantly, poetry “sound(s) an utterance in a resonant thought-structure” to “produce sympathetic vibrations of varying intensities throughout – to cause other utterances to sound” (p. 33). In this way, a poem speaks to the audience/reader and provokes that audience/reader to consider “the various components in a whole” and how such components integrate to produce an utterance, a thought, or a sound (p. 34). We use poetry as a way of thinking and responding that may provoke resonance – a sympathetic response that brings us closer to perceiving the unfathomability of suicide.

With sense-making as our focus, we examine how poetry signifies our understanding of suicide. We develop our discussion in three sections, each section foreshadowed by a poem and its title: (a) “No Mistake,” (b) “No
Signs,” and (c) “No End.” We analyze how the corporeal body, time, and absence signify the unfathomable in suicide. Our argument is that poetry is a medium through which we can approach the unfathomability of suicide. The poetry in this chapter, composed by Daniel G. Scott (2012), resonates with the factuality of suicide without bearing witness to the materiality of the act. Why poetry in the first place? Even though Scott is the poet, our use of poetry is not simply a matter of convenience. Rather, as Heidegger states, “poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (melos) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem” (1971, p. 205 [original emphasis]). If this is the case, poetry might bring to the fore that which feels so unfathomable about the finality of suicide and how this then becomes part of someone’s everyday life. The purpose of our argument is to imagine conceptual and creative alternatives for understanding suicide – alternatives that causality in suicidology has no hope of capturing – using resonance to guide our analysis.

We focus on the corporeal body not only because it is hardly ever credited with serious academic attention, but also because there is something about this body that we cannot witness. With some cultural exceptions, the bodily act of suicide happens in private. Hence, suicide is marked by absence the moment it takes place. Absence partly hails the material act of suicide. This absence, marked by a lack of witness, becomes a lacuna residing at the heart of suicide, an impossibility without which we cannot understand suicide. Perhaps this is one of the many reasons why death such as suicide is a response without-response (Derrida, 1995, 2001). That is, suicide is understood on the basis of those who respond to its occurrence rather than the one who is dead. The dead never leave too many clues, if any, and are in not in a habit of responding or confirming what is said about their deaths.

How do we understand this body? We draw on the notion of the corporeal body as a fleshy surface on which meanings are inscribed (Grosz, 1995). What is important about this notion is that “bodies speak, without necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become intextuated, narrativized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms, and ideals become incarnated” (Grosz, 1995, p. 35). This does not mean that bodies, as sites of inscription and interpretation, are passive, neutral surfaces. As Grosz (1995, p. 36) further explains, “the activity of desiring, inscribing bodies ... make their own inscriptions on the bodies of others, themselves.” In making inscriptions on the bodies of others and themselves, the corporeal body in more recent cultural analyses is never
outside affect because affect signifies the body’s potential for action and inscription (Massumi, 2002). Affect is also etched on the surfaces of the body, through which emotions “do things” in our everyday lives, whether it is through love, anger, disgust, or hate (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 59–60). Poetry resonates the doing of emotions: it resonates that which begins as impossible to fathom.

We also draw on notions of time and absence to understand the significance of the body in suicide. We focus on time as a dimension marked by dislocations rather than the passing of linear moments through which we have a sense of the past, present, and future (Grosz, 2004). The past, present, and future do play a role in our analysis. At the same time, we are more interested in working out the role that time plays in grasping the suddenness of suicide – the sudden “now” that forever changes the future and discolours the past. Absence is tied to time as much as it is tied to the body. If we follow Derrida’s (1988) thinking, absence refers to someone missing physically. This applies to our analysis not only because suicide is marked by absence from the beginning but also because all three poems meditate on the loved one’s not being there physically. But there is more to Derrida’s (1988) thinking. Even though a person is absent, their absence “continues to produce effects independently of his [sic] presence and of the present actuality of his intentions ... indeed even after his death” (p. 5). It is this kind of absence that we examine in this chapter. In addition, absence, as Frers (2013) argues, “derives its peculiar power from its embeddedness in the body, in bodily practices, sensual perceptions and emotions.” And this is where the paradox of absence resides. On the one hand, someone needs to be absent to qualify as absent. On the other hand, our interpretation of their absence in the present is linked to memories of their body and their presence in the past.

No Mistake

middle of the night
the knock persists
two young policemen
at the door
something not right
  may we come in
  may we sit down
something has happened
  your son, Nick, was found
  in his room, dead
there must be some mistake
he appears to have taken
his own life
there must be some mistake
the world falls open
spins
into surreality
there is
no mistake
a dead son, his body
and the bottomless pain
that adheres to the days
the weeks sliding
into the future

“No Mistake” bears witness to a moment of being wounded, of deeply
wanting the death to be a mistake. The mistake is invoked as sudden. Suicide
comes out of nowhere like a thief in the night. There are no words other
than: it is a mistake. The night’s fragility is suddenly shattered as the two
figures of the law announce the news. At that moment, suicide is already
part of the past even though it is present yet again while beginning to mark
the future for those who are subjected to its suddenness.

The rhythm of “No Mistake” draws attention to a terrifying moment in
time. Grosz explains time as

a kind of evanescence that appears only at those moments when our ex-
pectations are (positively and negatively) surprised. We can think it only
when we are jarred out of our immersion with continuity, when something
untimely disrupts our expectations ... We think it in passing moments,
through ruptures, nicks, cuts, in instances of dislocation, though it contains
no moments or ruptures and has no being or presence, functioning only as
a continuous becoming. (2004, p. 5)

Here suicide can be interpreted as rupture, not because it is suicide, but
because it becomes a tear in the time of one’s life. To draw on a metaphor,
imagine that life is like a piece of fabric. And suddenly, for no reason at all,
there is sudden rip that yanks at the fabric. It tears the surface and marks it
forever even if someone mends it later on. In the context of suicide, this tear
is marked by a son’s loss, and life’s rhythm with(out) the son. This tear,
however, should not be read as causal. While it is tempting to assume that the cause (suicide) precedes effect (shock and loss), we are arguing that the suddenness of the news, the dead body in the room, the police late at night, and the insistence it must be a mistake all mark a texture of time (Flaherty, 2011). This texture, embodied as a dislocation or cut in our daily activities, is something we cannot think through logically because, as Grosz (2004, p. 5) argues, time cannot be “mastered and controlled by life or understood through reason. Instead of containing and controlling time, life succumbs to its rhythms, directions and forces, to the ever pressing forces of development, growth and decay.” In “No Mistake,” this texture is invoked through language, when the body is cited performatively as dead (Jaworski, 2010). Suicide is recognized when the body is linguistically animated as dead. This is because, as Butler argues, “the act of recognition becomes the act of constitution: the address animates the subject into existence” (1997a, p. 25). This linguistic animation of the dead, however, is not bereft of emotion because “the world falls open/spins into surreality,” spins into grief.

Yet suicide is animated not only because it happened but also because it happened in a room. Space frames the response to a sense that something has gone wrong, articulated by: “there must be some mistake.” This resonates an unspeakability that translates into pain – pain for which there is no logical language. Such pain marks the presence of nonlanguage – a silence – in language. Such pain marks the aporia of loss – the room as an unfillable space, empty of one life in particular. We want to suggest that this unfillable space is private not only because it was a room but also because the material act of suicide was not seen, witnessed. The room too is part of representing this lacuna. Thus, the poem signifies various components of the lacuna to resonate the beginning of emptiness and a psyche ache attributed to suicide (Shneidman, 1996). This psyche ache, however, no longer belongs to the one who died. It is no longer part of the past. It becomes part of the present because it is retranslated into the suffering of the one who begins to grieve.

If the poem signifies components of the lacuna, how are we to understand this concept? Giorgio Agamben (1999, p. 38) argues that “every word, every writing is born ... as testimony.” Yet there is a lacuna in every testimony because experience as experience is possible to experience in retrospect only. As a result, language “must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness” (p. 39). Language must give way to the unsayable to mark a failure to express – and here, to the impossibility of bearing witness to the material act of suicide, thereby to know more fully why suicide took place. For Agamben, failure to express can happen...
“only on a condition of falling into silence” (p. 129). Alongside the words and the rhythm of thought, the poem captures a feeling of inexpressibility. From the moment the words materialize, there is something about suicide that is ineffable, captured in the response, “there must be some mistake.” Our suggestion is that the dead body is at the centre of the ineffable – a kind of evanescence that marks a traumatic dislocation from and in life. Furthermore, we want to suggest that despite the need to comprehend everything about suicide, something about it will always be elusive and outside the grasp of knowledge. This does not mean we ought to abandon our efforts in trying to prevent suicide. Instead, we ought to consider the possibility that those who grieve may not always find the words to express their grief yet will understand it wordlessly. Resonance then offers a possibility to broaden the conceptualization of suicide by taking into account not only those things about suicide that can be measured, but also those things that are inexpressible and act as a backdrop to everything that is rendered perceptible and tangible.

No Signs
this death had no warning
no traces
no online research
on a best way to kill oneself
no broken heart rejection
suspicious drugs, history of illness
only one happy son
so they thought
and a stack of goodbye
letters wishing everyone well
hopes for their lives
words of love but
not one word
of why

“No Signs” reads like a strand of thought that returns to one word and one word only: why. Returns because, we think, the search for signs begins with trying to understand the logic of why. Despite all the signs we are told to look for, suicide is like a bracket that arrives as a closing without any openings. The body, made absent in the search for clues, refuses to yield the secrets of the dead, refuses to explain why. All we are left with is absence.
warnings, no traces, perhaps a stack of goodbye letters, which hint at a sense of responsibility towards others even though suicide as an act might be seen as selfish and irresponsible. And even though the poem resonates the desire of seeing any signs in time, it also hints at suicide as partly unrecognizable, unintelligible. The poem reminds us that absence, and thus suicide, is a gift, constituted by how the living grapple with its incongruity. As preposterous as it might seem, let’s consider what suicide as a gift might capture.

Jacques Derrida argues that history is tied to three things: responsibility, faith, and gift (Derrida, 1995). Responsibility is “the experience of absolute decisions made outside knowledge or given norms” (p. 5). Faith is exercised “through a form of involvement with the other that is a venture into absolute risk, beyond knowledge and certainty” (p. 5). Gift is more complicated because it “puts me in relation to the transcendence of the other” (p. 6). Influenced by the work of Emmanuel Levinas, transcendence refers to the radical separation and difference – alterity – between oneself and other human beings. Working through the three things, Derrida arrives at the conclusion that the gift of death is a “marriage between responsibility and faith” (p. 6). This marriage is based on absolute risk, but this risk eschews the other rather than involving the other directly; thereby it leaves something impossible for the other: death. This leads to a lack of knowledge and acknowledgment by the other, both of which are at the heart of a true gift. Death becomes a gift because the giving party, the dead, do not recognize that the gift has been received and the receiving party, the living, have no apprehension of what has been given since death is not considered a gift. Therefore death is no ordinary gift because it does not involve reciprocity as Mauss (1966) argues. It is not caught up in a game of exchange, nor does it include expectations and gratitude.

Grafting this explanation to suicide, it is safe to say that suicide, as an act, does not permit a return. Lack of witness signified through absence preempts any possibility of exchange or return. Our suggestion then is that suicide can be seen as a gift because it is something given by the giver without that giver ever knowing the unintended consequences of the giving. “No Signs” resonates this kind of giving as the absent author of the goodbye letters is wishing everyone well and hoping their lives will be filled with love. In a way, this kind of wishing can be seen as a gift even though it may not have been the intention of the giver to be a gift or to be reciprocated by the living to confirm it as a gift. The wishing through letters effaces the possibility of return or any kind of gratitude. All of this, however, appears to be a cruel suggestion because the grieving do not exactly see it as a gift. Thus, we are
arguing that suicide is a gift insofar as it is given. In this sense, suicide as a given does not function as an adjective or a preposition. Rather, suicide as a given resonates with an established situation in which there is no response – no direct communion with the dead.

As useful as it is, Derrida’s interpretation does not take us far enough. Suicide might be explained as a gift, but what can this gift mean? The answer, we think, resides in the work of Levinas. Levinas argues that ethics derives from the encounter with and proximity to “the Other,” by which he means other fellow human beings, and “the other,” by which he means what is beyond one’s constitution, or essence (Levinas, 1969). Levinas (1981) considers the world one knows as “the said” because everything about the world is known through what is said of it. What is known can be conceptualized and interpreted into themes and patterns. The realm of “the other” belongs to “the saying,” because as Nuyen (2000, p. 124) succinctly puts it, “we are aware of it only through what it says to us rather than through our thematization.” For Levinas, the being of the “I” comes into being through encounters with Others. To put it simply for the context of this chapter, to have a sense of an “I,” one is dependent on relationship with Others, who impinge their “I’s” on the “I.” This is challenging because it means our sense of being is tied to others without our saying so and because, as Levinas (1981) insists, we have to reach out to Others in ways that will not destroy their differences. Thus, we not only exist in fellowship with other human beings, but also for them. This is what it means to exist ethically. By ethically, we are referring to acts, techniques, and practices that make our everyday living (Foucault, 1985, 1986). This is exercised for ourselves as much as it is exercised towards others who make the existential fabric of our daily living. As such, this existence is constituted by vulnerability and responsibility to one another because we are never entirely independent of one another to make sense of who and what we are. Perhaps this is why some interpret suicide as a selfish act, one that ignores the grieving of others.

In light of Levinas’s methodology, we are arguing that suicide is an ethical gift made possible through the absent body. By saying this, we do not mean that suicide per se is ethical. Rather, the encounter with and response to suicide is ethical. Suddenly something about the one we knew so well seems different to the point of incomprehension, which is why, as the poem notes, we begin looking for signs. This incomprehension is marked not only by grieving and remembering but also by perhaps asking: How could this be? How could you? How could you do this to yourself? How could you do this to me? Why didn’t I see it coming? Why didn’t I know? In this sense, suicide
creates an ethical dilemma. It demands that we respond because the act of suiciding has foregrounded a complete difference – alterity – of the one who died in the face of us believing that we knew them so well, believing that they would never leave us like this. Because of the foregrounding, the living encounter suicide as a mystery, marked by the deceased body. In the face of desperately trying to work out why they killed themselves, we also have to grapple with the fact that life may have to go on without them. The time of our lives is thrown off course, and it is safe to say that it will never be the same. Our suggestion is that grappling with this mystery and tear in time makes suicide unfathomable, thereby making our responses ethical to the act of killing oneself. Perhaps the question why is not only asked to understand reasons and motives. It is there to signal a tear in the existential fabric of the living that says the degree to which “reason for being … is not the source of all right and all meaning” (Levinas, 1985, p. 122).

Unfortunately, there is a problem with our argument. Levinas is opposed to suicide. For Levinas, suicide is contradictory and absurd. “Suicide is tragic,” Levinas writes, “for death does not bring a resolution to all the problems which birth gave rise” (1969, p. 146). However, suicide is not contradictory if it is a sacrifice because it marks a “being already in relation with the Other, already elevated to life for the Other” (Levinas, 1969, p. 149 [original emphasis]). Strangely, this claim makes sense for Levinas because “before defining a man as the animal that can commit suicide it is necessary to define him as capable of living for the Other” (p. 149). Unfortunately, the tragic character of suicide undermines the love of life, which leads Levinas (2005, p. 42) to conclude that “suicide is a contradictory concept.” Suicide is also absurd because “to die is to return to this state of irresponsibility” (p. 41) – a state where one tries to imagine existing without the Other (Levinas, 1987, p. 50; Hand, 2005, p. 42). It is not surprising then to see Levinas (1998, p. 177) conclude that “to be or not to be: the question par excellence probably does not lie therein.”

At first glance, Levinas’s position makes our argument absurd and does not relate to the “No Signs” poem. Suicide cannot be a gift, let alone an ethical gift because it marks the end of responsibility. The one who suicides cuts ties with the living not only because they are dead but also because they reject others around them in a very profound way. If our sense of the “I” is ethically dependent on others, then suicide, to put it very bluntly, says a very painful “fuck off” to the living whether they like it or not. Yet from the beginning our claim has not been about making suicide itself ethical. Rather, we have argued and are still arguing that the response to suicide is ethical.
because of the encounter with suicide as a result of the incongruity with which suicide confronts the living: someone healthy and exhibiting no signs of illness or distress decided to end their life.

Thus, suicide as an ethical gift is not about or for the dead. Rather, it is about the living, and for the living, not only because those who remain have to grieve but also because ultimately they are left in charge of making sense of the finality of suicide. Whether they like it or not, the living remain responsible to the dead, the Other, who rejected the living world. In light of this, perhaps suicide is a very painful and traumatic reminder that “responsibility is not a matter of cultivating a will, but of making use of an unwilled susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other” (Butler, 2005, p. 91). Maybe suicide, as a material act, can remind us that what is ethical is born in the process of materializing a given before a given becomes a given. To dismiss our argument would be a mistake because “No Signs” grapples with an ethical and philosophical tension in suicide not easily endured by those who mourn. It also grapples with the difficulty of having to embody one side of ethics that wounds and hurts deeply. Suicide may in fact be one of those impossible ethical acts, residing outside morality and the judgment of right and wrong. It tears at the fabric of one’s life and invokes more than we could ever imagine despite hearing of suicide from others.

But there is another problem. Absence marks suicide as an ethical gift. This absence is marked by the dead body, which no longer requires direct naming. We refer to the dead, but not their bodies. Their bodies become cadavers hailing silently the mark of suicide. This, we suggest, can be referred to as an absent presence (Shilling, 1993). By this we mean the body becomes self-evident to the point where it is superfluous to speak of it. It becomes present in its absence. This is conceived via language, through which the body disappears because it appears as a transparent medium of past activity (Foucault, 2006). Yet, as the poem signals, we long implicitly for this transparent medium because it is no longer transparent. We cannot understand its intentions, its motives. Goodbye letters mark the absence of explanation – a letting go, with love. The question of why remains opaque.

From a philosophical perspective, the question of why is opaque because of language. For Derrida (1973), words are there to articulate another kind of presence that is not objective or measurable. Dastur (2006, p. 58) reads this presence of things as “not objects because they are part of a world that cannot be objectively described, the presence of what is absent, of past and future, which cannot be objectively presented” yet is captured in the thingness of poetry. While this point might come across as cryptic and obscure,
it is something that philosophers such as Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida have grappled with. For Heidegger in particular, poetry beckons what feels impossible to say, to name, and in so doing, it “brings the presence of what was previously uncalled into a nearness” (1971, p. 196). Our point here is that the absent presence of suicide is something to do with language, and poetry, as a form, resonates its presence.

Poetry’s capacity to resonate the presence of absent presence depends on time. This might come across as a logical and obvious statement to make precisely because whether something is absent or not depends not only on the past but also on its ability to impact on the present and the future. “No Signs” struggles with time. Time is no longer linear because the content of the poem shifts between past and present as means of meditating on the question of why. Time comes across as a cut or a discontinuity in one’s sense of lived time for which there are no explanations (Grosz, 2004; Kern, 1983). The poem signifies suicide as a form of discontinuity not only because a loved one is no longer alive but also because their absence puts a mark on our own time lines. And this mark comes with a terrible longing of wanting to know why but never knowing the answer completely.

So “No Signs” offers an uncomfortable reminder. Along with all that we know of suicide, something about it remains out of reach. Butler argues that what is rendered intelligible depends on rendering something unintelligible, or even outside intelligible and unintelligible (Butler, 1990, 1997b, 2000). Put differently, what we know of suicide is dependent on what we do not know, not only because we have not yet discovered what we do not know but also because something of suicide is never accessible to the living because the secret rests with the dead. Agamben explains this point by suggesting that “everything that is presupposed for there to be in language (in the form of something non-linguistic, something ineffable, etc.) is nothing other than a presupposition of language insofar as it is excluded from language” (Agamben, 1998, p. 50). This does not mean the nonlinguistic is inaccessible. Rather, it appears as something unrealizable (Agamben, 1998). “No Signs” signifies something unrealizable about suicide that resonates with the intense desire to know that which cannot be known – a lacuna in which the living abide in the absent presence of the dead.

No End

it is not over, his end
an end with no end
how you live around

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the emptiness he
used to fill
the corner where
his ashes sit
the candle you light
when the family gathers
a flickering remembrance
you have to blow out
at the end of the day
the sentences you stop
where you might make
him disappear
and hesitate
his absence an intruder
presence
you cannot let go

“No End” returns to absence to invoke implicitly the shapeless textures of
grieving. Specifically, absent presence contributes to a deep sense that there
is no end to grieving suicide. There is an emptiness that cannot be filled,
marked by the absence of the corporeal and phenomenological body.
Memories etch the dead into the fabric of everyday life. The problem with
letting go – grieving – is not letting go of absence, but letting go of an absent
presence manifested by remembering the presence of the person. Those
who grieve are stuck in an interstitial space: hesitating in how to remember
so as not to forget, yet not being able to forget. This is a paradox because it
is impossible to forget those who suicided. Suicide is also a paradox because,
in our remembering, there is a response from the living only. This paradox
has a lot to do with time – a tug of war between the past, present, and future.
The grieving survivor invoked through the poem worries about the dis-
appearance of the one they loved. Absence is an intruder forever impinging
on daily life.

Derrida’s work is again useful. As explained earlier, he suggests that death
is a nonresponse in a response that will never come to an end for the one
who lives on (Derrida, 2001, p. 203). This is what makes suicide unfathom-
able. Because there is a nonresponse in a response, suicide is always just
beyond reach, a passage of no return for the dead, but also for the living
because nothing will ever be the same after suicide. In light of Butler’s argu-
ment, there is unintelligibility at the heart of making sense of suicide, and
this unintelligibility belongs to the future. If poetry tells stories of responses to suicide, this storying is based on a tug of war between unintelligibility and intelligibility located at the heart of speaking for and of the dead (Derrida, 2001). In this tug of war, the poem renders time as a fluctuation between past, present, and future, with an unending sense of grief, which resonates absence – a presence from the past – as an intruder that cuts into what otherwise would have been a life filled with the company of the person who once was.

A poem may provide words for grief’s intensity and loss’s disordering if the writer has “the willingness to be inhabited by and speak for others, including those beyond the realm of the human” (Hirschfield, 1998, p. 208). Perhaps both the suicided and the left behind are living beyond intelligibility, becoming inhuman in that place between unintelligibility and intelligibility. As “No End” implies, this is what “beyond the realm of the human” might feel like even though, paradoxically, one remains in the realm of the human to feel the disordering effects of grieving. This disordering also has no time; it is infinite, without an end. As a result, the poet must, as Jane Hirschfield (1994, p. 110) argues, “learn from what dwells outside his or her capacities and language, must learn from silence and exile.” The poet must be willing to stay in the liminal space. Liminal space is “a point of transition, entered briefly, at a particular time, in passage towards something else” (p. 110). Perhaps grieving for suicide can be understood as being in the liminal space, where wanting and not wanting to forget the deceased mark the process of grieving.

For Margaret Atwood (2002), this means a poet must stand on a threshold between the living and the dead even though death can only be understood through the living. Together with Hirschfield’s, Atwood’s point is significant for it suggests that poetry can acknowledge the silent departure of suicide, and the silence that comes after. Cloaked by silence, suicide becomes a space of forbidden speaking, of unspeakability. For Hirschfield (1998), poetry grows out of listening in that liminal space where speaking of suicide is at the risk of becoming forbidden, silent, forgotten through time.

This of course is not an easy task to accomplish. By listening to what is silenced about the finality of suicide, the poet must try “to understand the world beyond the narrow self ... be available to the unknown, to be touched and transformed by it” because “if we would seek out this widened knowledge, it is necessary first to leave the house of the ordinary self and the usual mind” (Hirschfield, 1994, p. 110). Suicide is like being out of one’s mind, out of intelligibility. But there is hope because “No End” speaks to the profound existential realization that our being is not the sum total of our...
being, or the point of origin from which we persist in the world after our loved ones are gone, even if our being is at the heart of how memories of them persist in their absence. What is important, then, is “learning to live in the speaking of language” so that we can “learn what is unspoken,” not so much about suicide but more importantly about life thereafter (Heidegger, 1971, p. 207, p. 93).

Conclusion: Resonant Responses

In responding to the death of Derrida, Butler notes that “there is no afterlife for Derrida, no soul that separates from the body, but there is an afterlife of words” (2005, p. 29). Our analysis of the unfathomable reveals that poetry offers an afterlife of words that articulates the dislocating effects of loss and grieving in suicide. Absence, time, and the corporeal body each represent a cut in time through which poetry resonates with the factuality of suicide without bearing witness to the materiality of the act. When the door to recognizability is slammed shut, the purpose of poetry is to respond, where response is framed as responsibility towards fellow human beings who suffer. Poetry is a responsibility towards others rather than for others. Poetry becomes a creative attempt to articulate the voicelessness of those who grieve, even if the poet filters this articulation. Through this, we suggest, poetry of suicide is an ethical practice through which we can be thoughtful and critical of how we respond towards suicide rather than worry about the content of our response only.

Will poetry, as one afterlife of words, prevent suicide? Can the conceptual work of lyric philosophy save lives? Diminish people’s grieving? Probably not. Yet what this chapter has offered is crucial to the project of preventing suicide because how we recognize and respond to the finality of suicide is an ethical project, which we are yet to imagine and put into practice. More often than not, responding to suicide at an everyday level belongs to the realm of the unspeakable, in which comprehending the finality of suicide is too difficult for words to grasp. Hence, we need to understand not only what ideas mean but also how people grapple with voicing them. As Butler (2004, pp. 204–5) reminds us, “something besides theory must take place, such as interventions at social and political levels ... which are not quite the same as the exercise of theory.” At the same time, “in all of these practices, theory is presupposed.” The danger with presuppositions is not that they exist but rather that they remain unquestioned, silently doing their work while people struggle living with the finality of suicide. It is this silence, as much as the
silence embedded at the heart of suicide as a material act, that needs further analytical yet compassionate response.

In ending this chapter, we want to confess to a problem with most of our assertions. Experience, in a phenomenological sense, does not make sense in suicide. Suicide, as an experience, is impossible to experience – something that both Levinas (1969; Hand 2005) and Derrida (1995) acknowledge in their work on death. This problem is important and one that might need to remain unresolved for now because it reminds us that how we remember those who suicide is dependent not on the dead but on the living. The living are implicated in understanding suicide, not simply because they grieve but because their responses articulate suicide as a nonresponse. In light of this, perhaps we ought to question sense-making in suicide. Perhaps sense-making can be understood as looking sideways at something, namely, the lacuna in suicide, and admitting that unfathomability is part of sense-making – part of living alongside the memory of the one who died.

There is something excessive about responding to suicide through the creativity of poetry. The three poems call for the recognition that lacunae shape grief in suicide. But absence is not the only thing that shapes lacunae. The responses of the living, be they through the poet or the grieving, are at the heart of constituting lacunae and, importantly, how we can respond to them. These lacunae teach us that loss claims our sense of grieving as we begin to make sense of suicide. As Butler (2005, p. 34) reflects on her response to Derrida’s death, “I did not seize upon it; it seize[d] upon me.” This suggests that something of the nonresponse in the response is not entirely up to us. Perhaps loss of agency, of both the dead and the living, is at the heart of the unfathomability of suicide. If this is the case, poetry’s role is to acknowledge not only the ineffable acceptance of death but also an acceptance that our lives and deaths are not entirely up to us. Perhaps we, as human beings, are undone from the beginning and know it only when it is too late.

Notes

1 Well over a decade ago, Range and Leach (1998, p. 24) explained and critiqued structural positivist approaches to research as follows: “Research methodology in suicidology has developed historically from philosophical roots in logical positivism and structural determinism. Reliance on these belief systems has led to research based on assumptions of cause-and-effect relationships, reductionist analysis, and the individual as the primary unit of analysis.”

2 We want to be crystal clear by saying that our reference to ethical does not refer to a moral good, or doing good towards another. Rather, we are drawing on the later
work of Michel Foucault (1985, 1986) in which he focuses on techne, or a range of practices that produced a citizen in ancient Greece. Rather than focusing on what is good or evil, Foucault was more interested in studying forms of living that characterized something as good.

3 We would like to thank Maria Kulp for bringing to our attention Levinas’s opposition to suicide in the spirit of a generous philosophical argument.

4 Suicide is also a contradictory concept because, in the context of Levinas’s work on time and being, death is never present – “death is never assumed, it comes” (Hand, 2005, p. 42).

References


