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Poetry and Diffidence: A Brief History

CHRISTOPHER OHGE

DIFFIDENCE HAS NEVER BEEN a commonly used critical term, but it appears or resonates in many of the greatest English works. The word seems to have nearly fallen out of usage after having peaked in the early nineteenth century (according to corpus searches in Google Books Ngram Viewer, Early English Books Online, and the UK Web Archive), and its present rarity might occasion some reflection about what has been lost (and gained). How has diffidence been used and portrayed in English poetry?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the archaic sense of diffidence as a ‘Want of confidence or faith; mistrust, distrust, misgiving, doubt’, and the common usage as a ‘Distrust of oneself; want of confidence in one’s own ability, worth, or fitness; modesty, shyness of disposition’. It comes from the Latin *diffidentia*, ‘mistrust, distrust, want of confidence’. The first sense of *diffidence* in the *OED* is that the person in question is distrustful, but the meaning has shifted to distrust of oneself. Diffidence occasions a wide range of emotions, from shame and anger (more intense) to timidity and doubt (less intense), yet it is not merely a disposition or a set of symptoms. Unlike embarrassment, it does not need to align with physical symptoms (blushing, for example). To echo Douglas Cairns’s comments on shame in ancient Greek culture, diffidence is ‘a unique way of

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looking at the world in its own right', and such a view can also model a way to think about poetry's inner negotiations with the cultural expectations of respect, and respectability.¹

Most published works of poetry are acts of ambition, and ambition may not seem easily to coexist with diffidence. Diffidence seems similar to a modesty topos, which naturally invites a reader's suspicion: 'all censure of a man's self is oblique praise', as Dr Johnson said. But associating diffidence merely with cant or a form of grandstanding would be too easy. How much trust is gained and lost when the writer struggles with duelling impulses of timorousness and temerity?

Diffidence is a literary inheritance: its practitioners are at once individually inventive and indebted to other expressions of diffidence. The verbal negotiations that arise from such complicated feelings may constitute a version of *in utramque partem*, an artful ambiguity that tries to get at both sides of an issue without having to commit to either.² Such ambiguity also suggests a kind of rhetorical *contrapposto* – putting one foot forward, as it were, while also uncomfortably drawing back into oneself. Diffidence may serve as an apology for both excess and insufficiency; excess, because literature has the effrontery to go beyond everyday utterance; insufficiency, because, as Shelley said, 'the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet'.³ It acknowledges a lack while making art about the lacking. Great poets find a way to protect against the dangers of diffidence while making use of it – not just in the ways they perceive doubt, and how others perceive that doubt, but also how they write about the taking in and projection of doubt. Diffidence in poetry is a form of expression and a way of looking at the world that is both in confident possession of, and shy about, its own inventive possibilities.

The Latinate word 'diffidence' has some relations to the Greek word *aidōs*. *Aidōs* was an inhibitory concept and figure evoking the Greek sense of shame, guilt, respect, and humility.⁴ As E. R. Dodds says, in the shame-culture of Homer the main driver of morality was not fear of the gods but respect of the public.⁵ *Aidōs* and the practice of poetry were linked for the Greeks, especially in the Archaic period. In Homer, Achilles'

aidōs makes him heroic and human, despite his rage and violence (*nemesis*), while in Hesiod it is personified in the world, embodying a virtue that is essential to civilised life but also reflexively paired with Nemesis. While discussions of *aidōs* have tended to focus on representations of shame in confrontations in battle or with the gods, it can also reflect the anxieties of expression. An obscure passage in Book II of the *Iliad* mentions Thamyris, the Thracian poet who was known to boast that he would win a singing contest even if the Muses opposed him.

Pride had made him say
 He could outsing the very Muses, daughters
 Of Zeus who bears the stormcloud for a shield.
 For this affront they blinded him, bereft him
 Of his god-given song, and stilled his harping.⁶

The Greek word for singing – *aeídoien* – bears a homophonic resemblance to *aidōs*. Thamyris's harping is god-given, then god-taken; that pride (a lack of *aidōs*) is his own, though. A. T. Murray's 1924 translation reads that Thamyris 'vaunted with boasting that he would conquer' the Muses, who 'made him forget his minstrelsy'.⁷ Here, pride, invention, and song coexist and find themselves in tension with the eventual guilt and shame that occasions Thamyris's loss of the thing which made his poetry possible: the voice. The reverence and voicelessness that occasion *aidōs* turn upon shame and the loss (*aidesten*) of honour later in the poem, in Book VII, when Hektor challenges the Akhaians, who 'all sat hushed, ashamed not to respond'.⁸ One powerful moment in the *Iliad* when the opposite of *aidōs* occurs is when Achilles calls Agamemnon a dog, which in the Greek translates literally to shamelessness. This instance, in Book I, is translated by Pope: 'O Monster, mix'd of Insolence and Fear, / Thou Dog in Forehead, but in Heart a Deer!'

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the satyr Marsyas – inventor not only of song but also of the aulos – loses a challenge to Apollo. His failure leads to shame and violence, and is a precursor to the flaying of Bartholomew (although it is an important difference that Marsyas was flayed by a god, whereas Bartholomew

flayed himself). Chaucer also invoked Marsyas as one of his prominent minstrels in *The House of Fame* (ll. 1229-32); he made this figure inhibitory while alluding to Dante's invocation of the same figure in a different sense: 'Nat that I wilne for mais-trye / Here art poetical be shewed!' Orpheus, whose failure not to look at Eurydice makes him lose her yet again, illustrates a kind of *contrapposto* with his tension between stepping forward and looking back. Adapting the legend for his film *Orphée* (1950), Jean Cocteau presents Orpheus as a struggling poet who has lost touch with his audience. In the opening scene, when his older companion admits that he has written nothing for twenty years, and that the public 'respects' his silence, Orphée responds with mock-shame (well, hostility) about the public: 'Il estiment sans doute que je n'apporte rien de neuf et qu'un poète ne doit pas être trop célèbre'. His young rival poet, Cégeste, is celebrated for *Nudisme*, collections of blank pages. Silence and expression, shame and celebrity, poetry and the blank page – Cocteau manages to distil all of these classical tensions of *aidōs* into a concise scene.

Diffidence started to appear in published works more frequently at the end of the sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth. Shakespeare usually used the word to evoke fears of disloyalty during the succession and sedition crises of the Elizabethan era – the 'distrust; mistrust, misgiving, doubt' of someone or something that the *OED* gives as its first sense. In *King John*, Queen Eleanor tells the Bastard, 'thou dost shame thy mother / And wound her honour with this diffidence' (I. i. 65-7); and in *1 Henry VI* a Bastard-usurper, this time spoken by Charles, says, 'We have been guided by thee hitherto, / And of thy cunning had no diffidence: / One sudden foil shall never breed distrust' (III. iii. 9-11).⁹ Stanley Cavell has argued that the intermingling of political succession and shame in *King Lear* reveals that 'shame is felt not only toward one's own actions and one's own being, but toward the actions and the being of those with whom one is identified – fathers, daughters, wives ... the beings whose self-revelations reveal oneself'.¹⁰ Lear's shame sparks his anger, yet that shame is rooted in a distrust of the nature of his love, and lovability (so too is Edgar distrustful of his love for his father): his behaviour exemplifies what

Edmund describes to Edgar as the ‘needless diffidences’ that result from ‘maledictions against king and nobles’, which include the breakdown of personal relationships – ‘needless diffidences, banishment of friends, dissipation of cohorts, nuptial breaches, and I know not what’ (I. ii. 154-6).

Diffidence lingers in Shakespeare in other surprising ways. As Emma Smith has said, *Antony and Cleopatra* explores shame and publicity (in all its senses), showing the differences between the external (Roman and Egyptian) shame culture and the internal (English) guilt culture:¹¹ the play ‘shifts the balance away from interior guilt to exterior shame. It turns tragedy inside out’.¹² That doubling of shame- and guilt-culture is set against the background of political diffidence and *nemesis*.

See

How I convey my shame out of thine eyes,
By looking back what I have left behind
'Stroyed in dishonor.

(III. ii. 53-6)

Shame and betrayal form the feedback loop of political malfeasance, but Antony also illustrates a *contrapposto* with his doubling of conveying (projecting) and looking back. These poetic stresses suggest the interpenetration of shame, guilt, and distrust, such as when Antony imagines his ‘face subdued / To penetrative shame’ (IV. xiv. 87-8), the horror of humiliating defeat coupled with his error of distrusting Cleopatra.¹³ A similar dynamic shows in *The Winter’s Tale*, when Autolycus says: ‘If I had a mind to be honest, I see Fortune would not suffer me: she drops booties in my mouth’; he then includes a self-reflexive awareness of his ‘double occasion’ of political opportunity and shame: ‘for I am proof against that title and what shame else belongs to’t’ (IV. iv. 836-46). A Marsyas-like figure who sings and entertains, he stands in stark contrast to Leontes, who is the only character in the play to use the word ‘shame’ more than once (four out of eight total instances). While Autolycus owns his diffidence and discards his shame – ‘what a fool Honesty is! and Trust, his sworn brother, a very simple

gentleman!’ – Leontes owns his shame and then discards his diffidence (and his guilt) after seeing Hermione’s statue at the end:

I am ashamed. Does not the stone rebuke me
 For being more stone than it? O royal piece!
 There’s magic in thy majesty, which has
 My evils conjured to remembrance, and
 From thy admiring daughter took the spirits,
 Standing like stone with thee.

(V. iii. 37-42)

Leontes’ admission of shame functions as expiation for his diffidence, released because he needs an heir. Yet Hermione herself is using diffidence to show the king’s perilous diffidence. These instances in *The Winter’s Tale* convey a linkage between diffidence and shame in the rogue and the king, a pairing which gathers together anxieties of trust, debt, roguishness, and political succession.

Shakespeare identifies diffidence as the root cause of political and personal contexts riven with duplicity. The word was in the air around this time for good reason. In his 21 March 1610 speech to Parliament, for example, King James I spoke about the

diffidence which men may haue, that I minde not to liue in any wastfull sort hereafter, will you but looke vpon my selfe and my posteritie; and if there were no more but that, it will teach you that if I were but a naturall man, I must needs bee carefull of my expences: For as for my own person, I hope none that knowes me well, can thinke me but as little inclined to any prodigall humours of vnnecessary things, as any other reasonable man of a farre meaner estate.¹⁴

James is not just seeking more taxes from an uncooperative Parliament as part of the proposed Great Contract; he is also making a point that diffidence involves debt, and that undermines the power of the monarchy. His emphasis on the self is also the dual self, the king’s two bodies: diffidence is an insult to one and a threat to the other. In his political satire *A Game at Chess* (1624), which evokes James I’s negotiations with the Spanish, Thomas Middleton has the Protestant White Bishop’s

Pawn acting in a devious fashion to protect against the Catholic 'Black House':

No truth or peace of that Black House protested
Is to be trusted; but, for hope of quittance
And warned by diffidence, I may entrap him soonest.
– I admit conference.

(I. i. 238-41)¹⁵

Political chaos seems to ask for stoicism, frugality, and faith, yet Middleton's poetic frame of the chess game, coupled with the doubleness of Black diffidence and White entrapment, reinforces the view that the institutions themselves are equally dissembling.¹⁶

Milton would carry diffidence in a distinctive new direction, moving beyond the monarch and focusing on individual virtue and reverence. In Book VIII of *Paradise Lost*, Adam's awe for newly created Eve perplexes him, and us.¹⁷ Gabriel warns Adam:

Accuse not Nature, she hath don her part;
Do thou but thine, and be not diffident
Of Wisdom, she deserts thee not, if thou
Dismiss not her, when most thou needst her nigh,
By attributing overmuch to things
Less excellent, as thou thy self perceav'st.

(VIII. 561-6)

The enjambment of 'diffident' and 'Of Wisdom' is appropriately halting, and the awe silencing; but this is also a passage about the 'skill' of self-esteem in marriage and the nature of spiritual love. To be diffident of wisdom is to be seduced by outer charm. Adam is not entirely embarrassed by his attraction, but 'half abash't' (l. 595). This emphasises a trope in poetry that, when diffidence appears, it tends to be coupled with some form of shame, or half-shame. *Samson Agonistes* is likewise a poem saturated with doubt, shame, 'over-potent charms' (l. 427), boastfulness, and self-flagellation. Diffidence only appears once, but it is crucial because it revolves around a

confession of shame and diffidence towards God that initiates a struggle to be heard and redeemed:

to God have brought
 Dishonour, obloquie, and op't the mouths
 Of Idolists, and Atheists; have brought scandal
 To Israel, diffidence of God, and doubt
 In feeble hearts, propense anough before
 To waver, or fall off and join with Idols;
 Which is my chief affliction, shame and sorrow,
 The anguish of my Soul, that suffers not
 Mine eie to harbour sleep, or thoughts to rest.
 (ll. 451-9)¹⁸

That dialogue with Manoa compounds several familiar diffidence-words: dishonour, doubt, waver, shame (and a new one enters: 'Atheists'). Later, in his response to Herapha, Samson plays the Thracian bard and vaunts with boasting: 'In confidence whereof I once again / Defy thee to the trial of mortal' (ll. 1174-5). In these visionary moments, perhaps Samson sees that God is diffident ('God's counsel have not kept, his holy secret / Presumptuously have publish'd impiously, / Weakly at least, and shamefuefly'). 'Even self-diffidence, when it hinders us from duty, or clogs us in duty, is very displeasing to the Lord', Matthew Henry would later say in his 1706 commentary on Exodus.¹⁹ And the Lord's secretiveness would be equally displeasing, Samson might say.

In *An Essay on Criticism*, Pope offers a profound and lasting change in the sense of diffidence: 'Be *silent* always when you *doubt* your Sense; / And *speak*, tho' *sure*, with *seeming Diffidence*' (ll. 566-7).²⁰ Robert M. Schmitz's work (1962) on the Bodleian manuscript of *An Essay on Criticism* shows that Pope reworked that couplet before its initial publication in 1711 by adding '*seeming*' and fixing the awkwardness of the first version, 'Be silent always you doubt your sense, / Speak when you're sure, yet speak with diffidence'. Pope characterised diffidence as inward, but it is probably better to say he was registering something akin to *aidōs*, showing a reciprocity between inner and outer senses of shame and respect. Shame registers a

kind of knowledge of the self, so a lack of diffidence would be an avoidance of self-knowledge. 'Sickness', Pope once said in a letter to Richard Steele, 'teaches us a diffidence in our earthly state'.²¹ Sickness was also a word used by Reformation theologians concerned with the vagaries of verbal dexterity, psychological complexity, and allegory. John King's 1599 sermon, which may have been responding to the kind of felicity with wordplay and self-reflection dramatised in Prince Hamlet, also includes the 'sickenesse of all the Allegoristes' who '*languish about wordes*, and in seeking deeply after nothing, to loose not onely their time, travel, and thankes, but their wits also'.²² Pope uses diffidence in another letter to Steele, from 29 November 1712, in which he takes issue with Steele's publication of Pope's rendering of Hadrian's verses with his name as the author: 'I am sorry you publish'd that notion about *Adrian's Verses* as mine; had I imagin'd you wou'd use my name, I shou'd have express'd my sentiments with more modesty and diffidence'.²³ Modesty *and* diffidence: Pope distinguished not only the two dispositions, but also the persona of the translator as against that of the original poet. But the diffidence of creativity also shows in his next line in the letter: 'I only sent it to have your opinion, and not to publish my own, which I distrusted'.

In *An Essay on Criticism*, for the first recorded instance in English, Pope intimates that there is something to be gained from a self-awareness that blends the Miltonic acknowledgement of our fallen natures as well as the potential untrustworthiness of poetry. 'Be *silent* always when you *doubt* your Sense; / And *speak*, tho' *sure*, with *seeming Diffidence*': Pope's lines recall 'O love's best habit is in seeming trust' (Shakespeare, Sonnet 138), but 'Oh, 'tis imposture all', the poet winks (Donne, 'Loves Alchymie', l. 6).²⁴ One of Empson's conclusions about Pope's wit is that 'one must expect a certain puppyishness' even in his authoritative writings.²⁵ 'On both sides thus is simple truth suppress'd': the sly poet can find that his best habit is in *seeming* diffidence. Such is the poet's ability to convey 'the world's false subtleties', and to feign being on both sides of confidence – authoritative and cunning, self-assured and insecure, like Samson. There is something more sly in Pope's craft: did he

add 'seeming' simply to complete the five-foot line? '*Seeming*' aptly pairs with '*doubt*'; it also pairs well with its rhyme word 'Sense', which is a crucial trope in the poem. Recall the *contrapposto*: the first line above has two italicised words that balance each other out, *silent/doubt*, but the second is unsure, with two words of assertiveness and one of distrust, *speaks/sure/Diffidence*. The capitalised '*Diffidence*' not only stands out, it creates unevenness; it towers visually over '*speaks*' and '*sure*': in a couplet about speech, the poet uses a *written* style (with italics and capitals) to complicate a rhymed couplet that conveys conclusiveness. Pope's seeming diffidence creates a secondary mechanism demonstrating a process that must be conscious, or nearly conscious, of failure. It is a verbal signal of the poet's imagining an audience (embodied in the example above by Steele) that sees the poet's failure in virtue of its rendering as a *seeming* failure.

Pope may have intuited from Milton the thought that the creation of poetry involves a reckoning with diffidence. Yet the very utterance of '*seeming Diffidence*' is itself not diffident. His authority to espouse diffidence seems to belie the virtue he promotes. Pope's diffidence is not merely false humility; it recalls a classical sense of *aidōs*, which he translates in his *Iliad* to 'Reason'. In one important instance, Apollo criticises Achilles' lack of shame in Book XXIV: 'Brave tho' he be, yet by no Reason aw'd, / He violates the Laws of Man and God' (ll. 68-9).²⁶ Swift also spoke of 'an Error of another Kind indeed, but not less dangerous, arising from a Diffidence and a false Humility'.²⁷ That error may seem too simplistic and merely directed towards religious believers who only pretend to repent of their sins, but it also connects rhetorically to Pope's sense of *aidōs* / Reason in the *Iliad*, as Swift adds, only two sentences after the error of 'Diffidence', that 'nothing is more common than to see a wicked Man running headlong into Sin and Folly, against his Reason, against his Religion, and against his God'.²⁸ Pope's use of '*seeming Diffidence*', and his pairing of reason and shame, gain more currency by moving away from mere sinfulness, ignorance, and political scheming and towards a rhetorical posture, and a self-reflexive gesture about the poet's relation to expression and embarrassment. It also gestures to

previous warnings against diffidence without embracing his contemporary Johnson's (or Swift's) sureness about its negativity. Pope's translation of *aidōs* is – ingeniously – pure sophistry: while connecting law to Reason, he is using Platonic language to evoke a pre-Socratic context, a tension which is captured in Protagoras's suggestion that Zeus bestowed justice (*dike*) and a sense of shame (*aidōs*) on citizens in order to promote a functional society, whereas Socrates invoked justice (*dikaiosune*) and moderation (*sophrosune*), in a society governed by reason and virtue (*arete*).²⁹ Pope's cagey restraint is that diffidence can be part of a performance, a *seeming* modesty resulting from a calculated effort not to play the prattler. This modesty topos is to speak surely to oneself, but with restraint, as a part of the poet's development, under the guise of rationality and virtue. Pope's own self-deprecations lead to second thoughts, revisions of himself, avoiding the danger of self-satisfaction. Dr Johnson was critical of those who recommended to critics 'the proper diffidence of themselves', and doubted that such 'professed enemies of arrogance and severity have much more benevolence or modesty than the rest of mankind': he realised the audacity of a writer who sought to express and publish anything.³⁰ 'An author places himself uncalled before the tribunal of criticism, and solicits fame at the hazard of disgrace', he said in his biography of Pope.³¹ (In his *Lives of the Poets*, Johnson only uses the word 'diffidence' once, and it is in the essay on Pope, in the section about the 'vexation' caused by his precarious subscription ventures, particularly his translation of Homer.³²)

Pope's inward sense of diffidence had an effect on the Romantic poets. His phrase '*speak, tho' sure, with seeming Diffidence*' becomes 'Speak, that my torturing doubts / their end may know!' in a Wordsworth sonnet ('Why art thou silent! Is thy love a plant').³³ Wordsworth perpetually acts out Pope's self-doubt, and shows that pride has its own diffidence: 'pride, / Howe'er disguised in its own majesty, / Is littleness' ('Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree which stands near the Lake of Esthwaite', ll. 50-2).³⁴ In *The Prelude*, the ecstatic possibilities of poetry are prefaced by 'heart-experience, and in humblest sense / Of modesty' (V. 585-6). Wordsworth takes Pope's 'sense' and enjambes it with modesty (recalling, too, Milton's

‘diffident / Of Wisdom’). Wordsworth also seems to be echoing Pope’s double consciousness of ‘modesty and diffidence’ when the youthful poet’s ‘timorous capacity from prudence’ (l. 241) eventually transforms into the tempering doubleness of ‘A quiet independence of the heart’:

hence for future days
 Ensued a diffidence and modesty,
 And I was taught to feel, perhaps too much,
 The self-sufficing power of Solitude.
 (*Prelude*, II. 74-7)

Wordsworth’s hesitancy, his ‘wise passiveness’, his profusion of half-measures – his variety of ‘modesty topoi’ – indicate a tension between the transcendental ecstasy of the natural world and the works of great poets.

The independent heart triumphs over reason for Wordsworth’s sense; triumph paradoxically breeds the deepest sadness; diffidence comes from this sadness, leaving him perplexed, and leading to rethinking. In the words of T. H. Green, on Wordsworth: ‘The natural man is the passive man’; the poet’s being ‘natural and free’ is a posture that conveys the diffidence *and* modesty of ‘perplexed persistence’.³⁵ Wordsworthian diffidence also concerns small successes in action. ‘Was the aim frustrated by force or guile, / When giants scooped from out the rocky ground, / Tier under tier, this semicirque profound?’, he asks, contemplating the landscape of Malham Cove, before turning to a more comprehensive sense of imperfection in human things.

Foundations must be laid
 In Heaven; for, ’mid the wreck of IS and WAS,
 Things incomplete and purposes betrayed
 Make sadder transits o’er thought’s mystic glass
 Than noblest objects utterly decayed.
 (Sonnet XXXIV, ‘Malham Cove’, ll. 10-14)³⁶

Wordsworth renders the tension between imaginary force and frustrating guile as well as ‘IS and WAS’, and the second distinction seems the mightier in small caps, visible but not audible to

a reader. What is and what was are repeatedly caught up in Wordsworth's diffidence:

The days gone by
Come back upon me from the dawn almost
Of life; the hiding-places of my power
Seem open, I approach, and then they close
(*Prelude*, XI. 333-6)

This is a mighty incompleteness, with 'almost', lost time, and hidden powers of which the poet only catches a glimpse. It is 'the aim frustrated by force or guile' that frightens the poet and that may be one of the best motivators for visionary poetry.

Emily Dickinson evoked a similar worry about expression in solitude – its inability to capture the picturesque, for instance, in a way which is both striking and memorable and yet comes with the dark knowledge that its subject is impossible to capture with words. The poet tries anyway:

I SEND two Sunsets –
Day and I in competition ran,
I finished two, and several stars,
While He was making one.

His own is ampler –
But, as I was saying to a friend,
Mine is the more convenient
To carry in the hand.³⁷

Belinda Jack has argued that Dickinson represents a poet in competition between the ideal and the real.³⁸ Dickinson's nimble disbelieving and believing is not just about her faith and her vision of nature; it is also an oscillation between belief and disbelief in the force of poetry.³⁹

The Lark is not ashamed
To build upon the ground
Her modest house –
(‘For every bird a nest’, ll. 13-15)⁴⁰

This lovely thought is then undermined by psychological doubt: 'Yet who of all the throng / Dancing around the sun / Does so rejoice?' (ll. 16-18). Seeming diffidence matures into nimble diffidence. Such a tension between a poetic guile and an ebullient, natural expression of the ideal shows in Herman Melville's synthesis of these competing aesthetic forces in a poem written near the end of his life:

Sad patience – joyous energies;
 Humility – yet pride and scorn;
 Instinct and study; love and hate;
 Audacity – reverence. These must mate,
 And fuse with Jacob's mystic heart,
 To wrestle with the angel – Art.
 ('Art', ll. 6-11)⁴¹

As if channelling Dickinson, Melville uses dashes to juxtapose diffidence-concepts of humility and pride, and audacity and reverence, in the spirit of *agon*.

Diffidence has become less about what others see and more about what the subject sees in themselves, but that seeing consists of a competition between desires to project artful words at the risk of embarrassment, and failure. Seeming diffidence creates an artful disproportion. As Richard Poirier says about genius (in a passage about Ralph Waldo Emerson and Gertrude Stein), successful artists exhibit a conflict between 'a determination to imagine that there is some sort of democratic-universal participation in the creation of art' and 'a recognition that there is nonetheless a special measure of genius in those who do in fact produce works of art'. He also attends to the 'stylistic imbalance' between the 'writer's ordinary claim to ordinariness' and 'rhetorical practices that give every indication of individual, eccentric, and unique mastery'.⁴² The style of writing leans towards the eccentric, the individual – the diffident, by any other name – and it becomes antithetical to ordinary language, if it succeeds. Perhaps Pope was suggesting that the poet exhibits seeming diffidence to sound less peculiar, yet peculiarity is there, subtly, for the careful reader. If it were not, it would not be compelling poetry.

The Victorian era saw a decline in the occurrence of diffidence. A translation of Epictetus by Thomas Wentworth Higginson represents the prevailing view: 'Two things must be rooted out of men, conceit and diffidence. Conceit lies in thinking that you want nothing; and diffidence in supposing it impossible that under such adverse circumstances you should ever succeed'.⁴³ This is a far cry from Wordsworth's diffidence-as-perplexed-persistence, but clever poets still experimented with diffidence. For instance, Robert Browning translated Clytemnestra's defiant speech to the Argeians:

I shall not shame me, consort-loving manners
 To tell before you: for in time there dies off
 The diffidence from people. Not from others
 Learning, I of myself will tell the hard life
 I bore so long as this man was 'neath Iliion.
 (*Agamemnon*, ll. 855-60)⁴⁴

Browning may be presenting a character thoroughly against diffidence, which in this speech relates to the shame (*aidōs*, again) of public 'back-revenging' against a woman stuck at home; but the presentation itself is Greek to English readers. His literalist translation was largely considered a failure even by ardent supporters such as Carlyle, who deemed it 'a violent disjunction of text and voice'.⁴⁵ In Browning's *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day*, a seeming vitriol against diffidence piles up, including 'the stir / Of mouth, its smile half smug half sinister, / Mock-modest boldness masked in diffidence' ('With George Bubb Dodington', ll. 212-14).⁴⁶ Such biting satire of obtuseness and hypocrisy overshadows an earnest concern for public virtue as well as a Victorian distaste for bloated writing. Yet Browning, as good as he is in these seething lines, plays with shame, 'Mock-modest boldness', and 'feigning'. Browning's own certainty might hark back to his Pre-Raphaelite tendency to return to archaic notions, namely, before diffidence became inward and more psychologically complicated. But again, to return to *Agamemnon*, Browning may also be alluding to the Greek shame culture. When Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigenia, Browning captures a halting diffidence of speech.

His ministrants, vows done, the father bade –
 Kid-like, above the altar, swathed in pall,
 Take her – lift high, and have no fear at all,
 Head-downward, and the fair mouth's guard
 And frontage hold, – press hard
 From utterance a curse against the House
 By dint of bit – violence bridling speech.
 (ll. 247-53)

This is a passage both violently executed and halting (distrustful of expression) with its admixture of commas and dashes.

Diffidence is a more hopeful, yet still negative and reactionary, conception in Gerard Manley Hopkins. As John Bayley writes in an essay about Tennyson and decadence, beneath the confidence of Tennyson's lines in poems such as 'Morte d'Arthur' 'is really the weight of diffidence', which seeks fellowship with the reader as to the poet's doubts. Bayley elaborates, 'Diffidence is not only the most human and most personalised of qualities, but the one that most surely if stealthily reaches out for the enlargement of human contact'.⁴⁷ Hopkins also sought to enlarge the spoken language of man, and was at once respectful of the spirit of diffidence and resistant to it. Hopkins not only created a novel style that was compressed and stressed, but also employed ellipsis to create verbal hesitancy in otherwise forceful poems. Consider one of his greatest and best-known poems, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', which features a potent combination of elements of diffidence – a self-aware poet like Homer's Thamyris ('I am bold to boast') then sees the self dissolving ('soft sift / In an hourglass'), and, with dimming vision, struggles to 'make words break from me here all alone':

But how shall I . . . Make me room there;
 Reach me a . . . Fancy, come faster –
 Strike you the sight of it? look at it loom there,
 Thing that she . . . There then!

(ll. 217-20)⁴⁸

Here it is – seeming diffidence, playing out hesitation and doubt before exploding in strangeness and extravagance, and concluding with a return of the decidedly un-diffident master, ‘Pride, rose, prince, hero of us, high-priest’ (l. 279). Yet this is a pride that comes with castigations.

While Hopkins himself had connected ‘diffidence’ to ‘spiritual sloth’, as would be expected at this time, it is a *seeming* diffidence that appears in his famous 21 August 1877 letter to Robert Bridges about his use of sprung rhythm – a sense of hope, and something to be overcome both in his own shame at spiritual sloth and in the ‘natural’ freedom of sprung rhythm, his invention.⁴⁹ He is using this as a kind of reticence in order to alert the reader to its existence. Bridges responded with his appreciation for Hopkins’s inventiveness in his preface to Hopkins’s posthumous collection of poems, saying that, in his latest work, ‘He works out his own nature instinctively as he happens to be made, and is irresponsible for the result. It is lamentable that Gerard Hopkins died when, to judge by his latest work, he was beginning to concentrate the force of all his luxuriant experiments in rhythm and diction, and *castigate* his art into a more *reserved* style’ (my emphases).⁵⁰ Sometimes Bridges seems repelled by Hopkins’s ‘rude shocks of his purely artistic wantonness’.⁵¹ Nevertheless, he is keen to notice the connection between the poet’s freedom and a reticent – yet forceful – style which is couched not in the commonly English ‘running rhythm’, but a ‘sprung rhythm’ that includes failures and successes. Rhythm and diction ‘castigate’ his art, Bridges writes – not just in the sense of revision (appropriate for a serial reviser like Hopkins), but also of a subduing and chastisement of the self.

If thou didst put this sour cold habit on
To castigate thy pride, ’twere well. . .
(*Timon of Athens*, IV. iii. 272-3)

The result is a ‘reserved’ style, which calls upon the reader to think about the silences, as well as the strengths, of being reserved. The expression of diffidence is itself a protection against diffidence.

As diffidence continued to fall out of the language in the twentieth century, the best poets continued to find ways to smuggle it carefully into their work. Showing a compulsion to write, as well as a desire for reassurance, Edward Thomas once said in a letter to Robert Frost in 1914, ‘I wonder whether you can imagine me taking to verse. If you can I imagine I might get over the feeling that it is impossible – which it once obliges your good nature to say “I can”. In any case, I must have my “writer’s melancholy” though I quite agree with you that I might spare some of it to the deficient’.⁵² Frost later said that ‘Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another. People say, “Why don’t you say what you mean?” We never do that, do we, being all of us too much poets. We like to talk in parables and in hints and in indirections – whether from diffidence or some other instinct’.⁵³ Here diffidence is not just double-speak; it is being ‘in indirections’ – itself a wonderful doubling – that comes with permission. And perhaps Thomas did not mean what he said. His acknowledgement to his mentor of his ‘writer’s melancholy’ becomes only a few years later the ‘melancholy / Wrought magic’ (‘The Melancholy’).⁵⁴ He also makes use of the ‘I can’ phrase from his letter in his poetry (in the company of glory):

The glory invites me, yet it leaves me scorning
 All I can ever do, all I can be,
 Beside the lovely of motion, shape, and hue,
 The happiness I fancy fit to dwell
 In beauty’s presence.

(‘The Glory’)

The diffidence of glory in this poem shows in the final line, which sets two instances of ‘I can’ (both in doing and being) against ‘I cannot bite the day to the core’. Both poems in Thomas display an energy of composition that at once springs from and betrays its diffidence.⁵⁵ This reticence reflects a kind of poetry that strives to be moral, to construct new worlds, while being reflective about the violence of the past. The personal and the public crises are one and the same, yet both cunning, in diffident fashioning – but is the poet the producer or

the product of the crisis? As Clive James said of Philip Larkin: 'In the animal world, stealthy diffidence is sometimes a useful lead-up to a deadly leap'.⁵⁶ The poet's anticipation of mortality can beget a powerful silence, recalling A. E. Housman's reticence which combines a classical discipline with an ingenious ability to leave important things unsaid.⁵⁷

John Crowe Ransom attended to T. S. Eliot's diffidence, or his (and our) being 'metaphysically wistful': 'Because I do not know my own intent – I am trying scrupulously not to determine yours. Perhaps we are grateful for that. But what we have then, in him and in ourselves too, is a certain diffidence. Perhaps we should enter a religious diffidence as one of the characters of modern poetry'.⁵⁸ Wit brings poetry a certain security – an idea which ties him to Pope – but 'another instance of the poet's diffidence' comes from the wit's metaphors and allusions that 'refer obsessively to objects which are symbolic with religious meanings'. This kind of seriousness is dream-like, often difficult, the result of weakened faith, and tinged with irony. Geoffrey Hill noticed a 'tactical diffidence' in Ransom's half-truth that critics often assume that the great poets are in control of their own style.⁵⁹ (Hill himself brilliantly parlayed Ransom's tactical diffidence while calling upon *Measure for Measure* in *Triumph of Love*: 'Scrupulosity, diffidence, shrill spirituality'.⁶⁰)

But there is more in Eliot's religious diffidence, in relation to thinking well of oneself – that is the problem of allusion and originality. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent': 'if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged'.⁶¹ *Timidity*, a kind of diffidence dogmatically attached to past poets.

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years –
 Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres* –
 Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
 Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
 Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
 For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which

One is no longer disposed to say it.

(‘East Coker’, V. 1-7)

Puzzling out the struggle for adequate expression, the poet attempts a new composition that may be thought of as a diffident kind of failure – not only a failure of poetry but also a failure of self (like ‘different’, ‘diffidence’ implies a notion of differing). A reflection on – and in – time, this opening to the fifth section of ‘East Coker’ bespeaks a humility about the practice of poetry – a kind of humility in ‘the trying’ that recalls Pope’s ambition: ‘But perhaps neither gain nor loss. / For us, there is only the trying’ (V. 17-18). There is still the need for aggressive action (‘a raid on the inarticulate’) rooted in the sense of where one is as a poet: between silence and poetry, employing a tactical diffidence (‘humility is endless’).⁶²

The last section of ‘Little Gidding’ explicitly invokes diffidence, ‘What we call the beginning is often the end ... The word neither diffident nor ostentatious ... Every poem is an epiphany’. While it seems that Eliot here is simply setting diffidence (timidity) as the opposite of ostentation (boastfulness), it is better to say that ‘the word’ is reckoning with both. As Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue note in their commentary to ‘East Coker’, Eliot would not have wanted readers to think of his seemingly straightforward line on humility straightforwardly. Not only was Eliot joining in a dialogue with Pascal, who said that ‘Few men speak humbly of humility’, but he also indicated in a 1935 letter to Jeanette McPherrin that ‘there is a wrong way of being humble as well as a right way’.⁶³ Few people speak diffidently of diffidence; and diffidence can be wrong as well as right.

Auden may have been the poet most sensitive to diffidence since Pope. Perhaps this is why the word ‘diffidence’ never appears in his poetry. Auden does invoke the adjectival form of the word in one important self-reflective moment in his prose, ‘The Well of Narcissus’:

The image of myself which I try to create in my own mind
in order that I may love myself is very different from the

image which I try to create in the minds of others in order that they may love me.

Most faces are asymmetric, i.e. one side is happy, the other sad, one self-confident, the other diffident, etc.⁶⁴

Auden's poetry dances around diffidence by frequently using related words such as 'trust', '(im)modest', 'humility', 'shy', 'timidity', and 'shame'. In his *New Year Letter* (1940), for example, he sets Dryden's 'modest smile' and 'middle style' against his own 'crimes', including a sometimes preachy 'immodest tone', but he doubles back in a seeming diffidence masked in apology: 'Yet still the weak offender must / Beg still for leniency and trust / His power to avoid the sin / Peculiar to his discipline'.⁶⁵ Auden was also sufficiently distrustful of public speech to be at least troubled by self-questioning. His modesty offers a Frostian permission to write poetry in a world riven with duplicity. Lucy McDiarmid has said of Auden that 'Every poem becomes an apology, undermining its own significance and alluding to the value it cannot contain'.⁶⁶ Auden's diffidence is a subtle sensibility that engages with reticence, which may be left unsaid or uttered as a spiritual modesty; but it also suggests ambivalence between poetry and a desire for moral and spiritual improvement. 'The Cave of Making', for instance, is not just an elegy for another poet, Louis MacNeice; it is also about the poet's diffidence, and an extraordinary self-reflection of the poet's asymmetric face. The poem features all of the familiar concepts surveyed thus far: trust ('but we shan't, not since Stalin and Hitler, / trust ourselves again'), shyness ('but the dead we miss are easier / to talk to: with those no longer / tensed by problems one cannot feel shy'), silence ('Here silence / is turned into objects', and 'knowing Speech can at best, a shadow echoing / the silent light, bear witness / to the Truth it is not, he wished it were'). In the 'Postscript' he moves from hope that 'your books will excuse you' to worry that

God may reduce you
on Judgement Day
to tears of shame,
reciting by heart

the poems you would
have written, had
your life been good.⁶⁷

Vanity and the unwritten poem might be intertwined in Auden, but so too is something which Milton also called ‘diffidence of God’, and shame. It resists the notion that poetry can provide eternal truths. This is not just ‘extrapoetic’, as McDiarmid argues,⁶⁸ in trying to apologise for the insufficiency of poetry while invoking a spiritual dimension; it is also metapoetic, letting slip how he negotiates with poetry’s elusiveness through craft.

At lucky moments we seem on the brink
Of really saying what we think we think:
But, even then, an honest eye should wink.

I am not sure it is possible to write a better adaptation of Pope’s seeming diffidence, and of Frost’s being ‘in indirection’. Auden is getting near to saying ‘what we think we think’, but opts instead for a wink, acted out through lyrical playfulness.

Seamus Heaney’s uneasiness with late Auden also calls upon diffidence, wordplay, and mortality:

Worshipped language can’t undo
Damage time has done to you:
Even your peremptory trust
In words alone here bites the dust.

Dust-cakes, still – see Gilgamesh –
Feed the dead. So be their guest.
Do again what Auden said
Good poets do: bite, break their bread.
(‘Audenesque’)⁶⁹

Time has worked against that diffidence-antonym ‘trust’, which is decisively haughty, like a ‘majesty’ of bearing, and yet ‘peremptory’, as in ‘How insolent of late he is become, / How proud, how peremptory, and unlike himself’ (2 *Henry VI*, III. i. 7-8). Heaney’s uttering ‘bite’ and ‘break’ recall Edward

Thomas's inability to 'bite the day to the core', while sounding Pope's order to 'speak'. Heaney's diffidence in his own poetry plays on the giving and the taking of self-doubt; Auden's language, for its part, has met its match, biting the dust. *Who is winking now?* Perhaps Heaney's interest in self-assuredness was one reason why he chose to devote a lecture to Auden in his 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures. In this lecture he lamented that the older Auden resembled 'an ample, flopping, ambulatory volume of the OED in carpet slippers'. The finest poetry produces 'a sensation of at-homeness and trust in the world', says Heaney.⁷⁰ Trust, yes; but also consolation, with some sense of false hope, which retains the right to impudence. Ricks once observed that Heaney had been established as 'an experienced poet secure in the grounded trust that he is trusted'.⁷¹ Heaney's trustworthiness comes from his blatant use of self-doubt. So Heaney's trust must also include his diffidence; his doubt is not just of himself but also of the utility of poetry – an inheritance from Auden.

This ulterior wrestling with the control of sound and meaningful expression shows too in Larkin. Consider 'Talking in Bed', which appears to be describing the honesty inherent in such intimate settings, yet the transition from the first stanza to the second is reminiscent of Pope: stanza 1 ends with 'honest' and line 1 of the second stanza ends with 'silently'. Perhaps this poem has a kind of *contrapposto*, but the couple in the poem cannot be fully honest, so the pairing of 'honest' and 'silently' is perfect. The end of the poem also plays with silences as Housman does, and the restraint is overwhelming:

Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation
It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.⁷²

The poem ends by being unsure of itself in seeming perplexity and with a hint of distrust. But is it the subject's distrust, or a distrust of language? He can neither be true and kind nor untrue and unkind. Larkin's *double* double negative ('not untrue and

not unkind') is a wonderful kind of reticence which echoes Wordsworth, who employed double negatives to great effect, as well as Emerson's opening to 'Apology': 'Think me not unkind and rude / That I walk alone in grove and glen'. Larkin's lines may also echo Elizabeth Barrett Browning's singing thrushes, with their 'melancholy patience, not unkind', in *Aurora Leigh*. Yet the double negatives do not stand on their own in Larkin; they attempt to be the alternative to straightforward truth and kindness, a melancholy patience. Sense also couples with sound in the most surprising of formal ways. The poem's rhyme scheme is *aba cac dcd eee* (with some off-rhymes). The statement of the poet's diffidence occurs in its final and most musical line; it is also a departure from the previous stanzas by employing the triple rhyme of *find-kind-unkind* (recalling that triple-rhyme ending with a 'wink' in Auden's 'Postscript' to 'The Cave of Making'). Another odd number.

Diffidence in poetry pushes the reader to ponder whether the writer is striking a pose, and what kind of pose, and why. Norman Mailer noticed Robert Lowell's 'string behind the string' and 'personification of ivy climbing a column' during a reading in which 'he was even diffident' and 'looked a trifle helpless under the lights'.⁷³ Mailer then lists all of the stresses that make Lowell's diffident reading impressive: the various weaknesses and noble strengths contained in the stammering ivy of his being. Lowell then proceeded to recite lines from 'Waking Early Sunday Morning', which itself alludes with half-modesty to Wallace Stevens's 'Sunday Morning'. The tension between the opening phrases in each stanza in Lowell also reveals that rhetorical *contrapposto* of diffidence: 'still and still moving', taking one courageous step forward and yet being still, in a melancholy pose. And so it goes: 'running downhill ... I watch ... remain ... Hammering military splendor ... a ghost / orbiting forever lost / in our monotonous sublime'.⁷⁴ The final movement of the poem is circuitous, just as Lowell's presence strikes Mailer as a kind creeping angiosperm clinging to an ancient stone edifice – 'alive enough to spawn and die' – yet still alive enough to conceive and recite moving poetry.

Lowell himself was also self-conscious of the circuitousness of being in indirections with diffidence and death, for in his ‘Alfred Corning Clark’ he appreciates his former classmate’s ‘triumphant diffidence’:

There must be something –
 some one to praise
 your triumphant diffidence,
 your refusal of exertion,
 the intelligence
 that pulsed in the sensitive,
 pale concavities of your forehead.⁷⁵

The only rhyme in the poem, of ‘diffidence’ with ‘intelligence’, stands out, as does the strain between stasis (‘refusal of exertion’) and pulsing thought. What if, indeed, there is a ‘sanity of self-deception / fixed and kicked by reckless caution’?⁷⁶

How are this shy intelligence and distrust working in the language? What was initially a worry about excess and outward distrust became a lingering (and increasingly unspoken) anxiety about insufficiency, about the inability to express a kind of sense that is similar to *aidōs*. Silence and hesitancy often attempt to conceal reservoirs of shame, waiting to be betrayed. These pauses register an awareness of what Adrienne Rich called ‘verbal privilege’:

It doesn’t matter what you think.
 Words are found responsible
 all you can do is choose them
 or choose
 to remain silent. Or, you never had a choice,
 which is why the words that do stand
 are responsible
 and this is verbal privilege
 (‘North American Time’)⁷⁷

Words carry weight and responsibility.⁷⁸ As Christopher Ricks taught me and many of his other students, studying poetry can encourage us not to be cheated by our own word choices and

the specious words of others. A poetic *seeming diffidence* warns against the dangers of the *rhetorical diffidence* coming from those in power. This brings both historical senses of diffidence (the outward as against the inward) full circle: they depend on each other.

Diffidence retains a relationship to injustice, illustrating an artful disproportion between the naked ego and tradition and temporality, trust and distrust of poetry, unencumbered thought and the constraints of expression. ‘Be *silent* ... And *speak*’, Pope ordered at the outset of consecutive lines in a rhymed couplet. The sense may seem diffident, but the movement of the poem is confident. The poet writes anyway, covering a tradition, ‘but still bear up and steer / Right onward’, heeding the directive, such as the one which W. S. Merwin received from John Berryman:

don't lose your arrogance yet he said
you can do that when you're older
lose it too soon and you may
merely replace it with vanity⁷⁹

Seeming diffidence should make readers suspicious, but in a constructive way, because the poem exerts a force alive, yet close to the edge of being; acknowledging mortality, yet struggling for control of the final expression; finding new knowledge, yet treading carefully over the old. This recalls Ezra Pound's Canto LXXXI:

But to have done instead of not doing
this is not vanity
To have, with decency, knocked
That a Blunt should open
To have gathered from the air a live tradition
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
This is not vanity.
Here error is all in the not done,
all in the diffidence that faltered.⁸⁰

And consider the ‘not done’ alongside what Eliot drafted – then dropped – in the ‘Fire Sermon’ of *The Waste Land*: ‘I’ve much

to say / But cannot say it – that is just my way'.⁸¹ Echoing Housman's silence ('The word unsaid will stay unsaid / Though there was much to say'), Eliot's diffidence is the direct expression of uncertainty, a forthrightness of confusion, a compulsion to write about what is most worrying – that there might be nothing to say that can rise to the occasion, or, as Wallace Stevens put it: 'words spoken / Were not and are not'.⁸²

School of Advanced Study, University of London, UK

NOTES

¹ Douglas Cairns, *Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* (Oxford, 1993), p. 10. See also Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, 1993), p. 78, in which he argues that the post-Enlightenment world-view after Kant, which attempts to cover up self-exposure, has insufficiently appreciated the intricacies of shame.

² For this connection I am indebted to Emily Pitts Donahoe's 'In Utramque Partem: Arguing Both Sides of the Question in *Othello*', *English Literary Renaissance*, 48/3 (Autumn 2018), 314-38.

³ 'The Defence of Poetry', in *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford, 2003), p. 697.

⁴ See Cairns, *Aidōs*.

⁵ E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), p. 18.

⁶ *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 2004), pp. 48-9.

⁷ *The Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray (1924), p. 95.

⁸ *Iliad*, trans. Fitzgerald, p. 158.

⁹ Shakespeare plays are quoted from the Folger Shakespeare Library, ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles; <<https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeare-works>>.

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, 'The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*', in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 286.

¹¹ See Emma Smith, *This is Shakespeare* (2019), ch. 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 264.

¹³ Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 11-12.

¹⁴ King James VI and I, speech to Parliament, 21 Mar. 1610, in *King James VI and I: Political Writings*, ed. J. Sommerville (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 179-203.

¹⁵ Thomas Middleton, *The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford, 2007), p. 1840.

¹⁶ For such a view, see Gary Taylor, 'Forms of Opposition: Shakespeare and Middleton', *English Literary Renaissance*, 24/2 (1994), 283-314.

¹⁷ *Paradise Lost*, ed. H. Darbishire, vol. i of *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, Oxford Scholarly Editions Online (2013).

¹⁸ *Samson Agonistes*, ed. L. Knoppers, vol. ii of *The Complete Works of John Milton*, Oxford Scholarly Editions Online (2013).

¹⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1706), accessed on *Bible Hub*, <<https://biblehub.com/commentaries/exodus/4-12.htm>>.

²⁰ The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope, vol. i: *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams (1961), p. 305.

²¹ Letter to Sir Richard Steele, 15 July 1712, in *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, vol. i: 1704-1718, ed. George Sherburn (Oxford, 1956), p. 148.

²² I owe this quotation to Kristen Poole's 'Words of Diverse Significations: Hamlet's Puns, Amphibology, and Allegorical Hermeneutics', in Kristen Poole and Thomas Fulton (eds.), *The Bible on the Shakespearean Stage* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 75-6. Hence the comparison to *Hamlet*.

²³ *Correspondence*, vol. i: 1704-1718, pp. 158-9.

²⁴ *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, Arden (2010), p. 138; Donne, *Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert Grierson (Oxford, 1973), p. 35.

²⁵ William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1967), p. 88.

²⁶ The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope, vols. vii-viii: *The Iliad of Homer*, ed. Maynard Mack (1967), viii.

²⁷ 'The Difficulty of Knowing One's Self', in *The Works of Jonathan Swift* (1746), viii. 262-3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See Plato's *Protagoras*, sects. 323a-329d, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. iii, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (1967); accessed on Perseus Digital Library, <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>>.

³⁰ *Rambler*, no. 93, in vol. v of *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D* (1796), p. 141.

³¹ Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets: With Critical Observations on Their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford, 2006), iv. 75.

³² *Ibid.*, iv. 14.

³³ *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1952), iii. 51.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, i. 93-4.

³⁵ T. H. Green, *Works of Thomas Hill Green*, ed. R. L. Nettleship (1888), iii. 119. The 'perplexed persistence' – itself a borrowing of 'sad perplexity' from 'Tintern Abbey' – comes from A. C. Bradley's discussion of Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence' in *Oxford Lectures On Poetry*, 2nd edn. (1965), p. 131.

³⁶ *Poetical Works*, iii. 37.

³⁷ Emily Dickinson, *Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), pp. 229-30. Accessed on the Emily Dickinson Archive, <www.edickinson.org/> .

³⁸ Belinda Jack, 'The Poetry of Emily Dickinson: Metaphor and its Philosophical Mysteries', lecture at Gresham College, 9 May 2017.

³⁹ See James McIntosh, *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2000), for more on Dickinson's vacillations on belief.

⁴⁰ Dickinson, *Poems*, pp. 102-3.

⁴¹ *Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. xi: *Published Poems*, ed. Robert C. Ryan, Harrison Hayford, Alma MacDougall Reising, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston, Ill., 2009), p. 280.

⁴² Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992), pp. 14-15.

⁴³ *The Works of Epictetus: His Discourses, in Four Books, the Enchiridion, and Fragments. Epictetus*, trans. Thomas Wentworth Higginson (New York, 1890), iii. 14.

⁴⁴ *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. xiii (1889).

⁴⁵ Yopie Prins, “‘Violence Bridling Speech’: Browning’s Translation of Aeschylus’ ‘Agamemnon’”, *Victorian Poetry*, 27/3-4 (Autumn/Winter, 1989), 151-70: 153.

⁴⁶ *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day* (1887), *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*, vol. xv, ed. S. Hawlin and M. Meredith, Oxford Scholarly Editions Online (2016), p. 126.

⁴⁷ John Bayley, ‘Tennyson and the Idea of Decadence,’ in Hallam Tennyson (ed.), *Studies in Tennyson* (1981).

⁴⁸ *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. N. H. MacKenzie (Oxford, 1990), p. 126.

⁴⁹ *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, vol. i: *Correspondence 1852-1881*, ed. K. R. R. Thornton and Catherine Phillips (Oxford, 2013), pp. 280-2.

⁵⁰ Robert Bridges, ‘Preface to the Notes’, *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (1918), p. 101.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-7.

⁵² Edward Thomas, *Selected Letters*, ed. R. George Thomas (Oxford, 1995), p. 94.

⁵³ Robert Frost, ‘Education by Poetry’ (1931), in *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), p. 107.

⁵⁴ Edward Thomas, *Poems* (1917), p. 40.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵⁶ Review of James Booth’s *Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*, *New York Times*, 23 Nov. 2014. James’s phrase recalls an earlier pronouncement on Larkin’s ‘sympathetic knack’, ‘where diffidence and self-confidence reinforce each other’ – i.e. personal diffidence coupled with artistic confidence (‘An Affair of Sanity’, in *Cultural Cohesion: The*

Essential Essays (New York, 2013), p. 80). He also said: 'Though Larkin's diffidence was partly a pose, his reticence was authentic' ('Somewhere Becoming Rain', in *Cultural Cohesion*, p. 38).

⁵⁷ See Archie Burnett, 'Silence and Allusion in Housman', *E in C*, 53 (Apr, 2003): 151-73.

⁵⁸ John Crowe Ransom, 'The Poetry of 1900-1950', *Kenyon Review*, 13/3 (Summer 1951), 445-54.

⁵⁹ Geoffrey Hill, 'What the Devil Has Got into John Ransom?', in *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford, 2000), p. 127.

⁶⁰ Geoffrey Hill, *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford, 2013), p. 130.

⁶¹ *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition. The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore, Md., 2014), p. 106.

⁶² See Victor P. H. Li, 'The Poetry Does Not Matter: *Four Quartets* and the Rhetoric of Humility', *T. S. Eliot Annual*, 1 (1990), 63-86.

⁶³ *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, 2 vols. (2015), i. 939-40.

⁶⁴ W. H. Auden, *Prose, 1956-1962*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, 1996), p. 527.

⁶⁵ Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (1991), p. 204.

⁶⁶ Lucy McDiarmid, *Auden's Apologies for Poetry* (Princeton, 1990), p. 12.

⁶⁷ Auden, *Collected Poems*, pp. 691-6.

⁶⁸ McDiarmid, *Auden's Apologies*, pp. 10, 26.

⁶⁹ Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems: 1988-2013* (2014).

⁷⁰ Heaney, 'Sounding Auden', in *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), pp. 123, 122.

⁷¹ Christopher Ricks, 'The Mouth, the Meal and the Book', *London Review of Books*, 8 Nov. 1979.

⁷² Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Archie Burnett (2012), p. 61.

⁷³ Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night* (New York, 1968), p. 58.

⁷⁴ Robert Lowell, 'Waking Early Sunday Morning', in *Selected Poems: Expanded Edition* (New York, 2006), pp. 183-6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁷⁷ Adrienne Rich, *Your Native Land, Your Life* (New York, 1986), p. 34.

⁷⁸ See Jeannette E. Riley, 'Entering History', in *Understanding Adrienne Rich* (Columbia, SC, 2016), pp. 58-83.

⁷⁹ Milton, Sonnet 22, *Poetical Works*, ii. 156; Merwin, 'Berryman', in *Migration: New & Selected Poems* (Port Townsend, Wash., 2005).

⁸⁰ *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York, 1970), p. 522.

⁸¹ *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, i. 333.

⁸² A. E. Housman, *More Poems*, XLII. ll. 17-18, in *A Shropshire Lad and Other Poems*, ed. Archie Burnett (New York, 2010), p. 182; Wallace Stevens, 'The Rock', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, Library of America (New York, 1997), p. 445.