

***“And the earth was without form and void”*: The Paradoxical Nature of
Formlessness in Eleanor Wilner’s “Reading the Bible Backwards”**

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Abstract for Master's thesis

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| <p>Abstract:</p> <p>This thesis explores the two-fold nature of formlessness through a vital materialist lens. The focus of the study is Eleanor Wilner’s apocalyptic poem “Reading the Bible Backwards”, which is a retelling of the Christian creation story in reverse. The driving questions are: if matter and form are regarded as inseparable, how can the formless be perceived, or exist at all? Is it possible to portray formlessness, and if so, how does Wilner do so in her poem? To answer these paradoxes I differentiate between absolute and relative formlessness. The loosening of concepts such as form and matter is a crucial praxis for this thesis. Absence is explored through its positive counterpart in a poetics of negativity.</p> <p>Literary pragmatics and an interdisciplinary methodology offer a holistic approach to this elusive topic. Apart from the main theoretical framework of vital materiality, the analysis contains four other interpretative perspectives. These are ecocriticism, historicism, narratology and spatial deixis. This composite close reading is followed by an overview of the materiality of poetry. The results of this study conclude that, on the imaginative, literary level, Wilner succeeds in breaking down structures of form and subsequently portrays formlessness. However, on the material level, it is impossible to achieve formlessness, as poetry as a medium is anchored in tactile reality. This is the two-fold nature of formlessness.</p> | |
| Keywords: formlessness, vital materiality, actants, Eleanor Wilner, literary pragmatics, poetics of negativity, apocalyptic poetry | |
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Some lovely glorious nothing I did see.
—John Donne

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1. Introduction

This thesis presents a two-fold take on formlessness by arguing that it is possible to portray formlessness on an imaginative, literary level, while on a material level, that portrayal is necessarily anchored in the materiality of the medium. Thus, formlessness is only ever relative, not absolute. The medium in question is poetry as this thesis offers an analysis of Eleanor Wilner's 1989 apocalyptic poem "Reading the Bible Backwards". This thesis is an example of literary pragmatics, as it takes an interdisciplinary approach which combines literary and cultural studies with philosophy and linguistics.

I approach formlessness through a philosophy of vital materiality built on the vibrant matter theory of Jane Bennett, Graham Harman's metaphysical account of Bruno Latour's actant theory and Henri Focillon's theory of kinetic forms of art. A vital materialist approach acknowledges the agency of all entities and does not distinguish between human and non-human or organic and inorganic substances, or what is sometimes referred to as a dichotomy of life vs. matter. According to vital materiality, all entities exist on the same ontological footing. Furthermore, this theory does not follow the Cartesian soul-body dualism. Instead, the vital materiality of this thesis sees matter and form as entwined and inseparable.

In chapter 2, I present the theoretical background to my analysis. I start with a few useful definitions in section 2.1, before presenting my motivation for choosing this topic and the reasons behind an interdisciplinary approach in section 2.2. Section 2.3 delves into form as a concept, with three sub-sections focusing on the philosophical and aesthetic history of form, and my interpretation and use of form and its absence. In 2.4, I present Graham Harman's metaphysical account of Bruno Latour's actant theory. In 2.5, I turn to Jane Bennett's theory of vibrant matter, which gave me the umbrella term vital materiality. Section 2.6 focuses on Henri Focillon's view of the relationship between form

and art. Focillon's "identity of touch" (111) plays a significant role in chapter 4, which is concerned with the tactile materiality of art. Section 2.7 moves into a literary pragmatic territory and introduces the linguistic marker spatial deixis. Chapter 2 is concluded with an overview of the theory to help the reader keep the most salient points in mind for the analysis.

The analysis of "Reading the Bible Backwards" is presented in chapter 3, with subsections for a synopsis of the poem (3.1), an outline of the poetics of negativity (3.2), and five different close readings of the poem. These are an eco-critical perspective (3.3), a historicist perspective (3.4), a narratological perspective (3.5), a spatial deictic perspective (3.6) and a vital materialist perspective (3.7). In section 3.8, these different readings are assessed and compared. All of these perspectives offer a different take on how Wilner achieves formlessness, although they might seem similar at first glance.

Chapter 4 focuses on the materiality of poetry to argue that on the physical level, a poem cannot be an example of formlessness. Poetry is compared to another medium, film, to demonstrate its unique properties. Section 4.1 examines colour, section 4.2 sound and section 4.3 scope. Lastly, I offer a conclusion to tie together all the threads of the thesis and suggest further research.

2. Theory

2.1. Definitions

Since this thesis is an attempt to do away with philosophical modernist dualisms such as human/nature, human/animal, life/matter, and organic/inorganic per the example of Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett, I want to problematize using such distinctions. For the sake of clarity, I refer to human or nonhuman forms and matter where a distinction is required. Non-human materiality includes, among other entities, “trash, bacteria, stem cells, food, metal, technologies, weather” (Bennett 115). This dichotomy still displays an anthropocentric focus but will be used to facilitate the discussion. These distinctions function like Latour’s notion of the *black box*: if the box is cracked open, the looseness and artificiality of the connections and boundaries become apparent, but for the sake of discussion they are regarded as agreed upon entities (Harman 2009, pp. 36-46). In the words of Bennett:

It is hard indeed to keep one’s mind wrapped around a materiality that is not reducible to extension in space, difficult to dwell with the notion of an incorporeality or a differential of intensities. This is because to live, humans need to interpret the world reductively as a series of fixed objects, a need reflected in the rhetorical role assigned to the word material. (Bennett 58)

Since agency is a crucial component of this view, (henceforth referred to as *vital materiality*) a definition of agency proves useful. The Oxford English Dictionary defines agency as the “[a]bility or capacity to act or exert power; active working or operation; action, activity” (“agency”). Across philosophical traditions, agency has been given different qualities and the question of free will has been debated, e.g. in Kant’s stress of

moral will (Bennett 29). The notion of agency is closely tied to human activity. This connection is influentially explored in Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the City", where the active movements of pedestrians are identified as weaving spaces together and creating text through the rhetoric of walking. Taking a shortcut rather than following a planned route is an act of micro-agency which asserts inhabitants of the city as being in control of the environment and resisting top-down regulation (de Certeau 153-159). There is also prominent post-colonial scholarship written on the lack of agency in the theory of the *subaltern* developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988).

In an attempt to deconstruct the aforementioned dichotomy of human-nonhuman, Bennett draws a parallel between the nonhuman agency of objects to which moral responsibility does not quite stick and the unnoticed "looseness and slipperiness" (28) of human agency. She uses the analogy of a pebble thrown into a lake and of electricity going through wires to showcase the effects of intention: "it vibrates and merges with other currents, to affect and be affected. This understanding of agency does not deny the existence of that thrust called intentionality, but it does see it as less definitive of outcomes" (Bennett 32). This thesis adopts Bennett's view of agency as belonging to both human and nonhuman materiality and the ripple effect caused by it.

When talking about formlessness, one inevitably talks about absolutes. The etymology of the word comes from the Latin *ab* (off) and *solvere* (to loosen), which informs the reading of the absolute as something that is "*loosened off* and on the loose" (Bennett 3). Compare this to the religious use of absolution, where a priest channels a divinity that "loosens sins from their attachment to a particular soul" (Bennett 3). The goal of this thesis is to loosen the concepts of matter and form in order to explore formlessness. Acknowledging the presence of matter and form also addresses questions of absence. So, paradoxically, talking about absolutes loosens the concepts rather than

tightens them. I return to this in the discussion of Latour's black boxes (below pp. 27-29). Informed by readings of Bennett and Harman, nonhuman materiality is given equal ontological weight in this thesis. However, since I am writing as a human being, from a human point of view, I inevitably centre the human experience. Furthermore, when writing about the absolute and formless, there is arguably no way of actually being able to perceive nor represent it. Everything knowable for humans is tied to space and time, so the absolute detaches from human thinking and goes beyond the limits of intelligibility (Bennett 3). This thesis is thus an exercise in academic imagination.

2.2 Interdisciplinarity and personal motivation

My academic background is in literary, cultural, cinematic and linguistic studies, which informs the interdisciplinary nature of this thesis. Rather than utilise a method of analysis specifically developed for literary studies, I take a pragmatic approach which allows me to analyse my primary material from an interdisciplinary and flexible point of view, incorporating such varied fields as philosophy, literary and media studies and linguistics. As Jason Finch (34-42, 48-51) points out, it is not only literary scholars and creative writers who can make observations on literary concepts, but linguists and philosophers as well. Linguistic pragmatics and, in this case, spatial deixis, is a useful tool for critiquing literature as it operates on both a micro and macro level, scrutinising the text itself in its smallest components and situating the reader in a larger context of place (Finch 49). I agree with the belief of Roger D. Sell (2) that pragmatics is a tangible and fitting way of changing the status quo and of incorporating interdisciplinarity into academia.

On a personal level, I am interested in the absence of something so ubiquitous as form. This is tied to my critical and political interest in networks of invisible societal structures that inform every aspect of action and interaction. These structures have real-

life consequences despite not being tangible in a concrete sense and my understanding of them have largely been built on the ground-breaking black feminism of bell hooks (1981), Audre Lorde (1984) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Systems of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and disablism are so embedded in dominant culture and practice that those not directly affected can disregard them and claim them to be non-existent. This idea of absence and non-existence fascinates me in a myriad of ways, and coupled with questions of materiality – particularly regarding the absence of materiality – and the paradoxical nature of non-spaces, it has led me to my thesis topic. While I am principally interested in the absence of form, i.e. formlessness, the lacking nature of it is so evasive that it is virtually impossible to approach without a detour through definitions of form.

I thus approach formlessness with an interest that is rooted in real-world politics and with an analysis that is grounded in literary and cultural studies, while borrowing elements of linguistics and philosophy. The challenges this presents for this thesis include keeping a sufficiently narrow focus and situating the research in an appropriate tradition. However, in this case, the advantages of interdisciplinarity outweigh the disadvantages. Approaching formlessness from a variety of angles allows a more complete picture to be drawn and mirrors the looseness of the concept itself. Furthermore, adding an ontological point of view to formlessness gives it more weight.

This thesis follows the concrete approaches to materiality of, among others, Harman, Latour, Bennett, Focillon and Kress and van Leeuwen. As is often the case, the way forward is a return to the past, and as such, concrete readings are in my interpretation evidence of an emerging style of post-postmodern practice. The subjective truths of postmodernity are seemingly becoming side-lined in favour of truth anchored in reality, yet still shaped by individual and communal experience. Materialist feminisms have proved to be a frontrunner in this critical practice (Alaimo and Hekman). On the other

hand, Petter Skult argues that the world with its multiplicity is only now becoming truly postmodern (56), although he does see signs of a cultural shift to an axiological discussion of values (98-100, 186). During the course of writing this thesis, encountering Graham Harman's object-oriented "guerrilla metaphysics" (2002, p. 11) has shaped much of my thinking in its attempt to make objects central in philosophy again after centuries of neglect.

By outlining the history of criticism, Kress and van Leeuwen predict that the next logical step is a trend to "deconstruct current practices of production by showing that 'underneath' production there is an already-existing, already-produced 'programme', a system which defines the limits of production" (219). In visual media, as computer-generated imagery becomes the norm, representation needs to be deconstructed in a new way: a manner much more concerned with materiality and the means of production. This preoccupation with materiality is not limited to academic criticism either:

Interest in the materiality of representation and representational practices reflects wider social and cultural concerns with questions of substance and materiality in a world in which the concrete becomes abstract, the material immaterial, the substance insubstantial and reality 'virtual'. (Kress and van Leeuwen 223)

In the current times of abstraction, of the reliability crisis of facts and images, of the apparent backtracking of democratic values and literal virtual reality becoming an entertainment option, perhaps anchoring existence in concrete reality and, by extension form in matter, is an attempt to make sense of the world. Questions of matter and form, abstraction and absence is thus a highly relevant topic for a thesis in 2020.

2.3 Form as a concept

In order to understand formlessness, we must first look at form since formlessness signifies the lack, absence and negative space of form. Form is a very difficult concept to pin down, since it has endless variations and since its study has followed Western philosophy from its beginning over two millennia ago, through the first natural philosophers, Plato, Aristotle and the Epicureans onward. As a critical term, form continues to resurface in different contexts and to return to fashion, currently in connection to studies of materiality. In the following sections, I offer a brief overview of the main philosophies and aesthetics of form, before delving deeper into the vital materiality that is relevant for this particular thesis.

Form is a word that is widely used in the English language, as an abstract noun and as a grammatical tool, e.g. by using “in the form of” to transform one thing into another (Leighton 3). As Angela Leighton points out, the word itself is very familiar and used not only in different critical fields, but in everyday language as well, yet it remains abstract and unspecific. One reason for this is its many meanings. Form can signify a variety of things, including: “shape, design, outline, frame, ideal, figure, image, style, genre, order, etiquette, body, beauty, mould, lair, print-type, format, desk, grade, class” (Leighton 2). Form also serves as a stem to which prefixes and suffixes are added to alter meaning, e.g. *in-form*, *de-form*, *re-form*, *trans-form*, *form-al*, etc. (Leighton 2).

Form is exclusively talked about in relation to something else, e.g. matter and content, or its absence. Arguably, form cannot exist on its own as it is always the form *of* something, although there are traditions within aesthetics that claim form can be disembodied from its content. Leighton (2) connects this line of thinking to long-lingering remnants of a Cartesian soul-body dualism disembodiment form until it might be seen as nothing on its own. This matter is further complicated by the fact that form by itself can

be interpreted as shape, body or matter. Form simultaneously functions as a “container and a deflector” (Leighton 16), keeping one thing in and another out. All of this suggests an aversion to rigidness which Leighton describes as mischievous on form’s behalf:

Although it looks like a fixed shape, a permanent configuration or ideal, whether in eternity, in the mind, or on the page, in fact form is mobile, versatile. It remains open to distant senses, distortions, to the push-and-pull of opposites or cognates. While most abstract nouns lend themselves to philosophical whittling, to definitions which reduce their sense for clarity and use, form makes mischief and keeps its signification moveable. (Leighton 3)

This description assigns agency and personality to form, allowing for an imaginative reading of it being not a static concept, but a vibrant and independent one. The notions of agency and vitality will be further explored in the following sections, which focus on the relationship between form and matter. Leighton also acknowledges the importance of different senses when trying to understand form, and that these senses may cause conflicting echoes and references. Related to this is the neurological circumstance of synaesthesia, which allows for one sense-impression to create a mental image of another sensory reaction happening simultaneously (“synaesthesia”). People with synaesthesia might for instance experience a visualisation of colour when hearing a certain sound, which raises further questions about the multi-dimensionality of form and different ways of perceiving it.

David Pole offers a simple, observational explanation of form in saying that everything must have form in some sense: “as outline or structure, a system of boundaries or relations: opposed to content, what they bound or relate” (82). This is both a colloquial

and an academically accepted view of a concept that is infinitely variable and practically indescribable. It is useful to break down this quote with a brief definition of terms that are talked about in relation to form. In Pole's definition, *matter* is "what anything is made of" (81) e.g. wood, plastic, plant fibres, clay etc. I, however, use *matter* as an umbrella term to refer to any kind of substance, and *material* to emphasize a specific type of substance. Sections 2.4 and 2.5 explore the ontological properties of matter and how it relates to form. *Content*, on the other hand, is what is contained within the form. Paradoxically, Pole adds that *content* can also be "something expressed, something made accessible; not something encompassed or enclosed" (82). This is the type of content which is produced, usually by creators for audiences.

Furthermore, form is not the same as *structure*, although all structures have form. *Structure* is the regular or irregular outline of form that marks out distinct but related parts (Pole 82). *Structure* is thus "constituted by a system of relations" (Pole 82), whereas *content* is constituted by what it relates. Pole (82-83) writes about relative formlessness for practical reasons. In a *non-aesthetic* sense, form can be without "specifiable features, visibly definite and regular" (Pole 83). According to the definitions above, this type of formlessness is form without *structure*. We might consider a wine stain as formless since it is not part of a structure we associate with wine nor a perfect circle, although the stain itself has some form or another, however uneven it may be.

2.3.1 Philosophical outline of form

Philosophical questions of form have traditionally been split into a dichotomy of either distinguishing between matter and form, or of not making such a distinction. This section situates the thesis within a larger philosophical tradition by offering a much-simplified outline of this main divide in Western philosophy. A more comprehensive account is

offered by Anthony Kenny (2010). Form has been an implicit subject of study in Western philosophy since its origins, which is evident in Kenny's historical outline of Western philosophical traditions. This thesis follows what Kenny and Bennett would understand as an Aristotelean-Epicurean-Spinozan line of thought, in that it sees matter and form as intrinsically entwined. This idea will be further explored through the vital materiality of Jane Bennett and Graham Harman's interpretation of Bruno Latour, both later presented in detail. The materialism pursued in this thesis follows Bennett's example by being less preoccupied with the historical materialism of Hegel, Marx and Adorno that exposes social hegemonies, and more invested in a "thingly power, [i.e.] the material agency of natural bodies and technological artifacts" (Bennett xiii).

The most famous proponent of a separation between mind and matter, body and soul, and mental and material substance is René Descartes, whose Cartesian dualism continues to have a long-lasting legacy (Kenny 531). I disagree with Descartes and his followers; I believe form and matter should not and cannot be separated, which this thesis attempts to demonstrate. Another highly influential philosopher, Immanuel Kant differentiates between what is human and nonhuman; between the organic and inorganic, offering a mechanistic and passive view on organisms which are driven by the concept of *Bildungstrieb* (Bennett 68). Kant's *Bildungstrieb* is a non-material force that "impels an undifferentiated, crude mass of matter to become an organized articulation of cooperating parts" (Bennett 66). *Bildungstrieb* is not the soul of the object – as it cannot exist outside of the body of the object – but rather an impersonal drive (Bennett 68-69). This can be likened to Aristotle's *teleology*, which posits that everything has a natural will or inclination to fulfil its purpose, as they move "towards their natural place, the place where it was best for them to be" (Kenny 889). This means that in a teleological view objects have no freedom of choice and no agency. Similarly, for Kant, human beings are the only

agents with free will, as they are at the top of the hierarchy of all living things (Bennett 68). To contrast, I follow the arguments of Bennett and Latour that posit that there is no such explicit hierarchy between organic and inorganic material; between human and non-human subjects. According to Latour, all matter exists on an equal ontological footing (Harman 2009, p. 43).

2.3.2. Leighton's aesthetic outline of form

At certain points throughout history, questions of form have gained extra critical momentum. This section briefly surveys Angela Leighton's outline of the progression of form through and beyond the philosophical branch of aesthetics. Aesthetics as a field of study was popularised from the mid-eighteenth century onwards through Kant's ideas of subjective perception (Leighton 4). For Kant, there are two planes of existence: the world of appearances and the external world. The first of these is intimately connected to the human body and mind, as everything we know is shaped by our perception of reality through our senses and circumstance. Kant argues that there is no way of truly knowing the external world, i.e. how things exist *a priori*, without the inevitable filters of perception and interpretation, since that knowledge is simply beyond our capacity to acquire with the narrow apparatus that is the human mind (West 2015a, 00:18:06-00:19:11; 2015b 00:08:12-57, 00:14:34-00:17:33). Kant uses form as a way of expressing and evaluating the conceptual abstractions of truth, judgement and taste (Leighton 4). Form thus becomes a "pure" entity, something that can withhold beauty, which Kant distinguishes from the lesser concepts of charm and emotion (Leighton 4). For Kant, beauty and form "belong [...] to a pure kind of perception, against more ornamental, or emotional ones" (Leighton 4), which has ramifications that last well over a century,

creating a dualism between “pure”, i.e. logically deductive, and empirical thinking, following the Cartesian tradition of separating form from matter.

As a response to Kant, Friedrich Schiller pushes the notion of form to be regarded as more plastic and less abstract: “it is shifting, purposeful, tied to an organicist metaphor which makes it, grammatically and literally, moveable” (Leighton 6). This vibrant and dynamic view of form is favoured by Leighton, Bennett and myself. From this already complicated German philosophical tradition, form comes into use with the English Romantics, most prominently by Samuel Coleridge, who embraces the agency of form itself (Leighton 6-7). For Coleridge, it is language, rather than philosophy, that brings form to life and life to form (Leighton 7). The relationship between form and substance has now become one of greed and risk; since form is hollow and ghostly and craves substance, there is a dramatic disjunction between form and matter (Leighton 8). Form thus maintains qualities of both emptiness and substance by being a “tangible object with a determined shape, [and suggesting] an outline, a shadow, a way of appearing” (Leighton 147). Furthermore, forms simultaneously exist inside and outside an object; at the same time contained and free (Leighton 16).

Victorian aesthetic notions of form are seductive and rich, especially in terms of criticism, which Oscar Wilde presents as a “weapon against intentionalism” (Leighton 11) in his essay “The Critic as Artist”. *Intentionalism* posits that a thought cannot exist without an object; the thought has to concern something (Crane 1). When applied to art, intentionality similarly claims that the artwork must be about something. According to Wilde, this dulls the beauty and mystique of art and “degrades the invisible arts into the obvious arts” (Greenblatt et al. 1730). Instead, Wilde argues that it is the failure of art forms to fully realise the artist’s ideal or presentation of reality that creates beauty

(Greenblatt et al. 1731). This is what anchors art to aesthetics rather than logic. For Wilde, form is dynamic, which leads to criticism being an art in itself.

Ideas of form further shift in the move from aestheticism to modernism, emphasising an association with visual arts rather than poetry. Visual arts were previously considered to be the most limited expression of form, but modernists such as Ezra Pound renew the notion of form to be particularly applicable to cubism and post-impressionism, which “turns it into the messenger of newness” (Leighton 14). Art for the modernists is not representative and form is neither symbolic nor tactile; it is “purely itself” (Leighton 17). Starting in the 1920s, there has been a functionalist trend in modernism to “let materials speak for themselves” (Kress and van Leeuwen 223). This trend was influenced by the rising interest in the notion of authenticity and by a critique of the distortive representations of decorative art. This functionalism is still prevalent, e.g. in Scandinavian minimalism. In contrast, around the same time, the art historian Henri Focillon rejects the abstract purity of form and writes on its complex relationship to art and substance, which is further explored in chapter 2.6. Following Focillon, Susanne K. Langer releases *Feeling and Form* in 1953, which builds on ideas of form from the previous century which connect it to expressions of emotion. By the mid-twentieth century, “form has once again become an activity” (Leighton 18). Leighton’s historical outline of the different definitions of form suggests the persistent importance of the term and its close relationship to the arts:

It is volatile, evasive yet resilient, surviving the fashions which bring it to prominence and constantly recovering forgotten meanings. If, at times, it also seems trivial, self-involved, not an easy word to justify politically, it is, nonetheless, one which will not go away. It has survived its connection with

aestheticism, modernism, and beyond, and continues, if sporadically, to be a word that probes the discomfiting distances of art, its aloofness, obliqueness, inwardness. (Leighton 19)

The vital materiality employed in this thesis, and this thesis itself, proves that questions of form are still highly relevant and are constantly being re-examined.

2.3.3 A two-fold approach to formlessness

It is useful to make a distinction of what formlessness refers to in this academic context. This thesis adopts a view on matter being inseparable from form in practice, as the two interact on a microscopic level (cf. Focillon; Bennett; Harman 2009). If one agrees with this view, it becomes very difficult to distinguish between form and matter and to speak about form in isolation. Therefore it is crucial for this thesis that form be viewed in relation to matter at all times. Since the two are necessarily entwined, writing about formlessness, includes writing about the matter within the form (or within the casing, if you will). In regards to the case study at hand, the matter within the form is the matter of nature, or the very building blocks of life and existence itself, which is why Harman's presentation of Latour's ontological perspective proves itself useful.

Since formlessness is an absolute, does it equal *anti-form*? By extension, if form and matter are inseparable, does the matter within the *anti-form* become *anti-matter*? *Antimatter* is, of course, already an established concept. It is an observable substance within the field of physics that, simplified, is a negative blueprint of the structure of an atom, which collides with and annihilates matter in a burst of energy upon contact (Sutton). *Anti-form* would suggest something defying any type of observable structure; a resistance to any kind of sense-bound form and could thus also be referred to as *anti-*

structure. Contrast this to the discussion in section 2.3 on Pole's (82) two-fold notion of form as withholding content and form as structure. On a practical level, form as structure, or in this case *anti-structure*, is much easier to observe as its relations are discernible from a distance, and any transgressions are thus noticeable. A third concept which closely relates to formlessness is *nothingness*. Considering that this thesis does away with the Cartesian separation of matter and form, perhaps *nothingness* is the most appropriate term to use for the absence of a form, since any such absence includes the absence of matter. In addition to being a popular topic in philosophical existentialism, there is also a tradition of studying nothingness in literature (Sartre; Neary; Tsur; Mehtonen). However, I stick with *formlessness*, to emphasize the anti-structural elements.

Connected to the idea of intangibility and invisibility is the view of form as a ghost, i.e. a memory of a lost meaning or life. To assess form is thus to exercise a "physics of the imagination" (Leighton 148). A way to make form concrete is to follow Pole's argument that formlessness is relative; it can also refer to an observable but irregular, unspecified substance within a space, such as an abstract pattern of watercolours or "bogs, fogs and the writings of Heidegger" (Pole 82). Breaking patterns and defying structures is thus effectively a way to create formlessness. If, on one hand, formlessness is *anti-form* as it pertains to content, in other words a synonym for *nothingness*, it can arguably only be studied in abstract philosophical experiments. If, on the other hand, formlessness refers to the absence of a set or rigid structure, it can be viewed in relation to those absent structures. This is the double-folded view of formlessness presented in this thesis, with focus on the latter. Since my source material is a poem, it exists on a curious boundary between the imaginative and the material. If only analysed in terms of its content, the analysis shows that Wilner successfully portrays formlessness, but when taking into

account the materiality of the poem as it exists in the world, its formlessness can only be representational, not concrete or absolute.

Thus, when language comes into play, whether it be visual or literary, it is arguably only the second interpretation of formlessness that is relevant, since language has a form in itself (Kaakinen 125). The underlying paradox is that there is no way of presenting formlessness without giving it form. This thesis is comprised of language, and has a set academic form, making it impossible to discuss formlessness without giving it form. To the extent that I can, I will attempt a concrete reading following the examples of Harman, Bennett and Focillon. Put briefly, the idea of formlessness as *anti-form* is necessary for interpreting the theme (what), while formlessness as *anti-structure* is relevant for analysing the presentation of the work (how).

2.4 A theory of objects and actants

Bruno Latour's theory of actants presupposes a level of activeness and agency in and of all objects. Latour's work has mainly been cited in sociology and linguistics, but Graham Harman (2009) argues that Latour's experimental approach to metaphysics should be taken seriously as an object-oriented philosophy that could rewrite the very fabric of science and philosophy. This section explores Harman's take on Latour as a metaphysical philosopher. Throughout history, there have been many names for a philosophy of substance (Harman 2015, 00:03:59-00:04:02). Harman uses the term *object*, whereas Latour favours *actor* or *actant*. I have chosen to use Latour's *actant* throughout this thesis, unless I specifically refer to Harman's ideas, as this term is also adopted by Bennett.

The biggest problem this thesis faces is that there is arguably no way of perceiving the imperceptible; no way of overcoming a human sense of space and time. Since Kant's theory of subjective perception, philosophy has been largely preoccupied with the human

access to the world, rather than the world as it exists without human interference or mediation. Harman seeks to bring back a speculative discussion of realism to philosophy and see past the human-centred perspective of phenomenology with his object-oriented ontology (Harman 2015, 00:01:56-00:02:22). He does this by radically expanding on Martin Heidegger's theory of *Zuhandenheit*, readiness-to-hand, or "tool-being" as Harman calls it, to include all entities rather than only the useful technical devices that are usually interpreted as Heidegger's tools (Harman 2002, p. 4). Emphasizing the equal ontological importance of all beings, useful or not, and expanding their relations to exist beyond human mediation, i.e. positing that objects interact with and relate to each other without human interference in the event and without exhausting each other in the process, de-emphasizes the significance of Heidegger's *Dasein*, which distinguishes human existence as different to that of objects and places humans on top of the hierarchy of objects (Harman 2002, pp. 1-2).

Similarly, Latour is preoccupied with the materiality of things. An actant is any existing entity, ranging from atom particles to thunder, discarded toys, humans, neighbourhoods, galaxies, lawnmowers and numerals. These entities are, for Latour, equally real and equally important, ontologically speaking (Harman 2009, pp. 14, 43). However, they are not equally strong. Capitalism has stronger *alliances* than the fictional character Popeye, meaning it has better bearings to "adjust or inflict its forces" (Harman 2009, p. 15). Put simply, an actant is only as strong as its effect on other entities. This explanation technically justifies the inequality of power, which is in itself entirely constructed. I would here like to add that my own perception of power dynamics is greatly influenced by my background in Marxist cultural studies, particularly from an intersectional feminist approach, and so I fear that Latour's argument can be construed

and misused by those who benefit from ignoring power structures and their historical origins.

Latour's *alliances* are mediated by *translations*, which link actants together in complicated patterns through a laborious process. This theory is similar to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *assemblage*, which are non-hierarchical ad hoc groupings of all kinds of vibrant materials (Bennett 23). In Latour's terms, each thing is an actant and everything is a *mediator* (Harman 2009, p. 18). Latour stresses that even the smallest actant can modify the course of history through negotiations with its alliances, e.g. a nut can bring down an empire if the Emperor should choke on it. On a smaller scale, a wrench can destroy a waste disposal unit should it get stuck in the shaft and a squirrel can cause an electrical power outage to more or less devastating effect. Following this "butterfly effect" line of thinking, it is easy to assume Latour to be a holist, but this assumption would be false as he does not believe that everything is interconnected and that one thing affects everything else (Harman 2009, p. 47). An actant relies on the translation of its related alliances; it cannot "skip" distances into "a *different* set of relations" and remain the same entity (Harman 2009, p. 104).

Harman's in-depth presentation of Latour's metaphysics is persuasive in its comparison between the now nonsensical beliefs of the pre-Enlightenment era having separate physics for the earth and the sky, and the current separation of reality into "hard scientific fact and [---] arbitrary social power" (2009, p. 22). Latour bridges this gap with the theory of actants. For him, there is no fundamental ontological divide between nature and society (Harman 2009, p. 43). Latour stands curiously alone as a non-modernist since he rejects the attempt of modernity to "purify" the world by distinguishing between human interpretation and a "natural" or external sphere, perhaps best exemplified in the nature vs. nurture debate (Harman 2009, pp. 57-58). Latour argues that the "dualism of

nature and culture is groundless [...] there were never two opposed zones in the first place. Instead, there is nothing but a cosmic hailstorm of individual actants, none of them inherently natural or cultural” (Harman 2009, p. 58). Latour is not anti-modern, as this group accepts the claim that modernism has changed everything that came before it, only to regard it with pessimism rather than optimism. Neither is he a post-modern thinker since that would mean rejecting the reality and concreteness of actants in favour of relativity, subjective interpretation, collage and simulacrum. Instead, Latour’s philosophy contends that the radical break in reality brought on by modernity is an illusion; that “we ourselves, just like Neanderthals, sparrows, mushrooms, and dirt, have never done anything else than act amidst the bustle of other actants, compressing and resisting them, or giving way beneath their blows” (Harman 2009, p. 58).

A superficial parallel between Latour’s denial of human superiority and deep ecology (also known as radical naturalism) can here be drawn. Garrard explains deep ecology as being in radical opposition to Western tradition by shifting “from a human-centred to a nature-centred system of values” (21). However, the corollary remains superficial since naturalism keeps the age-old dichotomy human/nature and simply inverts its power balance, whereas Harman (2009, p. 14) establishes that Latour sees all actants as ontological equals. Latour argues against the dualism of inner substance and trivial exterior of the philosophy of *essentialism*. *Essentialism* is a general philosophical doctrine that believes objects to have at least some degree of essential properties which can be separated from their external, accidental properties (Robertson and Atkins). An Aristotelian philosophy of substance contrasts substance with its removable and malleable qualities, accidents and relations. Removing or changing the qualities or relations over time does not change the “essence” of the thing, e.g. changing a shirt does not change the person underneath the shirt, neither does getting a spray-tan. Harman adds

another criterion for substance to be considered an object. In addition to the object having to be independent of its qualities and relations, it must be a unit; a single thing (Harman 2015, 00:03:06-50). If we apply these requirements to formlessness, it does not qualify as an object. Formlessness may be a unit, but any changes to its qualities inevitably changes its resisting nature of not having any qualities. This suggests that formlessness exists only in the imagination, unless Pole's aforementioned attempt to make formlessness concrete through its relations is put into practice. Formlessness does exist, but in a negative space; in relation to what it isn't. Further following Latour's logic, I consider formlessness to be an actant since it – elusive as it is – has alliances and is able to negotiate with its relations. The analysis shows that Wilner's imagined formlessness is capable of acting and inflicting force upon its surroundings.

Mainstream philosophy largely concerns itself with the question of objects' existence outside of the human mind, but for Latour “[objects] are ‘socially’ constructed not just by human minds, but also by bodies, atoms, cosmic rays, business lunches, rumors, physical force, propaganda, or God.” (Harman 2009, p. 16). Latour is thus not a traditional realist, as he places physical mass on level with puppet shows and courtroom procedures, neither is he a social constructivist as he embraces the influence of inanimate substances on actants rather than solely focusing on the human sphere (Harman 2009, pp. 43-44). Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, formlessness is not only imagined through the affordances of the human mind but also through the medium of portrayal, the multiplicity of writing environments over time, the technology that allows access to the material, my supervisor's comments, the reader and hundreds of other actants coming together for me to analyse whether formlessness can be perceived or not.

Latour rejects the notion of substance in favour of the performance of actants. The academic use of the term *performance* has a fairly complicated history. The term has also

crossed into popular discourse, e.g. in discussions of gender roles á la Judith Butler. *Performance* has become a kind of buzz word which is widely and shallowly used across academia (Ahmed 2004b, 51), which is why I henceforth refer to acting instead. The main task of an actant is to act, as the name implies. They have agency and do not only stumble into reactive relations occasionally and randomly (Harman 2009, p. 36). Contrary to Sara Ahmed's (2004a, p. 6) view of emotions being created at the surface of bodies, for Latour, agency does not happen on the surface, as the entirety of the actant is deployed in every event. Instead, they are "the sum total of reality rather than an incidental surface-effect of the movement of dormant substrata. In this respect, there is only one world for Latour; all actants are here and nowhere else" (Harman 2009, p. 47).

According to Latour, there are instances where a network of actants are so well-established that their origins are no longer questioned and they are regarded as a functioning unit. Latour calls these entities *black boxes*, which is not a term he invented but one he helped move into the discourse of philosophy (Harman, 2009, p. 33). The most familiar use of the term *black box* is the literal black box used to track movement and technical decisions made in aeroplanes. A fitting metaphor for a black box is a well-oiled machine; it consists of many parts, but we define it according to its whole purpose as long as it functions smoothly: "Ideally, a machine should be so well designed that there is almost no chance of its parts rebelling against the streamlined whole: a box put together so effectively it seems *unthinkable* to change it." (Latour qtd. in Harman 2009, p. 49). Black boxes are made up of networks of separate actants but they are treated as one:

Actants are born amidst strife and controversy, yet they eventually congeal into a stable configuration. But simply reawaken the controversy, reopen the black box,

and you will see once more that the actant has no sleek unified essence. (Harman 2009, p. 34)

Only once a network of actants have been well-established is it considered a black box. A black box is truly established once it is presented as fact without reference to its origin or originator. Today, no one but the occasional outlier questions the double helix structure of a DNA strand (Harman 2009, p. 36) and an example in Latour's own words is the question, "“who refers to Lavoisier's paper when writing the formula H₂O for water?”" (qtd. in Harman 2009, p. 37). Unlike traditional substance and Harman's objects, black boxes do not endure throughout time, but are created in and are very much dependent on their context. They have some semblance of endurance, but this can easily be deconstructed by the discovery of new information or a change in the relations of the actants within the black box. The black box exists only as an absolute – once it is loosened, it ceases to function as one. Black boxes are a crucial component to having fruitful conversations where one can make references without it leading down constant paths of scrutiny and explanation. The strength of a black box resides in its relation to other established black boxes.

Latour vividly demonstrates this in his example of a scientist re-enacting his experiment to convince a critical cynic he calls "The Dissenter" (Harman 2009, pp. 39-43). The scientist has powerful black boxes on his side: his experiment renders the same result when tried several times, his instruments are up to par, and he has the scientific community, including Newtonian laws, backing him. The Dissenter is ridiculed and isolated from his peers after his insistence to continue expressing his critical doubt. The Dissenter's attempt to dismantle the black box, that is the scientist's findings, has had severe consequences in his life. Harman (2009, p. 44) goes on to imagine a scenario where

The Dissenter isn't discouraged by the resistance he meets, but works to prove his point and, in the process, makes a scientific breakthrough that rewrites Newton's law of optics. The point of this example is not to encourage playing the devil's advocate, but rather that "anything *can* be challenged" (Harman 2009, p. 44).

Harman observes that it is a central human activity to create black boxes, e.g. forming friendships, writing a manuscript or sustaining a marriage. It is a human ambition "to establish something durable that does not constantly fray or break down" (Harman 2009, p. 37). On a smaller scale, actants function similarly to black boxes: a pebble on a beach is one actant, but once we consider where it comes from, it becomes part of the larger process of sedimentation (Harman 2009, p. 36). Neither black boxes nor actants fulfil Harman's criteria for objects. This is the main difference between Latour and Harman. Latour foregoes the solid object in favour of networks, whereas Harman insists on the integrity of the object as such (Harman 2015 00:03:42-50).

While Latour uses the metaphor of the machine to explain his black boxes, Bennett's use of Driesch's concept of *entelechy* leaves space for an unknowable component within that machine. In the following chapter, the concept of entelechy will be further explored, but simply put, it is an "invisible presence" (Bennett 70) born in the gaps and negative spaces of the machine. For Latour, there is no such mystical presence and black boxes work simply due to the actants' interdependence. The impersonal drive of objects and the metaphor of the machine closely resembles Kant's notion of *Bildungstrieb*, as described through Bennett in section 2.3.1. However, Latour and Kant differ substantially in their treatment of non-human things.

This section has outlined the account Harman gives of Bruno Latour's actant theory. Latour, Harman states, argues that every existing entity is an actant, meaning everything has agency and equal ontological value, and entities differ only in the strength

of their alliances. This does not mean that every single thing is connected, but rather that things are spread out like a system of roots. Some alliances are so well-established that they are effectively viewed as one entity, a *black box*. These boxes can, however, be cracked open to reveal a network of interacting agents. Latour does not believe in any unknown, mysterious, ensouled presence or essence within objects, but rather that everything that occurs does so because of an actant acting.

2.5 Bennett's vital materiality

As previously established, my understanding of form as it is presented in this thesis is built on the vital materiality of Henri Focillon, Bruno Latour as presented by Graham Harman and Jane Bennett. Bennett (vii) explains vital materiality to exist in the space created by the estrangement of rethinking the words "life" and "matter" until they are no longer two distinct categories. I apply it as an umbrella term for referring to scholars who agree that matter possesses vitality. The view on matter and form as inseparable has a long but non-dominant philosophical history in the West. Prominent thinkers who have embraced the idea of vibrant matter include Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Darwin, Henry David Thoreau, Theodor Adorno and Gilles Deleuze (Bennett viii).

Bennett has been dubbed "one of the foremost proponents of the New Materialism" (Donovan 34), and her work on vibrant matter strives for a political shift in how we view the material world. For Bennett, material that is disregarded as waste or trash is in fact made up of complex biodynamics that render it a living thing. She rejects the idea of matter being passive and inconsequential. The world should not, according to Bennett, be divided into "things" and "beings" (vii), but rather be seen as an inclusive, animate environment. This would affect consumer behaviour, political decisions, and first and foremost, environmental policy. Setting aside the political aspect of Bennett's theory,

her two other main goals will be relevant for this thesis. These include presenting vibrant matter as sources of “agency, action, and freedom”, and dispersing binaries of “life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic” (Bennett x). Vital materiality is thus arguably a non-modern philosophy in the vein proposed by Latour. Bennett’s vital materialism runs parallel to historical materialism, which focuses on the “economic and social structures of human power” (Bennett 62). While Marx and Engels argue that it is the conditions of production and human bodies and choices that move history forward, Bennett is much more engaged in the active power of dirt and grime, concerning herself with how all kinds of vibrant matter affect our surroundings.

Bennett is largely influenced by the work of critical vitalists Hans Driesch and Henri Bergson. Vitalism is a philosophical tradition that affirms the self-organizing or self-causational movement of living entities as a central life force of sorts. This force is found only in organic beings, whereas the movement of mechanic processes are externally caused (Lash 323- 324). To contrast, Latour’s actant theory is not a vitalist theory, as he does not distinguish between living and non-living entities and his actants have no unknowable life force as such; their agency exists solely within their networks. Bennett, however, can be interpreted as a critical vitalist who is influenced by Latour. She is critical since she rejects the dichotomy present in traditional vitalism and seeks to highlight the agency of non-living entities by exposing their self-compositional and self-animating properties.

Another major influence for Bennett is the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza: she believes all material is made of the same essential substance and refers to the idea of “conative bodies” (Bennett x) which cooperate with other material bodies to enhance their own activity. While Bennett’s Spinozan influence is in contrast to Latour’s rejection of an essentialist quality of objects, Bennett makes use of Latour’s theory of the actant,

which is explained in section 2.4. Non-human matter presented as an active agent is a crucial element in my analysis. It is, however, important to note that Bennett's view on the agency and substance of matter is not influenced by spirituality or an ensouled life force inhabiting the matter, but is constituted of the matter itself, following Latour's actant theory (Bennett xvii) To highlight this, Bennett (69-76) contrasts vital materiality with Driesch's theory of *entelechy*.

Entelechy refers to a "figure of impersonal agency" (Bennett 75) within living organisms, which in Driesch's view separates them from machines. This is closely related to Kant's concept of *Bildungstrieb*, briefly explained through Bennett in section 2.3.1. Entelechy is neither quantifiable energy nor measurable substance, but something existing in the negative space between these two; animating matter, giving it agency and existing solely in relation to energy and substance (Bennett 70-71). Driesch refers to the innovative and repairing action of organisms, e.g. recreating severed body parts, as an example of entelechy. Although as elusive as formlessness, entelechy is a useful concept for discussing vital materialism. This is neither the "soul vitalism" of Christian theology nor Kant's human exceptionalism, although Kant and Driesch agree that there is a transcendental quality to this vital presence that remains invisible and intelligible while performing tasks within the organism "which no mechanical matter could even possibly perform by itself" (Bennett 70). Traditional vitalists favour an anthropocentric and hierarchical construction of the world where Man is ranked at the top as the most animated and powerful being, and where organic matter outranks inorganic matter due to being ensouled. In comparison, Driesch's entelechy and Bennett's vital materiality are both examples of a critical vitalism that de-emphasizes human authority over the impersonal agency of objects or matter. Since a core belief of any kind of vitalism is that "life is irreducible to matter" (Bennett 87), Latour does not seem to fit into this category. He

stands separated from most mainstream philosophical movements in a unique in-between space. However, all three of these thinkers – Driesch, Bennett and Latour – share a fondness for direct and concrete engagement with their materials of study.

Building on Aristotle's use of the term, Driesch considers entelechy to be a "self-moving and self-altering power" (Bennett 71), but rejects Aristotle's teleological ideas connected to entelechy, to instead emphasize the agency of objects. Aristotelian teleology (from the Greek word for end, *telos*) describes the natural will of the object to obtain its end goal. Bennett describes Driesch's differing take as follows:

entelechy does not vary from person to person; it is not a unique soul, but neither does it vary across organisms. It is, rather, the immanent vitality flowing across all living bodies. This makes entelechy more resistant than soul to the strongest or most punitive notions of personal moral responsibility. [...] The agentic capacity of entelechy is not a disembodied soul, for it is constrained by the materiality that it must inhabit and by the performed possibilities contained therein. (Bennett 75)

This is what, according to Bennett, is embedded in all living organisms, regardless of matter or form. Bennett rejects the idea of "passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substances" (xiii) in favour of the elemental interactions and vitality of matter as it exists and reacts in the physical world and within the physical limitations of the organism. However, for Bennett more so than for Driesch, this type of agency is applied to matter which is traditionally seen as non-organic, e.g. electricity, which would be an example of a mechanical process without entelechy according to Driesch. In Driesch's view, entelechy has to be regarded as a nonmaterial force. His view on materiality is that matter

is either infused with life through entelechy or stays a lifeless and a deterministic machine without it. This is where Bennett makes a clear distinction between her vital materiality and Driesch's entelechy. Bennett rejects Driesch's view on materiality as being passive and dull and requiring an external force to breathe life into it. Instead, Bennett adopts a point of view which argues that the actants themselves possess agency without any external or unknowable factors. She argues that inorganic bodies also have life and that materiality itself is vital.

This section has presented the vital materialism of Jane Bennett, who deconstructs the traditional dichotomies of human/non-human and organic/inorganic to argue that all matter has agency and is vibrant. A distinction between traditional and critical vitalism has been drawn. I have also discussed the concept of entelechy, which presumes there to be an unknowable quality or life force within all objects. If adopting a mechanical model of nature, entelechy exists in the gaps and in-between spaces of the machinery, facilitating its function and agency. Driesch's theory is close to Bennett in viewing entelechy as an impersonal agency rather than the personal agency of a soul. The soul is a prominent belief in many religions and philosophical and mythological traditions, e.g. Christian theology and human exceptionalism. There are also traces of this often anthropocentric belief in traditional vitalism. Driesch's lack of enthusiasm for vibrant matter is contrasted with Bennett's view of objects as actants that possess agency and of matter as a force to be reckoned with in a concrete world.

2.6 Focillon and forms of art

To better understand the relationship between form and art, I turn to the prominent art historian and influential twentieth-century thinker Henri Focillon. His book *The Life of Forms in Art*, originally published in 1934, reads as an ardent love letter to art, the mind

of the artist and to form itself. Focillon is mainly concerned with traditional visual and tactile forms of art such as painting, illustration, sculpture and architecture. His ideas on form can nonetheless be applied to poetry. Being an art historian, Focillon speaks very passionately about art creating the human experience of the world rather than merely representing it. He further contends that art supersedes any interpretation, as art is “something added to our universe – an entirely new universe, with its own laws, materials and development” (Focillon 32). Examples of this are pieces of architecture, woodwork, needlework, sculpture or performance art that have influenced the cultural and political environment of their time and beyond, e.g. the Moai of Easter Island, Angkor Wat, the Bayeux Tapestry and Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue*.

Focillon, like Latour and Bennett, regards form and matter as inseparable from each other and from their surroundings. Art is inextricably tied to weight, density, colour and light and these structures anchor art in form. Whenever art tries to renounce matter and represent a “pure” form it only accentuates the impossibility of escaping from “this unequivocal bondage” (Focillon 95). Art and form are thus inevitably conjoined, as are form and matter. The fascination for the old antitheses of spirit-matter and matter-form is nothing new (Focillon 95), which is evident in the philosophical outline presented earlier. Forms also have an intimate relationship to imagination. Before a form is concretised in matter, it remains “a vista of the mind, a mere speculation on a space” (Focillon 95). Focillon rejects Platonic ideas of form as “suspended in some remote, abstract zone [...] They mingle with life, whence they come; they translate into space certain movements of the mind” (60). Forms are thus manifold “*constructions* of space and matter” (Focillon 33). A piece of art is intrinsically tied to questions of spatiality as it measures up its own space and presents itself first and foremost through its form. Focillon thus assigns artworks their own agency, meaning that in Latour’s terms, a work of art would be its

own actant. Focillon (41) asserts that a piece of art only appears to be static. Behind the finished product, there are constant, minute movements and alterations that help make up the artwork itself, e.g. early sketches and drafts or the hand movements of the sculptor or etcher.

Focillon views space as something more than an “abstract frame of geometry” (62) and emphasizes how the life of forms is created, develops and exists in space with the help of tools and the hands of those who create it. Forms thus exist in a tangible, concrete and diverse reality (Focillon 62). Focillon makes an important distinction between the space of life and the space of art:

A work of art is situated in space. But it will not do to say it simply exists in space: a work of art treats space according to its own needs, defines space and even creates such space as may be necessary to it. The space of life is a known quantity to which life readily submits; the space of art is a plastic and changing material. (65)

Focillon’s focus is on art created by hands, e.g. paintings, carvings, architecture and sculpture. These forms of art are situated in space in a very concrete sense; they can be touched, walked up to, moved around; they influence their surroundings. This resembles Leighton’s view on form as dynamic and plastic, which is explored in section 2.3. The principal form of art this thesis deals with, poetry, is less concrete than, say, architecture or ceramics, although it also possesses material aspects. Wilner’s poem exists on the page and wherever it is reprinted; the words evoke mental images and are thus also part of the realm of the mind. Focillon (67) argues that the spectator through their sight invests substance into the form and the work of art; it is through reading the poem that it

affects its surroundings. According to Focillon “anything that may elude the laws of space is still a legitimate treatment of space [...] Form is not indiscriminately architecture, sculpture or painting” (65). This suggests that less tangible forms of art are also woven into spatiality, although architecture, in particular, serves as an excellent example of form in context:

it seems difficult to conceive of architecture as existing outside of an environment. In its original forms, this art is closely bound to the earth; it is subject to the needs of society; it is faithful to a program. It erects its great monuments beneath a known sky and in a known climate, on a soil that furnishes particular materials and no others, on a given site, in a city that is more or less wealthy, more or less populous, more or less abundant in labor. It answers collective needs, even in the construction of private dwellings. It is geographical and sociological. Brick, stone, marble and volcanic materials are not merely elements of color: they are elements of structure. (Focillon 148)

Focillon (111) resembles Latour, Bennett and Driesch in his critical attention to the context of materiality and in his literal hands-on approach through an *identity of touch*, which is preoccupied with the tactility involved in creating art. The last chapter in *The Life of Forms in Art* is a praise of hands and the importance they have for the artist, as the hand “teaches man to conquer space, weight, density and quantity. Because it fashions a new world, it leaves its imprint everywhere upon it” (Focillon 184). Focillon refutes the idea of hands as mere tools and acknowledges their agency acquired through habit or instinct. Hands have played a major role in the development of measurements and language; they serve as instruments where language fails. The difference between a

painting and a painted door is found in how the two things are touched and the structure that touch brings. The structure and imprint of touch shapes the form itself through changes in value, colour, density, weight and motion. Focillon characteristically equates the importance of the mind to that of the hand: “The mind rules over the hand; hand rules over mind” (184). This can be exemplified with everyday tasks that become automated, e.g. brushing teeth, typing, knitting, etc.

Not only hands can shape art; consider how objects are transformed through different lighting. Light is in itself a form by way of being comprised of light rays that are compressed, stretched and bent. Rather than being a passive substance, Focillon describes light as a living element with agency (i.e. an actant) that collaborates with architecture, among other things, to give the latter its final form. Light thus “depends on the substance that receives it” (Focillon 102), meaning it more or less flows, rests, penetrates or gives its subject a quality, e.g. warmth, dryness or oiliness. In other words, light brings out the shape and characteristics of its subject.

To further distinguish between different types of spatiality, Focillon (78-79) differentiates between space as limit and space as environment. He defines space working as a limit by relying on the structures of forms and confining their expansion, e.g. a palm pressing against a table or the limits posed by skin as a canvas for tattoos. Forms are, in this case, contained and limited through space. Space as an environment, on the other hand, allows for the expansion of forms and their modulation, e.g. the art form of murals where the wall itself becomes part of the piece. While Focillon (84) argues that art is inseparable from space, he acknowledges that there are cases where space functions only as an ornamental feature within an artwork that sets the object apart. The concept of *background* in painting is one example of this. The meaning of background is that space and nature do not just surround and house the subject of the painting: instead they make

up a separate entity entirely (Focillon 84). The physical reality of an artwork is thus twofold in its relationship to space: the reality within and without the form.

Although the form and matter of a piece of art are intertwined according to Focillon, he offers a distinction between image and form:

We are always tempted to read into form a meaning other than its own, to confuse the notion of form with that of image and sign. But whereas an image implies the representation of an object, and a sign signifies an object, form signifies only *itself*. (34)

Here, Focillon argues that there is a distinct meaning of form and that form must be separated from any attributes we assign to it. The difficulty of dealing with form stems from the elusive nature of it, “which is neither that of physical extent nor that of pure thought” (Focillon 35). This thesis does exactly what Focillon describes above by attempting to dissect form – and its counterpart formlessness – through the interpretive lens of literary and cultural studies. This is due to the limitations of my academic background. In order to approach this matter, literary scholars such as myself must twist their minds around the very pillars that hold up the basis of their analysis. Focillon recognises the paradoxical nature of representational art, stating that “in an art seemingly dedicated to “imitation,” the principle of non-imitation appears as it does nowhere else” (99). Art is created through the interaction of form, matter and space, and even in cases of imitation, something new is inevitably created. Focillon’s perception of forms is thus that they are “not only, [...] incarnated, but that it is invariably incarnation itself” (101). Materiality still matters in representational art forms such as illustration:

drawing [...] is a process of abstraction so extreme and so pure that matter is reduced to a mere armature of the slenderest possible sort, and is [...] very nearly volatilized. But matter in this volatile state is still matter, and by virtue of being controlled, compressed and divided on the paper – which it instantly brings to life – it acquires a special power. Its variety [...] is extreme: ink, wash, lead pencil, charcoal, red chalk, crayon, whether singly or in combination, all constitute so many distinct traits, so many distinct languages. (Focillon 100)

Here, Focillon describes the many different properties of several methods within one art form and how they in their materiality create distinctive expressions. A relevant comparison is that poetry is one of many literary forms, which can be categorised into more specific groups of genre, stanza forms, audience, access etc.

Focillon (103-104) explains technique to be the instrument of form and form to be the instrument of the subject matter. The artist employs the “very technique of the mind; he gives us a kind of mold or cast that we can both see and touch” (Focillon 119). When this idea is applied to this thesis, form can be said to be an academic analysis on the subject matter – formlessness – and the technique is the grammar of the form, i.e. the structure and the language of thesis writing. Not to forget the more material aspects of the writing process: the computer and the writing program, an internet connection, and my educational background, as well as the effect on the text which spatial and temporal elements have. Technique is not “oppressed” by matter, but it must “extract from matter forces that are still vital and not vitrified beneath a flawless varnish” (Focillon 106). This suggests that to create art or a form of any kind, in this case, an academic thesis, the technique must find kernels or pockets of vitality that engage the reader.

According to Focillon, “[f]orms obey their own rules – rules that are inherent in the forms themselves, or better, in the regions of the mind where they are located and centered” (52). *The Life of Forms in Art* has an entire chapter devoted to the placing of forms in the realm of the mind. In it, Focillon questions the externality of forms and asks whether forms are “projections of some inner process”, but arrives at the conclusion that “the world of forms in the mind is identical in principle with the world of forms in space and matter: they differ only in plan or, possibly, in perspective” (118). Thus, Focillon follows the same concrete reading of form that both Latour and Bennett advocate. In Focillon’s assessment, form cannot be abstract nor removed from its surroundings. Rather, it is grounded in the tactile and the visual. Focillon illustrates this through the examples of the musician who hears music in timbres and instruments rather than numerical relationships between notes and the artist who sees their painting through the tones and the touch rather than an abstraction of their painting. This “creates the concrete within the abstract, and the weight within the imponderable” (Focillon 123).

For Focillon, accepting formlessness is a way of relaxing the mind which is constantly busy with the labour of defining itself and its surroundings. After such strenuous effort, “[a]ll that [the mind] then seeks or needs is to relax, to lose willingly all sense of form, to accept passively whatever may flow up to it from the ocean depths of life” (Focillon 119). He likens this cognitive process to a riot which seeks to overturn what is established but in the process establishes new forms. Not only does Focillon tie forms to ever-shifting cognitive processes, he also argues that form is the “innermost activity” (123) of feeling, over the interpretation of form as an allegory or symbol of feeling. An artist can turn his emotions into form and “form activates feeling” (Focillon 123), not only in the artist but in the audience as well, e.g. through the tender tones of an

aria or the Flower duet from *Lakmé*; through the softness of a watercolour painting or the subtle assonance of a poem.

Since Focillon is very invested in questions of spatiality, he inevitably also comments on the temporal aspects of form. He asserts that a work of art is primarily set in space, but it does also fall into a tradition and places on a scale of previous and later works of art. Focillon's treatment of time problematizes the ideas of succession and evolution. Evolution proposes a "deceptive orderliness [and] single-minded directness" (Focillon 47) although there are cases of the "line" between the past and the future not being straight-forward. The traditional historian views time as chronological: synchronic glimpses of time lose significance if not viewed in relation to what came before or after. Time becomes a kind of architectural structure that takes on an organic quality, as in the case of different centuries (Focillon 137-139). However, as Focillon points out, "[h]istory is not unilinear; it is not pure sequence" (140). There are many intersecting realities within the same points in time, which diversify history and unfolding events. This resembles Latour's take on time functioning like a kind of helix (Harman 2009, p. 68) and Massey's interpretation of space existing in a "sense of contemporaneous plurality" (9). Since the concept of time stands on such impressionable ground, Focillon breaks it down to its core to explain a *moment* as the "meeting point of several forms of the present" (152) rather than the total of what came before.

This section shows Focillon's take on art creating the human experience rather than representing it. The artist creates "a world that is complex, coherent and concrete" (Focillon 119). Focillon, like Latour and Bennett, highlights the agency of matter and the inseparable qualities of space, matter and form. Art is created through forms existing in space and forms are developed through technique. Focillon anchors form as cognitive processes and as expressions of emotion while fully acknowledging the concreteness of

the materiality of forms and the importance of a physical imprint. There is a discussion on the identity of touch and the critical distinction between image and form. Lastly, Focillon's approach to time is briefly outlined.

2.7 Spatial deixis

This section presents the linguistic tool of *spatial deixis*, which is relevant to the literary pragmatic analysis of "Reading the Bible Backwards". Deixis is derived from the Greek word for reference ("deixis"). A simple definition of deixis is the "anchoring of speech in a specific time and place" (Robert 156). Deictic expressions draw the attention of the addressee to the spatial and temporal environment of the utterance. In other words, deixis is a textual reference to the extra-textual world. This challenges any view of language as an autonomous system independent of its context. For those who believe language is a system with the sole purpose to objectively describe the world, deixis is "a big black fly in the ointment" (Levinson 2004, p. 97). Deixis disrupts the idea of an objective, impartial reality expressed through language, and instead introduces subjective, intentional, attentional and situational properties to languages. It is possible to take this philosophical angle even further and draw a direct parallel between deixis and Latour's actant theory. In this case, a language is a black box, and a word is an actant that exists and operates through its networks or, in other words, its context.

Deixis is closely related to indexicality, as both, in their simplest definitions, indicate or point towards something. Levinson (2004, p. 97) distinguishes between indexicality in a philosophical tradition which concerns itself with contextual dependency as a phenomenon and deixis as the linguistic markers of this dependency. Some linguistic expressions are inherently deictic, such as the demonstrative pronoun *this*, where the referent is provided by the context. Deixis is also closely linked to – and sometimes

indistinguishable from – *anaphora*, which is a reference back to something stated previously. Levinson (2004, p. 103) exemplifies this with the sentence *I've been living in San Francisco for five years and I love it here*, where *here* is simultaneously deictic and anaphoric. Adverbs like *near* or *far*, *now* and *today*, pronouns like *you*, *this*, *that* and verbs such as *come* and *go* can all function as deictic references, describing proximity or distance, temporal aspects, or roles and their functions. There are different categories of deixis, e.g. those referring to a person, discourse, time and place etc. (Levinson 2004, pp. 111-121). In 1934, Karl Bühler introduced the idea of a deictic centre; a “ground zero” or “origo”, around which the deictic field is organised (Levinson 2004, p. 111). The origo consists of the speaker “at the time and place of speaking” (Levinson 2004, p. 111). Take for instance *here* and *there*, which are perhaps the most known examples of spatial deixis. In English, *here* is a space which includes the speaker, while *there* is farther away from the speaker, both cases placing the speaker in the deictic centre (Levinson 1998, p. 203; 2004, p. 116). The origo can shift, however, e.g. “What should he do here now, Harry wondered?” is Levinson’s (1998, p. 202) example of the writer’s and reader’s sense of deictic centre shifting to that of the protagonist, Harry, by the use of *here*.

Deixis is a highly complicated and pervasive linguistic feature which struggles to fit neatly into the categories of semantic and pragmatic theory (Levinson 2004, p. 97). This is one reason an interdisciplinary approach is helpful, as it allows for fluidity and a holistic view. By approaching “Reading the Bible Backwards” through spatial deixis, we can uncover its real-world relations.

2.8 Conclusions on form

This section summarises the theoretical chapter of this thesis in an effort to radically simplify the complex themes of form and formlessness. I started by renouncing the

philosophically modernist dichotomies of human/nonhuman and organic/inorganic life or matter in favour of a less rigid interpretation of agency and vitality.

While trying to unravel the question of what counts as having agency, the loosening of absolutes becomes central. The vital materiality of Jane Bennett and Graham Harman's metaphysical account of Bruno Latour's actant theory are employed to argue that all entities, organic or not, possess agency. The loosening of concepts such as matter and form is relevant throughout this thesis. I do not view matter and form as two distinct entities that happen to coexist and be co-dependent, but as fundamentally intertwined and inseparable. Subsequently, form cannot be studied on its own, but needs to be seen in relation to something, usually content or matter. This is also the case for studying the negative, which needs to be related to its positive counterpart. Thus, in order to study the absence of form – formlessness – I discuss the presence of form and its development through philosophy and aesthetics. To discuss formlessness inevitably gives it form through language (Kaakinen 125), which is a paradox of this thesis.

A salient interpretation comes from Angela Leighton (3), who observes the mischief and vibrancy of form. Form is infinitely mouldable and lends itself to any shape and use. It is mobile, versatile and imaginative. I present Harman's object-oriented philosophy, which insists that it is possible to discuss what is external to human perception without necessarily imposing human values and interpretations onto objects. In other words, Harman believes it is possible to understand objects as they truly exist. This is one way of materialising metaphysics, which otherwise has a tendency to exist only as an abstraction; as a speculation of the world largely influenced by Kant's ideas of subjective perception.

My view on formlessness is best exemplified through David Pole's insistence that formlessness is relative. Since I view form and matter as inseparable, there cannot be

formlessness where there is matter and the only non-matter is arguably *antimatter*. However, *antimatter* also has a structure, or form. By simple extrapolation it is possible to conclude that there is no absolute formlessness. There is, however, relative formlessness (Pole 82). Pole (83) argues that form in a *non-aesthetic* sense can break its specific features and definitions, i.e. its structure, effectively exemplifying formlessness in practice. A baby's first drawings are not likely to be identifiable as having a particular form, rather they are formless scrawls and scribbles. This is the view of formlessness I refer to in the analysis unless otherwise specified.

Section 2.4 explores Latour's actant theory through the lens of Harman (2009). Actants are entities which have varying degrees of impact on their alliances, i.e. their surrounding or related actants, through an intricate network, not of cause-and-effect, but translations and mediations. When these actants bind together in a strong enough network, they become *black boxes*, which are entities that are so well-established that they are not questioned. Should someone start to examine these black boxes and start asking questions about their relations, the boxes would be dismantled or loosened. Alternatively, as we saw in the example of the scientist vs. The Dissenter (Harman 2009, p. 39-43), black boxes can be strong enough to withstand questioning. I discuss Latour exclusively through Harman's metaphysical presentation of Latour's work. While Latour and Harman broadly seem to share philosophies, one significant difference is that Harman views objects as units that exist in themselves, independent of their relations.

Bennett's theory of vibrant matter seeks to bring biodynamics into political and philosophical discourse. I have adopted Bennett's perspective that it is crucial to deconstruct the binaries between human and non-human life and acknowledge the agency of all entities. This also reflects Latour's actant theory, which is one of Bennett's main influences. Bennett diverges from Latour in that she leans towards *essentialism* through

Spinoza and critical vitalism. Bennett argues that all entities, including non-organic ones, have some incalculable self-animating property. This is not a spirit or soul inhabiting the entity, but something created in the spaces of the machine, as it were, born from the physical interactions of the matter itself. Bennett contrasts this belief to Hans Driesch's theory of *entelechy*, which sees vessels infused with a central, unknowable life force. Bennett, in contrast to Driesch, does not believe it to be an external force, but one created in the physicality of the material, and extends this agentic power to non-organic entities, e.g. electricity.

In section 2.6, I examine the relationship between matter and form in the realm of art through Henri Focillon. This is to bridge the gap between the discussion of metaphysics and the analysis of my primary source material. All of my main scholars are concerned with concrete materiality, and by discussing form and art, I build the basis for the upcoming interdisciplinary discussion. Focillon (32) argues that by creating art, the artist doesn't just represent the human experience of the world, but creates it. For Focillon, art is inseparable from its form, as it exists in a physical reality of weight, colour, density etc. Art is likewise an exercise of imagination and an exploration of spatiality, not only existing in space, but shaping and stretching it according to its needs. Focillon (78-79) distinguishes between space as environment and space as limit. He shares the belief with Latour that a piece of art possesses agency; it affects its surroundings. An art piece is thus static only in appearance. Forms of art are simultaneously plastic, dynamic and concrete. They are touchable. A poem exists as words on a page; in a physical environment, apart from its existence in the reader's mind. In my discussion, I explore the physicality of "Reading the Bible Backwards" through Focillon's *identity of touch*, which presents a literal hands-on-approach. I do this by contrasting it to the audio-visual medium of film.

Connected to this hands-on-approach is my use of the linguistic marker spatial deixis. Spatial deixis anchors language in a context and a time and place. I examine the spatial deixis of my primary source material to find out how it relates to the extra-linguistic world, i.e. the “concrete” world.

3. Analysis of “Reading the Bible Backwards”

This chapter analyses Eleanor Wilner’s poem “Reading the Bible Backwards” (1989) through a variety of different critical lenses. The main takeaway of the theory chapter is that form and matter are inseparable. This view is essential to my reading as a whole. Likewise, the concrete approach favoured by Bennett, Harman, Latour and Focillon, is applied throughout the analysis. However, due to the brevity of the poem and the intersectional nature of this thesis, it is useful to apply a range of theoretical frameworks to the analysis, namely ecocriticism, historicism, narratology, spatial deixis and vital materiality. I find that Bennett’s (vii) presentation of vital materiality comes closest to function as an umbrella term for the theoretical speculations I have presented in the theory chapter. By applying all these different perspectives, I present a variety of ways to approach formlessness, as the concept itself is fluid and defies rigid structure. Before diving into the multiple critical perspectives, a brief synopsis of the primary source material and an explanation of the poetics of negativity is provided.

3.1 Synopsis of “Reading the Bible Backwards”

Eleanor Wilner’s 1989 poem “Reading the Bible Backwards” (“RBB”) is a retelling of the Christian creation story in reverse. Consisting of six stanzas of varying lengths, it is a narrative poem in free verse; an apocalyptic tale of nature overtaking civilisation, slowly

drowning itself until only “*the Spirit*” remains. Wilner paints well-known biblical scenarios as temporally sequenced narratives within a grander retrogressive narrative as biblical events occur in backwards order. If the reader did not have any prior knowledge of the Bible, they would most likely not comprehend the inverted temporality of “Reading the Bible Backwards”, save for the title, which tells the reader that this poem is a retelling of a Bible story in reverse. However, the Christian creation story is so well-known that most readers will be at least superficially familiar with it and able to connect the dots between the two narratives. Wilner rewrites the scenarios of what is presumably a scene from the Book of Revelation, the birth of Jesus Christ, the story of Noah’s ark, the escape of Moses on the river Nile and the first chapter of Genesis, i.e. the moment of creation. Each of the six stanzas of the poem can be interpreted as representing one of the days in which the universe was created according to Christian belief. Following this interpretation, the seventh day and the non-existent seventh stanza are for God’s or in Wilner’s terms, the Spirit’s, rest and thus not part of the narrative. In a symbolically corresponding amount of time to its creation, the universe is *uncreated*.

To describe the journey to formlessness undertaken in this poem, I occasionally use the word *ascension* although terms like *declension* or *deterioration* are perhaps more associated with formlessness due to the qualities of lack and absence inherent to the nature of the concept. I prefer *ascension* since the waters are rising upwards throughout the poem. I also read it (from an ecocritical perspective) as a rather uplifting poem despite its apocalyptic narrative. Following the structure of the poem, the goal is to arrive at a metaphorical throne, where the Spirit takes the place of God. In other words, “RBB” culminates in a transcendent scene in which only the formless Spirit remains. Here, I use the word *transcendence* according to its dictionary definition of “surmounting, or rising above [...], excelling, surpassing eminence or excellence” (“transcendence”).

Transcendence is most often connected to deities who stand above their inhabited universe, i.e. are disconnected from form. It is sometimes contrasted to *immanence*, which in turn refers to the inherent; to something – usually God – “permanently pervading and sustaining the universe” (“immanent”). *Transcendence* is both another word as elusive as *formlessness* and an example of formlessness.

3.2 Poetics of negativity

As already concluded, depicting and observing formlessness is a paradox and is practically impossible. Simply addressing formlessness gives it form through language, and so moving towards such an abstraction necessarily involves analysing it through its negation. Literary scholar Leena Kaakinen identifies this strategy as a “poetics of negativity” (125). Effectively, if flipped, this means that the only reasonable way to approach formlessness is through its positive counterpart, form. Other examples include reading presence through absence, “fullness through emptiness, death through life and life through death” (Kaakinen 125). Kaakinen (127) argues that the best way to approach nothingness is through a concretisation of the material. This is the same tendency that we’ve seen in Harman, Latour, Bennett and Focillon. While Kaakinen writes about nothingness rather than formlessness, it can be argued that the two are virtually the same given a vital materialist reading, which sees matter and form as inseparable.

“Reading the Bible Backwards” has the form of a poem and is consequently a poem. Poetry is born – and inseparable – from form. Poetry is separated from other literary forms through, for instance, cadence, rhyme, rhythm and oral or visual patterns, and within the tradition of poetry, there are countless varieties of form. For instance, “RBB” is an example of a narrative poem written in free verse. Philip Hobsbaum and Thomas DiPiero both give in-depth explanations of the large range of poetic forms, the

latter further illuminating how poetry contrasts with the apparent formlessness of prose. Not only does DiPiero distinguish between the imagination of poetry and the transpired events of historical narratives, but he also highlights the importance of acknowledging the social and political context of different literary forms. For example, the idea that prose displays a formless quality has historical roots in the loss of the *jongleur*, the travelling balladeer who sang grand stories in the vernacular, and with him, the loss of rhythm and rhyme that helped the singer remember the stories. In literary prose, the extra-linguistic performance aspect, i.e. the form, which among other things contained aural and visual cues, was lost, leaving only disembodied linguistic features such as punctuation and deixis (DiPiero 209-210).

In other words, DiPiero (209-210) argues that poetry carries more aural and visual likeness to oral narratives than to written prose and in the move from oral to literary prose, there was a loss of form and hence the idea that prose is formless was born. This idea has been questioned by scholars and I do not claim that prose is an example of complete formlessness as this thesis does not concern itself with a work of prose. However, this suggests that, in comparison, poetry cannot be separated from its form to the same extent as literary prose. Hobsbaum (13) writes that, in practice, the form and matter of a poem are inseparable and are only divided into isolated components, e.g. verse, metre, rhythm, assonance and semantics, when engaged in analytic discussion. I agree with Robert Pogue Harrison's (3) stance that poetry is one of the only forms that can truly depict formlessness.

Related to the idea of formlessness is the aforementioned concept of *nothingness*, a well-established notion explored by such poets as W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon to name a few. "For poetry makes nothing happen", the famous axiom expressed by Auden in his elegy "In Memory of W.B. Yeats"

(1939), can be read through the poetics of negativity as turning the negative *nothing* into *something* (Leighton 145). Writing about nothingness is thus to conjure something into being; “nothing turns itself inside out and changes into its negation” (Kaakinen 127). This same two-fold nature of formlessness is evident in this thesis. Taking this analysis a step further shows that nothingness is becoming; it is “neither a thing, nor no nothing, but a continuous event” (Leighton 145).

To reiterate, poetry is arguably the best literary form for expressing formlessness, nothingness and an imaginary, denied or doubted “non-reality” (Kaakinen 128). Through concrete readings of poetry, e.g. looking at small, particular details and the interaction between form and matter, fresh and surprising points of view on worn-out themes can be found. Concretisation is a complex analysis “about emptiness that exceeds human understanding” (Kaakinen 133). Even though Kaakinen here is discussing the poetry of Wisława Szymborska, her statement is also applicable to Wilner’s “Reading the Bible Backwards”, which ends in a similar emptiness to that of Szymborska’s work. Wilner attempts to paint a picture of total formlessness like that of the moment of Creation, but inevitably anchors it in language, perspective and meaning. However, looking past this apparent paradox and following a pragmatic definition of formlessness, we see that Wilner succeeds. In the end, there is nothing left but an undefined Spirit moving across a vast landscape of undefined wilderness: *And / the Spirit moved upon the face of the waters* (85-86). In conclusion, through the poetics of negativity, poetry can depict the non-existent or formless, although it in the process gives form to the formlessness it imagines.

3.3 An ecocritical perspective

Ecocriticism is a school of thought that criticises the phenomenon of only valuing nature according to how useful it is for humans. Environmentalists argue that nature has an

intrinsic value which should be taken into account in our societal structures and value systems (Garrard 18). This illustrates that, according to ecocriticism, there is a fundamental divide between nature and culture. This is an example of the classic philosophical modernist dualism that Latour, Harman and Bennett seek to break down. An ecocritical reading of “Reading the Bible Backwards”, or indeed most art, becomes more relevant with each passing year, as the world appears to grow closer to such an apocalyptic event described in “RBB”, however implausible or extreme it might seem (cf. IPCC; UN; UNEP 2019). Questions of human existence have always intrigued philosophers and humanity is perhaps more threatened than ever in this respect due to the ongoing climate crisis. Apocalypticism is inevitably bound to imagination, as it envisions a future which has not yet come to pass, and the word itself stems from the Greek *Apokalyptein*, meaning to *uncover* or *unveil* (Garrard 86; “apocalypse”). In *Gathering the Winds*, Wilner accounts for an “apocalyptic-millennial” (1975, pp. 1-3) visionary imagination that accompanies times of distress and crisis and radicalises its contemporaries. This speaks very much to the current zeitgeist of millennials and zoomers whose online presence is heavily centred around suicidal jokes and Marxist memes. The current upswing of the right-wing using online humour as a tool of radicalisation towards fascism (Evans 00:08:28-00:17:13) shows that Wilner’s academic work is as relevant in 2020 as it was in 1975. She states that an apocalyptic vision always grows out of a social, historical and interpersonal context of extremes as a critical response to the threat of (social) dislocation (Wilner 1975, p. 3). Wilner wrote “RBB” at the end of a decade that in a USA centred context saw rapidly growing income inequality, alienation from nature in favour of excessive consumerism, race motivated drug wars, the AIDS-epidemic, the final gripes of the Cold War and the unrest that culminated in the disbandment of the Soviet Union. The 1980s were effectively the decade that led the world to its current point

in time where late-stage capitalism reigns and the planet is literally on fire because of it (PR Newswire; UNEP 2020). “Reading the Bible Backwards” is Wilner’s apocalyptic-millennial vision that is equally relevant, if not more so, thirty years later.

In “RBB”, Wilner subverts religious and mythological imagery in what can effectively be called a redemption of nature, as the literal uprising of the sea buries all traces of humanity. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to read it as a redemption of wilderness instead, since all land-dependent species are eventually drowned. Redemption refers to “freeing a prisoner, captive, or slave by payment; the fact of being freed in this way” (“redemption”). Nature has been the slave of humankind since the Creation (cf. *The Bible*, KJV, the Book of Genesis 1.26), and in “RBB”, Wilner sets it free; she acts as the priest giving nature its absolution: “the old / nightmares of earth would settle / into silt” (72-74). The payment that must be made is that freedom only comes on behalf of the extinction of everything else. Calling it redemption when describing nature overthrowing the religious and cultural order is subversive when considering that the word carries strong religious connotations. A theological definition reads redemption as the salvation of Christ; of absolution from sin and damnation. Commonly, redemption means liberation, restoration, deliverance (“redemption”). Wilner’s retelling of the biblical creation story restores nature to its primal, spiritual, prehistoric and pre-form self. The death-stroke of the Anthropocene is the birth of Jesus Christ who “would spell / the end of earth as it had been” (29-30). The birth of Christendom brings on centuries of violence done to the earth and its inhabitants. This supports a reading in which Judeo-Christian ideology is seen as having alienated humans from nature (cf. Wilner 2000, pp. 235-236). For Wilner, mankind, and specifically those of Semitic faiths, foster a false belief, supported by the Book of Genesis, that they are supposed to master the natural world, when in fact, they abuse and oppress it.

Since the formlessness presented in “RBB” is a result of nature taking over the earth as we know it by creating the wildest of wilderness (endless oceans), questions of the relationship between nature and form must be acknowledged in the analysis of formlessness. To analyse this relationship *wilderness* proves a useful term since it is arguably the formless version of nature as it defies rigid structures. As a concept, wilderness is the counterpart of place; it is othered from human constructions of place and thus defined by what it is not (through a poetics of negativity), i.e. by its borders against something known, tangible and approachable. Wilderness is traditionally seen as violent and it is in its nature unwelcoming from an anthropocentric perspective. Some of the oldest surviving works of writing, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, depict threatening aspects of wilderness. In the book of Genesis, being banished from the Garden of Eden forces humankind to go into exile in the wilderness. Other Bible stories characterise wilderness as a place of danger and trial, as well as a place of freedom, purity and redemption. These meanings are to some degree ascribed to wilderness still today (Garrard 61). For Garrard, wilderness is almost sacred, it is a promise of a “renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth, a post-Christian covenant, found in a space of purity, founded in an attitude of reverence and humility” (59). This brings to mind the concept of the *sublime* presented by Edmund Burke in 1757, which is a notion that describes the awe-inspiring quality of nature where beauty meets terror. The sublime, however, is much more concerned with the (civilized) human’s visual perspective on nature, seemingly upholding the traditional Christian dichotomy of man vs nature. Contemporary ecocriticism, on the other hand, regards humans as a part of nature, rather than superior to it or set apart from it. Following an ecocritical interpretation, Wilner’s wilderness embodies a post-Christian, post-religious, post-human world in its “purest”, awe-inspiring state.

Much of the imagery in “RBB” is rooted in Western religion or mythology. Gradually throughout the poem, these materialisations of culture become permeated by vines and populated by wild animals. The poem opens with

All around the altar, huge lianas
curled, unfurled the dark green
of their leaves to complement the red
of blood spilled there – a kind of Christmas
decoration (1-5)

There is immediately a sense of abandonment, that this is a place that has been left to overgrow with shrubbery without human interference, although there are still clear signs of culture: an altar and an allusion to Christmas decorations. During the first day, the angels arrive, “messengers like birds / but with the oiled flesh of men” (7-8), as a foreboding sign that the end of human time and the beginning of natural time is near. Later, these angels “who had seemed so solid, turned / quicksilver in the rain” (59-60), which illustrates that there is no God to save them; no human deity has a place in this new world. Furthermore, the materiality of the angels, and with it, their form, disintegrates into quicksilver that is washed out with the rain. Through this concretisation of religious imagery into bodies, and their subsequent break-down, both the form and content of religion and culture vanish.

Water is an elemental, encompassing force, slowly rising throughout the poem with a rhythm and assonance that echoes the motion of waves crashing onto the shore: “the polar caps were melting, the water was / advancing in its slow, relentless / lines, swallowing the old / landmarks, swelling the / seas” (32-36). The end of the Earth as we

know it begins with rain and with glaciers melting – not unlike the current real-world situation due to global warming – and soon “The Nile / merges with the sea” (45-46). The final drowning of the earth happens swiftly and unremarkably:

When the waves closed over, completing the green
sweep of ocean, there was no time for mourning.
No final trump, no thunder to announce
the silent steal of waters; how soundlessly
it all went under: the little family
and the scene so easily mistaken
for an adoration. (51-57)

Imagining the end of the human world as soundless is arresting. There is a tendency for humans to resist, to instinctively fight for survival. To envision a quiet close is characteristically *unhuman*, as we make so much noise as a species. We believe ourselves to be so important and vital to the Earth, that to think that our demise would not be accompanied by some great recognition from nature is humbling. However, humans have only inhabited the earth for a fraction of its existence, so it is not particularly difficult to imagine a world without humans. Perhaps, by removing the human element altogether, it becomes easier to engage in Harman’s object-oriented ontology; if there simply is no human perspective to take into account, we could, after several centuries, move away from Kant’s ideas of subjective perception.

By the end of “RBB”, there is nothing left to make sense of or identify. The seas rise until everything is absorbed into formlessness:

*And the earth
was without form and void, and darkness
was upon the face of the deep. And
the Spirit moved upon the face of the waters. (83-86)*

While Wilner ends the poem by quoting *The Bible*, Gen. 1.2, she omits the genitive marker “of God” when describing the Spirit. Wilner’s Spirit is a divine presence unlike God, the Holy Ghost or any other well-known religious image, rather, it is something “prehuman and prehistorical” (Harrison 9). This suggests that Wilner sees nature itself as having a spiritual essence and that this Spirit is as entitled to rule the Earth as humans are, if not more so. This point of view is reminiscent of the Gaia theory, which is favoured by deep ecologists and ecofeminists. Gaia is the female-coded Earth seen as a dynamic biosphere which regulates itself and strives to keep a balance of energy similar to that of a living organism, and should be seen as a process rather than a static object (Garrard 173-174). According to the Gaia theory, the Earth has a will of her own, i.e. is an actant. If human history and culture is a violation of nature, as Wilner presents it here, extinguishing the source of violation is accomplishing the planet’s elemental will (Harrison 9). It should be noted that Wilner does not explicitly gender the Earth, but allows nature to exist as is, without human constructions of gender interfering.

For Wilner, the real tragedy, the true original sin, is mankind’s neglect and abuse of nature. The universal flood she describes “‘reverses the spell’ of human history’s disasters and tragedies” (Harrison 8) by erasing all traces of it. However, nature is not vengeful, since it has no morality and no mission except to keep on living. The rising seas are not plotting to erase history, they just do. Harrison observes that, for Wilner, the sin of Adam is “against nature, not God, [and] hence the guilt of history is neither punishable

not atonable. It is only oblivionable through the miracle of the rain” (9). The oblivion Harrison speaks of and Wilner presents is not the religious notion of absolution (as there can be no forgiveness nor salvation), but an absolution that loosens the grip and guilt of history and mankind’s impact on nature.

In “Reading the Bible Backwards” Wilner explores a shift from the Anthropocentric to the eco-centric, which is a prominent feature of deep ecology. This radical point of view is in opposition to most religious and philosophical theories in the West, and a crucial aspect of how Wilner subverts the importance of established religion and culture. An ecocritical analysis of “RBB” is timely and shows that Wilner rewrites the Christian creation story as a redemption of nature, achieved through all-encompassing wilderness. By writing an apocalyptic end to the world, Wilner creates a new beginning; by returning to the past she obviates mankind’s transgressions against nature. By the end, only the transcendent *Spirit* remains, and Wilner has effectively offered an absolution to nature that simultaneously loosens form into formlessness.

3.4 A historicist perspective

A historicist view is that while nature and culture differ in terms of strategies, they share an instinct to prepare for the unborn (Harrison ix). Nature does this in a strictly organic sense, while, for a historicist, culture is restricted to the human sphere, built on a sense of responsibility and the foundations laid by those who came before us. Harrison (ix-xi) argues that, unconsciously or consciously, we act according to the will of our ancestors and that relating to the dead by the act of burial is essential to being human. Historicists also argue that another way culture and nature differ from each other is that humans grieve, whereas nature does not; it simply continues its existence when faced with loss. However, this ignores the fact that many animals display grieving tendencies (cf.

Alderton 2011; King 2013a, 2013b). Historicism argues that the very origin of culture is burial, as a grave marks a site of meaning, roots you to a place and serves as a foundation for future generations. Burial in a broader sense involves storing and preserving the past for future generations to reclaim and rediscover. Harrison (x) calls this the *humic foundations* of the world, i.e. the ideologies, languages and legacies of the dead. Since Wilner writes about grand themes such as mythology and anthropology and favours a communal approach to poetry rather than a personal or confessional one, her poetry can be said to reflect the humic foundations of the world.

Wilner's fondness for cultural memory rather than personal – or in her own words, a *transpersonal* style of poetry (2000, p. 227) – is rooted in her interest in uncovering the silenced voices of the past and scrutinising systematic violence (“Eleanor Wilner”). A recurring theme in Wilner's poetry is the notion of revisiting the past in an attempt to atone for committed atrocities. In her essay “Playing the Changes”, Wilner states that “as we change the past, so are we changed” (Wilner 2000, p. 226). This refers not only to a work of art shaping the view on previous and forthcoming works in the same genre, as T.S. Eliot famously gathered in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, but also to the dialectic exchange between the artist (or human) and the past (Wilner 2000, p. 226). Wilner's assessment of the epic poem *Metamorphoses* by Ovid is timely in its view of nature as a process rather than a static environment, which could similarly be said about her own writing in “Reading the Bible Backwards”. Wilner's passion for a change and transformation of the past is evident in “RBB” through her reimagination of a Creation that reverses the harm done to the earth by humans. Furthermore, “RBB” is included in Wilner's 1998 poetry collection *Reversing the Spell*, accurately summing up her body of work in one book title.

Harrison (3) contends that places (as opposed to wilderness) are always shaped by humans, most visibly so through architecture. Similarly, Focillon (50) argues that architecture is the most structured form of art and thus the best example of form as it exists within its context. Without architecture, there would be no dwellings (except for natural caves and crevices), no cities, no infrastructure and no marks of human time. Architecture “transforms geological time into human time, [...] it turns matter into meaning” (Harrison 3). Because, from a historicist point of view, architecture gives meaning to the material, seeing it disintegrate into ruins can be a startling experience. Ruins represent “the dissolution of meaning into matter” (Harrison 3) and remind us of the temporary nature of human beings. In “RBB”, Wilner deconstructs all architectural structures and lets them decay into literal ruins. Matter is allowed to exist on its own terms without the added burden of human interpretation of meaning. Following a historicist interpretation of culture being built on burial anchoring human beings to a place, the sea denies the opportunity for culture to take form as it is not possible to mark a gravesite at sea. The sea is thus a force that resists the very foundations of human culture. However, it is not immune to human interference in the form of pollution and overfishing, and thus its balance can be disrupted. Wilner’s poem undoes not only the Creation story told in the Bible, but also millennia of pollution and tragedy that has been inflicted on nature by humans (Harrison 8).

Significantly, water is the last matter standing, having devoured everything else. It is a poetic irony that culture and the Anthropocene are eradicated by water, a substance which makes up two-thirds of human matter. There is currently intriguing scholarship being written on the embodiment of water, not least from Astrida Neimanis, who offers a posthuman feminist perspective in her book *Bodies of Water* (2016). However, for scope purposes, I refrain from diverging too far from the sea as wilderness analogy. The sea

perfectly embodies wilderness. According to Harrison (11-12), the imagery of the sea is that of a cruel, irresponsible and unpredictable element that is hostile to memory and passionate of erasure. The sea is often regarded as treacherous as it can quickly transition from calm to calamitous. Joseph Conrad wrote several works that revolve around the sea as his seamanship gave him great insight into the matter, and came to the conclusion that “the sea is unearthly” (Harrison 11). The term *unearthly* suggests that the sea is unlike anything graspable or mouldable like the earth, dirt and soil is, which accentuates the formlessness of Wilner’s imagined ending to the Creation. While the soil of the earth may sympathise with human virtue and reward labour, the sea is non-respondent to the wishes and memories of humankind (Harrison 11-12). The sea thus displays an element of agency which is unphased by human interference. In other words, the sea is an actant, acting on its own accord.

From a historicist perspective, to be human is to translate mortality into history. In “RBB”, Wilner is subverting our view of mortality, religion, humanity and who culture belongs to, and of the concept of form itself. She erases history – and consequently the mortality and temporality of humans – by having the sea, which defies all traces of burial, envelop the world. She deconstructs religious institutions through breaking down architectural constructs, returning human time to geological time and shifting that which once carried human meaning into mere matter. Seeking meaning is the entire point of religion and Wilner brushes this aside. The end, or rather, the new beginning of the earth possesses no meaning for humans. Furthermore, the heroes of the story are not the peripheral human characters, but the creatures of the land and the sea: cockroaches, leopards and condors become kings, sea creatures are allowed to roam free and whales are the new bearers of culture as they “sing some mighty epic of their own” (67). One might question Wilner’s decision to anthropomorphise the whales, as she eradicates all

other traces of humanity and culture in this poem. In response, Harrison (9) argues that the only way we can fully experience the ecstasy of the whales being free of human oppression is by humanising them. Harrison thus follows a Kantian view on human subjectivity, as opposed to Harman's object-oriented reality, where we as humans can regard objects outside of the human experience; as they exist in their concrete forms.

Lastly, the world is absolved (in its original meaning of something being loosened) into absolute formlessness, as no one can define the elemental Spirit that remains. Wilner's Spirit can be interpreted as dead matter so entwined in nature that it is impossible to separate its form from matter:

the earth has reabsorbed the dead into its elements for so many millions upon millions of years, who can any longer tell the difference between receptacle and contents? Take away the millennial residues that consecrate them, human or otherwise, and our waters, forests, deserts, mountains, and clouds would lose the spirit that moves in and across their visible natures. (Harrison 1-2)

This excerpt from *The Dominion of the Dead* demonstrates that nature cannot exist without the cycle of life feeding itself. The living need the dead to thrive. Here Harrison talks about nature interweaving the dead with the living to a point where they are indistinguishable from each other. The form is inseparable from its matter, and since the matter of the Spirit is transcendent, so the form dissolves into formlessness.

From a historicist point of view, Wilner undoes the humic foundations of the world by drowning the earth in wilderness, i.e. endless oceans. The world is now placeless, as there is no counterpoint to wilderness; no geographical anchoring for humans through architecture or burial sites. Wilner deconstructs architecture, cultural

institutions and established religions into mere matter without meaning. She effectively deconstructs structure in favour of formlessness. Wilner loosens the form of all known things, and uproots all traces of humanity. The world is now formless, as there is nothing left to give it form.

3.5 A narratological perspective

Shifting the focus to a linguistic level, this section analyses “Reading the Bible Backwards” from a narratological point of view, specifically concerning the transgressive elements of the poem. “RBB” exemplifies formlessness, not only in its diluvian subject matter but also in its transgressive narratological form and its subversion of the Christian creation story. This, and the following section, are both examples of literary pragmatics; of applying concepts from linguistics to literary analysis.

What, then, is transgression? The dictionary definition reads that transgression is “passing beyond the bounds of legality or right; a violation of law, duty, or command; disobedience, trespass, sin” (“transgression”). In other words, transgression is something that crosses a boundary or takes a thing beyond its limit. By choosing such loaded terms, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines transgression as a negative practice; it means taking a thing too far. Michel Foucault (35) disagrees on transgression being an inherently negative concept, to him it simply confirms the limits of a thing. Foucault (34) argues that transgression exists entirely on the boundary that it crosses, and that it loses its effect if there is no limit to cross. If a thing is transgressive, it breaks the mould; it simultaneously delineates form and crosses into formlessness.

On a narratological level, the most transgressive element of “RBB” is its overall retrogressive temporality. To study this, the theory of the *unnatural narrative* proves a useful tool. However, before defining the “unnatural” narrative, a definition of its

antithesis, the “natural” narrative, must be given. According to Labov and Waletzky, the basic framework of a narrative consists of a sequence of temporally ordered clauses, which they refer to as *temporal juncture* (20). They specify that temporal juncture applies to independent clauses referring to events in the order of them happening, whereas subordinate clauses can be situated anywhere in the narrative sequence without disturbing the initial semantic interpretation. Elaborating further, Labov and Waletzky (20-21) introduce the term *narrative clauses*, to mean those which rely on temporal juncture to maintain their semantic understanding of the temporal sequence. Narrative clauses do not have to follow each other immediately in a text, but they do need to have a linear through-line for the reader or interlocutor to have a clear understanding of the sequence of events.

To contrast, according to Jan Alber (2013), the unnatural narrative defies physical laws and accepted dimensions of logical reality, creating spaces and scenarios that could not exist in the concrete world as we know it. “RBB” is an example of such a space and scenario: whales are not going to swim among mountain tops as the new lords of the earth anytime soon. Referring to the unnatural may elicit negative connotations, but I follow Alber and Heinze’s (2) stance against the unnatural being a notion of perverseness or deviance. “RBB” is an unnatural narrative due to its partly retrogressive temporality and due to it going against the notion of empirical time. Empirical time is time as it is perceived in science and experientially, i.e. the experience of linear time and time as divided into categories, e.g. weeks, days, hours, minutes etc. (Fludernik 119). There are of course those who dissent from this view of time. For Latour, time is not linear, rather it is made of “spirals and reversals” (Harman 2009, p. 68). Focillon’s view of history and time is similarly multiplex, as discussed in section 2.6.

Perhaps the best way to describe empirical time is through describing its transgression: one example of a narrative with retrogressive temporality is *Time’s Arrow*

(1991) by Martin Amis, in which time moves backwards and thus disrupts our empirical knowledge of the flow of time (Alber and Heinze 5). Another example is Christopher Nolan's feature film *Memento* (2000) in which a man, suffering from short-term memory loss, is trying to piece together what happened to him and his wife in a temporally two-folded narrative, where one part of the story moves backwards through time and the second moves forward. The very same structure is found in "RBB". The unnatural narrative is identified through whether it could exist or not in the real world. Alber (2013) specifies that a narrative is "never wholly unnatural", but most often contains recognisable or natural elements. "RBB" is certainly an example of this as it slowly deconstructs familiar imagery and nature.

Other ways in which a narrative can be unnatural include anomalies in terms of space, temporality, characters and narrators. Science fiction conjuring images of the never before seen and the non-existent, serves as an example of a whole genre of unnatural narratives. As anthropomorphising animals is a familiar literary trope, this particular aspect of the poem does not qualify as part of its unnaturalness (cf. Alber 2013). Alber and Heinze (2-5) offer a summary of definitions of the unnatural narrative as presented by prominent scholars in the field. Among other things, it can refer to either experimental, extreme or transgressive narratives that have a defamiliarizing effect, or anti-mimetic texts, i.e. "unrealistic" texts that are not representational of real-life speech patterns and which break Labovian narrative rules. These rules are the five basic structures that frame a narrative: orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda (Labov and Waletzky 27-37).

Tense has been at the forefront of narratological studies for decades. Charles Bally's and Günther Müller's theoretical approaches distinguishes between a story level and discourse level when analysing temporality (Fludernik 117-118). The story level

refers to the surface-level linguistic sequence of events, which are usually chronologically ordered. This is the level at which the close reading strategies of mainstream literary studies takes place. Applied to “RBB”, this ties into the sequential temporality of the multiple biblical narratives and the overarching theme of the uprising of nature. The discourse level is the sequence of words that make up the totality of the text, which allows for non-linear temporality (Fludernik 118). In the context of “RBB”, this refers to the relationship between stanzas and the poem’s unnatural temporality as a whole, i.e. telling the Christian creation story backwards. In the poem, two narratives play out simultaneously, intertwined (as matter and form are as well):

- (1) Synchronic snapshots of Bible stories progressing in backward order.
- (2) Diachronic narrative of nature, and specifically water, overtaking civilisation and planet earth.

These two narrative through lines are marked by tense: (1) past tense and (2) present tense, e.g. (1) “The child was bright in his basket” (12) and (2) “The dolphins sport in the rising sea” (38). Within narratology, the functions and effects of tense have been studied in-depth and found to be related to duration, chronology, sequentiality, foregrounding, backgrounding and the expression of subjectivity (Fludernik 117). In the case of “RBB”, tense is of particular importance for chronological and sequential ordering. The use of tense locates the reader in the shift between two parallel temporalities moving in different directions, allowing for synchronic glimpses of forward-moving time. Past tense is used to paint well-known biblical scenarios as temporally sequenced narratives within a grander retrogressive narrative as these biblical allusions occur in backwards order.

There is a shift in tense from past to present when the first sea-dwelling creatures, the dolphins, are introduced. This suggests that the protagonists of this story are the animals of the sea, who not only survive the longest but thrive in this apocalyptic scenario. These dolphins are enjoying themselves in their growing territory. Likewise, in the fifth stanza, whales are compared to angels, which are traditionally human-shaped; they are described as the new sacred figures of the deep: “the whales, heavy-bodied as the angels, / their fins like vestiges of wings, / sing some mighty epic of their own—” (64-66). The em dash serves as a link between the fifth and sixth stanza, which details the aforementioned epic imagined and sung by the whales. Here, whales are given the chance to create their own history and, subsequently, culture, something which is generally reserved for and seen as unique for the human species. The final stanza is, in fact, a reimagining of creation from the whales’ point of view.

The second shift into present tense occurs midway through the fifth stanza with the arresting temporal marker “Now”. This shift is further marked by a deep indentation, almost setting it apart as a separate stanza. After this point, there is only nature, wilderness and the sea with its giant sea creatures left, i.e. all humans and markers of culture are eradicated. This is further supported by the use of the modal “would” throughout the poem’s last stanza:

a great day when the ships would all withdraw,
the harpoons fail of their aim, the land
dissolve into the waters, and they would swim
among the peaks of mountains, like eagles
of the deep, while far below them, the old
nightmares of earth would settle

into silt among the broken cities, the empty
basket of the child would float (68-75)

“Would” is a preterite modal auxiliary that refers to an uncertain or possible future, i.e. a remote conditional construction. Modality is generally considered a marker of mood, which influences the semantic interpretation (Huddleston and Pullum 53). Here, “would” is used as a prediction, as there are no humans – and thus no human perspective – left to witness the final ascension into formlessness. In other words, since no humans survive past the point of submersion, the definite perspective of the human reader is extinguished. Nature does not mourn the demise of humanity, nor play according to the rules of fairness before eradicating humans. All that is left are natural elements, which are anthropomorphised in our stead, e.g. “the wind / moves on the rain-pocked face / of the swollen waters” (61-63). By subverting expectations of the human reaction to the apocalypse, i.e. “how soundlessly / it all went under” (54-55), “RBB” can be interpreted as breaking the mould, or the form of apocalyptic narratives.

A narratological approach to “Reading the Bible Backwards” shows the poem to be an example of an unnatural narrative due to its retrogressive temporality and its apocalyptic and subversive subject matter. By breaking traditional narrative structure, “RBB” is an example of linguistic formlessness.

3.6 A deictic perspective

Continuing with literary pragmatics, spatial deixis is a useful tool for analysing the positioning of the poem within or without a human perspective, and within or without a form. Deixis tangibly points to the relationships between the semantic components within the text (micro-level) as well as the relationship between the text and its reader (macro-

level). Recalling Levinson's (2004, p. 97) idea of the "big black fly in the ointment", deixis involves the extra-linguistic world, making it suitable for literary pragmatics. A deictic analysis is fittingly concrete, as it connects language to physical practices (Finch 50). Spatial deixis furthermore situates "Reading the Bible Backwards" on a formal level, and by doing so the absence of form can be explored.

Spatial deixis anchors the text in a context of place. This can be done by either content words or grammatical structures (e.g. *above, into, from, down*) which orient the reader in a specific spatial environment. Every stanza of "RBB" offers examples of this on the micro-level. The first two stanzas set the scene from an outside perspective by using *there* and then switching to an inside point of view by using the verb *to come*, which places the reader at the deictic centre, or origo:

(1) blood spilled there (4) [---] When the angels came (7)

(2) The three / who gathered there (21-22) [---] had not / come to adore (26-27)

Furthermore, spatial deixis paints the picture of an entangled environment with lianas curling around an altar which is "overhung with heavy vines" (5). The angels also hang "over the scene [beating] their rain-soaked wings against the turning sky" (9-11). The reader is thus in the midst of the action, with a sense of weight and impending doom hanging right over them. The second stanza contains similar content words that loom overhead, e.g. the word "above" and imagery of falling and dripping raindrops as big and heavy as pears, before shifting into a magnetic scene to which the animal equivalent of the biblical Magi are drawn alongside the reader.

The following two stanzas depict non-biblical scenes and situate the reader geographically:

(3) Somewhere north of this familiar scene / the polar caps were melting, (31-32)

(4) On the desert's edge where the oasis dies (42) [---] At the forest's/edge, (47-48)

In example (3), the referent is still the previous scene of the birth of Jesus Christ. Example (4) places the reader in nature's domain. Throughout the poem, biblical scenarios are consistently referred to in the past tense, while the reference to the swelling of the seas moves from the past to the present tense. This distinction between tenses places the biblical stories in the literal past as antiquated notions and situates organic matter as the currently active agent, echoing the vital materiality of Bennett and Latour's actant theory. While the poem in its form moves backwards through time, it has a temporally linear through-line marking the literal uprising of nature.

The act of water "rising up" is another example of spatial deixis, suggesting the point of view of a drowning humanity left below the rising seas. In the third stanza, the melted water from the polar caps is starting to "advance", i.e. menacingly move closer to the reader. The waters "pull down" everything in its path, while the sea itself is "rising". This push and pull motion visible through spatial deixis is present throughout the poem and replicates the sensation of waves, or perhaps more radically, of being caught in a riptide and dragged out to sea as the final stanzas escalate the flooding of the earth.

In the final flood, the world "goes under", which as a phrase has negative connotations. Compare this to the phrase "how soundlessly it all came over us". Here, the reader is at the deictic centre, but the phrase itself is less threatening. Instead, it can be read as either reverence or apathy. The reader is placed in the centre of the action: "Above, more clouds poured in / and closed their ranks across the skies;" (57-58). Here, the preposition "in" situates the reader beneath the sky but above the surface of the rising seas. Some of the last elements of spatial deixis are glimpses into the deep as seen from this perspective, namely "far below" (63) and "far below them" (72). The latter of these

situate the anthropomorphised whales at the origo, suggesting that the human perspective has been eliminated in the deluge of the previous stanza. “RBB” thus shifts from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric point of view. However, through anthropomorphising the whales and giving them a chance to create their own epic, and consequently their own history, imagination and culture, “RBB” keeps an anthropocentric point of view at its core.

On a macro, or extra-linguistic level, the deixis of the whole text refers to a tradition or a place. Therefore it is important to study the context of the text. In the case of Eleanor Wilner, this is postmodern poetry, following a tradition of Talmudic prophets and ancient Chinese philosophers (Wilner 1998, back cover). Wilner’s writing displays several traits of postmodernity, such as intertextuality, deconstruction and bricolage. The “big black fly” of spatial deixis (Levinson 2004, p. 97) also raises the question of why this particular poem is relevant; why this text has survived and is being discussed thirty years after it was first published. While there is no objective answer to this question, I believe Wilner’s work stands the test of time since it deals with classical themes in a subversive yet elegant way. While Wilner has been awarded several honours and literary prizes, the latest being the Robert Frost Medal (2019), her work has remained rather anonymous to the general public and overlooked in academia. It is my personal opinion that her work is underrated (perhaps as a result of distancing itself from the individual and in the process losing relatability), which is one reason I chose to build my thesis around her poem.

As previously discussed, “Reading the Bible Backwards” is timely both in terms of its apocalyptic narrative which reverses the tragedies that mankind has done to the earth and in its radical imagination. In *Gathering the Winds*, Wilner explores the radical nature of visionary imagination, a trait which is evident in her poetry. Wilner (1975, p.

171) refers to Frank Kermode's use of the medieval term *aevum* to argue that the apocalypse can only occur in a temporality that is simultaneously eternal and lasts only a moment; in a moment that exists in between earthly temporality and divine eternity; in the timeless moment that is still merely a moment in time. In "RBB", the final spirit exists in this transcendental space and time, this *aevum*. Here I would like to draw a parallel between Wilner's poetic imagination and Leighton's "physics of imagination" (148). "RBB" culminates in the paradox of a ghostly Spirit being brought to life; of form being simultaneously concretised and absolved. This final vision is a curious mix of the imagination of poetry, the elusiveness of transcendence and a concretisation through physics and language.

Through reading *Gathering the Winds*, it becomes clear that Wilner has such a deep familiarity with the apocalyptic tradition that it becomes part of her writing in "RBB". The extra-linguistic deixis or, in simpler terms, the context of "RBB" carries with it the weight of the apocalyptic tradition. In *Gathering the Winds* (172), Wilner explains the process by which an apocalyptic vision breaks down form into formlessness to be reborn as a new social order. The very same narrative is exemplified in "RBB", where the oppressive human domain is eradicated in favour of the whales who are the new carriers of culture, at least for a brief moment. Wilner furthermore states that all "genuine apocalyptic myth unites spirit and matter" (1975, p. 171), which supports a vital materialist reading of "RBB" that does not separate between form and matter. Moving away from Wilner's more straightforwardly Marxist reading of apocalyptic vision as a collective critical movement by humans, a vital materialist reading includes actants and vibrant matter in this collectivism.

This section has shown that analysing "Reading the Bible Backwards" with the help of the literary pragmatic tool of spatial deixis exemplifies a gradual loss of form and

structure. By applying the macro perspective of spatial deixis, the poem is situated in a larger context of the apocalyptic tradition through its extra-linguistic references.

3.7 A vital materialist perspective

This section presents a vital materialist analysis of “Reading the Bible Backwards” following in the footsteps of Latour and Bennett, whose theoretical perspectives are given more weight than any of the other approaches to the source material. Reading Wilner’s poem from a concrete point of view and following the tradition of vital materiality reveals many different actants affecting their environment. Such a reading is significant because it shows the gradual dismantling of form brought on by these actants. Thus far, my cultural analysis has presented the modernist dichotomy of human or culture contra nature through an ecocritical and a historicist reading of “RBB”. This is a notion which both Latour and Bennett question, as it ignores the agency of nonhuman material and the intersections of these two modernist dichotomies. This section shows that, in “RBB”, Wilner loosens the traditional dichotomy between matter and form in favour of a vital materiality.

Taking a concrete approach to a poem inevitably means looking at its language. Language is a form which is infinitely adaptable; simultaneously lyrical yet grounded in grammar, sound and orthography. Wilner’s language can be likened to that of W.B. Yeats, of whom Leighton observes the following: “for him, similes and metaphors are less figures of speech than figures of literally acted desire. Comparisons are not drawn, they happen; likenesses are not descriptions, but events.” (Leighton 148). Likewise, similes and metaphors in “RBB” are not simply comparisons: the first raindrops *become* tiny falling silver pears, the anemones waving their tentacles *become* the “hair / on a drowned gorgon’s head” (39-40), the rising water *becomes* the hand “reaching for the curtain” (49).

All the material subjects in the poem have agency and act accordingly. The wind has prophetic abilities, the sphinx shifts on her legs, angels hover in the air and the mother sings to her child, whose wet clothes swaddle him. Although the poem mostly depicts the vibrancy of organic material, inorganic material such as harpoons play a part as well when they “fail of their aim” (69). Wilner combines the materiality of writing with the imagination of apocalypse; she reimagines a story that already exists in the consciousness of billions of people and puts it to paper. In the next chapter, the affordances of the medium of poetry will be further explored and contrasted to the audio-visual medium of film.

The first stanza is anchored around an architectural and religious object: the altar. An altar is an actant as it impacts the space around it by creating a centre for worship. This particular altar is in turn impacted by other actants, i.e. massive lianas curling and unfurling around it. Even the colour of the lianas is ascribed agency as the “dark green / of their leaves [...] complement the red / of blood spilled there—a kind of Christmas / decoration” (1-4). The blood and the vines transform into a new actant: a Christmas-like ornament. Even passive gestures such as blood being spilt can be read as an act of agency as it is an action. This can be confusing: is any action – passive or active – the act of an actant? For Latour, the answer is yes, as everything is an actant. Does a passive act then have the same agency as an active act? Based on the common definition of agency as the capability to act or exert power, no.

However, if we follow Bennett’s inclination to move away from the human-centred view of agency in favour of a “human-nonhuman assemblage” (28) à la Deleuze and Guattari, agency can also be prescribed to the actants within a passive event. Bennett thus proposes a new view of agency being related to “a doing” rather than “a doer” (28). This would mean that questions of moral responsibility and blame become more

complicated, as the terms of agent and deed are loosened and beget a certain slipperiness. This looseness and slipperiness can, in turn, be contrasted to its counterpart, stickiness. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed (2004a, p. 4) explores the notion of stickiness, especially how emotions “stick” to bodies and how stickiness pertains to certain objects and signs as opposed to others. In Latour’s terms, we do not find out what caused the spillage of blood, which translations of the blood’s alliances led to it being spilt. As this is not a thesis about free will, any ruminations on whether it was the will of the blood all along to escape its vessel or whether the slaughter of a lamb only facilitated this escape are irrelevant. As actants act, they do not do so out of malice or vengeance, but simply because it is in their nature (cf. Aristotle’s *teleology*). It is the human reader and Wilner’s hand who imprint meaning into her poem.

The second stanza, or the second day, sees the coming of Jesus Christ: “The child was bright in his basket” (12). On this day, the first drops of rain start to fall “like tiny silver pears” (20). The birth of Jesus Christ is a world-altering event in Christian belief. Here, it is also world-altering, not because the Messiah will bring peace, but because he is the one “whom the wind had said would spell / the end of earth as it had been” (29-30). Jesus Christ is the tipping point for humanity: when he is born the “first big drops of rain” (19) begin to fall. Not only does Wilner subvert the Saviour persona in a few simple lines, she also gives the wind a prophetic role. Returning to the extract above, the fact that Wilner calls Jesus Christ a “recurrent, awkward son” (28) is intriguingly bold. Again, she is subverting the uniqueness of the Christian saviour, by suggesting that this Messianic figure reappears throughout history. The expression “awkward” originally meant something going in the wrong direction, but is today mostly associated with being embarrassing, inconvenient or difficult to deal with (“awkward”).

The mother's only act is to bend over and sing to her child. Curiously, the language in which she sings is given more space and more potency than the human subject. It is a "liquid tongue" (16) invented to calm babies with the syllables themselves becoming actants that drip and mix with rain. According to Harman (2009, p. 24), Latour criticises the prominence given to language in the philosophical legacy of Kant and Wittgenstein, instead insisting that language is simply another actant among actants. However, considering the literary pragmatic approach presented in this thesis, the importance of language and linguistics when it comes to literary and cultural studies cannot be ignored.

Apart from the child and its mother, the only human-like figures in this poem are the angels:

When the angels came, messengers like birds
but with the oiled flesh of men, they hung
over the scene with smoldering swords,
splashing the world when they beat
their rain-soaked wings against the turning sky. (7-11)

The angels carry out several different actions: they move, bring a message and hover over the altar as they beat their wings. The swords they hold are also actants as they smolder and splash the world. The sky itself is an actant as it turns and spills out rain. Later, these angels "who had seemed so solid, turned / quicksilver in the rain" (59-60). The form of the angel is thus dissolved. Likewise, the basket holding the child is an actant which floats, is abandoned and "unraveled [...] in filaments of straw, / till even that straw rotted" (77-78). Another form is completely dissolved into formlessness. Additional humanly

constructed actants include the sphinx, who anxiously “seems to shift / on her haunches of stone” (43-44), ships that withdraw from the ocean and harpoons that no longer pierce whales. Other notable actants are sand, which washes away the oasis and expands the desert, clouds that are figuratively militarised as they “closed their ranks across the skies” (58), and the wind which predicts the apocalypse and is the last thing left above “the rain-pocked face / of the swollen waters” (62-63).

“RBB” features many more animals than it does humans, which can be interpreted as an anti-modernist critique of the human superiority fed by Judeo-Christian ideology and a yearning to reconnect with nature. In “Playing the Changes”, Wilner examines the loss of the creature in our postmodern, technological age, which is evident in how plenty of contemporary poetry and fiction depicts a turn to “an animal condition” (2000, p. 236) positively. Wilner herself does this through reimagining the Three Wise Men as lords of the animal kingdom:

The three
who gathered there—old kings uncrowned:
the cockroach, condor and the leopard, lords
of the cracks below the ground, the mountain
pass and the grass-grown plain—were not
adorned, did not bear gifts, had not
come to adore; they were simply drawn
to gawk at this recurrent, awkward son
whom the wind had said would spell
the end of earth as it had been (21-30)

These animals are remarkable species that have adapted to the difficult circumstances they live in. One might not think of a cockroach as a king, but it is undeniable that cockroaches possess an extraordinary quality to survive and thrive in extreme conditions, much more so than fragile humans do. These animals are lords of their dominions in nature without much competition. They have been uncrowned by humans, discredited and disregarded for the tenacious beings they are. The cockroach, condor and leopard do not need to adorn themselves nor bring gifts to the child who marks the beginning of the end of the Earth as it is known. The poetics of negativity outlined earlier posits that negative action still suggests positive action at its core. The cockroach, condor and leopard are actants who rule their respective domains of ground, plains and air. They have no expectations of greatness from the baby, nevertheless they are drawn to the site.

The cracks in the earth, the mountain pass and the grassy plains are actants and vibrant matter in their own right. All of these environments are perpetually in motion so infinitesimally small that it is unnoticeable and in constant interaction with their surrounding alliances. Cracks in the ground force material apart to create their own space, or if viewed from the counter perspective, the soil is the actant that contracts and creates vacuums. Cockroaches, insects, larvae and immeasurable amounts of microscopic creatures contribute to this process, and to creating soil itself. Mountains are formed through the collision of tectonic plates and are shaped by millions of years of erosion. Grassy plains are likewise shaped by what came before, the quality of the soil and its affordances, climate conditions and the animals it accommodates.

As the seas rise, these animal lords cannot survive. The leopard will be the first to vanish, as the grass-grown plains are flooded. In line with the subversive quality of the poem, the leopard is the animal that humankind values as the strongest of these. The cockroach might outlive humans, but cannot survive the deluge of the earth. The condor

will continue to hunt for as long as there are peaks, and after the peaks are submerged, it will fly until it is too tired and eventually it will drown. “RBB” offers a bleak prospect for most of the animal kingdom. However, it is not meant to imagine paradise or the garden of Eden untouched by sin; it goes even further, to the moment of creation itself.

The child, whose arrival the wind foretells, is yet another actant. He is recurring, awkward, draws kings to him and brings about the apocalypse. Following Latour’s theory, this child – the Christian messiah – is no more an actant than any other child, but he has stronger alliances which means he is more impactful. In the extra-linguistic world, billions of people know his story and he has shaped the course of history in vital ways. The birth of this child is the final straw that breaks the camel’s back and brings on the apocalypse in “RBB”. The child meets his doom as quietly as everything else: the last image of the child is of him sleeping at the edge of a forest. Later, only the empty, abandoned basket where he lied, resurfaces to show his absence. Not even the messiah survives the final flood.

Starting from the third stanza, the waters are slowly beginning to rise and swell from the melting of the polar caps and the falling rain. The sea is the most powerful actant in “RBB”; it is the epitome of vital materiality as it in its nature refuses to bend to anyone attempting to mould it. It manages to submerge everything from landmarks to organic life and “great steel cities” (37). It erases all recognisable features of the earth and dissolves the concrete; it drowns out all noise and disintegrates both matter and form. The sea is the hand drawing the final curtain: “the waters gather— / as if a hand were reaching for the curtain / to drop across the glowing, lit tableau” (48-50). There is, however, another group of actants who prosper in these conditions, namely sea-creatures. Dolphins sport and play, anemones wave their tentacles, “giant squid lie hidden in shy tangles” (64),

never to be detected and whales become the new angels and “eagles / of the deep” (71-72).

Through the deictic shift in perspective presented in the previous section, we notice that the final stanza is an imagined epic sung from the vantage point of the whales. According to a traditional literary critical take, the whales are the agents that present their radical vision of utopia where they are no longer hunted since “the ships would all withdraw, / the harpoons fail of their aim” (68-69) and where they can move uninterrupted as “the land [would]/ dissolve into the waters [...] they would swim / among the peaks of mountains” (69-71). But when Bennett’s argument is followed, the whales are less like agents and more like pieces of the assemblage, i.e. of the deed itself. The whales are actants that pray and shoot “their jets of water skyward / in the clear conviction they’d spill back / to ocean with their will accomplished / in the miracle of rain” (80-83), but they could not achieve this without their alliances, e.g. water and gravity. It is uncertain whether or not the water spills back to earth at all, given the linguistic modality of their conviction.

There are at least two possible interpretations of the ending of “RBB”:

And the earth

Was without form and void, and darkness

Was upon the face of the deep. And

The Spirit moved upon the face of the waters. (83-86)

The first is to take the word earth literally, meaning that there is no ground, no soil, no literal earth left; all that remains is endless oceans. If this is the case, the sea creatures are either unscathed, living happily underneath the surface with their utopian vision realised,

or they have vanished in an impenetrable deep darkness. Whatever Spirit is left moves on the surface of the water. The second, and perhaps more persuasive interpretation, is the complete dissolution of earth in its planetary sense. There is no form defined through either positive or negative polarity. The poem (re)imagines the moment of creation, and creation happens out of nothingness. Whether or not one believes in the Big Bang, the notion of creation of life or form requires a blank canvas, a nothingness into which something can be created. This is how Wilner is able to portray formlessness: by eradicating all traces of matter and form, of life and death; to imagine a place and time before there were such distinctions as place and time and form.

All that is left by the end is a spirit; a hollowed-out, ghostly form which has no concrete substance. Through eradicating matter, Wilner absolves form into formlessness. The fact that the Spirit moves “*upon the face of the waters*” (86) is not anthropomorphising per se, Wilner is simply quoting The Book of Genesis to invoke an intertextual understanding of the moment of creation, or in the context of this poem, the moment of oblivion.

This section maps out the many different actants of Eleanor Wilner’s “Reading the Bible Backwards”, ranging from historical and religious figures to mythic imagery and elemental forces. All of these actants consist of matter within a form, but are ultimately dissolved into formlessness, which loosens the bond between the old dualism of substance and form. The poem ends on a transcendent note of vibrant matter present in the final Spirit.

3.8 Assessing the analysis

The interdisciplinary analysis of “Reading the Bible Backwards” presented in chapter 3 offers a multitude of pathways into the apocalyptic poem. Each of the readings contribute

with a particular perspective on how Wilner achieves formlessness on a literary and imaginative level.

An eco-critical reading is timely in its apocalypticism and can be related to the real-world situation of 2020. By offering nature absolution, Wilner loosens the bonds between nature and humanity and, ultimately, between form and matter. Wilderness functions as a symbol of utter formlessness, and wilderness takes over in “RBB”. Taking this point further, a historicist perspective argues that the sea is the ultimate wilderness, i.e. formlessness. It also accentuates how Wilner breaks down civilization and with it, familiar structures and forms. These are both examples of cultural analyses that focus on a split between human culture and non-human nature.

As for the linguistic pragmatic readings, a narratological perspective shows that “RBB” breaks traditional narrative structure by being an *unnatural narrative*, and spatial deixis also illuminates the gradual break down of form on the linguistic micro-level. In addition, a macro spatial deictic reading situates “RBB” in the apocalyptic tradition.

Lastly, a vital materialist perspective illustrates that “RBB” is full of actants that gradually dismantle structure in favour of formlessness. Here, the culture vs. nature dichotomy is no longer relevant as all actants exist on an equal ontological footing. In terms of the presented theory, the vital materialist reading carries the most weight. It also supports a view on matter and form as inseparable: where form breaks down, matter is dissolved. This affects both the profane and the sacred, even “the angels, who had seemed so solid, turned / quicksilver in the rain” (59-60).

All of these readings combined illustrate how “RBB” offers a portrayal of formlessness on the imaginative, literary level. In the next chapter, I argue that due to the medium of poetry, formlessness can only be relative, never absolute.

4. The materiality of poetry

This chapter delves deeper into the materiality of poetry by comparing it to the medium of film. To do so, I discuss the different affordances and materialities of poetry and cinema, focusing on colour, sound, and scope. Film is the most multimodal of art and entertainment media, incorporating elements of writing, performance, sound, visuals, colour and many types of design. A comparison between film and poetry will come to show that poetry is much more limited, not only in its material and technical elements, but in its scope as well. The extra-linguistic world of poetry is not as connected through its alliances as mainstream cinema is.

While a comparison with a multimodal medium such as film may obscure any such achievements within poetry, there is, however, a long-standing tradition of multimodal poetry, perhaps best exemplified in the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages and William Blake's illuminated printing. These poems are significantly shaped by their multimodality; the illustration is as much a part of the story as the written text (Greenblatt et al. 113). Wilner's work, particularly "Reading the Bible Backwards", follows the tradition of Blake in that it is an example of a visionary (re)imagination of creation. Indeed, Wilner's scholarly work *Gathering the Winds* is built around the radical visionary imagination of Blake, Beddoes, Yeats and Marx. While Wilner's poems are not multimodal in technique – she is firmly a poet of the pen – thematically she draws from a multiplicity of traditions and intertextualities.

In comparison, the medium of film has concretely material origins in the form of celluloid strips that run through the camera, capturing the images. Today, to shoot digitally is more common and more affordable. Add to this the prevalence of computer-generated imagery (CGI), which is the result of an artist's imagination and does not exist in the concrete world except as binary code. Is a digital file then not material? Latour

would argue that it is, although it is not tangible per se. After all, a digital file is created; it occupies and moves through digital space. Questions of what constitutes as ontologically “valid”, real and concrete will surely be of major concern following the advancement of the technological era.

4.1 Colour

Kress and van Leeuwen (225-228) identify the use of colour as a semiotic mode of visual communication. They argue that in a multimodal age, colour is increasingly becoming a communicative mode in its own right, alongside speech, image, music and writing. Colour fulfils Halliday’s metafunctional theory of semiotics; it has an *ideational function*, i.e. it constructs representations of the world; an *interpersonal function*, meaning colour enacts interactions with and in social purposes and relations; and a *textual function*, that is, it creates larger wholes of communicative acts (Kress and van Leeuwen 228). Following this argument, colour can thus create specific relations between actants, represent social relations and aid social interaction as well as create cohesion in a text. Essentially, colour functions as an actant itself.

Not only does colour represent or express certain emotions, it is “used to act on others” (Kress and van Leeuwen 236), be it a managerial decision to use an energising colour in a work environment or a parent wanting to calm their child. Colour can be incorporated in virtually any form, as it is refracted light, colouring everything in the world. On a philosophical level, even the absence of colour is a kind of colour. Since colour can be adapted into any form, it works exceptionally well in times of multimodality, e.g. in combination with architecture, product design, document design and typography. Historically, colour – or perhaps more accurately pigment – has had a concrete quality, as it was collected and created from different material substances, some

rarer than others (Kress and van Leeuwen 226-227). In contemporary times, digital colour has become the norm in the film industry and it is standard practice to colour grade each film in post-production.

Traditionally, poetry is not regarded as a visual medium. When asked what a poem looks like, most of us would probably think of black words typed on white paper. It can, however, be argued that poetry – and by extension, all literature – treads on a visual verge considering the concretely visible words on the page and their ability to spark the reader's imagination and paint pictures of the mind. The first of these – the words on the page – fit into a concretely materialist reading. Furthermore, much poetry plays with the positioning of words, lines and stanzas to create a visual element to accompany the text. Given a materialist reading, a poem can only incorporate colour through a coloured font or background, and when doing so it is most often categorised as experimental. Following a concrete approach, the colour itself must be used to achieve its full impact; simply referring to it by name is not enough.

What complicates the analysis of the use of colour in poetry is how the poem invokes a mental image and stirs the imagination. Referring to a colour to set the scene or using colour as a metaphor is common practice in poetry, including in “Reading the Bible Backwards”, e.g. “the dark green / of their leaves to complement the red / of blood” (2-4). Compare this to a coloured version of the same phrase: “the dark green / of their leaves to complement the red / of blood”. In this case, the colour is redundant; it does not add anything but shock value. The original phrase is much more impactful, as it allows the reader to focus on the mental image rather than be distracted by the sudden change in font colour. Colour in poetry is not just straight-forward pigment-based material, but it creates meaning; it is a way to describe the world, real or imaginary. Taking this loosening

of the form of colour any further would lead into neuroscientific territory, and is thus beyond the scope of this thesis.

4.2 Sound

There is an entire field of research devoted to the study of sound in poetry and the poetry of sound. A sound has an initiator and a receiver, human or otherwise. Its conception is very much tied to material reality and physiology. However, if we attempt to loosen the form of sound, we can ask whether a melody or a voice in one's head is a sound or not. Again, this would move the analysis into neuroscience, which is not feasible for this thesis. Here, I choose instead to focus on sound as an actant, and on the material aspects of sound and its significance for storytelling in "Reading the Bible Backwards".

"Reading the Bible Backwards" is at first thought not accompanied by any sound at all. However, there are small, almost undetectable sounds that go into its reading, such as the scraping of paper when turning the page or the scrolling of the mouse if reading the poem from a computer screen. The sound of "RBB" is thus shaped by its technological and material affordances. Taking this interpretation further, the reading of the poem is inevitably tied to one's reading environment. One might hear the rustle of trees if reading outside, or the sound of traffic if in a city. Daily life becomes background noise, a canvas for the poem. In the context of "RBB", with its eradication of all life and form – and consequently all sound – one's reading may be positively impacted if, by the end, any background sounds have faded into obscurity and the silence of nothingness is all that is left. Likewise, the eradication of all life may be undercut if one's reading experience is interrupted by sirens or any other bothersome sound.

Other ways a poem can carry sound is by being read aloud, even if it is not intended as a performance. A poem is often words in a familiar grammar and language

which are shaped into a specific form, but sometimes the words are nonsensical, merely phonetic sounds which benefit from being read out loud. Indeed, much poetry is much better heard or spoken, as it brings out such things as rhythm and assonance that might otherwise go unexplored. There are, of course, entire genres and massively popular competitions of spoken word poetry, and the oral recitation of poetry is an older tradition than writing itself. While a poem in its written form can be widely distributed and politically impactful, so can poetry performances. This is particularly evident in movements for civil rights and subcultures; a famous example being the Beat generation.

4.3 Scope

Just as a film consists of an edited final product, so do most poems. In the past, there was a significant difference in the materials behind the presented work, but as technology becomes increasingly integral in the way we live our lives, these mediums move closer to each other. When filming on celluloid was the norm, most of the film would literally end up on the cutting room floor before being either discarded or neatly stored away in a film reel box. Today, “end up on the cutting room floor” is used as a metaphor for whatever doesn’t make it into the final cut. If a film is shot digitally, most of the data ends up either deleted or stored on a data backup somewhere. Likewise, a poem might be revised several times before deemed ready for publication or presentation. For the past few hundred years, these versions were usually handwritten on paper by the poet, calling to mind Focillon’s *identity of touch* (111) as a prerequisite for art. Furthermore, there being several iterations of one art piece highlights Focillon’s view of art forms as being in constant movement. Today, working on a poem may take its form in quickly or carefully scrawled notes on (scraps of) paper or tissue, a line or two typed into a phone while out on errands, a voice recording or deleted lines only visible in the action log of a

document. Sometimes, a poet's sketches and drafts are released, often posthumously, which gives an insight into their working process, e.g. Leonard Cohen's *The Flame* (2018). Likewise, there may be several edits of a movie released, theatrical versions and director's cuts being the most common. This proves that a work of art may go beyond the scope it initially intended, even within its medium, and that there is an interest in the process itself.

Creating and distributing a feature film is a collaborative process, while writing a poem is usually seen as the work of a single author, no matter its level of intertextuality and tradition. A mid-budget film involves hundreds of people, with many different authorities and department heads in charge of their separate specialties. While it is common practice to refer to the director of a film as the creator, this does not mean that the efforts of the rest of the team are less valuable. Particularly regarding the materiality of the work, the collective nature of a film production should be acknowledged.

While poetry and film share the multiplicity of creative techniques, literary and audio-visual practices differ substantially. Kress and van Leeuwen (217) distinguish between three types of audio-visual production technologies: (1) technologies of the hand, in which everything is shaped by the human hand holding a variety of tools, (2) technologies of the eye and ear, which function through recording images and sounds, and (3) synthesizing technologies, in which material is produced digitally to a greater or lesser extent. However, Kress and van Leeuwen (218) emphasize that the line between these categories is faint and not necessarily clear-cut. The first of these denotes the traditional visual arts of painting, etching, sculpture, architecture, etc. (cf. Focillon's *identity of touch*). The second category contains the recording technology popularised in the past two centuries or so, e.g. photography, audiotape and film. These recordings show a "more or less analogical representation" (Kress and van Leeuwen 217) of their content,

which has traditionally been seen as objective representation. There is a common conception that the camera does not lie, but over the past century, there has been a rising critical awareness of the fact that those who use the camera and its images might manipulate the truth, as they are constructing a subjective narrative. In an age of image manipulation and uncertainty of credible sources, this is more pertinent than ever.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (217) third category is likewise gaining importance as technological advancements are made. Recording technologies are being superseded by synthesizing technologies, not least in the growing popularity of computer-generated imagery in film. CGI, which is a subdivision of visual effects (VFX), is not only being used to create explosions or nonhuman characters such as monsters or five-hundred-year-old decrepit hobbits, but also to digitally enhance the imagery of "unspectacular" scenes or allow virtual camera movements. One illuminating example of this can be seen in a breakdown of David Fincher's use of VFX in his films (kaptainkristian).

The shift from using mainly analogue recording technologies to digitally manipulated images has philosophical consequences. Kress and van Leeuwen see this as a continuation of the "crisis of representation" (218) which has taken place in theoretical debate since the 1980s. The use of synthesizing technologies undermine the notions of referentiality established through recording technologies' "objective" representation of the world:

'Reference' has given way to 'signification', the production, out of existing semiotic resources, of new semiotic means, new signs, new texts, new images, new visions, new worlds. This does not mean that representation has ceased. Rather, the formerly naturalized relation, the identity of representation and reference, has broken down, irreparably for the time being. A new relation is

becoming established instead, between representation and signification. (Kress and van Leeuwen 218)

This thesis is an example of this contemporary practice of breaking down the naturalised relationship between representation and reference, as formlessness is intangible and de facto unrepresentable. Formlessness, as it is presented in the primary sources, is less of a representation and more of a signification. I follow Kress and van Leeuwen's (219) insistence that in an age of a synthetic mode of production critical theory must deconstruct the combinations and context of production, with a focus on materiality.

As evidenced in section 2.6, materiality matters in classical art. Different mediums and tools have different affordances and are thus able to create different meanings. Kress and van Leeuwen (215) acknowledge the difficulty of separating material and meaning, e.g. how does one separate the meaning of a musical composition from the meaning of its performance? The importance of materiality is less straight-forwardly acknowledged within linguistics, in which one might not make a distinction between, say, a printed text or the same story written in ink (Kress and van Leeuwen 216). During a large part of the twentieth century, much of mainstream linguistics treated language as an abstraction, neglecting the material aspects of grammar, speech and writing. This trend of abstraction made it possible to move between mediums while disregarding their distinct material properties (Kress and van Leeuwen 216). Even something as seemingly intangible as the sound of speech is material: uttering sounds creates changes in air pressure, in the vibration frequency of the vocal cords and the frequency and volume of air in the vocal tract. Changes in pitch and intonation can also change the semantic meaning, cf. tone languages such as Cantonese, Mandarin and Igbo (Kress and van Leeuwen 226).

For the materialist, however, “the medium of inscription changes the text” (Kress and van Leeuwen 216). For Kress and van Leeuwen, the material expression of the text is always significant and shapes its meaning as texts are material objects consisting of several practices, surfaces, substances and tools of production. In terms of a feature film, practices include combining speech, image, music and writing, the surface is a flat (cinema) screen, the substance is a digital file full of filmed information, or in some cases, celluloid film, and the tools of production include cameras, microphones, rigs, a large cast of crew with designated tasks, etc. Furthermore, certain surfaces and forms of media facilitate different readings. A film, which is typically projected on walls and cinema screens, favours public reception, whereas a poem, routinely reproduced on pages of paper or a computer screen, favours individual reception (Kress and van Leeuwen 219-220). Naturally, different distribution media play into this as well. As technology advances, different paths of transcoding emerge, meaning that the “surface of reception” (Kress and van Leeuwen 220) is not necessarily the same surface on which the text was originally produced. A photograph of a painting does not relay every detail of the brushstrokes; a compressed audio file obscures the quality of the sound; a poem does not have the same reach as a blockbuster with a marketing team with a hundred million dollar budget. In Latour’s terms, a poem and a film are equally important ontologically, but the film (usually) has stronger alliances. That is not to say that every single film is more important than even the most known poems; it is merely a general observation of the cultural capital of cinema.

This chapter has examined the materiality of poetry as it contrasts to the audio-visual medium of film. The material affordances reviewed are colour, sound and scope. Taking the materiality of the poem into account, it is firmly grounded in the concreteness of the medium, whereas the previous chapter argued that on the literary and imaginative

plane, Wilner successfully portrays formlessness. On a concrete, material level, Wilner cannot possibly present formlessness, since a poem inevitably has a form. “Reading the Bible Backwards” exists in countless copies as ink on the page and as binary code in digital files.

5. Conclusion

This thesis argues that Eleanor Wilner successfully portrays formlessness in her reimagining of the Christian creation story, “Reading the Bible Backwards”. In this apocalyptic poem, all traces of life are washed away in a final flood that encapsulates the earth. “RBB” is a retelling of the Biblical creation story in reverse. Familiar forms of cultural landmarks and religious imagery deteriorate throughout the poem and, for a brief period, nature is offered a redemption from centuries of violence, until only a transcendent Spirit moves “upon the face of the waters” (86). This Spirit is in its essence formless, as a definition of transcendence shows in section 3.1. It would be appropriate for further research to be done on the (absence of) form of the Spirit and the nature of transcendence as it relates to formlessness.

In addition, this thesis further argues that formlessness can only be relative, not absolute (cf. Pole 82-83). In chapter 3, I present an interdisciplinary analysis of “Reading the Bible Backwards”, which shows that Wilner deconstructs form into formlessness on an imaginative, literary level. I analyse the poem from five different perspectives, namely ecocriticism, historicism, narratology, spatial deixis and vital materiality. Each of these analyses offer a distinct way into formlessness, and their contributions are assessed in section 3.8. In chapter 4, I anchor the poem in the materiality of the medium to argue that it is impossible for a poem to be a concrete example of formlessness. This reflects the two-fold, paradoxical nature of this thesis and highlights the elusive qualities of form and

its absence. To further be able to distinguish formlessness in practice, I apply David Pole's (82-83) notion of form-as-structure as opposed to form-as-content. By seeing form as a structure with tangible and observable relations, it is possible to observe transgressions to these relations. Instances where the boundaries are bent, broken or crossed are, in practice, examples of formlessness, e.g. a toddler's proud scribbles that could signify anything. However, as examined in chapter 4, anchoring a form to its material properties inevitably gives it some form or another, so utter formlessness is not possible according to this interpretation.

To comment on this paradox, I start by approaching formlessness through form, following the example of a poetics of negativity. I outline the philosophical and aesthetic history of form in sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2, before I settle on a view of form that is plastic and vibrant. This same vibrancy is given to matter through the vital materiality of Jane Bennett. I use *vital materiality* as an umbrella term for my analysis in section 3.7, which is influenced by theorists that align with Bennett to at least some degree, i.e. Graham Harman's metaphysical account of Bruno Latour and Henri Focillon's kinetic approach to forms and art. I follow the philosophical tradition of Spinoza and Deleuze, among others, who oppose a Cartesian dichotomy of matter and form. To me, form and matter should be viewed as intertwined at all times, which is supported by the scholars I have chosen to focus on. This is how Wilner dissolves matter and form simultaneously: because they are not separated in the first place.

At several points in the theoretical chapter I mention how, in the last 400 years of Western philosophy, discussion has revolved around human access to things, rather than the things themselves (Harman 2015, 00:09:46-49) following Kant's ideas of subjective perception. The theory of vibrant matter challenges this point of view in that it acknowledges the agency of matter, including that of inorganic things. Vibrant matter

dissects the traditional Cartesian and philosophically modernist dichotomies of form and matter, human and non-human and organic and inorganic. By not making such distinctions, a non-hierarchical vital materiality unfolds. Driving this discussion forward is Harman's object-oriented ontology, which offers a sceptical realist take on reality. Harman argues that it is possible to discuss the world as it exists outside of human perception: he insists on the integrity of the object, or to use Latour's term, the *actant*. This differs slightly from Latour, who, in turn, maintains that it is through networks mediated by human beings, and in the actant's relations and alliances that its agency lies. Bennett can be interpreted to exist between these points of view: she is interested in networks of socio-political affect, but also leans towards a Spinozan essentialist view that allows for all actants to have a life force of sorts that is created in and through their physical materiality.

Another important concept for this thesis is absolution as a loosening of bonds, after its original Latin meaning of *ab* (off) *solvere* (to loosen) ("absolve"). In "RBB", Wilner absolves the world from sin and from existence, i.e. she loosens the grip of humanity on nature and history. A similar loosening of concepts is present in vital materiality through fusing the boundaries between matter and form into one entity, one actant. Likewise, the notion of agency is opened up to include non-human subjects and inorganic material.

Writing about formlessness is undoubtedly a challenge. Putting it to paper – or in this specific case, typing it into a digital document – and phrasing it in words gives form to and trivialises any absence I try to examine. But in addition to the material plane, art also exists on the imaginative level, which is why a poem can arguably represent formlessness through breaking down familiar structures of form and by loosening the reader's imagination. While vital materiality emphasizes the importance of the material,

whether it be in art, politics or everyday life, it also argues that there is something intangible beyond or within the material, ultimately providing a fitting path to explore formlessness.

6. Swedish Summary – Svensk Sammanfattning

“Och jorden var öde och tom”: Den Paradoxala Formlösheten i Eleanor Wilners ”Reading the Bible Backwards”

Denna pro gradu-avhandling utforskar formlöshetens paradoxala natur via teorin om vital materialitet. Det är en närstudie av Eleanor Wilners dikt ”Reading the Bible Backwards” (hädanefter ”RBB”) som är en apokalyptisk återberättelse av den kristna skapelseberättelsen. Dikten har apokalyptiska drag i och med dess översvämningstema som ödelägger alla mänskliga, kulturella och religiösa symboler och strukturer. Wilner omarbetar kända tablåer ur Bibeln såsom scener ur Uppenbarelseboken, Jesu födelse, Syndafloden och Moses flykt på Nilen. Som titeln avslöjar utspelas dessa i omvänd ordning. Istället för en begynnelse ur intet som växer till dagens civilisation backar Wilner från mänskligt herravälde via naturens övertag ända tillbaka tills endast en transcendental, formlös ande återstår.

Efter introduktionen och en kort utredning av centrala begrepp tar jag avstamp i definitioner av form både ur en filosofisk och estetisk synvinkel i sektionerna 2.3.1 och 2.3.2. Avhandlingen är paradoxal i sig eftersom jag tar en genväg genom form för att kunna analysera dess frånvaro och eftersom att skriva om formlöshet ger formlösheten form genom språk och materialitet. Dessutom presenterar jag i analysen flera olika argument för att Wilner lyckas föreställa formlöshet på ett poetiskt plan, medan jag i kapitel fyra hävdar att det är i praktiken omöjligt att föreställa formlöshet i ett materiellt

medium såsom poesi. Jag hänvisar till David Poles uppdelning av formlöshet i absolut formlöshet (anti-form) och relativ formlöshet (anti-struktur) när jag diskuterar denna motsägelse. Avhandlingens slutsats är således att "RBB" är ett exempel på relativ formlöshet men inte absolut formlöshet.

En sista central paradox är sambandet mellan absoluta koncept såsom formlöshet och den ursprungliga betydelsen av absolution från latinets *ab* och *solvere*, vilket kan översättas till att lossa eller släppa på/från något. Den religiösa betydelsen av absolution är syndaförlåtelse, dvs. att synderna lossas ifrån syndaren för att hen ska bli fri. Enligt den ekokritiska analysen som presenteras i 3.3 förlöser Wilner naturen i "RBB", hon lossar på årtusenden av mänskligt våld, vilket leder till upplösningen av det absoluta och till omvandlingen av materia till total formlöshet. Paradoxalt nog nystar man alltså upp gränser när man pratar om det absoluta. Denna uppluckring av gränser är återkommande i hela avhandlingen, inte minst i fråga om sambandet mellan materia och form.

Den interdisciplinära analysen presenterar flera teoretiska infallsvinklar, varav vital materialitet är den mest väsentliga. Vital materialitet är baserad på Jane Bennetts idéer om levande materia, men jag kopplar den starkt samman med Graham Harmans tolkning av Bruno Latours metafysik. Latour framhäver tingens aktörskap och den ontologiska jämvikten hos allt som existerar. Han kallar alla entiteter för aktörer och gör ingen skillnad på organiskt och oorganiskt material. Bennett följer här i Latours fotspår och skiljer sig därför från andra kritiska vitalister såsom Henri Bergson och Hans Driesch. Enligt vital materialitet är ting inte besjälade eller utrustade med en inneboende essens, utan deras livskraftiga existens återfinns i själva materian. Denna teori avfärdar den kartesianska dualismen, dvs. den traditionella uppdelningen av kropp och själ, eller med andra ord, av substans och form. Vital materialitet innebär kort sagt att form och materia

är oskiljbara och till följd av detta håller jag med om Angela Leightons uppfattning att form är ett rörligt, dynamiskt och nyckfullt koncept som inte kan preciseras till fullo.

Innan jag övergår till analysen presenterar jag Harmans tolkning av Latours aktörteori, Harmans egen ”gerilla metafysik” (Harman 2002, s. 11, min övers.) som grundar sig i den spekulativa realismens yrkande på objektets integritet och betydelse inom filosofin, och Bennetts nymaterialism. Teorikapitlet inkluderar också separata avsnitt om konstens relation till form enligt Henri Focillon (2.6) och det lingvistiska fenomenet rumsdeixis (2.7). Focillons fokus på att konstformer skapas av händer och rumsdeiktiska uttryck som förankrar en text i tid och rum lägger grunden till diskussionen i kapitel fyra om materialitetens betydelse för form och dess frånvaro.

Analyskapitlet börjar med en beskrivning av vad Leena Kaakinen kallar ”a poetics of negativity” (125), vilket kan översättas till negativ poetik. Negativ poetik innebär att man närmar sig innehållet ur dess motsats, t.ex. genom att beskriva något som finns kan man få tillträde till det som inte finns. Denna avhandling använder sig följaktligen av negativ poetik. Själva analysen är uppdelad i fem olika teoretiska infallsvinklar för att ge en holistisk bild av formlöshet. Dessa är ekokritik (3.3), historicism (3.4), berättarteknik (3.5), en rumsdeiktisk analys (3.6) och vital materialitet (3.7). Genom att blanda lingvistik, filosofi och mera traditionella litteraturkritiska traditioner bildas en pragmatisk helhetsanalys.

I avsnitt 3.3 argumenterar jag att Wilners dikt är lika högaktuell idag som när den skrevs för trettio år sedan genom att dra paralleller till den till synes apokalyptiska klimatkris som vi genomgår just nu. Både den ekokritiska och den historistiska analysen uppmärksammar den traditionella uppdelningen av det mänskliga eller kulturella kontra det naturliga och framhäver vildmark som den absoluta motpolen till det mänskliga. Naturens kraft bryter ner allt annat i ”RBB” och till sist återstår bara den allra vildaste,

mest otämjbara formen av natur: gränslösa hav. Inom historicismen ses hav som den absoluta motsatsen till kultur, eftersom det är omöjligt att markera en grav till havs och följaktligen även ogenomförbart att bygga en kultur kring det begravda.

Den berättartekniska analysen i avsnitt 3.5 fokuserar på ”RBB” som ett exempel på ett onaturligt narrativ. Eftersom ”RBB” strider mot berättartekniska normer genom sin retroaktiva tidslinje bryter dikten ner etablerade strukturer och uppnår därför relativ formlöshet. Den rumsdeiktiska analysen i avsnitt 3.6 fortsätter på samma spår och ger inblick i hur struktur och form bryts ner på mikronivå medan den rumsdeiktiska makronivån placerar läsaren i en apokalyptisk tradition.

Den huvudsakliga analysen presenteras i avsnitt 3.7 och utgår från vital materialitet. Jag identifierar diktens aktörer och hur de upplöses allteftersom dikten framskrider. Enligt denna tolkning delas diktens värld inte längre in i det mänskliga kontra det naturliga, utan allt som omnämns existerar på samma plan och alla former är sammanbundna med materia. Avsnitt 3.8 sammanfattar analyskapitlet och klarlägger mina argument för att Wilner lyckas föreställa formlöshet. Kapitel fyra i sin tur ger en överblick av poesins materialitet i fråga om färg (4.1), ljud (4.2) och räckvidd (4.3). För att betona poesins specifika materiella egenskaper jämförs det med det audiovisuella mediet film. ”RBB” existerar i gripbar form till pappers och som elektronisk version och är därför inte en konkret representation av formlöshet. Avhandlingen avslutas med ett sammanfattande kapitel där jag redogör för den paradoxala formlösheten i ”Reading the Bible Backwards”.

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