



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Leegte die ademt: Het typografisch wit in de moderne poëzie

van Dijk, Y.

**Publication date**  
2005

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

van Dijk, Y. (2005). *Leegte die ademt: Het typografisch wit in de moderne poëzie*. [, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

#### **General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### **Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## Summary

*It is snowing*

*but it is not snowing anymore.*

These are the opening lines of a poem by Hans Faverey. In the spacing between these two lines, several things happen. The blank space surrounding the first line might represent the falling snow. Yet, even as early as in the spacing between the lines, it stopped snowing, almost before it had even properly started. The elusive moment in which it stopped snowing cannot be put into words and takes place in the spacing between the two lines. Faverey's poem exemplifies how not only the words of a poem, but also the blank spaces that separate them may acquire meaning. In this thesis I examine the significance of typographic blanks in six modern poets.

Even classical rhetoric paid serious attention to matters that could not be put into words, but could only be translated into silence. In Christian mysticism, silence also played an important part in describing the *unio mystica*: it was beyond words. The paradox that mystics nonetheless used language to express that God was unsayable, would later recur in modern poets. In literature the unspeakable has played a part since German Romanticism. The idea that there was something - the infinite - that could only be expressed in art, dates back to that period. Novalis, for example, says that poetry "darstellt das Undarstellbare". This implies a confidence in language that would disappear in the course of the nineteenth century. The Absolute could not be approximated to in words any longer, and language even fell short of expressing ordinary things, since the connection between words and the things they express is arbitrary. Therefore, Stéphane Mallarmé aspired to a poetic language that should contrast with everyday language. In this poetic language the connection between words and their meanings should be reasoned instead of arbitrary. Mallarmé was the first poet to draw conclusions from this premise with regard to the form of his poems. According to him, poetry should not use words that refer to the things they represent, but only words that refer to their own presence. That is why Mallarmé set great store by the material aspects of language; the act of writing was of the utmost importance, just as the physical concentration of letters on the white paper.

Even though, since the eighteenth century, the iconic possibilities of free verse had sparingly been used in England, Mallarmé was the first to conduct a real typographic experiment in his long poem 'Un Coup de Dés', a work that would greatly influence the visual poetry of the avant-garde. Mallarmé's experiments with the type page were taken one step further by avant-gardists such as Apollinaire, Marinetti and Van Oostaijen. In their pursuit of a more immediate connection between the word and the world, their poetry even became a figurative 'drawing with words'. The views on poetry of the Romantics, Mallarmé and the avant-gardists have laid the foundation of the theory about modern literature. In the absence of an existent theory, a 'reading attitude', in which blank spaces also acquire meaning, may be deduced from the works of philosophers such as Maurice Blanchot, Paul Rodenko and Jacques Derrida.

Three aspects characterise this reading attitude. First of all, the emphasis on literature as an expression of Otherness or Nothingness: the presenting of the un-presentable. By definition the poet will fail in this, but Blanchot and Rodenko maintained that in this failure triumph was hidden. Literature cannot name the Origin, but it can, as Rodenko said, touch upon it. This does not happen through language, but in the very places where the poem falls silent.

So, language falls short of approximating to Otherness. This shortcoming of language is the second principle of the reading attitude referred to here. Some poets therefore resort to silence or blank spaces. In those instances the typographic blank expresses a distrust of language.

A different solution to the shortcomings of language is the application of the substance and the shape of words: again, the use of blanks is a means to this end. The *signifier* doesn't only represent meaning, but acquires meaning itself. Through the physical shape of the letters, the lines on the paper and their arrangement on the page, the language becomes a tangible presence. A third aspect of the reading attitude referred to here, is modern literature as a representation of an intermediate space; a threshold area that may be accommodated by typographic blanks. This may be a space between the text and the outside world, but also between the self and the other, or between life and death. The modern poem refers to an intermediate zone, and simultaneously to itself as the representation of such a zone (liminality). So, the third aspect of the reading attitude may also be charged with self-reflection.

This last aspect plays an important part in the works of J.H. Leopold. In his works typographic blanks often constitute a threshold zone between the interior and the exterior. Leopold's ambivalent attitude adopted towards the outside world and the other is thus expressed in the visual form of his poems. These poems are alternately, for example by means of enjambments, opened to or closed off from the world. Thus, the poem may become a place of shelter within the words. This liminal aspect is merely one of the functions of typographic blanks in Leopold's works. Among other things, they may also acquire metaphysical, meta-poetic or iconic functions. The same goes for Van Ostaijen. In his works, no less than nine functions of the typographic blank may be distinguished. The blanks may again represent the area between the poem and the outside world. Yet, in Van Ostaijen, it is a matter of levelling the boundaries between art and everyday life. By letting his text slip off the page or, contrarily, by bringing in snips of the outside world into his poems, the margin separating art from non-art is neutralized. Some of the other functions of the typographic blank are also given a typically avant-gardist interpretation in Van Ostaijen. The temporal function, for example (the blank representing the course of time), recurs in Van Ostaijen as a striving for simultaneity. The linear poem gave way to a poem that could, like a painting, be seen at a single glance.

In Nijhoff, the typographic blank more often gains a meta-poetic significance: it is continuously applied to clarify the poet's intentions for his poetry. This meta-poetic function may, for example, go hand in hand with a metaphysical function, when Nijhoff uses the blank space to represent the 'superreality' to which he wanted his poems to aspire. That is to say not a pure, empty metaphysics, but rather a warm and living world that has, however, been charged with the experience of a Higher world. Nijhoff furthermore uses typographic blanks to turn the poem into an entity which is as tangible as possible, an 'organism'. Thus the language within the poem would once again reach its original state.

The same is true of Paul Celan. As it did in Jewish mysticism, the shape of words acquires meaning in his poems. One of the other functions of blank space in Celan's poems is that of silence. In the poems that explicitly deal with the holocaust, for example, the text has been broken up and fragmented, so that in the blank space there are sometimes only scraps of words left.

In conclusion, Hans Faverey is the only poet dealt with here whose poetry seems to aspire to designating a void or nothingness, whilst being fully aware that nothingness cannot be expressed. Moreover, Faverey's poems are self-reflexive and often represent what they are doing: the process completed in the poem, at the same time constitutes the contents of the poem itself.

An other important function of the blanks in Favereys work is temporal. More evidently than the other poets here concerned he used the spacing between the lines as a way to slow down the course of time. In employing the typographic blanks his poems can become a 'sur place': a movement in standstill.

In the six oeuvres, ten different functions of typographic blanks can eventually be distinguished: meta-poetic, iconic, metaphysical, thematic, temporal, rhythmic, grammatical, liminal and the blank which represents a self-reflexive movement. The tenth and final function is the most obvious one, and at the same time the most difficult to grasp: the blank space as a void. Sometimes typographic blanks do not intend to express anything but the absence of text and content. In those instances the typographic blank is what it seems: a blank space.

Vertaling: Patty van Hees