Silence and the Short Story Form

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In this consideration of silence as a function of writing which examines omissions, ellipsis and the role of suggestion, in the practical context of writing as an activity it is hard to separate the urge to write from the effects of silence, and of silencing and how the symbols of 'silence' constantly operate in writing. Silence in speech studies is associated with negativity: 'the hated antithesis of consciousness, freedom, presence' (Luckyj 2002, 3) which takes silences as an absence, while the struggle for a 'voice' belongs to minorities and finding a voice is one of the first things claimed in triumph.

However in her study on silence Simborowski frames her investigation in an active sense. Its title, *Secrets and Puzzles: Silence and the Unsaid* suggests a game, a conundrum, something to be solved, much as postmodern text practice plays with the notion of the page as gaming board on which both writer and reader engage.

So let us assume the 'voice' has been raised and we are here as players. Silence is now part of our strategy. Those strategies will include silence as suggestion, silence as reticence, and silence as a form of eloquence. It becomes a highly effective tool:

As early as Plato silence was associated with truth, wisdom and eloquence…later… (it) became a recommended form of strength …an expression of open defiance (Luckyj 2002, 7)

As long as it does not result in absence, and with this a general forgetfulness leading to eradication or erasure: 'The blank page is poisoned. The book which tells no story kills. The absence of narrative signifies death' writes Todorov, someone who does not pull his punches (1987, 74).

**Silence as Suggestion**

The first of the strategies, silence as suggestion, will be familiar to all those who read and write and work with short stories as silence fits this form naturally. The short form inhabits a space where the world beyond the text is always the bigger place. This is different than subtext which operates inside fiction. The brevity of the story suggests a further life for the characters, in the manner in which they are not finished off, or explained like an Oliver Twist or David Copperfield. They might even be 'finished off' in the manner of a Barthelme, who experimented with the end of character, along with mimetic fiction. However, intrinsic to the way the reader engages with the form is how the story has to suggest beyond itself.

**Cluster Forms**

Cluster forms have become popular on account of this function (above) which allows a reader to fill in the gaps taking the knowledge of one short section into another which seems to operate independently to it, but can be read as interrelated.

In Leonard Michaels' *Girl With a Monkey* there is sequence of micro fictions 'Eating Out' (2000, 85 - 99). In amongst these there are sections where the narrator appears to be speaking with his mother. These crop up randomly throughout the section, however there is a logical progression to the manner in which they appear. Four phone calls, broken up by other micro fictions, only some of which are relevant to (what can be assumed to be) the phone calls. The relevance is in their provision of background information such as one which recounts the time the narrator's mother invited him to a bar mitzvah, while in another equally unrelated early memory she is shown taking the narrator when he is only ten years old, to see a movie as a reward: 'I didn't know what movie it would be. Neither did my mother. She couldn't read' Michaels comments. Later he tells us she uses a Polish word ('Na'). The history is in those brief details. Elsewhere he notes 'My family came from Poland, they never went any place until they had heart attacks' (2000, 17) They are the past. These phone calls are an urgent present state, even when he uses the storytelling past of 'My mother said,' rather than the more urgent 'says'. These four micros about Ma are disrupted by what has been read between (and most bear little relationship to the Ma pieces). While these appear to function like phone calls, the phrase 'I dialled' only relates to stories which surround them. Yet, they seem to ring sporadically disturbing us from the longer sequence of fragments causing us to listen in. So, rather than read these tiny sections, it is as if we have found ourselves with a crossed line down which and we hear someone's mother speaking to their son. In fact, only the last Ma fragment has the clear instruction 'I phoned'. However, 'My mother said, “So? What's new?”' (89) is a phone-speak short-hand which eschews the usual face to face protocols of meeting and greeting. This is fast, down to business, calls-cost-money-speak. And so, in the middle of the section we have to stop as readers, and take the call, just like Michaels, or we'll have to ring her back. We read *inside* the situation Michaels places us in, while we remain *outside* as between the narrator and the Ma figure, is the weight of their personal history, which we cannot know, even as we feel we learn so much.

The repeat format of the calls lets us share the narrator's frustration with their familiarity. Everything is bad, and there are troubles which Ma will no doubt tell us about if we would only give her time. But time we haven't got, this call is running out and there is another, urgent fragment to be read.

When removed from the surrounding text and set out following the order in which they appear on the pages, it becomes apparent how they hang together as a cluster sequence with clear progression from the first one, leading up to a final exasperated claim from Ma's adult child (the narrator). The sense of fatalism and of dread builds up every time she answers.

'I knew it. I had a feeling. I could tell,' she says. Always expecting the worst she urges, 'What? You can tell me,' but is always ahead of the news. When he asks if she knows what happened she replies with dread fatalism, 'Oh, my God.'

That there can only be bad news is borne out by their own social history. Michaels trusts the reader. Much of the humour (and there is plenty) is in the imagined reaction shots of the worn out son who knows that his mother's universe is a place where even when things are good, they are bad. In the final section when he phones to tell her that everything is good, overemphasizing this in his frustration, she delivers her coup de grace, which has been building up throughout.

'I feel good, even wonderful. Everything is great … ' he says, telling her things have been like this for months, ' … and it's getting better. Better, better, better … ' and we could leave it there, but he makes the mistake of asking how she is. The reader winces, knowing he has cornered himself.

She said, 'Me?'

I said, 'Yes, how are you?'

'Me?' she said. 'Don't make me laugh.' (2000, 98)

Their world, their relationship, their shared history is complete and it is beyond the page.

**Clusters and Fragments as Experimentation**

Barthelme has a character say, 'Fragments are the only forms I trust' as a response to a plural view of reality (in 'See the moon?' (Barthelme 1993, 98, cited in March-Russell 2012, 164), and J.G. Ballard's London suburbia linked by motorways makes physical an experience where people live isolated lives, 'explor(ing) private obsessions'. (March-Russell 2012, 160). This fragmentation is reflected not only in Ballard's subject but in his method. His short story 'Answers to a Questionnaire', takes the shape of 100 answers. The silent questions can only be supplied by the reader (Ballard 2014, 657 - 661):

1. Yes
2. Male(?)
3. To Terminal 3, London Airport, Heathrow.
4. Twenty-seven
5. Unknown
6. Dr Barnardo's Primary, Kingston-upon-Thames: H.M. Borstal, Send, Surrey: Brunel University, Computer Sciences Department.

Ballard lets us infer the backstory, at the same time as we must infer a 'front story,' which is as equally elusive. By answer 19, we seem to enter a surreal place:

19) My greatest ambition is to turn into a T.V. programme.

Ballard, publishing this originally in the 1980's, predicts the rise of reality television while playing with everyday events, and that awkward decade reveals itself as he name checks Lady Diana Spencer, Torvill and Dean, the European Championships and the prospect of a gold medal at Seoul, British Telecom, and what will outlast them all, the constellation Orion. But by answer 27 the ordinary has slipped away:

27) I took him to Richmond Ice Rink where he immediately performed six triple salchows. I urged him to take up ice dancing … but he began to trace out huge double spirals on the ice. I tried to convince him that these did not feature in the compulsory figures, but he told me that the spirals represented a model of synthetic DNA …

Finally our form filler reveals that with this partner he erected an antenna from the Post Office Tower which caused answer 50:

50) Interference to T.V. reception all over London and the South–East.

Ballard's story demonstrates how the short form is a net of spaces (of silences) which are not empty. The ultimate place for experimentation. 'The short story's tendency towards idea and situation lends the form most effectively to the needs of postmodernism' (March-Russell 2012, 225) but beyond textual experimentation and game-playing such as exemplified by Barthelme, who at times forgoes character, or plot (sometimes both together) and at times offers a patchwork of images through which a reader may trail in the hope of discovering both meaning and non-meaning, silence also operates in all forms in mimetic fictions.

However, if a reader still expects mimicry in which a universe is imagined, Barthelme frequently offers no traditional imaginary world. In 'The Indian Uprising,' the writing leaps from one image to another. It does not resolve nor utilise anything that we recognise as plot. Instead it builds from observations, memories, broken thoughts, interruptions and insights which the narrator (there is a narrator) has. The narrator talks about an urban battle (streets barricaded with consumer goods, some of which, like the wicker waste basket feel ethnic, and echo the Indian of the title. An urban battle is described interspersed with memories of different women whom the narrator has been in failed relationships with. Men and women are unsuccessful in relationships, the ground or distance between them resembling a battlefield, such as the urban battle staged in the Uprising of the title. Put in context this was written in 1968, and the 1960's had seen America drafting nearly two million young men to go to Vietnam to fight a hugely unpopular war. Vietnam was on the news. Westerns were on T.V. as entertainment. Barthelme frequently refers to television. This is part of the enveloping culture in which the story was written.

In an essay 'Not Knowing', Barthelme claims the rise of T.V. as a medium is the culprit (he was writing in the 60's). He uses T.V. programme titles (*The Love Boat*) and the experience is like flicking through channels. He uses the silence of static and overload, so nothing clear can be heard or discerned, like Ballard's answer to Question 50.

**Reality and Tradition**

In mimetic reality, the prime mover of fiction Woods notes 'commercial realism has cornered the market, has become the most powerful brand in fiction' (2009, 175). However, this is to question the uses to which fiction is put, rather than look at how it puts them. The question 'Does fiction make true statements about the world?' is according to Woods the wrong question: 'Fiction does not ask us to believe things (in a philosophical sense) but to imagine them' (2009, 178) and this leads on to the second strategy.

**Silence as Reticence**

Silence as reticence considersthe unsayable, for what is it that a writer will not commit to the page, and what is the expectation placed upon the reader by this strategy? Reticence in fiction suggests, and allows the reader to fill in empty spaces which an author cannot, or will not, state.

Primo Levi, who wrote of his experiences as a Jewish prisoner in Auschwitz, used a technique of omission, not to avoid the truth but to engage readers with a horror which was difficult to depict. When he wrote, 'For the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence' (cited in Gordon, 2007, 51; 1987, 21) he was considering the development of language rather than its absence, something he would not accede to.

The German of the *Lager* – skeletal, howled, studded with obscenities and imprecations - was … language apart (1987, 75 - 6)

Simborowski notes a feature of his style 'is a notable reticence…which consists of omitting what could become oppressive detail' (2003, 25).

This is something short fiction has to consider simply because of brevity. When Levi separated event and response he wanted to both spare and engage the reader using an artistry which 'does not cancel out or contradict' truth (2003, 24).

If 'the German language was profoundly compromised,' as Schlant notes, in order to start again, experiments with language were necessitated in the search for a new form. Explorations with language, post modern forms allowed evasions as well as examinations (1999, 68).

When Günter Grass wrote there were 'certain things I should like to pass over in circumspect silence' (Schlant 1999, 68; Grass 1972, 9) the act of playing with language might become an end in itself. The discussion about narrative boundaries so that documentary and fiction is undermined reflects a 'scepticism about the narratability of events' (Schlant 1999, 58) and one which Primo Levi dismissed. However literalness and making an account of events witnessed or experienced as a form of documentary realism is not the only way of responding to suffering. George Perec's lipogramic novel (in which a letter is removed - in his case the letter 'e') is no less a response to the tragedy of his family in the Holocaust. The disappearance of the 'e' has been read as a metaphor for the Jewish experience in the Second World War. Prose does not have to be simple 'because it uses the ordinary daily language of communication' (Woods 2009, 139).[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Silence as Eloquence**

The third strategy, where silences ‘speak’,can be seen as a tactic, indeed Cicero considered silence as one of the arts of conversation. This 'eloquent silence' (Ephratt 2008) can be both damaging as well as enabling in conversation between people, but between reader and writers, what form does silence take? On the page this effortlessly takes the form of ellipsis.

Bal notes how a genuine ellipsis cannot be perceived 'if nothing is indicated, we cannot know what should have been indicated' (1992, 71). In Text World Theory, Werth claims that the text itself determines the readerly knowledge necessary for processing (Carter and Stockwell 2008, 155).

In a nutshell he states the author is important in the process of creating a text as they 'will have a particular text world in mind' but he says, 'there is no guarantee… that the reader will …reproduce the same text world on reading the text' (Werth 2008, 155).

This uses the idea that the author's world is not definitive and expands the postmodern notion of plural realities.

Only on the basis of information are we able to glean something has been omitted. Werth's example *An aeroplane flew overhead / No aeroplane flew overhead* shifts the meaning from a simple statement to one which now implies a lack of something expected, or a changed circumstance. Werth in Text World Theory notes how a negative operates in a set of expectations (Werth 1999). And these readerly expectations are an expansion on how gaps between stories, or the infill, is processed.

When the short fiction is the basis, omissions (complete removal) can be a puzzle in a fiction - to fathom what is not being revealed, or the more simple: 'I returned after five months.' Where did the narrator go? What happened in five months? Return to what?

Bal terms this form of information pseudo-ellipsis:

'Two years of bitter poverty passed, in which she lost two children, became unemployed and was evicted from her home because she could not pay the rent' (Bal 1992, 71)

Temporal organization such as above is necessary.

Tania Hershman's 'A Loyal Friend' sketches in the story of a con man, in three tight paragraphs, in 11 lines, which take us from an unspecified time when people knew the friend, named as Jacobson, had trusted him and had invested money in a scheme which is never named. Then there is the social function to which Jacobson does not appear, then several hours later the point where 'you call the police.'

How this is sketched in takes simple sentences;

When Jacobsen failed to appear at the time they had agreed, no-one worried …

He is probably delayed, they said cheerfully, and helped themselves to nuts.

And we can visualise these people standing round at a party, until

… they started talking in a different way … and you say, We should have known. This is the point where you call the police.

Then there is further time into the future, where Jacobson is never found, and now time is retrospective - 'for a long time' people still meet to talk about him. They realise they are not even sure of his real name. (Hershman 2012, 17)

The story is beyond this, in those past scenes, in how Jacobson built up trust (we never meet him on the page) and the present, how has this affected those people who invested? We imagine for ourselves the mess which Jacobson has left behind. This is the further and the most pressing drama, the expectation of a world beyond.

March-Russell cites Farrell's review of short fiction, stating its 'tendencies … toward implication and obliqueness' which he finds handy tools for social criticism (Farrell 1948, 114, cited in March-Russell 2012, 66). This raises the question of whether a 'self-reflexive narrative mode can successfully address wider social issues.' But if a text is part of economic and ideological pressures, it is also subject to historical changes in the relationship between writer and reader and dissemination (Eagleton 1978, 45). It also reflects unspoken assumptions, as much as it sees itself as a factor in change.

If the short story has been marginalised, 'its very lack of status has appealed to writers at odds with the dominant values of their society' March-Russell lists these-women writers, colonial subjects, sexual minorities (2012, 70).

So, in the silences are the spaces for imagination and interpretation, the very thing despised by what called itself 'socialist realism.'

We must be truthful with 'the absurd and the fantastic' (Tertz, cited in March-Russell 2012, 73)

Consider the various forms of banned literature in the once Soviet Union. Anything smacking of magic or religion would be problematic to the orthodoxy of its censors; however various authors of this era found in the surreal a form which let them describe experience.

When Bulgakov's cat, for example, is not allowed to ride the Moscow tram, he turns to argue that he carries the correct fare. Borrowing from a Russian tradition of fabulation, this Pushkin-like episode which employs the strategy of a traditional folktale, allowed the author to consider a reality of this era, where the absurd and the fantastic emphasise aspects of life under a regime where dissidents simply 'vanished.'

'The Soviet state had the peculiar ability to make an unwanted person, event or thing disappear' (Baruch Wachtel and Vinitsky, 2009, 270).

So authors dealt in illusion, even when they could not slip by the censors with this method (Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* did not appear in Russia until the collapse of the Soviet Union, ditto the hyper realist *Life and Fate* of Vassily Grosman, a novel built out of observations and stories gleaned from people he met while working as a journalist, this massive book is strung around the lives of members of a single family, and put together as a novel). If in Bulgakov 'non person status' is reflected in the surreal absurdities of life, Daniil Kharms' short fictions, '(which) had never seen the light of day in Russia' are described as ' absurdist short stories' when they finally appeared in the 1970's in the west only (2009, 271). In one of his longest stories, 'The Old Woman', a clock has no hands, yet when the narrator asks the time the old woman of the title 'looks at the clock face and says to me 'It's a quarter to three' (Kharms in Chandler 2005, 297). This suggests many things, but confusion and continued existence might be only possible through an accommodation of what clearly makes little sense and is still about the human sense of time's passing. If Bulgakov's stories are a mix of satire and the grotesque 'real and unreal hopelessly intermixed' according to Gleb Strue, all suggest the reality under which people found themselves struggling. In 'Devilry' a man 'loses his name and identity and encounters all sorts of queer and grotesque people' which according to Strue provide us with 'glimpses of Soviet Bureaucratic mechanism' (1972, 161). Bulgakov's scene of mass hypnotism from *The Master and Margarita* where an audience finds themselves released from a theatre barely clad, with their possessions missing, needs little explanation positioned against such history.

Philip Pullman, in an article 'The War on Words,' states reading is a democratic activity which theocracies discourage, because they hold 'degraded views of literature' in which its function is simply ' to present a clear ideological viewpoint, and nothing else' (2004).

He asks that we consider the nature of reading fiction, he frames this as a conversation, 'The book proposes, the reader questions, the book responds, the reader considers.'

Reading does not tell us what to think. Instead It challenges us to think, to fill in the gaps, listen to the silences. First we create our images in order to view the world being described; secondly we must form our ideas about the world we are viewing, and this surely leads to us forming independent ideas, which rub up against received opinions, and challenge us to see the world afresh.

Pullman states 'our relationship with (fiction) … is a profoundly … democratic one. It places demands on the reader, because that is the nature of a democracy: citizens have to play their part … it isn't static: there is no final, unquestionable, unchanging authority. It's dynamic.' (2004)

This is surely is what the short form proposes, by its nudges and silent spaces, in to which we can interpret, follow implication, let Bugakov's cat lead us to the apartment which vanishes. And where Pullman asks that we 'suspend our certainties and learn to tolerate the vertigo of difference' (2004).

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1. Georges Perec's writings play with textual matter, often have maps, diagrams of footfall (of characters) and games as part of the book. *La Disparition* (1969) was written without using the letter 'e'. Perec was a founder-member of the French Oulipo group (Ouvoir de literature potentialle).

   'A pangrammatic lipogram is a text that uses every letter of the alphabet except one. E.g. 'The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog' omits the letter s, which the usual pangram includes, by using 'jumps.' Perec is noted for his constrained writing. His 300-page novel *La Disparition* (1969) is a lipogram, written without ever using the letter 'e'. It has been translated into English by Gilbert Adair under the title *A Void* (1994).'

   ([https://en.wilipedia.org/wiki/Lipogram accessed 30.08.17](https://en.wilipedia.org/wiki/Lipogram%25252520accessed%2525252030.08.17))

   The silent disappearance of the letter has been considered a metaphor for loss during the Second World War. Perec lost both parents, Polish-Jewish immigrants. His father, a soldier, was killed in battle, while his mother was transported to Auschwitz. The vanishing of the letter 'e' since the name 'Georges Perec' is full of them, lets the son take part in a shared act of disappearance.

   'The absence of the 'e' in *A Void* announces a broader, cannily coded discourse on loss, catastrophe, and mourning. Perec cannot say the words *père*, *mère*, parents, famille in his novel, nor can he write the name Georges Perec. In short, each 'void' in the novel is abundantly furnished with meaning, and each points toward the existential void that Perec grappled with throughout his youth and early adulthood.' Warren Motte, *Reading Georges Perec* Context N°11 ([www.dalkeyarchive.com/reading-georges-perec/](http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/reading-georges-perec/) accessed 20.08.2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)