Figures of silence: ellipses and eclipses in John McGahern’s collected stories

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“Only a fool tells everything”, says one of McGahern’s characters. This statement implies that, unlike foolishness, clever story-telling resorts to the use of understatements, implications, allusions and other kinds of underlying remarks. Frequent in McGahern’s fiction, these figures of speech entail an economy principle which is noticeable through various typographic, syntactic or stylistic devices. The term “ellipsis” is here chosen when referring to a total omission of a word, a phrase or a name, whereas the term “eclipse” tends to be used when mentioning a partial concealment, a sense of semidarkness, chiaroscuro, in short a failing message, which keeps an important component in the dark. Both of these processes underline the implicit in their own way and both invite the short story reader to play an active part.

The implicit is particularly in keeping with the genre of the short story. As Valerie Shaw puts it:

The short-story’s success often lies in conveying a sense of unwritten, or even unwriteable things: the story-teller accepts the limitations of his art, and makes his freedom an aspect of those same restrictions (...). As long as a sense of limitation is prominent among people’s impressions of life, the short-story will be the best way of expressing this sense and, for a brief spell at least, allaying the worries that it brings with it.

This sense of “unwriteable things” has strong political connotations for most Irish writers, including John McGahern or Edna O’Brien, who were banned by the Irish Censorship Board in the 1950s. After several centuries of colonization and catholicism, Irish writers still had no freedom of speech, hence the prominent role of the implicit in their fiction. For example, McGahern’s stories emphasize the narrow-minded Catholic attitude, a significant aspect of the period, when the implicit is used to allude to sex: in the narrative, the love scene is silenced and replaced by a blank space which significantly
separates the sentences “night drew them” and “In the morning he asked” (“Like All Other Men”, 278). This is how McGahern’s texts lay stress on the parochial Irish state of mind of those days when any allusion to privacy, let alone sex, was impossible. The unspeakable is mirrored by the unsaid. Frustrated by repressive laws, McGahern subtly plays with the reader’s own frustration through the medium of the implicit: as the writer does not feel free to write whatever he wants, the reader is therefore not allowed to know everything. Nevertheless, the reader may have access to truths which are partially disclosed.

The blank space also seems to underline the necessity to keep the story going. Apart from the Irish context, of course, the unsaid imitates everyday reality in which some situations can generate a sense of decency or embarrassment. This is particularly noticeable when love (“Doorways”), sex (“Like All Other Men”) or death (“Eddie Mac”) are evoked. Death is also obvious in the syntax of the narrative, through the ellipsis which is nothing but disappearance. The ellipsis can be signified as simply as possible by the hole in the text: in “Sierra Leone”, as in many other stories, there are intervals of blank spaces which imply the passing of time in diegetical chronology. Ellipses have a binary value since not only are they typographic but also diegetic.

For example, the diegetic interruption of the thirteen years which occurs between the end of the story “Eddie Mac” and the beginning of “The Conversion of William Kirkwood” is also reflected in a mimetic way by the blank pages and the other short stories of the volume that separate these two stories. “The Conversion of William Kirkwood” can be considered as the sequel to “Eddie Mac” since the same characters, the same background, the same intrigue are to be found again thirteen years later. Gérard Genette considers ellipsis as one of the four component parts of narrative rhythm. Jumping forwards or backwards, which are the classical processes of prolepsis and analepsis, are useful devices for a writer when playing with the time scheme of a story. Significantly, a number of stories which are narrated in the first person and which are childhood memories end with the adverb “now”, that is the meeting-point between diegetic and narrative chronologies. This is precisely the case in “Coming into his Kingdom” which ends with the sentence: “her body in the clay of Aughoo now with worms and the roots of dandelions” (“Coming into his Kingdom”, 22). This narrative device is close to the epilogue: it does not mention the intermediate years between the narrated memory and the time of writing. The plot ends with its own writing, as it were. In the last paragraph of the story entitled “Lavin”, the narrator, after telling of his own visit to Lavin with his friend Casey, points out in a very matter-of-fact way: “Casey is now married, with children” (“Lavin”, 64). The chronological ellipsis draws a parallel between past and present and jumps forwards.

As regards chronological ellipses, another technical device is anticipation which can be exemplified with a sentence such as: “It was some years before Rachel and O’Reilly were seen again” (“A Ballad”, 248). With this kind of narrative, the reader, even in retrospect, never knows exactly what characters have experienced in between. With ellipsis, details are left in the unknown.

Syntactically, ellipsis is the result of the suppression of a verb or a phrase. It consists in avoiding a word or several words which would normally be found in the sentence. On the whole, the reader, more or less successfully, makes up for these omissions by bridging the gaps. Verbal ellipsis is a vacuum which is specific to McGahern’s short-story writing. It is often at work in the very first sentence of his stories, as for example in “Wheels”: “Grey
concrete and steel and glass in the slow raindrip of the morning station, three porters pushing an empty trolley up the platform to a stack of grey mail-bags, the loose wheels rattling, and nothing but wait and watch and listen, and I listened to the story they were telling” (“Wheels”, 3). On the one hand, the beginning of the narrative is unbalanced as a result of the verbal omission which deletes the key-word from the sentence. The sentence is deprived of its substance, of its vitality, of its dynamism. On the other hand, the excessive repetition of the conjunction “and”, which appears six times, together with the negative connotations (such as “empty” “nothing”), associated with cold substances (“concrete and steel and glass”) highlight a sense of emptiness and monotony, which reflect the narrator’s own melancholic state of mind as well as his negligence. This process is picked up a few lines further, and after the dialogue, in the main clause which reads: “the story too close to the likeness of my own life for comfort...”. Once again, the verb is absent, perhaps to reflect the weariness of the narrator who does not seem to have enough vitality to endow his sentence with verbal energy. An identical concentrated structure of these characteristics is illustrated in the following sentence which is on the same page:

Flush of tiredness in my face after the drinking, the jug of water by the bed had been no use, rough tongue, dry roof of mouth, dull ache and throb of the poison along the forehead and on all the nerves, celebrating this excursion home; and always desire in the hot tiredness, the dull search about the platform for vacancy between well-fleshed thighs: may I in my relax-sirs slacks (Hackney, London) plunge into your roomy ripeness and forget present difficulties? (“Wheels”, 3).

Here, the reader notices significant textual gaps, apart from the verbal ellipsis, with a parataxic juxtaposition of nouns, with a rough accumulation of words at the expense of transitions and link words. This sentence is devoid of any formal or explanatory link and turns out to be a mere succession of causes and effects without any articulate connection. The feeling of boredom and of sadness also pervades this elliptic passage. This phenomenon occurs in other stories with the same type of elliptic opening paragraphs. The story “Strandhill, the Sea”, for example:

The street in front of Parkes’ Guest House, grains of sand from the street coming on the grey fur of the tennis ball, the hopping under my hand idle as the conversations from the green bench before the flowerbed, red bells of the fuchsia vivid behind them and some roses and gillyflowers, the earth around the roots of everything speckled with sea shells, overhead the weathered roughcast of the wall of the house (Strandhill, the Sea, 39).

Such a syntax is reminiscent of stage-directions and is thus more evocative of drama than of the beginning of a short story. Here again, the verbal ellipsis is twinned with a whole network of words related to greyness and enclosure (“grey”, “idle”, “weathered”, “wall”). Likewise, the opening sentence of “The Recruiting Officer” uses similar words, such as “wall”, “coal”, “mountains”, adjectives such as “low” and “small” (“The Recruiting Officer”, 100). Another sentence, taken from “Strandhill, the Sea”, reads:

Even the strand, reached in good weather, the mile downhill accomplished, the mile home uphill yet out of mind, and in possession of strand of Strandhill, long and level for miles, the cannon on its rotting initial-covered carriage pointed towards the Atlantic as if on guard over the two ice-cream parlours; women at the tideline, with a child in one hand and skirt held tight between thighs with the other, whinnying at each spent rush of water at their feet before it curled in a brown backwash round their heels; all this time envy of the buckets of beach ball of others to gladden a royal stay (“Strandhill, the Sea”, 40).
Routine and boredom are paralleled with verbal ellipsis, as if the sentence required a verb to be endowed with animation and colour. This weariness is equally strengthened by the monosyllabic monotony or by the labial alliterations of the following phrases: “long and level... buckets of beach ball... brown backwash...” or “covered carriage”. These elliptic structures illustrate the protagonists’ deprivation and frustration and really prove to be the servants of description. Indeed, when they mirror the semantic fields of these sentences, they clearly disclose the narrator’s growing boredom. This pressure is syntactically reflected by rhythm with increasing odd numbers: “reached in good weather” (5 syllables), “the mile downhill accomplished” (7 syllables), “the mile home uphill yet out of mind” (9 syllables) stress the rising anguish of the lonely narrator but also the growing overall weariness due to depressing weather conditions. As for the verbal ellipsis of the opening sentence of the story entitled “The Recruiting Officer”, it not only discloses the narrator’s fatigue and sadness, but also his carelessness once again: “a feeling that any one thing in this life is almost as worthwhile doing as any other” (“The Recruiting Officer”, 100). In these stories, the ellipsis of the very first sentence heralds the protagonist’s frustration which develops in the rest of the text, particularly through the character’s inner thoughts. Frustration is rampant in McGahern’s fiction.

“The Recruiting Officer” and “The Wine Breath” are the stories of frustration par excellence. Both protagonists often resort to the unreal, imaginary worlds of memories and of dreams, precisely because they are frustrated. The vacuity which is at the heart of their existence is mirrored by the verbal ellipsis in the first sentence of each story. These two protagonists - a teacher and a priest – are devoid of ambition, affection, love or any other dynamic impulse. This failure is mirrored by the ellipsis of the verb, which can be considered as the mainspring of the sentence, hence an overall feeling of Joycean paralysis.

As a process of economy, ellipsis is characteristic of the short story - a laconic literary genre. The intrigue of the story has no time to waste in digressions, in commentaries and must always go straight to the point. The story is based on the unsaid, on the ellipsis, on the monologue, on words which remain in abeyance, hushed, unspoken or unheard. Maybe this is why the short story is not read as much as the novel. As it is characterized by frustration, by economy, the genre can be in turn frustrating for the reader. Moreover, the implicit incites the story reader to play an active part, to suggest conjectures and to provide answers to the questions raised by the failing text. The reader has to fill in the missing import. For example, the implicit meaning of the story entitled “The Wine Breath” is not obvious. Shall we speak of semantic ellipsis then? If the protagonist proves to be a social misfit, is it not due to his drinking too much, as it may be suggested by the title of the story which is a quotation from a poem by W.B.Yeats “All Souls'Night”? Indeed, why should a story in which wine is hardly mentioned be entitled “The Wine Breath”? Is it not an implicit way to call attention to a typical behaviour among the clerics in McGahern’s fiction? If the protagonist never speaks to anyone, would it not be to avoid all form of contact for fear that his interlocutors should laugh at his “wine breath”?

Similarly, in other stories with titles such as “Why We’re Here” or “Coming into his Kingdom”, to whom do the different pronouns refer? Given that the narrative is carefully blurred and covered with secrets and mysteries, the reader of McGahern’s short stories has numerous questions which remain unanswered. As Camus wrote in his essay Le Mythe de Sisyphe: “La véritable œuvre d’art est toujours à la mesure humaine. Elle est
essentiellement celle qui dit “moins”". It is not by chance if, in McGahern’s art of fiction, characters in novels have names whereas short story characters may not have.

Anonymity is appropriate to the short story insofar as the economic concentration of the genre and its brevity prevent the reader from developing a process of identification. Besides, the story character may not be imagined since, as Yves Baudelle has explained: “l’espace exigu de la nouvelle permet sans difficulté de tenir la longueur avec un appellatif qui ne soit pas onomastique”¹. Anonymity is also an elliptic process which can be justified according to verisimilitude insofar as anonymity lays stress on the ordinariness of characters, and implies that any character could be any one of us. The character is endowed with a neutral, impersonal aspect. The lack of denomination gives credibility to characters who are close to strangers anyone can meet in Dublin streets. This may be why the name is often replaced with the most neutral, the most tenuous denomination, the personal pronoun “he” or “she” (“Along the Edges”, “Gold Watch”, “Parachutes”). It does not refer to any preceding name except sometimes a vague, general noun, such as “the man” or “the woman” (“Along the Edges”, “Peaches”). In the couples of the second generation, the man and the woman are almost always anonymous, maybe to emphasize the short duration of their love affairs. These characters remain concealed in their anonymity to escape from the reader’s inquisitiveness, but also from that of the other characters: “They met in bars, changing only when they became known to the barmen or regulars and in danger of losing their anonymity” (“Bank Holiday”, 352). With this process, the narrative may aim at breaking with Irish country life where everyone knows everybody. In the 50s, McGahern’s generation wanted to break free from the burden of countryside gossip and the lack of anonymity. For his generation, city life meant freedom. The anonymous characters in McGahern’s stories are precisely city-dwellers, whereas the first generation of fictional characters, who live in the countryside, bear names. Significantly, in the eighteen stories which are told by first-person narrators, the latter remain anonymous. Both character and narrator conceal their identities and disappear behind masks. Their names are eclipsed by mere personal pronouns.

The eclipse is more explicit than the ellipsis because it says something even if it partly masks speech. The eclipse, like a silent word, avoids direct expression by implying it. This figure of speech, or figure of silence, is eloquent interruption. It is the process of reticence applied on a larger scale. The reader has to interpret the allusions of the text to understand it. The narrative remains below its meaning and appeals to the reader’s sense of cooperation.

Narrative silences are meaningful. For example, “The Key”, a story about a father who pretends to be ill, shows undeniable dramatic irony, which is often frequent in short stories because it is concise, laconic, intermittent. In this story, the narrator connives with the reader to cover reality with silence at the young character’s expense: the father is not ill. Appearance is illusive. The narrative never denounces the cheat, even if it maintains the principle of connivance through sentences like “he remembered (...) that he was ill” (51). The whole story is based on the implicit insofar as the father’s pretence is always suggested without being disclosed to other characters. The father’s imaginary illness is narrated through the description of domestic events. A subnarrative is underlying description, goes with the narrative in a minor key, inserts it in overall silence, like a lake which shows the inverted picture of the landscape it reflects. Likewise, the narrative mentions an ill man, the implicit turns him into a hypochondriac. The material and psychological worlds crisscross each other by a constant to-and-fro.
movement between appearance and reality. As a consequence, the conversations between father and son are completely empty and delusive because they are based on a lie. The anguished, misled boy keeps denying what he considers as reality: “but I don’t want you to die” (“The Key”, 52). The son, whose young age accounts for his naivety and misunderstanding, cannot decipher the truth and catch the concealed meaning of the event. Not only is the syntax affected by the eclipse but the whole story is. This process is often applied when the narrator is a child. Unlike the adult reader, who can, as we say, “read between the lines” and perceive what the implicit means, the young narrator is content with telling what he witnesses without realizing that reader and author connive at his own expense. He is frustrated by a lack of explanations.

On the scale of a sentence, this process is called reticence. The sentence then suggests more than it says. It starts with a few words which are interrupted by a break, like a moment’s hesitation, then the second part of the sentence is ellipsed. The predicate which sometimes goes on with digressions is interrupted by what is called abrupt in rhetorics. For example, the sentence: “imagining we were getting more out of it than had been intended, and afterwards... Where were we to go” (“Sierra Leone”, 326). The word is hushed, repressed, held back and replaced by aposiopesis, that is a series of dots, as in the following sentence: “If there were an instrument like radar... but that might show her half-stripped” (“Parachutes”, 226). In this example, the conjunction “but” exposes the semantic break. This link word, which is both a transition and an opening to the second clause, inserts an objection, a restriction to the idea mentioned in the first clause and perfectly mirrors this figure of speech. Reticence is half way between silence and allusion. It is both a syntactic break and semantic failure. The abrupt is often found in sentences which concern a daydreaming character who seems to be waking up, to prevent himself from going deeper into his imaginative process and to come back to the rational world of his reality.

The end of the first clause is eclipsed by the second one, which, most of the time, has nothing to do with it. This is often justified by the speaker’s decency or other psychological reasons, unless it is a symptom of depression, as Julia Kristeva puts it: “Rappelez-vous la parole du déprimé... Dans l’impossibilité d’enchaîner, la phrase s’interrompt, s’êpuise, s’arrête. Les syntagmes mêmes ne parviennent pas à se formuler”6. Silence and despair together with the characters’ frustration seem to form a vicious circle with the intertwining relations of reflexivity and osmosis they share and exchange. Like an eclipse, reticence conceals the unpleasant, disgusting truth. For instance, once again, reticence is often used in sentences concerning sex. It mirrors the embarrassment of the Spaniards when the latter ask if they have to use condoms or not: “With the... or without?” (The Beginning of an Idea, 125). Sex is unmentionable: “We’ve often... many times before” (“Along the Edges”, 193). The dots, which are breaks in conversations, are here suggestive of the speaker’s embarrassment. The implicit is significant, if not eloquent, insofar as it suggests more than any message. “And there are the two rooms...” he was beginning to say when she came into his arms and sealed his lips” (“Bank Holiday”, 152). Action replaces dialogue and supersedes it. It puts an end to uneasiness.

It must be noticed that “Hiberno-English”, English spoken in Ireland, may be more implicit than any other kind of English in the world because its syntax is shortened. For example, “have” is often constructed as an auxiliary where a do-construction would be expected: “Have you any idea...?” (“Korea”, 55) instead of: “Do you have any idea...?”. Similarly, other sentences exemplify such omissions: “she’ll not want » (“All Sorts of
Impossible Things”, 144) instead of « she'll not want to”, “of a sudden” (“Along the Edges”, 190) for “all of a sudden”. By the same token, the proverb “one man's meat is another man's poison” is partly, deliberately cut out by “well, what's one man's poison” (“Swallows”, 206), because it is supposed to be well-known and spontaneously completed. Shortening traditional sayings mirrors oral speech - some kind of light expression which makes itself understood with as few words as possible.

Minimal use for maximal understanding is also to be noticed in these shortened figures which keep only the first letter. Indeed, this desire to abbreviate, which is in keeping with the genre of the short-story, can be found in the modern use of acronyms, these letters whose meanings sometimes remain obscure. The I.N.T.O. (Irish National Teachers' Organization) mentioned in “Crossing the Line” (296), G.P.O. (General Post Office) (“Parachutes”, 228), C.W.A. (Catholic Workers' Association) (“Swallows”, 209) perfectly illustrate “what says least to mean most”. The narrative also searches to cut it short. Nevertheless, will McGahern’s average reader be able to decipher what INTO or CWA stand for? If it is not the case, the use of acronyms would be here somewhat abstruse, esoteric, fraught with secrecy which would arouse some kind of legitimate irritation among the uninitiated. A neophyte, a foreign narratee, unfamiliar with Irish civilization, could not be able to complete the message, to interpret the code.

The use of these capital letters aims at transcribing realistic transparency and reflects the scores of abbreviations which can be heard and seen in all the fields of our western societies. It must be underlined that acronyms are much more numerous in McGahern's fiction published in the 1990s, whereas they were uncommon in the 1970s. The INTO, the CWA do exist and are usually known through the medium of abbreviations, which are faithfully transcribed by the text.

The understatement or euphemism are not as obscure as the acronym but they also offer a whole range of possible interpretations. They are also minimizing processes which strive to soften, to ease, to tone down painful realities. Once again, most of the time such figures of speech can be noticed when death is mentioned: “they never talked other than glancingly of the dead man” (“The Creatures of the Earth”, 226). Man conceals death to reassure himself. The narrative uses this process through neutral subjects. Death is alluded to in “one summer the brown rocking chair was empty” (“The Country Funeral”, 380). Objects are no longer used for lack of a user: “The chair was still imperceptibly rocking before the window, but the book had fallen, and when she called there was no answer. An intense stillness was in the room. Even the spaces between the beech trees down the rich avenue seemed to gaze back in their emptiness, and she ran shouting for help to the yard” (“Eddie Mac”, 283).

Death is muffled, softened and implied through words such as “fallen”, “no”, “stillness”, “emptiness”. Its cruelty, its brutality are silenced. These euphemistic terms are paralleled with the beech trees among which the empty space of death circulates. In a subtle, skilful sentence, semantic emptiness uses implicit death as a foil. The emptiness between words and beech trees is quite significant. Likewise, “the formal heart of the house, perhaps the heart of the house itself, stopped with Mrs Kirkwood” (“Eddie Mac”, 283) exemplifies the understatement and its implicit meaning. The understatement is a spiritual process of economy. It says very little to suggest a lot. This figure is tinged with clever delicacy and allusive shrewdness. It expresses as much as possible by using the least possible. It proves to be much more emotional than it first appears.
This implicit emotion is recurrent in McGahern’s fiction which always shows great restraint, a high sense of decency. The narrative aims at handling the reader’s sensitivity carefully in the use of such figures. The implicit only shows a glimpse of truth, the impact of which is stronger than if it were completely disclosed. “Things felt but left unstated have value”, according to Valerie Shaw. As the saying goes, some things are better left unsaid. As a result, it is sometimes preferable to imply the truth or to hush it and to resort to the golden rule of silence. Anyway, all texts end in silence, which is the ultimate end of any speech. Perhaps there lies the meaning of Seamus Heaney’s words: “whatever you say, say nothing”.

NOTES

ABSTRACTS
"Only a fool tells everything" déclare un personnage d’un roman de John McGahern (The Barracks), impliquant ainsi l’intelligence des figures de l’ellipse, de l’implicite, de la dissimulation. Fréquents dans l’oeuvre de John McGahern, ces modes d’expression sont porteurs d’un principe d’économie repérable de façon :
- typographique, à travers l’espace blanc entre deux phrases, deux paragraphes, deux chapitres ou deux nouvelles,
- syntaxique, avec l’ellipse verbale, l’anonymat des personnages, la réticence, l’abruption,
- stylistique, enfin, par le biais de la litote ou l’acronymie.
Nous parlerons d’ellipse lorsqu’il s’agit d’une omission totale - d’un terme, d’un groupe de mots, d’un nom propre - et d’éclipse lorsque nous avons affaire à une occultation partielle, une semi-obscrité ou un clair-obscur, c’est-à-dire un message défaillant, conservant dans l’ombre du non-dit un élément permettant une limpide transparence. Chacun de ces procédés souligne l’implicite à sa façon et incite le lecteur à jouer un rôle actif.
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Bertrand Cardin is a lecturer at the University of Caen, France. He wrote a Ph.D thesis entitled: “Emptiness in John McGahern’s short-stories” (which has not been translated into English so far). He has published articles about John McGahern’s works, but also about other contemporary Irish novelists and short-story writers, such as Anne Enright, Bernard MacLaverty, Dermot Bolger, Frank McCourt, etc.