

Ellipsis, Narrative Gaps, and Their Functions in Contemporary British Poetry: A Narratological Approach

Abstract:

The narratological understanding of ellipsis is defined as a gap in the presentation of a narrative's *histoire*. The absence of extensive consideration of verse in narratological studies is argued. It is suggested that such an absence is surprising, as narrative and verse constantly intersect. The work of several contemporary British poets is discussed in terms of their employment of narrative ellipsis. A provisional typology of ellipsis in verse and functions for such ellipsis are put forward. It is hypothesised that this device is widespread in verse, and that examination of poetry using this and other narratological terms will prove fruitful.

Keywords: ellipsis, narratology, verse, contemporary British poetry

This essay has four parts. In the first, I discuss the meaning of the term ellipsis within modern narratological studies. Second, I consider the relative scarcity of consideration of poetry within narratology. (The scarcity of narratological-based commentary within poetry studies is even more glaring, although I do not discuss this¹.) Third, I look at the presence of different kinds of ellipsis in some contemporary British verse, and discuss some of the functions of those ellipses. Fourth, I discuss the possible functions of ellipsis within the poems I discuss, and I suggest an area of future research.

1

William Hughes Mearns's poem "Antigonish" (1899) begins thus:

As I was going up the stair
I met a man who wasn't there!
He wasn't there again today,
Oh how I wish he'd go away².

¹ Peter Hühn and Jörg Schönert make this absence clear when they point out that they aim to add precision and clarity to "die Methodologie der Lyrik-Analyse, der es notorisch an theoretischen Begründungen mangelt" (the methodology of lyric-poetry analysis, which notoriously lacks theoretical bases" ("Einleitung", Jörg Schönert, Peter Hühn, and Malte Stein, *Lyrik und Narratologie: Text-Analysen zu deutschsprachigen Gedichten vom 16. Bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 2007, p. 3).

² For the complete text see: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/antigonish-i-met-a-man-who-wasnt-there>

Mearns's account of a peculiar non-meeting is suggestive of wide range of experience. However, one way to understand it, is as detailing an encounter with an ellipsis.

Ellipsis is a fundamental category and analytic tool within narratology. The concept of a gap in a narrative account is connected with Roman Ingarden's term *Unbestimmtheitsstelle* (point of indeterminacy) and with Wolfgang Iser's term *Leerstelle* (semantic gap)³. The concept points to the obvious fact that no narrative is coterminous with the events it recounts; things always get missed out. In *Discours du récit* (1972), Gérard Genette devotes a whole subsection to ellipsis, distinguishing among different types of ellipsis – *l'ellipse explicite*, *l'ellipse implicite*, and *l'ellipse purement hypothétique*⁴. While Franz K. Stanzel does not use the term in *Theorie des Erzählens* (1979), he does consider the Ingardian category of *Unbestimmtheitsstelle* and his own category of *Selektion der dargestellten Wirklichkeit*, which are analogous to ellipsis⁵. H. Porter Abbott does not use the term as such, but writes of gaps as something very similar – as “The inevitable voids, large or small, in any narrative that the reader is called upon to fill from his or her experience or imagination”⁶.

Such voids are widely discussed by the central theoreticians of narratology. Gerald Prince writes of the ellipsis as the “nonnarrated”⁷. Mieke Bal comments on the ellipsis thus: “An ellipsis cannot be perceived [...] nothing is indicated in the story about the amount of fabula-time involved. If nothing is indicated, we cannot know what should have been indicated either. All we can do, sometimes, is logically deduce [...] that something has been omitted”⁸. Monika Fludernik also uses the term to indicate “when something that occurs in the fictional world is not mentioned at all on the level of narrative discourse”. “In point of fact”, she continues, “ellipsis is just the most extreme form of speeding up, which is also highly selective”⁹. Teresa Bridgman sums ellipsis up most succinctly “(zero textual space, variable story time)”¹⁰. It is these absences in narrative that I wish to discuss in the third section of my essay.

³ For discussion of Ingarden's and Iser's role in the formulation of the concept of ellipsis, see: Eva Müller-Zettelmann, “Poetry, Narratology, Meta-cognition”, in: *Current Trends in Narratology*, ed. G. Olson, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter 2011, pp. 240–241. In what follows I do not distinguish between ellipsis and narrative gap. This is because any theoretical difference is not germane to my essay.

⁴ Gérard Genette, *Discours du récit: Essai du mode*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2007, pp. 104–106.

⁵ Franz K. Stanzel, *Theorie des Erzählens*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht 2001, p. 85, 132, 149, 151, 158–161, 163, 173, 205, 220, 222.

⁶ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2008, p. 234.

⁷ For a discussion of Prince's terminology, see: Donald E. Hardy, “Towards a Stylistic Typology of Narrative Gaps: Knowledge Gapping in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction”, *Language and Literature* 2005, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 363–365.

⁸ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press 1985, p. 101.

⁹ Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, trans. P. Häusler-Greenfield and M. Fludernik, London and New York: Routledge 2009, p. 33.

¹⁰ Teresa Bridgman, “Time and Space”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. D. Herman, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2007, p. 58. See also: Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck, *Handbook of Narrative Analysis*, Lincoln, Nebraska and London: University of Nebraska Press 2001, p. 61.

2

Verse gets a raw deal from narratologists. As far as I can see, Genette, Stanzel, and Abbott do not discuss poetry at all in their far-ranging and illuminating studies of narrative. Indeed, Eva Müller-Zettelmann argues that “Poetry is one of the few literary modes perceived to be situated outside the ever-widening narrative realm”. She looks at the work of Manfred Jahn and Werner Wolf and points out how poetry is banished to a field of non-narrative or simply excluded from any consideration, while even instrumental music is allocated a degree of narrativity (by Wolf)¹¹. A glance at the topics considered in James Phelan’s and Peter J. Rabinowitz’s *A Companion to Narrative Theory* confirms this observation. Part IV of this collection considers narrative in law, cinema, opera, music, and performance, but not in poetry¹². As Müller-Zettelmann remarks: “Within narratology, the genre of poetry has had an important function to fulfil: in a system indebted to the figure of antithetical binarism, poetry has always performed the role of the other”¹³. Such an argument is confirmed by Patrick Colm Hogan. He comments that “In particular, lyric poems are commonly set off against narrative, opposed to it”¹⁴. In an essay entitled “The Unnaturalness of Narrative Poetry”, Brian McHale does something to combat this occlusion, while noting how it has been the norm within narratological studies¹⁵.

A major exception to this neglect lies in recent work by Peter Hühn and those scholars connected with him. However, Hühn and Jörg Schönert certainly acknowledge the innovative nature of their undertaking in bringing narratology to poetry¹⁶. A more recent endeavor to relate narratological concepts to the analysis and study of lyric verse is Hühn’s *Facing Loss and Death: Narrative and Eventfulness in Lyric Poetry*¹⁷. This major study offers theoretical and concrete justifications for the valuable contributions that narratology can offer the analysis and interpretation of verse. My essay, however, offers a somewhat different approach to poetry than does that of Hühn and his co-authors. First, they limit their purview to certain kinds of lyric verse (those dealing with loss and mourning). Second, they operate with a restricted notion of the event in lyric poetry (as one exemplifying an unexpected change, and a psychological-emotional one

¹¹ Müller-Zettelmann, op. cit., p. 232, 233–236.

¹² *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. J. Phelan and P. J. Rabinowitz, Malden, Massachusetts, and Oxford Blackwell 2005, pp. 413–512.

¹³ Müller-Zettelmann, op. cit., p. 234.

¹⁴ Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotions*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2013, p. 152.

¹⁵ Brian McHale, “The Unnaturalness of Narrative Poetry”, in: *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, ed. J. Alber, H. Skov Nielsen, and B. Richardson, Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State UP 2013, pp. 199–222. One should also note that Müller-Zettelmann argues that writers on poetry could take lessons from narratologists (op. cit., pp. 233–234).

¹⁶ Schönert, Hühn, and Stein, op. cit., p. 1.

¹⁷ Peter Hühn (with contributions by Britta Goerke, Halina du Plooy, and Stefan Schenk-Haupt), *Facing Loss and Death: Narrative and Eventfulness in Lyric Poetry*, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter 2016.

at that)¹⁸. The result of the latter focus (of which I am skeptical) is that they, thus, disqualify a great deal of what would certainly be widely classed as contemporary lyric verse. Third, they largely address pre-modern and pre-contemporary poetry (the work of Seamus Heaney and Sylvia Plath is their contemporary *terminus ad quem*). Fourth, although they do mention omissions and gaps in the narrative of the lyric, they do so only in passing¹⁹. However, this study and Hühn's and Roy Sommer's earlier essay "Narrative in Poetry and Drama" are ground-breaking and offer much for the student of contemporary verse²⁰.

Indeed, many narratologists' relative neglect of poetry is clearly blinkered²¹. It is so for three reasons. First, a great deal of poetry in the British tradition (to which I will restrict myself, although one could easily draw on other national traditions) is narrative poetry. It is not hard to find examples: the anonymous ballads that are central to English-language medieval verse, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667/1674), John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805/1850), Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859–1885), T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), John Betjeman's *Summoned by the Bells* (1960), and Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* (1991)²².

Second, there is a great deal of narrative in a great deal of poetry usually classed as non-narrative, that is, classified as lyric verse. Take Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" (1818), for example²³. The speaker meets someone (narrative 1), that is a "traveler from an antique land" who tells a tale (narrative 2) of seeing in the desert a ruined statue, the face of which seems to speak of power, grandeur, and cruelty. While a narrative (narrative 3) of imperial pride and fall is not given, it is implicit in the account²⁴. Take, as another example, Roy Campbell's great Second-World-War elegy "One Transport Lost" (1946). As this poem about the sinking of a troop ship of the coast of Africa may be less familiar to some, I quote two stanzas here.

Dashing the bulkheads red with slaughter,
In the steep wash that swept the hold,
Men, corpses, kitbags, blood, and water,
Colliding and commingling rolled.

¹⁸ Hühn, op. cit., p. 1, 4.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁰ Peter Hühn and Roy Sommer, "Narration in Poetry and Drama", *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. P. Hühn, J. Pier, W. Schmidt, and J. Schönert, Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter 2009, pp. 228–241.

²¹ Drawing on an international array of examples, Hogan points out that lyric texts are frequently embedded in narrative ones (op. cit., pp. 156–160). However, this conjunction of the lyric and the narrative is not my concern in this essay.

²² McHale discusses others (op. cit., pp. 207–221). I am unhappy with Hühn's cavalier ignoring of narrative poetry and bracketing it off from lyric verse. See, for example: Hühn and Sommer, op. cit., p. 228. Much work needs to be done in discussing the borders of lyric and narrative verse. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Kay's *The Adoption Papers* immediately present themselves as texts that fuse narrative and lyric verse.

²³ It seems redundant to cite a source for such a well-known and widely available poem.

²⁴ In Hühn's terms, sequencing and mediation are well-exemplified here, but Shelley's poem is rarely seen as narrative, and it does not manifest the kind of psychological-emotional change that Hühn argues is necessary for lyric classification. See Hühn, *Facing Loss ...*, op. cit., pp. 1–2.

Some clung, like flies, in fear and wonder,
Clutched to the crossbeams, out of reach,
Till sprayed from thence by jets of thunder
That spouted rumbling from the breach²⁵.

There is much else besides narrative taking place in that extract, but narrative for sure there is.

I am certainly not arguing that all poems are narrative poems, or even that all poems contain narrative elements (although I believe that the majority does). As an example of poem with virtually zero narrativity, let me quote Peter Riley's poem "30" from "Thirty Poems of Ten Lines" (1983).

One thing
always only

pen on table / gathered evening

one thing wished and
one thing worth it

seedfract / matchless / gathering light

heartbeknown²⁶.

It is hard to generate any narrative (event, sequencing) within that text (and hard to see any implied either).

However – and this is the third reason why narratologists should look at verse more – even if the degree of narrative in a poem is small, narrative is implied, suggested, and adumbrated in many poems. McHale addresses this in his discussion of Edmund Spenser's and William Shakespeare's treatments of the Venus and Adonis material. Both poets preserve "the narrative gap corresponding to Adonis's actual going", which "occurs offstage"²⁷. Müller-Zetzelmann discusses even larger ellipses, the lyric *histoire*, as she describes it, that is implied – she argues – by any brief lyric poem. (She writes, in fact, of "an average lyric poem", a designation to which one could take exception. However, I believe she is, in principle, quite right about the *histoire* adumbrated by the lyric in the majority of cases, although, as the example of Riley's poem indicates,

²⁵ Roy Campbell, *Selected Poems*, ed. P. Alexander, Oxford: Oxford University 1982, pp. 87–88.

²⁶ Peter Riley, *Passing Measures: A Collection of Poems*, Manchester: Carcanet 2000, p. 28.

²⁷ McHale, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

by no means all.) Müller-Zettelmann goes on to argue that an analysis of the basic story-discourse distinction would be of great use to those who discuss poetry²⁸.

Following from McHale's and Müller-Zettelmann's discussions, I suggest that ellipsis (or gap, or *Leerstelle*, or the unnarrated) is a strikingly useful (and underused) tool to employ when analysing and interpreting verse. As McHale points out, any discussion of narrative elements in verse must ultimately consider the interaction of those elements with the *differentia specifica* of verse, which elements, in his view, have to do with what he calls "segmentation", but which I would prefer to call technical features that are phonological and rhythmic as much as segmental²⁹. This goes, however, beyond the remit of this essay. Indeed, I am unaware of any substantial attempt in narratology or poetry studies to activate McHale's observation³⁰.

3

In this part of my essay, I discuss poems by several contemporary British poets in respect of the use of ellipsis. The choice of texts is, for sure, not entirely arbitrary. I have chosen texts that contain ellipses, that contain or strongly imply narrative, and that illustrate what I designate as two main types of ellipsis, and, in addition, show gradations within that type of ellipsis. The two main types of ellipsis are – to employ and adapt Genette's terminology – explicit ellipsis and implicit ellipsis. That is, respectively, a gap clearly signalled in the text, and one that is only implied³¹.

A text that clearly invites consideration in terms of explicit ellipsis is Anne Stevenson's *Correspondences: A Family History in Letters* (1974). *Correspondences* is a history of the Chandler-Boyd family from Vermont. In letters and other relevant documents, the poem (or the ensemble of poems and documents in prose) presents the experiences of several members of the family from the 1820s through the 1970s. *Correspondences* contains the utterances, in various forms, of a wide range of family members, from Adam Ezekiel Chandler, Calvinist minister, in the 1820s, to Nick Arbeiter, rebellious son of Ruth Chandler Boyd, in 1968. It presents a host of figures from 150 years of U.S. and family history, and especially worthy of note is its focus on women's voices³². One poem that is clearly marked by ellipsis is "Fragments: Mrs Reuben Chandler Writes to Her Husband During a Cholera Epidemic", dated August 1849. Its four verse paragraphs are laid out as fragments of a letter written in a substantially destroyed journal. For example, the third stanza reads thus:

²⁸ Müller-Zettelmann, op. cit., p. 238–240, 244. See also: Hühn and Sommer, op. cit., p. 233. These authors relate the presence of ellipsis and gaps in verse to cognitive schemata that underlie a writer's and reader's interaction with a text.

²⁹ McHale, op. cit., p. 201. Hühn calls this "over-structuring of language". See *Facing Loss ...*, op. cit., p. 5.

³⁰ It is not even listed among topics for further investigation in Hühn and Sommer, op. cit. p. 238.

³¹ Genette, op. cit., pp. 104–106. In fact, it could be argued that what I designate as explicit ellipsis could also be seen as purely hypothetical ellipsis, because in a manner analogous to that indicated by Genette, the explicit ellipses I point to are filled in or recuperated by adjacent and related textual material, similar to the analepses that Genette mentions.

³² I have written about phonosemantic aspects of this text elsewhere. See: David Malcolm, "It is America I can't contain': Poetry and Identity in Anne Stevenson's *Correspondences*", *Brno Studies in English* 2010, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 165–173.

(Third page)

arrived safely in New Orleans but
embark. We are all in quarantine
might be better, but Belle is
all day by her bedside. Doctor
plague and gives me no hope
pray for survival.

(page torn)³⁵.

The ellipses are explicit here. Words, sentences, or paragraphs have been omitted, and although the reader can make reasonable guesses at what has been lost, these remain guesses. However, this fragmentary letter is framed by information offered by the editor (implied author?) of the entire collection that Marianne Chandler seems (even the editor is not sure) to have travelled to New Orleans without her husband's permission and got caught up in a cholera epidemic, which leads to her child's death. The further degeneration of the Chandlers' marriage and the complexities that brings for their children is explicitly indicated by subsequent letters from Reuben Chandler to his sons and from one son to Marianne³⁴. Thus, ellipses are present, but absence of information is largely recuperated elsewhere.

However, ellipses of a less remedied kind constitute a major part of the text of *Correspondences*. For example, Marianne Chandler's letter is dated 1849, and the next letter, her husband's, unofficially dissolving their marriage on his part, is dated 1855. What happened in between? This is the case with most of the poems in the sequence. Large narrative gaps yawn between letters and notes. Some are filled in; others are not. In addition, the reader largely encounters only one side of a correspondence. What were the answers to most of the letters? One cannot know. Finally, the texts are surrounded by different silences: that of many of the family members, laid out in the genealogy that starts the collection, who never speak, write letters, or keep journals; and that of incidental figures (for example, Black Beck, mentioned in Abigail Chandler's 1830 letter, or the "midnight Quakers" alluded to in Elizabeth Chandler Boyd's letter of 1838)³⁵. The observation, analysis, and interpretation of these and other ellipses must surely constitute a major part of any serious engagement with Stevenson's poem.

Alice Oswald's *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* (2011) flaunts its ellipses. The author writes of her "reckless dismissal of seven-eighths" of the *Iliad*³⁶. Her strategy is to remove much of the narrative material of Homer's text, and to present, rather, short laments for individual soldiers killed in the War, interwoven with pastoral similes that are

³⁵ Anne Stevenson, *Poems 1955–2005*, Tarsnet, Northumberland: Bloodaxe 2005, p. 214.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 215–218.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 192, 202, 208.

³⁶ Alice Oswald, *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad*, London: Faber and Faber 2011, p. 2.

congruent in diverse ways with the deaths died by the soldiers. The text is not deprived of narrative, but that narrative is greatly reduced, and is centred on individual deaths, and occurrences in the natural and human world not directly related to warfare as such. The quasi-non-narrative aspect of the text is signalled in the opening eight pages, which simply list in unadorned and unassimilated fashion the names of the dead. The similarity to a war memorial is evident. In the end, the poem has not embedded these deaths in any overarching, reassuring narrative, but leaves the mini-narratives of the dead, and the pastoral similes that capture and contextualize their deaths, somehow unaccommodated and unassimilated.

However, like many of the overt ellipses in *Correspondences*, those in *Memorial* are readily recuperable. After all, the reader has the Homeric original. Thus, Oswald's text lists the following names:

OINOMAOS
ASKALAPHOS
APHAREUS
THOON
ANTILOCHUS
DEIPUROS
PEISANDER³⁷.

In *Memorial*, these soldiers' deaths are not recounted. There is no realized narrativity, or a refusal of narrativity. But this silence gains force by the fact that it is a lacuna that can be filled by reference to *Iliad* XIII (in the case of all except Antilochus, who dies outside the scope of the *Iliad*, in the later stages of the Trojan War). It is not that the soldiers' deaths and their circumstances are not known; this text refuses narrative for its own purposes³⁸.

Implicit ellipsis is extremely common in predominantly lyric poems (which contain narrative elements), but is not usually discussed in analysis of such verse³⁹. A reconstruction of what Müller-Zetzelmann calls the "lyric *histoire*" may be hard (because of the brevity of the text in question or because of its density of metaphor), but it is a fruitful undertaking⁴⁰. For example, James Fenton concludes his collection *Yellow Tulips: Poems 1968–2011*, with a piece of recent work entitled "Rain".

³⁷ Oswald, *Ibidem*, pp. 49–50

³⁸ In relation to the discussion of the recuperated and recuperable ellipsis, one can note that Carol Ann Duffy in *The World's Wife* (1999) reverses this process. Frequently, in the poems in this collection, Duffy gives voice to figures that are elided and to events that are not narrated in traditional versions of her story materials, for example in "Mrs Midas" or "Pygmalion's Bride". See: Carol Ann Duffy, *The World's Wife*, London: Picador 1999, pp. 11–13, 51–52.

³⁹ It is difficult to prove an absence. This is, however, my hypothesis.

⁴⁰ Müller-Zetzelmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 240–243.

The sweet rain falls on the sea
Far from the land.
They stretch a torn sail taut between torn hands
To fill the pail.
They turn their channelled faces to the sky
And the sweet rain runs in their eyes
And on the channelled sea⁴¹.

This poem achieves its effects by many means, but one of them is ellipsis. It teases powerful resonances out of modest moments and means. Rain falls on the sea and on some seafarers. How many seafarers are there? Where is the boat? It is distant from land, but how distant? When is this happening – now, or long in the past? Where are the voyagers going? They have “torn” hands and “channelled” faces. Their sail is “torn” and they collect water in a pail. Are they shipwrecked? Are they lost? Are they fleeing something? The situation, whatever it is, seems bad. The rain that falls on them is “sweet”. This is repeated twice. It brings some kind of relief, some hope of survival; it means the voyage can continue. The mariners’ faces are channelled, and so is the sea. Is it torn by the wind? Is it full of dangerous currents? Is a heavy swell beginning?

These questions cannot be answered, which is surely the point. The speaker offers little information, although he presumably does know who the voyagers are, where they are going, and what chances they have. On one level, their trip, in a poem published in 2012, has to strike echoes of the situation of refugees fleeing on small boats from cataclysm and brutality. The reader can decide whom to refer these seafarers to. Cubans? Vietnamese? Syrians? Somalis? But on another level, the crucial gaps universalize the situation. Today’s refugees have many antecedents. The narrative reticence about outcome is also meaning bearing. Here as then there is no guide, and not much promise of success, only the “sweet rain” that can keep you going a little longer over a dangerous sea.

Mimi Khalvati’s poem “Ghazal: The Servant” (2007) draws sinister meanings out of ellipsis.

Ma’ mad, hurry, water the rose.
Blessed is the English one that grows
 out in the rain.

Water is scarce, blood not so.
Blood is the open drain that flows
 out in the rain.

⁴¹ James Fenton, *Yellow Tulips: Poems 1968–2011*, London: Faber and Faber 2012, p. 164.

Bring in the lamp, the olive's flame.
Pity the crippled flame that blows
out in the rain.

Where are the children? What is the time?
Time is the terror curfew throws
out in the rain.

Hurry, Ma'mad, home to your child.
Wherever my namesake, Maryam, goes
out in the rain⁴².

What is elided in this poem is what generates unease. The text is addressed to "Ma'mad" (the informal Persian for Mohammed). The speaker refers to herself (such reference is traditional in the largely Persian form of the ghazal) as "Maryam". What is their relationship? Who is the other Maryam, the speaker's "namesake"? The speaker is in some distress. There is a curfew. There is blood on the streets. The addressee is delayed. Children are missing. But this is a highly elliptical poem. The context and its outcome are unknown (an inconclusive quality that contrasts with the text's extreme regularity – although it is, again disturbingly, not entirely regular). The poem's focus is on uncertainty, danger, and betrayal which is not, despite the non-English form and presumably non-English locale, not exotic, but is part of universal human experience. Elision of *histoire* and approximate attempts to reconstruct it are quite crucial to the meaning and effect of the poem.

Like Oswald's *Memorial*, John Burnside's sequence of twelve poems "Black Cat Bone" flaunts its elisions⁴³. The author has described it as a "murder ballad"⁴⁴, and it has the enigmatic gaps (and more) of a traditional ballad, although it observes little of the metrical regularity of such ballads. Much happens, but an overriding narrative of sorts has to be pieced together from fleeting allusions, metaphorical renditions of experiences, and empty spaces. There is birth, there is a mother's death, there is song, there is wildness, there is passion, there is jealousy, there is murder, there is awakening. But the deliberate elision of crucial linking events is central to the poem's meaning. What this is can only be essayed without a close examination of technical features of the texts, but suggestions can be made. The nameless figures and landscapes are universalised. The events themselves are not this sequence's predominant concerns, but rather response, imagination, sensation. The very difficulty for the reader of understanding what has happened reflects the central figure's own confusions about what is going on. One is plunged into a not fully narrated world, and that is truly frightening.

⁴² Mimi Khalvati, *Child: New and Selected Poems 1991–2011*, Manchester: Carcanet 2011, p. 21.

⁴³ John Burnside, *Black Cat Bone*, London: Cape 2011, pp. 27–43.

⁴⁴ John Burnside, "'...really interesting stuff happens on the borderlines...' – An Interview with Wolfgang Görtschacher and David Malcolm", *Poetry Salzburg Review* 2016, vol. 29, p. 8.

One of the most celebrated enigmatic poems by a mistress of enigma and ellipsis is Stevie Smith's "Croft" (1942)⁴⁵. The narrative gaps that surround these four lines cry out for filling.

Aloft,
In the loft,
Sits Croft;
He is soft.

One can only ask questions that the exiguous textual material prompts. How did Croft get into the loft? Can he leave? What does it mean to say that he is "soft"? Soft in the head? Soft on someone? Soft in a hard world? Soft of body? And who is Croft? (This last is a question that is complicated by Smith's illustration that goes with "Croft". The figure in the line drawing fills a rectangular box, which is unusual in Smith's drawings. His arms are grasping his elbows, as if he were containing himself. He has his legs crossed. He is wearing a flowery frock⁴⁶.) This is a poem that achieves its disruptive and disturbing effect, *inter alia*, through the absence of narrative, the elision of surrounding *histoire*.

4

The argument put forward in this essay is that the application of a narratological concept – in this case, the ellipsis – in the analysis of verse is a fruitful undertaking. This is so because narrative and poetry, even narrative and lyric verse, are not alien to each other. Much verse (most verse?) is either narrative verse or contains bigger or smaller narrative elements. Furthermore, even short lyric pieces suggest narratives to a greater or lesser degree. After all, somehow Croft got into the loft. It is striking to note how much individual poems achieve through ellipsis, either explicitly signalled ones that can in some manner be recuperated, or implicit ones which invite the attentive reader to essay a recuperation (more or less difficult, but always important, even when – or especially when – impossible).

Based on an analysis and interpretation of the small selection of poems discussed above, the functions of ellipsis in verse are:

1. to offer a refusal of a stabilizing narrative that might domesticate the events, persons, and situations considered (Oswald, Khalvati, Burnside, Smith);
2. to achieve a foregrounding of the occluded (Stevenson – the lack of correspondence; Oswald – the unaccommodated waste of death);

⁴⁵ Stevie Smith, *Collected Poems and Drawings*, ed. W. May, London: Faber and Faber 2015, p. 218. It may be thought that the publication date puts Smith's poem somewhat outside the scope of the term contemporary. However, the period of Smith's greatest celebrity as a poet was in the 1960s and 1970s, when poems like "Croft" became very widely known. In fact, Smith is so contemporary that she remains enigmatic and disruptive even today.

⁴⁶ Like William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789/1794), Smith's poems should be read with their visual accompaniments. One of the services of May's 2015 edition is that he does so.

3. to put an emphasis on the unspeakable (unnarratable) complexity of things (Khalvati, Burnside);
 4. to render events universal (Fenton, Khalvati).
- This can, of course, only be a provisional list.

Another aspect of the provisional nature of the above discussion is that it invites the largely unanswered question: how does ellipsis interact with the technical features of verse (phonological, metrical, typographical aspects)? This is a question that would apply to any attempt to use narratological terms in the analysis and interpretation of poetry. It is surely a subject for extensive study and reflection in the future.

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