University of Amsterdam

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

A Sentence is a Half-Formed Thing: Observations on Iconic and Indexical (Morpho)Syntactic Blanks Inspired by Eimear McBride's Debut Novel

Fischer, O.

DOI
10.1163/9789004394520_004

Publication date
2019

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Meaningful Absence Across Arts and Media

License
Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care)

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Fischer, O. (2019). A Sentence is a Half-Formed Thing: Observations on Iconic and Indexical (Morpho)Syntactic Blanks Inspired by Eimear McBride's Debut Novel. In W. Wolf, N. Balestrini, & W. Bernhart (Eds.), *Meaningful Absence Across Arts and Media: The Significance of Missing Signifiers* (pp. 59-86). (Studies in Intermediality; Vol. 11). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004394520_004

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.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date:29 Feb 2024

CHAPTER 3

A Sentence is a Half-Formed Thing: Observations on Iconic and Indexical (Morpho)Syntactic Blanks Inspired by Eimear McBride's Debut Novel

Olga Fischer

The novel *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* by Eimear McBride is permeated by absences of different kinds, whose purpose is often quite hard to fathom. What made the author write in this way; what is the function of these gaps? The paper examines the iconic potential of the novel's gaps against the background of what is conventional in three different types of text: spoken vs. written language, adult vs. child language, and historical developments in prose. The most significant gaps in the novel are the use of null pronouns, the absence of function words, as well as the absence of nominal and verbal inflexions and obligatory verbal arguments. The gaps all refer in an iconic-indexical way to characteristics of early child language representing the lack of linguistic-cognitive planning in a traumatized woman who was prevented from growing up into a normally functional adult.

1 Introduction: On Significant Absence in Syntax

Form and Function

The focus of the present volume is on 'significant absence' at the level of signifiers. In other words, the absence should be clearly visible or audible for the viewer/reader/hearer, and presumably the absence should also be significant in the sense that the absence itself is not some performance error but has a definite function (see Wolf 2005 and the introduction to the present volume). Whether the absence indeed has a function depends, of course, on the interpreter. In order to make an interpretation more objective, we may consider a number of formal aspects concerning absence: (i) whether the absence is clearly noticeable because it flouts certain conventions; (ii) whether it is noticeable because it appears in a specific position in sentences (in the case of

© KONINKLIJKE BRILL NV, LEIDEN, 2019 | DOI:10.1163/9789004394520_004

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

syntax) or other parts of the text;[1] (iii) whether the type of absence occurs only once or more frequently in the text as a whole.

If the absence is likely to be functional, based as it is on (one or some of) these three formal characteristics, its function may frequently be iconic as well as indexical, and often indeed these two functions are combined (cf. Moser 2007: 338; see also Müller 2001, White 2007). In the following I propose to focus on these two functions. What would it mean for an absence to be iconic? Here again, there are various possibilities. One type of absence is more concrete; it involves the textual absence of a sign resembling the absence of the sign's referent in the external world. We could treat this as an 'imagic' icon. A simple example would be a clause like 'I wanted to throw a …', where the speaker is looking for something to throw but cannot find anything and hence leaves out the word in the text. The other, less concrete type of absence is more schematic or secondary: it refers not *directly* to an absent referent but uses another route. I will call this the 'indexical iconic' absence because here a recognition of similarity emerges through a recognition connected with some form of bodily behaviour. This relation would constitute an 'exophoric' one because it refers to something in the external world (see Nöth 2001). It is also possible, however, for an absent sign to be linked to other similar absent signs in *the world of the text* (this gives it an 'endophoric' quality). Such a repetition of absences highlights the absence, which then becomes meaningful either in itself or because it forms a contrast with other parts of the text where similar absences do *not* occur.

Since the topic of the present volume is 'absence', which as a negative 'thing' is difficult to make visual or audible, it is more likely that the iconic absence is at the same time indexical, that is, that it *refers to* rather than that it *resembles* an absence in the real world. As mentioned above, the indexical and iconic natures of signs in fact often merge. A well-known example is the footprint, which both resembles (icon) and is caused (index) by the presence of a foot (for the close relationship between 'iconic' and 'indexical thinking' see Deacon 1997, Anttila 2003, Hofstadter/Sander 2013). Similarity as well as causation, for instance, is present in articulatory phonetic icons, as Fónagy (2001) has shown in various studies. We intuitively ascribe meaning to sounds because their articulation is linked to movements of our body (this is clearly indexical because the sound is produced ['caused'] by the speech organs) and we then see or feel a resemblance between those bodily movements and the meaning of the

1 I will use 'text' here in the widest possible sense since this volume includes many different media; in other words, it may be a verbal text meant to be read or heard, a musical score or its performance, a film script or the film itself, etc.

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

sounds, which makes the indexical sign iconic. This is used with great effect by poets, in what we usually term sound symbolism or onomatopoeia, but the iconic effect may also be present in natural language. We can see it at work in language acquisition, in language evolution and change (e. g., when there is a choice between variants), and in folk etymology (see Fischer 2004). For example, because the front vowel [i] is produced in the front of the oral cavity with the tongue high up and forward and our lips close together, we tend to associate this sound with smallness and nearness (there are also acoustic correlatives, which make the sound 'feel' light and bright). Similarly the liquids [l] and [r], because of the way they are produced, are often associated with continuity and softness (there is no obstruction or friction in the mouth when they are produced), in contrast to plosives, which are said to have the opposite effect.

Having established that certain forms of absence can be iconically/indexically motivated, and hence may be meaningful, the next question is what constitutes an absence in *syntax*. That syntax may work iconically is well-known; dislocation in word order is often mentioned, the use of transitive vs. intransitive verbs, animate vs. inanimate subjects, etc. (cf. Fónagy 2001: 58–86, Leech/Short 1981/2007: 60–94, and see Müller 1999, Fischer 2014).[2] In terms of syntactic absence, ellipsis may constitute an iconic sign, often used to convey emotion. It resembles a situation in which we are literally speechless because of anger, fear, or panic. Ellipsis is clear when it is typographically indicated in the text or by a notable pause, usually accompanied by either emotive vocal or bodily gestures in speech. This indicates formally that something is missing that should normally have been there. When a syntactic absence is not indicated in this concrete fashion, it is much more difficult to decide whether it constitutes a 'real absence'. This will be the topic of the next section.

2 What Constitutes Syntactic Blanks?

What constitutes syntactic blanks is quite a difficult question to answer because the use of a 'blank', or rather the decision whether something is a blank or not, depends on a large number of factors. Syntax is different from phonology, for instance. A missing sound is easily noticeable since the morphonological-lexical system of a language is generally strict, i.e. each language has

2 For instance, a recurrence of intransitive verbs and inanimate subjects may depict the situation as passive, listless, stative (a good example of this can be found in T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men"), whereas animate subjects and transitive verbs make a situation more active. This would be an example of endophoric (text-internal) iconicity.

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

definite rules as to how words are formed, which syllable structure is possible and which is not. Missing letters or sounds may have indexical value when they remind the reader/hearer of a particular geographical or social dialect. These may then be used in a meaningful way because they remind the reader that this is different from 'standard' speech and hence the characters using these sounds may also be seen as 'different'.

In contrast, even though there are clear rules in syntax, these rules are much more versatile so that more variation is possible. As in phonology, there are differences between spoken and written language in syntax, and indeed, the use of typically spoken forms in written language may carry meaning. Some syntactic blanks are simply symbolic (conventional). Thus, functionally transitive verbs like 'to eat' can and do occur without an object. Other blanks may be pragmatic or accidental in that they can easily be inferred from the context. On a higher, pragmatic level, they may even be due to a speaker's "'windowing' of attention" (Talmy 2010: 268):[3] when we describe a situation, we simply cannot describe all the details, so many are left out or not attended to. A writer could make use of this by leaving out details that we, as readers, would normally expect to be present and thus fill in automatically.

We need to make a distinction, therefore, between different types of contexts and different types of situations before we can address the question as to what really constitutes a syntactic blank. We need to do this, too, when we consider what the role of blanks is in the novel *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* by Eimear McBride, which forms the central part of this study. In the next section, we will first have a look at what these different types of 'contexts' may involve.

2.1 *Contexts: Spoken versus Written Language*

It is well-known that spoken and written language are two rather different modes. In our educated western society many people tend to think that the written variety is the norm (see, e. g., Elledge 1967), and they can be upset when oral forms of any sort are used in written language. Whether such typically spoken forms used in writing are meaningful depends on context. A spoken variant may be perfectly fine in a novel, especially where it concerns dialogue,

3 Talmy (2010: 266) writes: "[…] linguistic attention functions as a gradient, not as a dichotomous all-or-none phenomenon. The particular level of attention on a linguistic entity is set in terms of foregrounding or backgrounding relative to a baseline for the entity, rather than absolutely on a zero-based scale. And the linguistic aspects realized in the course of a discourse range along a gradient of 'access to attention,' from ones with 'interruptive' capacity, able to supplant whatever else is currently highest in attention, to ones that basically remain unconscious."

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

but the same form might well be unacceptable in an academic essay or in a newspaper report.

We all intuitively know that written text is much more explicit and rule-bound than spoken text. This is necessary for the simple reason that the immediate situational context is normally missing. In written text, for instance, an anaphor (e. g., a personal or demonstrative pronoun) has to refer to an entity that has been previously mentioned, preferably in the preceding clause, to make it fully accessible. This is not the case in spoken language because the entity may be *physically* present and hence can be referred to implicitly (i.e., without words) by a gesture or the direction of gaze. In a written text, however, such implicit use would be seen as a gap.

It is of interest to look at a piece of spoken text which has been transcribed literally. The first impression is that it is almost unreadable or uninterpretable because sentences are often incomplete; there are lots of repetitions that break up the sequence – especially when the speakers interrupt each other – the prosody is missing, and sudden events taking place in the context (like a wasp suddenly buzzing around in the room) may totally destroy cohesion

> Ah. *That's*, *that's* going to be a problem but *that's*, *that's* three years off. And **presumably** [Ø] (Speaker 1) No but (Speaker 2) by that time you've got the personnel and *you've* (Speaker 1) Oh I see. (Speaker 2) *you've* got much more information *and, and*, *and* you **would** [Ø] (unclear) (Speaker 1) But er what information? I don't **see** [Ø] (unclear) (Speaker 2) Well (unclear) presumably would go back in the village and if you asked other villagers look how much has x grown on that bit of land they will tell you. (pause) (Speaker 1) **Tax** [Ø] erm I can't remember where it was **that** [Ø], I think it might have been one of you **saying that** [Ø] how that (pause) a peasant of subsistence level erm would still have to pay eighteen percent of its income (Speaker 2) Right. (Speaker 1) in taxation but that *still the peasant was*, even though this might seem like quite a bit, *the peasant was still* in a better position than (pause) he had been previous because rents were at least thirty percent. (Speaker 2) Yes. Yes. (Speaker 1) So (Speaker 2) (unclear) (Speaker 1) it's a matter of **ho** [Ø] – I mean er greater equality was achieved, but they **could've** [Ø] erm (pause) I mean a hundred and fifty (unclear) was a very low threshold (unclear) (Speaker 2) (unclear) okay let's just work around that. *What*, *what* you're saying is **that** [Ø] (pause) I mean broadly this is, is quite an incentive based system, at least on the face of it (Speaker 1) Mm. (Speaker 2) er *in*, *in* that y*ou, you are, you*, *you're* sort of fixing your taxes and then you're allowing, anybody who increases

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

their output *will* **keep** [Ø], *will* benefit from that. (from the BNC, 111993, Bristol University History Department; my emphases)

Highlighted in bold and followed by a gap-sign [Ø] are the cases where a necessary syntactic element (mostly an object) is (temporarily) missing, either because the speaker is interrupted or because s/he is distracted for some other reason and thus is no longer able to complete the structure of the sentence (s)he has begun. The italicized elements represent instances where the speaker repeats him/herself because s/he was mentally interrupted so that the first instance of the repeated element is left, as it were, hanging in the air, i.e., the expected continuation of the clause does not occur (we could perhaps call these 'temporary' or 'pseudo'-gaps or blanks). All this is normal for spoken language, and will indeed not be considered in any way problematic in the situation in which it occurs because the intonation contours, the bodily gestures and the visual information will most likely ensure the cohesion of the dialogue. In such a situation we are probably not even aware that there *was* an absence or a repetition. These are therefore not the type of blanks that can be considered iconically motivated because they are conventional in speech.

However, it is quite clear that the above text looks completely different from the kind of dialogues we encounter in novels that follow a realist aesthetic of representing the characters' speech acts. In other words, when similar blanks occur *there*, they may well be meaningful.[4] For instance, because such blanks as illustrated above may occur in emotional speech, they can be used in written literature as an 'indexical icon' to convey the emotions of a character. I call this an 'indexical icon' because the fact that it resembles the reader's own behaviour when emotional will enable the reader to recognize this emotion through an indexical link to their own bodily behaviour in similar circumstances. Müller (1999) and Henry (2001) show that most of the syntactic blanks (or ellipses) they discovered in older literature are of this specific emotional kind, and they also note that most were typographically indicated by a dash, or '…', or other such marks.

2.2 *Contexts: Children versus Adults*

A second type of context/situation that marks differences in language use concerns the stage of language development. Thus, syntactic blanks can be found in children's early speech, which is still syntactically incomplete (cf., e.g.,

4 Some modern(ist) texts also leave out the quotation marks that indicate who is speaking. This could be considered a syntactic blank, too, but here it is the prosody/differences in voice etc. that is missing rather than verbal elements.

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

Fónagy 2001: 58–60; see Clark 2003). Children start with one-word 'sentences' or holistic phrases, later followed by two-word sentences (e. g., "where go" or "put book"; cf. Scott 2005: 9) before they begin to use proper grammar – in the sense that they begin to link the nominal and verbal elements into phrases and sentences by means of inflections and other functional elements. Again, it is important to note that such incomplete sentences are accompanied by all kinds of prosodic markers (intonation, stress, pauses) making them less difficult to understand in their proper context. However, if we only had written versions of these utterances, minus the (essential) situational contexts, these utterances would be very hard if not impossible to follow. Quite clearly these blanks are neither iconic nor in any way meaningful, but they *are* indexical of young children's speech and as such can be made use of both indexically and iconically in all kinds of literary texts, as we will see below.

2.3 *Contexts as Genre Differences: Poetry versus Prose*

Finally, we should consider genre differences, in particular differences between poetry and prose. David Lodge (see 1966/1984) devotes a large part of his essay to determining the essence of what poetry and prose are respectively. He first refers to Northrop Frye, who wrote

> Whenever we read anything, we find our attention moving in two directions at once. One direction is outward or centrifugal, in which we keep going outside our reading, from the individual words to the things they mean, or in practice to our memory of the conventional associations between them. The other direction is inward, or centripetal, in which we try to develop from the words a sense of the larger verbal pattern they make [...]. In all literary structures the final direction of meaning is inward. (1957: 73f.; qtd. in Lodge 1966/1984: 7)

A distinction is made here between emotive language and referential language, where one extreme can be said to be represented by lyric poetry and the other by scientific language. Lodge also refers to a metaphor once used by the French poet and critic Paul Valéry, who compared prose to walking and poetry to dancing (cf. 1958: 206). Prose is like walking because it has "a definite object" in mind. "The actual circumstances [...] regulate the rhythm of walking, prescribe a direction, speed and termination." Verse is like dancing, which is a system of arbitrary acts "whose end is in themselves. It goes nowhere." (Qtd. in Lodge 1966/1984: 11)

In modernist writing this difference between poetry and prose becomes blurred because, according to Lodge, modernist writers turned against the

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

"accumulation of detail" as found in natural or narrative prose; they wanted to break out of the "conventions of the readerly plot" because this was "deprived of authentic life" (1977: 138). Here he quotes Virginia Woolf

> The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will, but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole. … Is life like this? Must novels be like this? (1967: 106; qtd. in Lodge 1977: 138)

Lodge adds

> The modernist enterprise, however, had its dangers and its problems. The logical terminus of their fictional realism was the plotless 'slice of life' or the plotless 'stream of consciousness', and plotlessness could easily become […] a cover for self-indulgent incoherence. (Ibid.)

In other words, one needs something to replace the plot in order to hold the story together. Authors such as James Joyce and Ezra Pound took care of this through their use of the 'mythical method' and/or a strong use of metaphorical/metonymic thinking. This danger of plotlessness is also clearly present, as we will see, in McBride's novel; here it is the timeless Irish coming-of-age plot that provides the necessary cohesion.

It is not surprising that this difference between 'walking' and 'dancing' also has an effect on the syntax and, more particularly in our case, on the use of syntactic blanks. In prose writing, one expects enough details of time and place to enable us to follow the direction of the story being told. Furthermore, we expect cohesion not only in terms of 'when' and 'where' but also in term of 'why'. Such locative and explanatory details are much less likely to occur in poetry. Hence, in order to establish whether the lack of such details counts as syntactic absences, we need to take the genre into account.

Of course, it is possible to make further distinctions within each genre; for instance, epic poetry is more narrative than lyric poetry, and the prose used in novels differs widely from one subgenre to the next, while it is equally likely to be vastly different from that in academic essays and newspaper reports. But on the whole, as we will see below in section 3, most of these differences do not lead to a clear use of syntactic blanks. The blanks I noted above in terms of cohesion have to do with discourse rather than syntax proper. Apart from telegrams and texts with a tendency to use elliptical headlines such as newspaper articles, there is only one genre that could be said to have true syntactic blanks

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

as a regular and conventional feature, and that is diary writing – which has more recently also emerged as a feature in text messages. It is quite usual in that context to have a blank where there should be a subject, as in: “Visited the castle yesterday. Wish you were here.” (Scott 2013: 69) Because the subject is always the same, however, this is only a formal blank without any further significance. But of course this feature can be used in an iconic-indexical way in other writings, as we will see.

We may thus conclude that absences (or syntactic blanks) are only seen or felt as absences when they run against conventional expectations. This is true with respect to all three contexts discussed in this section, i.e., it pertains to differences between spoken and written modes, between child and adult language, and between genres. From this also follows that in order to decide what kind of syntactic blanks are used and potentially significant in McBride’s novel, we must consider the context in which this novel was written. In order to do this we must also look at the historical development of the use of syntactic blanks in prose, and of blanks in other art forms.

3 The Historical Context: the Use of Blanks in Literature and Other Media

We will first look at developments in literary prose. I am leaving poetry out of the discussion mainly because there are fewer changes here relevant to our topic, but also because the central concern of the present contribution is a novel. After a consideration of prose texts, I will take a brief look at other media, notably music and painting, in order to establish whether the use of blanks there has a historical connection with blanks in literary prose (see also other relevant essays in this volume).

3.1 *Modernism and Postmodernism: The Development of New Styles*

The most notable innovations with respect to blanks, of both a discursive and syntactic kind, can be observed in modernist writing. This is not to say that there were no experiments with syntactic structure before that time, but these are far and few between. The famous exception is, of course, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, which, not surprisingly, is often seen as the first ‘modernist’ or even ‘postmodernist’ novel “lauded for anticipating the later evolution of literary form (or lack thereof)” (Gioia 2013 online). The novelty is most obvious in the arrangement of the discourse, i.e., the lack of cohesion between clauses or scenes. Gioia, quoting the critic Ian Watt (see 1967), describes the work as “a parody of a novel” because it has “an indefinite theme, worked out by a verve

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

that has not the slightest concern for order, unity or logic" (ibid.). Regarding syntax proper, the novel is hardly experimental. Clauses have normal word order (except for some "syntactic shuffling"; Lodge 1977: 131), but this is still within the bounds of what is possible in syntax. True syntactic blanks *within* clauses do not really occur.

In fact, it could be said that many of the apparent blanks in *Tristram Shandy* are a result of the fact that Sterne often conveys dialogues in the most literal way. The blanks one finds therefore resemble the ones used in spoken language (as illustrated in section 2.1). No doubt this is part of the fun. The novel is very much a first-person narrative, with a narrator who not only tells us what is happening but also comments on what happens all the time, addressing the reader directly. His 'butting in' in this way continually disturbs the narrative plot. As Watt describes it: "The structure of Sterne's larger compositional units [...] is based on the rhetorical patterns arising out of the complex tripartite pattern of conversation between the narrator, his fictional characters, and his auditors" (1967: 319). Indeed Tristram himself tells us at the beginning of chapter 11: "[w] riting, when properly managed [...], is but a different name for conversation." (Qtd. ibid.: 320) We can see the resemblances between the text in section 2.1 and the following excerpt from the novel quite easily

> O *Jonathan*! 'Twould make a good-natured man's heart bleed, **to consider** [pseudo Ø], **continued the corporal (standing perpendicularly),** how low many a brave and upright fellow has been laid since that time!—And **trust me, *Susy*** [pseudo Ø], **added the corporal, turning to *Susannah*, whose eyes were swimming in water,**—before that time comes round again,—many a bright eye will be dim.—*Susannah* placed it to the right side of the page—she wept—but she court'sied too.—*Are we not* [pseudo Ø], **continued *Trim*, looking still at *Susannah***—*are we not* like a flower of the field—**a tear of pride stole in betwixt every two tears of humiliation—else no tongue could have described *Susannah's* affliction**—is not all flesh grass?—Tis clay,—'tis dirt.—They all looked directly at the scullion,—the scullion had just been scouring a fish-kettle.—It was not fair.—
>
> – *What is* the finest face that ever man looked at! – I could hear *Trim* talk so for ever, cried *Susannah*, – *what is* **it** [pseudo Ø]! **(Susannah laid her hand upon *Trim's* shoulder)** – but corruption? – Susannah took it off. (from *Tristram Shandy* Chapter 3.9, qtd. Watt 1967: 329; my emphases)

I have again indicated the repetitions in italics. The instances marked in the text by '[pseudo Ø]', however, are not literal examples of syntactic blanks as

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

they were in section 2.1. To keep the flow of the text understandable, Sterne does not use 'true' blanks but he inserts descriptive passages (without identifying them as such!) – these I have indicated in bold –, which disturb the flow of the syntax in the same way as syntactic blanks would. Thus, we do not immediately hear the object of "consider" (l. 1) or of "trust me" (l. 4) but have to wait a considerable amount of time, with five and twelve words getting in between verb and object respectively. I suppose we could again call these 'pseudo-blanks'.

A lack of cohesion between clauses is typical of many modernist writers, even though it is used somewhat differently from the way Sterne used it, and with a different effect. To show what it looks like, I will compare a brief initial passage from a short story by Ernest Hemingway, with a more 'conventional' narrative, as illustrated with a passage from a recent novel by Ian McEwan.

> *The hills* across *the valley* of the Ebro *were* long and white. On *this side* there was no shade and no trees and *the station* was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was *the warm shadow of the building* and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. *The American* and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and *the express from Barcelona* would come in forty minutes. It stopped at *this junction* for two minutes and went on to Madrid. (From "Hills Like White Elephants"; Hemingway 1987: 211, my emphases)

The first thing to be noted is that we are confronted with many definite noun phrases (shown in italics) referring to places and characters that have not yet been mentioned, so that we are not properly introduced to the location where the story takes place nor to the characters. The past tense *were* in the very first sentence of the story also feels a little awkward because it presents a description of scenery that is in principle timeless: we are immediately thrown into the past but we do not know what past or whose past. The purpose of the "bamboo beads" (l. 4) is made clear through the use of the purpose marker "to" (l. 5), but we have no idea *why* the American and the girl are sitting where they are sitting. And we also do not know *why* the express train from Barcelona is mentioned. Are they waiting for it? We are not told.

What is clear, however, is that there are no syntactic gaps *within* each separate sentence. Purely syntactically, nothing is missing. The gaps are in fact discourse gaps, and they *are* functional. The effect of this way of writing is that the details of the scene are very sharply put in front of our eyes, as loose, unconnected objects preventing the reader from building up a story; it causes a sense

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

of estrangement.[5] However, since humans are by nature inclined to interpret what they see as a coherent narrative (see Dawkins 1995),[6] the looseness forces us to think harder about what may be happening. This focus on loose objects is also seen in 'modernist' paintings by Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky (e. g., in his *Blaue Reiter* period) or in collages by Henri Matisse. Again they cause us to think about the possible underlying meaning and hence function quite differently from the romanticist paintings of *natural* landscapes in the manner of, for instance, John Constable.

Now compare Hemingway's style to the following passage from Ian McEwan's novel *The Children Act*

> She **could have** phoned one of three friends, **but she could not bear to hear herself explain her situation and make it irreversibly real**. *Too soon* for sympathy or advice, *too soon* to hear Jack damned by loyal chums. *Instead*, she *passed the evening* in an empty state, a condition of numbness. She ate bread, cheese and olives with a glass of white wine, and *passed an interminable period at the piano*. *First*, **in a spirit of defiance**, she *played through* her Bach partita. *Occasionally*, she and a barrister, Mark Berner, performed songs, and she had seen *that afternoon* that he was listed *for tomorrow* to represent the hospital *in the Jehovah's Witness case*. The *next* concert was *many months ahead, just before Christmas*, *in the Great Hall in Grey's Inn*, and they had *yet* to agree a programme. (2014: 58, my emphases)

I have italicized all the logical, cohesive links, both in terms of time and place; the inner 'logical' reasoning of the main character (an eminent judge, whose husband has just walked out on her) I have given in bold. Note, in addition, that the barrister Mark Berner is properly introduced as *a* barrister, followed by his identification, since he is here mentioned for the first time in the narrative. In this text, in contrast to the Hemingway passage, the situation is completely clear; there is much less need for the reader to guess.

When we look at some other modernist or postmodernist writers, we often find, as we saw in Hemingway, similar circumstances or discourse elements missing but, on the whole, not syntactic ones. For instance, in the

5 This way of writing in Hemingway, which is more typical of his short stories (and of short stories in general), is often referred to as his 'iceberg technique'.

6 Dawkins writes: "We humans have purpose on the brain. We find it hard to look at anything without wondering what it is 'for', what the motive is for it or the purpose behind it […]. Show us any object or process and it is hard for us to resist the 'Why' question – that 'What is it for?' question." (1995: 96)

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

theatre of the absurd, represented among others by Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett, there is a minimum of plot, and absurd or menacing shifts in discourse, but not many incomplete sentences.[7] Gavin discusses the techniques writers of the absurd use; they "deliberate[ly] violat[e] […] literary and dramatic norms, displaying features which can be seen to defy those conventions which had previously defined the qualitative boundaries of the literary canon" (2013: 20). The techniques Gavin illustrates have to do with disorder within the text-world and, as in Hemingway, do not involve disordered syntax. A staple diet with these writers is the fixed world in the head of the first-person narrator, through whose perception we see the world. Such a narrator cannot know more about other characters than what their actions reveal. Gavin provides many examples of such "unnatural story worlds" (ibid.: 93), where two realities are put against one another, and where the narrator no longer sees the boundaries between reality and fiction, as for example in: "The day came finally. Then again, perhaps it didn't" (McCarthy 2005: 259). Note that the two sentences here are syntactically sound. Gavin also mentions 'denarration': a kind of "negative narration in which a narrator denies significant aspects of his or her narrative that has earlier been presented as given" (2013: 78). What makes the 'absurd' style different from the style used by Hemingway, however, is that narrative cohesion per se is usually upheld. Anaphors are in place, and there is information about spatial and temporal circumstances

> Lockett needs my mattress more than I need his cabinet. He has to have an oasis, a place to rest and hear what's happening. I encourage him. I roll my sock into a ball and let it roll out. Over the past two days the mattress has become crowded. Someone just sat down and put his legs against the wall. Although my eyes have gotten used to the dark, I try not to notice anyone too closely. Another man sat down and put his legs against the wall. This has begun to happen lately. (From Rudolph Wurlitzer, *Nog* [1969/2009: 44], qtd. Gavin 2013: 101)

Thus, 'my' and 'his' (l. 1) have clear antecedents, as is true also for all other pronouns; the 'visitors' on the mattress are properly announced, and events follow each other chronologically ("over the past two days", "someone *just* sat down", "*another* man sat down", etc.). What is strange and emphasized instead is the

7 There are exceptions, as O'Toole (see 2014) mentions in his review of McBride's novel; see section 4.3 below.

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

'unnatural' reactions or actions of the protagonist:[8] why does he roll his sock into a ball, why does he let other people sit down on his mattress?

Finally, there is the syntax of the stream-of-consciousness style, which contains real gaps. In a way, this style is already visible in Sterne, but in his text it is syntactically not so deviant as it is, for instance, in Joyce's *Ulysses*. A short excerpt from the Hades chapter will suffice as illustration

> *Mr Bloom entered and sat in the vacant place. He pulled the door to after him and slammed it tight till it shut tight. He passed an arm through the armstrap and looked seriously from the open carriage window at the lowered blinds of the avenue.* One dragged aside: an old woman peeping. Nose whiteflattened against the pane. Thanking her stars she was passed over. Extraordinary the interest they take in a corpse. Glad to see us go we give them such trouble coming. Job seems to suit them. Huggermugger in corners. Slop about in slipper-slappers for fear he'd wake. Then getting it ready. Laying it out. Molly and Mrs Fleming making the bed. Pull **it** more to your side. Our windingsheet. Never know who will touch you dead. Wash and shampoo. I believe they clip the nails and the hair. Keep a bit in an envelope. Grow all the same after. Unclean job.
>
> *All waited. Nothing was said.* Stowing in the wreaths probably. I am sitting on something hard. Ah, that soap in my hip pocket. Better shift it out of that. Wait for an opportunity. (1969: 88f., my emphases)

The descriptive passages, which I have put in italics, are all syntactically sound. The stream-of-consciousness passages are not. Here many syntactic elements are missing. Almost always there is no finite verb in the main clause, while the subject is missing nearly every time it refers to Bloom, the I-figure in this passage, and also at times in other clauses as in "Glad to see us go" (l. 6). Note, however, that the antecedent of the missing subject, "they" (in l. 6), is still close enough to make sense. Still, "they" itself appears out of the blue; its antecedent *is* missing and can only be understood when one is familiar with Bloom's world and his way of thinking about women. A somewhat similar case concerns the antecedent of the third "it" in l. 9 (in the first two instances "it" refers to the corpse). Again we have to guess what it refers to, it may still refer to the corpse, but more likely it is the winding-sheet mentioned in the next clause. What is also usually missing in the streams of thought are indicators of time and place, but the reason for this is different from what we saw in Hemingway. Here it is

8 'Unnatural' for the reader in terms of what is conventional in the (text)world, but of course natural for the protagonist.

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

done to imitate the directness of thought, to represent the loose way in which our memory works, functioning through metonymy and metaphor rather than logically (cf. Lodge 1977: 139–144). Interestingly, what is not missing are direct objects. This makes the clauses on the whole still quite easy to follow.

3.2 *Comparison with Other Media*

I already briefly compared modernist writers with painters in that same period (section 3.1). Similar comparisons can be drawn with composers and musical performers. Referring to modernist and/or expressionist work, Butler writes: "In cutting itself [sic] off from previous conventions [these] works [...] attempted to construct worlds of their own – even to be locked into an inexorably personal experience" (1994: 72), making use of "simplificatory representation" and "reliance on instinct" (ibid.: 56). With reference to the composer Arnold Schoenberg, Butler notes that his œuvre reflects the idea that "music's ultimate significance lies not in the effect it makes on an audience, but in the integrity with which it expresses the composer's personal vision" so that "they ran the risk of composing only for trained listeners capable of an analytic response" (ibid.: 72). Similar remarks have been made with respect to some modernist writings, namely that they were too inward-looking or too fragmented to be easily understood by the average reader. Butler adds that "explicit syntax began to be replaced by an (unconsciously driven) associative juxtaposition [...] relying on intuitions", which is similar to Schoenberg's wish for "'mere juxtaposition'", which can "supersede previously accepted logical and formal connections, and the audience can be left to fill in the gaps which result" (ibid.: 76). Thus, "[t]hey inevitably draw our attention to the language of the work" (ibid.); previous conventions are seen to limit self-expression, threatening the discursive nature of the works in painting, literature and music.

In modernist works, the direction was mainly from objective to subjective representation. The idea is essentially to present reality without an interfering omniscient narrator, to bring emotion in a seemingly unadulterated form to the reader (viewer/listener). Backgrounding the author could be done in various ways in texts: either by presenting the (experience of the) world from an entirely personal point of view (the I-narrator, and the use of stream-of-consciousness, as we see, for instance, in Virginia Woolf's 1927 *To the Lighthouse*), or by offering a totally multi-focal photographic and non-linear reality, as we see in Hemingway's short stories, or indeed a mixture of both as in *Ulysses*.

In later periods, it seems that the subjective actuality of the event became even more important: the idea of presenting the experience in as raw and spontaneous a manner as possible. According to Lee (see 2012), we see this in

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

the poets of the so-called Beat Generation, represented by, among others, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, whose poetics were in turn influenced by new models in jazz and painting which were centred around improvisation (cf. Charlie Parker and Jackson Pollock respectively). This rawness comes to the fore clearly in the 'Wiener Aktionismus' of Günter Brus and Hermann Nitsch in the 1960s, with the activity itself rather than any static product representing the work of art. The action has to be shown directly in the act, on the canvas, on the page. Pure action, without context, without perspective, without depth.

4 Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013)

Having enumerated the types of gaps that can be found in texts of various kinds, and having taken into account the contexts in which these gaps occur, which may determine whether they are significant or not, I will now turn to the gaps found in McBride's novel. It can be said that her writing is a mix of modernist and actionist tendencies. I see this in her use of the stream-of-consciousness method. In her case, however, it is a method used in the extreme: protagonists are not identified, they have no name; as a result, we have to learn to follow and understand them through their actions. There are hardly any descriptive passages, almost all is action, and all action is represented in terms of pure acts and pure primitive thoughts. There is indeed no perspective, no spatial framing, hardly any indication of time and place. Because everything is presented as raw and immediate, the discourse blanks have widened, leading to many syntactic blanks and resulting in a narrative that is constituted "almost entirely in the fragments, words, and phrases of immediate and inarticulate sensations, impressions, and half-formed thoughts" (Swallow Prior 2014 online). In the words of another critic, who most appropriately compares her art to painting and music,

> [h]er prose is a visceral throb, and the sentences run meanings together to produce a kind of compression in which words, freed from the tedious march of sequence, seem to want to merge with one another, as paint and musical notes can. The results are thrilling, and also thrillingly efficient. The language plunges us into the center of experiences that are often raw, unpleasant, frightening, but also vital. (Wood 2014 online)

In what follows, I first supply a general description of the novel (section 4.1), after which I consider the type of gaps that occur in the novel (section 4.2), and

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

how they may be significant in the light of the different contexts and genres that have been discussed in section 2 above (section 4.3).

4.1 *General Description*

In the words of the reviewer Fintan O'Toole: "The central event is the rape of the narrator as a needy, rebellious thirteen-year-old by the uncle who takes advantage of her as-yet indistinct desires. It is an event she is compelled to repeat again and again in crude encounters with strangers and with the uncle who abused her." (2014 online) An important aspect of the story is the Roman Catholic background, the mother who turns to religion when her husband abandons the family, and the pious grandfather, who finds fault with his errant and blasphemous granddaughter. A crucial but passive role is played by the brother, who suffers from a brain tumour and is slow and awkward, making life difficult for his sister because he is constantly bullied by other children at their school, which makes her position vulnerable, too. When the brother's illness returns in his teens, the girl seeks – as an antidote but also as a form of punishment for not helping her brother when he is abused by his school mates – "the self-abasement of random sexual encounters with boys in her school, with young men in her town, with strangers in the city or on trains, and with her uncle" (Swallow Prior 2014 online). The story is consistently told from the perspective of the girl, the homodiegetic narrator, "through means more visceral than logical, more intuitive than intellectual, more raw than processed" (ibid.). The novel itself is dedicated to McBride's brother (who died of a brain tumour) in the same way as the story written by the protagonist is meant for her *fictional* brother. He represents the "you" addressed in the first paragraph of the novel

> For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did. Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day. (McBride 2013/2014: 3)

Here we already note the absence of an antecedent for "you", "her", "she" (l. 1), and "they" (l. 3); the absence of an infinitival phrase in the second sentence "You'll soon"; the absence of a subject (and possibly a preposition) in "Bounce the bed", and in "lay you down", where it is likely but not clear that the "you" is the object rather than the subject.

It is only after reading on through the next few chapters that we begin to understand what this text may convey. The following is my own tentative interpretation

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

> [*This writing is*] [f]or you [*the brother*]. You'll soon [*see it* (*the book*)/*see me* (*when I am born*)?]. You'll give her [*the as-yet unborn sister, the I-figure, who writes this*] [*a*] name [*the brother will call the sister by her name after she is born, or this writing for the brother will make a name for the sister in the world?*]. In the stitches of her skin [*the sister as still inside the mother's womb*] she [*the mother*] [*wi*]ll wear [*carries and will give birth to the sister who tells*] your say [*what will be said about/for you*]. Mammy me? [*says the brother about his having to be operated upon*]. Yes you [*says the mother*]. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did [*the sister imagines that the brother bounces on his bed in the hospital with the mother visiting, or she wishes that he would bounce* (*bounce as imperative*)]. Then [*the doctors?*] lay you down [*or the sister advises the brother to lay himself down after the bouncing?*]. They cut you round [*the brother's tumour is operated upon*]. Wait and hour and day [*long wait for the three of them before the operation, or a long wait for the brother to wake up after the operation, or a long wait before the I is born?*].

The question thus inevitably arises: what is the nature of these gaps, and what do they convey?

4.2 *Use of Blanks in McBride's Novel: General Aspects*

It is clear that there are many absences or blanks in these first few lines of the novel making the events themselves become almost impossible to follow. The blanks do not only constitute the familiar discourse blanks that we have already seen in modernist writing, i.e., the absence of elements indicating time and place, the absence of antecedents for pronouns and the lack of logical cohesion, as well as the typographic marks that indicate who is speaking. We are also not surprised to see the syntactic blanks familiar from stream-of-consciousness literature: the total absence of the syntactic subject when it refers to the protagonist and the lack of finite verbs. But here, in addition, we find that other *necessary* arguments of the verb are left out, too: non-recoverable subjects, direct and prepositional objects, infinitival complements, etc. To make matters worse, we lack all kinds of morphosyntactic functional and inflexional markers normally present that make it clear whether we are dealing with a noun or a verb (or a gerund or present participle), or which indicate the relation between a subject and the predicate (by means of verbal agreement), or between the past and the present, the indicative and the imperative (by means of tense and mood inflexions).

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

Let us have a look at one more paragraph on that same first page in order to find out more about missing morphosyntactic elements, elements that were never missing in the literature we have looked at so far

> Walking up corridors up the stairs. Are you alright? Will you sit, he says. No. I want she says. I want to see my son. Smell from dettol through her skin. Mops diamond floor tiles all as strong. All the burn your eyes out if you had some. Her heart going pat. Going dum dum dum. Don't mind me she's going to your room. See the. Jesus. What have they done? Jesus. Bile for. Tidals burn. Ssssh. All over. Mother. She cries. Oh no. Oh no no no. (McBride 2013/2014: 3)

The two most obscure sentences in terms of structure are: "Mops diamond floor tiles all as strong. All the burn your eyes out if you had some." We can guess the experience as a whole since we know what to expect in hospitals, but we wonder whether "mops" is a singular verb or a plural noun, whether someone "mops" the floor or "mops" are visible all around, or even whether the narrator wishes to indicate that the "mops", the "floor" and the "tiles" "all" smell equally "strong" of Dettol. Maybe it is the latter, because that would make sense of "All the" in the next line, i.e., all those things that "burn your eyes out if you had some". On the other hand "burn" need not be a verb; if we read "All the burn" as a noun phrase, "burn" could also represent a gerund (with the suffix missing) referring to a sense of burn*ing*.

4.3 *Types of Morphosyntactic Blanks*

I will now first sum up the various types of syntactic blanks that I have uncovered and illustrate them, in so far as they did not yet appear in the two passages above. At the same time, I will point out their possible role as 'indexical icons' in the novel, based on the three conventional registers/situations described in section 2:

i. Null-pronouns
ii. Absence of nominal and verbal inflexions
iii. Absence of determiners and other function words
iv. Absence of obligatory verbal arguments
v. Absence of finite verbs and even of non-finite verbs
vi. Absence of logical connectors of time and place
vii. Anaphors without clearly indicated or accessible antecedents

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

4.3.1 Spoken vs. Written Language

Many passages are difficult to follow because they present situations merely in terms of dialogues between characters, without any description of the situation or location, and without at first knowing who is speaking. These typically sound like spoken discourse, having all the hallmarks of the way language is used in actual dialogue. The sentences spoken are still complete because the protagonist simply records the conversation. The only absences here are of types (vi) and (vii), familiar from modernist literature. In the fragment below, I have indicated absences of type (vii) in brackets so that it becomes clear who is speaking, and who the antecedents of the personal pronouns used are (the reader will only understand who is who after going through the passage first). The two elements given in bold are the only elements that are not part of actual speech: the first one is put in to help the reader, and the second is probably a thought-comment of the girl-narrator (note that this is the only incomplete sentence). The passage itself is the beginning of chapter four. There is no indication of where we are and what the situation is. The grandfather is new on the scene and has not been mentioned before, and only with hindsight can we guess at the order of speakers and what the connections are between what they are saying (absences representing type (vi))

> [*The mother speaking:*] Whose is that car? Do you [=*the girl or the brother?*] see it **she said**, parking at the gate. Oh God let it not be the PP and the state of the place. Who's that now? Don't pull the curtain back [*command to girl or brother?*]. No it isn't. Well he's coming up the path. Oh Jesus Mary and Joseph. Go wipe your nose you [= *to girl or brother?*].
>
> Daddy [=*father of the mother/grandfather*], I didn't recognise you [=*grandfather*]. You gave me the fright of my life. I didn't know who it was at all. Is the car different? I thought that. Surely you didn't do all that drive today? **Sacred hour**. It's a terrible long old journey. Come in God and sit down. Anyways you're looking well.
>
> That's it. Is Mammy [=*mother of the mother/grandmother*] with you? Ah no of course. Ach she's [=*grandmother*] not able. She said that alright before. And can the doctor not give her something, just to relieve her a bit? You [=*grandfather*] must be worn out. Will you have a cup of tea?
>
> Come in here [*addressed to girl or brother or both?*] and say hello to your Grandfather. He's come all the way to see you, isn't that right? Just slip on that kettle as you [=*girl or brother?*] come past. And can you [=*grandfather*] get any sleep? Desperate at your time of life. Come you [=*the girl*] in and say hello like your brother. [*Grandfather speaking:*] Oh God look at the face on that [=*the state the house/the girl is in?*]. Would

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

> you [=*the mother*] not think about getting some help in? [*Mother speaking about the girl:*] No she's not a bit shy. [*Grandfather speaking:*] For a break in the morning even? [*Mother speaking:*] Will you have a sandwich with that [*the cup of tea*]?. (McBride 2013/2014: 11)

The type of absences used here is significant first of all in the sense that these gaps point out that this is 'dialogue'; stylistically, they form a contrast to highly incomplete clauses that are used elsewhere in the novel to express the inner thoughts and raw descriptions of the actions in which the protagonist is involved. Secondly, the 'rough-and-tumble' speech and the different You's iconically reflect the nervous to and fro-ing of the mother, as well as the messy state of the household and of the situation that the protagonist is in.

4.3.2 Children vs. Adults

Absences of types (i) to (v) are the most striking features of the novel and constitute the core meaning of the narrative. They are key to the novel, first of all, because they are unconventional as compared to the literary prose styles discussed in section 2.3 – this puts them in the limelight as it were –, and secondly because these absences show up most strongly in the passages that form the crudest scenes in the novel: the sexual abuse of the immature female narrator. Absences (i) to (v) are all typical of early speech development in children. Scott (see 2005 online) shows that children use 'null-subjects' or 'subject-drops' between ages 20 to 25 months, and that they also typically omit inflections and function words such as determiners, prepositions, and auxiliaries. There are various reasons given in the literature for these omissions, of which Scott provides a convenient overview. Bloom categorizes children's speech as "telegraphic" (1970: 139), which is due to a "cognitive limitation in handling structural complexity" (ibid.: 165), as well as the result of children's reduced memory span. The more complex the sentence is, the more it will be reduced. Bloom also notes that the words that are retained are the content words, i.e., full lexical nouns and verbs, but without their inflexions. Olson stresses the fact that the young child is not yet able to "recode, encode, to plan and monitor, to integrate and unitize" (1973: 153). He further notes that the child's "highly egocentric" view of the world also contributes to the frequency of abbreviated utterances (ibid.: 155).

I think one can view these 'absence'-types in McBride's novel as indexical of child's speech. As such they are iconically significant in that they *reflect* the mind and character of the narrator. It is interesting to observe, for instance, that O'Toole in his review of the novel writes that the narrator "*cannot build a self* because the foundations of her childhood have been undermined by

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

sexual exploitation" (2014 online, my emphasis); similarly Wood notes that "McBride's prose starts by mimicking the visceral, fractured comprehension of a child taking clumsy possession of an adult world" (2014 online). Anne Enright, who was the first to review the novel, describes the narrator as "affectless and highly transgressive" (2013 online), again typical of the egocentric phase that children go through. Thus, these blanks can be said to be iconic of a preconscious, not fully-formed mind, whose utterances are immediate and inarticulate, unplanned and unmonitored. They reflect the title, a half-formed girl struggling to come into being, a person whose identity is precarious and incomplete – and thus full of 'gaps'.

I will use three extracts to illustrate where these absences are most noticeable. These almost always reflect the most violent passages, mentally and physically, full of action or uncontrollable thoughts. What is clear is that there are few complete sentences here. I have italicized the ones that do occur. These are all descriptive so that we at least get some idea of what is happening. All the other main clauses have no clear finite verb. Subjects are often missing, and sometimes even direct and prepositional objects or adjuncts. Function words get lost, too, at times, such as the copula *be* or the indefinite article. Of special interest are the forms I have given in bold, where, if it is a verb, one would have expected an *-s* inflection to create agreement with the subject, in this case the mother. The lack of *-s*, again, makes the verbs more noun-like. Overall, a narrowing of Talmy's "'windowing' of attention" (2010: 268) is noticeable.[9] Only the most salient elements are left here, nouns rather than verbs, fully referential lexical items rather than function words or morphemes, main clauses rather than subordinate ones.

1. Take one and two. **Crack** *my eyes are bursting from my head with the wallop*. Blood rising up my nose. Drips[10] my head forward. **Drip** of that. *She gets my hair*. Listen. To me. Listen. What you've done. Shaking me **smack** and **smack** my head. Dirty brat. Shivering. Sharp with rage. *Get away from me* and **push** me over to the bannisters.

   You. Panic. Mammy sorry that I sorry I didn't know. *Your hands can't keep her off. She knows all the duck and weave we've done before. And hits you on your ear.* On your cheek. That hard. Ah mammy sorry. Sorry. Sorry please, all you say. She **have** you by the jumper. **Slap** you harder. **Slap** and

9 Talmy's description is useful here: "[…] one or more (discontinuous) portions of a referent scene are foregrounded in attention (or 'windowed') by the basic device of their explicit mention, while the remainder of the scene is backgrounded in attention (or 'gapped') by their omission from mention." (2011: 631) In these raw passages, the most physical facts are 'foregrounded', the rest is 'gapped'.

10 This, too, could be a plural noun.

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

slap and **slap**. **Push** you in the corner. Mammy. Mammy. Getting red face. Getting sore face. **Slap** again she. **Slap** again. Screaming. You imbecile. You stupid. I cupping all my blood nose in jumper. Crouch. You. Bold. Boy. You. Stupid. Stupid. (McBride 2013/2014: 17)

2. And you're walking coming crossing. Grab me by the elbow. *Is it true? Is it true? I know you're stronger than me now.* First time and **push** [?][11] me to the wall. *Don't you lie. You don't lie here. Is it true? It is!* I shouted pushing hands and might against I sticking fingers at your eyes. *You choke me.* I expel splode fight against. Kicking at. **Struggle**. **Whack** for I'll be screaming in a minute. **Push**[?] me on the ground. It is disgusting whore sputter filthy disgusting wrong it's wrong to. Do. Fucking bitch. I curl up **miss** [?] me **kick** [?] the floor. The stub of it. Rolling. (Ibid.: 73f.)[12]
3. Sloows. Hurts m. Jesus skreamtheway he. Doos the fuck the fuckink slatch in me. Scream. Kracks. Done fuk me open he dine done on me. Done done. Till he hye happy fucky shoves upo comes ui. Kom shitting ut h mith fking kmg I'm fking cmin up you. Retch I. Retch I. Dinneradntea I choke mny. Up my. Thrtoat I. He come hecomehe. More. Slash the fuck the rank the sick up me sick up he and sticks his fingers in my mouth [...]. Soon I'n dead I'm sre. Loose. Ver the aIrWays. Here. mY nose my mOuth I. VOMit, Clear. CleaR. He stopS up gETs. Stands uP. Look. And I breath. (Ibid.: 193f.)

Passage (3) occurs at the end of the novel. Right after the narrator's brother has died, she goes out towards the lake and lets herself be raped and abused by anyone who happens to be around. Here her feelings of utter loss and utter guilt combine to produce the most violent gaps in the entire novel. Not only syntax goes haywire, but syllables, sounds, letters, and spaces do so as well. All order disappears; her mind and her emotions are no longer there; in her own words: "I'm only here in my bones and flesh." (Ibid.: 197)

4.3 *Genre Differences*

I already explained that absences of types (i) to (v) are not common in literary prose, which marks them as significant in the sense that they flout the conventions of the genre (see section 1 (i)). It is true that some of these absences can be seen in earlier prose: O'Toole (see 2014 online), for instance, mentions in his

11 This may be a verb, which then has the correct ending since this refers to the You-character, the brother, or it could be a noun. The same applies to the other instances marked by [?].

12 Other sexually explicit and syntactically fragmented passages can be found all through the book, e. g., on pages 53f.; 107f., 116, 140f., 165-171, 174f.

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

review of the novel that McBride's prose resembles Beckett's late prose, as represented by pieces like *Fizzle 5*

> **The** lots still bright **are** square. [Ø] Appear square. Just room for **the** average sized body. [Ø] Stretched out diagonally. Bigger it has to curl up. Thus **the** width of **the** ditch **is** known. **It** would have been in any case. Sum **the** bright lots. **The** dark. Outnumbered **the** former by far.

Here, too, some subjects are missing (indicated by Ø), but they are not missing all the time. McBride, however, goes much further in omitting almost all functional elements, which are still quite clearly present in *Fizzle 5* (I have indicated them in bold). The passage even contains logical and temporal connectors, such as "still" (l. 1), "Thus" (l. 2), and "former" (l. 4).

Null-pronouns are, of course, also present in the diary genre, as noted above in section 2.3. I do not think, however, that the diary style accounts for their presence in McBride's novel. First of all, other functional elements are also missing, which *are* present in diary writing, but, more importantly, the story is not presented as a diary. Rather, we are given a description of the activities *as they take place*; we are, as it were, present at the scene. I would therefore interpret these null-subjects as iconic-indexical signs of the emotion present in the protagonist, one of the functions of null-subjects discussed by Scott. She calls this the "pressurized null" (2013: 77), which can be used by an author to introduce "a sense of panic and urgency", to indicate that the speaker is "under pressure". The reader is thus given "access to the feelings and emotions of the character *at the time of the events*, not at the time of the description" (ibid.: 81, emphasis added).

5 Conclusion: Frame and Function of Blanks in McBride's Novel

It is clear that the use of syntactic blanks in McBride's novel is highly significant according to all three criteria mentioned in section 1, i.e., the syntactic absences are frequent, unconventional, and occur in specific places. As to the last point, the position of the blanks in the novel, it was already noted that the absences are most strongly foregrounded in the sections of the text that describe physical and sexual abuse. For this reason, it is noteworthy that the passages that are the most regular ones from a syntactic point of view consist of prayers interspersed throughout the text (e.g., the 'Lord's prayer'; cf. McBride 2013/2014: 51). They represent the Roman Catholic world in the background, which is stable and does not change. It provides a moral counterpart, the vessel

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

in the sea that can still save the shipwrecked protagonist from shame and complete fragmentation. It is significant that the prayer often follows a description of her sexual lust, her "mortal mortal sin" (ibid.). What makes the prayer sections stand out even more is the fact that the text is devoid of the punctuation marks and capital letters that normally indicate the beginning and end of sentences.[13] This in turn forms a marked contrast with other emotionally loaded sentences, where the full stops and capitals abound, breaking up syntactically otherwise fully complete sentences, as in

> We're. Moving. House. Because. That. Is. What. I'd. Like. To. Do. And. If. You. Don't. Too. Bad. Because. I'm. The. Mother. And. You. Will. Do. What. I. Say. As. Long. As. You. Live. Under. My. Roof. You. Will. Always. Do. What. I. Say. O. Kay (ibid.: 33).

The *significance* of the blanks has also become clear, in that they can be related as iconic indexical signs to the characteristics of early child language, and the representation of pure emotion. They mimic the preconscious thoughts, the raw emotional reactions of the I-narrator. Apart from their role in the sexual scenes, the blanks overall are also an icon of the fact that the girl has no name throughout the narrative, and they are an icon of the 'message' of the story: the fragmentation of a girl preventing her to develop into a fully functional adult. They are an emblem of the title of the story: *A Girl as a* Half-Formed *Thing*.

Finally, since the contributions to this volume pay attention to the use and comparison of blanks in different media, it is interesting in this respect to quote a comment on McBride's novel by Adam Mars-Jones. He likens the way the narrative is told to the way the camera tells a story in film

> A virtual first-person narration in fiction is like a video camera at the central character's shoulder. A true first person is like a handheld camera, only this one is like a micro-camera attached to the narrator's head, facing in new directions with every nod and nervous movement. (Mars-Jones 2013 online)

I would even go one step further and see the narration as filmed through a camera chip placed deep inside the brain, filming events without them being

13 More examples involving prayers or psalms can be found on pages 75 and 111. It is interesting to observe that towards the end of the book, when the brother is dying and the girl is losing faith, the prayers are no longer represented with the same grammatical accuracy (see 180, 196).

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

filtered through what Goldberg has termed the "executive brain" (see 2001). Goldberg compares the prefrontal cortex that organizes and plans with the conductor of a large orchestra, whose members represent all the different complex components that our brain consists of (cf. ibid.: 23). What is missing in the narrator of McBride's novel is exactly that: organization and planning.

References

Anderson, Howard, John S. Shea, eds. (1967). *Studies in Criticism and Aesthetics, 1660–1800: Essays in Honor of Samuel Holt Monk.* Minneapolis, MI: Univ. of Minnesota Press.

Anttila, Raimo (2003). "Analogy: The Warp and Woof of Cognition". Brian D. Joseph, Richard D. Janda, eds. *The Handbook of Historical Linguistics.* Oxford: Blackwell. 425–440.

Bloom, Lois (1970). *Language Development: Form and Function in Emerging Grammars*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Butler, Christopher (1994). *Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe 1900–1916.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Clark, Eve V. (2003). *First Language Acquisition.* Cambridge: CUP.

Dawkins, Richard (1995). *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Deacon, Terrence W. (1997). *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain.* New York, NY: Norton.

Elledge, Scott (1967). "The Naked Science of Language, 1747–1786". Anderson/Shea, eds. 266–295.

Enright, Anne (2013 online). Review of McBride's Novel in *The Guardian*, Sept. 20. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/20/girl-half-formed-thing-review> [05/04/2015].

Fischer, Olga (2004). "Evidence for Iconicity in Language". *Logos and Language: Journal of General Linguistics and Language Theory* 5/1: 1–19.

Fischer, Olga (2014). "Iconicity". Peter Stockwell, Sarah Whiteley, eds. *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*. Cambridge: CUP. 377–392.

Fischer, Olga, Max Nänny, eds. (2001). *The Motivated Sign: Iconicity in Language and Literature 2.* Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Fónagy, Ivan (2001). *Languages within Language: An Evolutive Approach.* Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Frye, Northrop (1957). *Anatomy in Criticism: Four Essays.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.

Gavin, Joanna (2013). *Reading the Absurd*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press.

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

Gioia, Ted (2013 online). “The First Postmodern Novel? *Tristram Shandy* was ‘A Postmodern Classic before There was a Modernism to be Post About’”. <http://www.fractiousfiction.com/tristram_ shandy.html> [05/04/2015].

Goldberg, Elkhonon (2001). *The Executive Brain: Frontal Lobes and the Civilized Mind.* Oxford: OUP.

Hemingway, Ernest (1987). *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway.* New York, NY: Scribner.

Henry, Anne C. (2001). “Iconic Punctuation: Ellipsis Marks in a Historical Perspective”. Fischer/Nänny, eds. 135–156.

Hofstadter, Douglas, Emmanuel Sander (2013). *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Joyce, James (1969). *Ulysses.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Lee, A. Robert (2012). “Tongues Untied: Beat Ethnicities, Beat Multiculture”. Sharin N. Elkholy, ed. *The Philosophy of the Beats.* Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky. 97–114.

Leech, Geoffrey, Mick H. Short (1981/2007). *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. 2nd ed. London: Longman

Lodge, David (1966/1984). *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Lodge, David (1977). *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature.* London: Arnold.

Mars-Jones, Adam (2013 online). “All Your Walkmans Fizz in Tune”. Review of *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* by Eimear McBride. *London Review of Books*, Aug. 8. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n15/adam-mars-jones/all-your-walkmans-fizz-in-tune> [05/04/2015].

McBride, Eimear (2013/2014). *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing.* London: Faber & Faber.

McCarthy, Tom (2005). *Remainder*. New York, NY: Vintage.

McEwan, Ian (2014). *The Children Act*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Moser, Sibylle (2007). “Iconicity in Multimedia Performance: Laurie Anderson’s *White Lily*”. Tabakowska et al., eds. 323–345.

Müller, Wolfgang G. (1999). “The Iconic Use of Syntax in British and American Fiction”. Nänny/Fischer, eds. 393–408.

Müller, Wolfgang G. (2001). “Iconicity and Rhetoric: A Note on the Iconic Force of Rhetorical Figures in Shakespeare”. Fischer/Nänny, eds. 305–322.

Nänny, Max, Olga Fischer, eds. (1999). *Form Miming Meaning: Iconicity in Language and Literature.* Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Nöth, Winfried (2001). “Semiotic Foundations of Iconicity in Language and Literature”. Fischer/Nänny, eds. 17–28.

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek

Olson, Gary M. (1973). “Developmental Changes in Memory and Acquisition of Language”. Timothy E. Moore, ed. *Cognitive Development and the Acquisition of Language.* New York, NY: Academic Press. 145–158.

O’Toole, Fintan (2014 online). “The Rape of the Narrator”. *New York Review of Books,* Nov. 20. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/11/20/eimear-mcbride-rape-narrator/> [05/04/2015].

Scott, Kate (2005 online). “Child Null Subjects”. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*: 1–25. <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/publications/WPL/05papers/scott.pdf> [05/04/2016].

Scott, Kate (2013). “Pragmatically Motivated Null Subjects in English: A Relevance Theory Perspective”. *Journal of Pragmatics* 53: 68–83.

Swallow Prior, Karin (2014 online). “*A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*: Haunting, Defiant, Demanding to Be Heard”. Books and Culture: A Christian Review, Sept. <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/webexclusives/2014/september/girl-is-half-formed-thing.html?visit_source=twitter> [05/04/2015].

Tabakowska, Elżbieta, Christina Ljungberg, Olga Fischer, eds. (2007). *Insistent Images*. Iconicity in Language and Literature 5. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Talmy, Leonard (2010). “Attention Phenomena”. Dirk Geeraerts, Hubert Cuykens, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. Oxford: OUP. 264–293.

Talmy, Leonard (2011). “Cognitive Semantics: An Overview”. Claudia Maienborn, Klaus von Heusinger, Paul Portner, eds. *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. 622–642.

Valéry, Paul (1958). “Remarks on Poetry”. *The Art of Poetry.* Trans. Denise Folliot. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Watt, Ian (1967). “The Comic Syntax of *Tristram Shandy*”. Anderson/Shea, eds. 315–331.

White, John (2007). “Forms of Restricted Iconicity in Modern Avant-Garde Poetry”. Tabakowska et al., eds. 129–154.

Wolf, Werner (2005). “Non-supplemented Blanks in Works of Literature as Forms of ‘Iconicity of Absence’”. Costantino Maeder, Olga Fischer, William Herlofsky, eds. *Outside-In and Inside-Out: Iconicity in Language and Literature 4.* Amsterdam: Benjamins. 113–132.

Wood, James (2014 online). “Useless Prayers: Eimear McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*”. *The New Yorker,* Sept. 29. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/29/useless-prayers> [05/04/2015].

Woolf, Virginia (1967) “Modern Fiction”. *Collected Essays II.* New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and World. 103–110.

Wurlitzer, Rudolph (1969/2009). *Nog*. Two Dollar Radio.

Olga Fischer - 9789004394520
Downloaded from Brill.com 11/01/2023 10:47:02AM
via UvA Universiteitsbibliotheek