

Marta Goszczyńska\*

# Secrets, Epiphanies and Ellipses

## The Uses of Silence in William Trevor's Selected Stories

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2020.038>

**Abstract:** This essay discusses three different uses of silence in William Trevor's short fiction. First of all, it focuses on how silence is deployed on the thematic level of his stories, particularly the ones that depict the estranging effects of secrecy on personal relationships. Second, the essay draws attention to the writer's exploration of a decidedly more positive aspect of silence in many of his scenes of epiphany. In such scenes, silence is no longer associated with mendacious secrecy; quite the opposite, it becomes a precondition for glimpsing into the truth, allowing Trevor's characters to experience moments of heightened awareness and insight. Third, the essay looks at how silence also manifests itself on the formal level of the stories, in the ellipses, understatements and gaps that riddle Trevor's narratives. These three uses of silence – as a motif relating to the larger theme of secrecy and concealment, as an integral component of the scenes of epiphanic insight, and as a shorthand for Trevor's elliptical narrative technique – are illustrated with examples from stories collected in *After Rain* (1996) and *Cheating at Canasta* (2007).

**Keywords:** William Trevor, short story, silence, secrecy, ellipsis, epiphany

91

LITTERARIA COPERNICANA 3(35) 2020

ISSNp 1899-315X

ss. 91–104

---

\* Assistant Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture at the University of Łódź, Poland. Her research interests include women's studies, neo-Victorianism and narrative theory.  
E-mail: [marta.goszczyńska@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:marta.goszczyńska@uni.lodz.pl) | ORCID: 0000-0003-3156-8670.

# Sekrety, epifanie i elipsy

## Użycia ciszy w wybranych opowiadaniach

### Williama Trevora

**Streszczenie:** Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest wykorzystaniu ciszy w opowiadaniach irlandzkiego pisarza Williama Trevora. W części pierwszej analizuje przykłady obsesyjnego wręcz skupienia autora na motywie tajemnicy i przemilczenia. W części drugiej zwraca uwagę na obecność ciszy w licznych u Trevora scenach epifanii. W scenach tych cisza nie kojarzy się już z zakłamaniem i skrywanymi sekretami, ale ukazana jest pozytywnie, jako warunek umożliwiający postaciom wgląd w prawdę o sobie lub innych. Część trzecia skupia się z kolei na tych aspektach techniki narracyjnej pisarza, które mają swoje źródło w ciszy: elipsach, niedopowiedzeniach, lukach narracyjnych. Te trzy użycia ciszy – jako motywu związanego z tematem przemilczenia, jako stanowi pozwalającemu bohaterom na doświadczenie epifanii, wreszcie jako formalnemu elementowi narracji – zostaną zilustrowane przykładami z opowiadań opublikowanych w dwóch tomach: *After Rain* (1996) i *Cheating at Canasta* (2007).

**Słowa kluczowe:** William Trevor, opowiadanie, przemilczenie, sekrety, elipsa, epifania

In one of the rare interviews he gave in his lifetime, William Trevor admitted that his fiction was characterised by a degree of repetitiveness, confessing that he liked to return to “the same theme” in order to see what could be accomplished when a certain scenario is replayed “a second, a third, even a fourth or a fifth time” (Trevor 1993: 116). According to Miriam Marty Clark, the most significant of such thematic recurrences is Trevor’s “passionate and minute interest in human knowing and its enveloping, seductive other, unknowing” (2001: 406). For Clark, this interest is reflected in the writer’s near-obsessive preoccupation with lies, deceptions, and, in particular, with what she refers to as “concealments and half-truths” (ibid.: 407). These range from fairly “benign lies”, including “a disappointment unspoken” or “a harsh reality softened” to less innocuous ones that constitute “a threshold, carefully preserved, between the public world and the private” (ibid.: 407). All of them, however, are premised on secrecy and silence, signalling a refusal to come to terms with unpleasant realities.

Though accurate and perceptive, Clark’s observations only reiterate comments made by other critics, who point to Trevor’s persistent concern with what is unspoken, hidden or otherwise suppressed. The idea is expressed most succinctly, perhaps, by Robert E. Rhodes, who points to the writer’s “use of secrets as a plot device and as a means of directing our attention to his most important fictional concern: the mystery of human personality” (1989: 159). His words, however, tie in neatly with those of Julian Gitzen and Richard Bonaccorso, both of whom contrast the majority of Trevor’s characters, actively engaged in “creating and sustaining illusions” (Gitzen 1979: 60), with those rare individuals who “find themselves pursuing rather than fleeing truth” (Bonaccorso 1997: 114). Described

as “truth-tellers” (Gitzen 1979) and “martyrs for truth” (Bonaccorso 1997), such characters display a steadfast determination to break through silences, peel away falsehoods and reveal secrets, irrespective of personal costs involved. As Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt explains, however, their “acts of honesty” are seldom appreciated, and the truth-tellers themselves are typically “ignored or ostracised” by the communities they live in (2003: 107).

Insightful as they are, the considerations outlined above do not fully account for the complexity of Trevor’s fiction by drawing a fairly straightforward parallel between silence and mendacious secrecy and thus suggesting a largely negative, and rather mechanical, deployment of silence on the writer’s part. They also focus on silence as a recurring thematic concern, largely ignoring its presence as a formal narrative strategy. In an attempt to draw a more nuanced, and accurate, picture of silence in Trevor’s short fiction, I aim to extend the discussion in two ways. First of all, I will argue that the author’s deployment of silence as a thematic motif goes far beyond the “use of secrets as a plot device” (Rhodes 1989: 159). While indeed many of Trevor’s stories depict the estranging effects of secrecy on personal relationships, the author also explores a different, decidedly more positive facet of silence, wrapping in it many of his scenes of epiphany. In his stories, silence and isolation are often construed as prerequisites for moments of heightened awareness and insight. Paradoxically, then, while his “truth-tellers” display high levels of articulacy and a readiness to acknowledge what others would rather overlook and suppress, their heightened perception is often achieved in epiphanic moments of silent, thoughtful isolation. Apart from emphasising this ambiguous nature of silence as a motif, however, I also intend to draw attention to its presence on the formal level of Trevor’s short stories, where it is inscribed into what Ronan McDonald refers to as “strategies of silence”. In an essay devoted to fictional representations of the Northern Ireland “Troubles” (including Trevor’s “Beyond the Pale”), McDonald employs the term to describe such formal narrative features as “expressive reticence”, understatement and narrative gaps (2005: 249). Taking this cue, I will look at a selection of Trevor’s short stories in an attempt to identify his preferred set of these “strategies of silence”.

These three “uses” of silence in Trevor’s short fiction – as a motif relating to the larger theme of secrecy and concealment, as an integral element in the scenes of epiphanic insight, and as a shorthand for Trevor’s elliptical narrative technique – will be illustrated with examples coming from stories published in *After Rain* (1996) and *Cheating at Canasta* (2007). Accepting the brevity of the essay form, I will not attempt close readings of all the narratives in the collections. Instead, I will look in particular at four stories: “A Day” and “Lost Ground” from *After Rain*, and “Bravado” and “Men of Ireland” from *Cheating at Canasta*, referring to other pieces in the collections only when it seems relevant to the discussion.

\*

For some commentators, a link can be drawn between the persistence of Trevor’s concern with secrecy and his Irish background. The connection is made, among others, by Robert E. Rhodes, who sees silence and concealment as “engrained in the Irish nature” (1989: 162). By referring to geography, politics and history, Rhodes points to “the physical isolation of many Irish communities, families, and individuals” as a source of a characteristic “tribal reticence”. He also reflects on the British domination as a force that has “driven [the Irish]

to a conspiratorial mode of life in dealing not only with the British but with one another” (1989: 162). Much the same argument is voiced by Robert Cranny, who goes on to suggest that even the penchant for “banter and wit and laughter and cunning” may be interpreted as a strategy that allows the Irish “to hide their true feelings” (1995: 316). Finally, Ronan McDonald identifies silence “both as a symptom of a colonial condition and as an aesthetic strategy seeking to resist this condition”, and interprets, among other things, “the mistrustful silence prevailing between the two communities in Northern Ireland” as “a generalized failure of articulation in the politically fibrillated province” (2005: 253).

Tim Adams, on the other hand, locates the origins of Trevor’s motif of secrecy and silence in the author’s childhood, arguing that “all the mysteries of his insistent fiction grew out of that unhappy puzzle” (2009). The puzzle that the journalist has in mind refers to the failed marriage of Trevor’s parents, which seemed to disintegrate for no apparent reason. In the newspaper profile penned by Adams, Trevor reveals: “in all the quarrels that exploded, in all the accusations and recriminations, in all the brooding silences, there was never a clue to the truth that lay at the root” (Adams 2009). And since Trevor always insisted that the principal motive behind his writing was his unrelenting curiosity about others<sup>1</sup>, it seems plausible that one of the most obsessive motifs of his fiction can indeed be linked to this distressing childhood conundrum. As the author explained to Lisa Allardice,

I’ve always thought [...] that something actually happened, the way that quite often in a marriage or a relationship something happens, and nobody knows because it’s kept away from the rest of the world, because there’s shame or something. There’s a big question mark. (Trevor 2009)

Even if such speculations may be tinged with a hint of “biographical fallacy”, the marriage of Trevor’s parents – characterised as it was with “total silence in the house, nothing said at meals” (Trevor 2009) – seems to provide an accurate template for many of the unhappy relationships depicted in his short fiction. What is more, this explanation can also be reconciled with the view that regards reticence and concealment as emblematic of Irishness. After all, as Robert Cranny suggests, in Irish communities, “family secrets were the best-kept secrets”: “the elusive truth was always hidden, and those around behaved as though it didn’t exist at all” (1995: 316).

Irrespective of the reasons, the theme of disastrous secrets, shared by some but carefully hidden from others, is obsessively explored in Trevor’s short stories, many of which depict the estranging consequences of silences and concealments on the lives of couples, lovers and families. Unsurprisingly, then, the theme is also present in the collections under analysis, with secrets and silences affecting the lives of the majority of characters in the collections<sup>2</sup>. Story after story, relationships are undermined, friendships threatened, and

<sup>1</sup> In one of the interviews, the author asserted: “I write out of curiosity more than anything else” (Trevor 2009).

<sup>2</sup> A couple of examples will have to suffice as illustrations. In “The Piano Tuner’s Wives”, for instance, a wife lies to her blind husband to distort the happy memories of his previous marriage, which he realises but silently accepts. In “A Friendship”, a lifelong relationship between Margy and Francesca is sacrificed when the latter’s husband discovers a secret the two women have kept away from him. In “Gilbert’s Mother”, the title character suspects his grown-up son of leading a secret life of crime. “The Dressmaker’s Child” depicts its protagonist, Cahal, as caught within a web of lies and silences, the central of which is his accidental killing of the eponymous

family ties disintegrate, because the characters prove unable to engage in meaningful, open discussions of their problems, fears and feelings. Instead, they choose silence, “embrace falsities” (Trevor 2007b: 88), and resign themselves to “speak[ing] of little things” (Trevor 2007d: 39) or “conversing inconsequentially” (Trevor 1997d: 213). The emotional difficulties they experience, and the psychological costs of their fearful withdrawals into silence, are brought into particularly sharp relief when considered side by side with the honest, brave choices made by characters of such pieces as “The Potato Dealer” or “A Perfect Relationship”, whose stories ascertain that, in “Trevorland”, truth may be painful, but it is preferable to living in a lie.

In *After Rain* and *Cheating at Canasta*, however, such honest choices are rarely made. As elsewhere in Trevor’s fiction, truth-tellers belong to an exclusive minority while most of the characters accept their sad “restricted lives” as something that “could be borne” (Trevor 2007a: 127–28). In consequence, most of the stories lack climactic scenes of revelation or conflict, allowing secrets to linger. As argued by Robert E. Rhodes, however, the absence of a “dramatic confrontation scene” does not mean that such narratives fail to produce suspense and tension. Quite the opposite, tension is “all the more powerful” when the pressure that these secrets generate finds no outlet (Rhodes 1989: 160).

One of such emotionally-charged, anti-climactic stories is “A Day”. Its narrative recounts the daily happenings in the life of Mrs Lethwes, a middle-aged woman whose apparently happy marriage struggles under the burden of three problems: her childlessness, her husband’s love affair and her own alcohol addiction, none of which the couple is ready to acknowledge or discuss. The story repeatedly underscores the silences prevailing in the relationship, contrasting Mrs Lethwes with her mother, a woman “given to speaking openly” (Trevor 1997a: 191), and describing her husband as a person who makes sure “it had never been said” that “she’d failed him”: “he wasn’t in the least like that” (ibid.: 189). Weaving together omniscient third-person descriptions of Mrs Lethwes’s mundane activities (waking up to a new day, going to the shops, gardening, chatting with a housekeeper and preparing dinner) with passages of free indirect discourse where the reader is granted access to the woman’s thoughts, the story offers a damaging portrait of a relationship premised on secrecy and silence, where a single inadvertent word might shatter the façade of “a perfect marriage” (ibid.: 192). The precariousness of the relationship is visible, for instance, in a flashback that takes us seven years back, to a holiday in France when Mrs Lethwes accidentally learnt of her husband’s infidelity: “Say something, she thought, and as soon as she does it’ll be in the open. The next thing is he’ll be putting it gently to her that nothing is as it should be” (ibid.: 190). Fearing of what the two of them might have to acknowledge once she decides to be honest, Mrs Lethwes resigns herself to a thwarted existence, made bearable only when she drinks, and secretly “hopes that nothing ever shows” (ibid.: 191). This self-imposed censorship, however, manifests itself in the ambiguous, euphemistic language she uses as she describes her husband’s lover as “his other woman” (ibid.: 195) or constructs

---

child. “At Olivehill” is set in motion when two young Irishmen decide to hide from their dying father their resolution to convert their family estate into a golf course. “Faith” tells the story of a Protestant clergyman, whose lost vocation is never revealed to the sister with whom he has spent his whole life. “Folie à Deux” revolves around a chance encounter between two men, whose childhood friendship dissolved when they committed and then failed to admit to an act of mindless cruelty.

awkward, convoluted sentences when speaking of his infidelity: “she knew she must never say she had discovered what she had” (ibid.: 210).

Another story collected in *After Rain* and delineating devastating effects of secrecy and silence is “Lost Ground”, where the theme is investigated within the political context of the Northern Ireland “Troubles”. “Lost Ground” tells the story of Milton Leeson, a teenager from a staunchly Protestant farming family, who becomes a preacher after experiencing visions of St Rosa of Viterbo, a thirteenth-century Catholic saint and herself a child preacher. Though Milton’s message is that of peace and forgiveness, it is vehemently opposed by his family: the Leesons pride themselves on the fact that the route of the local Orange Order parade begins and ends on their land, their eldest son, Garfield, has links to Belfast paramilitaries, and Milton’s actions are seen as offensive and shameful. To put an end to his preaching, they lock the boy in his bedroom and install bars on his window. Soon afterwards, the teenager is murdered, apparently by members of the Provisional IRA who have been spotted in the neighbourhood. However, when Milton’s sister, Hazel, returns home for the funeral, she realises that the boy was killed by their elder brother, Garfield, and that the whole family, including her grieving mother, are well aware of what really happened. In the closing scene of the story, the woman looks at the faces of those gathered at the graveside, concluding that her family will have to resort to silences, lies and self-deceptions in order to live on: “The family would not ever talk about the day, but through their pain they would tell themselves that Milton’s death was the way things were, the way things had to be” (Trevor 1997c: 183).

“Lost Ground” has been analysed by a number of critics. Most of them, however, have approached the story from a very different angle, focusing on its representations of Northern Irish characters as caught in the vicious circle of sectarian violence, which they are unwilling, or unable, to break. Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt describes “Lost Ground” as a “cautionary tale” (2003: 126) illustrating “the dangers of clinging to the myths of the past” (ibid.: 131). Elmer Kennedy-Andrews sees it as underpinned with “the notion of Irish history as a continuum of violence” (2013: 71) while Jennifer M. Jeffers reads it through the lens of trauma theory, presenting its Protestant characters as destined to “continue to repeat history” (2013: 137). In his analysis of the ending, however, Kennedy-Andrews touches upon Trevor’s deployment of silence, commenting on sectarianism as a devastating force that “drives people to behave in ways which they cannot talk about or admit even to themselves” (2013: 73).

While the motif of silence finds its strongest expression in this finale of “Lost Ground”, it runs throughout the narrative, assuming increasingly ominous undertones. At the beginning, Milton embraces silence voluntarily, choosing not to tell anyone about his encounters with St Rosa for nearly eleven months: the visions take place on the 14th and the 15<sup>th</sup> of September, 1989, but it is not till the 12<sup>th</sup> of July the next year (when the annual Orange Order celebrations are organised) that the boy finally shares his secret. His initial reluctance to tell, the narrator explains, stems from shyness: he simply does not know how to talk about a woman approaching him and kissing him on the lips (Trevor 1997c: 149). Later, preserving the secret becomes a habit, and “Milton, who had kept the whole matter to himself, continued to do so” (ibid.: 155). On the day of the march, however, Milton has a sense that the woman keeps “agitating and nagging him”: “all the time on the march he had felt himself being pressed to tell” (ibid.: 161). Soon afterwards,

despite hostile reactions of those he confides in, he finds a voice that allows him to start preaching:

His voice came from somewhere outside himself – from St Rosa [...] He heard himself saying that his sister Hazel refused to return to the province. He heard himself describing the silent village, and the drums and the flutes that brought music to it [...] (ibid.: 172)

The fluency of Milton's newfound voice stands in sharp contrast to his earlier stumbling attempt to explain his experiences to Father Mulhall, a Catholic priest whom he visits when the Reverend Herbert Cutcheon, his brother-in-law, fails to help him. During the conversation with Father Mulhall, Milton stammers, loses his train of thought, and then reduces his voice to an "almost inaudible" whisper (ibid.: 165). Now, on the other hand, he speaks with eloquence and conviction.

By referring to the Catholic area during the Orange Order celebrations as "the silent village", itself an echo of an earlier and more sinister description of the same neighbourhood as "the deadened village" (ibid.: 161), Milton's speech reminds the reader of intimidated Catholic families "hidden" behind their windows (ibid.: 160), and establishes a clear link between silence and violence that is explored in the latter part of the story. When Milton finally recognises that "he was not meant to be silent" (ibid.: 165), silence is imposed on him – through increasingly more drastic means. While the Reverend Cutcheon merely admonishes him to preserve the secret: "Don't tell anyone else, Milton. Don't tell a single soul" (ibid.: 162), Father Mulhall reacts with hostility and shows Milton out of his house "in silence" (ibid.: 167). The reactions of other characters point to a disproportionate escalation in violence. On hearing about St Rosa and his son's subsequent conversations with both clergymen, Milton's father offers not a single word of comment. Instead, he "point[s] to where Milton should stand" and strikes him on the face, twice, drawing blood from the boy's nose (ibid.: 169). This silent act of violence leads to others. When Milton later attempts to preach in a nearby village, he is found, pushed into his father's car and forced to return home, with "no one [speaking] a word on the journey back" (ibid.: 173). The violence culminates in Garfield's fratricide, the ultimate silencing act, which allows the Leesons to restore their threatened reputation.

Silence is also negatively portrayed in "Bravado" and "Men of Ireland". The first of these stories is set in contemporary Dublin and revolves around a fatal attack committed by a gang of teenagers after a night of clubbing. The story centres on the ironically-named Aisling, who silently watches the crime, and later justifies her behaviour by connecting the victim with a story of rape she heard earlier that night: "So that was it [...] This Dalgety had upset Donovan's sister, going too far when she didn't want him to" (Trevor 2007b: 80). When she finally understands that the victim of the attack was not a rapist, but a randomly selected, innocent teenager, she blames herself for her passivity, realising that the assault was meant to impress her with a display of power and machismo. Like Aisling, Father Meade, the central character in "Men of Ireland", attempts to ease his conscience by embracing a lie of his own invention. The story centres around a visit he receives one day from Donal Prunty, an alcoholic tramp who has returned to his childhood parish to blackmail the elderly priest. Prunty accuses Father Meade of having molested him when he served as an altar boy, and the priest hands him all his money even though he is innocent of the allegations. Aware

of the tattered reputation of the Catholic clergy, “the sins that so deeply stained his cloth” (ibid.: 59), Father Meade feels he cannot risk a confrontation. Instead of admitting to his cowardice, however, he tries to convince himself that his gesture was rooted in charity, pity and “honourable guilt” over his failure to reach to Prunty when he was a boy (ibid.: 58). Only at the end of the story is he able to admit that “he had paid for silence” (ibid.: 58).

\*

As has already been stated, however, such negative representations of silence as implicated in secrecy, duplicity and violence are counterbalanced, in some of the stories, with epiphanic scenes where silence becomes a precondition for glimpsing into the truth. Though such revelatory experiences are by no means granted to all of Trevor’s characters, whenever they occur, they are placed in the context of silence, thoughtfulness and isolation. Gregory A. Schirmer describes Trevor’s epiphanies as “thoroughly Joycean” (2014: 41) and indeed the epiphanies experienced by his characters resemble what Annika J. Lindskog describes as “silent moments” of modernist literature and defines as “instances when stated silences suggest inner experiences” (2017: 20). According to the critic, such scenes are particularly prominent in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where “a stated silence often indicates that Stephen is experiencing something significant”, which allows to connect these moments “to his epiphanies on a number of occasions” (ibid.: 199). As Lindskog goes on to explain,

Stephen spends a large amount of time in the private silence of his inner world, and on numerous occasions the word “silent” in the text signals that descriptions of settings should be read not merely as soundscapes or landscapes but also as mindscapes: as metaphorical descriptions of Stephen’s interiority, and what is developing there. When escaping into his “mental world”, Stephen appears to shut out his surroundings to such an extent as to be unaware of what happens around him. (ibid.: 200–201)

Though intended as a description of what happens in Joyce’s novel, the commentary may well be applied to Trevor’s short stories where epiphanies are also experienced in scenes that foreground seclusion, withdrawal and silence. Coming at the climax of the narratives, such moments are deeply ambiguous since, on the one hand, they connote the positive values of revelation, illumination and self-discovery, but, on the other, they are accompanied by a pervasive sense of irony, disillusionment and bitterness.

In “Bravado”, for instance, such an epiphanic moment of self-discovery is experienced by Aisling as she kneels at the grave of her boyfriend’s victim. With a quintessentially Irish name that connects her to the world of poetry and dream visions, Aisling seems guilty of idealising the act of violence she once witnessed. In effect, the epiphany she experiences many years later can be interpreted as a moment of her waking up to the harsh reality of life. During the scene, Aisling comes to accept that the attack on Dalgety was not a justified act of revenge for a wrong previously committed but stemmed from violence that was purely gratuitous, a feat of drunken bravado performed for her sake. Even more importantly, she also accepts her own vicarious involvement in the crime:



In a bleak cemetery Aisling begged forgiveness of the dead for the falsity she had embraced when what there was had been too ugly to accept. Silent she had watched an act committed to impress her [...] And watching there was pleasure. If only for a moment, but still there had been. (2007b: 88)

If Aisling's passive silence during and after the attack testifies to her self-absorption and lack of spirit, the scene of her silent epiphany marks her readiness to accept the "ugly" truth – about her boyfriend, his act of mindless cruelty, and, most importantly, about herself.

A number of other stories in the collections end on similar notes of painful recognition, with characters admitting to a weakness of personality or recording a sense of disillusionment with the surrounding world. In all of them, epiphanic moments of insight are placed within the context of silence and solitude. In "After Rain", it is during "the solitude of her stay in the Pensione Cesarina that a young woman realises that in all her failed relationships "she has been the victim of herself", scaring off subsequent boyfriends and lovers "when she asked too much of love" (Trevor 1997b: 95). Similarly, in "Men of Ireland", it is in the context of a quiet, solitary evening in the garden that Father Meade begins to question his motives for giving money to the blackmailer who visited him earlier that day. Even though the priest had no doubt that the accusations of sexual abuse that the man levelled were false, he handed Prunty all his money, and then tried to convince himself that he had acted out of pity, charity and kindness. All these complacent self-delusions, however, collapse in a sudden flash of epiphany:

While he rested in the sun, Father Meade was aware of a temptation to let his reflections settle for one of these [comforting] conclusions. But he knew, even without further thought, that there was as little truth in them as there was in the crude pretences of his visitor: there'd been no generous intent in the giving of the money, no honourable guilt had inspired the gesture, no charitable motive. He had paid for silence. (Trevor 2007c: 58)

After examining his conscience, the priest recognises that he paid the blackmailer, because he feared the scandal that would doubtless ensue if the man made his allegations public. In doing so, he also displayed distrust towards his parishioners, assuming that they would react with anger and suspicions rather than offer their support. Thus, he concludes, though he is "guiltless" of the abuse, he is still "guilty" of what he sees in terms of a moral failure (Trevor 2007c: 58).

\*

As has already been suggested, however, Trevor's deployment of silence does not end at the thematic level of his short fiction but also encompasses a set of formal narrative strategies. This should come as no surprise, in fact, since the genre of the short story *per se* is characterised by what Ronan McDonald describes as "a suspicion of verbosity and extended realism" (2005: 249). In defining short fiction, McDonald draws attention to "the stringency and economy" imposed by "the tightness of its form" and a "wry, elliptical point of view", concluding that the genre "is geared towards the unsaid and suggested, rather than the elaborately articulated" (2005: 249). His views find reflection in numerous comments on the

topic made by Trevor. In an interview for *Paris Review*, for instance, the writer defined the short story as “the art of the glimpse” and argued that the “strength [of the form] lies in what it leaves out just as much as what it puts in, if not more” (Stout 1989). A similar comment appeared in his 2009 interview for *The Guardian*, where he compared the act of composing a short story to the process of “cutting and editing a film” and repeated his earlier claim that the most significant element of the narrative may actually be the one that undergoes elision.

The effects of this process of cutting, editing down and leaving out in Trevor’s short fiction are more than obvious. They can be discerned in the brevity of his paragraphs, which Declan Kiberd, in his review of *The Hill Bachelors* (2000), describes as “cut and chiselled, are those of a puritan stylist” (2001)<sup>3</sup> but also in the discontinuities (including shifts in point of view, prolepses and analepses) and silences that riddle his texts, many of which are explicitly signalled through graphic means: blanks between paragraphs and ubiquitous asterisks. Indeed, Trevor’s short stories tend to break into a number of fairly short sections separated by blanks. What these blanks usually indicate is a disruption in the chronology of events; quite often, however, particularly when they are accompanied by an asterisk, they also mark a change of perspective. John Mullan regards this technique as “almost a signature of William Trevor” and he captures its essence in the following commentary:

You begin a story with the unspoken reflections of one character, bound in some kind of intimacy with another. And then, just as the reader has become accustomed to inhabiting one person’s thoughts, there is a break [...]. As the reader jumps the gap, he or she realises that there has been a sudden shift. Now we are to see things from the second character’s point of view. (2004a)

In some of the stories in *After Rain* and *Cheating at Canasta*, including “The Piano Tuner’s Wives”, “Widows”, “At Olivehill”, “A Perfect Relationship” or “Faith”, this technique is applied quite rigorously. Tracing the trajectories of relationships between siblings, parents and children, and lovers, the narratives shift at fairly regular intervals, alternating between different viewpoints. These perspectives, however, rarely overlap or cohere, and the ubiquity of textual ellipses (coupled with the propensity of Trevor’s narrator to withhold judgement) means that none (or neither) is allowed to predominate. Instead, they remain suspended in a balance, forcing the reader to make sense of the fragments and draw their own conclusions. In a review of the posthumously published *Last Stories*, Julian Barnes insists that “Trevor does not make a point of being demanding or obscure” (2018). The comment is not entirely true, however, as Trevor did see the short story as an inherently difficult form. Years ago, during a literary festival, he admitted: “You demand far, far more of the reader [of the short story] than you do with a novel, or television” (qtd. in Lane 2004).

Some of these demands and difficulties can be illustrated with “Lost Ground”, one of the texts where the writer’s elliptical method of storytelling does not consist in switching between two competing viewpoints, but is encapsulated in a conspicuously absent

<sup>3</sup> Kiberd’s choice of words is significant here: “cut” and “chiselled” are indirect references to the writer’s early training as a sculptor, which Kiberd sees as exerting an influence on the quality of Trevor’s “shapely prose”. Other critics, and the author himself, also commented on the connection (cf. Trevor 2005 or Majola-Leblond 2014).

scene. The third-person narrative of “Lost Ground” falls into two major parts, each largely focalised through a separate character. Milton’s perspective dominates in the first section, which starts with the boy’s first sighting of the mysterious woman in the orchard and ends with a scene where he is, in effect, imprisoned in his room, and watches a car draw up in front of his barred window and Garfield and another man get out. Breaking off the narrative at this particular point means that the act of fratricide that is about to be committed is consigned to textual silence. In doing so, Trevor mimics the technique that Garfield himself relies on when he boasts about his exploits in the streets of Belfast. Describing “some Catholic going home [. . .] and being given a lift he didn’t want to accept” (Trevor 1997c: 156), the man invariably leaves his stories incomplete, depriving them of their climax: “Garfield always stopped before he came to the end of his tales; even when he’d had a few he left things to the imagination” (ibid.). In “Lost Ground”, the scene of Milton’s murder is also absent, while the reader’s imagination is propelled by Garfield’s earlier references to “disposal [that] completed the picture” (ibid.) and the rumours circulating among the local Catholic community that the Leasons’ eldest son “belonged in the ganglands of the Protestant back streets, [and] that his butcher’s skills came in handy when a job had to be done” (ibid.: 167). Trevor’s decision to “dispose of” the brutal scene of murder, however, also indicates that the correlation between silence and violence extends beyond the thematic level of “Lost Ground”. The asterisk and the textual blank that replace the absent scene mark the moment when the writer himself reaches the limits of verbal representation and stops short of venturing onto the territory of what is unspeakable. When the narrative resumes after a prolepsis, it is Milton’s sister, Hazel, who takes over as the focal character. Hazel’s position approximates that of the reader: she is an outsider as, years ago, she decided to move – or, as the narrator says, “run away” (ibid.: 55) – to England in an attempt to distance herself from the never-ending conflict between Protestants and Catholics, which she associates with “tit-for-tat murders”, “hard-man mentality”, and “a reluctance to forgive” (ibid.: 55). According to Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, “such an elliptical and understated style of narration allows Trevor to extract the maximum shock value” from the story, and “to register through Hazel the reader’s sense of horror at what this family has shown itself capable of” (2013: 72). As has hopefully been demonstrated above, however, Trevor’s reliance on these textual “strategies of silence” is not intended to merely shock the reader. Interweaving within a single text the three different “uses” of silence I have discussed, the graveyard scene takes the events of the story to their epiphanic crescendo where Hazel’s silent moment of horrified insight not only inscribes into the narrative the missing ending of Milton’s story but also reveals the psychological consequences of the perverse logic that has made the Leasons insist that certain “matters were best left unaided” (Trevor 1997c: 170). Like a number of other characters in Trevor’s fiction, they will henceforth live in the aftermath of the traumatic event, both the victims and the perpetrators of what Trevor describes in the story as “silence silently agreed upon” (ibid.: 181).

Trevor’s reliance on strategies of silence is even more conspicuous in “A Day”, a story riddled with epistemological gaps and unanswered questions. All the events here are filtered through the mind of Mrs Lethwes, as she moves, increasingly more chaotic, drunk and desperate, through her day. In light of the woman’s alcohol problem, and her penchant for self-imposed censorship, the story would certainly be less demanding if her

point of view was complemented by that of her husband, or of any other character in the story, be it the gardener or the cleaning lady who help Mrs Lethwes run the house. No other character's perspective is given, however, and the third-person narrator withholds all comment, refusing to link the woman's revelations into meaningful causal chains. In consequence, it is never explained, for instance, what came first: Mrs Lethwes's drinking problem or Mr Lethwes's infidelity. Nor is it clear whether the woman is correct in regarding her husband's affair as a consequence of her childlessness. The narrator, however, is not interested in levelling accusations, apportioning blame or pigeonholing characters into victims and victimisers. The point is rather to reveal the extent of psychological damage that has been wrought by this life of suppressed confessions, secret longings and unacknowledged frustrations. This is particularly visible in the closing scene of the novel when the absent husband finally returns home. At this point of her day, Mrs Lethwes lies, as usual, on the kitchen floor where she has apparently drunk herself into oblivion. This fact, however, is implied rather than openly stated in the story. The narrator offers no description of the woman. There is no comment, either, on how the husband reacts to the sight that regularly greets him as he comes back home. Instead, the reader is offered the following description:

On the mottled worktop in the kitchen the meat is where Mrs Lethwes left it, the fat partly cut away, the knife still separating it from one of the chops. The potatoes she scraped earlier in the day are in a saucepan of cold water, the peas she shelled in another. Often, in the evenings, it is like that in the kitchen when her husband returns to their house. He is gentle when he carries her, as he always is. (Trevor 1997a: 197)

Commenting on such passages in Trevor's short fiction, John Mullan argues: "You would think that the brevity of a short story allowed for no details that were not significant. Yet Trevor's stories often take the time [. . .] to ascertain facts that seem utterly circumstantial" (2004b). This remark may seem incongruous with Trevor's own vision of short fiction as concerned with "the total exclusion of meaninglessness" (Stout 1989) and "tell[ing] as little as it dares" (Trevor 1984: 134). The passage, however, as Mullan rightly suggests, deserves careful attention, revealing the "hardly spoken passions" of Trevor's characters (Mullan 2004b). Fulfilling the criteria of T.S. Eliot's "objective correlative", it suggests a sense of waste that characterises the marriage. Despite its apparent excess of circumstantial detail, it can also be seen as "a strategy of silence" where the narrator deliberately omits to describe Mrs Lethwes and focuses instead on what is commonplace and ordinary. This gesture of averting the eyes from what is uncomfortable and painful mirrors the characters' reluctance to face the problems of their relationship.

Though Trevor's preoccupation with the motif of secrecy has been recognised and analysed by a number of commentators, this essay shows that the writer's deployment of silence is more nuanced and complex than these studies might indicate. By offering his characters moments of silent epiphany, the author reveals a different, decidedly more positive aspect of silence, showing how it can lead to experiences of insight and heightened self-awareness. Most importantly, perhaps, these two "thematic" uses of silence are complemented in his fiction by a set of formal narrative solutions. Rooted in his conception of short story writing as "the art of the glimpse", these "strategies of silence" offer Trevor effective, yet subtle, tools for underscoring the themes of his short fiction.

# Bibliography

- Adams, Tim 2009. "William Trevor: The Keen-Eyed Chronicler". *The Observer* 2 August 2009, on-line.
- Barnes, Julian 2018. "A Master of the Short Form". Review of *Last Stories* by William Trevor. *The Guardian* 19 May 2018, on-line.
- Blades, John 1996. *How to Study James Joyce*. Houndmills: Macmillan.
- Bonaccorso, Richard 1997. "William Trevor's Martyrs for Truth". *Studies in Short Fiction* 34, 1: 113–118.
- Clark, Miriam Marty 2001. "William Trevor". In: Erin Fallon et al. (ed.). *A Reader's Companion to the Short Story in English*. New York: Routledge. 404–411.
- Cranny, Robert 1995. "Lives of Quiet Desperation". *World and I* 10, 6 (June): 313–321.
- Fitzgerald-Hoyt, Mary 2003. *William Trevor: Re-Imagining Ireland*. Dublin: Liffey.
- Gitzen, Julian 1979. "The Truth-Tellers of William Trevor". *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 21, 1: 59–72.
- Jeffers, Jennifer M. 2013. "The Tragedy of the Return of History: 'Lost Ground'". In: Paul Delaney [&] Michael Parker (eds.). *William Trevor: Revaluations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 134–144.
- Kennedy-Andrews, Elmer 2013. "'The Battlefield Has Never Quietened': Political Violence in the Fiction of William Trevor". In: Paul Delaney [&] Michael Parker (eds.). *William Trevor: Revaluations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 55–75.
- Kiberd, Declan 2001. "Demented Brothers". Review of *The Hill Bachelors* by William Trevor. *London Review of Books* 8 March 2001, on-line.
- Lane, Helen 2004. "Just Stick to the Brief". *The Observer* 5 Sept. 2004, on-line.
- Lindskog, Annika J. 2017. *Silent Modernism: Soundscapes and the Unsayable in Richardson, Joyce, and Woolf*. Lund: Lunds Universitet.
- Majola-Leblond, Claire 2014. "Writing Aslant: Putting Chisel to Paper: William Trevor's *A Bit on the Side*". *Journal of the Short Story in English* 63 (Autumn), on-line.
- McDonald, Ronan 2005. "Strategies of Silence: Colonial Strains in Short Stories of the Troubles". *Yearbook of English Studies* 35: 249–263.
- Mullan, John 2004a. "Looking Around. Elements of Fiction: William Trevor". *The Guardian* 17 July 2004, on-line.
- 2004b. "The Missing Stitch. Elements of Fiction: William Trevor". *The Guardian* 3 July 2004, on-line.
- Paulson, Suzanne Morrow 1993. *William Trevor: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne.
- Rhodes, Robert E. 1989. "'The Rest Is Silence': Secrets in Some William Trevor Stories". In: James D. Brophy [&] Eamon Grennan (eds.). *New Irish Writing: Essays in Memory of Raymond J. Porter*. Boston: Iowa College Press. 35–53. Reprinted in abbreviated form in Paulson 1993: 158–163.
- Schirmer, Gregory A. 2014. *William Trevor: A Study of His Fiction*. 1990. New York: Routledge.
- Stout, Mira 1989. "The Art of Fiction CVIII: William Trevor". *Paris Review* 110, on-line.
- Trevor, William 1984. *A Writer's Ireland: Landscape in Literature*. London: Thames.
- 1993. "Interview, 1992". Interview by Suzanne Morrow Paulson. In: Suzanne Morrow Paulson. *William Trevor: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne. 109–120.
- 1997a. "A Day". In: William Trevor. *After Rain*. 1996. London: Penguin. 184–197.
- 1997b. "After Rain". In: William Trevor. *After Rain*. 1996. London: Penguin. 80–96.
- 1997c. "Lost Ground". In: William Trevor. *After Rain*. 1996. London: Penguin. 148–183.
- 1997d. "Marrying Damian". In: William Trevor. *After Rain*. 1996. London: Penguin. 198–213.
- 2005. Interview by John Tusa. *The John Tusa Interviews*. BBC Radio 3, 12 June, on-line.

- 2007a. “At Olivehill”. In: William Trevor. *Cheating at Canasta*. London: Penguin. 109–128.
- 2007b. “Bravado”. In: William Trevor. *Cheating at Canasta*. London: Penguin. 73–88.
- 2007c. “Men of Ireland”. In: William Trevor. *Cheating at Canasta*. London: Penguin. 42–60.
- 2007d. “The Room”. In: William Trevor. *Cheating at Canasta*. London: Penguin. 24–41.
- 2009. “A Life in Books”. Interview by Lisa Allardice. *The Guardian* 5 Sept. 2009, on-line.