

Closing the Gap: Narrative Control and Temporal Instability in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

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Abstract: In both conventional fiction and national meta-narratives, such as that of the modern surveillance state, narrative progression is linear. Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) subverts this expectation by progressing non-chronologically, thus prompting its reader to restore the narrative's chronological order. However, the reader's reconstruction of the novel, an attempt at narrative control, is disrupted by the presence of diegetic gaps—gaps that the novel suggests are incompatible with narrative control. By observing how the novel's characters resist and reenact this control, I assert that Egan posits associative narrative building as an alternative to surveillance-dependent linear metanarratives.

On 11 September 2017, the *New York Post* published an article to commemorate the sixteenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. One attendee of the Ground Zero memorial, questioned by an interviewer, said that through this annual act of remembrance, “we can put away our disagreements and become one country again” (Trefethen and Eustachewich). Intended as an affirmation of American solidarity, her statement implies the power that traumatic events such as the 9/11 attacks have as a tool for constructing national narrative. In the wake of those attacks, there has been an unprecedented shift in US foreign and domestic policy, most evident in the intensification of surveillance practices at home and abroad. These changes reflect the US government's desire to establish international control over individual and communal narratives adverse to its own metanarrative under the pretense of providing national security.

Equally concerned with narrative control and how surveillance maintains it, Jennifer Egan's novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) pivots around not the events of 9/11 but their absence. Tracing the personal and professional ties that bind together a group of people loosely connected by the music industry, Egan's novel chronicles events separated by both time and place—ranging from the 1970s Bay Area punk scene to an imagined 2020s New York City and to Rome, the Middle East, and Africa through the intervening years. Incorporating multiple narrative styles, including first-, third-, and second-person perspective, as well as a chapter styled as a magazine article and even one rendered entirely in PowerPoint slides, the chapters do not progress in chronological order. At the chronological centre of the novel's combined narrative, Sasha (the troubled young assistant of washed-up record producer Bennie Salazar) remarks of the now-empty site that once housed the World Trade Center's Twin Towers that "It's incredible, how there's just nothing there.... [T]here should be something, you know?" (*Goon Squad* 36). For her, the Towers' absence presents a logical gap in narration. Her observation correlates with *Goon Squad's* thematic focus on how such gaps are incompatible with narrative control and thus provide the impetus for increased surveillance.

In a 2011 interview on the *Art Works* podcast, Egan said regarding *Goon Squad*, "when people talk about a collection of linked stories, they tend to assume there will be a continuity of tone and voice" (Interview). Her novel, composed of thirteen interconnected vignettes, subverts this assumption and all other expectations of narrative continuity. Because the novel's progression operates on the basis not of chronological time but rather of character association, readers are prompted to restore its missing temporal order. Any chronological reconstruction of the novel's narrative, however, is prone to diegetic gaps that preclude absolute knowledge of its events. By analyzing the characters' preoccupations with narrative fidelity (inherently linked to their anxieties about the passage of time) and observing how Egan's shifting narration engages readers in multiple levels

of narrative presence, I will argue that *A Visit from the Goon Squad* withholds conventional narrative control—from its characters, who strive to build stable narratives of self, and its readers, who are drawn to reconstructing the novel's narrative chronologically—to challenge metanarratives of control, such as the rhetoric that maintains the necessity of the American surveillance state.

In this essay, I draw upon the definition of metanarrative as “a theory of history that is said to move in a specific direction and, on the strength of which, confident predictions about the future can be made” (Cooke). This definition suggests that metanarratives provide stability and a degree of control over historical progression. For the surveillance state, the ostensible need for such control is sustained by a metanarrative that posits increased national safety, resulting from progressive improvement in surveillance methods. Grounding my analysis of *Goon Squad* in previous criticism of the novel, I posit a parallel between Egan's characters' attempts at narrative control and the reader's position in the narrative. Our reading is constantly informed by characters' methods of exerting that control, but Egan's use of formal variation forces us to reconcile our changing position with each new chapter. Some critics have sought to explain the effects of this narrative instability: Katherine D. Johnston discusses the connection through metafiction between surveillance and reading, concluding that the novel “resists the mythology of coherent, knowable identities” (181), and David Cowart lauds Egan's blending of narrative conventions as a way of dismantling the “supreme fictions” of her literary predecessors and opening new avenues of artistic expression (252). Egan's use of character association to drive narrative progression, however, suggests another conclusion: while her novel's metanarrative of control creates pervasive distrust of knowable identities and results in destructive limitations of the self and others, it shows that collaborative and community-forming narrative building conversely stabilizes individual narratives. The formal techniques of each chapter cue us to this stability's fluctuation.

In “Found Objects,” the opening chapter of *Goon Squad*, Sasha recounts her past date with a younger man, Alex, to her therapist, Coz. The focus of her account is not the events of the date itself but her more pertinent admission of guilt in stealing a woman’s handbag. Describing her relationship to the therapist, Sasha asserts that “She and Coz were collaborators, writing a story whose end had already been determined” (*Goon Squad* 6). Implicit in this idea of her “story” is the assumption that her overcoming kleptomania is pre-determined and therefore inevitable—an assertion of control. Her observation also suggests that her path to recovery from the illness is a narrative created in concert with Coz. This co-constructed, progressive narrative recalls the spirit of solidarity exhibited by the *Post*’s Ground Zero interviewee; unlike the interviewee, however, Sasha recognizes the World Trade Center’s absence as a negative influence: “she hated the neighbourhood at night without the World Trade Center, whose blazing freeways of light had always filled her with hope” (12). The loss of this pervasive symbol of national pride shattered the American narrative of security and necessitated a reevaluation of national identity. As if to affirm the resultant instability, Alex admits to a lack of trust for others, saying, “You have no fucking idea what people are like. They’re not even two-faced—they’re, like, multiple personalities” (12). By associating mental illness with unpredictability, he dismantles Sasha’s assertion of control over her and Coz’s ideal narrative of recovery.

Present in both Sasha’s expectations of her recovery and Alex’s mistrust of others is the undercurrent of a necessity for control; despite this apparent necessity, Sasha’s progression in her story proves impossible until she relinquishes her grip on one of her stolen objects, which through her keeping them paradoxically allow her to entertain the possibility that she will one day return them. She thus cultivates a fantasy that she is in control of her illness and not vice versa. When she allows Alex to use the bath salts she stole from a past roommate, Sasha becomes “aware of having made a move in the story she and Coz were writing,

taken a symbolic step" (*Goon Squad* 17). But, as Cowart observes, there is no "meaningful resolution" to Sasha's constructed story, and "its aimless unspooling mocks any larger metanarrative" (249). This deliberate lack of resolution precludes any certainty that Sasha's narrative will progress toward her recovery—toward control—but "Found Objects" prompts us to resign our expectations of such certainty at the level of form: Sasha's analeptic narration of these events to Coz, which not only places us in a temporally undefined (and thus unknowable) present but also highlights the events' constructedness, forces us as readers to cede our control over the narrative and trust her account. Sasha's use of narratological analepsis identifies us with Coz, whose knowledge of the events she narrates is restricted to what she tells him.

Readers are subject to similar narrative restriction in "Out of Body," the novel's tenth chapter, in which the familiar third-person narration of earlier chapters gives way to unsettlingly direct second-person narration. Here, we are absorbed into the person of Rob, Sasha's university friend, so that his self-addressed narration is simultaneously addressed to us. From this perspective, we are privy to Rob's internality but entirely cut off from the thoughts of others. We are thus aligned with his project of ensuring the fidelity of others' narratives: "Your friends are pretending to be all kinds of stuff, and your job is to call them on it" (*Goon Squad* 186). Unexpectedly, Rob reveals that he has also engaged in the construction of a false narrative meant to deny surveillance not unlike his own. Recounting his first meeting with Sasha, he recalls how she recruited him as a counterfeit boyfriend to convince her stepfather's hired detective of her trustworthiness (192–93). Her anxiety surrounding this implied surveillance ("Someone could be watching me right now ... I feel like someone is" [193]) indicates the novel's project of undermining the necessity of narrative control maintained through such surveillance.

Rob's apology to Lizzie earlier in the chapter engages readers in a metafictional consideration of our own role in his narration: "which one is really 'you,' the one say-

ing and doing whatever it is, or the one watching?" (*Goon Squad* 191). As evidenced by its title, "Out of Body" is centrally concerned with Rob's watching himself in moments of detachment. This theme, coupled with the chapter's second-person narration, places the reader in the curious position of watching oneself watch. Johnston intimates that these layers of watching are inherent to metafiction, which, she says, "is a form of surveillance itself" (99). Thus, Rob's narration of events that defy his control constitutes restrictive self-surveillance. He treats events that do not fit into his conception of self as distinct from his narrative, and his dissociation from reality facilitates this treatment: recalling his first homosexual experience, he says, "It wasn't you in the car with James. You were somewhere else, looking down, thinking, That fag is rolling around with another guy" (*Goon Squad* 195). Rob's disavowal of his involvement in this experience is an attempt to displace it from his narrative of self. He positions heterosexual normalcy as the keystone of his constructed identity, as evidenced by his self-admonishment that "[he] might have held on to Sasha and become normal at the same time, but [he] didn't even try" (196). Here, his narrative's fidelity is contingent upon his ability to control Sasha.

Sasha's providing information to Rob to thwart her stepfather's surveillance has its own negative repercussions in Rob's narrated present. Fearing that Sasha is "starting to forget [her troubled past], begin over again as the person she is to Drew [Sasha's boyfriend]" (*Goon Squad* 197), Rob attempts to exercise the power afforded to him by his knowledge of Sasha's past: "You don't really know her," he says to Drew, and he proceeds to convey the sordid details of that past (204). Rob recognizes that to begin anew, Sasha will have to jettison her past, thus removing what little control he has over her. When Drew responds by threatening to tell his girlfriend of Rob's attempted manipulation, Rob is "seized by a wild conviction that containing Drew will seal off the damage [he's] done," believing that "as long as Drew is in sight, she doesn't know" (205). This response indicates the logic inherent to metanarratives of control: maintaining

control over narratives adverse to one's own necessitates unbroken surveillance.

In the previous chapter, "Forty Minute Lunch," the narrator, Jules Jones, recalls Rob's narrative tampering in his use of metafictional constructedness to project objectivity. Jules narrates the events that led up to his (at the time of writing, current) incarceration as if it will be published. As such, he is committed to the accuracy of his account, right down to his thoughts, which are recorded in a series of footnotes throughout the chapter: one reads, "Here, carefully teased apart and restored to chronological order, is a reconstruction of the brew of thoughts and impulses that I believe coursed through my mind at that time" (*Goon Squad* 173). This excerpt indicates Jules's commitment to narrative fidelity, which requires that a correct order of events be established. His obsession with establishing stable narrative dovetails nicely with his role as a celebrity profiler and leads him to admit, as he sexually assaults his current interviewee, that "it's her life—the inner life of Kitty Jackson—that I so long to reach" (182). This admission reveals his distrust of Kitty's external depiction of herself, a distrust that likely influences his later appeal (in a letter to the editor of an unnamed newspaper) that Mayor Giuliani "erect checkpoints at the entrances to Central Park" to profile its visitors (185). Jules's solution to a lack of public safety, which he attributes to insufficient control over the actions of people whose character and allegiances are obscure, is to establish a microcosm of the larger surveillance state within the park. As Johnston asserts, this solution is reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze's "Society of Control," which, she notes, "undermin[es] notions of coherent identity and linear and totalizing life narratives" (180). Thus, the system of surveillance proposed by Jules contradicts his desire to establish stable narratives for himself and others, as it would contradict individuals' attempts at narrative building. Likewise, the literary register that he employs throughout the chapter highlights the lack of narrative control that we possess as readers but fails to convince us of the necessity for such control.

In contrast to Jules's profiling of himself and others, the concluding chapter of *Goon Squad* narrates the staging of an event that defies metafictional control. As "Pure Language" opens, an aging Bennie Salazar is engaged in persuading Alex to join him on a business venture that involves falsifying a narrative. Despite Alex's apprehension—a product of the public's suspicion regarding the authenticity of people's opinions after "the Bloggescandals," undefined past events that amplified the questionable veracity of online personas (315)—Bennie is convinced that they "have some history together that hasn't happened yet" (311). His prophetic assertion of certainty undermines the common understanding of time as historical progression, a chain of events in chronological order, by narrating a future event as if it has already happened. Alex accepts Bennie's offer (to find and recruit "parrots" tasked with disseminating favourable "word of mouth for Scotty Hausmann's first concert" in a month's time [315]) on the strength of their mutual desire to make such an event possible and thus defy the temporally locked narrative that restricts them both: Bennie to an existence in which he is now only referred to "in the past tense" (312), and Alex to identifying himself with the "people like him, who had stopped being themselves without realizing it" (317). Indeed, Cowart, drawing on Bennie's assistant Lulu's statement that (in the novel's proleptic present) information "travels faster than the speed of light" (317), asserts that "such acceleration ... would reverse time's arrow" (248). Through their collaboration, Alex, Bennie, and Lulu find a way to undermine the restrictions on narrative progression that are inherent to the quality control of their profiled society.

The product of their collaboration, the intense success of their advertising campaign for Scotty's concert, predicated on an idealized version of the aging rocker, leads Alex to assume that the narrative he has helped create is real. Upon seeing him, however, "Alex understood that Scotty Hausmann did not exist. He was a word casing in human form" (*Goon Squad* 332). Following this chapter's concern with the increasing redundancy of spoken language in an

age when digital communication (the “Pure Language” of the chapter’s title) has surpassed its efficiency, Alex intuits that Scotty’s public persona is a signifier without a signified. Nevertheless, his and Lulu’s efforts to promote the concert yield an unprecedented result, elevating Scotty to the level of myth. In a moment of prolepsis, Alex muses on how Scotty’s falsified narrative has now, some time after the event, become public property: “Now that Scotty has entered the realm of myth, everyone wants to own him.... Doesn’t a myth belong to everyone?” (336). His query parallels Paul Ricoeur’s assertion that “as soon as a story is well known—and such is the case ... with the national chronicles of the founding events of a given community—retelling takes the place of telling” (179). Scotty’s “myth” qualifies under this description, given that myths are employed as the traditional foundation for communal narratives and are retold from one generation to the next. The communal narrative that Scotty’s concert creates opposes the “two generations of war and surveillance” experienced by his audience (336), who see in his resistance to profiling the authenticity that surveillance precludes. Situated at the “Footprint,” Ground Zero renamed, this event reclaims the community-by-association that Egan’s future metanarrative of control has replaced with a strict linear narrative of progression.

In the final pages of the novel, Alex engages in a retelling like that of the concert when, while looking for Sasha’s apartment with Bennie in the hopes that he might recapture some moment of his past, he describes Bennie and himself as “co-conspirators” (338–39). This description recalls Sasha’s assertion that she and Coz were “collaborators” in their construction of her own narrative. Alex, too, hears the same “hum” as Sasha, which she associates with “minutes of Coz’s time” (18) and he intuits as “the sound of time passing” (340). For both characters, this temporal awareness comes after they have relinquished their need for control over their narratives. Each character’s collaborative act provides an escape from their fear of time’s passing and thus dispels the illusion of control’s necessity. “Pure Language” is a return to a form (and theme) that mirrors the first chap-

ter's temporal displacement of narrated events, this time removing our readerly control by projecting a future that has not yet occurred. Each chapter of *Goon Squad* acts similarly upon the reader to gradually undermine our own need for narrative control. The novel's conclusion fittingly refigures narrative as a tool for communal constructions of identity, thus affirming Egan's associative narrative building as an ideal alternative to the unbroken linear narratives necessitated by metanarratives of control.

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