

# Pauses in *Visit from the Goon Squad*: Aberration Takes Charge, or, Literary Hijinks with the Notion of Time

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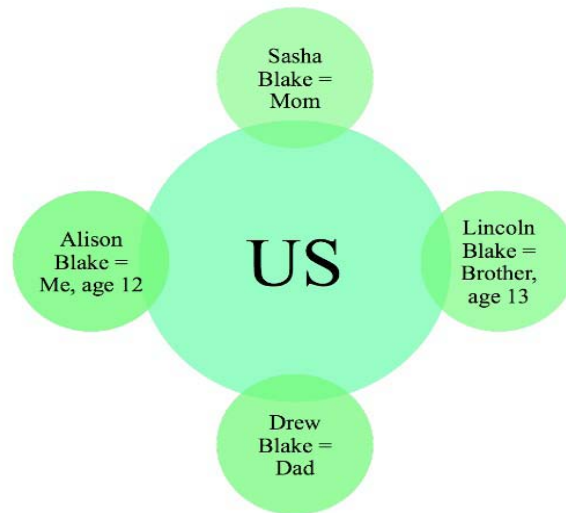
**Abstract** This essay identifies the “methodological signature” of Jennifer Egan’s 2010 Pulitzer Prize winning novel in the *idea* of pause, combined with the author’s *use* of pause — of the intentional gap in time. The novel’s achronological, seemingly random ordering, the absence of connective summaries, and most particularly the chapter rendered entirely in Power Point oblige the reader to connect moments and events, to understand relationships, thus drawing our attention to the workings of Time itself on the characters’ human strivings. As one character remarks, “Time is a goon.”

**Key words** theory of the novel; literary characters; pauses; relationships; fictional space

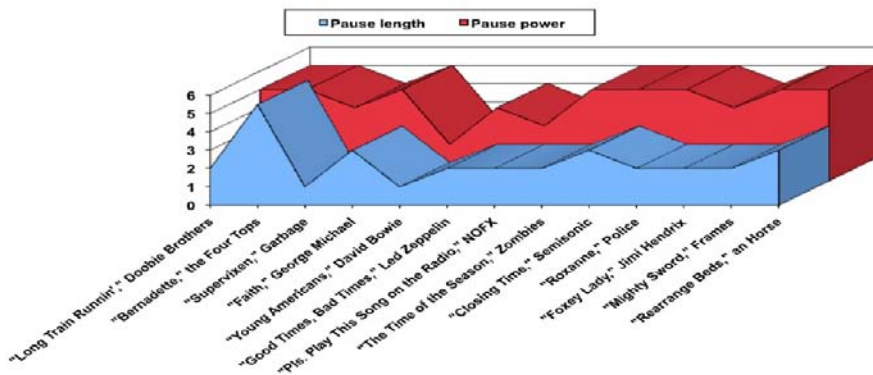
In the Four Tops’ “Bernadette” there’s a moment near the end of the song when the music stops and there’s a second and a half of pure silence. You might have thought the song was over, then there’s another twenty-six seconds. Is that interesting?

Interesting or not, the phenomenon is the central concern of a chapter in Jennifer Egan’s multiple prize-winning *Visit to the Goon Squad* titled “Great Rock and Roll Pauses.” Thirteen-year-old Lincoln Blake is deeply, persistently fascinated by the pauses that occur in certain rock songs — the gaps, the silent moments, when sound stops then resumes. The chapter is the twelfth of thirteen and, unlike all of those that precede it, is written in Power Point.

A sample page. This one establishes the cast of characters:



The chapter's content is the stuff of realism, family conflict, the obsessed autism-spectrum son and his frustrated physician father struggling for common ground. Ah, but the form — bubbles and diagrams and graphs. The last four slides graph the results of Lincoln's research into the nature and impact of The Pause in rock songs, accomplished at last with his father's help. Here he charts the relationship between the length of the pause in the song and its motive force or "hauntingpower."



The chapter follows eleven chapters that, as was mentioned, are all rendered in prose: sentences and paragraphs, dialogue and narrative. They are easy to read and easy to enjoy. Chapter one welcomes the reader in the familiar narrative manner, with a close-up on a character (a thirty-five year old woman) in a recognizable place (hotel washroom) with an interesting conflict (to steal or not to steal):

It began in the usual way, in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel. Sasha was adjusting her yellow eye shadow in the mirror when she noticed a bag on the floor beside the sink that must have belonged to the woman whose peeing she could faintly hear through the vaultlike door of a toilet stall. Inside the rim of the bag, barely visible, was a wallet made of pale green leather. (3)

Sasha, the main or focalizing character in this chapter, hungers for the “fat tender wallet” (3), and she takes it, although she is in therapy to cure her kleptomania and on a date that particular night, a date on the verge of collapsing in mutual indifference. The chapter dramatizes a series of intensifying events, mostly cause and effect: possession of the stolen wallet vivifies Sasha, and re-energizes the date. The wallet’s owner desperately confronts Sasha who returns the wallet. The date rises toward sex at Sasha’s apartment. Then while the young man is taking a bath, Sasha opens his wallet and finds an old, creased, penciled note that says, “I believe in you.” And she steals that.

This chapter is followed by ten more, all written conventionally, before the Power Point chapter. Then comes another oddity. Chapter 12 takes place “in the year 202 —”(235), at least ten years past the novel’s pub date. On first read, personally, I found it annoying. It was a rent in the skein of the narrative — a breach in the contract we teachers of fiction writing have been known to discuss with our classes, that fiction writers are said to create between writer and reader, that the narrator supposedly establishes at the outset, in her first chapter, first paragraph, first line sometimes, by means of point of view, distance, diction and syntax, figures of speech.

For example, the famous first line in *A Hundred Years of Solitude*: “Years later when he faced the firing squad Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to imagine that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.” It thrusts into future (firing squad), then sweeps back into the past (discovering ice), declaring in one sentence that the narrative is a linear and surreal. The book will swoop and circle through time, in a world where ordinary things like ice are strange.

A second example of the contract between writer and reader: if you want to introduce a ghost into an otherwise realistic novel so that it does not jar or seem contrived, do it up front, in sentence one maybe, in an offhand, throwaway phrase or dependent clause: *The night the ghost moved into my wife’s sewing room, we were making dinner and arguing about whether or not to have a baby.* Thus is established from the get-go the kind of book that is about to unfold — realist or surreal, detective or horror, comic or tragic. *Welcome, dear reader, to my vivid continuous dream,* says the narrative voice, page 1, paragraph 1. *And may I guide you through it?*

The term “vivid continuous dream” comes, of course, from John Gardner in

*On Becoming a Novelist*. It's convincing description of the process by which readers apprehend a fictional world:

We read five words on a page of a really good novel and we begin to forget that we are reading printed words on a page; we begin to see images — a dog hunting through garbage cans...an old lady furtively licking her napkin at a party. We slip into a dream, forgetting the room we're sitting in, forgetting it's lunchtime or time to go to work. We recreate...the vivid and continuous dream the writer worked out in his mind (revising and revising till he got it right) and captured in language . . . If the dream is to be vivid, the writer's language-signals — his words, metaphors and so on — must be sharp and sufficient. . . . If not, the dream will be cloudy, confusing, ultimately annoying and boring. And if the dream is to be continuous, we must not be roughly jerked back to the words on the page by language that's distracting. (Gardner 5)

One might think to counter this contract theory with books like *The Sound and the Fury*, where the voice changes completely from pre-conscious Benjy to hyper-conscious Quentin to Jason, who is primarily conscious of money. But still in Faulkner's exquisite book a pattern emerges. A quarter of the way through the book the second voice takes charge, at which point the contract enlarges to embrace the anomaly and normalize it. When we get the third voice, Jason's, we are ready and eager. Egan's oddity, however, plunks just before the end. After eleven vivid, not continuous but at least conventionally written chapters, in her chapter 12, it seemed, Jennifer Egan had let go of my hand, broken the contract, clouded the dream. Oh dear, I thought, having loved the book till now, she's indulging herself. So I skimmed the PowerPoint, fast-forwarding to chapter 13, to relax in the comforts of conventional narrative.

When questioned, however, Jennifer Egan stands by her penultimate chapter, placement and all. She said in an interview that she did not understand the overall structure of the book until the rest of it was already written and she was working on the PowerPoint section. "This book," she said, "is all about the pauses."<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising of course that in the author's view, far from being a mistake, the chapter is the book's capstone or lynch pin. But it bears inspection. Having been assigned to speak for thirty minutes on *Visit from the Goon Squad*, I had to reread the first 11 chapters, and then the book as whole with the following questions in mind. What else, if anything, was unusual about the novel's form? What, if anything, became more wonderful or more distinct by the light of PowerPoint?

For one thing, after chapter 1, we leave Sasha for Bennie Salazar, a music

producer and her former boss for twelve years; his point of view governs chapter 2. Here is something that is at least somewhat surprising, if not wholly unconventional: No matter how we might wish to return to Sasha's smart, sweet, troubled, larcenous mind and her terrible vulnerability, we never do. Whatever else we learn about Sasha comes through other characters' chapters, where she might be the antagonist, a minor character, a mere reference, or absent entirely.

Moreover, this is a pattern or a system that will hold in each of the thirteen chapters that comprise the novel. Each presents a new protagonist in a dramatic situation. The second chapter, featuring Bennie a couple of years earlier when Sasha was still working for him, shows him divorced and snacking on gold flakes to improve his virility, and sneaking peaks at Sasha's breasts as a test. Then comes a chapter from Bennie's high school days when he loves music more than food, point of view a girl in his band who's in love with him, then an African safari in which the children of a powerful record producer crave their father's attention and a guest gets too close to a lion. But we never return to these children though we hear about them, in the same way that we don't follow Sasha through her self-destructive urges or Bennie seeking to restore his musical and sexual passion. These protagonists, also called focalizing characters, those whose thoughts and feelings are rendered for us, appear only once in their central roles and no more.

There are thirteen chapters, and thirteen different protagonists. The points of view vary as well. Sasha's story is told in third-person past tense, the safari chapter is omniscient, there's a second-person chapter, and, of course the one in PowerPoint. And of course time darts and dashes about, starting in 2008 when Sasha steals the wallet, dipping back to 1973 when Bennie's mentor was on safari in Africa, to 1979 and Bennie's high school band, and flashing forward to a decade past the book's pub date (2011). The Seventies through the Twenty-twenties.

Here is a list of chapters with their focalizing characters, settings and approximate dates. Italicized are the roles Sasha and Bennie play in each chapter, however minor.

A

1 Found Objects, 3<sup>rd</sup> person past tense (Sasha), NYC, 2008. *Bennie named as her former boss.*

2 The Gold Cure, 3<sup>rd</sup> person past tense (Bennie), NYC and suburb, 2006. *Sasha works for Bennie; he loves her/ lusts over her.*

3 Ask Me if I Care, 1<sup>st</sup> person present tense (Rhea), San Francisco, 1979. *Bennie in high school managing a band and loving music; bandmate Rhea loves Bennie; Bennie loves Alice.*

4 Safari, omniscient, (Charlie, Rolph, Lou, Mindy), Africa, 1973.

5 You (Plural), 1<sup>st</sup> person present tense (Jocelyn), Los Angeles, 2005. *Bennie mentioned as the one who told everyone about Lou's stroke.*

6 X's and O's, 1<sup>st</sup> person past tense (Scotty), 1995, NYC. *Bennie's office, Sasha his fairly new receptionist.*

B

7 A to B, 3<sup>rd</sup> person past tense (Stephanie), 2002-4, NYC and suburb. *Bennie is Stephanie's faithless husband; Sasha briefly mentioned as Bennie's employee.*

8 Selling the General, 3<sup>rd</sup> person past tense (Dolly), NYC and 3<sup>rd</sup> world country, 2008.

9 40 Minute Lunch, 1<sup>st</sup> person present tense Interview format (Jules) NYC, 1997.

10 Out of Body, 2<sup>nd</sup> person present tense (Rob), NYC, 1992-3. *Rob is Sasha's best friend, attracted to Sasha's boyfriend Drew.*

11 Goodbye My Love, 3<sup>rd</sup> person past tense (Ted), Venice, 1990. *Ted is Sasha's uncle, who tracks her down in Venice, where she is self-destructing.*

12 Great Rock and Roll Pauses, Power Point Presentation (Alison), Cal. desert, May 14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup>, 202-. *Alison is Sasha and Drew's daughter, Lincoln their son.*

13 Pure Language, 3<sup>rd</sup> person past tense (Alex), NYC, 202-. *Alex, Sasha's one night stand in chap. 1, now works for Bennie. They by chance find themselves at Sasha's old apartment.*

So designed, the book could read like a patchwork, or a short story collection, nifty beads on a chain. But it is called a NOVEL, the word prominent on the cover of the first edition, as if the publishers had their doubts, or perhaps doubted the readers (*Moby Dick* does not call itself a novel).

But in point of fact — surprisingly, considering its loose structure — *Visit from the Goon Squad* has the forward drive of a full-fledged novel. In part it's because the two central characters recur. Thirteen different characters command their separate stages from chapter to chapter, but reader-interest centers on Sasha and Bennie. After her own chapter, Sasha appears in seven others, Bennie in six. We don't get their thoughts, but like hungry chicks we're pecking for news of them, no matter how remotely conveyed or tangential.

And — a second point — at the end, turning the last page, having read it all at last including the PowerPoint), I found the book start, in a way, to shimmer. This is a personal reaction, but I will try to explain its source, why the book seems in the end more than the sum of its parts. It is affecting in terms of its plot and characters, but it is about more than character, more than whether or not Sasha will curb her kleptomania and live a satisfying life. It inhabits, even embraces, the arena of ideas, the questions of why and how and what are we doing here, our quest to understand

how the world operates. How we get from A to B, as the novel asks in multitudinous ways.

As was shown, the novel is separated into parts, designated A and B. “A to B” is the title of a chapter in which Bennie self-destructs. *From A to Bis* the title of a minor character’s comeback record. Bosco, a once famous, now weak and sick, musician, plans to promote it on what he calls a suicide tour in which he will perform as hard as in the old days and do himself in gloriously.

“From A to B” came up earlier as well, on the lips of an old high school friend of Bennie’s who has failed to prosper. Scotty once in Bennie’s high school band, a magnetic personality and gifted guitarist, comes to see Bennie in his skyline office and says, “I want to know what happened between A and B.” Bennie is married, rich and famous while Scotty is poor and alone, asking the novel’s central question: Why do some people succeed and others fail? What takes you from A to B? Birthright, character, fate, good and bad luck?

The novel explores the question with all the characters, major and minor. Without reentering Sasha’s viewpoint, we still follow her career throughout the novel: attractive and almost formidable as Bennie’s girl Friday, back in college the center of the universe for two young men who love her in different ways, at nineteen turning tricks in Venice, Italy, and trying to stay sane. In her forties she has miraculously re-found her college boyfriend, and has two children.

Scotty rose then fell then miraculously rose. Lou, a music mogul, had sex, money, love and fame, but lost his son then had a debilitating stroke. At the end of his life he was in bed, on oxygen. He or she who was up can come down, and vice versa. The system prevails in the life of the novel’s most minor character, a Samburu warrior whose only role is to dance with Lou’s daughter and annoy Lou during the safari. He reappears, a brief reference, in chapter thirteen as the grandfather of a grad student at Columbia University who is engaged to the daughter of the protagonist in chapter 8. In Egan’s world, there are ups as well as downs. What persists, though, is the absence of connective tissue.

If the book doesn’t answer the question what brought its characters from A to B, it is not because Egan could not figure it out, but perhaps because to her novelist’s mind there is no answer. The point is the question, the need/wish for an answer that forever eludes. Without being at all didactic, being, in fact, playful as well as dramatic and tragic, she explores success in all its aspects — power, money, love, security — along with the driving need to understand what makes one person attain it and another fail, and the impossibility of really understanding.

And Egan’s vision is clarified, and realized too, in her PowerPoint chapter — both by its subject, the Pauses in Rock Songs, and also by its form. In both form and

subject it honors emptiness, the spaces between things in which we strive to connect moments and events, to understand relationships; we strive and fail. This is the realm of questions like whether or not God exists, that we can't answer and at the same time can't stop asking. We read self-help books, how to make friends and influence people, and the universe has its way with us and we die in the end, and only the question remains, insistent, desperate, unanswerable. We have to know; we don't or can't know.

Thus the PowerPoint chapter not only belongs and makes sense in the novel, it governs it. The chapter, which calls attention to pauses, is itself a kind of pause in the narrative. And the *idea* of pause, combined with the author's *use* of pause — of the intentional gap in time — is what we can call Egan's "methodological signature." However momentarily irritating or discomforting, Egan's decision to use it — the method — is her *signature*. Her characteristic manner of achieving her ends has become a statement in itself about what those ends are. The method signifies. The seeming anomaly, understood as intentional, casts the whole project onto a higher floor, or into a new arena. Does it bear repeating? The anomaly or aberration, understood as intentional, casts the issue into a new and more complex realm.

So, far from being a mistake, the PowerPoint chapter controls the novel in both content and form. The pauses in Lincoln Blake's rock songs echo the gaps in time between the moments rendered in the chapters. Lincoln's graph depicts a direct correlation between pauses and music's "haunting power," a power that resides or even stems from the gaps between the chapters. Rendered moments from the long span of years between 1973 and 2025, they ring out, the more resonant because of the spaces, the long silences between them — in which beats the great heart of this brilliant, playfully created universe.

### **Addenda in Praise of Pauses**

"Human freedom involves our capacity to pause between the stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight. The capacity to create ourselves, based upon this freedom, is inseparable from consciousness or self-awareness." (Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* 100).

"The right word may be effective but no word is as effective as a rightly timed pause to listen" (quote attributed to Mark Twain).

"One sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and

time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain. It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. . . . That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. (Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* 120-121).

## Note

1. Jennifer Egan, Interview in BookBrowser.

[http://www.bookbrowse.com/author\\_interviews/full/index.cfm/author\\_number/1890/jennifer-egan](http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/1890/jennifer-egan). Accessed May 6, 2014.

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