Jim Phelan 00:28
This is Jim Phelan, Director of Project Narrative at The Ohio State University. And I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative podcast. In each episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative or series of related narratives to read and discuss with me or another host. Today, I'll be talking with Brian McHale, who has selected a series of poems that contain significant narrative gaps. At Brian's suggestion, we're calling this episode "Stories with Holes." Brian McHale is an Arts and Humanities Distinguished Professor of English at Ohio State. And along with Frederick Aldama, David Herman and me, one of the founders of Project Narrative. Brian is one of the most influential scholars of post-modernism in the world. Brian's work consistently demonstrates his rare and remarkable gift for combining deep knowledge of literature, culture and scholarship with original and insightful ways of thinking about all three. Brian is the author of *Postmodernist Fiction*, *Constructing Postmodernism*, *The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole*, and *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism*. Brian has also co-edited multiple volumes of essays, including the Project Narrative Center collection on teaching narrative theory, that he did with David Herman and me. Brian has a long association with the journal *Poetics Today*, having served for many years as Associate Editor, and then Co-editor. From 2015 to 2019, Brian was the journal's Editor in Chief. Brian's currently working on a book on the poetics of science fiction, and another on narrative and poetry. His work on narrative and poetry is especially relevant for today's discussion. So Brian, is there anything you want to say about the poems you selected before we read them aloud?

Brian McHale 02:32
Well, thanks for having me in, Jim. I brought four little poems, story poems. Three of them are actually song lyrics. One's a nursery rhyme. The other two are story poems in the ballad tradition. And then one is a - is a more properly literary poem. I think they're akin to each other. And they share this feature that you just mentioned, that they're built around very large structural holes. When we talk about stories having holes, that's normally a negative. It means that, you know, the plot doesn't work. In this case, the holes are functional. In a couple of the cases, you might say they are normal holes, the kind that make the narrative work properly. And in a couple of cases, they go beyond that. They're extraordinary holes. And I hope we can dig out what that - what that means before we're done.

Jim Phelan 03:42
Okay, just one - one little footnote. It's also like, there's a progression, the holes kind of get bigger as we go,

Brian McHale 03:47
They do. And deeper or - or some other metaphor,

Jim Phelan 03:50
Okay. All right. Well, why don't we start, you're gonna read the first. A nursery rhyme,

Brian McHale 03:57

Right? So this is a nursery rhyme, an Israeli Hebrew Language Nursery Rhyme, which one sings to toddlers. I'm going to not sing it to - to avoid embarrassing myself but only read out the Hebrew and then Jim will read out the English translation of it. So the nursery rhyme goes like this.

Yonatan Hakatan
ratz baboker el haga
hu tipes al ha'etz
efrochim chipes

Oy va'avoy lo lashovav
chor gadol bamichnasav
hu tipes al ha'etz
efrochim chipes.

Jim Phelan 04:34
Okay. It was nice to hear the rhythm. Here's the English: Little boy Jonathan runs one morning to the park. He climbs up a tree looking for little birdies. Naughty, naughty rascal. A big hole in his pants. He climbs up a tree looking for little birdies. So what - what do you want to highlight here? Where's the hole? And how do we interpret it?

Brian McHale 05:01
So, this little nursery rhyme was used by my mentors at Tel Aviv, Menachem Perry and Meir Sternberg, to launch an article that they wrote about gaps and gap-filling in a biblical narrative. And they chose this nursery rhyme because it's so simple. And even a toddler understands perfectly well what has happened. And yet the poem doesn't say the crucial thing, which is that, presumably, Yonatan got a hole in his pants from climbing on that tree. It's a story with a hole in it. And I, you know, it's even more perfect in that it's a story about a hole with a hole in it. And nobody can doubt that that's what happened. Even though it doesn't say the climbing in the tree is what produced the hole. He might have had a hole in his pants before he ever started climbing for all we know. But that's not the way anybody in the world has ever understood this. And it's a normal hole in the sense that even toddlers get it, right, that this was caused by Jonathan climbing the tree.

Jim Phelan 06:14
Yes. Okay. Excellent. So one of the things that stands out, to me, is the, sort of, the move between the first stanza, which ends with Jonathan looking for the little birdies, and the beginning of the second with that "naughty, naughty, rascal" thing, and I think that's, you know, sort of, we shift from narration to, you know, kind of name-calling even. What do you make of that? And how do you see that working in the - in connection with the, you know, the narrative and the holey-ness of it, and so on?

Brian McHale 06:46
Well, I see this as - as being, you know, a turn to address Jonathan and - and also to address, of course, the listener, right. So this is - this is a didactic nursery rhyme. It's about, you know, not climbing trees, in your good pants, and it's about not seeking out fledglings. So there's - there's an element here of - of justice being done. And I think at that moment when the poem turns and says "oy-va'avoy" to - to Jonathan, it's - it's got a double audience. Right. It speaks to the character in the poem, but also speaks to the child listening to the poem.

Jim Phelan 07:34
Yeah, yeah. Great. So one of the other things that sort of, is maybe obvious, but worth commenting on is the repetition. Right. So both stanzas, and in the English, he climbs up a tree looking for little birdies. You know, to what extent is this sort of just formulaic or, you know, in what - what way is it kind of functional? Like, is the second iteration of that, you know, different because it's at the end of the - the end of the nursery rhyme.

Brian McHale 08:06
Right. I - I don't see that - those - those end lines as advancing the story at all, right. They're - they're returning to an earlier moment in the story. Their effect is mainly the musical effect of refrain and also a kind of - a kind of expressive or emotive effect. Right. It underscores the lyric dimension of the poem. It is, after all, a little song. So it's a non-narrative effect, seems to me, mainly.

Jim Phelan 08:39
Yeah. Okay. All right, good. Well, I think that, you know, you touch on a bunch of things that will come off of it with - in relationship to some of the other selections. Anything further on, Jonathan?

Brian McHale 08:52
No, I'm interested in this one, just because it sets up a kind of baseline, this is the normal function of gaps of this kind, right? And I want to move on from there to another one that's also, in a way, conventional gap. And then beyond that, to much more extraordinary uses of gap in this kind of narrative poem.

Jim Phelan 09:16
Okay, good. Well, let's - let's go to the next one, then.

Brian McHale 09:18
So the next one, I wanted to have a traditional ballad, in that British border ballads tradition, which are very often gappy in crucial ways. And I learned a good deal about this from our mutual friend Alan Palmer, who wrote an excellent essay about gaps in folk ballads and in the country and western songs that are modeled on folk ballads. And his point was that crucial elements of the story that - that make the narrative make sense, in particular motive and rationale, simply are left out of many ballads in the ballad tradition, and that that's carried over into the more commercial product of - of country and western music industry. So I wanted to

have one of those, and - and the one I -I chose is a ballad called, "When I Was on Horseback." And I was thinking of the version recorded by the British folk rock band Steeleye Span in 1972. Of course, it's been covered by other people, but that was the version I was thinking of. And it seems to me a classic case of a narrative poem, is a folk ballad, with an enormous gap in it. So, a poem with a hole.

Jim Phelan 10:54
Okay. Why don't you read.

Brian McHale 10:58
Okay.
When I was on horseback, wasn't I pretty?
When I was on horseback, wasn't I gay?
Wasn't I pretty when I entered Cork City
And met with my downfall on the 14th of May?

Six jolly soldiers to carry my coffin
Six jolly soldiers to march by my side
And it's six jolly soldiers, take a bunch of red roses
Then for to smell them as we march along

Beat the drum slowly and play the pipes only
Play up the dead-march as we go along
And bring me to Tipperary and lay me down easy
I'm a young soldier that never done wrong

When I was on horseback, wasn't I pretty?
When I was on horseback, wasn't I gay?
Wasn't I pretty when I entered Cork City
And met with my downfall on the 14th of May.

Jim Phelan 11:43
Okay, so I think there's lots to talk about here. Maybe we could start with, you know, where is the "I" located in time and space, you know, and is that something that's gappy?

Brian McHale 12:00
The way I read it, it is, right? There's - there's two strong possibilities. That this - this "I" is speaking from his deathbed, and he's giving in effect the instructions for his funeral. This is a last will and testament. And that's the, in a way, realistic way of handling it, but it could be framed differently. It could be a posthumous voice, speaking, as it were, during the funeral, from inside the coffin on his way to his grave site. And then it becomes uncanny and - and supernatural. And I think that can't be ruled out as a way of reading this, even if it's - even if we favor the first version, there's a touch of uncanniness to that voice, you know, dictating the funeral procession.

Jim Phelan 12:50
Right. Okay, good. Now, do you think it would be fair to say that there we might have, like, a determinate ambiguity about where we would locate, but - but some of the other questions, unlike the nursery rhyme, right, where we can fill in the gap confidently, and so on, some of these other ones, we can't even get to determinate ambiguity. Like, like, you know, what happened when he entered Cork City, right?

Brian McHale 13:15
Right. That's the crucial one, right? So the choice between the posthumous voice versus the deathbed voice, we can entertain both of those. And they don't, you know, they don't trouble us very much, that two possibilities are there. But the problem of what happened to him, which is - which is an enormous gap in the story, that's more problematic. You know, the story is inviting us to think of this as a very concrete, specific occasion. It was a specific day in a specific place, Cork City, the 14th of May. And we want to know what happened, what - what - what downfall was it that he met.

Jim Phelan 13:59
Right. A strong narrative question there, right? I mean, there's - sort of raises that

Brian McHale 14:02
Enormous, right?

Jim Phelan 14:03
Yeah. And we get no answer.

Brian McHale 14:05
We get nothing that - I mean, we can generate hypotheses, right? He's a soldier. So maybe it was a violent encounter, maybe he was ambushed. Maybe he got involved in a bar fight. There's, you know, possibilities, but - but nothing to go on that would allow us to fill in the gap. At least not in the - in the text that we have.

Jim Phelan 14:31
Right. Right. So then, does it make sense to sort of think about this as, sort of, moving from narrative to something more lyric, in the sense of, all right, well, there's that, you know, I'm not gonna tell you about that. But this is how I feel on my deathbed, or as I watch my, you know, funeral procession or something like that. That maybe takes over or is that - is that sort of, you know, reducing the - the ballad in another way?

Brian McHale 15:04
Well, maybe it is in the sense that, you know, we do still have a sense of strong narrativity here, right. So there's - there's lyric in competition with narrative here. And there, you know, there's a kind of struggle for power over how we're going to grasp this - this poem, as - as story or as

expression, right? If it weren't for the specificity of the details, we might go over to the narrative - the lyric reading rather than narrative one. Yeah. But it's that specificity that -

Jim Phelan 15:41
keeps the narrative grounded -

Brian McHale 15:42
Keeps it alive.

Jim Phelan 15:44
And it keeps that gap quite open. Yeah. And our curiosity about that. Yeah. Yeah. So, maybe you could say a little bit about the tradition. Right. You said one of the things you wanted was something from the ballad tradition, and maybe -

Brian McHale 15:59
Exactly, so as I - as I learned from our colleague, Richard Greene, who's a - who's a folk ballad expert, this is one version of a traditional type of folk ballad, the - the sort of ur-version of it is something - is a poem called "The Unfortunate Rake." And there are multiple versions. It migrated to the United States, it's akin to "Streets of Laredo" and "St. James Infirmary." And what they share in common is that these are poems about a young man who falls victim to syphilis and dies of venereal disease, which is precisely the missing part of the story in this version of it. There are some other earlier versions that are - that are more complete and more explicit. But here that element is - is gone. And you would not necessarily guess if you didn't know from the tradition, that that's the kind of story that's being told here. It actually doesn't make very much sense with all the details, right? The downfall being dated precisely to the 14th of May seems a little bit at odds with - with dying of venereal disease.

Jim Phelan 17:19
Yeah, yeah, exactly, right. It just seems like a sudden blow or one event. Yeah.

Brian McHale 17:24
But that's the tradition it belongs to. And of course, once we supply that, then it's hard not to see that story.

Jim Phelan 17:31
So, right. Right, partly because we have the desire to fill the gap, right?

Brian McHale 17:36
Right. And the tradition, you know, the tradition gives us an option for filling the gap.

Jim Phelan 17:41
Yeah. Good. Okay, so here, we also have, you know, this maybe goes back to some of the lyric, but - the lyric dimension of it, the repetition, you know, not just the first stanza to the last

stanza, but, you know, the six jolly soldiers, you know, things like that. What do you make of the function of the repetition?

Brian McHale 18:05
Yeah, so once again, that's, you know, that refrain-like material and the - and the parallelistic structures, you know, give us the - the - the lyric dimension of the poem, right? And that counterbalances that - the narrative appeal of those specifics, those place names, so that we're, you know, we're getting both, you know, the expression of this emotion of despair, the deathbed utterance, at the same time as the invitation to think, to fill in this story, to think narratively about the material.

Jim Phelan 18:42
Right. Right. Right. Yeah. And just to maybe make one comparison, another comparison with the nursery rhyme, right. And so we - we talked about that naughty, naughty rascal as, kind of, this double address. Here, we may have a more - sort of, stronger version of internal narrat - addressee, narratee, you know, the, "Wasn't I pretty," who's almost already addressed as an interlocutor,

Brian McHale 19:18
As though somebody were standing at the deathbed, leaning over to hear his last words. This is who's being addressed.

Jim Phelan 19:26
Yeah. Yeah. And so I mean, in a way, there's that - that little - kind of, the drama of the telling gets, you know, another, sort of, level of interest.

Brian McHale 19:41
Right. So for me, this is an example of what we might think of as a conventional gap, right, that - that the ballad can - tradition allows us to expect such gaps, and - and possibly not be too troubled by them, even though they make for part of the intrigue of the - the narrative.

Jim Phelan 20:05
Right. Right. Right. So maybe we shift to that - that play between what's there and what's not there as part of the interest as opposed to in a more conventional thing, we want to fill the gap, and then we - that provides the main source of our interests. Right. What just happened.

Brian McHale 20:23
Here again, you know, it's as though the gap came with the - the whole package. The whole genre package in this case.

Jim Phelan 20:31
Yeah. Yeah. Good. Good. Anything further on this one before we move on?

Brian McHale 20:37

I think maybe not. I think that's - I think that's what interests me about it. I do recommend anyone who wanted to follow up on this to go find that Steeleye Span version online, which is - which is hair-raisingly dark and, and makes a very interesting use of the - that repeated refrain.

Jim Phelan 21:00
Yeah, maybe say a little bit more about that.

Brian McHale 21:03
Right. So it's - it's - it's sung by solo voice, by Maddy Prior, the first three stanzas. And then after a long instrumental break, she returns and begins that - that last stanza, and then suddenly, all the male voices in the band join her and there's this chorus. And it's - it really sells the lyric aspect of the - of the song at that point, because again, that - that repeated stanza doesn't add anything narratively. It's exactly identical. We've learned all this before.

Jim Phelan 21:39
Yeah, yeah. Okay. So the moment of death or the moment of the funeral, whatever we saw, that then sort of gets elevated in a way by the treatment of it in this - in their song. Yeah. Okay, good. All right. Well, tell us about the next one.

Brian McHale 21:57
Okay. So I want to change languages again, and look at a poem by Federico Garcia Lorca, the Spanish language, Iberian Spanish poet of the years between the World Wars, and who is working from a - from a ballad tradition of his own, a Spanish language tradition of folk narrative songs, but in this case has been - has adapted it in a literary direction. It struck me that, you know, maybe there's an - a setting of this poem, as a - as a sung piece, and I thought - thought maybe I would find a Spanish composer who'd done it, but in fact, it's a Finnish composer, Rautavaara, set this song, the Canción de jinete, from 1924. He set it in 1973. So there's no Spanish version of it. So it has become after the fact, long after the fact, song lyric. But it's already intended as a kind of simulation of a song lyric. It is a Canción de jinete, the Song of the Rider, and another song about somebody on horseback. And a poem in which the gap is strategic and self-conscious, and highly artful, and - and even more enigmatic than the folk ballad tradition.

Jim Phelan 23:43
Okay, well, why don't you read the Spanish.

Brian McHale 23:45
So I'll try to read the original and then, and then you, Jim, please read the translation. So, "Canción de jinete."

Córdoba.
Leiana y sola.
Jaca negra, luna grande,
y aceitunas en mi alforja.

Aunque sepa los caminos
yo nunca llegaré a Córdoba.
Por el llano, por el viento,
Jaca negra, luna roja.
La muerte me esta mirando
Desde las torres de Córdoba.
¡Ay qué camino tan largo!
¡Ay mi jaca valerosa!
¡Ay que la muerte me espera,
antes de llegar a Córdoba!
Córdoba.
Leiana y sola.

Jim Phelan 24:28
Okay, now the English.

Córdoba.
Distant and lonely.

Black pony, large moon,
in my saddlebag olives.
Well as I know the roads,
I shall never reach Córdoba.

Over the wind, through the plain,
black pony, red moon.
Death keeps a watch on me
from Córdoba's towers.

Oh, it's such a long way to go, and
Oh, my spirited pony,
Ah, but Death awaits me,
before I ever reach Córdoba.

Córdoba,
distant and lonely.

Brian McHale 25:11
So again, what's interesting to me is how rich with narrative possibility this poem is. And yet, we can't figure out what's going on. You know, the rider is on a mission of some kind, and it's a doomed one. He's - he's bound to meet his death before he gets to his destination. So the stakes are very high. But we don't know why he's pursuing this mission. He - we don't know what it is, and we don't know why it's inevitable that he'll meet his death on the road.

Jim Phelan 25:55
Yeah, yeah. And so in a way, in this one, I think, it's at least worth, you know, playing with the idea that there is this bigger narrative that we don't know, and what we're getting is the song during this particular moment, or moments, right. So - so, it's like - it is a lyric, in this way of reading it. But it's a lyric, which depends upon the idea that it's part of some other larger narrative, which - which we don't know. And, and sort of that - that dependence means that the narrative is, in some ways, almost as important as the - as the lyric expression of, you know, going toward one's death and going toward the destination.

Brian McHale 26:42
Right, there's - there's a kind of paradoxical sense in which this is a very eventful poem, despite the fact that we can't understand the events. We lean forward, you know, to - to grasp the events. He's on the road, he's moving, he's riding, he's anticipating his own death. All - all things we're really interested in. And this poem is not going to satisfy us.

Jim Phelan 27:11
Right, and we might even add to them, you know, well, if you know, you're gonna die, if you keep going, why do you keep going? That's something else we don't have an answer to, right?

Brian McHale 27:18
Clearly, there's something that, you know, that's more important to him in this mission than - than his own life.

Jim Phelan 27:24
Yeah. Right. Right. Right. That adds to the sense of, alright, this is what I'm doing, you know. It's the kind of gloom of being in this position, in a way.

Brian McHale 27:37
Right. So it seems to me it has some of the same folk ballad features as "When I Was on Horseback," even though it's coming from a different national language tradition, but they're parallel folk traditions. One of the first people to write a monograph about Garcia Lorca in English, Roy Campbell, a poet himself, associated this poem with the border ballads explicitly. He said, this reminds me of Scottish border ballads, in which, you know, key things are missing. He didn't spell out that that was the intrigue of it, but I think that's - that is what he's reacting to. That's what - that's what the border ballot sounds like too, right? So Garcia Lorca is, is - is simulating that poetry in that tradition.

Jim Phelan 28:29
Yeah. Okay. So, here, again, we have some repetitions. But before we get to them, right, I want to ask you about the saddlebag olives, right. In a way that - there's a kind of particularity there that's different from, you know, the repetitions about the moon and the pony,and things like that.

Brian McHale 28:54
So I think that - I think of those details in the same category as 14th of May and Cork City in the - in the other one. The things that anchor the - the story in a world. And here, as you say, they - the olives in the saddlebag seems extraordinarily specific, right? And of course then we're - try to work out a narrative motivation for it. So he's, you know, left in a hurry, the only thing he could grab was some olives that he stores. That's - that's what he's going to be able to, you know, keep up his strength -

Jim Phelan 29:33
Sustain him on his journey

Brian McHale 29:34
On the road. But there's another dimension, I think. It's - it's also possible that García Lorca is - is signaling a kind of Spanishness, but beyond that kind of Andalucian character to this, right. He's writing out of his own region, the south of Spain, Andalucia, olive country. You know, the - the part of the country that was under Moorish occupation for the longest time. Etymologically both of those words "aceitunas," which is olives, and "alforja," which is saddlebag, are words of Arabic origin. Which I'm not - I'm not sure that a Spanish speaker would necessarily hear that in those words, but I think it's striking that that, you know, those - those are the - the words that Spanish absorbed from Arabic and - and maybe for García Lorca, it did have an element of local color to it.

Jim Phelan 30:35
Yeah, okay. All right. Good. Good. Well, let's talk a little about the repetitions here. And, you know, I think we got sort of more repetition with a difference than we did, say, in "When I Was on Horseback," right? So we have the sequence of, large moon, red moon. What about that one?

Brian McHale 30:54
So it seems - it seems to me that - that it is repetition, and the difference is a kind of inflection of the moon image towards the blood-red death that he's on his way towards, right. This is a blood-red moon maybe, right? As he gets closer and closer to that - that, you know, doom point.

Jim Phelan 31:18
Right, right. Right. Yeah, it's not a yellow moon. Right. Right. So, and then with the pony, we have black pony twice, and then spirited pony. And that's, you know, the spirited - also, such a long way to go, and, "Oh, my spirited pony," but that weights - sort of, the spirited somehow, you know, stands out in that concatenation of words.

Brian McHale 31:48
Right. It's "jaca valerosa" in the original, so "valerosa" is, you know, akin to our valorous, right, this is a brave pony, this is a heroic poet - pony, right? Carrying him to - towards this fatal

encounter. I think that whole - that whole stanza, "Oh, such a long way to go" and so on, that's the - that's the - the signal of - of the lyricness of the poem, right?

Jim Phelan 32:20
Almost, like, the lyric climax.

Brian McHale 32:24
That's the lyric climax, right? And those exclamations "¡Ay qué camino tan largo!," and, you know, "Oh, such a long way to go" in the - in the English. "Ay" and "Oh," those are the marks of lyric, those are the expressions that come, you know, from the heart. And - and so the, you know, narrative sort of gives way at this point to - to pure lyric. And then we get the repetition of the early - the early lines. Córdoba. Leiana y sola.

Jim Phelan 32:52
Right. Right. So, in this case, then, maybe do you feel like there's more, sort of, force or, sort of, the audience understands that "distant and lonely" sort of, in a different way than in the first iteration of it?

Brian McHale 33:09
Right. Right. And I think it's become you know, more laden with the, sort of, the heaviness, the doom awaiting the - awaiting the rider. I think - I think it's intriguing. Among - among the other things that we can't determine about this poem, we can't determine when this might have happened in world history, right. It's - it's a huge - it's a huge gap that surrounds sort of the entire world of the poem. Apparently, in some place, García Lorca said that he was thinking of a, sort of, adventurer, soldier of fortune from the Moorish Middle Ages, from the ninth century, who was a thorn in the side of the Emir of Córdoba, a rebel. And - so, that he was thinking of the adventure story of this medieval Moorish knight. And that's a perfectly plausible world to set this in. But on the other hand, that same Roy Campbell, the poet that I - the English poet that I mentioned before, who saw the connection with the border ballads, he immediately associates the "Canción de jinete" with dangers on the roads of Andalucia as late as the 1930s, right, that you were - that you were - had to be on your lookout for highwaymen and horse thieves riding around in the 20th century. And there's nothing in the world that prevents this from being a 20th century poet - poem, which is the way Roy Campbell hears it.

Jim Phelan 34:47
Yeah, so again, we go back to gaps, right, and so both of these are plausible, but neither one is better than the other, necessarily.

Brian McHale 34:55
Right, and for me, this - this goes beyond a kind of functional gap or a strategic gap, you know, the gap of Yonatan's pants, to something larger and, you know, approaching the metaphysical, right? We're - we're disappearing, the whole world is disappearing into this gap. We really don't know where we are, or when we are.

Jim Phelan 35:15
Yeah. Right. And so the focus is just on this speaker, on his horse, on this journey, whose goal is really unspecified, and how he feels, right. Okay, good. Anything else on this one before we go on?

Brian McHale 35:36
No. And again, you know, what's - what's appealing and intriguing in this poem for me is that - is how it's bristling with eventfulness. It's an adventure story. And yet, it's an adventure that's disappearing, before our eyes almost, down - down a hole. And we can't, we can't see inside. For me, that's - that's the - that's the appeal of that poem.

Jim Phelan 36:03
Right. Yeah. Sort of the magic of the whole thing, right? Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Well, now we come to Bob Dylan.

Brian McHale 36:10
Now we come to Bob Dylan. So I thought - I associated these, this poem of García Lorca, with Bob Dylan's lyric, "All Along the Watchtower," arbitrarily, but the more I thought about it, the less arbitrary it seemed. It's once again a lyric about horsemen and approaching doom. And now I begin to wonder if Dylan might even have had Lorca in mind. I can't find any place in the literature, any evidence of Dylan having read García Lorca. On the other hand, you know, why not? Right? Could have happened. You can never - you can never - you should never underestimate Bob Dylan, right, he might have read it. So, this is a famous song, "All Along the Watchtower," mainly from Jimi Hendrix's cover of the song from 1968, which - which is one of the few instances, I think, maybe the only instance, in which a cover of the Dylan song is arguably better than the original. But, so this is what Bob Dylan wrote.

Jim Phelan 37:23
You're not going to sing it like Jimi Hendrix?

Brian McHale 37:25
I am not. I will - I will pretend it's a poem. So, "All Along the Watchtower."

There must be some kind of way outta here
Said the joker to the thief
There's too much confusion
I can't get no relief
Businessmen, they drink my wine
Plowmen dig my earth
None of them all along the line
Know what any of it is worth
No reason to get excited
The thief, he kindly spoke
There are many here among us

Who feel that life is but a joke
But you and I, we've been through that
And this is not our fate
So let us not talk falsely now
The hour's getting late
All along the watchtower
Princes kept the view
While all the women came and went
Barefoot servants, too
Outside in the distance
A wildcat did growl
Two riders were approaching
The wind began to howl

Jim Phelan 38:20
Yeah. So this one seems - you know, I'd start by saying, it has a lot of good bits, but how do we put it together, right? You know, these three stanzas, all right, so there's some kind of exchange between the joker and the thief. But what does that have to do with "All Along the Watchtower," our title? And - and then, the last, you know, stanza we get a different speaker, seemingly, right? We leave dialogue and we go to, you know, the poet - poet-speaker, of a sort. What do we do with this?

Brian McHale 38:52
And we maybe even go to a different world, a different - a different place altogether. You know, this seems -

Jim Phelan 38:59
But there's only one watchtower in the title, right? So, so we're not saying "All Along the Watchtowers," and then we could go away. But, go ahead.

Brian McHale 39:05
I was going to say that this seems to be evidence of how deeply Dylan had absorbed the folk ballad tradition, and had capitalized on it, and in a certain way extended it, right? So he takes a song with a gap, something like, "When I Was on Horseback," and he makes the gap complete, he envelops the whole situation, the whole story, the whole world of this poem in the gap, right? And the end result is - is, you know, perfectly enigmatic. We don't know whether, for instance, we should place the joker and the thief in the same world as the watchtower. And if we do, do we place the joker and the thief inside - inside the walled city, presumably, or outside? Or are they the two riders who are approaching? And, you know, it's certainly tempting to read it that way, just in order to give this a kind of closure, right? We return to them. But on the other hand, the joker says, "There must be some kind of way outta here," which we can take metaphorically. We must - there must be some way to get out of this situation we're in. Or more literally, there must be some way to get out of this city. Because

something is approaching. Right? So even the - the topography flips between the first part and the second part, depending upon whether we want to place them inside or outside.

Jim Phelan 40:49
Right. And then just in terms of the, sort of, the impulse to narrativize, right, so if we place them inside, and we take that "outta here" as something more literal, then we, in terms of narrative - narrativization, we could think about, okay, the two riders from inside are going to come out and meet the two riders who are approaching.

Brian McHale 41:07
Something like that.

Jim Phelan 41:08
I mean, again, you know, but then--so what?

Brian McHale 41:13
Right. We could go through the poem picking out the details, which allow us to solve it one way, to put them inside, right? "There are many here among us who feel that life has been a joke." *Here*, among us. So perhaps, inside, right, "us," this - the people in the city, or - or in, you know, protected by the walls. But then there's no necessity to - to link those details up in that way, right? There's nothing in the poem that compels us to do that, right. So it feels like it's - it's hovering a few feet above the ground, it never quite gets grounded.

Jim Phelan 41:54
Right. Never lands, yeah, yeah. And here - and also, I think, the temporality or, you know, the location in time, right? So we have princes, we have a watchtower. But we also have, you know, many of us think that life - who feel that life is but a joke, right? That doesn't seem as much of a, kind of a medieval attitude. We think of it as a more contemporary one.

Brian McHale 42:18
Right. So here, you know, again, I - I'm - I like to entertain the idea that Dylan was aware of "Canción de jinete," here's a poem that could be in the Middle Ages. So the joker, then, we understand as a jester, and, you know, the thief then is a medieval thief. But there's, there's no reason to commit ourselves to that, it could just as easily be a 20th-century conversation between a joker and a thief, right, you know, more like *The Godfather* than like - than like the Middle Ages, right? And - and the - the indeterminacy is, it seems to me, complete here. And what we get is only a kind of a fringe of narrative eventfulness around a really deep dark hole. And - and that seems to be a kind of, you know, final step in, you know, the evolution of small stories with big holes in them.

Jim Phelan 43:30
Yeah. Right. And then would you say, then, the become - the interest of it sort of gets displaced onto that, sort of, performance of the hole, right? It's a kind of a meta, a meta ballad, or something like that.

Brian McHale 43:47
Right, and yet - and yet, you know, there is some narrative interest, right? And yet, we, you know, we do sort of lean forward and say, the riders, who are the riders? You know, why is everyone keeping the view from the watchtowers? What's the threat? Or, what's the expectation? You know, all of this. And then, of course, where's the joker - where are the joker and thief? Where's this conversation taking place? How are they related to the crisis, apparently, that's going on in the final stanza. And - and that keeps us engaged as co-constructors of narrative, despite the fact that we're engaging with the narrative at the last possible moment before it disappears into the hole.

Jim Phelan 44:35
Right, right. Yeah. You know, and maybe even, you know, going along with what you're saying about our leaning forward, or, who are those two riders, there is that - a little bit of a kind of progression in terms of the dialogue, right? The joker complains, the thief tries to reassure him, right, then - but there's not a - nothing happens in that, right? Then we switch - then we go - go to this - this third thing, right? So - so we're - we're following, and then we have to stop following and go somewhere else, right? That's all part of it. Yeah.

Brian McHale 45:09
So it seems to me that at this point, the sort of normal hole, something like the hole of Jonathan in the nursery rhyme, when the - and the conventional hole, the hole that we find in folk ballads, has become something else. That - that the - the - the quantitative hole, the size of the hole has created something qualitatively different, right? So this is more like - this is more like, you know, the black hole of astrophysics, right? Where, you know, no light comes out, no matter can be - can be detected. And all that we've got left is that event horizon, which is for our purposes, you know, brilliantly named. The event horizon, the last moment before anything can be seen before it disappears in the black hole. That's more or less the condition of "All Along the Watchtower."

Jim Phelan 46:04
Yeah, yeah. And, you know, also thinking about things which disappear, like - we don't have - like all the other ones, we have this repetition of beginning and end, and we don't have that here, and so on. Want to comment at all on why it's a joker and a thief rather than a knight and, you know, a page or something?

Brian McHale 46:26
We could say this is - this is of a piece with Dylan's interest in - in the lower depths, right? These are - these are the outcasts, these are the - the bottom dwellers of this world, right? But, you know, it's hard to reconcile all those details and make them into a - into a world, right? It's a kind of anti-world, it's a kind of disappearing world.

Jim Phelan 46:56
Yeah. So maybe as we move toward the end here, do you want to offer any kind of general reflections on, sort of, is there a - let me ask it this way, is there some kind of a relationship between the progression that you've taken us through and your sense of, like, the aesthetic quality of these things, or, you know, the kinds of things you're more interested in, anything like that?

Brian McHale 47:26
Right. You know, I would want to claim more the latter, that, for me, that, you know, the larger the hole, the more I'm intrigued. And I'm especially interested in those narrative - narrative and lyric at the same time poems, in which the event material is at a minimum, is really reduced to a trace, and the hole into which the narrative disappears is at the maximum. That seems to be aesthetically appealing and interesting and -

Jim Phelan 48:01
And challenging.

Brian McHale 48:04
And challenging, right? You want to understand how - how it could possibly work. How this - how, you know, how this could exist, even. It's - it's at the moment just before it vanishes.

Jim Phelan 48:15
Yeah. Right. So, just to go back to where you started with, you know, Sternberg and Perry, and, sort of, gap-filling and so on, it's almost like you've taken it to the logical extent--we're interested in gap-filling, and here's Brian McHale interested in the biggest gaps possible.

Brian McHale 48:34
Right, for them, gap-filling is, on the whole, functional, right? It keeps - it's the engine that keeps turning over, and the narrative driving forward because of it. And of course, they're right. In, you know, many, many places, this is what gaps are for and this is what they do, right? But then there's a gap that becomes a gap for its own sake, right? And that's a, I think, a different aesthetic quality, and one that I find really appealing.

Jim Phelan 49:04
Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Terrific. All right. Any final thoughts, Brian?

Brian McHale 49:10
No, I think I'm happy.

Jim Phelan 49:12
Yeah. Well, I'm very happy too, so thank you so much. I just want to say a couple things as we wind up. So, I want to thank everyone for listening, and also just say, you know, we're happy to get feedback from our listeners. So you could send it to us at projectnarrative@osu.edu, projectnarrative, which is one word or on our Facebook page, or our Twitter account, and with

Twitter, we are @pnohiostate. And finally, I want to say please join us for the next Project Narrative podcast, which Robyn Warhol and I will record on December 15th. Robyn will read and discuss Zadie Smith's short story, "The Waiter's Wife." Thank you all again