FAIL BETTER

Sometime in the mid-1980s, a student asked me “Did Beckett really say that? ‘Fail better?’” He was smiling, and I, smiling, assured him that Beckett had indeed put those two words together. They had appeared a few years before in Beckett’s last long composition in prose, *Worstward Ho* (1983), and now as it seemed had already gone viral. Global culture, even without digital assistance, was doing its work, digesting Beckett, and here we were, my student and I, enjoying a moment of this rapid and complex process. I doubt Beckett ever smiled when he wrote, but there was probably something like a wry internal smile when he hit upon this combination of words, since humor was an indispensable element of his “divergent intelligence.”1 His multi-layered astringent wit was a kind of soil out of which his work grew, giving it a combination of intensity and depth and wisdom and (dare I say it?) beauty that has rarely been matched. By contrast, my student and I were enjoying a joke: the comic

1. I found this apt concept in Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers*, where he contrasts it with the “convergent intelligence” ordinarily measured by standard IQ tests. Unlike convergent intelligence, there is no measuring divergent intelligence since there can be no right answers were one to test for it. The more powerful it is, the more surprising its results.
absurdity of two things that don’t go together, framed by wonderment at the strange doings of this strange man (Did he really say that?).

As such, our exchange was an instance of the process of culling, recombining, and disseminating “memes,” or cultural bits, that Richard Dawkins controversially proposed as analogous in their working to genes (Dawkins 1989: 192ff). In American culture, in addition to its memetic life as a lame joke, “fail better” has also been commonly appropriated as a way of saying “keep trying, never give up,” with the adjunct “learn from your failures and eventually you will succeed.” Among literary scholars, it has at times been parsed to mean that the success of Beckett’s art requires failing by the customary standards of artistic success. And, as literary history, this idea does apply to Beckett as modernist, if not to its function in Worstward Ho. “Failing,” interpreted as a vigorous and continually evolving refusal to meet the expectations of the artistic marketplace is one of the hallmarks of modernist achievement.

Much has been written about what Beckett meant when he said that “to be an artist is to fail as no other dare fail” (Beckett 1983: 145). And as failure is one of the commonest tropes in his oeuvre, much more will continue to be written on the subject. But commentary rarely probes the actual experience of something like “fail better,” especially when it’s put back in context. In Worstward Ho, written when he was seventy-seven, Beckett produced an extended valedictory fanfare in which failure is the dominating motif. It is a rich, rhythmic, complex work of art in which words are made to circle an absent center. This is my take on the work and, as such, it provides me with an opening note in this prelude to a book about the art of not knowing. Read in this spirit, the oxymoronic combination of “fail” plus “better” is felt as a momentary neural jamming in an art where words are constantly being abnormalized by their syntax. For this art to work, then, the reader must set aside, on the one hand, the self-sufficiency and distraction of the joke; and on the other, the joke’s opposite, that is, the explanatory attitude. In the experience of reading the actual text, Worstward Ho, these normalizing frames of mind get in the way.

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2. Paula M. Krebs draws explicitly on the authority of the name behind the phrase: “I had a colleague who had a poster in his dining room with Samuel Beckett’s ’Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.’ We may tell ourselves that, but we don’t tell our students. Maybe we should post it in our classrooms, not our dining rooms” (Krebs 2012). Krebs’s appropriation was echoed by the actor Peter Dinklage in his 2012 commencement address at Bennington College: “Don’t bother telling the world you are ready. Show it. Do it. What did Beckett say? ’Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better’” (Pérez-Peña 2012).

3. The multiple ways in which culture can recursively normalize intentional artistic failure has been especially problematic for Beckett, given his spectacular cultural success. After Godot, this meant working against cultural standards of success to which his own work had contributed.
They obscure the full force of “fail” in combination with the force of “better.”
This is what must be felt.

So, I go get the text and open it up:

Worsening words whose unknown. Whence unknown. At all costs unknown. Now for to say as worst they may only they only they. Dim void shades all they. Nothing save what they say. Somehow say. Nothing save they. What they say. Whosesover whencesover say. As worst they may fail ever worse to say. (Beckett 1996: 104)

“Say what?” my student says and pretty much hits the nail on the head. He and I experience a cluster of gaps opening up where some thing or some word should be but isn't and won't ever be. In this textual world, it both is and is not “enough still not to know” (ibid.). The striking verbal oddity, then, of “fail better” does its work best when it is felt as an oxymoron that cannot be undone, a real mystery poised on the cusp where the inexplicable meets the need to relieve it. It is but one example of one tool among multitudes in Beckett’s finely calibrated and always absorbing art of not knowing.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

Beckett returns in chapters 1 and 4 of this study, and in those I will give you a better understanding of two different strains of his art of not knowing, of how they work and why we should give them any of our valuable time. But what prompted this book-length study was my growing realization that other authors, who don’t deploy the trope of failure and in fact compose in quite different ways, have been eliciting their own versions of this same fundamental effect. Beckett is such a repository of brightly shining limit cases that it is easy to overlook the fact that his particular innovations belong to a broader, more diversified range of strategies devised by other authors intent on arousing different versions of the same effect. You could call this effect the “palpable unknown.” It is an intended effect, and the art of arousing it is what this book is about—how readers (and, by extension, viewers and auditors) of narrative can be made not only to know that they don’t know, which is a matter of understanding, but also to be immersed in the condition of unknowing, which is a matter of experience.

It also asks and tries to answer the question: Why should an author want to do this? It is a question that falls within a larger question that literary scholars and critics of the avant-garde are constantly badgered with: Why practice
an art that deliberately fails to meet readers’ expectations? Narratives after all are marketed within a highly determinate process of production, selection, and consumption. As Darwin wrote of natural selection, this process works “with unerring skill” (Darwin 1952: 87). And if, like natural selection, the market for narrative commodities is a case of emergent behavior and thus in key ways irreducible, immeasurable, and unpredictable, the chemistry of mind and text that makes it work is nonetheless something producers and consumers know a lot about. This includes, among other things, the enduring appeal of the narrative triad of suspense, curiosity, and surprise (Sternberg 1978). It is this understanding of the way narrative works that allows critics to deploy the “we” construction (“at this point in the novel, we begin to sense that something has gone terribly wrong”). Readers, in other words, effortlessly learn to respond to narrative as they are expected to respond. And though the competence of readers stretches over a wide range, narrative only exists because we share an experiential understanding of how narrative achieves its effects.

So if, now to adapt Wordsworth’s lines, narrative is so “exquisitely . . . fitted to the Mind” (“Prospectus,” ll. 63–66), why would an artist want to mess with that fit? What is to be gained from this? Over the course of the twentieth century, these questions have become more pressing as the ascent through the rarified air of high modernism achieved lift-off into the impossible worlds of postmodernism. And it has elicited any number of explanations. These include predictable dismissive explanations like the need for ever-fresh modes of inscrutability in marketing for a cultural elite that seeks status rather than the natural pleasures of narrative.4 On the undissimissive side, however, there has been much worthwhile theoretical work on texts that resist the reader to varying degrees. This work can be loosely gathered under the concept of defamiliarization.

RESISTING THE READER

The idea that literature can be a productive way of defamiliarizing the familiar has a distinguished pedigree though it is most commonly associated with

4. See particularly Ellen Dissanayake (1992), Steven Pinker (1997, 2002), and E. O. Wilson (1998), whose critique comes out of an understanding of what comes naturally to our evolved sociality. Pinker has also suggested that willful inscrutability might confer an advantage in sexual selection (the artist as romantically inscrutable, garbed in the plumage of inscrutable art). At this level of speculation, it is not hard to put other sorts of evolutionary spin on narrative misbehavior: e.g., “Avant-gardes are always cults of difficulty—Cubism, ‘The Waste Land’—by which a rising generation exploits its biological advantages, of animal health and superabundant brain cells, to confound the galling wisdom and demoralize the obnoxious sovereignty of age” (Schjeldahl 2005: 162).
the work of Viktor Shklovsky, who gave us the concept of plot (syuzhet) as the means by which the telling can be used to defamiliarize the story (fabula). In this kind of reader resistance the focus is on the conscious management of narrative as an instrument of disruption with insightful rewards for the hard-working reader. Thus, Shklovsky’s coinage, “ostranyenie” (остранение), often translated as “making strange,” is also “showing the strangeness of,” and in this regard it is keyed to the larger purpose of breaking habitual templates and seeing with fresh eyes. This general idea of yielding insight by resisting the easy transport of the reader of conventional texts, slowing the reader down and increasing reflexive awareness, can be found in a broad range of diverse conceptions of reader/viewer resistance from Bertolt Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekte (1935) to Austin Wright’s “recalcitrance” (Wright 1989) to Michael M. Boardman’s “urgent innovation” (Boardman 1992) to James Phelan’s “the difficult” and “the stubborn” (Phelan 1996, 2007, 2008, 2011) to David S. Miall’s “dehabituation” (Miall 2006) to Vicki Mahaffey’s “challenging fictions” (Mahafey 2007) and Criscillia Benford’s “the inassimilable” (Benford 2010). In the same spirit, modernist texts imported into narrative the more demanding and textually self-conscious modes of poetry (Lodge 1977), even as T. S. Eliot argued that poetry itself must be difficult to be successful. More broadly, these modernists were elaborating what Coleridge contended when he wrote that “Genius produces the strongest impressions of novelty” in rescuing truths that “lie bed-ridden in the dormitory of the soul” (Coleridge 1983: 60). Or more broadly still, these resistant texts provoke what the cognitive sociologist Paul DiMaggio has called “deliberative cognition,” a natural cognitive endowment that involves overriding “programmed modes of thought to think critically and reflexively.” As such, these texts arouse that degree of heightened attention that is regularly called into play when “existing schemata fail to account adequately for new stimuli” (DiMaggio 1997: 271–72).

5. In his translator’s introduction to Shklovsky’s Theory of the Novel, Benjamin Sher explains his use of the term “enstrangement” for остранение to capture the process of exposing the strangeness of “an object or image . . . by ‘removing’ it from the network of conventional, formulaic, stereotypical perceptions and linguistic expressions (based on such perceptions)” (xix). For an ambitious critical overview of the whole extended subject of defamiliarization, see Sternberg 2006.

6. For a penetrating analysis of how the “nonstandard” in literary discourse not only challenges thought but makes us conscious of the “standard” that informs our thought and language, see Margolin 2003. As so often in treatments of how literature can profitably resist the reader, Margolin references Beckett as a model of how far a writer can go in this direction: “the preference of much literature for nonstandard forms of cognitive functioning, be they rare and marginal, deviant, or involving a failure, breakdown, or lack of standard patterns . . . stems from a desire to explore new possibilities, and, in some cases such as that of Samuel Beckett . . ., the very limits or minimal conditions of cognitive activity as such. This procedure provides the reader with novelty and an intellectual challenge to make sense of the unfamiliar and excep-
In my mind this general view of reader-resistant texts accords with the thread of interpretive pedagogy that Schklovsky’s contemporary I. A. Richards articulated when he called a literary text a “machine to think with” (Richards 1924: 52). If the mechanical metaphor has been pretty much abandoned, the spirit and the pedagogy have swelled over the years. The effort to interpret literary texts, whether read in academic seminars or non-academic reading groups, is valued for the effort involved and the accompanying expansion of thought and feeling that is catalyzed along the way. The attitude is well expressed by the novelist Toni Morrison, whose willingness to discuss her own work and the work of others is as inexhaustible as it is interesting: “I like to think of a class as ending with really interesting questions. Just as when I’m writing, I don’t like my books to end, but rather leave the reader with questions that will prompt them to circle back into the text. A good book may prompt you to go out and learn more about something that hasn’t interested you before” (Denard 2008: 200–201). Morrison’s formulation is particularly apt because it articulates the way discussing reader-resistant texts not only feeds the lives that are lived outside the fictional worlds they create but also feeds back into the experience of those fictional worlds. Done well, reading and interpretation join hands. This is a view of the teacher’s craft that I fully endorse and over many years have sought to live up to in my own imperfect way.

There is also a dark version of reader-resistant narrative that, in effect, universalizes a condition of innate opacity for all texts. This is a quality that texts acquire not by any intention of the author but by their condition as texts. In this view, the yield for hard-working readers can only be perplexity as they seek the veiled meaning that Hawthorne can never let them see in his story of “The Minister’s Dark Veil” (J. H. Miller 1991). The hard work of interpretation, pursued with sufficient understanding of this universal condition, leads in only one direction: to cognitive darkness. The insight acquired is a lack of sight, the revelation of an inescapable condition of unknowing that is unacknowledged or pasted over in conventional texts, as it is in our lives outside the text. This is the problem of the absent signified that, in different ways, played a central role in the theorizing of Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and

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7. Asked why she distances herself from feminism, Morrison replied: “In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can’t take positions that are closed. Everything I’ve ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book—leaving the endings open to interpretation, revisitation, a little ambiguity” (Denard 2008: 140).
InTRodUCTIon

Paul de Man, and that leads to a process of interpretation without end. It is a resistance built into the walls of the prison-house of language in which we are all confined and that will allow no semiotic capture of “the real” (Lacan) or the “hors-texte” (Derrida). In Frank Kermode’s elegant formulation, the hidden is the “secrecy” that feeds on the very effort to abolish it: “We are most unwilling to accept mystery, what cannot be reduced to other and more intelligible forms. Yet that is what we find here: something irreducible, therefore perpetually to be interpreted; not secrets to be found out one by one, but Secrecy” (Kermode 1979: 143).

This sounds a lot like the subject of this book as described above, but it is not. I’ll get to the difference in a moment, but first it is helpful to note that what many poststructuralists were saying about the illusion of language’s transparency and our persistence in maintaining this illusion despite the news that whatever we write can be handily deconstructed connects with what some neurologists were, and are, saying about the way our minds work. On this view, we are by our nature, as Kermode writes, most unwilling to accept a mystery that cannot be resolved. In The Mind’s Past, Michael Gazzaniga refers to an “interpreter” in the left hemisphere of the brain that works tirelessly to make sense of the world, even before we are aware of what we think. “[T]here is something very special about the left brain. It reflexively generates a notion about how things work even when there is no real event to figure out. There is no stopping it” (Gazzaniga 1998: 156). The object of this constant, largely unconscious, application of recognizable form on what is otherwise inexplicable is to maintain a familiar world within which we are secure: “The interpreter tells us the lies we need to believe in order to remain in control” (138). In religious discourse, even the term “mystery” itself can be evidence of a nameable cause, the reality of which is implicated in the mystery. To proclaim that God moves in mysterious ways is, at the least, to proclaim that there is a Mover at work, making mysterious moves. What is, in short, is conceived as effect, and what Gazzaniga calls “figuring out” is primarily working backward, however imperfectly, to an assessment of cause. The result is a story, simple or complex, and its mode of representation is narrative. In Antonio Damasio’s words, “the mind’s pervasive ‘aboutness’ is rooted in the brain’s story-telling

8. Robyn Warhol (2005) has proposed the useful category of the “supranarratable” (230) for moments in film that are best conveyed by a strategy of concealment. An example she uses is an off-camera kiss, the intensity of which would suffer diminishment could we actually see the lovers. What I am dealing with in this essay is the narrative effort to deal with what is beyond narratable knowledge or expression. As such, its object is closer but not identical to what Allon White referred to as “the necessary not-said of the text” in Meredith’s “sudden ellipses,” Conrad’s “metaphysical enigmas,” and James’s “cultivated obscurity” (A. White 1981: 28, 130).
attitude” (1999: 189). Narrative, in other words, is the principal cognitive act of understanding, doing its busy work throughout the days of our waking lives, in law and gossip, in science and politics, in history and the news. Nassim Taleb calls it “the narrative fallacy” (Taleb 2007: 62–84): “an ingrained biological need to reduce dimensionality” that makes it “impossible for our brain to see anything in raw form” (64, 65). Taleb spreads his net pretty widely when he calls this operation “the narrative fallacy,” but he is simply echoing what in their different ways Sartre, Barthes, Hayden White, and others have observed: that to narrativize is to apply meaning where otherwise meaning would not exist, binding events through chains of explanatory causation.

But if our constitutional need to impose understanding where we do not understand is relevant to this study, the extreme constructivist view of all understanding is not. For it stands to reason that if our communications among ourselves, our readings of intention, and our descriptions of the world we live in were hopelessly sealed off from reality, we would not have survived as well as we have. Our knowledge and its means of conveyance are, in other words, good enough. In fact, the extreme constructivist view that I have just taken up has lost much of its cachet among humanists as it has (if it ever had) among scientists of cognition. It has been broadly criticized as a reductive product of an Enlightenment bequest—the false dichotomy between objec-

9. In contrast to Gazzaniga, Damasio locates this narrative faculty at a deeper, pre-linguistic level of “wordless narrative” (2010: 204). It is, he writes, a “strategic management of images” that likely evolved bottom up, early on, well before consciousness did” (174; see also Damasio 1999: 184–89). For a lucid, lively account of case histories involving neurological disorders that interfere with the capability of mentally organizing the world we live in, see Sacks 1985 (see also Young and Saver 2001; Mar 2004). In the next chapter, I’ll return to the more specific role played by our narrative capability in the construction of personal identity.

10. It is not therefore surprising that causation has been a central issue in theorizing about narrative and for some (Bal, Bordwell, B. Richardson) a defining feature of narrative itself. And certainly, for fictional or nonfictional narratives of any complexity, a key part of the experience of reading (or viewing) is a constant scanning for cause and effect. If, for the most part, this operation is reflexive and unconscious, and one among many operations proceeding at once, it finds its way up into the conscious construction of what we commonly call the interpretation of narrative texts. This involves not only sorting out the chains of cause and effect within the world created by the text but also determining another kind of cause in the world outside the text—a set of intentions that brought another kind of effect—the narrative world itself—into existence.

11. As Tony Jackson puts it in reference to deconstruction’s “infinitely self-disestablishing” text, “[m]y understanding of writing and representation does not have to do with this kind of theoretical absolute. Rather, I take language and narrativity as empirically established elements of Homo sapiens that do the work they have evolved to do, very well much of the time, but hardly in some exact or absolutely successful way” (Jackson 2009: 80). Philip Weinstein makes the same critique with a different inflection: “What happened to the space in between (the space where language's relation to the world typically operates)—representation as both determined and free, world-predicative yet open to contestation?” (Weinstein 2005: 52).
tivity and subjectivity (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Harding and O’Barr 1987; Maturana and Varela 1998). As the psychologist Susan Oyama argues, “Our responsibility is not the responsibility of unmoved movers, absolute originators bringing order to chaos. Rather the construction is mutual; it occurs through intimate interaction.” As a consequence, “[o]ur cognitive and ethical responsibilities are based on our response-ability, our capacity to know and to do, our active involvement in knowledge and reflection” (Oyama 2000: 149). So, to circle back, Oyama’s idea of response-ability extends logically into the pedagogy that, as I contended above, can be made to work productively with defamiliarizing modes of reader-resistance.

But this is a book about intentionally induced states of unknowing, so I need to make sure my reader understands that I am not at all dissociating my general orientation toward the reading and interpretation of fictional texts from Oyama’s more broadly applied concept of “intimate interaction”—a “constructionism” constantly inflected and corrected by the reality it works with. My focus in this book, however, is on literary texts that, in part, interrupt this process, bringing us past the limits of our understanding and at the same time inviting us to let go of the impulse to construct. They lead us not simply to acknowledge that we don’t know but to feel the insistent presence of this condition. It is a humbling experience, given our bent for misestimating the extent and exactitude of our knowledge. If this bent, too, has been an evolutionary necessity, giving us the sharp sense of clarity we need in our decision making, it has also been the cause of much suffering. Fiction provides a space where we can not only reflect on this bent but, in the uncommon instances I take up in this book, know what it feels like to release ourselves altogether from its sovereignty.

THE STUBBORN

In the field of the interpretation of fictional texts, what James Phelan has called “the stubborn” is an extreme form of reader resistance that will help me clarify by contrast the even more extreme form of resistance that is my subject. Phelan first applied his useful concept to a character, Beloved, in an analysis of Toni Morrison’s problematic novel of the same name, Beloved (Phelan 1996: 173–89). He opposed “the stubborn” to what he called “the difficult”: both are forms of narrative “recalcitrance,” but where the difficult finally “yields to our explanatory efforts,” the stubborn does not (178).12 Phel-
an's treatment of the stubborn was and is part of his larger on-going effort to deal with the disparity between two kinds of engagement with fiction—the experience of the text and its interpretation—a distinction that goes way back and that is also important for this study. For Phelan, as for many others, interpretation differs from the experience of reading in that it is the product of a conscious effort to develop “a single, coherent understanding” out of that experience (Phelan 2007: 212; see also Rabinowitz 1987: 1–2). This is where the stubborn does its refractory work. In his chapter on *Beloved*, Phelan dramatized the tension between the experience of reading a text and the analytical work of interpreting a text by alternating “a somewhat lyrical expression of response with abstract theorizing” (Phelan 1996: 173). The result is an “essay” in Montaigne's original sense of the term—an act of provocative incompleteness.

What makes it incomplete—that is, what prevents any satisfactory transit from the experience of the text to its interpretation—is the stubborn unac-

quick to turn instances of the difficult into the stubborn and then to thematize them into global conclusions about the impossibility of interpretation” (Rabinowitz 2001: 207).

13. The distinction between the experience of literature and its analysis is already implicit in Aristotle’s *Poetics* where he articulated two main roads that professional analysts of mimetic literature have followed ever since. The first is the approach most commonly associated with the word “interpretation.” It is the one we take when we talk about the meaning of a text or of its meanings or, for that matter, of its refusals to mean. Aristotle provided a powerful way of understanding it (Aristotle 1947: 635–36, 657–58) when he compared poetry favorably, on the one hand, to philosophy (it tells a story) and, on the other, to history (it conveys ideas). That stories convey ideas is an assumption that seems almost inevitably to come with the interpreter’s trade, though it can also plague the common reader who not uncommonly sees it as a distracting presumption, an intrusion on the pleasures of reading. In the century just past, some of the sharpest critics of this critical stance have been writers themselves, who in one way or another imply that the experience of the text is not only beyond paraphrase but threatened by the constraining abstraction of even the most nuanced interpretation. Asked what he thought Beckett’s plays were about, the playwright Brendan Behan replied, “I don’t know what his plays are about, but I know I enjoy them. I do not know what a swim in the ocean is about, but I enjoy it. I enjoy the water flowing over me” (Reid 1968: 48).

The second approach is one that gets closer to what Behan is talking about. Aristotle demonstrated it in his analysis of the well-wrought tragedy with its emphasis on the arousal and purgation of intense feeling (Aristotle 1947: 637–43). This is the experiential, processual, affective approach to interpretation with its focus on what happens to us over the course of an expressive or representational event (listening to a poem, reading a novel, watching a play). The most notable twentieth-century theorist of this approach was Kenneth Burke, though there have been some remarkable examples of theorists (Roland Barthes, Stanley Fish, Garrett Stewart) who have ramped up this focus to a microscopic, moment-by-moment tracking of the human transaction with a text. Any further intimacy with the experience of the text is the experience itself, from which any kind of commentary is a departure. And this is the problem, because the experience of the text is where the action is: the fluid, ever-evolving chemistry between the reader and the text. It is a chemistry that is ultimately beyond all analytical nets, yet without it there is no narrative to talk about.
countability of the character of Beloved herself. Reading Beloved as an individual character, a human being, is, to begin with, hard not simply because she is impenetrable (“deep down in those big black eyes there was no expression at all” [Morrison 1987a: 55]), but also because Morrison in developing this character crosses the line between realism and fantasy. Beloved was at the beginning of her very short life a living, breathing infant, though barely knowable as such. But then she returns: first as an angry, “spiteful” ghost, making life miserable at 124 Bluestone Road, and then as a “fully dressed woman,” with smooth skin, a weakness for sweets, and a scar on her neck, who walks out of a stream and finds her way to 124 where she further complicates the lives of those who live there. Her multiple interactions with Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and even the community of neighbors prevent her from being pegged as the projection of the psychological state of any single character or set of characters. And finally, as a ghost in the work of an unabashedly allusive writer, Beloved seems to symbolize a congeries of different conditions, both universal and historically specific: the repressed fury of the enslaved, the evil consequences of the middle passage, the chain of guilt that binds master and slave, the power of love, its possessive insistence and capacity for madness, the dangerous simplicity of the innocent. Beloved is, in short, a problematic feast for the interpreting mind. And this is something Phelan brings out very well as he tests possible interpretations, his own and those of other scholars, against his experience of reading the text. In every case, reading trumps interpretation.

But for all the frustrating discord in this novel between the experience of reading and the attempt to create a satisfactory over-arching interpretation—indeed because of it—the stubborn, according to Phelan, does good work, contributing “significantly to the experience of the larger narrative” (179). And this is because, at bottom, it does much the same work as “the difficult,” exercising and enlarging the reader’s emotional, intellectual, and ethical faculties.14 In this sense, both the difficult and the stubborn mesh with a pedagogy predicated on constructing and contesting interpretive possibilities. But the instances of narrative recalcitrance that I have brought together in this study are of a special kind and ultimately, as I shall continue to argue throughout, require the coexistence of two opposed frames of mind: the need to know and the acceptance that one will never know. This is not to say that experiencing such instances cannot be assisted by analysis and the establishment of

14. Phelan puts this similarly in a later essay, arguing that at the end of Kafka’s “Das Urteil” Herr Bendemann’s inexplicable judgment of his son and his son’s inexplicable acceptance of it open a stubborn gap that cannot be closed but at the same time “invites us to relate the story to an ever-widening range of issues and contexts” (Phelan 2011: 17). See also Phelan’s application of this concept to Frost’s “Home Burial” (Phelan 2007: 211–14) and to Lord Jim (Phelan 2008).
an over-arching or meta-interpretive analytical frame, which is also the job
of this study. But unlike the over-arching frame of Kermode, which posits
unending efforts of interpretation, or that of Miller, which posits the impossi-
bility of interpretation altogether, the frame I will be working with requires, at
times, a willing immersion in modes of cognitive failure that cannot happen
at the readerly distance required to explain or interpret. Like the experience
of the stubborn, the experience of the palpable unknown need not forestall
efforts to interpret a narrative as a whole. But if an interpretation does aspire
to account for the work as a whole, it must find a place for this special experi-
ence within those efforts. To give a practical indication of the different track
I am taking, let’s look at the same novel Phelan used to demonstrate the stub-
born but with a focus now on another aspect of our relationship to it.

THE ABSENT EPONYM

In several important ways, *Beloved* is governed by an art not of the unknow-
able but of the knowable, and vividly so. It is, to begin with, a book about the
necessity of recovering the repressed, of “rememory,” especially as this theme
is played out in the lives of Sethe and Paul D. It is also an effort to do the same
for its resistant audience. For this reason, Morrison actually thought *Beloved*
would be her least popular novel because “it is about something the characters
don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to
remember, white people don’t want to remember. I mean it’s national amnesia”
(Bowers 1990: 75). And, finally, *Beloved* is an act of making known not only
what we don’t want to remember, but also what we otherwise would not know.
It does so by publishing in rich and powerfully moving detail what could not
be published when it happened. As Morrison has written herself, nineteenth-
century slave narratives were composed under constraints that disallowed
what she could now allow herself to write.

[Popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too care-
fully on the more sordid details of their experience. Whenever there was an
unusually violent incident, or a scatological one, or something “excessive,”
one finds the writer taking refuge in the literary conventions of the day. . . .
Over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as,
“But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.” In
shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position
to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they “forgot” many
things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record
and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe. . . . My job becomes how to rip the veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate." (Morrison 1987b: 109–10)

This is a job that the twentieth-century novel, with its accumulated array of narrative devices, along with its roominess and flexibility as fiction, is well-equipped to do. And by most accounts, Morrison exploits her equipment with great brilliance in the service of this job of unveiling. As Susan Bowers writes, and I think all would agree, "her novel conjures slaves back to life in many-dimensional characters with a full range of human emotions" (Bowers 1990: 62).

What I want to suggest in this brief analysis, however, is that another aspect of the deep originality of her novel is the way Morrison also works against the job she has set herself. To get at this paradox, I will focus on the way Morrison has created in Beloved a ghostly version of the eponymous novel, along with its nonfictional sub-type, the slave narrative. In this context, I am referring particularly to the eponymous (that is, protagonist-titled) coming-of-age novel that evolved out of late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century eponymous narratives, flourished over the next hundred years, and is often included within the genre of the Bildungsroman, which got its name early in the nineteenth century. It was a form that, not irrelevantly, grew in tandem with the emergent advocacy of the Rights of Man and a democracy predicated on those rights. It helped shape an idea of the individual as an entity to whom by nature certain rights belonged and for whom democracies were fashioned, both to insure those rights and to provide an environment in which the individual could reach a full maturity in which to exercise them. Chief among such democracies, of course, is the one into which Beloved is born.

It was in this historical context that the slave narrative also took shape. And much has been written quite rightly about how the slave narrative served as both a resource and inspiration for Beloved. But the deep structure of the slave narrative also resides in the background of this work of fiction as the ghostly, skeletal framework of the eponymous coming-of-age novel. As such, this ghost of a life narrative serves a double purpose: it sets off the vitality of  

15. The term Bildungsroman was first applied to the coming-of-age novel in 1819 by the philosopher and philologist Karl Morgenstern. The term was coined, he wrote, "first and foremost because of [the genre's] content, because it presents the hero's Bildung from its inception and continuation until a certain stage of completion; secondly, however, because precisely through this presentation it encourages the cultivation of the reader more fully than any other type of novel" (Morgenstern quoted in Steineke 1991: 18). Implied in this founding definition is a social context in which protagonist and reader share the opportunity of self-creation.
the way Morrison fulfills her obligation to the writers of the nonfictional slave narratives, but at the same time it sets off the way Morrison utterly undoes the African American version of the immensely popular nineteenth-century fictional genre they echoed. As Gurleen Grewal argues, where “the slave narrative privileged the individual’s account of coming to selfhood—in which the single, heroic self is fixed in the ‘I’ of the subject and the tale ends with the victory of freedom—Morrison’s narrative removes the individual from its center, giving way to a multiplicity of voices” (Grewal 1998: 103). Grewal goes on to argue that, as such, Beloved “invokes ‘the polyphonic ideal’ of Mikhail Bakhtin” (ibid.). This is true as far as it goes. Beloved is a very busy, musical novel with a complex multiplicity of voices and tales.

My point, however, is that Morrison complicates this shift to “the polyphonic ideal” by equally invoking expectations that belong to the eponymous coming-of-age novel. By definition and prototypically (Jack of Newberry, Oroonoko, Pamela), the eponymous novel features the name of the protagonist (its eponym) in its title. And this is what Morrison seems to do. For the would-be interpreter, the titular eponym signals a novel in which meaning is entangled with the growth and maturation of its central character. Morrison accentuates this traditional entanglement of character and novel by her constant repetition of the “name” of its missing protagonist. But even the name, “Beloved,” is not a name but an accidental placeholder for an infant who seems never to have had a name. As such, and through its repetition, it is made to be an inescapable constancy of absence in this novel.16

To go back to Phelan’s concept, it is not just the character Beloved that is “stubborn” but the novel itself. And Phelan would agree. This stubbornness of the book is emphasized by the medley of contradictions that concludes the novel in its last two pages, and particularly the repeated sentence, “It was not a story to pass on.”17 For the rational mind, as Phelan shows, the

16. For a twentieth-century readership, I would argue that this effect of absence is accentuated by Beloved’s ghostly stand-ins. If there is a model of West African belief operating here, “that the dead live as long as they are remembered” (Grewell 1998: 107), the belief itself cannot be relied upon to persist in Morrison’s audience. For all the provocative interpretive work that the two versions of her ghost generate, their very extravagance works as a sign of their constructedness—shapes imposed on what was never allowed to take memorable shape.

17. As has often been remarked, the word pass in this sentence can be read in different ways. Stephanie Li, for example, articulates two common alternatives: “[d]epending on how one reads the verb pass, this statement can be read both as an injunction to forget the past and as an injunction to preserve it” (Li 2010: 81). If the syntactical intonation of Li’s second alternative requires an awkward strain that the first does not (and I think it does), the natural intonation of the first does not have to be taken as an injunction, but as a statement of fact. In other words, this was, and is, a story that cannot be passed on because what happened is irrecoverable. If this
sentence does not fully compute. Yet as an eponymous novel *Beloved* is correctly declaring that it has in fact not told a story. *Beloved* is a striking case of the absence of a story of maturation, of growing up, of *Bildung*, that provides the armature of the eponymous novel. The baby that *Beloved* should be telling the story of had neither a name nor a life to go with it and therefore could have no story to pass on. The repeated question, “already crawling?,” underscores the fact that there is no record that Beloved even achieved a first movement through time and space under her own power. Lacking anything that could be construed as tellable action, that is, action performed under her own agency, Beloved was robbed of narratable being. She was erased by an act that belongs to another story with another protagonist, that of her mother. Insofar as it is an eponymous novel, then, *Beloved* can only be a project of discourse—dis-course, that is, without the storytelling that gives discourse its status as narrative. There is, of course, much storytelling that goes on in *Beloved* with, as a kind of spine, the artfully delayed details leading up to Sethe’s terrible act and its consequences. But the arc of a tale that binds the parts of an eponymous novel is not there because it never happened. All that we are allowed is the dead body of an infant, whose silence is doubled by Sethe when she refuses to attend the funeral service and listen to the words of the Reverend Pike. Sethe goes instead “to the gravesite, whose silence she competed with as she stood there not joining in the hymns the others sang with all their hearts” (Morrison 1987a: 171).

It is not a great leap for the interpreting mind to see in the silence of the dead infant an evocation of the silence of all the lives among the “sixty million and more” to whom Morrison dedicates her book and for whom also there can be no story. Phelan makes this interpretive move himself (189). Their lives fall into an abyss of absence that compounds that of Beloved. Morrison herself has said that “[n]othing came down orally to my generation of the experience on the slave ship” (Grewal 1998: 102). Those who died in transit—some thrown overboard in infancy as Sethe’s mother did (“Without names, she threw them” [62])—plus those who survived the passage and those born thereafter who were cut down at one point or another and those who lived to complete the arc of a tellable life story – for all of these there is no record. One can, then, make the valid and important interpretive move of aligning Beloved with the sixty million and more, but the experience of *Beloved* must necessarily include the experience of this yawning absence—the absence of tellable stories and lived lives. It is plausible in this regard that all the frenetic busy-ness of

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is not the only way Morrison intended for the sentence to be read, it should not, as I argue in what follows, be excluded.
Morrison’s busy novel, in addition to the valuable interpretive work it provokes, is also intended to make this terrible silence deafening as one “listen[s] for the holes . . . the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind” (92). They are gone without a trace. For a writer who is so passionately absorbed by the vivid “fluidity” and “contradictions” of black life in America (Denard 2008: 61) and “how under the most inconceivable abuse, there is grace, there is power, and there is this tenacity” (18)—for such a writer, an absence of this magnitude must be an intolerable fact that won’t go away. It adds its weight to all the known injustices. And for all the humor and grace and buoyant productivity of Morrison’s prose, it adds an intimation of inextinguishable fury lying beneath her words.

Beloved’s absence from her own eponymous novel, then, is an absence that both contains and is contained within an immensity of absence. It is an absence we can talk around, but even as we do, one function of this multifaceted novel is to insist on this empty silence. It is a hole that travels through the novel, lurking in its sentences and its narrative disjunctions. As Morrison’s command of fiction does its valuable work, fashioning a life seeded by a few surviving contemporary words about the historical Margaret Garner’s desperate act, it also sustains the feeling of not being able to know. In this sense, Beloved is an expression of loss without end. The word “redemption” has often been used in connection with this novel in multiple references to the death of Beloved, Sethe’s act of killing her, and the deaths of sixty million and more. But none of its definitions work: “repurchasing,” “reformation,” “restoration,” “repayment,” “atonement,” “releasing from bondage.” As for the culmination of Sethe’s story, with its achieved society of three women enclosed in the house at 124, it is in its own right powerfully evocative and says much about Sethe’s complex psychology and her evolving relationship with both her daughters, the living and the dead. But, as Margaret Atwood wrote in an early review, this conclusion can only happen because “[i]n this book, the other world exists and magic works” (Atwood 1987: 47). The book’s culmination and the reuniting of Sethe and Paul D that follows, include a wishful element threaded in a fictional allegory that requires what cannot be: the grown ghost of a dead child, one moreover who is in some way a real entity in a fictional world and capable of acting, as Sethe says, “under her own free will” (Morrison 1987a: 200).

From this perspective, a key function of the novel’s disorienting two-page coda is to remind us that what we have read is fiction. It tells us that amid all the good work that fiction can do of making known, of building plausible characters whom we can know from the inside, of giving life to the bare facts of history; amid all this wonderful creation there is also, traveling right along
with it, the absolute of what has been lost to mind. To summarize, where Phelan’s concept of “the stubborn” plays a role in the energetic enterprise of interpretation, the palpable experience of what is unknown requires a space within this enterprise where the construction of knowledge stops, even as one feels the tug of the need to know. With the stubborn, the sense of both its intransigence and its textual importance, enlarged by the effort to bring interpretive order, serves a vigorous and on-going discussion of meaning. The palpable unknown, by contrast, derives from a form of recalcitrance designed to immerse the reader in a state of unknowing, robbed not only of cognitive mastery but of its resources.

THE PROBLEM OF MASTERY

Am I confident about my reading? Not entirely, at least as far as Morrison’s intention is concerned. My doubts on this score relate to the broader issue of seeming to master a complex fictional text through the agency of interpretation—even as I promote the experience of not knowing as a necessary element in interpreting certain texts. But before I get into the question of what Morrison may or may not have intended, there is a little bit of housekeeping that must be done regarding the words “interpretation” and “explanation,” on the one hand, and “understanding” and “comprehension,” on the other—words that are often used interchangeably as ways of knowing.

In this book, I use the former two as subsidiary forms of the latter two, which are the overarching terms. Following Paul Ricoeur (and many others), explanation is the attribution of causal connections, and interpretation is the attribution of meaning or value (Ricoeur 1984: 118ff). As Ricoeur elaborates, these terms often overlap in the functions they refer to as, for example, when explanation affects or even determines interpretation. But these two terms, in turn, refer to operations

18. In the context of this book, one thing that complicates (but does not confound) the issue is that narrative itself is a principal means of achieving what each of these overlapping terms refer to. Narrative is, as David Herman puts it, an “instrument for sense-making” (Herman 2003: 12–13). Whether or not it is at work at the most rudimentary cognitive level, giving pre-linguistic shape to our sensory input, as Damasio contends, narrative certainly does its sense-making job of work, for better or worse, many times a day in our conscious lives. History is a complex version of this way of making sense, and narrative fiction an even more complex version.

19. The interpretation of Mr. Garner’s treatment of his slaves at Sweet Home can turn on an explanation in terms of his motives (compassion, good business sense, stubborn individuality, all three). Depending on the motive or motives we settle on to explain his behavior, we interpret (appraise, evaluate, attribute meaning to) Mr. Garner in one way or another. Either interpretation or explanation can be applied, as here, to a part of a work or they can be applied to the
within the larger scope of the two other terms, which are closer together in meaning and for both of which the word “grasp” is usually found in the first dictionary definition. In fact, the Latin root verb for comprehend is “prehendere”—to grasp. All of these terms, then, refer to forms of grasping or mastery through the agency of one’s mind. And since the illusion of such mastery is an important companion theme in this study, it is worth pursuing just a little further in relation to the issue of interpreting Morrison’s novel.

Morrison has said how important it was for her as she designed the first sentence of Beloved to have the reader feel “snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel’s population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, without preparation and without defense” (Morrison 1988: 32). Slowly, with effort, the reader begins to put things together, to see the characters, to determine how they relate to each other, and to understand that there is also in this house an angry ghost who is making their lives miserable. But though the characters in this novel come vigorously alive, the cognitive dissonance incurred, not simply by the novel’s willful eponymous ghost, but by the author herself, is felt by the reader right up to the end.

This dissonance, felt in the reading, should not be lost in the interpretation. To put this in other words, the dissonance should not be mastered. It should not be made to submit to what Phelan, in agreement, calls “the standard academic interpretation” with its “underlying desire for mastery” and its “determination to make texts yield up their secrets” (1996: 180). I cannot presume to say what connotations or intensities the terms “master” and “mastery” may have in the mind of a black American writer and how they may differ work itself. But when we use the terms in the latter sense, the gap between them widens. We (academics) rarely talk of an explanation of a work except as a kind of stripped down biographical accounting: e.g., Morrison was inspired by the story of Margaret Garner to write Beloved. When we develop an interpretation of a work (often referred to as a “reading”), something we often do, we do so with an eye to how parts of the work relate meaningfully to each other. And, unless we are speaking of modes of interpretation that I have called elsewhere symptomatic and adaptive (H. P. Abbott 2008: 104–9), the ideal is to develop an interpretation that can provide an inclusive understanding of how all the parts work together in a meaningful way. I have also argued elsewhere that when we seek to do this, we are, implicitly or explicitly, reading intentionally—that is, according to the intentions of an author, implied or real (H. P. Abbott 2011; for two excellent, contrasting overviews of the complexity of this subject, including the various kinds of interpretation, see Hogan 1996 and Iser 2000).

20. To “comprehend” is, then, to grasp together (“com-prehendere”). As such, “comprehension” is both more and less spacious than “understanding”; more spacious, in that it suggests a complete understanding of something and its common antonym, “incomprehension,” suggests an equally complete blank; less spacious, in that one speaks commonly of having a number of understandings or misunderstandings of a subject.
from those in the mind of a white American reader. But there is an element of freedom from the mastery of interpretive nets, an “openness,” in this novel as in all of Morrison’s novels that is important to her. As she puts it, it is “a quality of mystery in the books that I recognize and underscore” (Denard 2008: 138). In this reader’s mind, it is a freedom that resonates with the complex thematic braid of freedom and imprisonment that runs through her work and particularly through *Beloved*. In the novel’s storyworld, physical imprisonment goes hand in hand with interpretive imprisonment, as when the sheriff, gazing on the scene of murder before leading the murderess to jail, sees in it “testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred” (Morrison 1987a: 151). It is more than a stretch to align the sheriff’s interpretation of Sethe’s behavior with a suppositional reader’s closed interpretation of *Beloved*, except in this: that both are examples of taking cognitive possession. I believe that Morrison, in her novels, takes preemptive care to avoid being possessed in this way, though these measures will only work for a reader willing to allow such dispossession.

So far, in this section, I have shifted my focus to the interpretative challenge that Phelan has isolated—that is, the stubborn recalcitrance of the conflicting avatars that go by the name of “Beloved”—because it helps to make clear how I will be using certain key terms in this book and also because the issue of unreadable characters will return in part three. But in addition it helps bring out by contrast the different way in which the felt absence that I have isolated adds its own disturbing weight to the experience of *Beloved*. It cannot be forgotten that in an important sense no story has been told in this novel. This contradiction creates its own counterpoint to the fictional Beloved’s stubborn provocations to both explanation and interpretation. The discourse we read stretches over a void where there is nothing “to pass on,” including the untold tale of an eponymous heroine. Sethe’s child, Mrs. Garner’s child, 60 million, and more are lost in that void. The mind’s need to “grasp” something to work with (“already crawling?”), something to pull out of this void in order to gain even the beginnings of cognitive possession is, in this text, repeatedly and pointedly rebuffed. It is an absence that is both enormous and an enormity, both vast and terrible, and in both senses it cannot be “comprehended.”

Of course, after deconstruction, the idea of achieving cognitive mastery over any semiotic artifact is quaint. Yet the need to comprehend is, as noted above, an embedded stance, something we have by our nature, as well it should be. Narrative is rooted in conversation, where the listener’s mastery is not only invited but is necessary to complete the speaker’s thought. Without this sufficiency of interpretive grasp, we would not have had the commu-
nictative advantage that has served us so well in our competition with other creatures. It is a practice we grow up with. Accordingly, the assumption or at least the illusion that meaning is there to be mastered is hard for the trained interpreter to give up. It has been observed many times of the generation of critics now almost past, that when, say, J. Hillis Miller writes of Hawthorne's "Minister's Black Veil" that "The veil is the type and symbol of the fact that all signs are potentially unreadable, or that the reading of them is potentially unverifiable" (J. H. Miller 1991: 97) and that by extension "the story is an allegory of the reader's own situation in reading it" (105), he himself is reading the story with confidence. The rhetoric of authority comes with the trade even as it disavows authority. But I am not advocating any such holistic discrediting of interpretation just as I am not advocating the other extreme of seeking the interpretation. Quite the contrary on both counts. My aim is to invigorate interpretation of the texts I have selected with an awareness of the intentionally induced states of unknowing that are embedded within them or, more accurately, that should be a salient part of the reader's experience of them. If, finally, to describe these states as such is to explain why they are there and to interpret what they signify, so be it. If I have explained and interpreted Beloved's absence from her novel, I hope I have done so in a way that helps the reader feel the insistent absence of that story and those of millions—that is, to have the immediate feeling of wanting to know them and knowing we shall never know them. In like manner, I will be making explanatory and interpretive assertions all the way through this study, though in such a way as to preserve the immediate experience of these gaps as part of our larger understanding of the texts in which they play a significant role. Readers, of course, will judge for themselves whether or not I succeed in doing so.

As also noted above, I have found that, though the kind of intentionally induced narrative "failure" that I have isolated in this study is comparatively rare, there is variety in it and a corresponding variety of states of unknowing. Moreover, they can occur within narratives that are otherwise amenable to multiple interpretations, as is the case with Beloved. I shall argue in a later chapter, for example, that as a short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener" not only succeeds but can be interpreted in a number of valid ways. But as a character—that is, as a representation of a living human being—Bartleby is inexplicable. What Melville's short story has in common with all the other works in the subset I am focusing on is an element that requires a change in reader/spectator orientation from an absorption in the forward-moving dynamic of narrative to an immersion in a state of bafflement. At the same time, the readerly distance required for representation to do its work gives way to a sense of being in an experience of what is unreadable. This is another subsidiary theme
of this book. At these moments in our reading, we are, in Gertrude Stein's words, no longer concerned with “about” but “is.” This “isness,” as I hope to show, must be understood as a cognitive state. The reader becomes a willing captive of an art in which the pressure of narrative expectation is felt even as the contract of its fulfillment has been abrogated.

THE UNKNOWABLE

It remains to distinguish my approach from that of Philip Weinstein in his *Unknowing: The Modernist Work of Fiction* (2005). Weinstein’s wonderful series of interlocking meditations provides a historically framed account of “the modernist drama of unknowing.” The heart of his study is a discussion of Kafka, Proust, and Faulkner as revisionary novelists intent on releasing narrative from the failed Western “project of knowing” (5). The story they seek to expose and undo is the realist story of growing up, that is, “the subject coming to know” (25), in which figure stands out clearly against ground, time proceeds with a dependable progressive linearity, and maturation is measured by a steadily enlarged understanding of both the self and others. Weinstein’s modernists assist in a “signature event” of literary and intellectual history when the tight bond of “subject/space/time” that gives realist fiction its world and its power was broken to reveal a condition of “unknowing.” Theirs was not only a project of demolition but also a “heroic,” if doomed, effort to achieve in fiction the “moment-by-moment” experience of life as it is lived in a plotless, futureless world of “unconvertable alterity” (166).21

The first difference between my approach and Weinstein’s is that for the most part I set aside Jameson’s rule: “always historicize” (Jameson 1981: 9). This is not to dispute the enormous and largely unconscious shaping power of ideology, but to assume that there is also a transcultural, transhistorical human.22 Where Weinstein’s orientation is toward ideological changes over

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21. For Weinstein, the deep challenge for these authors is that their target is “a narrative we cannot do without, yet one whose disturbing priorities we cannot ignore. . . . Once the Enlightenment in its thought and practice had delegitimized the authority of crown and church, it could put in its place only a story of adventuring subjects, each with an unforeclosed future. The telos of this story, for the Enlightenment, is education: escape from self-incurred tutelage, daring to know” (44). Yet, citing Emmanuel Levinas, “this adventure is no adventure. It is never dangerous; it is self-possession, sovereignty. Sovereignty, because consciousness converts—by way of knowing—the otherness of everything it encounters into aspects of its own (reconfirmed) self-sameness” (46).

22. In this, I side largely with Paul Hernadi, who stoutly debated Jameson in the pages of *New Literary History* (1981). Hernadi contended among other things that “no account of change in nature or culture can avoid postulating relatively constant factors . . . in relation to which
time, mine is for the most part toward universal human conditions and in this sense it can be called “cognitivist.” My assumption in all three parts of this book is that, for key aspects of both self and other, the limits of knowledge and the difficulty of accepting those limits are a part of our nature as *Homo sapiens*. A second difference is that where Weinstein’s “unknowing” requires a dismantling of realist conventions, there is no such requirement in the broader domain of my study. In fact, all the texts taken up in Part Three are by most definitions examples of realist fiction.

Finally, my focus is on an *experience* of unknowing itself—the strategies of its production and the frame of mind necessary for it to occur. In this sense, too, my study can be called “cognitivist.” But “cognitivist narratology” has been, in large part, an extension of the very old field of *narrative dynamics*—that is, the study of how narrative moves us and how it draws us from one point to the next. Efforts to account for narrative dynamics go back to Aristotle and forward to the mythic structures of Northrop Frye, the psychoanalytic analysis of Peter Brooks, the reader response theories of Wolfgang Iser and Meir Sternberg, the rhetorical theories of James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz, the cognitivist approaches of Monica Fludernik and David Herman, and the affective narratology of Patrick Colm Hogan (2003, 2011), to name just a few. But the subject of my study, the palpable unknown, is where narrative halts. And by this I do not mean those points where narrative gives way for a while to other text types—description, meditation, commentary, learned exposition—all of which absorb our attention while we are at the same time aware that the narrative motor is still running (H. P. Abbott 2000). The palpable unknown, by contrast, is a place where the narrative motor stops, where there not only is no narrative but no way for narrative to get in. As I described it above, it is a hole in the narrative that travels through it and stays in the

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22. The awkward coinage “cognitivist” is a short way of referring loosely to work in the study of literature, film, drama, narrative (or more broadly culture) that to a greater or lesser extent draws on research in the cognitive sciences. In the many instances in which it features the transaction between the reader/viewer and the text, this approach could also be called “cognoformalist.” For of necessity it must accommodate both sides of the transaction—how the reader responds and how the elements of the text generate that response—which is what I have tried to do in this book.
mind afterward. To steal another oxymoron from Samuel Beckett, but this time to redeploy it, it is a “moving pause.” How we relate to it is the key aspect of fiction’s “mind work” that I want to bring into focus.24

But however “cognitivist” one may wish to describe this book, I hope it will be clear to my reader that it is first and foremost a study of the writing and reading of narrative. And if I succeed in my goal, then there will certainly be material here for a diversity of other approaches, including those that historicize.

THE PARTS OF THIS BOOK

What follows is divided into three parts: Unimaginable Unknowns, Inexpressible States, and Egregious Gaps. The two chapters of Part One deal with narrative inferences of two vividly contrasting types of the unimaginable unknown. I call the experience they engender the “cognitive sublime.” In chapter 1, the experience of the cognitive sublime is a secular extension of mystical discourse that goes way back. I begin with Beckett’s version of the discourse because it involves the most extreme type of unknowability—the inability of the inquiring intelligence to account for its particularity as an inquiring intelligence. Chapter 2 shifts the focus to the equally ancient and exotic enigma of origins—the productivity of the new under the sign of its creator (the signature).

Part Two (chapters 3 and 4) turns attention toward the mystery of affective states,25 the nature and complexity of which can only be intimated. Here inexpressibility is an integral part of the experience of the unknowable. These two

24. “Moving pause” is lifted from Belacqua Shuah, the protagonist (soi-disant) of More Pricks than Kicks, who “had a strong weakness for oxymoron” (Beckett 1972: 38). “Mind work” is lifted from Kay Young, who used it in a fine recent volume in this series, Imagining Minds (Young 2010). Young uses the term in a much broader and richer sense than I do here and at the same time restricts her demonstration texts to selected nineteenth-century English novels. But her term derives from a premise we both share: that narrative fiction can perform where the sciences of mind and body can only theorize (Young 2010: 4). It performs, moreover, not only by representing the interaction of embodied minds but by engaging the embodied minds of its readers and viewers.

25. One could as well use the compound “affective/cognitive,” since, increasingly, the two are seen as inseparable concepts. In Damasio’s words, we have a “mind with feeling” (Damasio 2010: 20; see also, inter alia, Varela et al. 1991, Lakoff and Johnson 1999). In common parlance, we tend to associate cognition with understanding and affect with feeling, so that, for example, in the sentence “What part of 2 + 2 = 4 don’t you understand?,” one might say that 2 + 2 = 4 is a matter of cognition while the notes of sarcasm, exasperation, and humiliation in the sentence are matters of affect. Yet understanding the baby math of 2 + 2 plays its affective role in the rhetoric of humiliation, while conversely to understand (cognize) what’s going on must include a feeling response to the sentence’s affective notes (see Palmer 2004: 19–20).
chapters bring the focus down to a molecular level of narrative syntax and the syntax of narrative. At this level, we will examine deliberate failures to meet fundamental syntactical expectations in an art calculated to generate states of mind inaccessible through grammatical narrative discourse. Chapter 3, which deals with a unique form of asyntactically generated “neural sport,” paves the way for chapter 4 in which I deal with several stunning examples of syntactically layered prose poetry, or better, “lyrical narrative.”

Beside their intrinsic value, Parts One and Two provide a context for the concluding three chapters in that each features limitations of the knowable and the expressible that come with the mere fact of our existence as selves. They are, as it were, a birthright. In these four chapters also, perhaps unsurprisingly, the demonstration texts are each, in one way or another, a sharp departure from the realist tradition of prose fiction. By contrast, the narratives of Part Three are drawn from the realist tradition, and my focus is on enigmas, not of the self, but of the other. Accordingly, I take up a collection of narrative gaps and unreadable minds whose refusal of access plays a central role in the narratives in which we find them. Explicit in this part, but implicit in the other two, is an ethical theme that I develop more fully in the final chapter.

I like the way these three parts of my book come together and I hope the reader does, too. I hope it is also clear that, taken together, these three parts of my book are not at all meant to be a comprehensive anatomy of the subject. In my reading of Beloved in this chapter, for example, I have taken up another subdivision of the palpable unknown—the feeling of an absolute erasure of lives. I would not be surprised if readers were to experience similar evocations of loss, clinging with the same grievous depth of effect, in the literature of the gulag, the Holocaust, the disappeared, the killing fields, and of others who have been forcibly erased without record.