Real Mysteries

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In this chapter, I return to an art that actively seeks to express inexpressible mysteries that we live with outside our textual transactions. They don’t abide with us as a birthright in the manner of the unknowable I dealt with in the first part of this book. They are paradoxical states of feeling that come upon us during the course of our lives, but they are at the same time beyond our grasp. The art that seeks to approach them and that we will be focusing on is an art, as in Tender Buttons, that is practiced at the level of the sentence—in the present instance by two masters of slow-moving minimalist narrative. A central difference, however, between the garden-path structure featured in this chapter and the unresolved version of it that I featured in the last is that, where in the last chapter neither path worked, in this chapter both (and sometimes more) paths work. So the device we’ll be looking at in this chapter is really what you might call the apparent garden-path sentence, or more accurately the multi-path sentence, since, whatever path is taken, the path arrives at its goal. I’ll clarify how this works in the first section of this chapter, but in what follows thereafter I’ll show how such sentences can be used in an art of syntactical layering. With the assistance of this device, the two authors in this chapter, Beckett for most of it and Janet Winterson toward the end, seek to capture complexities of feeling and thought that lie beyond the expressive power of language. They are the dominants of lyrical poetry,
intensities of love and loss, which most of us come to experience at some time in our lives. As such, these authors deal with the knowable in the sense that they deal with inescapable conditions of our conscious life. But, as I hope to show, it is the very precision of their art that allows these authors to show us that we don’t fully know what words like “loss” and “love” stand in for—that they signify what lies not only beyond expression but beyond understanding as well.

This is also the point in my study where we come closest to an examination of specifically lyrical effects. The exemplary passages I use are drawn from texts of indeterminate genre, for which “prose poem” may work as a category of last resort. Not only do they feature the expression of feeling but they also have the poetic concentration and atemporal character that are commonly ascribed aspects of the lyrical, as opposed to the narrative, mode.¹ That said, there are both compacted narratives here and micro-narratives in which there is an intimation of action. More important, the same process of incremental parsing necessary for the garden-path effect is also necessary for the multi-path effect. And with it comes the corresponding cognitive drama that unfolds in the reader’s mind. Finally, and significantly in regard to the perennial subject of the limits of narrative, the multi-path effect seems unobtainable in longer narratives. If I am right about this, then, though there are fully fledged narrative versions of the garden-path sentence that Jahn demonstrated and comparable narrative versions of the irresolvable garden-path sentence that I have just demonstrated, there is no comparable narrative version of the multi-path sentence. The reason for this is interesting and worth pursuing. It will be my final subject in this chapter.

MULTI-PATH SENTENCES

Like the garden-path sentence the multi-path sentence can also be found in jokes:

She was only a whiskey maker, but he loved her still.

¹ This distinction between lyric and narrative is implicit in Wordsworth’s “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” (1800/02) and Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry” (1821; published 1840), as well as Poe’s over-the-top 1846 essay on “The Philosophy of Composition.” More recently the case for the atemporal and temporal distinction between the two “modes,” lyric and narrative, has been given explicit development by theorists like Culler 1981: 148–54, Brooks 1984: 20–21, and a number of others. For a helpful overview see Morgan 2009: 8–11.
Here we have a sentence that on the one hand tells us of a woman whom a man loves despite her societally marginal, déclassé profession and on the other tells us of a socially marginal, déclassé woman whom a man tolerates for the whiskey she makes. Both readings work and, in this case, neither strains credibility in the sense that neither reading requires us to entertain the possibility of a world unlike our own. There are other multi-path sentences in which both readings work syntactically, but one of them requires a world with different conditions from the one we live in. These are often classified as garden-path sentences for this very reason, even though technically the sentence can be completed following either path, since both are grammatical. In the classic garden-path headline, “Red tape holds up new bridge,” for example, both paths are grammatical, but one works for the world we recognize as our own while the other requires a world in which either the law of gravity works quite differently from the way it works in our world or there is a kind of tape we haven’t invented yet. In a similar way, alternate worlds that lie dormant in the commonest sentences can be awoken by supplementary context: “Mary had a little lamb. The doctor fainted.”

Multi-path sentences in which the alternative readings are each in themselves compatible with the way things are in our own world are actually quite common in everyday discourse:

Someone ate every Twinkie.

In this sentence, the double meaning of “someone” is the pivot that turns the reader in one direction or the other. Depending on how this word is read, the sentence could mean that one particular person ate up all the Twinkies, or it could mean that for every Twinkie there was someone who ate it. The only way to disambiguate such a sentence is through context. If, for example, the suspects are gathered in a room and the sentence is uttered by Hercule Poirot, who has been called in to solve the mystery, then it is likely that the correct meaning of the sentence is the first. But if the Twinkies had been piled on a plate for a group of hungry children, then it is likely that the correct meaning of the sentence is the second. In short, though multi-path sentences are constantly popping up—

He’s going to sleep.
I know the people Hortense knows.
They are hunting dogs.

—there is usually a context that makes them clear.
In conversation, problems of contextual meaning can be quickly resolved through on-the-spot clarifications. Where serious problems arise is in written discourse. As we have already discussed, written discourse is hobbled by the way it separates senders from receivers. This can be especially problematic in questions of law:

A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.

But what is problematic in law can be an advantage in art. This is what I will focus on in what follows.

A POETICS OF SYNTACTICAL PARSIMONY

I’ll start with a set of what are, technically, garden-path sentences, though ones in which the garden path is more than a false lead.

Here without having to close the eye sees her afar. Motionless in the snow under the snow. The buttonhook trembles from its nail as if a night like any other. (Beckett 1996: 68)

Each of these three consecutive sentences from Samuel Beckett’s haunting late work _Ill Seen Ill Said_ sets the reader on a garden path. In the first, the garden path terminates in the phrase “to close the eye sees,” in which the noun “eye” must be converted from an object to a subject in order for the sentence to make grammatical sense. The garden path in the second terminates with the word “under” since it is not the snow that she is standing in that is under the snow, but rather she herself. She is both standing in the snow and under the snow that falls on her. In both of these sentences, the “discourtesy” that enables the garden-path effect is a missing comma. The moment of hesitation in the third sentence comes in the phrase “as if a night,” which threatens to run astray for want of a verb: “as if [it were] a night like any other.” Technically, the verb (like the commas missing in the other sentences) has been there all the time since, once we get the sentence right, we feel its presence even without seeing it in print. But less is more. Beckett’s syntactical parsimony guarantees that we also cannot _not_ be aware of the verb’s absence and feel the mute impedance that comes with its visual suppression.

Once you “get” these sentences (and, unlike Stein’s, they can be gotten), they come together with an austere and eerily precise beauty. Eerie, because
the hesitations of a first reading remain a part of the whole effect, however adept readers may get at hearing and grasping the “proper” syntax of these sentences. Precise, because in this way more is said than grammatical correctness will allow. As the title of the work implies, Ill Seen Ill Said is not only an intensely self-reflexive piece, but one in which the difficulties of seeing and saying are identified as a single condition: perception as expression and expression as perception. Infected throughout its system, each of the work’s sentences is an instance in miniature of this “illness.” In each to some degree the reader feels the struggle of seeing as saying and saying as seeing. This is no mere case of what Ivor Winters called “imitative form,” in which the form of the work imitates what the work is about. “Here form is content, content is form,” as the young Beckett wrote of Finnegans Wake. “His writing is not about something; it is that something itself” (Beckett 1929: 14). The difficulty of this text, then, is no mere signifier of difficulty but, like the difficulty of Stein, inseparable from its condition as art. And, as in Stein, the syntax of this art is critical to its success. The difference lies in our awareness that there is something very important lying just out of the reach of seeing and saying. This is my first point. Beckett is not playing with his reader but keeping his reader from premature closure, from settling on meaning when meaning can only be approached, not arrived at.

THE SENTENCE MAN

Beckett is a “sentence man,” as Hugh Kenner originally observed, and as such the work of his maturity stands in marked contrast to the lush verbal art of Joyce the “word man.” From this perspective, the verbal pyrotechnics of Beckett’s apprenticeship in the 1930s was a legacy of the master, which, through constant formal exploration and exile in a foreign language, was refined to an art of syntax, “the local order of language” (Kenner 1990: 293),2 which only grew more austere and subtle as he aged. In a powerful extension of Kenner’s insight, titled “Beckett’s Tattered Syntax,” Ann Banfield has analyzed how Beckett increasingly relied on words whose meaning is almost entirely a register of their syntactical function. Unlike Joyce, who gathered together and even cross-germinated nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in a superabundance of semantic content, Beckett depended more and more on the “non-

2. “I could show you a Beckett sentence,” Kenner wrote, “as elegant in its implications as the binomial theorem, and another as economically sphinx-like as the square root of minus one, and another, on trees in the night, for which half of Wordsworth would seem a fair exchange” (Kenner 1977).
productive” words, the pronouns and determiners that “lack highly specified semantic content, having only cognitive syntactic features” (Banfield 2004: 16). Joseph Emonds (2000) called these, collectively, “the syntacticon,” and in Beckett’s late work they predominate along with semantically “‘light’ nouns, verbs, adjectives, and prepositions,” words like “be” (is, are), “one,” “self,” “thing,” “have,” “go,” “let,” “say,” “other,” “same,” “mere,” “such” (Banfield 2004: 16–17). Citing Emonds, Banfield notes that “the philosophical vocabulary is drawn from the syntacticon,” which in Beckett’s hands is the instrument of a negative quest for the beyond of language, a goal he first wrote of in his essay on Proust and, Banfield argues, never gave up. The words he drew on, especially in his late style, were “not mined in the riches of the dictionary, with its adjectives of infinite shades and qualities and nouns filled to the brim with meaning, but out of the poverties of the syntacticon” (20). The paradox of Banfield’s take on the evolution of Beckett’s style is that his lifetime pursuit of an art in which “the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family” (Beckett 1931: 11) required letting go of much of language’s semantic specificity. Thus, in Ill Seen Ill Said, “‘this old so dying woman’ is never named (apart from this single definite noun phrase) but only ‘pronamed’ by a function word . . . with no meaning but the syntactic features of feminine gender, third person, and singular number” (Banfield 2004: 19).

I think Banfield is right. However, the paradox she discloses is compounded by another: that it is not only the semantic lightness of his language that works for Beckett but also the contortions of his syntax. This is my focus. Beckett’s precision requires the serial impedances of his syntactic parsimony. And this again brings us into literary terrain that is neither representation of the world nor postmodern world-building. If I am right, Beckett’s project is to return us to a feature of the world we are always in, one that is neither fiction nor fact, neither “figment” nor its “counterpoison,” an object of neither the “vile jelly” of “the eye of flesh” nor that “other eye” in “the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else” (Beckett 1996: 58), and (fleshly or other) neither clearly the reader’s eye, the author’s, or the subject’s. It is a deep “confusion” of “[t]hings and imaginings. As of always” (ibid.).

Weeping over as weeping will see now the buttonhook larger than life (57)

Though there was enough of Joyce the punster left in Beckett to enjoy the impoverishment of “weeping willow” in “weeping will,” the energy in this sentence is syntactical. It lies in the opposing tugs of “will see” and “see,” plus the ambiguity of the latter. “Will see,” if it could work syntactically, would
become an implicit “she will see,” and the sentence would resolve into a brief narrative in the third person (i.e., no longer weeping, she will now see the buttonhook). But this would make the tautological “weeping over as weeping” the subject modifier. Disambiguated, the sentence requires the verb “see” to take the imperative mode with “weeping over as weeping will” as the modifier (i.e., weeping at an end, as weeping always does come to an end, see now the buttonhook). But then who is addressed? Who is being asked to see? There are three possibilities—the reader, the narrator, the woman—each of whom is curiously encumbered. If it is the reader, then it is the reader who has been in tears and thus unable to see the buttonhook until finished weeping. Likewise for the narrator, who is also by this construction addressing himself. If the woman, then the narrator is no longer describing her and her actions but giving her directions as well.

In my view, all of these options are meant to apply. By abusing our hard-earned capabilities in this way, forestalling any imposed clarity, Beckett makes us feel what happens when the borders separating the imagined, the real, the seen, the said, and the seer are not just erased but erased and maintained. On the one hand, the distinctions of the true and the false, the self and the other, are constructions embedded in language. On the other hand, they seem, for all their “constructed” nature, to correspond to distinctions that have an actual nonlinguistic existence. So Beckett seeks not to abolish them, but at one and the same time to abolish and promote them. Again, the exquisite lessness of Beckett’s syntax is a moreness of sensation as he pursues his project of driving language ever “worstward,” seeking at every turn to “fail better.”

**BEYOND REPRESENTATION**

It brought him (and brings us again) to *Worstward Ho*, the final text of the “second trilogy,” in which the quality of music, always present in Beckett’s verbal art, is accentuated almost to the point of displacing the dramas of syntactical meaning.

Stoop as loving memory some old gravestones stoop. (Beckett 1996: 115)

An old woman in a graveyard is seen “stooped as [in] loving memory some old gravestones stoop.” Or is it “stooped as, loving memory, some old gravestones stoop”? Or is it “stooped as loving memory [is stooped], some old gravestones stoop”? I would argue for all three—the memory of one loved, loving memory, and the burden of loving memory—three states of mind that
are at once different and yet susceptible to melding. But at the same time, in the same sentence, Beckett has created a perfectly symmetrical cataleptic alexandrine, bookended with the strong chiasmic chiming of “stooped” and “stoop.” The sentence moves toward a pure evocation of rhythmical sound, a music that threatens (as it does at times in *Tender Buttons*) to assert its own priority, absorbing all of the interest. Yet it doesn’t, and that’s the important point. This is the case even when the effects are so compacted as to approach a kind of nonsensical hilarity:

Not that as it is it is not bad. (99)
Whenever said said said missaid. (109)
So far far far from wrong. (110)

It has often been observed that if you repeat a word often enough it loses its meaning and becomes a moment of pure sound. Beckett loves to test the limits of this effect, but, uniquely, he does so without relieving readers of their syntactical obligations. In each of these brisk passages, modest words drawn from the syntacticon are rung like bells but only by observing the rules of the syntactical game (whenever said [is] said, said [is] missaid). And even when you do, uncertainties can remain (is it “said” that is “missaid” or is “said” meant to be read as “missaid”? In short, the struggle for meaning and the release from it are experienced simultaneously, but you can only know this by going into it.3

Reuven Tsur proposed in his essay “Two Critical Attitudes: Quest for Certitude and Negative Capability” that readers and critics can be ranged on a scale between those determined to find interpretive certitude at all cost and those who adopt what Keats called “negative capability” or a capacity “of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats cited in Tsur 1975: 776). The latter attitude, he argued, depends on a willingness to shift “mental sets” without settling on any one as final and requires a high degree of tolerance for “uncertainty and ignorance” (787). Tsur’s distinction between these two critical attitudes complements a similar distinction between works themselves—those that invite certitude

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3. In chapter 2, I argued that Beckett and García Márquez achieved effects in a medium without sight or sound that were unobtainable in media where the visual and auditory are experienced in their material form. As García Márquez insisted, the effect of his imagery in prose was unfit for a visual medium like film. I think the same is true for sound. There is no questioning the importance of rhythm and sound in the prose of these artists. But we hear, as we see, in silence. The effect may not be exactly what Keats meant when he wrote that “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter,” but writing does disembody language, and this makes a big difference of effect.
and those that require openness to a plurality of meaning. The latter certainly applies to much of the work of Beckett, and indeed Tsur’s prime example of a work demanding negative capability is Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.

But what I have been focusing on in Beckett requires, I believe, an attitude that goes one step beyond the far end of Tsur’s scale—it does, that is, if I am right in thinking that the critical attitudes Tsur describes are attitudes toward representations. As such, negative capability is an openness to the meaning of what is represented, but it does not deny that representation is going on. The reading of Beckett (by Günther Anders) that Tsur features to demonstrate this attitude can therefore assert that part of the meaning of Estragon’s game of “shoe off, shoe on” is that we, the audience, in our everyday lives, are doing “nothing but a playing of games, clownlike without real consequences” (Anders cited in Tsur 1975: 786). But a function of the impedances that I have been examining in both Stein’s and Beckett’s works is to foreclose such interpretive moves, taking their creations outside the realm of representation altogether.

Critical attitudes of whatever degree of subtlety, including Tsur’s version of negative capability, tend to draw even the most bizarre artistic departures back into the realm of *aboutness*. But in Stein’s definition of “Master-Pieces,” she distinguished between a “thing to see,” which belongs to the representable world of identity and human nature, and a “thing to be” which is the rare work of great art (Stein 1998b: 363). This was a leading principle of Stein’s aestheticism much as it was a leading principle in the young Beckett’s description of Joyce’s *Work in Progress* that I noted above (“His writing is not *about* something; it is that something itself”). Such an authorial intention may have been (and may still be) more widespread than has been credited. It may account in part for why a significant number of modernist and postmodernist authors tend to avoid interpretive commentary on their own work. Indeed it often seems that there is a kind of battle going on in which the increasingly radical modernist and postmodernist departures from narrative norms can be seen as a form of evasive activity. Yet as fast as writers generate an art of *isness* through modes of unfamiliarity, the academy reconstructs an art of *aboutness* through modes of familiarity.

What I have sought to do here, as elsewhere in this study, is to limit my focus on such aboutness in order to triangulate as best I can the immediate cognitive/affective states in readers that, if their reading is done right, complete that “something in itself” that is served by the text. As elsewhere in this study, I am arguing that we have in such prose fiction an art that achieves its effects through a deliberate and constant abuse of the fine communicative instruments that most distinguish us as we do the work of species survival.
But at the same time, I have sought to show how, in these sentences by Beckett, there is a payoff that differs from what Stein achieves in *Tender Buttons*. If Beckett strains the syntactical coherence of his sentences, he at the same time preserves their semantic plenitude. As multi-path sentences, they are not to be disambiguated. What slows the reader down is the way Beckett’s syntactical parsimony allows different sentences to occupy the same words in the same space. At one and the same time, then, the reader experiences both an enlargement of meaning and its inadequacy.

**PROSE POETRY**

It has often been said that as time went by Beckett’s prose evolved into a kind of poetry. This idea can be taken in several different ways: as an increase in “density,” or in “resonance,” or in rhythmical patterning, or in the primacy of what is happening in the language as opposed to what will happen in the story. All apply in varying degrees to Beckett’s prose as it progressed from *The Unnamable* through much of the prose thereafter. What I have been opening out in this chapter is a kind of layering of meaning for which the terms “density” and “resonance” are both certainly apt. But they are apt in a different way from the layering of meaning ordinarily attributed to poetry. To take a representative example of the way resonances in poetry are usually teased out, Yeats’s “rough beast” of “The Second Coming” is at once Christ and Anti-Christ, Sphinx and *Spiritus Mundi*, human and animal, nightmare and real, horrifying and necessary, and probably a lot more. Beckett’s prose can be resonant in this way, too, but his is basically the art of the “sentence man,” an art in which syntax plays the vital role in stacking layers of meaning. The result is a different kind of resonance, one that derives from the cohabitation of whole sentences. If both writers achieve a richness of meaning, Beckett’s sentences are harder to process than the symbolic freight riding on Yeats’s “rough beast.” Both kinds of complexity are irreducible, but Beckett’s complexity of effect can only succeed in the cognitive strain of its irreducibility. Its complexity thrives on this aspect of its effect in a way that Yeats’s complexity does not.

Yeats’s “Second Coming” helps in another way to isolate the kind of strain on the thinkable that I am dealing with in this chapter. It brings us back to the common modal opposition of narrative and lyric, the one defined by the representation of events or actions unfolding in time, the other defined as a “static” mode devoted to the expression of a single emotion. The distinction is at best porous.4 If “The Second Coming” is devoted to the expression of emo-

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4. See especially Phelan’s discussion of the way character and judgment emerge through
tion, it is, like many lyrical poems, more accurately described as an unfolding of emotion-in-action, the power of the poem residing in the transition from the distress of “mere anarchy” in the first stanza to the horror of the approaching beast in the second. Moreover, the temporal condition of the beast itself is made vivid in the acute narrative suspense that dominates the poem’s second stanza. Five years later, Yeats would actually try to tell the whole story behind “The Second Coming” in A Vision (1925). His aim, in part, was to make his poetry more accessible, to show among other things how the layered complexity riding on symbols like the “rough beast” could actually be laid out in a time-chart. But in works like Beckett’s Ill Seen Ill Said time slows to a crawl. To draw on the double meaning in the title of one of Beckett’s last texts, composed the year before he died, this kind of “prose poetry” is a matter of Stirrings Still (Beckett 1990: 111–28). In these works, suspense shrinks from what will happen in the story to what is happening now in the sentences as they unfold. If it can be called poetry, or even lyrical poetry, it is a kind of lyrical poetry that depends for its effects on our narrative awareness.

WHAT LOVE IS

The same kind of hybridizing of lyric and narrative can be found in Jeanette Winterson’s intense prose poem “The White Room.” In a seeming definition of the kind of thing she aims for, she writes, “Love is the story.” It is an answer, one answer, to the question: “How to make love in time?” But it is an answer that puts a strange pressure on our understanding of story as a sequence of events since love, when it happens, unfolds in “the place where time stops.” It is a room with a door. Yet even outside this room, as desire begins to take hold, time becomes compacted. Fraught with desire, she is at one and the same time “aim, arrow, and target.” It is only when “the stirrings of desire” are “sacrificed . . . to time” that life is gone and clock-time rules, carrying noth-

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5. Technically, a three-dimensional bi-directional infundibuliform time-chart.
6. What we never seem to remember is that most of the world’s verbal narrative has been conveyed in poetic form, not prose. This may account for why interesting questions like what distinguishes narrative in poetry from narrative in other modes are rarely addressed (cf. McHale 2009).
ing “in its hands but itself.” Roused from the dead, her life “is simultaneous—whatever the artificiality of time.”

If Winterson’s prose poetry is at times more discursive than Beckett’s, as it is in the passages I have just quoted, its discursivity works as such to frame the moments it brings us to, sentences in which her writing is no longer about something but is that something itself. These are the passages in which events go on and don’t go on at the same time. Syntax bifurcates, and her strange story is told in co-habiting sentences.

I walked into you.

In these four words, “into you” works, on the one hand, because at one and the same time what is entered, is a room, is love (figured throughout as a room), and is her lover (“you”). “[W]hen time opens like a door,” she enters both her lover and this room, which “like all sacred spaces . . . does and does not exist.” Despite the complexity of this expressive work, it is served by syntax that functions quite correctly. Yet with the same words in the same order the syntax creates another quite different but also quite correct sentence: “I walked into you,” in the sense of “I walked right into you” or “I bumped into you.” And this is to say that “you” is necessarily other, she who arouses “desire” across “the props of ordinary life,” physically separate, at once watchable and touchable, but as such un-enterable. What Winterson is trying to capture in words requires this impossibility. Writing two conflicting sentences with the same words in the same order is a way of bringing her reader into an experience of its inexpressibility. Together, we approach without answering the questions: “How can we enter what cannot be entered? How can we understand what cannot be understood?”

As noted above, Winterson’s prose in “The White Room” is more discursively expansive than Beckett’s, but in syntactically parsimonious sentences like this she relies on the same kind of sabotage to bring the reader as close as she can to what cannot be said.

The white room is where we made love.

In this sentence, the worn cliché “made love” conveys the desire-driven physical action of love, “skin close enough for grafting.” At the same time, the cliché can be given new life by slightly increasing the accent on “made.” Now the sentence says something else, which the context also supports: that in the act of love they created love, invented it, as a space in time that is both familiar yet new. Like “the circles of enchantment” in another context, it is both
“magic and cliché.” The two sentences are distinct, as sentences must be to be understood, yet bonded, co-existent. They also make a strange kind of micro-narrative that seems to undo its narrative status. Hinged on a transitive verb, the sentence doubles back on its customary, event-defined, physical, time-contingent construction (making love) to indicate a space out of time where something "goes on" without going on (making love).

In the last chapter, I made the following distinction: that where the garden-path effect at the level of syntax is a matter of warring sentences, the garden-path effect at the level of narrative is a matter of warring worlds. In the multi-path sentences of Beckett and Winterson, however, this distinction itself is hard to maintain. Their cohabiting sentences come equipped with worlds, worlds which are themselves compacted into one world. And that world is our world. But to begin to feel the nature of this baffling world that is our world requires the continual cognitive challenge of laying down opposing threads of discourse in the same series of words, each thread with its own way of being and its own values.

I know I loved and lost. Then I made the mistake of not loving enough, and won.

In an eerie echo of Beckett’s “it is I who win, who tried so hard to lose” (1965: 345), Winterson rewrites without unwriting. As so often in the prose of both authors, it is a cliché that allows her to tell a little story and then, recursively, to tell it again.8 In this case, Winterson rewrites the cliché (“I loved and lost”) by fusing the words “won” and “lost” in such a way that they each acquire antithetical meanings within antithetical worlds of discourse and value—but without the one giving way to the other.

Let’s look at how this works. Here’s the cliché, a story told in a four-word sentence:

I loved and lost.

A little more fully narrativized, it can run like this, “I fell in love and then I lost the one I loved.” It leaves open possibilities like “the one I loved died” or “the one I loved left me for someone else,” but it doesn’t, in common usage, imply that the verbs in their negative form work in the same way:

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8. The work on cliché as an asset in the creation of literary effects is extensive. See especially Lerner 1956, Zijderveld 1979, Redfern 1989, Amossy and Rosen 1982, and the collection of essays in Mathis 1998. For an excellent overview of the subject, as well as a rich investigation of Beckett’s use of cliché, see Barry 2006.
I didn't love and won.

Even though this is a literal reverse translation of the story in a five-word sentence, it’s a statement we wouldn’t expect to hear. It’s something a computer might come up with. But when Winterson intentionally puts this odd microstory together with the first microstory it gains a wry wit while bringing the cliché back to life. Together, the second inflects the first, so that “lost” becomes an outcome in the game of life where the losers must endure the heartbreak that can come with falling in love (losing one’s heart) and then losing one’s lover, while the winners are rewarded by avoiding the heartbreak of losing one’s heart and then losing one’s lover. Winning and losing are put together as a kind of contest.

But the second sentence that Winterson actually wrote was

Then I made the mistake of not loving enough, and won.

The added words unbalance the quality of strict semantic reversal, replacing one symmetry with another more complex symmetry in which “win” and “lose” undergo an ironic exchange of meaning and the cliché acquires the quality of judgment. Now loving enough to lose is to win, while to win by not loving enough is a mistake or, in other words, to lose.

Yet by rewriting, Winterson does not unwrite. Instead she creates two cohabiting worlds. The cognitive problem with these worlds is that neither is a “possible world,” as the concept has been applied to narrative literature by Umberto Eco (1979), Thomas Pavel (1986), Marie-Laure Ryan (1991), Lubomír Doležel (1998), and others. Possible worlds, in narratives of any complexity, are worlds that pop up in the might-have-beens, could-have-beens, and should-have-beens that sprout in the words and minds of characters as they talk and think. They pop up, too, in readers’ minds as they read and as suspense builds. The key point is that these possible worlds are eliminated as a story’s single possible world, its “actual world,” unfolds.

9. In the precise words of linguist Barbara Abbott, “[t]he universe and everything in it is a certain way, and that is one possible world—the actual world. However, one can easily imagine things that could have been different. Genghis Khan might have been thrown from his horse as a child and spent the rest of his life as a woodcutter, the US Supreme Court might have called for a recount of Florida ballots in the 2000 presidential election, the Milky Way might not have existed, one of the banana slices on my cereal this morning might have been a millimeter thicker. For each difference in the way things might have been (and all that that difference entails) we have a difference in possible worlds” (B. Abbott 2010: 52).

10. Technically, I suppose, since the possible worlds generated by the thinking and discourse of characters occur in an artifact (novel, short story, film) that has a continuing existence
They are eliminated just as a possible world is eventually eliminated from a garden-path narrative, and a possible meaning is eventually eliminated from a garden-path sentence. What I am claiming for the multi-path sentence as it is deployed here by Winterson and also in the prose poetry of Beckett is that the opposition of its meanings, and the “possible worlds” to which they each belong, does not result in the elimination of one world or the other. If one can still speak of an “actual” world in these works of art, and I believe one can and should, then it is a world that accommodates contradictory worlds of meaning and value—a world in which “won” and “lost” can at once retain and exchange meaning. And it is only by short-circuiting the need to maintain for our own world the purity of what Rudolf Carnap called a “state description”—that is, a world in which there is a “maximal consistent set of sentences” (B. Abbott 2010: 52)—that we can feel, in a kind of pleasurable discomfort, what we all somehow already intimate from our experience of the world we actually live in.

WARS OF THE WORLDS, II

I want to end this chapter by addressing the question raised at the beginning: Can we extend the concept of the multi-path sentence to larger narrative structures in the same way Jahn extended the concept of the garden-path sentence to extended garden-path narratives? After all, I have already suggested that a multi-path sentence can be seen as a multi-path micronarrative with its multiple paths all cohabiting in the same world. Why couldn’t an author do the same thing on a larger scale? It’s a good question. To begin, it’s worth recalling that the garden-path narratives I referenced in the last chapter—“The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” “Mazes,” The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Atonement, Pincher Martin, The Third Policeman, Vertigo, Mulholland Drive, Identity, The Sixth Sense—all shed one of their presumptive worlds, that is, the garden-path world, by the time you’ve reached the end. A different kind of discrimination of worlds is found in “forking path narratives” (Bordwell 2002, Branigan 2002), narratives like the films Groundhog Day, Run Lola Run, and Sliding Doors in which the same narrative is run and rerun with different outcomes. In these films, one version of the narrative doesn’t displace the others, as in a garden-path narrative, even when in the final version (Groundhog Day, Run Lola Run) the protagonist “gets it right.” Nor do they reside together in all its parts, these worlds undergo a continuing rebirth in the fictional actual world created by that artifact. In this sense, one could argue that they are not eliminated. But their insufficiency to constitute an actual storyworld of their own is nonetheless as evanescent in that storyworld as their counterparts in the lives we lead in our own nonfictional, actual world.
in the same actual world—not, at least, in the cognitively challenging way of the multi-path sentences that I have been describing. They invoke a commonplace of science fiction (and, increasingly, the science of cosmology): parallel universes. As for the irresolvable garden-path narrative (Caché), we are indeed left at the end with two narrative worlds still standing in the space of a single storyworld. But they are worlds at war. They don’t go together ontologically. My conclusion in the last chapter was that in this regard Haneke was deliberately inflicting on his viewers a version of the neural jamming Stein inflicted on her readers in the syntax of her irresolvable garden-path sentences.

But so far in this chapter I have been making the case that there are artists who for certain lyrical ends can sustain multiple ways of reading a sentence or micro-narrative, ways that ordinarily would not belong together but that in these instances work together. One of the working titles of Beckett’s The Unnamable was “Beyond Words” (Admussen 1979: 86–87), and this is where both authors are pointing. What their brief flights seek is an expressive goal that is beyond the grasp of ordinary discourse. Can we, then, find the same correspondence between sentences and worlds that we developed in the last chapter? Are there instances in which multiple worlds cohabit ontologically in the same way as different sentences can be made to cohabit in a multi-path sentence? What this would mean is that, just as individual words (nouns, verbs, pronouns, etc.) can have different meanings in the different sentences layered in a multi-path sentence, so events and characters can be read differently depending on their function in the different coherent storyworlds layered in a multi-path narrative. What we need to find, then, is a multi-path narrative that can be shown to work on the reader in the same way as Beckett’s and Winterson’s multi-path sentences do—that is, not only a narrative in which the same narrative details sustain two conflicting stories together with their conflicting storyworlds, but also one in which the different stories (and their storyworlds) can be held in the mind at the same time. Perhaps intuitively my reader may already be thinking that this is a tall order. But I believe it is instructive to test it out anyway.

My candidate is Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw, since over the course of the still lengthening controversy that has trailed Edmund Wilson’s reading of the novella in 1934 (“The Ambiguity of Henry James”; E. Wilson 1948), two different stories seem to recur most frequently. These are: 1) the tale of an heroic governess, alone and unaided, who discovers that the boy and girl in her charge are under the spell of two former employees of the house that are actually evil spirits, and who then sets out at the risk of her life to rescue the souls of her charges and finally succeeds in foiling the spirits, but only at the unavoidable price of the boy’s life as he dies in her arms; 2) the tale of a narcissistic, sexually starved governess, possibly in love with the absent master
of the house, who hallucinates the two evil spirits and their evil project, places herself in the role of heroic protector, and succeeds only in committing involuntary homicide by scaring (or possibly squeezing) the boy to death. This simplifies, of course, and omits the many twists and turns of this long debate, but over time, critics have most commonly settled on versions of one or the other of these stories.¹¹

Now suppose one wants to argue that this is a multi-path narrative in which neither story is meant to be eliminated and that, to achieve a full and adequate reading of the novella, both should be experienced at the same time. That is, the story of an heroic governess in a world that includes evil spirits bent on the damnation of innocent children is somehow fused with the story of a pathologically self-absorbed governess in a world in which the evil spirits are solely the products of her imagination. There are, in my view, two basic problems with this reading of the novella. The first is that it does not overcome the duck-rabbit effect. I’ll include the well-known image of the duck-rabbit so that you can feel the effect I am trying to describe.¹² The point is that, just as one cannot hold both the image of the duck and the image of the rabbit in the mind at the same time, in the same way one cannot hold the two versions of *The Turn of the Screw* in the mind at the same time. One might at best experience an oscillation between the two different stories in the same way one can between the duck and the rabbit. But they can never coincide. This is the problem of the “Gestalt shift” that Wittgenstein wrestled with in Part Two of his *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1997: 193–208). To use his term, we see one “aspect” or the other, and in doing so we are necessarily prevented from seeing the alternative aspect since it is blocked through the intervention of a temporary, but necessary, “aspect blindness” (213–14).

But then why does the duck-rabbit oscillation happen at this level but not at the level of the multi-path sentence? Well, the first answer to this question is that it usually does.

They are hunting dogs.

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¹¹. Full disclosure: my own experience of this tale favors the heroic governess version since in my opinion the other version requires too many unnarrativized insertions to make the story work (e.g., to account for how, never having seen or even known of Peter Quint, the governess could nonetheless hallucinate his image in exact detail).

¹². From the October 23, 1892, issue of *Fliegende Blätter*. This is the first known appearance of this familiar image and was, I believe, the image the American psychologist Joseph Jastrow used, when at roughly the same period of time, he developed the concept of competing Gestalts. I think this version of the image is better than those that are more commonly circulated.
This sentence can say, with reference to the dogs, that “they” belong to the type of dogs that we call “hunting dogs.” Or this sentence can say, with reference to two or more people, that they are out looking for some dogs. But only through the operation of aspect blindness can we make sense of the sentence. We are forced to hold in our minds one meaning of the sentence or the other. They can’t be made to coincide, however precariously. At least in my mind. There is no invitation to read them otherwise. In Winterson’s “I walked into you,” by contrast, there is. As in Beckett’s sentences, there is an implicit invitation to shift from the literal to the figural. As metaphors the two meanings of “I walked into you” can be felt as two opposing aspects of the same condition. But they reside in the same set of words as an unstable co-existence of meanings. In other words, the felt hesitation between meanings is the locus of cognitive action.

This brings me to a deep difference between on the one hand Winterson’s and Beckett’s multi-path sentences and on the other a multi-path narrative like *The Turn of the Screw.* For, if I am right, the conflict of meaning that takes place in the examples from Beckett and Winterson can be felt because something like it is already a part of the reader’s experience. It is a lived set of contradictions that they draw on, an enigma that one “knows” experientially in the same way that one “knows” the enigma of individually specific self-
awareness. But this isn’t the case in *The Turn of the Screw*. The conflicting readings of character and world the novella seems to invite do not draw on conflicting elements that are deeply bonded in certain emotions like those of love and loss. In skillful hands, the complexity of the latter can be elicited in short lyrical flights. By contrast, as the narrative details of James’s novella pile up, they build two increasingly independent worlds, increasingly at war. As in *Caché*，we have an ontological duck and an ontological rabbit, created in the same space with the same words, but refusing to meld into one animal.

I have no evidence from the cognitive sciences to support this particular contention. And readers may find convincing examples of multi-path fusions on a full-fledged narrative scale. But at this writing, my hunch is that the experience of cohabiting paths that I sought to demonstrate earlier in this chapter—an experience that replicates our best understanding of inexpressible states we experience in the actual world of our lives—becomes exponentially harder to achieve as a narrative gets longer and more detailed. The worlds remain separate in the same way that the meanings of most multi-path sentences stay separate. And for this—the cognitive operation that keeps worlds and meanings apart—there is much support. We are wired in a way that both enables and strongly inclines us to sort out possible worlds from actual ones and possible meanings from those that are intended. This is a cognitive bent that our lives as fully functioning human beings quite literally depend upon. And like everything else having to do with the relationship between the way we think and how we get by as human beings, the proclivity to sort out possible from actual meanings and possible from actual worlds does not need to be exact to be an asset in the game of survival. In the terms of schema theory, what we seek is the feeling of “goodness of fit.” At the level of the sentence, there have been landmark studies (Swinney 1979; Seidenberg et al. 1982) on the manner and the sheer speed with which the mind eliminates discordant meanings that do not “fit.” And though, to my knowledge, there has been no comparable study in the cognitive sciences of the same process of elimination at the level of narrative discourse, there has been extensive critical and narratological commentary on the ways we “naturalize” discordant elements—ways that involve strategic under- and overreading, and that allow for the same goodness of fit that we regularly achieve as we proceed from one sentence to

13. “Incoming information may be distorted or partially deleted, in order to achieve this fit, thus explaining some of the errors or gaps in remembered accounts. Schemas enable rapid perception, as information is assimilated to the existing composite, but they also lead to patterned and recurrent distortions” (Nuckolls 1999: 143). Indeed, the evidence (e.g., in the history of religion), would indicate that we also have a proclivity to settle for an impossible world when necessity dictates.
the next (Kermode 1979; Culler 1975; Fludernik 1996; H. P. Abbott 2008). Conversely, the way Haneke handles the device of the hidden camera in *Caché* makes “goodness of fit” impossible to achieve. But, to repeat, the game Haneke is intentionally playing (and that James for all we know might also have been playing) creates a contradiction of worlds that belongs strictly to the narrative that creates those worlds. Unlike the multi-path art of Winterson and Beckett, this game does not recreate for viewers a contradiction like those embedded in the feelings of love and loss that befall them in their extratextual lives. Of course there is an abundance of schemata available to us that are designed to override these felt complications of feeling as well. They can be found on Hallmark cards and gravestones, in popular songs and comforting sermons.

In the next two chapters, I shall be taking up another class of naturalizing schemata. These are schemata that readers are often prone to import from their lives as social beings into their experience as readers of narrative fiction. To resist this natural tendency, there is a signal device that authors have drawn on. As elsewhere in this study, the device can be handled in such a way as to immerse the willing reader in a condition of not knowing. It is in turn a condition that we could, and at times should, allow ourselves to experience in the social and cultural world in which we live our lives. Quite simply, this device is a gap. But it is a special kind of gap, and its deployment is my principal focus in Part Three.