Real Mysteries

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CHAPTER 5

Untold Events

I wanted to write a real mystery, as opposed to a mystery that’s solved, and then it’s not a mystery anymore
—Tim O’Brien

THEORY OF GAPS

A gap in narrative, like the much more salient gaps in poetry, is any kind of opening in the text that is either permanent or requires some degree of filling in order for the text to do its work. Defined as such, gaps are endemic in narrative and have been since people started telling stories, though it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the work of Menakhem Perry and Meir Sternberg ([1968] 1986), Gérard Genette ([1972] 1980), Wolfgang Iser ([1972] 1974, 1978), Jonathan Culler (1975), Mary Louise Pratt (1977), and Sternberg (1978) that both the inevitability of gaps and the complexity of their effects began to achieve serious attention in narrative theory. Since then, the work on gaps has gained in richness and sophistication (Eco 1979, Fish, Ryan, Spolsky, Doležel, Rabinowitz 2001, Herman 2002), but as the general thrust of this work stands in contrast to the argument I stake out in this chapter and the next, a brief survey at the outset will help frame my own contribution.

In his influential book, The Implied Reader ([1972] 1974), Iser put the principle of the gap at the center of his narrative theorizing.¹ For Iser, gaps

¹ Iser saw his work as both a development and a correction of Ingarden’s theory of inde-
not only occur in all narratives, but it is only through them that “scenes and characters [come] to life” (39). Gaps, for Iser, are moments of indeterminacy caused by a “break” in the narrative. They are “points at which the reader can enter into the text, forming his own connections and conceptions and so creating the configurative meaning of what he is reading” (40). Whatever dynamism a story has, then, depends on the reader’s creative engagement with the text, which in turn is enabled by moments of indeterminacy that allow the reader the space to do this work. “[W]henever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions,” Iser argued, “the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself” (280). The result is a movement beyond representation to “an experience of reality” that “only the reader” can bring about (227).

One serious problem with this view of narrative gaps, a problem that was quickly noted,² is that Iser limited his focus to the role of key “points” where gaps let readers in to do their work. In so doing, Iser neglected the way gaps actually riddle narrative at all points and the way readers begin filling them from the first words.

When he saw us come in the door the bartender looked up and then reached over and put the glass covers on the two free-lunch bowls. (Hemingway 1966: 384)

Just to get past this first sentence of Hemingway’s “The Light of the World,” we have a bar to create, a bartender, the narrator and his friend (or friends, we won’t know for a few lines), and an action to interpret (the bartender covering the bowls). Characteristically, Hemingway makes us work harder than most writers as we imagine what is intimated in his taut sentences. We have to infer the bartender’s concern when he covers the bowls, which requires in turn inferring the appearance of the narrator and his friend. But, as in our encounters with any other storyworld, the work we perform expands and deepens from sentence to sentence. We are always imagining far more than comes from the page. Simply to understand these opening lines of “The Light of the World,” we draw on what we know about bars, bartenders, drifters, tough towns in hard times, Hemingway’s style, and much else. We build characters and the world they inhabit, as we fill in scenes, imagine action, and inferences-

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². By Sternberg 1978, Umberto Eco 1979, and Stanley Fish 1980, who in their different ways called for a more finely grained approach to the reader’s relationship to the text.
tially construct significance and meaning. Narrative in this regard is like the universe, comprised largely of “dark” matter and energy. Just as the universe does not consist solely of the visible stars, a written narrative is not solely the marks on the page or even their explicit semantic content. We see points of light and then fill in the rest by exercising our powers of triangulation.

My analogy almost immediately breaks down, but it is instructive in this regard as well. After all, it takes no filling in to appreciate the stars. Unlike a human communicative artifact, they are not meant to be read and can be enjoyed as a visual pattern that brightens the sky. Moreover, the process of responding to the gaps of a text is a guided process in which we are not only cued to fill gaps in a certain way but also cued to leave other gaps unfilled. As I shall be focusing in this chapter and the next on a special kind of unfilled gap, it is important to make clear that permanently unfilled gaps—“ellipses,” to use Genette’s term in its broadest sense—far outnumber the fillable kind. Moreover, their emptiness plays its own critical part in narrative success. This necessity becomes very clear when you read a novel like Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine*, in which the entire action consists of a one-story ride up an escalator, with the narrator straining in an insouciant if doomed attempt to account for every particle of the action, mental and physical, during the course of this ride. Baker’s novel is an amusing exception that proves the rule that narrative is generally a blessed liberation from every little thing. We can be taken quickly to the important moments because we follow what Marie-Laure Ryan calls the “principle of minimal departure” (1991: 48–60), that is, unless informed otherwise, we assume the storyworld replicates the real world.

These unfilled gaps come in many different degrees of gappiness and in many different sizes. There are the gaps of space, which include all those unvisited parts of an implicated world, a world like ours that keeps pace with the action. In that space lie the children of Lady Macbeth (or their nonexistence) and the unmentionable product that made Chad Newsome’s fortune in *The Ambassadors*. And there are the gaps of time, what Genette termed ellipses of duration. Some of these are gaps of discretion: Tolstoy drawing a veil when Vronsky and Anna first make love or Hardy spending a page not giving us any details of the rape of Tess. Other gaps are huge, covering years. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine marveled at the way in which memory chooses among millions of events those moments that are essential to the story of one’s life. There is always much history that a story does not need. We jump years in the

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3. Genette’s discussion of the way ellipses can be managed (1980: 106–9ff.) has its own richness of distinctions. For my purposes, the definition of an ellipsis is a representation of “a practically nonexistent portion of text” (109).
lives of characters like Abel Magwitch, Michael Henchard, and Dick Diver, seeing them again, changed by the cumulative effect of untold events.

But the demands of gaps that can and must be filled, like those in the sentence above from Hemingway’s short story, are what give narrative its power to move us and to deepen our understanding. They are the main component of Hemingway’s “principle of the iceberg,” according to which the art of fiction is an art of leaving things out in such a way that they are still present, as it were underwater, contributing to the effect of the whole. The implication is that those with the requisite depth of experience supply what is missing from their own understanding and in that way are allowed to see and feel anew what they already know. Hemingway’s theoretical language was modernist and it echoed what Pound and Eliot were saying about poetry: that the reading of art is itself an art. The more informed the reader, the more fully and precisely are the gaps of art filled.

However elitist Hemingway’s High Modernist preachments may be, it is nonetheless true that the precision with which writer and reader collaborate in the dance of meaning is what releases the power of art. It is in this regard that Sternberg’s (1978) account of narrative as “a dynamic system of gaps” (50; emphasis added) is more in line with modernist aesthetic practice than Iser’s arguably more postmodern dynamics. Iser grants the reader what appears to be complete freedom to “read something into” the breaks in a text, capitalizing on “perplexity . . . as a stimulus and provocation” (Iser 1980: 210). Gaps, in his theorizing, are synonymous with “elements of indeterminacy,” without which “we should not be able to use our imagination” (283). In contrast, Sternberg (1978 and elsewhere) argues that narrative is a complex yet determinate system of “temporal ordering” reflecting at every point strategic authorial decisions to withhold or release information that in turn must be experienced by the reader in an equally complex internal process of questions, hypotheses, and answers.

Sternberg in effect is describing a contract between the reader and the writer. Each knows the rules of narrative and depends on the other to know them. Only in this way does the reader experience the plenitude of thought and feeling that is released by the arrangement of verbal signifiers over the course of any fictional narrative. This contract is similar to the “cooperative principle” that Paul Grice ([1975] 1989) contended was essential to conver-
sation. We acquire the “maxims” of this principle as unconsciously as we acquire grammatical language. They in turn allow us to grasp the “implications” that abound in ordinary verbal intercourse. The applicability of Grice’s theory of conversational pragmatics to literary discourse was almost immediately developed by Mary Louise Pratt (1977) and has been extended, qualified, and elaborated by others, including Ryan (1991), Doležel (1998), and particularly Herman (2002: 173–80). Though Grice was writing specifically of conversation, to extend his theory to the experience of fiction is not much of a stretch. Fiction characteristically combines, on the one hand, multiple inset conversations with, on the other, a narrative voice that, in effect, speaks the story. But however fully or successfully one can adapt Grice’s theory of conversational implicature to a theory of narrative implicature, it is certainly true that by the time we get to Hemingway’s famous concluding lines of *The Sun Also Rises*, what allows us to feel the weight of complex emotion riding underneath the words is the reading that got us to them:

“Oh, Jake,” Brett said, “we could have had such a damned good time together.”

Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me.

“Yes.” I said. “Isn’t it pretty to think so.” (Hemingway 1926: 247)

That we relate to narrative gaps by filling them is supported by work on perception in cognitive science, social and developmental psychology, discursive psychology, and the psychology of perception (Goffman, Mandler, Rumelhart, Schank, Schank and Abelson, Thorndike, Baron-Cohen). In a continuing elaboration of Kant’s original insight regarding our necessary involvement in what we perceive, such research has sought to describe the extent, and in some cases to infer the mechanisms, by which we internally elaborate the limited sensory input we obtain from the external world. We are designed to see, in other words, what we have a hand in shaping, drawing on an immense and highly flexible repertoire of generic structures or schemata that we carry within us. In Roger Shepard’s calculated overstatement, perception is an “externally guided hallucination” (Shepard 1984: 436).

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5. Grice distinguishes four “maxims”: of quantity, quality, relation, and manner.
6. As a refinement of the conversational model, Richard Gerrig has advanced the idea that we relate to narrative as “side participants” in a conversation (Gerrig 1993: 103–56). That is, we are neither active participants nor formally addressed, but nonetheless meant to grasp the narrator’s intended meanings.
7. More fully: “I like to caricature perception as externally guided hallucination, and dreaming and hallucination as internally simulated perception” (Shepard: 436; original em-
This is what writers of fiction depend upon as they construct, from sentence to sentence and even from word to word, the blueprint for a storyworld. But, and here I come to the main job of work in this chapter, they not only depend on the fact that we do this, but they also depend on the fact that we need to do it. Filling in is, in effect, a kind of cognitive lust and as such it can be manipulated to create the thread of curiosity and suspense that keeps readers reading. We seem unable to tolerate not knowing what is going on. The urgency of this need to fill in brings us back again to Gazzaniga’s notion of the “left-hemisphere interpreter” and the way it is always on the alert to make some kind of sense of what perplexes understanding—even at the expense of the facts. So, setting aside all the permanent narrative gaps or ellipses that are necessary to exclude the irrelevant, the question remains: what happens when we come across a narrative gap, the filling of which is vital to the narrative but which cannot be filled without “amending” the text by selective underreading or supplemental overreading? This is the gap that not only keeps the narrative from closure but at the same time aggravates the need for closure. Is it possible, then, not to fill such a narrative gap? Can you cognize its emptiness? Should you? And what would it feel like, if you could?

THE EGREGIOUS GAP

These questions bring me to the concept of the egregious gap. These are the gaps that we cannot fill but that, at the same time, require filling in order to complete the narrative. In other words, they cry out for authorial assistance in filling them. In Robbe-Grillet’s La Jalousie, is “A . . . ” murdered? In Christopher Nolan’s film Memento, what is the full story of the protagonist’s wife? Is she dead? If so, at whose hands? If not, why doesn’t she intervene to aid her husband? What happens between the two acts of Waiting for Godot? In Vanity Fair, does Becky Sharp kill Jos Sedley? Thackeray famously told inquirers...
that he himself didn’t know the answer. In *Wuthering Heights*, does Heathcliff kill Hindley Earnshaw? Hindley was alive when Heathcliff sent Joseph for the doctor, yet he was “both dead, and cold and stark” (Brontë 1995: 185) when Joseph and the doctor got back. For good reason, the space in which Hindley dies has become a crux in the criticism of *Wuthering Heights*, and interpreters have filled it with several possibilities of which the main contenders are: murder, involuntary homicide, and death without further assistance.

Egregious gaps have been handled in many different ways to serve different functions. Yet they share the capacity to call up immense inferential energy. This in turn would appear to confirm the rule that we are so constructed that simply to know of a gap is to try to fill it. Even an exacting theorist like Sternberg will not deny us the exercise of this all-too-human imperative—indeed, he will expect us eventually to come up with something:

What are Iago’s motives, or Raskolnikov’s? Is Becky Sharp “guilty” or “innocent” in her relations with Lord Steyne? Are the ghosts purely hallucinations of the governess’s disordered mind? What really happened in the Marabar Caves? All these questions point to permanent gaps in the respective works. No reader can afford to disregard them, but he will look in vain for pat explicit answers. Only through a close analysis of the text can he evolve an hypothesis or set of hypotheses by which these gaps can be filled with some degree of probability. (1978: 51)

The implication of the last sentence is that we not only have a need but an obligation to find something “with some degree of probability” to put in the unfillable gap. Peter J. Rabinowitz, an equally exacting instructor on the “rules” of reading, acknowledges a “license to fill” what is left blank. With but one exception his examples enjoy sufficient context to allow filling with more than a degree of probability. The exception is “avant-garde novelists” like Robbe-Grillet who nonetheless operate with the same expectation that readers will try to fill the gaps they have left. Indeed, they “demand that their readers fill in the blanks” (Rabinowitz 1987: 150). The operative word here is “demand,” and my questions are Do they? and Should we?  

There is much to be said for exercising what you might call the “narrative imperative” at these moments. The finely calibrated exercise of this natural human propensity is, arguably, the best kind of training that scholars in the

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10. For a provocative addendum to Rabinowitz’s treatment of gaps, see his argument for the strategic use of gaps to achieve a “rhetorical realism.” Rabinowitz draws on the cluster of confusing informational gaps that greet the reader at the opening of Dostoevsky’s *The Gambler* (Rabinowitz 2001).
fields of textual analysis can demand of their students. An egregious gap in a complex work of fiction is an opportunity for the most intense cognitive workout, because how it is filled can have consequences for one’s reading of the entire text. If one settles for the idea that Heathcliff’s unbridled ruthlessness drove him to kill Hindley, this contributes to the sense of a preternatural Heathcliff, almost entirely possessed by volcanic passions of hate and love. If one opts for a Heathcliff who, seeing how far he has gone in his rage, attempts, if grudgingly, to revive Hindley, this contributes to a different Heathcliff, one less preternaturally inhuman in whom there is an element of common humanity (and thereby qualifying Catherine’s cautionary words to Isabella). But if one imagines Heathcliff just sitting there, watching Hindley die, one is constructing a much colder Heathcliff—in our own epoch, a psychopath; in Brontë’s, what her sister called him, a devil.

It can be a salutary exercise to see how each of these different Heathcliffs differently inflect our reading not only of Heathcliff but also of Catherine and even of Brontë’s larger vision of life on earth. Is Catherine drawn by the erotic appeal of Heathcliff’s sheer ferocity? Or does she know, from childhood, a Heathcliff more leavened by humanity? Or is she, like Heathcliff, possessed by a cold, dark supernatural force that would make her indifferent to the suffering of others? These are actually only three of many more Heathcliffs and Catherines that have, over the years, been generated in the critical literature. But out of that little hole in the text, were readers to claim a license to do so, there can be drawn not only support for a certain Heathcliff and a complementary Catherine but with them support for complementary versions of what it can mean to be human (at least in this storyworld), of its nature and range, of its limits or limitlessness, of how it is or is not threaded with a supernatural element, and, if so, to what degree for good, or ill, or both. Such an exercise shows how closely bonded are the concepts of narration and interpretation. To supply one micronarrative in this gap is to interpret the novel in one way, to supply a different micronarrative is to interpret the novel in a different way.

But what I am suggesting is that we leave this gap empty. When the distraught Isabella asks Nelly “to explain, if you can, what I have married” (Brontë 1995: 134), she is asking a question that Nelly cannot answer. Correction: Nelly can provide any number of answers, just as the reader can. But in the reading I am proposing, such answers risk closing down a novel that was not meant to be fully closed. And by this I do not mean that the novel is “open” in the sense that it is open to a rich multiplicity of readings, which of course it is. What I am saying is that the most accurate readings of the novel will leave this
gap as empty as its author most definitely left it. This is hard. The interpreting mind, like nature, abhors a vacuum. But if you stifle the interpretive imperative (which in instances of egregious gaps means stifling the narrative imperative), that act comes with its own reading of Brontë’s overarching vision: that is, that there is wisdom in accepting with a full cognitive embrace the fact that there are things we simply do not and cannot know.

If a main theme of the mixed reception of *Wuthering Heights* was the “inexpressibly painful” (*Athenaeum*) and “wild, confused; disjointed and improbable” (*Examiner*) nature of its contents, what made it “a strange sort of book—baffling all regular criticism” (*Douglas Jerold’s Weekly*) was the author’s refusal to fill the gaps where interpretation demanded fulfillment. Brontë, to our knowledge, left no words indicating how we were to fill the egregious gaps in her novel. In a preface to the second edition of *Wuthering Heights*, Emily’s sister Charlotte, more conscious of what the market would tolerate, dealt with this problem by constructing two competing versions of her sister. On the one hand, “Ellis Bell” was the untutored servant of inspiration, working “passively under dictates [she] neither delivered nor could question” (Brontë: xxxvii). Thus “[h]aving formed these beings, she did not know what she had done” (xxxv). On the other hand, Ellis Bell for all her rude imaginings was indeed a devout believer in “the Great Being who made both man and woman” and that, in His universe, Heathcliff, at least, “stands unredeemed; never once swerving in his arrow-straight course to perdition” (xxxv–xxxvi).

The latter assertion was a key move. By closing the book on Heathcliff, Charlotte sought to reassure the mid-nineteenth-century English reader regarding her sister’s position on the broader metaphysical problem of the existence of evil. For a public that largely assumes the universe to be the intended product of a creator who is at once merciful, just, and omnipotent, the existence of evil as an active unpunished and seemingly unpunishable presence at large in the universe creates a metaphysical gap. It afflicts a sense of justice that may well be innate. Accordingly, as Milton did for the Bible, Charlotte Brontë did for her sister’s text—both in their different ways providing the source text with an in-filling interpretive supplement to show how, in the end, justice does prevail.

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But Charlotte’s sister may actually have known what she was doing when she left this egregious gap and others unfilled in her novel. Doing so, she anticipated Conrad’s refusal to provide us with sufficient narrative in-filling to understand the psychology of evil as it operated in the figure of Kurtz. In the words of the novelist Tim O’Brien:

[Kurtz] has witnessed profound savagery, has immersed himself in it, and as he lies dying, we hear him whisper, “The horror, the horror.” There is no solution here. Rather, the reverse. The heart is dark. We gape into the tangle of this man’s soul, which has the quality of a huge black hole, ever widening, ever mysterious, its gravity sucking us back into the book itself. What intrigues us, ultimately, is not what we know but what we do not know and yearn to discover. (O’Brien 1991: 180)

The formal differences between Brontë’s and Conrad’s texts are, of course, huge. The metaphysical gap that the creation of Heathcliff leaves open is the product of too much narrative—that is, more than can be accommodated in a single character. Kurtz, by contrast, is a case of too little narrative. Responding to this criticism, Conrad himself admitted “the fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic or rather symbolic at all” (Conrad 1999: 161).

I’ve quoted above Tim O’Brien’s take on Kurtz because of the way it chimes with O’Brien’s own version of Conrad’s novel, In the Lake of the Woods (O’Brien 1994a). In this novel, the experience of giving way in the jungle to pure anarchic cruelty is the slaughter at My Lai, an actual documented event in US history. Where we are only permitted glimpses in Conrad’s novella of leaping figures, heads on stakes, a single document with four words scrawled at the end (“Exterminate all the brutes!” [117]), O’Brien draws on the actual testimony in the court-martial of William Calley. As if making up for Conrad’s
lack of specifics, O’Brien not only recurs to this testimony throughout the novel, but extensively reimagines what went on.

[H]e found burning hooches and brightly mobile figures engaged in murder. Simpson was killing children. PFC Weatherby was killing whatever he could kill. A row of corpses lay in the pink-to-purple sunshine along the trail—teenagers and old women and two babies and a young boy. Most were dead, some were almost dead. The dead lay very still. The almost-dead did twitching things until PFC Weatherby had occasion to reload and make them fully dead. The noise was fierce. No one was dying quietly. There were squeakings and chickenhouse sounds. (O’Brien 1994a: 107)

The killing went on for hours. It was thorough and systematic. In the morning sunlight, which shifted from pink to purple, people were shot dead and carved up with knives and raped and sodomized and bayoneted and blown into scraps. The bodies lay in piles. (1994a: 200)

For the reader, then, as well as the novel’s disturbed and disturbing protagonist, John Wade, the horror is inescapable.

Wade was a fictional soldier, of course, but O’Brien inserted him into the actual Charlie Company, where he could serve under the actual Lieutenant Calley and be present at My Lai. Haunted by the experience, plagued by guilt, Wade finds a way to literally erase this part of his personal history when he is assigned to the battalion adjutant’s office in the last two months of his tour. Secretly, he “reassigns” himself from Charlie Company to Alpha Company (which happened to be the actual Tim O’Brien’s company) by removing all references to himself in the former, adding his name to all relevant documents in the latter, and “tidying up the numbers.”

The illusion, he realized, would not be perfect. None ever was. But still it seemed a nifty piece of work. Logical and smooth. Among the men in Charlie Company he was known only as Sorcerer. Very few had ever heard his real name; fewer still would recall it. And over time, he trusted, memory itself would be erased. (1994a: 269)

the original text indicates how important it was for O’Brien to include in his novel evidence of horror from a documented episode in American history.

15. The extent of Wade’s active engagement in the slaughter at My Lai beyond the shooting of an old farmer and, on impulse, PVC Weatherby is hard to determine. He is pictured wandering through the havoc uttering “meaningless sounds” (1994a: 107) and occasionally the words “No,” “Please,” and “Go away.”
For everyone else, the erasure works for seventeen years, until it explodes in the midst of Wade's campaign for senator in Minnesota. Up to that point, six weeks before the primary, the upward trajectory of Wade's political career and his carefully constructed and widely admired political persona had made victory a certainty. The revelation that he had participated in My Lai changes all this, and after a disastrous primary, he and his wife, Kathy, escape to a secluded cabin on the shore of Lake of the Woods, where they hope to repair the damage, personal and marital. It is here that the novel picks up their story.

Through multiple strategically inserted analepses, O'Brien does a masterful job opening out the complex ways in which the trauma of My Lai and Wade's fall from political grace combine with an already fragile personal chemistry, marked by obsessive secrecy and a volatile insecurity in matters of love. It is a novel of well-earned psychological complexity. But my focus here as elsewhere in this study is on how the author, like Brontë and Conrad before him, refuses to supply certain vital segments of narrative action. What most distinguishes this novel from recognizable generic types, and what has frustrated so many of its readers, is its narrative incompletion. Sometime early in the morning of their eighth day in the cabin Kathy disappears, and we never learn how or why. To reveal this to those of my readers who have not yet read *In the Lake of the Woods* is not much of a spoiler. In a footnote early in the novel, our narrator, an obsessed inquirer into the truth about the Wades, lets us know that we won't know what we most want to know: “Biographer, historian, medium—call me what you want—but even after four years of hard labor I'm left with little more than supposition and possibility” (30).

Unlike Emily Brontë, but like her sister, O'Brien was highly attuned to the market and, therefore, to the risk he was taking in leaving such an egregious gap. He knew he wanted to maintain right up to the end the mystery that has been pulling the reader through the novel, but he also knew what the market for mysteries demanded—that is, that they be solved and thus, in his own words, “no longer mysteries” (Edelman 1994). As he said in an interview shortly after the book's publication, this gamble held him back from submitting it to his publisher:

I started it in '85, wrote for two years until the end of '87, maybe into '88. Then I put it aside for a while and wrote *The Things They Carried*. It was mostly this business about the ending. I knew some reviewers wouldn't like the idea of having a mystery at the end, of leaving it unsolved, so I put

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16. Indeed, this is one novel that improves on subsequent readings, guided by a fuller awareness of how it is incomplete.
the book aside and figured I’ll try to change it around sometime later. But I realized that this is just what had to be. I figured what’s the point of making hypotheses and talk about mystery just to solve it in the end? What’s the point of it? So I gathered my courage for two years to write a book that wasn’t solved in the end. I knew I would get nailed in some places. (Edelman 1994)

And he was. As one reviewer wrote, the novel is a “beautifully written, often haunting, but ultimately disappointing book. . . . [H]as Wade always lived a lie? Did he kill Kathy and put her body in the lake? Did they escape their problems altogether? O’Brien openly asks the reader such questions, in a series of rhetorical footnotes that amount to an uncomfortable authorial intrusion.”

Actually, the entire novel, including the narrator’s footnotes (there are no “authorial intrusions” as such), is framed as a hypothetical representation of what might possibly have happened, interspersed with evidence in the form of documented facts, witnessed events, the words of friends, relatives, law enforcement, and the testimony given at the court-martial of Lieutenant Calley. Sometimes this material is collected in chapters titled “Evidence.” Other chapters are given titles like “Where they Looked” and “What was Found.” And some of them are titled, simply, “Hypothesis.” The latter is especially the case when it comes to developing certain alternative hypotheses regarding Kathy’s possible agency in determining her fate. Their possibility has already been seeded by a number of references to her trait of disappearing without warning. In a postcard to Wade in Vietnam, she warns him: “Careful with the tricks. One of these days you’ll make me disappear altogether” (1994a: 38). So maybe she got fed up, or sufficiently scared, and arranged for someone to pick her up early that morning and drive her out of this life. Or maybe, on a whim, she took off in the boat (which we learn is missing, along with the outboard, two oars, and a life vest). Maybe she and the boat in one way or another sank. Or maybe she’s still out there somewhere on that enormous lake.

17. This review is attributed to Samuel Goichman and appeared in the October 1994 issue of Publishers Weekly. Though it has been posted on publishers’ sites on-line, I have not been able to find the source text. But it is useful as a compact statement of a common response to In the Lake of the Woods. It did not help that the book was “tagged” in Vanity Fair and Harper’s as a “thriller,” a genre that, like the mystery, includes the expectation that suspense will be resolved. In his interview with Edelman, O’Brien comments on how this “necessity” of tagging a book of fiction compounded the marketing challenge he had anticipated: “People say that it’s a literary thriller,” but if that was all it was, “you’d have to dispense with three-quarters of the book” (Edelman 1994).
But the riveting hypothesis that builds suspense in this novel is that, in the early hours of the eighth day at the cabin, Wade finally cracks and in a fit of madness kills his wife and disposes of her body, packing it into the boat, which he sinks out in the lake. In a number of ways, O'Brien encourages his reader to feed on this hypothesis by incrementally fleshing it out in bits and pieces so that gradually we see a single story line, culminating in the last of the chapters titled “Hypothesis.” This story, in the narrator’s imagining, has a terrible climax in which Wade, repeating “Kill Jesus” like a mantra, pours boiling water on each of the potted plants in the cabin. He then refills the kettle with boiling water and pours it on the head of his sleeping wife. Through O’Brien’s carefully staged hints, the gathering horror of this hypothetical story—“the fascination of the abomination,” to use Marlow’s formulation (Conrad 1999: 65)—is made to exceed even the imagined horrors of My Lai.

In his way, then, O’Brien’s narrator confers the power of narrativity on the axioms that Marlow can largely only talk about: that horror breeds horror, and that the “immense darkness” (Conrad 1999: 148) a white European man can encounter in the jungle is a darkness that already lies in his heart. Like Marlow, O’Brien’s narrator wants at one and the same time to approach and to keep his distance from this “truth” about us. You can see this in the Marlovian language that inflects his footnotes:

> It was the sunlight. It was the wickedness that soaks into your blood and slowly heats up and begins to boil. Frustration, partly. Rage, partly. The enemy was invisible. They were ghosts. . . . The smell of the incense, maybe. The unknown, the unknowable. The blank faces. The overwhelming otherness. (1994a: 199, fn 88)

> Nothing is fixed, nothing is solved. The facts, such as they are, finally spin off into the void of things missing, the inconclusiveness of conclusion. Mystery finally claims us. Who are we? Where do we go? (1994a: 301, fn 133)

Again, and as in Conrad, this is the narrator speaking, not the author. He is a man exhausted by an inconclusive four-year quest and the effort to put what he has found into words. As with Marlow, the pressure of a story that is both terrible and untellable brings on clouds of melodrama that puff up between us and the narrative. O’Brien’s narrator even, if subtly, echoes Marlow’s own “retraction” at the end of *Heart of Darkness*. In a different voice, he disowns his
worst-case scenario with the claim that, finally, “it’s a matter of taste, or aesthetics, and the boil is one possibility that I must reject as both graceless and disgusting” (1994a: 300, fn 131).

“Too horrible,” is a better description and a better reason to want to reject “the boil” in a narrative that is supposed to be governed by standards of plausibility, not aesthetics. But if this particular hypothesis, as he continues, is not only “tasteless” but also belied by “the weight of evidence” (ibid.), then where does it come from? He goes on to add, as if to provide confirmation, that after all Wade “was crazy about her” (ibid.). But the idea of being “crazy” in love can be read in more than one way, given “the weight of evidence,” and it can support almost any act of madness. So, to return to my question, why this hypothesis, and why are we forced to see and feel so terribly what only can be imagined?

Bits of fat bubbled at her cheeks. He would remember thinking how impossible it was. He would remember the heat, the voltage in his arms and wrists. Why? He thought, but he didn’t know. All he knew was fury. The blankets were wet. Her teeth were clicking. She twisted away, pushing with her elbows, sliding off toward the foot of the bed. A purply stain spilled out across her neck and shoulders. Her face seemed to fold up. Why? (273)

There is more, but even to quote this much feels like an imposition on my reader. The thing about fiction is that it “makes real.” Done well, it is hard to dispose of as “fiction,” even when it is a fiction of a fiction—that is, even when it is a fiction imagined by a fictional narrator. And when it is this terrible, the question that the hypothetical Wade keeps asking, “Why?,” is also the reader’s question. And if the reader is angry at being put through this experience, both the anger and the question are focused on the author.

So, the answer to the question I asked at the beginning of the last paragraph—“where does this come from?”—is the author. Where else could it come from? “The object of storytelling,” O’Brien wrote in his essay “The Magic Show,” is to “reach into one’s own heart, down into that place where the stories are, bringing up the mystery of oneself” (O’Brien 1991: 183). By making us complicit in his imagining, O’Brien may, quite understandably, arouse considerable anger directed at himself, but he also does what Conrad failed to do by drawing us at least part of the way into “a huge black hole” (1991: 182) that we enter through our own willingness, however conflicted, to reimagine what he imagines. Much has been written lately about “affect” and “embodiment” in the processing of narrative: here both terms would seem to apply
with narrow force. I do not think a reader can fully read this scene without inhabiting it, entering emotionally and viscerally into the minds and bodies of both the killer and his victim.

But, to repeat, it is an imagined scene and framed as such, which brings me to my final point and returns me to my central theme in this chapter: we do not know what has happened. This is not to say that, as readers, we will have our preferences in what we believe has happened. O’Brien has acknowledged as much: “Everyone can have a different interpretation. My sister went for the killing, my brother thinks they got lost. My dad says they ran off together. That’s my whole family right there” (Edelman 1994). But he is also saying, by his own narrative refusal, that it is a good thing to realize that this is what we are doing: believing where we do not and cannot know. Revisiting the book is a way of reminding ourselves that we will never really know what might be pasted over when we say, “He was crazy about her.”

In This Chapter I have put the focus on the egregious narrative gap as a gap of action and on our need to know how the story, conceived as a chronological sequence of events, turns out. We require those “kernels” of action (Chatman 1978: 53–59), those key events, without which the story is incomplete. But it is hardly a new insight to assert that understanding the action is inseparable from understanding the characters involved in that action. As Henry James put it in his oft-cited words: “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” (H. James 1956: 15–16).18 And this inseparability, of course, is exactly the direction in which my reading of In the Lake of the Woods has been trending. Without the action, we don’t know the character. Still, there can be an interpretive advantage in keeping character and action separate as analytical concepts, as I have been doing in this chapter and as I will be doing in the next.

18. In “The magic Show,” O’Brien includes his own iteration of this insight in a way that chimes with other comments on his craft that I have included in this chapter: “[P]lot relies for its power on the essential cloudiness of things to come. We don’t know. We want to know. . . . As with plot, I believe that successful characterization requires an enhancement of mystery: not shrinkage, but expansion. To beguile, to bewitch, to cause lasting wonder—these are the aims of characterization” (O’Brien 1991: 180, 182).