In the last chapter, I quoted Andrew Delbanco’s description of the narrator of “Bartleby” as “a good man trying to become a better man in the face of another’s suffering.” There is something very nineteenth-century in this twenty-first-century critic’s assessment, with its stress on empathy, and the conscious effort to be “a better man,” and the catalytic agency of suffering. But it does not catch, in fact it displaces, our narrator’s puzzlement about his emotional captivity and the role that Bartleby’s unreadability, not suffering, plays in this captivity. Melville seems instead to have leapt ahead by a century, anticipating two key ideas of Emmanuel Levinas, of which the first is the recognition that the other is “absolutely other.” Adriaan Peperzak’s wording of this idea in his commentary on Levinas eerily chimes with the experience of Bartleby as “the irreducible Other . . . a stranger who cannot be reduced to a role or function within my world; . . . someone who comes from afar and who does not belong to it” (Peperzak 1993: 137). At the same time, the tenacity of the narrator’s attention to Bartleby would seem to bear out the other side of the Levinasian ethical equation: that “[t]he I is bound up with the non-I as if the entire fate of the Other was in its hands” (Levinas 1996: 18). This is not a matter of my “trying to be a better man” but of my being somehow “obliged
without this obligation having begun in me, as though an order slipped into
my consciousness like a thief” (119). It is like being held “hostage even before
I may know it” (Peperzak 1993: 26).

This central binary made the human face a major theme in Levinas, for
it is the face that beckons the captive reader even as it screens the unread-
able that lies on the other side: “A face confounds the intentionality that aims
at it. . . . The epiphany of the absolutely other is a face, in which the other
(Autrui) calls on me” (Levinas 1996: 54). Faces figure in much the same way
in these texts. Our narrator searches and searches Bartleby’s face, bound by an
absence he cannot read:

I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eye
dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the
least uneasiness, anger, impatience, or impertinence in his manner; in
other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubt-
less I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. (Melville
1957: 101)

Similarly Bigelow searches the inexpressive face of the Aleut woman and Rob-
ert searches the serenely contained face of his wife, both held hostage, not by
what they can’t read, but by not being able to read what they can’t read.

One other closely relevant theme in Levinas has to do with what I have
been calling the fall-back or default ways that readers cope with the unread-
ability of the unreadable mind. For Levinas, the deep motive behind the need
to read others is the fear of losing the integrity of the self under the spell of
the other. The coping mechanism is to absorb the other by incorporating it
into the terms of the self’s own understanding, “to annex otherness to itself
by knowledge, possession, mastery” (M. Smith 2005: 37). Levinas was writ-
ing about relations in general—how we read each other almost as a rule. And
it could be argued that most narrative fiction abets this process of annexa-
tion by depending on it as a condition that gives fiction its readability and
appeal. Unreadable characters intrude on this compact by removing the veil
of readability and exposing the need for mastery that is generally hidden
from us. The urgency of this need and the pain of its frustration is vividly
expressed in Bigelow’s dream when he cuts open the Aleut woman, and “a
stream of writing spills from her veins, letters and runes, . . . a cipher he
is to translate into meaning. Except he can’t fathom the writing inside the
woman” (Harrison 2002: 70).

Harrison’s complex metaphor is much the same as the one J. M. Coetzee
used in Waiting for the Barbarians (1982) when he made the magistrate an
amateur archeologist, struggling to read barbarian runes even as he struggles to read the captive woman who holds him captive by her unreadability. In this novel, as in Harrison’s, sexual penetration leads nowhere. Bigelow tells himself that by having sex with the Aleut woman, “[h]e’s getting what he hoped . . . but it isn’t at all what he expected, and a desolation seizes him” (70). The same desolation afflicts the magistrate. As many have noted, the physical contact that the magistrate “enjoys” with the barbarian woman, and that is described at length, is an index not of contact but of the absence of contact. In this light, the most intimate forms of physical contact—sex (as taking, using) and torture—are aligned as two desperate expressions of the same desire.

[T]o desire her has meant to enfold her and enter her, to pierce her surface and stir the quiet of her interior into an ecstatic storm; then to retreat, to subside, to wait for desire to reconstitute itself. But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other! (Coetzee 1982: 43)

Coetzee preserves intact the secret body of this other from both the magistrate and from us right up to their last moment together: “When I tighten my grip on her hand there is no answer. I see only too clearly what I see: a stocky girl with a broad mouth and hair cut in a fringe across her forehead staring over my shoulder into the sky; a stranger; a visitor from strange parts now on her way home after a less than happy visit. ‘Goodbye,’ I say. ‘Goodbye,’ she says. There is no more life in her voice than in mine” (73).

In drawing on the apt words of Levinas, I by no means wish to implicate his metaphysics or much else of the layered complexity of his thought in the case I have been making. As noted above, the match between Levinas and my authors quickly breaks down, beginning with the fact that, though I have been focusing on their unreadable characters, there are also characters in their novels who are clearly meant to be readable. Coetzee, of all the writers I have dealt with here, has sought to develop an ethics in connection with human unreadability, yet the unreadable characters in his novels are in general socially marginalized and often solitary others. They seem (as they are often taken to be) part of a more narrowly focused commentary on the colonial mindset. The barbarian woman is coded as both racially and ethnically distinct; Michael K in Life and Times of Michael K would have been recognized by South African readers as “colored”; Vercueil in Age of Iron is home-
less; Friday in *Foe* is a black man from a distant island, mute, and exotically unreadable: “In the grip of dancing he is not himself. He is beyond human reach. I call his name and am ignored, I put out a hand and am brushed aside. All the while he dances he makes a humming noise in his throat, deeper than his usual voice; sometimes he seems to be singing” (Coetzee 1987: 92).

The word “barbarian” is itself a generic type. It works as a performative, swallowing up an entire people. A central focus of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the condition that gives rise to the term and sustains the behavior it enables. In this regard, the magistrate mirrors his vicious antagonist, Colonel Joll. Moreover, we are allowed the sense that we can read both men: the magistrate from the inside, Colonel Joll from the outside. When these two have their final encounter after the defeat of Joll’s forces, it begins with a tableau, the two of them separated by the window of Joll’s carriage.

His face is naked, washed clean, perhaps by the blue moonlight, perhaps by physical exhaustion. I stare at his pale high temples. Memories of his mother’s soft breast, of the tug in his hand of the first kite he flew, as well as of those intimate cruelties for which I abhor him, shelter in that beehive. (Coetzee 1982: 146)

There is a complexity emerging here that suggests a multitude of possible Jolls in that “beehive.” But look what happens once the magistrate literally grabs Colonel Joll by the arm and forces him to talk:

“Let me go!” he sobs. He is no stronger than a child.

“In a minute. How could it be that the barbarians did this to you?”

“We froze in the mountains! We starved in the desert! Why did no one tell us it would be like that?” (147)

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1. Coetzee renders the same implicit judgment on our relations with animals, who could be described as having the absolute of unreadable minds. In an essay that has become a classic, Thomas Nagel contended that we will never “know what it is like for a *bat* to be a *bat*” (1970; cited in Coetzee 1999a: 31). In *The Lives of Animals* (1999a), a slippery document at best, Coetzee’s fictional surrogate, the famous novelist Elizabeth Costello, struggles to make a stand for animal rights against an onslaught of academic reasoners. Her position is that, whatever their unreadability, one is obliged to assume that animals have “fullness of being” and as such deserve the honor and respect and care that comes with that status. “Fullness of being” would then be the common denominator shared by humans and animals, just as fullness of *human* being is the common denominator shared by Europeans and barbarians. One could extrapolate further from this that the word “animal” has worked like the word “barbarian,” in that it is a performative that, among other things, excludes. It has allowed those animals of the species *Homo sapiens* to slip from under the term while retaining its application to the rest of their fellow creatures.
The tableau gives way to the busy, discursive intermental interchange of narrative action, and at the same time Colonel Joll shrinks back into a type, the would-be bully crying with self-pity. In the context of a searching critique of empire, it works. But at the same time it reinforces the impression that in the storyworld of this novel the exclusivity of Otherness is reserved for its unreadable barbarians.²

To repeat, the experience of unreadable fictional minds, meant as such, is very hard to maintain. Jesse Bering writes that people “cannot turn off their mind-reading skills even if they want to. All human actions are forevermore perceived to be the products of unobservable mental states, and every behavior, therefore, is subject to intense sociocognitive scrutiny” (Bering 2002: 12). This intense scrutiny can be extended to any bizarre event, which can be read as a signifier, sent perhaps from the mind of God (Bering 2002, 2011). Correlatively, in fiction we often find signifiers of this sort and often attribute them to the mind of the author. This is the symbolic default whereby the unreadable becomes readable at another level of signification. In fact, in Life and Times of Michael K, it is hard not to read Michael K symbolically, with his seeds in his pocket. He does it himself: “It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, the truth, the truth about me. ‘I am a gardener’” (181; original emphasis). Similarly, we are invited to see Vercueil as the Angel of Death, wrapping Mrs. Curren in his cold embrace at the end of Age of Iron. Failing these, there is still the term “other,” which can work as a familiar signifying tag, conveying its own minimal degree of readable displacement.

The ethical move that I am promoting here is to read the barbarian woman, the Aleut woman, Bartleby, Heathcliff, Kurtz, John and Kathy Wade,

². It is quite possible to see the generic type of the barbarian overlain in this novel by another generic type, woman, which may well be the dominant element in the magistrate’s obsessive need to breach an impenetrable otherness. This possibility snapped into sharper focus with the publication of Coetzee’s Disgrace (1999b), a novel whose protagonist, David Lurie, is captive to the same overriding combination of need and mindset, though with less awareness and more devastating personal consequences. William Butler Yeats, a famous real-life captive, generalized its sexual dimension, claiming that the “tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul” (to John Sparrow, cited by Christopher Ricks 1974: 64). For Yeats, “the finest description of sexual intercourse ever written” could be found in lines by Lucretius as translated by Dryden:

They gripe, they squeeze, their humid tongues they dart,  
As each would force their way to others heart:  
In vain they only cruse about the coast,  
For bodies cannot pierce, nor be in bodies lost . . .  
All ways they try, successless all they prove,  
To cure the secret sore of lingering love. (Dryden, “Lucretius, the Fourth Book, Concerning the Nature of Love,” ll. 75–78, 91–92; cited in Ricks 1974: 64)
Peg and the Weebles in a full acceptance of their insistent unreadability. I am arguing that there is value in not allowing default responses to override the immediate experience of an unreadable fictional mind. This does not preclude the symbolic, but requires that it not displace the experience of unreadability. This does, however, preclude empathy, at least insofar as empathy involves the presumption of a readable mind. To release one’s understanding even from the claims of empathy is to adopt a stance of humility and respect before the human unknowable that I believe to some extent governs each of these texts.

THE DARK SIDE OF “THEORY OF MIND”

To reword the point above that I abstracted from Levinas, the “promiscuous, voracious, and proactive” cognitive imperative that makes us want to read minds (Zunshine 2011: 66), and that has played and continues to play such an important role in our survival as a species, can run in tandem with a need for mastery over others that has been the cause of great suffering over the same long course of our history. In these fictions, the two needs often appear to be fused, as in Bigelow’s dream of cutting up the Aleut woman in order to find her secret self. The “dry pity” that the magistrate feels for the men who tortured his barbarian “lover” is a recognition that they were motivated by the same need as he is in his love making—a refusal to accept her impenetrable otherness. Like Coetzee, though even more explicitly, O’Brien’s narrator in In the Lake of the Woods extends this insight to the atrocities of wartime. Struggling to enumerate the possible causes for the fury that led to My Lai, O’Brien’s narrator winds up with “[t]he unknown, the unknowable. The blank faces. The overwhelming otherness” (O’Brien 1994: 199).

As Conrad understood, the heroic quest to penetrate the unknown can be hard to separate from the desire to appropriate and to tame—in effect, to spread knowability. Edward Said spent many years arguing the same point as well as its corollary: that what was being spread in that quest was not actual knowability but an illusion of knowability built on preexisting terms. It was, as it were, an accredited knowability, and its failure can augment the fusion

3. The potentially confusing phrase, “Theory of Mind,” derives from Premack and Woodruff’s (1978) seminal question, “Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind?” The “theory” is formulated as a gift acquired early in our lives that allows us to understand that people other than ourselves have minds. But it is a gift that comes with a need. We not only assume that others have minds but we crave reading those minds. Much of the impact of Zunshine’s Why We Read Fiction lay in the way she connected this evolutionary acquirement with the art of narrative and its universal appeal.
of fury and fear that grips a soldier fighting in a strange land. It is here that
the reading of faces and the inability to do so, which was so important a sub-
ject for Levinas, is critical. We are face-reading mammals even before we are
mindreaders. An infant begins reading her mother’s face within minutes of
being born, laying the foundation for the set of skills required to read the
mind that lies behind the face. Well before the acquirement of language, the
infant enters with her mother into an evolving communicative matrix with its
own complexity and precision. So when one is sent into a land where one not
only does not know the language of the people but cannot read their faces,
the effect goes deep. In Vietnam, of course, American soldiers, having lost so
many of their friends in terrible ways, had good reason to be both frightened
and furious. A death-dealing enemy could be hidden anywhere, not just in the
jungle but among the villagers one has been sent to defend. But these soldiers
were also in an aboriginal state of not knowing, where the “overwhelming
otherness” of the entire situation is perhaps felt most acutely in their inability
to read anything in the “blank faces” they encounter.

4. For an overview of recent literature on infants’ recognition and reading of the mother’s
face see Grossmann and Vaish 2008.

5. Just to be clear, there is no argument here that to understand is to forgive. Whatever
French nuances inflect the as-yet unsourced expression “Tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner,”
in context the word that is belied is generally translated as “to forgive” but also could be “to
pardon” or “to let off the hook.” When David Edelman suggested to O’Brien that his “empathy”
for soldiers under the stress of combat indicated something like this, O’Brien’s reaction was
emphatic:

I understand what they went through. . . . You can explain it. It doesn’t mean
you can justify it. I tried in the book to carefully show the circumstances that led
up to it, the men dying, anger and everything. My own unit, we went through
the same things they went through, land mines and snipers and deaths, but we
didn’t cross the line between rage and homicide.

Murder’s murder, and I’ve always felt the same. (Edelman 1994)

In his memoir, “The Vietnam in Me,” which was published in the New York Times Magazine at
roughly the same time as the interview with Edelman, O’Brien developed this point in greater
detail and along with it the anger he felt:

[I]t’s to say that I more or less understand what happened on that day in March
1968, how it happened, the wickedness that soaks into your blood and heats up
and starts to sizzle. I know the boil that precedes butchery. At the same time,
however, the men in Alpha [O’Brien’s] Company did not commit murder. We
did not turn our machine guns on civilians; we did not cross that conspicuous
line between rage and homicide. I know what occurred here, yes, but I also feel
betrayed by a nation that so widely shrugs off barbarity, by a military judicial
system that treats murderers and common soldiers as one and the same. Ap-
parently we’re all innocent—those who exercise moral restraint and those who
do not, officers who control their troops and officers who do not. In a way,
America has declared itself innocent. (O’Brien, 1994b)
I argued in chapter 5 that two of the challenges O’Brien set himself in his admiring competition with Conrad was, on the one hand, to give detailed documentary representation of the human capacity for horror carried out as warfare in a foreign land, and, on the other, to show with a gathering narrativized intensity how the same terrible aggression could replicate at the level of personal relations at home in one’s own land. More than that, I argued that, though a medical diagnosis of PTSD might account for the way Wade’s tenuous sanity might have cracked in the middle of the night, the reader’s willing collaboration in imagining an openly hypothetical horror extends the significance of the scene beyond its medical accounting. We, I argued, who are neither crazy nor criminals, play the role of virtual accomplices in the recreation of imagined horror.

I now want to suggest that, with regard to the theme of the volatility of frustrated Theory of Mind, O’Brien lays down similar parallel tracks in In the Lake of the Woods, so that the dangerous frustration felt by soldiers among unreadable faces can be seen to resonate in an individual life story that begins well before the war. Here again, Wade is a special case that brings out a general human potentiality. A dominant theme of his childhood is his inability to pierce the barrier between himself and his father, an aloof alcoholic whose self-contempt translates into contempt for a slightly overweight son whose absorbing interest is not the manly sports of physical prowess but the childish games of magic. Wade’s anxiety to read his father’s mind is so great that he takes to spying on him:

[It] was like an elaborate detective game, a way of crawling into his father’s mind and spending some time there. He’d inspect the scenery, poke around for clues. Where did the anger come from? What was it exactly? And why didn’t anything ever please him, or make him smile, or stop the drinking? Nothing ever got solved—no answers at all—but still the spying made things better. It brought him close to his father. It was a bond. It was something they shared, something intimate and loving. (1994a: 209–210)

What is latent in this stealthy, one-sided illusion of intimacy and love is a dangerous anger that echoes the mysterious anger of Wade’s father. When his father commits suicide, leaving his fourteen-year-old son permanently excluded from any access to his father’s mind, the effect is lethal. “What he felt that night, and for many nights afterward, was the desire to kill. At the funeral he wanted to kill everybody who was crying and everybody who wasn’t. He wanted to take a hammer and crawl into the casket and kill his father for dying” (14).
When John Wade falls in love with the “[f]iercely private, fiercely independent” Kathy Hood, a woman who had the trick of vanishing, “cleanly and purely gone, as if plucked off the planet” (33), he takes up spying on her as well. And, as he felt toward his father, though now with an erotic sensual element, he wants to “crawl inside” her. His desire carries the same off-hand menace as Bigelow’s dream of cutting up his unreadable lover. “There were times when [he] wanted to open up Kathy’s belly and crawl inside and stay there forever. He wanted to swim through her blood and climb up and down her spine and drink from her ovaries and press his gums against the firm red muscle of her heart. He wanted to suture their lives together” (71). Again, however easily Wade may be slotted into clinical categories of narcissism or arrested development, for O’Brien these conditions create opportunities for a more general understanding, in the same way the analysis of human psychopathologies did for Freud. The sickness reveals the deep structure of a condition we acquire by virtue of being human.

This implicit commentary on the dark side of the gift of Theory of Mind organizes much of O’Brien’s rich and complex novel. Moreover, the story it tells resides within a drama of the narrator’s own long losing battle to penetrate the mind of the man he is so arduously tracking. As this exhausted would-be historian wields the power of narrative, how much is his considerable gift guided in turn by anger? To what extent is he artfully stacking the evidence against his prey? Given the way O’Brien has woven together the themes of mind-reading and aggression, I don’t think this reading of the narrator stretches credibility. The act of imagining Wade’s terrible retribution on the hiddenness of Kathy may itself be an act of retribution—a lurid hypothesis inflicted by an intolerably frustrated biographer who, after accumulating “oceans of hapless fact,” still finds his subject “beyond knowing. He’s an other” (101).

Still, Wade is indeed an extreme case. And it is worth asking if his unusually obsessive need governs this novel to the point of skewing the presentation of its theme, infecting its narrator, and perhaps even implicating the author himself. The same could be asked of the world as imagined by the notoriously shy J. M. Coetzee, whose avatars in his later autobiographical fictions and fictional autobiographies endure painful feelings of being set apart and unable to share in the lives of others. Moreover, it would be foolish to deny not only

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6. After Coetzee’s first two novels, a prevailing coldness of temperament seems to have set in, a trait which he has subjected to withering scrutiny. One of Coetzee’s strengths (among many) may be that he keeps to the feelings which, by his own account, he knows best. Warmer
that human beings are endowed by their nature to understand the minds of other human beings, but that by and large they do so with considerable success. Both the ability and the need to exercise it have been essential for our species survival. More than this, it is a moral strength that we seek to understand others as we would wish to be understood ourselves. Adding to its luster, the impulse to read minds has also been loosely associated with empathy, a concept that has enjoyed largely positive connotations and has often been used interchangeably with "sympathy." Thus the discovery of mirror neurons by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his colleagues (1996) was met not only with wonderment but in some quarters with rejoicing. It seemed to make empathy demonstrably neurological (Gallese 2001; Preston and de Waal 2002; Decety and Jackson 2004), giving renewed support to the long thread of evolutionary theory from Peter Kropotkin to Frans de Waal that has put our sociality at the center of our evolutionary success.7 But the main point in our context is that the gift can fail even as the need to exercise it persists and fulfillment crystalizes into an imperative. For readers and interpreters, what this means is that an alertness to intentionally unfilled gaps of action and characterization should be worked into our methods of reading complex fictions lest we fabricate a mind behind a face meant to be left unread.

One final point before going on. It is not hopelessly old-fashioned to maintain that an essential part of being human, perhaps the essential part, is the sense we have of being free. Whether or not this sense of freedom is wholly an illusion has yet to be determined and may never be. But for now, in the present context, it means being free of the presumption that we are wholly knowable. So you might say that a perfected operation of our Theory of Mind would have to include a counter-presumption of unknowability, granted to others in the same way one grants it to oneself. This consideration should

emotions of affection and even love will leak through the crevices of his novels, often sighted from afar; but Coetzee's specialties are the feelings of isolation: of shame, humiliation, embarrassment, disgrace, alienation, fear, pain, and the general weight of emotional repression, relieved by the familiar comforts of thought, irony, and an exquisitely dry humor.

7. What empathy can do for readers is actually a vexed issue. As Suzanne Keen (2007) has shown in her magisterial study of empathy and the novel, there is no unanimity in the research. For Keen, at least, the empathy that we feel for fictional characters is neither sufficiently nor inevitably productive of sympathy for real people in the real world or, by extension, of altruism. This point bears directly on the revisionary side of Keen's study, which is to unsettle firm convictions about whether or not the arousal of empathy in fiction can lead to altruistic behavior. Her working definition of empathy is "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [which] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (Keen 2007: 4). Fritz Breithaupt provides another serviceable, if barer, definition: "the capacity of an observer to receive access to the emotional state or intellectual awareness of another being or fictional construct" (Breithaupt 2011: 273).
also, I think, inflect our methods of interpretation, insofar as they grant a
degree of unknowability to the intentions behind a fictional text. To do so is
to recognize a freedom to be that, in a strange unbidden way, authors in their
turn often recognize in the characters they create. As I suggested in my reflec-
tions on Morrison’s *Beloved* and García Márquez’s tales, and as I have argued
elsewhere (H. P. Abbott 2011), there is an unpredictability in the creative
process that can be felt even in the texture of a finished, packaged, published
work of art.

**WHAT I HAVE TRIED TO DO IN THIS BOOK**

In this chapter and the two before it, I have sought to sketch an analytics of
egregious narrative gaps, currently a hole in an otherwise immensely profit-
able ongoing cognitive inquiry into what goes on in our transactions with
narrative storyworlds. There is much else to be inquired into, beginning
with the historical issue of why unreadable characters began proliferating in
twentieth-century literature. But I have focused in this last chapter on what
I believe are genuine ethical considerations that link the way we relate to the
unreadable characters of fiction with the way we relate to real people, both
near at hand and around the globe.

But just as this last chapter is nested in the two before it, these three chap-
ters are in turn nested in the chapters that precede them. When I set out to
put this book together, I felt that to make the points I was intending to make
in my concluding chapters required a frame that was both important in itself
and also important as a context for those chapters. Our abiding lack of knowl-
dge encompasses more than what we don’t and won’t know about what goes
on in the minds of others. The enigmas of self that I took up in Parts One
and Two are enigmas that are always with us and therefore always, in that
sense, available, if easily ignored or replaced with what passes for knowledge.
The minds of others, including the enigmas of self that must abide in those
minds, constitute a different kind of unknowability. It is the unknowability
that comes with one’s being, to some extent, locked out from the minds of
others. It, too, can be easily ignored or superscribed with certainty.

If a constant reference of this book has been our cognitive limits as
human beings living our lives in what we call the real world, the focus of
the book has been the experience of fiction. Could I have as easily drawn
on nonfiction? It’s a good question and worth pursuing. After all, when Tim
O’Brien said of *In the Lake of the Woods* that he wanted to write a real mys-
tery, the context might suggest that nonfiction could serve the same purpose:
“I think that’s the way life usually operates. I wanted to write a real mystery, as opposed to a mystery that’s solved, and then it’s not a mystery anymore” (Edelman 1994). O’Brien mentions the unsolved mysteries of the disappearance of Amelia Earhart and the assassination of Jack Kennedy as immediate examples of “the way life operates.” But life also operates with the ever-present possibility that these mysteries will be solved, even though we will all go to our graves with a thousand other such mysteries unsolved. Nonfiction carries with it this same possibility. Unlike fiction, nonfiction is “falsifiable” and always subject to correction; its mysteries may be solved. But in fiction, the author reigns, and a mystery can, if the author chooses, remain a mystery forever.

Of course, if all that is at issue are whodunits (Who killed Kennedy?), then I would not have written this book. Nor, I think would O’Brien have written his, because in the same paragraph of the same interview he goes on to mention “the greater mysteries the book’s about, the mysteries of love. How much do people love us? What do they really feel about us? You live with someone for twenty years and you never really know.” Even if she did not disappear, there would still be this and more about what goes on in the heart and mind of Kathy that Wade would never really know. Nor would we—and not only about her, but about Wade as well. What Kathy’s disappearance helps do is write these mysteries large. It is here that O’Brien comes closer to the kind of mystery that Conrad is dealing with through Marlow, a narrator who will never penetrate the heart and mind of Kurtz. Both authors exercise their license as fictionists to keep their narrators permanently weighed down by the burden of unknowing.

I began Part One with Beckett and then picked him up again in chapter 4 not only because he was a specialist in permanent mysteries, but also because of the thoroughgoing, multifaceted ways his “art of failure” served him—keeping his readers poised along the knife edge of knowledge and ignorance. When he told Georges Duthuit that “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail” (Beckett 1983: 145), he was speaking literally, not metaphorically. Failure by itself, of course, is easy. It is an experience we have on a daily basis—and writers, painters, dramatists, and cinematographers are no exception to this rule. It is why we have critics. It is also why the other term in Beckett’s oxymoron, Art, is so important. Taken together, the two terms encompass not only Beckett’s refusal to give audiences what they were designed by nature and trained by culture to want, and not only his own need to feel the strangeness of the human condition, but also the daunting task of bending to his purposes what he had to hand—that is, the materials of his craft and his immense powers of invention.
The other authors I have chosen for this book have not (to my knowledge) and probably would not describe their art as an art of failure. And yet the experience of a failure to know is something that they clearly have prized as an object of their art. To borrow words from Flannery O'Connor, they have pursued a kind of fiction that “will always be pushing its own limits outward towards the limits of mystery, because for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted” (1961: 41). I have lifted O'Connor’s words from a context of belief that is not in my reading intended by the authors I have selected for this book. O’Connor falls more nearly among the Christian apophatic writers, for whom there is one final metaphysical certainty that contains the mysteries that are so important for her and her fiction. But despite the absence of any such containment and the assurance that goes with it, the mysteries evoked in the works I have chosen are no less wonderful for that. In this book, I have tried to show that an art dedicated to these mysteries, an art so radically and variously practiced by Beckett, was also skillfully practiced by others in their often quite different ways.

It only remains to ask: is this project at all useful? Is it useful to know what it feels like to experience the kinds of cognitive failure that I have claimed are available to the willing reader? Is it good to be immersed in the experience of our ignorance: to sustain a felt awareness of not knowing why or who we are, or to feel the breakdown of syntax in pursuit of the inexpressible, or to honor with full acceptance the deep unreadability of the minds of others? Or are these states of mind in fact debilitating, undermining a cognitive efficiency that we have relied on extensively for our current success as a species? After all, without convictions—beginning with the conviction that we can rely on our convictions—we cannot make the decisions we need to make simply to survive. Does an acceptance of failure in the areas I have dealt with in this book encroach on this necessity? Or are all these questions moot, since we are the way we are?

Well, to the extent that we are genetically hard-wired by evolution, reading these authors in the spirit I have advocated will not change us. After such knowledge, we go on much the same. But I believe our individual development is also governed by a flexible and many-stranded “genetic leash,” to use E. O. Wilson’s coinage (Wilson 1998: 128, 157–58). It has given us a freedom of cultural evolution that even a self-confessed “diehard hereditarian” (158) freely acknowledges. It has allowed the production of a superabundance of behavioral variety. And it is here, along the indefinable extent and complexity of this leash, that one finds the large and complex issue of how literature
functions in the context of our lives. At its best, I believe literature is indeed a “machine to think with”: that is, a way of growing knowledge in a vast, collective, evolving conversation. And a key terrain of that growing knowledge is the knowledge of our common humanity and the great range of behavior and cultural practice that falls within it. What I am arguing is, to begin with, that a vital part of that knowledge is the knowledge that there are important things we will never know and questions we will never answer. But what I am also arguing is that it is vital to feel this. We can talk about this knowledge, yet in doing so we occlude the experience of it. We slip in “aboutness” where we felt “isness.” What the authors in this study do (if we permit them) is disengage us from the attitude of such “aboutness” by techniques of total immersion.

So, my answer to the question I asked above is that such experiential knowledge is at the present time not only useful but urgent. After all, the planet on which our reflex capabilities took shape was a big one with lots of room in which pockets of opposing cultural certainties could thrive and do the necessary work of social cohesion that culture can do so well. If those were much more violent times than our own, as Steven Pinker (2011) and Joshua Goldstein (2011) have recently shown with abundant evidence, it is still very hard to predict where we’ll be, violence-wise, when the global population has gone from 7 billion to 10 or 11 billion. The planet we live on now is already a crowded one in which constant contact brings with it threats of cultural relativism, which in turn seem increasingly to provoke a backlash of cultural absolutism (Robertson 1992, Waters 2001, Campbell 2005). Such absolutism brings with it a strenuous, aggressive, and often violent certainty on issues of who we are, what we can know, and what in the course of human events we have the power to control. In such a world, the awareness these authors offer is at the least chastening. They remind us that what wisdom we have is incomplete without the awareness of our ignorance. This is a point that Socrates made long ago. But Socrates made the case logically, confounding in argument all the so-called wise men of Athens. These authors go about the task much differently. They do not make the case but let the case make itself simply by asking of their readers that they “let go” as their authors had done before them. Letting go sounds easy, but for these authors this kind of letting go required a remarkable degree of creative independence. It was an independence not simply from the pressures of the literary marketplace but from the well-grooved imperatives of their own minds.