

This is a repository copy of *The Force of Fictions*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/103509/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

## **Book Section:**

Walsh, Richard orcid.org/0000-0002-6409-6916 (2011) *The Force of Fictions*. In: Alber, Jan, Iversen, Stefan, Jacobsen, Louise Brix, Kraglund, Rikke Andersen, Nielsen, Henrik Skov and Reestorff, Camilla Møhring, (eds.) *Why Study Literature?* Aarhus University Press , Aarhus , pp. 235-252.

---

## **Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

## **Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

## The Force of Fictions

Richard Walsh

I want to make a case based upon one kind of literary study, and confined to one kind (or mode) of literature, without prejudice in either respect to other possible affirmations of the value of what literary scholars do. The kind of study I mean emphasizes the continuity between literary artefacts and the broader domains of cultural discourse, scientific understanding and human cognitive faculties; it is the study of narrative theory, and my claim is that its central preoccupation with literary narrative is in no way at odds with the much larger scope of narrative in general as a distinct object of study. More specifically, my object is fiction, though I mean fictional narrative in a sense that accommodates not only the novel, but the drama (and indeed film), and a great deal of poetry too. *Literary* fiction, for my purposes here, is defined both etymologically (written fiction) and honorifically (fiction it is possible to credit as a significant contribution to culture, rather than just a symptomatic cultural product); at the same time, however, I situate this narrowly-defined object of study within a series of progressively more inclusive contexts—that is, fictions in general, narrative discourse in general, and narrative as a cognitive faculty. The recursive relationship between these contexts secures a significant continuity between literature and the broad reaches of scientific understanding, while the distinctive contribution of literary study is provided for by the re-inflection of the concept of narrative with each narrowing and refinement of the frame of reference. Finally, in speaking of the “force” of fictions I am proposing to make some play with the relation between the notions of “force” and “value,” extrapolating

somewhat from the framework of speech act theory in order to emphasize a performative quality of literary narrative, which arises out of the recursive logic I am proposing, and which can be extrapolated one step further, to the activity of study itself.

My thesis, then, is that the importance of literary fictions as objects of study can be understood to follow from the status of such fictions as the most highly elaborated instances of a mode of cognition that lies at the heart of what it is to be human (the human, I mean, as a social and trans-cultural construct, rather than simply the species *homo sapiens*, though I am interested in the relation between the two). In making that claim I am situating literary fiction at the apex of a hierarchical stratification of levels: above the dynamics or rhetoric of fictionality in general; above the discursive ubiquity of narrative in general; and above the fundamental place of narrative sense-making in cognition. That hierarchy, I think, exists only for the purposes of my argument, but it corresponds to a process of recursive stratification that *does* structurally inform the genesis of any given narrative, and that inheres in the emergence of narrative cognition as such. The engine of that process is reflexiveness, and it is as a token of such a cyclical, metadiscursive series of levels that the stages of my own argument are meant to stand. So in due course I shall be attempting to bring home my argument in relation to Samuel Beckett's *Watt*, which is (I hope) both unimpeachably literary and fairly resistant to easy explanations of its value as an object of study. But before that I shall be considering narrative discourse in general against the backdrop of Darwin's theory of evolution (not the most obvious context for Beckett, but a legitimate one, as it turns out). The main point of this stage of the argument is to throw into relief the cultural importance of narrative, by situating it in relation to a theory—natural selection—it is notoriously

incapable of representing. The discussion will also, and not adventitiously, consider the place of narrative itself in human evolution, because before then I shall be talking about the intimate relation between narrative sense-making and human cognition.

To even begin talking about narrative at a cognitive level, however, I need to make a declaration of methodological principles. It is not currently feasible to describe the mind's actual cognitive processes, at least at the level I want to discuss, in terms that would be meaningfully accountable to empirical confirmation or falsification within the disciplines of cognitive science and neuroscience. Any attempt at such a description is bound to be largely conjectural, and I prefer to confine myself to a less ambitious but more accountable approach, in which the goal is to understand the mind in terms of its outcomes, its manifest effects—such as a certain behaviour, or a certain ability to respond to an environment; that is, to conceive a model that will sufficiently account for those effects in given circumstances. The question of the relation between such a model and any actual cognitive process is bracketed: in this respect it offers only the merits and limitations of an analogy or a heuristic. The strength of such a methodology is that it confines itself to extrapolation from manifest features—in the case of narrative cognition, behavioural interactions with a physical and social environment, and the pervasive cultural phenomenon of narrative as a mode of explanation and communication. In articulating an adequate account of these manifest features, such an abductive model can also shed light upon their internal logic.

What would it take, then, to produce the cognitive faculty of narrative sense-making? To begin with a proposition I shall subsequently retract, narrative emerges in the cognitive effort to articulate causal relations. One way to get at the distinctiveness of

narrative is to contrast causal thinking with associative thinking as ways of negotiating with reality. Associative thinking is horizontal: its syntax is coordinate, of the form “circumstance *a* and circumstance *b*.” Causal thinking involves the hierarchical subordination of *a* and *b*, as instances of a general rule, in the form of a syllogism: “circumstance *a* is an instance of cause *A*; cause *A* always has effect *B*; instance *a* will result in an instance of effect *B*.” The hierarchy of conceptual levels introduced by causal thinking is crucial in several respects, which I’ll discuss in turn, but which can be briefly enumerated as concerning, firstly, the relation between the explicit and the implicit (which I shall refer to as saying and doing); secondly, the relation between the particular and the general; and thirdly, the relation between the cognitive and the communicative, or social.

It is important to recognise that any behaviour oriented towards an anticipation of future events is already an implicit form of representation, in that it is falsifiably predictive of a state of affairs.<sup>1</sup> Associative thinking is implicitly representational in this way. So, my dog gets excited when I pick up my wallet—he expects to be taken for a walk. He has reasonable grounds for this: there’s a good chance I have picked up my wallet because I’m going to the shop, and there’s a good chance, if I’m going to the shop, that I’ll take him with me. So, very often, he’s right; but this impressive feat of understanding doesn’t mean that my dog is particularly shrewd. In fact, my dog is particularly stupid: in twelve years he has still not grasped the basic canine fact that being on a lead means you can’t go wherever you like. He certainly isn’t capable of grasping

---

<sup>1</sup>. For a suggestive discussion of representation in the context of emergence, see Bickhard (2000).

the concepts of money, goods, shops, and the convenience of walking the dog at the same time as going to the shop, all of which would figure in a credible causal explanation for the association he has made. But neither does his association depend upon a naïve causal inference, such as “wallets make walks happen.” He needs only to have responded to prior conditioning, in the form of the experience of the wallet being followed by the walk a number of times in the past. The most elementary difference between the associative and causal modes of understanding, then, does not concern the quality of the causal explanation but the bare fact that, as explanation, it involves an explicit representation of the circumstances—a modelling of them. Although associative thinking involves implicit representation, in that it projects a falsifiable state of affairs, it does not generate a hierarchy of levels as explicit representation does. The difference is brought out clearly when the expected circumstance *is* falsified, as it very well might be: I may be reaching for my wallet, for example, in order to buy off the kids—which, for even the most basic causal understanding would require a revision of the model, such as “wallets make walks happen, except when kids are around.” An association involves no such revisionary moment, because it is merely cumulative. If a conditioned response is falsified on a particular occasion, then that occasion takes its statistical place in the ongoing series of such occasions, and the conditioning is weakened in proportion. Conditioning is additive: it is a behavioural response to the sum of experience, and as such it requires no explicit abstraction from, or synthesis of, the occasions that make up that experience. Conditioned behaviour is just doing it—even when the behaviour concerned is entirely mental, as in the association of ideas (or in modern parlance, the sort of cognitive processing that can be wholly accounted for in terms of connectionism). The explicit representation involved

in causal understanding, on the other hand, is the saying of a doing, the articulation of a cognitive response; it is the reflexive product of a stratification of levels and of the relation between them. Saying, as speech act theory has taught us, is itself a kind of doing; the relation is recursive, a feature which has vast implications. One way of conceptualizing this dual aspect of saying-as-doing is to recognise that each explicit articulation of a specific instance is also the implicit permutation of a covering rule. That is to say, each cognitive act of causal thinking is a representation that instantiates a perceived or anticipated regularity; it is the articulation of the particular in terms of the general.

Narrative, as we have known since Aristotle, is fundamentally concerned with the relation between the particular and the general, but I want to stress the reciprocity between the two: the particular is understood in terms of the general, and the general is understood in terms of the particular. This is one of the reasons I want to retract my original proposition, that narrative emerges from the articulation of causal relations: there is a sense in which that proposition seems merely tautologous, in that the possibility of a concept of causal relations in itself already presupposes narrative thinking. The relation of the particular to the general in causal thinking, in other words, already participates in a discursive economy. It presupposes not only the availability of a general frame of reference within which to articulate the particular, but also the reciprocal contribution particular articulations make to the establishment and consolidation of that general frame of reference. As soon as we ask where the general comes from, it becomes clear that every causal articulation also participates tacitly in a communicative context, and the boundary between the cognitive and social frames of reference must be seen as

permeable. We do learn from our own experience, incident by incident, yes—but that way of learning can be very expensive. One of the obvious advantages of causal thinking over associative thinking is that it allows us to short-circuit this process, to draw upon the collective legacy of representational paradigms, established idioms and tropes, folk wisdom, types, genres and masterplots that constitute the whole category of the general within which, and in terms of which, every specific narrative is articulated.<sup>2</sup>

The social nature of narrative understanding is fundamental to its importance and to its limitations as a mode of cognition, in a sense that is best illustrated by considering another quality of narrative that seems to disallow the equivalence with causal thinking I have proposed. According to this view, narrative thinking implies more than the mere articulation of causal relations, in that it is concerned not just with bare causal sequence, but with agency.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, narrative is more specifically concerned with the behaviour of people than with our whole physical environment, and this substantive focus upon agents and their acts is what really marks out the social orientation of narrative understanding. But the essential point here, that the horizons of narrative understanding are defined by specifically human concerns, is correct in a more fundamental sense than this formulation allows for, a sense that ultimately obliterates the distinction it seems to require between narrative understanding proper and causal understanding. Narrative does indeed deal in agency and purposive actions, and the adaptive value, for a social animal, of understanding the behaviour of others presumably accounts for those features of

---

<sup>2</sup>. Turner (1996) gives a good, wide-ranging sense of this continuity between the literary and the cognitive.

<sup>3</sup>. See, for example, Fludernik (1996, 12-13).

narrative in terms of human cognitive evolution. Narrative serves human needs, addresses human concerns, and expresses human values; but it does so in virtue not of its subject matter, but of the inherently anthropocentric scope of its frame of reference, which is the inevitable, only frame of reference for the articulation of any sequential explanation in human terms—no less so than human visual cognition is necessarily defined in terms of our apprehension of the visible spectrum. Narrative does not merely take human experience as its topic, but subordinates the flux of existence to human experientiality. So, there is an irreducible level at which every cause is an anthropomorphic agent, every effect the result of a purposive action, however muted and figurative its formulation may be. Narrative is anthropocentric not because of what it is about, but because of who it is for; it is not a belated cognitive faculty, but one that is coeval with our ability to reflect upon our environment and condition as temporal beings, and inescapably defines the terms in which we do so. Human cognition and narrative are mutually, recursively reinforcing; accordingly, narrative does not merely depend upon a general context of human values, it substantially constitutes that context with respect to the temporality of consciousness.

I have been trying to characterize the centrality of narrative to the conceptual frame of reference that marks the evaluative horizons of the human; and in doing so I have been circling around the difficult concept of emergence. Emergence, roughly speaking, defines the possibility of the appearance of anything really new, from helium to human culture.<sup>4</sup> In the pat phrase, it is the notion that the whole may be more than the

---

<sup>4</sup>. Good general introductions to the concept of emergence include Holland (1998) and Johnson (2001).

sum of its parts. It is a live concept in fields as diverse as philosophy, theoretical physics, evolutionary biology and artificial intelligence, and I don't propose to get drawn into it here, beyond noting that the additive notion of the sum of parts is extremely unhelpful, and contributes to a somewhat misleading confrontation between emergence and the principles of reductionism; it isn't possible to approach a viable concept of emergence until we begin to think in terms of relations.<sup>5</sup> I have been circling around the concept because I think it involves, more specifically, the kind of recursive relations that I have been trying to articulate with respect to narrative. The development of narrative cognition is itself an example of emergence, that is to say of the appearance of something that is not intrinsic in the conditions prior to its appearance. Narrative cognition is also at the heart of the difficulty of the concept of emergence itself, because it is not a concept susceptible to narrative explanation, even though it is clearly temporal and developmental. Narrative is so fundamental to our grasp of reality that it is extraordinarily hard to even think things that do not fit its template; and yet the possibility of narrative cognition itself does not fit that template.

If narrative does not respond to something intrinsic in how the world works, but rather to the contingencies of human cognitive needs in an evolutionary context, then it is unsurprising that its limitations are exposed by complex developmental phenomena exhibiting emergence. The question of the limits of narrative understanding is what I want to pursue further in the context of a classic version of emergence, which is the concept of evolution itself—evolutionary biology being one of the fields in which emergence is most prominent as both an explanatory concept and a problem. The

---

<sup>5</sup>. See Holland (1998, 244-6).

canonical model of evolutionary process, of course, is Darwin's theory of natural selection; among literary scholars the influence of Darwin upon narrative since the late nineteenth century is well known, as is the incompatibility between natural selection and any narrative account of it.<sup>6</sup> Porter Abbott has shown in detail that natural selection provides for no agents, and no purposive action, on which to pin a narrative explanation (Abbott 2003). He also shows just how resistant to understanding this makes the idea of natural selection, and also how hard it is to avoid traducing the theory by projecting agency and purpose onto it and subjugating it to narrative (both Darwin himself and such modern champions as Richard Dawkins occasionally indulge in such misrepresentation, as Abbott notes, and the fact that they make only figurative use of narrative explanation, by attributing agency to nature, or to the gene, does not at all diminish the significance of the expository need to do so). My point is that this and other non-narrative models of process are more fundamentally problematic than just because they challenge our habitual narrative way of thinking. That is, to the extent that such models of temporal process resist narrative explanation, they are experienced as not offering an explanation at all. Narrative cognition is so involved with what it is to be human, in other words, that an account of temporal process that does not work in narrative terms has failed to bring that process into relation with human experientiality; has failed to fully mediate between the implacably unfolding universe and the domain of human value.

Natural selection is a theoretical model of great explanatory power, yet its irreducible abstraction does not offer that sense of mastery over brute reality we gain by

---

<sup>6</sup>. Eminent studies of Darwin's influence upon literature include Beer (1983) and Levine (1988).

subordinating it to human meaning. This is a problem encountered whenever science, or theory, seeks to go beyond the scope of human experience as a literal or figurative frame of reference, and the intractability of emergence to narrative explanation can be seen in the larger context of debate about the nature of knowledge. One of the most vexed issues in the philosophy of science is the status of “scientific realism,” to which the notion of explanation is crucial.<sup>7</sup> In quantum physics, for example, there are current mathematical models of subatomic phenomena which powerfully predict what can occur at this level in given conditions, but which offer no intelligible description of what is going on. From a realist perspective this amounts to an approach to quantum physics as a kind of magic, but although the scientific realist stance is adopted in the name of the real, as with all realisms what is actually at stake is the accessibility of the real from within the parameters of human understanding. There is some force to the argument that an abstruse mathematical model with predictive but not descriptive power falls short of scientific explanation, or anything we can recognise as explanation; but then there is no reason to suppose that reality is ultimately recognizable, that it is any more accessible to the human cognitive apparatus than subatomic phenomena are to the human sensory apparatus.

So it is with the resistance of natural selection to narrative explanation. As a model of temporal development, natural selection appears to invite comprehension in narrative terms; yet the independence of natural selection from any concept of agency or purpose, and the massively aggregate, recursive and statistically distributed nature of the model, put it beyond the human experiential horizons within which narrative sense-

---

<sup>7</sup>. For a good overview of the issues, see the entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Boyd 2002).

making operates. The inadequacies of narrative sense-making, however, only testify to its power. Narrative cognition can itself be understood as an adaptation produced by natural selection, but this doesn't lead to a cultural Darwinist view of the relation between narrative cognition and all the innumerable contemporary manifestations of narrative.<sup>8</sup> It is fairly clear that the adaptive advantages of narrative are exhausted at a relatively early stage in its development as a cornerstone of human culture: yes, for a social animal the ability to model and anticipate the behaviour of others offers improved chances of survival and enhanced reproductive prospects; an understanding of Beckett, on the other hand, will not appreciably improve your chances of perpetuating your genes. Beyond a basic level, the development of narrative understanding, and human culture in general, is an incidental bi-product, or spandrel, of evolutionary processes. The vast elaboration of narrative culture has not been sustained by evolutionary pressure; I am suggesting instead that its mechanism is reflexiveness (by which I mean representational recursiveness)<sup>9</sup>. For this reason it is implausible to see the cognitive challenge of ideas like natural selection as part of some quasi-evolutionary development in human thought beyond the

---

<sup>8</sup>. The arguments for and against literary Darwinism have been aired recently in a special issue of *Style* (Knapp 2008).

<sup>9</sup>. In making this suggestion I am distinguishing my view from the account of culture offered by memetics, based upon Dawkins's concept of the meme as a cultural unit of natural selection, analogous to the gene (Dawkins 1976, ch. 11). Memetics tends to conflate the formal mechanism of natural selection with the biological terms of its instantiation in the evolution of the gene, and in doing so fails to ground cultural phenomena in their only meaningful domain, that of cultural value.

limitations of the narrative paradigm. The prejudicial value system to which narrative cognition so fundamentally contributes, and which constitutes the deep, inherent anthropocentrism of the human, cannot be simply sloughed off; it is non-negotiable, because it leaves no position from which to negotiate with it. But this state of affairs does not leave us oblivious to our limitations, and one of the most powerful functions of reflexivity is indeed to continually expose those limitations, refining and qualifying the framework of our narrative understanding in the process. Perhaps the most important effect of this reflexivity, one of enormous significance in the development of narrative culture, is the troping of narrative sense-making that we understand as fictionality. The rudiments of this reflexive strategy can be seen in a simple example of figurative language such as Dawkins's image of "the selfish gene" (Dawkins 1976). This is such an overtly fanciful notion that to take it in earnest and convict Dawkins of unreflective anthropomorphism would be to wilfully ignore its rhetoric. Figurative language, when it functions figuratively, draws attention to its conceit: it says, in effect, "this is not the case: this is a manner of speaking." The need to speak thus in Dawkins's case, as we have seen, arises because of the inaccessibility of natural selection to narrative understanding; but the conceit does not unthinkingly defer to that limitation.

Figurative language is fictionality in miniature. The figurative is akin to the fictive in that both present themselves as dealing in meanings first and foremost, and only via that discursive obliquity offering to describe the world. Fictive discourse is not distinguished by the ontological status of its referents, nor by the suspension of its illocutionary force, nor by any dissociation of the discourse from its author, but by its rhetorical orientation, which both deploys narrative indirectly and foregrounds that

indirection.<sup>10</sup> Fictionality, then, is inherently a kind of reflexivity. All narrative meaning is the product of a discursive economy, of the reciprocal negotiation between the particular and the general within the domain of representation, and we ignore the fact at our peril; but fictive meaning offers itself directly as an exploration within that discursive economy, and to ignore that is simply to fail to respond to it as fiction. I am not referring to metafictionality here; that concept covers a range of devices by which a specific fiction may internally redouble its discursive strategies (as we shall see with *Watt*), and in doing so may raise the principle of recursiveness to a higher degree. The fundamental reflexivity of fictionality is inherent in its rhetorical orientation, in the bare fact of being offered and received as fiction, which is to say, as a second-degree exploration of the faculty of narrative sense-making that is our cognitive heritage.

I hope I have done enough to make the leap from evolutionary narratives to *Watt* seem less arbitrary than at first sight. Darwin does in fact get a mention in *Watt* when Mr. Magershon, in exasperation, tells the repetitive Mr. O'Meldon, "Go on from where you left off ... not from where you began. Or are you like Darwin's caterpillar?" (Beckett 1953, 193). Darwin's caterpillar, if interrupted in the process of building its cocoon and placed in another cocoon at the same stage of construction would nonetheless begin the cocoon-spinning process all over again. Its behaviour was genetically programmed, not responsive to the demands of its actual environment. In Beckett's hands, the example becomes a parable of a kind of formal compulsion, in which the dogged recitation of a form of words takes precedence over any accommodation to the communicative purpose that occasioned it, and the effect is one of frustration, in which the possibility of

---

<sup>10</sup> . See Walsh (2007), especially chapter one.

resolution, of sense, is endlessly deferred. This, of course, is very relevant to the experience of reading *Watt* itself, in which the narrative is repeatedly held up by attempts to permutate all the possible combinations of circumstances or attributes that might apply in the given situation. So, among many other instances, we are given an extended account of all the ways a committee of five may look at itself without ever achieving a reciprocal look, along with the correct procedure for ensuring that any such committee has fully looked at itself in the minimum number of looks (this takes 7 pages; 173-79); we are given all the permutations of Mr. Knott's remarkably unstable physical appearance with respect to variables of figure, stature, skin and hair (3 pages; 209-11); and we are given a scrupulous analysis of all the possible implications of Mr. Knott's edict that his leftovers should be given to the dog, given that there is no dog in his household (12 pages; 87-98). Is there anything to be gained from studying, or even reading, such a narrative? Even by fictional standards, it seems remote from our understanding of the real world. I want to argue, however, that Beckett's intensification of fictive reflexivity actually makes that relation more direct and overt, so that far from being marginal, it is exemplary of the pertinence of literary fiction.

Permutation and narrative are antithetical ways of knowing, the one offering exhaustive multiplicity, the other offering coherent singularity. The novel appears to set them up against each other, stalling the progress of the narrative at every opportunity to conjugate a paradigm. Watt's relentless permutation of possibilities aspires to an intellectual mastery of the real, but this goal can never be reached, and mockingly recedes before him. The effect is absurdly comic in the first instance, and the more so given that it is vitiated by error anyway, as a footnote confirms for us: "The figures given here are

incorrect. The consequent calculations are therefore doubly erroneous” (101). The absurd comedy is ratcheted up a third degree as the text continues to pursue this exponential permutational logic nonetheless, beyond all communicative moderation and beyond all sublimity. The narrative frustration of all this can be offset to an extent by aestheticizing it, submitting to its incantatory rhythms and its purely formal resolutions. The text provides for this, most obviously with the frog chorus that Watt recalls (135-7), consisting of three frogs croaking Krak!, Krek! and Krik! every 8, 5 and 3 beats respectively (Beckett provides the score for 120 beats, the interval from unison to unison). The series 3, 5, 8 forms part of the Fibonacci sequence, in which each number is the sum of the preceding two, and the relation between each adjacent pair approximates the golden ratio; which is to say, the most pervasive and fundamental principle of formal aesthetic satisfaction in Western culture.<sup>11</sup>

Even the most patient reader, though, will sooner or later say, “Ok, I get it – can we please get on with the story?” At which point Beckett has you, because in doing so you have merely confirmed your preference for one formal satisfaction over another; you have chosen the synthetic illusion of narrative coherence over the analytic folly of exhaustive permutation. As in the case of narrative representations of evolution, narrative itself here becomes a limitation, perhaps a consolation. If evolutionary narratives amount to a failure of narrative understanding, though, Beckett’s novel is, more acutely, a narrative of the failure of understanding. Its overriding preoccupation is with the ways in which the real continually eludes the most determined efforts of articulation, explanation and comprehension. The paradigmatic instance of this elusiveness in the novel is the

---

<sup>11</sup>. Beckett’s interest in mathematics is well documented; see Culik (1993).

incident of the Galls, father and son, a phlegmatic duo who come to tune Mr. Knott's piano and engage in a brief dialogue about it. This, we learn, "was perhaps the principal incident of Watt's early days in Mr. Knott's house" (69), and it shares with all the others the properties, for Watt, of "great formal brilliance and indeterminable purport" (71). Watt, who would've been happy merely to achieve narrative sense, to be able to say to himself, "That is what happened then" (70), finds that under the scrutiny of his analytic intelligence the incident of the Galls "gradually lost, in the nice processes of its light, its sound, its impacts and its rhythm, all meaning, even the most literal" (69). Watt is distressed, in this case as in others, to confront an unbridgeable gap between sensory fact and sense; he is unable to accept that "nothing had happened, with all the clarity and solidity of something" (73). Worse, it emerges that the incident of the Galls is actually one of his relative successes, as its presence in the narrative testifies, for "he could never have spoken at all of these things, if all had continued to mean nothing, as some continued to mean nothing, that is to say, right up to the end. For the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something..." (74). The radical doubt therefore remains: at the time of the incident's occurrence, "were there neither Galls nor piano then, but only an unintelligible succession of changes, from which Watt finally extracted the Galls and the piano, in self-defence?" (76).

In this respect, *Watt* has been seen as part of an abiding Beckettian project to confront and demonstrate the impossibility of achieved meaning and value; the impossibility, in fact, of its own compulsive aspirations.<sup>12</sup> As one of Watt's predecessors,

---

<sup>12</sup>. The range of recent *Watt* criticism is well represented by Ackerley (2004), Beausang and Galiussi (1996), Benjamin (1997), Hayman (2002) and Wall (2002).

Arsene, puts it in his 25-page leave-taking, “what we know partakes in no small measure of the nature of what has so happily been called the unutterable or ineffable, so that any attempt to utter or eff it is doomed to fail, doomed, doomed to fail” (61). The converse of this inability to articulate ineffable knowledge is the inability to penetrate to the reality beyond our cognisances. Towards the end of the novel, *Watt* appears to reconcile himself to the inaccessibility of the real and to accept the bounds of appearances as he impatiently waits to identify a distant figure on the road: “Watt’s concern, deep as it appeared, was not after all with what the figure was, in reality, but with what the figure appeared to be, in reality. For since when were Watt’s concerns with what things were, in reality?” (226). At face value, this seems a kind of resolution, albeit a negative one—resignation to the inevitable failure of his quest for the real. Such a reading is undercut, though, firstly by a pointed revelation of the reality beyond appearance—the figure is receding, not approaching as Watt had thought—and secondly by the rather more enigmatic intimation that this obscure figure, with its highly distinctive gait (225), is Watt himself, whose gait was described in detail early in the narrative (28). Soon afterwards, Watt disappears from the narrative, having bought a train ticket to the end of the line. When his train arrives, it does not take up a single passenger (245). The book ends with the remaining characters looking at “nothing in particular” (246), and a series of fragmentary addenda. The suggestion of a kind of skew circularity at the end of the narrative has been foreshadowed in the picture of a broken circle and a dot that Watt contemplates at length in Erskine’s room. It is there too in the nearly regular alternation of types in the series of men, Watt and Erskine among them, who serve first downstairs then upstairs in the household of Mr. Knott. And it is developed in the mirroring motif that characterizes Watt’s relation with

Sam, who receives and relates Watt's narrative. Watt, by this point, is doing everything in reverse, notably both walking and talking. The intimate reciprocity between Watt and Sam is enacted in the physical clinch in which they engage during Watt's inverted narrations, clasped together face to face in lock step, Sam going forwards and Watt going backwards (161). The fact that this relationship is itself the vehicle of the narrative transmission confirms the sense that all these cycles, repetitions and reflections are not closed loops, but hierarchical recursions that generate a series of levels. Or perhaps "degenerate" would be better: Watt's narration is relayed to us by Sam, despite the fact that, as he repeatedly acknowledges, he has understood little, remembered less, and reported still less of Watt's reversed speech (72, 124, 154, 163ff.). The status of the narrative information is further undermined in respect of Watt's own dubious role in the narrative transmission: we are told, for example, that Watt largely ignored Arsene's long elaborate farewell speech (77), which is nonetheless given in its entirety.

The problem of knowledge, then, is not confined to Watt's experience of Mr. Knott's household, nor to his competence to narrate it, nor even to Sam's competence to understand and retell Watt's narrative. Sam's role as narrator only emerges gradually as the novel unfolds, and indeed most of the time the narration gives every appearance of being omniscient, making no discernible effort to conform to the logic of the narrative transmission it offers as the whole basis of its own authority, however woefully inadequate. The opening scene, for example, is entirely outside Watt's experience, and Sam's doubly so: most of it precedes Watt's introduction into the narrative, and when he does first appear, "like a roll of tarpaulin" (14), it is not as the narrative's centre of focalization, but as a distant object of the speculative discourse of other characters. At the

other end of the novel, one of the addenda tersely notes that “Arsene’s declaration gradually came back to Watt” (248). It is a wry, absurdly inadequate concession to the logic of the narrative transmission that the novel has flouted in so many other ways. The novel’s addenda—which are offered to the reader with the comment that this material “should be carefully studied. Only fatigue and disgust prevented its incorporation” (247)—these addenda themselves foreground the fictive text and its transcendence of the logic of narrative representation to which it ironically purports to defer. To the same end the main body of the narrative has been qualified by footnotes, as for example following the observation that Kate, one of the numerous Lynch family, is “a fine girl but a bleeder” (100), where the footnote adds, “Haemophilia is, like enlargement of the prostate, an exclusively male disorder. But not in this work” (100).

At such moments the fictionality of the text, and indeed its literary status, is itself made the object of our attention. To the extent that this metafictionality is continuous with the problematics of narrating and knowing that saturate the narrative itself, it is inevitable and appropriate that such moments are themselves drawn back into the thematics of the novel, as my own gloss has suggested, and as the text itself intimates, for instance when the incident of the Galls finally becomes for Watt “a mere example of light commenting bodies, and stillness motion, and silence sound, and comment comment” (70). Meta-discourse is one more in a series of levels, of cycles of reflexivity. In this respect fictionality is an epiphenomenon of the condition that informs Watt’s own experience and the benighted state of human cognition, of consciousness, in general—the irreducible recalcitrance of the real. At the same time, the displacement of consciousness by self-consciousness, without transcending that problematic, frames it as itself an object

of knowledge. Fictionality effects a reversal of the dynamics of narrative knowing that makes it possible to conceive the limits of knowing, and to imagine the real by negation as that which throws those limits into relief. The narrative imagination is therefore precisely, and paradoxically, the closest approach possible to that grasp of the real to which narrative always aspires. Towards the end of the novel, Watt passes a “strayed ass, or goat, lying in the ditch, in the shadow.... Watt did not see the ass, or goat, but the ass, or goat, saw Watt” (222). The ass, or goat, is the real. It also appears early in the novel as the only witness, apparently, when Mr. Hackett “fell off the ladder” as a child (14). And it is there again just after Watt’s disappearance at the novel’s end (245). The goat eludes Watt, and therefore eludes the whole logic of the narrative transmission, which is contingent upon his knowledge, and yet it is there; there, in an ironic reversal, by virtue of the narrative imagination, the trope of fictionality.

That is not, however, an adequate account of the force of fictionality. Everything I’ve said comes within the compass of the thematicization of fictionality, and of metafictionality, which is only one face of its reflexive dynamic—what each cycle of reflexivity *says*. But just as every reflexive cycle of narration, in trumping the one before, provides occasion to be itself trumped, so every interpretative recuperation leaves a remainder, itself available to interpretation but perpetuated rather than exhausted by it. This continual surplus results from the performative force of narrative representation, considered as an act itself susceptible to narrative representation. The best index of the effect in *Watt*, I think, is comedy. It is an extremely funny book, and we would have no trouble, if asked to identify the cause of our laughter, in picking out any number of comic incongruities in the text, which abounds in inversions, perversions, inflations and

deflations of our common understanding of things. If we are asked about the tenor of our laughter, though, we would probably have greater difficulty, because although we are always laughing at *something*, the novel's reflexiveness continually subordinates the comic object to the comic routine, which is itself comical *as* routine, and so quickly establishes a generative mechanism for levels of comic dislocation that is in principle interminable. Within the novel, Arsene offers a kind of typology of laughter: "The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. . . . But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout—haw!—so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs—silence please—at that which is unhappy" (47). This is offered as a hierarchical series, and critics have understood the dianoetic laugh to be Beckett's own ultimate laugh, just as they have sought to gloss his comedy in various ways: as absurd, stoical, nihilistic, and so forth.<sup>13</sup> But Arsene's speech is only part of *Watt*, a discourse enclosed and qualified by several more levels of discourse—and Arsene himself refers to his series as "laughs that strictly speaking are not laughs, but modes of ululation" (46). In the same way these evaluative critical interpretations of Beckett's comedy confine it within a limited frame of reference, the sphere of thematics. They make it mean something, but in the process they leave out what it does. The very idea of the tenor of laughter reduces it to its evaluative import; it gives the sense without the effect, just as the explained joke is not funny. This is only to say that the comedy of *Watt* exemplifies the way in which the more general reflexive movement enacted by all narrative, *a fortiori*

---

<sup>13</sup>. The classic studies are Kenner (1962) and Cohn (1962).

by all fiction, and most rigorously by literary fiction, is a creative force that always outlives final signification. Here, that logic is played out in the oscillation between thematics and affect; thematics is a form of reductionism, in the scientific sense, oriented towards the sufficient cause of the representation, and this orientation in itself generates the phenomenon of the emergent, the surplus effect, which—temporally and conceptually—faces the other way. The laugh itself is recursively generative: the fact that something is funny may itself be funny, and most laughter is a more complex, layered response than interpretation generally allows. Laughter, indeed, is in itself both absurd and infectious, and every laugh may be the occasion of a further, more inclusive laugh. The ultimate law has not been hawed.

The comic force of Beckett's novel exemplifies the same duality that I was concerned with at the beginning of this essay, where I described narrative sense-making in terms of a split between what it says and what it does. Narrative sense-making, narrative discourse, fiction, literary fiction, are characterized by this symbiotic but asymmetrical relation between saying and doing, not once but recursively, over and over, and I equate these two faces of narrative respectively with the notions of value and force. What narrative *says* is how it articulates a sense of the way things are from within the domain of human value: it cashes in value in order to achieve the resolution of meaning, however local, however fleeting. What narrative *does* is how it functions as a communication, or an articulation; how it changes the terms of reference, the value system, within which it was performed. What narrative does is its force, a force being what acts, rather than what is. Literature, which I have considered synecdochically as literary fiction, is the most elaborated exploration of these reflexive hierarchies that our

culture has to offer, and its intricacies strive to articulate our fullest sense of the human—that is, both to express it and to produce it: continuously, simultaneously, reconceiving the entire space in which we live, and living in it. The study of literature is also the saying of a doing, then; the saying of this doing which is itself a saying, and which itself enfolds a hierarchy of doing and saying. Literary study specifies and articulates the operation of these negotiations of cultural value in literature, and it draws out the significant continuities between the literary and broader, more fundamental frames of reference such as those I have concentrated upon here. This in itself would be enough to justify its place in the academy, but it is not all; literary study also, necessarily, participates in the negotiations of cultural value it describes; it acts, it has force. The immediate manifestations of this performative dimension of literary scholarship are its interface with contemporary culture at large and its pedagogy. In both respects literary scholarship testifies to the impossibility, characteristic of the discipline, of disentangling its object of study from the act of engaging with it. I suspect this quality of literary study features prominently among the reasons its status is called into question, but it is no weakness—far from it; I have argued that it is principled, and essential to a recognition of the significance of its object.

#### Notes

#### Works Cited

Abbott, H. Porter. 2003. *Unnarratable knowledge: the difficulty of understanding*

- evolution by natural selection. In *Narrative theory and the cognitive sciences*, ed. David Herman, 143-62. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Ackerley, Chris. 2004. Samuel Beckett and the geology of the imagination: toward an excavation of *Watt*. *Journal of Beckett studies* 13: 150-63.
- Beausang, Michael, and Valérie Galiussi. 1996. Watt: logic, insanity, aphasia. *Style* 30: 495-513.
- Beckett, Samuel. 1953. *Watt*. Paris: Olympia Press.
- Beer, Gillian. 1983. *Darwin's plots: evolutionary narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and nineteenth-century fiction*. London; Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Benjamin, Shoshana. 1997. What's Watt. *Poetics today* 18: 376-96.
- Bickhard, M.H. 2000. Emergence. In *Downward causation*, eds. P.B. Andersen, C. Emmeche, N.O. Finnemann, P.V. Christiansen, 322-348. Aarhus, Denmark: University of Aarhus Press.
- Boyd, Richard. 2002. Scientific realism. In *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-realism/>.
- Cohn, Ruby. 1962. *Samuel Beckett: the comic gamut*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Culik, Hugh. 1993. Mathematics as metaphor: Samuel Beckett and the esthetics of incompleteness. *Papers on language & literature* 29: 131-51.
- Darwin, Charles. 1859. *The origin of species*. Reprinted. London: Penguin.
- Dawkins, Richard. 1976. *The selfish gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fludernik, Monika. 1996. *Towards a "natural" narratology*. London: Routledge.
- Hayman, David. 2002. Getting where? Beckett's opening gambit for *Watt*. *Contemporary*

- literature* 43: 28-49.
- Holland, John H. 1998. *Emergence: from chaos to order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, Stephen. 2001. *Emergence: the connected lives of ants, brains, cities and software*. London: Allen Lane.
- Kenner, Hugh. 1962. *Flaubert, Joyce, Beckett: the stoic comedians*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Knapp, John V., ed. 2008. Special issue on literary Darwinism. *Style* 42.2-3.
- Levine, George. 1988. *Darwin and the novelists*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Turner, Mark. 1996. *The literary mind: the origins of thought and language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wall, John. 2002. A study of the imagination in Samuel Beckett's *Watt*. *New literary history: a journal of theory and interpretation* 33: 533-58.
- Walsh, Richard. 2007. *The rhetoric of fictionality: narrative theory and the idea of fiction*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.