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Closure in the Novel

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For Matthew

CONTENTS

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I

BEGIN to tell the plot of a narrative to an ordinary listener and the result is predictable—a plea at some point not to "give away" the ending. Begin to do the same to a student or critic of literature and although so "sophisticated" a reader might not admit it, he'll probably regret losing the suspense that normally accompanies an unknown text. Go see a movie or read a book knowing that the love scenes are torrid, or that the heroine dies, or that the ending is surprising, and results are similarly predictable: anticipation of the love scenes, waiting for the heroine's death and guessing how it will happen, weighing the probable ending and deducing the nature of the surprise. To see the same movie or read the same book with full knowledge of the ending is to expect and look for signs and anticipations of the way in which things will work out. Try to interrupt someone nearing the end of a novel or sporting event or television program, and, unless the person's interest in his activity is minimal, you'll get a request to wait just a moment until the reading or viewing is completed. All these phenomena testify to the importance most of us, whether devotees of popular or high culture, ordinary readers or literary critics, attribute to the ways in which stories end.

In identifying the attraction fictions exert on the human mind, E. M. Forster reaches a conclusion embarrassingly commonplace yet totally true, which helps to explain our interest in endings: all narratives appeal to the fundamental impulse of curiosity.[1] In any narrative, "what happens next" ceases to be a pertinent question only at the conclusion, and the word "end" in a novel consequently carries with it not just the notion of the turnable last page, but also that of the "goal" of reading, the finish-line toward which our bookmarks aim. In long works of fiction, endings are important for another commonplace but true reason: it is difficult to recall *all* of a work after a completed reading, but climactic moments, dramatic scenes, and beginnings and endings remain in

the memory and decisively shape our sense of a novel as a whole.

In more elevated language, Henry James agrees with Forster about what makes a story interesting:

> The prime effect of so sustained a system, so prepared a surface, is to lead on and on; while the fascination of following resides, by the same token, in the presumability *somewhere* of a convenient, of a visibly-appointed stopping-place.[2]

According to James, individuals interrupt the flow of their own lives for immersion in the life of fiction to achieve the satisfaction of an ending. Our sense that fictions will end in part nurtures our desire to read them.

Some critics, especially the Deconstructionists, have lost sight of the individual reader discussed by Forster and James who, like Scheherazade's husband, wants most to know "what happens next." Endings, we are told, both "ravel" and "unravel" the text, with interpretation a constant and constantly self-canceling act.[3] Such ideas have a tantalizing newness and a certain abstract validity. But they violate what common sense and practical experience tell us: novels do have forms and meanings, and endings are crucial in achieving them.

Return for a moment to what James has to say about endings. After discussing the allure of an ending, he goes on to note that "stopping-places" in fictions are never entirely natural or easily found:

> We have, as the case stands, to invent and establish them, to arrive at them by a difficult, dire process of selection and comparison, of surrender and sacrifice.[4]

James moves from the idea of endings as the reader's goal to the idea of endings as fundamentally artistic. A proper ending can be established only by a process of "selection and comparison," by artistic arrangement which makes the novel a unified and organic whole. Forster's thinking about fiction expands in similar fashion. For if human curiosity sustains the reading of novels, a completed

novel, he insists, must contain "pattern and rhythm," internal connections which give it meaning and make it art.[5]

Achieving an ending through the selection and comparison that completes a work's pattern and rhythm tests the very artfulness of a writer. As James sees it, skillful endings give readers a sense that the text fully captures life and leaves no relevant aspect of its subject unexplored:

> Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.[6]

Endings enable an informed definition of a work's "geometry" and set into motion the process of retrospective rather than speculative thinking necessary to discern it—the process of "retrospective patterning.'"[7] Moreover, in completing the "circle" of a novel, endings create the illusion of life halted and poised for analysis. Like completed segments of human lives and as representations of them, completed stories illuminate and invite examination of human experiences. In part, we value endings because the retrospective patterning used to make sense of texts corresponds to one process used to make sense of life: the process of looking back over events and interpreting them in light of "how things turned out." Ordinary readers and literary critics share an interest in endings because appreciating endings is one way of evaluating and organizing personal experience.

II

James's "so sustained a system" and Forster's "pattern and rhythm," restate one of the oldest principles in literary criticism, Aristotle's definition of an artistic whole as "that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end."[8] The formal relationship of ending to beginning and middle is what I call the shape of fictions. Interest in the shape of fictions, in the internal structures of a

work, requires the study of novelistic closure, not just of novelistic endings. As I use the term, "closure" designates the process by which a novel reaches an adequate and appropriate conclusion or, at least, what the author hopes or believes is an adequate, appropriate conclusion. My use of the term closure corresponds to what Barbara Herrnstein Smith in *Poetic Closure* calls the "integrity" of a lyric and what David Richter in *Fable's End* calls the "completeness" of an apologue—a sense that nothing necessary has been omitted from a work.[9]

Effective closure cannot be assured solely by the unity or consistency of beginning, middle, and end. Nor need effective closure definitively announce that the work has ended or resolve all the novel's aesthetic and thematic elements. My use of the term thus differs somewhat from Smith's in *Poetic Closure*, in part to include the now familiar tendencies, particularly in Modernist literature, which she calls "anti-closural." My terminology should also be distinguished from Robert Adams' use of the term "closed" to refer to fully resolved meanings.[10] Works that Smith and Adams would call "anti-closural" or "open" can, in my terms, still achieve effective closure. The test is the honesty and the appropriateness of the ending's relationship to beginning and middle, not the degree of finality or resolution achieved by the ending. The word "ending" straightforwardly designates the last definable unit of work—section, scene, chapter, page, paragraph, sentence—whichever seems most appropriate for a given text.

To study closure and the shape of fictions, we begin with the ending, but evaluate its success as part of an artistic whole, as the final element in a particular structure of words and meanings. The discussion of closure includes the discussion of aesthetic shape—verbal, metaphorical, gestural, and other formal patterns. It also includes the study of the themes and ideas embodied in the text and of relevant extratextual contexts that help form those themes and ideas, contexts including the author's life, his times, and his or his culture's beliefs about human experience. To approach fiction by way of closure is not, then, at all narrow. Endings, closures

reveal the essences of novels with particular clarity; to study clo-
sure is to re-create and re-experience fiction with unusual vivid-
ness.

Recognizing the importance of endings, other recent critics have
explored the subject. Frank Kermode's fine *The Sense of an Ending*
has probably been more responsible than any other single work
for initiating renewed critical interest in narrative endings.[11] Ker-
mode's work on endings reflects a general and theoretical interest
in the pattern-seeking tendencies of the human mind. He persua-
sively demonstrates that literary plots and the endings they pos-
tulate resemble other fictions men use to make sense of the world
(in religion, philosophy, the sciences, etc.), and change as men's
ideas about the world do. He nicely documents tension, in all
human fictions, between the desire to mime contingency and dis-
order and the opposing need to create coherence and system.

The Sense of an Ending uses Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *La Nausée*
as a point of departure. In that novel, the narrator, Roquentin,
expresses an idea also known to Herodotus and to the writers of
Greek tragedy: the idea that endings confirm the patterns of both
lives and texts, but are always unknown for lives in progress.[12]
Roquentin insists that "Quand on vit, il n'arrive rien. . . . Mais
quand on raconte la vie, tout change" ("Nothing happens while
you live. . . . But everything changes when you tell about life").[13]
What seem petty details assume significance in narratives because
endings confer coherent structure on the flux of experience. An
ending transforms:

> tout. . . . Les instants ont cessé de s'empiler au petit bonheur
> les uns sur les autres, ils sont hâppés par la fin de l'histoire.

> everything. . . . Instants have stopped piling themselves in
> a lighthearted way one on top of the other, they are snapped
> up by the ending of the story.[14]

Kermode agrees with Roquentin about how a "piece of informa-
tion" assumes significance in a novel:

the beginning implies the end. . . . [A]ll that seems fortuitous
and contingent in what follows is in fact reserved for a later
benefaction of significance in some concordant structure.[15]

Kermode's study is indisputably "major." But it is incomplete
in two significant ways. First, its emphasis on theory results in
a relative distance from actual texts except, perhaps, from *La
Nausée*, hardly a representative novel. Second, as an article by
Roy Pascal has shown, Kermode remains fundamentally ambig-
uous about whether or not reality is purely contingent or contains
inherent principles of order.[16] He sometimes loses sight of how
endings correspond to very ordinary aspects of experience—to, for
example, speculations about our futures in terms of anticipated
"endings" (like marriage, graduation, recovery from or descent
into illness), to retrospective analyses of history or of our pasts
in light of "how things turned out," and to observations of the
lives of others and the endings we project for them.

In his seeming acceptance of Sartre's emphasis on the differences
between living and reading, Kermode ignores other pertinent
analogies between the two. The process of reading without know-
ing endings is, for example, rather like the process of day-to-day
living: we make tentative guesses at direction and meaning by
applying our experience of what the data we encounter usually
lead to and mean.[17] Since first readings involve the continuous
making and revision of guesses, first readings are like the process
of living from moment to moment in the present. Second or sub-
sequent readings—when the question of "what happens next" no
longer pertains with urgency—differ fundamentally from first
readings and resemble the ways in which we experience the past.
Upon rereading, pattern and rhythm—connections between be-
ginning, middle, and end—may be more easily discerned and more
fully understood by the reader. Appreciating such connections
through retrospective patterning provides the primary pleasure of
rereadings, just as reliving the facts or perceiving the patterns in
our lives forms the basis on which we regard our pasts.

III

Two other major studies of closure in the novel are marred by too
narrow a selection of texts or too polemical a preference for certain
kinds of endings. Réné Girard's *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, for
example, discusses in detail only selected novels by Stendhal, Dos-
toevsky, and Proust, but proposes to summarize the nature of all
novelistic conclusions. According to Girard, novels end with "con-
versions" in which the hero recognizes the deceitfulness and me-
diated quality of his desires and thereby comes to share the author's
viewpoint and be *"capable of writing the novel."*[18] Any text that
does not conform to this paradigm is, for Girard, "romantique"
(romance-like), rather than "romanesque" (novelistic). But by
converting the word "novelistic" from a description of literary
type to an evaluation of literary merit by the standards of nine-
teenth-century fiction, Girard forces us to omit too many novels
(especially non-realistic and Modernist ones) from the ranks of
"novelistic" works. More significantly, illuminating though it is
for many texts, Girard's thesis obscures the differences that count
as much as the similarities in novelistic closure.

Another well-known study of how novels end, Alan Friedman's
The Turn of the Novel, reverses Girard's standards. For Friedman,
the "truer ending" is one that endorses "either an ever-widening
disorder or a finally open 'order' which embraces all the opposed
directions on whatever ethical compass it has brought along for
the trip."[19] Thus, endings in which characters and readers finish
with an "open stream of conscience"—with an expanding, unre-
solved moral *consciousness*—are, for Friedman, "good" endings.
Since such endings are more characteristic of Modernist than of
nineteenth-century novels, we must devalue a significant number
of nineteenth-century texts if we accept Friedman's vague, polem-
ical criteria. Indeed, the Modernist bias of critics like Friedman has
virtually destroyed the usefulness of the terms "open" and
"closed" to describe endings, by making "open" a term of appro-
bation, and "closed" a term linked with unadventurous and narrow

didacticism. In the conclusion, I will want to return to Friedman's assumption that newer endings are better endings, since my approach to closure will allow us to see continuities, as well as discontinuities, in strategies of closure.

A special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, reprinted in book form under the title *Narrative Endings*,[20] indicates a continuing preoccupation with endings; at the same time, it reveals the lack of any consistent framework within which to describe narrative endings, and even the lack of any shared sense of what an ending is. We need for closure in the novel what Barbara Herrnstein Smith has provided for closure in poetry: flexible, non-polemical ways to describe endings and strategies of closure. But Smith's *Poetic Closure* cannot really serve as the model for such a study despite the suppleness of Smith's insights and terminology, to which I am often indebted. In *Poetic Closure*, she rapidly and successfully surveys how closure works in a great many poems. In novels, as in lyrics, the process of closure often begins with the work's first lines. But the greater length of novels renders closure a longer, more intricate process in most novels than in most poems. Following that process requires detailed, sustained analyses of representative works, rather than an attempt at a comprehensive survey.

I have chosen to discuss closure in depth for eleven representative novels: *Middlemarch, Bleak House, War and Peace, The Scarlet Letter, Vanity Fair, L'Education sentimentale, The Portrait of a Lady, The Ambassadors, The Golden Bowl, Light in August,* and *The Waves*. Individual chapters sometimes include brief discussions of a number of other texts. The chapter on *War and Peace,* for example, touches on Tolstoy's other novels; that on James's sense of an ending concentrates on *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors,* but briefly surveys endings in many of James's early works. The novels were chosen for their inherent interest and their importance. They were also chosen to give a roughly historical or chronological sense of developments in the novel since 1848— particularly of developments in reader expectations and in authorial

treatment of themes typical of novels (themes like the importance of family life, or the relationship of the individual to society or cosmos).

The endings of these novels follow two common and major formal patterns. Many are epilogues; several are scenes. As defined by the Russian Formalist Boris Eikhenbaum, the epilogue has two formal characteristics: it sets the perspective by a shift in time-scale or orientation; it provides some element of *nachgeschichte* (after-history) for the major characters.[21] Eikhenbaum's definition of the epilogue is more inclusive and less pejorative than the familiar definition of the epilogue, a definition of content based on Henry James's dismissal of the endings to many popular nineteenth-century novels as "a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks."[22] Eikhenbaum's definition allows us to recognize epilogues not just in nineteenth-century novels like Dickens', but also in Modernist works like *Light in August* and *The Waves*. One of its leading practitioners, Henry James, best defines the scenic ending. Modeled after endings in drama, the scenic ending presents a final dialogue between two or more characters, which is intensely focused and usually presented without authorial commentary.

The division of endings into formal kinds like epilogue and scene might satisfy our desire for a description of closural strategies, were it neat enough or informative enough. But as the chapters which follow show, the identification of the form of an ending, while a necessary first step, does not take us far enough in the description of novelistic closure. If we follow Eikhenbaum's definition of the epilogue, for example, all the following major novels end in epilogues: *Pamela, Clarissa, Tom Jones, The Mysteries of Udolpho*, most of Scott's novels, all of Austen's, most of Dickens', *Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Vanity Fair, The Scarlet Letter, The House of the Seven Gables, Madame Bovary, L'Education sentimentale, Middlemarch* and most of Eliot's other novels, *War and Peace, Anna Karenina, The Way of all Flesh, The Waves,*

Women in Love, Light in August, The Sound and the Fury, and many, many others. Even cursory thought about the implications of this list reveals that labeling an ending an "epilogue" does not tell us much. The ending of *Tom Jones* differs significantly from that of *Middlemarch,* and both differ significantly from that of *The Waves.* Too simply used, the formal label "epilogue" can, then, distort our sense of each ending's uniqueness. And, of course, we could substitute at will the names of any three novels using the same form of ending in the preceding statement.

Moreover, a number of these epilogues resemble scenes (some being very similar, in fact, to the purely scenic endings of Henry James), or else include scenic elements. I am thinking here of endings like those of *War and Peace, L'Education sentimentale, Women in Love,* and *Light in August*—all epilogues, but all also scenic to one degree or another. It is fairly easy to define forms of endings distinctly; it is much more difficult to find examples from literature that absolutely fit our definitions. We cannot, then, explain how closure works in novels merely by labeling endings with formal terms like epilogue and scene.

We need to supplement our sense of formal kinds of endings with a collection of terms to describe basic strategies for closure in novels, terms applicable to many forms of endings. Such terms should describe the significant relationships that influence closure: the relationship of the ending to the novel's shape, to the author's preoccupations, and to the experience of the reader. Descriptions of closural strategies should apply equally well to epilogues and scenes, and should indicate the differences between these two formal kinds in their purest forms. Ideally, such terms should also be useful for other forms of endings, and for endings in novels rather different from those I discuss—novels less interested in character and plot, in philosophical and moral issues than those I have chosen, novels (for example) like the recent work of authors like Pynchon and Hawkes. Such terms are possible, though they should be used as descriptive and analytic tools rather than substituted for the analysis of individual texts.

V

We first need a set of terms to describe the relationship of ending to beginning and middle, to the shape of the fiction. We may begin with a geometric metaphor already widely used: the metaphor of *circularity*. When the ending of a novel clearly recalls the beginning in language, in situation, in the grouping of characters, or in several of these ways, circularity may be said to control the ending. One of the most common of closural patterns, circularity may be obvious or subtle, immediately perceived or perceivable only upon retrospective analysis. A familiar and obvious kind of circularity is the "frame" technique common in narratives. When language, situation, or the grouping of characters refers not just to the beginning of the work but to a series of points in the text, we may speak of *parallelism* as the novel's closural pattern. Often less obvious than circularity, parallelism sometimes becomes clear only upon retrospective analysis.

Both circularity and parallelism are geometrical metaphors, and we may use a third geometrical metaphor to describe another closural pattern—*incompletion*. Incomplete closure includes many aspects that suggest circular or parallel closure, but omits one or more crucial elements necessary for full circularity or parallelism. Incomplete closure may result from deliberate authorial choices, or it may result from an inadvertent formal failure, or from some combination of the two. It is quite different from endings that do what students are told never to do at the conclusion of an expository essay—endings that begin a new topic.

When an ending does introduce a new topic, the introduction of that topic (if not incompetent) is usually a deliberate gesture of the kind Smith would call "anti-closural." We can describe this strategy for ending as *tangential*. Because such endings do not lend themselves to detailed analysis, the following chapters include no example of a tangential ending, except for aspects of the ending of *War and Peace*. André Gide's *Les Faux Monnayeurs*, however, provides a well-known example of a tangential ending, one mo-

tivated by the author's wish to end his novel with the sense that it could be continued.[23] In *Les Faux Monnayeurs*, the narrator and main character, Edouard, spends the novel pursuing the adventures of a fascinating boy named Bernard. In the novel's last paragraph, Edouard becomes "bien curieux" (very interested) in getting to know Bernard's younger brother, Caloub. Such a new acquaintance could, theoretically, initiate a totally new novel.

One other kind of closural strategy, similar to the tangential ending, also does not lend itself to detailed analysis and will be largely omitted from the following chapters. The strategy is often that of novelists like Balzac and Zola who wrote *romans fleuves*, novels conceived as part of a larger series of works, in which characters reappear in several texts. Novels that form part of such a series sometimes end with the explicit message, "to be continued." Thus, the last chapter of Honoré de Balzac's *Illusions perdues* (in form an epilogue) refers us to future novels for the fate of the main character:

> As for Lucien, his return to Paris belongs to the domain of the *Scenes of Parisian Life*.[24]

Fyodor Dostoevsky ends *Crime and Punishment*, to which he intended to write a sequel, very similarly:

> He did not know that the new life would not be given him for nothing, that he would have to pay dearly for it, that it would cost him great striving, great suffering.
> But that is the beginning of a new story. . . . That might be the subject of a new story, but our present story is ended.[25]

We may call such a closural strategy *linkage*, since an ending like this links the novel not to its own beginning and middle, but to the body of another, often as yet unwritten, novel.

We need a second set of terms to describe the author's and the reader's viewpoint on the novel's characters and major action at the novel's end. Less numerous than the possible relationships of ending to beginning and middle, the two basic possible points of