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Closure and the novel

Abstract
While writing my PhD thesis about the concept of closure in literature, I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, a usually curable type of cancer that, in my case, has nonetheless developed into a dire prognosis. In this paper I weave literary theory with personal memoir as I attempt to make sense of my life and its possible ending. Fiction helps to make sense of the world by reflecting it and imbuing the reflection with structure and meaning, However, this reflection is illusory, and we face a world far less certain in which we must make meaning for ourselves.
Keywords: memoir, cancer, closure

I

'Begin at the beginning,' advises the King in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 'and go on till you come to the end: then stop' (Carroll 2000: 121). This advice may seem obvious, but it stands in stark contrast with that given by the Water-rat in Oscar Wilde's 'The Devoted Friend', who claims, 'Every good story-teller nowadays starts with the end, and then goes on to the beginning, and concludes with the middle' (Wilde 1994: 27).

As I type this, I'm reading old stories and trying to make sense of my own life – this is what old stories are for – and like my eyes when I read, my mind is drawn ever to the ending. This isn't new. My doctoral studies focused on endings; in my thesis I explore stories about the end of the world. But endings have a more personal relevance to me now. When I was approaching the end of my candidature, I discovered I might also be approaching the end of my life. Completing a doctorate is expected to be a hair-tearing experience. My chemotherapy did the job for me. Now I sit in an oncology ward with poison dripping in my veins. The poison burns. My mind falters. I turn to childish pursuits, to children's stories and cartoons and computer games, as I drift between profound focus and the fog of chemo-brain.

An ending provides reason for whatever precedes it. Imagining an ending provides a sense of finiteness, and allows understanding. In this ultimate state, meaning and purpose can be found. Without an ending, the reader is left always awaiting that final full-stop and always suspecting the possibility of another subordinate clause that will undercut the expected meaning. 'Ultimately ... the passion that animates us as readers of narrative is the passion for (of) meaning,' writes Peter Brooks, and 'this passion appears to be finally a desire for the end' (Brooks 1977: 282). On the other hand, as the Water-rat's comment suggests, contemporary literature often demands a certain obfuscation of that purpose. It demands a complexity that provides both a sense of sophistication and in some way better pretends to represent the complex and confusing state of the real

world, thereby helping to maintain a suspension of disbelief. It is too late in history for neat endings, so the deceitful hand of the author guides readers towards an organised and complete conclusion while simultaneously avoiding their suspicion that the real world does not operate like this.

Real conclusions are not neat, or purposeful. I know this as I watch lives drip drip away around me. I sink into my chair, skeletal arms outstretched to receive the stigmata. Needles go in. But this is the middle; or maybe the end. What was the beginning of my story? I first noticed the lymph node on my neck when it was the size of a pea. Is that the beginning? The cancer had been already inside of me for months before, making me ill, making me cough as I unwittingly grew a nine-centimetre lump in my chest. It would spread to fourteen different sites. Maybe the beginning is some time in my youth, when I unknowingly contracted the Epstein-Barr virus, the exposure to which is highly correlated with developing Hodgkin's lymphoma later in life; but most people contract that virus, so it is a beginning that usually leads nowhere. Does the beginning keep stretching behind us, and out, like the endless beginning of *Tristram Shandy* (Sterne 1986), or is it more like the never-beginning-always-beginning of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (Calvino 1992)? These questions themselves dangle, open without conclusion, and I'm making the same mistakes I point out to my students: Don't pose rhetorical questions, I scrawl in the margins of their papers, I want answers.

Maybe the end is implicit in the beginning; maybe the first act of a death is a birth. Deconstructionist critic J Hillis Miller reminds us, on considering the final unravelling of a plot, that the word ravel actually means both to tangle and to untangle (Miller 1978). To unravel thus has the same meaning as to ravel, or to un-unravel. A plot is constantly unravelling and ravelling, knotting and unknotting. As is sometimes the case with deconstruction, this may have the air of mistaking an arbitrary feature of language for evidence, but it also has the benefit of being true. Novels, and lives, are always beginning and ending.

And in the beginning, it took weeks to convince my doctor I was ending.

'Well, the good news,' she offered as consolation on my diagnosis, 'is that your HIV test came back negative.'

By the time I saw a haematologist and was finally treated, the lump on my neck was the size of a bunch of grapes. Within a few hours of treatment, they had withered and blackened on the vine, but the roots were deep. That was three years ago now. While Hodgkin's is generally known as one of the most curable types of cancer – Larry David called it the 'good Hodgkin's' in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (Gordon 2004) – I have watched my odds of survival drop as relapse follows relapse. My death might already be implicit in my condition. I might already be wandering on past my own ending, like the characters in a post-apocalyptic fiction, searching for meaning and structure, searching for a story.

Those with cancer are often collectors of little stories, little platitudes. We are awash with them. Those people we interact with are given the harsh task of dealing with death, and so they mutter phrases that are often both well-meaning and, well, meaningless. And just as often we, the cancer patients or survivors or whatever you call us, play along. There are those statements that are simply not true, such as 'it can only get better'. There are those that are ultimately dismissive of the situation, and these are most common when it comes to the uncertainties around treatment. Dealing with a high probability of death is very difficult to navigate. It cannot be fairly dismissed, but it is also not an absolute. There are the well-it-might-not-happens and the it-hasn't-happened-yets, which

are both true in their way, yet often come across as dismissive. There is also a whole constellation of variations on you-could-get-hit-by-a-bus-tomorrow – this, in all its forms, somehow reduces the very genuine fear of facing a high probability of imminent death to comparison with a billion-to-one-chance event. If it were a fair comparison, and it is not, it would do nothing to make me feel better; it is not enough to survive the cancer, now I have to deal with a deadly plague of buses. I try not to engage with these platitudes; they force me to explain why they are wrong or meaningless, they force me to focus on the negatives while demanding that focusing on the negatives is somehow inappropriate.

More interesting to me, though, are those little gnomic verses that encompass entire world-views in a form more judicious than haiku. These are the everything-happens-for-a-reasons and the no-one-is-given-more-than-they-can-handles.

The former always upset me as I watched those stricken by disease. It invokes a worldview that justifies good and bad fortune: the bad fortune of those struck by disease and the good fortune of those left unscathed. It is an Oprah spirituality that provides solace to the wealthy, the powerful, the enfranchised and the lucky. In its worst form, it places blame on the victim; they simply did not ‘think positive’ enough, or want it enough, or deserve it enough.

The latter I first heard as I lay in a hospital bed weak and febrile. The room was small but well-kempt, like a hotel room but with a lino floor, for easy clean-ups, and a hospital bed. The window overlooked a newly-minted herb garden and a very small area for children to play, with a blackboard – this was for the adjoining hospice. It was a garden to die for. I had been struck by an unnamed infection that swelled my feet and hands and caused a creeping rash that burst blood vessels and left my feet with brownish, patchy scarring. As I was severely immuno-compromised from the chemo, I was looking at a long stay in hospital. My mind was unfocused and I was losing hope. Each night I awoke numerous times drenched in sweat; I was plugged up to bags of fluid and antibiotics day and night; and they were taking blood every morning to search for the cause of the infection (it was never diagnosed). Recently discovering the severity of my situation, and being faced now with a horrible present as well as an uncertain future, I lay gaunt and pathetic. A woman came to collect my blood; she was smiling and cheerful. We talked a little. She mentioned that it was rare to see someone so young. And she asked if I had had many visitors. I hadn’t. No-one really knows what to do when a young person has cancer.

‘Nobody is given more than they can handle,’ she said, and left with a clutch of vials of my blood.

I later discovered that she sat in her car afterwards, crying, moved by how sad I looked. And I was caught between the sweetness of this seemingly genuine response, and my own cynical knowledge of its meaninglessness, for what does it mean to ‘handle’ something? Specifically, what would it mean to ‘handle’ death? And does it matter? I am not scared of my inability to handle death; I am scared that I will be dead. Everyone ‘handles’ their own death, if to ‘handle’ that means to die. They all stop breathing. Is there any better way?

II

All lives end. Achieving closure, though, is more than merely ending.

Take, for example, the form of the novel. All novels end. They all have a final page. These ends are also the temporal-spatial limits of the world invoked by the words of the text. To walk to the tip of a peninsula may be to walk to the end of the land, the physical border of that land. In the imaginatively created world of a novel, the ending may metaphorically form a final edge, demarking the ends of that world. However, walking to the edge of a landscape does not provide a sense of closure and neither does the simple stopping of a narrative. This definition, of an ending being simply a cessation, or 'negation' as George Eliot puts it (1954: 324), is unable to account for incomplete, open endings, and it cannot account for closure. Closure is the sense that something has not simply ended, but instead has been resolved and is now complete. It is the sense that something *should* be over, which is distinct from it merely being over. It is the sense that something has been designed, that it provides meaning and purpose. It is the sense that something is not just finished, but complete. When a sentence reaches a full stop, it has reached its ending. However, a sentence does not just require a full stop, but also a closed internal structure. A sentence requires a subject and a finite verb. Otherwise, the sentence may be finished, but it is possibly also meaningless and ill-designed. It has ended, but it has not achieved closure.

Closure is the sense that all narrative threads have been tied off, rather than simply cut. The dawn of critical thought on endings, at least in the west, is a few sentences devoted to the subject in Aristotle's *Poetics* suggesting what an ending should be like in a well-designed tragedy. Aristotle proposes an ending is 'that which itself naturally follows something else, either of necessity or for the most part, but has nothing else after it' (Aristotle 2001: 96). This claim makes more sense when placed next to his earlier statement that a tragedy is 'a complete ... action' (96). A tragedy is a singular narrative thread, a complication followed by a resolution: an action and its repercussions, ceasing at the point at which there remains nothing more to be said about that singular action. A single narrative thread may be neatly answered: the scene is set, the complication asks a question, and then the question is resolved in the *dénouement*, the untying.

However, when the threads are tangled, when they attempt to represent the infinite complexities of real life, as in the form of the novel, simple closure seems all the more difficult. For the realist Henry James, a novel is a recreation of life, and in life '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' (James 1934: 5). James's definition departs slightly from Aristotle's narratological model. The word 'relations' suggests that James is not merely talking about narrative complications, but a broader relationship between people, events, locations, ideas and so on. Every person exists within an infinitely expanding social network. Every location sits within a broader landscape. Every idea is founded upon other ideas. Each word, as Ferdinand de Saussure makes clear (1983), is defined by its relationship with other words. The term '*appear*' is also particularly important in James's statement, as it suggests the failure of wholly resolvable endings. No-one ever really ends. Instead, there is merely the *sense* of closure.

What this implies is that closure is always a fiction. Even the beginning and ending of a life are hotly contested issues, in law, in religion and in ethics. Scientifically, there is no clear answer to either. For instance, life exists even before the fertilisation of an egg, the result of which is no more alive or unique than the preceding egg or sperm. This uncertainty stretches out almost infinitely; theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss reminds us that all physical constituents of our bodies predate us and will outlast us: 'Every atom in your

body came from a star that exploded. ... You are all stardust. ....So, forget Jesus. The stars died so that you could be here today' (Krauss 2013). In the graphic novel *Watchmen*, in which destruction is used as an escape from a deterministic world turning towards absolute obliteration, Dr Manhattan goes even further: 'A live body and a dead body contain the same number of particles. Structurally, there's no discernible difference. Life and death are unquantifiable abstracts' (Moore, Gibbons & Higgins 1987: I/21). A cultural or social view may be even murkier again as 'relations stop nowhere', something that Laurence Sterne seems to have realised, and satirised, in the beginning of *Tristram Shandy*, as mentioned above. Similarly, in Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1998), the titular character portrays such a sentiment in the poetic, invented, phonetic language of Riddleyspeak:

> I dont think it makes no diffrents where you start the telling of a thing. You never know where it begun realy. No moren you know where you begun your oan self. You myt know the place and day and time of day when you ben beartht. You myt even know the place and day and time when you ben got. That dont mean nothing tho. You stil dont know where you begun.
> (Hoban 1998: 8)

Death, as I began to explore above, is just as murky. It is a process rather than a liminal moment. Some days, at my worst, I feel that I have already died, that merely a vestige of my old self remains. Yet I still have to fill out the paperwork for my own ending. I have to list my meagre possessions in a will, and contemplate at what point I will consider my own life to be over, and when I might want the machines turned off. On my better days, I remember that I still have real hope of a cure, but even then this could be the death of my old self. It is highly likely that I will be doomed to long-term complications. Even if the worst happens, I still hope that memories of me will live on, I hope that my connections with others will continue to progress my story onwards, even as I resent my life becoming merely the motivation of another protagonist.

Following on from James's suggestions, when more complicated structures are attempted, Aristotle's threads of narrative form a fabric that is, essentially, infinite. The novelist's job, then, is to reflect this infinite fabric of the world, both infinitely large and infinitely small, but to cut it into a finite piece for investigation, and then hem the threads together into a closed network. A novel is a balance of *mimesis*, 'the representation of reality' (Torgovnick 1981: 208), or at least its appearance, and *harmonia*, arrangement (214), or at least its appearance. Both are in opposition. Part of that arrangement is the attempt at the creation of a discrete, finite system. Separated out from infinity, the novel is frozen in time, investigable and understandable. In this way, endings 'create the illusion of life halted and poised for analysis' (209). In order to achieve this, they have 'some principle of organization or design that implies the existence of a definite termination point' (Smith 1968: 2). They must provide an ending that suggests closure.

III

So I found myself clearing out my life and hemming the edges. I tried to finish papers, like this one about closure in the novel, as well as various pieces of fiction and poetry. After a few months off, I even finished my PhD thesis, literally typing through a hair-covered keyboard as the itchy needles fell from my skull.

As I mention above, my thesis deals with death, the death of everything. Specifically, it deals with post-apocalyptic fiction, stories about the end of the world usually via nuclear war or environmental devastation. This includes *The Road* (McCarthy 2007), *Riddley Walker*, and *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (Miller 1971). In these works, the characters grope for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. This is post-apocalypse, and while the Apocalypse is a myth of the great, purposeful ending of all things, these fictions are actually about the failure of the ending, designated by the prefix 'post-'. In these fictions, humanity limps on after an incomplete end, which was really just pointless destruction. Or the inverse occurs: in Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*, humanity is set to become extinct, but 'it's not the end of the world at all ... it's only the end of us [humanity]. The world will go on just the same, only we shan't be in it' (Shute 1958: 89). To write on past the end of the world is to deny closure and metafictively bring attention to the fictional nature of closure, for, in reality, nothing really does end absolutely. All these characters look for meaning, they look for completeness; they look for the closure denied them.

Two competing fears can then be untangled (or unravelled): the fear of the finite and the fear of the infinite. There is the fear of the world ending, of great destruction and death, but there is also the fear of the world failing to end, of the world being infinite, as James suggests, and of disappearing, in relation, into the infinitesimal, like the incredible shrinking man (although it must be acknowledged that the shrinking man eventually finds hope, and God, in the infinitesimal) (Arnold 1957). This desire is expressed through literature, as explored above, but the desire for a finite world is also the desire for some kind of apocalyptic end of the world. This might include a desire for the destruction of the old order, often with vengeance meted out – which is, at least, a key part of Revelation, the influential Christian myth of the end of the world, wherein violent destruction is most often described in joyful terms (Weber 2000: 130). More broadly, though, this is the desire for a meaningful resolution to the world, one with a purpose, and that purpose normally implies some kind of divine plan. And so myths of destructive endings, albeit often with regenerative rebirth, are found throughout the world – the Hindu *Mahāyuga*, for example, or the Viking *Ragnarök* (see Wagar 1982). All these myths find a way of placing a structured, finite and meaningful world within an infinite cosmology.

In fear of the finite, I have tried to outrun the ending. My miraculous early treatments have given way to harsh, life-threatening doses that only have a moderate effect on the cancer. The most brutal so far was an autologous stem-cell transplant, the gold-standard treatment. The transplant involves storing the patient's own stem cells, extracted from his or her blood, and then giving chemo-therapy over five days. The dose is so high as to induce complete failure of the bone marrow. It is essentially a lethal dose of poison. The stem cells are then brought to the patient's private, air-filtered room to be thawed out in a bain-marie, and hooked up to a drip. The hope is that they will rebuild the bone marrow before the patient dies of blood loss or infection, while the patient is supported with blood transfusions and antibiotics. In my case, I was in hospital for two and a half weeks but the slow recovery afterwards took months, and it was almost a year later that my blood counts had become normal. I am told that under a microscope my chromosomes are still a worrying mess.

After a year of remission, and feeling relatively healthy, I began to tire easily, and my stomach felt bloated. Desperately wanting to believe I was fine, I ignored the symptoms until the night-sweats returned.

I sat in the specialist's office and heard the words, 'You have a brother?' and I knew instantly that the next round of treatment would be extreme, that the next transplant would involve a donor. It would carry a high degree of risk and I

would be dealing with the repercussions for the rest of my life. My hands started to sweat.

In fear of the infinite, I rushed to the end of my thesis. Yet, viewed from another angle, the completing of my thesis may well be an attempt to escape death; it may be completely futile attempt at some vague kind of immortality to avoid the feelings of 'radical futurelessness' that Robert Jay Lifton argues is the symptom of the nuclear age (Lifton & Falk 1982: 66). According to Lifton, people need to have some kind of continuity and to feel they are part of an immortal human lineage through children, art, religion and a connection to society – all of which now seem less certain than they once did. For Lifton, this fear of futurelessness leads to a clinging to fundamentalism, including nuclear fundamentalism, which ironically includes the building of more bombs. Jacques Derrida describes similar in his 'Seven Missiles, Seven Missives', and argues that humanity is now (or was in the 1980s) racing towards the end in a battle of brinkmanship, while knowing that the end is merely complete destruction (Derrida, Porter & Lewis 1984). Even within this expression of the fear of the finite, of everything ending, there is still a rush to the end. In the case of my thesis a similar contradiction occurred, for it needed to be made complete and finite in order that it might survive beyond the finite.

Maybe the real fear is not of the ending, but its arbitrary nature. After my initial diagnosis, I was told I was lucky. I even had a glass of champagne, because the alternative diagnoses at that point were dire. I don't feel very lucky anymore. I am in the hands of random chance, and one never knows how lucky one is until the die is not only cast, but landed.

In this vein, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, writing specifically about poetry, suggests that, 'haunted, perhaps, by the spectre of that ultimate arbitrary conclusion, we take particular delight, not in all endings, but in those that are designed' (Smith 1968: 1). And so King Lear, facing his own meaningless death, hopes for the heavens to fall on him so he might join with the divine end of the world. He cries:

> Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
> You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
> Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
> You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
> Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
> Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
> Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
> Crack Nature's molds, all germens spill at once,
> That make ingrateful man! (3.2 ll.1-9)

This is a hope to find a meaningful ending in the Apocalypse. It is not to be, and the mere death of a dynasty becomes an imperfect placeholder. As Frank Kermode, who sees tragedy as frustrated apocalypse, puts it, 'the world goes forward in the hands of the exhausted survivors' (Kermode 2000: 82). If Smith is correct, then fear of the finite and the fear of the infinite can be resolved by the suggestion that they both embody the fear of a structureless, meaningless world, a world lacking purpose and design.

IV

So I seek to outrun death, but I also seek a sense of completeness if it comes. I emptied out my garage, I started selling items on ebay and I organised the linen cupboard, trusty labeller in hand. This may have simply been out of a sense of

boredom, or maybe it was the intense quantities of steroids that woke me at four each morning. It felt like it was something more, though. And I tidied my house and I looked through old boxes, old photos, old books. I relived my life as I packed it all away. A formal portrait of my brother and I wearing Star Wars t-shirts, shortly after a visit to the 'Degobah swamp room'. A copy of *Alice in Wonderland*. A *Sesame Street* journal. A series of boxes full of video game systems and their games. Playing the Nintendo, the Sega Master System and the Commodore 64 are some of my earliest memories of joy, when such games felt communal, when players took turns, and I sat with friends late into the night talking and solving challenges together. Later in life it seemed like I had wasted too much of my time on them.

Just as with the novel, video games also allow escape into a structured world with a creator. If a coin sits right at the edge of the screen, only half exposed, the player knows that it is reachable, somehow, and will attempt to reach it. A boss will have a hidden sweet spot to be targeted. A jump will be placed to be achieved, with perfectly executed keystrokes. An enemy will be within range. The pleasure of playing a game comes with the sense of feeling in safe hands, of being in a meaningful and purposeful world, and of it being solvable. This is something suggested in *That Dragon, Cancer*, a game developed and written by Ryan and Amy Green exploring the loss of their son, Joel, to cancer at the age of five (Green, Green & Larson 2016). Ironically inverting the video game form, *That Dragon* cannot be won; all options lead to death, and all that can be done is pray as the boy ascends to Heaven. Unable to create resolution, the creator hands the job back to faith in a God. This is a faith that I do not possess.

I am typing this in a hospital room. It is seven in the morning and my childish pursuits continue as the Coyote chases the Roadrunner on the television. In a room above, a woman is dying. A 'code blue' is matter-of-factly called over the tannoy.

I know the coyote will fail; I know there is a design. That is part of the fun. The bully will be punished, and the good will survive. How this unravels is usually less certain, but in this case, as the Coyote opens his package, pulls out a spring and places it against a boulder, it is obvious. The boulder is a different colour from the background, suggesting it was drawn separately. It is in the domain of the animators, the inbetweeners and the colourists, with their pre-computer-colour-matching imperfections. The boulder will crush the Coyote. And I am not sure whether I want my disbelief suspended, or if I want the reassuring hand of the creator to be visible. Without a God, a God-author might do.

In one of my boxes, I found a copy of *Super Mario Bros*. (Miyamoto & Tezuka 1985), long-ago committed to muscle memory. The sequel is best left un-mentioned, but the third game, *Super Mario Bros. 3* (Miyamoto & Tezuka 1988), always posed something of a challenge in my youth. Later on I tried to finish it, only to have my Luigi, my girlfriend at the time, break up with me in another fractured and unresolved ending. The failure to finish a book may well be the writer's fault, but the failure to finish a game is the player's. The little deaths, the losing of 'lives', are just incomplete ends that drive the player to start again due to their incompleteness. So, with numb fingers and chemo-brain, and despite it seemingly wasting what may be limited time, I inserted the cartridge and rushed to the end without delay or extension. I had silenced Scheherazade.

V

Closure is the provision of a feeling of nothing more needing to be said, a feeling of being comfortable putting a book down. In this subtle recasting, the emphasis turns to the psychological state of the reader, and the use of the word closure in literary studies may be related to the usage of the word in psychology, which implies the resolution of a trauma. Presumably, most novels do not attempt to create trauma. However, they generally institute a state of emotional uncertainty, an engagement with that uncertainty, and resolution of that uncertainty. Norman Holland suggests that 'plots arouse emotions and endings resolve them' (Holland 2009: 166), before he embarks on a neurological examination of the way that this occurs. DA Miller further suggests that a narrative may pursue happiness, but not achieve it, for narrative is a 'state of lack, which can only be liquidated along with the narrative itself' (Miller 2002: 272). Happiness, in Miller's usage, is a stand-in for closure, release, and resolution of narrative tension:

> Traditional narrative is a quest after that which will end questing; … an interruption of what will be resumed; an expansion of what will be condensed, or a distortion of what will be made straight; a holding in suspense or putting into question of what will be resolved or answered. (272)

To create a narrative requires the creation of tension, and the possibility of resolution drives the narrative forward until that resolution is achieved and the narrative itself abolished. This, of course, seems to be 'a truth generally acknowledged in every manual for aspiring writers – namely, that there must be conflict to generate a story and resolution to end it' (272). Continuing this idea, EM Forster claims that the only objective merit a story can have is 'that of making the audience want to know what happens next', and the only merit of a conclusion is to make the audience cease wanting to know (Forster 1927: 29). Along similar lines, Torgovnick suggests that closure is 'a sense that nothing necessary has been omitted from a work' (Torgovnick 1981: 6). This is the pursuit of happiness, the frustration of that pursuit, and its extinction, that DA Miller conceives as the goal of the traditional novel. The traditional goal of literature, then, is to invite readers into the desire of wanting to know what happens, to then fulfil that desire, and release them.

However, the field of literary studies implies that texts can be re-engaged with, re-questioned and re-read into new times and places. Even with the great tragedies, with their plots unified around the inevitability of an ending, this is the case. *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*, for instance, offer thorough, almost apocalyptic closure. In tragedy, 'all exist[s] under the shadow of the end', to borrow this phrase, a little out of context, from Kermode (2000: 5). The death-ridden *dénouement*s of tragedy are predictable, intractable, and final. Yet these texts have been reengaged with throughout the centuries. They are re-read in new times and places, offering up new questions, new answers. In this respect, all texts are open, or at least all texts exist in oscillation between being closed and open, complete and incomplete. Resolution may always be disrupted by further questioning. Of course, there is selective process at work here as well – those texts that find their way onto university syllabi, for instance, are likely to be those same texts that inspire re-engagement, so that classes continue to be taught and academic papers continue to be written.

Closure can also be un-done by the publication of further material, of sequels, prequels, adaptations and extended universes. This can be an attempt to finally close a text by answering its open questions; there is also, however, also a financial incentive to defer closure or re-open a popular text.

Discussion of closure in the novel, necessarily, is a discussion of the expectations of closure, and of the traditions of closure. It should not be taken as a denial that many novels subvert these expectations: there are always exceptions. Indeed, many novels revel in the failure of closure, yet this still reinforces its importance: the cyclical *Finnegans Wake* (Joyce 1949), the never-starting *If on a Winter's Night A Traveller*, or the multiply ending *French Lieutenant's Woman* (Fowles 1998), fail to meet expectations of closure. This is to say they succeed in their goal of failing to offer simple closure. They still offer a unity of artistry and purpose, which leaves them complete and structured, despite lacking a traditional ending. The final piece still fits into a network of meaning like the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Simultaneously, they remind the reader of the impossibility of real closure, the impossibility of this literary expectation actually being fulfilled and the artifice of literature in general.

Frank Kermode suggests that endings supply a meaning and purpose, that real endings are impossible, and that, therefore, novels supply the sense of an ending that is missing in life. In a similar vein to Henry James's claims, Kermode argues that literature attempts, temporarily, to fool its audience into believing in the possibility of final conclusion. Specifically, his *The Sense of an Ending* suggests that literary endings fulfil the role of the Apocalypse in a world that can no longer believe in an imminent ending (Kermode 2000). Of course, doubt can be cast at the claim that belief in the Apocalypse has waned. For example, the two geo-politically opposed beliefs of American Evangelism and Wahhabism both have strong foundations in a very similar apocalypticism. Kermode, however, focuses his attention on the 'clerkly scepticism' of those who see themselves as too sophisticated to believe in such things, the metaphorical Water-rats. Closure in literature is, in this view, an illusion perpetrated on the reader to make the reader feel, for at least a few moments, that the real world has structure and meaning.

VI

I am often asked how I deal with it, facing the possibility death in my thirties just as my life solidifies around a career and the possibility of a family. The answer is, 'I haven't, I don't.' I try to write memoir, but my overwhelming emotional state is one of complete numbness and, besides, I don't know how the story ends. Even if everything goes right, I will never be the man I was. He is dead and the I that continues will be a vestige, weaker, more vulnerable, on medication forever. And if it goes wrong, the last weeks of my life will not be spent travelling the world or holding my non-existent children. They will be spent wasting away, deformed by swollen glands, in a hospital bed, unable to think. So I focus on what meagre joy can be had today, while being tired and depressed, and with money gushing out of my bank account like my platelet-deprived blood gushes out of my veins. I just live one day at a time, as my former life fragments and dissipates. I let the springtime sun warm my cold hands.

A novel is a simulacrum of life that, unlike the real world, has a distinct beginning, ending and meaning. The form of the novel, as with many other discrete and structured art-forms, allows the defeat of both the fear of the finite and the fear of the infinite. It is a finite form, but, through being structured and closed, a novel gains a meaning and purpose that can outlast its own ending. A novel is both separated out from eternity, while existing complete within it. It is therefore always able to be revived by re-engaging and re-questioning. 'A book

lives as long as it is unfathomed', claims DH Lawrence, 'Once it is fathomed, it dies at once' (Lawrence 1980: 60).

While novels attempt to deceive the reader into maintaining the suspension of disbelief, by obfuscating those endings, and by hiding the hand of the author, there is, ultimately, finiteness, conclusion and a creator. There is thus a double deception, both reinforcing the other yet in tension. While I look to extend my life further, while I hope for the new round of treatment to work, I also find solace in the illusion of a world with structure and purpose. The experience of a world with a creator is comforting. However, such a world gains meaning and purpose through its ending. Despite my claims that novels can extend the finite into the infinite, when these fictions end I return to a world of uncertainty and random chance. I return to a world where, unlike *Super Mario Bros.*, the challenges are not always achievable, where sometimes that final leap for the coin cannot be made regardless of how perfectly the buttons are pushed. My finite life disappears into the infinite world, into a world without a creator, where the only meaning is that which I create myself. That is, where meaning is a fiction, a vital, vital fiction.

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