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J. Hillis Miller

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The Problematic of Ending in Narrative

J. HILLIS MILLER

IT IS NO ACCIDENT that the notion of ending in narrative is difficult to pin down, whether “theoretically,” or for a given novel, or for the novels of a given period. The notion of ending in narrative is inherently “undecidable.”

The impasses of closure in narrative are present already in the terms most commonly used to describe endings. An example is the tradition, going all the way back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, of the use of the image of the knotted and unknotted thread to describe the narrative line. “To every tragedy,” says Aristotle, “there pertain (1) a Complication (δέσις) and (2) an Unravelling, or *Dénouement* (λύσις). The incidents lying outside of the drama proper, and often certain of the incidents within it, form the Complication; the rest of the play constitutes the *Dénouement*.”¹ Where does the complication, folding up, or tying together end and the untying start?

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¹ *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, trans. Lane Cooper (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1947), pp. 58–59. Λύσις is the root of such English words as “analysis” and “paralysis.”

Aristotle suggests the possibility of a narrative which would be all unraveling or denouement, in which the “turning-point” from tying to untying would be the beginning of the narrative proper and all the complication would lie prior to the action as its presupposition. “More specifically,” he says, “by Complication is meant everything from the beginning of the story up to the critical point, the last in a series of incidents, out of which comes the change of fortune; by *Dénouement*, everything from the beginning of the change of fortune to the end of the play. In the *Lynceus* of Theodectes, for example, the Complication embraces the incidents anterior to the drama proper, the seizure of the child Abas, and then the seizure of the parents; the *Dénouement* extends from the indictment for murder to the end.”² By a strange but entirely necessary paradox, the problem of the ending here becomes displaced to the problem of the beginning. The whole drama is ending and beginning at once, a beginning/ending which must always presuppose something outside of itself, something anterior or ulterior, in order either to begin or to end, in order to begin ending. The moment of reversal, when tying becomes untying, can never be shown as such or identified as such because the two motions are inextricably the same, as in the double antithetical word “articulate,” which means simultaneously putting together and taking apart. The tying/untying, the turning point, is diffused throughout the whole action. Any point the spectator focuses on is a turning which both ties and unties. This is another way of saying that no narrative can show either its beginning or its ending. It always begins and ends still *in medias res*, presupposing as a future anterior some part of itself outside itself.

These aporias of closure underlie disagreements among critics about whether a given novel or the novels of a given period exhibit closure or are “open-ended.” These puzzles are present also in the way a given apparently closed novel can, it seems, always be reopened. Virginia Woolf’s evidently definitive treatment of the Dalloways in *The Voyage Out* is reopened much later to produce *Mrs. Dalloway*. Anthony Trollope, a novelist of closure if there ever was one, in the cases of the Basset series and the parliamentary series reintroduces in later novels characters whose lives have seemingly been entirely closed in earlier novels. The apparently tri-

² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

umphant closure of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* has its unity quietly shattered ten years later by the publication of the continuation story, "The Cage at Cranford." "The Cage at Cranford" is in fact a story about the impossibility of closure, of "caging."

"Our tale is now done," says Trollope at the beginning of the last chapter of *The Warden*, "and it only remains to us to collect the scattered threads of our little story, and to tie them into a seemingly knot."³ On the other hand, the ending of a narrative or dramatic action is still today spoken of as its resolution or denouement: that is, of course, its untying. The vogue in the seventeenth century of that story of a Byzantine complexity by Heliodorus, the *Aetheopica*, was the pleasure of an untying, the sudden pleasure felt by one caught in a labyrinthine entanglement of mistaken identity and inextricably knotted narrative lines when suddenly he escapes into the full light of day. It is like the explosive release felt when one sees the point of a joke, or the pleasure of the final *éclaircissement*, the "he done it" at the end of a detective story. The contrary pleasure, however, no less intense, is that of closure, the neat folding together of elaborate narrative materials in a single resolution leaving every story line tucked in. Solve, dissolve, resolve—why this blank contradiction in our images of closure in narrative? Why cannot we describe unambiguously the moment of coming full circle in a final revelation at an end point toward which the whole story has been moving, fixing the characters in a new relation, their final destiny? This tying/untying would provide the sense of an ending, casting a retrospective unity over the whole. It is most commonly marriage or death. This ending must, however, it seems, simultaneously be thought of as a tying up, a neat knotting leaving no loose threads hanging out, no characters unaccounted for, and at the same time as an untying, as the combing out of the tangled narrative threads so that they may be clearly seen, shining side by side, all mystery or complexity revealed.

The aporia of ending arises from the fact that it is impossible ever to tell whether a given narrative is complete. If the ending is thought of as a tying up in a careful knot, this knot could always be untied again by the narrator or by further events, disentangled or explicated again. If the ending is thought of as an unraveling, a straightening of threads, this act clearly leaves not one loose thread

³ *The Warden*, Oxford Classics edition (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 259.

but a multitude, side by side, all capable of being knotted once more. If marriage, the tying of the marriage bond, is a cessation of the story, it is also the beginning of another cycle in the endless sequence of generations. "Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending," says George Eliot in *Middlemarch*.⁴ Death, seemingly a definitive end, always leaves behind some musing or bewildered survivor, reader of the inscription on a gravestone, as in Wordsworth's "The Boy of Winander," or in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, or in that mute contemplation of a distant black flag, sign of Tess's execution, by Angel Clare and 'Liza-Lu at the end of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Death is the most enigmatic, the most open-ended ending of all. It is the best dramatization of the way an ending, in the sense of a clarifying *telos*, law or ground of the whole story, always recedes, escapes, vanishes. The best one can have, writer or reader, is what Frank Kermode, in his admirable phrase, calls "the sense of an ending."

Knotted, unknotted—there is no way to decide between these images. The novelist and the critic of novels needs them both and needs them both at once, in an indeterminable oscillation. Trollope, for example, goes on after his neat image of tying up in *The Warden* to open up his story once more in the figure of a speculative or indefinite closure left to the free imagination of the reader: "we have not to deal with many personages, or with stirring events, and were it not for the custom of the thing, we might leave it to the imagination of all concerned to conceive how affairs at Barchester arranged themselves."⁵ Trollope both ties his novel neatly up and opens it to the free imagination of the reader. He leaves it open even to his own imagination, so that the whole sequence of Barset novels can follow over the years. The apparently closed story of Eleanor Bold, for example, is reopened again with the death of John Bold and her courtship by Arabin in *Barchester Towers*.

All this problem of endings is neatly tied within another double antithetical word: ravel. The word ravel already means unravel. The "un" adds nothing not already there. To ravel up a story or to unravel it comes to the same thing. The word cannot be given

⁴ *Middlemarch*, Cabinet Edition (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, n.d.), "Finale," III, 455.

⁵ *The Warden*, p. 259.

a closure by however extravagant a series of doubling negatives attempting to make the initial opening into closure: ravel, unravel, un-unravel, un-un-unravel, and so on. In a similar way, no novel can be unequivocally finished, or for that matter unequivocally unfinished. Attempts to characterize the fiction of a given period by its commitment to closure or to open-endedness are blocked from the beginning by the impossibility of ever demonstrating whether a given narrative is closed or open. Analysis of endings leads always, if carried far enough, to the paralysis of this inability to decide.

Yale University