

Chapter 5

Closure

Conflict: the agon

If, with its immense rhetorical resources, narrative is an instrument of power, it is often about power as well. This is because, in almost every narrative of any interest, there is a conflict in which power is at stake. You might say that conflict structures narrative. The ancient Greek word for conflict (actually “contest” is closer) is *agon*, and how the *agon* played out formed the spine of any Greek tragedy. The presence on stage of a chorus reinforced awareness of the *agon* as the chorus debated with itself during the course of the play, one side of the chorus pitted against the other (Woody Allen richly satirized the role of the chorus in his *Mighty Aphrodite* [1995]). Characters in the narrative of Greek tragedy were assigned roles in the *agon*. Thus, there was a “protagonist” (hero) and an “antagonist” (the hero’s chief opponent). Conflict in narrative, of course, does not necessarily take the form of a clear opposition of good guys and bad guys (though this is one defining feature of *melodrama*). And in many narratives, there is more than one conflict at play.

The *agon*, or conflict, has been so central a feature of narrative throughout its recorded history that it is reasonable to assume that it serves important cultural purposes. One very plausible possibility is that the representation of conflict in narrative provides a way for a culture to talk to itself about, and possibly resolve, conflicts that threaten to fracture it (or at least make living difficult). In this view of narrative, its conflicts are not solely about particular characters (or entities). Also in conflict, and riding on top of the conflict of narrative entities, are conflicts regarding values, ideas, feelings, and ways of seeing the world. There is, of course, no culture without many such conflicts. Narrative may, then, play an important social role as a vehicle for making the case for one side or another in a conflict, or for negotiating the claims of the opposing sides, or simply for providing a way for people to live with a conflict that is irreconcilable (as, for example, the conflict between the desire to live and the knowledge that we have to die). *Hamlet*, for example, features a set of conflicts between certain characters – Hamlet and his mother, Hamlet and his uncle, Hamlet and

Ophelia, Hamlet and Laertes – but it also deals with a complex set of cultural conflicts centered on the issue of revenge. In Chapter Twelve, I will take up this idea of a culture using narrative as an instrument to think about difficult issues. In this chapter, I want to focus more narrowly on the rhetorical impact of both the presence and the absence of closure in narrative.

Closure and endings

When a narrative resolves a conflict, it achieves closure, and this usually comes at the end of the narrative. We expect stories to end. We talk about good and bad, satisfying and unsatisfying endings. There are, for example, stories that snap shut at the end.

Taboo

His guardian Angel whispered to Fabian, behind his shoulder:
 “Careful, Fabian! It is decreed that you will die the minute you pronounce the word *doyen*.”
 “Doyen?” asks Fabian, intrigued.
 And he dies.¹

In this very short story, the conflict between an implacable decree and the unthinking wonderment of youth is resolved decisively when the fulfillment of the decree coincides with the last word of the narrative. Here’s another:

Bedtime Story

“Careful, honey, it’s loaded,” he said, re-entering the bedroom. Her back rested against the headboard. “This for your wife?”
 “No. Too chancy. I’m hiring a professional.”
 “How about me?”
 He smirked. “Cute. But who’d be dumb enough to hire a lady hit man?”
 She wet her lips, sighting along the barrel. “Your wife.”²

These are rather wonderful narratives, and certainly one of the things (if not *the thing*) that makes them work so well is how decisively they end. In each there is a clear (though not necessarily simple) conflict which is resolved emphatically with the final words of the narrative.

But closure does not have to come at the end of a narrative; in fact, it does not have to come at all. So it is important to keep the two concepts – the ending and closure – distinct.

Must narratives end?

Aristotle wrote that the well-made tragedy has a beginning, a middle, and an end. But this was an evaluation rather than a definition. Soap operas, by contrast, can go on forever. Some sagas, myth cycles, comic strips, TV series seem also to have no proper end. And the phenomenon of the “prequel” (the opposite of the sequel) suggests that even beginnings are not sacred, but can be pushed back endlessly into the past. Much as we, like Aristotle, want shape in our narratives we seem also frequently content with postponing the end – and therefore some final perception of narrative shape – indefinitely.

Closure, suspense, and surprise

The term “closure” can refer to more than the resolution of a story’s central conflict. It has to do with a broad range of expectations and uncertainties that arise during the course of a narrative and that part of us, at least, hopes to resolve, or close. Closure is therefore best understood as something we look for in narrative, a desire that authors understand and often expend considerable art to satisfy or to frustrate. If the object is to satisfy this desire – which is often the case – it can’t be satisfied too quickly, because we seem also to enjoy being in the state of imbalance or tension that precedes closure. In fact, narrative is marked almost everywhere by its *lack of closure*. Commonly called *suspense*, this lack is one of the two things that above everything else give narrative its life. The other thing is *surprise*. All successful narratives of any length are chains of suspense and surprise that keep us in a fluctuating state of impatience, wonderment, and partial gratification. We are held this way until the final moment of closure, though there are also instances, and not infrequently, when a narrative will fail to close altogether. And this, too, can have its satisfactions.

Decoding narrative. It will help at this point to refer to Roland Barthes’s argument in his book *S/Z* that, just as we bring to a sentence a complex set of linguistic codes by which we understand it, so we bring to any readable narrative a set of narrative codes. These codes are necessary, not just to make sense of the narrative, but to extract meaning from it. He argues that there are five fundamental codes that author and reader share in order to make a narrative readable. Two of these codes that are especially applicable to us here are what Barthes called the “proairetic code” – having to do with expectations and actions – and what he called the “hermeneutic code” – having to do with questions and answers. In these two codes, Barthes referred

to the ways in which narratives arouse both expectations and questions, and then either give us satisfaction or frustrate us. This is where the presence or absence of closure comes in. If expectations are fulfilled or questions answered, we say that closure occurs. Adapting Barthes, we can identify two important levels at which suspense and closure occur in narrative: the *level of expectations* and the *level of questions*.

Closure at the level of expectations

At the level of expectations we recognize, by numerous signals, the kind of action or sequence of events that we are reading (revenge, falling in love, escape, murder, a bad dream). Once actions start in a certain way, we expect what follows to be consistent with the overall code. When a beautiful young woman like Cinderella meets a handsome young prince, we expect falling in love to follow. Moreover, we see these two successive events as one part of an overall sequence of events, a *genre*, which in common language is called "romance" and which often but not always closes with marriage. It may seem coldly inappropriate to speak of such an event involving such lovely people as part of a code, but it is nonetheless true that we learn at a very early age to read and decode not just words but whole patterns like the genre of romance. This is another way to look at masterplots: as coded narrative formulas that end with closure. When the beautiful young woman is relocated from romance to the genre of tragedy, as Cordelia is in *King Lear*, we expect a very different kind of closure from romance. Depending on her role in the tragedy, we might well expect the worst. When at the end, Lear finds Cordelia dead in her cell and then dies himself, painful as this is, it fulfills expectations that have been built into the play. You could call it a painful satisfaction.

At least these expectations seem to be "built in" to the play, especially to modern viewers of *Lear* who come to the play for the first time, having heard what a bleak tragedy it is. But half of what gives life to expectations in narrative is their violation, for which the common word again is surprise. Conversely, directors, screen-adapters, audiences themselves, can force a story to conform to expectations. After all, the earliest version we have of Shakespeare's *Lear* does not refer to itself as a tragedy. And renaissance audiences, familiar with *Geoffrey of Monmouth's King Leir*, would have fully expected both Lear and Cordelia to live. So Shakespeare surprised his audience with his version of the story in a way that we can't be surprised since we are so familiar with the tragic version. Later, in 1681, Nahum Tate rewrote the conclusion of *King Lear*, not only saving Cordelia's life but also marrying her off to Edgar (who may not have been a prince but

was certainly well born, unlike his wicked sibling). That version held the English stage for the next 160 years. Purists may object that this ruined the tragedy, but then Shakespeare could be said to have "ruined" Geoffrey of Monmouth's *King Leir* when he decided to kill both Lear and Cordelia.

With regard to expectations, then, there appear to be two imperfectly balanced needs: on the one hand to see them fulfilled, on the other to see them violated. When, at the end of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Kim Novak falls for real from the mission tower, the audience's lingering expectations that it is watching one kind of romantic thriller – the kind with a happy ending – are rudely violated with a closure that retroactively instates a much darker genre. For some, this makes the film a hard one to see twice; for others, it is a stroke of genius. The extraordinary Dutch film, *The Vanishing* (1988), cast as a romantic quest to rescue a kidnapped lover, sickeningly violates expectations when the hero is buried alive at the end. Difficult as the film is to watch, however, the conclusion can be seen to be in accord with the dark moral obsession of the hero's deeply disturbed killer. In both of these films (at least for those for whom they work), the surprise of the conclusion casts a light backward over the whole film, giving it a new shape and tone as the sense of surprise wears away and the ending is seen to fit.

Certainly the key to suspense is the possibility, at least, that things could turn out differently. And surprise, which is such a common feature of successful narrative, is what happens when, to a degree, things do turn out differently. But for any audience there is a range of what they will tolerate in the way of surprise. When the same director (George Sluizer) remade *The Vanishing* for Hollywood in 1993, the producers gambled that a large American audience would not tolerate the original ending. Such at least was Hollywood's assessment when they gave it a happy ending, but the remake was not a box-office hit either. Meanwhile, *Vertigo*, which also did poorly when it was released, has aged into a classic and for some is Hitchcock's masterpiece.

So it is important to note that words like "code" and "formula" may work in describing how expectations are aroused, but they fail when applied to narrative itself. Codes and formulas thrive on their inflexibility. Because the Morse Code is always dependably unchanging, it could be relied on in the days of telegraphy. Likewise, the formula for methyl alcohol can be depended on so long as it stays the same. Change it ever so slightly and you've got a formula for something else. Were narrative to operate in the same way, we would have nothing but stereotypes and wooden clichés for our literature. Indeed, one could argue that, for there to be any kind of success in narrative, the codes and formulas that go into it have to be sufficiently flexible to permit all kinds of variation in the details. This would include not just variation in the things inessential to the story (*setting, supplementary events*) but variations in treating the story's *constituent events* as well. So Barthes was describing not

how a narrative necessarily should turn out but what we expect as we read or watch. And, of course, without expectations in the first place we could not appreciate the variations. Yet this brings up a further difficulty with the word "code," since one of our expectations in almost all narratives of any complexity, is that our expectations will turn out to have been anywhere from inadequate to completely wrong. We expect, in short, to be surprised. This is still a dark area in the study of cognition, so in this book, I have avoided the connotations of "code" by using the word "level," as in the phrase "level of expectations."

Chekhov's famous advice

Chekhov told an aspiring writer: "If in the first chapter you say that a gun hung on the wall, in the second, or third chapter it must without fail be discharged."³ This is a famous piece of advice and it has been repeated in many different versions ever since. But it is worth distinguishing between two ideas that are packed into this statement: first, that the mere presence of a gun arouses expectations that it will be used and, second, that an author must fulfill those expectations. The first is probably quite right, but the second seems to be a pretty mechanical rule. In fairness to Chekhov, he may have been overstating to make the point that authors must include only those elements in their stories that contribute to the overall affect ("Everything that has no direct relation to the story must be ruthlessly thrown away"). But certainly one can think of all kinds of ways that a gun introduced in Chapter One might *never* go off, and with great success. There could be, for example, a prolonged struggle at the end of which we discover that the gun isn't loaded, or, after many threats to shoot, a desperate would-be assassin throws the gun out of the window, or the gun produces a little flag with the word "Bang!" written on it, or it turns out to be a chocolate gun and is eaten after the quarreling lovers kiss and make up. So, yes, "discharging" is certainly something that a gun stands for in our minds, since we know that discharging is what guns are made to do. But narrative can succeed in many ways, not just by delaying the discharge (suspense) but by happily frustrating it altogether (surprise).

Closure at the level of questions

If at the level of expectations we anticipate what will happen, at the level of questions we anticipate enlightenment. These two may look alike and they

may work very closely together. But they are also opposite. At the level of expectations, we lay down tracks in our mind for the ways in which the action will develop. These can be short little tracks for small pieces of action (now she is going shopping, now they are going to fall in love) or long tracks of *genres* and *masterplots* (this is a tragic story and it will close with the death of the protagonist). We can be surprised when our expectations are not fulfilled, but then usually, if the narrative isn't over yet, new expectations rush in on new tracks. Finally, as we saw with regard to *Vertigo* and the original *Vanishing*, a surprise at the conclusion can, if it works, reveal retrospectively tracks running through the narrative that we had not fully picked up on.

At the level of questions, we seek enlightenment. Who did it? Who killed Councilman Stubbs? At the level of expectations, we recognize that we are heading into the investigation of a crime and we expect that it will end with a revelation of the murderer. But at the level of questions, we want to know who did it. This is another kind of suspense in narrative. The level of questions is also a level of answers. Just as there can be a steady stream of questions, so too there can be a steady stream of answers. These answers may not be the right answers. They could be red herrings – a likely murderer but not the real one – as is frequently the case over the course of a mystery. Or they may be partial answers. But this thread of information (and disinformation) keeps us going until the narrative (in most cases) provides the answer and closure comes. A mystery story is only the most obvious genre in which the level of questions is activated. In reality, that level is activated in all narratives, and right from page one, or scene one, or shot one. Where are we? What's going on? Who are these people? What is their relationship? What do they want? But there are also larger questions that frequently come into play. In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, large questions are pursued throughout the novel's 900 pages in a running debate that weaves in and out of the story's events. The most pressing of these questions is whether or not, in the cosmic scheme, anything and everything is permitted (even murder).

The absence of closure

Critics disagree about whether this question is answered by the time you have come to the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*. But the fact that closure does not have to happen in narrative makes it especially important to keep closure separate from the formal concept of an ending. Here, for example, is a short, fascinating narrative by Franz Kafka that ends quite emphatically but does not close the questions that it raises.

A Common Confusion

A common experience, resulting in a common confusion. A has to transact important business with B in H. He goes to H for a preliminary interview, accomplishes the journey there in ten minutes, and the journey back in the same time, and on returning boasts to his family of his expedition. Next day he goes again to H, this time to settle his business finally. As that by all appearances will require several hours, A leaves very early in the morning. But although all the surrounding circumstances, at least in A's estimation, are exactly the same as the day before, this time it takes him ten hours to reach H. When he arrives there quite exhausted in the evening he is informed that B, annoyed at his absence, had left half an hour before to go to A's village, and that they must have passed each other on the road. A is advised to wait. But in his anxiety about his business he sets off at once and hurries home.

This time he covers the distance, without paying any particular attention to the fact, practically in an instant. At home he learns that B had arrived quite early, immediately after A's departure, indeed that he had met A on the threshold and reminded him of his business; but A had replied that he had no time to spare, he must go at once.

In spite of this incomprehensible behavior of A, however, B had stayed on to wait for A's return. It is true, he had asked several times whether A was not back yet, but he was still sitting up in A's room. Overjoyed at the opportunity of seeing B at once and explaining everything to him, A rushes upstairs. He is almost at the top, when he stumbles, twists a sinew, and almost fainting with the pain, incapable even of uttering a cry, only able to moan faintly in the darkness, he hears B – impossible to tell whether at a great distance or quite near him – stamping down the stairs in a violent rage and vanishing for good.⁴

What closes here is the sequence of action. By mid-narrative, we have enough cues to recognize that this is a world of nightmare and to anticipate that, accordingly, things are not going to turn out well for A. Readers familiar with Kafka might guess this from the author's name alone. Sure enough, the chain of frustration and failure achieves closure with the angry departure of B and the despair of A. But along the way, all kinds of questions (with competing possible answers) have been raised in the reader's mind. Who are these people? What business do they have with each other? Is there more to this relationship? Why is the trip sometimes hard and sometimes easy? Why did A not recognize that B had arrived at his own house? Why can't A cry out? And how on earth, to go back to the title, is this a "common confusion"? The ending not only fails to close these questions, but opens them up even wider.

Kafka is an extreme example. In his world, little is ever known for sure, though some would argue that, at least on the level of metaphysical wonderment ("What are we here on earth for?", "Who is in charge?", "Why

is there needless suffering?", "Why do we often feel guilty for no reason?"), the lack of closure in a Kafka narrative is an accurate representation of our general condition on this planet. But there are also those who argue that any truly valuable narrative is "open" to some degree. *King Lear* may close with tragic finality at the level of expectations, but some of the issues raised during the course of the play are left open at the end. For example, at one point, Gloucester in despair says,

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,
They kill us for their sport. (IV, I, 38–39)

And though there is much in the narrative to support this view, the issue of whether or not any being or beings control our fates and, if so, whether they "sport" with us in this cruel way seems to remain permanently open by the end of the play. And this openness is not necessarily a bad thing. By not closing, the plays of Shakespeare, like so many other powerful narratives, don't tell us what to think but cause us to think. Narrative as such, to borrow a line from I. A. Richards, is a "machine to think with."⁵ Conversely, we tend to think of narratives that close the issues they raise, or at least close them too easily, like satire or children's fables, as lesser works, with modes like advertising and propaganda, which seek to close unequivocally, somewhere near the bottom. But this raises in turn yet another vexed issue. Is there something necessarily wrong or inferior about a narrative that closes with moral clarity? Conversely, isn't it an easy thing to build confusion into one's narrative? In short, the presence or absence of closure by itself can not be taken as a standard of narrative failure or success.

The peril of buying a story

Stockbrokers sometimes talk about clients who make the mistake of buying a story rather than a stock. These are people who hold on to dead or moribund stocks because they have become caught up in the story of the stock. What such people want is for this story to close in the right way, with a recovery and eventual ascent to the point where the buyer makes a profit. So strong is this investment in the story of the stock that the investor forgets where her or his best interest lies (e.g., abandoning the story of the stock and investing the money in securities that show promise).

What we can say is that closure is something we tend to look for in narratives. We look for it in the same way that we look for answers to questions or fulfillment to expectations. This would appear to be a natural human

inclination. For this reason, the promise of closure has great rhetorical power in narrative. Closure brings satisfaction to desire, relief to suspense, and clarity to confusion. It normalizes. It confirms the masterplot. At the same time, we don't want closure too quickly. We seem to like the experience of remaining in doubt while moving toward closure. But even as I write this, I have to stop and remind myself that "we" refers to an immense number of very different people. Some of us demand closure and have little tolerance for narratives that don't provide it. Others prefer Kafka. Most of us have a broad range of narrative tastes, depending on our moods. If I pick up a mystery to read on the plane, chances are I am going to be disappointed if I don't eventually learn who killed Councilman Stubbs. But then, to complicate matters even further, some of us can find closure where others cannot. In other words, we read in different ways. So far we have been discussing the rhetorical power of narrative, but power also resides in the reader. We will take up this subject in Chapter Seven when we directly address the issue of **interpretation**. But before we get there, we need to look at yet another set of considerations that seem to be part of the text (what some call "formal" considerations) having to do with **narration**, that is, "the telling of a story."

Recommended secondary reading

There are a number of good works devoted to the subject of closure in narrative. Among these are Mariana Torgovnick's *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton University Press, 1981), David H. Richter's *Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1974), and Russell J. Reising's, *Loose Ends: Closure and Crisis in the American Social Text* (Duke University Press, 1996). A major work on the general human tendency to project a cosmic masterplot with satisfying closure at its end is Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*. My distinction between closure (or the lack of it) at the level of expectations and closure at the level of questions is indebted to Roland Barthes's brilliant anatomy of how we read narrative, *S/Z*. A good book on suspense in narrative is Eric Rabkin's *Narrative Suspense*.

Additional primary texts

There is hardly a narrative that is not powered by a story of conflict, and there are numerous longer works – notably among nineteenth-century French and English novels – that feature several conflicts, often in progress over the same story time. The first two-thirds of the English nineteenth century also saw the production

of many novels – by Austen, Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Trollope and others – in which it appears by the end of the novel that the *implied author* is seeking closure not only on the level of expectations but on the level of questions as well. In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, these same novels – among them *Emma* (Austen, 1816), *David Copperfield* (Dickens, 1849/50), *The Moonstone* (Collins, 1868), *The Eustace Diamonds* (Trollope, 1873) – were opened up in readings by a whole range of critics who, despite their differences, were intent on refuting easy assumptions about the kind of wisdom that such novels communicate. This latter day attention to complexity and ambiguity seems to have flowed in the wake of the energetic experimentalism of twentieth-century writers, many of whom were determined to frustrate the quest for closure. Among these are André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* (1925), Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1952), Alain Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth* (1959), Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and Michael Joyce's hypertext novel *Afternoon: a Story* (1987/93). Among the narratives that I personally have found most challenging with regard to the question of closure, because they seem capable of yielding strongly built, yet conflicting, interpretations, are Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1849), Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1863), Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and John Guare's play and film, *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990/93). There are many more.

In this chapter, I have tended to stress problems at the level of questions, but there are certainly examples of authorial challenge at the level of expectations. The best, I think, is *Great Expectations* (1860/61), for which Dickens wrote two quite different conclusions. The first satisfied Dickens's own sense of what the novel has led us to expect; in it, Pip and Estella part without marrying. The other is the one that Bulwer-Lytton persuaded Dickens was the only one his readership would accept; in it, Pip sees "no shadow of another parting" from Estella.

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S/Z - PQ2169 R4 B3

Loose Ends - PS169 S57 R45 (50)

Fable's End - PN3448 P8 R5x (20)

Closure in the novel - PN3378 T6 (20)

Music Library: MT6 H583 (6)