

“How Do I Stop this Thing?”

Closure and Indeterminacy in Interactive Narratives

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[Conventional novelistic] solutions are legitimate inasmuch as they satisfy the desire for finality, for which our hearts yearn, with a longing greater than the longing for the loaves and the fishes of this earth. Perhaps the only true desire of mankind, coming thus to light in its hours of leisure, is to be set at rest.¹

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Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back.²

Just how essential is closure to our readings of narratives? Do we read narratives to satisfy our need for the closure denied to us in our everyday lives, as both Conrad and Benjamin have argued? Is closure essential to the pleasure we take

in reading narratives? Or is closure integral to both narrative aesthetics and poetics, as Peter Brooks has insisted? Using the sentence as a paradigm of narrative structure, Brooks argues that in narratives “the revelation of meaning. . . occurs when the narrative sentence reaches full predication”(20). Just as sentences are incomplete without their predicates, narratives without closure are like sentences which include only the subject and not the “action” of a sentence. Closure, in this view, completes the meaning of a story: “[o]nly the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality”(22). It is the anticipation of this closure, Brooks argues, that enables us to interpret the narrative as we read through it. Although Brooks bases his poetics primarily on readings of nineteenth century fiction and not on existing models of reading, his theory parallels psycholinguist Frank Smith’s concept of prediction as the keystone to the act of reading. The act of prediction enables us to move forward in our reading and causes us to continually modify our responses to the text based on our predictions. It also causes us to turn pages because, as Brooks notes, “the anticipation of retrospection [is] our chief tool in making sense of the narrative” (23).

As the experiences of readers engaged in reading interactive narratives for the first time have revealed, “strong” or “inner-directed” readers can substitute the metaphor of the map for the metaphor or trope of the text which we understand, Brooks claims, through the chain of metonymies stretching through the narrative, binding beginning and middle alike to the ending.³ Inner-directed readers may base their interpretations on the significance of the spaces occupied by narrative segments as they navigate through the structure of a text like Stuart Moulthrop’s “Forking Paths,” an interactive fantasy on Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “The Garden of Forking Paths.” And they may even decide when their readings of the narrative are complete, based on their reconstructions

of the narrative as a virtual, three-dimensional structure. But this, nonetheless, doesn't resolve the issue of how the suspension of closure affects reading at a local level. Do we read for closure anyway, even though the structure of hypertext narratives may displace it? Can we read entirely without a sense of closure, and, if we do, can the displacement of closure affect the reasons why we read narratives?

Classical Closure and Twentieth Century Print Narratives

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.

—Henry James, preface to *Roderick Hudson*.

It is no coincidence that critics such as Brooks, Frank Kermode, and Walter Benjamin insist on closure as an essential component—perhaps *the* essential component—in narrative poetics. Contemporary concepts about the role of endings or closure derive some of their authority from the earliest written example of poetics, Aristotle's simple definition of story as an aggregate of beginning, middle, and ending. For Aristotle, the definition of plot, or what we might call “story”, is “a whole. . . [with] a beginning, a middle, and an end” where the beginning “does not itself follow anything by causal necessity” and the ending “itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it.”⁴ In the same vein, Kermode argues that the

provision of an ending “make(s) possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle,” thereby giving “meaning to lives and to poems.”⁵ But the ending need not necessarily be physically provided by the text itself (or announced by a lengthy newspaper obituary) in order to endow meaning on the life or narrative that has proceeded it because, as readers of texts and of lives, we create “our own sense of an ending” by making “considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns” (17). Endings, in other words, either confirm or invalidate the predictions we have made about resolutions to conflicts and probable outcomes as we read stories, watch films, or speculate about the lives of others. While the “coherent patterns” articulated by Kermode dimly echo Brooks’s flow of metonymies, they also suggest Smith’s concept of readerly predictions as the action that enables comprehension.⁶

For Smith, readers use hypotheses to limit ambiguity or uncertainty in their understanding of the text, and it is these inferences that enable readers to assemble the meaning of a text. For Kermode, however, we form hypotheses about the present in order to anticipate the ending that will, in turn, confer meaning and significance on the hypotheses. Like Brooks’s “anticipation of retrospection” (23), Kermode’s act of reading is endlessly recursive, continually building a structure that presupposes an ending that, in turn, modifies the building of the structure. Brooks takes this still further, making closure the limitation on narrative that defines its shape and significance:

[A]ny narrative plot, in the sense of a significant organization of the life story, necessarily espouses in some form the problematic of the talisman: the realization of the desire for narrative encounters the limits of narrative, that is, the fact

that one can tell a life only in terms of its limits or margins.

The telling is always *in terms* of the impending end (52).

Significantly, Brooks, Kermode, and Benjamin use closure as the single entity that confers cohesion and significance on narratives in a way that strongly suggests that the experience of narrative closure numbers among the principle pleasures of reading narratives—at once showing us how closure both prompts and enables us to read.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that all three writers also typically concern themselves with what we might define as “classical” narratives, texts which all predate the modern and post-modern eras. Although Kermode touches briefly on Robbe-Grillet, acknowledging that the “reader [of Robbe-Grillet] is not offered easy satisfactions, but a challenge to creative co-operation” (19), he concerns himself chiefly with fictions that have determinate closure—endings that are paradigms of an apocalyptic and definitive end. Discussing Robbe-Grillet’s *In the Labyrinth*, he is only with difficulty able to grapple with the concept of the novel representing a conceptual labyrinth that continually violates our expectations of narratives—a text that provides none of the continuity, coherent patterns, or closure endemic to works from which (and upon which) Kermode bases his textual aesthetics. “[T]here is no temporality, no successiveness. . . [t]his is certainly a shrewd blow at paradigmatic expectations,” Kermode writes, then dismisses the Robbe-Grillet’s work as simply “very modern and therefore very extreme” (21).

But neither Kermode, nor Benjamin, nor Brooks can explain how readers make their way through Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter,” Julio

Cortazar's *Hopscotch*, or John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—all of which contain multiple and therefore highly indeterminate endings—or even Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, where the novel concludes abruptly immediately before the solution of the central “mystery” around which the narrative revolves. Further, all three critics deal with nineteenth century narratives where story and narrative are conventionally bound inextricably together. But in twentieth century fiction stories may “end” long before the narrative finishes on the last page of a book, making it difficult for us to perceive just to which “ending” it is that Brooks, Benjamin, and Kermode refer. While it is certainly true that readers of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* proceed through the novel wondering if Catherine will ever be united with her beloved Henry, I can work my way forward through Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* already knowing, perhaps not the end of the narrative itself, but certainly the “end” of the story, the events that take place at the very limits of its chronology.

With more than one-third of the narrative's bulk remaining, I learn that both Edward Ashburnham and Florence are already dead, and that Nancy, mad and vacant, has been entrusted to Dowell's care. In a series of flash-backs which direct the action of the novel, Leonora and the novel's narrator, Dowell, meditate on the successions of deceptions practised by their two dead spouses, with Leonora's revelations informing Dowell's gradually evolving sense of the events he relates. In *The Good Soldier*, we do not discover closure in the “ending” of the story—which we learn less than two-thirds of the way through the narrative. Instead, we find closure in the way in which the narrative gradually confirms our conjectures, in the way that Leonora's fully informed viewpoint eventually endows Dowell's blissfully ignorant perspective with a complete knowledge of the events he has witnessed.

Similarly, what are readers to make of Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth* which continually reverses our expectations from sequence to sequence, and from paragraph to paragraph—and even, occasionally, from sentence to sentence? A soldier walks through the streets of an unnamed town, carrying a box. He is lost; he is in his barracks dormitory. He is merely tired; he is mortally wounded. He is a figure in a photograph; he is a figure in an engraving; he is a soldier trudging through snowy streets. The engravings and photographs come to life; the sequences we read may or may not have happened—in fact they may not even be probable. At the end of the narrative, a doctor identifies the contents of the dead soldier's box; at the end of the narrative, the soldier and his box appear in an engraving and the narrative takes up again where it first began, with descriptions of the interiors of dusty rooms and the snow falling silently outside.

In Robbe-Grillet's novel, as well as in *The Good Soldier*, closure in the conventional sense has been displaced. The novel's end, like a labyrinth, simply draws us back to its beginning without either confirming, negating, or resolving any of the tensions, questions, and hypotheses we may bring to our reading of the narrative. Whatever the narrative offers in the way of goal-seeking—the soldier's attempt to orient himself in a strange location, or the mission behind the box he clutches to him—is never resolved in the narrative. In narratives such as Robbe-Grillet's, where the referents for pronouns may change within the space of a paragraph, it is difficult for readers to establish any sense of causal relationships between characters' actions or narrative episodes. Contrary to the view of the relationship between expectation and causal relationships in reading expressed by some psycholinguists, our sense of causal reasoning in the narrative is not simply driven by expectations.⁷ Instead, our perceptual proclivity toward

seeing connections and causal relationships prompts us to form the expectations that, in turn, help us comprehend what we read.

When these are violated at every turn, as they are in *In the Labyrinth*, we call upon our knowledge of narrative conventions to hold our reading of the text together. As readers, we expect characters to remain constant throughout the narrative: we don't, for example, expect the soldier we follow through the streets to metamorphose into someone else as we follow him—as he does in Robbe-Grillet's novel. We expect that shifts in time and place will be signalled by transitions or descriptions that physically pursue characters as they move from one setting to another. We expect to learn about the most important events in the story through the narrative. But in Robbe-Grillet's narrative, we discover the soldier is wounded without having learned just how or when this may have happened. The ending of the novel prompts me to recognize its structure as a textual labyrinth, but it is the continual subversion of my narrative expectations throughout the novel that gradually induces me to see the narrative as a form of anti-narrative, a gesture that reveals to me the nature of the unseen elements for which I unconsciously search as I read—without delivering to me any of the actions, consequences, or resolutions I overtly seek in my reading. The ending, to use Barbara Herrnstein-Smith's definition of closure, simply removes any “residual expectations” I may have concerning the narrative—I know that the narrative physically has nothing left to reveal after I have finished my reading of it and that I am free to begin to make sense of the work as a whole.⁸

Many twentieth century print narratives, as we have seen, have rendered problematic the traditional definition of closure. Only their physical

endings ensure that their readers can hold no further expectations that something else will happen in the narrative, or that they will need to revise their concept of the narrative as a whole as a result of some, as yet unexperienced narrative episode. Nonetheless, we can argue that this does confer upon the narrative the quality of Brooks's "anticipation of retrospection," promising readers that they will soon be able to see their inferences about the narrative action either affirmed or disproved when they finish reading the text. But what happens to readers of hypertext narratives, who can face as many as 539 places or narrative segments in Michael Joyce's *afternoon*, accessed by way of 950 links, or, in Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, as many as 991 places, read by way of 2800 links? Even a reader navigating through Joyce's *WOE*, which contains a relatively modest 63 places and only 221 links, has no comforting sense of having exhausted the narrative's array of possibilities in two, three, or even four readings.

What triggers the ending of a reading? Where print readers encounter texts already supplied with closure and endings, readers of interactive fiction generally must supply their own sense of an ending—enabling us to gain a new understanding of the relationship between the structures integral to the act of reading and the concept of closure. What prompts readers to decide they are "finished" with a particular interactive narrative and to discontinue their readings of it? And can readings, cumulatively, approximate a sense of closure for readers, where they sense they have experienced a full range of the narrative's possibilities or have grasped the narrative as what media theorist Jay Bolter has dubbed a "structure of possible structures," even though their readings may not have explored every narrative space and link?⁹

One of the chief difficulties with discussing readings of interactive narratives is our inability to provide readings of print narratives as an index against which we can measure the time and effort involved. Readers of hypertext narratives can expend up to six times the length of time required to read print narratives.¹⁰ A single reading of an interactive narrative such as *afternoon* can thus occupy the same amount of time as a reading of an entire novel such as *The Good Soldier*. Or, conversely, depending on the paths readers may take through the hypertext, one reading can correspond to the reading of a single chapter of *Lord Jim*. With no clear-cut divisions such as chapters between episodes or narratives strands as they read, readers of interactive narratives encounter few cues as to when they can temporarily interrupt their reading, or when they can decide that they have completed the reading of a single version among many versions of the narrative's possibilities.

In Search of Closure: Four Readings of Afternoon

What readers can experience, in *afternoon*, are places where the narrative refuses to default—that offer readers a sense of an “ending” if and only if they are pursuing their readings simply by default, or if they happen to attempt to move by default from a place that has none. In my first reading of *afternoon*, I pursued a strategy of navigating through the narrative primarily by way of default. By answering simply “yes” or “no” at a single decision point, where the text of the place “Begin” asks, “Do you want to hear about it?” it is possible to realize two completely different readings of *afternoon*, even if the rest

of the narrative is read simply by default. It is, in fact, possible to experience wildly different versions of the narrative when reading through it by way of default, simply by altering a single response, as I discovered in two other, lengthy readings of the text. This strategy enabled my reading experience to somewhat approximate a reading of a print narrative, in that I did not need to deliberate about my options for movement at the end of each hypertext node. More important, this way of reading also provided me with physical cues—an absence of default connections, signalled by a Macintosh “beep”—that prompted me to conclude each reading session as a version of the narrative.

As I completed each reading, however, I remained painfully aware of my reading representing only one among many actualizations of the narrative’s constellation of possibilities. The most “straightforward” reading of *afternoon*, significantly, is the most accessible, in that a reader can proceed through the entire narrative by striking a carriage return and activating a default—a reading that most closely resembles our reading experience of conventional print narratives. In this version of the narrative, the narrator, Peter, fears that he may have seen the bodies of his estranged wife and son lying by the roadside as he drives into work. The narrative then physically follows his frenetic search for his ex-wife and son, his pursuit of evidence which will either confirm or disprove his fears about what he believes he has seen. This reading, however, ends abruptly thirty-six places later in the narrative, with the narrator deciding not to begin phoning around the local hospitals but, instead, to call someone named Lolly. Since Lolly has not yet appeared in the narrative, her significance to the narrator and the possibility that she may hold the key to the whereabouts of Lisa and Andrew combine to make this reading of the narrative seem particularly inconclusive. I feel prompted to return to the narrative, despite the fact that the

text will not default and I can physically proceed no further without altering my reading strategy.

While I encounter no places that refuse to default on my second reading, I do, however, encounter a relentless loop, that persistently pushes me through the same sequence of places repeatedly without offering any chance of escaping it—thus spelling the end of my second reading. When the text refuses to default on my third reading of *afternoon*, my reading of the narrative actually possess more ambiguities and tensions I wish to resolve than it did in the first reading. Peter's quest for the whereabouts of his ex-wife and son is still unfinished. And I also want to confirm whether he is having an affair with a fellow-employee named Nausicaa and to assess the nature of his involvement with Lolly, a sometime therapist who also happens to be the wife of his employer. Instead of narrowing the margins of the narrative the further I read, *afternoon* considerably broadens them. Where the number of probable and plausible narrative outcomes conventionally progressively dwindles in print narratives the nearer we approach their endings, the more of the narrative we read in interactive narratives the more these seem to multiply. My third reading of *afternoon* has provided me with still more inferences to verify, and I cannot begin to form a sense of the narrative as a more or less complete structure of possibilities. My first three readings have satisfied none of the requirements for closure stipulated by psycholinguists like Trabasso, Secco, and Van Den Broek, by Herrnstein-Smith, or even by Kermode and Brooks. There seems to be no final, concluding metaphor here that organizes patterns in the text into a coherent, tangible whole.

By my fourth reading of *Afternoon*, I become uncomfortably aware of mutually exclusive representations of events cropping up in each reading—most notably the lunchtime exchange between Peter and his employer, Wert. In one

version, the accident seems not to have occurred; in another, Wert distracts the worried Peter from his fears about the fates of ex-wife and child with bawdy suggestions. In one scenario, only Peter is having an affair with Nausicaa; in another, Wert knows both that he and Peter are having an affair with Nausicaa and that Peter is blissfully ignorant of Nausicaa's involvement with him. In one version of the scene, Wert idly wonders aloud how Peter would react if he, Wert, were sleeping with Peter's ex-wife; in another, Wert is testing the extent of Peter's ignorance of his involvement with Peter's ex-wife. While my readings of all these versions are physically possible, I cannot accept all of them simultaneously in my final understanding of the events described in *afternoon*.

On my fourth reading of *afternoon*, my uncertainty about Nausicaa's involvement with both Wert and Peter is confirmed by a sequence of places narrated by Nausicaa. Most significantly, however, this particular version of the narrative rearranges the sequence in which Peter first sees the bodies of the child and woman stretched out on the green lawn. In this instance, Peter cannot track down either Lisa or Andrew prior to his driving to work and has become distracted by his anxieties when he spots Lisa and Andrew riding in Wert's truck. The possibility that Lisa may be sleeping with Wert—and possibly, his recognition that Wert's lunchtime query may have been a real question—shocks him. Peter's feeling out of control is, in this version of *afternoon*, accompanied by a physical loss of control of his car. In an ironic twist, Peter himself causes the accident that injures or kills his wife and son—and it may be his feelings of guilt that prompt an amnesiac search for their whereabouts which both follows this sequence and which began my first, default-only reading of *afternoon*. This reading ends, as did the first reading, on the place "I call," with the narrator relating his actions to us: "I take a pill and call Lolly"—only this time, he calls Lolly to assuage his guilt. And it is his calling Lolly which has enabled her to

reveal, in the places “1/,” “2/,” and “white afternoon,” that Peter has caused the accident.

To penetrate the narrative to its furthest extent, to realize most of its possibilities, I need, in a sense, to experience the place “I call” in each of the readings. The beginning of the therapy, introduced in my first reading of *afternoon* by the narrator’s electing to call Lolly to stem his fears, becomes, through several encounters with the place “I call,” an on-going process of realization and discovery that culminates in Lolly’s intercession, encountered in my last reading. It is this gesture of calling Lolly, in the end, that enables Peter to face the fact that he is culpable for the deaths or injuries of his ex-wife, Lisa, and son. Joyce himself has noted: “In order to physically get to ‘white afternoon,’ you have to go through therapy with Lolly, the way Peter does,” and it is only in the first and last readings that the place “I call” does not default.¹¹ In all other readings, the place defaults and also provides access to numerous other narrative strands. Of all the places in *afternoon*, “I call” has the largest number of paths branching out from it—ten—making it, significantly, a place both physically and literally central to the structure of the narrative.

What, precisely, triggered my sense of having come to some sort of closure, my sense that I did not need to continue reading *afternoon*? Most obviously, I became conscious of my readings having satisfied one of the primary quests outlined in the narrative: what has happened to Peter’s ex-wife and child? Although my discovery that Peter has caused the accident is not entirely congruent with his desire to learn of their condition, it does short-circuit Peter’s quest. Since Peter himself has caused the accident, clearly, he knows whether the pair is unharmed, fatally injured, or already dead. The language in the place

“white afternoon” suggests the last possibility may be the most valid: “The investigator finds him to be at fault. He is shocked to see the body. . . on the wide green lawn. The boy is nearby.”¹² The word “body” may signify that the woman Peter sees is lifeless, but it could also refer to the fact that she is unconscious, inert, quantifiable as an accident victim. Although he does not identify the bodies he sees in this segment, elsewhere in the narrative the absences of both Lisa and Andrew from home, office, and school suggests that they might be the accident victims Peter sees. Further, when Peter revisits the scene of the accident, he comes upon crumpled school papers written by his son, that may have fallen out of one of the vehicles on impact and is moved to tears—again strongly suggesting that he has caused a fatal accident.

In building up this particular reading of *afternoon*, I become aware of an indeterminacy at work in the text that is peculiar, in its extent and character, to interactive narratives. I cannot really be certain that Peter didn’t simply see his ex-wife keeping company with his employer, swerve and strike another car, carrying an unknown woman and child in it—leaving Peter’s quest for information about Lisa and Andrew as open-ended as it was when I first began reading the narrative. What leads me, then, to accept this reading as the reading of *afternoon* that brings the narrative to some approximate, albeit stylized, version of closure?

First, *the text does not default, requiring that I physically alter my reading strategy or stop reading.* Since the place “I call” also refused to default the first time I encountered it, what distinguishes my first and last experiences of this physical cue? Why does it prompt me, the first time I come across it, to read the

narrative again from the beginning, pursuing different connections, yet prompt me to stop reading the second time? The decision to continue reading after my first encounter with “I call” reflected my awareness that my first reading of *Afternoon* visited only forty places out of a total of 539—leaving the bulk of the narrative places still to be discovered on subsequent readings. And, further, on the first reading I perceived the failure of the text initially to default from the place “I call” as an invitation to return to the narrative. This recalls the same sort of re-direction of textual energies which Brooks mentions in his analysis of Freud’s narrative of the Wolf Man:

. . . Causation can work backward as well as forward since the effect of an event. . . often comes only when it takes on meaning. . . Chronological sequence may not settle the issue of cause: events may gain traumatic significance by deferred action or retroaction, action working in reverse sequence to create a meaning that did not previously exist. Thus the way a story is ordered does not necessarily correspond to the way it *works*. Indeed, narrative order, sequence as a logical enchainment of actions and outcomes, must be considered less a solution than part of the problem of narrative explanation (280-1).

That is, this physical “conclusion” to the narrative sends me back into its midst to discover the cause behind Peter’s anxiety, and to resolve additional questions that my journey through the narrative has already raised. Readers of Freud’s narrative about the Wolf Man may have to page back through the narrative to assemble their own versions of the causation and motivation behind the

occurrences they have discovered in the narrative. But on the other hand, as a reader of an interactive narrative, I am fairly certain that further readings of *afternoon* will yield a different chronology, different apparent motivations, and even a different set of events leading to a conclusion totally dissimilar to that of the narrator gulping a pill and reaching for the phone to call his therapist friend.

Second, *this particular conclusion represented a resolution of the tensions which, initially, give rise to the narrative.* *afternoon* begins with two quests: Peter's search for the whereabouts of his ex-wife and son, to confirm whether they might have been the accident victims he glimpsed that morning, and our seeking a better sense of exactly what it is that Peter saw on his way to work. When we look at the accident through Peter's eyes, we see only the scene of the accident revisited by him several hours later—and we cannot begin to account for his nearly paralyzing fear that the bodies he saw so briefly might belong to those closest to him. The mere proximity of the accident to his son's school doesn't completely account for it, nor does the nature of the conversations he conducts with people who cannot recall whether they have seen Lisa and Andrew later on that day, unharmed and going about their regular business.

My sense of the significance of “white afternoon” lies partially in its ability to account for the undertone of hysteria edging Peter's fear. If Peter has caused the accident that has injured them but has blocked this horrifying bit of knowledge from his consciousness, his inquiries would probably have this particular character of concern mixed with panic. Put another way, Peter's panic-stricken inquiries and fearful conclusions do not match any script I can recall from either experience or from other narratives that describe a search for the whereabouts of missing family members or friends. It does match, however, scripts familiar to me from narratives where characters attempt to forestall an

acknowledgment of a particularly painful or destructive event by proceeding about their business as if they were not already certain of what has happened.

Third, *the conclusion represented a resolution which accounted for the greatest number of ambiguities in the narrative.* In other words, this place represents the most *plausible* conclusion to the narrative's network of mysteries and tensions. Psycholinguistic models of reading posit plausibility and referentiality as the glue that holds texts together at the level of sentences and paragraphs.¹³ Plausibility and reference in the larger narrative structure, likewise, direct the focus of my attention to the interpretation that refers to the largest number of narrative episodes and constructs the model of causation that seems, according to my knowledge of human behavior, to be the most likely, the most plausible. Wert's romance with Lisa accounts for the peculiar tenor of some of his comments to Peter, but it also accounts for testimony by Lisa, Lolly, and Nausicaa, throughout the narrative, to Peter's inability to see himself as anything but the center of everyone else's narrative. Without this reading of "white afternoon" representing the key to what really happened to Peter on his way to work that morning as a consequence of seeing Wert with his ex-wife, what am I to make of Lolly and Nausicaa discussing the accident and concluding that they shouldn't blame "either of them"? This reading of "white afternoon" also accounts for the otherwise puzzling places "1/" and "2/" in Lolly's monologue:

Let's agree that it is shocking, unexpected, to see this particular woman with [Wert]. Yes, I know that, for anyone else this should not be unexpected, that Peter should, at least, have suspected; but we nonetheless ought to grant him his

truth. It is all he has, and so it is authentic. Let's agree he must feel abandoned-- even, literally, out of control ("1/").

Wert knows Peter takes this road.

Peter knows we women are free. . . .

The world is a world of properties and physical objects, of entropy. . . Even coincidence is a free-will decision ("2/").

Having discovered a series of places, culminating in "white afternoon" and "I call," that satisfy my inferences about ambiguities and occurrences in the narrative, I find a place that also invites me to grasp the narrative as a whole, as a structure of possibilities representing one man's simultaneous drive to learn the fates of his ex-wife and son--and also a mad dash away from his own culpability in an accident that may have caused their violent ends.

If the direction of the narrative is toward revealing the fates of Lisa and Andrew, it is also toward revealing truths that Peter himself is too self-absorbed, insecure, or out-and-out terrified to admit. Lolly's monologue, ending in the revelation that Peter has caused the accident, represents the farthest reaches of this narrative movement. Once I have reached it, I am able to retrospect back over the entire narrative and to perceive it as a chronicle of Peter's denial of everything from his feelings for his ex-wife to his role in the car accident. In other words, I reach a point where I perceive the "structure of the work as, at once, both dynamic and whole"—satisfying Herrnstein-Smith's definition of conventional narrative closure (36).

Fourth, my interpretation of the significance of “white afternoon” is tied to my perception of “I call” as a central “junction” in the structure of the text and of “white afternoon” as a peripheral, deeply embedded, and relatively inaccessible place in afternoon. At least one media theorist and Joyce himself have pointed out that the cognitive map of *afternoon* reflects his organization of the narrative as he wrote it and not the structure of readers’ potential encounters with it.¹⁴ But this does not prevent me from discovering some striking concurrences between my perception of the virtual space occupied by places such as “I call,” and “white afternoon,” and the spaces they occupy in the cognitive map of *afternoon*.

The narrative’s network of guard fields, that require that readers have visited a particular space or have selected a certain word or phrase from the text of a place, appear particularly to track readers depending upon whether they have visited “I call.” The sequence of places visited hence tracks readers through the text, making certain paths accessible and certain defaults tangible, causing my experience of the text to somewhat resemble Dante’s penetration of the rings of Hell in *The Inferno*. The more I read the narrative, the closer I approach its center—and, like Dante, I cannot suddenly emerge in the environs known to Judas Iscariot in the very pit of Hell without having first visited the more lofty realms populated by those who merely lived lives without the benefit of Christian baptism.

The place “I call” seems to exist as a central junction, where readers are switched onto certain narrative strands that spiral down further into the narrative with each successive encounter. Significantly, the place “white afternoon,” along with the rest of the sequence revealed in Lolly’s monologue, is embedded at the deepest structural level of *afternoon*, five layers below the uppermost layer of the narrative, the one through which readers first enter the text. Only two connections lead into this narrative strand, and a succession of

guard fields ensure that it is only reached after a lengthy visitation of fifty-seven narrative places. Hence, my sense, when I arrive at it, of having come, somehow, to the end of something, because “white afternoon” physically represents the furthest reaches of the physical spaces within *afternoon*.

My arrival at a sense of an ending for *afternoon* is thus tied equally to reading strategies translated directly from reading print narratives and to strategies which embrace the text as an interactive narrative existing in virtual, three-dimensional space. As a reader familiar with print narratives, I find my quest for closure satisfied by the fourth reading that satisfies the tensions that originally give rise to the story of Peter's frenetic search and that also resolves or accounts for the greatest number of ambiguities in the narrative. Yet, my sense of an ending here is informed equally strongly by my recognition of the significance of the lack of physical defaults and by my awareness of the relative centrality of “I call,” and of the relative inaccessibility of “white afternoon.” By embracing both points in a single reading, I experience a sense of having both literally and figuratively plumbed the depths of the narrative space of *afternoon*.

The Suspension of Closure: Woe - A Memory of What Will Be

It is a story of being at the edge of something. That is not authorial intention but discovery. If in doubt how to read, ask your teacher or your heart.¹⁵

In one sense, the layers of *afternoon* represent what we could call “stratigraphic” writing. Its narrative structure enables us to delve through layer upon layer of singular versions of narrative events until we reach the bottom band, that holds the tale of the origin of the story in the same way that the oldest strata in sedimentary rock tell geologists of the earliest days of our fossil records. The event that triggers the narrative is Peter’s accident, that lies in the bottom layer of *afternoon*, and it is his denial of this event that sets the narrative in motion.

Although *afternoon* is not a mystery in the conventional sense, its action, nonetheless, takes its central thrust from the narrative dialectic of discovery and concealment driving events in nearly every narrative strand. Seen in this light, it is not terribly surprising that the narrative should prompt and somewhat satisfy my search for a rough equivalent of narrative closure—albeit a search somewhat satisfied through avenues (such as the physical cues of defaults and my knowledge of the narrative structure) beyond the boundaries of print narratives.

But how do we know that this sense of closure is not simply unique to *afternoon*? What happens when we encounter interactive narratives without clear-cut narrative tensions, texts without a narrative which establishes itself, from the outset of its most accessible reading, as a quest? Is closure integral to our reading of these works? In the absence of narrative tensions, do we discard our search for resolutions, or do we impose or invent them, in order to confer purposiveness on our readings?

Like Robbe-Grillet’s *In the Labyrinth*, or James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, or Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, *WOE—Or a Memory of What Will Be* is a narrative

“about” its own structure. The two modernist novels span a single day in the lives of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Daedalus, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, expressing a pattern of tensions, conflicts, and ambiguities that cannot be resolved simply by the closing of the day. Although the day that begins and ends *Mrs. Dalloway* permanently dispatches with one of the narrative’s most overt questions—namely, what will happen to Septimus Warren Smith—it merely traces the origins of regrets, ambitions, desires, and decisions that drift through the minds and memories of Clarissa, Hugh, Richard, Peter Walsh, and Lucrezia Warren Smith. Where we expect the two parallel narrative strands involving the days of Clarissa and Septimus Warren Smith to intersect in a manner that will alter the direction of both, we discover, instead, that their lives run in a perfectly parallel lines. Clarissa approaches the life of Septimus Warren Smith only in her nearness to the eddies cast out by his suicide. The ambulance wailing down Tottenham Court Road on its way either to or from the place where the dying Septimus lies interrupts Peter Walsh’s thoughts of Clarissa; later Clarissa will herself learn of his suicide from Lady Bradshaw in the midst of her dinner party.

Like *In the Labyrinth* and *The Good Soldier*, *Mrs Dalloway* falls under the aegis of narratives structured around what Joseph Frank dubbed “spatial form.”¹⁶ Noting that modernist literary works attempted to convey simultaneity and the patterns of thought through recurrent images, fragmented narrative sequences, and the division of plot from narrative, Frank argued that these patterns acquired significance when perceived as part of a whole in the minds of their readers. Interpreting these works, or making meaning from these texts, in this view, occurred only after readers finished reading the entire text. Taking Frank’s concept further, David Mickelsen has argued both that novels employing

spatial form “are far from resolved,” and are, instead, open works formed largely as explorations:

The world portrayed is in a sense unfinished (unorganized), requiring the reader’s collaboration and involvement, his interpretation. . . . the “implied reader,” in Iser ’s phrase, in spatial form is more active, perhaps even more sophisticated, than that implied by most traditional fiction.¹⁷

Obviously, the spatial form at work in these print narratives exists in the minds of readers grappling with their intricacies of time and place, with patterns of recursion, and with digressions that violate expectations based on readings of conventional narratives.

Wrestling with the static, uni-dimensional form of the printed page, Proust similarly strained to portray time in a dimension of space in his *Remembrance of Things Past*, and, at one point, toyed with the idea of giving the sections of the narrative titles corresponding to the architectural details of a cathedral, for example, “Porch,” and “Stained Glass of the Apse.”¹⁸ In *WOE*, however, Joyce creates a narrative that physically, visibly reflects the same characteristics that distinguish narratives exhibiting what Frank and a large number of critics recognize as spatial form.

The perception of spatial form is produced by readers of print narratives in the process of reading, as they work their way through layers of narrative time, juxtaposed images, recurrent themes, multiple perspectives on events, and parallel lives:

Verbal space acquires consistency as the stylistic rendering of the text becomes apparent: reiteration, allusion, parallelism, and contrast relate some parts of the narration to others, and the construction imposes itself on the reader through the action constituted by the reading.¹⁹

In the treatise that first brought the concept of spatial form to the attention of critics, Frank claimed that readers exploring narratives using spatial form were required, by the very nature of this pattern of references, ellipses, recursions, and fluctuating points of view, to suspend “the process of individual reference temporarily” until completing the narrative, when “the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity”(13). The apprehension of the narrative as a structure or pattern of references is hardly a novel concept since, as we have seen, it is more or less an integral part of the act of perceiving narrative closure. But it is Frank’s insistence that we must suspend our need to discover meaning as we read—reflected in his proclamation that “Joyce cannot be read—he can only be reread”(19)—that is problematic. On one hand, Frank may be accurate in claiming that we can only grasp the full meaning of these narratives when we consider them retrospectively as Gestalts or bundles of relations. But his belief that readers can read without perceiving associations and references, or without making predictions or seeing the grouping of images as already meaningful, flies fully in the face of nearly every theory of reader-response. Like the theories of reading and closure elaborated by Brooks, Benjamin, and Kermode, Frank’s concept of spatial form is essentially an examination of modernist textual aesthetics—not a realistic model for how readers approach the reading of narratives.

Even as they begin reading a narrative, readers are interpreting texts from the outset: integrating details, forming and developing hypotheses, modifying, confirming, and abandoning predictions. The “glue” that holds texts together is the readers’ ability to perceive references and causal connections linking phrases, sentences, and paragraphs together. The very act of reading requires us, albeit generally unconsciously, to continually perceive links, references, and contexts for the words we read that come to us already endowed with meanings at the moment in which we perceive them:

Meanings come already calculated, not because of norms embedded in language but because language is always perceived, from the very first, within a structure of norms. That structure, however, is not abstract and independent but social; and therefore it is not a single structure with a privileged relationship to the process of communication as it occurs in any situation but a structure that changes when one situation, with its assumed background of practices, purposes, and goals has given way to another.²⁰

In other words, readers begin interpreting and assembling the meaning of a narrative from the moment when they first start reading. And, moreover, as Fish argues in “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One,” reading is as much an act of constructing as it is of construing (327). In narratives where both story and narrative grow from a complex network of recurrent themes, densely interwoven thickets of time, and clusters of multiple perspectives, we do not suspend the action of construing/constructing, as Frank insists. What seems more likely is that we are unable to form determinate predictions, as we tend to in our readings

of narratives with clear-cut conflicts and tensions calling for tangible resolutions. Instead, our coming to closure on these spatial or exploratory narratives involves our ability to construct models of the narrative structure that assign a place, weight, and significance to the associations and themes we have encountered—an action that recalls my own efforts in reading of *Afternoon*.

In other words, readers have been challenged with the task of reading something which approximates the virtual, three-dimensional space of hypertext narratives arguably since the advent of the modern novel. From the perspective of a media theorist like Bolter, the reason why *Ulysses* can only be reread stems from Joyce's wrestling with what the former has called spatial or "topographic" writing in a uni-dimensional, static medium (136). The act of perceiving reference, layers in time, multiple perspectives, and many of the devices used by modern and post-modern writers is infinitely simplified in reading interactive narratives, particularly where the narrative provides its readers with access to cognitive maps of the hypertext structure.

When I begin reading Michael Joyce's *WOE*, I am immediately confronted by a place entitled "Mandala," which opens over a cognitive map of the narrative structure. Significantly, the map itself resembles a mandala with the place "Mandala" representing the hub of a narrative wheel, connected through a series of paths to five other places that, in turn, contain other, subsidiary places [see figure 1]. From "Mandala," however, readers need not pass through the five places on the upper-most layer of the narrative in order to gain access to the levels of narrative within each of these five places: a series of links, paths, and defaults connects some of the text's most embedded places with "Mandala." In Buddhist practice, the mandala pulls the eye from the center of

and “she,” and the pair seems to be driving somewhere, but I cannot be certain even whether their journey is actually a physical one or whether it is simply metaphoric. As I move through the narrative by way of defaults, I encounter more scenes that portray the actions of a nameless “she” and “he.” Generally, as I read print narratives, if I lose track of the pronoun referents, I can easily verify the identities of the respective “he” and “she” I encounter and assign their actions or declarations a meaning relative to my perception of the developing narrative. But because hypertexts can be read in a number of sequences, and interactive narratives such as *WOE* are clearly written to be read in a variety of orders, I cannot be certain, even if two places follow one another, that the pronoun referents in each are necessarily identical. In other words, when I encounter places that display physical continuity—places that are linked in a set sequence—I have no guarantee that the actions or actors depicted in them are the same across all of the places.

In print, I can safely assume that the “she” in *The Good Soldier* is the same Leonora I encountered in the preceding paragraph. In the interactive *WOE*, however, I find myself straining to minimize the indeterminacies that temporarily disrupt my reading of each place. There are four couples involved in the narrative strand entitled “Relic,” with each of the places in this strand easily distinguishable from places situated along other narrative strands by their pronoun titles: “She,” “They,” “He,” “It,” “Your,” “Their,” “His,” “Her,” and “We.” In a sense, the titles reflect my chief concern as a reader of these places—to establish just to whom each pronoun refers. Since the narrative of “Relic” involves adulterous liaisons between two married couples—as I discover four places into my reading of *WOE*—my need to establish who each “she” and “he” represents becomes essential to my making sense of the narrative. One couple, married with children, remains unnamed throughout the entire narrative of

“Relic,” making identification of pronoun referents particularly difficult. The others, however, are named “Filly” and “Steve,” enabling me to identify when the “she” mentioned is not Filly by references to her made during conversations between the unnamed husband and wife.

When I read “Their,” for example, I encounter a conversation between a man and woman and manage to identify the woman as “not Filly” because the man here wonders if the woman wears this perfume because she knows he loves it on Filly. Who, then, is the man? I work back and forth in my reading of this passage, prospecting and retrospecting forward and backward through the narrative in search of cues to his identity even as I continue reading. The fact that these people have packed the kids off to see the film *Dick Tracy* seems to indicate that they are married, a hypothesis reinforced by the man’s shock when the woman tells him she believes that he is thinking of Filly. His reaction—wondering “do you know?”—seems motivated by guilt and I latch on to what we might call an “adultery” schema, familiar to me from my encounters with print and film narratives about *ménages à trois*. Accordingly, I form the hypothesis that the man in this place is involved with his wife’s friend Filly, although I cannot be certain just how much the wife knows or doesn’t know. Since the schema or script for adulterous relationships invariably involves a dialectic between deceit and discovery, however, I perceive the question of the wife’s knowledge or ignorance of the affair as one of the tensions in the narrative that drives me to continue reading.

In the place “His” which follows “Their,” I discover that the “she” lying in “his” arms is not the same “she” as in “Their,” when Steve interrupts their post-coital musings by leaving a message on “his” answering machine. Since Steve is identified as “her husband,” I realize that the woman must be Filly, Steve’s wife. As no new characters have been introduced into the narrative—and

my knowledge of print narrative conventions prompt me to assume that any new characters will be introduced in this narrative—and I know the man is not Steve, I conclude that the “he” here must be the unnamed husband and that what I have just read is a chronicle of an adulterous liaison. The physical juxtaposition of the places “His” and “Their” lead me to assume, as I would in print narratives, that the actors in both places will remain constant, making my shock at the switch in the identity of the woman more potent. Here the physical gaps separating narrative spaces approximates the space of cinematic cuts, making my reaction similar to the experience of a viewer watching two adjoining scenes in a film involving lovers, where in two separate scenes the slow pan of the camera moving up the intertwined bodies of a man and woman reveals two different women’s faces topping seemingly identical sets of breasts, hips, and thighs.

As I read on through the narrative of *WOE*, however, the text does not become more determinate, as I had expected based upon my knowledge of print conventions, believing that my predictions about the discovery/deceit dialectic would enable me to see the text of the places I encounter, as Fish argued, already in a determinate, meaningful context (309). Instead, I find myself seizing upon references and likely connections between smaller elements in the text in order to build up a global structure of meaning, or a macrostructure. This leads me to see a correspondence between an unnamed woman who murders her philandering husband and then kills herself and the *ménage à trois* involving the husband, wife, and best friend—and to use this correspondence to add incrementally to my hypothesis involving the adulterous couple. I modify my sense of the narrative structure of *WOE* and see this correspondence foreshadowing the violence that may ensue once the wife verifies her suspicions concerning the liaison between her husband and Filly. The murders are referred to in

“Murders,” “The Railroad,” and “ 6/17 Father’s Day,” in an entirely different narrative strand at a different subsidiary level of the *WOE* narrative, but the connections I make between these places and the places along the “Relic” path bridge the gaps between these spaces easily, as other researchers in the reading of hypertext have discovered:

Recent extensions of the concept of macrostructure suggest. . . that the macrostructural hierarchy is also “networked”: the repetition in a text of a previously mentioned element may form a connection between the two related propositions, even if they are at different branches in the hierarchical macrostructure. . . The macrostructures which readers build of texts allow them to organize and reduce complex information to a meaningful, manageable whole.²¹

Further, the familiar schema of adulterous liaison that encouraged me to form certain predictions about the narrative of *WOE* as a macrostructure leads me to filter the information I receive elsewhere in the narrative according to whether it enables me to confirm or modify my hypothesis.

When I encounter a number of places that seem to have no bearing on the “Relic” narrative, I gloss over some of the same indeterminacies that excited my attention in the places “His,” “Their,” “It” and “We” in “Relic.” I cannot find contexts in which to include what I read in these places, and sometimes I am not even certain, as a result of the ambiguous nature of pronouns, or the lack of a clear-cut context for the action within each place, who or what it is that I am reading about. Because my concept of the macrostructure of *WOE* has no context for these places, I simply background their contents as I read. It is only

when I grow frustrated at my inability to discover paths or links to more places on the “Relic” strand that I decide to consult the topographic map of *WOE* as a guide to navigation.

What I discover momentarily shocks me: instead of forming the principle narrative axis of *WOE*, with the other narrative strands feeding into and expanding on it, “Relic” is merely one of five places on the periphery of *WOE*. Although I had noticed the mandala-like shape of the narrative upon first opening the document to its topographic map, I had then lacked any context that would make this particular bit of information meaningful to me, relevant to my reading the narrative. Now, however, my very purposive search obliges me to see in the structure of *WOE* a definitive negation of my suppositions about the text—particularly when I locate “Relic” as one of the five marginal places and peer at its structure within the confining space [see Figure 2].

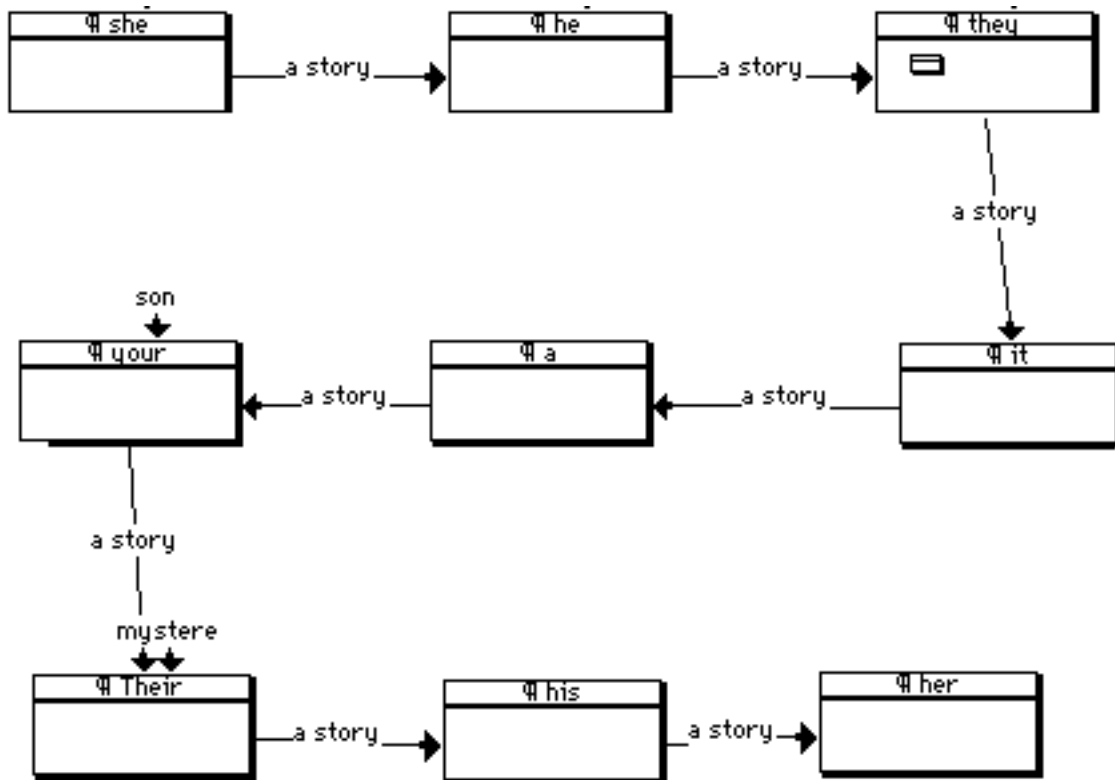


Figure 2: cognitive map of part of the “Relic” narrative in *WOE*

The words “A happy ending” end the text of the place “We.” But when I first encounter them, I read this phrase ironically and attribute the words to the unnamed narrator, whom I believe to be the child of the unnamed married couple—a boy named Liam—since his is the only name excluded from the family list that ends in “me.” This must clearly be a child’s eye view of the relationships shared by his parents and their friends, I believe, and, consequently, perceive the inclusion of “a happy ending” in this place as a ironic counterpart to the problematic couplings I encountered elsewhere in “Relic.”

Far from seeming an ending, these words originally appear to me as a narrative device employed strictly to heighten tension, to create a sense of suspense anticipating the next developments in the “Relic” narrative. But my encounter with the topographic map reveals the “Relic” strand to be limited to

the places I have already visited and, moreover, to end with the path also entitled “happy ending” that leads only to “We.” The phrase, “a happy ending,” it seems, truly does indicate a happy ending and nothing more. It seems that I have created the narrative tension myself in my reading to prove or negate the hypothesis I have formed about “Relic” and *WOE* as a whole.

When I dip into the narrative of *Woe* again, I find myself still accumulating references to the characters first introduced in “Relic,” who appear in different contexts. With their strongly sequential and causal links, narratives such as “Relic” act as a centrifugal force in a textual mosaic such as *WOE*, prompting me to read the other, disparate places in the narrative in light of their references to and consonances with the characters and events in “Relic.” As I continue reading, I begin to rearrange my sense of *WOE* as a macrostructure and begin to see the references to a “doubled family,” and the wife who murdered her husband and then killed herself as something other than portents of things yet to unfold in “Relic.” This family tragedy seems to me to represent an echo from Joyce’s own past, represented throughout *WOE* in the form of journal entries, one that mirrors the unhappiness of the family in “Relic.” Earlier, my reading incorporated the places “Murders,” “The Railroad,” and “Directions?” into a sequence that somewhat mirrored the tensions between the husband and wife in “Relic,” and served as a device to heighten the suspense inherent in that narrative’s dialectic of discovery/deceit. But, because the topographic map of *WOE* has negated this hypothesis, I am obliged to read these places differently. Accordingly, I form a tentative hypothesis about these fragments from Joyce’s own past possibly giving rise to his writing “Relic”—a hypothesis that thus accounts for the presence of the fragments of diaries and meta-textual

commentary on the act of writing *WOE* Joyce includes elsewhere in the narrative.

Eventually, I evolve a sense of the narrative as an amalgam of snippets of experience gleaned from Joyce's own past in diary-like, dated extracts or places titled with numbers, fragments of the experience of others, snippets of news items and poetry, and meta-textual commentary on the act of creating *WOE* itself—each representing one of the places ringing “Mandala.” This revised sense of the narrative structure of *WOE* grows slowly, involving my creating a network of references and connections between places—much as readers engaging modernist narratives—reinforced by careful explorations of the topographic map of *WOE*. Ultimately, I arrive at a sense of the narrative as a complete structure long before I resolve any of the ambiguities I encounter in the text, without having ascertained anything approaching an answer to my many questions about the narrative and the events it describes. Who, for example, is “M”? Did the murders really take place? What is the significance of the paths named after directors in the “Glas” narrative strand: “Huston,” “Ray,” “Satyajit”?

I feel a sense of having completed my reading of the work, nonetheless, an arrival at a reading that enables me to encompass the text, its narrative structure, and at least some of its imagery and thematic references into a plausible reading that accounts for a majority of its places. This is, perhaps, a sense of closure akin to the closure that enables us to distinguish a sense of an ending in our readings of *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*, that approaches a sense of having arrived at one plausible reading of the narrative without having exhausted the many other readings of the narrative still possible. But I find my reading enabled less by my knowledge of the structure of *WOE* and its narrative contents than by my knowledge of schemata for other narratives that are also

“about” their narrative structure. In this instance, I rely on previous encounters with texts such as John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse,” in which the Funhouse in the narrative was both a physical place visited by Ambrose, the protagonist, and a metaphor for the structure of the story—and of fiction itself. I also recall that when I first read “Lost in the Funhouse,” in an undergraduate writing course to which I came already equipped with three years of studying modern and post-modern narratives, I was, not coincidentally, the only student in the class able to read the Funhouse as a metaphor for the experience of navigating through a fictional narrative, a reflection of the powerful role of schemata in shaping/enabling our readings of narratives.

In reading *WOE*, however, I also recognize deviations from the schema of narrative-as-structure, informed by my awareness of three conditions. First, my version of *WOE* could not reconcile all of the disparate texts I encountered under a single rubric, a single signifying metaphor which bestowed significance on each. The concept of *WOE* as a narrative about the production of coherent, tidy narratives from the inconclusive, fragmentary flotsam of everyday life could not also encompass, for example, the places along the paths named for directors. Second, my reading of the indeterminacies in *WOE* relied heavily upon the context in which I encountered each place. Since the sixty narrative places are connected by 221 links, the order in which I navigated through my reading of *WOE* was only one actualization among many possibilities. Finally, the schema that provided a script for my perceiving the disparate texts in *WOE* as part of a single, organic whole was reinforced by a schema not usually applicable to narratives—at least not to print narratives—that of the Open Work.

Multi-value logics are now gaining currency, and these are quite capable of incorporating *indeterminacy* as a valid stepping-stone in the cognitive process. In this general intellectual atmosphere, the poetics of the open work is peculiarly relevant: it posits the work of art stripped of necessary and foreseeable conclusions, works in which the performer's freedom functions as part of the discontinuity. . . . Every performance *explains* the composition but does not *exhaust* it. Every performance makes the work an actuality, but is itself only complementary to all possible other performances of the work. In short, we can say that every performance offers us a complete and satisfying version of the work, but at the same time makes it incomplete for us, because it cannot simultaneously give all the other artistic solutions which the work may admit.²²

Inspired by the appearance of what he perceived to be a notable shift in aesthetics across an entire spectrum of art, informing the works of artists from Jean Dubuffet and Pierre Boulez to James Joyce, Umberto Eco in *Opera Aperta (The Open Work)* explores the radical differences in the aesthetics informing traditional and modern art. Like the interactive narratives "Forking Paths," *afternoon*, and *WOE*, the works of modernists such as Henri Posseur, Alexander Calder, and Mallarmé leave their sequence or arrangement either to chance or to their audiences, providing them with a multiplicity of possible versions in which they can be experienced. Where traditional works appear to possess singular,

determinate meanings, these modern “works in motion” seem consciously constructed to provide their audiences with

a field of possibilities. . . a configuration of possible events, a complete dynamism of structure. . . and a corresponding devolution of intellectual authority to personal decision, choice, and social context (15-16).

My version of the structure of *WOE* as a network of snippets of personal history, a chronicle of creation, and invented narrative is thus both reinforced and modified by my knowledge of Eco’s aesthetics of the Open Work. On the one hand, my awareness of this aesthetic prompts me to see Joyce’s narrative as the paradigm of the Open Work, one which can embrace divisions normally insuperable in print narratives: commentary on the act of creation, the mechanics of production, the convergence of voices, past and present, the snatches of experience that become the grain that irritates, the core that we pearl over to become the stuff of fiction. *The Open Work*, however, also provides me with a schema for recognizing the discontinuities in *WOE* as endemic to the Open Work, its indeterminacies the source of the narrative’s rich field of possibilities. I have, in a sense, a meta-script which also enables me to be comfortable with the very inconclusiveness of my reading, with its inability to account for everything I have discovered in *WOE*:

Reading for the Ending—Closure in Print and Interactive Narratives

Even in interactive narratives, we as readers never encounter anything quite so definitive as the words “The End,” or the last page of a story or novel, our experience of the text is not only guided but enabled by our sense of the “ending” awaiting us. We truly do read, as Brooks argues, in “anticipation of retrospection” (23). Our predictions enable us to minimize ambiguities, as Smith has argued (61), and to perceive words in an already largely determinate context—as Fish observes in “Is There a Text in this Class?” (318)—even when we read with an awareness of the possibility that these words can and may crop up in an entirely different context or contexts. The anticipation of endings is, in this sense, integral to the act of reading, even when there is no such thing as a physical “ending.” Ultimately, we cannot separate the desire for an ending—that might resemble either the longing described by Conrad or the “sanction” seen by Benjamin in the epigraphs beginning this article—with our need to create contexts for the perception of what we encounter as we read in the immediate sense by anticipating what may follow in the future. When we read, prediction enables us to create contexts for the words and phrases we encounter that guides our interpretation of their meaning in an action that appears to unfold simultaneously and not in discrete stages in time.

So when we navigate through interactive narratives, we are pursuing the same sorts of goals as we do as readers of print narratives—even when we know that the text will not bestow upon us the final sanction of a singular ending that either authorizes or invalidates our interpretations of the text. Because our sense of an “ending” does not derive explicitly from the text itself in the case of hypertexts such as *afternoon* and *WOE*, reading these interactive narratives sheds light on what—other than the physical ending of a story—satisfies our need for endings or closure. We rely on a sense of the text as a physical entity in reading both interactive and print narratives, on a sense of having finished reading all of

the book's pages or having visited most of a narrative's places, of having grasped the spatial form of *Mrs Dalloway* or *The Good Soldier*, of having arrived at a space which does not default in *afternoon*, or of having incorporated the contents of the periphery with the hub in *WOE*. Our sense of arriving at closure is satisfied when we manage to resolve narrative tensions and to minimise ambiguities, to explain puzzles, and to incorporate as many of the narrative elements as possible into a coherent pattern—preferably one for which we have a script gleaned from either life experience or from encounters with other narratives. Unlike most print narratives, however, interactive narratives invite us to return to them again and again, their openness and indeterminacy making our sense of closure inevitably simply one “ending” among many possible. It is often impossible to distinguish between explaining a work and exhausting its possibilities in the sense of an ending we experience when we finish reading *The Good Soldier*. My readings of *afternoon* and *WOE*, however, explain the versions of the texts I have experienced as I navigate through the hypertexts without exhausting the number of other possible versions and explanations I might experience on other readings. If we as readers truly do long for a sense of an ending as we might for loaves and fishes, it is not necessarily the definitive, death-like ending foreseen by Benjamin—it seems that merely a plausible version or versions of the story among many will suffice equally well.

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^Notes

1. Joseph Conrad, "Henry James," qtd in Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 263.

². Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 94.

³ For a fully fledged discussion of this, see Stuart Moulthrop's "Reading from the Map: Metonymy and Metaphor in the Fiction of Forking Paths," in *Hypermedia and Literary Studies*. ed. George P. Landow and Paul Delany (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 119-132 and my "Gaps, Maps, and Perception: What Hypertext Readers (Don't) Do," *Perforations* 1:3 (Summer 1992).

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher, in *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 4th ed. (New York: Dover, 1955), 52.

⁵ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Narrative Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 17.

⁶ Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 77.

⁷ See, for example, Tom Trabasso, Tom Vecco, and Paul Van Den Broek, "Causal Cohesion and Story Coherence," in *Learning and Comprehension of Text*. Eds. Heinz Mandl, Nancy L. Stein and Tom Trabasso (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1984), 87.

⁸ Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 30.

⁹ Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991), 144.

¹⁰ Richard Ziegfeld, "Interactive Fiction: A New Literary Genre?" *New Literary History* 20 (1989): 363.

¹¹ Personal communication with the author, October 1991.

¹² Michael Joyce, *afternoon: a Story*, (Cambridge: Eastgate Systems, 1990), white afternoon.

¹³ Arguments for the primacy of causality, plausibility and referentiality in readers' comprehensions of texts are noted, for example, in Alison Black, Paul Freeman and P.N. Johnson-Laird, "Plausibility and the Comprehension of Text," *British Journal of Psychology* 77(1986): 51-62 and in John Black and Gordon H. Bower, "Episodes as Chunks in Narrative Memory," *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 18 (1979): 309-318.

¹⁴ Mark Bernstein, personal communication with author, November, 1991; Michael Joyce, personal communication with author, October 1991.

¹⁵ Michael Joyce, *WOE—Or a Story of What Will Be*, *Writing on the Edge* 2.2 (Spring 1991), directions.

¹⁶ Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, eds. Michael Hoffman and Patrick Murphy (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988), 85.

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- ¹⁷. David Mickelson, "Types of Spatial Structure in Narrative," in *Spatial Form in Narrative* eds. Jeffrey R. Smitten and Ann Daghistany (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 74.
- ¹⁸. Joseph Kestner, "The Novel and the Spatial Arts," in *Spatial Form in Narrative*, 128.
- ¹⁹. Ivo Vidan, "Time Sequence in Spatial Fiction," in *Spatial Form in Narrative*, 133.
- ²⁰. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 318.
- ²¹. Johndan Johnson-Eilola, "'Trying to See the Garden': Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hypertext Use in Composition Instruction." *Writing on the Edge* 2.2 (Spring 1989): 104-105.
- ²². Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 15.