



Just Tell Me When to Stop: Hypertext and the Displacement of Closure

[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.

—Joseph Conrad, “Henry James” (1905)

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.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller”

Just how essential is closure to our readings of narratives? Do we read narratives to satisfy some deep craving for closure denied to us in our everyday lives, as Conrad and Benjamin argued, an aesthetic equivalent that entitles us, godlike, to have the whole story revealed to us nakedly, in its entirety, something we seldom see in life? Part of the pleasure in reading is tied up with an ending—with our knowing that, no matter how many characters wander through the pages of *War and Peace*, it is strictly finite: it all ends, satisfying some longing or curiosity within us and freeing us to pursue other things. Or perhaps closure is more than simply a mere component in our pleasure, perhaps it is integral to narrative aesthetics and poetics, as critics like Peter Brooks and Frank Kermode have persuasively argued.

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.”¹ Narratives without closure are like sentences that include only the subject and not the “action” of a sentence, the predicate. Closure, in this view, does more than complete the meaning of a story. It limits it, much in the way

that my using the word *plink* as a verb in the sentence "The note plinked," tells us that the note is musical and not, say, a billet-doux. Instead of wondering whether the noun "note" means either a paper mash note, or a piece of paper currency, or a musical tone, I simply infer that it means a musical note. As Brooks and psycholinguists of reading would have it, my inference drives me forward, looking to confirm my unconscious hypothesis; the predicate "plinked" restricts my possible readings of "note" to sounds made by musical instruments—and tells me I was right all along.

Anticipation helps us comprehend ambiguous and indeterminate language, which includes just about everything in the realm we classify as fiction or literature, not to mention the gamut from the *National Enquirer* to sales stickers in Macy's. But it also provides us with boundaries that confine our predictions and interpretations: I am scarcely aware, if at all, of pausing between reading "note" and "plinked" to mull over the possibilities. "Only the end can finally determine meaning, close the sentence as a signifying totality," Brooks claims, insisting that our predictions or projections of closure, like the predicate in a sentence, enable us to interpret narratives.² But we cannot be quite certain that our hypotheses are right, and, in fact, we may simply wonder what everyone's trying to warn the Stephen Rea character about in *The Crying Game*, and not formulate any theories at all about the gender of the object of his infatuation. We are merely aware, at least momentarily, of the narrative's being left deliberately, teasingly incomplete. Reading is, more than anything, an act of faith, belief that, by the time we reach the ending, everything we have witnessed will at last make perfect sense, all our nagging questions will be answered, all disputes settled, all the wayward threads corralled into a tidy unity: something we can lay to rest before comfortably turning our backs on it. When endings are looked at in this light, it is not difficult to account for our seemingly inexhaustible desire to reach them in the stories we watch or read.

While the inner-directed readers of "Forking Paths" and "The Garden of Forking Paths" alike generated their own sense of closure in the absence of an acceptable ending, the fact does not tell us much about how the suspension of closure affects our ability to understand narratives at a local level. After all, if I am not certain where my destination lies or how I will recognize it once I reach it, how am I supposed to distinguish the landmarks that should guide me into the narrative equivalent of a safe harbor from the detritus along the wayside I should simply ignore? Questions also remain about how integral closure is, not only to our ability to make sense of narratives, but to the pleasure we

take in reading or watching them. Do we read for something that resembles closure, even when endings themselves are an impossibility? Or do we perhaps simply redefine closure as the reader of "Forking Paths" did? Or do we just create our own list of the probabilities we find most plausible or palatable or logical, as the readers of the Borges short story did, and call it closure?

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* (1874)

I have, I am aware, told this story in a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find their path through what may be a sort of maze. . . . [W]hen one discusses an affair—a long sad affair—one goes back, one goes forward. . . . I console myself with thinking that this is a real story and that, after all, real stories are probably best told in the way a person telling a story would tell them. They will then seem most real.

—Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (1915)

It is no coincidence that critics such as Peter 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 authority from Aristotle's simple definition of story as having a 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."³ 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."⁴ But, Kermode goes on to insist, the ending need not be 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.”⁵ 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 secret lives of the couple across the street.

While Kermode’s “coherent patterns” dimly echo Brooks’s flow of metonymies, they also suggest theories of reading that enshrine readerly predictions about what word or event is coming next as the single action that enables comprehension. I cannot read a sentence without making inferences: about what a pronoun refers to, which denotative meaning is intended with words that can signify radically different things, what certain words connote, how this line of text fits in with the others I have read, where the writer seems to be steering the prose. These hypotheses help me limit ambiguity at a local level and, some psycholinguists of reading would insist, at a global level as well.⁶ As Kermode’s theory of interpretation would have it, however, we are not merely looking perpetually forward—we are forever envisioning the end. Like Brooks’s “anticipation of retrospection,”⁷ 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.⁸

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—the one thing that both prompts and enables us to read.

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that all three of these critics also typically concern themselves with what we might define as “classical” narratives, texts that predate the modern and postmodern 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,”⁹ 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 its 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. . . . This 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).

As any sociologist will tell you, it is far easier to predict practices represented by common and highly conventionalized examples than it is to guess how the woman or man in the street might make sense of an object that aims to deliberately subvert them. It is one thing to theorize how readers behave in the throes of reading *Joseph Andrews* or *Nana* and quite another to account for what any of us might do when confronted with the likes of Coover's “The Babysitter,” or Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, or Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—all of which contain multiple and therefore highly indeterminate endings. In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels and stories most critics use as fodder for their theories, plot and narrative are generally 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 the “ending” to which Brooks or Kermode would have us refer. Which ending to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* should I be anticipating: the “traditional” paternalistic resolution, or the less resolutely cheerful, more “modern” one? And can I make inferences or draw conclusions comfortably or with any degree of certainty, if I know that there are at least two endings lurking toward the back of the book? Far from strictly limiting ambiguity, multiple endings would seem to leave things open—certainly far more than conventional endings.

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 (and probably view nearly every scene in the book according to this light), 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. I do not need to anticipate the end of the plot: I already know it. The narrator, John Dowell, has told it to me, a mere two-thirds of the way

through the novel. Both Edward Ashburnham and the narrator's wife, Florence, are already dead, and Dowell's beloved Nancy, mad and vacant, has been entrusted to his care. Since a series of flashbacks shape Ford's novel, the narrative rockets between two separate chronologies, one that traces events in the friendships and marriages of the Ashburnhams and Dowells and one that follows Dowell's slowly burgeoning awareness of what happened in the interstices of the first chronology. On one level, *The Good Soldier* is about the old themes of adultery and deceit; on another, it is the chronicle of a loss of innocence or naïveté, the destruction of Dowell's utter faith in the world of appearances. So closure is not really present at the "ending" of the plot that, in any case, grinds to a halt before the last third of the novel. Closure here is something the narrative provides as Leonora's bitterly perceptive memories eventually penetrate Dowell's blissful ignorance, transforming his memories and history alike. If I had not initially suspected Dowell was a naive observer who, as a judge of the events he perceives, falls somewhere between Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury* and the child in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*, by the time a bystander remarks on Florence's not-so-salubrious past in Dowell's hearing, I am already a good fifty pages ahead of him. What keeps me plowing on is my curiosity to discover just how far the wandering eyes of Edward and Florence will stray, and exactly how long it is going to take Dowell to piece it all together. I already know how it all ends—I am just waiting for Dowell to catch up, as he does, a measly eight pages from the end of the book.

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 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 the tensions, questions, and hypotheses we 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 (or even addressed directly) in the narrative. Even referents for pronouns may change within the space of a paragraph, making it well-nigh impossible for readers to guess about future events or to establish a sense of the causal relationships between characters' actions or narrative episodes—in short, to perform any of the actions readers normally do.

When these relationships are violated at every turn, as they are in *In the Labyrinth*, we can 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 do not, for example, assume that the soldier we follow through the streets will metamorphose into someone else as we follow him (unless we know we are reading horror or science fiction)—as he does in Robbe-Grillet's novel. We are accustomed to shifts in time and place being signaled by transitions or descriptions that pursue characters as they move from one setting to another. And we wait to learn about the most important events in the story as we meander through the narrative. But in Robbe-Grillet's narrative, all these expectations, all this readerly patience seems profoundly misplaced. I discover the soldier is wounded without having learned just how or when, and, in the end, I am not sure that he existed at all, leaving me perhaps less certain about the status of characters and events than I was even at the outset. The ending of the novel prompts me to recognize its structure as a textual labyrinth (something I am becoming increasingly familiar with), but it is the continual subversion of my expectations that gradually induces me to see the narrative as a form of antinarrative, a gesture that reveals to me the nature of the unseen elements for which I unconsciously search as I read—without delivering to me the actions, consequences, or resolutions I overtly seek. The ending, to use Barbara Herrnstein-Smith's definition of closure, simply removes any "residual expectations" I may have—I know that the narrative 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.¹⁰

So, to echo Gertrude Stein, an ending is an ending is an ending. Regardless of whether the plot stops dead or dribbles to a halt in the middle of a novel, or the narrative turns itself into a labyrinth where neither the center nor the end offers us any scraps that resolve riddles in the plot, their physical endings sever our connection with the story.

We can only reread them, either now, haunted by the same unanswered questions and nagging doubts, or later, as a slightly different reader who has either forgotten all the old questions or has evolved entirely new ones. In any case, the text, as Plato noted so aptly, will just keep saying the same thing. Nevertheless, simply knowing that an ending exists, an all-will-be-revealed implicit compact between the reader and absent writer, invites us to make projections, assures us that our inferences will be held up against the real article before the pages run out. But what happens to me when I plunge into *afternoon* with its thicket of segments, all 539 of them, and its 905 connections—let alone *Victory Garden*, with nearly a thousand segments that I may read or possibly never get to, strung together with twenty-eight hundred defaults, links, and paths? Even a digital narrative like *The Last Express*, which, as a “story-based adventure game,”¹¹ offers only one “winning” ending, also offers eleven “losing” endings—some of them more neatly resolved than the “winning” ending—as well as narrative threads, overheard lunchtime conversations, romance, and backstory on its cast of characters that in no way determine the outcome of the game-plot. In fact, readers tempted to eavesdrop on conversation between two characters lingering over a late lunch will miss an opportunity to ransack their compartment for clues that may or may not help resolve one of the plot’s central puzzles. Readers can successfully negotiate the plot’s challenges and arrive at the “winning” conclusion without experiencing half the content of *The Last Express*¹² even after twenty-five hours or more with the narrative, a rare experience in our age of obsolescence—and the sort of satisfaction even readers of *In the Labyrinth* can enjoy.

How can I read without fixing my sights on an ending—any ending? Whereas readers of even the most “difficult” writers in print face texts already supplied with endings, readers of hypertext fiction generally must supply their own senses of endings. Since the mechanisms necessary for me to interpret a novel resemble those that enable me to read a sentence, an exploration of how hypertext readers deal with the suspension of closure might cast light on the relationship between 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, a cumulative experience of the narrative’s manifold possibilities, approximate a sense of closure for readers, a sense they have grasped the narrative as, in Jay Bolter’s phrase, “a structure of possible structures,” even though their readings may not have explored every narrative space and connection?¹³

Looking for the Close of afternoon: Four Readings

I want to say that I may have seen my son die this morning.

—Opening segment of *afternoon* (1990)

Hypertexts, of course, do not have pages, and, in any case, a mere tally of how many places *afternoon* or *Victory Garden* contains tells us little about how long any one reader might spend with it, since you may encounter the same two or five or fifty segments in more than one context—or run through the entire hypertext without twice stumbling across the same segment. In any case, the length of time you or I might spend reading anything in print is a poor measure of the time and effort involved in exploring a hypertext, especially since readers of hypertext narratives can spend up to six times the length of time required to read print narratives.¹⁴ So a single reading of *afternoon* could occupy the same amount of time as a reading of an entire novel such as *The Good Soldier*—or, in some cases, what can even amount to entire months of reading, the kind of time you might lavish on Proust or the Bible. Conversely, depending on the paths you take through any hypertext, one reading can correspond to the time you might spend with a single chapter of *Lord Jim*. With no clear-cut divisions such as chapters between episodes or narrative strands, readers of interactive narratives encounter few cues telling them where to pause in their reading for a breather, let alone when they have completed one possible version among the narrative's multiplicity of stories.

This does not mean that hypertext narratives are inevitably, like Antarctica, without the usual signs or paths we need to guide us. There are, after all, certain limitations authors can build into their hypertexts to encourage behavior, foster conclusions, or invite assumptions from their readers—as we saw with Moulthrop's building links from words into the design of "Forking Paths." The simplest form of these also most closely approximates the limits familiar to us from print: by removing default options from the connections or by attaching a condition to its paths, the author makes it impossible for readers to move beyond a given place. So if I were working my way quickly through a hypertext for the first time solely by relying on defaults, the hypertext equivalent of channel surfing, stumbling into a place that has no default connection from it can seem tantamount to running headlong into a brick wall. Or the ending of the narrative. It is entirely up to you, dear reader.

Afternoon has a network of connections sufficiently rich that, even if I were to read several hundred places strictly by default for two

readings, I could produce an entirely different version of the narrative simply by choosing a path instead of a default—say, by answering “yes” or “no” when the text in “Begin” queries, “Do you want to hear about it?”—in only one of its places. In certain lights, reading by default can produce the most accessible reading of *afternoon*, since I am simply pursuing an already determined path, one with an invisible logic and no apparent branches off it that does not require me to mull over which paths or links I should be looking for, just like a book. Fittingly, this version is also literally the most accessible, hewing to the contours of plots about quests. 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. He drove by too quickly to get a fix on their identities, so he might be wrong, but when he embarks on a series of phone calls to reassure himself that both are still ambulatory and going about their everyday business, he uncovers nothing but gaping holes: no one has seen them. Panicking, he scouts around the accident scene—and uncovers a scrap of paper, a school report in childish writing he recognizes as belonging to his son, blowing around on the grass. The pace of his now-frenetic quest heats up, then ends abruptly thirty-six places into the hypertext, with the narrator deciding not to begin phoning around the local hospitals but, instead, to call someone named Lolly. No default branches out from this place, and, moreover, not even the menu of paths is accessible from this point, at least not during this particular reading. Since Lolly has not yet appeared in the narrative, I have no idea what significance she holds for Peter’s quest. The possibility, also, that she might hold the key to the whereabouts of wife Lisa and son Andrew—since the narrator’s last resort before calling around the local casualty wards is to take a tranquilizer and call her—makes this version of the narrative seem particularly inconclusive.

During my second reading of *afternoon*, I pass through the same initial portal into the text, exactly as Joyce intends, with the narrator’s wondering whether he had, unknowingly, seen his son die one morning. This time, by altering a single choice, choosing a path instead of a default, my reading experience changes again, shunting me onto different segments, new ones I had not encountered before. What I also stumble upon, however, is a relentless loop, where I shuffle through the same twenty-three segments repeatedly, the default from the twenty-third segment leading straight back to the first I had already read. My knowledge of the characters and events is enlarged somewhat, but I become disoriented by this circling through the hypertext, which spells the end of my second reading. When I return to the text

for a third shot, I again rely on defaults to push me through it; however, I select a different place in the text to move via a path, and continue reading until the hypertext, again, refuses to default, handing me an excuse to pause—the way you might midway through, say, Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, not because you are tired of the narrative or tottering from so much evocative but understated prose, but simply to digest what you have read. This time, however, the narrative possesses more tensions and ambiguities than it did the first time around. Peter still has not discovered the whereabouts of his ex-wife and son; he may or may not be having an affair with a fellow employee named Nausicaa; and I am not entirely certain what kind of relationship binds him to Lolly, a sometime therapist who also happens to be the wife of his employer.

Usually, the further along my reading takes me through *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Long Goodbye*, the more the profusion of probable and plausible outcomes dwindle, declining from a torrent into a mere trickle of possibility until they are narrowed to a single outcome, a final conclusion. But, instead of narrowing the margins of the narrative the further I read, *afternoon* considerably broadens them. The more I read, the more contingencies arise, the larger the tangle of causal relationships grows. My third reading of *afternoon* provides me with still more inferences to verify, and I have, if anything, a less complete picture of the hypertext as a structure of possibilities than I had during my first reading. There is nothing in any of my three readings to satisfy either the sense of closure I know from years of reading both pulpy novels and canonized literature—let alone the definition of closure set out by the likes of Herrnstein-Smith, or even by Kermode and Brooks. There seems to be nothing whatever resembling a final, concluding metaphor in *afternoon* that organizes the patterns I have discovered 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, described earlier. 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 by making bawdy suggestions to their waitress. 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, a childish ploy intended only to provoke Peter; in

another, Wert is testing the extent of Peter's ignorance of his own involvement with her. While my readings of all these versions are physically possible, I cannot accept all of them simultaneously when I finally reach an understanding of the events described in *afternoon*—they represent the clashing of too many different worlds, too many readings of characters and events that are simply too disparate to be embraced in a single interpretation.

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 herself. Most significantly, however, this particular version of the narrative rearranges the sequence in which Peter first sees the bodies of the child and woman splayed out on the green lawn. In this instance, Peter cannot track down either Lisa or Andrew prior to his driving to work, and his anxieties have already distracted him when he spots both of them riding in, of all places, Wert's truck. The possibility that Lisa may be sleeping with Wert—and perhaps, his recognition that Wert's lunchtime query may have been a very real question indeed—shocks him. Peter's feeling out of control is, in this version of *afternoon*, accompanied by his loss of control over 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, one that both follows this sequence and begins most readings 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 that enables her to figure out, as we discover in the places "1/," "2/," and "white afternoon," that Peter has probably 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 ongoing 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. As 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, providing access to other segments at a mere click.¹⁵ In all

other readings, the segment 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 triggered my sense of having come to some 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 (unless, of course, he’s suffering from either amnesia or denial), 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.” 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 suggest 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, which 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.

So I can, to borrow the expression from the print world, close the book on *afternoon*: I am finished with it. I might pick it up in a few months or years’ time, the way I could watch *Chinatown* a good five or six times in a decade without exhausting my pleasure in the way the narrative simultaneously evokes, includes, and demolishes the whole world of film noir—but, in any case, these types of returns are nearly inevitably prompted by satisfaction with your aesthetic experience, not from a nagging sense of incompleteness. At the same time, I cannot help but be aware of the mutability of Joyce’s narrative, the way it appears to shift, chameleon-like, each time I open it, becoming, sometimes, a story about everything *but* Peter’s quest to locate his wife and son. I am not, for example, absolutely 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. That would certainly account for the “investigator finds him at fault”

line, as well as the bodies stretched out on the grass, but not his son's school paper, blowing about on the grass—just as it would also leave Peter's search for Lisa and Andrew as open-ended as it was when I first began reading *afternoon*. Which makes all the more intriguing the reasons for my closing *afternoon*, feeling satisfied with the last version of the text I read, and accepting the approximate, albeit stylized, type of closure I reached at that last "I call."

First, *the text does not default, requiring that I physically alter my reading strategy or stop reading*. Since the segment "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 the first reading of *afternoon* visited only 36 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 redirection of textual energies that 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.¹⁶

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 backward 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 a hypertext 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 that, initially, give rise to the narrative. The fiction 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 revisited by him several hours later (when, in any case, there is practically nothing to observe)—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. It is also more than simply an irrational tic, since, for all Peter knows, his son might be busy teasing a girl in his class and his ex-wife slogging through a thoroughly average business day even as he's dialing his index finger into a bruised stub. There are no absences to provoke his fear, and the mere proximity of the accident to his son's school does not account for the crescendoing panic driving his actions. Nor should the tone of the perfectly banal conversations he conducts with people who cannot recall whether they have recently seen Lisa and Andrew, 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. His emotions do, however, correspond to scripts familiar to me from other stories or films. In *Angel Heart*, for example, the Mickey Rourke character frantically tries to discover the identity of the killer trailing in his wake, who seems to be following just scant steps behind him, only to find that the murderer is not merely right behind him—he *is* him.

Third, *the conclusion represented a resolution that accounted for the greatest number of ambiguities in the narrative.* In other words, this version provided the most *plausible* conclusion to the narrative's network of mysteries and tensions. Just as plausibility and referentiality bind sentences and paragraphs together like invisible glue, inviting us to see logic, causation, and sequences linking lines of text together like a chain, they also prejudice me toward certain conclusions. The conclusion that refers to the most narrative tensions, that stands for the most plausible model of the motives and intentions of characters like Peter and Wert, seems the most satisfying. Wert's romance with

Lisa accounts for the peculiar tenor of some of his comments to Peter, but it also coincides with the way Lisa, Lolly, and Nausicaa, throughout the narrative, bemoan Peter's peculiar proclivity for imagining himself at the center of everyone's universe. Also, I cannot seem to account for the contents of "white afternoon" through any other way of interpreting the narratives in *afternoon*, regardless of how artfully I make my guesses about the pronoun referents. If Peter does not crash his car (and into Lisa and Andrew) on his way to work that morning because he realizes his womanizing boss has taken to sleeping with his ex-wife, then how should I construe Lolly and Nausicaa's concluding that they should not blame "either of them" as they mull over the accident? 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸

So, the "either of them" in "white afternoon" must be Peter and Wert: Peter for being so self-centered that the shock of seeing his still beloved ex-wife with another man causes him to swerve across the yellow line; Wert for deliberately, perhaps maliciously, driving along a road where Peter will probably spot them—a gesture not unlike the old "What if I were sleeping with your ex-wife?" query tossed out between courses at lunch. Read this way, the string of segments that culminate in "white afternoon" and "I call" have all the coherence of a cinematic sequence that spans climax and denouement, plugs all the missing gaps, and overturns my hypotheses, so to speak, in the same way that the flashback sequence toward the end of *The Other* jolts me with the realization that the good twin, who, to all appearances spends nearly the entire film spinning in the wake of his evil brother's destructive acts, really is himself the bad twin.

Its murky spots and ambiguities resolved by this interpretation, the narrative suddenly looms into focus as a unified whole, a structure

of possibilities representing one man's simultaneous drive to learn the fates of his ex-wife and son—as well as a mad dash away from his own culpability in an accident that may have caused their violent ends. If the narrative pushes us to follow the paths Andrew and Lisa might have taken to discover their fates, it also prods us to uncover truths Peter himself is too self-absorbed, insecure, or downright terrified to admit. So Lolly's monologue, ending in the revelation that Peter has caused the accident, is, in a sense, the destination toward which the narrative has been pushing us from two entirely different directions, baring some of the tidbits Peter could never bear to admit even to himself about his boss, about his former wife, about his own shortcomings, at the same time that it reveals what has happened to his family. Once I have reached it, I am able to shuffle back through my experience of the entire narrative and to see it as a chronicle of Peter's ongoing 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”—which, coincidentally, manages to neatly satisfy Herrnstein-Smith's definition of conventional narrative closure.¹⁹

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.* Joyce himself is the first to point 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.²⁰ But this does not prevent me from discovering striking concurrences between my perception of the virtual space occupied by segments such as “I call,” and “white afternoon,” in the overall structure of the hypertext and their position on the cognitive map of *afternoon*. The narrative's network of guardfields, requiring readers to visit a particular segment or select a certain word or phrase from its text, appears to track readers through the hypertext in a highly controlled manner—witness the way I could realize consistently different versions of the narrative by simply making a change at one point in my navigations. In particular, my ability to visit certain portions of the hypertext seemed largely contingent on whether I had visited “I call” and how frequently I had been there. The sequence of places visited tracks me through the text via these conditional links, 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 to 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 benefit of Christian baptism. In order to reach the pit where Peter becomes his ex-wife's (probably inadvertent) executioner, I first have to trundle through a narrative that lets me conclude that he might very well have been a lousy husband, several rings up from the bottom.

The place "I call" seems to exist as *afternoon's* 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 notches 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 guardfields ensures that it is reached only after a lengthy visitation of fifty-seven narrative places. Hence, my sense, when I get there, of arriving at the end of something, because "white afternoon" represents the furthest reaches of the physical spaces within *afternoon*, the textual equivalent of a basement—or the end of a novel.

The Suspension of Closure:
WOE—or 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.

—Michael Joyce, *WOE* (1991)

We could call *afternoon*, with all its layers of text and levels of meaning, "stratigraphic" writing. Once we open it, we can delve through layer after layer of singular versions of narrative events until we reach the bottom band, the one that contains the deepest, most secret record, in the same way the oldest stratum in sedimentary stone tells geologists tales of what lived and died in the shadowy recesses of the past. The trigger that sparks off Peter's frenetic quest, encased in Lolly's narrative, slumbers on the bottom level of *afternoon*, shaping everything that follows it, including Peter's denial of all knowledge of what might have happened on his way to work. Although *afternoon* is not a mystery in the conventional sense, its action takes its central thrust from that genre's narrative dialectic of

concealment and discovery that drives events forward in nearly every narrative strand. Peter's quest makes me itch to fill in the fine details. Once I can sketch them in, however, the whole search is, essentially, up—even if *afternoon* lacks the traditional denouement beloved of Victorian novelists and Hollywood moguls alike, where the perpetrator either ends up straitjacketed and muttering to himself in an institution, enveloped in the bosom of his family, or behind bars. Seen in this light, it is not terribly surprising that the narrative should prompt and finally satisfy my search for a rough equivalent of narrative closure—albeit a search somewhat satisfied through avenues beyond the boundaries of print narratives.

On the other hand, this sense of ending-ness could just be unique to *afternoon*, making closure something that hypertext narratives can, but may not, have. Even if *afternoon* is, as Stuart Moulthrop has argued, “only a ‘mystery’ in the older sense of that word, the sense of ritual or hieratic procedure,”²¹ it is a narrative that begins with a question that begs to be answered: a matter of life and death. It is difficult to imagine a more potent formula to compel readers through a text, even a network as dense and circuitous as *afternoon*. As a genre, mysteries could have been designed for hypertext or hypermedia—as writers like Shannon Gilligan have clearly already discovered. The whole pleasure bound up with the reading of them revolves around the narrative leaving a vacuum that invites us to hurl any number of hypotheses and hunches into it. But whereas Raymond Chandler or Sara Paretsky eventually narrows the field to a single culprit with a single outcome conferring on us the fleeting pleasure of knowing we had called all the right shots and interpreted the signs as well as our hero did, a digital narrative like Gilligan's *Magic Death* urges us to go on guessing, reminding us that life, like texts, is indeterminate. The case can always wind up differently, the guilty party turn out to be somebody else: the sweetly inquisitive elderly neighbor, the brother honking his grief into a handkerchief so convincingly during questioning, the ones you would never suspect. So the questions remain: if I were to read the hypertext equivalent of a melodrama or something distinctly Chekhovian that does not spur me on, panting after the answers to a few pressing questions, would I still read for closure? Or would closure become relatively unimportant? If it does, then would it be possible for me to read these narratives comprehensibly? And how on earth would I figure out when (and where) to stop? In a text that has no rending narrative tensions, will I discard my search for resolutions? Or will I impose or even invent some, to confer some shred of purposiveness on my readings?

Like Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Michael Joyce's hypertext, *WOE—or a Memory of What Will Be*, is a narrative "about" its own structure—a radical notion even during the modernist era. On the face of it, the Joyce and Woolf novels simply span a single day in the lives of two unlikely pairs: Leopold Bloom and Stephen Daedalus, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. Both of the days involved, however, are loaded with recurrent patterns of tensions, conflicts, meditations, and ambiguities that extend their tentacles both into the distant past and forward into the future, so that few of them are resolved by the closing of the day.

The plot of *Mrs Dalloway* has at least one overt question: what will happen to Septimus Warren Smith, who never entirely came back from the battlefield (for all he manages to stumble through the appearances of normality)? And the novel certainly dispatches with it, quite permanently, when he hurls himself out a window and ends up impaled on the iron railings lining the pavement below. This, nonetheless, occupies only a fragment of the narrative, which goes on to trace 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. We expect the two parallel narrative strands involving the very different days spent by Clarissa and Septimus Warren Smith to intersect, and for their collision to alter the trajectory of both, but we discover that their lives glide by one another in perfectly parallel lines. The nearest Clarissa approaches the life of Septimus Warren Smith is one of the eddies cast out by his suicide, when the doctor invited to her party is detained by Smith's death, and the ambulance wailing down Tottenham Court Road on its way either to or from the place where the dying Septimus lies merely interrupts Peter Walsh's thoughts of Clarissa.

Like *In the Labyrinth* and *The Good Soldier*, *Mrs Dalloway* is structured around what Joseph Frank dubbed "spatial form."²² Modernist literary works, Frank noticed, attempted to convey simultaneity and the often circuitous and incomplete patterns of fleeting thoughts through literary devices that included recurrent images, fragmented narrative sequences, and the division of plot from narrative—patterns that acquired significance, he believed, when perceived as part of a whole in the minds of their readers. A fully fledged interpretation of them, the revelation of their full meaning, could occur only after readers had finished reading the entire text. In this view, meaning resides not simply in an ending that either confirms or subverts the expectations the narrative has fostered, but in the relationship

between the content of the text and the place it occupies relative to the work as a whole. Taking Frank's concept further, David Mickelsen has argued 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. . . . [T]he "implied reader," in Iser's phrase, in spatial form is more active, perhaps even more sophisticated, than that implied by most traditional fiction.²³

Obviously, the spatial form at work in these print narratives exists in our minds—like the maps of the structure of "Forking Paths" that the cartographic readers created—as we grapple with their intricacies of time and place, with patterns of recursion, and with digressions that violate expectations based on readings of conventional narratives. When a character like John Dowell tells his story in an order dictated by all the vagaries of memory, when Borges prefaces "The Garden of Forking Paths" with an allusion to an historical event seemingly unrelated to Yu's lengthy confession (itself discovered in fragments, its earliest pages missing), or when Justine goes looking for her kidnapped child in a brothel in *The Alexandria Quartet* and the novel reveals, nearly seven hundred pages (and three whole books) later, that she has discovered its final resting place, fiction requires us to attend to spatial form. Even in more straightforward, conventional texts, the slightest distance between time as it occurs in the plot chronology and time as it is traced by the narrative requires us to piece together intricate chronologies in our heads, and to assign significance and weight to events on the basis of where they appear in the narrative and the places they occupy in plot-time.

Although it may seem difficult to think about space in narratives that are, after all, made of lines of text laid out on flat pages, we inevitably think about their contents along two axes: time and space. The works that appear to deal with "spatial form" are those that insist we consciously and constantly deal with both dimensions. An author's aim might be to make time as visible, as palpable as space, as Proust attempted in *Remembrance of Things Past*—right down to his original notion of assigning sections of the narrative to spaces in a cathedral: "Porch," "Stained Glass of the Apse."²⁴ Authors like Woolf might try to capture simultaneity, a single event perceived from multiple viewpoints, as when the mysterious car glides across London, inflaming speculation about its occupants, and Woolf's narrative skips

lightly between the consciousnesses of the observers who watch it pass. Or, as in "The Babysitter," a single occurrence might belong to entirely different scenarios, like the babysitter's scream, which metamorphoses from a squeal of terror to an indignant shriek, depending on the context we see it in.

Just as Iser reminds us that texts are only skeletal maps until readers flesh them out, so critics focusing on spatial form insist that it exists only in latent form on the page. Readers actually create it as they shuffle bits of text around in their heads, trying to get a bead on the layers of narrative time, juxtaposed images, recurrent themes, multiple perspectives on events, and even 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."²⁵

In "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," the treatise that first brought the concept of spatial form to the attention of critics, Frank claimed that readers exploring narratives that use 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."²⁶ This particular method of reading a narrative as a structure or pattern of references is hardly a novel concept since, as we have already seen, many critics believe our perceiving patterns and forging hypotheses about their significance draws us through the narrative, anchoring body to conclusion. But for Frank, we do not simply require an ending to ratify our guesses and assign a definite and fixed value to what we have read—we can perceive the full meaning of complex, spatial works only when we reencounter them again, piecing the whole thing back together in our minds, or, even, reading the entire work over again. This conviction is reduced to a more elegant formula in Frank's famous declaration: "Joyce cannot be read—he can only be reread" (91).

It is not terribly difficult to accept that we can grasp the full meaning of *Ulysses* or *The Good Soldier* only once we have finished reading them and reflect back on their jumbled chronologies, patterns of reference, and hiccups in time. It is another, however, to contend that readers can suspend the act of creating or construing references for the words they read until they can place them within a global vision of the text. While we may leave some of our assumptions open to future revision, we cannot surge forward through any text without making

assumptions. Without making inferences, without construing references and significance, we cannot read—and this is one of the few aspects of reading on which most theorists and critics agree. Part of the problem with Frank's theory lies, as critics like W. J. T. Mitchell have pointed out, in his insistence that spatial form is the property only of "modern avant-garde writing."²⁷ The concept of spatial form, like Frank's essay, is useful for its reminding us that texts occupy as well as describe both time and space. As a realistic model of how readers approach works by Pound, Eliot, or Joyce, though, Frank's theory flies in the face of the admittedly modest amount of wisdom we possess on the act of reading.

Even as we begin plowing through our first sentences in, say, *Ulysses* or even the likes of *Princess Daisy*, we are busily interpreting, integrating details, concocting hypotheses, modifying, confirming, and abandoning predictions.²⁸ The "glue" binding disparate elements spread out over several hundred pages is our ability to perceive references between sentences and paragraphs: to see all the pronouns anchored to precedents and to see sentences aligned in chains describing causes and their effects. The very act of reading requires us, albeit generally unconsciously, to continually perceive links, references, and contexts for the words we read, which come to us already endowed with meanings at the moment we perceive them. "Meanings come already calculated," Stanley Fish has famously argued, "not because of norms embedded in language but because language is always perceived, from the very first, within a structure of norms . . . [a] structure, however, [that] is not abstract and independent but social."²⁹

Far from the passive consumers Frank envisioned, who merely assemble pieces and refrain from assigning them a value until the whole has been revealed, Fish's readers construct as much as they construe. The readers of "Forking Paths" and "The Garden of Forking Paths" interpreted the narrative according to models of the integral structure they had erected, as when the readers of Borges's short story insisted that its conclusion betrayed the entire notion of the labyrinth. In "How to Recognize a Poem When You See One," Fish's readers, believing names left over on a blackboard from an earlier linguistics class were part of an esoteric piece of poetry, constructed a poem from them, based on the significance they assigned each name and its alignment on the board.³⁰ Even in texts 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 predic-

tions, 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 the efforts of the readers navigating through “Forking Paths,” as well as my own readings of *afternoon*.

In other words, as readers we have always been challenged with the task of reading something that approximates the virtual, three-dimensional space of hypertext narratives: what Frank insists is the hallmark of the modern novel seems to have been the property of fiction since the days of Richardson and Defoe. What does lend a ring of truth to Frank’s declaration that *Ulysses* can only be reread is perhaps Joyce’s wrestling with what Jay Bolter calls spatial or “topographic” writing in a unidimensional, undeniably static medium.³¹ To understand *Ulysses*, we need to construct the equivalent of Greek rhetoricians’ detailed memory palaces in our heads, where we can weigh narrative-time against story-time, Joyce’s narrative against the familiar conventions of the novel. To understand the ellipses, leaps in perspective, and disjunctions in time in Michael Joyce’s *WOE*, however, I need only crank open the cognitive map and peer into the structure of the hypertext.

Indeterminacy, Spatial Form, and WOE

WOE opens with a place called “Mandala,” a segment of text that lies over a cognitive map of the hypertext that itself looks like a mandala. “Mandala” represents the hub of a narrative wheel, connected through a series of paths to five other places that, in turn, contain other, subsidiary places (see fig. 1). From “Mandala,” however, I need not pass through the five places on the uppermost 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,” the point of entry into *WOE*. In Buddhist practice, the mandala pulls the eye from the center of the image to the periphery or vice versa. In *WOE*—its title a pun on the acronym of the journal *Writing on the Edge*, for which the piece was written—the map is also a visual pun and a metaphor for a form of writing on the edge.³² Physically, the reading of all places except “Mandala” takes place at the periphery, or on the edge, of the narrative’s structure, making the narrative itself, quite literally, a writing on the margins of experience, an accumulation of the experiences, memories, and metaphors from which fiction grows.

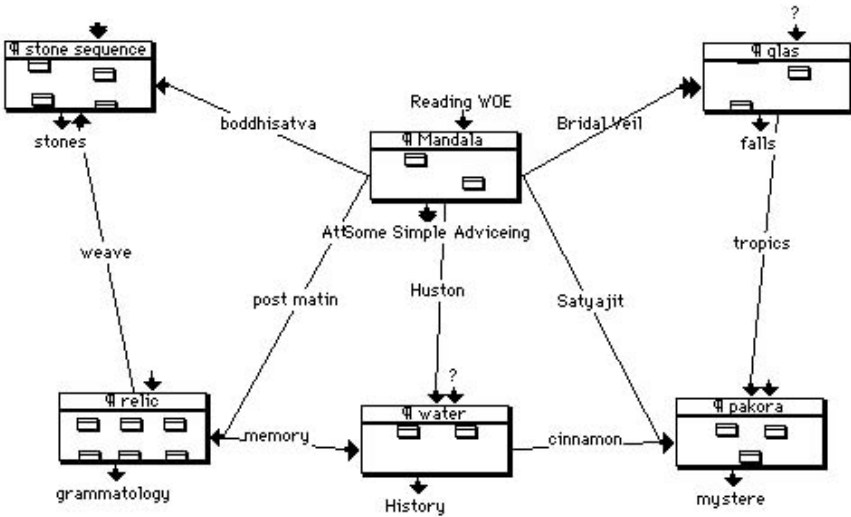


Fig. 1. The cognitive map of *WOE—Or What Will Be*: writing and reading at the edges.

Although my reading of “Mandala” is colored by my awareness of its central place in the *WOE* narrative structure, my knowledge of its placement at the hub of the narrative structure does little to relieve the ambiguities littering its text. Here the protagonists are identified solely by the pronouns “he” and “she,” and the pair seems to be driving somewhere, but I cannot be certain even whether their journey is a physical one or merely metaphoric. As I move through the narrative by way of defaults, I encounter more scenes that portray the actions of a couple, but I cannot be certain whether these two pronouns are the same ones I passed earlier, taking what may or may not have been a trip in the car. When we read print stories, if we lose track of which name is “he” or stumble over the identity of the next “she,” we simply trace the text backward to verify the pronoun referents, until we know that “she” is Leonora or Clarissa or Lucrezia. With *WOE*, however, tangible gaps separate pronouns from precedents, and even when I traipse through the text via its defaults, which in Joyce’s hyperfiction usually string the text together in sequences, I cannot assume comfortably that the “she” in one place is the same “she” I meet another three places down the line. Because I also know that the same place can crop up in wildly different contexts from my experience with

afternoon, I am distinctly aware of my hesitation as I cast around for the likeliest anchor for the pronouns.

Of course, the central story in *WOE* also has something to do with my treading so carefully: two married couples, one identified solely through pronouns, joined through friendship and infidelity. Sometimes the "he" and "she" are labeled "Steve" and "Filly"; sometimes they are simply "she" and "he." Often, the pronouns refer not to this couple but to their friends, who can be distinguished from Filly and Steve only when their children are mentioned (since Filly is unable to have children) or when the text makes it clear that they are *not* Filly and Steve. The titles of the places involved in the narrative sequence "Relic" that focuses on the couples are identified by pronoun titles—"She," "They," "He," "It," "Your," "Their," "His," "Her," and "We"—almost a teasing promise that this jumbled network of identities will be smoothed out in each place, all the female pronouns tamed into a single referent, the respective characters that make up any given "we" pinned with bright identity tags. Since I quickly learn that one "he" is sleeping with the "she" with whom he did not swap wedding vows, my reading of *WOE* develops into a quest to establish and fix the identities of these wayward pronouns. However, because pronouns in hypertext narratives can be more slippery or promiscuous than any poststructuralist theorist ever dreamed, even my wariness cannot prevent me from unknowingly making some determinate assumptions.

In "Their," a man and woman converse. The woman must be the one with children, since the man here wonders if she is wearing a certain fragrance because she has realized he loves the scent of Filly's perfume. That leaves me to establish the identity of the man, but, as I begin reading the passage, he remains elusive, a set of XY chromosomes, Anyman . . . until I read that the two of them have packed the kids off to see the film *Dick Tracy*. Sounds like the sort of thing a couple seeking a little privacy or some quasi-spontaneous sex might do, a familiar enough schema. On the other hand, if the couples are such good friends, neither the children nor the unnamed woman would think it amiss if Steve—the man who *is not* her husband—were to ply her kids with dollars in an avuncular way and send them off for an afternoon at the cinema, so the two of them could spend a few hours in the sack together, another familiar and highly plausible schema. I continue reading, and it is only when the man reacts with shock when the woman tells him she believes he's thinking of Filly that I latch onto a certain sense of his identity. His silently wondering "Do you know?" seems motivated by guilt: Why else would he feel a shock, if he is not thinking of another woman while he lies alongside his wife?

What does he know that plainly she does not? There are enough of its trappings here for me to recognize the old "adultery" script, familiar to me from my encounters with print and film narratives about *ménages à trois*. So, I believe, the man here must be involved with his wife's friend Filly, although the text does not make explicit just how much the wife knows. Since the schema or script for adulterous relationships invariably involves a dialectic between deceit and discovery, however, the question of the wife's knowledge or ignorance of the affair is one of the engines that keeps the narrative—not to mention the affair itself—barreling along.

When I begin reading the place "His," which immediately follows "Their" by default, I assume that the "she" embraced in "his" arms in bed must be his wife, the same "she" I ran across seconds before. But I am jolted when Steve interrupts the couple's postcoital musing by leaving a message on "his" answering machine. Since Steve cannot be both leaving messages on answering machines and fondling someone in bed at the same time (and in most instances people do not call their own answering machines to leave messages on them), I realize that, although the man is the same, the woman may not be. This "she" is startled by the messages left by Steve, who is identified as her husband, so she must be Filly, Steve's wife. Although the "he" lying in bed might be a third man, Joyce's narrative seems to cleave close enough to the conventions of print narratives for me to believe that new characters would be introduced with some modicum of fanfare, some indication of their debut. Still, this abrupt switch in identities comes as a shock, even though it is couched in an environment that has encouraged me to believe I can leave behind all the baggage of assumptions, projections, and conventions I bring to my experiences with the printed word. Mere continuity, supplied by the default connection between "His" and "Their," has led me to assume, as I would in print narratives, that the actors in both places will remain constant, making my surprise at the switch in identities all the more potent. Here the gap separating narrative spaces approximates the space of cinematic cuts—which, although we know at some level are splices in the film, we still believe smoothly connect one image to another. My reaction is similar to the experience of someone watching adjoining scenes in a film about an affair, where in two separate sequences 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 thighs, hips, breasts.

I read on, expecting the text to seem more determinate, since my predictions about the deceit/discovery dialectic should encourage me

to see language in a more determinate, meaningful context. I find correspondences between another narrative strand, involving yet another unnamed woman who murders her philandering spouse before killing herself, and the *ménage à trois* in "Relic," which may foreshadow the violence with which the nameless wife may react once she discovers her own husband has been sleeping with her best friend. Physically, the tale of this double killing resides at an entirely different subsidiary level of *WOE*, but the connections I make between these two distinct narrative strands easily bridge the gaps between them, a feat, apparently, many readers accomplish with ease:

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.³³

The familiar script of adulterous couples encourages me to forge certain predictions about how the narrative will develop, how the tale of Filly and Hubby's stolen afternoons might blossom into a story of a rage unleashed, marked by a trail of bodies, a schema into which the double murder fits quite nicely, and I take it as a temporary confirmation of my hypothesis. As I read on, however, I keep running up against segments that seem to have no bearing whatsoever on the events in "Relic," let alone any answers to my questions: Does she or doesn't she know? Will she act, or won't she? Because my reading is now purposive, turning *WOE* into a thriller that has a clearly defined set of oppositions, I gloss over some of the same indeterminacies that had earlier excited my attention in places like "His" and "Their." In any case, I have no other context against which to set the contents of these other places, so I simply assign this newer information a place in the background to my reading of *WOE* while I pursue further developments with the "Relic" couples by consulting the cognitive map to fix their whereabouts.

What I discover momentarily shocks me. "Relic," I had believed, was the axis of the hypertext, uniting its disparate narratives with themes of impending violence, violated fidelity, and bonds forged by love and desire. According to this view, "Relic" should have occupied the center of *WOE*, or something close to the position of "Mandala,"

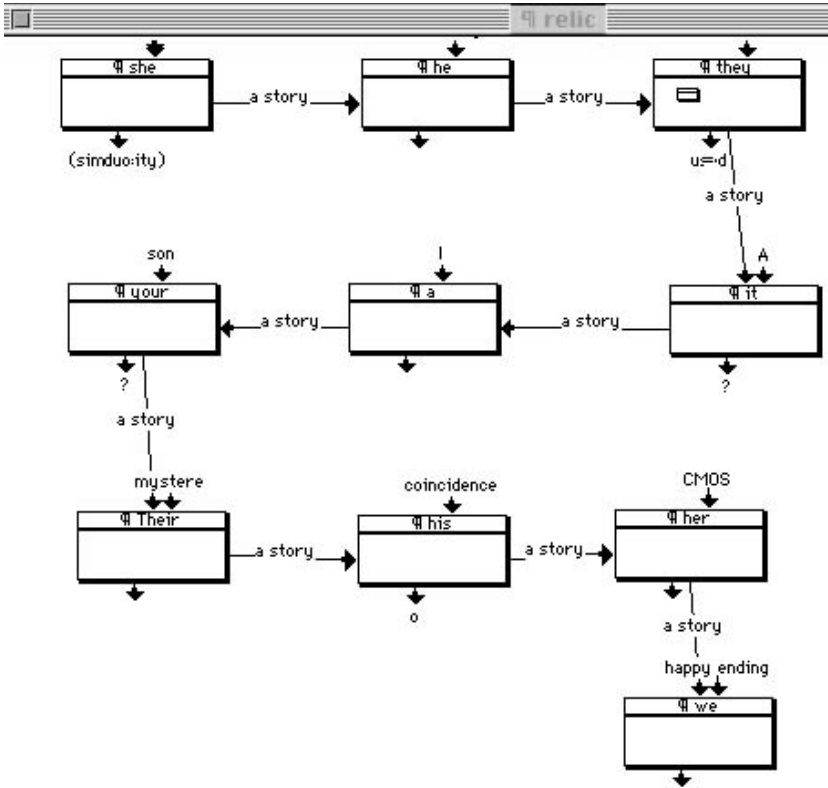


Fig. 2. The cognitive map of "Relic" tells its own version of the story.

with other narrative strands feeding into its motifs, enlarging upon them, foreshadowing the future in "Relic." Instead, I discover, "Relic" is merely one of five places on the periphery of *WOE*. Although, of course, I had noticed the mandala-like shape of *WOE* when the hyper-text opened into both "Mandala" and its cognitive map, I lacked any context to make this knowledge meaningful, and, as we tend to do with things we perceive that do not seem particularly relevant at the time we first notice them, I pushed these details to one side. Now, confronted with them again, I realize the couplings and uncouplings of "Relic" cannot be as central to *WOE* as I had assumed (see fig. 2).

The words "A happy ending" conclude the text of the place "We." But when I first see them, I read this phrase ironically and attribute the

words to the unnamed narrator of this particular passage, possibly the child of the married couple, who lists the name of his beloved family members but leaves out the name Liam, which must, therefore, be his own. If Liam is the “me” in this passage, and he is reporting things in what must be a tense household, then, like the child in *What Maisie Knew*, his “happy ending” is most likely going to be anything but that. Far from seeming an ending, these words originally appear to be a way of heightening tension—one of those familiar tricks like the moments in *Sleeping with the Enemy* and *Misery* when it looks like the heavies have gone down for the count, inviting you to relax and heave a sigh of relief . . . before the narrative propels them upward again, Rasputin-like, for one last tussle with the horrified protagonists. The cognitive map, however, tells me otherwise. According to it, I have already experienced all the twitchings and couplings “Relic” contains, a relatively short sequence that ends with “We.” Even the connection linking “We” with the place that precedes it is named, echoing the text, “happy ending,” obliging me to revise my assumption that this place merely marked the narrative’s downturn into a more violent phase. The child’s phrase “a happy ending” should, after all, be read without irony, a simple statement of fact: this particular story is finished. The tensions I discovered in the narrative seem to have existed in my imagination more than on the virtual pages of *WOE*—and I may well have drawn upon my knowledge of familiar schema about adultery and revenge, however subconsciously, to make my reading of *WOE* more quest oriented and, therefore, easier.

At the same time, I have to admit that the places in “Relic,” as the most decidedly sequential in *WOE*, also seem to draw the trajectory of the rest of the narrative into them by a kind of centrifugal force. It is hardly surprising, from this perspective, that I felt prompted to read so many of the other, disparate places in the narrative in light of their real or imagined references to, and consonances with, the details contained within the “Relic” narrative. But if I view the story in “Relic” as limited to what I have already read, the avenging wife and her dead husband become something other than portents of things yet to unfold in the story of Filly and Steve and their friends. Approached again, however, these events seem to be related in some way to Joyce’s own past: involving a cousin who murdered, then killed herself, leaving behind an orphaned child—particularly when read against fragments of what seem to be Joyce’s diaries or a journal, as well as metatextual musings on the act of writing *WOE*. By carefully comparing the places I read in *WOE* with their position on its topographic map, I eventually evolve a sense of *WOE* as a narrative about the creation of hypertext fiction,

brewed from snippets of experience from Joyce's own past in diary-like, dated extracts, fragments of the experience of others, scatterings of news items and poetry, and metatextual 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, as I create a network of references and connections between places—much as readers of *Ulysses* or “Forking Paths” might read. If closure is a sense of completion, though, surely it cannot look like this: I feel far from having resolved many of the ambiguities hanging around the text. Did the double murder “really” happen? Is this nameless woman who murdered her cheating husband the same woman, “M’s sister,” who I discover has been murdered? Does the wife ever find out her husband has been screwing around on her? Does Filly’s husband discover his best pal’s duplicity—or do the friendships remain intact, the affair undiscovered?

Despite this, I feel as if I have completed *WOE*, discovered a level place from which I can, a little like Archimedes with his place to stand and his fulcrum, grasp the world—in this instance, the text, its narrative structure, and some of its imagery and thematic references—and fashion them into a plausible reading that accounts for the majority of its form and content. This is, perhaps, a brand of closure akin to the sense of an ending you might arrive at after reading *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*, a feeling you have merely completed one plausible reading of the text, realized one version without exhausting the many others still possible, still to be discovered. Perhaps this sense of a completion is informed less by what I have learned about the structure of *WOE* than it is about my knowledge of other print narratives, like John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse,” which are also mostly “about” the relationship between narrative structure and the experience of reading. In Barth’s short story, the Funhouse is both a physical place—tricked out with all the usual halls of mirrors—and a metaphor for our own readerly way of getting “lost” amid all the mirrors and false turns and fake walls thrown up by fiction.

But my arrival at a sense of completion for *WOE* also represents the kind of strategy by which closure can act as an elegant form of shorthand, a way of providing a single interpretation of events that most efficiently accounts for the greatest amount of information. Had I attempted to find a metaphor or attach significance to each of the disparate texts I encountered in *WOE*, I would still be at it. Once I decide, though, that Joyce’s hypertext is about the production of coherent, neat narratives from the inconclusive, fragmentary flotsam of everyday life, this reading accommodates nearly all of these passages and

effectively neutralizes their disparities. Of course, I may be more inclined to leave the loose ends in *WOE* flapping than I was with *afternoon*, because part of what *WOE* is about, I suspect, is the flexibility of certain works of art that can invite readers and viewers inside their framework repeatedly for fresh runs at involvement and interpretation without ever exhausting the work itself. I can close *WOE* without worrying what my reading neglected, since I realize that, as an Open Work, no single version of the text can truly complete it.

*Reading for the Ending:
Closure in Print and Interactive Narratives*

[T]he 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.

—Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (1962)

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 *The Open Work* explores the radical differences in the aesthetics informing traditional and modern art. Like the hypertext 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. Whereas traditional works appear to possess singular, determinate meanings, these modern “works in motion” seem 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.”³⁴

My version of the structure of *WOE* as a network of snippets of

personal history, a chronicle of creation, and an invented narrative is thus both reinforced and modified by my knowledge of Eco's aesthetics of the open work. On one hand, my awareness of this aesthetic prompts me to see *WOE* as the paradigm of the open work, one that 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 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 metascript that 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*.

Even in interactive narratives, where 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."³⁵ Our predictions enable us to minimize ambiguities, and to perceive words in an already largely determinate context, even when we move through a text knowing that the very words we read can and may crop up in entirely different contexts. The anticipation of endings is, in this sense, integral to the act of reading—even when no tangible, final ending exists. Ultimately, we cannot separate the desire for an ending—which might resemble Conrad's longing or Benjamin's sanction in the epigraphs beginning this chapter—with our need to create contexts for the perception of what we read in the immediate sense by anticipating what may follow in the future. When we read, prediction enables us to create contexts for words and phrases that guide our interpretation of their meaning in an action that appears to unfold simultaneously, not in discrete stages in time.

So when we navigate through hypertext fiction, we are pursuing the same sorts of goals as we do when we read *Our Mutual Friend* or *Love Story*—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 hypertext fiction such as *afternoon* and *WOE*, reading these 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 that 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 minimize 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 schema gleaned from either life experience or from encounters with other narratives. Unlike most print narratives, however, hypertext fiction invites us to return to it again and again, its openness and indeterminacy making our sense of closure simply one “ending” among many possible. It is often impossible to distinguish between explaining a work and exhausting its possibilities in the sense of the 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 hypertext 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 the starving long for loaves and fishes, it is not the definitive, deathlike ending foreseen by Benjamin: a plausible version or versions of the story among its multitudinous possibilities will suffice equally well.