

Endings are created by interpretations which exploit our knowledge of what came before.

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This blog is a response to Patrick's response to my valedictory lecture marking my retirement, 'Why endings are better than beginnings'. This title was appropriate to the occasion, but not quite accurate, as the lecture was about the special affordances of endings, rather than a competition between beginnings and endings. Patrick develops an account of a particular kind of ending which might be universal. In this blog, I explain and illustrate the two things I said in the lecture about endings. The first is that an ending is established as an outcome of an interpretation of the text; it is not an observer-independent fact about the text. The second is that the ending of a text can exploit the audience's prior knowledge of the text, because the ending (usually) comes at the end, and that this can give endings an emotional boost based on expectation and surprise, accompanied by the empathy we have developed for characters. These are simple and ontologically parsimonious proposals which require nothing other than ordinary psychology, and so should be universally available for writers and readers, though how endings are interpreted, and how they use prior knowledge, may differ cross-culturally.

I begin by explaining what I mean by saying that an ending is derived by interpretation. This proposal is in keeping with the account of literary form which I outlined in *Language and Literary Structure*, where I suggested that many kinds of literary form are not facts about a text but arise as interpretations of the text. In effect, these kinds of literary form – which include almost all kinds of literary form – are meanings of the text, pragmatically communicated. The literary form is attributed to the text on the basis of evidence offered by the (author of the) text in context. This is the same as the way that all communicated meanings are attributed to the communicator, on the basis of evidence provided by the communicator in context. This follows from the 'relevance theory' of communication established by Sperber and Wilson, and it should be universal. The idea that an ending is an interpretation of the text can be clarified by comparing endings with 'lasts' which are objective facts about a text. The last word in *Jane Eyre* is 'Jesus', and this is a fact about the text. But where the ending of the novel is depends on the reader, with the ending likely to be located at the beginning of the final chapter with the statement "Reader, I married him." This makes sense as an ending both because it resolves the romantic plot of the narrative, but also because it restores the broken family of the beginning. In contrast, the activities of St John Rivers (which occupy the end of the book) do not feel like the ending to the novel. However, since endings are interpretations there is nothing stopping a reader from treating the description of his activities in fact as the ending of the novel, depending on whether the reader finds this part of the text to conclude one of the themes of the novel (I return to this below). It is worth noting that one of the reasons why an ending is best treated as an interpretation, that is, a kind of meaning, is that to a large extent it is the meaning of the preceding text which tells us where the ending is. If locating an ending depends on meaning, that strongly suggests that being an ending is also a type of meaning.

A 'last' is a fact about the text, but nevertheless the identification of the last can depend on how it is defined. What, for example, is the last sentence in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or Cortázar's *Hopscotch (Rayuela)*? These questions can be answered by making the question more precise. *Finnegans Wake* ends in the middle of a sentence (which is then continued by

returning to the beginning of the novel), so is this the last sentence, or is the last sentence the preceding completed sentence? This is a matter of definition, not inference. *Hopscotch* begins with an instruction from the author as to how to read the text, offering (at least) two options, each of which have a different last sentence. In one reading, the reader reads chapters in sequence and stops at chapter 56, so the last sentence of chapter 56 is, in this reading, the last sentence of the book. In another reading, the reader reads chapters according to an out-of-order sequence, and in this reading the last sentence of chapter 131 or the last sentence of chapter 58 is the last sentence of the book. These are both ways of defining the last sentence, and a third is that the last sentence is the last sentence in the highest-numbered chapter 155 (which is under neither instruction the last to be read). Again, finding the last is a matter of definition and instruction, not a matter of inference. Thus, it is possible to do interesting things with lasts but because they are fairly determinate, the possibilities are nowhere as rich as the possibilities of manipulating the ending.

The distinction between an ending and a last can be seen in the common phenomenon of making the ending not the last thing in the text. Fairytales and folktales often have a ‘coda’ (Labov’s term) which comes after the narrative finishes, and reflects back on the narrative or connects it to our audience world. Consider for example the story of the Demon of Ganish, in the Burushaski language and told by Jemadaar Imaam Yaar Bèg to D.L.R. Lorimer in 1924, and published in his grammar. In the story, a demon eats people and then a hero pegs her down into a boulder, thus putting her activities to an end; this is the ending of the story. But then there are two more sentences, explaining that the boulder and the peg still exist and can be located still; these are the last part of the text, but not its ending. Fairy stories which end “And they lived happily ever after” do the same thing: this sentence is not part of the ending of the story, but comes after it. Texts sometimes provide a kind of post-ending coda by directly addressing their audience, after the narrative has finished: the Scottish writer Alasdair Gray liked ending his texts with ‘Goodbye’, and Puck at the end of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* asks the audience to applaud. Here the address to the audience might or might not be interpreted also as an ending. What counts as an ending is always a matter of interpretation, depending on the evidence provided by the text in its context, which can include a knowledge of the genre.

If endings depend on how the text is interpreted, then there are a great many possibilities for endings. There can be one ending, or more than one ending, or no ending, depending on how the text is interpreted. Perhaps *Jane Eyre* has two endings, depending on how we interpret St John Rivers’s place in the overall narrative. Relevant evidence comes from a reading of the novel where many of the characters are named after the elements of earth, air, water or fire; this character has the distinction of being both fire – St John pronounced as ‘singe-in’ - and water, which perhaps gives him a special symbolic role, allowing his ending to be part of the book’s ending, if the book is interpreted as being about the four elements. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* can be interpreted as having four endings, one for each of the groups of characters, in sequence: the lovers, the mechanicals, the royals, the fairies. Sometimes it is hard to find an ending in a text. A friend described her experience of borrowing a novel from the library, getting to the last page and finding no ending, and assuming that there were some pages missing (and so, fruitlessly, borrowed another copy to check). Some texts imply that the narrative sequence will come to an end after the last: in the penultimate chapter of *To the Lighthouse* only Mr. Ramsay reaches the island and his children rise to follow him as the chapter ends, but by implication their ending/arrival will occur after the last words of the chapter. (This is also a novel which can be interpreted as having two distinct endings.) In some texts, involving live performance in particular, the empty space after the text has finished can be interpreted as the ending, such as a concert performance which ends with a

silence, before the audience is allowed to clap, or *The Sopranos* which cuts to a long-held silent black screen at the end.

How do we locate the ending in a text? The text provides us with evidence, and we also come to the text with prior knowledge. So, we know that the ending is likely to be near the last but may not be the last, and if we know the genre we can predict sometimes where the ending will fall. In many kinds of text, the ending has a relation to the beginning, and so by knowing how the text began we can infer the presence of an ending. For example, in Propp's schema for fairy tales, a narrative begins by the hero's family being disrupted (for example by the father leaving home) and it ends when a family is constructed around the hero (for example by marriage). This is one of the important pieces of evidence which we use to infer that 'Reader, I married him.' is the ending of *Jane Eyre*. Some endings at the last quote the title of the text (because the title is also a beginning) to imply the ending of the text, as in 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' or *The Crying of Lot 49*. Or the text cycles back to the beginning as *Finnegans Wake* does. It is worth noting that some texts explicitly discuss the fact that they have an ending (as *The Truman Show* does), and may tease the reader as to when the ending will come, and what it will be. Or the text may tell the reader at the beginning how it will end, as *Slaughterhouse Five* does, though with a prediction compromised by the disordered temporal structure of the text. Endings are normally near the last part of the text, but it is also possible to find endings elsewhere in a text, including near the first part of the text: a novel or film which starts at the end of events and then recounts how we got there might be said to have an ending at the beginning (as in *Sunset Boulevard*), though perhaps this stretches the notion of ending too far, given that being near the last is one of the relevant kinds of evidence for the presence of an ending.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith in *Poetic Closure* offered one of the most extensively worked-out accounts of endings in poems, focusing in particular on the reader's experience of 'closure' at the ending. Smith notes that the form of the poem offers a clue as to the ending, by changing its form: she said that closure arises from "the terminal modification of a formal principle". She focuses mainly on terminal modifications in the direction of greater regularity, but also acknowledges that the modification can also go in the direction of greater irregularity. Beyond poetry, we can also say that a text can use a change to tell us that it is ending: something different happens. For example, a play or film may end with people dancing, when they have not previously danced (as in the films *White Noise* or *Leon the Pig Farmer*). It is worth noting that the recognition of a terminal modification also depends on inference. A change is something we infer about a text. Texts are too complex for 'change' to be just a fact about them: they constantly change, so what we are looking for is a significant change, an attribution which depends on interpretation. Increased or decreased regularity must be established relative to some interpretative framework, and what is 'different' in a text depends on what we think the text has been before. So, Smith's terminal modification is not an irrefutable fact about a text but an interpretation of it.

What I have said here about endings should in principle be universal: that is, endings are always attributed to a text by inference rather than holding of the text as facts. The universal fact is that form is capable of holding of a text just by being inferred. But because inference depends on knowledge, including cultural knowledge and knowledge of literary genres, whether an ending is inferred, and what evidence cues the ending, is likely to vary between cultures. The novel, a form which emerged in a particular cultural context, also developed a type of ending of its own, something Kermode discusses in *The Sense of an Ending* and Lodge in the last chapter of *The Art of Fiction*. Readers of novels take this into account as context both when interpreting where the ending is and in expecting that there will be an ending. Perhaps for some genres of texts, in some cultures, there is no convention that there

will be an ending near the 'last' part of the text. Thus the presence of endings, and what kinds of endings there are, may all differ between literatures.

I turn now to a different aspect of endings, which exploits our universal human psychology and thus should also be universal. Endings are (usually) near the last part of a text, which means that if we have read the text all the way up to this point, by the time the ending arrives we have built up knowledge of characters and events. This knowledge can generate expectations as to what will happen at the end, and our knowledge of characters can produce empathy towards them which makes us care about what happens to them at the end.

Expectations can be met, which can be emotionally powerful. Expectations can also be denied, which can also be emotionally powerful, particularly when we are surprised by an ending. Expectations can also be met but before or after or slightly differently from what we expect: a combination of satisfaction and denial, again potentially emotionally satisfying. (Huron's *Sweet Anticipation* is a very nice account of expectation and emotion in music, which carries over to literature.) The combination of the manipulation of expectations with our empathy towards characters can also be emotionally powerful.

In a text dependent on time, such as a piece of music or a film, a change in tempo at the end (a 'terminal modification of a formal principle') can produce a powerful effect. I find this for example in Todd Haynes's film *Carol* in which the final action is very slightly decelerated as Rooney Mara moves towards Cate Blanchett, and where the actors themselves become very still at the end (the slowing down of the action is made very salient by having extras walk across the image, clearly slowed down). A speeding up at the end can be found the end of Istvan Szabo's *Mephisto* where the first world war is represented very rapidly, or the television series *Six Feet Under* when we see the future deaths of all the characters. These speedings up also feel like prolepsis, where we remain in the present and anticipate the future, another type of terminal modification which cues the ending. The denial of expectations can involve various kinds of 'twist'. Two of my favorite twists come in the endings of Borges 'The Aleph' and Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (I won't say what they are, to avoid spoilers). Another kind of denial comes with the bathetic ending, the ending that ends not with a bang but a whimper: for some, *King Lear* ends like this. A common technique in approaching an ending is to interrupt the flow of the sequence, just before the ending comes. The Burushaski story of the Demon of Ganish, mentioned earlier, is interrupted just before the final gesture of pegging the demon into a boulder, when the narrator stops to explain where the boulder came from. This type of interruption resembles the technique which Labov and Waletzky identified as the 'evaluation' in oral narratives, an interruption just before the point of the story arrives; though this is not an ending, the technique of interrupting in order to cue something important is the same. Note again that a lot of this is dependent on how we interpret the text, because what constitutes an interruption is a matter of interpretation, not just a fact about the text. I think, for example, that we can treat the ending of Shostakovich's fifth symphony as having an interruption of this kind. The symphony shifts from D minor to D major towards the end, and the whole orchestra plays a sustained major chord while the timpani beat out a repeated pattern on A and D, then just before the end the whole orchestra cuts out and all we hear is the timpani playing three beats on A-D-A, now accompanied by the bass drum, and then the chord returns and the whole piece ends. That break in the texturally thick sound, leaving just the texturally thin but loud sound of the percussion, feels to me like an interruption, and has an extraordinarily powerful effect at the ending.

A connection between these is that they involve a change at the ending, either in form or in content. In narratives, the change may involve a change of place, sometimes crossing a saliently liminal zone, as when going in or out of a doorway, or down or up a staircase.

Consider for example the end of *The Searchers*, with its movements in and out of the doorway of the house. I once saw Ingmar Bergman's production of *A Doll's House*, and though I knew it ended with Nora going out of the door, I was astonished when Nora first walked down from the stage into the audience and then out through the auditorium door, crossing two liminalities. In the ending of *The Truman Show*, the hero Jim Carrey goes up a staircase and through a door into the world, and the heroine Natascha McElhone goes down a different staircase and out into the world. In changing locations, endings share a characteristic with beginnings, which can also involve a change of place, and for the same basic reason: we experience the world as divided into events, and event boundaries at the beginning and end can be marked by changes in location. In interpreting a text as having a beginning and an ending, we may draw on our perception of the organization of events in the world (Radvansky and Zacks). One of the ways of changing place is to move from a narrow domain into a broader domain, as Adam and Eve do at the end of *Paradise Lost*, or Chief at the end of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, or Calvin and Hobbes in the last frame of their cartoon strip, or more abstractly at the end of 'Ozymandias' as "the lone and level sands stretch far away". In addition to signalling an event boundary, this type of ending also allows new anticipations and expectations to be formed at the end of the text, offering an 'openness' which some readers respond positively to. Another type of change can be a shift to utter chaos, as at the end of 'Dover Beach' or the disintegration of language at the end of the songs 'The big country' (Talking Heads) or 'White man in Hammersmith Palais' (The Clash).

All the techniques which can be used to manipulate our expectations of the ending are available in all languages and literatures. They depend on commonalities such as our experience of time, our building up of expectations, our empathy, and the fact that most of what we find in texts depends on universal principles of interpretation (i.e., a universal pragmatic theory such as relevance theory).

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