The Austere Simplicity of Fiction: Rules of Coherence

"I've lost my faith in pure coincidence. Everything in life tends to hang together in a pattern."

Ross Macdonald, *Black Money*

*The Nature of Coherence*

Coherence (or its frequent surrogate, unity) has held a high rank in the critical court—especially during the 1940s and 1950s, when New Criticism dominated American academic practice. As Cleanth Brooks puts it, "The primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity—the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole." Or, as he and Robert Penn Warren put it when writing specifically about fiction, "Successful fiction always involves a coherent relating of action, character, and meaning. . . . Most of the failures in fiction could be stated as failures in coherence." Similarly, for Murray Krieger, "The object whose creation the poet supervises wants above all to be one, a unified and complete whole." And despite our current romance with theory (in particular, with deconstruction), the majority of critical work being done today still aims at setting out the basic coherence of literary works, their "unity" or "basic pattern" or "overarching meaning."

2. Brooks and Warren, *Understanding Fiction*, 27. See also Brooks' claim that bad poetry is "chaotic and incoherent," whereas a good poem has "coherence of statement" and "unity of style" [*Well Wrought Urn*, 256, 76, 251].
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True, like form, coherence has been difficult to define, in part because it occurs along so many literary axes. At times, coherence is defined as a formal relation among elements in the text itself; that is how Culler, for instance, sees it when he lists "the binary opposition, the dialectical resolution of a binary opposition, [and] the displacement of an unresolved opposition by a third term" among the basic types of unity.\(^4\) Alternatively, coherence can be treated as a quality of the vision of the poet or of the world he or she describes. This seems to be what is happening when Eliot claims that if a poem is to interpose "no obstacle to the reader's enjoyment," it needs to present a view of the world that "the mind of the reader can accept as coherent, mature, and founded on the facts of experience."\(^5\) Sometimes, the term is used in more restricted ways, as when Seymour Chatman uses it to refer to consistency of reference: "Another restriction on selection and inference is coherence. Narrative existents must remain the same from one event to the next. If they do not, some explanation [covert or overt] must occur. If we have a story like 'Peter fell ill. Peter died. Peter was buried,' we assume that it is the same Peter in each case."\(^6\)

Coherence not only means different things to different critics. To complicate matters, coherence as an aesthetic category is even more strongly colored by ideological overtones than notice, signification, and configuration. Of course, other literary conventions have ideological aspects as well. Rules of ethical enchainment, for instance, make sense in so-called realistic texts only if the reader begins with an assumption about the integrity of the human personality. But the ideological pull on coherence is greater than that on other types of convention. Indeed, to read the discourse of the New Critics, one sometimes wonders whether coherence is an aesthetic attribute at all. Although that discourse is often framed as a defense of ambiguity, in fact the New Critics had a limited tolerance for conflict and uncertainty. They tended to treat ambiguity not as an end in itself (that is, neither as a goal nor as a last

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step), but rather as an obstacle eventually to be overcome through resolution. Thus, for all their praise of irony, Brooks and Warren, in *Understanding Fiction*, reject any irony that "preclude[s]" resolution, for such irony leads to "smug and futile skepticism." Instead, they stand for an irony that "force[s] the resolution to take stock of as full a context as possible."7

This insistence on resolution has its analogue in Brooks and Warren's views of human experience more generally. For many writers, from Aristotle on, the coherence of art is what separates it from life: "It was a little too pat," notes Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*. "It had the austere simplicity of fiction rather than the tangled woof of fact."8 But for the New Critics, coherence seems to be what *binds* art and life. Brooks puts it in cosmic terms: "Man's experience is indeed a seamless garment, no part of which can be separated from the rest."9 But this almost metaphysical claim has social variants, too. The stress on conflict/resolution, for instance, privileges certain kinds of political values through its implicit appreciation of compromise. The New Critics' vision of coherence has psychological implications as well, especially in their discussion of fiction. According to *Understanding Fiction*, the very definition of fiction demands an acceptance of a common sense understanding of "human nature"—common sense, in this case, validating a bourgeois conception of the individual. The New Critics insist that "thoughts and actions must ultimately be coherent."10 More broadly, "the domain of fiction is . . . the world of credible human beings. . . . What it excludes at either end is the world of pure abstraction: economic man, Mrs. Average Housewife, the typical American, *homo sapiens*; and at the other extreme, the mere freak, the psychological monster, the report from the psychiatrist's casebook."11 New Critical discourse, furthermore, naturalizes this notion of the individual—that is, presents it

11. Ibid., 170.
as if it were coextensive with human experience in general. "Our judgment of probability and our notion of credibility in general are based firmly upon the way in which the human mind works and upon the experience that we have had as human beings" [emphasis added].

It is therefore not accidental that in the New Critical view of fiction, the individual receives more stress than the social.

Thus, as I suggested in my Introduction, when New Critics discuss coherence, they are often judging a work's content as much as its structure. For example, in explaining why an anecdote related by Francis Parkman does not count as fiction, Brooks and Warren end up criticizing not the structure of the episode, but its content—specifically, the view it offers of human character. Parkman's point, they claim, is "to show that the characters of the plainsmen do not fit the 'standard rules of character' which are accepted in more civilized societies. He is merely using the episode as a sociological example." To make the episode fiction, they imply, an author would not only have to "develop . . . the character of Beckworth (which is exactly what Parkman does not do)" but would also have to arrive at a different conclusion, such as that "individuals cannot be judged by rule of thumb; every individual character is unique and has mixtures of good and evil in it." 13

Coherence, then, often serves as a vehicle by which ideological biases are smuggled into literary discussions disguised as objective aesthetic qualities. Beyond that, the very claim that coherence is valued turns out, in practice, to be paradoxical. Recent reader criticism is making increasingly clear that when critics discuss coherence, their true subject is less a quality in the text or the author than an activity on the part of the readers (or, more particularly, their public representatives, literary critics)—what Susan Horton has aptly called "the critic's rage to pattern." 14

At first, the distinction between coherence as a textual property

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12. Ibid., 27.
13. Ibid., 24.
14. Horton, Interpreting Interpreting, 40. Culler similarly claims that the unity of texts "is produced not so much by intrinsic features of their parts as by the intent at totality of the interpretive process: the strength of the expectations which lead readers to look for certain forms of organization in a text and to find them" [Structuralist Poetics, 91]. See also Wolfgang Iser's notion of "consistency-building" in The Act of Reading, esp. 118–25.
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and making coherent as a critical activity may seem simply another front along which the objectivists and subjectivists (or formalists and reader critics) continue their endless skirmishes. Perhaps it is. Yet it is an especially important area of conflict with serious implications for the process of canonization. For works differ markedly in the degree of activity they require in order to be made coherent.

On the one hand, to return to the text-as-swing-set metaphor of Chapter 1, we have essentially preassembled texts, where all that is left for the reader is grabbing on to the trapeze. These are the most extreme examples of what Roland Barthes calls "readerly texts" [textes lisibles]—Harlequin Romances and Horatio Alger novels, for instance. Here, the rules of notice, signification, and (especially) configuration are working well. There seem to be no extraneous details or complicated symbolic patterns; their endings easily and completely satisfy the desires and expectations aroused at their beginnings. They thus require no special rules of coherence—and no special effort—for the reader to make sense of them. For just as rules of notice presuppose that not all things are equally important, so rules of coherence presuppose that a work is not apparently coherent—that there are some surface incoherences that need to be explained in some way, or at least made the subject of our critical discourse. But these preassembled texts lack such surface ruptures; to their authorial audiences, they appear coherent simply on their face. Often, in fact, their coherence is explicitly trumpeted. Alexander Kuprin's story about a servant named Yasha, for instance, tells us point-blank how we should make sense out of Yasha's apparent inconsistencies. The last paragraph reads:

> And now that I am nearly what may be called an old man, I go over my varied recollections now and then, and when I come to the thought of Yasha, every time I say to myself: "What a strange soul—faithful, pure, contradictory, absurd—and great. Was it not a truly Slav soul that dwelt in the body of Yasha?"

Entitling the story "A Slav Soul" only binds its elements together more tightly. It is significant that such texts are rarely taken seriously in current academic critical discussion.

Other texts, in contrast, are completely incoherent. These are the swing sets that arrive without the proper screws, with mismeasured poles and warped seats. In the end, their inconsistencies are unmanageable, and there seems no sense to their structures or to their systems of signification. Such works are rarely the subject of critical discussion either. For the most part they remain unpublished—a sign that literature maintains higher quality control than many other industries.

But between these lies a third category of works: works that leave us baffled and confused until we apply the proper procedures to them—works that are just pieces of wood and rope until we find the proper assembly techniques and apply the proper effort.

Now if coherence itself were really viewed as a literary virtue, it would be the first type of text that received the greatest critical praise; in practice, however, the academy has by and large come to privilege the third, taking members of the first group seriously only when it is possible to prove that their true coherence is not the coherence that appears at first glance. Thus, while Brooks and Warren insist that a good story should "convey a definite 'point,' a definite idea or meaning," they hasten to add that it need not be (and rarely is) expressed explicitly. 17

Of course, not all reading communities share this preference for the not-yet-coherent. Contemporary readers of romances probably do not; nor, in all probability, did Homer's original audience. But at least the contemporary academic critical community seems to have adopted Barbara Herrnstein Smith's principle that "art inhabits the country between chaos and cliché." 18 Whatever is said in critical pronouncements, the academy puts high value not on coherence per se, but rather on the activity of applying rules of coherence to works that are not evidently unified, but that can be made so through critical manipulation.

Behind the valorizing of coherence, then, lies a preference for

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works with disjunctures, with at least some surface ruptures and inconsistencies. This preference is just as strong in New Criticism as it is in post-structuralism. The two critical camps may be moving in opposite directions, the former trying to smooth over the gaps, the latter trying to widen them; but their differing critical activities tend to be nourished in the same literary soil. This is why post-structuralism, in contrast to feminism, has not led to any fundamental shift in the canon, even though it may shuffle the respective rankings of particular writers.¹⁹

In arguing that coherence is more usefully discussed as an activity by readers rather than a property of texts, I am not arguing that the coherence that results is unintended by the author. The conventions by which we make novels coherent can, like other literary conventions, be shared; and writers can plan their effects with the understanding that these rules of coherence will be applied. The gaps found in texts, in other words, are not necessarily either errors or even ambiguities—they may well be intended as opportunities for us to apply rules of coherence in some guided fashion. In fact, as we shall see, this is often one of the strongest ways an author can express his or her meaning.

We can find those intended meanings, though, only if we assume that they are there. Indeed, the fundamental rule of coherence is parallel to the second metarule of configuration: We assume, to begin with, that the work is coherent and that apparent flaws in its construction are intentional and meaning bearing. As Northrop Frye puts it, "The primary understanding of any work of literature has to be based on an assumption of its unity. However mistaken such an assumption may eventually prove to be, nothing can be done unless we start with it as a heuristic principle."²⁰

Rules of coherence are invoked whenever a text appears to resist such an assumption. I shall examine three sets of them, corre-

¹⁹. Culler has a different explanation of deconstruction's tendency to center on canonical texts; see On Deconstruction, 280.
²⁰. Frye, "Literary Criticism," in The Aims and Methods of Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures, ed. James Thorpe [New York: Modern Language Association, 1961], 63. See also Gary Saul Morson: "To take a verbal text as a literary work . . . is to assume in principle [1] that everything in the text is potentially relevant to its design, and [2] that the design is complete in the text that we have" (Boundaries of Genre, 41).
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sponding to three ways in which texts can appear to be incoher-
ent. First, texts can be insufficient—that is, they can be appar-
ently incoherent because of gaps in their fabric, holes that need to
be filled in. Second, works can be overabundant—they can have a
surplus of information that we need somehow to tame, including
details that seem to contradict one another and that we need to
reconcile. Finally, works can be simply disparate—and we need
rules to help us bundle them together into convenient packages.
These categories, to be sure, are rough—and it is not always clear
whether a particular activity by a reader responds to one kind of
apparent incoherence or another. Nonetheless, this classification
provides us with a preliminary scaffolding for discussing some of
the activities by which readers make works coherent. Let us look
at each of these situations in turn.

License to Fill

Miss Binney stood in front of her class and began to read aloud from
Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel. . . . [Ramona] listened quietly
with the rest of the kindergarten to the story of Mike Mulligan’s old-
fashioned steam shovel, which proved its worth by digging the base-
ment for the new town hall of Poppersville in a single day. . . .

"Miss Binney . . . —how did Mike Mulligan go to the bathroom
when he was digging the basement of the town hall?"

Miss Binney’s smile seemed to last longer than smiles usually last.
Ramona glanced uneasily around and saw that others were waiting
with interest for the answer. . . .

"Well—" said Miss Binney at last. "I don’t really know, Ramona.
The book doesn’t tell us. . . . The reason the book does not tell us . . .
is that it is not an important part of the story. The story is about
digging the basement of the town hall, and that is what the book tells
us."22

21. For a different classification of the processes for making texts coherent, see
Mary Louise Pratt, Toward a Speech Act Theory. Pratt has been especially suc-
cessful in working out the ways that assumptions of unity govern reading activities.
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No work of literature can tell us everything that the characters do or think; instead, selected moments, thoughts, and events are flashed on the page. Chekhov's "Grasshopper," for instance, starts with the wedding of Olga Ivanovna and Dymov, followed by a general description of their life as newlyweds. But chapter 3 jumps to Whitmonday, chapter 4 to an evening in July, chapter 5 to September 2, and chapters 6 and 7 take place the next winter. How do we know what is going on in the interstices?

Perhaps the most common procedure for dealing with such holes is to assume, with Miss Binney, that "the reason the book does not tell us . . . is that it is not an important part of the story." Miss Binney is certainly correct that authors often leave out what is unimportant; one of the reasons actual readers interpret and evaluate texts differently is that their perspectives on what is important differ:

Miss Binney spoke as if this explanation ended the matter, but the kindergarten was not convinced. Ramona knew and the rest of the class knew that knowing how to go to the bathroom was important. They were surprised that Miss Binney did not understand, because she had showed them the bathroom the very first thing. Ramona could see there were some things she was not going to learn in school, and along with the rest of the class she stared reproachfully at Miss Binney.23

But the Chekhov example cited above suggests that Miss Binney's claim is not universally true, even for authorial readers. Despite her arguments, and despite the claims of such critics as Robert Champigny ("In the case of a piece of fiction . . . filling gaps would amount to creating another fictional world"),24 there are many works of fiction where important events do occur in textual lacunae. One may think at first of classical detective stories, which ask the reader to use information at his or her disposal to close the crucial gap and figure out who done it. Such stories, though, while

23. Ibid., 24—25.
24. He continues: "One of the differences between fictional individuals and 'real' individuals is that a character cannot be assumed to exist outside what the text says about him" (Champigny, What Will Have Happened, 20). Champigny qualifies this position later in his text.
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they may allow an opportunity to play with rules of coherence, do not finally depend on them, for they traditionally end with explicit solutions for those readers who have not been able to fill in the gaps on their own. In fact, the pleasure of the text in detective stories resides primarily in the reader’s inability to figure out what has happened until told. More to the point is the early work of Robbe-Grillet where he takes his cue from this genre, but radicalizes it in a fundamental way. The solution to the mystery is never explicitly given in The Erasers, and the plot of The Voyeur centers around a blank moment in the middle of the text that the reader has to fill in on his or her own.

But it is not only avant-garde novelists who demand that their readers fill in the blanks. Although the rape of Clarissa occurs between two chapters, Richardson assumes that we will be able to extrapolate from what we are told, logically and readily. Tolstoy leaves unarticulated the crucial part of a conversation between Dolly and Anna, expecting his readers to be able to peer behind his ellipsis:

“I shall not have any more children.”
“How do you know you won’t?”
“I shan’t, because I don’t want them.”

And in spite of her agitation Anna smiled on noticing the naive expression of curiosity, surprise and terror on Dolly’s face.

“After my illness the doctor told me . . .”

“Impossible!” said Dolly, with wide-open eyes. To her this was one of those discoveries which leads to consequences and deductions so enormous that at the first moment one only feels that it is impossible to take it all in, but that one will have to think it over again and again.

[Ellipsis in original]26

25. Indeed, Iser would argue that such gap filling is characteristic of any real literary text. See, for instance, The Implied Reader. See also Stanley Fish’s attack on Iser’s position, “Why No One’s Afraid of Wolfgang Iser,” Diacritics 11 [Spring 1981]: 2–13. Fish’s objections might seem to apply to my arguments, too, but they dissolve when the distinction between authorial and actual readers is taken into account.

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In such cases, what rules permit us to fill in the blanks as the author intended?

First, there is a general rule of inertia. Although rules of configuration lead us to expect that inertial situations will not last indefinitely, we generally expect their undermining to be noted explicitly in the text. Thus we assume, unless we are given reason to believe otherwise, that events in the blank spots continue along the same path as the events preceding them. Since the affair between Olga Ivanovna and Ryabovsky in "The Grasshopper" is more stormy than sweet, therefore, we assume—in the absence of evidence to the contrary—that the same hostilities and recriminations and ambivalences continue in the gap between chapters 5 and 6. Similarly, in Harriet E. Wilson's Our Nig, two years pass between chapter 3 (when Fredo is delivered to the Bellmonts and first discovers the virtual slavery in which she is to be held) and chapter 4. The authorial audience is not intended to think that nothing important has taken place; rather, we are expected to assume that the important events have been repetitions of the beatings and degradation that we have already witnessed.

Even when events change course within textual gaps, the authorial audience can usually make correct inferences by applying the realism rule discussed in Chapter 3. Every literary text, as I've argued, depends on areas of congruence between the narrative and authorial audiences. As Seymour Chatman puts it, "We assume that a character has the requisite numbers of eyes, ears, arms, hands, fingers, and toes unless we are informed to the contrary." And narrative gaps can be filled through reliance on the authorial audience's assumptions about the way things are. Thus, to cite Mary Pratt, "If we are not told how a character got from point A to

27. Chatman, "Towards a Theory of Narrative," New Literary History 6 (Winter 1975): 304. Chatman's argument shows some of the ways in which problematic assumptions about the world may lie behind interpretive inferences: "If a girl is portrayed as 'blue-eyed,' 'blond,' and 'graceful,' we may assume further that her skin is fair and unblemished, that she speaks in a gentle voice, that her feet are relatively small, and so on. (The facts, of course may be other, but we have to be told so, and our inferential capacity remains undaunted. Indeed, we go on to infer a variety of details to account for the 'discrepancy,' too)" (304-5). This passage was revised when it appeared in Story and Discourse, 29.
point B, we assume he did so in some normal and untellable [that is, usual or unproblematic] way." When an author, for instance, finishes one chapter at night, with the sentence, "I needed a drink badly and the bars were closed," and begins the next with the sentence, "I got up at nine, drank three cups of black coffee . . .," we can reasonably assume [unless we are given reason to believe otherwise] that the narrator has spent most of the intervening time drinking alone in his apartment. Jane Austen plays with this rule for comic effect in Mansfield Park. After the novel's complications are resolved, and Edmund is finally on the verge of realizing that he is in love with Fanny, she writes:

I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people.—I only intreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire.

In particular, the realism rule allows us to fill in gaps through cause and effect; unless signaled otherwise, we assume that gaps contain those events that are most likely to produce the effects that we see in the events that are explicitly narrated. In The Postman Always Rings Twice, the idea of the murder is at first posed implicitly—but when Frank says, "They hang you for

28. Pratt, Toward a Speech Act Theory, 158.
30. Austen, Mansfield Park, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3d ed. [London: Oxford University Press, 1932], 470 (vol. 3, chap. 17). Note a similar gesture in Tom Jones: "The reader will be pleased to remember that . . . we gave him a hint of our intention to pass over several large periods of time, in which nothing happened worthy of being recorded in a chronicle of this kind. "In so doing . . . we give him . . . an opportunity of employing that wonderful sagacity, of which he is master, of filling up these vacant spaces of time with his own conjectures, for which purpose we have taken care to qualify him in the preceding pages" [Henry Fielding, Tom Jones [New York: Modern Library, n.d.], 74 (bk. 3, chap. 1)].
that," the authorial audience can readily determine the subject of their plans, for only thoughts of murder could elicit that response.\textsuperscript{31} We are expected to make a similar interpretive move in Southworth's \textit{Allworth Abbey}. The happy marriage between Hollis Elverton and Athenie de la Compte has been broken asunder by a visit from a mysterious stranger, which for unexplained reasons forces Elvery to abandon his wife and child, Alma. The mother turns against her daughter, who grows up virtually alone. When Athenie discovers that Alma is planning to marry Norham Montrose, she tells her that such a marriage—indeed, that love and marriage, period—is impossible. Yet at first, she will not tell her why. She only tells her "'what the objection is not": that Montrose's birth, position, and character are all exemplary, that there is no feud between the families, that her parents loved each other and lived happily "'up to that fatal evening," that neither had had a previous marriage that separated them. Finally, Athenie tells Alma that her "'parents' marriage proved the most awful calamity that could have crushed any two human beings," that Alma's birth was "'a curse to Hollis Elverton—a curse to me, and deeper still, a curse to you,'" and that she is "'not flesh and blood as others! but something set apart, accursed, that must not join heart or hand with any other human being.'" None of this makes sense to Alma, so finally Mrs. Elverton "whispered in her ear." We do not hear her explanation of the mystery, but we do see Alma's reaction:

Alma sprang to her feet, gazed with dilated eyes and blanched cheeks in bewildering despair upon her mother's face, as though unable to receive at once the full horror of her words, and then drew her hands wildly to her head, reeled forward and fell senseless to the floor.

Yet while Southworth refrains from telling us explicitly what the secret is, she certainly expects that her reader will, from the effects that have been produced, be able to infer that we are dealing with a case of incest. Indeed, the surprise twist of the plot is not the discovery that the relation between the Elvertons was incestuous, but the final revelation that it in fact was not—a revelation that

\textsuperscript{31} James M. Cain, \textit{The Postman Always Rings Twice}, in \textit{Cain x 3} (New York: Knopf, 1969), 13 (chap. 3).

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produces the intended effect only if the reader has previously concluded that incest was involved.\textsuperscript{32}

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\textit{Rules of Surplus}

Novels not only leave gaps that we need to fill in; they also, on occasion, provide a surfeit—give notice to too much information. In the easiest cases, that information is simply unnecessary or extraneous. As a general rule, especially when we are dealing with the canonical texts of the Western tradition, we are not expected to assume that such extraneous information results from authorial oversight (like the unexplained death of the chauffeur, Owen Taylor, in \textit{The Big Sleep}). Instead, unless there is evidence to the contrary, we are intended to assume that the surplus is intentional and that we are supposed to interpret it in one way or another, transforming the text so that it is no longer excessive.

More specifically, when notice is given to apparently irrelevant textual features—features that do not contribute to plot or characterization, for instance, or that do not serve some immediate function, like the provision of verisimilitude or local color—then they are to be treated as figurative. The repeated descriptions of the sign advertising Dr. Eckleburg—like the repeated description of the green light at the end of the Buchanans' dock—are thus legitimately treated as metaphors in \textit{The Great Gatsby}, although there would be less justification for so doing if they did not have as much notice as they do. Similarly, while the description of Vevey at the beginning of "Daisy Miller" makes sense as local color—as a setting—the famous description of the turtle crossing the road in the third chapter of Steinbeck's \textit{Grapes of Wrath} does not, and must therefore be treated symbolically. More specifically, the authorial audience assumes a kind of parallelism—that the journey of the turtle is intended, in some way, to reflect on the journeys of the characters in the book.

Surplus can be more difficult to manage, however, when it in-

\textsuperscript{32} Emma D. E. N. Southworth, \textit{Allworth Abbey; or, Eudora} (New York: Hurst, 1876), 274-78 (chap. 20).
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volves contradictory information. In Othello, the Moor offers two different histories for the crucial handkerchief. When talking to Desdemona (act 3, scene 4), he tells her that it was given to his mother by an Egyptian charmer; in the climactic scene of the play, he tells Iago and Emilia that it was "an antique token/My father gave my mother" (act 5, scene 2). This is extra information with a vengeance; how are we to account for the discrepancy?

The most general rule in such cases is "trust the last." If, for instance, a text proffers a series of variations on the same story (as, say, Absalom, Absalom! and Anthony Berkeley's Poisoned Chocolates Case do), we are generally to accept the final version, rather than one in the middle, as the "correct" one. In part, this ties in with the rule of notice that endings are privileged—for, given the weight our culture puts on truth, that which gets the greatest attention in a text is most likely to be construed as true. It is for this reason that John Fowles realized the futility of giving The French Lieutenant's Woman its double ending: "I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the 'real' version."33

The trust-the-last rule also fits neatly with a common configuration, what Culler calls "the pattern of alethic reversal: first a false or inadequate vision, then its true or adequate counterpart."34 To put it otherwise, while nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives on the whole tend to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar, the unfamiliar tends to be increasingly understood.

To be sure, many narratives—Heart of Darkness comes readily to mind—move from clarity to ambiguity, but even here, the ambiguity that Marlow confronts is intended to be taken as a truer vision than the false clarity at the beginning of the text. Intellectually, therefore, such narratives generally move from darkness to light, even if they move temperamentally into gloom; in the Western realistic tradition, characters are more likely to be correct after undergoing experiences worthy of narration than before them. Susan Suleiman points out that in the roman à thèse, it is unlikely

34. Culler, Pursuit of Signs, 69 (italics in original).
"that a positive apprenticeship will be followed by its opposite. Once the truth has been found, it is inadmissible, in the 'exemplary' world of the roman à thèse, that it will be abandoned in favor of error."\(^{35}\) But this is also generally true of most other nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative genres where discovering the truth is an issue. Thus Emma Woodhouse's final perception of herself—her recognition of her snobbish and meddlesome nature, her altered views on marriage and her relation to Mr. Knightley—is to be considered by the reader as wiser and more understanding than those views she holds at the beginning of the book.

As with most other rules of reading, though, the proper application of the trust-the-last rule is radically bound up with genre. Although most genres do incorporate this rule, there are types of novels that move in the opposite direction—novels in which characters lose their grip on the truth, move backward in terms of self-awareness. An extreme case is Orwell's *1984*: surely, we are not expected to take Winston's final vision ("But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself")\(^{36}\) as correct. But while extreme, *1984* merely exemplifies what we see in certain other texts. Indeed, many novels centering on characters who sell out (Balzac's *Père Goriot*), go mad (Dostoyevsky's *Gambler*, Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*), or fall prey to vice and degradation (*Madame Bovary*) operate in a different way. Such exceptions, though, are usually signaled, for in most of them, there is a strong disassociation of the voices and values of author and narrator (or main character). And we are generally not expected to accept the last vision in a text if it comes from a frankly unreliable character.

In addition, regardless of genre, application of the trust-the-last rule depends on rhetorical context. That is, when the contradiction comes in the spoken words of a character—as opposed to his or her thoughts, or the statements of a reliable narrator—the circumstances in which the words are spoken also put pressure on whether we are to apply the rule of trust the last. In the example from *Othello*, of course, the rhetorical context seems to support,
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rather than undermine, our tendency to believe the final version. The first story comes when Othello is trying to terrorize Desdemona so that she will reveal her true feelings; the handkerchief is but a means to further the end of finding out the truth about her. But in the second account, the real subject of the discussion is the handkerchief itself—and Othello is trying to find out the truth about it. But in Lermontov's Hero of Our Time, where Pechorin describes himself in different terms virtually every time he searches his soul, there is no reason to give credence to any version, for in each case, he has reason to lie either to himself or to his audience (for instance, when he is trying to impress the first narrator with his worldliness or trying to seduce Princess Mary through self-laceration). Lermontov, of course, is aware of the problem raised by Fowles—of the tendency of the reader to apply the rule even where it is inappropriate. He has thus structured his novel so that the reader who tries to trust the last account is blocked. Specifically, he confuses the time scheme so that the chronologies of the narration and of the story do not correspond. We see Pechorin near the end of his life well before we read of his youthful adventures, so it is thus not at all clear what the “last” statement really is. Indeed, this temporal complexity is announced in the novel’s paradoxical opening line (“In every book the preface is the first and also the last thing”), which introduces a preface where even the author’s voice is ironized.37 This self-conscious thwarting of the traditional techniques for making determinations about the validity of various versions of self offered by the main character is one of the sources of the novel’s psychological richness.

A similar structure is used to confuse political issues in Sutton Griggs’ 1899 novel, Imperium in Imperio. The core of the novel consists of a debate about the appropriate black responses to white oppression. After a notice from “Sutton E. Griggs” vouching for the “truthfulness” of the narrative, the narrator’s voice is the first and last we hear, and he supports the conservative position espoused by Belton Piedmont rather than the more violent alter-

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native posed by Bernard Belgrave. But since his opening words are "I am a traitor," and since he has no active presence in the novel that can counteract the negative impression created by that declaration, it is hard to know where we are expected to stand.38

Contradictions can occur not only in the content of a text, but in its formal aspect as well, most specifically in the violation of conventional configurations of closure. I will be able to deal with this more fully at the end of the next section of this chapter, where I talk about endings as conclusions.

Rules of Naming, Bundling, and Thematizing

Once done reading a text, readers usually try to tie it up in some way. If a text is short and simple, especially if it has a clear point, this may not prove difficult, any more than it is difficult to get a quart of milk from the checkout counter to your car. But a major text in our tradition is apt to be more cumbersome—and readers need some kind of packaging that allows them to treat it conveniently as a whole, just as they need paper bags and carts when doing more elaborate shopping. There are a number of ways in which texts can be packed up.

For instance, as linguists and philosophers have long maintained, the process of naming serves to take the complex or unfamiliar and make it manageable by putting it in a category, increasing its apparent coherence by stressing some features and downplaying others. The same process occurs in reading. Academic readers, in particular, name and thus classify works—for instance, by appropriating them to particular generic categories, by elucidating their central theme, or by finding their governing metaphorical or mythic structure. Annette Kolodny suggests, for instance, "the tantalizing possibility that metaphor, or symbolizing in general, . . . helps to give coherence to the otherwise inchoate succession of discrete sense data."39 These naming activities are

made easier by the fact that readers usually start with the assumption that such a handle is there to be grasped in the first place.

As a general rule, if a reasonable number of textual features unite it with another known textual pattern, then that pattern can legitimately be treated as an appropriate "name" for the artifact in question. The more features that can be subsumed under this name, the more appropriate it is, and the more coherent the bundle is deemed to be. Sometimes, as we have seen, authors themselves suggest the potential bundles: Joyce calls his novel *Ulysses*, and the parallels to the *Odyssey* that are thus uncovered are seen as proof of its coherence. More often, we have to find the names ourselves. It is important to realize that the very act of naming provides a sense of coherence; this is true even when, paradoxically, the name given is the name of some kind of chaos. Thus, we get a sense of some kind of order even when the narrator of William Kennedy's *Legs* points out the incoherences of his text: "I've often vacillated about whether Jack's life was tragic, comic, a bit of both, or merely a pathetic muddle. I admit the muddle theory moved me most at this point." 40

Bundling can also be facilitated through the use of parallelisms. It is generally assumed, for instance, that parallels along one axis imply parallels along another. In poetry, for instance, parallel syntax is usually assumed to imply parallel thoughts. Similarly, in fiction, Bruce R. Stark is able to argue that there is a thematic parallel between Daisy Faye and Ella Kay—the woman who cheated Jay Gatsby out of his inheritance from Dan Cody—at least partly because of the "phonological equivalence" of their names. 41 Indeed, we are generally invited to assume that any elements—characters, plot lines, settings—that can be treated as parallel should be treated in that way. Of course, like all spatial metaphors, literary parallelism resists Euclidean exactness. Two elements can be called literary parallels if they are variations of the same theme, for instance, if they provide commentary on each other, or even if they serve as counterexamples of each other. Thus, for instance, since Chekhov wrote "The Man in the Case," "Gooseberries," and

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"About Love" in the form of a trilogy, it is appropriate to see them as three different exemplifications of the same general theme—to see, for instance, the social forces that keep Alchin from declaring his love for Anna as a variant of the social and physical shells in which Belikov encases himself. The stories of Anna Karenina and Levin, in contrast, serve as exemplifications of the opposite trajectories that lives can follow. Interpretive disagreement can often stem from the application of this rule—not only from dispute over whether the general rule ought to be applied, but also, once it is applied, from dispute about how to do so, about what sort of parallels are in fact intended. Is the parallelism between Tom and Huck in *Huckleberry Finn* intended to make us see them as similar—or radically different?

Because of the parallelism rule, collections of stories differ radically from novels. When formally discrete narratives are a novel—as the seven "stories" of Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place* are—we are entitled to see them as reflections of one another, as different ways of saying what is, in the end, the same story. When stories are merely collected as stories, however, there is no convention allowing us to treat them in that manner. Thus, it makes a tremendous difference in which way we consider such ambiguously structured books as Jean Toomer's *Cane* or John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*.

Perhaps the most important bundling technique, however, involves the rule of conclusive endings. The ending of a text is not only to be noticed; there is also a widely applicable interpretive convention that permits us to read it in a special way, as a conclusion, as a summing up of the work's meaning. Marianna Torgovnick puts it especially strongly: "An ending is the single place where an author most pressingly desires to make his points—whether those points are aesthetic, moral, social, political, epistemological, or even the determination not to make any point at all." I would phrase it differently: readers assume that authors put their best thoughts last, and thus assign a special value to the final pages of a text. It is particularly easy for the reader to do so, of course, when the ending is apparently congruent with the text that

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precedes—for instance, the moral of a traditional fable or the marriage of a traditional paperback romance. As E. M. Forster puts it, "If it was not for death and marriage I do not know how the average novelist would conclude."43 Endings, however, are not always so neat, and when they are not, the reader is often expected to reinterpret the work so that the ending in fact serves as an appropriate conclusion. Take, for instance, Lucas Beauchamp's demand for a receipt at the end of Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*. We not only notice it because of its privileged position, we are also expected to interpret the novel in such a way that it serves as a satisfactory summing up. In particular, it serves to undercut Gavin's political pronouncements—for the only way to turn that ending into a summation is to assume that Gavin, in contrast to Chick, has failed to attain the wisdom that would make him worthy of Lucas' trust and friendship. Similarly, Huckleberry Finn's decision to "light out for the Territory" could, taken out of context, be read as an introduction to adventures to come, but its placement in the novel we have requires us to read it as a conclusion—a final response—to what he has already experienced.

This is the general reading strategy that allows readers to deal with the formal contradictions that I mentioned at the end of the previous section of this chapter. To exemplify the process, I would like to look at some of the ways that the expectations aroused by the second metarule of configuration—the metarule that leads us to expect balance in a text, to expect that the ending will somehow be prefigured in the beginning—can be apparently frustrated, and the interpretive operations that readers are likely to use to restore balance. Specifically, I will look at two ways in which balance can be upset: through violation (deceptive cadence) and through exaggeration (excessive cadence).

1. Kenneth Burke suggests that formal excellence requires that a work's ending fulfill—perhaps after considerable teasing—the promises with which it begins. But novels often have endings that do not simply surprise (to surprise, after all, is not necessarily to contradict) but that seem, when we get to them, flagrantly to defy what has come before—which end, as Ives' Second Symphony

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does, with what musicians call a deceptive cadence. Ambrose Bierce's "Dame Fortune and the Traveler" provides a transparent example:

A weary Traveler who had lain down and fallen asleep on the brink of a deep well was discovered by Dame Fortune.

"If this fool," she said, "should have an uneasy dream and roll into the well men would say that I did it. It is painful to me to be unjustly accused, and I shall see that I am not."

So saying she rolled the man into the well.44

The fable's detour around the expected tag line—especially since it moves in the name of a kind of cynical realism—jolts the authorial audience into questioning the validity of the moral it expected. This is because, by the general rule of conclusive endings, readers are invited to revise their understanding of the beginning of the text so that the ending, which at first seems a surprise, turns out to be in fact prefigured. One common way of doing this is by "thematizing" the jolt so that it becomes the very subject of the text. Thus, Torgovnick argues about Sentimental Education:

Any shift in time-scale at the end of a novel ordinarily involves a movement forward in time; Flaubert parodically inverts this traditional element by having the novel end with an "incident" that had occurred before the beginning of the novel's action. The inversion has thematic value, for it indicates that our heroes' journey through life is regressive rather than progressive.45

More generally, the undermining of a conventional ending tends to stress the conventionality of that closure, and hence makes us

45. Torgovnick, Closure in the Novel, 115. I, of course, would prefer to reword that final sentence: the inversion indicates regression because it is assumed beforehand to have thematic value. See also Jonathan Culler's claim that "The Waste Land can be unified by thematizing its formal discontinuities" ("Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading," in Reader in the Text, ed. Suleiman and Crosman, 48; much of this essay ended up, in altered form, in chap. 3 of Pursuit of Signs). This interpretive technique is applied to ancient as well as to modern texts. See Alice M. Colby-Hall's analysis of the "double ending" of Renaut's Bel Inconnu in the special issue of Yale French Studies devoted to closure ("Frustration and Fulfillment: The Double Ending of the Bel Inconnu," Yale French Studies, no. 67 [1984]: 130–34).
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aware of the gap between the authorial and narrative audiences. In works that present themselves as jests—works, like S. J. Perelman's parodies, that are intended primarily to charm—it is possible to interpret the opening of the gap as an end in itself, as a source of surprise and hence amusement. But in works that have greater pretensions to seriousness, we assume, in the absence of instructions to the contrary, that the undermining of a convention is to be read at least in part as a critique of that convention.

There are, in general, two directions such a critique can take. If the primary subject of the work in question is art itself, then we can assume that the convention is being questioned from an aesthetic point of view. Pushkin's ostentatious refusal to wrap up the plot at the end of Eugene Onegin, for instance, seems—given the discussion of poetry throughout the text—to be a commentary on literary convention itself.

If, on the other hand, the work seems to be trying to make a statement about the world, we will start off assuming that the convention is being criticized for its falseness when held up to the outside world—at least, the outside world assumed by the authorial audience. Take, for instance, Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson. At first, the text may seem but a variant of the traditional Cinderella pattern. In this plot, an impoverished but deserving person is cruelly abused, even enslaved, but he or she endures and is eventually discovered (usually through some bizarre coincidence, often involving switched infants) and rewarded with wealth and rank. Twain's novel tells the story of a black woman who, to save her child (who looks white) from being sold down the river, substitutes him for the son of one of the local aristocrats. In a climactic courtroom scene, the deception is uncovered, and the true freeman, the virtuous Valet de Chambers, who has spent the first two decades of his life as a slave, discovers that he is heir to a fortune. But just as we are about to delight in his success, there is an unexpected twist.

The real heir suddenly found himself rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation. He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter. His gait, his attitudes, his gestures, his bearing, his laugh—all were vulgar and uncouth, his manners were the manners of a slave. Money and fine
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clothes could not mend these defects or cover them up, they only
made them the more glaring and the more pathetic. The poor fellow
could not endure the terrors of the white man’s parlor, and felt at
home and at peace nowhere but in the kitchen. The family pew was
misery to him, yet he could nevermore enter into the solacing refuge
of the “nigger gallery”—that was closed to him for good and all.46

This does more than joke about art; it forces the authorial audience
to question the ideological assumptions behind the convention:
the belief that if we could somehow make our fortunes, we could
easily transcend any limitations in our upbringing.

One of the primary targets for many nineteenth- and twentieth-
century novelists has been closure itself. The term closure, unfortunately, has been confused by its application to at least two radically different concepts. On the one hand, closure can refer to the
way a text calls on readers to apply rules of signification; in this
sense, a text is “open” if its symbolic meanings are not restricted.
Maeterlinck’s play Pelléas and Mélisande, with its vague but resonant symbols, is open in this way, and it is presumably in this way
that Renée Riese Hubert is using the term when she argues that
“the modern work of art is essentially open, proposing a dialectic
between the work and its interpreter.”47 But closure can also refer
to the way that a text utilizes rules of configuration; in this sense,a work is “open” when, for instance, the plot remains unresolved
and incomplete even at the end. In this second meaning, Pelléas,
where both the mismatch of Mélisande’s marriage to Golaud and
the oddly innocent passion of her adulterous/incestuous love affair
with Pelléas are rounded out by the deaths of the lovers, is a fairly
closed text.

In the argument that follows, I will be talking about this second
kind of closure. More particularly, I would argue that many real-
istic writers prefer endings in which the full consequences of the

46. Mark Twain, Pudd’nhead Wilson, in Pudd’nhead Wilson and Those Extraor-
dinary Twins (New York: Harper, 1899), 224 (Conclusion). It is, though, risky to
talk about coherence in a work as textually tangled as this one; for a discussion of
the problems, see Hershel Parker, Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons, chap. 5.
47. Hubert, “The Tableau-Poème: Open Work,” Yale French Studies, no. 67
(1984): 43. Hubert’s claim, of course, applies only to a fairly restricted text-milieu.
See also Gerald Prince’s distinction between hermeneutic, proairetic, and tonal
closure later in that same issue (“La Nausée and the Question of Closure,” 183).
Events portrayed—even the consequences immediately pertinent to the narrative at hand—are neither worked out nor clearly implied. *Crime and Punishment*, as I've noted, ends with Raskolnikov looking toward the future.

At the beginning of their happiness at some moments they were both ready to look on those seven years as though they were seven days. He did not know that the new life would not be given him for nothing, that he would have to pay dearly for it, that it would cost him great striving, great suffering.

Now it is true that such unresolved endings are sometimes rounded off with a desultory closing of the door, such as the final paragraph of *Crime and Punishment*, which follows the passage just cited.

But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life. That might be the subject of a new story, but our present story is ended.48

Similarly, Robert O'Brien's book for young readers, *The Secret of NIMH*, ends with important unanswered questions about what has happened to some of the major characters, as well as about what will happen in the future. But it still includes the final gesture that brings down the curtain in so many children's stories: "They went to sleep."49 These easy assertions of well-roundedness, however, do not make these texts substantially different from texts that are more blatant in their failure to tell the whole story, such as Chekhov's "Lady with the Dog," which ends with the following paragraph:

And it seemed to them that they were within an inch of arriving at a decision, and that then a new, beautiful life would begin. And they

49. O'Brien, *The Secret of NIMH* (New York: Scholastic/Apple, 1982), 249 (Epilogue). The novel was originally entitled *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, but was later renamed to conform to the title of the film version.
both realized that the end was still far, far away, and that the hardest, the most complicated part was only just beginning.\textsuperscript{50}

It is important to realize that such lack of closure does not mean lack of conclusion. By the rule of conclusive endings, the authorial audience will take these open endings and assume that openness itself is part of the point of the conclusion.\textsuperscript{51} It will not, however, treat these texts as it treats \textit{Eugene Onegin}, for in \textit{Crime and Punishment}, \textit{The Rats of NIMH}, and "The Lady with the Dog," art itself is not the primary subject. Thus, the authorial audience is more likely to thematize the apparent incompleteness as an attempt by the author to cast doubt on the social and philosophical implications of the traditional well-made story—most specifically, the implication that stories really do have endings, that lives ever reach a state of rest. "That is the story," writes Alice Walker in "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells." "It has an 'unresolved' ending. That is because Freddie Pye and Luna are still alive, as am I."\textsuperscript{52}

Of course, different conventions have different ideological implications—and even the same convention (or its overturn) may have different meanings in different texts, depending on when, where, by whom, and for whom it was written. Thus, for instance, when W. S. Gilbert mocked the Cinderella story in \textit{H.M.S. Pinafore}, he may have been ridiculing certain class pretensions, but he apparently did not see the power of those class pretensions to warp personality beyond redemption. He may have thought that the lucky break was unlikely, but there is no textual indication that he did not believe that with luck the individual could transcend class. Twain sees the convention in radically different terms, for he sees class as \textit{forming} the individual to begin with. Attacks on well-roundedness, too, bear a different ideological weight in different contexts. "The Lady with the Dog," for instance, reflects


\textsuperscript{51} Prince, although he uses almost the opposite terms, is describing the same paradox when he says that there can be "a closure of uncertainty [making sense of or exploiting inconclusiveness, hesitation, and contradiction]" (\textit{"La Nausée and the Question of Closure"}, 188).

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Chekhov's sense that humans always have to deal with concrete particulars rather than generalities, and that the course of an individual's future is therefore always unpredictable. In Chandler's *Big Sleep*, as I will show in more detail at the end of Chapter 6, the attack on well-roundedness reflects a political critique of a certain notion of crime promulgated by the classical detective story. The novel violates the primary conventions of the genre, and the rule of conclusive endings allows the reader to treat these violations as a statement, specifically as an attack on the vision of the world that the traditional conventions imply.53

(2) So far, I have considered only deceptive cadences. Thematizing a text's conclusion is more complex still when a convention is undermined not by overthrowing it, but rather by following it in such an ostentatious way that it looks absurd—where the cadence is not deceptive, but excessive. Farce is particularly apt to use this mode. In Ludovic Halévy's libretto for Offenbach's *Ba-Ta-Clan*, which concerns a revolutionary conspiracy in China, tragedy is averted at the last moment when it turns out that all the major characters are secretly French. A more pointed example is the rescue of Macheath in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. Even without Peachum's explicit criticism of the falseness of the ending ('In reality, their end [i.e., that of the poor] is generally bad. Mounted messengers from the Queen come far too seldom'),54 the intended reader would have little trouble concluding that he or she should take the arrival of the mounted messenger as a criticism of the lack of realism inherent in all such last-minute rescues.

But the technique can be subtler as well. Southworth's *Allworth Abbey* provides a telling case. Annella Wilder is one of those dashing Southworth heroines like Capitola in *The Hidden Hand*—courageous, spirited, prepared for action while the men wring their hands in despair unable to think of what to do. She seems destined for a life of independence. Yet when the romantic couples are being

53. More generally, as Fredric Jameson puts it, the "consummation[ion] of the central murder" by the "random violence" of what he calls the "secondary plot" ("the search") in Chandler's novels in general is part of a strategy of "de-mystification of violent death" ("On Raymond Chandler," 648–49).

united in that culminating series of marriages that ends so many comic novels, we find that Annella, too, has been paired up—with Valerius Brightwell. Annella has had no heterosexual romantic attachments in the course of the novel (in part because the men are so far beneath her in character and fortitude); and Brightwell, neither so bright as a button nor so deep as a well, has been entirely incidental to the plot until this point (he utters hardly a word and performs no actions at all). Their union thus seems flagrantly contrived—the conventional configuration of final marriages is fulfilled to a degree that the plot itself does not demand, and the artificiality of the convention is thus foregrounded almost as much as it would have been if it had been reversed. The effect is that the reader begins to doubt all of the marriages—and perhaps the institution itself.

Or is that the intended effect? Like all interpretations, this one requires the application of rules that preexist the text and that may not be appropriate to it. Surely, whether a given actual reader sees the ending of Allworth Abbey (or, for that matter, the formally similar ending of Sense and Sensibility) as subversive will depend to a large extent on his or her politics and prior opinion of the author’s talents and outlook. If one takes the current deprecatory attitude toward Southworth and assumes that she didn’t know what she was doing, one can conclude that the book is merely conventional. Similarly, if a given actual reader thinks that Chandler was not a skilled novelist, he or she may not apply the rule of conclusive endings to his texts, and may, as Stephen Knight does, conclude that his novels are simply poorly plotted.55 Indeed, it is specifically because of his refusal to apply certain kinds of rules—in part because he sees Chandler as a popular novelist—that Luke Parsons can conclude that his novels are not a “serious indictment” of American society (if they were, they would have been “a boon to the propagandists of the Kremlin”): “His books, after all, are detective stories. . . . Just because Mr. Chandler writes so well, we must take care not to apply to him inappropriate literary standards.”56

55. Knight, Form and Ideology, esp. 150–51.
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Applying *appropriate* standards—there's the difficulty. For disputes about appropriateness are bound to lead to disputes about interpretation and ultimately about evaluation. Let me now turn to this problem and show in more detail both how interpretive disagreements can arise and how, as cultural critics, we might learn from them.