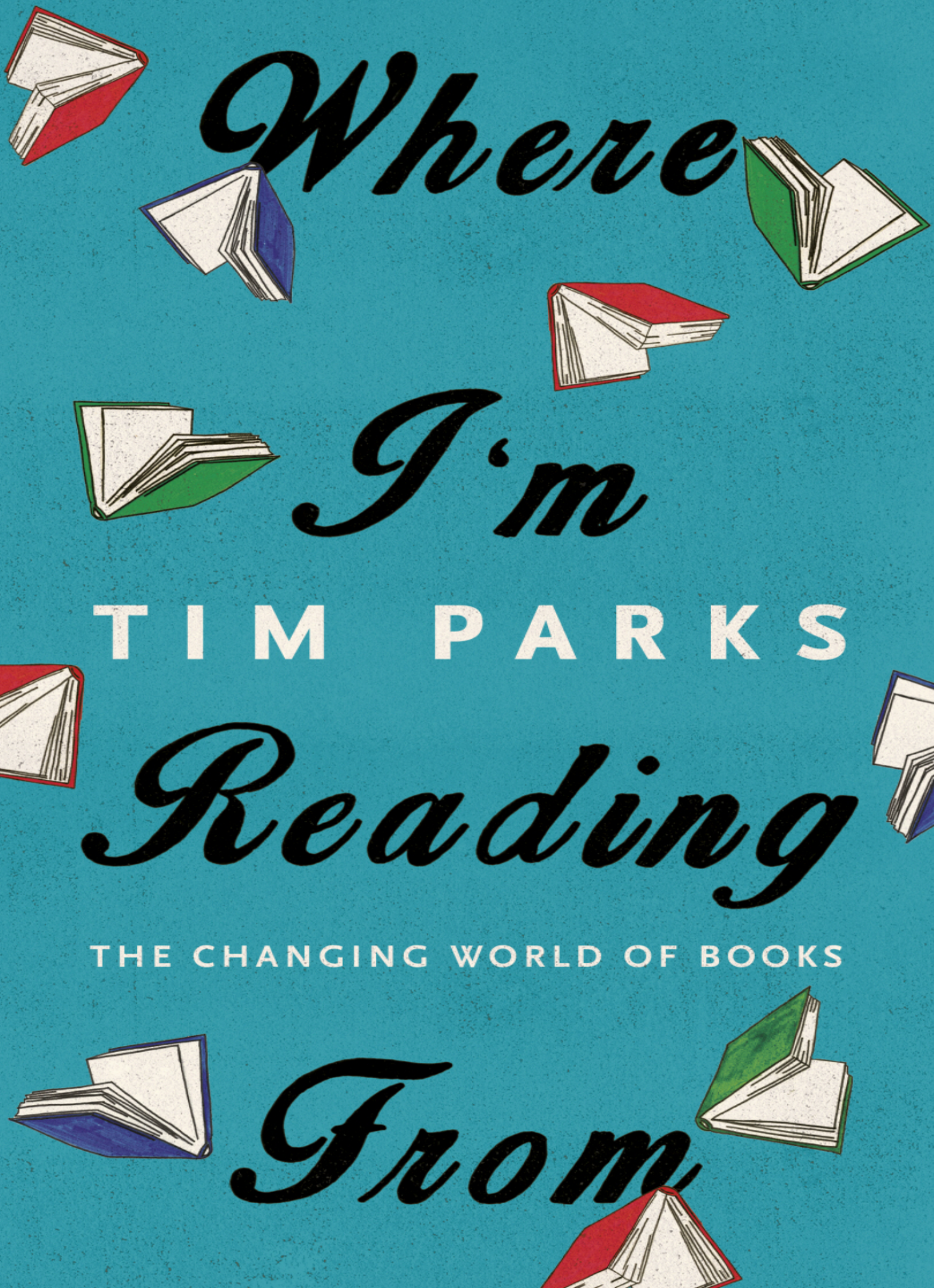
Where I'm Reading From

TIM PARKS

THE CHANGING WORLD OF BOOKS



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What happens to your brain when you read a good book?

As a novelist, translator and critic, Tim Parks is well-placed to investigate any questions we have about books and reading. In this collection of lively and provocative pieces he talks about what readers want from books and how to look at the literature we encounter in a new light.

About the Author

Born in Manchester, **Tim Parks** grew up in London and studied at Cambridge and Harvard. In 1981 he moved to Italy where he has lived ever since.

He is the acclaimed author of novels, non-fiction and essays, including *Europa, Cleaver, A Season with Verona, Teach Us to Sit Still* and *Italian Ways*. He has won the Somerset Maugham, Betty Trask and Llewellyn Rhys awards, and been shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He lectures on literary translation in Milan, writes for publications such as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*, and his many translations from the Italian include works by Moravia, Calvino, Calasso, Tabucchi and Machiavelli.

Also by Tim Parks

FICTION

Tongues of Flame
Loving Roger
Home Thoughts
Family Planning
Goodness
Cara Massimina
Mimi's Ghost
Shear
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Judge Savage
Rapids
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Dreams of Rivers and Seas
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Painting Death

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Where I’m Reading From

The Changing World of Books

Tim Parks

Harvill Secker
LONDON

Introduction

It’s time to rethink everything. Everything. What it means to write and what it means to write for a public – and which public? What do I want from this writing? Money? A career? Recognition? A place in the community? A change in the government? World peace? Is it an artifice, is it therapy? Is it therapy *because* it is an artifice, or in spite of that? Does it have to do with constructing an identity, a position in society? Or simply with entertaining myself, with entertaining others? Will I still write if they don’t pay me?

And what does it mean to read? Do I want to read the things other people are reading, so I can talk to them? Which other people? Why do I want to talk to them? So that I can be *of my time*? Or so that I can know other times, other places? Do I read things to confirm my vision of the world, or to challenge it? Or is reading to challenge my vision a reassuring confirmation that I am indeed the courageous guy I thought I was? The more challenging the books I read, the more complacent I feel.

Does the idea of one world, one culture, mean we are all being driven towards the same books – in which case how many writers can there possibly be? Or will everyone be a writer, but without being paid? ‘No one can do without some semblance of immortality,’ remarked Emil Cioran. ‘Ever since death came to be accepted as the absolute end, *everybody writes*!’

Why do we so often disagree about the books we read? Is it because someone’s reading well and someone’s reading badly? The professor and the students? Because there are good books and bad, or because people with different

backgrounds inevitably like different books? If so, can we begin to predict who will like what?

Most book talk is formulaic and has been for decades. Your average review offers a quick value judgement summed up in one-to-five stars at the top of the column. Why read on? There'll be a declaration of theme (worthy), an assessment of narrative competence, some mention of character and setting (we've all done a creative writing course), some praise, some reservations. Above all it's understood that books are fierce competition for what few crumbs of celebrity TV and film have left to them. They have to hit the ground running. Towards the end there may or may not be a precious quote the publisher can use for the cover of the paperback edition. In 99.9 per cent of cases the reviewer knows perfectly well what books are for, why they are written and read, what's literature and what's genre. He's ticking boxes. Or she. Understandably, the newspapers have reduced the books section to the size of a postage stamp.

For feedback there's the internet. Sometimes it feels like all feedback and no feed. What's most surprising on sites where readers offer their own reviews is how similar they are to journalistic reviews. They don't object to distributing the Amazon stars. They know perfectly well how to hand out praise and punishment. They have their unquestioned criteria. The medium dictates the tone. 'I haven't actually read the book, but . . .'

In the weeklies that still cover books, the author interview comes in the form of the same ten questions for all. *When did you last cry? What is your greatest regret?* It's an invitation to look for distinction in quirkiness. Usually by email. *Of the novels you've written, which is your favourite? What are you reading now, during the day and at bedtime?* Apparently interviewers know that all authors read different things at bedtime. They are not allowed not to have a favourite novel, a greatest regret. The small photo running

beside the piece is taken from the author’s Facebook page at no expense to the paper.

The multiplication of literary prizes is in line with this. Their uncoupling from national literatures tells us that it’s the reputation of the prize that counts, not nurturing writers in a given community. People have invested money. The longlist is added to the shortlist to squeeze out a little more publicity. At the awards dinner one writer is hoisted up to the pantheon and the others cast into outer darkness. It doesn’t matter that the winner was no one’s first choice, that two members of the jury complained they couldn’t finish the damn book. It’s a winner now. By democratic process. And the winner’s sales outstrip the loser’s, the losers’.

Meantime, literary scholarship in the universities is impenetrable: less monumentally abstruse perhaps than in the rarefied heyday of structuralism and post-structuralism, but maybe that’s because there’s no need to work so hard not to be read these days. The tired jargon is enough, the tendency to confuse studies of literature with exercises in cultural history. It is astonishing how many hundreds of thousands of academic articles are produced to no end aside from the conferring of this or that teaching contract; how much endeavour and how little adventure.

Beneath all the chatter and the liturgy runs a fierce nostalgia for the literary myths of the past, for the gigantic figures of Dickens and Joyce, Hemingway and Faulkner. A writer can’t even aim at that kind of aura today. But it’s that yearning for imagined greatness that drives the whole literary enterprise. Plus the publishers’ desperation to manufacture a bestseller to pay the bills. The idea of greatness is a marketing tool. See Franzen.

Perhaps in the end it’s just ridiculous, the high opinion we have of books, of literature. Perhaps it’s just a collective spell of self-regard, self-congratulation, the way the jurors of the literary prize are so damn pleased with themselves

when they invite their new hero to the podium. Do books, after all, *change* anything? For all their proverbial liberalism, have they made the world more liberal? Or have they offered the fig leaf that allows us to go on as we were, liberal in our reading and conservative in our living. Perhaps art is more part of the problem than the solution; we may be going to hell, but look how well we write about it, look at our paintings and operas and tragedies.

It is not, after all, that we have to worry about the survival of literature. There's never been so much of it. But maybe it's time that the beast carried a health warning.

Milan, May 2014

NB: Impersonal use of the third person pronoun has become a problem for the contemporary writer in English. People have grown sensitive to issues of gender. Do I say, “Someone who has been told he is dying and must make his will . . .” or “Someone who has been told he or she is dying and must make his or her will”? My own feeling is that the old ‘he’ was always understood to be impersonal and without gender while the ‘he or she’ formula is fussy and inelegant, constantly reminding readers of a problem that isn’t really there. For the most part then, with occasional exceptions, I have stayed with the old impersonal he and I invite my readers to believe that I do not do this in a spirit of chauvinism, but to keep the focus sharp.

Part I

THE WORLD AROUND THE BOOK

1 | Do We Need Stories?

LET'S TACKLE ONE of the literary set's favourite orthodoxies head on: that the world 'needs' stories. 'There is an enormous need,' Jonathan Franzen declares in an interview with *Corriere della Sera* (there's no escape these days), 'for long, elaborate, complex stories, such as can only be written by an author concentrating alone, free from the deafening chatter of Twitter.'

Of course as a novelist it is convenient to think that by the nature of the job one is on the side of the good, supplying an urgent and general need. I can also imagine readers drawing comfort from the idea that their fiction habit is essential sustenance and not a luxury. But what is the nature of this need? What would happen if it wasn't met? We might also ask: Why does Franzen refer to *complex* stories? And why is it important not to be interrupted by Twitter and Facebook? Are such interruptions any worse than an old landline phone call, or simply friends and family buzzing around your writing table? Jane Austen, we recall, loved to write in domestic spaces where she was open to constant interruption.

Proponents of 'the world needs stories' thesis are legion, but one of the more elaborate statements comes in Salman Rushdie's novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). Here, in a text that falls between fable and magical realism, the telling of many stories is aligned with the idea of a natural ecology; in the normal and healthy way of things, we're told, all the different stories of the world flow together in a great ocean of narrative. But now this harmony is threatened by an evil 'cultmaster' who seeks to poison and eventually shut

off the flow of stories, imposing universal silence and sterility as part of a bid for omnipotence.

Given Rushdie's personal plight at the time of writing, it's hard not to think of the 'cultmaster' as a metamorphosis of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Stories are presented as a manifestation of the natural pluralism of the imagination, engaged in a mortal battle against any fundamentalism that would impose its own, univocal version: fiction is on the side of freedom. Of course.

Rushdie's idea is charming, but his ocean of stories argument never, to risk a pun, holds water. Far from flowing together in a harmonious ecology, stories tend to be in constant competition with each other. Far from imposing silence, cults, religions and ideologies all have their own noisy stories to tell. Christian fundamentalism with its virgin birth, miracles, exorcisms and angels boasts a rich narrative flora; if we toss into the mix the Catholic saints and their colourful martyrdoms we can hardly complain that the censorship and repression of the Inquisition resulted in storyless silence.

The problem is that preacher and polemicist want us to accept just one, exclusive set of stories, one vision, which we must believe is true. And many people are happy to do this. Once they've signed up to a Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or even liberal pluralist narrative it's unlikely they'll go out of their way to research competing accounts of the world. People tend to use stories of whatever kind to bolster their beliefs, not to question them.

But I doubt if this politicised version of the we-need-stories thesis was what a writer like Franzen had in mind. 'This is an excellent novel,' I remember a fellow judge for a literary prize repeatedly telling the rest of the jury every time he encouraged us to vote for a book, 'because it offers complex moral situations that help us get a sense of how to live and behave.' The argument here is that the world has become immensely complicated and the complex stories of

novels help us to see our way through it, to shape a trajectory for ourselves in the increasingly fragmented and ill-defined social environment we move in.

There's something to be said for this idea, though of course stories are by no means the exclusive territory of novels; the political, sports and crime pages of the newspapers are full of fascinating stories, many of them extremely challenging and complex. What the novel offers, however, is a tale mediated by the individual writer, who (alone, away from Facebook and Twitter) works hard to shape it and deliver it in a way that he or she feels is especially attractive, compelling and right.

Here again, though, even if we are not immediately aware of it, and even when the author is celebrated for his or her *elusive ambiguity* (another lit-crit commonplace), such stories compete for our assent and seek to seduce us towards the author's point of view. D.H. Lawrence attacked Tolstoy's novels as evil, immoral and deeply corrupting. Writing about Thomas Hardy he rather brilliantly questions the motives behind Hardy's habit of having his more talented and spiritually adventurous characters destroyed by society; Hardy goes 'against himself', Lawrence tells us (meaning, against his own specially gifted nature), to 'stand with the average against the exception', and all this 'in order to explain his own sense of failure'. To Lawrence's mind, a tremendously complex story like *Jude the Obscure* becomes an invitation not to try to realise your full potential but to settle instead for self-preservation. Hardy reinforces the mental habits of the frightened reader. It is pernicious. In this view of things, rather than needing stories we need to learn how to smell out their drift and resist them.

But there's something deeper going on. Even before we actually tell any stories, the language we use teems with them in embryo form. There are words that simply denote things in nature: a pebble, a tree. There are words that describe objects we make: to know the word 'chair' is to

understand about moving from standing to sitting and appreciate the match of the human body with certain shapes and materials. But there are also words that come complete with entire narratives, or rather that can't come without them. The only way we can understand words like God, angel, devil, ghost is through stories, since these entities do not allow themselves to be known in other ways, or not to the likes of me. Here not only is the word invented – all words are – but the *referent* is invented too, and a story to suit. God is a one-word creation story.

Arguably the most important word in the invented-referents category is 'self'. We would like the self to exist perhaps, but does it really? What is it? The need to surround it with a lexical cluster of reinforcing terms – identity, character, personality, soul – all with equally dubious referents, suggests our anxiety. The more words we invent, the more we feel reassured that there really is something there to refer to.

Like God, the self requires a story; it is the account of how each of us accrues and sheds attributes over seventy or eighty years – youth, vigour, job, spouse, success, failure – while remaining, at some deep level, myself, my soul. One of the accomplishments of the novel, which as we know blossomed with the consolidation of Western individualism, has been to reinforce this ingenious invention, to have us believe more and more strongly in this sovereign self whose essential identity remains unchanged by all vicissitudes. Telling the stories of various characters in relation to each other, how something started, how it developed, how it ended, novels are intimately involved with the way we make up ourselves. They reinforce a process we are engaged in every moment of the day: self-creation. They sustain the idea of a self projected through time, a self eager to be a real something (even at the cost of great suffering) and not an illusion.

The more complex and historically dense the stories are, the stronger the impression they give of unique and protracted individual identity beneath surface transformations, conversions, dilemmas, aberrations. In this sense, even pessimistic novels – say, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* – can be encouraging: however hard circumstances may be, you do have a self, a personal story to shape and live. You are a unique something that can fight back against all the confusion around. You have pathos.

This is all perfectly respectable. But do we actually *need* this intensification of self that novels provide? Do we need it more than ever before?

I suspect not. If we asked the question of, for example, a Buddhist priest, he or she would probably tell us that it is precisely this illusion of selfhood that makes so many in the West unhappy. We are in thrall to the narrative of selves that do not really exist, a fabrication in which most novel-writing connives. Schopenhauer would have agreed. He spoke of people 'deluded into an absolutely false view of life by reading novels', something that 'generally has the most harmful effect on their whole lives'. Like the Buddhist priest, he would have preferred silence or the school of experience, or the kind of myth or fable that did not invite excited identification with an author alter ego.

Personally, I'm too enmired in narrative and self-narrative to bail out now. I love an engaging novel, I love a complex novel; but I am quite sure I don't *need* it.

2 | Why Finish Books?

‘SIR –’ REMARKED SAMUEL Johnson with droll incredulity to someone too eager to know whether he had finished a certain book – ‘Sir, do you read books through?’ Well, do we? Right through to the end? And if we do, are we the suckers Johnson supposed us to be?

Schopenhauer, who thought and wrote a great deal about reading, is on Johnson’s side. Life is ‘too short for bad books’ and ‘a few pages’ should be quite enough, he claims, for ‘a provisional estimate of an author’s productions’. After which it is perfectly OK to put an author back on the shelf if you’re not convinced.

But I’m not really interested in how we deal with bad books. It seems obvious that any serious reader will have learned long ago how much time to give a book before choosing to shut it. It’s only the young, still attached to that sense of achievement inculcated by anxious parents, who hang on doggedly when there is no enjoyment. ‘I’m a teenager,’ remarks one sad contributor to a book review website. ‘I read this whole book [it would be unfair to say which] from first page to last hoping it would be as good as the reviews said. It wasn’t. I enjoy reading and finish nearly all the novels I start and it was my determination never to give up that made me finish this one, but I really wish I hadn’t.’ One can only encourage a reader like this to learn not to attach self-esteem to the mere finishing of a book, if only because the more bad books you finish, the fewer good ones you’ll have time to start.

What about those good books, though? Because Johnson certainly wasn’t just referring to the bad when he tossed out

that provocation. Do we need to finish them? Is a good book by definition one that we did finish? Or are there occasions when we might choose to leave off a book before the end, or even only halfway through, and nevertheless feel that it was good, even excellent, that we were glad we read what we read, but don't feel the need to finish it? I ask the question because this is happening to me more and more often. Is it age, wisdom, senility? I start a book. I'm enjoying it thoroughly, and then the moment comes when I just know I've had enough. It's not that I've stopped enjoying it. I'm not bored, I don't even think it's too long. I just have no desire to go on enjoying it. Can I say then that I've read it? Can I recommend it to others and speak of it as a fine book?

Kafka remarked that beyond a certain point a writer might decide to finish his or her novel at any moment, with any sentence; it really was an arbitrary question, like where to cut a piece of string, and in fact both *The Castle* and *America* are left unfinished, while *The Trial* is tidied away with the indecent haste of someone who has decided enough is enough. The Italian novelist Carlo Emilio Gadda was the same; both his major works, *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana* and *Acquainted with Grief*, are unfinished and both are considered classics despite the fact that they have complex plots that would seem to require endings which are not there.

Other writers deploy what I would call a catharsis of exhaustion: their books present themselves as rich and extremely taxing experiences that simply come to an end at some point where writer, reader, and indeed characters all feel they've had enough. The earliest example that comes to mind is D.H. Lawrence, but one thinks of Elfriede Jelinek, Thomas Bernhard, Samuel Beckett, and the wonderful Christina Stead. Beckett's prose fiction gets shorter and shorter, denser and denser as he brings the point of exhaustion further and further forward.

All these writers, it seems to me, by suggesting that beyond a certain point a book might end anywhere, legitimise the notion that the reader may choose for him or herself where to bow out (of Proust's *Recherche* for example, or *The Magic Mountain*) without detracting from the experience. One of the strangest responses I ever had to a novel of my own – my longest, not surprisingly – came from a fellow author who wrote out of the blue to express his appreciation. Such letters of course are a massive boost to one's vanity and I was just about to stick this very welcome feather in my cap, when I reached the last lines of the message: he hadn't read the last fifty pages, he said, because he'd reached a point where the novel seemed satisfactorily over.

Naturally I was disappointed, even a little angry. My leg had surely been pulled. Wasn't this damning criticism, that I'd gone on fifty pages too long? Only later did I appreciate his candour. My book was fine, for him, even without the ending. It wasn't too long; just that he was happy to stop where he did.

What, then, since clearly I'm talking about books with aesthetic pretensions, of the notion of the work of art as an organic whole – you haven't seen its shape unless you've seen all of it? And, since again I have mainly referred to novelists, what of the question of plot? A novel that is plotted requires that we reach the end, because the solution to the tale will throw meaning back across the entire work. So the critics tell us. No doubt I've made this claim myself in some review or other.

But this is not really my experience as I read. There are some novels, and not just genre novels, where plot is indeed up front and very much the reason why one keeps turning the pages. We have to know what happens. These are rarely the most important books for me. Often one skims as heightened engagement with the plot reduces our attention

to the writing as such; all the novel's intelligence is in the story, and the writing the merest vehicle.

Yet even in these novels where plot is the central pleasure on offer the end rarely gratifies, and if we like the book and recommend it to others, it is rarely for the end. What matters is the conundrum of the plot, the forces put in play and the tensions between them. The Italians have a nice word here. They call plot *trama*, a word whose primary meaning is weft, woof or weave. It is the pattern of the weave that we most savour in a plot – Hamlet's dilemma, perhaps, or the awesome unsustainability of Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon – not its solution. Indeed, the best we can hope from the end of a good plot is that it not ruin what came before. I would not mind a Hamlet that stopped before the carnival of carnage in the last scene, leaving us instead to mull over all the intriguing possibilities posed by the young prince's return to Elsinore.

In this regard it's worth noting that stories were not always obliged to have an end, or to keep the same ending. In *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* Roberto Calasso shows that one of the defining characteristics of a living mythology is that its many stories, always so excitingly tangled together, always have at least two endings, often 'opposites' – the hero dies, he doesn't die; the lovers marry, they don't marry. It was only when myth became history, as it were, that we began to feel there should be just one 'proper' version, and set about forgetting the alternatives. With novels, the endings I'm least disappointed with are those that encourage the reader to believe that the story might very easily have taken a completely different turn.

To put a novel down before the end, then, is simply to acknowledge that for me its shape, its aesthetic quality, is in the weave of the plot and, with the best novels, in the meshing of the writing style with that weave. Style and plot, overall vision and local detail, fascinate together, in a perfect tangle. Once the structure has been set up and the