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The Sense of an Ending — in Life and Narrative

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The sense of an ending – in Life and Narrative

The view that narratives are mediations of reality, has been put forward, among others by Jerome Bruner (1991). This presentation will concentrate on one important aspect of the relation between life and narrative, namely the end. What happens at the ending of a literary work – to the reader, to the protagonists, to the narrator – could it be related to how human beings react and behave at the end of their lives?

According to literary critics like Peter Brooks (1985) and Armine Kotin Mortimer (1984), readers approaching the end of a narrative search for « a total metaphor », an « ultimate » meaning of the story as a whole. In cases where the story relates the life of a character, and ends with his or her death, this search for a global meaning is at work at several levels simultaneously; sensing the end approach the character reassesses his life and tries to grasp an overall meaning of it, sometimes reaching a moment of truth or new knowledge. Questions that are posed centre around the quality of life (was it a happy life or an unhappy one?) and around the possible lesson that the protagonist might have learned from the experiences of life. In addition, the reader might ask himself why the author chose to expose these particular experiences to us and what implications all of this might have in the reader's own life.

We would like to relate these considerations to some theories and experiments within cognitive science about the human need in general to evaluate the quality of a life at its end. Rozin and Stellar (2009), for instance, suggest that posthumous happy effects within the frames of studies in short life accounts, may be a result of a generic human process, which they call 'retroactive re-evaluation'.

Our point of departure will be some examples from endings in the French history of literature, namely from Germaine de Staël's autobiography *Dix années d'exil*, Balzac's novel *Illusions perdues* and Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*. One may assume that the endings have different implications for the reader, the first being a non-fictional narrative and the other two fictional ones.

References:

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