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Knots, Story Lines, and Hermeneutical Lines

A Case Study

Arnaud Schmitt

Reading fiction requires sometimes the ability to entertain several hypotheses simultaneously, to follow new diegetic lines and to erase obsolete ones, to juggle ideas around and suddenly, though very often tentatively, to make choices and head for closure, or accommodate the possibility of an open ending (i.e., keeping at least two options open). The theory of possible worlds can help us delve further into the mechanisms of this specific hermeneutic activity, since it aims at allowing the literary analyst to bring the complex and connective structure of a story to light. Developed by Marie-Laure Ryan, among others, this theory enhances the intrinsically layered configuration of every story and the fact that reading is a modular activity. Ryan's primary concern was to study the *multi-layeredness* of a story, from top (the actual) to bottom (the virtual), or, to resort to a different imagery, to show the diversity of the diegetic offshoots appearing further up the trunk of the

primary narrative (in this image, the actual is down and the virtual is up): “These hypothetical constructs can be visualized as a tree whose trunk is formed by the character’s representation of the factual domain, and whose branches probe into the future (or into the past)” (1985: 725). The problem with these two images (layers or tree) is that, apt as they are, they convey a static idea (or, to be precise, a series of static ideas) of the process of mentally structuring a story, whereas Ryan insists on the ever-changing nature of possible worlds. Thus, if one decides to opt for the tree metaphor, one has to keep in mind that the offshoots keep growing, sometimes in unexpected directions, merging with other offshoots or with the trunk, or simply have to be pruned. As Elena Semino pointed out, Ryan “suggests that plot development can be explained in terms of changes in the mutual relationships between the worlds contained within a textual universe” and “makes the important claim that the creation of complex networks of unrealized possibilities is central to the aesthetic potential or ‘tellability’ of plots” (2003: 88). The key words in Semino’s appraisal of Ryan’s theory are arguably “changes,” “relationships,” “networks,” and “unrealized possibilities.” In this article, I would like to further our understanding of the *virtuality* and *transitionality* of every novel’s textual universe, building on Ryan’s research: I will keep the graphic representation of stories as a myriad of diegetic worlds, but the worlds I have in mind are more *hypothetical* than *possible*, most of them competing with each other for “hermeneutical dominance.” I will take Dan Chaon’s novel *Await Your Reply* (2009) as an example, since its plot relies on the interaction between three parallel story lines and their possible merging.

According to the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the virtual can be seen as always forthcoming and already past (1996) but also “a task to accomplish” and “a problem to solve” (1985: 274). In terms of reading fiction, this means that the virtual idea (hermeneutical hypothesis) is either actualized (and so ceases to be virtual) or erased (because it does not fit the dominant diegetic pattern). On the basis that a plot is composed of several coexisting hermeneutical lines forming “prospective mappings” (Ryan 1985: 741), I intend to study how these lines overlap, merge or simply disappear. The constant transitionality of the hermeneutical process (“Transitions between states” [Ryan 1985: 749]) reveals how our reading

of a novel relies on the creation of hypothetical worlds and how the management of these worlds requires constant deliberations.

Ryan's possible worlds operate at micro- and macro-levels. At micro-levels, they mostly operate within the *characters' domain* ("domains centered around one or several main characters" [Pavel 1980: 105]). We can differentiate between the *characters' domain* and the *readers' domain* (the wider narrative domain, according to Pavel). The former includes layers of diegetic reality inherent in the various worlds attached to the main characters. The trunk represents the mimetic universe of the diegesis or, according to Ryan, the textual actual worlds (TAWs): "the textual universe [is] the sum of worlds projected by the text. At the center of this system is the TAW" (1991: 32). Each character appearing within this universe spawns a multitude of "relative worlds." Ryan lists various relative worlds (1985: 722–32) stemming from the psychological zone proper to each character: belief or knowledge worlds (B-worlds and K-worlds), hypothetical extensions of K-worlds, Intention-worlds, Model-worlds, Wish-worlds, and so forth. These relative worlds generate a textual phenomenon common, to a certain degree, to all texts of fiction, "recursive embedding" (1985: 723). The reader, in his or her wide-ranging domain, the domain of the whole text and of the architext, is able to mentally apprehend all the characters' domain(s). This is the level I am interested in here, the macro-level of the analysis of hypothetical worlds. It will not be possible to embrace all the specifics of the plotting devices used by Chaon in his novel, and I will only consider the higher level of interpretation, the organization of hermeneutical lines into a coherent whole.

The very concept of plot has been analyzed before, from a minimalist point of view (E. M. Foster) or from a "kinetic or organic" point of view (Brooks 1984; Baroni 2007), and one can argue that every story has one. From one novel to the other, plots vary in terms of intensity and range (a plot can be one of several diegetic engines, or, as in traditional crime fiction, *the* all-encompassing element). But recent novels, and more precisely, postmodern ones, have altered the notion of plot. It is still considered as a way for the writer to affect (in a broad sense) the reader, but no longer in a linear way or only by means of traditional narrative techniques (mostly paralipsis). Information (and the absence thereof) used to be at the very heart of plotting strategies, but writers have be-

come more sophisticated and have decided to resort to narrative, not to slowly reveal the plot, but to embody it. In other terms, it is common nowadays to view the telling of the narrative as the only plot. Indeed, because *some* narratives have become (chronologically or semantically, for instance) noncongruent, the “secret” is no longer within the story; it simply lies in the ability to reconstruct a linear narrative from achronological bits and pieces, or a common narrative from chapters narrated from different perspectives. James Phelan makes a useful distinction between *instabilities* (plot-related) and *tensions* (reader-related):

Progressions can be generated through what happens with the elements of story, that is, through the introduction of *instabilities*—conflictual relations between or within characters that lead to complications in the action and sometimes eventually to resolution. Progressions can also be generated through what happens with the elements of discourse, that is, through *tensions* or conflictual relations—relations involving significant gaps in values, beliefs, or knowledge—between authors and readers or narrators and readers. (1996: 90)

The key hermeneutical stakes have ceased to revolve only around conflicting information (“instabilities”); indeed, postmodernity and metafiction (the former is a recent literary trend, while the latter has been around for centuries but nevertheless characterizes the former for many analysts) have the readers focus on *organization* (“tensions”). Consequently, in noncongruent narratives, the onus is on the reader to retrieve a certain unity from the narrative in order to achieve an increasingly relative closure. Narrative patterns have tended to become more fragmented, not only because this fragmentation seems to convey a more genuine sense of the real but also because they offer new ways of telling stories (although, simultaneously, traditional linear and hypermimetic stories have continued to thrive). Whatever the reasons driving writers to renew narrative techniques, the reading of “serious” fiction and “ambitious” genre fiction has, over the last century, switched from imagining a congruent story to *structuring* a noncongruent (often non-linear or multivoiced) one.

This evolution is the reason why we can distinguish story line (henceforth SL) from hermeneutical line (henceforth HL). SLS stem

from a classical view of narrative, according to which the narrative unfolds several SLs bound to meet at the end to merge into one story. These SLs, often linked to each character's domain, seem to exist independently of the reader's subjectivity, whereas HLS are the product of the reader's effort to figure out the *linearity* of fragmented diegetic pieces: they formalize hypothetical worlds. HLS are not supposed to replace SLs. They describe an altogether different mental activity, as they mostly represent the hypotheses formed by the reader. Several contradictory HLS can coexist until one appears to be the best option, as a result of which the others are suddenly discontinued. In the case of a particularly unfamiliar or deconstructed narrative, the reader can "spin" several HLS simultaneously. He or she makes hermeneutical choices based on the information conveyed by the text and buttressed by a "balance of probabilities" but, also, by his or her background as a reader, his or her particular knowledge of literature as a whole, and more particularly, of narrative patterns similar to the one used by the noncongruent text at hand. In other words, HLS are the product of a reader's encounter with a "difficult" text and the subsequent necessity to entertain several *lines of interpretation*. One "fragmented" story line can spawn several HLS. Much work has been produced on the ethos of postmodernity, but the exploration of the hermeneutical adjustments required from the reader for the reading of deconstructed fiction remains limited; HLS might be a concept allowing us to do so.

Await Your Reply does not qualify as a postmodern novel, since there is no apparent metafiction play involved. But it certainly qualifies as a noncongruent narrative, at least until the very last pages. It is characteristic of post-postmodern fiction, a form of fiction that has relinquished authorial metalepsis as a core criterion while maintaining a high level of narrative playfulness. As postmodern fiction, it also dabbles in genre fiction without strictly playing by the "rules"; the novel's plotting devices tap both into avant-garde and genre fiction. It presents the reader with a multilayered narrative he or she has to reassemble, while using traditional crime fiction elements in a sparse but nevertheless explicit way (villains, thieves, murders, detectives . . .). The overall theme of the novel is theft, not material theft but identity theft (by means of the Internet). Chaon manages to produce an increasing narrative tension by

using the mettle of crime fiction while tackling postmodern topoi (the relativity of identity and Baudrillard's hyperreal). The novel's double background will allow me to illustrate the concept of HLS as exhaustively as possible.

Chaon's novel presents three SLs:

SL1: Ryan (*focalizer*) and his father, Jay, identity thieves who manage simultaneously several false identities: "avatars" (102), "he was juggling nearly a hundred different personas" (153). "Jay's schemes" (152) consist mostly of bank transfers and cash withdrawals in various cities under various identities. This SL begins *in medias res*, with Jay driving Ryan to the hospital with the latter's severed hand resting on a bed of ice on the seat beside him. The circumstances under which his hand was severed are not clear but contribute to the isotopy of fear and underlying danger borrowed by Chaon from crime fiction which is present throughout the novel. The rest of this SL describes his youth, difficult teenage years, and late reunion with his biological father (whom he believed was his uncle), then the mounting pressure on their illegal operations until the SL catches up with the scene in the cabin where Ryan's hand is severed by henchmen because his father refuses to reveal the identity of Jay Kozelek, the man he is supposed to be, simply because the real Jay is dead. The end of this SL sees Ryan surviving and hiding in Ecuador and the real identity of his (not real) father revealed. [SL1: Chapters 1, 4, 7, 10, 11, 14, 17, 19, 21, 24, 26].

SL2: Lucy (*focalizer*) and George Orson elope (George is Lucy's teacher). They leave Pompey, Ohio, Lucy's hometown (both of her parents died, and she lives with her sister, Patricia), to "lay low" in Nebraska in a motel where, supposedly, George grew up. Right from the start, George is a mysterious figure (a teacher driving a Maserati) with a murky past: "he had no connections at all that she knew of" (5). As soon as they reach Nebraska, George becomes increasingly aloof, providing Lucy with very little information regarding his business. Pressed by her to reveal the true nature of his "scheme," which seems to involve constant use of a computer, George starts percolating information and Lucy soon

realizes that George Olson is not George's real name and that his identity turns out to be a flimsy idea: "I've been a lot of different people since then" (127), "I don't think I can be George Orson for much longer" (128). He also provides a new identity for Lucy, who is supposed to be younger and George's daughter. The gist of his business is revealed in chapter 15: he steals identities from dead people, which allows him to own "unclaimed estates" and embezzle money "from an *entity*" like Goldman Sachs, for instance (175). George urges Lucy to let go of her old identity, since they have to fill passport applications and leave the country under new names. Indeed, his latest "projects" lead them to Africa, where George's schemes start unraveling and things quickly go wrong. As George's pursuers finally catch up with him (ominous Russian men), Lucy barely manages to escape. [SL2: Chapters 2, 5, 8, 12, 15, 18, 19, 22, 25]

SL3: Like SL1, SL3 opens *in medias res* with Miles (*focalizer*) looking for his brother, Hayden, which is what he has been doing for the past decade, and the rest of the SL retraces the (fruitless) quest that has led Miles to this forlorn place in Canada. Miles's search is rendered extremely difficult by the fact that his brother regularly picks up new identities. Hayden also suffers from advanced schizophrenia and can be dangerous. Miles meets Lydia Barrie, whose sister has been missing for three years. Hayden was her sister's teacher. She shows Miles a picture of the young man and the girl: "It was Hayden, all right" (241). Lydia has various theories concerning Hayden: "He was a thief, . . . he had defrauded numerous individuals and corporations, . . . he had focused particularly on several investment banking firms, from which he had possibly stolen millions of dollars," setting "loose various Internet worms" (244). She has hired a detective and is armed, as she believes Hayden to be extremely dangerous: "I think he might have killed her" (199). She has come to believe that Hayden is occupying an abandoned meteorological station and invites Miles to join her and the detective on board a plane to Banks Island, where they discover a "shrine" (285) and come to the conclusion that Hayden and Lucy's sister probably were trapped by winter and died (288).

We know by means of the other SLs that only Lucy's sister died.

[SL3: Chapters 3, 6, 9, 13, 16, 19, 20, 23]

Await Your Reply displays a tertiary structure (three SLs, one per chapter) that is disrupted on two occasions: chapters 10 and 19. These two chapters can be described as hybrid chapters, mixing two SLs (or three, depending on the configuration of the reader's HIs at that point) that so far have been kept separated (but as we will see, possible inter-relations between chapters start early in the novel). Chapter 10 seems to be narrated from an unidentified perspective and broaches the general theme of hacking; though unidentified, the narrator is not impersonal, since he addresses a narratee: "An invader arrives in your computer and begins to glean the little diatoms of your identity" (10). According to the tertiary logic of the novel, chapter 10 should follow SL1, and it could actually be the case, since criminal activities on the Internet are Ryan and Jay's main occupation. What's more, there is a direct reference to the book's opening chapter (SL1): "Imagine the parts of yourself disassembled; imagine, for example, that nothing is left of you but a severed hand in an ice cooler" (89). Thus, the narrator could be the same as the narrator of the other chapters related to SL1, but occupying a different narrating position: no longer presenting the story through the eyes of his main character but directly addressing this character, Ryan, and reminding the reader that he or she has access to the whole narrative (since the severed hand reappears at the very end of SL1).

Chapter 19 displays another form of hybridity. Whereas chapter 10 disrupts the narrative flow and introduces a new frame of perspective, chapter 19 inserts itself congruently in the overall narrative framework. Its hybridity is the result of the presence of two characters from distinct SLs (SL1 and 2) in the same chapter: Jay Kozelek and Mike Hayden meet outside Denver International. First of all, chapter 19 allows the reader to have access to Jay's (and thus Ryan's) and Mike's stories from a different and more direct source (not mediated through son and brother), and the different versions seem to tally. Indeed, Ryan is Jay's son (the scene takes place before Ryan and Jay reunite): "I've got a kid out there somewhere. . . . I gave him up, like, for adoption, in a way. To my sister. He doesn't know that I. That I'm his dad" (232). But what the reader learns

in this chapter is that Jay's phone call to his son was apparently Mike's idea: "It was Mike Hayden's opinion that Jay should contact his son. That Ryan should be told the truth about his adoption, and all the rest" (235). Nevertheless there are several degrees of revelations embedded in this chapter, and this particular piece of information evolves as the chapter moves forward: additional input makes it unstable and prompts the reader to interpret it differently (in other words, insert it differently in the macro-mapping of the tentative HLs). As for Mike Hayden, he appears in this chapter as secretive and potentially malevolent as when he is seen through his brother's eyes in the other chapters linked to SL3: "At the time, Jay didn't know that the guy's name was Mike Hayden. . . . All the hackers in Jay's house were in awe of him. It was said that he had personally been involved in a huge national blackout. . . . 'I wouldn't fuck around with that guy if I were you,' said Dylan" (228); "'That dude is the Destroyer,' Dylan said. 'He's stolen probably fucking millions of dollars'" (230). As mentioned before, these portraits of Mike and Jay match their personalities and background described in previous chapters, but as the chapter unfolds, Mike's semantic outline starts resembling George Orson's, and this is the main stake of chapter 19, namely, progressively bringing SL3 into the fold with the possibility of only one coherent and stable HL looming ahead. Quite early in the novel (how early depends once again on the reader's focus, or expertise, or simply his or her experience with similar—deconstructed—diegeses), parallels can be drawn between Mike Hayden and George Orson's illegal and mostly cybernetic activities. As Lucy gradually learns more about George's identity and the true nature of his trade, the reader becomes aware of the similarities between both characters' activities.

These connections can be made as the author trickles down diegetic information. The onus is obviously on the reader to decide to link, or not, the three SLs into an eventual unique HL or, at least, to consider this possibility, while simultaneously entertaining the other possibility that these three SLs will never intertwine. These connections are of two kinds: *connectors* and *knots*, the former describing a low degree of connectivity while the latter refer to a high degree, approaching certainty. Marie-Laure Ryan identified knots as one of the key elements of an author's plotting strategy: "plots originate in *knots*—and knots are created

when the lines circumscribing the worlds of the narrative universe, instead of coinciding, *intersect* each other” (1985: 754; emphasis added). Even though she had other knots in mind—ones connecting possible worlds—the impulse to connect what previously appeared as separate narrative threads remains one of the most important elements in the dynamics of plots and takes up most of the time devoted to hermeneutical management when it comes to more sophisticated novels presenting “loose narrative ends.” To go further into the concepts of connectors and knots, we could say that the main difference between them is that connectors suddenly bring SLs closer and alert the reader to a possible rearrangement of HLS, whereas knots merge hitherto distinct SLs and reconfigure HLS:

Fig. 1. Connectors

Fig. 2. Knots

As we will see with examples taken from *Await Your Reply*, connectors are subjective, sometimes to a high degree, and can be overlooked or misinterpreted, whereas it is more difficult to turn a blind eye to knots. Furthermore, missing a knot can lead the reader not to jettison HLS that have suddenly become obsolete and irrelevant to the new diegetic context; on the other hand, connectors can be seen as signposts, and if you miss one it is likely that you will be given another chance, depending of course on authorial strategy and demands placed on the reader.

As mentioned above, *Await Your Reply*’s main “hermeneutical chal-

lenge” is for the reader to figure out the possible links between the three SLs. The reader of DeLillo’s *Underworld*, McCann’s *Let the Great World Spin*, or again Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* for instance, is used to dealing with unconnected narratives that can eventually be connected, although sometimes by the thinnest of threads. Chaon’s threads are nothing of the sort and even turn out to be quite tangible.

Diegetic connectors generate thematic connection. In *Await Your Reply*, the reader can identify thematic common denominators between the three SLs: cybercrime and identity theft being the most obvious ones. These shared features prime (Holland 2009: 132) the reader to believe that, even before the appearance of concrete diegetic connectors, there might be connections between characters and situations further down the line. Furthermore, the novel clearly displays the isotopy of a crime novel, and a substantial majority of texts belonging to this genre imply that a “mystery” has to be solved, that an intense plotting strategy will lead to a satisfactory closure, and that dots will be connected. It seems that, by resorting to this specific genre isotopy, Chaon wants his authorial audience to try, as soon as possible (i.e., from chapter 4, once the three SLs have been introduced), to find possible clues linking the three stories. Indeed, the thorough reader can quite early in the novel test different HLS, while waiting for more input to choose the most relevant one. The fact that, as we will see, the novel eventually achieves closure and the three SLs end up merging seems to confirm this interpretation of the role of the authorial audience in the novel. Therefore, mostly by means of this constant reference to genre fiction, thematic connectors are ubiquitous in Chaon’s novel. But thematic connectors depend solely on diegetic connectors, namely, hints dropped by the author to evoke, and not confirm, the possibility of a thematic convergence. Here are some examples:

Chapters 1 and 4: Because of the *in medias res* opening, we know that the nature of Ryan and Jay’s activities will lead violent “henchmen” to torture Ryan and cut off his hand.

Chapter 2: connectors linked to the (non-)identity of George Orson: he has no connections to any relatives or friends.

Chapter 5: George talks about his business, with a lot of money at stake, and about changing names and inventing oneself. He is also

a teacher who drives a Maserati (a discrepancy between profession and financial means).

Chapter 7: Jay involves his son in his secret business venture which implies fake IDs, dubious bank transfers, and invading people's computers. A mail in Cyrillic is mentioned, ending with the ominous sentence: "I see were u r."

Chapter 8: Lucy notices a safe and a computer, and "George" seems more and more intent on finding new identities.

Chapter 9: Hayden's schizophrenia, his potential violent behavior, he was institutionalized.

Chapter 10 (hybrid chapter): invasion of privacy, identity theft by means of computers, potential threat.

Chapter 11: Avatars.

Chapter 12: George's illegal activity, erasing identities, being a lot of different people, **George has a brother**, who died. (125)

Up until page 125, we can say that the connections between the three SLs are loose, although some could argue that the similarities displayed by George and Hayden are quite obvious (multiple identities, illegal activities involving computers). Indeed, all the reader's hermeneutical efforts seem to revolve around George and Hayden. Jay's identity seems more fixed, and SL1 appears at first sight as the most remote from a potentially unified HL. How soon the reader figures out that George and Hayden are one and the same depends on many variables, but the fact that, as mentioned above, their personalities and activities are quite similar is obvious as soon as SL2 and SL3 enter their second chapter. Nevertheless, if one decides to combine SL2 and SL3 (George is an earlier or later avatar of Hayden's, or vice versa), this decision rests on the connectors aforementioned, which represent a lesser degree of certainty on the statistical scale the reader employs to make hermeneutical decisions.

We have now seen how diegetic connectors build thematic connectors throughout the first twelve chapters, and this process is even intensified after chapter 12 since the degree of probability—probability that two or three SLs overlap—rises. Let us focus on chapter 12, since it introduces a new type of connector, knots. This type represents the highest degree of certainty when it comes to taking a hermeneutical

stance and deciding whether or not to merge SLs. One has to bear in mind that within this category, although several degrees of certainty might still exist (absolutely certain or quite certain, for instance), there is no doubt about the certainty factor, since knots imply “textual phenomena” (Phelan 1996: 119) that can be interpreted consensually. In my opinion, the connector in bold letters in the analysis devoted to chapter 12 is unmistakably a knot: the fact that George has a brother (who died, and Miles mentions later that Hayden has repeatedly told people that his brother was dead [149], so the knot is either on page 124 or, if one requires a tighter connector to make a knot, on page 149) goes beyond the numerous thematic connections with Hayden (cyber-thieves with multiple identities); it links both characters’ biographies and occurs at a point in the novel where the attentive readers have had ample opportunities to bring the two SLs closer. Contrary to the connectors, this knot provides a case for definitively merging SL2 and SL3 (in other words, merging Hayden’s and George’s identity). But in fact knots are often built on connectors: they exist mostly because they are preceded by connectors that alert the reader to certain possibilities. There definitely is a priming effect knots benefit from.

From chapter 12 onward, Chaon provides the reader with other knots:

- 192: Hayden was Lydia Barrie’s sister’s teacher (George was Lucy’s teacher): SL2/SL3.
- 230: Jay and Hayden actually met, and this is the first knot combining SL1 and SL3. But at the end of the same chapter, the following passage gives way to a new combination: “It was coming on dusk when they pulled into the motel. The Lighthouse Motel, it said . . .” (236). Suddenly, the text implies that the three SLs can be converted into one HL. The reader might not know yet the exact nature of the link between the three SLs, but he or she is now primed for the possibility of a unified SL. The link between SL1 and SL3 is also strengthened as we realize that a lot of what happens in SL1 is based on advice given by Hayden to Jay.
- 264: During the torture scene leading to Ryan’s amputation, one of the henchmen keeps asking father and son where Jay Kozelek is. When Jay answers logically that he is Jay, the man wrapping “the thin wire around Ryan’s wrist” replies: “You must think I’m an

idiot . . . I *know* Jay Kozelek. He was my *roommate*.” The Jay the man thinks he knows could turn out not to be the real Jay, but since the reader strongly suspects by now that George and Hayden are in fact one character, the possibility that Jay is not Jay but is George/Hayden at a different point on the narrative time scale is very likely (and leads to a complete fusion of SL1/SL2/SL3).

307: In the final chapter dedicated to SL2, as George’s plan seems to reach a dead end and he starts drinking, Lucy hears him mutter “Poor Ryan” and “I’m not going to screw up this time, Lucy.” This reference to Ryan seems to acknowledge the fact that George, Hayden, and Jay are all the same character. Chapter 25 also ends with the probable death of this now unified character.

315: “Jay” has just dropped Ryan at the hospital and, after breaking into a car, is about to leave his son, who is not his son as we now know, and embrace a new identity. He feels sorry for Ryan, even if, just before leaving, he tells him that it is going to be all right: “Of course, he’d said the same thing to Rachel, back when they were in Inuvik, pretending to be scientists, and that hadn’t turned out so well.” As suspected, Lydia Barrie’s sister is dead and Jay is Hayden (who is indeed George), which is confirmed by other knots later on in this chapter: “And so when Jay hadn’t returned from that ill-advised trip to Rēzekne, Hayden hadn’t been surprised” (317), “It was amazing he’d been able to convince Ryan in the first place . . .” (318). The merger of SL2 and SL3 is also strengthened: “Maybe he could just write Miles a letter, maybe he could send Miles up to the final memorial he had made for himself on Banks Island. . . . Of course, he would have to get Miles up to Canada somehow, but with Miles that wasn’t so very difficult” (319).

319–320: The final knot allows the reader to build the unified HL along a sensible chronological axis: “He was crying again as he passed from Michigan into Ohio, thinking of Ryan, he supposed, though he knew he shouldn’t. . . . What if he just settled into a new life and stayed there? . . . He had failed as a father, and yet he had the soul of a teacher.” In other words, as Jay is in the process of erasing Jay, he is about to become George and Lucy’s teacher in Ohio. To recap, Hayden became Jay and then became George.

To sum up, after reading the final knot, the reader is in a reliable position to establish the following chronology: Hayden (SL₃) first became Jay (SL₃) and then George (SL₂), but if SL₁ and SL₂ are clearly successive, SL₃ covers a wider diegetic area since it describes Hayden years before he becomes Jay but, without being certain, one can argue that SL₃ and SL₂ end on a similar position on the chronological axis of the narrative; indeed, since Hayden “sends” Miles to Canada as he is about to become George, Miles reaching Banks Island and Hayden being finally caught in Ivory Coast must happen at approximately the same time. Figure 3 is a possible representation of the “final” layout of hermeneutical lines:

Fig. 3. The final pattern

It is important to bear in mind that, if knots usually tie, they can also be untied, as is often the case in crime movies. Nevertheless, Chaon’s strategy is not *substitutive* but *integrative*. Although opinions may diverge and textual phenomena always remain relative to the actual event of the reading of the text, a majority of readers would agree that each knot allows us to draw one HL from two SLs and then three SLs and that, in the end, all the diegetic parts can be assembled into one coherent narrative. Other fictional examples may have resisted such a clear-cut representation of the hermeneutical work devoted to connectivity, but the concepts developed in this article—diegetic connectivity by means of connectors and knots—would still be relevant, because connectors, in multi-diegetic novels, are always present, even when they are of the flimsiest sort, and readers will always be looking for (and imagining?) knots to confirm their “hermeneutical hunches.” Indeed, what the figures presented in this article do not show is the number of overlapping tentative HLs and of HLs jettisoned by the reader on his or her interpreting journey. Furthermore,

when no clear resolution is provided by the narrative, several HLS can coexist, long after the reading is over, in the part of the brain dedicated to storing our memories of artistic encounters. It could also be argued that similarly to metaphors, even when they have merged into one HL, the separate original SLS can remain vivid in the reader's memory: "The parts of a metaphor, for example, 'make sense' together and yet retain their distinctiveness as words or images" (Spolsky 1993: 26). As readers, we often experience this duality when we remember the experience of reading texts, and especially noncongruent texts: engraved patterns (the ones we have striven to establish over the course of reading the novel) coexist with remnants of all the hypothetical worlds we created to achieve these fixed patterns. This dual system might stem from the very nature of the sort of knowledge summoned up to apprehend texts: it is fundamentally "kinesic knowledge" (Spolsky 1993: 27), constantly alternating between tentative patterns and deep remodeling.

What novels like *Await Your Reply* demonstrate is that many contemporary novelists have learned their postmodern lessons (by tapping into and disrupting the dynamics of genre fiction, for instance) and that one of these lessons is that readers thrive on connectivity challenges: making sense of (i.e., integrating into one narrative) several parallel SLS. Creating patterns where none seem to exist at first, clinging to the slightest connecting signals, are examples of the lasting pleasures provided by fiction, and as readers get more sophisticated, writers invent new "games," new forms of connectivity (either complex macrostructures or minimalist connections). This very specific kind of *libido sciendi* might be explained by what Jerry Fodor called the modularity of mind, Ellen Spolsky showing in her seminal text how this modularity works when readers interpret novels. Thus, the mind is intrinsically a *connecting machine*: "Each module receives information at peripheral or low levels (the sensory receptors) and then processes that information by means of correspondence rules through several levels of selection and integration, ultimately making it available for whatever functions are required at higher or more central levels" (Spolsky 1993: 21). This pleasure we take in connecting SLS, this constant drive for connecting the dots, can also be explained by the sense of order these hermeneutical patterns provide, a haven from the chaos of everyday reality:

“The aesthetic experience is related to other forms of enjoyable flow experiences, relying as it does on the use of skills to match situational challenges within a field of action delimited by clear goals and constant feedback. Like other flow experiences, it provides a sense of transcending everyday reality, a deep involvement with a more ordered and intense world” (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990: 114).

Whether they are a mere reflection of our cognitive activity or a way of simulating order or closure, hermeneutical connections need deeper understanding, and the creation of connectivity studies within the field of cognitive poetics could provide a way of bringing together cognitive modularity and connectivity in the area of literary studies.

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