Death beds, marriage beds: often in Victorian fiction they end up interchangeable, mere formalities. By their structural role in the conventions of closure, that is, they highlight the fact that, in most novels of the period, death and sex are what happens afterwards. Sex follows marriage as death follows the scene of dying. They brook no representation except as the far threshold of what can be spoken of. With their pre-narrative counterparts in familial lineage and conception, the unenacted poles of marital consummation and death thus lay bare the fact that all narrative ends as well as begins in medias res. And Victorian fiction itself, not just its commentary, regularly exposes this fact in and of itself, exposit it, plays with and against the reader’s anticipations of such often ‘premature’ finish. Yet what about the myths of perpetuation that at the same time attend these seemingly opposite modes of closure? Given the varieties of continuance figured separately by marriage and dying – on the one hand generative and generational, on the other elegiac and at times transcendental – the marked overlap in a text of these otherwise divergent last strategies may therefore be more than tautological. Such a closural overload may break open certain questions about the transactive nature of a literary reading: about what readers may be constrained to expect and await, and about their place, or emplacement, when all is done and said. When leaving off, where does a narrative leave the very attention that has sustained it? What are the readers left with – and left to? How, in other words, is a story’s implied continuance beyond plot sometimes rendered as our own?
I

As conclusive a stop to the energies of Victorian narrative as is death, and often a day of reckoning and judgment in its own right, marital culmination makes by far the most prevalent and resounding appeal to the paradox of closure as renewal: the wedding bells that knell the end of plot by satisfying its original urge. Given the structural importance naturally accorded to marriage, it would certainly be no surprise to find a reader’s investment in such achieved finality actually thematised within Victorian fiction — as a public taste for the written accounts of such private communions. An avid reader about marriages (or for that matter a character evincing a morbid curiosity about death) would thus tend to read our own motives in the desire for narrative fulfilment and stasis. George Eliot, far along in her last novel, stations a particularly complex instance of such a readerly urge rendered by narrative itself. Mrs Meyrick, a minor character in Daniel Deronda, is portrayed in passing as ‘a great reader of news, from the widest-reaching politics to the list of marriages; the latter, she said, giving her the pleasant sense of finishing the fashionable novels without having read them, and seeing the heroes and heroines happy without knowing what poor creatures they were’ (p. 793). In her disinterested fondness for the daily litany of marital celebrations, Mrs Meyrick is addicted to the inherent euphemism of journalistic statistics or the brief reports of the society pages. She stakes her fascination precisely on culmination as closure, on the apogee of marriage cleansed of details, a rite of passage that entails no prologue or aftermath. In this she finds a gratification not won at the price of novel-reading, all reward without the work.

Mrs Meyrick would undoubtedly have neither patience nor stomach for the scarcely ‘fashionable’ novel in which she is a character, Eliot’s virtual parody of the Austenian novel-of-manners, a story including all that outer world of cultural and political action excluded from the precincts of Austen’s domestic representations. Daniel Deronda is a novel, of course, whose heroine’s marriage has occurred (off-stage) thirty chapters before in a typographically marked blank between plotted episodes (p. 403): a tainted ceremony from which narrative has averted its very gaze. Recasting the structural function of the wedding as a depicted but closural ceremony, Eliot’s lacunary plotting seems to imply that it is all over for Gwendolen well before the sanctified exchange of vows, her doom