Notes on Clean Cut — A Companion

Two essays by P. A. Rallax, to be read after the novella. Both discuss the ending.

I. Where You Stopped Is the Ending

On the structure of Clean Cut

The shape of a fugue

A reader who finishes *Clean Cut* and turns back to the contents page will notice that the five parts are not called what parts of a novel are usually called. They are called Prelude, Exposition, Development, Stretto and Coda, and the chapters inside them have names like Counterpoint, The Bellamy Variation and The Unanswered Entry. I should say plainly what that vocabulary is doing there, because it is not decoration.

I came to fiction from composition, and the first thing I noticed when I tried to plot a mystery was that the detective story and the fugue are built on the same bargain. Both begin by stating a subject in a single voice. Both bring in other voices that take up that subject at their own pitch and in their own time. Both spend their middle sections pulling the subject apart, turning it upside down, stretching it, chasing it from voice to voice, until the listener is no longer sure which entry is the original. And both arrive, near the end, at a passage in which the entries crowd together faster than the ear can separate them, before the whole thing settles into a final statement that is supposed to feel inevitable.

In a fugue that crowding is called *stretto*, from the Italian for narrow or tight: the voices enter one on top of another before the previous entry has finished. In a mystery it is the last fifty pages, when every clue comes back at once. Part IV of this book is called Stretto because that is what Chapters 10 through 13 are. The memorandum arrives; the signature is traced; the chronology is erased and rebuilt; and the prosecutor, Rebecca Vale, sits down with all of it on the

table at the same time. The investigators have four voices going and no room between them.

What a fugue does not promise is a resolution. It promises a *cadence*, which is a different thing: a place where the voices agree to stop. The subject can be left unanswered. A great deal of the music I admire ends on a chord the ear hears as a question, and I wanted to know whether a crime novel could end the same way without cheating the reader, because the crime novel's cadence is almost always a name. Someone did it. Here is who. The form is so committed to that resolution that an unsolved mystery usually reads as a broken one.

The book you have just read is my attempt to write a mystery whose cadence is not a name, and to make that feel like an ending rather than a failure to supply one. The investigators do everything right. They separate observation from account and account from inference. They refuse to let a resemblance become a transfer, a transfer become a location, a location become a person. They find a motive so strong that the detective says out loud that she believes she knows who did it. And then the prosecutor tells them, correctly, that belief is not what she was appointed to weigh, and the file stays open, and a church bell strikes twice on the laboratory steps and does not strike a third time.

That was the ending I planned. It is still the ending, in the sense that it is the only ending the record provides. But in the writing I discovered that the book contained a second structure, smaller than the fugue and more exact, and that it was going to decide how the book closed whether I wanted it to or not. That structure is the subject of the next section.

Five, three, two

In Chapter 4, Detective Morrow sits down to watch the first ten minutes of a recorded conference lecture and watches the whole thing. The lecturer is Miriam Sloane, the woman Morrow will spend

the rest of the book suspecting, and the lecture is called The Limits of Attribution. Halfway through it, Sloane stops talking about forensic reports and plays ten dry piano notes, marking them with her hand into groups of five, three and two. Then she lets the silence run long enough that the detective wonders whether the recording has frozen.

I wrote that scene as a piece of characterization. Sloane is a scientist who has spent her career warning people against hearing more in their data than the data contain, and the musical demonstration is the kind of thing a good teacher keeps in her pocket. The ten notes do not change; the grouping the listener imposes on them does; and the silence afterward is the sharpest part of the lesson, because nearly everyone in the room supplies a continuation that was never played. Who decided where the pattern began? Who decided it was unfinished? The listener did. The recording is innocent.

What I had not planned was how completely the demonstration would take over the book. Once the investigators have heard it, they cannot stop hearing it. Morrow writes 5 / 3 / 2 on her pad and crosses it out and will not erase it. A junior detective summarizes the victim's last afternoon as five public appearances, three private contacts and two unexplained gaps, and Iris Quell, the forensic scientist, spends most of Chapter 8 proving that the grouping only exists because he chose categories that produce it. The hotel's digital records are drawn into one blue line from ballroom to elevator to suite, and an examiner erases the line and leaves three dots. Every time the evidence looks as though it is about to resolve, somebody notices that the resolution has been supplied by the person reading the evidence, not by the evidence.

By the time I reached the last part of the book I understood that five-three-two was not a motif in the story. It was the story's argument about itself, and it was going to govern the ending whether or not I invited it to. A mystery is a phrase the reader expects to be completed. The reader of *Clean Cut* has just spent three hundred

pages watching intelligent people refuse to complete a phrase on insufficient evidence, and has been applauding them for it. If the last chapter then played the missing note (here is who did it, here is how) the book would be doing exactly what its own lecture had warned against. It would be humming.

And yet I knew who had done it. I had known since Chapter 7, when Sloane first told Morrow the name of the old case. I had written a final chapter in Miriam Sloane's head, in which she goes back to the hospitality suite and does what the record cannot show, and it was the best chapter in the book, and it broke the book's thesis in half.

The form of the demonstration suggested the way out. Sloane does not play the missing note. She lets the audience supply it, and then she asks them where it came from. What if the coda did the same thing: stopped where the record stops, and then offered the reader the entries they were already supplying in their heads, labeled as such, so that the act of reading on became the book's final demonstration of its own point?

Three stopping points

So the coda has three places where the book may be closed, and I want to be exact about how they relate, because the word that usually gets used for this (alternate endings) describes something I did not do.

Alternate endings branch. The story reaches a fork; in one version the lovers marry, in the other they part; the reader is handed both and asked, implicitly, to choose or to hold both in suspension. The two versions contradict each other. That is the device in Fowles, in the revised Dickens, in Atwood's story, and I will come to it. It is a legitimate device and it is not the one in this book.

The three endings of *Clean Cut* nest. Each one is the previous one plus more. Nothing in the Second Entry contradicts the First; nothing in the First contradicts the end of Chapter 14. The record is the same in all three. The only thing that changes from one stopping point to

the next is what the reader is permitted to know, and that is precisely the thing the book has been about.

The first stopping point is the end of Chapter 14. The prosecutor has declined to charge. Iris has signed a report that says what the evidence can bear and nothing more. Morrow has told her, on a stairwell, that she believes Sloane did it and that she knows belief is not evidence. The bell strikes twice. A reader who closes the book there has read a complete novel, and it is the novel I set out to write: a crime the system cannot solve, handled by people honest enough not to pretend otherwise. There is a short note after that chapter which tells the reader this in so many words.

The second stopping point is the end of the First Entry of Chapter 15. The reader is now inside Miriam Sloane's head, and learns what the investigators learned about Bellamy from her side: that she wrote the warning, that she signed the report anyway, that for eleven years she told herself a story in which she had been overruled, and that Whitcomb's message took that story away from her. The reader follows her through October 13 to the reception, where she puts down her glass and remembers a corridor, an elevator, the green light of a card reader, and the narrative declines to say whose door. Weeks later she corrects a colleague's overstated conclusion with a precision her colleagues will call integrity. She reflects that her answer to the detective, *no*, was exactly the kind of answer she teaches students to distrust, and that whether it was true is a fact about the evening while whether anyone can establish it is a fact about the record. The heating system clicks. She waits for something to follow. Nothing does. A reader who stops here knows everything about her except the one thing, and will almost certainly have decided it anyway. That is the lecture, performed on the reader.

The third stopping point is the end of the Second Entry, which begins on a new page with a sentence that undoes the ambiguity in five words: it would be comforting, afterward, to say she had made no

decision until she saw him again. That was not true. The reader follows her to the suite, and the note is played.

The two entries end on the same two paragraphs, word for word. I did that deliberately and I want to say why. If the endings had different last lines, the last line of the book would carry more authority than the one before it, and the reader would be right to take the confession as canon and the ambiguous version as a feint. By closing both on the identical cadence I wanted to make a different claim: that the cadence itself is innocent, that the same woman waiting for the same click in the same kitchen is the same in both versions, and that what differs is not her but what you have been allowed to see. In the First Entry the click is a woman living with a secret the reader cannot name. In the Second it is a woman living with a killing. Same bars. Different harmony.

Which brings me to the question I expect to be asked most, which is whether this has been done before, and by whom.

Precedents

It has been done, by better writers than I am, and it is worth knowing how, because each of them was solving a different problem.

The novel everyone names first is John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Fowles was writing a Victorian novel from inside the 1960s and could not, in good conscience, pretend to the Victorian novelist's authority over his characters' fates. So he stepped into the book in person, offered a conventional happy ending partway through and dismissed it, and then, in the final chapters, gave two incompatible endings in sequence and told the reader he had flipped a coin for the order. His problem was authorial honesty about an inherited form. His solution was to make the choosing visible.

Charles Dickens had the opposite problem. He wrote *Great Expectations* (1861) with an unhappy ending: Pip and Estella meet once more, briefly, and part for good. His friend Edward Bulwer-

Lytton read it in proof and talked him into something gentler, and the published ending leaves the two of them walking out of the ruined garden together with no shadow of another parting. Dickens kept both. Editions have printed both for more than a century, and readers still argue about which is the true one. His problem was a reader who wanted a cadence. His solution, in the end, was to let posterity have the dissonance as well.

Ernest Hemingway did not publish alternatives at all; he drafted them. The manuscripts of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) contain dozens of endings, forty-seven by the usual count, and in 2012 Scribner published an edition that prints them as an appendix: the one in which Catherine lives, the one that ends on a sentence about the weather, the bleak ones, the religious ones. Reading them in sequence is like watching a composer reject thirty cadences before finding the one that sounds like no cadence at all. His problem was the same as every writer's. His solution was the only one that works, which was to keep going until the ending stopped feeling chosen.

Margaret Atwood's short story "Happy Endings" (1983) turns the device inside out. It offers six versions, lettered A through F, of what happens to a couple called John and Mary, each ending the same way (they die), and then tells the reader that the endings are all the same and that the only part worth attending to is the middle, the *how* and the *why*. It is three pages long and it is taught everywhere, and it is the closest thing in fiction to Sloane's lecture: the structure you hear is the one you were taught to listen for.

The closest cousin to what I have done is not a literary novel. It is the seventh volume of Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* (2004), which reaches a natural ending and then, before the coda, stops and addresses the reader directly: you may close the book here, King says in effect, and you may prefer to, and if you go on you will get the ending you asked for and you may not like it. He then supplies it. I had not reread that passage in years when I wrote the note that stands before Chapter 15, and when I went back to it I found I had

done nearly the same thing for nearly the same reason. The reader who reads on has chosen to. The author's job is to say so plainly and then to write the thing well enough that the choice is honored either way.

Crime fiction has its own precedent, from the cinema rather than the page. The film *Clue* (1985) was shipped to theaters with three different endings, each naming a different murderer, so that audiences in different cities saw different solutions; the home release runs all three in sequence and labels the last as what really happened. That is the branching version of the device, and its reception is instructive: it was treated as a gimmick for twenty years and then as the best thing about the film. Reviewers decide these things slowly.

And there is the precedent from my own trade. In 1825 Beethoven finished his String Quartet in B-flat, Op. 130, with a finale so long and so difficult that his publisher, Matthias Artaria, asked him to replace it. He agreed, with reluctance and for a fee, wrote a lighter finale in its place, and the original was published separately as the Grosse Fuge, Op. 133. For a century the substitute was the quartet's ending. Today quartets choose. Some play the lighter finale; some restore the fugue; a few play both and let the audience hear what the choice costs. Bruckner left most of his symphonies in two or three versions and the arguments about which to perform have never ended. Composers have been issuing alternate finales since before the novel had settled on having one ending at all, and no one calls Beethoven indecisive.

That is the company. I am not claiming to belong in it. I am claiming that the device has a pedigree, that each of these writers reached for it because the form they inherited could not hold the truth they wanted to tell, and that a forensic novella about the difference between what was observed and what was supplied has a better reason than most to end in more than one place.

Sources checked for this section: Britannica, The French Lieutenant's Woman · The Millions, on the 2012 edition of A Farewell to Arms · EdWeek, on the 47 endings · Mother Jones, on King's Dark Tower coda · Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, on Op. 130 and the Grosse Fuge · Beethoven-Haus Bonn, Op. 133

The objection

The objection is obvious and I would rather state it than wait for it. A mystery that ends three ways is a mystery whose author could not decide. The reader bought a verdict and was handed a menu.

I take the objection seriously enough to have tried to write the book so that it does not apply, and the test is simple: does each stopping point read as an ending, or does it read as a pause? If the first stopping point felt like a story interrupted, if the First Entry felt like a chapter that lost its nerve, then the objection would be right and the three-part coda would be a way of avoiding a choice. I have tried to make each of the three true, and the reader is the only judge of whether I managed it. But I want to say what I think the difference is between indecision and this.

Indecision would be three answers to the question *who did it*. This book has one answer to that question, and it is in the Second Entry, and I have never been in doubt about it. What the three stopping points offer is three answers to a different question, which is *how much do you need to know before you are entitled to stop*. That is not a question I could decide for the reader without contradicting the whole book, because the whole book is a group of people deciding it for themselves, with care, under pressure, and arriving at the honest answer that the record does not entitle them to stop where they want to.

The reader is under no such discipline. The reader may know what the investigators cannot. I have simply arranged the knowing so that it happens in stages, and labeled the stages, so that the reader who goes on to the Second Entry does it with open eyes. You wanted the

note. Here is the note. Now, as Miriam Sloane says to her students, tell me where it came from.

I will add one practical thing, because readers ask. If you lend this book to someone, do not tell them which ending is the real one. All of them are. Tell them where you stopped.

II. Five, Three, Two

The music in Clean Cut, *and the music that will accompany it*

What the demonstration actually is

Readers sometimes ask whether Miriam Sloane's piano demonstration is real, by which they mean whether it is a trick that works or a thing I invented for the plot. It is real, and it is older than forensic science. Psychologists have been studying it for a century under the name of perceptual grouping, and musicians have known it for far longer than that without needing a name.

Take ten evenly spaced taps. Nothing in the sound distinguishes the first tap from the sixth. Now ask listeners to write down the groups they heard. They will write down groups, every one of them, and the groups will disagree: four and six, three-three-four, five and five, two-two-two-two-two. The ear cannot hear ten undifferentiated events as ten undifferentiated events; it organizes them, and it organizes them before the listener is aware of having done anything. Now tell the room that the grouping is five, three, two, and play the taps again. Everyone hears five, three, two. Some of them laugh at how obvious it is. The taps have not changed. The listener has.

That is the first half of Sloane's lesson, and it is the half that the investigators keep tripping over. A chronology is a row of taps. The detective who writes *five public appearances, three private contacts, two gaps* has grouped them, and the grouping feels like a discovery because the ear is built to feel that way. Iris Quell's work in Chapter 8, where she changes the definition of a confirmed appearance and watches the grouping dissolve, is nothing more

than the classroom demonstration run backward: take away the suggested brackets and the taps go back to being taps.

The second half of the lesson is the silence, and it is the half I care about more. Sloane plays five, three, two and stops. The phrase is unfinished; or rather, the listener feels it to be unfinished, which is a different claim. Western ears, trained on centuries of music that balances a phrase against an answering phrase, expect the two-note fragment to be answered. Some listeners hum the answer. Sloane's question is where the answer came from. It was not in the recording. It was in the room.

This is the part that crosses over from music into the subject of the novel. A forensic report that says *strong association* is a two-note fragment. The reader of that report, a prosecutor or a juror, hears the phrase as unfinished and supplies the continuation, which is *identification*. The analyst did not say it. The analyst did not have to. The ear completed the phrase, and a man went to prison on the strength of the completion. That is what happened to Adrian Serrano in the book, and it is what has happened in actual courtrooms often enough that the lesson does not need to be invented.

So the demonstration is real in both senses. It works on anyone, including, I found, on me, and it describes something true about how evidence is heard. What I wanted in the novel was for the reader to experience it rather than to be told it, and the only way to do that was to build the whole book out of it: to make the reader hear five, three, two in the chronology, in the drafts of the Bellamy report, in the three suspects and the fourth, and then to arrive at the end and feel the unfinished phrase and know exactly what they were doing when they hummed.

The novella as counterpoint

Counterpoint is the art of making two or more independent lines sound well together without either surrendering its independence. It is the hardest thing in music to do and the easiest to fake, and the

difference is whether each voice would still make sense if you played it alone. I built the cast on that rule.

The *subject* is Miriam Sloane. She states the book's theme first, in her own voice, in the lecture: the instrument does not know which proposition interests you; the distinction belongs to the person reading its output. Everything that follows is a response to that statement, and she is the only character who is both the author of the theme and the thing it is eventually turned against.

The *answer* is Iris Quell. In a fugue the answer takes up the subject at a different pitch, usually a fifth away, close enough to be recognizable and far enough to be a different voice. Iris believes exactly what Sloane teaches and is appalled to discover that Sloane did not live by it. Her line is the subject's, transposed into a life that has not yet been tested. Listen to the two of them in the interview room in Chapter 11, when Sloane turns to her and says that an analyst can be right about a limitation and still make a bad professional decision, and Iris answers that she understands the distinction and does not think it makes the decision disappear. That is a subject and its answer sounding at once.

The *countersubject* is Sarah Morrow. A countersubject runs against the subject in a different rhythm, and Morrow's rhythm is the detective's: forward, by the clock, toward a name. She is the only principal character who says what she believes. She is also the one who draws the line through the hours of Whitcomb's last day and leaves the important interval blank, which is the book's most contrapuntal gesture: a melody written mostly as rests.

Malcolm Trane, the laboratory director, is the *pedal point*. He holds one note under everyone else's movement, and the note is *not yet*. He is irritating by design. Rebecca Vale, the prosecutor, is the cadence that refuses: she is the chord on which all four voices are finally allowed to stop, and she will not let them stop on a tonic.

The Bellamy material, the old wrongful conviction, is the subject in *augmentation*: the same theme played at half speed, so slowly that its shape becomes a lament. Serrano's sister Lucia has two scenes and no theme of her own, because grief in this book is what the subject sounds like when it is stretched far enough to hurt. And the version chain of the Bellamy report (candidate association, strong correspondence, identification) is the subject in *diminution*, the same three steps compressed into three words, each one a little more certain than the measurements allowed.

Finally there is *inversion*, which is the device the whole book turns on. To invert a theme is to flip its intervals: every step up becomes a step down. The inverted theme is recognizably the same theme and recognizably its opposite. Sloane's public voice, the lecture, says: do not supply what the evidence does not give you. Sloane's private act, the signature, supplied exactly that. They are the same intervals turned over. The reader who has heard the lecture will recognize the signature as the lecture's inversion before anyone in the book says so, and Iris's unease in the stretto chapters is the unease of hearing a theme and its inversion in the same texture and not yet knowing which is the original.

That is also why the book has no villain in the usual sense. In a fugue the inverted subject is not the enemy of the subject. It is the subject, looked at from underneath.

The album

Clean Cut was planned as a novella with a score, and the score is being written to the same architecture as the book. What follows describes the design. The recording, when it is finished, will be found where this companion was found.

It is chamber music, not film music. A string quartet, a piano, a bass clarinet, a muted trumpet, and once or twice a celesta: an ensemble small enough that every voice can be followed by ear, which is the whole point. There are no swelling strings, no percussion

hits, no sting when the detective turns a page. A score that told the listener when to be frightened would be doing what the book spends its length refusing to do.

The key is A minor. The subject is five notes: A, C, B, E, D. It is a plain shape, a rising third, a step down, a leap up, a step down, and it is designed to be remembered after one hearing and to survive being turned upside down. Separately from the pitches there is the rhythm, the ten pulses in five, three and two, which is heard first by itself, as Sloane plays it, before it is ever given a melody. The pitches and the rhythm are two different ideas that spend the album finding each other.

Seven motifs carry the characters, and a listener who knows the book will be able to place them without a program note. Sloane's is the subject itself, played with a polish and a narrowness of dynamic that is meant to sound like control. Iris's is a clear single line that pauses where other lines would push on. Morrow's is a low, irregular ostinato in the cello and bass, a pulse that keeps arriving a beat early or late. Whitcomb's is a compressed chromatic figure in the bass clarinet, a voice that is always slightly too close. The Bellamy motif is the subject at half speed, a lament. The sixth is Sloane's subject inverted, every interval turned over, and the listener should hear it as both familiar and wrong. The seventh is not a melody but a place: three voices enter in turn, a fourth position opens in the texture where the ear expects a fourth voice, and what happens in that position is the album's version of the three endings.

The tracks follow the five parts. The Prelude opens on the broken rhythm with no answer and lets Iris's line find it. The Exposition sets the three suspects as three competing lines and declines to pick a winner. The Development contains the false resolution (a cadence that the next bars reveal to have been in the wrong key), the Bellamy lament, the five-three-two demonstration built and then dismantled, and the first full appearance of the empty fourth

position. The Stretto tightens the subject against its own inversion until the two are nearly indistinguishable, and withholds the cadence.

Then comes the Coda, and here the album does exactly what the book does. There are three final tracks, and each one is a last track.

The Last Report belongs to Chapter 14. Iris's line restates everything plainly over a suspension that never resolves, and at its end a bell strikes twice. It is the only bell on the album. The third stroke does not come. A listener who stops here has heard a complete, unsolved score.

First Entry belongs to the first half of Chapter 15. Sloane's subject is heard whole for the first time, and underneath it the inversion, as in the stretto; but when the texture reaches the fourth position, the voice that enters is written so that its opening intervals belong equally to the subject and to its inversion. It is a line that could be either. It is deliberately the hardest passage on the album to write, because the listener must be able to hear it both ways and must not be told which. The track ends on a cadence I will describe in a moment.

Second Entry belongs to the rest. The same material; the same approach to the fourth position; and this time the voice that enters is the inversion, unmistakably, in the same register and the same bar as the ambiguous voice of the track before. Nothing else announces it. There is no sting, no change of key, no drum. A voice enters and the listener knows whose it is. Afterward the texture returns briefly to the cool exactness of Sloane correcting her colleague's draft, so that the listener understands the same woman does both. And then the cadence.

The shared cadence, the bell, and the question that remains

The last eight or twelve bars of First Entry and Second Entry are identical. Not similar: the same notes, the same recording. One dry click, like a muted piano key or a single plucked string; an A-minor chord with one note held against it that never resolves; a slow fade

into the sound of the room; then silence, measured, the same length in both.

In the book, the two entries end on the same two paragraphs, and I explained in the first essay why: so that the last line of the book would not outrank the line before it, and so that the reader would understand that what changes between the endings is not the woman but what they have been allowed to see of her. The album makes the same claim in the only way music can. The cadence contains nothing from the inversion. It is as innocent in First Entry as it is guilty in Second Entry, and the listener who plays the two tracks in sequence will hear the identical chord mean two different things, which is the lecture again, delivered without words.

The bell is the other fixed point. It appears once, at the end of The Last Report, two strokes. I have kept it off every other track so that its absence at the end of the two entries can be heard. Iris, on the laboratory steps, waits for a third strike without meaning to. The listener, at the end of the album, should find that they are still waiting for it.

I said at the start of this essay that the demonstration works on anyone, including on me. Here is how. When I had written the two cadences and played them back to back, I could not hear the First Entry's as innocent. I knew what came after it. The chord that was supposed to be ambiguous sounded guilty to me because I had supplied the continuation, and no amount of knowing better would take the supplied note out of my ear. Which is the question the album leaves the listener with, and I do not know the answer: having once heard the fourth voice enter, can you ever again hear the silence where it was and not hear her?

Sloane would say that the silence is innocent and the hearing is yours. She would be right. She would also, in this book, be the one person with the least standing to say it, and that is the whole of what I wanted to write about.