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‘My Father Bleeds History’: Survivor’s Guilt and Filial Inadequacy in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* and E.L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*

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Inherited and intergenerational trauma weighs heavily on the mental health of the children they concern, particularly in E.L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Both Doctorow and Spiegelman’s male protagonists, Daniel and Artie (Spiegelman himself), turn to language and literary expression as a way of coping with these troubling legacies: Daniel through his doctoral thesis and Artie through the graphic novel itself. Daniel and Artie struggle with feelings of filial inadequacy in the shadows of their parents, specifically their fathers. The impact of their fathers’ legacies on the lives and existences of both men is immense, creeping into every aspect and reappearing in countless different forms. This, coupled with their inherited trauma, weighs heavily upon both men throughout their respective works and raises the questions of whether one can ever truly tell a story that does not belong to them and, by extension, whether, as a descendent or living remnant, it is ever possible to let go of intergenerational trauma and survivor’s guilt.

Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel*—a fictionalised novelisation of the lives of the children of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg—here renamed as Paul and Rochelle Isaacson—in the wake of

their execution – begins and ends with Daniel, the eldest of the Isaacson siblings, in the library working on his doctoral thesis, which situates the text almost entirely in a literary space—a space of expression. The opening of the novel is explicitly concerned with establishing this overarching context by focusing intently on the physical components of Daniel's thesis:

> On Memorial Day in 1967 Daniel Lewin thumbed his way from New York to Worcester, Mass., in just under five hours […] This is a Thinline felt tip marker, black. This is Composition Notebook 79C made in U.S.A. by Long Island Paper Products, Inc. This is Daniel trying one of the dark coves of the Browsing Room […] On the floors above are the special collections of the various school libraries including the Library School Library. Downstairs there is even a branch of the Public Library. I feel encouraged to go on.[1]

In this passage, Doctorow hints at the complexities in identity that Daniel goes on to face as the novel unfolds, partly due to the complicated legacy of his parents, through the use of both the third and first-person voices: 'This is Daniel' and 'I feel encouraged to go on'. This blurring of identities creates a sense of narrative confusion whilst, to an extent, undermining Daniel's narrative authority. The narrative voice continues to shift over the course of the novel as Daniel struggles to tell both his own story and that of his parents. Although both stories are inextricably linked, he appears to struggle in his telling of them which, in turn, begs the question: how does one tell a story that is not their own? The dependency of Daniel's story on that of his parents is demonstrated through the narrative structure of the novel. There are consistent switches from Daniel's adult life to his childhood as the stories appear to intertwine. Moreover, there are no direct signals as to when these shifts occur: the narrative switches suddenly. This constant switching between narrative voice as well as temporal setting generates a certain level of

[1] E. L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel* (New York: Random House, 2007), pp. 1–2. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

confusion for the reader at first and creates a sense of dissociation on Daniel's part as the narrator and, indeed, author of this thesis. Despite writing a doctoral thesis, for which an academic writing style is the prerequisite, Daniel seems unable to decide on a specific style of writing, instead exploring a variety of stylistic avenues—biography, autobiography, epistolary—that do not necessarily reconcile themselves to this prerequisite. The ending of the novel further cements this apparent lack of direction in the academic summary of Daniel's thesis: 'DANIEL'S BOOK: A Life Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Doctoral Degree in Social Biology, Gross Entomology, Women's Anatomy, Children's Cacophony, Arch Demonology, Eschatology, and Thermal Pollution' (Doctorow, p. 302). By describing his thesis as a 'Life Submitted in Partial Fulfillment', Daniel expresses a clear sense of inadequacy by suggesting that his life's work, and by extension his life itself, is only ever partially fulfilling: he does not and cannot ever fully live up to the legacy set by his parents. The sheer breadth of his doctoral degree presents a vastness of opportunity for Daniel, none of which he can ever completely realise, leaving his entire identity as a 'Partial Fulfillment' and nothing more.

Similarly, Artie—the anthropomorphic mouse form of Spiegelman himself in *Maus*—struggles with his telling of a story that is not his own. Unlike Daniel, whose childhood unfolds parallel to the downfall of his parents, Artie inherits the legacy attached to the Holocaust, which his father experienced first-hand, without having lived through it. Just as Daniel turns to writing as a way of processing and documenting his stories, Artie turns to writing and illustration as means of expression and storytelling. Although the story of Artie's parents, Vladek and Anja, and their life in Poland during the war pre-exists Artie, this history is inextricably tied to his own. The first volume of *Maus* opens in 'Rego Park, N.Y. c. 1958':

> It was summer, I remember. I was ten or eleven…I was roller-skating with Howie and Steve…'til my skate came loose…My father was in front, fixing something…
>
> 'Why do you cry, Artie?'
>
> 'I-I fell, and my friends skated away w-without me.'
>
> He stopped sawing. 'Friends? Your friends? … If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week…Then you could see what it is, friends!'[2]

The inclusion of this memory in the graphic novel demonstrates the ways in which legacy is very much an inherited thing. Vladek's response to Artie's tears invokes his highly troubling past in an almost uncomfortable way. His allusions to his experience of the Holocaust is entirely out of the scope of 'ten or eleven' year old Artie's understanding yet Vladek draws on it regardless. Thus, for Artie, this story—although not his own directly—is something that weighs on him from an early age: it is an example of intergenerational trauma and the interconnectivity of familial history. For the rest of his life, Artie must come to terms with the notion that this inherited trauma will never leave him. Spiegelman includes his personal struggles in regard to the ethics of telling his father's story in the opening of the second volume of *Maus*: 'Just thinking about my book…It's so *presumptuous* of me. I mean, I can't even make any sense out of my relationship with my father…How am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz? …Of the Holocaust?' (Spiegelman, II, p. 14). Spiegelman's use of the word 'presumptuous' here captures his overarching feelings of guilt associated with trying to represent or depict a story he was never party to, especially seeing as this story concerns the Holocaust. Spiegelman reinforces this guilt within the panels of the graphic novel itself through examining his internalised inadequacy without reservation in the form of a conversation with

[2] Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, 2 vols (New York: Random House, 1986), I, pp. 5–6. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

his wife, Françoise, in which he acknowledges that in depiction, there must always be a certain level of aestheticisation—it is inevitable:

> I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz w*ith* my parents so I could really know what they lived through! […] I guess it's *some* kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did […] I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams. And trying to do it as a comic strip! I guess I bit off more than I can chew. Maybe I ought to forget the whole thing. There's so much I'll never be able to understand or visualize.[3]

Spiegelman's struggle with the ethics of representation, especially within the context of a graphic novel, is a recurring theme in the second volume of *Maus* as the guilt of the first volume's success takes an immense toll on him and his own sense of artistic integrity. As Spiegelman goes on to write, 'reality is too *complex* for comics […] so much has to be left out or distorted […] see what I mean […] in real life you'd never let me talk this long without interrupting' (Spiegelman, II, p. 16). This instance of Artie joking with Françoise about how she would 'never let [him] talk this long without interrupting' is a slight example of how Spiegelman lightens his bleak subject matter with slight comedy. However, he does this in such a subtle and trepidatious way that his hesitation over its implication is evident.

Both texts fall into the category of historiographic metafiction (a term coined by Linda Hutcheon) as a result of their overarching preoccupation with the act of writing, specifically within the context of historicity—although it is important to note that the categorisation of *Maus* as a work of fiction is potentially problematic as a result of its biographical elements in

[3] Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, 2 vols (New York: Random House, 1986), II, p. 16. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

reference to the real lives and experiences of the Spiegelman family. With regard to the definition of historiographic metafiction, Hutcheon writes that:

> the term postmodernism, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it 'historiographic metafiction'.[4]

Amongst the features of historiographic metafiction that Hutcheon outlines is intertextuality. In specific reference to *The Book of Daniel*, Hutcheon touches on the inextricable ties between Daniel and his biblical namesake, observing that although the narrative voices follow a similar formula, switching back and forth from first to third person, 'the customary authority of the biblical omniscience is ironised into the modern Daniel's futile attempts at distance and self-mastery' (Hutcheon, p. 23). The irony in question functions as a narrative tool in *The Book of Daniel* whereby Doctorow posits that self-reflexivity and understanding is 'futile' in the face of such a troubling legacy. Likewise, Spiegelman's use of the hierarchy within the animal kingdom as an illustrative vehicle—he chooses to illustrate himself and other Jewish characters as mice—operates as a tool for attempted self-reflection within a grander scheme of order. Both texts tackle the notion of creating art—in both cases, storytelling—in the face of historical tragedy and, subsequently, the trauma it creates. Daniel grapples with pinning down his identity, using his doctoral thesis as a means of self-investigation, and Artie struggles with the ethics of aestheticisation with regards to the harrowing reality of his father's Holocaust experience. Examining both texts from such a postmodernist lens, however, leads to the

[4] Linda Hutcheon, 'Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History', in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. by P. O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 3–32 (p. 3). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

conclusion that 'what historiographic metafiction challenges is both any naive realist concept of representation and any equally naive textualist or formalist assertions of the total separation of art from the world' (Hutcheon, p. 6). No form of representation, fictional or not, will ever be free from aestheticisation. Art is the medium through which human experience is to be understood and shared; it is what allows both Daniel and Artie to ultimately come to terms with their present realities as informed by their pasts as it is, for both men, a direct product of their inherited trauma.

For Spiegelman, the knowledge that he will never truly understand his parents' experience manifests as a form of ongoing survivor's guilt, which appears to intensify after Vladek's death. The title of the graphic novel—*Maus: A Survivor's Tale*—begs the question: who, exactly, is the 'survivor' in question? Indeed, the immediate answer appears to be Vladek, having been the only one of the two main characters to have actually survived the Holocaust. Yet, Artie's experience as the child of a survivor does not necessarily discount him as a survivor, despite the perceived distance between himself and the historical tragedy in question. As Erin McGlothlin writes: 'the children of the victims and perpetrators grew up with the simultaneous presence and absence of Holocaust memory in their everyday lives, and thus feel profoundly stamped by its legacy'.[5] Artie's specific struggle with this legacy stems from the fact that he, himself, did not endure the same experience as his parents; he develops a strong sense of filial inadequacy as a result of his second-generation experience, grappling with this 'simultaneous presence and absence' (McGlothlin, *Second-Generation*, p. 8). Nonetheless, Artie is a product of survival and, thus, bears the burden of its continuance.

Spiegelman's illustrations in the opening of Chapter Two of the second volume of *Maus* show him sat at his desk surrounded by flies as he recounts the success of the first volume. In

[5] Erin McGlothlin, *Second-Generation Holocaust Literature: Legacies of Survival and Perpetration* (New York: Camden House, 2006), p. 8. Google eBook. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

the last and largest panel on the page, Spiegelman draws his desk, chair, and himself on top of the dead and decaying bodies of several anthropomorphic mice, his chosen representation for Jews. This extended metaphor of representation—whereby Jews are mice, Germans are cats, and Poles are pigs—appears to fall apart slightly in this volume and continues to do so within these panels. For instance, Spiegelman illustrates himself as a man wearing a mouse mask as opposed to a fully realised anthropomorphism, as he had done in the first volume, thus highlighting the problems of this conceit as well as emphasising his own feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Spiegelman's use of the cat and mouse anthropomorphisms as a means by which to illustrate the victim-perpetrator dynamics of the story is, at first, a seemingly fitting conceit. However, upon further examination, there are issues with its consistency—almost as if Spiegelman seems to be losing control of this narrative, which is a large fear of his throughout. In addition to the transition from complete anthropomorphism to a man in a mouse mask, Spiegelman also includes photographs, albeit only a few, within the graphic novel, most notably a photograph of his father post-war in a concentration camp costume, a disturbing 'souvenir' that Artie's mother, Anja, held onto (Spiegelman, II, p. 134). Thus, the story is again displaced, this time from anthropomorphism to reality, as opposed to vice-versa, and the conceit becomes almost paradoxical. Ultimately, despite the complexities and contradictions of the conceit, Spiegelman, through his use of this extended metaphor, defamiliarises how his readers understand the Holocaust and, specifically, how they understand Vladek's experience of it. This, in itself, hearkens back to the issues of the ethics of representation and the inevitable aestheticisation of suffering as it creates a vicious cycle from which Spiegelman cannot escape and must resign himself to. The juxtaposition of his success with the bodies at his feet is a visual representation of Spiegelman's internalised guilt at profiting from this highly personal depiction of a suffering that he never directly experiences.

In order to contend with the troubling legacy left to him by his father, Artie is overcome with guilt for, as his psychiatrist Pavel says, '[exposing his] father to ridicule' (Spiegelman, II, p. 44). This 'ridicule' seems to stem from Spiegelman's feelings of filial inadequacy in the face of his father's legacy: 'No matter what I accomplish, it doesn't seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz' (Spiegelman, II, p. 44). Spiegelman's illustration of himself sat opposite Pavel with the physical stature and presence of a child—as opposed to as the adult he is—as well as his voicing of his feelings of inadequacy here reflect the opening of the first volume. Vladek appears to minimise Artie's sadness over his friends by alluding to his own experiences at Auschwitz and essentially creates a hierarchy of suffering that Artie will never truly understand. Thus, the intense strain of living in the shadow of a monumentally troubling legacy is shown to eclipse Artie's life in such a way that remains inescapable across both volumes of *Maus*. Spiegelman's use of the graphic novel as a means of storytelling and as a coping mechanism are an attempt to gain control of this troubling inheritance: 'Samuel Beckett once said: "Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness." […] On the other hand, he SAID it' (Spiegelman, II, p. 45). The very authoring of the graphic novel allows Spiegelman the one thing he needs the most—a structured understanding of his father and their intertwined history—by placing him in total narrative control, not only in regard to the words and dialogue, but the visual, illustrative depictions too. For example, the use of the cat and mouse conceit is the vehicle through which Artie can come to terms with and understand the dynamics of his father's trauma. The graphic novel form allows Spiegelman a significant fluidity in his storytelling whereby time, as a narrative device, functions in such a way that Vladek's past is never wholly separated from the present; the illustration and narration of these events allows Artie, to a certain extent, experience his father's past in the only way he can. Spiegelman combines Vladek's present day narration with illustrations of past events,

transitioning smoothly from the illustrated now to the illustrated then. As Erin McGlothlin writes, the shift

> suddenly transports the reader from a visual depiction of a present site of verbal narration of the past to a visual depiction of the narrated moment of the past itself. The visual seems to signify the abrupt chasm between past and present […] while Vladek's telling of the story appears to hold the two events together, linking the past and the present in the process of narration.[6]

McGlothlin draws comparison between the visual structure of the panels depicting the selection process at Auschwitz Birkenau and the panels depicting Vladek's present-day retelling of the event: 'The observer in the last panel, [Josef] Mengele, mirrors Artie's posture in the previous panels almost exactly, and, just as Mengele determines and records Vladek's future 'fate' […] Artie watches and records Vladek's story of the selection' (McGlothlin, 'No Time like the Present', p. 178). While this observation is not a comparison of the two characters, it does, as McGlothlin writes, 'establish a visual analogue between the representation of an original scene of victimisation and trauma and the retelling of the event, insisting that the two are not distinct, mutually exclusive processes' (McGlothlin, 'No Time like the Present', p. 178). Thus, in a sense, Artie's storytelling functions as a fuel for his own sense of survivor's guilt and the process of realisation whereby he can understand and come to terms with the fact that this is to be expected, psychologically speaking. Spiegelman acknowledges that guilt itself is an incredibly subjective feeling and experience; Artie's therapist Pavel, himself a survivor of Auschwitz, tells Artie that he feels 'just sadness' when

[6] Erin McGlothlin, 'No Time like the Present: Narrative and Time in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*', *Narrative*, 11 (2003), 177–98, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20107309> [accessed 15 August 2020] (p. 178). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

asked if he, too, experiences any form of survivor's guilt (Spiegelman, II, p. 44). For Artie, putting his father's story into words and images and onto paper grants order to it. This process allows him to gain some control over this narrative, as well as his guilt, which, although not his own to begin with, is left to him by his father in the echoes of Vladek's narration.

Contending with this troubling legacy is a great burden on both siblings in *The Book of Daniel* but takes its toll most noticeably on Susan, whom Daniel visits at a sanitorium where she has been institutionalised in the opening of the novel. In describing Susan's mental state, Daniel acknowledges the familiarity of it, suggesting that this is a shared experience between the siblings as a result of their shared trauma:

> He thought he knew what it was, that sense of being overcome. You suffocated. The calamity of it. He had had such spells. People looked at you in a funny way and spoke to you down corridors. You didn't know what to do. Something was torn, there was a coming apart of intentions, a forgetting of what you could expect from being alive. You couldn't laugh. You were in dread of yourself and it was dread so pure that one glance in the mirror scorched the heart and charred the eyes.
>
> (Doctorow, pp. 8–9)

This notion of shared trauma, demonstrated through Daniel's own relation to his perception of Susan's struggle, is enhanced by Doctorow's use of the second person pronoun 'you'. Although the situation for the Isaacson siblings is highly specific, the use of the 'you' pronoun generates a sense of universality about this personal trauma and places the reader in a position of relating, to an extent, with Daniel and Susan. Despite the shared nature of this trauma, Daniel and Susan are affected in vastly different ways. Upon his visit to her in the sanitorium, Susan tells Daniel 'They're still fucking us' (Doctorow, p. 9). The identity of 'they' is not made clear until later in the novel where Daniel writes:

> THEY'RE STILL FUCKING US. She didn't mean Paul and Rochelle. That's what I would have meant. What she meant was first everyone else and now the Left. The Isaacsons are nothing to the New Left. And if they can't make it with them who else is there? YOU GET THE PICTURE. GOODBYE, DANIEL
>
> (Doctorow, p. 153)

Thus, the troubling legacy of the Isaacsons implements itself in vastly different manners in the lives and attitudes of their children. For Daniel, this legacy is something to contend with; it is something that he holds against his parents, 'Paul and Rochelle'. In Daniel's mind, his parents are primarily guilty of having chosen their executions over their children and, ultimately, of leaving him to deal with this burden which infringes upon his ability to carve out his own identity and destiny:

> Nothing I do will result in anything but an additional entry in my file […] I am deprived of the chance of resisting my government. They have no discoveries to make about me. They will not regard anything I do as provocative, disruptive or insulting […] No matter what political or symbolic act I perform in protest or disobedience, no harm will befall me. I have worked this out. It's true. I am totally deprived of the right to be dangerous. If I were to assassinate the President, the criminality of my family, its genetic criminality, would be established.
>
> (Doctorow, p. 72)

Daniel, like Artie, exhibits anger towards his parents across the novel, although this anger is something that begins to dissipate the more Daniel investigates the murky truth surrounding his parents. As stated previously in reference to Susan's declaration of 'They're still fucking us', Daniel admits that he would have meant his parents, Paul and Rochelle; he

would hold them accountable. He believes that he is predestined and programmed to have no impact on the world as a result of the legacy he inherits. This legacy robs him of the choice to be 'provocative, disruptive or insulting'; Daniel is 'deprived' of the right to individuality and self-accountability. Daniel's anger seems to stem from this sense of frustration and deprivation that, in his mind, can, time and time again, be directly linked back to his parents, the choices they made, and their untimely execution. Daniel's personal sense of neglect—heightened by his constant positioning as Susan's protector, mirroring the positions of their biblical namesakes from the Books of Daniel and Susanna—manifests as anger towards his parents for failing, as it were, to be there for them and for permanently altering the course of the Isaacson children's futures. As Aaron Derosa writes: 'certainly, [Daniel's] abusive relationship towards his wife and child, his manic disposition, and even the wilful repression of his past all point to the lingering damage the Isaacson executions have caused'.[7] Derosa goes on to argue that the Isaacson children do, in fact, 'cope in mutually exclusive ways': in contrast to Daniel, Susan views their legacy as something to utilise for positive change (Derosa, p. 478). 'Susan suggested that she would welcome Daniel's participation in [The Paul and Rochelle Isaacson Foundation] […] because it would indicate […] a unanimity of family feeling, a proper assumption of their legacy by the Isaacson children' (Doctorow, p. 79). Where Susan does all that is in her power to try to embrace the Isaacson legacy, Daniel does all that he can to angrily refute it. The notion of legacy is a complicated one and, in light of this, the Isaacson siblings seem unable to reconcile their differing beliefs. Daniel's pessimistic and traumatic understanding of legacy extends to his perception of his sister, the only biological family he has left, and the uncomfortable parallels of her hospitalisation and death with the execution of his parents; the Isaacsons are executed via the electric chair and Susan is subject to electroshock

[7] Aaron Derosa, 'Apocryphal Trauma in E. L. Doctorow's 'The Book of Daniel'', *Studies in the Novel*, 41 (2009), 468–88 <www.jstor.org/stable/29533954> [accessed 18 August 2020] (p. 476). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

therapy in the hospital prior to her death. Ultimately, despite all her attempts to redirect the fate predestined for her by their legacy, Susan is unable to escape the cycle in which Daniel believes they are locked into. Susan's eventual suicide attempt and subsequent death from related complications illustrate her almost innate inability to process trauma healthily as she turns to inflicting harm on herself as a means of coping, just as Daniel turns to physically abusing his wife, Phyllis. Nearly two decades after the executions of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, the Isaacson children still find themselves drowning in their wake.

Troubling legacies and inherited trauma provide an immense level of difficulty in the lives of the children that they affect. Literary and artistic expression is the only way in which both protagonists, Daniel and Artie, can assert their own control over the narratives into which they are born. Although neither appears to ever reach a solid resolution in coping with this trauma, both reach a point of conclusion whereby they are able to accept their part in the story they inherit. Vladek's final words to Artie and the image of his and Anja's tombstones indicate a sense of closure to both the graphic novel and to Artie's struggle with his filial inadequacy through Spiegelman's allusion to the parental tradition of the bedtime story: 'I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now…' (Spiegelman, II, p. 136). Spiegelman accepts his father's mistaking of him for his brother Richieu, who died in the Holocaust. Where Artie might have fought this misnaming earlier, he now accepts that this legacy troubles not only him, but his father, too, and, rather than let this inherited trauma consume him, it is better to let it be. Likewise, Doctorow concludes Daniel's struggle by having him finally leave the library at the end of the novel:

> "You mean I have to get out?"
>
> "That's right, man, move your ass, this building is officially closed."
>
> "Wait–"

> "No wait, man, the time is now. The water's shut off. The lights are going out. Close the book, man, what's the matter with you, don't you know you're liberated?"
>
> I have to smile. It has not been unexpected. I will walk out to the Sundial and see what's going down.
>
> (Doctorow, p. 302)

Daniel's leaving the library corresponds to his freedom, it corresponds to the lifting of the burden of his legacy. For the first time in his life, Daniel is 'liberated'. And, as the unknown speaker points out, it is as if Daniel has, until now, been unaware of this. The power to free oneself from inherited trauma is latent within Daniel and, for that matter, within Artie, too. The key to attaining self-liberation is, as both protagonists come to realise, the recognition and understanding of it. Some things can never be undone, as both Daniel and Artie know too well, but it is the choice to persevere beyond that narrative that empowers both men, something that is perhaps best encapsulated by the final words of *The Book of Daniel*, which are taken from the Biblical text itself: '*O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end … Go thy way Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end*' (Doctorow, p. 303).

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