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EDITORIAL

# *Fin de siècle* international law

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## 1. Introduction

There are moments when a discourse begins to echo itself. International law, once the preserve of rarefied institutions and experts, now resonates through press conferences, protest slogans, campaign platforms, and courtrooms. Its lexicon – sovereignty, genocide, aggression – has become almost ambient, saturating the political atmosphere with juridical resonance. But ubiquity brings a strange paradox: the more present international law appears, the less decisive it feels. Norms are invoked with greater frequency and intensity, even as their capacity to settle disputes or forestall violence seems to weaken. What once promised order increasingly reads as performance.

Still, the practice continues. Treaties are recited, reports drafted, judgments issued, and norms invoked with ritualistic discipline. The gestures repeat but their effects fade. One might call this persistence a kind of work-song: a rhythm that sustains coordination when conviction wavers. These are not expressions of unshakeable belief, but acts of professional fidelity – refrains of a craft that continues to act even when meaning feels tenuous. The function is less prescriptive than existential. To cite, to declare, to accuse: these are no longer merely legal manoeuvres; they are orientations within an unstable political field. And, paradoxically, international law has never looked more assertive. Heads of state are indicted while in office. Genocide cases proliferate. The International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court (ICC) calendars overflow. Doctrines evolve faster than ever, jurisdictions expand, and everyone is becoming conversant in the vernacular of genocide, legal standing, and third-party intervention in legal proceedings. The number of international lawyers presenting arguments before international courts (once the sanctum of a privileged circle) has grown exponentially. We are witnessing, on the surface, a juridical renaissance. Yet below this procedural vitality lies a growing disquiet.

This paradox – between saturation and impotence, expansion, and exhaustion – evokes the cultural atmosphere of a *fin de siècle*. Not merely an end, but a moment of unmooring: when the forms that once made sense of the world endure, but no longer explain, let alone compel. In late nineteenth-century Europe, this mood generated ambivalent art, nostalgic politics, and fragmented philosophies. Today, it manifests in the domain of law as well: in the repetition of juridical gestures whose promise has dulled but not disappeared. And for those of us within the discipline, *fin de siècle* is less of a metaphor and more of a mood that we inhabit. We feel it in the glut of commentary, the recycling of crisis vocabularies, the performative declarations of resolve that accompany each new 'unprecedented' event. What follows in this note is not a doctrinal

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analysis or a programmatic critique. It is an attempt to capture the texture of this moment – what it feels like to think, write, and act in international law when its rituals grow thin, yet remain insistently in use.

## 2. The *fin de siècle* trope

The phrase *fin de siècle* first emerged in France in the 1880s to describe a cultural mood: a pervasive sense of decline accompanied by an ambiguous hope for renewal. It is not merely a historical label for the final years of the nineteenth century, but a structure of feeling that has since recurred whenever inherited forms begin to feel exhausted. In the literature of the time the trope crystallized as a self-conscious aestheticism – a decadent, often neurotic recognition of the world's unraveling at the very moment of its apparent refinement.[1] It was later endowed with intellectual weight, not as collapse but as an anticipatory stasis: a suspension between epochs, where meaning lingers even as belief fades.[2] In this sense, *fin de siècle* is decay with a dramaturgical arc. Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) married beauty with rot, captured this paradox: the moment of disintegration could still be the site of aesthetic intensity emerging precisely at the time when older forms begin to lose their coherence.

If *fin de siècle* first named a particular cultural landscape, today it has become a diagnostic mantra, invoked whenever a society feels it is witnessing the end of something it cannot quite define. Benjamin suggested that modernity generates these moods cyclically, as each new wave of technological and political novelty shocks the collective sensorium into crisis.[3] For Benjamin, history moves not linearly but in flashes of recognition that make the present legible only by invoking ghosts of the past. Or, to resort to Marshall Berman, the experience of modern life is defined by unstable velocities, overlapping crises, and the perpetual collapse of durable meaning.[4] Thus when I speak of *fin de siècle* today, I evoke a similarity in sensibility: our own era is likewise marked by ambient exhaustion, aesthetic overproduction and proliferating declarations of 'endings'. The end of liberal internationalism, of Pax Americana, of the Anthropocene, of truth, of the rules-based order – all of these are symptomatic not of collapse, but of the compulsive *naming* of collapse. This repetition of endings may itself be the defining affect of our historical moment.

But *fin de siècle* is not just about discourse; it is about form. Its distinctive trait is not simply that it imagines endings, but that it does so ritualistically, as a cultural practice. That is what makes the term so attractive to capture international law's present mood. Here, too we encounter a disciplinary form that continues to pronounce transitions – the end of impunity, the end of sovereignty, the end of the nation-state – while its core practices remain remarkably stable. The juridical categories endure, but the thrill is gone. In this light, international law's current malaise is not a symptom of failure but of cultural exhaustion. It is as if the emotional economy of the field has shifted. What once felt like progress now registers as recursion. Every verdict feels like a citation. Every new institution arrives haunted by the revenant memories of a predecessor. This is the deeper resonance of the *fin de siècle* mood. It is a way of marking a structure of feeling – an atmosphere in which forms persist even as their animating force dissipates. If international law today feels both over-articulated and under-believed, it may be because we are inhabiting one of these moments: an ending that does not quite end.

[1]P. Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine (1885)* (2022). Bourget analyses the psychological dimensions of the society of the time, exploring how a perceived cultural exhaustion informs decadent literature. Although he never claims sole invention of '*fin de siècle*', his discussions helped cement the term and the anxieties surrounding it in French literary criticism of the late nineteenth century. In the same vein, see also J-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature (1884)* (2004).

[2]On the late 1800s as a period of cultural exhaustion, see Part IV of A. Thibaudet, *French Literature from 1795 to Our Era (1936)* (1968).

[3]W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (translated by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin; 1999).

[4]M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity (1982)* (1988).

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## 3. Narratives of closure: How international law writes its own endings

International law is drawn to the poetics of closure. Its instruments – treaties, resolutions, judgments – promise finality even when the realities they address remain unsettled. This is not just a formal tendency but a narrative one: a way of managing the dissonance between what the law aspires to achieve and what, in practice, repeats or persists. Resolution becomes a mode of discipline – not because it resolves, but because it allows the legal project to remain coherent.

The archetype is familiar: a Security Council resolution that restores peace, an ICC indictment that ends impunity, a comprehensive peace agreement that marks a clean break with the past. These are not just juridical interventions; they are narrative acts. They are staged as culminations – scenes in which legal language seals the fracture, and the curtain falls. But conflicts return, justice delays, atrocities recur. The same discursive gestures are repeated in the next crisis, and the one after that. The repetition is not accidental. Frédéric Mégret once argued that the law does not merely regulate but performs, imagines futures, generates subjectivities, and organizes collective memory. Its legitimacy depends less on empirical success than on its dramaturgical power to project finality.[5] This power is expressed not only through judgment, but through the staging of a future perfect: that the wound will have been healed, the crime will have been punished, the page will have been turned. The end is narrated in advance, so that the present might become intelligible. We are always five minutes away from something that never arrives.

Academic writing echoes this performance. Aphorisms about the end of human rights, the age of accountability, the post-Westphalian turn, all share a rhetoric of closure. Even critical scholarship frequently replicates the form: disillusionment with the old, heralding of the new, arrival at some threshold ('Fin de NAIL').[6] The structure of *fin de siècle* thinking saturates not only what international law does, but how it narrates itself. The signing of a peace agreement becomes a moral landmark; the closing of a tribunal's mandate, the presumed conclusion of an era (e.g., the conclusion of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda). Yet survivors and observers alike often report a far messier reality. As Christine Bell has shown in her work on peace settlements, legal closure may coincide with political ambiguity and social fragility, producing ambiguous transitions that are narratively overdetermined but practically unresolved.[7] To narrate closure, then, is not merely to resolve a case – it is to curate memory, to 'close the books'.[8] The legal document serves as a script. Its lines are performed at press conferences, anniversaries, donor summits. And when the outcomes falter, the language endures. We mark the end of conflict even as fighting resumes. We celebrate justice as if it were completed, even as sentences go unenforced. Finality is performed not because it has been achieved, but because its performance sustains the discipline's coherence.

Our endings, as it turns out, do not stay ended. They are reiterated, revised, reenacted, narrativized. The field of international law reanimates the form of finality even when the content has expired. In this sense, our endings are closer to performance than fact. They are dramaturgical techniques that generate orientation in the midst of structural ambiguity. Like the aesthetic projects of the original *fin de siècle* – those of the Vienna Secession or the *Mir Iskusstva*[9] – international law frequently announces its twilight to reaffirm its seriousness. To dismiss this as failure is to miss the point. The ritual of closure is not deception – it is a discipline (pun intended). A structure of belief in continuity, rehearsed through the language of ending.

[5]F. Mégret, 'The Apology of Utopia: Some Thoughts on Koskenniemian Themes, with Particular Emphasis on Massively Institutionalized International Human Rights Law', (2013) 27 *Temple International and Comparative Law Journal* 455.

[6]T. Skouteris, 'Fin de NAIL: New Approaches to International Law and its Impact on Contemporary International Legal Scholarship', (1997) 10 *Leiden Journal of International Law* 415.

[7]C. Bell, *On the Law of Peace: Peace Agreements and the Lex Pacificatoria* (2008), at 287–8, 291–4, and 302–3.

[8]J. Elster, *Closing the Books: Transitional Justice in Historical Perspective* (2004).

[9]The 1999 centenary of the movement in Helsinki's Ateneum was a superbly curated retrospective. See *Miir iskusstva: On the Centenary of the Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Artists, 1898* (1998).

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## 4. Narrative masterplots in international legal texts

Most international lawyers would (still) contest fiercely the claim that international law arguments tell stories.[10] Its core texts – treaties, Security Council resolutions, judicial opinions – rely on a repertoire of narrative forms to impose coherence on disorder. These forms are not incidental. They are patterned, affective, and deeply structured. Hayden White observed that (scholarly) historical narratives tend to gravitate toward what he called masterplots: tragedy, comedy, romance, and satire – genres that shape how events are not only recounted but experienced.[11] Such masterplots, I argue, surface vividly in international legal discourse. Tragic, comedic, romantic, and satirical arcs animate everything from judicial decisions to press releases, from monographs to tribunal mandates. Their function is neither ornamental nor purely expressive. They serve to render fragmentation narratable, to organize legal affect, and to transform complexity into something graspable. They do not mirror the world so much as shape how we can speak about it.

Tragedy is the most familiar of these genres. In this mode, law is anti-climactic, enters too late – always after catastrophe. The Holocaust, Rwanda, the Yugoslav wars: the legal response is framed as an elegiac aftermath. Trials – at Nuremberg, Arusha, The Hague – arrive not to prevent suffering but to narrate its inevitability. The arc is grim, linear, mournful. As Raymond Williams insisted, modern tragedy is less about individual downfall than systemic collapse: structures that produce suffering beyond the reach of individual agency.[12] The legal actor in this frame is not a saviour, but a witness to the already broken, and promises to work harder to ensure that this 'never again' happens. Comedy, by contrast, turns on reconciliation. It charts the passage from conflict to harmony, however provisional and incredulous. Northrop Frye's theory of mythic structure locates comedy in the movement from confusion to social reintegration.[13] International law deploys this arc in transitional justice mechanisms and constitutional settlements – moments that script peace even before it is achieved. The Rome Statute, for instance, was heralded as an improbable consensus. The Oslo Accords, the Dayton Agreement, even the Paris Climate Agreement all perform this dramaturgy. The achievement is not necessarily that peace endures; it is that peace is declared. Comedy requires a happy ending, even when it is implausible in the context of the preceding story. Romance, on the other hand, infuses law with an heroic grammar. In Fredric Jameson's account, romance is the symbolic form of transcendence – a quest driven by moral clarity, institutional courage, and redemptive struggle.[14] Prosecutors become protagonists. Courts become guardians of humanity.[15] The Hague becomes A *City without Walls, A Heaven for free Thought.*[16] Indictments function as rituals of purification. Legal promotional materials lean into this aesthetic: they evoke epic confrontation, sacrifice, and virtue. Yet romance is a fragile form. It withers under delay, politics, and selective enforcement. The noble path becomes entangled. The hero falters. The quest remains unfinished. But we fall by our sword, defending our commitments. Satire, finally, is the genre of disillusionment. It punctures pretence, exposes theatricality, and insists on irony. As Dustin Griffin reminds us, satire is not just about ridicule – it

[10]Recent work on the role of narrative of international law begins to make amends. See, a.o., J. Otten, 'Narratives in International Law', (2016) 99 *Critical Quarterly for Legislation and Law* 187; B. Sander, 'The Method Is the Message: Law, Narrative Authority and Historical Contestation in International Criminal Courts', (2018) 19 *Melbourne Journal of International Law* 299; J. R. Slaughter, 'Narration in International Human Rights Law', (2007) 9 *Comparative Literature and Culture* 19.

[11]H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973).

[12]R. Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (edited by P. McCallum, 2006), esp. at 69–108.

[13]N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (1957/1990), esp. at 43–52.

[14]F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), at 101–108.

[15]See, e.g., the manner in which prosecutors are portrayed in the *Watchers of the Sky* (2014) (www.imdb.com/title/tt2049589) documentary (directed by E. Belzberg).

[16]R. Hisgen and T. de Nijs, *The Hague Cultural Capital of Europe 2018 – Our Bid: City Without Walls – Haven for Free Thought (2012–2018)*, Pamphlet.

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functions precisely where moral seriousness collapses and certainty becomes untenable.[17] Advocacy writing frequently adopts this register. Satire catalogues the contradictions between law's solemn declarations and its systemic failures. This is the 'gotcha' moment. Never again – and yet again; the end of impunity – selectively; responsibility to protect – dismantled by veto. The satire is rarely explicit.

These genres colour international legal discourse and shape how legal texts are framed, how readers are positioned, how emotional responses are choreographed. A genocide trial narrated as tragedy demands solemnity. A new court, such as the ICC, cast in comedic form solicits optimism. A prosecutor or an activist cloaked in romance asks for admiration. A critique structured as satire calls forth detachment and informed distance.

Still, international law returns to these forms – not because it is naïve, but because it is committed to a practice of utopian narration. As Gerry Simpson writes, international lawyers are connoisseurs of 'unprecedents': events that claim rupture while subtly re-staging familiar legal performances.[18] In this dramaturgy, the end is announced not to mark closure, but to render the moment legible as a turning point – even when the wheel keeps turning. Indeed, finality in law is less an outcome than a technique. The performance of the ending – the tribunal closing ceremony, the Rome Conference's dramatic final moments, the judgment day headline – is not the culmination of meaning, but its maintenance. The legal act closes the book, but not the wound. It stabilizes mainstream narrative, not memory. Endings, we learn, do not stay ended, yet we turn to the next crisis that demands our expertise.

## 5. Dated tools

Every discipline inherits a vocabulary, and at times, the vocabulary outlives the conditions that gave it meaning. In international law, in 2025, for a middle-aged scholar, teaching in Cairo, this exhaustion has become increasingly difficult to ignore. Words like sovereignty, jurisdiction, and aggression – once the sharp tools of legal interpretation – are now uttered with a kind of reflexive solemnity. They still anchor arguments, shape judgements, and signal authority. But their conceptual weight no longer matches the realities they are asked to describe. This is not to say these terms are meaningless. On the contrary, they remain embedded in doctrines, cited in pleadings, and upheld in institutional procedures. But their invocation often feels gestural rather than generative – a ritual of continuity, not a source of insight. What once served to distinguish, to clarify, now functions more like a refrain. We repeat these words not because they still grip the world, but because their repetition sustains the impression that we still know how to speak about it.

Take sovereignty. Historically, it was international law's organizing fiction: the premise that a singular authority governs a defined territory. Today, its utility is fraying. In the face of planetary climate collapse, algorithmic governance, distributed surveillance, and transnational ecological harms, sovereignty no longer resolves – it defers. Its invocation marks the limits of legal imagination. It insists on presence where there is no longer coherence. It asserts control where there is no longer capacity. Jurisdiction operates similarly. The traditional categories – territorial, personal, universal – remain doctrinally intact. Yet they are strained by a world in which actions unfold simultaneously across platforms, borders, and time zones. When legal subjects live online, when violence is mediated by drones, when accountability is pursued through interwoven forums, jurisdiction loses its grounding. It is mapped out of habit, but increasingly experienced as fiction. The law asserts reach, but often without grip. Even aggression, long considered the threshold concept of international criminal law, now resists stable definition. Proxy wars, cyber operations,

[17]D. Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (1994), esp. Section 2 (The Rhetoric of Satire: Inquiry and Provocation).

[18]G. Simpson, *The Sentimental Life of International Law: Literature, Language, and Longing in World Politics* (2021), esp. at 77–89 and 92–107.

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and grey-zone tactics disrupt the neat binary of peace and war. The 2010 Kampala amendments to the Rome Statute attempted to adapt the legal meaning of aggression to new forms of conflict. Yet in doing so, they exposed the fragility of the category itself – how much it relies on assumptions of identifiable actors, clear chains of command, and observable thresholds that no longer hold in contemporary conflict theatres.

What binds these examples is not doctrinal failure, but conceptual fatigue. These are tools that continue to function within their own terms while losing their explanatory power. Their endurance is not a sign of confidence – it is a sign of 'discipline'. We persist with them not because they still illuminate, but because international law has not yet learned how to think without (or beyond) them. This condition – where legal categories remain institutionally indispensable but epistemologically depleted – generates a peculiar kind of dissonance. The law continues to act as if its words still correspond to realities. But more often, the correspondence is historical rather than analytical. The terms endure as residues of once-persuasive distinctions. They offer continuity, not clarity. This is why the repetition begins to feel symptomatic. It is not simply doctrinal habit; it is an affective stance. The field continues to cite what it no longer fully believes. And yet it cannot abandon these concepts without risking its coherence. To let go would be to lose not only a vocabulary, but a worldview – a set of mental habits, disciplinary reflexes, and professional identities that depend on the fiction that these categories still hold.

We might describe this, in good faith, as a structure of professional fidelity. International lawyers do not repeat these terms because they are deluded or opportunist, but because the act of repetition keeps the discourse going. Like the work-song evoked earlier, the repetition is sustaining. It allows the rhythm of the field to endure, even as its melody weakens. This dynamic is not unique to law. Bruno Latour observed that the modern imagination clings to conceptual separations – nature from society, law from politics – even when the world stubbornly resists such partition.[19] International law today faces its version of that problem. Its categories remain formally distinct, even as the world increasingly reveals their entanglement, their insufficiency, their obsolescence. And so, we arrive at a mood of epistemic suspension. This is not really a standstill: the tools are used, even when they no longer work.

This is the deeper sense of the current *fin de siècle* mood. Not the end of the discipline, but the end of a *certain* legibility. The legal world still speaks – but its speech increasingly feels like a psalm. Perhaps this is what it means to continue a tradition under conditions of exhaustion: to preserve the rhythm even when the meaning falters. Not out of deception, but out of care. Not because we believe the categories still work – but because we do not yet know what could replace them – or us.

## 6. Post-critique and the perpetual return of endings

For decades, critique held pride of place in international legal scholarship. It proudly revealed the exclusions of formalism, the afterlives of empire, the fictions of neutrality, and led to the change of guard in a given discipline's centre and margins. Critique has always been more than a method. It was a posture, a refusal to accept law's self-presentation at face value. It was worn with pride, it bore professional risks, and moral returns. In its many variants critique denaturalizes the discipline, illuminating what international law worked hard to forget. It unsettles the field's presumptions, called attention to structural injustice, and trained a generation of scholars in the politics of suspicion. But, at this moment, it no longer works. A sense of ennui now trails critique. The gesture of unveiling, the 'gotcha!' moment, once disruptive, even exhilarating, has grown familiar. Its cadences are now recognizable. Much like in literary and political theory, international law has begun to entertain the discourse of post-critique – a term that signals not so much rejection as fatigue. As Rita Felski notes, critique has become virtually synonymous with

[19]B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), at 1–12.

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intellectual virtue, yet risks performing 'the same moves over and over', transforming suspicion into habit and disenchantment into reflex.[20] I would add that it has acquired an almost athletic nature: perfecting the pirouette to get maximum score. The perfection of form and the apotheosis of habit.

The prefix 'post-' turns out to be not historical descriptor but a defensive manoeuvre. It does not overthrow the noun it follows but it *protects* it from disrepute and gives it a new lease of life. The prefix performs a double act: mourning what has been lost, while reaffirming its centrality. In this way, 'post-critique' (like any post-ism) is not an exit from critique, but an extension of its affective range. It holds on, not out of conviction, but out of the melancholy recognition that there is, perhaps, nowhere else to go. This insight has not gone unnoticed within the field. Anne Orford, in her reflections on pedagogy, has observed the burden of teaching critique to new generations of international lawyers who have come to inherit its disillusionment without its fervor. They are, she writes, learning to unlearn before they have even had a chance to believe.[21] Burgis-Kasthala and Sander offer a similar diagnosis, describing how critique risks becoming an epistemic orthodoxy – a ritualized performance that gestures toward disruption while reproducing its own tropes.[22]

This impasse is partly a function of success. Many critical insights – about race, empire, violence, and the imperial genealogy of legal institutions – have moved from the margins into the syllabus, from the periphery to the Ivy League. That international law reflects asymmetries of power, privileges certain voices, or sustains structural inequalities is no longer a radical claim. It is often the starting point of the conversation. Yet incorporation has dulled force. What once provoked now confirms. The critical gesture risks becoming self-parodic, diagnosing the same injuries with diminishing stakes. The response to this has been varied. Some scholars have turned to normative reconstruction – trying to rehabilitate institutions or refine doctrinal frameworks. Others have drifted toward abstraction: ethics, aesthetics, theology. Others decide to move to the periphery as an act of redemption. Others experiment with genre, affect, and form, treating critique itself as a mood to be archived or a device to be disrupted. Finally, it is no accident that many scholars have unexpectedly moved to the 'left' during the past decade, just about at the time when the left has lost its transformative potential and the ensuing professional 'risk' – the same scholars who fiercely dismissed critical theory a mere 20 years ago. The mainstream is now Crit. What unites these trajectories is a shared discomfort with the circularity of critique – a sense that it no longer points outward, but folds back on itself.

Yet, even in this moment of weariness, the rhetoric of endings proliferates. We continue to declare the end of the liberal international order, the collapse of human rights consensus, the death of global solidarity. These announcements have become genre conventions. They carry the structure of rupture but lack its force. Like the *fin de siècle*, they name transition in order to stabilize it. The gesture of finality is performed repeatedly, even ritualistically, as though to summon the change that eludes enactment. In this context, endings proliferate – but nothing ends. Legal scholarship, too, participates in this genre: special issues on the future of international law, conference themes centred on disciplinary crossroads, monographs on crisis and transition. These texts often announce themselves as farewells, but repeat established motifs. Their tone is elegiac, not insurgent. The ending becomes a figure of thought, a placeholder for the desire to narrate change – even as change refuses to materialize. Post-critique, then, is not a betrayal of critique. It is its melancholic continuation. Too old, too rock'n'roll, but too young to die. And yet, something persists in this act of repetition. Even as endings multiply, even as critique is routinized, the work continues. Perhaps what remains is a practice of fidelity: a way of thinking that does not insist on novelty, but it bears witness to the difficulty of still caring when belief begins to wane.

[20]R. Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (2015), at 1–13.

[21]A. Orford, *International Law and the Politics of History* (2021).

[22]M. Burgis-Kasthala and B. Sander, 'Contemporary International Criminal Law after Critique', (2024) 22 *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 127.

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## 7. The sense of an ending

For all the emphasis placed on closure, critique-fatigue, and cyclical narration, there remains a deeper, more disquieting possibility: that we simply do not – and perhaps cannot – see what comes next. The *fin de siècle* is not only a historical trope but a mode of inhabiting the world when the frameworks that once made meaning possible begin to fray. One begins to suspect that one's interpretive tools – legal, critical, even affective – belong to a moment that has passed, and that their continued use may no longer produce comprehension. They echo their own voice. The stories that once organized the world now feel overfitted to a reality they no longer contain. Their coherence starts to look suspicious, their symmetry too perfect. What follows is not illumination but impasse – a condition known to philosophy as *aporia*. In its classical Greek form, ἀπορία means 'without passage'. It names a state not of mere uncertainty, but of epistemic blockage. One cannot continue along the current path, but neither can one turn back. In contrast to critique, which still seeks to reveal, aporia accepts the limits of revelation. It spawns in the exhaustion of inherited forms, neither rejecting nor affirming, but remaining with the discomfort. It neither promises rupture nor seeks repair. It waits.

Julian Barnes captures this existential hesitation in *The Sense of an Ending*, through the character of Tony Webster, a man who comes to realize that the narrative he constructed for himself – a story of coherence, of legibility – has occluded more than it has revealed. 'What you end up remembering isn't always the same as what you have witnessed,' he writes.[23] In other words, the account displaces the event. Closure becomes a product of narration, not of reality. And in this realization, the narrating self falters. What comes next is the *sense* of an ending. This is when what you considered true turns out to be not false, but stories we tell ourselves about who we are.

This does not signal nihilism. Aporia is not absence of thinking, it is attention. It is the discipline that remains when confidence has withdrawn, but responsibility endures. Paul Ricoeur reminds us that endings give narrative its intelligibility, but that lived experience resists closure precisely because it continues: 'To conclude a narrative is to impose an ending on a process that does not conclude in experience.'[24] The same may be said of law. A case may close, but its consequences do not. A tribunal may end its mandate, but not its entanglements. The disjuncture between legal finality and lived continuation defines the present mood. The critique is issued. The essay published. The resolution adopted. But nothing ends.

To speak of *fin de siècle* today is not to assert that we are at the end of anything in particular. It is to register an inability to comprehend and to see what comes 'next'. A transition from a field that once sought resolution to one now contending with indeterminacy. And yet, the work persists – not out of conviction, but out of fidelity. Aporia, then, is not failure. It is what remains when all known genres of resolution feel exhausted. It is the space in which the discipline pauses to admit the end may never come. It may be the beginning of a different kind of care: less declarative, more attentive; less about mastering the present than about dwelling in its difficulty. To remain 'here', at the threshold of believability, amid fading plots and enduring forms, is not to give up. It is to carry on, without (too many) illusions, in the company of others who still think, still write, still interpret. Our doctrines do not hold. But something holds us still.

[23]J. Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (2012), at 95.
[24]P. Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (1984), Vol. 1, at 67 et seq.

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