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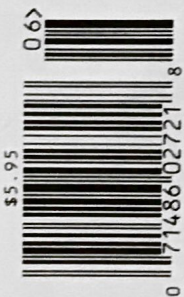
ON THE MOTION & MEANING
OF HUMOR IN POETRY

HAS THE

*Happy
Ending*

FALLEN
OUT OF STYLE

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BY LEELEE GOODSON

Happiness has long been a subject of controversy in Anglo-American literature. Thomas Jefferson, laboring in 1776 over a draft of the “Declaration of Independence,” listed it as one of only three essential and undeniable human rights, ordered from most concrete [life] to least concrete [happiness].¹ Jefferson’s decision likely gave the crown fits. How does one refute an “inalienable right”? Moreover, how can one precisely measure or define an abstraction such as happiness?

Long before Jefferson’s time, Aristotle argued that happiness (he called it *eudaimonia*) ought to be the highest human aim, but even Aristotle had difficulty precisely defining it. “What constitutes happiness is a matter of dispute,” he wrote in *Nicomachean Ethics*. “When he falls sick he thinks health is happiness, when he is poor, wealth.”²

A discussion of happiness in literature is similarly slippery and controversial, especially when it comes to endings. If people aspire to be happy in their daily lives, as Aristotle posited, wouldn't they appreciate happy conclusions in fiction? Not necessarily, it seems. A traditional happy ending in literature, especially lately and especially among critics, seems too pat, conventional and unrealistic. Again, the problem of definition arises. What constitutes a "happy ending"? Is it the same thing as a "good" ending? There is little agreement on this. A tragic ending, if it is fitting or appropriate, might be "good" but not necessarily pleasing. Adding to the debate is the critical dispute over the value of open versus closed endings. Open endings, favored by many writers and critics lately, are inconclusive, often leaving the central conflicts of a work unresolved. Closed endings, as the name implies, resolve the conflict, although not always in a happy way. For centuries closed endings have dominated Anglo-American literature, but have increasingly come under fire for arbitrarily cutting off experience. Human lives are continuums, some critics argue, and fiction that provides full closure (other than in the form of death) is therefore artificial. Other critics maintain that we need a sense of closure in literary endings to help us understand our experience and give it shape and meaning.

Maryanne C. Ward, in "Romancing the Ending: Adaptation in Nineteenth-Century Closure," describes traditionally closed endings as providing the reader "aesthetic reassurance."³ The problem, she explains, lies in who gets to decide what this means. On the subject of happy endings particularly, she says there exists a rift between the lay reading public and critics of literature. Lay readers might enjoy "the easy geniality of romance,"⁴ and expect or even demand endings in which conflict is amicably resolved. In the nineteenth-century particularly, Ward asserts, publishers and novelists were keenly aware that the reading public wanted endings which provided "the il-

If people aspire to be happy in their daily lives, as Aristotle posited, wouldn't they appreciate happy conclusions in fiction? Not necessarily, it seems.

lusion of on-going happiness" in which "good triumphs over evil."⁵ For support, she cites the popularity of the Victorian romance novel which traditionally ends with marriage.

Charles Dickens is an example of a nineteenth-century writer influenced by popular taste. He famously changed the original unhappy ending of *Great Expectations* to a happier one upon the advice of his friend and best-selling novelist, Edward Bulwer-Lytton. About this controversial change critic Edwin Eigner writes, "I believe we can conclude that it was based on [faulty] aesthetic principles."⁶ Eigner quotes Bulwer-Lytton on endings: "I hold it a principle in true art...that the soul of a very long fiction should be pleasing."⁷ Eigner goes on to state that Bulwer-Lytton felt that "disagreeable or unpleasant elements have no place in a novel and especially in its ending."⁸ This is borne out by Bulwer-Lytton's 1860 complaint about George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, the ending of which he disliked. Bulwer-Lytton wrote about it that "the Disagreeable [*sic*] should be carefully avoided. You may have the painful, the terrible, the horrible even; but the disagreeable should be shunned."⁹ He was apparently concerned about a work's "durable popularity,"¹⁰ that is, how well it would be received by the public over time. He did not, however, clarify what he meant by disagreeable, nor how he saw this as distinct from the painful, the terrible, etc. Eigner goes on to point out that Bulwer-Lytton himself had written successful tragedies, and that other Anglo-American novels of the day with unhappy endings were doing quite nicely in terms of sales, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Eigner

concludes that Dickens conceded to change the ending of *Great Expectations* in order "to gain immediate popularity" with the reading public.¹¹

When evaluating literature, critics often apply different measures of quality than the reading public, and romances with happy endings get short shrift. René Girard, for example, divides fictional texts into two categories: "'romantique' (romance-like)," and "'romanesque' (novel-like)," suggesting that the latter has far greater "literary merit."¹² Nineteenth-century romances in particular, which offer closed endings (often marriage) have come under critical scrutiny for being trite and unrealistic. Marianna Torgovnick, in *Closure in the Novel*, cites two late twentieth-century examples of this kind of objection: "the dismissal of nineteenth-century endings as 'lacking sophistication' in a recent book on the novel [Douglas Hewitt's *The Approach to Fiction*]; ...[and] the statement that nineteenth-century endings are an ontological 'form of deception, veiling the abyss' in an article in *The New York Review of Books* [the article is by Michael Wood, entitled 'Victims of Survival']"

This objection to unrealistic happy endings began well before the nineteenth-century. Even the venerable William Shakespeare was subjected to critical fire for writing such endings in his comedies. William Allan Neilson, in *The Complete Dramatic and Poetic Works of William Shakespeare*, says that "the marrying off, at the close, off all eligible youths and maidens [in the comedies] is more a concession to the convention of the happy ending demanded by the particular type of drama than the logical outcome of the characters or their

deeds.”¹⁴ Writing in particular about Shakespeare’s “problem comedies,” a term coined by F.S. Boas, critic William Lawrence says that Shakespeare sometimes appears to have “sacrifice[d] psychological consistency to purely theatrical effect.”¹⁵ Lawrence identifies three comedies that fit this category: *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida*. He explains why he finds these three “comic” plays problematical.

The settings and the plots are still those of romance, but the treatment is in the main serious and realistic. They are concerned, not with the pleasant and fantastic aspects of life, but with painful experiences and with the darker complexities of human nature. Instead of gay pictures of cheerful scenes, to be accepted with a smile and a jest, we are frequently offered unpleasant and sometimes even repulsive episodes, and characters whose conduct gives

rise to sustained questioning of action and motive.¹⁶

The temperament of these plays is flawed because it is inconsistent and mixed, according to Lawrence; they are neither wholly comic nor wholly tragic, creating for readers or theatregoers the problem of how best to encounter or interpret them. Furthermore, Lawrence says, the often abrupt and even forced happy endings of these plays do not fit the serious subject matter raised throughout. “At the close our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed, for the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome even when... the complications are outwardly adjusted in the fifth act.”¹⁷

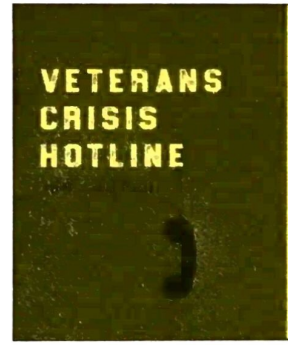
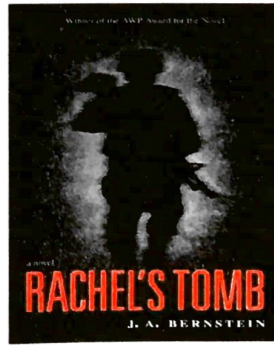
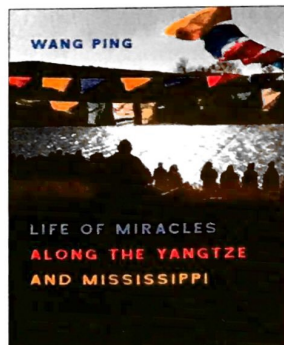
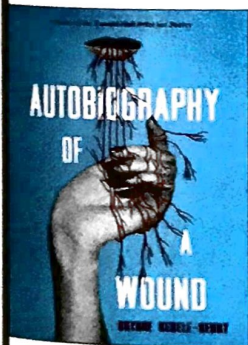
Zvi Jagendorf, in her book *The Happy End of Comedy*, agrees, saying, “The very name *All’s Well That Ends Well* points to a tension between the happy ending and the not-so-happy events that

it compensates for.”¹⁸ Essentially, she asks *does* the end justify the means? She asserts that the play’s abrupt, happy ending in which Bertram accepts Helena does nothing more than “convert bad into good without demanding the full price of recognition,”¹⁹ or without resolving the “disequilibrium” introduced earlier in the work.²⁰ Jagendorf goes on to identify and examine some devices writers of comedy employ to bring about happy endings. They resort to these, she says, because

Comic plots... often deal with material that does not lend itself easily to comic solutions. Obsessions are obstinate, self-delusion is deeply rooted, and ingrained folly is incurable. The devices and displayed skills of the ending, then, tend to deal in a pronouncedly artificial way with passions, fixations, and relationships that resist the conventions created to master them.²¹

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Shakespeare's comedic happy endings may seem artificial or forced to modern critics, readers or theatregoers, but William Lawrence reminds us that the theatregoers of the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century had different expectations about what constituted a satisfying ending. Despite issues with his "problem comedies," Shakespeare, according to William Lawrence, wrote successfully for both "the pit" and "the gallery," or—in other words—for the "ignorant as well as the educated."²²

17th-century theatregoers' expectations may even have inspired a dramatic revision of *King Lear*, with a happy rather than tragic ending. According to Sonia Massai in "Nahum Tate's Revision of Shakespeare's *King Lear*," playwright Nahum Tate adapted Shakespeare's *Lear* story to portray *Lear*'s tragic flaw as minor, and to portray *Cordelia* as secretive (she is engaged to *Edgar*, unbeknownst to the king). In the end of Tate's version, *Lear* regains his throne and *Cordelia* and *Edgar* marry: a happy ending all around. Massai writes that Tate's "exposure of the good characters' inner being encourages identification not only through sympathy but also through the voyeuristic pleasure of the onlooker."²³ In short, rather than attack Tate's revisionist happy ending, she defends it from [its many] detractors. "In my view," she writes, "*The History of King Lear* [Tate's adaptation] is rather a magnifying glass, through which Shakespeare's 'unstrung jewels' shine even more clearly than through the thick coat of editorial dust which three centuries of conflation have laid upon them."²⁴ Stanley Wells, one of the editors of *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, is not quite as complementary. He notes that although Tate's adaptation of *Lear*'s story satisfied the populous and essentially replaced Shakespeare's version for nearly 200 years, many critics condemned Tate's happy ending as trite and sentimental.²⁵

Sentimentality in fiction, especially in Anglo-American literature, has long suffered a grievous reputation. It has been roundly and historically criticized as the facsimile of true feeling,

of real, earned emotion. Oscar Wilde once wrote, "A sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it."²⁶ A hundred years after Wilde, literary critic Andrew Sean Greer agreed, labeling sentimentality mere "lazy emotion."²⁷ Rob-

Sentimentality in fiction, especially in Anglo-American literature, has long suffered a grievous reputation. It has been roundly and historically criticized as the facsimile of true feeling, of real, earned emotion.

ert Solomon, in an essay in *Philosophy and Literature*, describes the critical prejudice against sentimentality, calling it a loaded word often used as an epithet: "Sentimentality substitutes a cheap manipulation of feeling for careful calculation of form or judicious development of character."²⁸ It is characterized by "saccharine sweetness and the manipulation of mawkish passions."²⁹ In short, it is viewed as a sort of emotional kitsch. Solomon claims that critics today and for the past 200 years have seen it as excessive and even self-indulgent.³⁰

Not only critics condemn literary sentimentality. Many current or recent authors concur. For example, Margaret Atwood, in her short story "Happy Endings," bluntly warns of its dangers. The story opens with a short statement followed by a question: "John and Mary meet. What happens next?" It then offers six alternative endings, labeled from A to F, but near the end Atwood writes:

You'll have to face it, the endings are the same however you slice it. Don't be deluded by any other findings, they're all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality.

The only authentic ending is the one provided here:

John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.³¹

Other authors, too, have treated the possibility of a sentimental happy ending with similar scorn. Berthold Brecht, in his early 20th-century work *The Threepenny Opera*, set in Victorian England, parodies the happy ending by having Macheath (Mack the Knife) saved miraculously at the last possible moment by a pardon from the queen. As critic Steve Giles writes, "Brecht was particularly concerned that the audience should not be deluded into thinking that what they saw on stage was a slice of real life, and so one of his techniques is to expose and undermine traditional dramatic devices... the text self-consciously plays with the temporal conventions associated with the neo-classical unities."³² Giles further asserts that Brecht's ending, which employs a *deus ex machina* to save Mack the Knife from hanging, "underlines the absence of mercy and justice for all in the non-operatic world of capitalism."³³

Edward Albee, in his searing 1961 theatrical satire *The American Dream*, also lampoons the notion of the happy ending. His characters are banal, wounded, insensitive to the suffering of others or just plain miserable. At the end of the play, Mommy and Daddy simply substitute the damaged Young Man for his twin, whom they killed. Albee writes in the play's introduction that "it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen."³⁴

John Fowles, in his 1969 postmodern historical novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, included three possible endings ranging from happy to unhappy: the first ending (patently false), a tradi-

tionally happy one in which Ernestina and Charles marry; the second ending (possibly false—readers must decide), in which Charles and Sarah might reunite; and the third (again, possibly false—readers must decide), in which Charles and Sarah do *not* reunite and Charles leaves for America. The narrator of the novel enters the debate, weighing in on the plausibility of each of these endings. About tidy, happy endings the narrator says, “the conventions of Victorian fiction allow... no place for the open, the inconclusive ending; and I preached earlier of the freedom characters must be given.”³⁵

Critic Charles Scruggs theorizes that Fowles included and then intentionally rejected the first happy ending, playing it off as Charles’s daydream, because Fowles was contemptuous of “thoroughly traditional endings.”³⁶ About the latter possible endings Scruggs writes, “It is no wonder that Fowles’s critics prefer the second ending to the first. The first ending—Charles and Sarah reunited—not only seems mawkish,

but it also appears to be Fowles’s joke on Victorian endings. He seems to be deliberately poking fun at the false sense of closure so typical of Victorian novels in general.”³⁷

Contemporary critics and authors seem keen to label *any* happy ending as suspect. Novelist Heather Sharfeddin joins this critical chorus, warning of the “destructive” aspects of the happy ending.³⁸ She, like Atwood, says that such endings create “unrealistic expectations;” they “diminish... the reader’s interaction with the story, downgrading the experience from engaging to simply entertaining;” and they “anesthetize... the reader against real world dangers.”³⁹ In sum, she argues, “instead of giving us the foundation for coping with difficult real-life problems, [happy endings] falsely solve them in our imagined worlds. They deepen our sense of discontent with real life and build false expectations.”⁴⁰

Walker Percy, in his essay “The Man on the Train,” agrees, but warns against happy endings for another reason, and



LeeLee Goodson

instead advocates for the unexpectedly comforting quality of *unhappy* endings. Modern humans are alienated, he says, and as such readily identify with and find solace in reading about fictional characters who are also alienated. “The reading commuter,” Walker writes of his fictive man on a train, “rejoices in the speakability of his alienation, and in the new triple alliance of himself, the alienated character, and the author.”⁴¹ Essentially, he argues, alienated readers

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feel less alone when they read about the struggles of other poor, unhappy souls. By contrast, he continues, literature that promotes tidy, happy endings (he cites Perry Mason novels as an example) works to increase the already unhappy reader's sense of misery.

It is just when the alienated commuter reads books on mental hygiene which abstract immanent goals from existence that he comes closest to despair. One has only to let the mental-health savants set forth their own ideal of sane living, the composite reader who reads their books seriously and devotes every ounce of his strength to the pursuit of the goals erected: emotional maturity, inclusiveness, productivity, creative, belongingness—there will emerge, far more faithfully than I could portray him, the candidate for suicide. Take these two sentences that I once read in a book on mental hygiene: 'The most profound of all human needs, the prime requisite for successful living, is to be emotionally inclusive. Socrates, Jesus, Buddha, St. Francis were emotionally inclusive.' These words tremble with anxiety and alienation... the alienated commuter shook like a leaf when he read them.⁴²

When most readers think of happy endings, conventional or formulaic genre fiction such as Percy's Perry Mason example comes to mind. Genre fiction, in particular fairytales, pot-boilers, and romances, relies on predictably happy endings that are often sentimental. Here again, the divide between the reading public's taste and critics' taste is apparent. Critics are frequently dismissive of "lowbrow" genre literature, seeing it as less than artful. Daniel Gabelman, in his essay "In the Shadow of the End: The Moral of Fairytales," explains why a predictably happy ending comes at a cost.

More than perhaps any other genre, the fairytale exists in the shadow of its ending. The phrase "fairytale ending" is synonymous with blissful marriages, joyful reunions and successful adventures to such an extent that some educators denounce

For [Frank] Kermode, a satisfactory ending speaks to a basic human need for comfort, he says, and the act itself of interpreting narrative is transformative.

fairytales as morally dangerous wish-fulfilment narrative, while feminists decry the way they reinforce patriarchal stereotypes about how only love and marriage can satisfy women.⁴³

Another potential problem with predictably happy fairytale endings, according to Gabelman, is that they eliminate the possibility of suspense. "Where is the suspense and intrigue if we know from the opening words what the outcome will be?" he asks.⁴⁴ But Gabelman points out that J.R.R. Tolkien defends fairytales' happy endings, asserting that "the fairytale does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure; the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies universal final defeat and in so far as is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world."⁴⁵ In fact, Gabelman himself concludes his essay by defending the happy endings of fairytales, suggesting that they end "harmoniously with the promise that life joyously continues beyond its arbitrary termination."⁴⁶

Perhaps the antithesis of the happy ending would be the apocalyptic ending. Frank Kermode, in *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, spends much of his book discussing literary apocalyptic depictions. These depictions, Kermode says, demonstrate a very human preoccupation with "a widely shared sense of crisis."⁴⁷ This might support Walker Percy's theory that misery loves company. People crave consonance, Kermode argues, and this craving can be traced back to early times, evident even in the Bible, which he reminds us "begins at the beginning ('In the beginning...') and ends with a vision of the

end ('Even so, come, Lord Jesus'); the first book is Genesis, the last Apocalypse. Ideally, it is a wholly concordant structure, the end is in harmony with the beginning, the middle with beginning and end."⁴⁸ And so, if the Bible doesn't offer the promise of a universally happy ending, it offers at least a sense of needed perspective. In literature, Kermode writes, "We project ourselves—a small, humble elect, perhaps—past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle."⁴⁹ Closed literary endings, Kermode insists, help us "to make sense of our lives."⁵⁰

Other critics point to the Biblical Apocalypse as a reinforcement of the possibility of hope. As evidence of this, Daniel Gabelman points to the words of Theologian Jürgen Moltmann.

"Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving [...] the eschatological is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key which everything in it is set." In this way, living in the shadow of the end is not frightening or burdensome but hopeful and liberating. Eschatology transforms the end of death into the beginning of true life. In so doing, it also loosens the stranglehold that fear and doubt have on everyday life and frees people to engage more light-heartedly with troubles and suffering.⁵¹

In keeping with this interpretation, Gabelman refers to 1 Corinthians 7:31-32, which tells us that after Paul says, "the appointed time has grown very short," he exhorts the Corinthians to live "as if" whatever most worried and concerned them were not important,

for "the present form of the world is passing away."⁵²

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* depicts just such a world. The novel won the 2006 James Tate Black Memorial Prize for Fiction and the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and yet its ending remains problematic for many critics and readers. As a dying father and his young son trudge southward through a world of horrific suffering, the few people they encounter are dangerous and desperate, all struggling to survive an undisclosed cataclysmic event. The father eventually dies, and the novel concludes with the boy presumably taken under protection by a family with two children. Does this unexpected turn of events represent hope? Or is it *too* unlikely given the preceding bleakness? Shelly Rambo in her essay "Beyond Redemption?: Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* After the End of the World," addresses the novel's irresolute ending.

Reviews of the book diverge greatly in their reading of the final two paragraphs. Does McCarthy provide, in the end, a picture of redemption? Does the boy's survival—a survival beyond the death of the father—constitute a redemptive ending? Some find the notion of a redemptive ending sentimental, unrealistic, and inconsistent with the rest of the book and its unrelenting picture of doom. Others interpret the boy's survival as a testimony to the persistence of hope and regeneration... For them, McCarthy is depicting the substance of hope and the triumph of parental love in the face of terror.⁵³

Ultimately, Rambo writes, McCarthy leaves the reader torn, "in a schizophrenic, and distinctively American post-apocalyptic crisis of meaning: between the craving for a happy ending (for resolution, for redemption) and the recognition of its impossibility."⁵⁴

Lydia Cooper, in her essay "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative," agrees that the ending of the novel can be read as equivocal, but she sees in its imagery a mythological motif.

The novel's title in an early draft was *The Grail*, a title illustrative of the narrative arc in which a dying father embarks on a quest to preserve his son, whom he imagines as a "chalice," the symbolic vessel of divine healing in a realm blighted by some catastrophic disease. The motifs of the Waste Land, the dying Fisher King, and the potentially unattainable healing balm in the cup of Christ provide particularly apt metaphors through which *The Road* examines pervasive apocalyptic fears in order to explore if and how the human project may be preserved.^{55w}

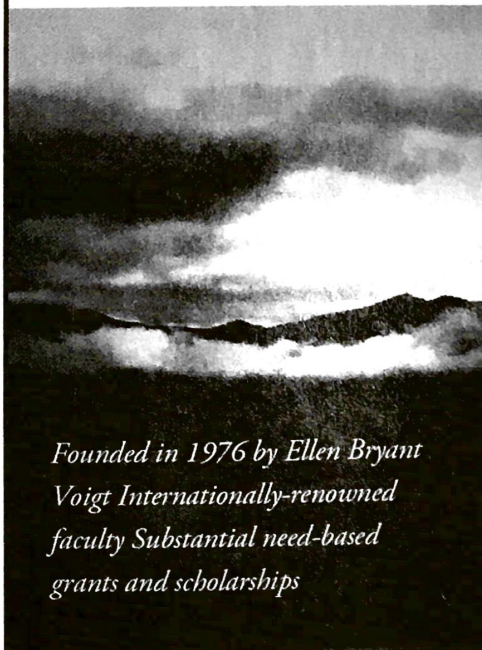
Cooper posits that this grail imagery "becomes a metaphor for that which is capable of healing a world terribly in need of spiritual or moral renewal."⁵⁶

John Gardner, author of the acclaimed novel *Grendel*, would likely have agreed with Cooper's position that the world needs "spiritual or moral" renewal. Gardner, in his 1978 critical work *On Moral Fiction*, champions literature that reinforces what he considers to be the value of reading.⁵⁷ For Gard-

ner, "art instructs."⁵⁸ Furthermore, he says explicitly that he does not agree with Walker Percy's assertion that happy endings are artificial or harmful.⁵⁹ "Truth, Goodness, and Beauty... are the fundamental concerns of art," he writes.⁶⁰ He elaborates: "Goal[s] for the human condition here in this world, a conceptual abstraction of our actual experience of moments of good in human life; it is the essential subject of all literature... and nihilistic literature perniciously denies it."⁶¹

Gardner expands upon his endorsement of art that offers moral instruction when he writes, "Ideals expressed in art can affect behavior in the world, at least in some people some of the time." For support, he quotes Leo Tolstoy's essay "What is Art": "The task for art to accomplish is to make that feeling of brotherhood and love of one's neighbor... the customary feeling and the instinct of all men."⁶² Gardner is careful, however, to distinguish between art that affirms life and fiction that "hold[s] up cheap or cornball models of behav-

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Nihilism and cynicism may be in vogue among critics and writers, and traditional or conventional happy endings—endings in which all conflict is neatly resolved—may have justifiably lost currency...

ior.”⁶³ He is not promoting didacticism because, as he says, “nothing guarantees that didacticism will be moral. Think of *Mein Kampf*.”⁶⁴ What, then, constitutes moral fiction? Gardner says “it explores, open-mindedly... It clarifies... Moral art tests values and rouses trustworthy feelings about the better and the worse in human action.”⁶⁵

Frank Kermode, in *The Sense of an Ending*, doesn't require that a good ending be moral, but suggests that good endings offer a needed respite from skepticism by offering us a sense of what he calls concordance: “in ‘making sense’ of the world we still feel a need, harder than ever to satisfy because of an accumulated skepticism, to experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end.”⁶⁶ Even tragedies such as *King Lear*, he maintains, function as “a looking-glass, fumbling with a button—we make an experimental assent. If we make it well, the gain is that we shall never quite resume the posture towards life and death that we formerly held.”⁶⁷ For Kermode, a satisfactory ending speaks to a basic human need for comfort, he says,⁶⁸ and the act itself of interpreting narrative is transformative.⁶⁹

Nihilism and cynicism may be in vogue among critics and writers, and traditional or conventional happy endings—endings in which all conflict is neatly resolved—may have justifiably lost currency because they lack the semblance of reality, but nothing precludes an ending that offers the possibility of hope from being considered art. Gardner says that the traditional view of art, which contemporary artists and critics

seem to have forgotten, a view “drawn from Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Dante, and the rest, and standard in Western civilization down through the eighteenth century...” is that “[art] seeks to improve life, not debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the gods and us.”⁷⁰

Marianna Torgovnick, in her work *Closure in the Novel*, concurs.

Some critics, especially the Deconstructionists, have lost sight of the individual reader... who... wants most to know ‘what happens next.’... Endings, we are told, both ‘ravel’ and ‘unravel’ the text, with interpretation a constant and constantly self-canceling act. Such ideas have a tantalizing newness and a certain abstract validity. But they violate what common sense and practical experience tells us: novels do have forms and meanings, and endings are crucial in achieving them.⁷¹

Gardner, too, sympathizes with the reader's experience: “When one talks with editors of serious fiction,” he says, “they all sound the same: they speak of their pleasure and satisfaction in their work, but more often than not the editor cannot think, under the moment's pressure, of a single contemporary writer he really enjoys reading.”⁷²

Stephen Emms, in his essay “Some Conclusions about Endings,” examines the endings of six fairly recent novels and concludes that there is no magic formula for achieving satisfying closure. He quotes George Eliot, who wrote that “Conclusions are the weak points of

most authors... [and that] some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation.”⁷³

Perhaps *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward might exemplify closure that manages to resist the tendency to resort to negation. Winner of the 2011 National Book Award, the novel depicts the impoverished Bastiste family's desperate struggle to survive and recover from the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. Esche, the novel's protagonist, is fifteen and pregnant when the storm and subsequent flooding occurs. Manny, the baby's father, will not acknowledge his responsibility, and Esche must not only contend with this abandonment, but with the loss and horror that Katrina wreaks upon her family and home. Despite their unimaginable suffering, however, Esche remains remarkably stoic. Early in the novel Esche thinks, “In every one of the Greeks' mythology tales, there is this: a man chasing a woman, or a woman chasing a man. There is never a meeting in the middle. There is only a body in a ditch, and one person walking toward or away from it.”⁷⁴ Esche's clear-eyed and unsentimental view persists throughout the novel, suggesting that she is so accustomed to deprivation and misery that she expects nothing else.

Parul Sehgal, a book critic for *The New York Times*, writes that “for all its fantastical underpinnings, *Salvage the Bones* is never wrong when it comes to suffering. Sorrow and pain aren't presented as especially ennobling. They exist to be endured—until the next time Katrina arrives to ‘cut us to the bone.’”⁷⁵ And yet, despite Esche's own lack of a mother, the loss of her family's home, and the maiming of her father, the novel ends on a note that is arguably hopeful. Big Henry shows himself to be a caring person, possibly willing to take on the role of father to Esche's baby, and Skeetah, Esche's brother, refuses to give up hope for the survival of his prize dog, China. “She's going to come back to me,” he says. “Watch.”⁷⁶ So they do. Big Henry, Esche, and Skeetah sit on the roof in the dark, surrounded by ruin, and wait. In the final paragraphs Esche

thinks: "China. She will return... and she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister... She will know that I am a mother."⁷⁷ Esche's last thought in the novel is not about loss, but about reaffirming life. As Sehgal concludes, "like every good myth, at its heart, the book is salvific; it wants to teach you how to wait out the storm and swim to safety."⁷⁸

Similarly, James Hannaham in his 2015 novel *Delicious Foods*, winner of the 2016 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, chooses an ending that allows for a glimmer of hope as well. Throughout the work his characters endure unimaginable suffering: the loss of one's hands, the loss of one's family, the loss of one's sobriety and free will due to addiction to crack cocaine, and even the loss of one's personal sovereignty to modern-day slavery, inflicted by a big-food corporation with no regard for its workers' lives. And yet... somehow in the end, Hannaham's antagonists get their due. Sextus is crippled and brought to justice, and Scotty, the voice

of crack cocaine, is left abandoned as Darlene manages to free herself from his grip. The protagonists all manage to find meaning in their lives, even if their new reality seems modest when contrasted with their earlier aspirations. Sirius, TT, Tuck, and Jackie escape the farm. Jarvis writes an exposé about the food company. Sirius becomes a musician, and Eddie, Darlene's son, finds a way to manage his disability, becoming a successful businessman, married with a child. Darlene, the character in the deepest grip of despair and addiction, is able to reject her craving for crack when she meets Eddie and his wife and son in the end. Hannaham writes about this in the voice of Scotty, who is bitter about his loss.

But then Darlene looked at me [Scotty] again, and she caught herself and stepped back from the three of em. She wiped her teary, mucousy face with a sleeve and covered her mouth with her fingers on either side, almost like she praying. Suddenly they was a

trinity to her, some sacred folks who had managed to turn they rotten life into something got value... She seen how spiderwebby and delicate that connection be between any two people, even when they blood, and how bad she had fucked with it far as Eddie concerned...

Scotty, Darlene said to me, it's over.⁷⁹

Hannaham's choice to write of this reunion from the disgruntled stance of addiction saves it from being sentimental. Had he written this from another character's perspective, it might come off as too pat and tidy. Scotty can mention prayer, the Trinity, and sacredness without seeming preachy because he is sarcastic, but this allows readers to grasp the poignancy of the moment, despite how unlikely Darlene could kick addiction that quickly. In the end, Hannaham is careful to show, she can't. Withdrawal is hellacious and she needs to check herself into a free clinic. Gradually, she begins to exercise; she

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So the traditional happy ending—an ending that expresses excessive optimism—might well be unrealistic or passé, but an ending that offers even a little hope can endure.

quits smoking, secures a job, gets dental implants... and then suffers a heart attack while out jogging.⁸⁰ Again, this last event prevents the ending from being too sappy and unrealistic. Eddie and she do meet again when he comes to see her in the hospital, but the meeting is awkward, as it must be; filled with anger, regret and guilt. Despite this, however, it is genuine. Eddie relays to her the story of Sirius's escape, which functions as a truth for both of them.

The survival instinct took over from the day-to-day fairy tales he'd needed when all of them worked for Delicious, and something essential in his brain turned him back into an animal. And there he was, catching fish with his bare hands, navigating by smell, bathing in the rain. Sirius quit asking how he could go on, Eddie told his mother. He had to survive. He had to live. He was free.⁸¹

Do we interpret this ending as one which reveals the necessity of giving up on one's dreams, or do we read it as an affirmation of hope? The final three-word declaration concludes with the word "free," allowing readers to sense that Eddie and his mother might also follow Sirius's example.

David Richter, in his essay "Closure and the Critics," writes that what constitutes "good" fictive closure is currently under debate. He points out that "critical theory, over the last quarter-century, seems to have oscillated between... two poles"⁸²: closed, unified or resolved

endings of the kind favored by Frank Kermode, and open, inconclusive endings, which have become increasingly popular. McCarthy's *The Road*, Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, and Hannaham's *Delicious Foods* all seem to find a delicate balance in this area. All three works leave readers understanding that the future will be bleak at best, but they leave open the possibility for a future, one that just *might* be better than the past.

While conventional happy endings seem to have fallen out of style amongst writers and critics of Anglo-American literature today who rightly reject them as trite and artificial, there still seems to be room for a glimmer of hope. As Thomas Jefferson well knew, amongst the populous the desire for happiness and the need to believe in the possibility of a better future runs deep. We still seek stories that affirm meaning. John Gardner says it unequivocally: good art "present[s] valid models for imitation, eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a... vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward... life affirmation as opposed to destruction or indifference."⁸³ So the traditional happy ending—an ending that expresses excessive optimism—might well be unrealistic or passé, but an ending that offers even a little hope can endure.

AWP

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