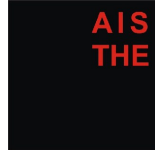


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## IN DEFENSE OF CROESUS, OR SUSPENSE AS AN AESTHETIC EMOTION

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**Abstract:** Suspense is perhaps unique in being an emotion that responds specifically to narrative: without a story, with beginning, middle, and end, there is no suspense. Some have argued the reverse as well: it is not a story if it does not produce suspense (Brewer and Lichtenstein 1981). Suspense, which is compounded of hope and fear (Ortony, Clore, and Collins 1988), anticipates a conclusion: hence its connection with narrative closure. Paradoxically, there is suspense even where the outcome of a story is known (Carroll 1996). Suspense thus provides rich material for the poetics of emotion, yet it has rarely been examined in connection with classical literature and emotion theory.

**Keywords:** Suspense, Emotion, Narrative,

**Resumo:** O suspense é talvez ímpar enquanto uma emoção que corresponde especificamente à narrativa: sem história, sem começo meio e fim, não há suspense (Brewer and Lichtenstein 1981). O suspense, que é composto de expectativa e medo (Ortony, Clore, and Collins 1988), antecipa uma conclusão: daí sua conexão com o desfecho da narrativa.

Paradoxalmente, há suspense mesmo se o desenlace de uma história é conhecido (Carroll 1996). O suspense, portanto, provê matéria preciosa para a poética da emoção, ainda que raramente tenha sido examinado em conexão com a literatura clássica e a teoria da emoção.

**Palavras-chave:** Suspense, Emoção, Narrativa

"There ought to be behind the door of every happy, contented man someone standing with a hammer continually reminding him with a tap that there are unhappy people; that however happy he may be, life will show him her laws sooner or later, trouble will come for him."<sup>1</sup>

Suspense is a particularly relevant sentiment in connection with the "poetics of emotions," since it would seem to bear a special relationship to narrative -- and narrative is certainly at the heart of any conception of poetics. Indeed, there is a sense in which suspense

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<sup>1</sup> Anton Chekhov, "Gooseberries," in Constance Garnett, tr., *The Wife and Other Stories* (New York: Ecco Press, 1985), p. 283.

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is inseparable from the idea of a story, and if this is so, then suspense would appear to be unique among emotions commonly identified -- supposing for a moment that it is an emotion -- in that it is essentially a response to an aesthetic phenomenon. Stories do not exist in nature, as it were; they are the product of a sense of order that we impose on events so as to give them a shape. Indeed, some have argued that the reverse is true as well: a narrative is a story only if it produces suspense.<sup>2</sup>

The closest terms in Aristotle's *Poetics* for a narrative are μῦθος, "story" or "plot," and σύστασις, a "composition" or "combination." As Aristotle puts it, of all the parts of tragedy -- he mentions μῦθος, character, diction (λέξις), thought (διάνοια), spectacle, and music (1450a90-10; cf. 13-14)-- "the most important is the combination of events [ἡ τῶν πραγμάτων σύστασις]" (1450a15). When he comes to defining σύστασις -- which, he repeats, is first and weightiest of all -- Aristotle recalls the definition of tragedy as "the imitation of an entire and complete action that has magnitude," and then stipulates that "what has a beginning, a middle, and an end is entire [ἅλουν]" (1450b26-27). As the well-known writer of fiction, Patricia Highsmith, observes, in her guide to prospective authors entitled *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*: "Every story with a beginning, middle, and end has suspense; a suspense story presumably has it more so," although shortly afterwards she mentions a "successful playwright" who "is furious with Aristotle for having said that a story needed a beginning, middle and an end."<sup>3</sup> Aristotle's definitions of these three moments in a composition are notoriously simple: "what does not of necessity come after something else, but another thing naturally exists or comes after it, is a beginning" (1450b27-28), and the end and middle are defined in similar terms. He concludes that "stories that are well composed" (τοὺς συνεστῶτας εἶ μύθους, 1450b32) must not begin or end just anywhere, but in accord with these specifications.

That a story has a structure or constitution requires that it be conceived of as a whole: one cannot perceive that the action imitated or represented in a μῦθος is complete, as Aristotle requires that it be, until one has reached the end, and looked back on its entire trajectory. A spectator or reader knows when the tale has reached its finale, and is equally aware when it is still somewhere in the middle, and hence unfinished. It is this sense of

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<sup>2</sup> See W.F. Brewer and E.H. Lichtenstein, "Event Schemas, Story Schemas, and Story Grammars," in J. Long and A. Baddeley (Eds.), *Attention and Performance IX* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981), pp. 363-379.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1966), pp. 1, 11.

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something not yet finished, of a way still to go before the narrative reaches its natural end, that induces, I wish to argue, the feeling of suspense. That is, it is not simply the awareness of some immediately impending threat in the course of the action, such as a tree or rock about to topple on an unsuspecting passer-by. Such scenes generate tension in the audience, of course. However, this is not the same response as suspense, and in fact has no particular connection with the completeness of an action or story: it is merely an event, and an event, or even a sequence of events, does not generate suspense concerning the outcome of a narrative. To be sure, some events in real life have, or seem to have (if properly selected or attended to), an order that resembles a complete action or *πρᾶξις*, to use Aristotle's term; more particularly, a few such actions have, according to Aristotle, found expression in a limited number of myths, to which the tragedians returned again and again just because they had the appropriate narrative shape. But such coherent episodes are generally speaking at best a part of an entire life, and Aristotle cautions against imagining that a proper story can be constructed around all the events in a person's biography. As he puts it: "It is not a single story if, as some people imagine, it is about a single individual: for many indefinite things befall a single individual. Thus many actions pertain to a single individual, but no single action arises from them" (1451a16-19). Without a single or coherent action, there can be no expectation of an ending -- no sense that one is in the middle of a story rather than at the beginning or near the finale -- and hence no suspense.

Modern discussions of suspense often describe it as compounded of hope and fear,<sup>4</sup> which are treated as two emotions aroused in anticipation of the conclusion -- the hope that things will turn out all right for the appropriate characters in the story, and the fear that they may not. Hope and fear, as prospective emotions, call to mind the Stoic pair of desire or appetite (*ἐπιθυμία*) and fear or aversion (*φόβος*), two of the four generic *πάθη*, along with distress (*λύπη*) and pleasure (*ἡδονή*), under which all emotions are subsumed. It is natural, in turn, to associate this composite sentiment of hope and anxiety with Aristotle's pair, pity (*ἔλεος*) and fear (*φόβος*), which he stipulates as the emotions proper to tragedy. Thus, Ari Hiltunen, in a study of suspense in film entitled *Aristotle in Hollywood*, affirms that "Aristotle's concept of fear can best be understood by the word suspense. The audience are aware of threatening danger and would like to warn the character but of course cannot do

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. Andrew Ortony, Gerald L. Clore, and Allan Collins, *The Cognitive Structure of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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so."<sup>5</sup> Although pity, in turn, is not the same thing as hope, it would seem to represent a comparable investment in the fortunes of the persons in a drama.

And yet, the difference between pity and hope is instructive here. Aristotle is discussing, of course, the emotional responses specific to tragedy, and so both the emotions he indicates are reactions to misfortune, as opposed to hope, which at least imagines a more positive outcome. But on the usual, textbook understanding of suspense as a "state of uncertainty, anticipation and curiosity as to the outcome of a story or play, or any kind of narrative in verse or prose," which arise "particularly as they affect a character for whom one has sympathy,"<sup>6</sup> one might certainly entertain at least the hope that events, even in a tragedy, will take a turn for the better, if not in the end, at least locally and for the time being. Indeed, many Greek tragedies, such as Sophocles' *Philoctetes* or Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, do end up favoring the protagonists. Nor need our knowledge of the conclusion, which is often given in advance in the case of the familiar myths that form the plots of tragedy, entirely eliminate the possibility of some more positive expectation. Thus, to cite one of the few in-depth studies of suspense in classical literature, Stephen Ohlander states: "Suspense in drama may be classified into two types." The first of these is "the suspense of uncertainty wherein the audience does not know what is going to happen," which Ohlander defines as a "mixture of fear before a possible but unwanted event, and hope before a desired but uncertain one."<sup>7</sup>

The second type is the "suspense of anticipation wherein we either know or else are fairly certain about what is going to happen but are still aroused in anticipation of its actual occurrence. That is, we know but do not wish to accept."<sup>8</sup> Philosophers too have addressed the problem of suspense even where the outcome of a story is known. For example, Richard J. Gerrig argues that when we reread a familiar work, we pretend not to know how it will end (p. 79).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ari Hiltunen, *Aristotle in Hollywood: Visual Stories that Work* (Portland OR: Intellect Books, 2002), p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Donald Beecher, "Suspense," *Philosophy and Literature* 31 (2007) 255-279), abstract.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Ohlander, *Dramatic Suspense in Euripides' and Seneca's Medea* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10; Ohlander takes it that one can "experience both types of suspense simultaneously."

<sup>9</sup> Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 79. Cf. the penetrating discussion by Noel Carroll, "The Paradox of Suspense" in Peter Vorderer, Hans J. Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen, eds., *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), pp. 71-91; Carroll begins: "It is an incontrovertible fact that people can consume the same suspense fiction again and again with no loss of affect.... However, although the suspense felt by recidivists like me is an undeniable fact, it appears to be a paradoxical one. For there seems to be agreement that a key component of the emotion suspense is a cognitive

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If, then, Aristotle does not mention hope among the effects of tragedy, it is not simply because tragedy is essentially gloomy or pessimistic. It is rather, I think, because the emotions he identifies are not responses to the uncertainty of the outcome, whether known in advance (at most in broad outline) or not. They are not, that is, reactions to specific moments in the drama, such as the apprehension the audience might feel at the onset of Philoctetes' unendurable pain in Sophocles' play, or the tension preceding Jocasta's suicide in *Oedipus the King*, where Oedipus stubbornly fails to perceive the truth that has already dawned on his wife. Rather, the pity and fear are inspired by the entire story, up to and including the denouement. For Aristotle, these emotions are a response not to a given moment or episode but to the action or  $\pi\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$  as a whole, which is what has a beginning, middle, and end. Pity and fear presuppose the conclusion: they are the emotions elicited by the particular type of  $\pi\rho\tilde{\alpha}\xi\iota\varsigma$  that the tragic poet has elected to represent. At this stage, hope is beside the point.

Before proceeding to draw out some of the consequences of this conception of pity and fear, and its implications for the nature of narrative suspense, I shall pass in review Aristotle's mentions of these emotions, to show that he does in fact regard them as elicited by the entire or complete action, and not by discrete events that take place as the drama unfolds or by uncertainty as to their result. The first mention of these emotions comes with Aristotle's definition of tragedy: "Tragedy, then, is a representation of a serious and complete action that has magnitude..., effecting, through pity and fear, the catharsis of such sentiments [ $\pi\rho\alpha\theta\eta\mu\alpha\tau\alpha$ ]" (1449b24-28). It could of course be the case that the pity and fear are elicited by events that transpire in the course of the drama, but I think that the most natural way to take the sentence is to relate the emotions to the mention of a complete action that immediately precedes (the bit I have omitted refers to poetic language and performance through speeches rather than narration). The next passage to mention pity and fear is trickier

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state of uncertainty" (p. 71). He notes further: "Suspense, in general, is an emotional state. It is the emotional response that one has to situations in which an outcome that concerns one is uncertain" (p. 84). The solution, according to Carroll, is to argue that "audiences must *believe* that the relevant outcomes are uncertain or uncertain to them. For example, they must believe that the relevant moral outcome is improbable" (p. 87). Even though they may not believe this, strictly speaking, they may nevertheless "entertain the thought that the relevant outcome is uncertain or improbable." Thus, "not only beliefs, but also thoughts can give rise to emotions. Indeed, thoughts that are at variance with a person's beliefs can give rise to emotions. Thus, effectively asked to imagine -- that is, to entertain the thought -- that the good is at risk by the author of a fiction, the reader appropriately and intelligibly feels concern and suspense" (p. 90). See also, in the same volume, Lothar Mikos, "The Experience of Suspense: Between Fear and Pleasure" (pp. 37-49), who concludes: "Spectators in films within the suspense genre consciously seek out the thrill's specific mixture of fear, anxiety, and hope ... as a quality of experience. In experiencing this pleasurable anxiety they can both test their limits and work out past experiences and the negative emotions they have learned to associate with them" (p. 48).

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for my argument. Here, Aristotle points out that, "since the representation is not just of a complete action but also of frightening and pitiable things [φοβερῶν καὶ ἐλεεινῶν], these happen most of all when they happen contrary to expectation because of each other. For in this way it has more of the amazing than if [they happen] of themselves and by chance" (1452a1-6). Are the frightening and pitiable things, then, individual events that occur on stage, as opposed to the action as a whole? One might imagine so, if one takes the phrase παρὰ τὴν δόξαν to mean "by surprise," as Butcher renders it.<sup>10</sup> Taking it as "contrary to expectation" points to the movement of the entire action rather than to specific moments. That the successive events are linked by cause and effect again suggests that Aristotle is thinking of the full narrative, and not just a given sequence of events. Aristotle offers as an example the real-life instance of a statue of Mitys in Argos which fell upon Mitys' assassin while he was viewing a spectacle -- the kind of thing, Aristotle says, that does not seem merely random. This incident seems to have its own intention or logic because it comes as the fitting conclusion to the original murder; it is unexpected, to be sure, but appears to have been necessitated by a moral law or principle that makes the end suit the beginning. Aristotle concludes his argument with the words: "It is thus necessary that such stories are the finest" (1542a10-11) -- stories, that is, that seem coherent in this way, and provide a satisfactory termination even though one could not foresee how it would work out at the start of the action.

In the next passage, Aristotle argues that a recognition in a tragedy is best when it coincides with the reversal. There are indeed other types of recognition, "but the aforementioned is the best in a story and in an action. For such a recognition and reversal will have either pity or fear, and it is of such actions that tragedy is assumed to be a representation" (1452a36-b1). Here, pity and fear are clearly associated with the principal turn of the narrative, which brings the action to its tragic denouement. No doubt, the moment of recognition itself brings a shock, but it does so because it reveals what the final outcome of the action will be -- the completion that gives it its character as a tragic narrative. Aristotle makes the same point when he affirms in passing that the composition (σύνθεσις) of a tragedy should be complex rather than simple, as well as imitative of things that are frightening and pitiable (1452b30-33): it is the arrangement of the whole that renders the parts productive of pity and fear. The discussion that follows remarks on the need to represent the fall from good

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<sup>10</sup> S.H. Butcher, ed. and trans., *The Poetics of Aristotle*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1936).

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fortune to bad of a man who is of an elevated position, albeit not distinguished for virtue or justice, and whose devastation is the result not of vice or wickedness but of a mistake: for this pattern alone is productive of fear and pity (1453a7-10). Here it is, I think, perfectly clear that the tragic emotions are elicited in principle by the contour of the story as a whole, from beginning to end. Aristotle does allow that what is frightening or pitiable may arise through the spectacle, as well as through the composition of events (σύστασις τῶν πραγμάτων), but the latter is primary and the mark of a better poet (1453b1-3). He goes on to specify that "poets who, by means of spectacle, produce not what is frightening but merely what is monstrous [το τερατῶδες] have nothing in common with tragedy; for one must not seek just any pleasure but that which is specific to tragedy" (1453b8-11). Here, Aristotle introduces a term to identify the shock that hideous masks and other props can produce, a technique for inducing alarm that is familiar from the special effects characteristic of modern horror and action movies. This kind of terror is wholly distinct from the fear we feel at the conclusion to a properly constructed μῦθος. Aristotle goes on to note the kinds of actions that produce such fear and pity, and observes that the best kind are those that occur among kin (ἐν ταῖς φιλίαις, 1453b19). Once again, it is the action as a whole, as represented in the entire work, that generates the tragic emotions; for the story to arouse the appropriate affects, it must have achieved closure. This is the last relevant reference to pity and fear in the *Poetics* (apart from the mention of these two πάθη, along with ὀργή or "anger" and such, at 1456b1).<sup>11</sup>

I have been arguing that, for Aristotle, tragic pity and fear are essentially responses not to any bad thing that happens to a character with whom the audience sympathizes, but rather to the complete action that is represented in the play, with the final closure that brings it to a proper termination -- that point at which nothing of necessity exists or comes afterwards, in Aristotle's formulation. To be sure, he sometimes speaks as though events in the course of the drama elicit these passions, but always in a context in which he is evidently thinking of the movement of the plot or composition as a whole. Assuming I am right, it will

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, not all tragedies ended unhappily, as Aristotle knew perfectly well, and those that do not ought not to elicit pity and fear, on my interpretation of Aristotle's argument. It is possible, as Jennifer Wise has recently argued ("Tragedy as 'An Augury of a Happy Life,'" *Arethusa* 41 [2008] 381-410), that Aristotle had in mind not the entire gamut of fifth-century tragedy, but rather those that were staged in his own time, when Euripides dominated the theater and conditioned the dramatic taste of the public. Jack Winkler suggested that Aristotle's theory of drama was in some ways well suited to novelistic adventure plays like *Iphigeneia among the Taurians* ("The Invention of Romance," *Laetaberis* 1 [1982] 1-24), irrespective of whether the ending was happy or not; he seems indeed to have admired dramas with close calls and twists of plot, but he regarded as most genuinely tragic those in which the finale, and hence the story as a whole, inspired pity and fear.

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be clear that Aristotle's conception of fear and pity has little to do with modern notions of suspense based on uncertainty and a tension between fear and hope, since the tragic emotions respond to the plot in its entirety. Suspense, on this conception, will reside in the anticipation of the narrative closure: it is the tension between the sense of still being in the middle of the story and the knowledge or anticipation of the frightening and pitiable effect of the completed action. This is not a negligible sentiment, and in some ways, I believe, it offers a better and more consistent view of how suspense might operate in the Greek theater. It also resolves the paradox of suspense identified by Noel Carroll and others, insofar as suspense depends not on ignorance of the outcome but on the certainty that the tale will end in a predictable way which will, when it arrives, arouse a suitable emotional response, together with the understanding that this moment is still in the future -- that is, with the awareness that one is still *in mediis rebus* or in the middle of things. The necessary connection between suspense and stories, which has been frequently remarked on, becomes clear as well on this interpretation: not just any event in which one is left hanging as to what will happen next counts as suspenseful. If this conception of suspense fails, in turn, to account for some of the effects that count as such in some modern treatments, and are sought after in certain novels and movies, this may be a deficiency worth accepting.

But supposing that such a notion of suspense, and its relation to the completeness of the action that is represented, is true, or at all events that it corresponds well to Aristotle's understanding of mimesis and the tragic emotions: of what import is it? What significance, if any, does Aristotle's emphasis on the totality or comprehensiveness of the action as the basis for the audience's response have for our understanding of narrative itself, or at all events of ancient Greek *μῦθος*? I want to suggest that it does have an important connection to the ancient Greek ideal of looking to the end when judging a life -- the view that Solon insists on in the fictional dialogue with Croesus reported by Herodotus -- and to the relationship between stories and real life as the Greeks conceived it. Let us begin, then, with Solon.

As is well known, Croesus, having shown his treasures to Solon in an attempt to impress him with his great prosperity, then asks him who is the happiest or most fortunate (*ὀβριώτατον*) man he has seen in his travels (1.30). Croesus expects to hear that it is himself, but Solon surprises him by mentioning a certain Tellus (the name, which resembles *τέλος* or "end," is surely significant), an Athenian citizen who lived to see children and grandchildren, and when already older died fighting nobly for his country. Perplexed by this



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response, Croesus asks who was second happiest, and Solon this time mentions two Argive youths, Cleobis and Biton, who, when their mother had to attend a festival of Hera, but the oxen had not yet returned from the fields, yoked themselves to the cart and drew her all the way to the temple (1.31). All of Argos was amazed at their strength, and when their mother, in the glory of the moment, prayed that her sons might receive what was best for a human being, their reward was to lie down in the temple never to rise again. Once more, Croesus is plausibly astonished at Solon's choice, and asks outright whether his happiness (εὐδαιμονίη) is worth so little. To this, Solon famously replies that many things happen in a long life abundant in days: Croesus indeed is rich, but whether he is happy he cannot say "before I see that your life has ended well" (πρὶν τελευτήσαντα καλῶς τὸν αἰῶνα πύθωμαι, 1.32). If someone is healthy, handsome, with fine children, and so forth, and in addition to all this ends his life well (τελευτήσει τὸν βίον εὖ), then he is deserving of being called ὄλβιος, but until then, merely lucky. And he winds up by declaring that the person who consistently possesses such advantages "and then ends his life in a gracious way" truly deserves the name; "for in every matter one must look to the end and how it will turn out [σκοπέειν δὲ χρὴ παντὸς χρήματος τὴν τελευτήν κῆ ἀποβήσεται]." Croesus was not convinced, and "thought that this man who ignored present goods and bade him look to the end was extremely stupid."

Since Croesus, as all readers of Herodotus know and will have known in advance, will lose his dearest son and end up defeated in battle and consigned to be burned to death on a pyre, a fate from which he is rescued only by an almost miraculous accident -- and if one did not know this, Herodotus promptly signals the onset of his misfortunes -- it is natural to grant Solon the wisdom for which he was esteemed by the Athenians. I myself certainly felt this way, once upon a time. What led me to question my former attitude was an experience that I'll relate briefly. I was travelling with a companion -- the personal details can be omitted -- and, arriving at what seemed a pleasant hotel, I expressed my delight. "Wait till we see inside," said my companion; "you never know." When we settled into a restaurant for dinner, I savored the appetizers and exclaimed: "Delicious! We've chosen the right place." To which my companion said: "Wait till the main course: it could be terrible." At this I muttered irritably: "I feel like I'm on vacation with Solon!" My companion, knowledgeable in classics, laughed heartily and enjoyed her dish. And for the first time my heart went out to Croesus, so proud and pleased with his current good fortune, so eager to find some innocent

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confirmation in the words of his Greek guest; and all Solon could say was, "Look to the end," and tell him stories about kids who died in temples, thereby proving that death is better than life. What a killjoy!

Indeed, why should a life be judged by the end? Why not concede that Croesus is felicitous, even if at some future time he may not be -- or if he was not at some past time? Does the final moment confer on the trajectory of a life its value? The idea that it does has been defended by modern philosophers, who sometimes speak of the projects we have and the need to complete them if a life is to be deemed complete and happy. I shall return to this question shortly. Here, let me mention a slightly different position. Robert Nozick, in an essay entitled "Happiness," reasons as follows (I take the liberty of quoting the passage *in extenso*):

We should care also about how that happiness was distributed within a lifetime. Imagine graphing someone's total happiness through life.... If only the total amount of happiness mattered, we would be indifferent between a life of constantly increasing happiness and one of constant decrease, between an upward- and a downward-sloping curve, provided that the total amount of happiness, the total area under the curve, was the same in the two cases. Most of us, however, would prefer the upward-sloping line to the downward; we would prefer a life of increasing happiness to one of decrease. Part of the reason, but only a part, may be that since it makes us happy to look forward to greater happiness, doing so makes our current happiness score even higher. (Yet the person on the downward-sloping curve alternatively can have the current Proustian pleasure of remembering past happiness.).... We would be willing, moreover, to give up some amount of happiness to get our lives' narratives moving in the right direction, improving in general.... Therefore, the contour of the happiness has an independent weight, beyond breaking ties among lives whose total amounts of happiness are equal. In order to gain a more desirable narrative direction, we sometimes would choose *not* to maximize our total happiness.<sup>12</sup>

This argument forms part of Nozick's proof that there is more to happiness than simply the quantitative amount of pleasure. But why should one desire that one's life's narrative move "in the right direction"? Is there a direction to one's life, and can a narrative run backwards? It is only by conceiving of one's life as a narrative or story, with beginning, middle, and end, that the end takes on such special importance, and serves to constitute the measure, as it were, of one's entire biography. Nozick has taken it for granted, without seeing the need to offer supporting arguments, that a life is naturally perceived in this way. And yet, it seems to me

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Nozick, "Happiness," in *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), pp. 99-117; citation on p. 100; I am grateful to Charles Larmore for calling my attention to this text.

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that one might just as well affirm: "I would rather have had a wild and festive youth, when I was able fully to enjoy it, than a contented old age, when happiness takes on a tranquil, contemplative, and softer aspect; for I could then have the pleasure of looking back on a life well led."<sup>13</sup>

If one does imagine one's life to be a story, or like one, then it is natural to wonder how it will turn out in the end -- the end defined not merely as death, the termination of life itself, but as a conclusion that somehow marks it as finished and complete. It is a moment that might well precede death, as when we think of someone who has outlived his or her own life, with the last part a matter of merely surviving, and no longer living in the full sense. So too, one might be thought to have died prematurely, before one's life had realized its natural trajectory and fulfillment. Many ancient Greek and Roman epitaphs for those who died young, especially before they could marry and produce offspring, convey this sense of an incompleteness or curtailment, and evoke precisely the sentiment of pity. Thus, a fourth-century B.C. epigram found in the Attic deme of Rhamnous runs: "We must all die, but you have left behind pity for your youth."<sup>14</sup> The Greek rhetorician Menander (3rd or 4th century A.D.) affirms that it is absurd to lament the passing of the aged.<sup>15</sup> The pity is thus elicited not by the fact of death itself, but by the failure of the young to have lived fully. In this, however, the epigrams differ from the pity evoked by tragedy, which responds not so much to the foreshortening of life, deprived of its natural goal, as to a story that has indeed achieved a narrative culmination but in such a manner as to appear terrifying and wretched.

Much has been written, some of it very subtle, on the human tendency to view one's life as a story; to some, it has seemed an unalienable feature of humanity.<sup>16</sup> I do not wish to

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Aristotle's view that a happy life must be complete, *EN* 1.9, 1100a4-9: δεῖ γάρ, ὥσπερ εἴπομεν, καὶ ἀρετῆς τελείας καὶ βίου τελείου, etc.; in the immediately following lines (1.10, 1100a11-30), he cites Solon on the need to look to the end (τέλος ὄραν, 1100a11), and proceeds to inquire whether one ought not also to consider events after death as affecting the description of a life as happy; he declares this to be an ἀπορία (1100a21), and allows that what happens to one's descendants affects at least to some extent the happiness of the ancestors.

<sup>14</sup> *SEG (Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum)* 40: #212, revised text in *SEG* 42 1992; cf. J. Bousquet in *Bulletin épigraphique* (supplement to *Revue des Etudes Grecques*) 1994: #35; further examples in Konstan 2001: \*

<sup>15</sup> 436.23-24 Spengel; translation in Donald A. and Nigel G. Wilson, eds., *Menander Rhetor* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> Cf., e.g., Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols., trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985, 1988; orig. French edition 1983, 1984, 1985). As Bernard Dauenhauer explains, in "Paul Ricoeur", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/ricoeur/>): "We make sense of our own personal identities in much the same way as we do of the identity of characters in stories. First, in the

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enter into that debate on this occasion; rather, I would like to consider some texts that seem to point in another direction, and to affirm that a happy life is complete at any moment, without regard for longevity or indeed for the future at all. I am thinking principally of Epicureanism, which insisted that happiness was independent of duration. Thus, Lucretius puts in the mouth of Nature itself a reprimand for those who would lament their mortality (3.955-60):

*aufer abhinc lacrimas, baratre, et compesce querellas.  
omnia perfunctus vitae praemia marces.  
sed quia semper aves quod abest, praesentia temnis,  
imperfecta tibi elapsast ingrataque vita  
et nec opinanti mors ad caput adstitit ante  
quam satur ac plenus possis discedere rerum.*

Stop snivelling, you dolt! Away with your whinings! You had full use of all the precious things of life before you reached this senile state. But because you continually crave what is not present and scorn what is, your life has slipped away from you incomplete and unenjoyed, until suddenly you have found death standing at your head before you are able to depart from the feast of life filled to repletion.<sup>17</sup>

Seneca (*Letters to Lucilius* 15.9 = fr. 491 Usener), whose letters betray a strong Epicurean influence,<sup>18</sup> expresses a similar idea: *stulta vita ingrata est et trepida: tota in futurum fertur* ("a foolish life is unpleasant and fearful: for it is all projected into the future."<sup>19</sup> On this view, it is precisely attention to present goods that confers a blessed contentment, whereas looking to the future -- to the end, as it were -- destroys the pleasure that is at hand. Indeed, it is just such felicity that is, according to Epicurus, the natural goal or τέλος of life (cf. Diogenes Laertius 10.137), though τέλος here does not bear the sense of an ending or conclusion.

It is perhaps no accident that Epicureanism, like Stoicism, was concerned to eliminate extreme passions such as fear and pity, and held that the gods, who were the model for human felicity, were immune to both these sentiments. One may feel compassion for human beings who, in their ignorance of what pleasure and fulfillment consist in, restlessly seek

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case of stories, we come to understand the characters by way of the plot that ties together what happens to them, the aims and projects they adopt, and what they actually do. Similarly I make sense of my own identity by telling myself a story about my own life."

<sup>17</sup> Trans. Martin Ferguson Smith *Lucretius: On the Nature of Things* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), p. 93, reading *barde* for *baratre* in v. 955, which would mean "hell-hole"; further discussion in E. J. Kenney, ed., *Lucretius De rerum natura, Book 3* (Cambridge: University Press, 1971), pp. 216-17.

<sup>18</sup> This is perhaps in part in recognition of Epicurus' priority in composing philosophical epistles: cf. Brad Inwood 2007, "The Importance of Form in the Letters of Seneca the Younger," in Ruth Morello and Andrew Morrison, eds., *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 133-148.

<sup>19</sup> cf. Epicurus fr. 493-94 Usener; Sen. *De beneficiis* 7.2.3-4: *illa est voluptas ... perturbatione carere... Hanc voluptatem aequalem, intrepidam, numquam sensuram sui taedium percipit hic.... Hic praesentibus gaudet, etc.*

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wealth and power (Lucr. 2.1-13), but a life marked by tranquillity -- the Epicurean ideal -- is static, like the pleasure that characterizes it (ἡδονὴ καταστηματική). A life without movement or change has no intrinsic trajectory: it neither looks to the end, in Solon's formula, nor judges its history from the perspective of the completed life story, and so is not a suitable vehicle for inducing the tragic passions identified by Aristotle. Perhaps this rejection of narrative, among other things, lies behind the charge that Epicurus was hostile to traditional education or *paideia*, which was grounded in classical literature.

In criticizing Epicurean arguments designed to counter the fear of death, a number of modern scholars have seen as a weakness in their position the failure to take account of human projects -- the ambitions, desires, and hopes that we invest in an imagined future, and which, if left incomplete or unimplemented, render our lives something less than wholly fulfilled and hence wholly happy.<sup>20</sup> This view, I believe, implicitly imports into the conception of a happy life the idea that it involves a story, with a beginning and a narrative ending or conclusion, which brings the narrative to its natural closure. It does so, however, by making each human being the creator of her or his personal tale, and thus identifies a sense of frustrated goals and terminations if the story is cut short before it reaches its self-constructed terminus. Ian McEwan, in his novel *Atonement*, describes how the young protagonist suddenly feels a sense of liberation as he begins to imagine his own future: "There was a story he was plotting with himself as the hero, and already its opening had caused a little shock among his friends.... He had never before felt so self-consciously young, nor experienced such appetite, such impatience for the story to begin."<sup>21</sup> But to project such a conception of a narrated life onto Epicurean philosophy seems to me to be misguided; it betrays rather a very modern preoccupation with career paths and success, or, in ancient terms, with the kind of *cursus honorum* which the Epicureans saw as inimical to happiness.

Now, Solon may not have been simply supposing that how a life's story turns out is the key to its ultimate value or happiness quotient. The tale of Cleobis and Biton suggests also that death comes best at a supreme moment of exceptional glory, the acme of a life, after which it is, as it were, all downhill. Such an ideal undercuts to some extent the idea of narrative, since transcendence may occur at an arbitrary moment rather than as the fulfillment

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<sup>20</sup> See James Warren, *Facing Death: Epicurus and his Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), in the chapter entitled "Premature Death and a Complete Life" (pp. 109-60), with full bibliography.

<sup>21</sup> Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001; cited according to the Vintage Press edition (Random House: New York, 2007), pp. 91-92.

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of a life plan. But allowing for this alternative, it is still the case that Solon's injunction to regard the end invites a retrospective interpretation of one's life, as seen from the point of arrival. And until one reaches this moment of finality, one is aware of being in mid course, part way toward the conclusion. Such a narrative vision of life as having structure and closure, a beginning, middle, and inevitably an end, tends to migrate from stories proper, as Aristotle defines them, to the sense of human experience as such being constructed in this way. In the novel, *Atonement*, McEwan provides a surprise ending, in which it turns out that the heroine of the story, who as an overimaginative girl at the age of thirteen accused a man of raping another girl and thereby ruined his life and that of her sister, with whom he was in love, spends the rest of her life as a novelist retelling the tale so as to find a satisfactory ending -- one that will relieve her of the guilt she has felt all along. As an old woman, she meditates: "There was a crime. But there were also the lovers. Lovers and their happy ends have been on my mind all night long. As into the sunset we sail. An unhappy inversion.... It is only in this last version that my lovers end well, standing side by side on a South London pavement as I walk away. All the preceding drafts were pitiless" (p. 370). But she cannot allow the story to terminate in such a negative manner: "How could that constitute an ending? What sense or hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them" (p. 371). The narrator reflects that "there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what *really* happened?" (ibid.). But she insists that the final version of the story is the truth, and there is no more to know. The novelist is all-powerful, and there is nothing outside her. But need the meaning of the tale reside so securely in the end? McEwan's own literary style is deeply moving, and he has an insight, a descriptive ability, and a rich precision of vocabulary and imagery that make it a pleasure to read each sentence, each paragraph. Did this novel have to include a childish and improbable allegation, and the consequent suffering it brought about? Did it need to have even a middle, much less an end?

It is this drive to an end -- always via a middle -- that constitutes the essence of suspense. We assume that structure and direction are necessary to a novel or a play, and that without such linear movement there can be no dramatic interest. We want, with Solon, to know how it will come out. Yet this may not be such an inevitable narrative imperative. In a fascinating paper on the German writer Theodor Fontane's intriguing last novel, *Der Stechlin*

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(published in 1899), Martha Nussbaum observes: "This is not a novel like other nineteenth-century novels we know, held together by suspense, tension, and conflict, by romantic adversity and its resolution in marriage."<sup>22</sup> There are events, of course: "But somehow these events do not form a literary plot. They happen, but they are not woven together into a dramatic story of the usual sort, with tension and resolution. They are not very much connected to one another, and they are not very prominent." Nussbaum quotes a letter by Fontane himself: "At the end an old man dies and two young people get married. That is apparently all that happens in five hundred pages. As for complications and resolutions, as for romantic conflicts and conflicts in general, as for tensions and surprises -- one finds nothing like that." Nussbaum relates the idea of a proper plot to which Fontane alludes to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and she describes vividly the danger that inheres in expecting our lives, and those of our dear ones, to conform to such patterns: "Interest in dramatic narrative is not altogether incompatible with an interest in people for their own sake. But the minute the person is seen as interesting because of his or her role in a grand narrative, misunderstanding and even exploitation are big dangers." But Nussbaum is not content with so radical a rejection of the function of plot. Instead, she reads Fontane as criticizing a certain kind of story, the kind that encapsulates and endorses social constraints of a harmful sort: what Fontane avoids, she asserts is the grip on our imaginations of "his society's social narratives of gender and marriage, involving ideas of male control and female purity."

It may be that Fontane was clearing the way for alternative stories, which were less indebted to outmoded social roles. But his novel shows that a story in which "nothing happens," for all its violation of Aristotle's precepts, may still have its own interest -- not that of suspense, and the expectation of an ending that will leave us with a deep experience of pity and fear, or of the opposite emotions, but simply the pleasure of seeing people interact, and lead lives that have no expected conclusion from which they may be judged fulfilled, or else lacking and so fit occasions for the tragic sentiments.

[Recebido em julho de 2008; aceito em julho de 2008]

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<sup>22</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "A Novel in which Nothing Happens: Fontane's *Der Stechlin* and Literary Friendship," in Alice Cary, ed., *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: A Festschrift for Cora Diamond* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007).