

End Game

by Bill Yarrow

Where the Story Lies

Everybody wants to know where the story lies. Does it lie in childhood? Does it lie in old age? Does it lie in an angry outburst or a stinging rebuke? Does it lie in a moment of compassion or in the recognition of calloused selfishness? Bruised love or hidden despair? Unfounded ego? Personally, I couldn't care less where the story lies. I care only where the story tells the truth.

Where the Story Tells the Truth

Can a story tell the truth? What truth? The truth of a moment? What good is that? A good story is an honest story, but honesty is not the same as truth. Anderson's "Untold Lie" is a good story. In that story, Hal Winters, twenty-two, asks Ray Pearson, just fifty with six kids, whether he should marry his pregnant girlfriend Nell. Ray mulls it over, finally deciding to tell him "No! Don't do it!" but before he can say anything, Hal tells him he's decided to marry her. Ray thinks, "It's just as well. Whatever I told him would have been a lie." See what I mean? Honest, yes, but that's not at all the same as the truth.

Why Stories Can't Tell the Truth

Look, even a great story like Delmore Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," which tries to tell the truth, can't help but fail. Remember the story? A kid in a movie theater sees on the screen his parents in their courting days. Like Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*, he tries to warn them: "Don't do it! It's not too late to change your minds!" He gets thrown out by the usher. He's about to turn twenty one. That's where the story ends. That's the problem. That's the essence of the problem. It's the problem with every story, every novel, every play, every poem. Stories end. Novels end. Plays end. Poems end. The truth doesn't end. It doesn't pretend to.

Every Ending Is False

Every ending is false as every beginning is false because every ending is arbitrary as every beginning is arbitrary. We pretend otherwise, but our life does not commence with our birth (had we no parents or ancestors?) nor end with our death (had we no influence or effect?) We didn't begin; neither do we end. Just because a book by us or about us has a first and last page doesn't mean that we do also. We've never not been here (we were potential in everyone who came before us) and we'll never not be here (we persist in some way in everyone who succeeds us) and therefore every ending is false. This one too.

Not Every Ending Is False

for Marshall Levin

Though arbitrary, not every ending is false.
Better to say not every ending is accurate.
To the extent to which no story reaches
a final conclusion, the most we can do
is echo Dostoyevsky:

*That might be the subject
of a new story
but our present story
is ended*

We are the past story, the present story,
and also the new story, the future story.
We end as a stanza ends, as a chapter ends.
Our book is not just long—it is endless.

Blake said

One thought fills immensity

I say, one person fills eternity.

