Getting the Ending Right:
Some Thoughts on Writing and Life

"The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs…"
--Tennyson

I
The Beginning of the End

One way to look at it is, It's over. The race is over, and I lost. I did my best, I gave it my all, but I didn't win, place or show. I also-ran. I'm not beating myself up about it, but I'm not jollying myself along, either (as my father used to say). I turned 65 this week, and am now officially a senior citizen. Game over. Give 'im the watch and move 'im out. Into the pasture. Mixed metaphor, I know, but fuck it. Mixed metaphors are to be expected from a writer who didn't make the grade, who couldn't cut the mustard, who couldn't hack it. (Clichés are to be expected, too, so let 'er rip.) They're all par for the course. Fuck it. The race is to the swift, and I wasn't swift enough. Not bold enough, either. I hugged the railing the whole time, and a horse that hugs the railing is never going to win the race. Who said "Winning isn't everything – it's the only thing"? Vince Lombardi -- everyone knows that. (Now I'm mixing sports as well as metaphors. And they're not even sports I care about!) But I like the guy who said, "Winning isn't everything – but losing is nothing." Who was that? Wikiquote says it was

the Australian talk-radio host Red Symons. I'm not familiar with his work. Doesn't matter, though. I doubt he actually made up that line – I've been hearing it for years – but who cares? I like it because it's so basic. So inarguable. So ground-zero. So Zen. Losing is… nothing.

But is it true? Is any of this true? Is it really all over? Did I really do my best? Am I really nothing because I lost the race? Because, at 65, I can't seem to buy a publication – not even in pop-up literary websites I've never heard of? I don't think so. While there is some truth to all of the above statements (despite their unseemly air of self-pity -- though frankly, I believe self-pity is actually a very interesting, complex, and too-hastily-dismissed emotion; it is worthy of further examination; see below), it's also true that there is more than one way to look at it. And I don't think I'm just jollying myself along when I say that. I don't think I'm nothing, nor do I think that losing is nothing. Though I have inarguably lost the race, the publication race, I believe that losing is not only not nothing, it's much more meaningful than winning. Because it's only when it's over, and you've lost the race, that things begin to get interesting.

Baseball's my game. It's slower. More contemplative. The summer sport. Of a warm summer's evening, the heaviness in the air, the murmur of the crowd, the crack of the bat, the snap of the ball in the mitt. The lull of the waiting. And out of it all, situations arise. Emergent situations arise. All tied up, bases loaded, two outs, bottom of the ninth. Pitcher versus batter. Will he – either one -- choke, or will he come through? And suddenly, out of the lull, out of the waiting, out of the slowness of a warm summer night, we find ourselves at a moment of crisis. How did we get to this place? Baseball, you see, is like life. We are not in complete control of things. Situations emerge. Huge pressures converge. All is decided with a pitch and a swing. Or not. The battle is over, or it goes on. Baseball is life.

And as in life, what interests me is the losers. Watching their faces on TV. A moment ago, they were in contention. They were <u>contenders</u>. Now, it's all over. Look at their faces. The victors are whooping it up, prancing, embracing, disporting themselves – if it's a division or a league or a World Series championship – on the field. Animal spirits. Running, shouting, screaming, hooting. It is not a nuanced scene. There are no subtle gradations of emotion among the winners. Whereas in the losers' dugout, there reigns the thoughtfulness of defeat. Faces are stoical. After the total engagement of physical

forces in pursuit of the same goal, omne animal est triste. The consolations of philosophy. With the losers, there is a certain wisdom – or at least contemplation. The winners are exulting, but the losers are thinking. As far as I'm concerned, there is no contest. I'm with the thinkers. Losing engenders thought.

But surely I romanticize. I idealize and over-generalize. I betray an ideological bias for the underdog. Always have. And now that I'm old, this lifelong tendency appears to have been fulfilled. I am the underdog – at the very least. There seems to be – to indulge my philosophical bent for a moment longer – an entelechy in my situation. A carrying out of the plan. But was it a plan? Did I really always want things to work out this way? When I was in my mid-twenties, a therapist once asked me, "Do you want to be old?" The insight of the question took my breath away. I confessed that I did, that I always had. And what exactly about it had I wanted? What about being old had I always wanted? To be confirmed in my constitutional pessimism? To have reached a point of at least imputed wisdom? Or did I just want for the game to be over -- to not have to compete anymore, to be among the contemplative, the subdued? (I mean "subdued" more in the sense of the quiet than the vanquished. Or am I just jollying myself along here?) To be no longer in the melee, but finally above it all, with the vantage-point of the

wise – or the imputedly so. To be no longer – if I ever was – at the mercy of animal spirits and strivings, but to be with the philosophers. "To philosophize is to prepare to die." Who said that? Socrates, of course. Well, better Socrates than Vince Lombardi. (What a snob I am!) Or is it just that I prefer to be with the losers of baseball than the winners of football? Baseball players seem more human to me. For one, they don't wear armor. (Except for the catcher. And as a former catcher myself – a softball catcher, in Tocaloma Boys' Club, third through sixth grade – I am totally on board with the catcher having protection. Slow-motion TV footage of catchers getting caught by foul tips always brings an uneasy feeling to my balls.) Plus, baseball's the most literary of our sports – has the richest literary tradition. Why is that? I'm not sure, but it may have to do with the slow pacing, the pitch-by-pitch narrative, the emergent storyline, the sudden drama.

I used to tell my writing students, when they'd gotten to what they thought was the end of a story, "It's not the end. It's not even the beginning of the end. It's just the end of the beginning." Things are starting to get interesting, I'd tell them; the plot is thickening; complications are arising. The middle of the story is about to begin. And the middle of the story is the hardest part to tell. At the same time you're moving the story

along and introducing complications, you're also setting up the ending. (As an apparent loser in the literary race, you see, I felt I had a certain degree of wisdom to impart. Nothing original, but tried and true.) The story is always longer and more complicated than you think, I told them. You want it to be over, but it's not. It's only just beginning – the real story, the heart of the matter, is only just beginning. And it knows better than you do. Follow the story where it wants to go. Don't be in a hurry. Let the story emerge. It cannot be rushed. It won't be rushed. You're in for the long haul. And subconsciously you (the students) know this, and are resisting it, which is why you're in such a hurry. You want the hard part to be over; you want the problems, the complications, to be already solved, and neatly dispatched. But it doesn't work that way. Life doesn't work that way, and neither do stories. You've got to play out the game. Don't drop the ball. Keep running. And don't run off the road. Someone – was it Anne Lamott? – said, "Writing a novel is like driving at night. You don't need to see to the end of the road to finish – you only need to see 20 feet in front of you. If you can do that, and you drive slow enough, you'll eventually get home." I liked to quote that to my students. It seemed like good advice to me – even for a short story. (Though I myself have always found the shorter forms harder than the longer forms. There's

less margin for error. The shoulder of the road is much narrower.)

I liked pointing out parallels for them between writing and life. Time is short. Energy is precious. People's attention is hard to get, and easy to lose. Make use of what you've got. Make up as little as possible. And if you make up anything, you've got to call it fiction. Not that I ever discouraged them from writing fiction. Most of them wanted to write fantasy, or sci-fi, or horror, so I suppressed my own tastes and let them do what they wanted. I just wanted them to do whatever they did as well as they could. I told them there were only three rules (except I didn't like the sound of "rules", so I called them "principles" instead): be interesting, be logical, and respect the language. (Henry James, adapted for undergraduates.) And I usually tried, as a writer, to follow my own advice – which is not as easy as it sounds.

And now I find myself at the beginning of the end. There is still a ways to go, and there will no doubt be some surprises yet; but we're definitely in the third act – with a nod to Bette Davis -- and the story is pretty much over. We're not yet in the end game (to mix my metaphors again), but the end game is being set up. We know who's going to win, and it's not going to be me. In this game, black always wins. As the poet-man said, "Death closes all; but something near the end,/Some work of noble note

may yet be done…" (Tennyson, "Ulysses"). Not so sure about the "noble note", but certainly some work may yet be done. (And even published!) The publishing race is to the young and swift, for sure; but old Jason (to mix my classical personages now) is not quite ready to throw in the fleece just yet.

II
Self-Pity

I mentioned earlier the matter of self-pity, and said it was worth further examination. (I actually just now wrote "the always-fatal error of self-pity", but then crossed it out, because I am not so sure it is always fatal.) I mean, yeah, in some people's eyes it is; and there is no question that in our American culture of self-reliance, there is little tolerance for self-pity. And if by that term we understand the mewling and whining of the self-sentimentalizing complainer, the crybaby, the self-perceived victim, then I share your impatience. I would suggest, though, that there are not only degrees but also kinds of self-pity. Unreflective self-pity is childish and tedious, and a waste of everybody's time. Agreed. But what I call <u>reflective</u> self-pity – self-pity that is conscious, that expands the range of self-knowledge – well, that is another matter. This kind of self-pity, it seems

to me, extends compassion, on the part of the self-pitier, to oneself as a suffering subject, worthy of sympathy. The fact that the sympathy is one's own, and that the subject and object of the pity are the same person, is bizarre, admittedly; but that shouldn't necessarily disqualify either subject or object from dispensing or receiving sympathy. To experience the "enlightened" form of self-pity, as both dispenser and receiver, is to participate in an act of self-awareness.

Let's take, once again, the example of baseball. If we can feel sorry for the losers of a baseball game – especially an important championship game – why can't they also feel sorry for themselves? The conventional answer is because feeling sorry for yourself is a display of weakness and self-indulgence. Also, when you are feeling self-pity, you're not in a position to learn anything from your mistakes, and learning from your mistakes is a fundamental principle of life. Furthermore, self-pity inclines you to make exceptions for yourself that are basically hypocritical, and guilty of a double standard. If you were to make these sorts of exceptions for someone else, they might see you as condescending. Similarly, to feel sorry for yourself is to condescend to yourself, to sell yourself short, to objectify yourself, to deceive yourself. Self-pity is a form of bad faith.

There is also a problem with the emotion of pity itself. It's seen as a condescending emotion. Most people do not want to be the object of pity. It's demeaning; it takes away our inherent human dignity. It is, as we say nowadays, disempowering. So to see someone demonstrating self-pity is to observe them demeaning and disempowering themselves. A distasteful spectacle, to say the least.

But I propose that the presence of reflexiveness -- not just reflectiveness, but the inherent reflexiveness of self-pity -- changes the situation considerably. The fact that the pity is coming from oneself, and aimed at oneself, gives the emotion of self-pity a psychological complexity and richness – and also, I believe, a sort of sanction – that have not been sufficiently appreciated. One is allowed, after all, to hold attitudes toward oneself that one would not allow oneself to hold toward another person. Take the acts of self-criticism, or self-disparagement, or self-effacement. In moderation, at least, these reflexive acts are perceived as salutary demonstrations of objectivity toward oneself. Kierkegaard said in his Journals that whereas it is customary to be subjective toward oneself and objective toward others, it was his goal, rather, to be objective toward himself and subjective toward others.

But isn't Kierkegaard's inversion really the opposite of what I'm proposing regarding self-pity? Aren't I saying

that self-pity is an instance of compassion – a form of subjectivity -- towards oneself? No, not really. It's not subjective – not completely subjective, anyway -- if one observes oneself doing it. The fact of observing oneself in the act of self-pity makes all the difference; it shows you are being objective toward yourself – or at least trying to be. And here is where the importance of the reflexiveness of self-pity comes into play. It's reflexive because it – the pity – redounds back to onseself. And it's also reflective, in that it's conscious and aware of itself as such. You might say that self-pity, at least in its most conscious form, is mindful pity. And one of the things it's mindful of is its own self-scrutiny. It is, in that sense, objective toward itself and its own processes. One is observing oneself feeling sorry for oneself – feeling compassion for oneself. One is observing oneself, objectively, feeling subjectively toward oneself – in the same way that, in Kierkegaard's stated ideal, one would feel subjectively toward someone else.

But it is true that the emotion of self-pity has fallen into disrepute – and rightly so, for the reasons sketched above. Feeling sorry for yourself is not only a pathetic spectacle; it also promotes bad emotional habits, and leads to ways of feeling that are, as they say, "counter-productive". But maybe this happens because we are looking at self-pity in the wrong way, and also calling

it by the wrong name. Terminology, after all, can be biasing, and feeling sorry for yourself is not quite the same thing as feeling the "lower" (less conscious) form of self-pity. It seems to me that when you are feeling sorry for yourself – or for anyone, for that matter – you are focusing on the emotion of sympathy, rather than condescension. Of course it all depends on the emotional disposition of the "feeler-sorry-for". One person who feels sorry for (whomever) may be feeling more sympathy than pity, whereas for another, the balance of feeling may be reversed. But I think we can all agree that sympathy is more positive, more constructive, than pity.

III
Getting the Ending Right

So what am I saying here? Am I just saying that if we substitute the idea of self-sympathy for self-pity, the whole matter would be set right, and we would have empaths (and self-empaths) rather than crybabies and pitiers? Well, that would be a start. But even if there were still a bunch of crybabies feeling self-pity rather than self-sympathy, and a bunch of pitiers only too willing to condescend to them, I still think the reflexiveness inherent in self-pity – if you're able to get beyond yourself enough to see it – is a phenomenon worthy of more consideration, and perhaps a little more respect.

But what does all of this have to do with my being at the beginning of the end of my story? Is the relabeling of self-pity as self-sympathy just a defense against the stigma of pathos inherent in my own situation? Maybe. There is no doubt that, like anyone else, I am sensitive to accusations of self-pity; no one wants to present as a pathetic creature. And it's even worse to be the object of self-pity than of "simple" pity -- just as it's worse to be the pitier than the pitied (bad as it is to be the latter). Because as the pitier, you're guilty of condescension, of applying a double-standard by dispensing an attitude you wouldn't yourself want to be on the receiving end of.

We could relabel our terms here too, in the interest of changing our perspective on the matter. Instead of saying I'm at the beginning of the end of my story, I could say I'm at the point where the different strands of my narrative are finally coming together – however it is they're going to do that. Childhood, boyhood, youth (to echo Tolstoy), then maturity. And now, the beginning of old age. OK, but to put a narrative structure to it, to life processes, seems both obvious and facile. Better, maybe, just to see it as a natural outcome for a writer – especially one prone to draw parallels between writing and life. Nothing original there either. Then again, as I tell my students, originality shouldn't be the goal in writing a story. Getting it right should be the goal –

however you can do that. If you get it right, originality will come on its own. Which is to say, if you put your story together carefully and skillfully, it will be original enough. Here I like to tell them about Borges' realization regarding metaphor, which I think was in an interview with him, or quoted from an interview. He told of how, as a young poet, he was always searching for the fresh image, the original metaphor – something that would be new, and strikingly different. But now that he was old, he'd come to see that the best images and metaphors were the old ones (he didn't say "clichéd", he said "old"): life is a road, time is a river, hope is a bird. And here I can't help thinking of Nabokov's sublime "found poem", taken verbatim from an exercise in a Russian grammar textbook, which he used as the epigraph for his novel "The Gift":

> An oak is a tree. A rose is a flower. A deer is an animal. A sparrow is a bird. Russia is our fatherland. Death is inevitable.

Getting it right is, in the end, the most important thing – and, as in the study of grammar, maybe the only thing (as Vince Lombardi would say). And getting the ending right is a big part of that. I think a lot about the ending these days. I think about it every day. Which is maybe a little morbid. I mean, I'm not sick – no major health problems. Overweight, yes. I've got GERD (Gastro-Esophageal Reflux Disorder), and I suspect I've also got Irritable Bowel

Syndrome. (I'll spare you the details, except to note that I first became aware of this problem nine years ago on a street in Torino, Italy that I dubbed "Shit Street" – Via di Merda -- because it was there that I experienced what I called my "Gran Torino". Fresh figs, plus a couple of cappuccinos in quick succession, and you can do the math.)

On the whole, though, I've gotten off very easy so far. But who knows what the future holds? My mother, after she was diagnosed with a rare and incurable blood disease (amyloidosis), said to me – in that wry way she had when confessing something of which she was mildly ashamed – that she was thinking a lot about "the end", about the details of the end. What would go fatally wrong where, and how. Morbid, yes – and who could blame her? As it happened, the end was gruesome – gruesomer, perhaps, than she had imagined in even her most morbid fantasies. Her feet curled up in a ghastly fashion, caused by neuropathy – perhaps as a result of the amyloidosis, or perhaps from the chemotherapy that had initially been prescribed by an oncologist (dubbed by my father "The Duchess of Death") who had wrongly diagnosed her condition as lymphoma. (The diagnosis was later corrected to amyloidosis at the Mayo Clinic.) In the last six months of her life my mother, who had always been emotionally accessible, and even demonstrative, retreated into her own mostly silent world, perhaps because of a moribund depression, or perhaps – as

my wife came to believe – as a symptom of Alzheimer's. (The amyloidosis had as one of its effects the buildup of beta-amyloid protein – the principal agent in Alzheimer's – in all of her major organs, including her brain.) But we will never know whether she developed Alzheimer's at the end, because there was no autopsy. The cause of death was recorded as amyloidosis.

I worry a lot about Alzheimer's myself. I forget names, and sometimes also common nouns, which worries me -- especially as a writer. I know I'm hardly unique in these fears – Alzheimer's is a bugaboo of the elderly – and this knowledge is even something of a reassurance. But not that much. Because here there enters the kind of thinking I refer to as "The Airplane Syndrome". It operates as follows. You're in an airplane, and it occurs to you that this airplane could crash. Then you reassure yourself that air travel is a much safer form of travel than, say, car travel. It is commonly said (and because you don't have the actual figures, you resort to vague forms of adduction like "it is commonly said") that air travel is the safest form of long-distance travel. That may be, your devil's advocate replies; but the problem is that while plane crashes are statistically much less common than car crashes, per capita they are always, when they occur, much more deadly. There are rarely any survivors. This is certainly true regarding the deadliness, answers your

better angel; still, given the odds, the possibility of any one particular large commercial airliner crashing is almost negligible. Ah, rejoins the devil's advocate, but the thinking of the passengers on that rare plane that did crash was surely identical to your own line of reasoning. They no doubt sought to reassure themselves with the same thoughts as you – and look where it got them.

And so it goes with my "Airplane Syndrome", back and forth, until I finally succeed in turning my mind away from the subject. And it's the same with my "Alzheimer's Syndrome". The odds of my getting Alzheimer's are fairly slim – though not nearly as slim as the odds of my plane crashing. (The Alzheimer's Society says that one in fourteen people over 65 develops the disease – that's 7%. For people over 80, the risk rises to 17%.) But wait, pipes up my devil's advocate. Did those people who got diagnosed with Alzheimer's think, before they were diagnosed, that they were any likelier than anyone else to get it? And so on, and so forth. In the end, The Alzheimer's Syndrome is no more reassuring than The Airplane Syndrome, and the only thing to do is to give it up and think about something else.

I may not be a crybaby, but I definitely am a worry-wart, which can be just as tedious. But enough of that; we have bigger fish to fry. My mother began imagining the details of her end after she received her death sentence of

an incurable and fatal blood disease, in the face of what she knew would happen soon. (She died within two years of diagnosis.) I am not in the same situation at all; my end, though I can see it distantly approaching, is still merely notional and unspecific. Of course that could all change instantly: stroke, heart attack – or more gradually: cancer, Alzheimer's. Nevertheless, I am going to try to still my worrying brain and think about higher things (paulo maiora canamus, Vergil says): the smell I want to leave behind, the example I want to set, the things I still want to write (and publish!). The moral of the story, if that doesn't sound too heavy-handed.

It is especially important that the end be worthy of "The Tradition", as I call it. (The aristocratic note, I realize, is unfortunate, since my allegiance, through my mother -- Scranton-born and –bred -- has always been with the middle class – the "very best" of the middle class, as she would have said: with fundamental decency, unostentatiousness, unpretentiousness.) The Tradition" is suffused with the values of my mother – and my father as well, though perhaps to a lesser extent, since the aristocratic note comes unmistakably from him, who grew up rich in Manhattan, and went to Exeter and Harvard. (Though he redeemed himself, at least in part, by marrying a Scranton girl.) Together they taught me to value the underdog, as well as loyalty and simplicity (though

obviously, this lesson didn't carry over into my prose style). But it was from my mother alone that I acquired my feeling for losers. I suppose she considered herself one of them. No, that last sentence was disingenuous – I know she considered herself one of them. I can still hear her saying to me, in one of her wry, confessional asides, "I'm such a loser, Josh." Was there also perhaps a note of pride in her voice when she said this? If so, the pride was not so much in the fact of being a loser as in her being honest enough to confess it.

The Tradition is not anything venerable or grand or hallowed; it is, rather, just my abiding sense of the values my parents, and especially my mother, stood for. The values they wanted me to absorb and embody. The sort of person they saw me as. And now, as I begin the last act, the sort of smell I want to leave behind -- the memory-impression others will have of me after I'm gone. Of course, one doesn't have control over these things. One has an overall sense of the smell one would like to leave behind – but that sense could be very different from the reality of the memories that other people have of you. Just as my sense of The Tradition may not be the same as my parents', who never actually used the term. It would have seemed too grand for them. Not that they had anything against grandness, in its place. And grandness of spirit,

we certainly would have all agreed, was something worth valuing.

So is it that – a certain grandness of spirit – that I am aiming at as my own legacy? If it is, that seems like a rather pretentious aim – and as such, it would run exactly counter to the spirit of "the tradition", which values unpretentiousness. Yet grandness of spirit is something that I, as an unreconstructed romantic, very much value. Not necessarily for myself – that seems more than a bit much – but as a kind of spiritual touchstone in the world. There are certainly a number of persons, both historical and fictional, who embody grandness of spirit: besides the obvious figures of Jesus, Buddha, Moses and Gandhi, there are also those in my personal pantheon: Keats, Dostoevsky's Alyosha Karamazov, Tolstoy's Pierre Bezukhov, Albert Camus, Lincoln, Churchill. A motley crew indeed – but I'm sure you all could come up with lists of your own. They are the ones whose smell – the smell of whose juices, so to speak – still wafts through the world. I wish my posthumous fragrance to blend (inconspicuously, unostentatiously, subtly) with theirs, though in a decidedly more minor key (to mix metaphors for the last time). Keats said, with breathtaking confidence – which turned out to be completely justified – that after his death, he "would be among the English poets". I have no such confidence, nor expectations, nor even hopes. No, that last part was

disingenuous again. I do have such distant hopes, absurd and presumptuous as they are. I hope for some sort of posthumous recognition as a memoirist. Prehumous recognition would be nice as well, but so far that's not happening, and I have begun to expect that it never will -- though I continue to hope to the contrary. But the hope of the good smell is almost enough. Because that is part of The Tradition, too.