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Ending the Yarn

The yarn is the great American story. With its rambling, deadpan style, its interlacing of truth and fantasy, and its peculiar ending forms, the yarn is tightly woven into the fabric of U.S. culture. For instance, the burlesque humor of the old Southwest is directly traceable to oral raconteurs-turned-writers.[1] In addition, the open-ended yarn anticipates the open-endedness of much American fiction (Twain, Faulkner, Wolfe, Ellison, etc.): Furthermore, the folk group in which yarnspinning developed — the Anglo-American male of the frontier-was, for better or worse, the dominant cultural group throughout American history. In order to be accepted by this company, one had to learn to play the yarning game. Indeed, though not an exclusively national story type (see the Munchausen tales [Raspe]), the charming, zesty yarn is a prime expression of the American temperament.

On a narrative continuum the yarn would be roughly mid-way between traditional oral forms: the myth, the folktale, the legend, and newer literary forms: the sketch, the short story, the novel (Rourke 181-2). Besides the tall tale, which is a kind of yarn,[2] the story types that sometimes share subjects,[3] style, structure, context, and functions with the yarn are the local legend, the personal experience story, and the humorous anecdote. The yarn is the folk narrative that is the most free from convention, the most flexible, the most localized and personalized, the most improvised, and the most artistic because the *manner* of telling is far more important than the matter(Twain in Botkin 499).[4]

The main character in a yarn is the storyteller. Yarns are told most often in the first person, in vernacular, in a straight-faced

monotone. This mask of innocent seriousness lends credibility in order to gain the listeners' trust. Moreover, the teller mimics various stylistic qualities of speech like pauses, repetition, repairs, run-ons, elaboration, additions, and so on. Yarnspinning is the art of gab. (See Twain's *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* in Flanagan and Hudson 251-4).

The threads of reality and fiction are knit together using three main narrative stitches. *Digression* is a mass of circumstantial detail that distracts and confuses in order to hide the humorous point. It also extends length and slows pace, thereby relaxing and naturalizing the telling. Mark Twain parodied digression in "Grandfather's Old Ram" in *Roughing It* (382-90). *Understatement* distorts the truth to produce paradox and irony, and, hence, humor, And, thirdly, *exaggeration* carefully twists facts to create absurd incongruity. As Viv Edwards and Thomas Sienckwiez explain, "Exaggeration extends the truth in the search for the boundaries of human experience and releases the tensions which surround these boundaries" (162).

Oral yarns are dramatically perfomed; written yarns imitate their style, form, and language. As Bruce Rosenberg points out, the differences are not momentous:

> (...) the aesthetic informing the [folk narrative] is not much different from that of narrative prepared in writing for a print medium. Oral narrative and written narrative are united by the psychology of the audience which, in the aesthetic of Kenneth Burke, is the form of literature. (19)

The unsure ending of an oral yarn is a performance feature more than a structural feature. Printed yarns have a clearer ending, but it may just be the illusion of closure, an arbitrary cutting-off, perhaps even the error of some plot-oriented folklorist.

Yarn endings are varied and distinct from those of other folk narratives. The *anticlimax* or letdown type of story ending is the basis for the unpredictability of yarns. After a dramatic build-up the missing climactic bang catches the listener off guard and provokes the humor of surprise. A *restoration of solemnity*--a mock serious or even melancholic dénouement, including a claim of truth--closes the diverting interlude of the yarn, easing the return back to

the gravity of reality. Similarly, the *frame* separates the oral from the written, as represented by the narrating character and the storytelling character. (See Thorpe's "The Big Bear of Arkansas" [Flanagan and Hudson 255-63] for a full frame, Twain's "Jim Baker's Bluejay Yarn" in *A Tramp Abroad* (14-21) for a partial frame with implied closure, and Harris's "Sicily Burns's Wedding" [Flanagan and Hudson 263-8] for a completely implied frarne.) The metanarrative frame allows the reader to identify with the educated urban writer and sit vicariously to hear the uneducated, dialect-speaking rural artist at work — to sympathize with him and to mourn the passing of the old ways. A *hyperbolic tag* may be added after the climax of the yarn to raise the stakes of believability. This includes, for example, the type of catch tale in which the first person storyteller is seriously injured in the climax and then pauses to elicit a question from the audience. "Then what happened?" somebody asks. The teller answers, "I died, of course!" In addition, a *coda,* that is, a short isolated incident tacked onto the end of a yarn, imitates the storytelling context in which one tale leads to another and exemplifies the episodic nature of folk stories. Lastly, *formulaic endings,* for instance a final rhyme, though not frequent in yarns, recall an ancient oral tradition. As John Burrison reports,

> In Afro-American tradition it appears most often as "I stepped on a piece of tin, the tin bend, and that's the way my story end" ... while the most common Anglo-southern closing tag is "I couldn't hang around because 1 had on paper clothes, and I was afraid it might rain or the wind might blow." (19)

These, then, are the six forms of yarn closure, which are found alone and in combination.

Stories are not separate from life; they delineate one's personal identity (gender, ethnicity, age, family, place of origin), belief system (attitudes, prejudices, tastes), affective realm (fears, hopes, desires), social network, behavior patterns, and so on. Stories are a form of communication; they require an audience which brings to the telling a complete set of cultural baggage. In the days of do-it-yourself entertainment, men would sit for hours on the "liar's bench" by the pot-bellied stove at the general store,

or in a hundred other settings (like the steamboats of Twain's *Life on the Mississippi),* and spin their whimsical tales and grotesque brags. Stories were traded in some locales between blacks and whites, both before and after slavery. Some African-American story tellers told tales to white children, as portrayed in the *Uncle Remus Stories* by Joel Chandler Harris. In African-American story sessions- accurately described by Zora Neale Hurston in *Mules and Men* - women were also accepted. Whatever the setting, the context of the yarn is the individual's real world.

Tales are printed singly and read singly, but almost never told singly. Just as with joke-telling, yarns are told in sequence, forming an episodic chain. If told in the first person they become "my personal adventures". Or they may be the adventures of an established folk character, either local or national, man or comic superman, although as Mody Boatright says: "the accretion of folk tales around a. few names is mainly the work of writers, not the folk" (94). Storytelling sessions are cooperative and/or competitive, consisting of formal turns of monologues. According to Roger Welsh, "During such exchanges, there may be a silence between the stories, as if the audience were pondering the wonder of the event just described - but the pauses are more likely opportunities to recall even more amazing tales" (11). This phenomenon of "going one better" is called capping. Carolyn Brown explains, "Often a tale that seems to end on its most impossible point will be capped by another speaker who provides a resolution either by undercutting the first speaker or by adding an even more absurd claim" (20). The proud winners of the on-going contest - the expert yarnspinners - were rewarded with social status in the community.

The functions of folklore include: transmission of culture, reinforcement of values, maintaining conformity, creating a sense of group affinity, providing an outlet for social tension, etc. The most interesting function of the yarn is initiation (Brown 36). Yarns divide a listening audience into two groups: the initiated in-group, and the uninitiated out-group, that is, those who understand and appreciate the yarn and those who don't. The telling is the same

but the effect is quite different. Yarns, though outlandishly fictitious, are told as true narratives: *as if* they were meant to be believed. The teller pretends to believe his tale and make it believed, and the initiated pretend to believe it, while the uninitiated can feel confused about the correct attitude to assume (non-belief being as inappropriate as belief), The uninitiated, then, undergo a sort of test of mental poise and sense of humor, and if they do not pass they are made to feel foolish and inferior (a similar but more intense feeling as that of not "getting" a joke). They may be ignored, become a laughing stock, or even be excluded from the social community. The yarn's anticlimactic style plays with deluding expectations and gives the storyteller the power to pull legs because when the listeners do not know what will happen next they are at his mercy. Roland Barthes's hermeneutic code, that is, following a narrative to find out if the outcome is that expected or not, does not apply to yarns because anticipation of events is impossible (Cohan and Shires 123).

Yarns are mainstream America's family folklore. Children, tourists, greenhorns, migrants, city slickers, and foreigners may be the victims of this practical joke-like ritual. Yarns encourage or discourage assimilation into the dominant social group. America has a history of mobility and antagonistic encounter between different individuals and collectivities. Communities formed fresh in the expanding American frontier, and this caused tension between firstcomer and newcomer. (See the folk drama *The Arkansas Traveler* as discussed in Bluestein 80-90.) American life has been marked by conflict between: Old World and New, north and south, east and west, rural and urban, educated and uneducated, and, in particular, between different ethnic groups. Whether Chinese, Italian, Norwegian, or Mexican, immigrants already possessed their own stories, narrative forms, comic sense, and storytelling style. Women also had their own story bag. Women and minorities, therefore, often excluded themselves from yarning because they didn't like this type of tale, considering it stupid, boring, wordy, or weird. They were not allowed in or did not desire to be included in the clannish storytelling circle. Nevertheless, yarns also help to cope with

these unfriendly realities and have a pleasure-inducing effect-converting conflict into diversion. As William Bascom concluded,

> Here, indeed, is the basic paradox of folklore, that while it plays a vital role in transmitting and maintaining the institutions of a culture and in forcing the individual to conform to them, at the same time it provides socially approved outlets for the repressions which these same institutions impose upon him (298).

Folkloristics scholars have studied the structure of the folktale and other classic genres, but none, to my knowledge, have investigated yarn endings in depth. Rosenberg, in *Folklore and Literature: Rival Siblings,* lists some of the attempts made to diagram folk narrative form:

> One of Bremond's major conclusions is that all stories proceed from a satisfactory state through a degredation (sic) of that state back to one that is satisfactory. But this is hardly new; it barely, if at all, alters Todorov's assertions that the minimal complete plot consists in the passage from one equilibrium to another. .. It is hardly different from Dundes's description of the North American Indian tale's progress from "Lack" to "Liquidation of Lack", a modification of Propp by way of Pike... All of these definitions are, after all, confirmations of Aristotle's earlier formulation of beginning, middle, and end. (98)

Danish folklorist Axel Olrik identified a series of laws governing the *Sage* or folk narratives. The first is *the Law of Opening (das Gesetz des Einganges)* and the *Law of Closing (das Gesetz des Abschlusses).*

> The *Sage* does not begin with sudden action and does not end abruptly... The *Sage* begins by moving from calm to excitement, and after the concluding event... the *Sage* ends by moving from excitement to calm... The constant reappearance of this element of terminal calm shows that it is based, not just on a manifestation of the inclination of an individual narrator, but on the formal constraint of an epic law. (131-2)

Though the observations are valid, difficulties exist in the application of these theories to yarn endings. The laws governing the world of *Sage (Sagenwelt)* imply a "superorganic conception of

culture" (Dundes 129), as something separate from ordinary human reality. The universitality and durability of Olrik's laws are impressive (folklore is, after all, based on fixed forms), but the paradigm takes, in a sense, the "folk out of folklore" (Dundes 130), refusing to consider any psychological or individual factors. Olrik's system seems to be based on research done only on written folklore texts. In his exploration and arrangement of those texts, he ignored the dynamics of storytelling performance, the style, the context, and the functions of tales. For example, he failed to mention the fact that yarns, like ballads, epics, and other recitations, begin and end gradually, without essential information, in order to gather or dismiss a group of listeners. About the laws Rosenberg commented, "The tendency of morphological analysis is to make all folktales look structurally alike. The same would be true of any corpus of narratives described by a similar system" (101). Yarns, given their singularities, resist being lumped together with all other narratives for analysis.

Narrative closure responds to profound human needs, but creative experiments with more open endings — as in yarns — respond to other basic impulses. The debate about the nature of endings demands exploring the goal of narratives in a metaphysical and psychological sense. In John Kucich's summary of Frank Kermode's closure theories he notes, "Kermode... sees endings as the expression of a human wish for order and centrality... the goal... is the self-conscious imposition of order on the chaos of experience" (89). J. Hillis Miller, in "The Problematic of Ending", proposes:

> [The untying of a narrative] is like the explosive release felt when one sees the point of a joke, or the pleasure of the final éclaircissement, the "he done it" at the end of a detective story. The contrary pleasure, however, no less intense, is that of closure, the neat folding together of elaborate narrative materials in a single resolution leaving every story line tucked in. (5)

These tying and untying forms of closure — like the twin sensual delights of wrapping and unwrapping a gift — could be exemplified by the *surprise punchline* of a joke or anecdote and the *predictable conclusion* (the closure tagmeme "they lived happily

ever after") (Kermode 153) of a folktale or legend. Yarns contain traits of each: the element of unforeseen revelation through exaggeration and understatement, but also the knotting of narrative loose ends in a deliberate, leisurely *dénouement.*

Whether yarns end or merely stop, whether the endings are closed or open, conceivably remains impossible to determine (Miller 7). Yarn endings are closed in the sense that, though they are purposely weak and flirt with formlessness (Kucich 89), there is still a return to stability, a "calm", a "satisfactory state", an "equilibrium", a "liquidation of lack", an "order", a "completeness", a "resolution of conflict". (Freytag's pyramid applies!) On the other hand, yarn plots are not cyclic like folktale plots but are disjointed, loosely-linked, and fragmentary, so a return to the starting point does not indicate closure. In another sense, the tale never ends because it is continually re-told and re-elaborated; the storytelling session goes on from day to day and generation to generation. Every *dénouement* leads to the calm necessary to begin another version with another climax and another *dénouement.* If this effect is not of true open-endedness, at least it is the illusion of open-endedness.

The New World encouraged overstatement; the early explorers sent back fantastical reports on the enormousness of nature; North America had to become the land of tall tales. In the rebellious United States, the classic folktales of kings, fairies, and pots of gold became the droll, outrageous yarns. With their verve and violence, their optimism and cliquishness, yarns express the rich spirit of the land of freedom and expansion. The limitless frontier (both physical and imaginary) fostered tall stories less limited by conventions of form, contents, and closure. As Alessandro Portelli asserts, "The stories don't close not only because America is open, but because its contradictions remain open" (93). *(Le storie non si chiudono non solo perché l'America è aperta, ma perchè aperte restano le sue contraddizioni).*

1 Creative writers in the ante-bellum period (1830s-60s) of Southwest humor (Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Joseph G. Baldwin, Johnson J. Hooper, George W. Harris, Joseph M. Field, T.B. Thorpe, etc.) were also expert oral storytellers (Blair 74-79, 96). Their written-down yarns appeared in the New York newspaper *The Spirit of the Times*, edited by William T. Porter, and in comic almanacs. A second generation of post-war humor writers including Artemus Ward, Petroleum V. Nasby, Josh Billings, Bill Arp, and Mark Twain, continued the tradition.

2 Most people, including even some genre scholars, use yarn and tall tale interchangeably; they can be the same, but I agree with a distinction made by Mark Twain ("How to Tell a Story" in Botkin 49-501), James Tidwell (582), and B.A. Botkin (491) that the yarn is a larger narrative category that includes the tall tale.

3 Yarn topics typically include: hunting and fishing, animals, accidents, escapes, fights, tests, hoaxes, thefts, trades, weather, nature, seduction and marriage, wisdom, cleverness, foolishness, laziness, and folk heroes like Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, or Mike Fink.

4 Given the importance of yarn performance style, the motif method of folk narrative indexing is of little use. Many yarns are based on traditional motifs (Thompson X900-X1899), but many others are original, based on personal experience stories or non-indexed motifs. Yarns cannot be taken out of context and recorded as summaries of their narrative essentials.

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