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Endings and Meanings: A Study of George MacDonald’s *The Portent*

Rebecca Thomas Ankeny

“A love story, that came to a bad end up at the Hall years ago. A tutor was in it, they say. But I don’t know the rights of it’’” (127). Thus Duncan Campbell hears his own story summarized by an acquaintance who does not know that Duncan was the tutor. Planning to elope, Duncan and Lady Alice are surprised by his employer and her guardian, Lord Hilton and the love story seems to come to an end. In 1860, when the third and final installment of *The Portent* was published in *Cornhill Magazine*, George MacDonald left Duncan not knowing whether Alice is alive. Duncan is hopeful, however:

They say that Time and Space exist not, save in our thoughts. If so, then that which has been, is, and the past can never cease. She is mine, and I shall find her—what matters it where, or when, or how? Till then, my soul is but a moonlighted chamber of ghosts; and I sit within, the dreariest of them all. When she enters, it will be a home of love; and I wait—I wait. (*Cornhill* 83)

Four years later, MacDonald published *The Portent* as a book, adding to it material that doubled its length. Most of the additions come after the first conclusion and move the story toward a happy ending:

My wife purchased for me the possession of my forefathers, and there we live in peace and hope. To her I owe the delight which I feel every day of my life in looking upon the haunts of my childhood as still mine. They help me to keep young. And so does my Alice’s hair; for although much grey now mingles with mine, hers is as dark as ever. For her heart, I know that cannot grow old; and while the heart is young, man may laugh old Time in the face, and dare him to do his worst. (*Portent* 160)

Though both endings affirm the persistence of human relationships despite temporal circumstances, in the first ending Duncan forlornly holds onto memories while he hopes against hope and endures the present; in the second he happily reunites with his love and returns home. Because
it often seems true that a story’s end places certain requirements on the shape and direction of a narrative, the question arises of what MacDonald changed about the first version to make possible the second. Further, the change in how the story ends changes the power of the portent itself in the story, and this change highlights issues of determinism and freedom in the narratives we make of our lives.

Writing two decades after Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Peter Brooks, in his *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, remarks: “As Frank Kermode has put it, man is always ‘in the middest,’ without direct knowledge of origin or endpoint, seeking the imaginative equivalents of closure that will confer significance on experience” (95). Brooks paraphrases Sartre, saying that “[a]ll narration may be in essence obituary in that . . . the retrospective knowledge that it seeks, the knowledge that comes after, stands on the far side of the end, in human terms on the far side of death” (95); he also applies Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to fictional plots and concludes: “Desire is the wish for the end, for fulfillment, but fulfillment must be delayed so that we can understand it in relation to origin and to desire itself . . . . Plot mediates meanings within the contradictory human world of the eternal and the mortal” (111, 112). In *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode suggests that our story-telling derives from the paradigm of apocalypse, the belief in an ending that gives meaning to the events of our lives. A clear example is the version of the human story that begins with Genesis and ends with the Apocalypse of St. John. Kermode writes:

. . . to make sense of their span, [humans] need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The end they imagine will reflect their irredicibly intermediary preoccupation. They fear it, and as far as we can see have always done so; the End is a figure of their own deaths. (So, perhaps, are all ends in fiction . . .). (7)

Both Brooks and Kermode, then, lead us to consider why *The Portent* has two endings, the first absorbed into and overwhelmed by the second.

The portent in MacDonald’s story is the sound of a galloping horse with a loose shoe and derives from the family legend of two Scottish brothers who loved the same woman. She returned the love of the older brother. The younger killed the older and abducted the woman, placing her across the saddle before him. Her hair became entangled with the horse’s hooves, and her neck was broken. The spirit of this younger brother can be seen by those
with second sight, and the horse can be heard by those with second hearing. It portends disaster. Duncan Campbell hears the horse several times, each time to his hurt. When he goes to England as a tutor, he falls in love with Lord Hilton’s ward, Lady Alice, who also hears the portent. Just before they are separated, they both hear hoof beats and the loose shoe. The first version ends with that separation, envisioning it as permanent until death reunites them. The second version brings Duncan back to Scotland, where he learns from his old nurse, a seer, that Alice still lives. He returns to the Hall where they rediscover each other and again plan to elope. When the discovery scene repeats, Lady Alice hears the portent, but this time they escape.

MacDonald made many changes in the serialized version of The Portent as he prepared it for its second publication. Many of these can be explained by editing preferences, and his editing is frequently in the direction of economy. For example, the Cornhill version states: “Fearful stories were told of many an awful gulf, many a sullen pool, and many a dread and dizzy height upon that terror-haunted mountain” (618). The book version reads: “Fearful stories were told of the gulfs, sullen waters, and dizzy heights upon that terror-haunted mountain” (4). Unsurprisingly, however, some of the changes show the necessities of preparing for a different ending. Duncan opens the first version by explaining that he has written this for his doctor, to whom he leaves the fate of the document. Duncan ends this passage with the words “my decease,” which preview the last paragraph of the story, where he is simply waiting to die. The second version omits that opening, substituting in a similar space a lengthier description of the hill on which his home stood. This previews the second ending, in which he returns to that home and that hill. Duncan ends the first installment in Cornhill Magazine by saying he has never revisited his home. In version two, he has to omit this because he pays an intermediate visit to his old nurse and finally purchases the land and lives there. Duncan ends the first version with the present tense: “I know not whether she is alive or dead. I have sought her far and near; have wandered over England, France, and Germany, hopelessly searching; . . . I have not found her” (Cornhill 83). In the second version, this passage is necessarily in past tense: “For years and years I knew not whether she was alive or dead . . . . I did not find her” (Portent 93). In version one, he also previews the story to follow by telling the reader he heard the portent twice with disastrous effect in “a period of my history involving such events, that the thought of writing it makes me tremble” (Cornhill 630). This passage is necessarily omitted in the book because Duncan has come out victorious and no
longer trembles when he remembers the past. A further effect of the omission is that less importance is placed on the portent itself as a controlling element.

Other changes show how eventual happiness can lessen the poignancy of memories of pain. In the first version he refers to his memories of the haunted chamber, where he surreptitiously met Lady Alice, as sorrowful; he removes that word in the second version because the sorrow has been replaced with happiness. In the first version, Alice never came to Duncan’s room again; in the second, she did. In the first version, he says about Alice, “Alas! what was she ever to me but an apparition” (Cornhill 672); MacDonald takes that out of the second version for the obvious reason that by the second ending, she is physically present with him. His first version has Lady Alice’s “calm, beautiful, infinite” spirit “ruffled,” “dimmed,” and “dashed” by its reentry into the world on her awakening out of sleepwalking; he takes that disturbance out of the second version because the disturbance is again made unimportant by the eventual return of peace and beauty.

Duncan’s descriptions of his own feelings of despair show the distancing effect of complete happiness. In the first version, he says:

Gladly would I die for a thousand years, might I then awake for one night in the haunted chamber, a ghost among the ghosts who crowd its stained moonbeams, and see my dead Alice smiling across the glimmering rays, and beckoning me to the old nook, she, too, having come awake, out of the sleep of death, into the dream of the haunted chamber. (Cornhill 82)

In the second, he still remembers, but there is space between him and the memory: “In the griefs that followed I often thought with myself that I would gladly die . . .” (Portent 86). He does something similar to the passage that ends the first version (quoted above in the opening paragraph). In the second version, he places that passage in quotation marks as something he said to himself at the time. He ends that revised chapter with his worry at that time that the entire love story might have been his own madness. The effect of the first change, the quotation marks, is to place at a distance his desperate waiting to die. The second change implies that such a desperation is akin to madness; this different attitude derives from the conviction in the second ending that happiness can be won in the present rather than being something he must defer until eternity.

One passage added to the second version helps emphasize the movement toward a happy ending. In the first chapter, Duncan writes:

Here I would often lie, as the sun went down, and watch the
silent growth of another sea, which the stormy ocean of the wind could not disturb—the sea of the darkness. First it would begin to gather in the bottom of hollow places. Deep valleys, and all little pits on the hillsides, were wellsprings where it garnered, and whence it seemed to overflow, till it had buried the earth beneath its mass, and, rising high into the heavens, swept over the faces of the stars, washed the blinding day from them, and let them shine, down through the waters of the dark, to the eyes of men below. I would lie till nothing but the stars and the dim outlines of hills against the sky was to be seen, and then rise and go home, as sure of my path as if I had been descending a dark staircase in my father’s house. (Portent 3)

This passage welcomes the darkness in a way the first version does not, helping us to see it as not exclusively the domain of the portent. Although night is often associated with the forces of evil, and the portent most often fulfills itself at night in the story, night also expresses “potentiality” (Cirlot 77, 228). We find here that Duncan can find his way in the darkness. Although he is soon completely lost in the dark and nearly dies, this earlier assurance anticipates his finding his way through the dark passages of his life to his home. We also see that darkness makes it possible to see the stars; stars represent “the forces of the spirit struggling against the forces of darkness” (Cirlot 309). Their persistence foreshadows the persistence of Duncan and Lady Alice in their struggle against the portent and its evil history. Finally, the reference to descending a staircase in his father’s house resembles the change that Duncan says takes place in their relationship at the end of the book: “It was as if the gates of the unseen world were closing against us, because we had shut ourselves up in the world of the present But we let it go gladly. . . . In fact, we are now, I am glad to say, very much like other people” (Portent 139). Their love has moved them from the “region of the psychological” to the ordinary world, a move mirrored in the descent down the stairs in Duncan’s early metaphor.

Through the doctor’s description of his conviction that sometimes he felt he was watching by a woman’s bed rather than Duncan’s, Duncan is convinced Alice still lives. This occasions his setting down on paper the story of the first half. And this is the only truly squeaky hinge of the revised story.

[25] I promised to account fully for my apparently senseless excitement; and that evening I commenced the narrative which forms the preceding part of this story. Long before I
reached its close, my exultation had vanished, and, as I wrote it for him, it ended with the expressed conviction that she must be dead. Ere long, however, the hope once more revived. While, however, the narrative was in progress, I gave him a summary . . . . (*Portent* 98-99)

This is MacDonald’s attempt to absorb into the book the fact that Duncan’s story had appeared in print in a version that ended with Duncan waiting to die. The Duncan ostensibly writing here would not have ended, his narrative “with the expressed conviction that she must be dead.” He had just received assurance that she was alive. The two “however” sentences side by side also signal an awkward transition between two versions of a story. At the same time, the effect of Duncan’s waffling on whether Alice is dead works to emphasize the tentativeness MacDonald has introduced into the interpretations Duncan makes of his own story.

Duncan retells the story several times in the second half. These retellings underscore a possibility subtly introduced into the first half that there are explanations alternative to the dominating portent and the legend it represents. The most obvious of these occurs in chapter three: “And so I looked back upon the strange history of my past; sometimes asking myself, ‘Can it be that all this really happened to the same me, who am now thinking about it in doubt and wonder?’” (*Portent* 28). Besides questioning his own sanity, he comes to himself after his illness to find his head shaved and the scar from his sabre-cut painful, causing him to wonder later if Dr. Ruthwell had performed an operation on his skull (*Portent* 96, 97).

This tentativeness continues in the summary he gives Dr. Ruthwell. He explains away the weirdness of the story by proposing a distant blood relationship that probably produced a psychological attraction that combined with love made it possible for them to practically think each other’s thoughts (*Portent* 99). Duncan uses this psychological sympathy to explain how they had such strange correspondences in their personal histories: “my memory being open to her retrospection, she saw my story, and took it for her own” (99). Duncan’s summary shows that he is looking for alternative ways to explain his story.

When he goes home to see his old nurse, Margaret, he also tells her his story: “My voice sounded to myself as I spoke, not like my own, but like its echo from the vault of some listening cave, or like [26] the voices one hears beside as sleep is slowly creeping over the sense” (*Portent* 114). This description suggests that he is placing some distance between himself and his
story. He needs this distance if he is to break out of the pattern established in the family legend.

He shows his need for natural explanations of the eerie event that occurs while he waits beside Margaret in her trance. “I saw two fiery eyes looking in at the window, huge, and wide apart. Next, I saw the outline of a horse’s head, in which the eyes were set; and behind, the dimmer outline of a man’s form seated on the horse” (Portent 116). In retrospect he says that the sword he wanted would have been less useful than a “soothing draught.” He also notes that he heard nothing. Both statements show his desire to avoid the supernatural explanation. When he leaves the house the next morning, he “look[es] back on the vision of the night as on one of those illusions to which the mind, busy with its own suggestions, is always liable. . . . The more of the marvellous any one may have experienced in the course of his history, the more sceptical ought he to become, for he is the more exposed to delusion” (Portent 118). When he finds his old black horse which he had thought dead, his skepticism seizes that shape as an explanation for the night visitation.

Duncan must gain some sense of control of his life. To do so he reenacts the first series of events. Before he had left home the first time, Margaret had told him that she thought he was put on earth to give the anciently separated lovers a chance to fulfill their love through him and the woman he would love. When he entered Hilton Hall for the first time, he remarked, “I passed under its flat arch, as if into the midst of the waiting events of my story” (Portent 31); his recurring sense of déjà vu confirmed this feeling. He returns to Hilton Hall, following the steps he took twelve years before; he persuades Mrs. Blakesley to let him see Lady Alice asleep and then spends the night in his old room. Of the room, he writes: “a new and strange experience dawned upon me. Time became to my consciousness what some metaphysicians say it is in itself—only a form of human thought. For the Past had returned and had become the Present. I could not be sure that the Past had passed” (Portent 135). He again wills Lady Alice to come to him, and she does, sleep-walking, and with no memory of the intervening twelve years. At this first meeting, he tells her that Lord Hilton has behaved badly to him; at the next meeting, he tells her that he has quarreled with Lord Hilton and been turned away from the house. Then he takes up surreptitious residence in the house. Again he teaches her to read, again her mind comes increasingly awake. “Meantime, after a marvellous fashion, I was living over the old lovely time that had gone by twelve [27] years ago . . . . It was strange, indeed, to live the past over again thus” (Portent 150, 151).
In accordance with the past and the necessities of the present, Duncan again plans an elopement. On the night of the planned escape, he finds Alice locked in her room, lets her out, and they make their way to the haunted chamber. Suddenly, Alice hears the “horse with the clanking shoe,” and people burst into the deserted part of the house, just as happened before. She remembers everything, catches up a sword, tells Duncan to follow her, and they escape Hilton Hall and the portent. They cross the border to Scotland, where they are married. Duncan says, “We have never again heard the clanking shoe” (*Portent* 159). Indeed, he has not heard it since his violent illness at the opening of the second half of the narrative, another circumstance that opens the narrative to other interpretations.

In their happy marriage, Duncan and Alice doubt “a great deal of what seemed to have happened” (*Portent* 159). They are prone to explain things in terms of unusual coincidences falling together with psychological peculiarities rather than in terms of an ancient legend that had exerted control over their lives. At the same time, when Dr. Ruthwell hints the sabre-cut is the key, Duncan sets him straight, insisting on one or two events that defy that explanation. “At all events,” says Duncan, “he considers me sane enough now” (159).

This shift toward interpretive indeterminacy signals their freedom from the family myth. Frank Kermode, distinguishing between myth and fiction, writes:

> Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive . . . . Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. (39)

The second version signals an emergence from the ancient legend into a new provisional fiction. This can be seen in the chapter titles. The three installments of the *Cornhill* version are Its Legend, The Omen Coming On, The Omen Fulfilled. The emphasis is on the pattern of the legend; in this first version, the legend is myth and is therefore inescapable. In contrast, the chapter titles of the second [28] version place greater emphasis on persons, places, emotions, and actions: My Boyhood, The Second Hearing;
My Old Nurse’s Story; Hilton Hall; Lady Alice; My Quarters; The Library; The Somnambulist; The First Waking; Love and Power; A New Pupil; Confession; Questioning; Jealousy; The Chamber of Ghosts; The Clanking Shoe; The Physician; Old Friends; Old Constancy; Margaret; Hilton; The Sleeper; My Old Room; Prison-Breaking; New Entrenchments; Escape; Freedom. In the first version of Duncan’s story, the portent holds Duncan in its power. Each time he hears it, disaster or near disaster occurs. Its patterns must be fulfilled. In the second version, Duncan questions the portent and simultaneously loses the ability to hear it. He says about his return to his old home:

[The hill] would receive me with the same familiar look as of old, still fronting the great mountain from whose sides I had first heard the sound of that clanking horseshoe, which, whatever might be said to account for it [my emphasis], had certainly had a fearful connection with my joys and sorrows both. Did the ghostly rider still haunt the place? or, if he did, should I hear again that sound of coming woe? Whether or not, I defied him. (Portent 100-101)

The passage of time, his physical breakdown, and the telling of his story to a friendly but skeptical doctor help Duncan establish the provisional nature of the tale, moving it from myth to fiction. In Kermode’s terms, the story moves from a “total and adequate [explanation] of things as they are and were” to ways of “finding things out,” ways of making sense of events. Even in the happy ending, Duncan holds to the provisional nature of their various fictions by reminding the doctor of the events that remain inexplicable.

In his introduction to The Portent, Glenn Edward Sadler suggests that MacDonald added the happy ending because of “the pressure of his Victorian reading public, who would have liked a happy ending in the original” (xvii-xviii). He adds that the happy resolution may have been added “for more than literary or audience-appeal reasons . . . . We see in the happy ending to the story MacDonald’s deep commitment to marital bliss (the fairy-tale ending) and the fantasies of his own life, dating from his childhood” (xxii). I find none of these explanations compelling. In 1860, MacDonald was no Charles Dickens with an enormous reading audience on tenterhooks over the fate of Little Nell. MacDonald was also capable of leaving a story with an unfulfilled love affair, as in “The Grey Wolf; and of refusing the conventional wish-fulfillment ending, as in Robert Falconer. Indeed, MacDonald believed that
life did not end with death; [29] death, for him, was more like a door into reality. Therefore, it is possible that he considered the first version to imply a reunion; it is quite similar to the ending of Lilith, written very late in his life, in which the hero is waiting for death to reunite him with his lost love. The second version moves the reunion into time and continues it into eternity.

We can not identify the writer with the meanings or effects we find, yet MacDonald typically thought carefully about the implications of form. One effect of the changes he made in his story is to emphasize the similarity of Duncan and Alice’s love story to the stories of other people and to suggest that marvel always inhabits love. The second effect is to de-emphasize the determinism of the portent itself—that a bad omen must have its fulfillment. He repeatedly injects uncertainty into the mythic explanation for events, making it possible for Duncan and Alice to escape the myth. The portent loses its power as the characters ask questions, assert their choices, and enter a provisional—that is, fictive—world.

Notes
1. For the sake of clarity, references to the 1860 serialized Portent will be cited as Cornhill; parenthetical references to Portent will refer to the book-length version of 1864.
2. Several other passages of significant length are added to the first half of the second version. Two of them deal with the library at Hilton Hall and Duncan’s more sympathetic reading of love poetry when he himself is in love. Also, he incorporates several poems verbatim that he does not include in the Cornhill version. These are interesting interpolations but exploring them will have to wait for another paper.

Works Cited