

Working with reality: or, where to next?

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From the *Merriam-Webster*

Definition of parable (noun)

: a usually short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle

“Parable comes to us via Anglo-French from the Late Latin word *parabola*, which in turn comes from Greek *parabolē*, meaning “comparison.” The word *parabola* may look familiar if you remember your geometry. The mathematical “*parabola*” refers to a kind of comparison between a fixed point and a straight line, resulting in a parabolic curve; it came to English from New Latin (Latin as used since the end of the medieval period, especially in scientific description and classification). “Parable,” however, descends from Late Latin (the Latin language used by writers in the 3rd to 6th centuries). The Late Latin term *parabola* referred to verbal comparisons: it essentially meant “allegory” or “speech.” Other English descendants of Late Latin *parabola* are “parole” and “palaver.””

Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

“Apart from the reflections this death called up in each of them about the transfers and possible changes at work that might result from it, the very fact of the death of a close acquaintance called up in all those who heard of it, as always, a feeling of joy that it was he who was dead and not I.

“‘You see, he’s dead, and I’m not,’ each of them thought or felt. Close acquaintances, Ivan Ilyich’s so-called friends, involuntarily thought as well that it would now be necessary for them to fulfill the very boring obligations of decency and go to the funeral service and to the widow on a visit of condolence.” (Tolstoy 40)

Anton Chekhov, “The Bishop”

“... ‘Yesterday in the convent, when I looked at you—Lord! You haven’t changed a bit, only you’ve lost weight, and your beard has grown longer. Ah, Queen of Heaven, Holy Mother! And yesterday during the vigil, nobody could help themselves, everybody wept. Looking at you, I suddenly wept, too—though why, I don’t know. It’s God’s holy will!’

“And in spite of the tenderness with which she said it, she was clearly embarrassed, as if she did not know whether to address him formally or informally, to laugh or not, and seemed to feel more like a deacon’s widow than his mother.” (Chekhov 426)

Charles Baxter, from *Burning Down the House*

Defamiliarization is the act of making “the familiar strange, or the strange familiar” (31). It resists what the Russian writer Viktor Shklovsky called “algebrization”, the process of turning an event or familiar object into an “automatic symbol”:

“Shklovsky goes on to say that familiarity follows what he calls an economy of perception. You can’t be equally attentive to everything. You have to budget your attention. That’s how you survive. In order to drive to work, you can’t treat every corner, every piece of perceptual material, as new, as if it were an image in a poem ... You have to drive the car; you have to get to work; you have to assume some familiarity with the problems you face or else you won’t solve them, you’ll just stare at them.” (32)

David Foster Wallace

“Here are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys, how’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What the hell is water?’” (Wallace)

From the *Merriam-Webster*

Definition of curate (verb)

: to act as curator of

// curate a museum

// an exhibit curated by the museum’s director

Definition of curator (noun)

: one who has the care and superintendence of something

especially : one in charge of a museum or other place of exhibit

Mavis Gallant, “The Pegnitz Junction”

“Christine thought she knew what ‘information’ truly was, and had known for some time. She could see it plainly, in fact; it consisted of fine silver crystals forming a pattern, dancing, separating, dissolving in a glittering trail in the window. The crystals flowed swiftly, faster than smoke, more beautiful and less durable than snowflakes ...

“It was from the woman that the silvery crystals took their substance; she was the source. *It started this way*, Christine understood. She looked carefully at the woman who was creating the information, all the while peeling paper stuck to a cream bun. She licked her fingers before taking the first bite. *This was the beginning. Two first cousins from Muggendorf married two first cousins from Doos. Emigrated to the U.S.A., all four together ...*” (574)

“There was a plan to save some German cities, those with interesting old monuments. The plan was to put Jews in the attics of all the houses. The Allies would never have dropped a bomb. What a difference it might have made. Later we learned this plan had been sabotaged by the President of the USA. Too bad. It could have saved many famous old statues and quite a few lives.” (596)

From an interview with Claire Wilkshire:

“When the young woman hears the older woman thinking about her life in America, she really does hear her thinking. She is not inventing or making up stories. Everything the

young woman sees when she looks out the train window, she really does see. A kind of magic, if you like. A short circuit ... There is a German expression, 'I can hear him thinking'. I've always liked that. Because one does very often." (Wilkshire)

Toni Morrison, *Sula*

"Conventional wisdom agrees that political fiction is not art; that such work is less likely to have aesthetic value because politics—all politics—is agenda and therefore its presence taints aesthetic production." (*Playing in the Dark* xi)

Antonia S. Byatt, from *Possession*:

"... A sense that a text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was *always there*, that we, the readers, knew it was always there, and have *always known* it was as it was, though we have now for the first time recognized, become fully cognizant of, our knowledge." (xi-xii)

"What is friendship between women when unmediated by men? What choices are available to black women outside their own society's approval? What are the risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static, community?"

"Female freedom always means sexual freedom, even when—especially when—it is seen through the prism of economic freedom." (*Sula* xiii)

"Tell me how you killed that little boy."

"What? What little boy?"

"The one you threw in the river ... "

"I didn't throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula."

"You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched." (168)

In an interview with Charlie Rose, January 1998

"[I] could feel the address of the narrator over my shoulder, talking to somebody else. Talking to somebody white. I could tell because they were explaining things that they didn't have to explain if they were talking to me."

Lesley Nneka Arimah's January 2020 lecture on speculative fiction:

"Almost every culture from the Celtic to the Zulu has a story about why the sky is blue. The correct answer, the truth, is that the sky isn't blue, but only appears blue because blue light travels in shorter wavelengths, making it visible to the human eye. But in Zulu mythology, the entire Earth is encased, shell-like, in a blue rock, and stars appear where cracks have formed ...

“The color, the concept of blue did not appear in Western literature for a long time. Blue does not appear as a descriptor of the sky or the sea in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. The word ‘blue’ was only used as a descriptor in regions that used indigo. As though blue did not exist until it could be quantified and named. Now that’s fascinating to me. The idea that something didn’t exist until it was named, then suddenly people could see and identify it. It is almost a real-world confirmation of the importance of naming, a concept explored in many religions, Christianity included, where you must name a thing in order to summon or cast it out. Where you can speak something into existence.”

From Zadie Smith’s “Downtown”:

“... you don’t say to a witch: the reason they’re dunking you is because you’re a witch. You say, the reason they’re dunking you is these motherfuckers believe in witchcraft! ... Nobody put a spell on them. They produce witchcraft every day, collectively, together.”

Charles Baxter’s July 2019 lecture, “On The Plausibility Of Dreams”:

“... a world that’s still, with its mass murders and its unstable, unreadable leaders, seems deeply untrustworthy and still unwelcoming. But there is always a portal. An escape hatch, and it’s always been there. The books that we must find, that will welcome us in to take you into a dream-like place that is wiser and smarter and more generous and more emotional about the world, than the world itself may be. If you’re lucky, you enter the story and the story gives you a home and a portal. Bertolt Brecht says that late capitalism wants to put everybody asleep, and that it’s the duty of theater and literature to wake us up. Yes, I agree. We must wake up, but we have to do it by turning the techniques of dreaming to our own purposes. We have to inspire our dreams to lead us to hope, and to action, and to hope’s companion, enlightenment.”

Dean Bakopoulos’s January 2019 lecture, “What Is Your Life? On The Uncertainty Ahead”:

“The initial act of writing is not political work, or social justice work, or psychotherapy. Writing is survival work. I’m not saying these other elements don’t co-exist with the work, especially in revision, but I am saying that in the beginning when the page is blank, don’t try to write something that will save the world, which may be unsavable. Write what you need to write to stay alive. Honor that initial impulse when you first picked up a pen or read your first book. Many of you started writing and reading, most likely, because you were just trying to stay alive in a world that had become overwhelming to you. So are the other writers and the poets in your community. Do not expect any more than that from yourself, or your peers, or even your mentors.”

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