

Instructions May Vary: The Empathetic Appeal of the Parable

Daniel J. Cecil

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2017

Committee:

David Bosworth

David Shields

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

©Copyright 2017

Daniel J. Cecil

University of Washington

Abstract

Instructions May Vary: The Empathetic Appeal of the Parable

Daniel J. Cecil

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Professor David Bosworth
English

This essay explores the form and power of the parable as a storytelling device both in its traditional usage in world religions, as well as its inclusion in 20th and 21st Century literature, specifically fiction.

Portals of Prayer was a pocket-sized pamphlet of meditations, given out once a month by the gentle old ladies that stood like sentinels in the front driveway of our family church. These slight volumes championed the divineness of holy meditation. Throughout most of my childhood, my mother kept several of these dog-eared prayer books on top of a small blue Bible—one of those “New World” translations with Jesus’ words cast in red lettering—placed within a wicker basket given to her by her my grandmother, the lot of which sat next to the living room chair.

When I was a boy, alone in the home, I would stare at *Portals of Prayer* and its amateurish cover designs, giggling at the comically drawn apostles cowering under the wrath of Satan; the hands clasped in prayer, bathed in golden light from heaven; a lamb grazing under a darkened sky, a beam of light illuminating the beast through a peak in the clouds. I often wondered whether the artist believed that God, with a leisurely schedule, took time out of his day to shine a moon-sized flashlight onto those poor creatures of the Earth in need of His holy guidance. At the time, such a notion didn’t seem altogether outlandish.

My mother had a tradition of reading from that month’s volume of *Portals of Prayer* while drinking coffee in the morning light cast through the living room window, and would return to the book again in the evening, under lamplight, to sip a large glass of wine and pray. When I asked why she drank wine while reading, she replied dryly that it was her communion.

When I repeated that question later, sometime during my early adolescence, my mother’s life had come to a breaking point—a sum of loss and hurt. She was twice divorced and many times humiliated in ways too gruesome for public airing, and this accumulation of

disappointment and betrayal led to her dueling needs for rehabilitating prayer and the succor of wine.

During those teenage years—a rocky period when I, too, was coming unhinged from childhood innocence—I loved the weekly tradition of my mother’s devotion to churchgoing and prayer. It kept me as on track with the saints as I think I will ever be (which wasn’t really on track at all, but at least it kept up appearances). I sang in the choir. I played trumpet for the major holiday services: Maundy Thursday, Christmas, and Easter. I learned to transpose from C to Bb so I could follow the organ impromptu when necessary. I practiced those holy pieces endlessly; sometimes, until my lips bled.

These things kept me from taking to the streets like an unchained Wildman. I had smoked my first hand-rolled cigarette (and subsequent others); bonged my first lungful of dope; drank my first six pack of beer in one sitting; all of it an escape from the troubled situation at home with my stepfather and my own budding disdain for Ohio and Midwestern boredom. Sometimes, I worry that my toeing the line in those days between what was holy and sinful is the root of the excruciating white noise of anxiety that I feel in most situations today. But being there at Church in those days, being a part of that conversation, filled me with purpose and a sense of community.

So, I was devoted for a time. And since the Lutheran church placed great importance on the teachings of Jesus, I listened many Sundays to His great parables. Thinking back to a time when I could barely sit upright in the pew on my own volition, those stories are the first I remember hearing. And it was likely the parable of the Mustard Seed I heard most of all, as it was a surprising favorite of the three pastors I had when growing up.

From the Gospel of Mark:

He said, "How will we liken the Kingdom of God? Or with what parable will we illustrate it? It's like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, though it is less than all the seeds that are on the earth, yet when it is sown, grows up, and becomes greater than all the herbs, and puts out great branches, so that the birds of the sky can lodge under its shadow."

— Mark 4:30–32

As a boy, I found this parable fascinating in its rich and powerfully expressive detail. I could imagine the Kingdom of God as a *literal* mustard seed, planted in the ground to become a tree, something grand growing from something small. I understood the pictorial and literal aspects of the parable, but the imagery also puzzled me in the way most children find themselves flustered by the language of Shakespeare. I had not learned what the suggestions of the analogy meant, or the power of the metaphor (some Christians seem to never grow beyond this phase). I didn't understand that the parable was speaking of the Kingdom of God as something so small as to be invisible, and that the Kingdom required a firm, metaphorical planting in my soul to flourish and grow. Still, I felt a deep affection for these narratives and for what the pastor insisted was their instructional qualities.

Later, I learned what the metaphors and analogies meant, and gained comfort from them. But soon after that understanding those stories began to clash with my own fast moving narrative and what I saw in the world. I was and always will be a melancholy boy, not one given to seeing the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

When I left my mother's home for college, I resented what I saw as my mother's weakness in drink and her cowardice in confronting my stepfather, with whom I was so obviously clashing with physically—not understanding, of course, the math of her adulthood (grief + time=complicity). I blamed the church, too, for contributing to her failure in character—that her retreat into scripture was a kind of escapism, a childlike game of hide and seek in which the goal was to avoid being brave in the worldly present. It was a cruel assumption.

But I was too bullheaded a young man to see it. I had left for college and had begun exploring freely what the secular world had to offer, all without the weekly church excursions. On occasion, while studying for my bachelor's degree, I returned home to attend church with my mother, mainly to keep her happy and to avoid the inevitable conversation about my lapsed faith (a conversation my mother and I still avoid to this day). I would silently sit in the pew on those long-ago Sunday mornings, a condescending smear spread across my face. These returns to the fold grew more sporadic as I entered my Sophomore and Junior years. I had no time for the parables my pastor dissected with care. I saw them as simple stories for the simpleton, narratives that spoke to a world beyond—one in which I no longer believed.

I didn't quite comprehend, at the time, how those fanciful narratives played a part in my engagement with the world, or how they could help me discover truths beyond easy reckoning. I had come to a place not only of disbelief, but also of fervent renunciation of anything to do with the church.

When I moved to Europe in 2004, I left the church completely behind and thought little of the Bible and its parables—that is, until quite recently, when I read a story of mine at a public event a few months ago. As I stress chugged a beer after the show, a friend rushed over to me

visibly excited, her own drink in hand. She thanked me for the “lovely” reading and asked if I ever realized that my story was, in fact, a parable. I said no, countering snidely that I didn’t see it as a parable at all. I explained to her (in a quite condescending way) how un-parable-like my story was (to my obviously disillusioned friend). As I rambled on, I felt a heat rising in my face. I couldn’t understand, at the time, why. At home, later in the evening, felling a little tipsy and reflective (as I usually get after a reading in which I abide too many beers) I realized that, though I had a notion of what a parable was, I didn’t really know how to formally define it. More importantly, I understood that my hesitation in allowing my work to be called a parable was perhaps that unruly and rebellious teenager pressing against the skin of the adult me in a painful attempt to deny the power of the church’s stories in my writing.

So I began to consider how my story was a parable, and why this would be important. What defines a contemporary parable? And, most importantly, outside of the church and religion in general, does the parable have a place within contemporary fiction?

What a parable is ... and what it isn’t

So, I start with questions of form. Is there a way to define how a parable should look, feel, read and sound?

Some scholars define a parable as a short narrative, one that uses the allegorical mode to reveal religious, moral, or common truths using comparison, analogy, or metaphor. These modes are used to make so-called meaning of abstract concepts by relating what is esoteric to our everyday lives. There’s a lot to unpack in that definition even though it seems a rather broad interpretation of what the parable might be—in fact, it raises more questions than it

answers. Are all allegories parables? Can the fable be considered a kind of parable as well, given that it also contains some of these features?

Let's start with those familiar stories of Aesop. We all know them—short, moral narrative often focusing on the antics of animals or plants to illustrate the point. It would be great for our purposes if this use of the plant and animal kingdom were something novel to the fable. But of course, nothing is easy: parables also use animals for pedagogical purposes. Do fables use animals differently? Some scholars argue that the creatures of the fable are anthropomorphic, a feature not shared by parables. But again, there's a caveat if we're to cast a net beyond the Synoptic Gospels of the Bible: anthropomorphism is found in the parables of the Upanishads, the Qu'ran and the Zen Koan, as well as contemporary parables such as those from Jerome R. Mintz (in his *The Anarchists of Casas Viejas*).

Already, separating the parable from other, similar forms appears to be tricky. And while it's difficult to discern the difference between parable and fable, dissecting the slight differences between parable and allegory is a bigger puzzle.

On its surface, an allegory acts as an extended metaphor to illustrate a point. And yes, you're probably thinking: This sounds suspiciously like a parable. And you'd be right, given that the parable also instructs a lesson or religious principle using something akin to metaphor. The key to defining the allegory then is that sneaky modifier: "extended". Allegories, in this extension, tend to be longer in the teeth than its biting cousin the parable. But, on the flipside, some parables are also quite long. So again, are we getting any closer to the truth of the form?

Famed scholar Jülicher proposes in his work that the parable should have only point of comparison (*tertium comparationis*) to be considered a true parable, with multiple *tertia*

comparationis being reserved for the kingdom of allegory. However, this approach—one parable, one point—has been criticized in recent years (McArthur and Johnson, 5).

For example, in Jesus' *Prodigal Son*, a parable collected in the Synoptic Gospels, several points of comparison are made at once.

In the story a father has two sons. The youngest son, eager to explore the world, asks for his inheritance early. His father gives him his inheritance, which the young man heads out and squanders in haste. Poor, lost, and desperate he returns home, ready to offer himself a servant to his father in exchange for room and board. Certain he will be shunned by his father, the young man is humbled when accepted with open arms—not as a servant, but as a blessing. The older son is furious to see his brother welcomed back into the fold without reprimand, and refuses to accept his brother's return. He argues to his father that while his brother selfishly squandered his good fortune, he as devoted kin spent his life dedicated to the homestead, serving him father dutifully and without question with the understanding that someday he would be rewarded for that service. The father, understanding his son's frustration, assures his older boy that he will soon inherit his share of the fortune—nothing has changed. But he should put aside those concerns. His brother, who was once lost, is now found, and that is the true fortune.

Here, as a counterpoint to Jülicher's assertions, we see the parable working towards three points of comparison. On one level, the parable expresses that worldly wealth means nothing—it is a distraction from devotion to Christ. Worldly wealth will, at best, sidetrack the servant from salvation, as seen in the case of the youngest son. His story of greed, squandering and loss is set in comparison to the older brother, who represents the devoted servant of

Christ. This eldest son sees merit in his unquestionable servitude and believes that only those who follow without deviation are deserving of reward. This is put in comparison, and in stark contrast, to the beliefs of the Father, who is a metaphorical stand-in for the Heavenly Father. He is less concerned with the day to day actions of His servants on Earth. Instead, he is willing to accept his children with open arms as they return to the fold with humbleness. This parable certainly make several points of simultaneous comparison. In that sense, it's a lot like an allegory rather than the single point parable as championed by Jürlicker. So what, then, makes it a parable and not the allegory?

Etymology might offer us some further clues. First, let's start with that troublesome word allegory, which comes from the Greek allēgoria, meaning "other speaking". This origin speaks to the makeup of the allegorical form, which tells tales of events or conflicts while meaning something else entirely, usually using metaphor to do so. The word parable, on the other hand, comes from the Ancient Greek term parabole, meaning "beside a casting/turning/throwing" (Foley, 43). This etymology suggests that comparison, perhaps in addition to "other speaking", is the mode of the parable. These origins are close, but we can begin to see a bit of a divide.

Another wrinkle. Academic debate questions whether the truest parables of the Synoptic Gospels are not simple tales of comparison, but riddles as well. Some of the stories from the Synoptic Gospels seem to be derived from a Hebrew genre story called a meshalim, meaning "Mysterious Speech" (Wheeler). These stories use figurative language to create short riddles that are both confounding in message and refuse immediate transfer of meaning to the confused listener. And yet we call them parables instead of meshalim. In the end, it appears

that some lazy or ill-informed translator was responsible for all this confusion. The cover for the meshalim/parable subterfuge likely arose through the New Testament Greek translation of *meshalim* as *parable*, meaning that the meshalim were accidentally given the same name as a very different story form. Adding to the confusion are additions made to the original, oral versions of these meshalim (which again, were quite puzzling without explication) likening them (in appearance and long-windedness) to the similar comparative allegory. Jülicker assumed that this “allegorical overgrowth” (Gowler, 3) had occurred between the *historical instance* of the parables being *spoken* and the parables we received in written form through the Synoptic Gospels. He suggests that the authors of the Gospels were in fact “creative expositors” and that the gospel authors “obscured the parabolic message of Jesus with an overgrowth of allegory, descriptive supplementation, and interpretive application.” (Gowler, 3)

Defining lines between the allegory and parable seem to be blurred to the point of frustration, making a clear representation of what is and isn't a parable a nasty business—one that maybe, just maybe, has driven this essay writer (more than once) to throw any books that seemed to contradict any of his obsessive knot tying across the room. However, in this exploration, we've come closer to pinning down some common characteristics of the parable, even if we never get down to finding a definitive model for *all* parables.

It's my tendency as a man raised Lutheran to look exclusively at the Gospels for answers to this parable question. But Christianity is so mucked with and mired by schisms that finding a definitive answer to anything through its lens is perhaps a fool's errand. So, looking at Christianity alone might be too myopic a view for this defining task.

Parables in the Rabbinic verses were taught in the first Century of Christianity, and it is estimated that these Rabbinic parables total around 2,000 in number (McArthur, Johnson, 7)—a staggering amount in comparison to those in the Christian Bible. So, it's with authority that the Rabbinic versus, specifically the *Song of Songs*, offer a clear definition of the parable's use in Judaism:

Our Rabbis say: Let not a parable be lightly esteemed in your eyes, since by means of the parable man can master the words of the Torah. If a king loses gold from his house or a precious pearl, does he not find it by means of a wick worth of farthing? So the parable should not be lightly esteemed in your eyes, since by means of a parable a man arrives at the true meaning of the words of Torah. Here is proof that it is so: for Solomon by means of the parable penetrated to the finest nuances of the Torah. (McArthur and Johnson, 8-9)

This passage points to a certain necessity in the parable form—regardless of whether this be through comparisons or through riddles—for teaching and memorability. The verse above recalls the story of Solomon, who memorized thousands of parables to better judge and hold court with his subjects. This kind of retention would likely be impossible with longer story forms. In fact, it seems memorization was quite common with parables during this time. According to McArthur and Johnson, in Rabbinic literature, documents often “begins a parable and then breaks off without completing it” suggesting that readers, “would be sufficiently familiar with the materials to continue the parable for themselves”. (9) This kind of portability

was and is an important part of the parable's appeal—and likely why it's an effective form, even now (more on that point later).

In addition to the Torah, parables are also used extensively throughout the Qur'an, as in the parable of the Spider's House:

Those who take protectors other than God can be compared to spiders building themselves houses—the spider's is the frailest of all houses—if only they could understand.

29:41 (Haleem)

Short, punchy, and memorable. We see here the single point of comparison, as championed by Jülicher. Notice, however, that this parable is explicated in such a way that the mystery, the riddle of its meaning, is removed. So unlike the meshalim-style parable, the Qu'ran here is focused more on the comparison. However, it does bear the traits of the parable as we've come to describe it: an analogy is made between an abstract concept (the Kingdom of Heaven and finding peace in its shelter) and that of something earthly and familiar (we have all felt the spider's flimsy house on our face and hands).

Here is the story of *The Hungry Dog* from the Upanishads, an example in which certain features of the fable are also present:

There was a wicked tyrant; and the god Indra, assuming the shape of a hunter, came down upon earth with the demon Matali, the latter appearing as a dog of enormous size. Hunter and dog entered the palace, and the dog howled so woefully that the royal buildings

shook with the sound to their very foundations. The tyrant had the awe-inspiring hunter brought before his throne and inquired after the cause of the terrible bark. The hunter said, "The dog is hungry," whereupon the frightened king ordered food for him. All the food prepared at the royal banquet disappeared rapidly in the dog's jaws, and still he howled with portentous significance. More food was sent for, and all the royal store-houses were emptied, but in vain. Then the tyrant grew desperate and asked: "Will nothing satisfy the cravings of that woeful beast?" "Nothing," replied the hunter, "nothing except perhaps the flesh of all his enemies." "And who are his enemies?" anxiously asked the tyrant. The hunter replied: "The dog will howl as long as there are people hungry in the kingdom, and his enemies are those that practice injustice and oppress the poor." The oppressor of the people, remembering his evil deeds, was seized with remorse, and for the first time in his life he began to listen to the teachings of righteousness.

(Sinclair)

This parable is slightly different from the other examples in that it is an extended story. Here the God takes form of human, and a demon the form of an animal—something often seen in fables and myth. The Gods have come with their magical, mysterious speech, to teach the tyrant a lesson. Here, the demon represents the voice and anger of the people, who will never be satisfied until their hunger for revenge against their oppressor is satiated. The message of the story is delivered in allegorical "other speak". There is also only one point here and this, according to Jülicher, pushes it towards parable. Unlike the metaphor which stands to be puzzled out, notice the subtle explanation of the stories inner meaning at the end.

To find the true riddle of the meshalim, let's turn to the parables of the Zen Koan, which are likely the most complex, giving little explanation as to the greater meaning of the story.

A man walking across a field encounters a tiger. He fled, the tiger chasing after him. Coming to a cliff, he caught hold of a wild vine and swung himself over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Terrified, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger had come, waiting to eat him. Two mice, one white and one black, little by little began to gnaw away at the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine in one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted! (Schiller)

This parable, *The Tiger and the Strawberry*, is a glimpse of the form in its most natural state. Notice the story's simplicity, stripped of all explication. And yet, buried just beneath the surface of this attractive narrative is a tantalizing suggestion: that if you forget about the dangers around you, pause long enough to forget what puts your time on this earthly at risk, then you might be able to greater appreciate life's great bounty. Also in this beautiful parable is the glimpse of a greater cycle of life: the *inevitability* of death, the futility of trying to flee from it. To stop running, to stop worrying about what waits at the other end comes peace, enjoyment, and finally, fulfillment.

Regardless of what the final definition the parable might be, we can see a similar purpose amongst all its variations: a revealing of some point, some greater truth, abstract from everyday thought.

The most surprising thing about the parable to me, given these striking similarities in purpose, is how the form has spread—what with religious infighting and contested borders between East and West, North and South—all without a single origin. The parable appears to be a mode of storytelling that has formed separately and independently from any single religious tradition. In my mind, this suggests that it's an innate storytelling form. This is further supported by the fact that the parables of the Bible, the Torah, the Upanishads and the Zen Koan have common root in oral storytelling.

And it is perhaps this commonality shared between the religions that have defined the parable's shape and contours, as well as its riddle-like qualities. Oral culture forced a certain form on the parable due to necessity. Without written language, or without easy access to the tools necessary for writing, a certain amount of difficulty was required by the parable. The hidden or metaphorical meaning of the parable, a much trickier element than the overarching narrative of the form, required a deduction from the listener. This is what I find particularly interesting about the parable: complexity in meaning, beyond being a fun rhetorical trick, was built into the story so that the listener was required to *pay attention* to the storyteller. If the parable were easily dissected on first encounter, the listener might not revisit the story in their mind to discover its true message.

Think of a riddle that has stuck with you through the years. Try to recall all its details. Do you remember the solution being difficult? The necessary return to the riddle, over and over, likely helped with your memorization. And when you figured out that riddle, it isn't unlikely that you spread that riddle on to a friend not only because of the memorization, but because of the sense of accomplishment you felt for puzzling it out. It's the same way in which a joke can

sometimes take a few moments to land, but when the audience discovers the humor of the moment, the joke is more powerful. To explain that same joke—well, we all know where that leads: the leaden “Oh, I get it,” the air in the room letting out into disappointment. This is the way in which the meshalim gains its power—through trickiness. Allegorical lengthening then produces a problem that the shorter, traditional parables do not have: with *explanation*, the power of *discovery* inherent in the parable’s original form is lost.

But what does this have to do with contemporary fiction?

Contemporary Riddles for an Incomprehensible World

The parable’s most famous, modern innovator might be Franz Kafka—he’s most certainly one of my favorite practitioners of the form. What made Kafka’s use of the parable so interesting is the way in which he shaped them not to reflect higher spiritual truths, but rather, retooled them as a lens to investigate the subjects of his day-to-day concerns: bureaucracy, existential despair, anxiety, and the paradoxes created in a rapidly changing world (specifically, the mind-bending movement from the end of the 19th Century to the beginning of the 20th).

Kafka had a deep respect for the parable and what it was capable of, especially in a contemporary context. In “*On Parables*”, Kafka sets out to define the parable, while also questioning its efficacy in exposing and critiquing modern day issues:

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: ‘Go over,’ he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he

means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost. (Kafka, "The Basic Kafka", 158)

This short narrative presents many features of the traditional parable while at the same time creating a new kind of purpose for the parabolic form. Here, Kafka uses meta-narrative to indicate the possible fallibility of the parable—that the parable, while proposing truth or a more concrete version of the abstract, is in fact proposing nothing close to the truth. It falls short. Really, this parable could be looked at as a lamentation that knowledge *itself* is impossible to secure in an increasingly fractured society. The paradox at the end of the parable, in which it is suggested that the adherent to the parable who learns nothing of the parable becomes a parable himself, further pushes the analogy of impossible knowledge, a refracted mental state with no concrete object.

However, there's also hope in this parable: that to engage with the parable one comes to learn the unknowable and can make it a part of the real. Kafka can be seen in other parables,

like here, trying to tackle the things he cannot designate more precisely. By doing so, he allows his audience to come to what is inexpressible in their own, varied way.

This example urges me to consider how the parable, in its riddles and slights of hand, allows the writer to posit questions without being simply rhetorical—meaning, the writer uses the parable to ask a question on page that doesn't simply hang limp in perpetuity. Rather, the parabolic qualities of the form actively ask a question that begs to be answered. This is useful for the writer (like myself) who sometimes feels their fictional work to be too passive, or too focused on plot to ask bigger, universal question without looking like a dogmatic busybody. Instead, by creating a complex thought experiments, the writer can mirror the way in which the mind puzzles out complex, or unanswerable questions in solitary moments, but on the page, without reveal his own judgement. No one wants to be told what to do—but if they can be led to water ... then so be it.

Kafka's most famous collection, *Parables and Paradoxes*—which includes samples of his notebooks, letters, diary entries, and short stories—offer further examples of the parable in his work. In *Before the Law*, an extended parable from the book, a man from the countryside goes to visit the Law. At the front door leading to the Law is a doorkeeper who says the man from the country is not permitted inside. When the country man leans down to look through a gap in the door, the doorkeeper says that he could try sneaking by, but he would be greeted by other, more powerful guards who await at other doors he must cross to finally appear before the Law. This greatly distresses the man, who believes the Law should be accessible to everyone. He grows old and bitter waiting for admittance through the door. When the man from the country is about to die, he asks the doorkeeper why, since everyone is surely seeking to gain access to

the Law, that no one else has visited. The guard exclaims loudly that: “No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you.”

Again, we see Kafka’s treatment of man as confounded beast. This time, instead of being lost when the old methods provide no answers (suggested in the parable on parables above) man is thwarted by bureaucracy. Kafka is indicating that man is promised the Law and access to it, but at the same time he is not allowed to access that very Law that is his right. If, as Derrida suggests, we should focus on the Law as *place*, then the man from the country as well as the doorkeeper are both *outside* of the Law. But Kafka is perhaps suggesting that the Law is something constructed and accessible only to those who seek the Law and consider themselves free to access it at any time. Man is kept from the law not only by constructs of hierarchy, but also by also his own fears and devices. It is a sad place to find yourself—a prison of your own making—and Kafka wants you to avoid this fate at all costs.

What is important in *Before the Law* is that Kafka uses the parable form, once reserved for religious lessons or questions of morality, to attack societal constructs, asking the reader to question what is man-made. This isn’t for purposes of saving the eternal soul but, rather, to offer a glimpse of what one’s life might be like in the here and now if free of hierarchal control. This is an important allowance for the secular, contemporary author wishing to use the parable (like myself), but is unsure whether the form is limited only to religious pedagogy (it isn’t).

Kafka uses the parable in a similar way in his clever short, *The Leopards in the Temple*:

Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes a part of the ceremony. (Kafka, "Parable", 93)

Here we see Kafka furthering his interests in human fallibility and internal paradoxes. It could be argued that this parable is dealing with, yet again (and in an indirect manner) questions of constructs and bureaucracy while also widening the scope to include religious ceremony. Water is put out and is drunk by the leopards, causing the worshipers to fill up the pitchers in anticipation of the leopards coming. In one way, this suggests that we create systems to deal with problems that arise from the systems already in place, creating a feedback loop of sorts. A *self-perpetuating* system. But there's a further layer here—Kafka is asking the age-old question: What came first: The chicken or the egg? Is the sacrificial water being put out for the leopards? Or, do the leopards only continue to visit because the water is already there? Instead of universal truth, Kafka is dealing in matters of epistemological doubt. Instead of revealing the Kingdom of God, the necessity of devotion, or the comfort that this world does not exist, Kafka is instead twisting the parables purpose to reveal how little we can trust the world around us, and how little we can put faith in ritual.

Again, the thought experiment created by Kafka here in this twisting, meshalim-like parable is one that asks the reader to ponder the structures around them—not in a religious-sense, though the parable uses ceremonial rites to illustrate a point, but in the sense of the bureaucratic. Kafka is asking us to consider the power in questioning: what is freedom of choice, and what is rote habit? Can we really believe in the tasks we've been given by way of

religious or patriotic tradition? Kafka is calling for an awakening of sorts—to look beyond the surface of an act to see its origin clearly. In puzzling out the meaning of the parable, the reader is given the tool necessary for further exploration of other puzzles—beyond matters of the soul and the individual, and into the world around us that may very well have a stake in corrupting our natural state of humanity. These skills are invaluable. They create an informed and critical citizenry, one with the power to see through lies and gerrymandering, with the power to resist and overthrow autocratic rule of the soul.

Italo Calvino, the famous Italian author, worked in a later period than Kafka. His early stories were neorealist, which was in close line with his values as a communist—a mode chosen by many of the Italian intellectual elite after fascism—but soon moved from realism to the fantastical, which we would now call magic realism, a mode which uses a primarily realistic mode of representation with an added magical element. The magic realist mode was known for its use of contemporary fiction techniques as well as its inclusion of classic storytelling modes, the parable included.

Invisible Cities is a collection of short prose poems narrated to the aging emperor Kubla Khan, who is interested in hearing of his expanding power throughout the world. He is told these tales by the famed explorer Marco Polo. Although Kubla Khan believes he is hearing stories of real cities that he controls across the world, he is in fact only hearing descriptions of Venice, albeit inflated and often imaginary descriptions of what Venice might be. Each section of the book describes a new city (55 in total), each of the cities bearing the name of a woman. These short narratives are bookended with dialogue between Polo and Khan, in which Polo sometimes speaks to Khan in parabolic fashion. Although there are many uses of parable in

Italo Calvino's work, his novel *Invisible Cities* is the most concentrated example, with parables scattered about like little gems. Here, for example, is Marco Polo describing a fantastic bridge to Kubla Khan:

Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone.

"But which is the stone that supports the bridge?" Kublai Khan asks.

"The bridge is not supported by one stone or another," Marco answers, "but by the line of the arch that they form."

Kublai Kahn remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: "Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me."

Polo answers: "Without stones there is no arch."

Italo Calvino's parable is a riddle that twists. Polo cannot describe only the arch of the bridge (which Khan finds so fascinating), because Polo cannot separate the arch from the stone. Here Calvino is suggesting that the city (and in the overarching metaphor of the novel, the imagination) cannot be isolated from its parts; much like the structure of the book cannot truly be isolated from its whole. So here, the parable is working in a structural way, commenting through meta-narrative on the construction of the book as well as the leaps of imagination necessary for the book to exist. Italo Calvino, in the same way as Kafka before him, teaches the author interested in post-modern winking and breaking with form that the parable is flexible enough to accomplish almost any task.

In a similar vein, Marco Polo, in the parable "Cities and Signs", describes a city in which:

“You walk for days among the trees and among stones. Rarely does the eye light on a thing, and then only when it has recognized that thing as the sign of another thing: a print in the sand indicates the tiger’s passage; a marsh announces a vein of water; the hibiscus flower, the end of winter.” (Calvino, 13)

He further explains that:

“However the city may really be, beneath his thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it. Outside, the land stretches, empty, to the horizon; the sky opens, with speeding clouds. In the shape that chance and wind give the clouds, you are already intent on recognizing figures: a sailing ship, a hand, an elephant ...” (Calvino, 14)

Although the form of this parable appears, on the surface, slightly different from traditional parabolic modes, it retains many of its defining features. First, the comparison of an abstract mode of thought—in this case signs and semiology—is set against their very real counterparts (the footprint to the animal, the sign saying what one can or cannot do). Arguably second is the city life, with all its confusing signs, compared to the romantic ideal of nature. This plays with the age-old prejudice that the city is somehow a false reality, one that confounds its inhabitant into believing it is somehow good and natural. Finally, there is the analogy of the sign as pure human thought—what is primal? What is innocent? What is free from the poison

of oversaturation? Here, perhaps, Calvino is suggesting a frustration with how complex our lives have become, that to leave the city with all its bounty the mind is left to wander towards what is natural, free of baggage.

Again, what speaks to me in Calvino's work is his prescience—he speaks to a modern mediation, of contemporary culture and all its symbols. How can we think clearly when everything is reified? When nothing reveals what it really is, because there is no meaning behind it? Here, Calvino is twisting the “other speaking” and the “casting aside” of traditional parable to speak of the real world and its own castings. Slow down, the parable says, take a break from the contemporary world and its sleight of hand. I don't think there's a more important message that fiction can relate—and the parable seems to be the perfect mode of delivery, because it asks in its very form to look for deeper meaning. That's a hell of a trick that easy to parse fiction can't always achieve with its clear prose and hand delivered messages. The power is in the complexity, and the requirement to think deeper, to not expect easy answers but to instead, expect a bit of work with a potentially life-changing reward.

This leads us quite nicely to Joy Williams work, which is perhaps the most complex, and seems concerned with bring the parable back to some of its earlier purposes with her attention to religious salvation in a secular society.

When asked in a Paris Review interview what she sees as “the connection ... between religious thought and the writing life ...” Williams replied:

“The Bible is constantly making use of image beyond words. A parable provides the imagery by means of words. The meaning, however, does not lie in the words but in the

imagery. What is conjured, as it were, transcends words completely and speaks in another language. This is how Kafka wrote, why we are so fascinated by him, why he speaks so universally.” (Paris Review)

Williams seems to model much of her parabolic work on the earlier lessons of Kafka. In her most recent book, *Ninety-Nine Stories of God*, Joy Williams uses the parable extensively to, as she says, transcend words:

20

Our ferry’s crossing seemed to take longer than usual. From what we could remember of previous crossings, this seemed longer to us. Otherwise, matters proceeded in their usual fashion and things appeared to be the same, which none of us entertaining the notion that we hadn’t wanted to come.

THIS TIME

(Williams)

Here Williams is creating something close to a Zen Koan. In it, Joy Williams uses a royal “we” to suggest *humanity* rather than a group of individuals. “We”, she writes, are on the same journey together, through the cycles of movement and history. And though we accept it, this dumb repetition, Williams suggests we look around and consider whether this is the journey we really signed up for. And though there is no explicit suggestion that religion is the answer here, there is a suggestion that another approach to the material before us begs to be found, if only

at the edge of our conscious. Here Williams, rather than simply leaving the exposed question of the parable untouched, hints towards a prescribed solution for the reader.

Other parables in the collection are a bit more “open” about deliverance beyond what the material world can offer:

91

Each day brings something, she has decided, some little gift. It's important to recognize in every identity its particular light. We become what we behold.

To be honest, she thought of things when comprehended giving of a peculiar light but she had corrected herself with the word particular.

Her father had been a student of alcohol. From him she learned the word epitasis, which refers to the part of the play developing the main action and leading to the catastrophe.

THIS IS THE WAY THAT THE NIGHT PASSES

Like the previous parable, Joy Williams is asking the reader to look at things in a different, “particular” light—to see things as gifts and not as burdens. This requires a shift in perception and perhaps for empathy. The main “character” of this story has seen the tragedy of her father, which to her at the time might have been peculiar and something she was doomed to become. And to be peculiar in that way would be, for her, destructive—she does not want to become the thing she beholds. Instead, she looks at it in a particular light, which allows her to redefine her father’s tragedy as a warning, rather than destiny. It is not suggested here how that change from peculiar to particular has brought about this change, but that’s part of this

short story's parabolic qualities. This ambiguity asks the reader to come to their own conclusion—the author's presence is no longer wanted.

I see Williams use of the parable a return, in a way, to the story of the *Prodigal Son*. Her work asks for a reinterpretation of a suggested unfortunate set of circumstances—in *Prodigal Son* the youngest loses his fortune; in *Night Passes*, the unfortunate demise of a father. But Joy Williams, in her ambiguity (and unlike Jesus) asks the reader to find their own interpretation of the “catastrophe”, begging the reader to consider the struggle of the individual. *This is the Way the Night Passes* suggests a character who spends her evenings struggling with the weight of what is *peculiar* and what is *particular*; as if that will change anything. Have we not all gone to bed with similar worries? The same unnecessary thought experiments that try to rewrite history? I know I have.

Williams, then, is teaching us empathy for the one in desperate need—not unlike the *Prodigal Son*. But in *Night Passes*, someone who is lost and is not yet found. In our individualist, secular culture, there are a lot of the lost out there, and the teaching of empathy and the giving of it is often forgotten. Perhaps this is the pedagogical remit of the parable. No need for the melodrama or flashing signs of certain story forms—feel bad for this character because event + event = tragedy. Instead, it allows us to formulate the tools for empathy without all the information. To understand through our own solutions. To extend a kind hand when facing doubt.

Is there a greater lesson?

Why the parable matters now

Novelist Chigozie Obioma, in an essay for *The Millions*, wrote:

One of the major ways in which fiction has changed today—from the second half of the 20th century especially — is that most of its fiction reveals all its limbs to us all at once. Nothing is hidden behind the esoteric wall of mystery or metaphysics.

He went on to say:

The writers who do well to divvy up their fiction into fractions of what is revealed to the reader are the writers who tend to achieve transcendence, which, according to Emmanuel Levinas is recognized “in the work of the intellect that aspires after exteriority.”

In contemporary culture, I see a fascination with the immediate and the literal. To be perfectly candid, I’m not exactly sure I understand the thronging presence of the Internet, the denizens of which seem to be on a feverish, maddening, and never-ending quest to reify the world as something complete and understandable.

Individuals are swallowed up in the maelstrom. Trolls attack others in feral groups. Pundits and social warriors post and retweet “facts” in some weird sense of public duty. Individuals are buried for their word choices, without consideration of what once might have been called a mistake. In other words, there’s no sympathy for the human or the humane. We’re culpable for what we say in public, because that’s the only world that seems to matter.

We “consume” articles on this or that outrage of the week, never giving ourselves any pause to consider the implications of what we’re reading. The masses seem obsessed with the material world, with internalizing everything that is *outside of them*, obsessing over the external factors that create the structures around them without giving thought to the state of their soul. The *social* seems to lack a sense of the *spirit*.

There was a time where I, too, was obsessed with keeping up with that sort of madness. Then, two years ago, my mother was hospitalized with liver failure. At the time, my brother and I were under the assumption that she would die within the year. I flew out from Amsterdam to Ohio to see her, and moved my flight back when it seemed possible that I might need to bury my mother.

Without any Internet connection on my phone, or a connection on the farm that my mother lived and where I stayed, I was completely unmoored. In boredom and a sense of duty, I took it upon myself to clean out the farm house—it was cluttered with old newspapers and bottles and molding hair brushes. I decided to move some of the salvageable materials I found in the house to the storage unit my mom had rented when she made the move from Northern to Southern Ohio. While moving boxes, I stumbled onto the old wicker basket that my mother used to keep by her living room chair. Inside the basket, I found that old blue Bible and a few copies of *Portals of Prayer*.

It started raining outside the storage unit, and I sat on a plastic tub to read through some of those old prayer books as I waited out the flash storm. With a similar quickness to the storm’s beginning and end, I saw in a cathartic flash the long and troubled narrative of my mother’s life through those old prayer books. And, instead of judging her like I might have in

the past, I felt an overwhelming empathy for her. I saw how the experiences of her life had led her down certain paths, and that sometimes her choices while raising my brother and I were not hers alone—those choices were informed, in part, by what was expected of her from society, by her father, by her unrelenting depression and shame.

My mother recovered quickly. I left Ohio with a new devotion to her, and a new devotion to myself: that I would take stock more often; that I would filter out the noise and focus on the problems that would teach me something important.

Reflecting on this now, I can see that my mother had always been a riddle, one to figure out slowly. My mother was a meshalim. She was a parable. Looking back, I see the strength in my mother's ability to juggle her conflicting desires—that nihilistic alcoholism and her devotion to prayer—to bring my brother and I to Church each Sunday in the hope that the institution might help her raise two good boys. To continue a devotion to kindness, to understanding, to trying better. This insight has only come to me recently, and has asked me to reevaluate certain perceptions I had of the value of the parable. The parable isn't just a mode of storytelling, it is a condensing of the long and often labyrinthine paths of life into something comprehensible.

The parable is an important form for today's fiction writer because it is a sound denouncement of a dumbed down, illiterate capitalism devoid of its own moral compass. It says "no" to direct speech that neither thrills nor informs. It is not prettified polemic, nor fascist populism. It is a pedagogical tool in a time that requires better tools for teaching what life means in a fragmented, confusing, and fast-paced world.

So I, like my mother, will keep my own devotionals by my favorite chair. Contemporary parables that will act as a road map towards a purer soul. I will look for the *particular* moments

in those parables that bring me gifts. I will put those stories that open the world as an experience beyond my own, narrow views to memory. And maybe, if I work at it, I might some create my own parables that someday, in some beautiful moment, will reveal the transcendent for some other soul.

Teaching. Now that, to me, is empathy in action.

Works Cited and Referenced

Bock, Darrell L., Charlesworth, James H. *Parables of Enoch; a Paradigm Shift*, Reference and Research Book News 28.4 (2013): Reference and Research Book News, Vol.28(4). Web.

Calvino, Italo, and Weaver, William. *Invisible Cities*. Orlando: Harvest Book, Harcourt, 1974. Harvest Book. Web.

Foley, Edward, Vincie, Catherine, Fragomeni, Richard N., Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, Sponsor, and Catholic Academy of Liturgy. *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical, 2016. Print.

Gowler, David B. *What Are They Saying about the Parables?* New York: Paulist, 2000. Print. WATSA Ser.

Haleem, M. A. S. Abdel. *The Qur'an*. Oxford: Oxford UP, UK, 2005. Oxford World's Classics. Web.

Heine, Steven., and Wright, Dale S. *The Koan Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Web.

Kafka, Franz. *The Basic Kafka*. New York: Pocket, 1979. Print.

Kafka, Franz, Van Vliet, Claire, and Janus Press Archive. *Parables and Paradoxes, in German and English*. New York: Schocken, 1961. Print. Schocken Paperbacks; SB12

Leaman, Oliver. *The Qur'an : An Encyclopedia*. London; New York: Routledge, 2006. Web.

McArthur, Harvey K., and Johnston, Robert Morris. *They Also Taught in Parables: Rabbinic Parables from the First Centuries of the Christian Era*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Academie, 1990. Print.

Mintz, Jerome R., and Paul Avrich Collection. *The Anarchists of Casas Viejas*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1982. Print.

Schiller, David. *Little Zen Companion*, Workman Publishing Company, Print, January 2, 1994

Schiltz, Elizabeth A. *Two Chariots: The Justification of the Best Life in the 'Katha Upanishad' and Plato's 'Phaedrus.'* *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2006, pp. 451–468.

Sinclair, Upton. *The Cry for Justice; an Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest*. New Ed., Rev. and Ed. with the Cooperation of Edward Sagarin and Albert Teichner. ed. New York: L. Stuart, 1964. Print.

Wheeler, K. *Literary Terms and Definitions M*, Carson Newman University, Web,

January 30, 2017

Williams, Joy. *Ninety-nine Stories of God*. Portland, OR: Tin House, 2016. Print.

Winner, Paul. *Joy Williams, The Art of Fiction No. 223*, Paris Review, Summer 2014, Web,

January 30, 2017

Wong, Suk, and Bock, Darrell L. *A Categorization of Jesus's Parables: An Examination of Example Stories* (2016): ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. Web.