

## How to Tell Your Heart Out: Forming an Aesthetic of Parable

Presented by Sarah Read, April 5, 2003  
Graduate Humanities Conference, The University of Utah

**“The writer’s business is truth”** Grace Paley told us just yesterday during the graduate colloquium. Yes, I came to Utah to study writing because I am interested in telling the truth. It has not always been easy to actualize myself openly as a truth teller, to declare truth-telling as the motivation for writing fiction (I think that poets have an easier time of this) in the milieu of American fiction writing that doesn’t promote fiction as philosophy, or as an arena requiring of mattering. A milieu which especially does not promote the role of the fiction writer as philosopher or poet. Truth tellers are poets and philosophers. As fiction writers we must remain humble craftspeople, mere recorders at the margins of the circus of life around us.

I wrote impassioned words last fall in a narrative theory paper entitled “Towards a Definition of my Aesthetic:”

“As I writer I want to LIVE narrative, not examine it. I want to inhabit a place where I trust that I know everything worth knowing, a place where I have my own authority, a place where learning is no longer the disempowering act of acquisition and “otherizing,” but an act of responding to and giving back to the world; where learning is additive, emergent. I want to have arrived at a place where **I can presume to “tell” about the world of the “R”eal** (and I am only interested in a world where there is a real) as I know it.”

**Truth-telling means writing about the Real.** How a writer chooses to arrive at the Real, or how a writer or artist chooses to address the Real, accounts for the multiplicity of voices among writers, artists and all people. That said, I have my own way to name this Real, and that is as the transcendent. Visual artist Brian Kershisnik succinctly articulates my view of a writer’s relationship to the Real when he says:

“It [art] is a rip in the seam of the other world, where a purer reality leaks out, intentionally or not. An artist is someone who can give that leak a shape.”

How do we give truth shape with narrative? Or, more generally, how do we touch the transcendent through narrative? There are a thousand answers to this question, but I would like to consider theologian John Dominic Crossan’s answer of the narrative form of parable. In his small book The Dark Interval: A Theology of Story Crossan sets the story forms of myth and parable up in binary opposition: While myth functions to create and stabilize the world (think of creation myths), parables function to destabilize, to change the world. Jesus’ parables, for example, do not reassure the listener that the world is a safe and stable place, instead they subvert the readers expectation of the status quo (the socio-religious outcast, the Samaritan, performs the good deed, against the social norm that Jews should have not dealings with Samaritans). Structurally, the parable is

formed around the tension between the two opposing forces of reader expectation and of author expression, where the former is necessarily disrupted by the latter at least once and often twice. Functionally, the parable subverts the known world of the reader, and in doing so causes the reader discomfort and makes way for change. The power of parable, Crossan states is that:

“Parables give God room...They are stories which shatter the deep structure of our accepted world...They remove our defenses and make us vulnerable to God...My own term for this is transcendence” (100).

**Yes, transcendence, the Real. Parables are a form of narrative which function to make room for the experience of the Real.**

I do not aim to write parables in the structural sense. No, **but I do desire to write narratives which function as parables**, that is, narratives that make room for the transcendent, **narratives that truth tell.**

Yes, *tell*; that ever-present and problematic word in the tool box of the writers craft. I want to tell truth as I know it; and this writerly ambition, aside from being hopelessly bold and a doomed proposition from the get-go, also does not find much support in an academic writing environment where we teach creative writing students, often without even meaning to, to “**show, don’t tell.**” Show, show, show, we hear at the workshop table, don’t tell.

In the fiction workshop, as a corporate body, we believe that fiction should not be driven by ideas; fiction is not about abstractions or theories, fiction is about the world of the senses. Yes, fiction writers are reporters who dare not say what they think for fear of scaring away the wary reader who does not want and does not expect to be hit over the head by the dogma of the author. The job of a fiction writer, Janet Burroway claims in her standard text for teaching fiction, Writing Fiction, “is to focus attention not on the words, which are inert, nor on the thoughts that these words produce, but through these to felt experience, where the vitality of understanding lies (74).” That is, we learn that **fiction writers are neither poets nor philosophers.** Fiction writers are reporters. Fiction writers are materialists. All they have to work with is the materiality of the fictional world that they can create on the page. What then, am I doing claiming to want to write fiction at all?

This is dogma! I cry. This is dogma! I am a writer because I have things to say about the world. And then I am taught by the craft of my art that I cannot say these things that I have to say, or that if I want to say them I have to disguise my ideas behind character development, plot, scene and good dialogue. I have to sneak my ideas in through the back door of narrative; **through the felt sense.** Thankfully, I believe that there is an alternative to the limited philosophical flexibility of showing, even in fiction: *the alternative is telling that can evoke the felt sense of an idea as vividly as showing can evoke the felt sense of an emotion.*

I am not alone in my quest to point out that fiction writers (especially beginning fiction writers) are dumbed-down and silenced by a taught craft which disempowers writers from putting themselves, and their thoughts, boldly down on the page by telling it straight.

Poet Roger Mitchell writes in The Practice of Poetry: “Poetry and philosophy are close cousins.” The maxim “Show, don’t tell” repeated many times starts to sound like “Don’t Ever Tell” or “Telling is Bad” or “in fiction you must disguise what you really want to tell your audience in the material world of bodies of characters and the things of their lives” (58).

Mitchell claims that “Show, Don’t Tell” is an aesthetic reaction to the didactic literature of the late nineteenth century. While this aesthetic value was a necessary antidote in the beginning part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, now, he claims, we are apt to think of thinking, propounding, generalizing and telling as crimes against art. We are, he says, “Legatees of the Aesthetic movement a hundred years after its demise.”

*I agree with him:* The truth is that we all want to tell, yes, truth tell. Why write except to tell about what we are most passionate about? Have we ever read anything whose creation wasn’t driven by the desire to tell something about the way things are or should be? Something that gets at a truth, that subverts our knowing and makes way for change, that has the power to put us in touch with the transcendent? I claim (boldly!) that the taught craft value of showing over telling oppresses the writer’s desire to write from a place of knowing and limits the fiction writer from writing both poetry and philosophy, from writing directly about truth. It limits the fiction writer to the role of reporter, to the craft of creating of things that are made up.

Burroway quotes one of our master teachers, T.S. Eliot: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative;” in other words, a set of *objects, a situation, a chain of events* which shall be the formula of that particular emotion...” (275). Or the formula for a particular idea: “**No ideas but in things,**” said William Carlos Williams (Oliver 74).

I offer an alternative suggestion to Eliot’s dogma to which fiction writers remained faithful for most of a century: Can an *idea* function as an objective correlative? Can an idea function as a formula for a particular emotion, or if not an emotion, then at least a movement in the reader? Can an idea exist above the page as a felt sense that in its manipulation can stir and engage the interests and/or the emotions of the reader? Can the action of a piece of fiction be the manipulation/exploration of an idea?

So, what is the difference in the formation of the felt sense of an idea by telling as opposed to the formation of the felt sense of an emotion by showing? Consider this illustration. Think of a car chase as it appears in a film; the viewer experiences the car chase literally. Cars whiz back and forth across the screen, one in front of the other, until one car or the other ends up in a heap of metal or gets away across the desert. In this case the action of the car chase is literal; cars move across the screen fast and then faster and

then they don't. If the hero has died in the car wreck, the viewer responds appropriately with a felt emotion, given that the film has sufficiently convinced him or her that the action on the screen is actually happening. This is an example of showing. Now consider this passage about a car chase, which I have just made up:

Once the get-a-way car leaves behind the labyrinthine center of the city, and drives off the side of the highway, over the yellow lines of the emergency lane, and onto the dusty, sagebrush ridden desert, the car will immediately lose its velocity. The car will not, however, necessarily lose any speed. The speedometer's needle will hang steady at ninety-miles an hour, as evidenced by the roiling plume of dust rising behind the car.

Velocity, speed with direction, is a laughable idea against the receding horizon of the stock Southwestern desert of an action flick car chase. There is nowhere to go in the desert, and if going back to town is too risky, then there remains only the certainty of running out of gas, out of water, or driving over an edge into a grand canyon. Once the victorious car can no longer claim any direction, there is only speed, and nowhere to go, and everywhere to get lost—and the vultures circling overhead.

In this passage there is no car chase, no action that has actually taken place, and only a suggestion of plot. Yet, I have told about a car chase as it ends in the desert, most likely in the air thousands of feet above the canyon floor (echoes of Thelma and Louise). What there is is the idea of a car chase—told. The action, the movement, is in the evocative telling of the *idea* of a car chase, rather than in the literal showing of the car chase, as in the case of viewing a film.

Another way to articulate this difference is to say that **telling is the story about the story, and showing is the story itself**. The idea of velocity is the story about the story. Which car ended up in the desert is the story itself. **Truth-telling is, I claim, telling the story about the story**. (While the text of a parable shows a story, the function of parables is to tell the story about the story—the subversive function that makes way for the transcendent). Remember that it is the function of parables which is useful for my discussion).

But there are people in the get-a-way car. Of course there are. And successful fiction will move a reader to empathy or sympathy with the characters in a particular situation. Can a reader be made to care about the story of a relationship between two people? Can the telling of a relationship be as evocative as the showing of one? Expert showers of relationships are, for example, Raymond Carver and Alice Munroe and Anne Beattie. Their ability to move the reader to empathy is unmatched. But there is a telling alternative. Listen:

Decay, he tells her, come relatively quickly to the tree after pruning, and the healing process takes its time and it is vital that we find a balance between the two. Cavities, he tells her, must be avoided at all costs. Delores listens to her father but she wants to consider aesthetics too. She says so. She says that mechanical strength and physical

health are all fine and good but what about the way it looks, doesn't he care about the way it looks. He's glad she mentioned aesthetics, he tells her, he really is. See, the problem with nature, he says, is that we like to think we can live outside of it.

—From *The Trees in North America* by Steven Tuttle.

Terry knows even better than he does, because she has told him so, that she understands how much he needed that training in killing men to make him a useful man. A man with skills to act in the world. A man who can look at the bloody body of an enemy and feel right about it. A man who can, and will, take life in service of a higher authority, military and divine. He can feel this way, Terry tells him, because he has never had to kill another man. No, Richard tells her, you don't understand. My choice is not a matter of compassion. We are not having an abstract conversation. The unshed blood is already warm on my hands.

—From *The Wrong Private Reserve* by Sarah Read

These two passages are about conversations between two characters, however, neither conversation is *actually happening* in the current narrative time (even though both, ironically, are written in the present tense), nor have the conversations necessarily happened at a determined time in the past. The narrative is set in a suspended, indeterminate time. There is no car chase, only the idea of the car chase. There is no conversation, only the idea of the conversation. Yet, the materiality of the conversation does not matter because the passages are about the ideas driving the conversation; the stories about the story—the problem with nature, the fact of men trained to kill. This is idea driven fiction; the characters and the fictional situations serve the idea. The idea is evoked more vividly than the characters. The felt sense is of an idea. And this is the point.

And writing ideas so that they can take on this essential felt sense, telling the story about the story, writing about the Real, being in the presence of the transcendent, writing to parable, is what motivates me and gives me purpose as a writer. **“The writer’s business is truth”** Grace Paley, told us. Yes, I say, and let us go about it as writers of fiction **unabashedly and without apology.**