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## Introduction

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# Introduction

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- 1 In the 1960s, the British composer Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) momentarily abandoned opera for the more intimate genre of what he called his *Parables for Church performance*. The first one, his 1964 *Curlew River*, was inspired by a Japanese Noh play to which he gave a Christian slant, as it illustrates the wonders of performing Faith. The following two, *The Burning Fiery Furnace* and *The Prodigal Son*, were directly inspired by Scripture, from which the parable as a literary genre derives. According to Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, parables, from the Greek *parabole* meaning comparison, illustration or analogy, are "fictitious narratives in which the realities of everyday life are used to reveal and illustrate a doctrine or spiritual or moral matters or to enlighten the hearer by submitting to him a case with which he is not directly concerned so as to elicit a disinterested judgment from him (Fowler 558)". Generally associated with the teaching of Christ, parables make use of concrete narratives in order to allow people to more easily discuss and understand difficult or complex ideas, abstract arguments or the mysteries of religion. The Hebrew word for "parable" is "machal", which also means "enigma" and "proverb" and this use of parable is confirmed by Matthew 13, 13-15: "This is why I speak to them in parables: though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand".
- 2 Contrary to fables or allegories, parables involve human beings and often include characters who face moral dilemmas or make wrong decisions only to suffer the unforeseen consequences. Such use of characters makes it possible to dramatize stories on canvass, like Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*, one among a great many others. Parables target the listener's imagination rather than the hearer's powers of theoretical reasoning, hence their development on stage as Mystery plays, for instance. In pre-Protestant England and medieval times elsewhere, they used to represent a vivid theatrical tradition which was revived in Britain in the 1920's with the Canterbury Festival for which T.S. Eliot was commissioned to write his 1935 *Murder in the Cathedral*, a tradition to which Britten deliberately attached himself, as Gilles Couderc points out. Hence, great numbers of cantatas, oratorios or even ballets were inspired by the

popular parables from the Gospels, like Debussy's or Prokofiev's *Retour de L'Enfant Prodigue* or André Gide's own version of the Lost or Prodigal Son story.

- 3 Although the meaning of a parable is often not explicitly stated, it is not normally intended to be hidden or secret but, on the contrary, to be quite straightforward and obvious, even if it is rather bleak and not immediately transparent, as in the case of Britten's *Curlew River*. Most parables in the Gospels deal with the same and unique theme: how to reach the nebulous, abstract, mysterious Kingdom of God or to create Heaven on earth. All parables introduce the same comparative device: "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom" says Matthew 25:1. However, for each narrative the evangelists resort to many different images and metaphors drawn from everyday life which are all the more striking as they are not directly linked to the topic broached and consequently unveil new meanings, so that one parable may lead to several interpretations and teachings. A story that conveys a lesson, a parable has at least two meanings, the literary meaning and the figurative, that of the story told and that of its lesson, meant "to effect a change in the hearer, to lead to a decision or action; and the lesson always is religious or moral (Gowler 93)." Thus, a parable may provide embedded and unexpected meanings, far removed from the ones originally intended.
- 4 Providing guidance and suggestions for conducting one's life properly according to precise moral standards, parables were used in sacred books, religious teaching or initiation rituals. They frequently refer to a prescriptive subtext suggesting how a person should behave, or what people should believe. It is to such subtext that a person invested with moral authority will refer to justify norms and rules. But parables exist outside the Christian tradition as well, and they are present in all religions, frequently involving the teachings of masters to their disciples. Originally, parables belonged to an oral tradition which became fixed when written down. Masters crafted the stories which they tailored to the background or personality of their disciples to illustrate the teachings to be transmitted. The pedagogical element of parables in the Gospels accounts for their rhetorical aspect, with the triadic structure of most of Jesus' parables, which characterises Olive Schreiner's narratives, as discussed by Nathalie Saudo-Welby, or Britten's *Curlew River*. Most parables are both singular and universal, but the parables in the Gospels are part of a specific and greater story framework, that of Christ's life and ministry, his incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, part and parcel of the new covenant of salvation or *kerygma*, the apostolic proclamation of salvation through faith in Christ.
- 5 The writers discussed here — Schreiner and C.S. Lewis — and Britten himself, with his Low Church mother, were raised in the tradition of intense Bible reading, and so was their public, which led them to use Scriptures as a basis for their writings. As Daniel Warzecha shows when dealing with C.S. Lewis's Bible-inspired parables, Lewis appropriated and reactivated foundational biblical episodes in his parables in order to metaphorize his apologetic purpose through the process of re-effectuation, the retelling of parables in one's own words, coloured by personal experience. Moreover, Scripture as prescriptive text, representing the Law, can be appropriated and subverted as the free interpretation of Scripture is one of the tennets of Protestantism. The meaning of Scripture was never written in stone and can be freely interpreted by successive generations of readers, however different and foreign to the original they may appear, provided they interpret it in good faith. Schreiner's rewriting of parables

aims at denouncing the arbitrariness of man's domination over woman, while the ambivalence of the narrator's gender in those parables opens up new paths for new meanings.

- 6 Britten belonged to the 'Auden Generation' who believed, along with many others before and after them, that literature and poetry were forms of action, as Samuel Hynes points out in his eponymous analysis of 1976. In *'Psychology and Art To-day'* (1935), Auden defined parable-art as "that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love", thus recalling the Gospel and the Book of Common Prayer he knew by heart as an Anglican. He was to turn back to Anglicanism after 1939, and such conversion affected both T.S. Eliot, as he attempted to find a way out of his personal waste land, and C.S Lewis, as Warzecha recalls. Auden later was to qualify the prescriptive Covenant-like "shall" of his statement by eliminating any parallel with propaganda and the Marxist and Brechtian tenets of class struggle in favour of a revolution whose main agents would be art and artists : "Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity of action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice." (Preface to *The Poet's Tongue*, 1935) While eschewing the genre's didacticism, Auden, like Britten, followed in the long tradition of allegory and that of the fable which run from *Pier Plowman*, *Everyman*, and *The Pilgrim's Progress* to Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. That tradition is also present in Schreiner's parables discussed by Saudo-Welby. The dream sequences in those parables were probably inspired by Bunyan's narrative strategies.
- 7 What is striking is the constancy and stability of the genre of the parable in spite of its multifarious metamorphoses in literature, drama, poetry, music and painting. Even though ideologies have collapsed and western societies have become secular, the tradition of the parable has persisted well into the late XXth and early XXIst centuries and it has remained relevant when parables still contribute to evangelising. How is that specificity dealt with in transpositions and adaptations involving several artistic forms? Is parable a valid definition of drama, mirror of the world, microcosm of the macrocosm? Is parable part of our mental structures? Those are just a few of the questions that beg to be addressed and which find some answers in the articles here.

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