The History Of Literature II

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Compelling Narrative Vehicles:

Certain narrative templates have universal appeal, as they tap into something that is endemic to human nature. This explains why certain themes crop up time after time in sacred lore…across epochs…and around the world. I explore the incidence of such templates in my essays on "Mythemes".

Perhaps more than any other art-form, literature has been instrumental in making statements in provocative ways. Stories take many forms:

- **Myths** (as with The Iliad, Exodus, and the Ring Cycle)
- **Fables** (as compiled by Aesop, or those in the Pancha-tantra) {11}
- **Folktales** (about Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan; or those by Alexander Pushkin)
- **Morality tales** (as with those by Chaucer, Voltaire, and Dahl)
- **Cautionary tales** (as with Crime And Punishment, The Jungle, and Lord of the Flies) {3}
- **Epics / sagas** (as with those about Utnapishtim, Odysseus, Beowulf, Rama, Sinbad, and King Arthur)

Another common narrative style is the **fairytale**–as with those compiled by:

- Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll **(English)**
- Giovanni Francesco Straparola **(Italian)**
- Charles Perrault **(French)**
- Hans Christian Andersen **(Danish)**
- The brothers Grimm **(German)**
- Alexander Afanasyev **(Russian)**
- Isaac ben Solomon "Ibn Sahula" of Castile **(Sephardic Jewish)**
- Muju Dokyo **(Japanese)**

These works are not merely engaging narratives. They are often VEHICLES–in that they relay ideas. Hence the present thesis: A compelling narrative vehicle (CNV) is the primary means by which a memeplex (e.g. an ideology) operates, and is promulgated. The "C" means both "captivating" and "compelling". For a story needs to first catch–and keep–people's attention before it can motivate them. Put another way: In order to be effective, a narrative vehicle must be MOVING in the psychical sense–which is to say: the audience is "moved" / "touched" by it (in the emotive sense) and consequently influenced–nay, motivated–by it. To be persuasive, a story must be compelling in the sense of impacting how / what the audience thinks.

Sartre made the distinction between poetic writing, which is merely expressive, intended to evoke or capture; whereas prose is meant to to make a point via what he called "committed writing". The former is purely artistic; the latter is didactic. (Put anther way: The former is a matter of perceiving; the latter is a matter of conveying.) It is the latter with which we are concerned here. Compelling stories are the primary form of what Daniel C. Dennett calls "intuition pumps". As effective didactic tools, parables have historically been the primary means of conveying a vital message, making an important point, and teaching

a valuable lesson.

The idiom of a "vehicle" is apt because a masterfully-embroidered narrative tapestry is said to "transport" us. A CNV is a vehicle because it transports us to someplace we want to go. CNVs generate their own momentum. Once we get the ball rolling, so to speak, it is difficult to arrest its advance. This is due to what could be dubbed "memetic inertia". The most robust of CNVs are effectively memetic perpetual motion machines. But, then again, CNVs are fueled by a steady influx of hope and fear. They barrel on, down a road paved by credulity. (The more credulity, the smoother the road.)

We homo sapiens are suckers for a good story. The universal inclination to become smitten with–and, subsequently, inclined to disseminate–provocative tales can be explained by this universal predisposition. We ALL want to be enchanted–that is: beguiled and inspired. A well-crafted yarn draws us in, and strikes a nerve. If a yarn enthralls us, then we will be strongly inclined to embrace it; and do so irrespective of its connection to Reality. In other words: If a tale is going to serve as a VEHICLE for something (e.g. the inculcation of an ideology), its factual accuracy is beside the point. What matters is that it is tantalizing; and serves some sort of purpose.

We are story-telling creatures; and so our lives are shot through with myths. The narratives we embrace are invariably festooned with leitmotifs that resonate with all humans. (After all, we're all operating with the brains of homo sapiens.) As a consequence, these archetypes crop up again and again in history's most successful mythologies.

Moreover, certain themes seem to jive with our human nature. A mytheme can be anything from a simple narrative gimmick (as with a virgin birth) to any epic plot arc (as with Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey"). Once a mytheme proves effective in one milieu, it is often adopted by those in other milieus–and adapted to indigenous cultural exigencies (a phenomenon I dub "mytheme milking"). For more on this, see my essays on "Mythemes".

CNVs resonate with us because they move something deep inside us that is waiting to be moved.

An effective CNV helps us navigate what is often a beguiling cosmos. We are all gripped by the pressing questions: Where did I come from? (And how so?) Where am I going? (And why?) We seek explanations of both our origins and crave a worthwhile telos. {1} A narrative is thus meaning-FUL and meaning-MAKING. CNVs are useful for ameliorating the existential disorientation that afflicts every human. Stories help us make sense of a vertiginous existence–ascribing meaning to events around us so that we may more readily determine what to care about (and see WHY we should care about it). They give us a sense of purpose / direction; which enables us to get our bearings in a dismaying world (and to establish our place in it).

In any given memetic ecosystem, there are many memes vying for our attention. The social psychology here is also relevant; as which narratives prevail is largely a function of hype. Note the roster of memes that are famous simply for being (in)famous. Oftentimes, the quality of the material is entirely beside the point. CNVs work because they have appeal. They catch on due to their utility, not their verity. A narrative doesn't need to have merit to propagate. Testament to this is the fact that, in contemporary culture, the vast majority of blockbuster films (from amusing yet sophomoric comedies to titillating yet vacuous action movies) and best-selling books represent some of the most mindless–nay, idiotic–material. In spite of its lowbrow nature, such fare sells like hotcakes.

Here's the thing: Their fatuity is not a handicap; it's often an asset. The key is that they captivate. It is satisfaction, not erudition, that draws huge audiences. Prospects of a cheap thrill will usually trump fare

that–though more edifying–requires cognitive exertion. A cursory survey of pop culture's biggest hits–in the cinema and on bookshelves–illustrates this point.

Outside of the parables relayed by Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospels, morality tales (narratives intended to convey a moral lesson) in Christian lore go back to the "Shepherd of Hermas", a text from the 2nd century that was popular until the Roman magisterium ousted it from the acceptable canon.

Several works have been done on an allegorical treatment of the Bible. While works like those of Albert Schweitzer, Reinhold Neibuhr, Paul Tillich, and Northrop Frye are mildly interesting, the most edifying is probably "You Shall Be As Gods" by Erich Fromm (who was, it might be noted, a Marxian and humanist). Unsurprisingly, the best insights consistently come from those who are LEAST dogmatic, and treat the material-at-hand more as literature than as holy writ. The more doctrinal (read: conservative) a religionist is, the more deluded he will be; and–as a direct consequence–the more any commentary will devolve into religious apologetics.

As might be expected, some parables are downright idiotic–from the tribulations of Job (Yahweh's utterly pointless exercise in sadism) to the Akedah (Yahweh testing Abraham's fealty by seeing if he'd be willing to murder his own son). Spoiler alert: Both Job and Abraham passed their respective tests.

And how does the Koran fair in this department? Dismally. The book's authors' ham-fisted attempts at parable are more like half-baked vignettes–terse, hackneyed, prosaic, superficial–than they are instances of profound allegorical disquisition.

The point of parable / allegory is not to be "true" qua factual; it is to capture something important about the human experience; and elucidate our shared human nature. Such an understanding can then be used to make sense of the (factual) world in which we find ourselves. Parable / allegory is thus a heuristic–in that it uses patterns (esp. metaphor) to REVEAL things. After all, art doesn't so much "tell" us something (like a literal statement); it SHOWS us something.

A prime example of the didactic power of parable is the Buddhist "Jataka Tales" from Late Antiquity…which eventually inspired the Kashmiri "Katha Sarit Sagara" [Ocean Of Streams Of Stories] by Suma-deva in the 11th century.

Cultivating a thorough understanding of the role STORIES play in our lives entails recognizing how CNVs operate at the micro and macro levels. This means being cognizant of the deep ideological structure that buoys the myths by which we live. For a myth is only useful insofar as it DOES something to us. The point is worth reiterating: It is how gratifying, not how edifying, a narrative is that makes it compelling; and so useful as a vehicle. WHERE, exactly, it happens to take people is important. This is what might be thought of as a matter of narrative telemetry. But regardless of where it takes us, the point of a CNV is to take us SOMEWHERE. And the destination tends to serve the incumbent power structures. (Those in power tend to have a vested interest in perpetuating the narratives that justify their power; thus maintaining the conditions on which their continued power depends.)

When it comes to folklore, much of the most useful material is effectively an elaborate–often epic–"just so story" (JSS). This narrative gimmick uses plot-points that are fabricated to fit the available facts (or at least the set of facts that have been acknowledged by the tellers). It does this to arrive at the desired conclusion (i.e. to show that the coveted worldview is justified). A JSS is crafted to fill in holes and smooth over "bumps" in any narrative account. {13} Hearsay is often used to complete the narrative; and to get it to DO what one wants it to. {14}

Here's the catch: After it is established, the JSS is then used to EXPLAIN the available facts. In other words, the narrative is retro-fitted to salient exigencies; and is subsequently treated as an EXPLANATION FOR those exigencies. The fact that the narrative was DESIGNED to fit the evidence is elided. Such epistemic recursive-ness (a catch-22) has purchase in pliable minds because it serves a purpose.

One might think of this as the folkloric equivalent of artificially-inflated stock. Those who exalt a narrative will tend to argue not from facts, but from the perspective of that narrative. For every position will be thought of (and articulated) in terms of how it comports with said narrative; and consequently will be RATIONALIZED as such.

And so it goes: That the narrative fits the evidence is taken as validation of the narrative. (It MUST be right, for it accounts for everything we now see!)

Take, for instance, the outlandish pontifications of Azeri writer, Zecharia Sitchin–who employed his knowledge of Sumerian culture to weave fantastical yarns about the Babylonians (and their mysterious forebears, the "Anunnaki", who hailed from the planet Nibiru). Sitchin's books of tantalizing pseudo-science have sold millions of copies. Such musings have inspired cults from Japan's "Pana Wave" to America's "Raëlism". His ideas have even spawned the spurious arena of "Xeno-archeology" (ref. Swiss author, Erich von Däniken's 1968 "Chariots of the Gods?" and the speculations of Graham Hancock). WHY is such material so popular? Because it is FASCINATING. As a CNV, it plays upon the imagination in the same way that religion does. (It is no coincidence that Scientology was concocted by a successful science fiction author.)

And so it goes: A JSS recognizes cherry-picked facts in order to offer solid grounds for the ideology-at-hand…which is, in turn, used to make sense of those facts. As with any CNV, embellishment is used AS NEEDED in order to add narrative luster. The "catch" is that embellishment is difficult to reverse (once flair is introduced, it is hard to extricate). This creates a ratcheting effect for each link in the line of transmission. This narrative calcification is only exposed when we have a record of antecedent versions; and so can use historical documentation to trace the (otherwise elided) changes.

It is difficult to temper creative license when it is the prerogative to embellish (as he sees fit) that animates the passion of any given amanuensis. After all, it is in the interest of the story-teller–who's sin qua non is to propound a tale in the most enticing way–to augment the propulsion of the CNV. This is done by making it more captivating (catchy) and more memorable (sticky). Why, then, would such enhancements (be they epidemiological or mnemonic) be rescinded by the next link in the line of transmission? Why would a proponent of a narrative do anything to comprise the fitness of that narrative? Insofar as CNVs are concerned, the incentives are clearly set in favor of narrative enhancement, not a commitment to Truth. (So goes the adage: Don't let Truth get in the way of a good story.)

CNVs proliferate by reverberating–in perpetuity–amongst those for whom they've been crafted. As such, story-telling acumen involves a kind of panache–a willingness to add zest to what may otherwise be a mundane topic. In order to enhance the poignancy of the CNV, emendations are incorporated into the re-telling to, as it were, spruce things us. Once incorporated (seamlessly) into the narrative, such modifications are no longer seen AS modifications. It is assumed they were integral to the story ALL ALONG. After all, every version of a story will invariably present itself as AUTHENTIC (i.e. the original version).

We are not incentivized to notice such things; as we are all suckers for anything that inspires us (even when it is based on false hope; see my essay, "The Island"). Give people hope, and they'll eat out of the palm of

your hand. We are especially enticed by any narrative that notifies us that we are on the cusp of a pivotal juncture in history (teetering on the brink of something wonderful; see my essay: “Brink Porn”).

The most effective CNVs have verve; they have pizzazz. They stimulate and provoke. Any CNV that has stood the test of time has a good hook–both to get people’s attention and to keep their attention. To invoke the six primary senses: a successful CNV is piquant (taste), gripping (tactile), flashy (visual), resonant (auditory), pungent (scent)…all while enabling us to get our bearings (balance).

In his “After Virtue”, Alasdair MacIntyre described our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world: “Man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to ‘truth’ [he might have said: useful plausibility]. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship. I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ We enter human society with one or more imputed characters–roles into which we have been drafted–and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed” (p. 216). {2} Jurgen Habermas also developed a theory on meaningful (and meaning-generating) human interaction, which he referred to as “communicative action”.

We homo sapiens are, after all, meaning-making machines (as Max Weber astutely articulated); and meaning is typically posited according to some sort of narrative structure. It can’t NOT be thought of in narrative terms, because our thought processes are INHERENTLY narrative in nature. (And, as Daniel Dennett put it, the transcendental self is essentially the center of narrative gravity.) Note that “narrative” in this profound sense is not just a story one tells oneself–and others–about one’s life (and about the world in which one finds oneself “thrown”). It operates at the deepest existential level; and so it prefigured into one’s everyday life–dictating that way one conceptualizes one’s experiences, and even one’s identity. As Paul Ricoeur noted, an existential narrative provides a comprehensive schema for positing the worldly dimension of our “moral selfhood” and the moral status of our actions.

Being meaning-making machines, we tend to ascribe significance where there is none. We are predisposed to impute purpose to events in which there is only blind contingency. More to the point, we are story-tellers; so we force-fit everything into a pre-determined narrative. This is why we are tempted to call a coincidence “more than just a coincidence”. We believe what we want to believe (a condition that might be called “epistemic pareidolia”). {4}

A CNV, then, serves as a framing device. For it is integral to one’s perception of the world, and one’s place IN that world. Indeed, a CNV provides a sense-making schema for a universe that is otherwise intimidatingly bewildering; and even exasperatingly dismaying. It does so by furnishing us with the terms by which we make sense of, well, anything and everything. Consequently, the creation of meaning is invariably a narrative construction.

Life can be disorienting–nay: dizzying; and so often quite bewildering. An efficacious narrative helps to stave off existential vertigo. The “catch” is that, more than just as a vehicle for existential ballast, a potent CNV can serve as a vehicle for ideology–no matter how cockamamie that ideology might be. In fact, the more outrageous the narrative is, the more entrancing–and addictive–the it might be; and so the more compelling a vehicle it can become. After all, milquetoast narratives are not nearly as captivating as fantastical ones. (Scott Atran made this point in his “In God’s We Trust”.)

It should be obvious, then, that RELIGIOUS CNVs are–among other things–coping mechanisms. They facilitate the sublimation of primal yearnings into a socially acceptable scheme. In order to understand

how this works, we need to flesh out UNIVERSALS–that is: common threads that seem to exist in virtually ALL successful narratives. (For more on this topic, see the Appendix.)

Bottom line: An effective CNV meets our existential demands.

CNVs not only serve as existential girders, they can serve as heuristics (that is: practical, ready-to-use schemes for making sense of any otherwise confounding / bewildering world). Indeed, they are semiotic lenses in one of the most accessible and relatable forms: narrative form. For it is, after all, STORIES that strike a nerve, that press our buttons, that enthrall and inspire us. (It is hard to find a riveting semiotic lens.) Regardless of their didactic value, a CNV is only a valuable as we make it; as we must bring our (innate) moral intuitions to bear on even the best narratives. For obviously the standards we us to make judgements about how worthwhile a story is cannot THEMSELVES come from the story. We evaluate it based on a wherewithal we possess independently of having made productive use of the story. (The same goes for a text, a figurehead, or any other consecrated source.)

We humans are equipped with moral intuitions, yet sometimes we need something to help us to hone them. A CNV, then, might be thought of as a prosthetic for cultivating wisdom; which is to say that it can never possibly be an ULTIMATE basis. After all, didactic tools are only valuable insofar as they help us GET AT something; and that something is not the tool ITSELF. (Tools are, by definition, a means to an end; not an end in themselves.)

Therefore, it is never ULTIMATELY ABOUT the narrative vehicle–whatever it might be; and however much we might be smitten with it. We employ a sense-making mechanism to help us make sense of something beyond the mechanism. The (potential) problem is that we often become transfixed by–and thus obsessed with–the mechanism. So when we are dealing with an enthralling NARRATIVE, we sometimes fixate on the particulars of the narrative–as if it were a LITERAL ACCOUNT. (I explore such folly in the Appendix.)

A heuristic–narrative or otherwise–serves as an mental prosthesis. While we are all capable of grasping universal principles, we often need CNVs to help us to articulate them. But CNVs are not ends-in-themselves. The problem is that when a CNV entrances us, we sometimes treat it as far more than just a narrative vehicle. We are always prone to confuse a well-crafted social construct for an objective description of the cosmos. Suitability is often construed as veracity. So whenever we become smitten with a narrative, we should always ask ourselves: Is the narrative serving us or are we serving the narrative?

The becomes a moot point for those suffering from existential vertigo. When one is stumbling around in the dark, searching for something–ANYTHING–solid to grasp onto, one will cling to whatever one finds. Groping around in desperation, once one finds something, one will be reticent to let it go; as that would mean once more being–as it were–lost at sea. So once found, one will hold onto a narrative like a child clinging to a security blanket.

When people find meaning / purpose, or experience transcendence, or simply stumble into something that confers (apparent) benefits, one of two things happen. They will either latch onto whatever narrative in which it is already couched (if that narrative is sufficiently compelling), or they will search out some narrative that seems plausible enough to explain it…and then latch onto THAT. Important things need to be somehow accounted for, and we tend to gravitate toward explanations that have a narrative structure. The most captivating narrative usually wins. {10}

Once one commits to a CNV, one comes to NEED it to be true. Becoming dependent on a proposition's verity entails a suspension of critical reflection. People "sign on" to a particular CNV not because they

have consciously decided: “Hey, I find THIS particular CNV most captivating / compelling for THESE reasons.” Rather, they find a CNV to be captivating / compelling for reasons they do not fully understand…let alone acknowledge. “It works for me; therefore I’m going to run with it” is what everyone IMPLICITLY says about a worldview they’ve adopted (nay, committed themselves to); but–pace post-hoc rationalizations–they usually can’t articulate WHY.

To reiterate: Ideas catch on not so much because they are CREDIBLE (for demonstrable reasons), but because they happen to RESONATE (for whatever reasons, no matter how specious). That is, dogmas propagate more due to the idiosyncrasies of subjectivity than due to unassailable standards of objectivity. If it strikes a chord, its credence (or lack thereof) is beside the point. For PERCEIVED merit often trumps ACTUAL merit. {15}

Parables:

Parables are stories that teach us lessons (or make statements) by using metaphor as a didactic tool. In other words: they are ALLEGORICAL (rather than literal) in nature. In our attempts to apprehend abstract ideas, we tend to think not in literal terms, but in metaphors. Consequently, a CNV serves as a better heuristic than dry, turgid exposition. {12}

Parable has been a vehicle for explication since the Ancient Greek’s told the tale of “The Blind Man and the Lame”. In the 8th century B.C., Hesiod recounted the fable of the Hawk and the Nightingale. Then Aesop of Samos formalized the genre in the early 6th century B.C., first compiled by Demetrius of Phaleron in the 4th century B.C., then by various other writers of Classical Antiquity like the Syrian writer, Babrios and the Roman fabulist, Phaedrus.

The use of allegory as a didactic tool was pioneered by Lucius Apuleius of Madauros (Numidia) with is anthology of tales, the “Metamorphosis” [alt. rendered “Asinus Aureus”; “The Golden Ass”] c. 160 A.D. Philo of Alexandria employed allegory to reconcile Greek Stoicism with Judaic lore–emphasizing the point that literal interpretations of the Hebrew Bible were specious. Even Christians got in on the act–as with the collection of (Christian-themed) parables, the “Physiologus” from the 2nd century A.D.–originally written in Alexandria using Koine Greek, but then translated to Syriac, Ethiopic (Ge’ez), Armenian, and Vulgar Latin.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Samuel offers somewhat of a political parable; which was then adapted into the sacred history found in “Chronicles”. Elsewhere in the Mikra, we find Daniel and the Lion’s Den, Jonah and the Whale, Samson and Delilah, etc. As “mashal”, these tales can be understood as allegorical (rather than as some attempt at historical documentation) without compromising their narrative heft.

In the New Testament, we find parables such as that of the Prodigal Son, the Visitor At Night, the Rich Fool, the Sower, and the Good Samaritan. (We also find pithy allegories like the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl, the Mustard Seed, the Leaven Bread, and the casting of the first stone). These are clearly allegorical; which is simply to say that they are presented for didactic purposes–as Jesus himself specified in chapter 13 of Matthew (verses 10-17).

During the Roman Empire, the great Syrian satirist, Lucian of Samosata penned “Philo-pseudes” [“Lover of Falsehoods”]–a tale that mocked those who are credulous and superstitious. (I explore the role of satire throughout history in my essay: “In Defense Of Satire”.) Later, Martianus Minnueus Felix Capella of Madauros (Numidia) employed allegory the epic prosimetrum, “De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii” [“On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury”] c. 410.

Even during the Dark Ages, parables were composed to teach moral lessons–as with the "Vaddaradhane" by the Kannada writer, Shiva-kotia Charya of Karnataka in the 9th century. Poetry was also used to teach moral lessons–as with the didactic verse of Japanese writer, Yamanoue no Okura in the late 7th / early 8th century.

During the Enlightenment, Montesquieu used the epistolary novel to articulate his ideas–as with his tale of Persian noblemen, Usbek and Rica traveling through France in "Lettres Persanes". Meanwhile, José Cadalso provided commentary on Spanish society with "Cartas Marruecas".

As discussed earlier, CNVs convey vital messages, make important points, and teach valuable lessons. Let's survey the incidence of parable around the world. I will limit the scope primarily to the modern era. Let's begin with **Russian** literature–which offers some of the most notable examples:

- Afanasyev's "The Frog Princess" [a.k.a. "Vasilisa The Wise"]
- Turgenev's "Mumu"
- Pushkin's "Ruslan And Ludmila"
- Gogol's "Dead Souls" and "The Overcoat"
- Dostoyevsky's "The Grand Inquisitor" and "The Idiot"
- Tolstoy's "Resurrection" and "The Kingdom Of God Is Within You"
- Lermontov's "The Song Of The Merchant Kalashnikov"
- Bulgakov's "Master & Margarita"
- Nabokov's "Pale Fire"
- Chekhov's "Nincompoop"
- Zamyatin's "We"

Here are examples from 34 other cultures–listed by the author's ethnic background:

- Coelho's "The Alchemist" **(Brasilian)**
- Llosa's "The Time Of The Hero" and Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" **(Spanish-speaking Latin American)**
- Kierkegaard's "The Seducer's Diary" and Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes" **(Danish)**
- Lagerkvist's "Bödeln", "Dvärgen", and "Barabbas"; Lagerlöf's "The Wonderful Adventures of Nils"; as well as Strindberg's "The Red Room" (**Swedish**)
- Ibsen's "The Master Builder" (**Norwegian**)
- Van Diest's "Elckerlijc" (**Dutch**)
- Hesse's "Siddhartha" and "Narcissus & Goldmund"; as well as Gotthelf's "The Black Spider" (**Swiss German**)
- "The Fisherman and His Wife"; Lessing's "Nathan The Wise"; Kleist's "The Broken Jug"; Nietzsche's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"; Goethe's "The Sorrows of Young Werther"; and Brecht's "The Good Person of Sichuan" (**High German**)
- Yourcenar's "L'Œuvre Au Noir" [a.k.a. "The Abyss"] (**Belgian French**)
- Voltaire's "Zadig" and "Micromégas"; Rabelais' "The Life of Gargantua & Pantagruel"; Saint-Exupery's "The Little Prince"; Pizan's "The Book of the City of Ladies"; as well as Molière's "The Misanthrope", "Tartuffe", and "The School For Wives" (**Parisian French**)
- Dante's "Divine Comedy" (**Tuscan Italian**)
- Boccaccio's "Teseida" [from his "Decameron"] (**Florentine Italian**)
- Cervantes' "Don Quixote"; Ruiz's "The Book of Good Love"; Calderon's "Life Is A Dream"; and "The Life Of Lazarillo de Tormes [And Of His Fortunes And Adversities]" (**Castilian Spanish**)
- Kafka's "Metamorphosis" and "The Castle" (**Slavic Jewish**)

- Biernat of Lublin's "Eden of the Soul" and Boleslaw Prus' "Pharaoh" (**Polish**)
- Kundera's "The Joke" and "The Unbearable Lightness Of Being" (**Bohemian**)
- "The Knight In The Panther's Skin" **(Georgian)**
- Krasznohorkai's "Satan-tango"; Mikszath's "Peter's Umbrella"; and Tolnai's "The New Lieutenant" (**Hungarian**)
- "The Book of Dede Korkut" (**Turkish**)
- Chortatzis' "Erotokritos" and "Erophile" (**modern Greek**)
- Rihani's "The Book of Khalid"; and Gibran's "The Prophet" (**Lebanese**)
- Sa'di's "Golestan"; as well as the "Samak-i Ayyar" (**Persian**)
- Narayan's "A Tiger For Malgudi"; "The Brahmin And The Mongoose"; as well as Ramdhari Singh's "Hunkar", "Kurukshetra", and "Rashmirathi" (**Indian**)
- Ananthamurthy's "Samskara" (**Kannada**)
- Lahiri's "The Real Durwan" (**Bengal**i)
- Kim Man-jung's "The Cloud Dream of the Nine" **(Korean)**
- Lu Xun's "Call To Arms" (**Chinese**)
- Viet Thanh Nguyen's "The Sympathizer" [originally written in English] **(Vietnamese)**
- "Tale of the Bamboo Cutter" [a.k.a. the tale of "Princess Kaguya"]; Ozaki Koyo's "The Usurer" [a.k.a. "The Golden Demon"] (**Japanese**)
- Matar's "The Wedding of Zein" (**Sudanese**)
- Fagunwa's "A Brave Hunter In The Forest Of Demons"; Obioma's "The Fisherman"; Soyinka's "The Lion And The Jewel" (**Yoruba**)
- Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" (**Igbo**)
- Ama Ata Aidoo's "Anowa" (**Ghanaian**)
- Ngugi's "Weep Not, Child" (**Kikuyu**)

The examples go on and on. Ibn Sahula's "Meshal ha-Kadmoni(m)" [Parables of the Ancients] was an Andalusian classic. Muju Dokyo's "Shasekishu" was a collection of Buddhist morality tales. In surveying such works, we find that the power of parable transcends ethnicity.

We might also note the great parables from **Britain**. The oldest in English is (arguably) Geoffrey Chaucer's "Troilus And Criseyde" from the 14th century. Then came "Mankind", "Mind, Will, and Understanding", and "The Castle of Perseverance"–all from the 15th century. Here are 33 more of the most notable:

- William Langland's "Piers Plowman"
- Edmund Spenser's "The Faerie Queene"
- Samuel Johnson's "The History Of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia"
- John Milton's "Paradise Lost"
- Oliver Goldsmith's "Citizen Of The World"
- Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe"
- John Dryden's "The Hind And The Panther"
- William Shakespeare's "Coriolanus"
- Alexander Pope's "The Rape Of The Lock"
- Jonathan Swift's "Gulliver's Travels"
- James Joyce's "A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man"
- Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot"
- David Lindsay's "A Voyage To Arcturus"
- William Godwin's "The Adventures Of Caleb Williams"
- Laurence Sterne's "The Life And Opinions Of Tristram Shandy"

- Thomas Carlyle's "Sartor Resartus"
- George Macdonald's "Phantastes"
- Charles Dickens' "The Life And Adventures Of Martin Chuzzlewit"
- Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol"
- Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein"
- William Butler Yeats' "The Herne's Egg"
- William James' "The Beast In The Jungle"
- William Morris' "A Dream Of John Ball"
- Oscar Wilde's "A Picture Of Dorian Gray"
- George Bernard Shaw's "Pygmalion" and "The Doctor's Dilemma"
- Henry Newbolt's "Aladore"
- David Lindsay's "A Voyage To Arcturus"
- Malcolm Lowry's "Under The Volcano"
- Arthur Koestler's "Darkness At Noon"
- Virginia Woolf's "To The Lighthouse"
- George Orwell's "Animal Farm"
- Aldous Huxley's "Island"

Again, we find that the themes are timeless. Even as they might lose some of the flavor when read in a language other than the one in which they were originally composed, a reader can procure a full appreciation of their merits. Their brilliance, as it were, "shines through" after a competent translation is performed. This is the case whether one is reading "Beowulf" or "The Sneetches".

We do not need to read such tales in the original language to appreciate them. Indeed, one can read any great work by British or American authors in languages other than English and still grasp their significance. Ask a non-English speaker to read a classic tale initially written in English–like those listed above–in his native language. One can even refer to more recent parables–such as Neil Gaiman's "The Ocean At The End Of The Lane" and Richard Powers' "The Overstory".

In the U.S. / Canada, there have been many classic parables–most notably: Dr. Seuss' "The Sneetches" (about the foibles of consumerism and tribalism) and Shel Silverstein's "The Giving Tree" (about the importance of appreciation). Here are twenty more of the most notable parables (sometimes morality tales, sometimes existential commentaries) from **American** literature:

- Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Evangeline: A Tale Of Acadie"
- Mark Twain's "The Prince And The Pauper"
- Herman Melville's "Bartleby The Scrivener" and "The Confidence-Man"
- Sinclair Lewis' "Babbitt"
- Ernest Hemingway's "The Old Man And The Sea"
- Kate Chopin's "The Awakening"
- John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums"
- F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby"
- James Baldwin's "Blues For Mister Charlie"
- Joseph Heller's "Catch-22"
- John Updike's "A&P"
- Saul Bellow's "Henderson the Rain King"
- Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery"
- Philip K. Dick's "The Penultimate Truth"
- Kurt Vonnegut's "Cat's Cradle"

- Robert Heinlein's "Job: A Comedy Of Justice"
- Norton Juster's "The Phantom Tollbooth"
- Daniel Keyes' "Flowers For Algernon"

Each is allegorical in nature. That is: They are meant to be read as parable more than as literal accounts. {16} Any one of these stories can be translated into virtually any language and retain its literary merits. In each case, it is obvious that the parable IS A PARABLE. Such tales can be translated into ANY language and not lose any of their charm or potency. The merit of the writing shines through.

One will find that–pace an understanding of the respective native cultures–one can fully appreciate / understand EVERY ONE of these great works. Their themes are universal. They resonate across ethnic backgrounds. Such is the nature of well-crafted parable. Yet such is NOT the case with, say, Surah 12 of the Koran (the crudely-fashioned "parable" of Joseph) or Surah 18 (the crudely-fashioned "parable" of the cave based on "The Sleepers of Ephesus"). Sometimes, attempts at parable are ham-fisted, their content utterly inane.

In assaying the history of parable–good and bad–we should bear in mind that stories THEMSELVES are not wisdom. It is by perspicaciously interpreting those stories that wisdom can be gleaned. The message is there for culling, but it's up to the audience to bring his moral intuitions to bear. After all, didactic tools are JUST TOOLS. A tool is only as good as how astutely one makes use of it.

Existentially Profound Works:

The present survey would be derelict if it focused ONLY on parables. For narratives can also be highly complex–that is: not necessarily allegorical in nature. So let's now explore literary works that are valuable in that they explore existential issues by telling stories in less metaphorical ways (though metaphor is still certainly employed). Again, I will limit the scope primarily to the modern era; and I will tend to stick to the more estimable examples (in terms of literary quality as well as philosophical profundity).

We might begin with the bildungsroman (coming-of-age story). In **English**, this narrative approach began in 1749 with Henry Fielding's "The History Of Tom Jones: A Foundling". Here are twenty more notable examples (composed in English):

- Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre"
- Jane Austen's "Emma" and "Sense And Sensibility"
- Willa Cather's "My Antonia"
- Charles Dickens' "David Copperfield"
- Thomas Hardy's "Far From The Madding Crowd"
- Rudyard Kipling's "Captains Courageous"
- F. Scott Fitzgerald's "This Side Of Paradise"
- Jack London's "Martin Eden"
- Rudolfo Anayas' "Bless Me, Ultima"
- James Baldwin's "Go Tell It On The Mountain"
- J.D. Salinger's "The Catcher In The Rye"
- Booth Tarkington's "Alice Adams"
- James Salter's "A Sport And A Pastime"
- Jack Karouak's "On The Road"
- Saul Bellow's "The Adventures Of Augie March"
- David Paterson's "Bridge To Terabithia"

- Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Wizard Of Earthsea"
- Jennifer Egan's "A Visit From The Goon Squad"
- Nnedi Okorafor's futurist "Binti"

Also notable are children's classics like Lucy Maud Montgomery's "Anne Of Green Gables", Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women", and Scott O'Dell's "Island of the Blue Dolphins". (Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God" was over-rated.)

Meanwhile, a bildungsroman composed in an alternate language can be fully apprehended–and appreciated–in English. Sixteen notable examples:

- Umberto Saba's "Ernesto" **(Italian)**
- Italo Calvino's "The Path To The Nest Of Spiders" **(Italian)**
- Hermann Hesse's "Demian" **(German)**
- J.W. von Goethe's "Willhelm Meister's Apprenticeship" **(German)**
- Rainer Maria Rilke's "The Notebooks Of Malte Laurids Brigge" **(German)**
- Thomas Mann's "The Magic Mountain" **(German)**
- Gustav Flaubert's "Sentimental Education" **(French)**
- Stendhal's "Le Rouge Et Le Noir" **(French)**
- Leo Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" **(Russian)**
- Junot Diaz's "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" **(Spanish)**
- Gafur Gulom's "Shum Bola" **(Uzbek)**
- Khalid Hosseini's "The Kite Runner" **(Afghan)**
- Kamala Markandaya's "Nectar In A Sieve" **(Indian)**
- Haruki Murakami's "Noruwei no Mori" ["Norwegian Wood"] **(Japanese)**
- Hayao Miyazaki's film, "Spirited Away" **(Japanese)**
- Qiu Miao-jin's "Notes Of A Crocodile" **(Chinese)**

Also note "Purple Hibiscus" and "Americanah", bildungsroman written by Igbo (Nigerian) author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; as well as "Washington Black" by Barbados native Esi Edugyan (all of which were composed in English).

There are many narrative devices of which writers can avail themselves to accomplish the desired task. Some invent a religion to make the point–as was done brilliantly by:

- Lord Dunsany (with the deities of Pegana) in 1905
- Usula K. Le Guin (with the Kesh) in 1964
- Frank Herbert (with the "Bene Gesserit" and their "Missionaria Protectiva") in 1965 {9}
- George R.R. Martin (with the "Sparrows") in 1991
- Octavia Butler (with "Earthseed") in 1993
- Neal Stephenson (with the "Cartasian Discipline" of Arbre) in 2008

H.P Lovecraft went so far as to invent a godhead to tell his story ("Cthulhu" / "Aza-thoth"), reminding us that even when they are overtly fictional, fans can become spell-bound by deities.

Russian literature is renown for addressing existential matters. Here are the ten most notable examples:

- Fyodor Dostoyevsky's "Notes From The Underground"; "Crime and Punishment"; "The Possessed"
- Mikhail Lermontov's "A Hero Of Our Time"
- Maxim Gorky's "The Mother"

- Anton Chekov's "The Lady With The Dog" and "The Seagull"
- Ivan Turgenev's "Fathers and Sons" and "Virgin Soil"
- Vladimir Nabokov's "Invitation To An Execution"

In **German**, a dozen notable examples are:

- Heinrich von Kleist's "Michael Kohlhaas"
- Hermann Hesse's "Steppenwolf"
- Jacob Bidermann's "Cenodoxus"
- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Hermann and Dorothea" and "Faust"
- Hans Herbert Grimm's "Schlump"
- Alfred Döblin's "Berlin Alexanderplatz"
- Anna Seghers' "Transit"
- Thomas Mann's "Doctor Faustus"
- Heinrich Böll's "Billiards At Half-Past Nine"
- Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann's "Signor Formica"
- Robert Musil's "The Man Without Qualities"

In **French**, a dozen notable examples are:

- Denis Diderot's "The Nun"
- Voltaire's "Candide"
- Marcel Proust's "In Search Of Lost Time"
- Émile Zola's "Germinal" and "Nana"
- Guy de Maupassant's "Ball Of Fat"
- Albert Camus' "The Stranger"
- Gustav Flaubert's "Madam Bovary" and "The Temptation Of Saint Anthony"
- Louis-Ferdinand Céline's "Journey to the End of the Night"
- Honoré de Balzac's "La Comédie Humaine" series (esp. "La Peau de Chagrin" and "Scène de la Vie de Campagne")
- Hugo's "Toilers Of The Sea"

When it comes to addressing existential issues, Latin America has also offered its fair share of profound literary achievements. Here are the most notable **Latino** works:

- Miguel Angel Asturias' "Mister President"
- Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "The Autumn of the Patriarch" and "Love In the Time of Cholera"
- José María Vargas Vila Bonilla's "Ibis"
- Don DeLillo's "Mao II"
- Antonio Di Benedetto's "Zama"
- Romulo Gallegos' "Doña Barbara"
- Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis' "Dom Casmurro" (Brasilian Portuguese)

Let's look at existentially profound works from twenty other cultures:

- Knut Hamsun's "Hunger" and Henrik Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler" **(Norwegian)**
- Halldor Laxness' "Wayward Heroes" **(Icelandic)**
- Henrik Pontoppidan's "Lucky Per" **(Danish)**
- Boleslaw Prus' "The Doll" and Jerzy Kosinski's "The Painted Bird" **(Polish)**
- Jaroslav Hasek's "The Good Soldier Svejk" **(Bohemian)**

- Mesha Selimovic's "Death And The Dervish" **(Bosnian)**
- Ismail Kadare's "The General Of The Dead Army" **(Albanian)**
- Arthur Koestler's "Darkness At Noon"; Magda Szabo's "The Door"; and Marai's "Candles Burn Until The End" ["Embers"] **(Hungarian)**
- Mircea Eliade's "The Forbidden Forest" **(Romanian)**
- Alessandro Manzoni's "The Betrothed" and Alberto Moravia's "A Ghost At Noon" **(Italian)**
- Benito Perez Galdos' "Fortuna And Jacinta" and "Doña Perfecta"; as well as Leopoldo Alas' "La Regenta" **(Spanish)**
- Wole Soyinka's "A Dance Of The Forests" and "The Strong Breed" **(Nigerian)**
- Tayeb Salih's "Season of Migration To The North" **(Sudanese)**
- Aravind Adiga's "The White Tiger" and Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Lowland" **(Indian)**
- Taslima Nasrin's "Lajja" [Shame] **(Bengali)**
- The Tale of Hong Gildong **(Korean)**
- Ge Fei's "The Invisibility Cloak" **(Chinese)**
- Yasushi Inoue's "Tun-Huang" and Yukio Mishima's "Confessions Of A Mask" **(Japanese)**
- Nguyen Du's "Doan Truong Tan Thanh" [a.k.a. "The Tale of Kieu"] **(Vietnamese)**
- Sutan Alisjahbana's "With Sails Unfurled" **(Indonesian)**

In **English** literature, already mentioned was Oscar Wilde's "Picture of Dorian Grey". Charles Dickens is arguably the greatest writer of the modern age when it came to conveying an important message. His "Christmas Carol" was mentioned earlier as one of the great parables of all time. When it comes to existential matters, we might note his "Nicholas Nickleby"; "A Tale Of Two Cities"; and "Great Expectations".

Here are forty more existentially profound works that were composed in England and America:

- Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin"
- Henry James' "The Ambassadors"
- James Hogg's "The Private Memoirs And Confessions Of A Justified Sinner"
- Thomas Hardy's "The Return Of The Native" and "Jude The Obscure"
- Joseph Conrad's "Heart Of Darkness"
- Elizabeth Gaskell's "Mary Barton"
- Herman Melville's "Moby Dick"
- M.G. Lewis' "The Monk"
- William Faulkner's "Requiem For A Nun" and "The Reivers"
- Theodore Dreiser's "An American Tragedy"
- Willa Cather's "Death Comes For the Archbishop"
- Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle"
- T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"
- W.H. Auden's "The Age Of Anxiety"
- John Steinbeck's "East Of Eden" and "The Winter Of Our Discontent"
- F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Tender Is The Night"
- Arthur Miller's "Death Of A Salesman"
- Graham Greene's "The Power And The Glory"
- D.H. Lawrence's "The Rainbow" and "Sons And Lovers"
- Ursula K. Le Guin's "Orsinian Tales" and "Malafrena"
- Edith Wharton's "Ethan Frome"
- John Irving's "Avenue of Mysteries"
- Charles Monroe Sheldon's "In His Steps"

- Thornton Wilder's "The Bridge Of San Luis Rey"
- William Golding's "Lord Of The Flies"
- Richard Wright's "Native Son"
- Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man"
- Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five"
- John Updike's "Rabbit" tetralogy
- Philip Roth's "Portnoy's Complaint"
- Alice Walker's "The Color Purple"
- Saul Bello's "Ravelstein"
- Penelope Lively's "Moon Tiger"
- William Vollmann's "Europe Central"
- Michael Chabon's "The Amazing Adventures Of Kavalier And Clay"
- Jonathan Franzen's "The Corrections"

Many of these are cautionary tales. For grim morality tales, note Klaus Mann's "Mephisto" and Kafka's "The Trial". Sometimes, the work addresses the contemporary political world–as with Günter Grass' "The Tin Drum", John Steinbeck's "The Grapes Of Wrath", Jonathan Franzen's "Freedom", and Salman Rushdie's "Quichotte".

For sardonic existential commentary, note John Kennedy Toole's tongue-in-cheek "A Confederacy of Dunces" and Dave Egger's quasi-memoire, "A Heartbreaking Work Of Staggering Genius". Literature can even provide commentary on the human condition via zany comedy–as with Robert Heinlein's "Job: A Comedy Of Justice" and Douglas Adams' "Hitchhiker" pentalogy. That leaves one more major narrative device for making an important point. It is to that genre to which we now turn.

Dystopias & Utopias:

A story needn't explicitly promote a moral message to be effective; it can simply serve as a warning…by painting an ominous picture of what MIGHT be. This is sometimes done via speculations about a dystopian future. During the 20th century, the genre became one of the primary ways to convey a vital message, make an important point, or teach a valuable lesson. As with any well-crafted parable, the aim of a dystopian tale is to provoke critical thought. Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-four"–one of the most powerful and important cautionary tales of all time (with the oft-used narrative device: "Big Brother").

Dystopias have often been fashioned as an implicit warning: "This is what COULD happen if we're not careful" or "This is how things will turn out if we continue down the present road." {3}

The portrayal of a dystopian future is an admonishment in the form of parable. Most post-apocalyptic stories serve as cautionary tales (which illustrate the consequences of imprudence). In 1897, H.G. Wells' inaugurated the genre with "A Story of the Days To Come". Since then there have been thirty dystopian novels (in English) worth noting:

- H.G. Wells' "When the Sleeper Wakes" (1899)
- Jack London's "The Iron Heel" (1907)
- E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1909)
- Rudyard Kipling's "As Easy As ABC" (1912)
- Owen Gregory's "Meccania: The Super-State" (1918)
- Olaf Stapledon's "Last And First Men" (1930)
- Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" (1931)

- Sinclair Lewis' "It Can't Happen Here" (1935)
- Aldous Huxley's "Ape And Essence" (1948)
- George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-four" (1949)
- Isaac Asimov's sci-fit epic "Foundation" series (starting in 1951)
- Kurt Vonnegut's "Player Piano" (1952)
- Alfred Bester's "The Demolished Man" (1953)
- John Wyndham's "The Chrysalids" (1955)
- Michael Young's tongue-in-cheek "The Rise Of The Meritocracy" (1958)
- Kurt Vonnegut's "The Sirens of Titan" (1959)
- Robert M. Miller's "A Canticle For Leibowitz" (1960)
- Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" (1961)
- Frank Herbert's "Dune" (1965)
- Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" (1966)
- Roger Zelazny's "Lord of Light" (1967)
- Philip K. Dick's "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" (1968)
- Walker Percy's "Love In The Ruins" (1971)
- Joe Haldeman's "The Forever War" (1974)
- Stephen King's "The Lawnmower Man" (1975) {6}
- Tanith Lee's "Don't Bite the Sun" (1976)
- Stephen King's "The Running Man" (1982)
- Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985) {7}
- Stephen R. Donaldson's "The Gap Cycle" (starting in 1991)
- Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower" (1993)

More recently was Margaret Atwood's "Oryx and Crake" (2003); as well as its sequels, "The Year Of The Flood" and "MaddAddam". In regards to the United States, there is Omar El-Akkad's brilliant cautionary tale, "American War" (2017). During the past generation, there has been a spate of young adult fiction based on dystopian worlds–as with "The Giver" as well as the blockbuster "Hunger Games" and "Divergent" series.

In the cyber-punk genre, there was William Gibson's ouvre; as well as Neal Stephenson's classic works like "Snow Crash" (1992) and "The Diamond Age" (1995). {6}

In cinema, dystopian futures have made for captivating narratives. Notable are films like "Logan's Run", "Total Recall", "Gattaca", "Minority Report", "In Time", "Equilibrium", "Elysium", and Disney's "WALL-E".

Dystopian novels have not been quite as popular in other language. Already mentioned is Yevgeny Zamyatin's "We", written in 1921 (Russian). Other notable works include Hermann Hesse's "The Glass Bead Game" in 1943 (German) and José Saramago's "Blindness" in 1995 (Portuguese).

Sometimes, tales dealing with hypothetical futures don't quite rise to the level of dystopian, yet serve as cautionary tales–as with, say, Cory Doctorow's "Little Brother" / "Homeland". A cautionary tale doesn't even have to regard a possible future; it can be a satirical retrospective–as with, say, Bret Easton Ellis' "Glamorama". {8}

One can make a point via a utopian vision as well. Utopias–by definition–do not exist. They are UN-real, and so inherently allegorical. (After all "utopia" literally means "no place".) The tradition emerged during the Renaissance–starting in 1516 with Thomas More's "Utopia". Thereafter three notable works were published:

- Tommaso Campanella's "The City of the Sun" (1602)
- Francis Bacon's "New Atlantis" (1627)
- James Harrington's "The Commonwealth of Oceana" (1656)

This compelling narrative strategy continued into the modern era. Prior to the Second World War, it's worth noting a dozen effective uses of utopia as a didactic tool:

- Robert Owen's "A New View Of Society" [more expository than allegorical] (1813)
- Mary Griffith's "Three Hundred Years Hence" (1836)
- Étienne Cabet's "The Voyage to Icaria" (1840)
- Edward Bellamy's "Equality" (1897)
- Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's "New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future" (1889)
- William Dean Howells' "A Traveler from Altruria" (1892-94)
- Alexander Bogdanov's "Red Star" (1908)
- Edward Mandell House's "Philip Dru: Administrator: A Story of Tomorrow" (1912)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Moving The Mountain" (1911) and "Herland" (1915)
- H.G. Wells' "Men Like Gods" (1923) and "The Shape Of Things To Come" (1933)

In 1941, as the Second World War gathered steam, Sandor Szathmari published "Kazohinia". Then, in 1949, following the war, Robert Graves published "Seven Days In New Crete". Contemporary utopias include:

- Sheri S. Tepper's "The Gate To Women's Country" (1988)
- Kim Stanley Robinson's "Mars" trilogy (1990's)
- M.T. Anderson's "Feed" (2002)
- Cory Doctorow's "Down And Out In The Magic Kingdom" (2003)

Sometimes, it is difficult to discern whether a futurist tale is dealing with a utopian or dystopian vision–as with:

- Edward Bellamy's "Looking Backward" (1887)
- William Morris' "News From Nowhere" (1890)
- Mervyn Peake's "Gormenghast" trilogy (starting in 1956)
- Robert Heinlein's "The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress" (1966)
- Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" (1973) and "The Dispossessed" (1974)
- Alastair Reynolds' "Revelation Space" series (2000)

Conjecturing an alternate history is yet another way to make a point–as with:

- Castello Holford's "Aristopia"
- Philip K. Dick's "Man In A High Castle"
- Neal Stephenson's "Cryptonomicon"
- Michael Chabon's "The Yiddish Policeman's Union"
- Ben Winters' "Underground Airlines"
- Philip Roth's "The Plot Against America"

Alternate histories can, of course, be either dystopian (a cautionary tale) or utopian (an "if only" scenario), depending on the approach the author wants to take.

A compelling narrative does not always serve as a vehicle for something laudable. Sometimes, novels offering grand visions can be used to promote odious ideologies. Indeed, some have highly dubious messages–as illustrated by, say, John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" (1678), or Bernard Mandeville's "The Fable of the Bees" (1714). In Pilgrim's Progress, piety was the source of all righteousness. In the Fable of the Bees, the message was that private vice can eventually lead to the public benefit (that is: when individuals are avaricious, it ultimately bolsters the general welfare).

Tales with odious themes go back to Abraham's willingness to murder his own son (because he was following orders). It then continued on, through the fetishization of propriety in Samuel Richardson's "Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded" and "Clarissa; or, The History Of A Young Lady" (in the 1740's). Here are a few more examples:

- Lord Edward Bulwer-Lytton's (occult, Aryan Supremacist) "Vril, The Power of the Coming Race" (1871)
- B. F. Skinner's (behaviorist) "Walden Two" (1948)
- Taylor Caldwell's (hyper-capitalist) "Devil's Advocate" (1952)
- Ayn Rand's (anarcho-capitalist) "Atlas Shrugged" (1957)

This can also be done by drumming up paranoia with dystopian visions:

- Hal Lindsey's (Christian Millenarianist) "The Late, Great Planet Earth" (1970)
- Jean Raspail's (nativist) "The Camp Of The Saints" (1972)
- Gerald James McManus' (Aryan supremacist) "Dark Millennium" (2001)

Virtually all cult activity involves some sort of contrived telos: "If only we play our cards right, THIS is what Providence holds in store for us! But beware; if we fail to toe the line, peril awaits!" This gimmick has been most blatant in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Allegory is a prime tool for persuasion. So one must wonder: What knowledge one might glean from treating the Koran–or any part of it–as a parable? Any at all? This is an open question. The closest we get to parable in the Koran are the tales of "Joseph" (Surah 12) and of "The Cave" (Surah 18)…which, if they WERE meant to be allegorical, are utterly inane. The lesson to learn from either is anyone's guess. {5} Are we really expected to believe that those are the two greatest parables ever devised? The pithy stories recounted in the Koran all have a single theme (the same theme, it turns out, as the Koran itself): God is great and is to be worshipped and obeyed, praised and appeased…and, above all, FEARED.

In the end, we find that some literary works are better than others; and only some have something estimable to say. In order to tell the difference, the discerning reader must bring his own critical faculties to bear.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Humans covet meaning; and–being eminently pragmatic creatures–tend to do whatever seems to work. Since humans are also inveterate story-tellers, typically what works best involves some sort of narrative structure that imbues life with meaning. Such a narrative must answer many existential questions: Why is the world the way it is? What is our place in it? What are we [not] SUPPOSED to do / believe? Etc. The most pressing question, though, is: Who are we and why are we here? To answer this, the narrative needs to provide both a causal explanation (Where did we come from?) and teleological explanation (Where are we going? What is our purpose?) This invariably translates to an etiology (an origin story) and an

eschatology (a destination story).

A CNV has an existential dimension (it gives my life meaning / purpose) and a practical dimension (it is useful for living my life), neither of which is necessarily apprehended by the adopter. Indeed, nobody picks the parameters of their own affinities…any more than anybody picks their own comfort zones or sexual turn-ons or aesthetic tastes or culinary preferences.

Those who are adept at weaving an enthralling yarn can commandeer the attention of large audiences. If people like a story, then it will tend to "catch"…and "stick". (Therein lies the ultimate appeal of any successful religion. This innate human proclivity is why certain narratives "catch on" and spread.

Footnotes:

{1 The alternate articulation of such existential queries is: Why am I here?" which can be taken as a question about efficient causes (how so?) or ultimate ends (what for?) Another version of this is: What's this point of it all? PERSONAL narratives (that is, narratives employed on the level of the individual rather than as a collective) are also salient. As MacIntyre put it: "Narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human action." The catch is what happens on the micro level is typically constrained by what is happening at the macro level. That is: One's personalized narrative, custom-tailored to suit one's own life, is–by default–molded according to the parameters of the (prevailing) Grand Narrative of the society in which one finds oneself. It is only the radical thinker that breaks outside these parameters.}

{2 MacIntyre is a relativist, so I do not concur with his overall moral philosophy. His relativism is best encapsulate by the title of his book, "Who's Justice? Which Rationality?"}

{3 One of the most famous "see what might happen" scenes in film is the final moment of "Planet Of The Apes".}

{4 For more on this topic, see the writings of Joseph Campbell. Useful insights about RELIGIOUS narratives in particular can be found in Ernest Becker's "The Birth & Death of Meaning", Daniel Dennett's "Breaking The Spell", David Sloan Wilson's "Darwin's Cathedral", Scott Atran's "In Gods We Trust", and Pascal Boyer's "Religion Explained".}

{5 There is, of course, endless commentary available about the "moral of the story" for these two parables. The problem is that, for any one of the candidates, one is still left thinking: Was THAT the best way the point could have been made? And is THAT one of the most important points that needs to be made to mankind? In any case, both were appropriated from antecedent Syriac lore.}

{6 These were about the impending emergence of a malevolent "singularity" (i.e. the dangers of a non-benevolent super-A.I.). In addition to Stephen King's "The Lawnmower Man", we might note Daniel Suarez's "Daemon" and "Freedom (TM)", Charles Stross' "Singularity Sky" / "Iron Sunrise", "Rule 34", "Accelerando", and "The Rapture of the Nerds" (with Cory Doctorow). The genre of cyber-punk (pioneered by Philip K. Dick in the 1960's and popularized by William Gibson in 1984 with "Neuromancer") imagines possible futures in which technological advances play themselves out in ominous ways. In the advent of social media technology run amok, Dave Egger's addressed such concerns with "The Circle". Much of this genre has to do with mankind's handling of a post-apocalyptic world–as with Neal Stephenson's "Seveneves". For "hard" science fiction about a speculative far-distant future, see Ian M. Banks' "Consider Phlebas" and Stephen Baxter's oeuvre. For fantastical, see Dan Simmons'

“Hyperion”. For phantasmagorical, see Philip K. Dick’s “Ubik”.}

{8 Dystopias are not to be confused with post-apocalyptic tales, which merely portray a bleak future in which society has completely broken down, and those who remain need to find ways to survive. Classic tales about post-apocalyptic futures include Mary Shelley’s “The Last Man” (1826), Jack London’s “The Scarlet Plague” (1912), Richard Matheson’s “I Am Legend” (1954), and Stephen King’s “The Stand” (1978). More recent examples include Max Brooks’ “World War Z” and Cormac McCarthy’s “The Road” (both from 2006). We might also note bleak futurist novels that have a strong message–such as H.G. Wells’ “War Of The Worlds” (1898).}

{7 As well as its sequel: “The Testaments”.}

{9 The Bene Gesserit were a female-only order. There was a holy book: the Orange Catholic Bible. There was a quasi-divine super-being: the Kwisatz Haderach. And there was a campaign to overthrow a network of super-intelligent machines (the xenophobic Bene Tleilax and their “Mentat”): a crusade ironically named the Butlerian Jihad. The Bene Tleilax even had a term for all outsiders (heretics): “powindah”.}

{10 Take, for instance, the tales about Mohammed of Mecca. (What else is the story of MoM than the 7th century Arabian version of an urban legend?) Illiterate desert-dwellers in the Dark Ages who were highly prone to superstition (and were yearning for something solid to hold onto) were perfectly primed for what was being peddling. Many surely found the prospect of a celestial oasis awaiting them after “death” (the assurance that “death” wasn’t REALLY death) irresistible. Why WOULDN’T they have eagerly signed up for the program on offer? I discuss the psychology behind this in my essay, “The Island”.}

{11 Aesop was only the beginning. Compilations of fables are commonplace the world over–as with Krasicki’s “Fables and Parables” (Polish), La Fontaine’s “Fables” (French), and Henryson’s rendition: “The Morall Fabillis Of Aesop The Phrygian” (Scottish).}

{12 Some great scholarship has been done on CNVs as ways to promulgate an ideology: “The Power of Parable” by John Dominic Crossan, “The Power of Myth” by Joseph Campbell, “Mythologies” by Roland Barthes, “The Uses of Enchantment” by Bruno Bettelheim, and “The Denial of Death” by Ernest Becker.}

{13 Parable does not even need to have a fluid narrative (that is: a contiguous plot arc)–as Milorad Pavic demonstrated with “Dictionary Of The Khazars”, Ursula K. Le Guin demonstrated with “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas”, William Faulkner demonstrated with “The Sound and the Fury”, James Joyce demonstrated with “Ulysses”, and David Foster Wallace demonstrated with “Infinite Jest”. Note that JSS that features a deity often involves an array of deus ex machinae: magical interventions that are orchestrated by said deity to account for otherwise inexplicable jumps in the narrative.}

{14 Whenever hearsay seems to fit (and especially when it bolsters the emotional thrust of the telling), it may be adopted irrespective of its veracity–especially if it gives better flow and/or more sheen to an otherwise rickety / bland account. This usually does not happen conscientiously; it typically occurs organically, and thus unwittingly. Only rarely is memetic selection calculatedly dictated from the top down–as with, say, the material given sanction at the Councils of Nicaea.}

{15 Sagacious commentary on this matter has been done by Ernest Becker–especially in his “The Birth and Death of Meaning” and “The Denial of Death”. Other works that address this include George Akerlof’s “Phishing for Phools” (in an economic context), David Parfit’s “Reasons and Persons” (in an existential context); as well as Michael Shermer’s “How We Believe” and “Why People Believe Weird

Things”.}

{16 Parables can be fantastical–as with Madeleine L’Engle’s “A Wrinkle In Time”. When it comes to parable, the outlandish-ness does not compromise the efficacy. For other great parables, we might also note the works of by Jumpa Lahiri, Octavia Butler, and Angela Carter.}

APPENDIX:

Misconstruing Parable As MORE THAN Parable

How is it, one might wonder, that an inquiry into literary traditions can encompass both novels (which are recognized by even the most ardent fans as fictional) and religions (which are often not recognized as such; at least, not by adherents)? What I hope to have shown is that they are both kinds of STORIES. As discussed, narratives–especially when compelling–can serve as vehicles. This may be either didactic or propagandistic (that is: informative or manipulative). The former may be anything from pithy allegories to epic sagas. The latter may be sacred histories (e.g. national origin myths) or urban legends–that is: anything that can be used to justify an agenda.

The “catch” is that metaphors don’t always announce themselves AS metaphors. In other words, the metaphorical nature OF metaphors is not openly disclosed; so it is up to the audience to, as it were, figure things out for themselves. (Allegories are essentially elaborate metaphors with tiny plot-arcs–as with, say, “the boy who cried wolf” and “the tortoise and the hare”. Plato’s “allegory of the cave” is more a metaphor than an allegory.) Here, I’ll explore how mere parable (i.e. parable that is taken AS parable) can bleed into sanctified folklore (parable that doesn’t admit that it is mere parable).

CNVs tend to proliferate not only because of their virality, but because of their highly mnemonic nature. They are catchy AND sticky. The human mind can better process and retain memes when they are presented in narrative form. Moreover, the mind can more readily apprehend and remember material that is couched in terms that are already familiar to and/or more easily digested by the target audience. (This is one of the most elementary principles of pedagogy.) Therefore, a CNV can be either a didactic tool or a device for persuasion. But here’s the thing: The two roles often become blurred. Am I being edified or swindled? When the CNV is well-crafted, it is difficult to discern the difference.

This is a common pitfall. For when religiosity is involved, analogical (that is: allegorical) thinking can slip into literal thinking without the audience even noticing. It’s a short leap from “I enjoy imagining this to be true” to “I want it to be true, so I’ll proceed AS IF it were true.” To be spell-bound by a narrative is to put oneself at its mercy; and perspicacity is usually sacrificed on the altar of whimsy.

A well-crafted narrative captivates its target audience; sometimes so much that it ENTRANCES…and never quite lets go. This is how effective propaganda works; it’s how savvy marketing works; and it’s how RELIGIONS work. Insofar as a narrative is to be used as a vehicle (i.e. for inculcation), its efficacy depends on it being hypnotic. Put another way: In order to influence people, it first casts a spell on them–capturing not only their attention, but their cognitive machinery.

Reality-denial is often involved in such a project. As is often the case, foundation myths are fantasy-dependent (in that they require a leap of Faith…which, in turn, requires some combination of confabulation and obfuscation). Reality can only get in the way when one is determined to promulgate a farcical etiology. Bereft of illusion, a mythos evaporates; so the illusion must be sustained–if, that is, one wants to preserve the mythos through which one’s ideology subsists.

Again: This involves a slight-of-hand; hawking a captivating narrative, and then passing it off as a description of HOW THE WORLD REALLY IS. It is easy to confuse an enthralling tall-tale for historical fact if doing so seems beneficial. Such folly is not uncommon, as it is easy to get swept up in a well-woven yarn…especially if it is provocative. The urge to construe fanciful tales as a description of Reality is especially strong if believing that the tale is true seems to offer something of value.

A CNV is effective in promulgating certain memes NOT because it has credence, but because it hits the right buttons. It boils everything down to a STORY–a story that occludes any discrepancies that may have otherwise been apparent. The CNV primes the audience for indoctrination; delusive thinking does the rest. One might think of religiosity as a local anesthetic for any discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance.

Ergo the integral role that CNVs play in religion.

A Grand Narrative is a SOCIETY-WIDE narrative that confers on that society's denizens a sense of purpose (viz. those who consider themselves to be participants in the narrative). Grand Narratives are effective ways to promulgate dogmas on a large scale, ensure consistent messaging, and to manipulate people en masse. Consequently, such narratives can be used to effect homogenous thinking; and even to CHOREOGRAPH that thinking. The implications of this are plain to see. Those who control a society's Grand Narrative are positioned to control the polity; as they can dictate the manner in which the common-man perceives the world (how and why things are the way they are, and what might be done about it).

The key is to convince the rank and file that serving the incumbent power structures is in THEIR best interest. After all, the best way to manipulate (exploit) people is to convince them that they're NOT BEING manipulated (exploited). A CNV is designed to do exactly that.* It is no surprise, then, that every religion employs a CNV in one form or another.

The thing with hallowed folklore (effectively: glorified folktales like those in the Mikra and the Gospels) is that tellers–and listeners–tend to half-pretend that the events relayed really might have occurred. In other words: They are stories that are sometimes treated as more than, well, just stories (as with many people with urban legends).

Many of us today are unfamiliar with this phenomenon, as fiction in the modern era is typically consumed to indulge in fleeting bouts of escapism. Consequently, most entertainment is now designed for immediate gratification. The key is that, UN-like sanctified lore, modern-day fiction openly admits that it is fiction.

The notion of confusing farce (on the one hand) with factual accounts (on the other hand) is anathema to many of us. But to truly understand religion, it is necessary to put oneself in the shoes of those who conflate folklore with history–as was routinely done in the pre-Enlightenment world. The role that sacred scripture plays in the life of a religionist is largely accounted for by thinking of it as a CNV.

A consecrated narrative can be difficult to jettison once one is "on board". Generally speaking, once committed to a narrative, we will tend to reject anything that fails to comport with it (or, at least, help move it along). Insofar as the narrative serves as a VEHICLE for something important, this rejection can be especially adamant; as it is not merely a matter of NOT FITTING IN, it is a matter of potential SABOTAGE. That is to say, when one is dealing with a CNV rather than just a cherished narrative, the introduction of something discordant is no mere perturbation; it threatens to make things to GO OFF THE RAILS.

Just as our language is suffused with metaphor, the Grand Narrative by which we make sense of the world (and our place in it) is typically a melange of useful schema that have been inherited from antecedent

narratives; then incorporated into our own version in an ad hoc manner. We are then obliged to esteem our own version as sui generis. Why? Because to admit the material's derivative nature would be to (implicitly) concede its FICTIONAL nature.

We find this in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, Psalm 29 was adapted from a Ugaritic hymn to the Canaanite deity, Baal. The etiological myth found in the Book of Isaiah is an adaptation of the the etiology in the the Zoroastrian Gathas (i.e. the "Yasna"). Yasna 44 tells us that the godhead dictated the routes followed by the sun, the moon, and the stars; keeping the Earth fixed bellow while keeping the dome of the sky above from falling–a trope that is repeated in the both the Bible and the Koran. (I discuss the cribbing of antecedent lore in my essays on Mythemes". For instances where the Koran coopts material from extant lore, see my essay on "The Syriac Origins Of Islam's Holy Book.)

Disrupting a quotidian narrative is simply a matter of discordance–that is: of simply not jiving with exigent sensibilities; and of not comporting with conventional wisdom. However, disrupting a highly-coveted CNV is far more treacherous; as it is a matter of crashing a vehicle that is being used to deliver sanctified dogmas. This becomes especially perilous once adherents are–as it were–already airborne, and soaring at high altitudes. Those with their head in the clouds are incentivized to maintain the coveted farce…lest they be brought down to earth, which entails a long, long fall.

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{* The underlying theme of such a narrative is: "It's all part of god's plan; so who are YOU to question it?" The trick, then, is to convince people of the plan. The best way to do this is with a CNV. By offering the illusion of control, those who claim to act on behalf of the Creator of the Universe can dupe the rabble into playing right into their hands. (Those who claim to act with the imprimatur of god can get their flock to do their bidding, as it is equated with doing GOD'S bidding.) Getting people to believe that one is doing them a favor by controlling them is the master-stroke of every charismatic leader. (Get them to serve you; and then to thank you for the privilege of doing so. I explore this phenomenon in my essay, "The Island". I survey the incidence of demagogy around the world in "The History Of Exalted Figures". And I explore its implications in "The Many Faces Of Fascism".) If one is thoroughly convinced that one is doing his deity's will, then what could possibly be questionable about ANY deed? I discuss the "Doing God's Work" (DGW) Syndrome in the Postscript to my essay, "Nemesis".}