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Lawrence Fixel's *Truth, War and the Dream Game*

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Lawrence Fixel. *Truth, War and the Dream Game: Selected Prose Poems and Parables.* Coffee House Press. 1991. 167 pp. Paper: $10.95

When I first opened Lawrence Fixel's *Truth, War And The Dream Game*, I resisted the impulse to start reading at the beginning, to enter, as it were, by way of the front door. Consequently, I went around the *porte-cochere* of the prefatory materials, the opening apothegms, even the table of contents, for what I wanted was to experience the book and the mind behind it as I imagined one would experience the dream-game itself—by playing randomly and learning the rules as I went along. (In another context, doesn't Borges himself observe that "life and dreams are leaves of the same book: reading them in order is living; skimming through them is dreaming")? I wanted to dream, for unfettered by expectations, I reasoned, I would encounter truth, or rather, truth would come to me unexpectedly, presenting itself with a quiet, "Here I am."

Imagine, then, my surprise and my slight discomfiture when, for no particular reason, I turned to page 75 and found myself reading the following passage from "Reading Borges":

> For years, I avoided reading him. Then one day, at the urging of friends, I read a few of the parables.... I saw at once how one could become intrigued with that intricate vision...there was still the dazzling example of a "world in which somehow we are permitted to enter".... Perrier's phrase underlies the danger. Especially the word *somehow*, with its suggestion of an "entrance" into another realm—without knowing how we got there, how to manage the passage, the return...

A warning? A clue? Encouragement? Admonition? The speaker is describing the *ficciones* of Borges, but the speaker is also suggesting that any reader entering the world of prose poems and parables is subject to the same dangers, especially that of managing the return. I had broken into the book/world as a thief only to discover that I had been anticipated.

The world of Lawrence Fixel, as that of Borges, is a world in which we are *somehow* permitted to enter—a world of Bachelardian spaces and Borgesian labyrinths. I have liked the metaphor of the poem as an interior space ever since I read Robert Bly's wonderful evocation of the farm granaries in his "Warning to the Reader." In

that poem, the speaker describes how birds who have entered the empty buildings are tricked by the play of light on the walls and never find their way out again. In this way, the writer of poems is warned against letting the reader out too easily: "Writers, be careful then by showing the sunlight on the walls not to promise the anxious and panicky blackbirds a way out !" The reader, however, is told to beware: "Readers who love poems of light may sit hunched in the corner with nothing in their gizzards for four days, light failing, the eyes glazed... / They may end as a mound of feathers and a skull on the open boardwood floor..." The speaker is addressing all who build word structures and all who enter them, but the warning is to the reader. When we read parables, we enter the vaulting spaces of a prose form whose intention is to hook us into staying long enough to see how it comes out. By staying, we are tricked into learning a simple lesson that may indeed be the one we need. With his sly allusion to Borges, Fixel has prepared me, then, to be a reader of parables; he will not hold my hand, certainly, and he will not give me a map out of the labyrinth, but he will beckon, invite, share, perhaps even trap me into staying much longer than I intended.

Fixel, in his own words, uses parables to convey what he calls "the distilled essences of a fragmented world." But which world is he talking about? Borges's world is literary, self-reflexive; Fixel promises us more, I think, for the concreteness of the last image in "Reading Borges," that of a caribou suddenly appearing "in that untouched elsewhere," suggests a reality beyond the "fragrances" of those "endless shelves," a reality that we encounter not in our libraries or in our readings, but paradoxically in our mundane, fragmented lives. This realization, in turn, suggests to me why Fixel chooses the parable form, with its traditions of moral teachings and of the broad implications of the lessons learned. "Therefore speak I to them in parables," Jesus is quoted by Matthew, "because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand" (Mt 13:13-15). I wonder if Fixel, by using the parable, points to a reality implicit in all parables —that there are two kinds of listeners: the privileged few and the many non-believers. To make sense of the parable, to gather its meaning, the listener must be willing to believe that the parable does contain a truth. This demands a tremendous faith on the part of the reader/listener, as much as it demands a tremendous restraint on the part of the writer/teller. The reader must work at it; the writer must not disclose too readily. I suspect, then, that this restraint is behind

the complicated intentions of a long selection from the book, "The Choice," which describes a claustrophobic atmosphere of legerdemain, the world of the initiate and master (or of therapist and patient). I detect strains of both, but the ambience here is just right for this contest of wills between the believer and the unbeliever. Says the speaker, "All I can make of this, in terms of choice, is that it seems to exclude retreat." Can this mean that the choices are limited to acceptance or rejection? In just a few lines, then, in a few images, Fixel has communicated an almost perfect ambiguity—the only way, ultimately, in which truth can be revealed.

In working my way backward and forward in the book, I hear or see a line here or an image there that stuns me with its felicity or freshness. In this way I snatch at the title "The Loaves/The Fishes." Because it is one of my favorite New Testament stories, I stay to read it. The allusion to the miracle is obvious, and yet, what Fixel does here with it is suggest that language and writing are miracles to feed a multitude. The speaker goes on to describe a dream in which he becomes Jesus. The artist as Christ is not a new idea; James Joyce spent his entire life refining and refashioning it until the artist's own flesh and blood become the paper and ink of his own dream book. Here, however, Fixel stays with the fish and the loaves. He conjures up an enormous fish that is fashioned to feed a multitude, in this case one with "carrot slices for eyes...cucumber wedges for scales, wavering lines of mayonnaise to represent the sea." Mocks the speaker, "Do we eat the words?" I like this terrific image, for as a chef conjures up fishes and seas with a wave of his pastry tube, so, too, does the poet fashion for us worlds on silver platters, and now the allusion is not so obvious, for the *logos* here, the word *to fashion*, shimmers like an optical illusion. The meaning is there and yet it isn't there. The word creates a reality and yet the reality is that these are just words. This may be what Gilbert Ryle calls "ideation": "the reader imagines not only the object but 'makes present in the image something which is not given.'" What we have here is the gastronomical certainty of something to eat, but one "can't eat the words." We are given the word, and the word is fish. We are given a fish, and we are not given a fish; even the fish fashioned by the chef is not a fish but something made to look like a fish. We are given, it seems to me, a promise of a reality disguised as art posing as a reality. And yet, I like the conundrum and the subversiveness of it all. Unlike to construct, to make, to build, the verb *to fashion* has the right conno-

tations: to influence, but especially to contrive. I am in a labyrinth indeed. And Fixel's enormous joke, "In the beginning there was a loaf, a fish," radiates until I am back on my own and not quite so surefooted as I was when I first began.

It was at this point, however, that I began to apprehend—though not entirely comprehend—something behind Fixel's narrowing of the distinction between the parable and the prose poem. In Fixel's work, we have both the image-making (I prefer *vates* to *poetas)* that we associate with poetry, and the storytelling of the parable. As poet, Fixel takes words out of their dis-usages and forces our attention on their myriad possibilities. We also have the terse dramatic structures and resonant voices of a master *raconteur.* Now, in re-reading these impressions I have of Fixel's work, I see that I've used the verb *to like* too often to be considered a serious critic, but I do like this book. I am struck as well by the enormous seriousness of the play, but I like, too, the wit and the ironies, and the games of the trickster, and never more so than in what has become my favorite selection of the book, "The Poet Digs a Hole." In this delightfully funny and acerbic parable, a poet is described as digging a hole, and not being clear "as to what brought him here." The speaker comments, "Whatever the case, the poet has again undertaken a project involving intense labor, leading to another absurd outcome. And not only the labor, but the purchase of a shovel —when his imagination could have invented one. One that could be lying on the ground next to *the red wheelbarrow, standing in the rain, beside the white chickens."*

But, in the last paragraph, the speaker notes the theorists and critics who have advice for the poet and adds, "Let us leave it for some future archaeologist puzzling over a series of holes apparently started and then abandoned—with not a single artifact in sight." The idea of the reader as archaeologist here is tantalizing. As a rule, archaeologists sift through a civilization's ashpit, looking for clues, forming impressions, peering through abandoned intentions and discarded masks. But here, is the poet digging a hole for us to examine? or, to fall into? The speaker warns that there are no artifacts. Is the reader, then, the archaeologist digging and sifting with infinite care the site of some disappeared author to gather some insight, some imaginary fancy, to reconstruct a past from the vague impressions left by things? Or are we thieves in the night, letting ourselves in and stealing away furtively, the detritus of a night's work in our satchels? It is a tribute

to Fixel and his work that answers to these questions are not forthcoming but that the questions themselves are still worth considering.

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