

Daphne Marlatt / QUESTIONS FOR NARRATIVE

narrative is something i've struggled with, & continue to struggle with, its usual definition: a story, a relating of an event or set of events — (how much has to happen to constitute an event?) — & that serial notion implied in the causative chain of plot, a movement as linear as the subject-action-object sentence in English. as a fiction reader, i resent the lure of suspense that pulls us through a series of time-bound events to continually find out what happens next. often it feels like coercion. there's so much else along the way i'd rather look at. (what's off the track, what gaps in the narrative road?). yet suspense is linked to the notion of continuity & without some thread of continuity we get lost. (well, lost — from what sense of direction? — could just as easily be found in another view.)

the so-called novel i'm writing (novel for want of a better term — it might be a long poem, it might be a sort of verbal/vocal score) occurs in a series of fragments. thought goes off in diverse directions, bouncing off word-associations, off personal & cultural memory-rhymes and tone-echoes, as it pursues (rationally or not) a set of connections. idea unravels, revels in branching pathways, resists staying on track, goes haring off after whatever attracts it on the periphery of attention (the shifting play of attraction as distinct from single-minded pursuit).

so, a distracted, a dis(at)tracted narrative perhaps, which doesn't arrive at a final ending.

yet continuity, and its obvious form, suspense, engages us, keeps us engaged right up to the very point of arrival at conflict-resolution. Rest in Peace, as the gravestones say. at which point continuity has ceased.

recently I had occasion to ponder fictional continuity and actual uncertainty juxtaposed. over Christmas my partner and i took our grand-daughters to their (& my) first pantomime, “Ali Baba & the Forty Thieves.” it was at the Metro, an old community theatre tucked away at the foot of the Arthur Laing bridge and almost dwarfed by that structure rising over the north arm of the Fraser River. now for those who don’t know about them, “pantos” are dramatic entertainments for a general audience, & there were certainly whole families present, from infants to elderly grandparents. pantos are loosely based on a fairy tale, but they’re a mongrel genre involving song & dance, old slapstick routines, romance painted with a very broad brush, social satire — contemporary political quips, for one. this panto included a fairy narrator who spoke in doggerel verse, the traditional cross-dressed “dame,” animal masquerade, lots of puns, & of course the old struggle that always grabs children, the struggle between good & evil, in this case between Wakey Fakir & Demon Distastely. its suspense was creaky & outrageously overt, but it kept the heterogeneity of the show moving forward & the audience engaged for 3 hours.

so, the question: if one does without suspense generated by plot, what other form of movement will keep readers engaged? how minimal can narrative get and still lead a reader on? (our very language for this suggests that narrative’s metaphor of linearity is itself misleading.)

but can we do without narrative? we use it regularly in daily conversation. there is something about its “leading” aspect that offers the pleasure of pursuit — “so then? and then?” tracing a movement from some point of origin to some point of impact. even if it’s impossible to see “the whole story,” following an arc, a storyline, gives us a sense of control over what we otherwise experience as random, scattered, or disconnected.

just as we came out of the Metro Theatre a fire-engine roared past us up the bridge ramp, followed soon after by an ambulance, both with emergency lights flashing. staring up in the dark, we could see an

endless line of stalled tail-lights. what had happened? from fantasy suspense to the cold douse of the real. if we had been heading that way it would have been a burning question in a far from metaphorical sense.

hung up. suspended. in uncertainty & doubt. the actual condition of our lives, with no fairy narrators to assure us that good will always triumph in the end. chance or hazard as names for this condition. chaos or the void as other names. any bridge can tell us our mortality looms as exit from the span of our lives suspended over this void of unknowing.

we drove home wondering who could have lost her life, or his, on that bridge? lost. it's a curious phrase, as if being alive were a possession we could carelessly mislay, leave behind by/in accident. (if we don't own our lives, then how do we shape them? how design where we think we're going?) in pantos there are designed incidents based on outrageous coincidence and nobody dies. the genre relies on the conventional happy ending, a "happy ever after" continuity of the same.

centuries ago, 500 B.C. to be more precise, Heraclitus pointed out that everything flows and changes — *panta rhei*. why you can't cross the same river twice because it's not the same & neither are you. meanwhile, we go on telling our lives as if they were solid and continuous arcs rising above that river of our unknowing.

narrate: hidden in its root, the ancient syllable *gna-*, know. how does narration know? & what does it have to do with unknowing?

in 1919 the American poet, H.D., musing on different states of consciousness, wrote: "each comfortable little home shelters a comfortable little soul — & a wall at the back shuts out completely any communication with the world beyond." that was before television broke a big hole in the wall, & long before the internet which now inundates our little rooms in massive waves of global information. rather than owning anything these days, it's easy to feel

occupied, preoccupied by disparate bits of collective life. to counter this, to make of these bits a telling of what we deeply know, a telling that also acknowledges the depth of what we don't know, becomes a strategy against the filling up of our days with haphazard data. the question: how narrate, how build a narrative arc that doesn't simply pave over the gaps?

In the opening essay of *Biting the Error*, Kathy Acker writes of the interstices between narrative events as “chaos or places where language cannot be, or death.” which doesn't simply mean without language we're dead, though we could be. the complex sets of phonemic difference that make up language fix the flow of chaos into recognizable points or markers. definition. so we know who & where we are & can communicate that to one another. but in the gaps between events, between bridge sections over the void shining beneath us, we dissolve, our story unravels. chaos exists not as a state way back then at the beginning of history/mythology, but with us now, the other side of everything that has form, including us. difficult to write (using words presupposes form, presupposes fixed points of meaning). but can i nudge my words a little closer to that edge? to the unfamiliar, the strangeness that comes between words, comes with attention to what rises into being & passes out through the very familiar we barely glance at — when we do more than glance. poems can do it. but narrative?

narrative depends on memory, on remembering events already told and building on them. not all events are large-scale. a single image can trigger a tremor in the psyche. at its most minimal, then, narrative can build through repetition of motif or sound, allusion, image-echo — small sections in the bridge of continuity we like to erect. sections that still leave open the gaps between them. but what about that sense the reader requires of a piece “going somewhere”? (going to the moon?) i'd like to delete “somewhere” in the same way that Hsueh-tou splinters the moon:

*Looking for the moon, it is here,
In this wave, in the next.*