

Free!

Volume 1
Number 2 *Free!*

Article 19

5-1973

Three Parables

Roger Lasley
University of Northern Iowa

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Recommended Citation

Lasley, Roger (1973) "Three Parables," *Free!*: Vol. 1: No. 2, Article 19.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/free/vol1/iss2/19>

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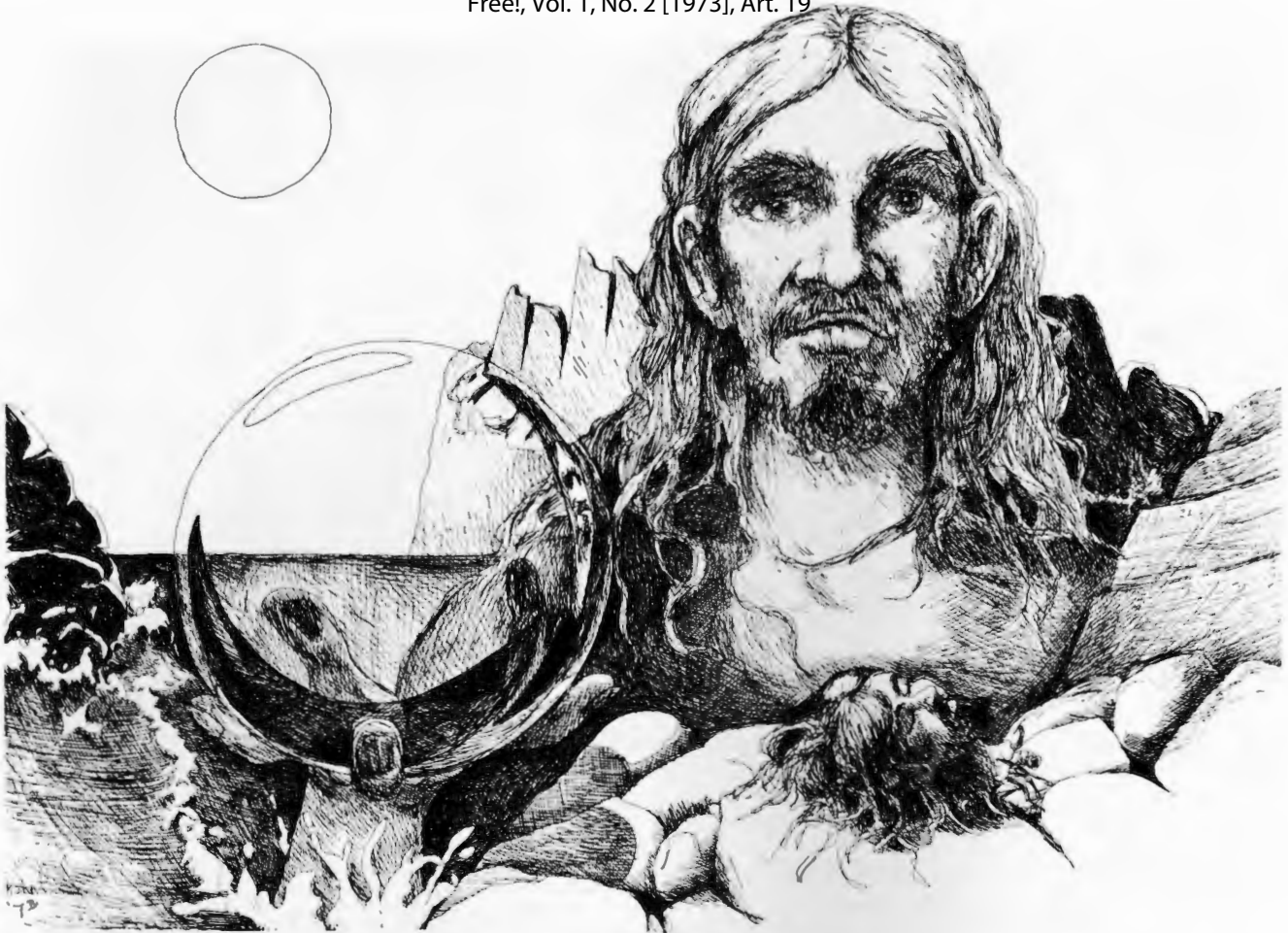
Three Parables *by Roger Lasley*

Parable #1

When he was a young man, the writer was ungraced with what is termed the critical sense. He was incapable of judging his own efforts objectively. His interests in handwriting, however, helped him with his problem. Knowing full well that a person's personality can be read in his handwriting style, the young writer discovered yet another truth. A person's handwriting changes ever so slightly with different moods, different intensities of expression. The writer analyzed his own handwriting more closely than had up till then been possible and was able to, by simple experimentation, discover just which style of hand connoted inspiration coupled with technical mastery in his work. Then by practical application—that is, by going through his own manuscripts after they had been obscenely fleshed out and compiling from these overgrown hulks of fiction works of spare and rare insight—he became an internationally acclaimed author, a no doubt just tribute for such a keen critical eye as his had become.

But now the writer is no longer so young. His eyesight grows weak and his handwriting is incredibly shaky, the latter being perhaps a result of the unnatural tensions that surround his putting pen to paper—at least, in part. Age explains the rest. He publishes a larger percentage of his work than he was wont to in the past and the critics term his increased output a result of “the flaccid narcissism of old age.”

And so, another great writer is misunderstood.



Parable #2

It is currently believed that puppeteers manage their creations with the help of strings and a wooden frame constructed in the form of a double cross. The vast majority of our villagers hold that the wooden frame is not only necessary and expedient but also all the puppeteer really has to offer. They ignore the show and concentrate on trying to catch a glimpse of it. To behold even a single splinter of the wooden frame is thought to be a blessing, but no one has as of yet been so blessed.

Of course, no attention is paid to the strings. The puppeteer makes no attempt to hide them, he goes out of his way to purchase string of a color which he is assured will clash with his familiar backdrop, and he has now even introduced stage lights which complement the color of his strings in such a striking manner as to seemingly bring them right out into the audience, yet the villagers are not interested. As it has always been with the puppets (or does my memory fail me?), so it is now with the strings. No matter how complicated the drama, it makes no one curious; no matter how simple the acts sometimes are, they reach no one. The villagers seem responsive enough, with the way they crowd close to the stage in an apparent attempt to crush one and all and yet still manage to stare intently stageward as if oblivious to their own pushings and shovings. Laughter even breaks out. But the crowding is the result of the villagers' common attempt to get close enough to the stage to be able to look straight up and see the frame without being frustrated by the upper curtain, and their laughter is in response to the hurriedly choked cries of joy that echo down the streets when someone realizes an instant too late that he is mistaken if he believes he has seen the puppeteer's wooden frame. The villagers' laughter is cruel but they do not turn toward their victim. They only look all the more intently and with an added savage glee for a glimpse of the frame. It is rare, but once in a great while someone will leap onto his comrades in an attempt to rip down the curtain and expose the object of all their desires. But he is doing no one a favor, the puppeteer is always prepared. By the time any curtain is ever ripped down, the gaudy strings lie in a heap on stage, along with the puppets. Should the curtain still be ripped down (and this is extremely rare), true, the puppeteer is exposed, but where is his wooden frame? The show is in any case at an end. The only further thing the puppeteer has to offer the villagers is a most exemplary demonstration of how to fold up a puppet stage. The efficient, practiced manner in which he goes about this reduces his offender to such a guilt-ridden state that he is unable to function, he falls to his knees.

Although the villagers are not stupid, their demeanors at this moment suggest that they are. Their faces are slack and their gazes vacant. The scene of the puppet master striking his stage is like a hand which, waved in front of their eyes, they don't see. As they turn blankly toward him the offender collapses completely. They fall on him—but whether in revenge or because he presents the softest landing place, it is impossible to say.



Parable #3

One day, a small town man was struck by a quite novel idea. It occurred to him why spouses, after they had been together for some time, looked so much alike in certain respects. The reason, he decided was their subconscious imitation of each other's facial expression. As they talked and watched one another, they adopted certain ways of holding their mouths, their eyebrows; special ways of glancing and nodding at things; identifiable looks of contemplation and confusion, petty or concerned. And these ways were the ways of their companion in life.

The man's new interest in life knew no bounds. He scrutinized nearly everyone he met; only the blatant imitation to be seen in the faces of children did not intrigue him. He learned and memorized the subtle forms that spousal imitation took on in his town. He couldn't remember just exactly when it first happened, but there came a time when his sense for these reflected facial expressions opened a new and even subtler world for him. Spousal imitation was not all there was to the world. A man with a good eye for this sort of thing could discern similarities which were the result of only a few months, weeks, even a few days of acquaintance. And he had just the eye. He could tell who a person was having an affair with by certain facial similarities which begin to show after, say, about a month. The darker side of his town's social life was laid bare before his very eyes. Soon the man became interested in the most transitory effects. He gave parties. His introductions were conscious creative efforts. For instance, he would bring a lady who constantly and delicately arched her eyebrows over to meet a man with a tendency to flare his nostrils and observe the results of their five-minute *tete-à-tete*. Of course, if two people hated one another, they would consciously avoid imitation. But even this effect interested him. For at such moments a person revealed what he thought was his most individualistic stance, his most intense denial of habitual imitation. The host enjoyed noticing influences of other people in these "individualistic" stances. When the party was over, he would help his guests into their cars so he could ever so briefly watch their faces sink back into time-honored reflection of each other.

The small town man—after a year or so of partying—became a cynic. His introductions acquired tonations of cruelty. People grew more and more annoyed by his piercing and disdainful stares; they stopped coming to his parties altogether. Everyone adopted an "individualistic" stance when in his presence. The exciting part of his new life came to an abrupt end. What had once seemed the variety of life, became a burden to him; and he wasn't at all reassured by the notion that, in death, all people look alike.

He couldn't bear to look at himself in a mirror.