GODISNOWHERE: STORYTELLING AS RELIGION IN THE NOVELS OF DOUGLAS COUPLAND

Bv Florian Duiisens

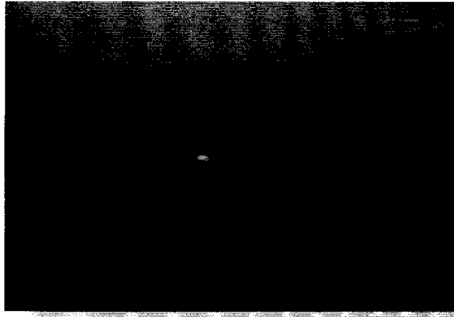
A fan of Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland since I first read his bestselling *Generation X* in grungy 1991, I have followed his European success with as much interest as I did his decline in popularity in the United States. Charged with sappy sentimentality on the one hand and being an ironic "pop culture taxonomist" on the other, this author seems to have become more obscure as his novels have become more enlightened, in the spiritual sense. Lightly and sometimes outrageously plotted novels filled with separate small stories, Coupland's works, as I reread them recently, seem to be a great deal more spiritual than I, an avid atheist, usually find comfortable, yet something seems to ring true for me in Coupland's unquestionably faith-themed novels. He somehow packages his tales of contemporary anomie so deftly, never capitalizing the g-word, never referring to any one religious tradition. Nor does he package his books as works of spiritual awakening like *Celestine Prophecy* or the works of Paulo Coelho. In writing his topical time-capsule novels, he sketches a bleak image of the western consumer society, even going so far as to dedicate *Life after God*'s last story to the first generation raised without religion.

In that story, *1,000 Years*, the protagonist explains how today's late twentysomethings, who were teenagers in the late seventies and later eighties, are symptomatic of our current godless existence:

"The radio would be turned on, full of love songs and rock music; we believed the rock music but I don't think we believed in the love songs, either then, or now. Ours was a life lived in paradise and thus it rendered any discussion of transcendental ideas pointless. Politics, we supposed, existed elsewhere in a televised non-paradise; death was something similar to recycling. It was [...] life after god [...] the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to fully believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched." (*Life After God,* 273)

This inverted Midas touch Coupland describes is especially troubling in academic writing, since love is hardly a word easily pin down-able and terms like faith, hope, and religion are even more bogged down in a myrrhy mire of dusty shelves and kneeling

seniors. Still, Coupland manages to package these subjects to a cult audience not usually, or at least publicly, known to engage in spiritual discourse. These youngsters are less prone to extracting their day-to-day



values from between the lines of a bible than they are to *tele-parablizing*: "Morals used in everyday life that derive from TV sitcom plots: *That's just like that episode where Jan lost her glasses*" (*Generation X*, 120).

Knowing his audience like the controls of his iPod, Coupland, dealing with the loaded question of the meaning of life, does not give us the traditional Christian vernacular of Jesus and damnation, or even the wildly popular bible code prophesies, but settles for a different, perhaps even narratological, approach to the question, such as in the voice of *Eleanor Rigby*'s protagonist, Liz Dunn: "Like anybody, I wanted to find out if my life was ever going to make sense, or maybe even feel like a story" (3). Coupland's promised land lies in a life lived like stories.

Yet it seems those stories never run the course intended by their protagonists, who somehow expected a different denouement, an uncommon catharsis. In *Little Creatures,* the opening story of Coupland's *Life after God*, the author portrays a young father and his son on a road-trip. The father, going through a divorce, is too confused to tell the stories his son demands to hear.

"Clappy the Kitten was going to be a movie star one day. But then she rang up too many bills on her MasterCard and had to get a job as a teller at the Hong Kong Bank of Canada to pay them off. Before long she was simply too old to try becoming a star – or her ambition disappeared – or both. And she found it was easier to just talk about doing it instead of actually doing it and..."
"And what," you asked.
"Nothing baby," I said, stopping myself then and there – feeling suddenly more dreadful than you can imagine having told you about these animals – filling your head with these stories – stories of these beautiful little creatures who were all supposed to have been part of a fairy tale but who got lost along the way." (23-24)

It seems that stories within stories, at the heart of every religion, are the way Coupland chooses to communicate his final thoughts. The three friends at the heart of *Generation X* have an arrangement; they can tell their stories without being interrupted or questioned on their content. This arrangement allows them to talk about their deepest emotions, without being called on them; an ironic distancing device that keeps them from getting too close for comfort. These stories, like the parables of old, operate outside of reality but still within a determinedly Earthly logic, possibly meant to accentuate the difference between a merely natural and a higher spiritual state. Without ever revealing their agenda, the ever-present twist endings hinted at the unknowability of God, the unpredictability of fate, or even the harsh power of human will.

Reading a collection of Kierkegaard's parables, similar characteristics become apparent: startling reversals, a condensed story, easy to retell, but meant to enlighten a reader morally or spiritually. More difficult is the way we should interpret them; are they just stories, meant to briefly thrill and pass the time, or hermetic philosophical mysteries, only readable after years of studying arcane iconography, or even logical puzzles, the key embedded between the lines? However one wants to read them, parables are undoubtedly meant to divert a reader from a set path of philosophical thinking. They suggest a small diversion through the underbrush, just as Socrates started his questionings with a simple question, only to end up at the philosophical foot of a mountain or the existential edge of an abyss. The reader is shocked out of her comfortable academic stupor and forced to find a way across or perhaps through.

Kierkegaard valued parabolic communication so highly because he associated subjectivity with truth and objectivity with straight up fact. If we can communicate objective, or empirical, truth through charts and graphs, how can we convey those truths most personal, most subjective, those of emotion or religion? What he conceived of was an indirect way of communicating truth to others. What better example of indirect communication than to "compose jest and earnest so that the composition is a dialectical knot?" (*Training in Christianity*, 132). He suggested that the only way to get the truth across is to let the readers attempt to untie the knot by themselves. Kierkegaard intended his parables not to merely illustrate, but positively illuminate the reader, changing the way he

finds truth inside himself and others.

Kierkegaard explains this process by way of a parable called *The Test*. A lover wants to know if his beloved believes he loves her. Instead of simply asking her, he starts to behave like a double being, both passionate lover and treacherous deceiver "to reveal the heart of the beloved in a choice; for in this duplex possibility she is obliged to choose which character she believes to be the true one." Although Kierkegaard does not necessarily condone this kind of amorous behavior, he most definitely deems the dialectic nature of parables essential to the communication of truths.

In *Eleanor Rigby*, Liz' son, who is dying from MS, has visions when he stops taking his medication. These visions ultimately estrange his girlfriend, Jane, from him. As she explains to Liz, while he packs up his stuff from her apartment, the reality of his visions make her doubt her doubt; her very disbelief, her atheism, is at stake. One story in particular has hit her hard: Two ex-lovers passed each other on the street. They'd had an ugly breakup, and their punishment was that each time they saw each other they rusted just a little bit, like robots. In the end they rusted frozen in front of each other.

In trying to pick at the dialectical knot this vision presents, the allusion to a punishing entity must have struck Jane, but also the notion of a love that can outlast its relationship of origin long enough to freeze its sufferers; in a secular worldview without an afterlife, how does anything immaterial ever survive?

In *1.000 years*, the protagonist also suddenly stops taking his medication and holes himself up in his apartment to think about "a person or a thing larger than a human being." When his best friend asks him what he learned, he avoids the question and responds with an anecdote:

"Last year in Stanley Park when Mark and I went rollerblading [...] there was this group of blind people [...] and they heard us coming, and they motioned for us to stop, and we did. Then they handed Mark a camera. They wanted him to take their picture."
"Blind people?"
"Exactly. But the strange thing was, they still believed in sight. In pictures. I'm thinking that's not a bad attitude." (338)

This short excerpt is exemplary of the subtle way Coupland infuses his work with religious meaning. In his *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims Of The Christian Message*, Ravi Zacharias, quotes this same passage, direly missing the point when he concludes: "The pictures were probably shown to those with sight, who could add to the insight of these women who, in their memories, could relive the occasion, transcending the way they had lived it for the first time."

Even though this particular story ends with a pathetic plea for God's return, all we need to know has been said in the quoted passage above. Belief in the face of total incomprehension as shown by these blind people's trust in the power of images and sight itself is crucial. Just as people pose for a photograph they will never see, so Coupland encourages us to live with trust in something larger than ourselves.

When Kafka reflects, "In the fight between you and the world, back the world," his aphorism is the opposite of Coupland's, who tells us to bet on ourselves, since we cannot lose: "Our smallest acts – crossing a street, peeling an apple, giving Miss January the one-hand salute – are as though we are ripping an Olympic ribbon to thunderous applause. The universe ***wants*** us to win. The universe makes sure we're winning even when we lose" (*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 234). The author

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surely means that the mere fact that we have a choice is reason enough for the universe to rejoice. He redefines destiny as the opposite of fate, "what we work toward. The future does not exist yet. Fate is for losers" (6).

With these kinds of clinchers it must seem odd that I would be surprised to see the many spiritual books that cite *Life after God*. I am not the only one who sees the appeal these novels have to generations estranged from religion and the church. What does seem miraculous to me is the way these authors enlist Coupland to draw young people to church. Apparently what I interpret as non-Christian, not any organized religion, and thus not scary, can just as easily be assimilated in a different spiritual diet, and that just might be the most powerful characteristic of modern parables.

Florian Duijsens is a student of popular culture and often wonders whether the OC was ever really as good as he thought it was.