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FABLE AND PARABLE

In my first chapter it was claimed that Kafka's stories have 'meaning' on two levels, one the familiar one that belongs to any structured story in which a number of uncertainties are resolved in a fulfilling ending, the other the symbolic meaning that in several ways they incite the reader to seek. That is, in this latter respect Kafka's stories have something of the character of a fable or parable. We have noted in them several formal elements that drive us to look for some such symbolic meaning, notably the apparent incoherence of events and of the behaviour of the characters and the baffling effect of the ending. But repeatedly the theme itself evokes such a search. For this theme is not suffering pure and simple, suffering that arises from circumstances, but suffering that repeatedly is understood by the central character and alleged by others to be a punishment. And punishment is not a simple fact of existence unencumbered by moral implications, but a concept that implies and exists within a whole ethical and perhaps legal system of which it is a member; it belongs to a code-family the other members of which are related concepts like innocence, guilt or sin, expiation, justice, verdict and trial and judge. In two of these stories – 'The judgment' and *The trial* – there is an explicit framework of a guilt and a verdict, an accused man and a condemning authority, while 'The metamorphosis' and the other two novels, *America* and *The castle*, suggest a comparable nexus of guilt, protest, and implacable authority. 'In the penal colony' is the only one of these stories in which the hero is not involved as a victim in a case brought against him, but as we have seen his behaviour pronounces his consciousness of guilt in failing to intervene in the punishment of which he is a witness.

When he reads these stories, therefore, the reader is faced

with the operation of a penal or moral system to which the characters pay tribute in their consciousness and their behaviour. But a Kafka story is distinguished also by a second characteristic that we do not find, for instance, in Dostoevsky's *Crime and punishment*, namely, that the nature of the guilt and punishment, their cause, the ethical or legal code to which they belong, perhaps the justice of this code and the legitimacy of the authorities who administer it, remain tantalisingly obscure. We can indeed very properly use the term 'code' for the underlying ethical system, for in Kafka's work it remains a code in the other meaning of the word, a secret language that has to be deciphered before we make a judgment on its morality. If we wish to grasp the very structure of the story, the coherence of events and thoughts, the relationship of the ending – perhaps its relevance – to what has preceded it; if we are to see seemingly arbitrary contingencies transformed into articulated significance: then we are forced to read it as a codified message. There are other elements in the texts that force us to look beyond the surface story, such as the irruption of unrealistic events and grotesque figures into the everyday world that surrounds these stories, the nightmarish effects like the strange foreshortening of time or the endless bewilderment of corridors. But the main feature that we have to wrestle with is this repeated insistence on some system of meaning that is of a different order than ordinary mundane concerns.

However, though these stories bear in this respect some similarity to the fable or parable, one would not call them such. They are too much the stories of specific individuals in specific situations, social and material, to be felt to be written as illustrations of some lesson. There is too much of a story in each, that is, there is too much change of situation to allow for any single lesson. Above all, the narrative form is strikingly different from that found in the fable or parable, since the reader is drawn into the experience of the main character, participates in it emotionally and imaginatively to such a degree that his participation suspends or even obstructs the sort of

objective judgment that a fable seeks to inculcate. Many of Kafka's most fable-like shorter pieces tend to the quality of a story and many of them make us hesitate what to call them, fables or stories; and if we do call them 'stories' we must mean that they contain much more, and more than can be formulated, and involve the reader more intimately and mysteriously than do fables or parables. Even when, like 'The huntsman Gracchus', they seem to conclude with an interpretative 'explanation' – 'My boat has no rudder, it drives before the wind that blows in the nethermost regions of death' – the vivid scenes of the brief story are not all contained within this moving conclusion that itself raises more questions and associations than it settles. And yet, contrariwise, one can invert this opinion and observe that many of Kafka's later stories, and especially those with an animal subject – the ape's report, the dog's investigations, the badger's (?) ruminations, the mouse's singing – all seem to be extended fables and to seek some 'moral' that would explain their existence. Artistic and literary genres do not have sharp frontiers: here, with Kafka story–fables, we are not concerned with lines of demarcation but with tendencies and approximations. It is perhaps unnecessary to explain that I here use the term 'fable' in its most common meaning and am not concerned with its other meaning as a 'fabulous' i.e. far-fetched or incredible story or legend.

What is a fable or parable? Is there any difference between them? In structure they are very similar, in content and reference there is considerable difference. Both aim at supplying a lesson about human behaviour, perhaps a moral injunction, and create an incident, a story, the purpose of which is to illustrate the lesson. Both belong originally to an oral tradition and in the great examples, in Aesop's fables and the parables of the New Testament, this oral character is strongly marked in the form. Both are short, capable of being assimilated and understood by the surrounding listeners. The story must be simple, without elaboration, so that it can be immediately understood; it must have the sole aim of one particular lesson

and not offer the distraction of other issues or ambiguities. The context of that aspect of the story to which the speaker draws particular attention must be familiar to the listeners, close to their normal experience and thought, so that the specific incident and its meaning stands out prominently against a background that provides no surprise or puzzle. Neither the scene nor the characters are individualised since the greater the individualisation, the greater is the risk of disparate and confusing responses. The style must be bare, objective, so that the reader will not identify with the character but remain at a critical judicial distance. The characters are always types. When animals are used in these illustrative anecdotes they can be so used because they are reduced to single well-known characteristics on which the moral turns – the cunning of the fox, the might of the lion, the timorous speed of the hare, the innocence of the lamb and the foolishness of the sheep, the greed and obstinacy of the pig etc. In the same way the human characters are generalised into types – the father and the son, the good housewife, the sower, the master and the servant, the good neighbour. In order to isolate and emphasise the lesson of his fable the teller must share, or at least adopt, certain common assumptions which he is not concerned to challenge and for this reason, in a later age, problems and issues will be discerned that were not intended earlier. Thus the parables of Jesus about the unfaithful steward or the prodigal son are read quite differently in an age when the ancient conception of the master–servant or the father–son relationship is no longer accepted.

If the fable and parable share these features, in other ways they are different. Traditionally the fable is distinguished by the use of animal characters while in the parable we expect human beings. This distinction is not so great as might be inferred since the animals speak and think like human beings and are like them not individualised; it is clear that they are meant to illustrate human predicaments, faults and virtues and they have the extra attraction that in spite of this glaring anthropomorphisation the behaviour of these humanised animals reflects

shrewdly enough their observed appearance. But, perhaps because of this, the wisdom the fable teaches is above all practical and useful, for an animal would be an unsuitable vessel for a subtle spiritual truth. And the greatest and characteristic distinction of the parable is that it is concerned with spiritual principles and attitudes, and with behaviour as it flows from these. It creates simple practical models of God's ways with man and teaches what are the right and wrong human responses: it is essentially an instrument of religious instruction.

The central purpose of fable and parable has not changed greatly over the centuries. Both have remained above all media for the use of moral and religious teachers and preachers, and they were extremely popular in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance, when the concept of an independent art of literature scarcely existed. The most prominent of the changes they underwent arose from the effort of the tellers to bring the circumstances of the tales up to date, to attach an anecdote to a particular town, profession, or even person. Since at the same time, with the development of printing, the fable lost its oral character and was written for readers, there was opportunity for developing this sort of local colour at greater length, to win the attention of remote readers as well as near neighbours. But though this didactic literature was extremely popular in the Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it became a sort of sub-literature, for its themes remained mostly domestic and humble in an age in which 'high' literature was engaging in the grandest and deepest of human concerns. The fables of La Fontaine, the literary peak of the fable, are indeed an oddity in his time, the later seventeenth century. In form they are brilliant. Vivid images evoke his animals, the narrative is terse and swift, the dialogue lively and full of wit, the moral comments pointed, humorous, and often full of humane feeling. But it is strange to find so sophisticated and subtle a narrative skill and linguistic mobility married to so humble a morality, and it would seem that these entrancing fables were read for their charm rather than their explicit message. In the succeed-

ing centuries the fable fell out of fashion in the higher culture, pursuing its modest way in quieter regions; perhaps only in Russia was it possible for a Krylov to win a high literary status for his shrewd versions. European literature did not forgo moralising, even preaching; but more and more it was felt that the 'moral' must be implicit in the story, and as stories filled with more and more life, any 'moral' came to be inadequate and misleading.

Parable and fable must be distinguished from allegory although all arise from a similar purpose, to instruct in or exhort to right thought and behaviour. Allegory indeed became one of the main literary and artistic forms from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, whether harnessed in the interest of religion, like *Piers Plowman* or *The Pilgrim's progress*, or of courtly love like the novels of Mlle de Scudéry. But the method of allegory is different from that of parable. Whether it offers a story of many episodes or few, allegory is built out of elements – situations, events, characters – that stand for something else, for some vice or virtue, some temptation or ideal, and their function in the story is this spiritual one that dominates and often obliterates their natural character. It is true that in the most living of allegories, such as Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's progress*, the actual living characters of the allegorical figures keep to our delight always breaking through their formal function, as in the conversations of giant and giantess at Castle Despair. But usually the relation of each item to a specific meaning destroys the living unity of characters and events and, if the lesson becomes plain, the aesthetic experience is pallid. By contrast we can see how important it is that the parable is limited to a very simple theme and situation, since this can be presented to us as a whole event in its own terms without the need for allegorical hints and props. Its religious or moral meaning arises from the totality of the event, not out of the particular meanings of its parts, and it is this totality that evokes not one but many life-situations in which similar problems. faults, choices are to be found and made.

The modern history of the parable is similar to that of the fable, though its close association with doctrinal teaching has placed sterner limitations on its survival in the secular civilisation of modern times. While the ancient biblical parables retained their significance within and without the churches, few new ones arose except in the context of the sermon. The limitless greed for incident and adventures, for the excitements of war and love, contributed to the growth of an extensive allegorical literature during and after the Middle Ages, and even the pious retelling of biblical stories, such as we know in Philipp von Zesen's seventeenth-century novels based on such popular stories as those of the biblical Joseph, shows a predilection for incident and dramatic tension that is the very opposite of the parable. As a genre, the parable in these centuries shows its most pertinacious vitality in the closed Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, where a rabbinical literature of religious anecdote, often verging on allegory, served until modern times to elucidate the faith in terms of the life-situations familiar to these communities.

The great crisis of religious belief in the nineteenth century, that in the case of the Jews was exacerbated by their social emancipation, led to an almost frenzied search for substitute faiths, and the first decades of the twentieth century bear witness to this search in various ways.[1] Just as in Christian circles there was a revival of interest in the medieval moralities and mysteries, so in emancipated Jewish circles there grew a lively interest in the mass of religious anecdote flourishing in the Eastern European rabbinical literature, notably in the Chasidic tradition, of whose spiritual value Martin Buber made his contemporaries appreciatively conscious. For most of the emancipated, educated Jews in Germany and other Western cultures these rabbinical stories held a nostalgic attraction enhanced by their alienation from the ancient communities and beliefs. We can see from Kafka's diaries that he too, living in a great centre of traditional Jewish orthodoxy but philosophically and socially divorced from it, felt at times something like this nostalgic

affection for these products of a more primitive and closer community. This was not unusual. What was unusual was that he found in the ancient tradition of exegetic story and parable not a sentimental comfort but a means to express his own spiritual situation. He created a modern type of parable, not by modernising its formal elements or building out its descriptive detail, but by returning to its original simplicity of structure as a means to express, with excruciating simplicity, a message that is the very opposite of the faith that inspired the traditional parable. Several of Kafka's brief parables have indeed been shown to have arisen from Jewish stories to which he supplies a new ending and message.[2]

It was Heinz Politzer, in his important study *Franz Kafka: parable and paradox*, who firmly established the parabolic character of Kafka's stories and their formal connexion with the Jewish tradition of parabolic anecdote, and on this basis could define their peculiar character as 'code ciphers conveying indecipherable messages'.[3] But in his first chapter, 'A discourse on method', Politzer fails to distinguish Kafka's parables from his stories and because of this approaches the parables with, I believe, false premises. He applies to Kafka's parables the pious ingenuity of rabbinical biblical exegesis that finds in the sacred stories, the myths, of the Old Testament never-ending possibilities of meaning, scrutinising every word, every turn of phrase, for some secret message. Now, this method has its justification for the biblical stories, those about the patriarchs for instance, as it does for myth in general, since such texts reveal layers of meaning deposited by successive ages, who add to and subtract from original versions in order to meet their need. Round the great figures collect a group of variable meanings that together construct the significance of the hero for the subsequent life of the people. Politzer looks in Kafka's parables for a similar fullness of meaning that reaches out beyond the confines of the actual situation presented. Instead of recognising the abstract character of the figures of parable, Politzer sees them as having a real individual life that is hidden from us and

that holds perhaps the clue to their meaning; the events of such a parable, Politzer says, 'seem to be the last visible signs of invisible chain reactions which originate in the unknown, the not-knowable'. Since these remarks are made specifically in relation to Kafka's parable 'Give it up!', I defer more precise discussion of them till I discuss this parable. But it seems to me a grave error, that raises innumerable irrelevant questions and needlessly magnifies the uncertainties that Kafka texts provoke. Kafka's parables are much more akin in form to the parables of Jesus. Like these they are about imaginary, typified figures, cut off from any past or future, from any reality except an imaginative one, and built round a particular theme; they are not accretions but are deliberately composed and completed. If they are baffling, we should understand that this is their intended effect, and we should not look outside them for clues or explanations.

At the same time, a baffling parable need not be an 'open parable' in the precise sense that Politzer gives this term. By it he means a parable with an infinite number of possible meanings, and Ingeborg Henel is certainly justified in saying that this would imply that every interpretation is 'equally meaningless'.[4] Here we shall use the term in a more restricted sense.

I. THE THIRD-PERSON PARABLES

Kafka's parables and fables belong essentially to the years following the publication of his early tales 'The judgment' and 'The metamorphosis', to the years when we find abundant evidence in his diaries and imaginative work such as *The trial* and *The castle* that the problem of religious faith (or unbelief) was deeply occupying and tormenting his mind. I use both terms, parable and fable, to indicate that in these pieces he used sometimes animal, sometimes human characters, but in fact there is in this context little profit in distinguishing the two forms. From the beginning it is clear that Kafka's work in this genre belongs to the tradition of parable, and Heinz Politzer

quite rightly spoke simply of them all as parables. What this term means is that Kafka's parables, including those that, like 'Little fable', seem closest to the form of the fable, are concerned with spiritual attitudes and problems, not with practical morals; one might almost say, indeed, that viewed in relation to the ancient tradition of fable they strangely and alarmingly lack all concern for practical behaviour, for interpersonal and social obligations. One may legitimately wonder whether Kafka thought of his animal tales as fables; even the title 'Little fable' was invented by Max Brod for a story that in Kafka's manuscript has no title.

In some ways Kafka's parables (henceforth this term will include what might be called fables) are in form closer to the ancient type than the modern. There is a minimum of description, no brilliance of imagery or subtlety of dialogue, no verbal sparkle or elegance; nor does he seek the local colour, the characterisation that is an attraction of the rabbinical anecdotal parables. In the bareness of his settings, the lack of individualisation of his characters, the abstractness of his situations, he echoes the serious simplicity of the ancient parable, with its universalistic reference. In many Kafka also adopts the traditional narrative medium of the non-personal narrator, who stands at a distance (technical and moral) from his characters and whose unchallengeable authority guarantees the significance of every item in the story. But if in these ways he seems to associate himself more with the ancient tradition than with modern variations, in another he is startlingly modern. For though he invites us to read these parables as we would ancient parables, with the same expectation of a simple moral lesson that will illuminate the meaning of the events related, in fact the reader finds his expectations cheated, for there is no formulated moral and the conclusion of the incident is obscure and ambiguous, leaving the reader baffled and distressed. Politzer gave the name 'open parable' to this type of Kafka parable, but I do not think he admitted to what a degree such a term is a forbidding paradox. For the essence, the *raison d'être* of the fable or parable

is precisely a clear, defined moral inference or injunction; and here, in Kafka's parables, this essence is absent. We can easily imagine 'morals' that are more open, less precise, less narrow than the Aesopian; but if a story does not allow for any conclusion, and yet invites us to expect one, it runs the danger of seeming mere cynical play – unless its object is to attack the whole tradition of believing that moral rules can be formulated. Yet the simplicity and transparency of these Kafka parables are such that they do not at all seem to be intended to be cynical parodies; they are not like Brecht's parodies of popular hymns. Rather, they seem to be forced from him in his effort to find an image for the human situation, and he himself is distressed by what comes into being.

In addition to these parables there are other, even contrary tendencies in Kafka's parabolic writing which include both the individualisation of a situation and the use of a first-person narrator. There is no sharp difference of date between the different types, but we will start our examination of a few examples with the type I have defined and leave to the end the first-person parables, which are more frequent at the end of Kafka's life.

'Little fable' ('Kleine Fabel', 1920)

'Alas', said the mouse, 'the world is growing smaller every day. At first it was so wide that I was afraid, I went on running and was glad that at last I saw in the distance walls to right and left, but these long walls are hurrying so swiftly towards one another that I am already in the last room and there in the corner stands the trap into which I am running.' – 'You have only to change direction', said the cat, and ate it up.

This is disarmingly similar to a traditional fable and Max Brod's title is appropriate enough. Speaking animals invoke all the associations of the fable and we read in it a symbolic message. Mouse and cat symbolise human qualities, stand for weakness and power, the hunted and the hunter, victim and victor, timidity and ferocity, harmlessness and pitilessness, panic and calm. The weak mouse, hynotised by its fear, runs irresistibly

towards the doom prepared by man, only to succumb to the cat who calmly and with relish tells its victim, before she is eaten, how to escape.

But what is the lesson? Is it that of Aesop's wolf and lamb, that there's no arguing with power? Or is it: 'Don't surrender to your fear'? Or: 'Don't fear the world merely because it is open'? Or: 'Don't always keep on in the same direction'? Or: 'Don't complain to the powerful, who are your enemies'? Or: 'Have you asked whether this doom is deserved'? Or is it a fable about a cat – 'Power disguises itself as friendship' or 'Power likes to humiliate as well as destroy' etc.? Some or all of these 'lessons' may be drawn, but surely one loses oneself in endless speculations if one expects there to be a clear lesson to be drawn from this example from life. Simple in its outlines the story has indefinite implications. The function of fable was to allow us to understand life, to order and label its manifestations, to teach us practical wisdom that will serve to guide our behaviour. But this fable of Kafka's does not illuminate the mind but terrifies and confuses.

Its apparently so simple form powerfully contributes to this result. It is composed of two statements followed by a conclusive 'and ate it up'. But actually this simplicity is highly sophisticated. The mouse's successive phrases start as reflexions upon the past but end in the present tense, the recognition of the threat to its life. These successive phrases pour out tonelessly, breathlessly, without a true pause, without distinctions of emphasis or feeling, communicating the helpless panic that has seized the creature. The transfer of activity from herself to the walls which close in on her intensifies the reader's feeling of the paralysis of will and mind that is overtaking her. The relaxed ease of the cat's remark and the last words are brief and sudden like the deadly spring that we imagine. And the simple finality of 'and ate it up' confirms the ending with the authority of the objective narrator.

This narrator hardly appears. But he ensures that we read the words of the mouse and the cat as their partial view, not as

general truths, and above all he holds us at a distance from the characters and thus allots to us the role of impartial judges. This narratorial stance, so different from that in Kafka's stories where the narrator normally evades authoritative judgments and viewpoints and, adopting the perspective of the character, continually submerges the reader in the character's experience, is characteristic of the religious teacher, the composer of parables. In the stories, as we have seen, the impersonal narrator's dual function, to establish the events of the story and to evoke the experience of the character, is shared in very unequal proportions, since the experiential side dominates in quantity and quality of significance the record of events. In 'Little fable' and the other third-person parables these proportions change drastically or, rather, the role of the narrator as an independent recorder of incident and describer of situation becomes very large and important. He can still tell us of the experience of the character but he does so from outside, not through the medium of free indirect speech which in the stories often implies the subordination of the independent objective view to the subjective view of the character. Or, as in 'Little fable', direct speech is used by the characters to express their thoughts and feelings, and this means that we take note of their views as something distinct and personal, something towards which we may stand in a critical relationship. Thus the most characteristic feature of Kafka's narrative style in the stories, the submerging of the objective narrator in the character, is absent from the third-person parables. It is this independent objective authority that we recognise in all the items of 'Little fable', though in this mini-fable these are of course very few, and for this reason the shock of reaching not a religious message and lesson but a disaster and a puzzle is all the more disconcerting.

'Before the law' ('Vor dem Gesetz', 1914)

'Little fable' belongs to 1920, but its spirit is close to Kafka's perhaps most famous parable, 'Before the law', which was written in 1914. This forms part of the unfinished novel *The*

trial, and in its context is proffered by the prison chaplain as a 'holy' text that belongs to the documents of the law and should overcome Josef K.'s febrile resistance to the charge laid against him. Since Kafka himself published it separately we can first consider it as an independent work.[5]

Again the work proclaims its genre from the opening words – 'Before the law stands a door-keeper.' The identity of law with a place is biblical, though Old Testamentary rather than New, and we are immediately in the mental region in which the law is God's word and its decrees worshipped as the tables were once in the ark. Throughout, the term law is used without explanation, in its bare dignity, and worship of it belongs unquestionably to it. So we expect a parable within a normal religious framework, and the second sentence confirms this: 'To this door-keeper there comes a man from the country and begs for admission to the law.' We understand the door-keeper is a servant of the law and the 'man from the country' is a simple believer seeking the fulfilment of his faith; all the terms are traditional, all simple and abstract. When the believer is told by the door-keeper that he cannot be admitted now, though he may be later, the man accepts the refusal; but he is bewildered when the door-keeper taunts him with the account of the hierarchy of numberless door-keepers that will bar his way to the law, for, he tells himself 'the law must be accessible for all and at all times' – and he now notices what an alien 'tartar' appearance his door-keeper has. The simple man settles down to wait, tolerated by the door-keeper but treated as an inferior and a nuisance; he grows old and senile, all his thoughts obsessed by this one obstacle, the door-keeper. As he falls blind he becomes aware of a radiance that 'unquenchably' issues through the forbidden doorway. Before he dies he is allowed to ask one final question: 'All strive towards the law; how is it that in these many years no one but me has asked for admission?' And the door-keeper 'bawls' at him: 'No one else could gain admission here, for this entrance was appointed for you alone. I am now going to shut it.'

Just as the terms of this story belong to parable, so also does the narrative form. For it is told with complete authority, the authority of a narrator who knows the place and function of each item in his exemplary tale, that is to say its meaning in the whole; who therefore is leading the reader to an ending that will reveal the meaning of the whole. This narrator concentrates our attention on the 'man from the country', since he is the subject of the story, and we are informed about his thoughts and feelings whereas the temple of the law and the door-keeper are described from outside (there is no external description of the main character). But though this narrative perspective is superficially parallel to that in Kafka's early tales, the independence of the narrator's objective perspective is always retained and repeatedly emphasised. It is he who describes the arrival of the man, explains that he bends down in order to peer through the door, that after he settles down to wait he tries to bribe the door-keeper etc. The tale of the long wait is securely in the narrator's hands, especially clearly so in the foreshortening of time, for it requires the retrospective narrator if the passage of days and years is to be summed up in a brief sentence. This external authority appears when we are told that the man deludes himself with the belief that this door-keeper is 'the only hindrance' preventing his admission to the law or again when we are told the man is becoming 'infantile' and blind, matters the man cannot himself know of or be sure of. In the last sentence, when we are told that the door-keeper 'sees the man's end is near', we stand, with the narrator, outside the action. At no time does this narrator suffer from any of the conditions limiting a personal narrator, never does his report subordinate itself to the subjective experience of the man. And this means that we too, the readers, are placed in this position, are spectators of a situation and event the significance of which we are led to believe is to be made manifest and which we are called on to understand.

Since the form of this story is indubitably that of a parable most critics consider that, in spite of the cruel deception of the

man from the country, there must be a religious meaning for his rejection, and this must lie in some sin attached to him. Some critics suggest this must be the barbarism, paganism that belongs to men from the country, though this would run utterly against its normal meaning of simple faith. Others suggest that his unpardonable sin was his patience, his readiness to sit and wait, to obey the menial door-keeper, when he should have taken the law by storm (this would be a curious lesson for the chaplain to give Josef K., for his intention in telling this parable is to dissuade Josef from his protests and persuade him to admit his guilt; and the K. of *The castle*, who does try to take the castle by storm, comes to no better end than the patient 'man from the country'). But no ingenuity can obliterate the massive simplicity of this tale, and we have to come to terms with the idea that Kafka is saying that so cruel a punishment may be visited on simple trust. We might allay our horror by transferring the blame to the humble servant of the law, but this too would be a mere evasion.

The error of the religious interpretations is very understandable because the form of the parable and its whole manner invites the reader to expect some such lesson. But we learn that this invitation cannot be fulfilled, and we have to learn to accept this. It is not that Kafka is using the parable parodistically, in order to make fun of a genre that defined spiritual values and a spiritual order within the world. He sought these himself and always clung to the hope that they might exist and create a meaning to life that it does not have on the everyday plane. But the situations his mind imagined always led him into bewilderment and despair. For his generation Georg Lukács wrote in 1916, before he became a Marxist: 'The abandonment of the world by God is evident in the incongruity of soul and achievement. Human endeavour lacks transcendental coordinates.'[6] Lukács overcame this dilemma by embracing Marxism; Georg Simmel by shearing the supernatural attributes from the concepts of soul and God. But Kafka could never renounce his longing for a spiritual meaning

and authority even though it always eluded him and at best tantalised him as an uncertain gleam through a doorway or a misty outline on a hill. If the heroes of *The trial* and *The castle* persist in seeking some metaphysical authority, they never reach it nor find their hopes confirmed; they are cheated as the 'man from the country' in 'Before the law' is cheated. But in every case the author does not triumph over their failure; in it he embodies his own grief and despair. The form of the parable enables him to express his persistent hope as well as its grievous disappointment.

In *The trial* this parable is followed by a discussion on its meaning between the chaplain and Josef K. The latter, finding in it a parallel to his own treatment by the servants of the law, or to the chaplain's all-too-ready assumption of his guilt, takes it as an indictment of an unfaithful servant, the door-keeper; and when the chaplain defends the latter's behaviour as 'necessary', Josef K. bitterly remarks: 'A melancholy inference. Lying is made into a universal principle.' The chaplain's own attitude and argument seem to be underpinned by the dignity of his office and of the cathedral in which he stands in the pulpit, yet if we assume this we are perhaps being misled much as we may be by the parabolic form of the story about the 'man from the country'. This chaplain is hollow; his credit lies only in his office and the circumstances in which he speaks.[7] He assumes Josef K. to be guilty before he has come to trial; when Josef maintains his innocence the chaplain's rejection, 'So speak all the guilty', means that in his view all men are guilty; and he skilfully uses all the resonance of the cathedral and the authority of the preacher to urge his views. Finally, when he begins to elaborate on the possible meanings of the parable he has told, he finds such a variety of problems and tackles them with such a zestful volubility that we recognise here a bureaucrat for whom these spiritual issues are enjoyable intellectual playthings and who is quite incapable of understanding that for Josef K. they are matters of life and death. If Josef K. is dissatisfied with his own conclusion, he and we are even less

satisfied with the chaplain's empty dialectics. So that in the novel, as well as when we read 'Before the law' as a separate parable, we find its 'meaning' is its lack of meaning, the deceiving of love and faith; though the reader may well go further than Josef K. and the chaplain in their argument and find the cause of the failure of meaning to lie not in the servant or the petitioner but in the power they serve and worship.

'The huntsman Gracchus' ('Der Jäger Gracchus', 1917)

Several of Kafka's parables are richer in detail and individualisation even than 'Before the law', and the richer they are the more they inevitably tend to story; that is, the richer the suggestiveness and the more specific the characters, the less clearly will they serve an unambiguous meaning. Often the elements may have such stray radiance and point in such different directions, may be so unfulfilled within the framework of the work, that one does not know what to call them, parable or legend or story. I use 'parable' only when the various facets of the story, by fusing into a meaning, require us to seek it. To this borderline type belongs the mysterious and fascinating 'The huntsman Gracchus'.

The opening describes a still, dreamlike scene, the almost deserted little harbour on the Lake Garda (it is Riva that Kafka knew well). A strange barque arrives, seemingly drifting before the breeze, and a sailor leaps out and moors the boat to the quay, and two black-coated bearers carry on to the quay a bier on which a covered human figure is lying. They wait there till the skipper has secured the sail and then the three proceed with the bier to a nearby house which they enter. A man in formal mourning clothes, top hat and black gloves, comes down from the town and after knocking is admitted to the house, where fifty young boys form a welcoming double row. The barque skipper greets the visitor and takes him up to a room on the first floor where lies the man on the bier, lighted candles at his head; his wild matted hair and beard and brown skin seem to refute the impression that he is a corpse. When the two bearers

and the skipper leave the room, the prostrate man opens his eyes and with a painful smile asks the visitor who he is; the latter answers, 'The mayor of Riva', and adds that he knows the other is the huntsman Gracchus, for a pigeon had woken him in the night and whispered to him that he was officially to welcome 'the dead huntsman Gracchus'. Gracchus asks the mayor whether he thinks he is to stay in Riva, and the latter answers that he cannot say, but asks: 'Are you dead?' Gracchus then explains who he is.

Long before, Gracchus was a great huntsman, the famous huntsman of the Black Forest, who had fallen to his death when hunting chamois. But the death-barque that was to have taken him to the other world (*das Jenseits*) had by some accident or negligence of the skipper lost the way, and for centuries now they have been crossing the seas, never able to find the way; sometimes he thinks he is near the goal but his hopes are always cheated and he is doomed to travel for ever in the dismal barque of death, his 'wooden cage', still alive 'in a way'. He had always enjoyed life and was glad too to welcome death, and he does not understand why he should have suffered such misfortune. When the mayor asks him whether he had incurred any guilt, Gracchus answers that he knows of none and surely there is no evil in being a huntsman. The mayor agrees that so far as he can see there is no evil in it. Putting the fault on the skipper, the huntsman complains that he can find no help: no one knows of him, nor of his whereabouts, nor of how he might be helped; people hide under the bedclothes in order not to hear of him – 'The idea of helping him is a disease and must be healed under the bedclothes.' And when the mayor asks him if he intends to stay in Riva the huntsman answers, with a smile that mitigates his mockery: 'I have no intentions. I am here, I do not know more and I cannot do more. My barque has no rudder, it drives before the wind that blows from the nethermost regions of death.'

The message of this strange parable, summed up in the huntsman's last words, is clear enough: the alienation of man,

falling upon him without cause, pursues him even after death, forbidding him the peace of oblivion. As the author postulates a mythical underworld and ferryman, the story is full of mythical or fairy-tale elements, more than I could include in my brief synopsis, and from the beginning, the still scene in the harbour, the reader is entranced in a magical spell. Many of the details are difficult to understand and might seem mere decoration or mood-creators. But the brilliant researches of Hartmut Binder have uncovered the source of almost every puzzling item and have done the great service of clarifying the specific importance of Kafka's composition.[8] Some of the descriptive items, like the harbour at Riva, come from other contexts, even from contemporary stories; the boys who greet the mayor are reminders of an earlier version, and so on. But Binder's chief discovery was to link Kafka's main theme, usually till then accepted as an original invention, with the ancient myths of the Wild Hunter and the Flying Dutchman, of which the former appears in a collection of legends in Kafka's library, the second would be known to him through Heine's account and perhaps through Wagner's opera which was based on Heine. Both these legends are built round men who cannot die and are forced endlessly to roam the woods or seas; the legend of the Wandering Jew also contributed to Kafka's story, as Binder suggests. But these sources also throw into relief the peculiarity of Kafka's conception. For the Flying Dutchman and the Wild Hunter are condemned to wander because of a sin or crime, and both are permitted to return to life at seven-yearly intervals with the hope of winning redemption through the love or intercession of a human being. This double source explains the connexion of Kafka's huntsman with the sea and the landing at Riva; it explains too the reference of the huntsman to the 'help' he can never hope for, which in Kafka's story is puzzling. But above all, these sources, which bear a familiar message of guilt, punishment and redemption, make it all the more remarkable that Kafka's huntsman is guiltless and that his suffering is incomprehensible, a theme that is so profoundly Kafkaesque and

so disturbing that few readers can acknowledge its presence. To cap his discoveries Binder points out that the apparently mysterious name *Gracchus* is the Latin for 'daw, jackdaw' (Kafka would have known the Italian *gracchio*), and this is also the meaning of 'Kafka' itself. So that under this code lies Kafka's message: 'this is my fate, too'.

There can be no doubt that the multiplicity of motifs in this parable threatens to bury the message, or better, to disperse the message in a brilliant shower of possible associations that lead away from the central issue. We are here on the borderline of a story, which is not only more complex in motif and setting than the parable but also is not so tightly bound up with a meaning, a message. Faulty as a parable, 'The huntsman Gracchus' may serve however to close this review of parables written in the third person, partly in that it illustrates the claim this form makes to present an imaginative general truth and partly in that, through the name that makes 'Kafka' the hero, this particular parable slyly disclaims a general validity and becomes a personal confession. It links with the first-person parables, as with the later tales, in another important respect since it does not present us with a closed incident but leaves the reader suspended in an uncompleted puzzle.

2. PARABLES IN THE FIRST PERSON

The third-person parables so far discussed all have that non-personal narrator who is a function not an identity. The lack of third-person parables with a personal narrator is not accidental. For the role of the narrator is here authoritative, he bears the authority of the religious teacher, and any personal identity could only diminish this unquestioned authority. This authority Kafka claims even for parables that offer dismay and puzzlement instead of comfort and guidance.

For a similar reason the first-person parables do not include any in which the personal narrator is only at the periphery of the action, a bystander; always the narrator is the main charac-

ter himself. Only this character has an authority equal to that of the impersonal (often called omniscient) narrator, though his authority comes from a different source and applies to a different field. It is the authority of authentic experience, inward experience, as contrasted with that of religious conviction and truth; to neither of these could a bystander lay claim with such power. Because of this, these first-person parables of Kafka have a different structure as well as a different quality; they describe the character's experience of events rather than the events and situations themselves. And while they are like the third-person parables in that they present the reader with a fearful and puzzling situation, they are different in that the story, the action, is not rounded off with a conclusive ending, but ends as it were without a conclusion.

'Give it up!' ('Gibs Auf!', 1922)

It was early in the morning, the streets were clean and deserted, I was going to the railway station. When I compared a tower clock with my watch I saw that it was much later than I had thought, I had to hurry, the fright over my discovery made me uncertain about the route, I did not as yet know my way about in this city, luckily there was a policeman at hand, I hurried up to him and breathlessly asked him the way. He smiled and said: 'Are you asking *me* to tell you the way?' 'Yes', I said, 'since I can't find it myself.' 'Give it up, give it up' he said and turned on his heel with a flourish, like people who want to be alone with their laughter.

Brod gave this parable its title.[9] The narrator tells how, trying to find the way to the station in a strange city, and pressed for time, he asks the way of a policeman – the German word *Schutzmann* emphasises the latter's function as a 'protector'. The policeman, aggressively addressing the stranger with the familiar 'du' that a superior uses to an inferior, jeers at the very idea of expecting help from him and turns away triumphantly to enjoy a good laugh. One can see a relationship between this parable and 'Little fable'. The central figures of both are caught in a trap, the stream of pauseless sentences conveys their

growing panic, and cat and policeman rejoice in their helplessness. But while 'Little fable' ends in catastrophe, 'Give it up!' breaks off in bewilderment, bewilderment over being lost and bewilderment over the failure of expected help.

The first chapter of Politzer's *Franz Kafka: parable and paradox* is devoted to an exhaustive analysis of 'Give it up!' that provides a model of Politzer's critical method, and since this method has great advantages as well as significant faults I take the opportunity of giving a critical summary of much of its argument, especially that part that is relevant to the nature of parable.

Recognising that 'Give it up!' is an example of a Kafkaesque type to which he gives the term 'open parable', Politzer considers it to be an image of 'the insoluble paradox of human existence' (p. 22) and rightly rejects all those types of interpretation that would read into it as a whole, or into particular elements in it, some clear, unequivocal meaning. Amongst these are the view that the parable presents the position of the Jew in the Habsburg empire; that which sees it as an image of pathological angst and the policeman as a father-figure; that which detects in it a moral lesson on the evils of impatience; that which sees the policeman as a messenger from a higher realm (pp. 9–13). Demonstrating the insufficiency of these 'explanations', Politzer concludes that while the parable clearly centres upon the uncertainty of the individual in a world of 'disorder', it does not present any religious interpretation of this disorder; nor does it bear an existential message, he argues, since we do not know whether that 'Give it up!' demonstrates a real power of choice nor whether such a choice would free the man from his uncertainties.

But though Politzer rejects certain positive interpretations, he himself lays false trails. For he sees almost every item of the little story as a riddle, as posing a question, even if this question cannot find an answer (pp. 3–8). The story is for him the tip of an iceberg and everywhere he sends down probes to find causes and motives. When the man looks at the public clock on its

tower, Politzer says: 'We feel strangely compelled to ask for the motivation of his trivial action. His watch was slow; he must have sensed that he was behind time.' And Politzer goes on to suggest that we are presented with a contrast between subjective and objective time; the clock on the high tower means a 'higher' order of reality, and the shock the man experiences is due to his realisation that 'he is no longer in step with a higher order of things'. On the other hand the question arises, why does he accept the clock's time as true, why does he not check it? Perhaps his own time, his watch, is right?

Or again, since his insecurity arises from his unfamiliarity with the city, perhaps the cause of his discomfiture is his impatience; he should have waited till he was more at home there. It is impatience that brings him to want to leave, that causes his haste.

Or questions regarding the policeman. I pass over a set of suggestions that the policeman 'towers' over the man and is thus mysteriously related to the tower clock, since these clearly go beyond the text. Politzer also makes an unnecessary mystery of the presence of the policeman in the deserted street and asks why the man does not question why he was there. With more justification he suggests that the policeman's arrogant and jeering question really may indicate diffidence, uncertainty on his part, that it is only a question not an affirmation and is misunderstood by the man. The policeman's use of 'way' may indicate something deeper than merely the way to the station. And what does 'give it up' refer to? Does it not mean more than just 'give up your effort at finding the way to the station', perhaps give up your haste and your travels? Politzer goes so far in his exegetical enthusiasm as to write: 'We hasten to substitute an "everything" for this "it". "Give everything up!" the policeman seems to be saying, "let all hope go, abandon the way and the desire ever to find it, give up your quest, your drive and your yearning, your very existence – yourself!"' These few syllables, Politzer concludes, 'can mean anything from benevolent advice to the most sinister urge to self-destruction'.

We can see that by the term 'open parable' he means, not a parable embodying a tormenting scepticism, a despair of meaningfulness, but one that offers a choice of many interpretations, all indiscriminately possible.

My primary concern here is not to point out how far-fetched some of Politzer's suggestions are, but to show that they indicate a false conception of the parable genre. When we read Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, we do not ask, what did the father cultivate on his farm? What work did he require of his sons? What were his relations with his wife? What upbringing did he give his sons? What quarrels caused the son to leave home? etc. etc. We understand the parable to present a generalised case, representative figures and conflicts, the great and central theme alone being unique: the son's confession of sin and prayer for pardon, the father's forgiveness and joy. So here, in 'Give it up!', Kafka provides a concrete image of a general situation, concrete enough to have a recognisable outline, but generally applicable for the very reason that the man concerned has no character except his wish to get to the station in time, his fear of being late, his confusion about the way. This is a situation everyone has experienced, both in this precise form and in other forms for which it can serve as a model. All those questions that Politzer asks are irrelevant, about subjective and objective time, about haste and fear. On the background of this normal situation there stands out the one, unique event: the policeman to whom the man naturally turns in his difficulty refuses to help, jeers at the very idea that he (or anyone else) will help, and tells the man to give up his attempt. That is, the normal assumption of order, upon which we build our daily existence, is suddenly shattered, and we are left baffled. I suggest that this is the direct 'message' of the parable and it is in this way that we are intended to read a parable.

Thus Kafka's parable is 'open' not because it offers an infinite number of possible and perhaps contradictory meanings, but because it describes an event that suddenly, mysteriously, without cause, shatters our innocent expectation of order and

meaning. This is the immediate content of this parable of Kafka's. Like all parables, however, it has innumerable applications and the reader tests its truth against other types of experience through which a familiar and understood world suddenly reveals unexpected disorder and threats. The fault of many Kafka critics is to see some particular experience as the meaning of this parable, while the task of the writer was to create a model for many experiences.

There remains the question of the form of this parable, in that it is written in the first person, the 'man' being 'I'. This is not considered by Politzer. If this parable had been written in the third person, I believe the reader would feel he had the right to know what came next, he would require the anecdote to be completed – as the story of the mouse is completed in 'Little fable'. But I do not think we in fact look beyond the end of 'Give it up!', and I believe the reason is that it is written in the first person. We understand it as a symbolic statement of a general experience of incipient lostness and isolation and bewilderment, a condition which affects most of us. This experience does not necessarily lead to catastrophe nor to any conclusion; most of us survive it without conquering it. How we survive is in this parable not at issue; its essential theme is the repeated experience of being abandoned. The use of the first-person narrative places the reader more precisely in the position of the character than does the third person. That is, it places him in the position of a man who is reflecting on his experience and still remains baffled and suspended within the uncertainties and vague threats that are suggested. The first-person form is admirably fitted to communicate this continuing situation; perhaps, even, one might suggest that this form frees the author from the obligation of inventing an end, catastrophic or not, for a situation that in its essential nature is endless.

'Testimonials' ('Fürsprecher', 1922)

'Testimonials' belongs to the same year as 'Give it up!' yet its situation and theme are closely related to the world of *The*

trial.[10] The writer, a man suffering from an undefined accusation, is searching in a crowded law-courts building for witnesses to his character, guarantors, and he can nowhere find anyone suitable. It is clearly a hopeless search and the accused man himself almost gives up in despair. It is the situation familiar to us in many Kafka texts. Professor Stern has shown that *The trial* explores an issue arising from the persecution of the Jews and a response on Kafka's part that has frightening implications.[11] Its essence is that the crime the accused faces is not something he has *done* but something he *is*; thus, though he may feel that everyone joins in this condemnation, he can never find the formulation of this law nor the law courts in which he can stand trial, and the more he protests his innocence the more his guilt-feelings accumulate. Thus, in this short text 'Testimonials' the accused man is not looking for witnesses to his innocence of an alleged offence but for people who can give a favourable opinion of his character. Probably we should understand an implicit reference to antisemitism, which is certainly indicated in another short parable called 'Community' ('Gemeinschaft', 1920), in which five friends decide irrationally to exclude a sixth from their friendship.[12] The theme of 'Testimonials' has however a wider bearing than the situation of the Jews, for it is a common misfortune to imagine a charge or a guilt of this nature and to consume one's energy and happiness in a necessarily vain effort to protest one's innocence.

However 'Testimonials' (I prefer this translation of 'Fürsprecher' since 'guarantors' has unwanted implications) does not remain in this sphere of *The trial*. The story-teller describes how tempted he is by his failure to give up the search for witnesses and retrace his steps, submit. But then something in him rebels, for to retrace his steps would be a confession of error, of failure. And the piece concludes with a remarkable injunction he directs to himself:

Once you have started on a path, keep on, under all circumstances, you can only win, you are running no danger, perhaps in the end you will fall to your death, but if you had turned back after your first steps and

had run down the entrance stairway you would have fallen at the very outset and not perhaps, but certainly. So, if you find nothing here in the corridors open the doors, if you find nothing behind these doors there are more floors above, if you find nothing up there do not worry, hoist yourself up new stairs. As long as you do not stop climbing the steps will not give out, under your mounting feet they will grow upwards.

This is a most unusual ending for a work by Kafka, for it is a moral injunction, an exhortation with regard to behaviour. As such it brings 'Testimonials' closer to the traditional fable or parable than we should expect, even if the precept does not belong to the practical wisdom or altruistic principle that form the staple of the ancient parable. Nor does this work, with its ending, negate the image of a hostile, baffling world that recurs so insistently in Kafka's stories and parables. The writer remains engaged in an apparently hopeless search, there is no end in sight, no resolution of his puzzles and problems; we can even observe, in the hurry and anxious articulation of his sentences something akin to the panic of the mouse or the man lost in the city. That is, the uncertainty and suspense of the ending is a common feature of Kafka's imaginative world. But here, though suspended within uncertainties, the tone is hopeful, not despairing, and the last sentence itself emerges from the restless flow of the preceding one to form a precise, shaped, significant image, a shapely and balanced sentence. It is the Kafka world we have become familiar with, but Kafka's attitude towards it has changed. Instead of despairing he formulates a means of surviving in the midst of threats.

There is even more in this attitude than survival. One might say, all his exhortation to himself means is that he must persist in seeking those guarantors who will bear witness to his character – yet the writer has already admitted the hopelessness of such a search, just as Josef K. in *The trial* bears unconscious witness to the hopelessness of his endless rejection of the undefined accusation. But this ending contains a message, we feel, that is not limited to his misguided search. If he can really 'keep on', he will really transcend the guilt that he is charged with

and that by acknowledging he persistently renews. His resistance becomes an attack, his effort will create new conditions, new 'stairs', and becomes a model of the whole creative effort of mankind.

We have something here that is extremely rare in Kafka. That it is possible at all seems to depend on its being a first-person statement. For this injunction is delivered by a man to himself in a situation that is full of insecurity. The parable starts in the past tense, describing the searcher's quest and questionings as if they were the preliminaries to some decisive event. But in the middle it switches to the present tense as his helplessness and self-questionings torture him. There is no resolving event, only a resolve that takes shape in the midst of all the uncertainties; it is a resolve to persist that does not dispel the threats and uncertainties but does re-shape his attitude. Whatever hope and energy there is in this injunction, they are no more than is permissible for the character to assert in his challenge with circumstance. As a summing up made by an authoritative objective narrator, an objective moral commentator, it would surely be or seem pretentious, unfounded, deceptive wishful thinking, and would scarcely fit into Kafka's *oeuvre*.

'The emperor's message' ('Eine kaiserliche Botschaft', 1917)

The nearest approach to this ending of 'Testimonials', both in form and message, is found in the earlier parable 'The emperor's message' which Kafka published in the collection *A country doctor* in 1919. It was abstracted, as 'Before the law' was abstracted from *The trial*, from a larger unfinished work 'Building the Chinese wall', which belongs to 1917.[13] Like 'Before the law', too, it is a parable told by a character to illustrate the latter's point of view, though in this case the teller is the fictitious narrator of the whole work, a Chinese scholar who sets out to explain why the Chinese wall was built and, more generally, what the attitude of the widely scattered Chinese people is to an authority, an emperor, who lives so remote from

most of his subjects that his capital itself, Peking, 'is much stranger to us than the next world'. When published separately the parable perhaps would not seem to belong to the first-person group, though the humble subject (*Untertan*) of the emperor, with whose attitude it is concerned, is addressed in the second person. But the context bears repeated references to the position and thoughts of the person composing 'Building the Chinese wall' and throughout he puts his arguments, including the parable itself, as his modest attempt at explaining the nature of the relationship of the Chinese people to their emperor, the source of their unity as a people and of what we may call their awareness of their political identity. We can thus take this parable as belonging to Kafka's first-person parables; it describes how the typical humble citizen wins this sense of identity.

This is the legend: on his death-bed the emperor calls his messenger and whispers in his ear a message he is to carry 'to you, an individual, a mean subject, a tiny shadow cowering in the furthest distance from the imperial sun'. The messenger sets out, fighting his way through crowded rooms and anterooms. Beyond there are endless other crowded rooms, stairways, courts – 'he will never get through them; and if he did, there would be still more in the great encircling palace, and so forth through millenia'. And were he to burst out of the precincts – 'but never, never can this come about' – there would still be the capital city to traverse 'clogged high with its dregs' – 'He will never get through, let alone with a message from a dead man.' And then comes the unexpected startling sentence that ends this 'legend': 'But you sit at your window and dream it [the message] into being, as evening falls.'

Up to this last sentence the legend seems to repeat, in a new and moving image, the theme of many of Kafka's tales and parables. Man longs for some recognition from a revered authority some task, some assurance that his person and his life have some significance, some meaning behind the mere fact of existence; but though the authority exists, and even if a message

has been sent to him, the obstacles are such that the message will never get through, the longing and the faith are unrewarded and have been in vain. But the astonishing ending, as in 'Testimonials', transforms despair into hope. It does not deny the material facts, that is, it does not say the emperor makes contact with you or the message gives you a significant task to fulfil. No, the emperor remains no more than an image in your head and the message will never come. But the parable asserts that you can turn the supposed message into a reality by the ardour of your need and the power of your faith, you can 'dream it' into reality – Kafka uses the verb *erträumen*, and the prefix *er* means to bring the dream to completion, to fulfilment. And in his surrounding commentary the Chinese scholar explains that it is through this power of the mind that the authority of the emperor itself comes into being, that the imperial power, the unity of the nation, and the individual's sense of identity, of a worthy task, all depend ultimately on this subjective act.

When the theme of 'Building the Chinese wall' is reduced to this level of abstraction, some violence is done to the fragile little work. For all its arguments and conclusions are put in a tentative and modest form, hedged in by a sort of Chinese delicacy and politeness. It is not the work of dogmatic self-confidence but of a prudent yet tenacious search through the complexities and obscurities of existence for a basis for sufficient confidence to ensure a worthwhile existence. Our scholar retreats indeed when he finds his thoughts becoming too dangerous, especially when he might be charged with undermining the objective reality of the political authority. Kafka must have smiled to himself when he composed the scholar's prudent principle: 'Seek with all your powers to understand the instructions of the authorities, but only to a particular limit, then put a stop to your reflexions.' A gentle humour of this kind often appears in this little work, a recognition of the modesty with which, in the face of all the gigantic problems of life, a means of survival, of spiritual survival, can be discerned.

To this sense of modesty we can attribute the first-person form which presents its conclusions in a personal, hypothetical way, not as a dogma.

'Homecoming' ('Heimkehr', 1920)

Very few of Kafka's parables have the consoling or encouraging ending that 'The emperor's message' and 'Testimonials' offer, even if the consolation is only one of hope and attitude, rather than anything more concrete and tangible. However in these later parables there is a lessening of the absolute despair and angst that we usually associate with Kafka, and as my last example I take his 'Homecoming', so perfect an expression of an attitude that we frequently meet in Kafka's last years that I allow myself the indulgence of giving a translation of the whole little work. It is one of the many works that were not published during Kafka's lifetime and it was Max Brod, who first published it, who gave it its title:[14]

I have come back, I've come through the gateway and am looking round. It is my father's old farmyard. The puddle in the middle. Old unusable implements, driven into a tangled heap, clutter up the approach to the loft-steps. The cat is crouching on the landing. A ragged cloth, once draped round a pole in fun, stirs in the wind. I've arrived. Who will receive me? Who is waiting behind the kitchen door? Smoke is coming from the chimney, the coffee is being made for supper. Do you feel at ease, do you feel at home? I don't know, I'm very uncertain. It is my father's house, but one thing stands cold beside another as if each were busied with its own affairs, which I have partly forgotten, partly never knew. Of what use can I be to them, what am I to them, even though I be the son of my father the old farmer? And I don't dare to knock on the kitchen door, I only listen from a distance, standing upright, not in such a way as to risk being caught out eavesdropping. And because I am listening from a distance I make nothing out, I hear only a faint chime of a clock or perhaps only imagine I can hear it coming over from childhood. What else is going on in the kitchen is the secret of those sitting there, that they are keeping from me. The longer one hesitates outside the door, the more one becomes a stranger. How would it be if someone were now to open the door and ask me a question. Shouldn't I myself then be like a man who is intent on keeping his secret?

More than once I have criticised Hartmut Binder for referring us too emphatically and exclusively, in his commentary to Kafka's writings, to Kafka's biography and hence for singling out their autobiographical significance. In his commentary on 'Homecoming' he mentions only biographical implications.[15] But the most striking and significant feature of 'Homecoming' is that it is clearly a parable, which must mean an attempt to create a generalised situation and symbolical event; and as striking is the fact that it conjures up one of the most loved and profound of the parables of Jesus, the parable of the Prodigal Son, that embodies Christ's message of God's love for sinful man, the power of repentance and the joy in Heaven over the repentant sinner. It is only in the context of the genre of parable, and specifically in relation to the story of the Prodigal Son, that we can understand Kafka's 'Homecoming'. The explicit association – the father as a farmer, the hesitation and doubt of the returning son – and the implicit – the utterly different outcome – both surely suggest that Kafka was deliberately composing an alternative to the theme of Jesus' parable.

In Kafka's parable we do not know what the son has been doing, we are told only that he has been away, clearly for a long time. The farmyard is much as it used to be, only neglected, disorderly. There is no one there to welcome him, a cloth attached to a pole, which seems once to have been a flag, is ragged and stirs listlessly. Once familiar objects seem now unrelated to one another and to him. There are signs that people are at home, but the returning man asks himself what he can mean to them; he clearly is not returning with a mission, to take up his inheritance, restore the homestead, support his father in his old age. Whoever it is that is there, behind the kitchen door, will always possess a secret he can never penetrate; the more he hesitates, the more insurmountable this barrier between himself and his family appears to him; and he realises, as he waits outside the door, that he himself does not wish to open himself to the others, to emerge from his own isolation.

Like so many of these later Kafka parables, it is an image of

a situation, not a story. There is no decisive event, the character remains poised in the midst of laming questions. There is no catastrophe as in 'Little fable', but also not the positive injunction of 'The emperor's message' or 'Testimonials'. The implicit contrast with the welcome of the Prodigal Son's father, the self-cleansing of the son's confession and prayer for forgiveness, the joy of the feast, make the return of Kafka's son sombre, hopeless. If we believe, as I think we must, that Kafka is also evoking the religious meaning of Jesus' parable, then we can recognise that he is sadly admitting that the son is alienated from his Heavenly Father's house and will never enter into his inheritance.

But the tone is one of grief, not of catastrophe or rebellion. It is the son who tells this parable, he describes his return, the farmyard, and his thoughts. The mood the account creates is his mood. It is not that of a rebel or a sinner, but of a man who half wishes to return, perhaps longs for the mutual trust and confidence of childhood, but recognises that this has gone and that return has no meaning. The account is throughout in the present tense so that the reader passes with the character through the various responses the return arouses. What it will lead to we do not know, it is not a retrospective account, and in this way too the character, with the reader, remains poised in the midst of uncertainties. Yet this lack of an ending, and the lack of decisive event, do not mean that the character is racked by anxiety. The stillness the unemphatic, undramatic scene evokes, the reflective self-questioning that the absence of question marks makes undramatic, the steady pace of the self-communion, all suggest not a sudden dilemma but already a coming to terms with his alienation, mournful but not tragic.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in an interview shortly before his death, was asked about the 'despair' he had written about in *Being and nothingness*, and he answered that he had never really felt despair; man cannot live without hope, he said, and hopes cannot be fully realised, but what he had called 'despair' should better have been called 'a lucid view of the human condition'.[16]

His comment on himself has an important bearing on Kafka (whose work Sartre greatly admired). Of course, Kafka had a long and profound experience of despair, itself commensurate with the intensity of his hope, and his early parables demonstrate the angst and despair accompanying cruelly frustrated hope. But in 'Homecoming' and some other of the later parables we find not a tragic despair over the inaccessibility of the faith, trust, reconciliation that would bind him to life, but what Sartre calls 'a lucid view of the human condition'. The very composure of the style breathes this calm insight that comes to terms with the world as it is, beyond horror and panic.

3. KAFKA'S PARABLES IN REVIEW

We have not considered all those works of Kafka's that might be considered to have the form of the parable. I have confined my choice to those that approach most clearly to the form, that is, that combine a story-situation and characters sufficiently generalised to suggest a 'lesson'. What we have been able to observe is an evolution in the character of Kafka's parables, or better, a marked tendency that separates many of the later parables from the earlier.

At first the theme of the traditional parable seems to be violently inverted. In place of the encouragement, hope, faith of the traditional fable, Kafka offers disaster, the cheating of hopes, despair. He uses the familiar form of the parable, which rouses in the reader the expectation of a revelation of meaning and significance, only to shock all the more severely with a proclamation of disillusionment. The profound contentment that lies in the mutual love and trust of man and man, man and God, that forms the atmosphere of the traditional parable turns into the desolation of loneliness, alienation, abandonment. The traditional parable enables us to understand a spiritual world, Kafka's parables veil it in a baffling uncertainty. But in the later parables of Kafka, while the opacity of the world, its hostility or indifference to the helpless individual, are no less, he finds a

new way of contemplating the human situation. Kafka does not provide better endings to the problems his characters face, but he shows that in the midst of uncertainties and threats they need not despair. They can summon up, perhaps, courage still to hope from the depths of their own spirit or recognise the inaccessibility of home and shelter as the natural condition of man which they may learn to endure. Neither happy endings nor catastrophic tragedies are our lot, this older Kafka seems to say, but survival in which our alienation may be quickened by an undefined hope.

To this different emphasis in the theme correspond changes in the form of the story. While the early parables have a recognisable story, i.e. an event that comes to an end, the later present almost only an unresolved situation; the character does not emerge out of his confusions through a terrible end, but remains poised in the uncertainties, changing only in his attitude towards them. Further, Kafka uses more frequently the first-person mode, so that the stories, while they seem to claim a universal validity, ultimately rely more on the note of personal experience that speaks in them; there is a winning humility in this form that accords with the modesty of the 'lesson'. And often the present tense is used and strengthens our awareness that we are invited to reflect on ever-present experience in its inconclusiveness, without the somewhat suspect wisdom that retrospection comforts us with.

I have reserved for this moment, when the main features of Kafka's parables have been reviewed, a consideration of the only attempt known to me to make the narrative perspective the feature that separates Kafka's stories from the parables. For this purpose W. H. Sokel has relied in the main on a comparison of the parable 'Before the law' with the novel to which it belongs, *The trial*, though his article of course considers several other parables and stories.[17]

Professor Sokel accepts the structural distinctions between parable and story that Hillmann makes, which correspond roughly to those formulated in the early part of this chapter

and to which I refer in note 4 of chapter 1. But to these he adds 'the relationship of the narrative perspective to the events related'. In Kafka's stories, Sokel says, adopting Beissner's view, the narrator presents only the hero's experience, there is only one perspective, that of the hero, and hence 'seeing and experiencing are identical'. In the parable, on the other hand, there is an independent narrator, distanced from the characters, who may see events from various viewpoints and is not locked within the perspective of the main character. The meaning of this formal difference is that while in the stories and novels the reader is offered only the experience of the hero, in the parables he is directed towards reflexion about events; in the first his objective is experience, in the second it is knowledge, understanding. There is some truth in these definitions, but they do not hold for all Kafka's stories and parables; and since this distinction is called 'essential', a large assumption is made regarding the nature of literary genres.

In my earlier analyses of the narrative perspective of the stories I have shown that the monoperspectival view, even in the less rigid form that Sokel adopts, fails to do justice to the structure of these stories; it is equally unsatisfactory to read that where a story presents more than the hero's perspective it is tending towards the parable. Though Sokel's definitions are applied only to Kafka, one is uneasily aware that they are not valid for story and parable in general. But here I am chiefly concerned with Kafka's parables and leave other questions on one side.

It might be thought that the first-person parable would propose difficulties for Sokel's definitions, since here 'seeing and experiencing' are one. Sokel does not shirk this problem. Taking 'The emperor's message' and 'A report for an academy' as typical, he shows that in these parables the first-person narrator is distant from the events, even if only as a creature looking back over his life, so that seeing takes precedence over experiencing and the reader engages with the narrator in a search, an enquiry. It is indeed very helpful when Sokel calls

this parabolic manner of writing a 'life-saving projection of an inner problem', as opposed to the dangers of submersion in experience. But of course what he says does not apply to other first-person parables like 'Give it up!' or 'Homecoming'. And since in these, which Sokel overlooks, the reader is immersed only in the perspective of the 'I', they shatter the foundation of his distinction between story and parable – for no one would dare to call these works anything but parables.

There are differences between stories and parables, as I have indicated in the opening pages of this chapter. There is also a case for arguing that all Kafka's stories have something of the parable about them in the sense that we are often aware of two levels of meaning, one explicit and one 'in code'. We are aware too of many instances where we hardly know whether to call a work a story or a parable. Here Sokel makes what seems to me a faulty assumption since he believes that there are features which 'essentially' separate the two genres. For the literary genres do not have the rigid identity and characteristics of biological species, and it is useful to adopt Wittgenstein's suggestion of 'family resemblances' as an analogy of the features that establish membership of a genre. That resemblances and differences are various and fluid does not mean that there is no reality or usefulness in the concept.

I said at the outset of this chapter that in his parables Kafka returns to the simplicity of form of the New Testament parables. He eschews the elaboration, the individualisation of character and situation, that usually marks modern variations of the older fable or parable. His own are abstract and simple. But this does not mean they are artless, even if sometimes they seem so. The story element, bare, using well-understood motifs, constructs without emphasis a meaning, and the lack of emphases, the unpretentiousness of events and connexions serves to drive home all the more surely the perhaps forbidding or baffling conclusion. The language of narrator and of characters is usually rather colourless in itself, not imaged or epigrammatical, and does not need to contrive great effects for, closely consonant

with the action, it brings out both the disturbing message and the helplessness of the victim in the face of suffering and confusion. Every statement is doubly charged since, while each parable describes a situation, it also conjures up at the same time, through its evidently parabolic form, suggestions and expectations that are to be flouted, cheated. These compositions are very subtle and can reveal, on examination, a host of possible meanings. As such, they are the very reverse of oral parables. We do not feel, as with the parables of Jesus, the presence of a crowd of listeners seeking and receiving guidance; it is rather the opposite, since we feel as it were the reluctance of the author, in many of them, to offer his understanding or problem, his unwillingness to urge on his readers his painful lessons. They seem to be wrung from him, their terseness, the lack of exposition and argument seem to suggest this. The non-oral element is even more appreciable in the first-person parables. If these were actually autobiographical fragments they might well invite the attention of listeners. But they are not. They too have a generalised form, the 'I' is a stylised medium, a means to offer a general experience in a way that allows us to feel all the uncertainties that surround and weigh on the character. They require therefore a more complex attention than the traditional oral fable, ask the reader to place himself imaginatively in the role of this 'I' and not confuse him with the real-life author. Above all, when the first-person is allied with the present tense we have a highly sophisticated form of parable, that asks us to experience a situation without asking for an ending or solution, something that seems to reject the very essence of the ancient parable. In all these respects we have in Kafka's parables a very subtle and very modern art-form, fascinating and deeply disturbing, involving our imagination and our minds without giving the comfort of definite conclusions, a form that, completed in itself, embodies incompletedness.

There is one negative characteristic of Kafka's parables that forces itself on our attention. It is the absence of those moral

'lessons', that moral concern, that distinguishes nearly all the parables of the Christian and Jewish tradition. The parables of Jesus speak both about the soul's relationship with God and man's relationship to man; often it is in the latter, in human goodness, love, devotion, self-sacrifice that the former becomes manifest. Kafka's parables are entirely lacking in this mighty theme; they are altogether concerned with the relationship of the alienated individual with the authority that dispenses meaning, significance, to life – or rather, with the authority that fails to fulfil the faith of the individual that it will do so. His dramas arise from the contest of man with God, Jacob with the angel; all else drops away.

I believe that we shall find parallels in Kafka's stories and novels for this general evolution of attitude and for the formal structure of the parables, and it is mainly for this wider purpose that I have tried to consider Kafka's parables. There is of course also a closer connexion between these and the stories. In a number of the parables (if we can call them by that name) there is a marked tendency to an individualisation of both the situation and the characters. This we have noticed in 'The huntsman Gracchus'. They can threaten to turn into stories, that is, to overstep the frontiers which the parabolic symbol requires. No sharp distinctions can be made. But some of the later stories even have animal characters and hence seem to indicate a type of fable or parable, perhaps may be seen as evolving out of the fable. We could hardly discuss these without first having examined Kafka's parable-type.