

In Parables: Teaching Through Parables

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A Literary Preface

Walter Lacklustre had not been the best student who has ever appeared on a college quadrangle. He had continued, with less and less success, to use old high school formulas – wide margins, blank pages at the front and back of every paper beyond two pages, and the clear plastic I-Love-You-Teacher-and-Find-This-Assignment-One-Of-The-Best-I-Have-Ever-Had covers on all projects. His writing usually began, "There are many possible interpretations that can be made..", but despite the surfeit, he usually came up with none, claiming a lack of space.

Suddenly his papers had depth. Not only did myriad explanations follow his assurances that there were many ways to look at a question, but also he added almost lyrical imagery to enliven the usual soldierly slogging through evidence. His teacher was heartened by the change while suspecting a ghost writer.

An explanation surfaced when a dog that had been trained to sniff out marijuana became highly agitated in Walter's presence. Looking closely at the pupils of Walter's eyes the teacher asked, "Have you been using parables?"

Later, when the police searched Walter's room, they found parabolic paraphernalia – a lamp, a desk board, a pad and a pen. On the pad was a short story that ended mid-sentence; Walter did not have time to

flush it down the toilet when the police came. Under Walter's bed they found thirty copies of Kafka's *Parables and Paradoxes* and twenty copies of *Parables of Kierkegaard* that have a quadrangle value of \$50,000.

In the week following the raid, the bookstore reported a run on clear plastic folders and yellow felt highlighters. The president congratulated the police on the full restoration of order to the campus.

Introduction and Conclusion

For more than a decade I have opened all of my law courses with a series of parables by Franz Kafka.¹ Students who take a second course from me expect Kafka to be there, like townspeople who await the tolling of a familiar bell that will let their town come to life. For newcomers, Kafka disrupts their sense of what law study should be – literature in a law course; no judge, jury, or court in sight, at least not in a form that a student would look for them, and so on. They are struck by Kafka's parables much in the way beginning professional law students are struck by the case method or "socratic" teaching. Some academic rule has been breached, but before anyone can protest too vigorously, the process has begun and everyone is engaged.

Kafka continues to wake me up too. His impeccable writing, engaging images and characters, and his mind-bending ellipses provoke me over and over. I have never developed that quiet confidence about Kafka one would expect when material is repeatedly used.

How do students and Kafka get along? A distinct minority of them – say five in a class of sixty like Kafka right away. The vast majority of students dislike him or even hate him, a rare intensity of feeling (though negative) in a place as prosaic as a classroom. One student voiced the frustration of tens more, practically shouting, "If Kafka has something to say about law, why doesn't he come right out and say it?" (I pondered this question for quite some time and came up with an answer – Kafka has come right out and said it, and with greater economy than one would expect.) Another malcontent rhetorically offered, "Kafka talks in circles," figuring that people who talk in circles are entitled to pretty short shrift. In later classes I began to use this "complaint": Kafka seems

to talk in circles. What geometry would we prefer? If Kafka as a gifted writer could choose among several geometries of discourse, what would impel him to choose the circle?

Another rejection of Kafka began with politics. If Kafka is a populist – he seems to be on the side of the countrymen, commoners and the couriers of the world – what makes him write in parables that can be understood only by the literary elite?

One lone testimonial on Kafka's behalf reached the level of intensity of the foregoing. Several years after graduation a former student said, "Of all the things I learned at the University, Kafka stands out as the most useful!" He wrote the real handbook on organizations. Every day on my job I run into things that are understandable only by reference to Kafka. He keeps me from going crazy."

From whatever angle, Kafka seems to have an unusual ability to arouse strong feelings. Given the general academic malaise of clock-watching, playing dumb, and "meeting requirements and getting out of here" a strong emotional response, even anger, seems worth moderate teacher suffering.

Since parables are not sure fire, what reasoned justification can be offered for their use? Despite years of use, and the inclusion of Kafka's parables in an introductory textbook about law, I had no specific justification, and must have felt guilty about it since this paper would not have been written were I not ill at ease. Parables had always seemed right to me, but academics rightfully insist on more explanation than simple intuition.

This writing marks my first venture into the art and science of parables. Here is what I can now conclude. The more one studies parables as a form, the more defenses there will be found for extending the use of parables in law and law-related curricula. Often I felt like the child who finds that his native tongue is called English. My guardedness about providing reasoned justification for parables has proved totally gratuitous.

Having become sufficiently convinced about the peculiar advantages of parables over other educational forms, especially at the beginning and end of a course, I see the next task for teachers of legal studies to be a search for a wider array of law-related parables. Kafka's parables, and those of the New and Old Testaments are well known. But what of the hundreds of parables of Kierkegaard that lie all across his philosophical writings, or the labyrinths of Jorge Luis Borges?

Sometimes in class discussion of Kafka I have asked what a person's education might be like were it to consist of nothing but parables. Students reeling from Kafka are aghast and say they have already had enough. But what if there were a wise guy in the class: "It's worth a try. Let's have two more weeks of parables or maybe half a semester. Up to now we have been confused, but we will get used to them and get good. We might even grow to like them as much as you seem to do." The wise guy has not yet appeared, but the risk that one might be out there stalking about should give some exigency to compiling a compendium of parables especially conducive to learning about law.

Most writing about parables concerns the content of parables, *e.g.*, what possible interpretations might be made of the parable of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son? There is a small but very useful literature on parables as a form. Here the focus is on parables as a form, although the line between form and substance will not always stay put. It may be the form of the parable as much as its content that produces some of the unique effects of parables on those who encounter them.

In identifying the formal attributes of parables, three lines of discussion are taken and two are omitted. Those left out include the material on hemispheric specialization of the brain. Readers will recall that Robert Ornstein used Sufi parables throughout *Psychology of Consciousness*² to demonstrate how the right or "non-analytic" hemisphere of the brain might process information differently from the left hemisphere. For right-handed persons, straight psychological discourse would be processed by the left hemisphere and the Sufi parables by the right hemisphere. It was only fair in Ornstein's judgment to give the right hemi-

sphere something to chew on while the left hemisphere was busy with the rest of his book. In the more than ten years since his work first appeared, there may have been developments in brain research of interest to students of parables.

In addition to the brain researchers there are semiologists who have undertaken computer-assisted studies of the structure of parables. *Semiology and Parables*³ contains the proceedings of a conference devoted to this theme, and would be a place to start for the technically fearless. I myself blanched and came away with little understanding of what this very complex venture was all about.

Since it was Marshall McLuhan who first made the educational community sensitive to the importance of forms of communication, it seems appropriate to reconsider some of his central ideas. McLuhan asked the questions no one else seemed to be able to pose, and followed changes in form through to changes in person and society. For example, he wanted to know how the telephone (quite apart from what is said on the phone) makes a difference to our psyches and interpersonal relationships?

What personal and social consequences follow from the use of parables rather than some other educational forms? Do parables have peculiar effects comparable to the effects of the telephone? Is the ratio of eye to ear changed? Heart to mind? Thinking to feeling? Does the use of parables change the politics of the classroom, and if so how, and in what directions?

A second line of discussion draws on the writing at the borderland of religion and literature. Exegesis of the Bible may have sparked the interest in parables, but the field has become general. How does a parable differ from a story with a moral lesson? From a fairy tale, a fable, a myth, an allegory or didactic writing? The study of the peculiarities of a literary genre can transcend the mere impulse of academics to be neat about their categories. For example, by the harshest test, if a story that otherwise qualifies as a parable reaches moral closure rather than leaving

the reader caught in a paradox that requires moral choice, the story is not a parable. Aesop may have been fabulous, but he did not give us parables.

A third line goes spiritually deeper. Parables touch the soul of the person in ways that other forms of discourse do not, a point made by Soren Kierkegaard more than one hundred years ago. According to Kierkegaard, parables can reach the soul, change the self, change the capacity of a person to spiritually grow, and enable a person to live subjectively, which for Kierkegaard means to live in truth. I was as shocked to find Kierkegaard's wholesale testimonial for parables as readers might be to read it.

I. Marshall McLuhan -- Form and Content

Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media*⁴ makes a number of arguments pertinent to the study of parables as a form. The first is that the form of communication has proliferate psychic consequences that are independent of content. To briefly illustrate, reading a play in the quiet of one's home and attending a live performance of the same play will be different psychic and social experiences. At home the ear is irrelevant, while at the live performance the ear must share the play with the eye. The home is private and individual whereas the live performance is public and socially shared. Only at the level of meaning might the alternative forms merge, but even there, different meanings may be derived from the "same" experience.

A culture may be at least partially defined as the sum of its communicative forms. Oral cultures, where speaking, listening and remembering predominate, differ from print cultures where writing, reading, and record keeping (forgetting?) occur. Parables look like an old form since they still lend themselves to oral presentation. Being a form that has fallen into disuse outside religious circles, the parable looks alien, but being strange it also arrests attention, and excites curiosity, like a matched pair of Belgian work horses at the Indianapolis Speedway ready to do a lap alongside the high performance cars.

According to McLuhan, new forms facilitate certain social relationships while rendering others obsolete. The large scale computer makes the large university and centralized bureaucracies possible, reducing individuals to an integer, and reducing the small liberal arts college and smaller scale organizations to mere art forms. The personal computer partially reverses this trend by decentralizing information processing and deinstitutionalizing learning; each person is a learning center, the individual becomes an "office" (gone is the familiar network of messengers, steno pools, copyists, and file clerks) and even "publisher" in words perfect.

Personal computer people begin to differ from their non-computer brethren, speaking a new language, putting their overloaded memories on file and separating themselves socially. Anti-computer technopeasants stand outside this new world in disgust-awe. To enter the world of the computer will make them different – in ways that they might not like.

Parables as a form can be better understood against this background of illustrations. They are stories, of moderate length, amenable to repeated readings in one short sitting. They surprise the reader, arrest the regular "processing" of information and, in so doing, irritate the psyche. The reader cannot quite let go, because letting go is usually conditioned on closure which in the case of a true parable cannot be reached. Thus when the parable is officially "ended," the reader/listener cannot serenely put the parable to rest. It sits in the psychic craw as a piece of unfinished business. Perhaps this is why even those students who initially reject Kafka as hopelessly obscure nevertheless use his insights throughout a course.

One grand difference between parables and other pedagogical forms can be identified by imagining two college students in a library. One has been assigned Kafka's "Before the Law" and the other Roscoe Pound's, "The Causes of Popular Dissatisfaction With the Administration of Law."⁵ By the time the student of Pound has completed several pages

of the essay, the Kafka kid might have already made two readings and be looking up at the ceiling and speculating as to whether one more reading might not clear things up. After the third reading, there is still ample time for reflection. Where the Roscoe Pound student would be at this point would be hard to say. Perhaps not finished, perhaps bored, or restless, but no doubt experiencing far less psychic discomfort than the student of Kafka.

Many reading assignments like Pound's essay go partially unread by students. In more than ten years of using Kafka's parables, I have never had students say that they did not finish Kafka. Many student papers begin, "After three readings" With the typical academic assignment, reading takes almost all of the students' time, with little, if any, time left over for reflection. Most students of Pound will, at best, get Pound's understanding of the sources of popular discontent with law. The thought of that student's slipping into an evaluative mood is probably quite heroic. What the student of Pound would remember six months hence might also be less momentous than devotees of Pound would wish.

Leaving the largely unknown world of the way students study, what are some of the social consequences of using Kafka rather than Pound? Teachers, like their students, would be more uncomfortable with Kafka since Kafka cannot be dominated by a teacher the way a conventional essay can be. (This says nothing about grading student work on Kafka as compared to grading conventional work.) Classroom politics can go in two directions when Kafka is on the agenda. A teacher can impose closure on Kafka, perhaps finding authority in literary criticism, and thereby become obliquely tyrannical. Such teachers set themselves up as the touchstones to two mysteries – law and Kafka. Or teachers can stay faithful to Kafka (i.e., be themselves), a feat that takes less effort than trying to reach a closure, although a teacher will be more fearful that students will grow impatient or that a class will seem aimless. The latter approach would mean that Kafka's parables have democratized the classroom. If more tyranny results from the use of Kafka, the blame must be placed on teachers, not on Kafka.

A second idea from McLuhan is that form speaks louder than content, a reversal of the usual belief that ends are more important than means and that educational messages are more important than the way the messages are conveyed. For McLuhan, the television program is a hunk of red meat that attracts the viewer to television. It is the act of watching television that produces the greatest psychic and social change and not the person's favorite program. Families watch television ritualistically – as they would participate in a religious service.⁶ That television 'changes' a person's mind is reflected in the television withdrawal sports fans experience when they go to a stadium without instant replays.

Kafka's "Before the Law" can be helpful here. The parable has eminently memorable content – countryman, a doorway, the doorkeeper's furred robe and tartar beard, a stool and the doorkeeper's finally bellowing into the old man's almost deaf ears that the door that was intended only for him is about to be shut. However, the form of the story may be more important than its content. If one of Kafka's purposes was to push people toward greater sensitivity to equality and away from an uncritical reliance on authority, then he cannot come right out and say it. First, he has to make readers his equal by cutting them in on the problem, paradox, or dilemma associated with accepting or rejecting authority. The reader, not Kafka, must rise to the paradoxical occasion.

For Kafka to attempt a resolution or to approach the problem of law and legal order dogmatically would only create more countrymen. One way to demonstrate the counter-productivity of such an approach would be to imagine a conclusion for Kafka's parable in straight prose: "Mindless bureaucracies grind up unsuspecting, guileless, law abiding, people. Believe me, I have had enough experience in my work as a lawyer for a claims commission in Prague, Czechoslovakia to know that bureaucracies and bureaucrats frustrate the very purposes for which they are created. Be very careful in your dealings. No, be more than careful. Rather than enmeshing your fate in one of those regimes, run for your life."

Where would such an ending leave a reader? The psychic tension has been removed. Readers might be interested in more advice and enlightenment from Kafka, but would feel no pressure to become their own sources of wisdom. They would be left dependent rather than independent and in their dependence less up to the challenge of confronting authority. By invoking an imperial, monologic form, Kafka would have undone his purpose: authoritarianism cannot be confronted in an authoritarian way, without further depoliticization (addiction to authority) of the audience.

A third idea from McLuhan parallels the second. Media can be hot or cool, exclusionary or inviting, imperialistic or participatory. A hot, exclusionary, imperialistic form – think of the straight lecture in academics – allows a sharply diminished role for the audience. Compare the monologic form to the dialogic form: Here is material. What do you think about it? Do we have a common ground or do we have differences?

Parables are cool, inviting and participatory, unless sabotaged. Kafka draws the reader into the story, but once in, the participation of the reader begins, rather than ends. The more powerful the parable, the more furious the involvement, the more sustained and profound the impact. Compare Kafka's parable on parables:

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life. When the sage says, "Go over" he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely and therefore cannot help us in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: "Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that be rid of all your daily cares."

Another said: "I bet that is also a parable."

The first said: "You have won."

The second said: "But unfortunately only in parable."

The first said: "No, in reality; in parable you have lost."⁷

Readers can feel their minds bend as they try to follow the above dialogue. A persistent immersion of students and teachers in parables would make them different as individuals and different in the ways they respond to each other. If this seems to be parabolic megalomania and absurd, perhaps the later material in the paper will make it seem less so.

II. Parables As a Genre

Heinz Politzer, the author of *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox*,⁸ defined a parable as a paradox formed into a story. Speaking about Kafka's special gift for writing parables, he concluded, "He created symbols which through their paradoxical form expressed the inexpressible without betraying it."⁹ Three distinctive elements of parable shine through this opening definition of the genre. First, a parable must contain a paradox or paradoxes – irreconcilable but equally plausible configurations of reality. Secondly, the parabolic form of discourse is not a gratuitous form, i.e., one among many forms that an author happens to choose, but rather one that the parabler must choose for a raid on the inexpressible. (The parable might choose its writer, if that doesn't make matters more obscure.) In this sense the creator of a parable uses symbols the way a poet uses metaphorical language, not as ornament, but as the only way to speak. When the student thought that if Kafka had something to say about law that he ought to have come right out and said it, the student might have been failing to see that without the parabolic form, there might not have been any expression at all.

A third element concerns the duty of the artist to express the inexpressible without violating it. The idea of violation would include reductionism, making paradoxical elements of life seem simpler and more resolvable than they actually are. Or reaching closure in a story where psychic suspension would be the only honest denouement. This element of parables may be what leaves students and teachers "hanging." We are led to a question: If Kafka leaves us hanging, how do we cut ourselves down? We can't simply walk away because by this time he has us captured.

Part of the difficulty in orienting parables among related literary genre – allegories, myths, fables, fairy tales, aphoristic or didactic stories – stems from the fact that parable study was once the exclusive province of Biblical scholars who considered all of the stories of the Old and New Testaments to be parables.¹⁰ While it is true that the Hebrew word *mashal* covers all figurative language "from the riddle to the long and fully developed allegory,"¹¹ modern scholars have imposed more refinement on the taxonomies. Some material from the Bible qualifies under modern definitions of parable, some does not.

The central element of parables is paradox, as Politzer noted. When a story has been completed there must be an irreducible paradox left. As Dominick Crossan puts it, "the original paradox should still be there at any and every level of reading."¹² (How it might be good for students and teachers to steep themselves in unending paradox will be discussed later.)

The aphorism "a stitch in time saves nine" does no more than extol the virtue of preventive maintenance or nipping trouble in the bud. This is true of all expressions or stories that can be reduced to an appeal: Act like this and all will be well. Contrast the parable about the laborers in a vineyard in Matthew.¹³ Workers hired late in the day received the same pay as those hired early in the morning. Though the workers hired early agreed to work for the rate, our expectations about just deserts might be disappointed – we identify with the early birds. When the story ends there is no clear resolution. The householder explains matters legalistically in terms of contract and property: 1) You agreed to the wage and; 2) "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?" When Jesus

takes over for the householder, he moves off legalisms, but in doing so seems to make the decision more perverse rather than defensible: "So the last shall be first, and the first, last: for many be called, but few chosen." Are the complaining workers to be cast out entirely?

The story in Matthew on the sower of seeds¹⁴ fails the modern tests of parable. Some seed that is sown is eaten by birds, some falls on rocks, some falls among thorns and some falls on good ground and flourishes. The story is followed by the exhortation, "Who has ears to hear, let him hear." This so-called parable seems to be reducible to a recommendation that we keep ourselves open (be good ground) for the receipt of the word of God (the seed). When a story can be translated into a direct message like the foregoing, and metaphorical expressions replaced by direct ones, the story cannot be considered a parable.

III. Kierkegaard, Parables, Indirect Communication and the Quest for Inwardness.

The most rewarding aspect of this study of parables has been the discovery of Kierkegaard's thoughts on parables and about education generally. Thomas Oden has prepared an anthology of Kierkegaard's parables along with a supplementary index and thematic guide to hundreds of parables. In his insightful introduction, Oden gives five reasons why Kierkegaard used parables:

1. The perversion of speculative philosophy. Kierkegaard was convinced that value inquiry and spirituality could not be furthered through the study of philosophy; hence his return to homely stories.
2. The parable allows deep communication between the narrator and the reader. The parable begins "benignly," in the form of a story, disarming readers, drawing them in, and encouraging them to compare features of the story to their own experiences. They identify with a certain character or characters, and with the characters encounter dilemmas or unanticipated circumstances that call for choices. At this point the story teller

departs and readers must tap their own resources, moving more deeply into self examination. (By the time readers would curse their fate it is too late to withdraw.)

3. The parable involves indirect communication that provokes self discovery. Direct communication conveys information and, by reference to authorities, endorses certain lines of thought. By contrast, a parable presents a moral knot which the reader must untie by inward reflection and choice. Whereas direct communication creates observers and listeners, indirect communication creates participants and action. Those who prefer to "learn about the world" in a direct and controlled way, lose control of their responses when they encounter the parable. The parable carries them, willingly or unwillingly, inward toward undiscovered dimensions of self.
4. Experiences with indirect communication cultivate the capability for developing the self. Whereas direct learning does not change the capability of a person (learning simply adds to knowledge) indirect communication jolts the person out of mental routines once and for all. Rather than a simple change in information there is a change in consciousness. (Like the seeds of the sower in the New Testament, the parable does not always fall on receptive ground, but even in such instances, the person is placed on notice that a world outside regular understanding exists.
5. Parables are memorable and amenable to oral tradition.¹⁶

Oden invites a closer look at the longer writings of Kierkegaard. The problem which preoccupied Kierkegaard was that he believed that his contemporaries were spiritually dead. They might profess to be Christians, go to church regularly, listen to sermons, and "study" church teachings, but in the end they led no substantial spiritual life nor did they have an intense relationship with God, the professed purpose of a Christian.¹⁷ How does one approach spiritual somnambulists? Logic would require the piling up of more learning about Christianity, or the lecturing

to people about the vital role of spirituality in their lives. It might be thought that the power of the personality of a lecturer can penetrate to the spiritual core of "pagans" and revitalize them spiritually. Kierkegaard rejected the potential of logic out of hand:

An illusion (that a person is a Christian) can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed ... One must approach from behind the person who is under an illusion.¹⁸

Later he adds:

A direct attack only strengthens a person in his illusion, and at the same time embitters him...the indirect method, which loving and serving the truth, arranges everything dialectically for the prospective captive and then shyly withdraws...¹⁹

Well-intentioned ranting and raving might momentarily coerce a person to acknowledge the ranter's point of view, but according to Kierkegaard, at almost the next moment the person "steals away by a hidden path for a rendezvous with his hidden passion for which he longs all the more ardently and is almost fearful lest it might have lost something of its seductive warmth."²⁰

If well-intentioned savants cannot augment the spiritual life of a person, how might it be done? Kierkegaard saw the parable as the best method of instruction. Parables are set in motion by the teacher, but acted upon by the student. The parable takes the student inward rather than toward an exterior world devised by the savant.

Kierkegaard discredited the pursuit of objective learning as a means for spiritual growth. The goal of a person must be to become subjective, and to live in subjective truth. By paired words derived from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscripts* we might get some idea of the difference between subjectivity and objectivity and why Kierkegaard found the pursuit of subjectivity indispensable:

Subjective

person
 individual
 good, evil
 attachment
 decisive
 self penetration
 quality
 self, soul
 inwardness
 salvation
 uncertainty
 risk
 faith, belief
 passion
 existence
 form (how said)
 hero

Objective

object
 collective
 significant
 detachment
 indecisive (suspended)
 worldliness
 quantity
 role
 outwardness
 success
 certainty
 security
 knowledge
 dispassion
 speculation
 content (what is said and why)
 ghost²¹

Objectivity is designed to reduce the individual to an actor on a world stage. Subjectivity enlarges the person out of the recognition that spiritual development is personal and not wholesale. What might look logical from an external perspective – no heroes – leaves a world of ghosts. Of course, Kierkegaard's hero is no megalomaniacal extrovert, but rather the rare person willing to undertake a difficult inward journey toward the spiritual.

The problem of contemporary teachers of law may be little different from the problem that Kierkegaard confronted. Teachers complain that their students are little more than money-grubbing yuppies who believe in the death penalty. For such students, the problem of justice is nothing more than a gossamer intrusion upon their life plans. Student contempt for the "theoretical" (read spiritual if Kierkegaard's lead is followed) poses a major challenge for teachers who conceive their orientation to legal studies as being "critical," "humanistic," or simply "liberal arts." (It could be that teachers are caught in a more sophisticated but nearly identical trap as their students.)

If Kierkegaard was right, insensitivity to the grand questions of law cannot be approached directly, no matter how well intentioned the teacher may be. Students schooled in academic games will give surface acknowledgement only to "steal away by a hidden path" to their yuppie enclaves. (Teachers often have different but comparable enclaves, *e.g.* gourmet cooking or mid-winter junkets.) If the problem of the contemporary student is too much outwardness, *i.e.* too much preoccupation with role and status, then the greatest need might be for a pedagogy of inwardness, designed to reach undiscovered dimensions of self. If there is nothing there, what will have been lost by the effort?

Conventional teaching – ranging from ideological harangues to the presentation of more and more empirical evidence on the perils of materialism and militarism – will probably never reach the illusions of contemporary youth and will exhaust sincere teachers. Parables might help. At least, given the freedom of students to roam around in the parabolic form, the teacher using parables will not have added to the anti-democratic and depersonalized trends already well under way. More optimistically there may be some takers at both sides of the podium for that long and difficult journey begun by Kafka and Kierkegaard.

Postscript

When this paper was in its final stages I received a letter from a teacher who had been highly interested in the use of literature for law study. His interest included parables, but when he had tried using Kafka's parables they had not worked well. He observed that the parables tended to be "rich in their suggestibility and, for discussion purposes, were Rorschachs where anything and everything can be read into them." How could material with so much promise leave teachers (and I assume students) with a sense of failure?

How might McLuhan answer the question? As teachers and students we are conditioned to read with particular purposes in mind, to get the point, and in doing so we pay too little attention to form. A parable can be failing as content, while it is succeeding because of its unique form. Kafka has effects that are incommensurable by regular measures. Was Kafka's story memorable? Do the countryman and the doorkeeper haunt later discussions? Yes.

Part of the difficulty in using parables might be traceable to the peculiar features of parables. Recall the duty of the artist – to express a paradox without violating it. The absence of a resolution, however tentative, leaves teachers and students with the feeling that something is wrong with the story, that Kafka is vague or that Kafka revels in personal discomfort. Perhaps if we let the genre be what it is instead of trying to transform it into straight exposition, we will be less anxious about results. Can we get out of the way and let Kafka speak to our students?

Were Kierkegaard to arise from the dead, would he offer consolation to those of us who have struggled with parables? He might say that people have to be deceived into the truth and that Kafka is preeminent in taking people inward, toward themselves, toward choice and decisiveness (making decisions) and toward spiritual growth. Even as I write these phrases, I know these aspirations seem out of place. They seem more properly extracurricular or too religious. That they seem out of place may say more about the ethical bankruptcy of modern education than about the worth of parables. It is true that as "inwarding" forces, parables are not conducive to group consensus. But if salvation is person by person and not wholesale then parables have a special place.

One final thought comes from Thomas Pynchon who in *Slow Learner* could have been speaking to teachers as well as to aspiring writers:

Everybody gets told to write about what they know. The trouble with many of us at the earlier stages of life is that we think we know everything, or to put it more usefully, we are often unaware of the scope and structure of our own ignorance. Ignorance is not just a blank space on a person's mental map. It has contours and coherence, and for all I know rules for its operation as well, so as a corollary to writing about what we know maybe we should be getting familiar with our ignorance.

Were we to take Pynchon seriously, a first step when we fail with parables would be to structure the defeat, and to chart the contours of our ignorance.

NOTES

I owe special thanks to Jeanne Winner of Northeastern University who in the dead of summer made a most careful editing of my manuscript and improved it dramatically. If it is still a sow's ear. . . .

1. "Before the Law," "The New Attorney," "The Problem of Our Laws," and "Couriers" are all Found in Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradox*, (1961).
2. R. Ornstein, *The Psychology of Consciousness* (1972).
3. D. Patte, ed. *Semiology and Parables* (1976).
4. M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (1964).
5. R. Pound, "The Causes of Popular Dissatisfaction with the Administration of Law," 40 *Am. L. Rev.* (1906).
6. G. Goethals, *The TV Ritual* (1981).
7. F. Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes* (1961), 11.
8. H. Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (1962).
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