

Parables

Parables we might read with Kafka's "Before the Law"

■ The Pilgrimage ■

A man made a long pilgrimage to a holy city. As he neared the city he saw, looming above the lower irregular shapes of other structures, the walls and roof of the great temple that was the object of his journey. Yet again and again, as he searched through dark narrow alleys and small marketplaces, he failed to find its entrance. As best he could, in a language not his own, he made inquiries of the townspeople; but all of them, taught in a newer religion, seemed neither to know nor to care. After much frustration, he was directed at last to a priest of the old faith, who told him that the great temple had in fact long ceased to possess a formal entrance, but rather could be entered in many ways, through any of a large number of the narrow houses and tiny shops which surrounded it. Yet in the end this revelation gave the pilgrim no help at all. Each house or shop he entered seemed so dark and squalid, its furniture so alien, its occupants so forbidding, that it seemed manifestly incapable of opening into the grandeur and freedom of the temple vault. The man left the city in bitterness and sought an easier faith.

—Robert Grudin, *Time and the Art of Living* 209 (New York: Harper & Row, 1982)(untitled in Grudin's book)

■ Cerebus ■

His three fierce mastiff-heads bloodcurdlingly bark. No spirit may enter the Elysian Fields until he is satisfied that it is truly at peace. Some have tried to bribe him, but he is incorruptible. Some have tried to sneak past, but he tore the memory of their bodies to agonized shreds. Pain outlasts its vehicle.

Even he, though, was a puppy once. He sometimes looks out at the vast crowd milling desperately by the gates of horn (or is it the gates of ivory?—he can never keep his classical references straight), and feels a twinge of pity for them, like a minor third. How impatient they are. How they would love to be able to pat him on each of his heads, say “Nice doggy,” and move on. But they are no longer living in the trivial, safe universe of their desires.

Everything here is real.

—Stephen Mitchell, *Parables and Portraits* 58 (New York: Harper & Row, 1990)



▪ Abraham ▪

What had become very clear to him that night on the fast-disappearing summer pavements—the air thick with jasmine, the bony cats sniffing among the garbage heaps—was that he would be able to take along: nothing. Precisely nothing. Not even the memory of his face, glimpsed some morning in the bathroom mirror, or the name of the woman he had loved. He would have to leave it all behind, here, in this world, which had come to fit him like his own skin. Soon enough, in due time, perhaps in no time at all, he would have to step out beyond the boundaries of his life, move where there is no place to move, grope in the blinding light, toward a goal he could be sure of never reaching.

—Stephen Mitchell, *Parables and Portraits* 60 (New York: Harper & Row, 1990)