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**THE GENESIS
OF SECRECY**

On the Interpretation of Narrative

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Hoti's Business: Why Are Narratives Obscure?

He did not speak to them without a parable.

Mark 4:34

He settled Hoti's business.

Browning, "A Grammarian's Funeral"

IF WE WANT to think about narratives that mean more and other than they seem to say, and mean different things to different people, with a particularly sharp distinction drawn between those who are outside and those who are inside, we can hardly do better than consider the parables.

A parable is, first, a similitude. "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it?" (Mark 4:30): here the word for parable — *parabolē* — could as well be translated "comparison," and sometimes is. It means a placing of one thing beside another; in classical Greek it means "comparison" or "illustration" or "analogy." But in the Greek Bible it is equivalent to Hebrew *mashal*, which means "riddle" or "dark saying," but I gather it can extend its range to include "exemplary tale." Sometimes the Greek word is also used to translate *hidah*, meaning "riddle."

Riddle and parable may be much the same: "Put forth a riddle and speak a parable to the house of Israel," says Ezekiel, proposing the enigma or allegory of the eagle of divers colors and the spreading vine (17:2f). The saying of Jesus that nothing that enters a man from outside can defile him is called by Mark a parable; it is not especially dark, but dark enough to call for an explanation.

What is interesting about parables from the present point of view is first this range of senses, which seems to reflect pretty well all the possibilities of narrative at large. At one end of the scale there is a zero point, a strong saying, perhaps, with no narrative content to speak of; and at the other is the well-formed story which, as structuralist exegetes like to demonstrate, exhibits all the marks of narrativity. But there is another scale to consider. Parables are stories, insofar as they *are* stories, which are not to be taken at face value, and bear various indications to make this condition plain to the interpreter; so the other scale is a measure of their darkness. Some are apparently almost entirely transparent; some are obscure.

All require some interpretative action from the auditor; they call for completion; the parable-event isn't over until a satisfactory answer or explanation is given; the interpretation completes it. In this respect it is like a riddle, sometimes a very easy riddle, sometimes one of the comic kind that contain interpretative traps: for example, the riddle that asks how you fit five elephants into a Volkswagen, which can only be answered if you ignore the hint that it has to do with size; it has to do only with number.¹ But it is more usually a tragic riddle, like that proposed by the Sphinx to Oedipus — if you can't answer it, you die, for that is the fate of the outsider who sees without perceiving and hears without understanding. Or we might try another comparison, and say that the interpretation of parable is like the interpretation of dreams, for the dream-text, when understood, disappears, is consumed by its interpretation, and ceases to have affective force (or would do so, if one were able to conceive of a completed dream-analysis).

But this notion, that interpretation completes parable, and there's an end, is much too crude. The parable of the Good Samaritan, to which I'll return, ends with a question: "Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?" There is only one possible answer: "The Samaritan." Or so it would appear to common sense; though common sense is not our business. The answer may leave an interpreter unsatisfied, because a narrative of some length, like

the Good Samaritan, works hard to make the answer obvious and in so doing provides a lot of information which seems too important to be discarded, once the easy act of completion is performed.

When parable stretches out into short story commentators sometimes say that it has escaped from the genre altogether; so they call The Good Samaritan and The Prodigal Son "example stories." But that, in my view, is dodging. They are indeed parables, though as far from the pole of maxim or riddle as one can get; they are about to merge into long narratives, which may also retain some of the qualities of parable. Think, for instance, of *Party Going*. Of course between these extreme points — the maxim and the short story — there occur parables of varying degrees of "narrativity" and varying degrees of opacity. Moreover there is a relation between these properties: "narrativity" always entails a measure of opacity.

FOR THE LAST century or so there has been something of a consensus among experts that parables of the kind found in the New Testament were always essentially simple, and always had the same kind of point, which would have been instantly taken by all listeners, outsiders included. Appearances to the contrary are explained as consequences of a process of meddling with the originals that began at the earliest possible moment. The opinion that the parables must originally have been thus, and only thus, is maintained with an expense of learning I can't begin to emulate, against what seems obvious, that "parable" does and did mean much more than that. When God says he will speak to Moses openly and not in "dark speeches," the Greek for "dark speeches" means "parables." John uses a different word for parable, but uses it in just the same sense: "speak in parables" is the opposite of "openly proclaim." If a word can cover so many things, from proverbial wisdom to dark sayings requiring recondite rabbinical explanation, and even to secret apocalyptic signs, it seems likely that people who used the word in this way must have interpreted all narrative with a comparable variety and range.

In our own time we cannot easily use the word "parable"

in such a way as to exclude the notion of "enigma." Who would deny Kafka the right to call his anecdote of the leopards a parable (*Gleichnis*)?² "Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes part of the ceremony." Webster (third edition, 1961) says that a parable is "a short fictitious story from which a moral or spiritual truth can be drawn." Do we draw any such truth from Kafka's parable? What, to mention first a rather minor difficulty, are we to make of those definite articles: *the* temple, *the* sacrificial pitchers? They imply that the cultus is one with which we ought to be familiar; we ought to know the god whom the temple serves, and what liquid is contained in the pitchers. Of course we don't. All we can suppose is that some familiar rite is being intruded upon, and that the intrusion is assimilated, the cultus altered to accommodate it, in a manner often discussed by sociologists of religion. The alternative procedure, to their way of thinking, would be to shoot ("nihilate") the leopards.

Beyond that, we are left to consider the peculiar nature of the rite. There are ceremonies which claim to enact an historical sequence of events that occurred at a particularly significant moment in the past, and to do so in such a way as to translate them into the dimension of liturgy. The Passover is such a ceremony, and so is the Eucharist; both include expositions of the recurring symbolic senses of the original events. But here the repetitiveness belongs in the first place to the original events ("this is repeated over and over again") and only later becomes liturgical; though it might be argued that the presence of the leopards is all the more a Real Presence. At this point, it must be admitted, we are very close to what might be called "wild interpretation."

Here I will interpolate a reading of the parable by another hand, my wife's. "The letter of the parable," she writes, "masters our freedom to interpret it. The words, we know, must mean more and other than they say; we would appropriate their other sense. But the parable serenely incorporates our spiritual designs upon it. The interpreter may be compared to the greedy leopards. As their carnal intrusion is made spiritual,

confirming the original design of the ceremony, so is this figurative reading pre-figured; only complying with the sense, it adds nothing of its own and takes nothing away. In comparing himself to the leopards, the reader finds himself, unlike the leopards, free — but free only to stay outside. Thus dispossessed by his own metaphor, excluded by his very desire for access, he repeatedly reads and fails to read the words that continue to say exactly what they mean."

This reading, which firmly excludes speculation about liturgy or ritual, has, I think, much to be said for it. Thurber, peering into a microscope, saw his own eye, which was wrong; interpreters, often quite rightly, tend to see the Problem of Interpretation. The sense of the parable, on the view just stated, must be this: being an insider is only a more elaborate way of being kept outside. This interpretation maintains that interpretation, though a proper and interesting activity, is bound to fail; it is an intrusion always, and always unsuccessful. This is bewildering, for we fear damnation and think it unfair, considering how hard we tried. The opinion of Mark is quite similar: he says that the parables are about everybody's incapacity to penetrate their sense. Of course both the interpreters in question go some way toward exempting themselves from this general inhibition.

There is a famous parable in Kafka's *The Trial*. It is recounted to K by a priest, and is said to come from the scriptures. A man comes and begs for admittance to the Law, but is kept out by a doorkeeper, the first of a long succession of doorkeepers, of aspect ever more terrible, who will keep the man out should the first one fail to do so. The man, who had assumed that the Law was open to all, is surprised to discover the existence of this arrangement. But he waits outside the door, sitting year after year on his stool, and conversing with the doorkeeper, whom he bribes, though without success. Eventually, when he is old and near death, the man observes an immortal radiance streaming from the door. As he dies, he asks the doorkeeper how it is that he alone has come to this entrance to seek admittance to the Law. The answer is, "this door was intended only for you. Now I am going to shut it." The outsider, though someone had "intended" to let him in,

or anyway provided a door for him, remained outside.

K engages the priest in a discussion concerning the interpretation of this parable. He is continually reprov'd for his departures from the literal sense, and is offered a number of priestly glosses, all of which seem somehow trivial or absurd, unsatisfying or unfair, as when the doorkeeper is said to be more deserving of pity than the suppliant, since the suppliant was there of his own free will, as the porter was not. Nevertheless it is claimed that the doorkeeper belongs to the Law, and the man does not. K points out that to assume the integrity of the doorkeeper, or indeed that of the Law, as the priest does, involves contradictions. No, replies the priest: "it is not necessary to accept everything as true, one must only accept it as necessary." "A melancholy conclusion," says K. "It turns lying into a universal principle."³

"Before the Law" is a good deal longer than any biblical parable, and reminds us that in principle parable may escape restrictions of length, and be, say, as long as *Party Going*. And like Mark's Parable of the Sower, it incorporates very dubious interpretations, which help to make the point that the would-be interpreter cannot get inside, cannot even properly dispose of authoritative interpretations that are more or less obviously wrong. The outsider has what appears to be a reasonable, normal, and just expectation of ready admittance, for the Law, like the Gospel, is meant for everybody, or everybody who wants it. But what he gets is a series of frivolous and mendacious interpretations. The outsider remains outside, dismayed and frustrated. To perceive the radiance of the shrine is not to gain access to it; the Law, or the Kingdom, may, to those within, be powerful and beautiful, but to those outside they are merely terrible; absolutely inexplicable, they torment the inquirer with legalisms. This is a mystery; Mark, and Kafka's doorkeeper, protect it without understanding it, and those outside, like K and like us, see an uninterpretable radiance and die.

Let me now return to Mark's formula of exclusion, which I quoted near the beginning of the book. Jesus is preaching to a crowd, teaching them "many things in parables." The first

is the Parable of the Sower. He went out to sow; some of his seed fell by the wayside and was eaten by birds; some fell on stony ground, where it grew without rooting and was scorched by the sun; some fell among thorns, which choked it; and some fell on good ground, yielding at harvest thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear": this is the formula that tells you the enigmatic part of the text is concluded, and you need to start interpreting. Later, the Twelve, baffled, ask Jesus what the parable means. He replies that they, his elect, know the mystery of the kingdom and do not need to be addressed in parables, but those outside are addressed only thus, "so that seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear but not understand, lest at any time they should turn, and their sins be forgiven them" (Mark 4:11-12). He adds, a little crossly, that if the Twelve can't make out this parable they will not make out any of them, but nevertheless goes on to give them an interpretation. What the Sower sows is the Word. People by the wayside hear it, but Satan (the birds) comes and takes it from their hearts. The stony ground signifies those who receive the Word with gladness, but are unable to retain it under stress and persecution; the thorns stand for those who hear it but allow it to be choked by worldly lust and ambition. The last group are those who hear and receive the Word and bear much fruit (4:14-20).

All this is very odd; the authorized allegory seems inept, a distortion *après coup*,⁴ as bad as the priest's exegeses in Kafka. It gives rise to suggestions that Mark did not understand the parable, that its original sense was already lost, and its place taken by an inferior homiletic substitute. But let us put that question aside and look at the general theory of parable pronounced on this occasion: To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may hear but not understand; lest they should turn again and be forgiven. Some argue that Mark's *so that* or *in order that*, the Greek *hina*, is a mistranslation of a word that in the lost Aramaic original meant *in that* or *in such a manner as*, so that Mark's Greek distorts the true sense, which is some-

thing like: I have to speak to them in parables, seeing that they are the kind of people who can take stories but not straight doctrine. This is an attempt to make *hina* mean "because," a very desirable state of affairs. In this altered form the theory no longer conflicts with the prefatory remark that Jesus was *teaching* the crowd, which seems inconsistent with his telling stories in order to ensure that they would miss the point. It also fits the run of the sentence better: the Twelve don't need parables, but the crowd does. Apparently Mark misunderstood, or used *hina* carelessly or in an unusual way, and it is a fairly complex word. But the best authorities do not accept these evasive explanations, a refusal all the more impressive because they would really like to. They admit that Mark's *hina* has to mean *in order that*; and we are left with a doctrine described by one standard modern commentator as "intolerable,"⁵ by Albert Schweitzer as "repellent," and also, since the meaning of the parables is "as clear as day," unintelligible.⁶

Now it happens that Mark's first interpreter was Matthew (I assume throughout that Mark has priority and is Matthew's principal source, though this long-established position is now under challenge). And Matthew also seems to have found Mark's *hina* intolerable. For though he does not omit the general theory of parable from his big parable chapter (13), he substitutes for *hina* the word *hoti*, "because." This is a substantial change, involving a different grammar; Matthew replaces Mark's subjunctive with an indicative. Later he had to deal with Mark's *mēpote*, "lest they should turn," which obviously supports the uncompromising mood of *hina*;⁷ here he went to work in a different way. The whole passage about hearing and seeing comes from Isaiah (6: 9-10), though Mark, in paraphrasing it, does not say so. What Matthew does is to quote Isaiah directly and with acknowledgment, so that the lines retain a trace of their original tone of slightly disgusted irony at the failure of the people to perceive and understand. The sense is now something like: As Isaiah remarked, their stupidity is extremely tiresome; this seems the best way to get through to them. The *mēpote* clause is thus bracketed off from the

rest; instead of Mark's uncompromising exclusions — outsiders must stay outside and be damned — Matthew proposes something much milder: "I speak to them in parables *because* they see without perceiving . . ." He was, it appears, unhappy with the gloomy ferocity of Mark's Jesus, who is also, in this place, very hard on the Twelve: "if you don't understand this you won't understand anything." Matthew leaves this out, and substitutes a benediction: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see . . ."

It has been argued that Matthew's *hoti* has a causal force, that he is saying something like: It is only because the people lack understanding that the parables will have the effect of keeping them from the secrets of the kingdom.⁸ The implication is that the exclusion arises not from the speaker's intention, but from the stupidity of his hearers, so that the blame is theirs. This gives the parables the same effect as they have in Mark's theory, while avoiding his candid avowal that the telling of them was designed to have that effect. I must leave *hoti*'s business to the grammarians, but it seems safe to say that Matthew's principle of secret and inaccessible senses, if he had one, is a good deal softer than Mark's. When he came to edit Mark's concluding note ("he said nothing to them without a parable," 4:34) Matthew adds that Jesus in so doing was fulfilling the Psalmist's prophecy: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:34-35; Ps. 78:2). And in support of this preference for overt proclamation, Matthew omits the remainder of Mark's sentence quoted above: "but privately to his own disciples he explained everything." *Ereugomai*, the verb translated as "utter" in Matthew's quotation, means "disgorge, vomit forth, spew out" and can only suggest total disclosure. On the other hand, it is Matthew who remarks, at the moment when he is explaining the difference between insiders and outsiders (13:12) that "to him who has will more be given . . . but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away," a saying used by Mark later on in the parallel chapter, and in a different context. So Matthew's position is hard to define, though we can say it was less intran-

sigent than Mark's. It is sometimes suggested that from this moment of the ministry Jesus has given up trying to get himself understood by the Jews,⁹ whom he therefore does not mind baffling. Whether this is true or not, we can say we have two kindred but different secrecy theories. Each of them makes the parable a bit like a riddle in a folktale, where to get the answer wrong means perdition; but *hina* and *hoti* distinguish them. One says the stories are obscure on purpose to damn the outsiders; the other, even if we state it in the toughest form the language will support, says that they are not necessarily impenetrable, but that the outsiders, being what they are, will misunderstand them anyway.

Now if you think that Jesus could not possibly have thought of his parables as riddles designed to exclude the masses from the kingdom; and if you have also the prior knowledge that the original parables cannot have been allegorical — so that, quite apart from this particular allegory being so feeble, you know it should not be there at all — then you are virtually obliged to claim that the whole Marcan passage is inauthentic or corrupt. Since A. Jülicher set the tone of modern parable criticism at the end of the nineteenth century, this has been the general view. According to Jülicher, Mark simply misunderstood the parable as he had it from the tradition. There are many explanations of how he might have come to do so; but behind them all is a conviction that the parables must originally have been simple illustrations of the teacher's point, made in order to help those who had difficulty with abstractions. The purpose of the Sower parable, as many think, was, like that of most of the parables, eschatological: it had to do with the end-time that had now come upon the world, with the breaking-in of the kingdom of God, here represented by the harvest, a traditional figure for it. Between sowing and harvest many frustrations occur; but when the harvest comes, and the angel puts in his sickle, all will be fruition and triumph. For this original, Jewish, eschatological sense, Mark substitutes his feeble, Hellenistic, homiletic allegory. His theory of impenetrable narrative darkness is likewise an error. Jesus occa-

sionally made despairing observations, and Mark, somehow misled, took this one from its proper place and attached it to a group of parables with which it has nothing whatever to do.¹⁰

One can't help thinking of Kafka's parables as recalling these clerical contentions. Kafka, like Mark, or the text of Mark as we have it, supports what might be called the *hina* doctrine of narrative. The desire to change *hina* to *hoti* is a measure of the dismay we feel at our arbitrary and total exclusion from the kingdom, or from the secret sense of the story, of which we learn — by its radiance — only that it is overwhelmingly important. Both Mark and Kafka go on to offer unacceptable priestly glosses on their parables. Each seems to arrive at a melancholy conclusion. Matthew took the first step toward reducing the bleak mystery of Mark's proposals; and later a rational, scientific scholarship spirited away the enigma by detecting behind the text of Mark a version more to its liking.

Of course what the scholars say is plausible. They speak of a redactor living after the time when the Kingdom was imminently expected, so that he had lost the original eschatological sense of the story. He remodeled it in such a way that its original meaning was muddled by an incongruous interpretation. The attempts of the learned to explain away Mark's *hina* are worthy of Kafka's priest. But there it stands, and has stood for nineteen hundred years, a silent proclamation that stories can always be enigmatic, and can sometimes be terrible. And Mark's gospel as a whole — to put the matter too simply — is either enigmatic and terrible, or as muddled as the commentators say this passage is. Why, to ask a famous question, does Mark so stress the keeping of the secret of the messiahship of Jesus? One answer is that since this was an idea that developed only after the death of Jesus, Mark was forced to include it in his narrative *only* as a secret deliberately kept, concealed from all save the Twelve, and not understood by them until the end of the story. This leaves a good deal unexplained; nor is the theme of secrecy the only mystery in Mark. My present point is simple enough: Mark is a strong witness to the enigmatic and exclusive character of narrative, to its property of banish-

ing interpreters from its secret places. He could say *hina*, even though his ostensible purpose, as declared in the opening words of his book, was the proclamation of good news to all.

THE SOWER PARABLE is the great crux. But it is not a parable that has any of the expansiveness or expressiveness of a short story; and it first occurs in the most difficult of the gospel texts. The Good Samaritan is an example of parable as extended narrative; and it occurs only in Luke (10:25-37), who is generally thought of as the most literary as well as the most genial and bourgeois of the evangelists. I will use it to comment on varieties of interpretation, and on the division between those who suppose that all stories have obscure senses and those who think this need not be so.

All the synoptics have the episode in which a lawyer or scribe asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment, though Luke changes the question to "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" In Mark (12:28-34) and Matthew (22:34-40) the answer is an unadorned declaration of the requirement to love God and one's neighbor; Mark adds that Jesus commended the lawyer for knowing that obedience to these commandments was more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices. Luke again varies the procedure; instead of answering the lawyer's question, Jesus puts one of his own: "What is written in the law? How do you read?" Luke accepts the hint that the lawyer is testing Jesus; Mark does not say so, and indeed his report is inconsistent with the notion of a contest. Such contests often breed parables; so Luke includes one. When the lawyer gets the answer right, Jesus tells him so. But the lawyer, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

The answer to this question is the parable. According to Luke, it is meant to explain the sense of the word "neighbor" (*plēsiōn*). Naturally, being a coherent narrative, it says more than is strictly necessary to make this point. (The obligation upon narratives to do this is, by the way, a great generator of narrative senses.) A traveler is robbed and left wounded in a

ditch. A priest and a Levite pass by without offering assistance, but a third passer-by goes to much trouble and expense to help the victim. He is a Samaritan — a member, that is, of a nation hated and despised by the Jews. The nature of his help is specified: he binds up the wounds, treats them with oil and wine, carries the half-dead patient on his own beast to an inn, and, having left with the innkeeper a supply of money for further care, departs with a promise to return. Which of the three travelers proved neighbor to the wounded man?

Here is a narrative that seems to be a simple exemplary tale. The detail that could be called redundant to its merely exemplary purpose may be explained away as a gesture toward realism, a way of adding the interest of verisimilitude, or even of topicality, to the folktales triple design of the story. The Jericho road is chosen because it was a road on which such assaults were frequent. The Samaritan does all that can be done to help the man, expending his supplies, forfeiting the use of his animal, giving the innkeeper a precisely specified sum of money (enough to cater for the man's needs over many days) and, so far from thinking that he had now discharged his neighborly duty, promising to come back and finish the good work. This is how one ought to behave *now*, not in some storybook situation that vaguely impends. Perhaps the point is being made with such determined clarity because *we* need help, and ought not to be left in a ditch of incomprehension.

Yet this simple view of the story is very far from having gained universal acceptance. And in understanding why this is so we happen upon an important, if obvious, reason for the interminability of interpretation. My way of reading the detail of the parable of the Good Samaritan seems to me natural; but that is only my way of authenticating, or claiming as universal, a habit of thought that is cultural and arbitrary. My reading would certainly not have seemed "natural" to the church Fathers, for instance. The Holy Ghost does not give details merely to please or reassure; in all his works every word and every figure is charged with sense. The fate of the traveler represents the fall of the human race into the hands of demons;

he is Adam, who has left Jerusalem, the heavenly city, for Jericho, the world. The Samaritan is Christ, the inn is the Church, the promise to return the Second Coming.

To such interpreters the story is loaded with hidden meanings and although there will be a consensus as to certain of these, there is no suggestion that the process of interpretation need ever cease. The reading I've just alluded to is that of Irenaeus.¹¹ A gnostic allegorist proposed that the wine and oil embody an esoteric conception of *chrisma*.¹² Augustine interpreted the parable on several occasions, with some variation. The main purpose of the parable is to show the continuing care of the Samaritan (which means "Keeper"); for although all sins are remitted by baptism (the wine and oil) man is still weak, must be lifted up, tended and strengthened at the inn, which is the Church. Or, more elaborately, the wounded man is Adam, who has left heaven for the world (Jericho means the moon, the sphere of mutability) and fallen into the hands of demons, who strip him of immortality, leaving him half-dead. The priest and Levite represent the inefficacious old dispensation, the oil is hope and the wine good works; the beast is representative of the Incarnation, the inn of the Church, and the innkeeper of the apostle Paul. This interpretation, as Dodd remarks,¹³ had great authority and longevity; but it was always subject to variation, the inexhaustibility of the text being greater than the authority even of Augustine. No doubt the parable has a carnal sense which does not vary materially; its spiritual sense is not so constant.

And we should reflect that interpretations of the kind I have touched upon were applied to narratives other than parables. All narrative is susceptible. For example, Augustine, interpreting the five loaves and two fishes of the first Feeding, says that the loaves are the books of Moses — they are of barley, rough outside and hard to open, but containing much nourishment; while the fish represent Christ in his characters as Priest and King. The multiplication of the loaves is the exposition of the Law in many volumes. The number of thousands of people is five because the people were under Mosaic Law. They sat on the grass because, being carnally minded, they rested on sen-

sual things. The fragments they left were truths of hidden import, such as they were unable to receive (they took the carnal, left the spiritual). And so on.¹⁴

The persistence of this kind of explanation is well known; the following interpretation of the same passage was written more than a thousand years later: "By the five loaves, doctors understand the five Books of Moses which are aptly compared to a barley loaf; for a barley loaf on its outside is rough, in part, and harsh . . . yet within it is full of the purest flour . . . By the two fishes are signified the Prophets and Psalms, and the book of the Apocalypse in the New Testament, which, taken in their literal sense, are more difficult and obscure than the aforesaid books, but none the less in their mystical senses are far more fruitful. So it is with the Gospels and the Canonical Epistles of Paul; for as fishes lie hid in the waters, so the moral senses lurk hidden in these books."¹⁵ Or the five loaves are the five wounds of Christ; the two fishes are the Virgin Mary and the penitent thief; the twelve baskets are the twelve articles of the Creed or the Twelve Apostles — "whichever you like," adds the preacher, certain that liberty of interpreting exists, though doubtless not without constraint.¹⁶ I mention these medieval variations to illustrate a point made in my first chapter: an institutional tradition — such as that which transmitted Augustine's interpretation to medieval preachers — does not inhibit the indefinite multiplication of spiritual readings. One divination spawns another. If I say the fishes are one thing, that does not prevent your saying they are another, just as plausibly; and you may tell me, with notable liberality, that I may make them stand for anything I choose, though there will be a family or institutional resemblance between our interpretations.

Later the admissibility of such readings became an important issue in hermeneutics. There had long been a literalist opposition to free allegory, but Luther's rejection of it was decisive, and in the era of "scientific" interpretation it was rejected absolutely. Yet science also makes its assumptions. For example, it was assumed that the Parable of the Good Samaritan existed before Luke wrote it down (an assumption now

challenged, and for which there is no evidence). And of course Luke was accused of getting it wrong.

It is true that good sense may be made of Luke's version if we supply some historical context. For instance, the question, "Who is my friend?" was less vague than it now sounds; certain rules of caste and race were involved. Also, by the folk-tale rule of three, you expect a third passer-by. Since the first two were an Israelite priest and a Levite, you might also expect that the third will be an Israelite layman — that the story, written at a time when the clergy were greatly disliked, will turn out to be anticlerical. However, by a rather shocking peripeteia, the third man turns out to be an enemy and unclean. So the story, instead of saying that lay folk can be more charitable than parsons, a commonplace truth, extends the sense of *plēision* quite violently to include the least likely person imaginable, and so, by implication, everybody.¹⁷

This seems reasonable, but narrative is not a very reasonable subject, and the view that this tale, however transparent it may seem, however self-sufficient, must have senses less obvious than that is certainly not extinct. One modern interpreter argues that the surface, with its blend of reassuring local detail and folktale, conceals a sense that depends on secret allusion to a repertory of Old Testament texts. That such repertories existed is not in doubt, and I shall refer to them later. The argument in this case is that so far from merely illustrating the second commandment, the story of the Samaritan is about the Second Coming. "Samaritan" (as Augustine seems to have known) comes from the same root as "shepherd"; the Samaritan is the Good Shepherd. Moreover, *plēision*, neighbor, is related to another Hebrew word meaning "shepherd"; and the original parable, now concealed by Luke's, asked "Who is the true shepherd?" So the lawyer asked a new question and got the answer to an old one: the Good Shepherd, who comforts our distress and will return hereafter. This "futuristic" eschatology is wholly lost in Luke's hortatory conclusion, "go and do likewise." But science enables us to recover the true sense, already imperceptible to Luke.¹⁸ It happens to be quite close to the sense proposed by the Fathers I've referred to, but the

method is of course quite different, theirs being allegorical and this being scientific. Other scientific readings bear no resemblance to patristic allegory: for example, the argument that the parable was written to justify sending a mission to Samaria.¹⁹

I suppose we could say that none of these interpretations leaves the parable untouched, unintruded upon, though it is easy to see that some regard it as deeply enigmatic and some do not. Those who think it enigmatic also think they can explain the enigma rather fully, as Augustine did long ago, and as Gerhardsson did only a few years back when he identified the Samaritan with the Good Shepherd. Gerhardsson says, in effect, that what he has unearthed *is* the interpretation. However, there is a fashion still more recent, which revives, in its own way, the notion that the sense of the text is inexhaustibly occult, and accessible in a different form to each and every interpreter. The object of this kind of interpretation is no longer "scientific"; one does not try, like Jeremias, to state what the narrative meant in its original, or in any later setting; one does not try to "re-cognize" it, as the more conservative hermeneutical theorists say one should. Rather one assumes, to quote an opponent of this school, that "the meaning of a text goes beyond its author not sometimes but always" and that "one understands differently when one understands at all."²⁰ The object of interpretation is now sometimes said to be to retrieve, if necessary by benign violence, what is called the original event of disclosure. This is the language of Heidegger; he takes the Greek word for "truth," *alētheia*, in its etymological sense, "that which is revealed or disclosed, does not remain concealed." Every hermeneutic encounter with a text is an encounter with Being as disclosed in it. For Heidegger indeed, it is the very fact that one is *outside* that makes possible the revelation of truth or meaning; being *inside* is like being in Plato's cave.²¹

Every such hermeneutic encounter is still, in a measure, historically conditioned, though now that limitation is no longer thought of just as a limitation — it is the prerequisite of interpretation, each act of which is unique, one man on one stool, so to speak, seeing what no power can withhold from him, his

glimpse of the radiance, his share of what is sometimes called the "hermeneutic potential" of a text. Interpreters in this tradition sometimes think of earlier interpretations, transmitted by institutions, as having attached themselves to the original, and as having tended to close it off, lowering its potential rather than as mineral deposits clog a pipe and reduce its flow. Since by their own interpretative act they discover what the parable *originally means*, they are not constricted by the conventional demand that interpretation should say what the parable *originally meant*, to its author and its first audience. What it meant and what it means are both actualizations of its hermeneutic potential, which, though never fully available, is inexhaustible.

Now that which requires to be disclosed must first have been covered, and this view of interpretation certainly implies that the sense of the parable is an occult sense. Its defenders like to say not that the interpreter illumines the text, but that the text illumines the interpreter, like a radiance. For this, as I said, is an outsider's theory. It stems ultimately from a Protestant tradition, that of the devout dissenter animated only by the action of the spirit, abhorring the claim of the institution to an historically validated traditional interpretation. It may be the end of that tradition; for I do not see how, finally, it can distinguish between sacred and secular texts, those works of the worldly canon that also appear to possess inexhaustible hermeneutic potential. (Heidegger's own exegeses of Hölderlin treat the text exactly as if it were sacred.) The tradition is that of a productive encounter between the text and the reader, illuminated by a peculiar grace or, in more secular terms, a divinatory genius, as far as possible independent of institutional or historical control. That encounter is the main concern not only of modern German hermeneutics but also, though their ways are different, of its French rivals. The method has, of course, been applied to the parables.

An interpreter working in this tradition cannot altogether free himself from historical and institutional constraints. He will try to avoid them, insofar as they are avoidable; but he cannot escape his own historicity, and he was trained in an institution. Nor can he acquire divinatory genius for the ask-

ing. The book that first made American readers familiar with the idea of hermeneutic potential was Robert Funk's *Language, Hermeneutic, and the Word of God*.²² It is an admirable piece of exposition. Yet Funk agrees with Jeremias that the effect of the Good Samaritan story depends on the narrative shock of the discovery that the merciful traveler is a stranger, an enemy. He departs from known paths only when he conjectures that the wounded man might have preferred not to have the assistance of this unclean outcast; but this is a conjecture that owes nothing to the new hermeneutics. Although he denies the Good Shepherd interpretation, he agrees that Jesus is the Samaritan, and we the wounded man; so the Good Shepherd is there somewhere, in a sort of penumbra. There seems to be a traditional quality about this reading that is rather remote from the libertarian possibilities suggested by the speculative parts of Funk's book, and very remote from the unique and somber meditations of Heidegger on Hölderlin.

This is perhaps to say no more than that the interpreter is likely to have a touch of the dyer's hand. Thus structuralist exegesis of this parable will pass from a demonstration of its narrativity to a demonstration that Luke, as many have said before, mistook a parable of the Kingdom for a homiletic example story. And Paul Ricoeur is surely right to assume that interpretation begins where structuralist analysis ends,²³ that such analysis should be thought of as a way of facilitating divination.

I take it that The Good Samaritan sufficiently illustrates the point that a story need not be manifestly obscure to be thought by interpreters to possess that which only interpretation may disclose. I will end with a word on another parable, partly to accustom us to the existence of variants in gospel narrative, partly to make a point about allegorical interpretation that I have not had time to develop.

The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen occurs in all three synoptic gospels, and in all three it follows a contest between Jesus and the chief priests or scribes and elders on the topic of his authority, for which he refuses explanations. The connection between the parable and this dispute is not obvious; there

may not be one. Moreover the three versions differ significantly. Mark's is quite circumstantial: a man plants a vineyard, surrounded by a hedge and containing a tower and a winepress. Then he lets it to tenants and leaves the country. On his return he sends a servant to demand some of the fruit, presumably in accordance with the original contract. The tenants beat the servant and send him away. So he sends another, who is even worse treated, and then a third, whom the tenants kill, and then more, all of whom are either beaten or killed. Finally the landlord sends his only son (or his beloved son — the same word serves for both), supposing that the tenants will at least respect him. But they kill him too, hoping thereby to inherit the estate. What, in such circumstances, will the landlord do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others (Mark 12:1-9).

This is a somewhat implausible narrative, but Matthew's variations (21:33-44) are not designed to help it in this respect. He develops the ending, saying that the new tenants will be of the kind who will ungrudgingly give up a proper share of the fruit, and he makes an explicit application: "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it" (21:43). He makes another change which I will mention later. Luke cuts out the tower, the winepress, and the hedge, and sends only three servants in advance of the son; they are maltreated but not killed, which improves the progression of the tale (20:9-18). The simplest and most elegant version is in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, a volume in the Gnostic library discovered at Nag Hamadi in Upper Egypt some thirty years ago (Logion 65). Thomas sends only two servants, who are beaten; then the son, who is killed. Thomas, who never appends interpretations, says nothing about the reaction of the father. In the present instance the synoptics also withhold direct interpretation, though all add, more or less clumsily, the saying about the stone that the builders rejected, which yet became the cornerstone.

The Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen looks very like an allegory, which is why the first reaction of scientific criticism was to regard it as inauthentic, as something made up in the

church and read back into the gospel account. Let us suppose that there lies behind it a simple tale, very like Thomas' version. There were three emissaries, the first two beaten and the third killed. Having lost his property and his son, the landlord is now obliged to do something decisive; the synoptics give their versions of what this was. Mark has muddled this simple scenario. He sends not three but an indefinite number of messengers, and fails to make the treatment they receive more and more severe. And he puts in a good deal of unmistakably allegorical detail. The winepress, the tower, and the hedge come from Isaiah (5:1-2) where they are already allegorical; the vineyard is Israel. And when Mark describes the last messenger as the *huios agapētos* (beloved or only son) of the lord, he cannot be forgetting that he makes God use exactly these words of Jesus at the opening of his book (*Su ei ho huios mou ho agapētos*, 1:11). The allegory is now plain: God sent his prophets to Israel (not only two of them, hence the greater number of messengers); they were abused by the Israelites or their rulers; then he sent his son and they killed him, too. (This presupposes, on the part of Jesus, a foreknowledge of his own death, which is one reason why the scientific critics regard the parable as inauthentic.)

Matthew of course saw the point, and developed it. Where Mark says the son was killed, then cast out of the vineyard, Matthew says he was cast out and then killed; the Crucifixion took place outside the city wall. Luke cares less for allegory, dropping the Isaian tower; but he uses Matthew's order, first casting out, then slaying. Thomas alone shuns all allegory, contenting himself with the formulaic "Whoever has ears let him hear." But this is perhaps no more than an invitation to do the allegory yourself, if you can.

So it seems that the parable is an allegory, and has no point except as an allegory. It is more like Spenser's House of Holiness than Kafka's Leopards in the Temple. The reason why Mark put in a lot of messengers was simply that there had been a lot of prophets; to have only *three* would have obscured this point. Spenser represents the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy by seven beadsmen, not three. But if it is an allegory, where

should licit allegorization stop? The common patristic answer is, of course, nowhere. Allegory is the patristic way of dealing with inexhaustible hermeneutic potential. And the Fathers had many successors; the notion that ancient myth as well as scripture concealed occult wisdom was as common during the European Renaissance as it was in the Hellenistic world. By contrast later scholars ask only what kind of allegory one may expect the evangelists to have inserted into a story that was not in itself allegorical at all. Then they ask what the story meant in its original form, before the salvation allegory got attached to it. Jülicher simply rejects the whole thing as inauthentic. Jeremias and Dodd say it reflects the resentment felt by Galilean tenant farmers toward their absentee foreign landlords; such landlords might, when all else failed, send their sons to collect, and the tenants might kill them in the hope of benefiting from a law that assigned ownerless property to the first claimant. They were wrong to do so, of course, and God would give the vineyard not to them but to the poor.²⁴ But this is only a more rationalistic allegory; it denies that the parable was originally what it certainly later became, a prophecy of the Crucifixion, and turns it into a somewhat ridiculous fable about current affairs.

In fact it seems impossible to think of the tale appearing in the gospel context simply as a tale. So the difficulty (unless we take the dissentient view that the parable as we have it is much as it always was) is merely that different interpretations have got attached in the course of time to the same parable. Paul Ricoeur thinks of interpretation as the linking of a new discourse to the discourse of the text; in a sense he treats the formal description of a narrative (as by the structuralists) as carnal, the long historical succession of interpretations as spiritual: the "form" of a parable (that which can be analyzed in terms of internal synchronic relations) is what ensures the survival of meaning after the disappearance of the original historical setting; and that meaning arises from a kind of conversation between the interpreter and the text. A parable, he says, is a fiction capable of redescribing life; its sense can never be fully closed, or this process of redescription would not be

possible.²⁵ It is, one might add, a paradox applying to all narrative that although its function is mnemonic it always recalls different things. The mode of recall will depend in some measure on the fashion of a period — what it seems natural or reasonable to expect a text to say. This is another way of affirming that all narratives possess "hermeneutic potential," which is another way of saying that they must be obscure. The apparently perspicuous narrative yields up latent senses to interpretation; we are never inside it, and from the outside may never experience anything more than some radiant intimation of the source of all these senses.

So inveterate, so unalterable is this exclusion that it is easy to pass from saying that the outsiders are told stories because they are dull and imperceptive to saying that stories are told in order to keep the dull and imperceptive outside. And suppose that we somehow discovered that all stories were, after all, *hoti* stories. The interpreters *de métier* would, to protect their profession, to continue their privileged conversations with texts, at once strive to discredit the discovery; finally all stories are *hina* stories, even the story that they are all *hoti*.

That all narratives are essentially dark, despite the momentary radiance that attends divination, is a doctrine that would not have surprised pre-scientific interpreters. They might have offered various reasons for holding it, though usually they would have attributed the darkness of the tale to the intention of a divine author. Calvin and Pascal, close as they were to the epoch in which a presumptuous human reason would attempt to explain the mystery away, nevertheless agreed with Mark that the divine author made his stories obscure in order to prevent the reprobate from understanding them; on a kinder Catholic view, he did so in order to minimize the guilt of the Jews in refusing the gospel.²⁶ Even now, when so many theories of interpretation dispense in one way or another with the author, or allow him only a part analogous to that of the dummy hand at bridge, the position is not much altered; the narrative inhabits its proper dark, in which the interpreter traces its lineaments as best he can. Kafka, whose interpreter dies outside, is a doorkeeper only; so was Mark.

Mark distresses the commentators by using the word "mystery" as a synonym for "parable," and assuming that stories put questions which even the most privileged interpreters cannot answer. For example, he tells two stories about miraculous feedings. Any creative writing instructor would have cut one of them; but Mark's awkwardness can hardly be dismissed as accidental. Later the disciples are on board a boat and discover that they have forgotten to bring bread — there is only one loaf. At this point Jesus gives them an obscure warning: "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." Puzzled, they say among themselves, "it is because we have no bread," or "this is why we have no bread," or, maybe, "is this why we have no bread?" — the sense of the Greek is uncertain. Whatever they intend, Jesus gets angry. "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?" They are behaving exactly like the outsiders in the theory of parable. The sign given them by the Feedings is lost on them, and unless something is done about it they will find themselves in the same position as the Pharisees, to whom Jesus has just refused any sign at all. So he takes them once more, slowly, through the story of the Feedings. Five thousand were fed with five loaves: how many baskets of fragments were left over? Twelve, they correctly reply. Four thousand, at the second Feeding, were served with seven loaves: how many baskets of fragments were left over? Seven. Well then, don't you see the point? Silence. Perhaps the disciples mistook the riddle as we do the one about the elephants: there is a strong suggestion that the answer has to do with number, but it probably doesn't.²⁷ Anyway, they do not find the answer. Here again Matthew does not want to leave the matter so obscure; his Jesus is much less reproachful, and also explains: "How did you fail to see that I was not talking about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ("Leaven," used figuratively, ordinarily meant something infectiously evil.) "Then they understood that he was not telling them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (16:11-12). This is not perhaps very satis-

factory; but the point is that Mark, with his usual severity, makes Jesus angry and disappointed, and also turns the insiders into outsiders. They cannot answer this riddle, any more than they could read the Parable of the Sower. And although this passage has been subjected to the intense scrutiny of the commentators, no one, so far as I know, has improved on the disciples' performance. The riddle remains dark; so does the gospel.

Parable, it seems, may proclaim a truth as a herald does, and at the same time conceal truth like an oracle. This double function, this simultaneous proclamation and concealment, will be a principal theme of what follows, for I shall concern myself with the radiant obscurity of narratives somewhat longer than parables, though still subject to these Hermetic ambivalences.