This discussion of Der Verschollene (The Man Who Disappeared) begins by making some introductory observations on the narrative structure of Kafka’s uncompleted novel. I then proceed to analyze a particularly interesting example of embedded narrative, namely Therese’s story in chapter five, entitled “Im Hotel Occidental.”

The central plot of the novel concerns the story of Karl Roßmann. Having been seduced by a maidservant and given her a child, Karl has been cast out of his family’s home in Prague and sent to America. According to his uncle, Karl has been “einfach beiseite geschafft . . . wie man eine Katze vor die Tür wirft, wenn sie ärger” (38) (“simply got rid of, the way you put the cat out if it’s making a nuisance of itself”). This expulsion is only the first in a catechism of repudiations that serve to establish the novel’s narrative pattern. This pattern is embedded in the overarching narrative scheme of a journey: literally, the crossing from Europe to America, the arrival in New York, the trip to a country house on the outskirts of the city, the “march” to the city of Ramses, the period spent in the Hotel Occidental, and then the ride to Clayton, where Karl is admitted to the “Nature Theatre of Oklahama” under the name of “Negro.” As in other narratives by Kafka, however, the literal journey is given overtones of another, larger and spiritual journey, of which the movements of the figures are examples.
The narrative pattern of journeying bears a wide range of associations in Kafka’s oeuvre. K.’s arrival, after a long walk, at the bridge leading to the village constitutes the beginning of the novel Das Schloß (The Castle), in which the protagonist will undertake numerous, fruitless attempts to communicate with the authorities who are assumed to occupy the castle overlooking the village. By the end of Der Proceß (The Trial), it emerges that another kind of journey (one that leads to death) started with the arrest of Josef K. at the beginning of the novel. The waiting of the man from the country in the story “Vor dem Gesetz” (“Before the Law”), which Kafka incorporated in The Trial, is presented as a stage in a journey toward The Law. In The Man Who Disappeared, the pattern of journeying includes passages describing communication through various media, technical devices, writing situations, work sequences and, above all, traffic. America is perceived and described as a domain in which humans, means of transportation, and information are incessantly chasing one another.

In this novel, journeying can be described more accurately as a pattern of temporary or illusory inclusion alternating with expulsion, via the (repeated) cycle of seduction, lapse, condemnation, and banishment. This pattern emerges mainly from the interactions of the protagonist Karl with seductive females on the one hand and authoritative figures on the other, such as his parents and uncle, the Head Waiter, the Head Porter, and the female Head Cook who all pull and push him in various directions. As we shall see, Therese’s story is integrated into the overall composition by the way it represents a revealing variation of this pattern of inclusion and exclusion, as a sub-plot in which someone is brought to the reader’s attention as an expellee in need of help from others—including Karl himself. If the novel shows Karl being expelled and others failing to help him, Therese’s story shows Karl in turn failing to help another person, who is just as much in need of help as he is. Karl was expelled by his parents, Therese was abandoned by her father and then by her mother. Karl’s self-image as an excluded victim of circumstance is thereby contrasted with an image of him as one of the excluders.

The first seduction of Karl Roßmann in the family home by the maidservant or “Köchin” Johanna Brummer results in his condemnation and subsequent expulsion by his parents. Karl’s second seductress is Klara, daughter of Pollunder. Acting against his uncle’s wishes, Karl has let himself be coaxed by Mr. Green into visiting a country house near New York. Karl experiences the meeting with Klara as a seduction; he resists it and calls Klara “eine tolle Katze” (91) (“wildcat”); in his view, her room
bears the traits of a “recht gefährlichen Höhle” (90) (“rather dangerous lair”). As his uncle had earlier compared Karl to a cat being turned out of the house (38), the encounter underscores the ferocity of relations in a world of hunters and prey. After midnight on the day of Karl’s visit to Pollunder’s country house, the uncle (repeating the pattern that began in the parental home) communicates his own condemnation and expulsion of Karl by letter, according to which his nephew’s lapse stems from his decision “vom Onkel fortzugehen” (123) (“to leave his uncle”).

The third seduction of Karl, ostensibly into the role of adopted child, is undertaken by the maternal and obese Head Cook at the Hotel Occidental, Grete Mitzelbach, who hails from Vienna. Here again Karl’s lapse is marginal and apparently involuntary. He leaves his workplace at the elevator for a brief moment in order to help a comrade. Nevertheless, the condemnation by the Head Waiter and the subsequent “execution” by the Head Porter are effected. Karl is accused of having left his “Posten” without permission (225) and of having “gelogen, gelumpt, gesoffen und gestohlen” (259) (“lied, debauched, drunk and stolen”). With the introduction of the fourth woman encountered by Karl it becomes evident that most of the female characters have been designed as a serial type. Her name, Brunelda, faintly echoes that of “Brummer,” the name of the family maidservant, and may allude ironically to Brunhilde, the mythical figure of Germanic saga and of Wagner’s opera.

The fifth and last “Verlockung” (388) (“lure”) is effected by a poster offering admittance to the “große Theater von Oklahama.” “‘Jeder war willkommen,’ hieß es” (388) (“‘Everybody was welcome,’ it said”). Hundreds of seemingly gigantic women are standing at the entrance to the grounds of the racecourse where recruiting to the theater takes place. Alternating with male devils, the women figure as a line of angels. Karl recognizes one of these women as Fanny, an “alte Freundin” (393). To him she appears as “fast die höchste” (“almost the tallest”) of women. It is Fanny who enables him to make his way to the place of admission. Her name may allude to Cleland’s pornographic novel *Fanny Hill*, but the link is not elaborated.

In this pattern of seduction and expulsion, the experience of sexuality opens repeatedly onto encounters with death. During his sexual intercourse with Johanna Brummer, Karl, suffocating, shakes: “Kopf und Hals aus dem Kissen heraus” (43) (“Karl’s head and neck leapt out of the pillows”). The next dominatrix, Klara, threatens to slap Karl in the face and says “Und vielleicht bist du ein Ehrenmann—ich möchte es fast glauben—und wirst mit den Ohrfeigen nicht weiterleben wollen und dich aus der Welt schaffen” (92) (“Maybe you’re a man of honor—I
almost think you are—and you won’t be able to go on living after you’ve been slapped and you’ll have to do away with yourself”).

The series of female characters opens with the maidservant, introduced in the very first sentence of the novel. Immediately thereafter we are told how Karl sees the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor. As she is furnished not with a torch but with sword, this “goddess of freedom” appears to have been transformed into a figure alluding both to the goddess of justice and to the cherub with the flaming sword who guards the gate of Paradise (Gen. 3:24). As the semantic switch from “die schon längst beobachtete Statue” (“the statue which had already been in view for some time”) to “erblickte” (“suddenly saw”) and “wie neuerdings” (“only just”) indicates, this description is not made by an objective narrator. Rather, it is a focalization of Karl’s perception. He perceives, or imagines, the statue as a figure whose arm with the sword rises up while the “freien Lüfte” (7) (“unchained winds,” verbatim: “free winds”) are blowing around it.²

This entangling of a realistic and an imaginary perception establishes from the outset a realistic and at the same time an allegorical dimension of meaning for the entire novel. In the narrative process, the elements of the opening sequence—seduction, expulsion, journey—are picked up again, elaborated, and integrated into a spiralling network of motives. This is quite characteristic of any traditional novel. The statue’s sword, for example, recurs as the uncle’s stick and several subsequent hints and allusions to the military (“comrade,” “post,” and “execution,” for example). The direction of the sword-arm, “empor” (“aloft”), commented on by Karl—“So hoch” (7) (“So high”)—is mirrored in Karl’s path, which on the one hand leads spatially upward from station to station, always a little farther up: from the uncle’s house to the house in the country, to the hotel, to “solche Höhe” (“such heights”) in the theater of Oklahoma, while at the same time leading downward socially.

In an attempt to brush aside his uncle’s account of his seduction and expulsion, Karl uses the words “große Geschichte” (43), translatable verbatim as a “big story” or “a great story.” Yet within the novel’s allegorical dimension (introduced by the sword of the goddess), this “big story,” which Karl wishes to reject, evokes the seduction of Adam by Eve and the expulsion from paradise. Given that their expulsion entails the change from immortal to mortal existence, in which the continuity of life is only assured by procreation (the consequence of the “original sin”), this expulsion has the character of a birth or re-birth. When Karl’s uncle compares the crossing from Europe to America with a “Geburt” (56) (“birth”), involving the passage “vom Jenseits in die menschliche Welt”
(“entering the human world from the beyond”), he is invoking precisely this “große Geschichte” to impose a particular, culturally familiar meaning on Karl’s arrival in the New World. At the same time, this journey into the human world is fraught with allusions to death: The pattern of the passage to America itself alludes to the mythical Acheron: the passage to death. The officials at New York harbor wear black uniforms, Karl applies at the Theatre of Oklahoma under the name of “Negro.” The cold and loneliness of the abandoned Therese and her mother in New York and the deliberate death of Therese’s mother will take up the same motif again.

II

On his way to Ramses with two mysterious characters, the tramps Robinson and Delamarche, Karl arrives at the Hotel Occidental. The Head Cook takes to him and employs him as a lift-boy. Therese, typist and secretary to the Head Cook, befriends Karl. However, one cannot say that Karl befriends her in equal measure. “Sie hatte keine Geheimnisse vor ihm” (195) ("she had no secrets from him"), we are told, but nothing is said about Karl revealing his secrets to her. On the contrary, she has to submit to Karl. From Karl’s perspective the following arrogant statement is added: “Es wäre auch nicht gut möglich gewesen, nach ihrem Besuch damals am ersten Abend noch Geheimnisse vor ihm zu haben” (195–96) (“and indeed it would have been difficult for her to have any secrets after her first visit to him that first evening”).

Therese is an illegitimate child; the father, a builders’ foreman, had emigrated to New York, leaving Therese’s exhausted mother to follow him with her daughter. Yet he deserted them shortly after their arrival without much explanation, moving on to Canada. The “Zurückgebliebenen” heard no more of him—“zum Teil auch nicht zu verwundern . . . denn sie waren in den Massenquartieren des New Yorker Ostens unauffindbar verschwunden” (196) (“which wasn’t all that surprising as they were hopelessly lost in the cramped ghetto in the Eastern part of New York”; “unauffindbar”: verbatim: “not to be found”). This father is “verschollen,” they are “verschollen.” The term “verschollen” is applied to people whose whereabouts are known to no one, of whom there are no tidings, of whom no one knows whether they are still alive. This story contains a twofold reflection of Karl’s story. Like Karl, bereft of his family, the mother has lost her husband and the child has lost her father and her mother while they themselves are lost in New York. Conversely, the
father has left his only child behind, voluntarily, just as Karl seems to have forgotten about his own child. At any rate, his consciousness betrays no trace of it.

Therese’s story begins thus: “Einmal erzählte Therese—Karl stand neben ihr am Fenster und sah auf die Straße—vom Tod ihrer Mutter” (196) (“Once—Karl was standing next to her at the window, gazing down on the street—Therese had talked about the death of her mother”). Obviously she relates this event in considerable detail because it is “spät” (202) (“late”) when she finishes. The reference to looking out of the window down at the street is of some importance. Previously, the uncle had warned Karl not to look down at the street from the balcony, since this action would give rise to confusion and would lead anyone “der hier bleiben will” (“who wants to stay here”) to his “Verderben” (56) (“doom”). The situation at the window is a situation occurring, ominously, at a threshold.

Therese’s story is not the first embedded narrative or narrated narrative in the novel. In the first chapter, the uncle, while being entertained in the captain’s cabin, relates the story of Karl’s seduction and expulsion, mentioning the maidservant’s letter that announces Karl’s arrival in New York. The uncle tells this story to explain a “kleine Familien-szene” (37) (“little family scene”), since Karl has questioned their relation. In this account, more of the events predating Karl’s arrival in New York are revealed. Furthermore, the uncle’s narrative has such a profound effect on Karl that the episode of his seduction returns to the forefront of his consciousness “Aus dem gedränge einer immer mehr zurückgestoßenen Vergangenheit” (41) (“in the crush of an ever-receding [verbatim: ‘repelled’] past”).

Besides the acts of saying, talking, asking, answering, inquiring, interrogating, and admitting, the act of narrating is of importance. Throughout the novel, narrations are demanded or warded off. Karl asks the stoker to narrate “einfacher . . . klarer” (28) (“more clearly and simply”); he tells the uncle about life at home; he has to tell the Head Cook about Europe; the Head Waiter tells about Karl’s misdeeds (240). In her narration, Therese tells of the death of her mother ten years ago, when she was about five years old. Together with Therese, the mother is in desperate search of accommodation in wintry New York. The mother has no employment, no money, nothing left to eat, no “Plätzchen,” (198) (“place”) only the prospect of work on a construction site, starting the next morning. As she feels dead tired and has already coughed up blood, she tries to “irgendwo in die Wärme zu kommen und sich auszuruhen”
(197) (“get in the warm somewhere and rest”). As if “in einem Wahn” (196) (“possessed”) she rushes through the streets during a snowstorm, a situation her child is not wholly able to understand: “das Ganze schien damals für seinen Unverstand nur die Erklärung zu haben, daß die Mutter von ihm weglauen wolle” (199) (“in her incomprehension the only explanation she could find for the whole thing was that her mother was trying to run away from her”).

They seem to be refused admittance everywhere, but they do not step inside any building even though the gates and doors are not locked. After midnight, the mother stops addressing anyone and does not want rest anymore. In the morning, they reach the construction site where the mother is supposed to start working. Like a Native American preparing for fighting, she ties a colored rag around her head, then she climbs the scaffolding and plunges herself over the edge. Seen from Therese’s viewpoint, the mother has escaped into death. “Die letzte Erinnerung Thereses an ihre Mutter war, wie sie mit auseinandergestreckten Beinen dalag in dem karierten Rock, der noch aus Pommern stammte, wie jenes auf ihr liegende rohe Brett sie fast bedeckte, wie nun die Leute von allen Seiten zusammenliefen und wie oben vom Bau irgendein Mann zornig etwas hinunterrief” (202) (“Therese’s last memory of her mother was of her lying there with legs apart in the checkered skirt she had brought with her from Pomerania, the rough plank on top of her, almost covering her, people running together from all directions, and from up on the site some man angrily shouted something”).

Embedding narrations is a familiar enough technique of novel writing. Embedded narrations can mirror and condense fundamental aspects of the novel as a whole. Kafka already employs this technique in Beschreibung eines Kampfes (Description of a Struggle) and also in his two other novels: “Before the Law,” which is the “legend” in The Trial, and Olga’s story about Amalia’s secret in The Castle. Both have similar mirroring functions. Therese’s story reflects Karl’s story, while the mother’s restless hunt through the streets exemplifies the pace of the American world of industry and labor he encounters elsewhere. The Head Cook only sleeps for a few hours each night; the student Joseph Mendel does not sleep at all; the elevator-boys sleep standing on their feet in order to manage their twelve-hour-shifts; Karl and Therese carry out their errands in a great hurry. However, in Therese’s memory this great hurry might well have been “in Wirklichkeit ganz gut auch bloß ein Schleichen” (“and perhaps in reality it was no more than a mere crawl”). “Therese wußte auch nicht, ob sie von Mitternacht bis fünf Uhr früh in zwanzig Häusern
oder in zwei oder gar nur in einem Haus gewesen waren" (199) ("Nor could Therese be sure whether they had tried their luck in twenty houses between midnight and five o’clock, or two or even just one"). The fruitless search appears to go on for an eternity; it seems that mother and child are refused entry everywhere—and for all time.

The mother’s climb up the scaffolding, whose vertical bars soared into the blue sky, takes the same direction as the sword raised aloft by the Statue of Liberty; it also mirrors Karl’s progress through a series of ever-higher destinations. This detail is particularly important to Therese: “Sie hatte ausführlich erzählt, wie es sonst nicht ihre Gewohnheit war, und gerade bei gleichgültigen Stellen, wie bei der Beschreibung der Gerüststangen, die jede für sich allein in den Himmel ragten, hatte sie mit Tränen in den Augen innehalten müssen” (202) (“It had been unusually detailed for her, and, especially in unimportant places, for instance the description of the scaffolding poles each soaring into the sky, she had to stop with tears in her eyes”). The expression “gleichgültige Stellen” (202) (“unimportant places”) is semantically ambiguous, since it can also mean “gleich gültige Stellen” of the story, i.e. passages of equal importance.

At first glance, the story told by Therese about her mother is a tale of hunger, sickness and despair, ending in the mother’s lethal fall from the scaffolding. It seems to be a tale of the deadly coldness and indifference of a capitalist society in the tradition of the social novel à la Dickens or Hugo. However, the situation also bears apocalyptic traits transcending the social dimension. The passage describing the “rauchigen Dunst, der wie durch einen Brand verursacht, die Zimmer erfüllte” (198) (“the haze that filled the rooms like smoke from a fire”) conjures an image of the tenement halls as an apocalyptic world. The hotel dormitory is likewise filled with smoke (149) and the uncle is somber with satisfaction when Karl, sharing his place by the window, recites his first American poem, “die Darstellung einer Feuersbrunst” (62) (“the account of a conflagration”).

Much the same as her memory is not reliable, Therese’s narration also is ambiguous because it is intertwined with a conflicting voice telling a different story. In the narration two voices are blended. From a certain moment onward, the mother is no longer looking for an accommodation for herself and her child; instead, already “totmüde” (197) (“dead tired”), she is looking for death. With hindsight it appears to Therese that the mother “nur in den ersten Stunden ernstlich einen Platz suchte” (198) (“had only been serious in her search for the first few hours”). The child’s incomprehension can only give the whole thing the seeming
“Erklärung,” (“explanation”) “dass die Mutter von ihm weglauen wollte” (199) (“that her mother was trying to run away from her”). In this context the expression means more than merely running away. They do not join any of the groups of people they encounter but count themselves “glücklich” (200) to escape them. They are no longer looking for accommodation.

The mother’s fall seems at first glance to be an accident. But it is no accident. There are indications that she resolutely plunges herself into death: for her climb, she has decorated herself with the aforementioned “colored rag” like an Indian. She moves purposefully, with a sureness and authority she did not have before. “Nun kam aber die Mutter auf ihrem Gang zu einem kleinen Ziegelhaufen, vor dem das Geländer und wahrscheinlich auch der Weg aufhörten, aber sie hielt sich nicht daran, ging auf den Ziegelhaufen los, ihre Geschicklichkeit schien sie verlassen zu haben, sie stieß den Ziegelhaufen um und fiel über ihn hinweg in die Tiefe” (157) (“Then her mother came to a little pile of bricks marking the end of the railing and probably the path as well, but she didn’t stop, she walked up to the bricks, her sure-footedness seemed to have deserted her, she kicked over the bricks and fell with them over the edge”). In this sentence, one voice recounts the mother’s death as a deliberate act, while another voice presents the death as an accident caused by clumsiness. The expression “ging auf den Ziegelhaufen los” also means a determined attack by the mother against the obstacles in her path. In her narration, Therese both understands and misunderstands “the whole thing,” marveling at her mother’s “sure-footedness” in “ihrem Dusel” (201); “Dusel” means drowsiness or daze as well as stupendous, unexpected good fortune. The ambiguity plays both on the mother’s numbed subjection to circumstance and on her determined pursuit of release from her situation.

Enhanced by semantic allusions and ambiguities, the intensity of Therese’s narration establishes a parabolic meaning. It can be understood as “proof” of the impossibility of finding “Unterkommen”—accommodation as well as a sustaining position—in life. The men in the doorways of the houses not only deny entry to Therese and her mother by their mute presence or a curt word. They prove, as it is said, the “Unmöglichkeit des Unterkommens”—the impossibility of finding shelter, or, indeed, a place in life: “trat nur die Gestalt irgend jemandes hervor, der im Türrahmen stand und entweder durch seine stumme Gegenwart oder durch ein kurzes Wort die Unmöglichkeit eines Unterkommens in dem betrreffenden Zimmer bewies” (198) (“a human figure would loom in the doorway, and either with a curt word or by its mute presence prove the impossibility of finding shelter in that particular room”). Strikingly,
the phrase mentions the fact that there is “immerfort Leben” (199) (“always life”), thus life per se. The houses where people meet at every turn can stand for life in general. Thus, one possible meaning of “immerfort Leben” is that there is always life, evermore, continuous. Another meaning of the phrase is “life that always is already gone, permanently lost”: immer fort.

A proof to whom? To Therese? She is shown in the narrative as a character who does not understand and yet at the same time understands “the whole thing.” To Karl? Should he, or can he understand the story as proof of a previous statement or experience? Does he already understand the story as such a proof? Or should we say that the employment of “proved” betrays a subconscious understanding? In any case, the word indicates a proof to the addressee of the narration: Karl on one level, the reader on another.

III

How is Therese’s story presented? It is the classic storytelling situation. Somebody, Therese, in her room one evening, is telling somebody else, Karl, on some occasion and for some purpose, that something happened: the death of her mother. The story is framed by indicating an act of narration: “Once . . . Therese had talked about . . . ” and by a concluding narrative comment on the narration (202). Retrospectively, Therese tells of an incident that occurred “damals” (197) (“then”), ten years earlier; she must have been five years old, as she says. Her narrative commentary asserts that she can recollect everything—“ganz genau” (202) (“every detail”). And yet the use of the modal particles “wohl” (“arguably”) or “vielleicht” (“perhaps”) and the phrase “schien es jetzt im Rückblick” (198) (“had a dim memory, verbatim: “seemed in retrospect”) indicates the uncertainty of her recollection. Thus, Therese’s story is a subtle example of Kafka’s technique of producing narrative uncertainty and of blending different narrative voices, different perspectives.

Originally, Kafka had written Therese’s narration as a passage related by a first-person narrator (KAVA, 195). He then changed it into a third-person narrative, thus making it congruent with the narrative discourse of the whole novel. He proceeded similarly with the beginning of The Castle. The adoption of a third-person narrative allows for interferences and the shifting of voices and perspectives. As is well known, the narrative perspective in Kafka’s novels and stories is closely related to the main character’s perspective. Moreover, adapting Therese’s story to the novel’s
overall narrative discourse creates an intriguing bond between Karl’s perspective and the perspectives adopted by the narrator. The following sentence is an illustrative example of these shifts and interferences: “Karl hatte noch keinen Winter in New York mitgemacht” (196) (“Karl hadn’t yet experienced a winter in New York”). The narrative voice could be Therese addressing Karl, presented or transposed as third-person narration. Or the voice could be that of a heterodiegetic narrator. Or, if we link the sentence to Karl’s perspective, the narrative voice can merge with Karl’s voice, thus constituting a variant of free indirect speech influenced by Therese’s description.

Thus two—or, given the possibility of Karl’s voice being heard, three—narrative instances are blended together: Therese’s—narrating, as we have seen, with two voices—Karl’s, and the one reporting, transposing, and narrating Therese’s speech. As readers who are considering the narrative situation—Therese as narrator, Karl as her audience standing close to her—we get the impression that this narrator’s voice is blending into the filter of Karl’s awareness or consciousness. Hence we also get the impression that Karl is deeply affected by Therese’s story.

In the narrative discourse, four levels of speech are integrated: reported direct speech, free indirect speech, transposed speech, and narrated speech. The discourse alternates between scenic immediacy and narrative mediation, between past and present tense. Consider the first sentence: “Wie die Mutter und sie an einem Winterabend—sie konnte damals etwa fünf Jahre alt gewesen sein—jede mit ihrem Bündel durch die Straßen eilten, um Schlafstellen zu suchen” (196) (“The way that one winter evening her mother and herself—she must have been five at the time—each carrying a bundle, chased down the street, looking for a place to sleep”). This is a beginning in medias res. The transposed speech indicated by the third-person narration and the past tense switches to free indirect speech due to the absence, the deletion of a narrative act (i.e., “Therese erzählte.”) Narrating and experiencing, or reliving, converge. The inserted sentence, “sie konnte damals etwa fünf Jahre alt gewesen sein” (“she must have been five at the time”), is being told from the distance of an external focalization.

Immediacy and mediation of the narrative presentation also change in the following three sentences: “Und diese Schneestürme in den langen geraden Newyorker Straßen!” (196) (“And the snowstorms in the long straight streets of New York!”): free indirect speech, reported speech. “Karl hatte noch keinen Winter in New York mitgemacht.” (196–97) (“Karl hadn’t experienced a winter in New York”): reported speech,
reported thoughts of Karl or utterance of an external narrator. “Geht man gegen den Wind, und der dreht sich im Kreise, kann man keinen Augenblick die Augen öffnen, immerfort zerreibt einem der Wind den Schnee auf dem Gesicht, es ist etwas Verzweifeltes.” (197) (“If you walk into a swirling headwind, you can’t open your eyes even for a second, the wind is incessantly rubbing snow in your face, you walk and walk and get nowhere, it’s quite desperate”): reported direct speech.

With what intention does Therese tell Karl the story about her mother’s death? Therese’s narration has a mirroring, parabolic-reflexive, “proving” function in the novel’s discourse. In the narrated world of the novel, the narration has diverse functions as well: Therese tells of her mother’s death since she does not want to keep any secrets from Karl. With this narration, she confides in Karl and thereby asks for his reliance, friendship, and affection. She also explains her personal situation, particularly her relationship with the Head Cook who takes on the role of a substitute mother.

Another important purpose is specified directly. This purpose is what Therese is interested in at the end of her story: “weil der Anblick ihrer Mutter oben im halbfertigen Erdgeschoß das letzte Andenken an das Leben der Mutter war und sie es ihrem Freunde gar nicht genug deutlich überantworten konnte, wollte sie nach dem Schluße ihrer Erzählung noch einmal darauf zurückkommen, stockte aber, legte das Gesicht in die Hände und sagte kein Wort mehr.” (202–3) (“because the sight of her mother up on the partly finished ground floor was her last memory of her mother’s life, and she couldn’t relate it clearly enough to her friend, she wanted to go back to it again after the end of her story, but she faltered, buried her face in her hands and didn’t say another word”). This is odd phrasing: “das letzte Andenken an das Leben der Mutter . . . überantworten”—that is, to commit or hand over the last memory, the last mental souvenir to Karl. The last sight does not really refer to the actual last sight, the dead mother on the ground, but to the mother’s behavior on the scaffolding, to the mother’s life. “Überantworten” can mean to bequeath, to entrust, to deliver; it connotes giving ownership, responsibility, and consequences. Something of importance is judiciously entrusted to the care and responsibility of another.

Which message does Therese want Karl to understand by telling her story? What consequence is the bequest of the “last memory” of the mother’s life supposed to have for Karl? Which kind of Antwort (“answer”) is he supposed to give? Is it supposed to be a recognition of death, of one’s own mortality, of the responsibility for one’s own death?
The sentence “Sie hatte ausführlich erzählt, wie es sonst nicht ihre Gewohnheit war und gerade bei gleichgültigen Stellen, wie bei der Beschreibung der Gerüststangen, die jede allein für sich in den Himmel ragten, hatte sie mit Tränen in den Augen innehalten müssen” (202) (“The story had been unusually detailed for her, and, especially in unimportant places, for instance the description of the scaffolding poles each soaring into the sky, she had to stop with tears in her eyes”) symbolically emphasizes that the human being is alone in this situation. The poles rise up to the sky “jede allein für sich” (“each on its own”), conveying the sense that one must take responsibility for living and dying. Therese narrates this while crying. For her, this part of the story is anything but unimportant. The phrasing “gleichgültige Stellen” (“unimportant places”), in contrast, focalizes Karl’s perception of what she describes so vividly, or rather, his incomprehension. Yet why does Karl so emphatically perceive these passages to be unimportant? The end is ambiguous: Therese falters and rests her face in her hands. This could convey that she is overwhelmed by her own feelings, or it could be an expression of her desperation, since she cannot reach Karl; this communicative journey too has led into emptiness. The chapter ends without Karl giving an answer.

Notes


2. At this point in the manuscript, Kafka deleted the following sentence: “er sah zu ihr auf und verworf das über sie Gelernte” (KKAVA, 123) (“He looked up at her and discarded all that he had learned about her”).

3. See Gerhard Neumann’s discussion in chapter 4.

4. Cf. the apocalyptic image of New York: “Und morgen wie abend und in den Träumen der Nacht vollzog sich auf dieser Straße ein immer drängender Verkehr . . . und alles dieses würde erfaßt und durchdrungen von einem mächtigen Licht, das immer wieder von der Menge der Gegenstände zerstreut, fortgetragen und wieder eifrig herbeigebracht wurde und das dem betörten Auge so körperlich erschien, als werde über dieser Straße eine alles bedeckende Glasscheibe jeden Augenblick immer wieder mit aller Kraft zerschlagen” (55) (“In the morning and evening, and in his dreams at night, that street was always full of swarming traffic . . . and all
this was held and penetrated by a mighty light, that was forever being scattered, carried off and eagerly returned by the multitudes of objects, and that seemed so palpable to the confused eye that it was like a sheet of glass spread out over the street that was being continually and violently smashed”).

5. The motif of the Native American Indian as a figure of liberty recurs throughout Kafka’s work. Illustrative examples include “Die Abweisung” and “Wunsch, Indianer zu werden.”

Works Cited


