Franz Kafka

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STARTING IN THE MIDDLE?
COMPLICATIONS OF
NARRATIVE BEGINNINGS AND
PROGRESSION IN KAFKA

Beatrice Sandberg

Reading Kafka in the critical and the facsimile editions deepens one’s sense of how much he struggled to create continuity and connectedness (Zusammenhang) once he had started to write from a given beginning or to find the right point of ingress in order to follow a thread that would lead him through a story he wanted to tell. Whenever he found such a beginning, as in “The Metamorphosis,” “The Stoker,” and especially in “The Judgment,” he felt overwhelming joy at having achieved coherence in a complex story. What he experienced while writing “The Judgment” represented his ideal: “Nur so kann geschrieben werden, in einem solchen Zusammenhang, mit solcher vollständigen Öffnung des Leibes und der Seele” (KAF, 10:101) (“This is the only possible way to write, in such a connected way, with such complete opening of body and soul”). This experience set a standard he strove to meet throughout his life but seldom attained, according to his own rigorous criteria. Usually the critics have agreed about the success of these narratives, but some have disagreed, such as Hans Dieter Zimmermann, who expresses doubts about “The Judgment,” a novella that he believes to be overestimated with regard to its formal qualities and its elaboration of motifs.

Zimmermann is not the only critic to have pointed out various deficiencies and inconsistencies, which are possibly attributable to the fact that the story was conceived of and executed in the course of a single
According to Kafka’s own testimony, however, the story had great importance for him because it represented the liberation of his ambitions as a writer. It also has a fascinating enigmatic obscurity as a story that welled up from a hard-pushed writer’s mind in a more or less uncontrolled way after many unsuccessful attempts at producing literary texts. Yet Kafka could also be harsh about stories his readers admired when the stories did not meet his own standards. Even if he usually argues too negatively because of his high ambitions and his low self-esteem, such criticism of weaknesses in his texts is not always unwarranted. He mentions his feelings of bitterness, for example, while listening to Max Brod’s reading aloud of his “kleine Automobilgeschichte” (KAF, 9:177) (“little automobile story”):

Die ungeordneten Sätze dieser Geschichte mit Lücken daß man beide Hände dazwischen stecken könnte; ein Satz klingt hoch, ein Satz klingt tief wie es kommt; ein Satz reibt sich am andern wie die Zunge an einem hohlen oder fälschen Zahn; ein Satz kommt mit einem so rohen Anfang anmarschiert, dass die ganze Geschichte in ein verdrießliches Staunen gerät. . . . Ich erkläre es mir damit dass ich zu wenig Zeit und Ruhe habe um die Möglichkeiten meines Talentes in ihrer gänze aus mir zu heben. Es kommen daher immer nur abreißende Anfänge zu Tage, abreißende Anfänge z. B. die ganze Automobilgeschichte durch. Würde ich einmal ein größeres Ganzes schreiben können wohlgebildet vom Anfang bis zum Ende, dann könnte sich auch die Geschichte niemals endgültig von mir loslösen und ich dürfte ruhig und mit offenen Augen als Blutsverwandter einer gesunden Geschichte ihrer Vorlesung zuhören, so aber läuft jedes Stückchen der Geschichte heimatlos herum und treibt mich in die entgegengesetzte Richtung. (KAF, 9:177)

(The unordered sentences of this story with gaps you could put your hand through; one sentence sounds high, another sounds low just as it comes; one sentence rubs against the next, like your tongue rubbing against a hollow or false tooth; one sentence comes marching up with such a coarse beginning that the whole story is thrown into ill-tempered astonishment. . . . I explain this to myself as the result of having too little time and peace to raise the entire potential of my talent to the surface of my being. This is why the only things ever to emerge are broken-off beginnings, such as the broken-off beginnings throughout the entire automobile story. If I were ever able to create a larger whole, well formed from beginning to end, I would never be able to detach the story from
myself completely and I could listen calmly and with open eyes to its recitation, as a blood relative of a healthy story; as things stand, however, every little piece of the story runs around without a home and drives me off in the opposite direction.)

When we read this story, which Kafka wrote in September 1911 (Reisetagebücher KAF, 12:75–78) after seeing a car accident in Paris together with Max Brod, we cannot wholly disagree with Kafka’s verdict. In a way we are reminded of a film clip by Charlie Chaplin, with people coming and gesticulating, vehicles moving around and filling the square, and finally a crowd waiting for further developments. The sentences comment on the situation ironically in a rather erratic sequence, following the confusion on the square. The laboriously detailed description creates a staccato effect or resembles a film going into reverse from time to time. This impression is intensified when a policeman enters the scene and starts to take down details from the witnesses. His pedantic accuracy corresponds to the kind of behavior we know from silent movies and reaches a peak at the end, when he runs into trouble with his report:

Er hat nämlich den Bogen an einer Stelle zu beschreiben angefangen, wo er aus irgend einem Grunde nicht hätte anfangen dürfen. . . . Er muß den Bogen immerfort wieder umdrehen, um den schlechten Prot. [okoll]anfang zu glauben. Da er aber von diesem schlechten Anfang bald abgelassen und auch anderswo zu schreiben angefangen hat, kann er, wenn eine Spalte zu Ende ist, ohne großes Auseinanderfalten und Untersuchen unmöglich wissen, wo er richtigerweise fortzusetzen hat. Die Ruhe die dadurch die Angel.[egenheit] gewinnt, läßt sich mit jener früheren durch die Bet.[eiligten] allein erreichten gar nicht vergleichen. (KAF, 12:78)

(You see, he had started to write on a part of the page where, for some reason, he ought not to have begun. . . . He has to turn the sheet of paper round several times in order to believe the bad beginning of the report. As he quickly abandons this bad start and begins writing somewhere else, it is impossible for him to know, without much unfolding of paper and searching, where the report should continue once he has reached the bottom of a column. The calm imparted to the incident through this procedure simply cannot compare with the calm previously achieved by the parties involved alone.)
The narrator describes the event from the position of an observer. His manner of reporting recalls the role of the witness in the famous “street scene” Brecht used to teach his actors how to give an objective, unemotional description of an accident when the narrator claims: “Es handelt sich nun zuerst darum zu erklären, wie es zu dem Unfall gekommen” (KAF, 12:75) (“What matters in the first instance is to explain how the accident came about”). This witness misses no opportunity to describe as fully as possible all the movements and discussions he is able to observe. We are dealing here with a witness who reports extensively on an episode and thus becomes a real, if somewhat long-winded narrator. Not until we get near the end of the text does the policeman begin recording the witness statements without much investigation of his own, at which point the unconscious and “unverständige Hoffnung aller Anwesenden auf eine sofortige sachliche Beendigung der ganzen Angelegenheit durch den Polizisten ging in eine Freude an den Einzelheiten der Protokollaufnahme über” (KAF, 12:78) (“unreasonable hope of all present that the whole matter would be brought to a rapid and objective conclusion gave way to delight in the details recorded in the officially recorded statements”).

The reader who is familiar with Kafka’s type of narrative progression (or lack of it) and the difficulties involved, will intuitively read this passage as an indirect self comment, exemplified in the actual presentation, which comes to a stop while the policeman is still struggling with his various beginnings in an attempt to find the right place to continue. In spite of the transposition of place and time and an apparently dissimilar situation, there can be little doubt that Kafka is using the figure of the policeman to satirize his own problems with this text. Intensified by its orchestration as a public event, the whole scene becomes very awkward and results in the incomparable calm of the crowd as the policeman struggles with the different beginnings in an effort to arrive at the last entry. It seems that the feelings provoked in Kafka by Brod’s reading “meine kleine Automobilgeschichte” were particularly linked to his dissatisfaction at the “abreißenden Anfänge” (KAF, 9:177) (“broken-off beginnings”). In addition he criticizes a lack of fluency and the disparate directions the many beginnings take throughout the story. The holes in the argumentation emerge from a lack of decent workmanship, in contrast to his ideal of continuous narration without gaps. Although a writer’s criticism of his own work may not be reliable, what we are witnessing here is Kafka’s lifelong struggle for coherence, evident in the countless attempts to bring off the kind of narratives he had in mind. His own observation that his account lacked fluency convinced him that what he had written was not
designed for reading, as he writes to Max Brod in 1922: “Dieses Heft, das ich Dir nach Deiner Novelle zu geben gewagt hatte, obwohl ich weiß, daß es doch nur da ist zum Geschriebenen-, nicht zum Gelesenenwerden” (MB, 389) (“This notebook that I dared to give you after your novella, although I know that it is only there to be written, not to be read”). Nevertheless, despite this deeply felt skepticism, Kafka still thought of his writing as being like “die Fahne des Robinson auf dem höchsten Punkt der Insel” (MB, 386) (“Robinson [Crusoe’s] flag on the highest point of the island”).

At the end of 1909, while plagued by an inability to write, Kafka defined his difficulties thus:

Alle Dinge nämlich, die mir einfallen, fallen [mir] nicht von der Wurzel aus ein, sondern erst irgendwo gegen ihre Mitte. Versuche sie dann jemand zu halten, versuche jemand ein Gras und sich an ihm zu halten, das erst in der Mitte des Stengels zu wachsen anfängt. Das können wohl einzelne, zum Beispiel japanische Gaukler, die auf einer Leiter klettern, die nicht auf dem Boden aufliegt, sondern auf den emporgehaltenen Sohlen eines halb Liegenden, und die nicht an der Wand lehnt, sondern nur in die Luft hinaufgeht. Ich kann es nicht, abgesehen davon, dass meiner Leiter nicht einmal jene Sohlen zur Verfügung stehen. (KAF, 9:15)

(You see, all the things that occur to me do so not from the root up but rather from somewhere about their middle. Let someone then attempt to hold them, let someone attempt to hold a blade of grass and support himself by holding on to it as it begins to grow, starting in the middle of its stalk. Some individuals can probably do this, like those Japanese acrobats for example who climb up a ladder that is standing not on the ground but on the raised soles of another acrobat who is lying half prostrate, and which is not leaning against a wall but simply goes up in the air. I can’t do it, quite apart from the fact that my ladder doesn’t even have such a pair of soles to stand on.)

A year later Kafka wrote: “Kein Wort, das ich schreibe, paßt zum andern. . . . Meine Zweifel stehn um jedes Wort im Kreis herum. . . . Wenn ich mich zum Schreibtisch setze, ist mir nicht wohler als einem, der mitten im Verkehr der Place de l’Opéra fällt und beide Beine bricht” (KAF, 9:103) (“Not one word I write matches the next. . . . My doubts stand in a circle around every word. . . . When I sit down at my desk I feel no better than someone who falls and breaks both legs in the middle
of traffic on the Place de l’Opéra”). Kafka’s comparisons are virtually unique in their vividness and degree of self-exposure. In the first example, he fears he lacks the artistic ability to meet the challenges presented by his calling as a writer. The second example expresses a crisis so intense that even his writing desk, that most precious object to which he often clung for dear life, makes him feel utterly exposed and vulnerable (see chapter 4 for Gerhard Neumann’s discussion of the abandoned writing desk in “The Stoker”). He tries to explain why he is incapable of putting on paper things he had imagined before sitting down to write:

Es liegt natürlich zum großen Teil daran, daß ich frei von Papier nur in der Zeit der Erhebung, die ich mehr fürchte als ersehne, wie sehr ich sie auch ersehne, Gutes erfinde, dass dann aber die Fülle so groß ist, dass ich verzichten muß, blindlings also nehme nur dem Zufall nach, aus der Strömung heraus, griffweise, so dass die Erwerbung beim überlegten Niederschreiben nichts ist im Vergleich zur Fülle, in der sie lebte, unfähig ist, diese Fülle herbeizubringen und daher schlecht und störend ist, weil sie nutzlos lockt. (KAF, 9:195)

(Of course this mainly stems from the fact that away from paper I only invent good things during a time of exaltation [“Erhebung”], something I fear more than I long for, however much I may long for it, but then the abundance is so great that I have to become selective and let some things pass, snatching things blindly, as chance dictates, out of the current, in handfuls, so that when it comes to writing down in a moment of reflection what I have managed to capture in this way, it is nothing compared with the abundance in which it lived, the writing process is incapable of conjuring up that abundance and is therefore bad and disturbing, because it entices to no avail.)

The passage illustrates vividly why Kafka was unable to capture in writing the richness of things he had imagined before beginning to write. It can be contrasted with other, successful moments when the imaginative conception of an Einfall ("inspiration," literally the “falling in” of a creative idea) and its material transformation into ink on the page coincided completely.

Given the difficulties Kafka had in finding the right beginning from which to unroll a whole story, we may ask quite properly whether Kafka can be called an Erzähler (“story-teller”) in the ordinary German sense of the word. The incoherent argumentation and the lack of logic, which we
also find in “The Judgment,” resist straightforward, sequential representation. At the beginning of The Trial too we observe a protagonist who stumbles over his arguments, muddles them in his own mind, turns them around, and puts them in doubt. In many sketches, Kafka begins a narrative sequence, but then the flow of narration becomes hesitant or gets blocked entirely. He complains about the difficulties of finding the right starting point that will offer him a guarantee of getting into the story:

Anfang jeder Novelle zunächst lärchlich. Es scheint hoffnungslos, daß dieser neue noch unfertige überall empfindliche Organismus in der fertigen Organisation der Welt sich wird erhalten können, die wie jede fertige Organisation danach strebt sich abzuschließen. Allerdings vergisst man hierbei, dass die Novelle, falls sie berechtigt ist, ihre fertige Organisation in sich trägt, auch wenn sie sich noch nicht ganz entfaltet hat; darum ist die Verzweiflung in dieser Hinsicht vor dem Anfang einer Novelle unberechtigt . . . (KAF, 11:65)

(The beginning of every novella is laughable in the first instance. There seems to be no hope that this new, unfinished organism, vulnerable at every point, will be able to survive in the already finished organisation of the world which, like every complete organization, strives to become self-enclosed and to exclude other things. Admittedly one forgets, as one thinks along these lines, that the novella, if it is justified, carries its own already finished organization within itself, even if this has not yet unfolded completely; thus this kind of despair before the beginning of a novella is unjustified.)

When Kafka really did find a beginning, he could become dominated by the unhappy sense of a “fortwährenden Anfang, das Fehlen der Täuschung darüber, dass alles nur ein Anfang und nicht einmal ein Anfang ist” (KAF, 11:187) (“permanent, continuous beginning, the absence of the illusion that everything is just a beginning and not even that”), so that he was able neither to progress any further nor to find a way of ending the story.6

Kafka regarded Dickens with envy as a writer who seemingly “eine Geschichte von ihrem Anfang an in sich erlebt vom fernen Punkt bis zu der herannahrenden Lokomotive aus Stahl, Kohle und Dampf . . . von ihr gejagt wird und aus eigenem Schwung vor ihr läuft wohin sie nur stößt und wohin man sie lockt” (KAF, 9:33) (“experiences a story within himself from its very beginning, from that point in the distance up to
the approaching train made of steel, coal and steam . . . is pursued by the story and runs ahead of it under his own impetus in whichever direction it pushes him and wherever he entices it to follow him)—whereas he himself experienced all the troubles described above when trying to find a thread that would at least help him to get a story moving.

If we look at two of Kafka’s earliest texts, the first from 1906, the draft of a response to Max Brod’s article on aesthetics “Man darf nicht sagen” (One may not say) and the other the beginning of a planned novel, the so-called Raban story, which in some respects is a predecessor of the “Metamorphosis,” we can see some characteristic features of his writing that are connected to the problem of “vorwärts zu kommen” (KAF, 11:187) (“moving ahead”). The first of these texts is just three pages long and deals with the term “ästhetische Apperception” (“aesthetic apperception”). In it Kafka offers a kind of philosophical reflection, but the discussion of the term is challenging and inconsistent. There is something of a lawyer’s and a philosopher’s discursive practices in play here. The author of the text promises a rational procedure but never arrives at a clarifying solution; rather, he persuades the reader that it is not possible to arrive at such a solution. Here we can readily recognize many of the elements found in such short narratives as “gib’s auf!” (“Give Up!”) and other writings: tiredness, loss of orientation, and an unsuccessful struggle, while logical reasoning becomes more and more difficult and contradictory and ends in unresolved conflict. The reader, who has followed the argumentation eagerly in the hope of learning more about this important concept, is left at the end facing both its “uncertainty” and the impression of its lack of fit with practical life. As so often is the case in Kafka’s stories, the line of argument is inverted and the conclusion is missing.

The next text Kafka wrote in the same year is familiar to many readers, namely the opening sequence of “Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande” (“Wedding Preparations in the Country”), of which various drafts exist. There are differences in the descriptions, some simplifications, and some enhancements between version one and two. Both start in an easy manner with an everyday situation, as a man steps out of his door into the street:

Als Eduard Raban, durch den Flurgang kommend, in die Öffnung des Tores trat, sah er, daß es regnete. Es regnete wenig.

Auf dem Trottoir gleich vor ihm gab es viele Menschen in verschiedenenartigem Schritt. Manchmal trat einer vor und durchquerte die

Raban fühlte sich müde. . . . Man arbeitet so übertrieben im Amt, dass man dann sogar zu müde ist, um seine Ferien zu genießen. . . . Und solange Du “man” sagst an Stelle von “ich”, ist es nichts und man kann diese Geschichte aufsagen, sobald Du aber Dir eingesteht daß Du selbst es bist, dann wirst Du förmlich durchbohrt und bist entsetzt. (KAF, 5:15)³

(When Eduard Raban, after coming through the hall, stepped into the opening of the entrance onto the street he saw that it was raining. It was raining lightly.

On the pavement directly in front of him he saw people walking in a variety of ways. Sometimes someone would step forward and cross the street. A little girl held a tired little dog out in front of her on outstretched arms. Two gentlemen were giving information to each other. One of them held out his hands with the palms upwards, moving them evenly, as if he were balancing a load. Then one saw a lady whose hat was heavily laden with ribbons, brooches and flowers. And a young man with a thin stick hurried past, holding his hand flat against his chest, as if it were lamed. Now and again men would come who were smoking and carried small, thinnish, vertical clouds of smoke before them. Three gentlemen, two of them carrying light coats over bent arms, would frequently go from the wall across to the edge of the pavement, look at what was going on there, and then step back to the wall again, still talking. . . .

Raban felt tired. One works so excessively at the office that one is too tired even to enjoy one’s holidays. . . . And as long as you say “one” rather than “I,” it’s nothing and one can tell this story, but as soon as you admit that this is about you, then it cuts you to the very quick and you are horrified.)
It is a typical Kafka scene—like something taken from a painting by Georges Seurat. The first part of the fragment is written in the third-person perspective, with events being observed by an omniscient narrator who reports in the past tense. Then the point of view changes, and in certain passages we hear Raban arguing with himself in the present tense about his undertakings. Later the author changes the perspective yet again and reverts to the authorial point of view. However hilarious many of the scenes may look, we are soon confronted with the protagonist’s problems, difficulties we are also familiar with from the author’s life. The switch to the first-person perspective thus is not merely a technical choice but indicates that the protagonist is the author’s alter ego, expressing moods and analyzing situations and decisions that Kafka himself was struggling with. The crucial moment lies in the switch from the impersonal pronoun “one” to the personal pronoun “I,” a change which opens up a gulf between the detached recital of a story and the experience of being cut to the quick by its significance. James Rolleston (1979, 404) has called Raban a “transparent substitute” for the author (a connection confirmed by Kafka’s free play with the letters of his own name). There is certainly much autobiographical material in these drafts, expressed in a rather direct and subjective form, whereas Kafka later tried to find less immediate ways of expressing his inner concerns. Thus, Raban conjures up in his mind a picture of himself lying securely in bed in the shape of a huge stag beetle while the empty shell of his bourgeois persona is to be sent out into the world on unsteady legs. The image will return in the figure of the transformed Gregor in the “Metamorphosis” but with the fundamental difference that in the later story the dream is no longer a dream and the reader is confronted with an unacceptable premise he is nevertheless forced to accept, not least because the point of view is shifted into the protagonist Gregor, a narrative move that brings the figure close to the reader while at the same time alienating the reader from empirical reality.

We find specific elements of Kafka’s art in this fragmentary novel about Raban. Kafka’s language is plain and unpretentious, and the narrator presents figures and settings visually and theatrically. Raban has to cope with so many movements, so many sharply observed people crossing his path, and so many visual curiosities that he soon gets tired. There is also Kafka’s characteristic way of opening the narrative—inviting the reader to follow the narrator into a seemingly harmless, innocent looking world, which soon turns out to be confusing and difficult to deal with despite the simple language and all the seemingly humorous devia-
tions that prolong the protagonist’s promenade almost ad infinitum. If readers simply follow the narrator’s authorial perspective, they might be misled by the colorful street scene and only discover the first suggestion of a disconnection between form and content when Raban reveals what he is thinking. A crucial point here is Kafka’s combination of the pronouns “man” (one), “du” (you), and “ich” (I) in the reflection at the end of the paragraph that turns the passage into a metatext that conveys the narrator’s own options regarding the choice between different ways of describing things via the protagonist’s revelations about his state of mind.

Another typical element, the “impossibility of narration,” seems to be implicit in Kafka’s texts from early on, both in the struggle for explanations and sometimes in the fragmentary character of the texts. The attentive reader will be brought to reconsider his or her reading strategy and ask whether Kafka’s texts offer more resistance than other texts and therefore whether they demand to be read in different ways. Is it enough to describe Kafka’s narrators as unreliable narrators, or is the problem located in the approach to subject matter? Does it originate, for example, in the typical “Schaukel-Diskurse als sprunghafte Widerspruchs-sentwicklung” (“see-sawing discourses as a way of developing contradictions by discontinuous progression”) with which Kafka was familiar from the Jewish narrative tradition (BrM, 154), whereby the meaning changes according to shifts of perspective, as in the famous discussion between Josef K. and the prison chaplain in The Trial? The “Negierung der Erzählbarkeit” (“negation of narratability”) in Kafka’s work is the starting point of Peter Höfle’s argument. He characterizes the specific form of Kafka’s narratives as “aufbauende Zerstörung” (“constructive destruction”), an expression taken from Kafka’s notebooks in spring 1918 (KAF, 6:222). In Höfle’s view (1998, 159), Kafka’s entire oeuvre embodies a “Poetik des Mangels” (“poetics of deficiency”).

In the two texts from 1906, we find two important indications for both the deviant discursive progression highlighted by Höfle and the relation between the narrator’s perspective and the exposure of the narrative as such or, to put it another way, between the shifting loyalties of the narrator and the communicative effect of the text. When reading The Trial and other narratives by Kafka, early readers experienced difficulty in getting hold of the content and the argument because the narration appeared to lack consistency and logical stringency. The peculiarities of Kafka’s narration are largely responsible for the ways his works have been read—or misread—over the years because his strange stories and uncommon motifs made the strongest impression on his early readers, prompt-
ing them to compare his stories to others they were already familiar with, such as the fantastical tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann. After all, what do we do when we have difficulties with understanding a text? We often refer to something similar in order to get some help for the interpretation. This kind of normalization can be carried out on different levels.

If we look at the beginning of some of the published texts, a novel and some stories, we can take the first chapter of Der Verschollene (The Man who Disappeared) as an invitation from Kafka to read the novel in the tradition of the great novels of self-formation from the classical and realistic periods in Europe. A suitable model for Karl’s story might also be sought in the novel of travel (see Gerhard Neumann’s discussion in chapter 4). In both types of novel a young person is sent out into the world to gain experience, but with the aim of bringing him home again, matured by the challenges and adventures he had to deal with, and ready to settle down to an ordinary life as a useful member of society. Kafka seems at first to open his novel with the same procedure, but the reader soon discovers complications that neither the young protagonist nor the reader knows how to tackle or to integrate in their fields of experience. Even if Karl Roßmann seems initially to be guided by a benevolent Providence when he gains admission to the fine house of his rich uncle, where he is provided with riding and piano lessons and an English teacher so that he can have as “brilliant” a career as his uncle, the reader senses from early on the dangers in the situation Karl is sliding into.

In this way Kafka designs a pattern and invites the reader to follow it, while at the same time building in warning signals that an experienced reader will spot immediately. Through these expressions, signs, and words, the narrator establishes an unobtrusive but important degree of distance between the narrator and the protagonist. Thus, the narrator may either lead the naive reader to see the fictional world through the eyes of the protagonist and feel alienated along with him, or he may make the more experienced reader suspicious and wary of looking at the world in this way.

Beside this network of motifs and patterns that help the reader to navigate through the texts, Kafka uses other means, which have a contrary effect. He organizes a game of ambiguities, contradictions and traps that force the reader into strenuous mental gymnastics in an effort to establish some logical order. The reader follows the narrator and his syntactic model: conjunctions like “if,” “though,” “but,” and “however” invite him to make rational pirouettes, while causal and consecutive clauses give the impression of logical argumentation, although such an
argument is not actually present. Other expressions like “perhaps,” “in a way,” “rather,” “in a sense,” “seemingly,” “nearly,” “at first glance,” and “in reality” relativize the logic of progression, as in the opening lines of a key narrative from his last period of writing, “Der Bau” (“The Burrow”):

Ich habe den Bau eingerichtet und er scheint wohlgelungen. Von außen ist eigentlich nur ein großes Loch sichtbar, dieses führt aber in Wirklichkeit nirgends hin, schon nach ein paar Schritten stößt man auf natürliches festes Gestein. (KAF, 8: 165)

(I have established my burrow, and it seems to be a success. From the outside all that is visible is a large hole, but in fact it leads nowhere; after just a few steps you hit hard, natural rock.) (KSS, 162)

In the first half of the opening sentence, the first-person narrator, a mole-like creature, talks about the result of his labors, but the second half concludes only that the burrow seems to be well made. At first the hole mentioned in the second sentence is taken by the reader to be the entrance, but it turns out to be merely a mock opening leading straight into a wall of rock. That the narrator’s logic does not match the reader’s expectations is made clear when the narrator applies the adjective “natural” to a system that does not immediately strike one as the most natural. But the reader is likely to stop fighting against the narrator’s strange logic quite quickly and to listen instead to the narrator who is the architect of this building/burrow as he explains the distinctiveness of his burrow/construction (detecting perhaps in the ambiguity of the term “Bau”—meaning both burrow and construction—that this strange enterprise may allude to the narrative itself).

A contrasting example is the opening of “Ein Landarzt” (“A Country Doctor”), which begins with an admission: “Ich war in großer Verlegenheit” (KAF, 1:200) (“I was in great difficulty”). From this not very promising start, which goes on to enumerate all manner of hindrances preventing the doctor from responding to a call to visit a patient, the story suddenly starts to accelerate, trapping the doctor on his carriage and whisking him away “wie Holz in die Strömung” (KAF, 1:201–2) (“like wood in a current”), finally leaving the reader in great difficulties as he too struggles to understand the nightmarish story.

We surely can agree with Beicken when he says that Kafka “takes over the gesture of traditional narration without fulfilling the promise of familiar contents. What he narrates is always alien in character” (1979,
The difference between the traditional form of narration and Kafka’s can be ascribed to certain factors on different levels. He certainly did not write in accordance with the ruling literary conventions of his time, neither stylistically nor with regard to expectations of meaningfulness or logical progression. As many critics have demonstrated, this had an impact both on his narrative technique and on the reception of his works. Beda Allemann found that Kafka’s works do not have a conventional narrative structure—typically, an opening situation, complication, development and resolution, all arranged in chronological order (see Introduction, note 1). Not only does the action usually stagnate in Kafka’s stories almost immediately but the narrated world is not situated in the empirical world and seems to be detached from time as we know it. This is what Kafka might have meant when he spoke of “Stillstand im Fortschritt” (“stasis in progress”) or “stehender Sturmlauf” (“charging on the spot”) (see Andringa 2008, 331).

Klaus Ramm (1971, 1979), on the basis of earlier investigations by Beißner, Walser, Allemann, and others, has made important observations that may help us to understand why Kafka often did not succeed in his efforts to carry a narrative through from beginning to end. Kafka himself may have been aware of more hidden obstructions than those he mentions. Ramm was interested in the problem of narrative organization in Kafka’s narratives. He saw the main difficulty in the non-congruence of traditional narrative terminology with Kafka’s mode of narrative progression. Instead of following a particular path, Kafka’s protagonists are ceaselessly thinking of alternatives, which are incorporated in the action in hypothetical or subjunctive form (cf. Kremer 2008, 344). “On the Gallery” and “Before the Law” are two striking examples of a form of narration that takes the form of a reflection that is progressively deepened and yet arrives at no goal, a pattern of thinking that we have met as a central characteristic of Kafka’s writing from the very beginning. No wonder it was extraordinarily difficult to guide a protagonist through all these hypothetical alternatives, relativizations, and constrictions toward a solution. When an experiment of this kind failed because “the plenitude of what was imagined” could not be got down on paper, Kafka had simply to dismiss his figures. Such a complicated method does not aim at a synthesis or conclusion but rather produces a sequence or series of sequences in which construction is followed by deconstruction.

In his study on the art of portraiture, Peter von Matt tries to capture this phenomenon of Kafka’s very special kind of writing. He argues
that the fury of the writing spirit transforms Kafka into “ein Textwe-
sen” (“a textual entity”) who ignores all kinds of obligations and laws: “Even within an evolving text a preceding sentence has no power over its successor, the event currently being described is not determined by the event that has just been described; saying A does not involve the obligation to say B, and saying B does not involve the obligation to have said A first. References to a reality or an idea are only necessary in as much as they facilitate the gesture of emancipation from any such obligation on the part of the writer to refer to things outside the text” (1983, 16). Other critics have been struck by the same peculiarity. Umberto Eco, for example, describes the phenomenon as “the autonomous movement of a text” (1984, 13), while Neumann outlines the movements of “reversal and deviation” in Kafka’s “slipping paradoxes.”

Perhaps one of the most outstanding examples of this kind of procedure is to be found in “The Judgment,” where almost every statement is inverted in the course of the action. In spite of this lack of narrative consequence (seen from a traditional point of view), Kafka is filled with an exuberant feeling of happiness or even ecstasy, which he usually expresses through his feelings of exaltation, euphoria, sovereignty, and domination. These feelings find its equivalents on the level of narrated events through the suspension of gravity (as in “The Bucket Rider,” “A Hunger Artist,” “Investigations of a Dog”). In “The Metamorphosis” and in “The Burrow” we find examples of a similar kind of happiness, such as the “Schwingen” (“swinging/vibration”) experienced by Gregor as he hangs from the ceiling. At such moments he feels free and no longer bound by the laws of gravity, even if he has lost the outer attributes of a human being:

Besonders oben auf der Decke hing er gern; es war ganz anders, als das Liegen auf dem Fußboden; man atmete freier; ein leichtes Schwingen ging durch den Körper; und in der fast glücklichen Zerstreutheit, in der sich Gregor dort oben befand, konnte es geschehen, dass er zu seiner eigenen Überraschung sich losließ und auf den Boden klatschte. (KAF, 1:126–27)

(He especially liked hanging from the ceiling; it was completely different from lying on the floor; one could breathe more freely; a faint swinging sensation went through the body; and in the almost happy absent-mindedness which Gregor felt up there, it could happen to his own surprise that he let go and plopped onto the floor). (KSS, 23)

In “The Burrow” too we find a description that recalls Kafka’s images of happiness on those few occasions when all the obstacles to writing were eliminated. The first-person narrator expects to find the greatest possible happiness in a specially constructed room in his burrow once the whole work is finished (something that is never in fact realized and indeed may not ultimately be achievable):

In diesem Hohlraum hatte ich mir immer, und wohl kaum mit Unrecht, den schönsten Aufenthaltsort vorgestellt, den es für mich geben konnte. Auf dieser Rundung hängen, hinauf sich ziehen, hinabzugleiten, sich überschlagen und wieder Boden unter den Füßen haben. (KAF, 8:192)

(I had always imagined this hollow space, probably not without some justice, as the most wonderful abode I could ever have. To hang from this dome, to pull yourself up, to slide down, to turn a somersault, and once again to feel the ground under your feet.) (KSS, 179–80)

In all these examples we find the above-mentioned overlap between the narrator’s and the protagonist’s feelings that the editor of the critical edition, Malcolm Pasley, noticed when working with Kafka’s manuscripts. The close link between the author and the writing process, the interpenetration of the writing situation and the situations being narrated, results in the recording of processes in which the movement of writing (literally the movement of the pen across the page), narrative progression, and the unfolding of events correspond to one another so that the text as a whole absorbs the flow of narration with all its obstacles and recalcitrant reflections. This illustrates what Kafka meant when he said, in numerous variations, that his entire life was dictated by his relation to literature and the writing of literature. It is the process of writing that matters more to him than the final outcome—although of course he was always disappointed if that process could not be unfolded and pursued to a fitting conclusion. In this writing process lay for Kafka the most intimate connection between living and writing. As he writes, life is transformed into literature and literature into life. Only as a writer did he feel fully alive, albeit at the cost of radical separation from what the majority of non-writers would recognize as life truly lived.

In his letters and diaries, Kafka almost invariably uses the term writing (“mein Schreiben”) for the activity on which his life depended. He does not distinguish between his fictional and non-fictional writing in this respect (he turned back to his diary, for example, when the fictional
vein dried up), and the reason seems to be that all forms of writing had the virtue of keeping the activity of putting words on paper going in the hope of not missing that crucial moment when the flow of a story might emerge, involuntarily, from the movement of his pen.  

It is important to remember that not all of Kafka’s literary works fall under the category of “narratives.” His longer works are definitely narratives, and so are many of his novellas or longer short stories. But it seems important to draw a categorical line between these texts and some of the shorter pieces of prose, “die kleinen Winkelzüge” (“minor maneuvers”) as Kafka called them (see Kurz 1995, 345), which are not really narratives but rather short descriptions or reflections. These are often strikingly visual and can have a strong element of tentative, sometimes unsuccessful or inconclusive reasoning, as in “Die Bäume” (“The Trees”) from Betrachtung (Contemplation), Kafka’s first published book of prose. As Neumann has argued convincingly (1968, 728), this whole text is concentrated on and built around deviation—no action takes place other than in the mind contemplating some tree trunks in the snow, no conflict, no resolution. There is instability, but the instability is concentrated in the movement of thought and perception. Each mental movement undoes the previous perception so that by the end we are left totally unsettled. If we think of the first text mentioned above on apperception, “Man darf nicht sagen,” it seems that these two texts permit an interesting comparison. The text about apperception started in logical reasoning but moved toward narrative as the reasoning faltered, whereas “Die Bäume” starts with perception and moves toward an increasingly reflective mode of discourse as it becomes unclear what is actually seen—or not seen.

Such deviations, which are not narratives per se, are sometimes integrated in the narrative flow of the longer texts. More often than not, they seem to hinder the flow, at least temporarily. Although part of the narrative progression, they seem to turn and redirect it, moving it toward some kind of paradox. In this way the deviant movements on the micro-level seem vital for the structure on the macro-level, alienating the text from normal narrative progression and perhaps even from the concept of narrative itself.

As we have seen, Kafka tried repeatedly to describe the difficulties he felt when struggling to grasp a topic and find an adequate form for it. At the end of January 1921, while staying at a sanatorium in Matliary, vainly trying to build up some strength after the debilitating onset of tuberculosis, he tried to write to Max Brod to explain some of the difficulties he had with his conception of life, but the letter swelled up both in volume
and in complexity. Finally he tried to explain his difficulties figuratively to his friend in the following passage:

Es ist aber eben das Musterbild eines schlechten Schriftstellers, dem das Mitzuteilende wie eine schwere Seeschlange in den Armen liegt, wohin er tastet, nach rechts, nach links immer nimmt es kein Ende, und selbst was er umfasst, kann er nicht ertragen. (MB, 313).

(It is the paradigm of a bad writer, who carries what he has to convey in his arms like a heavy sea-snake; in whichever direction he reaches out, whether to the right or the left, it never comes to an end, and he cannot even support the part he is holding in his arms.)

There are many drafts by Kafka that start like this at some point in the middle of a story rather than at the beginning. As James Rolleston has noted, “Kafka’s stories begin in the middle; or rather, near the end, as the very specific situational details seize hold of the hero’s mind (sometimes his body too) and propel him forward” (1979, 3). As Anniken Greve points out in her analysis of the “Metamorphosis” in chapter 2 of this volume, even this story that otherwise satisfies the definitions of a narrative, does not start at the very beginning. The reader gets no indication of how the metamorphosis came about, how the changes started, and what exactly happened to Gregor as he was assuming his new, verminous shape. Of course, here we can point to the convention that the narrator may start at any point he wants to and thus throw the reader in medias res, but that is not the kind of problem we are discussing at this point.

All of Kafka’s protagonists have a history behind them when they appear on the scene, whether one looks at Karl Roßmann, whose embarrassing past is pulled apart by his uncle in front of the authorities in New York, or K. in The Castle who (like Josef K. in this respect) is not regarded as trustworthy by the reader because his past is unknown and unverifiable. But we are familiar with this technique from analytical drama and from many other texts as well, especially from all kinds of detective stories where the past has to be unfolded once the action has begun and as things happen in the present time. As readers we are willing to read on and find out, as we do at the beginning of The Trial, only to discover after some time that this text, in spite of many similarities, does not fulfill the norms of the genre it initially seemed to belong to. Thus, pretending to follow a specific pattern seems to facilitate the beginning of a new text for Kafka even when he does not actually intend to continue along the same lines.
The last two examples I wish to consider are taken from Kafka’s last years of writing. After the onset of his tuberculosis in 1917, a series of narratives mark the beginning of a new period of creativity for Kafka. From 1918 onward, he wrote, for example, a number of very short stories or sketches based on Greek myths, such as “Prometheus,” “Poseidon,” and “Das Schweigen der Sirenen” ("The Silence of the Sirens"). By taking these pre-existing stories as his point of departure, Kafka seems to have avoided the frustrations of beginning and not finding an end. He can simply leap into the middle of the story, twist it in another direction, and mystify the reader by estranging its content. Another such case is a little story about the Tower of Babel, written in September 1920 and published by Brod in 1931 under the title “Das Stadtwappen” ("The City Coat of Arms").

The motif of the Tower of Babel accompanied Kafka throughout his life (see Binder 1975, 241). Kafka’s well-known comment “Wir graben den Schacht von Babel” (KAF, 8:95) ("We are digging the Shaft of Babel") dates from the same time as the story, and here again we can see him using the image in a quite unfamiliar way, for instead of referring to the new structure as a kind of skyscraper, he inverts the dimension of the tower, sending it beneath the surface of the earth.

If we compare Kafka’s story with the original myth in the Book of Genesis, we can see the difference between the two narratives immediately. The people of Babylon decided their city should have a tower so immense that it would reach into the heavens. The tower was built not for the worship and praise of God but for the glory of man: “And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4, King James Version). God, seeing what the people were doing, confounded their languages and scattered the people across the earth.

Kafka starts the narrative “somewhere in the middle,” pointing out that all is well when the construction of the tower begins, at which time interpreters and workers are already at work. Thus, the building activity starts after the confusion of language, reversing the biblical order of cause and effect. What matters is only to construct a tower that reaches into heaven, and to achieve this goal it is considered wise to build as slowly as possible because technical progress that they hoped to achieve within one hundred years would make it easier to accomplish the building. On the other hand, it is unclear to the builders whether the next generation would like the building or would prefer to destroy it and start again. These doubts undermined the project and the morale of the building.
workers who neglected the tower and concentrated instead on building a nice town to live in. This in turn gives rise to jealousy and quarrels among the workers, which further hinders work on the tower. While the second and third generations continue the work with even greater skill, the senselessness of the undertaking becomes obvious. But it is too late to give up because people in the city are now too involved with one another. From this point onward, the city is filled with longing for the prophesied day when a “Riesenfaust” (giant fist) will smash the whole city. Which is why, according to the conclusion of Kafka’s story, the city has a hammer in its coat of arms.

If one compares Kafka’s version to the original myth, the most obvious change is the lack of a larger, framing narrative, since the pact between God and mankind has been omitted. God is never mentioned by Kafka, the building of the tower has nothing to do with disobedience or hubris, and no reason is given for the confusion of tongues. The focus is not on the accomplishment of the tower, but on changes from an early stage that obstruct progress. Ultimately, the only apparent purpose of the story is to “explain” Prague’s coat of arms, albeit with one crucial difference. Just as Kafka exchanged the torch in the hand of the Statue of Liberty for a sword in The Man Who Disappeared, Kafka changed the meaning of the fist with the sword in the Prague coat of arms, turning it into an image of the desire for destruction rather than for protection. Thus the original story loses its meaning entirely in the new version, while the new story changes the meaning on every level to produce an antithesis. Although the narrator constructs a new pseudo-logic, he deconstructs it at the same time: the senselessness of the project is acknowledged by all, but the work goes on while everybody waits for its destruction. Instead of God’s punishment, the people damn themselves to a Sisyphean prolongation of their undertaking. The story seems to illustrate Kafka’s aphorism that in life generally there is a goal, but no way (KAF, 7:146). It may also (and consistently) express Kafka’s view of his own creative work.

The manuscripts written after 1920 consist of numerous recordings of small events, impressions, or thoughts, but they also contain a good number of promising stories in which we as readers are left regretting the fact that we seem to be deprived of the solution, which sometimes appears to lie just round the corner. The evidence of the manuscripts shows that Kafka was still struggling “in immer neuen Ansätzen den Einstieg in das Erzählen zu finden” (KAF, 8:251) (“to find a way into narration by attempting one new approach after another”). In 1921 he states that he wants to use small components from his “autobiographical inves-
tigations” (KAF, 8:10) to build a “house,” but he still fears that he lacks the strength to complete the construction.21

The last story I wish to discuss was not, as Binder assumed (1975, 239–41), written at the same time as the other stories, which were based on pre-existing narratives, but was actually composed in the autumn of 1923 when Kafka was living in Berlin, away from Prague and his family for the first time in his life.22 This finding, one of the results of the critical edition of Kafka’s works, puts the text, entitled “Heimkehr” (“Homecoming”) by Brod, into a new context. His difficult economic situation and the spread of his tuberculosis made Kafka think more and more of the necessity of returning to Prague. The little story alludes almost certainly to the parable of the prodigal son from the gospel of St. Luke, but it differs significantly from its predecessor, possibly because of the ambivalent feelings Kafka had with regard to his return to his hometown.23

In the biblical parable we hear of a man who has two sons. The younger demands his share of the inheritance and goes off to a distant country, where he wastes everything and finally has to take work as a swineherd. There he comes to his senses and decides to return home and throw himself on his father’s mercy, thinking that even if his father does disown him, being one of his servants would be better than feeding pigs. But when he returns home, his father greets him with open arms and celebrates his return. The older brother resents his father’s favored treatment of the younger brother, but the father responds that he must be glad, for his brother who once was dead is alive again, was lost and now is found. In the original story we can recognize the narrative schema of “someone telling somebody on some occasion that something happened.” Kafka, however, makes some surprising and radical changes that throw this scheme into disorder:


(I have returned. I have crossed the entrance and look around me. It is my father’s old farmyard. The puddle in the middle. A tangled jumble of useless equipment blocks the way to the stairs leading up to the loft. The
cat lies in wait on the balustrade... I have arrived. Who will receive me? Who is waiting behind the kitchen door? ... Do you feel safe and secure? Do you feel at home? I don’t know, I’m very unsure.)

The crucial change lies in the shift from an authorial third-person story to a first-person narrative told in the present tense and in direct speech. All the preceding events of the biblical story are absent, and if we do not assume that the story of the prodigal son is the underlying model for this one, we have to admit that we are confronted with a person we know nothing about. We see the lurking cat and the disorder of the neglected farm through his eyes, and it is not long before the narrator addresses me, the reader, asking if I feel at home. Who answers? I (the reader) or the man who has just arrived? We deduce that the latter does, for he explains that it is his father’s house, although he does not feel connected to anything. He does not dare to knock on the door. He tries to listen from a distance to what is going on in the kitchen but can hear nothing and carries on waiting so as to respect the secret of those sitting in the kitchen. “Je länger man vor der Tür zögert, desto fremder wird man. Wie wäre es wenn jetzt jemand die Tür öffnete und mich etwas fragte. Wäre ich dann nicht selbst wie einer der das Geheimnis wahren will” (KAF, 8:163) (“The longer one hesitates outside the door, the more of a stranger one becomes. How would it be if someone were now to open the door and ask me something? Wouldn’t I then be like someone who wants to keep a secret?”).

The story ends with an unbridgeable distance between the returning man and his family, who may be sitting in the kitchen. They do not know about his arrival, while he adopts the posture of someone who is hesitating, someone who is just as reluctant as they are to reveal his secret. No reunion with his father takes place; indeed, who knows if the father is even alive? There is no joy at seeing one another again, no reconciliation, not even an effort on the part of the returning man to overcome his timidity to knock at the door and reveal his presence. If the opening sentences look like the preparation for the last steps to complete the return, the closing sentences show that the reunion does not take place. Uncertainty and ambivalence take over: every observation is relativized, what seemed to be secure becomes uncertain, home becomes an alien place. We as readers enter the story via a typically Kafkaesque route, by following the protagonist and arriving at the same state of mind as he is in when it is over. We feel as uncertain as he does, we do not know if we have reached the end or if some act of courage might change the situa-
tion or the door might open—or whether everything might end in great disappointment.

Similarly, between the beginning and the end of the story about the tower or shaft of Babel, we find Kafka’s well-known words: “Es gibt nur ein Ziel, keinen Weg. Was wir Weg nennen, ist Zögern” (KAF, 7:146) (“There is only a goal, but no path. What we call a path is hesitation”). Again, the story shows exactly this pattern of movement, taking one step forward and two steps back, before it finally stagnates at some point, unsure if it is at the end.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by Ronald Speirs.
2. Zimmermann discusses, for example, six defective twists in the plot or incredible suspensions that contradict all narrative logic (2004, 65–72).
4. As a parallel we can see Karl Roßmann’s thoughts in “The Stoker” by listening to Schubal’s words: “Sie bemerken freilich nicht, daß selbst diese schöne Rede Löcher hatte” (KAF, 2:29) (“Admittedly they did not notice that even this fine speech had holes in it”).
5. Written in November or December 1909 after seeing a group of Japanese acrobats at the Theater Variété of Prague.
8. There are two versions of this fragment; the later one dates from 1910. Between 1904 and 1906, and again from 1909 to 1910, Kafka wrote these short, often fragmentary, narratives, which were subsequently published in Beschreibung eines Kampfes (Description of a Struggle). In 1909 he started writing about his journeys (Reiseberichte), and from 1910 onward he wrote his diary.
10. See also the Blumfeld fragment, which Kafka started writing in 1915 after abandoning his work on The Trial, for marvelous examples of movement, stasis, and the expansion and contraction of narrative time. Kafka notes on January 18, 1915, “Unfähig zu längerer konzentrierter Arbeit. . . . Trotzdem eine neue Geschichte angefangen die alten fürchtete ich mich zu verderben. Nun stehen vor mir 4 oder 5 Geschichten aufgerichtet wie die Pferde vor dem Cirkusdirektor Schumann bei Beginn der Produktion” (KAF, 11:70–71) (“Incapable of a longer period of sustained concentration. . . . Despite this, I have begun a new story, I was afraid to spoil the old ones. Now 4 or 5 stories are standing up on their hind legs in front of me like horses in front of the circus director Schumann at the beginning of a performance”).
11. Peter U. Beicken (1979, 43) argues that Kafka reveals the deficient vision of a main character or focalizer through the dialectical interplay of contradictions between the protagonist’s and the narrator’s perspectives (“the perspective of experience” and the “perspective of observation”).

12. The assumption that the reader is often led along a course parallel to that of the protagonist and his attempts to orient himself is still made by critics today; see, for example, Schmidt (2007, 228).

13. In her excellent study on Kafka’s textgenesis, Annette Schütterle analyzes Kafka’s Oktavhefte (Journals) from the period 1916–1917 and beyond as “a process of writing that takes the form of a system of partial construction” (2002, 140) as described in Kafka’s story “Building the Great Wall of China.”


16. A few quotations indicate this important topic: “nur der Wellengang des Schreibens bestimmt mich. . . . Meine Lebensweise ist nur auf das Schreiben hin eingerichtet” (F, 66) (“Only the wave-like movement of writing determines my life. . . . My way of life is entirely organized for the purpose of writing”); “dass Schreiben meine einzige innere Daseinsmöglichkeit ist” (F, 367) (“That writing is the only inner possibility of existence for me”); “Alles, was sich nicht auf Literatur bezieht, hasse ich” (DW, 140) (“I hate everything that is not related to literature”); “Ich habe kein literarisches Interesse, sondern bestehe aus Literatur” (F, 444) (“I don’t have literary interests, I consist entirely of literature”); “Mein ganzes Wesen ist auf Literatur gerichtet” (F, 456) (“My entire being is directed towards literature”).

17. Kafka was certainly not alone in having this problem. Many great novelists experienced difficulties in writing, and at the beginning of the twentieth century we find a great number of writers suffering not just from writer’s block but also from the crisis of language—the disjunction of signifier and signified—that became acute around that time.

18. In his next letter from the beginning of February, Kafka apologizes that his long letter might not have arrived, but if so, this would not matter, since nothing was lost because “so wie er kein Ende hatte, hatte er auch keine Mitte, nur Anfang, nur Anfang. Ich könnte gleich wieder von neuem anfangen” (MB, 314) (“Just as it had no ending, it had no middle, only a beginning, only a beginning. I could start from the beginning again immediately”).

19. In a study from 1985, Hans Dieter Zimmermann analyzed these and other short narratives by Kafka on a modified structural basis and in comparison with Robert Walser’s prose. He showed the specific way in which the two authors construct a narrative, paying particular attention to Kafka’s use of a pre-existing pattern as a starting point and his deviation from it, as in the examples mentioned earlier. Also many other critics have pointed out this specific procedure (cf. Neumann 1968, 702–44).

20. Like most of the stories in Kafka’s manuscripts, this story was given no title by Kafka.
21. Here we are reminded of the Babel metaphor as an impossible undertaking.  
22. For the evidence of the manuscripts, see KKANIIA, 134–42).  
23. There are several fragmentary texts from this period dealing with the theme of return: “Es ist meine alte Heimatstadt und ich bin wieder in sie zurückgekehrt” (KKANII, 562) (“It is my old home town and I have returned to it”) and “Es ist meine alte Heimatstadt und ich irre langsam, stockend durch ihre Gassen” (KAF, 8:154) (“It is my old home town and I stray slowly, hesitantly, through its streets”).

Works Cited


