Franz Kafka

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Movement has always been a staple of storytelling, especially in narratives involving adventures, conquests, or banishments, pursuits or escapes, encounters or withdrawals, ascents or descents, finding or losing the way, or myriad combinations of such elements. It has also been associated with the experience and procedures of writing, as in the figure of Pegasus, who flies between the Muses and the poets, or the motus animi continuus that refuses to let Thomas Mann’s Gustav von Aschenbach rest, or the scribbling pen from which emerge the journeys undertaken by Uncle Toby and the many other figures of wit and fancy who populate Sterne’s Tristram Shandy. That Kafka had his own distinctive ways of presenting movement in his stories, ways that seem to promise some insight into his perplexing imaginings, has not escaped his commentators, though the topic deserves to be pursued more extensively.¹ This essay will consider movement as a focus of narration, as a motive of narration, and as a mode of narration. I shall begin by examining Betrachtung, Kafka’s first published collection of prose, in some detail, before going on to consider the topic in more general terms.

As the double meaning of the title suggests, Betrachtung (Contemplation)² is a set of very short narratives addressed both to the eye and to the mind, in which the reader is shown scenes from life and invited to reflect on them in company with the (mostly first-person) narrator. One has to say “scenes from life” because the descriptions seldom create the
illusion of solidity that is the aim of the conventional realist author. We are presented rather with imagery that captures a shifting kaleidoscope of states of mind. In some of them, impressions drawn from nature and society predominate, while in others the narrator’s imagination is clearly creating a quite distinct world of its own, but in every instance the border is permeable or fluctuating. Together they create what Kafka would later describe as the “monstrous” (ungeheuer, also meaning “uncanny” or “enormous”) world in his head that it was the task of writing to set free.

What interests me here are the contrasting patterns of movement within and between these different spheres of experience, those that are completed and those that are not, and what they might tell us about the imagination in which movement and stasis feature so prominently and so pervasively.

The abruptness of the transition from one sphere to another, for example, is clearly conveyed in “Der plötzliche Spaziergang” (KAF, 1:19) (“The Sudden Walk”). Here the narrator-protagonist envisages the possibility of stepping completely outside the circumscribed world of social conformity simply by donning his outdoor coat and announcing that he must go for a walk at an hour when, like the rest of the family, he would normally be getting ready for bed. The little story is told in a series of “if” clauses (most of them belonging to a single, long, breathless sentence with a rising rhythm) which are hypothetical in sense but so specific and vivid in their details that the description reads like an account of a past event (or various such incidents) now being retold as if the events were happening in the present. The use of the indicative rather than the subjunctive is calculated to make it seem plausible that what is conjectured can indeed be realized. The narrator’s increasingly agitated suppositions, carried on a surge of emotion, culminate in a moment of release, indeed almost of apotheosis, in which the body he is speaking about is suddenly filled with a strange form of physical movement that matches the flow of his thought and feelings:

Wenn man sich auf der Gasse wiederfindet, mit Gliedern, die diese schon unerwartete Freiheit, die man ihnen verschafft hat, mit besonderer Beweglichkeit beantworten, wenn man durch diesen einen Entschluß alle Entschlußfähigkeit in sich gesammelt fühlt, wenn man mit größerer als der gewöhnlichen Bedeutung erkennt, daß man ja mehr Kraft als Bedürfnis hat, die schnellste Veränderung leicht zu bewirken und zu ertragen, und wenn man so die langen Gassen hinläuft,—dann ist man für diesen Abend gänzlich aus seiner Familie ausgetreten, die ins Wesenlose abschwenkt, während man selbst, ganz fest, schwarz vor Umrissen-
heit, hinten die Schenkel schlagend, sich zu seiner wahren Gestalt erhebt.  
(KAF, 1:19–20)

(When you come to yourself again on the street, with limbs that respond with particular mobility to the quite unexpected freedom you have given them, when you feel that your whole ability to make decisions has been concentrated by this one decision, when you recognize with greater significance than usual that your strength to effect and endure even the most rapid change with ease is greater than your need to do so, and when you walk in this manner down the long streets—then, for that evening, you have stepped out of your family entirely, which slips off into insubstantiality, while you, firm, silhouetted in black, slapping your flanks behind you, rise up to assume your true shape.)

These last few phrases suggest that the unremarkable, petty-bourgeois protagonist is transformed at this moment of exaltation or elevation (Erhebung is a key term for Kafka) into the figure of a rider on a horse, or even a fusion of the two. This strange notion of human-animal hybridism re-appears elsewhere in Betrachtung in the “Wish to Become a Red Indian,” and it was later to recur in the name of Roßmann, the protagonist of The Man Who Disappeared, and later still in the figure of the new lawyer, Dr. Bucephalus, formerly the warhorse of Alexander the Great (but now a student of the law), whose equine origins are betrayed to the knowledgeable eye by the curious way he walks up a flight of steps. In “The Sudden Walk,” however, the suggestion is developed no further, as the narrator-protagonist (denoted only by the impersonal pronoun “man”) is imagined as using his newfound resolve merely to call on a friend at this late hour and to ask after his health. Taken at face value, the story seems to be one of the most optimistic in the collection; it implies that equilibrium can be achieved between the different forces pulling on the self so that it would be possible to remain a member of society, albeit an eccentric one, while “rising up” (sich erheben) in one’s hybrid “true shape” and drawing energy and confidence from an experience of the self that places it wholly outside the control of “insubstantial” (wesenlos) family life. On the other hand, the narrator may actually be deluding himself that his ability to make decisions will be strengthened and confirmed simply by visiting a friend, even at this late hour. For by making this visit he could equally well be withdrawing again into the security of familiar social relationships rather than facing the challenges presented by the new dimension of the self that has just opened up to him. Most of
the other stories in the collection do not support the optimistic conclusion of “The Sudden Walk.”

Indeed, the very next story, entitled “Entschlüsse” (“Decisions”), which begins by asserting that it must be possible to “raise oneself up” (sich erheben) out of a state of misery (“Aus einem elenden Zustand” [KAF, 1:20]) through the determined use of will-power, proceeds, via an admission of the predictable failure of any such undertaking, to the desire for withdrawal into a state of complete isolation and immobility. The story unfolds as a series of conjectures about what would follow from a given starting point. In this case the narrating self appears to be alone at the outset (rather than in the midst of a family), and his ambition is not to “step outside the family completely” but rather to move, both literally and emotionally, into contact with others:

Ich reiße mich vom Sessel los, umlaufe den Tisch, mache Kopf und Hals beweglich, bringe Feuer in die Augen, spanne die Muskeln um sie herum. Arbeit jedem Gefühl entgegen, begrüße A. stürmisch, wenn er jetzt kommen wird, dulde B. freundlich in meinem Zimmer, ziehe bei C. alles, was gesagt wird, trotz Schmerz und Mühe mit langen Zügen in mich hinein. (KAF, 1:20)

(I tear myself out of my armchair, run around the table, make head and neck mobile, put fire into my eyes, tensing the muscles around them. I make efforts to go out to meet every feeling halfway, if A. comes I greet him with stormy enthusiasm, I tolerate B. amicably in my room, and, when C. is present, I draw everything that is said into myself in long draughts, despite all the pain and effort.)

The narrator-protagonist cannot imagine himself making such a move successfully, however, as he is convinced that he is bound to make some mistake, that the whole enterprise will stocken (“come to a standstill”), compelling him to “go back around the circle.” Faced with this dismal prospect, his preference is for immobility. He decides that he should “als schwere Masse sich verhalten” (“behave as a heavy mass”) and, even if he were to feel himself being fortgeblasen (“blown away”), he should not allow himself to be tempted into taking even “a single unnecessary step” or to engage in any emotional contact with others. In short, his aim is “was vom Leben als Gespenst noch übrig ist, mit eigener Hand niederdrücken, d.h., die letzte grabmäßige Ruhe noch vermehren und nichts außer ihr mehr bestehen lassen” (KAF, 1:20) (“to suppress with my own
hand all that remains of life as a ghost, to increase the ultimate, grave-like rest and permit nothing else to exist”). Here the optimistic belief that an “elevating,” truer form of movement could be attained as an alternative to the static routines of social existence is challenged by the pessimistic view that even entry into social intercourse may not be achievable by an effort of the will because the self feels itself to be fundamentally inert and alienated from all other selves. The condition of being “miserable” or more precisely elend (with the etymological root sense of being “out of the land” or “exiled”) seems to entail inescapable stasis and loneliness in the midst of life. An explanation for this bleak conviction is perhaps to be found in the description of everyday existence as “das Leben als Gespenst” (“life as a ghost”). Something similar was suggested in “The Sudden Walk” by the notion that the family would slip away “ins Wesenlose” (“into insubstantiality”) at the moment of the self’s elevation to a truer state of being. If, at bottom, the self perceives life in society to be spectral, no more than a dead simulacrum of life, then it is no wonder that the self cannot be forced by the will to enter successfully into social interaction.

Taking these two stories together, the rational will appears to be ineffective and condemned to relapse into stasis, whereas the “Entschlußfähigkeit” (“capacity to make decisions”) that seems to be concentrated by a sudden, apparently irrational impulse can lead to the release of an unfamiliar kind of dynamism. It is possible, however, that the sensation of concentrated Entschlußfähigkeit is merely epiphenomenal, the reflection in consciousness of an impulse that neither originates nor operates in the conscious part of the self. Just as the rising gallop of the self’s “true shape” was not allowed to have the last word in “The Sudden Walk,” so the resolve of the self in “Decisions” to withdraw into utter, insensate immobility is subject to ironic relativization by the very last sentence of the story: “Eine charakteristische Bewegung eines solchen Zustandes ist das Hinfahren des kleinen Fingers über die Augenbrauen” (KAF, 1:20) (“A characteristic movement of such a condition is the passing of the little finger over the eyebrows”). No matter how socially alienated and static the mind of the narrator may perceive the self to be, this bodily gesture tells a rather different story. The tiny movement of the little finger suggests both that the protagonist’s behavior is still constrained by social awareness, as he modestly conceals from others his intense feelings of despair and anomie, and that the body is still subject to dynamic impulses, no matter how “ghostly” the conscious mind may declare a life in the company of others to be. The attempt to attain complete immobility thus appears to be no more than the equally pointless obverse of
inauthentic social interaction, a form of sulking, to put it harshly. Rest, it appears, is not to be found in this life, or at least not through any refusal to participate in life.

To the mind of the narrator of “Das Gassenfenster” (KAF, 1:29–30) (“The Window onto the Street”), the complete isolation and immobility allegedly desired by the protagonist of “Decisions” cannot even be conceived to be a sustainable mode of being. He imagines that anyone living alone (verlassen has the sense of “abandoned” or “desolate”) would be bound to feel the need for human contact occasionally and an arm—any arm (”einen beliebigen Arm”)—to hold on to. Even the most isolated of individuals, he insists, could not live for long without a window onto the street. Even if such a person is not actually seeking anything but simply goes to the window as a tired man whose eyes go up and down between the sky and the public, indeed even if he leans his head back a little because he simply “doesn’t want to” look down at the street he will nevertheless be subject to an impersonal force that does not permit him to remain in static isolation: “so reißen ihn doch unten die Pferde mit in ihr Gefolge von Wagen und Lärm und damit endlich der menschlichen Eintracht zu” (KAF, 1:30) (“then, despite all his efforts, the horses down below will tear him into their retinue of carriages and din, and thus finally pull him towards oneness with humanity”). The protagonist’s need for human support is prompted by awareness of the constant changes—movements—in his environment: “die Veränderungen der Tageszeit, der Witterung, der Berufsverhältnisse und dergleichen” (KAF, 1:29) (“changes in the time of day, the weather, working conditions and such like”). Surrounded by a restless world, his responsive gaze betrays his own restlessness. At the same time his tiredness suggests that it demands great effort to endure the conflicting pulls between a life of isolation on the one hand and the need for contact on the other, between the life of the public on the street and the view up toward the Himmel (“which could denote heaven or simply the sky”). The ironic twist at the end of this story consists in the fact that, whether because the isolated, hesitant individual feels the need for something to hold onto in a restless world or because he is simply exhausted by living with his internal tensions, he will ultimately be unable to resist the violent pull (“reißen”) of the carriage horses towards oneness or harmony (Eintracht) with humanity. Given this individual’s lack of oneness with even his own life (a condition he shares with Kafka), however, it seems unlikely that the supposed Eintracht will prove to be anything more than a mirage.

By contrast, far from having to be “torn” into society willy-nilly by the irresistible pull of imagined human Eintracht, the narrator-protagonist
of “Entlarvung eines Bauernfängers” (KAF, 1:17–19) (“The Unmasking of a Confidence Trickster”) is determined to follow an invitation to join a social gathering (Gesellschaft) in a “herrschaftlichen Hause” (KAF, 1:17) (“a well-to-do house”—the adjective herrschaftlich connotes membership of the ruling class). At the beginning of the story, however, it is already ten o’clock in the evening and he is still standing in the street outside the door of the house he wishes to enter. His progress into society has been delayed and is now blocked by a strange companion he first met soon after arriving in town and who, having re-appeared unexpectedly earlier that evening, has “dragged” the protagonist through the streets for the past two hours. During a long pause in which they face each other in silence, the narrator-protagonist of this story gradually comes to resemble the narrator of “The Window onto the Street” as more and more is revealed about his relation to the stranger/acquaintance. While insisting that he was invited to join the company upstairs and not to stand outside the door looking past the ears of his Gegenüber (“opponent/interlocutor”), the protagonist appears unable to move any farther—“als seien wir zu einem langen Aufenthalt auf diesem Fleck entschlossen” (KAF, 1:17) (“as if we had decided to stay on this spot for a long time”). As they stand there, seemingly joined by mutual resolve, the protagonist and the stranger are shrouded in a shared silence in which everything in the vicinity seems to participate:

Dabei nahmen an diesem Schweigen gleich die Häuser ringsherum ihren Anteil, und das Dunkel über ihnen bis zu den Sternen. Und die Schritte unsichtbarer Spaziergänger, deren Wege zu erraten man nicht Lust hatte, der Wind, der immer wieder an die gegenüberliegende Straßenseite sich drückte, ein Grammophon, das gegen die geschlossenen Fenster irgend-eines Zimmers sang,—sie ließen aus diesem Schweigen sich hören, als sei es ihr Eigentum seit jeher und für immer. (KAF, 1:17)

(As we stood there, the houses around us and the darkness above them right up to the stars shared in this silence. And the steps of invisible pedestrians, whose ways one had no desire to guess, the wind that repeatedly pressed against the other side of the street, a gramophone that sang against the closed windows of some room or other—these things let themselves be heard from out of this silence, as if it always had been and forever would remain their property.)

As he stands facing this man, the protagonist’s experience of the world as
a dark place of profound silence in which every sound and sight speaks of the isolation of all things and all people, each in motion, resembles far too closely that of the man behind the “window onto the street” for us to accept readily his protestation that his proper place is in the company of those who are masters in society (an implication of the “herrschaftlichen Hause”). When his opponent/partner finally steps aside with a smile to permit him to proceed, the protagonist professes shame at his failure to have “recognized” the man for what he allegedly is, namely a confidence trickster. Shame, an important emotion in Kafka’s work,\(^{10}\) attests both to the social conditioning that outlaws certain actions and to the individual’s attraction to those very things that have been declared taboo. In this instance, the feelings connoted by the dark silence on the street are likely to be part of the taboo area from which the protagonist tries to distance himself. He does so by claiming to feel ashamed of his failure to “recognize” this man as a confidence trickster rather than by admitting to the deeper shame of having been enveloped by an experience of alienation from the world so profound that it casts doubt on any notion of a harmonious life in society (“menschliche Eintracht”). Even as he insists that the man is nothing but a trickster, the protagonist confesses to having felt an instinctive affinity for such figures ever since he arrived in town:

Ich verstand sie doch so gut, sie waren ja meine ersten städtischen Bekannten in den kleinen Wirtshäusern gewesen, und ich verdanke ihnen den ersten Anblick einer Unnachgiebigkeit, die ich mir jetzt so wenig von der Erde wegdenken konnte, daß ich sie schon in mir zu fühlen begann. (KAF, 1:18)

(I understood them so well, they were after all my first acquaintances in the little pubs in the town, and I had them to thank for my first sight of a stubborn refusal to yield that I now felt so strongly to be part of the world that I was already beginning to feel it within myself.)

He confesses that the gaze of these figures is always convincing and that part of their technique of preventing people from reaching their goal is to offer instead “eine Wohnung in ihrer eigenen Brust” (a dwelling in their own breast). If one’s feelings rebelled against such an approach, the figures would treat the resistance as an “Umarmung, in die sie sich warfen, das Gesicht voran” (KAF, 1:18) (“an embrace into which they would pitch themselves head first”). All of this testifies to the power of attraction the stranger exercises over the protagonist, illuminating both
the source of his shame and his need to displace the feeling. Only by patronizing the man, by saying “Erkannt!” (“Found out!”) and patting him on the shoulder, can the protagonist free himself from the confrontation and rush up the stairs to join the party, thereby rescuing his vision of a life devoted to upward movement in society. But as someone who recognizes that the loyal expressions on the faces of the waiting servants are “groundless,” it is clear that he will never in fact be able to integrate himself securely into society. Having once been brought to a standstill in the dark silence reaching up to the stars, he is unlikely ever to forget that alienating experience of universal isolation and unconnected motion in the world.

That a life based on social success is not the prize envisaged by the protagonist in the “Unmasking of a Confidence Trickster” is confirmed by other stories in *Betrachtung*. In the reflection “Zum Nachdenken für Herrenreiter” (KAF, 1:28–29) (“Something for Jockeys to Think About”), for example, coming first in a horse race simply means a brief moment of exultation followed by a string of negative consequences that induce regret: the envy of one’s opponents creates a painful contrast between the ride through the narrow railings to the winners’ enclosure and the openness of the course glimpsed during the race; the friends who have backed the winner are more interested in their winnings than in him, while those who did not back him, for fear of losing, resent the fact that he won; the losers dismiss the winner’s success and look forward to the next race, while the ladies find the winner ridiculous because he doesn’t know how to handle the fuss that is made of him; to cap it all, at the end of the race it starts to rain. In other words, if life is regarded as a circular race to a finish line, the isolated individual will have progressed no further toward any worthwhile goal by the end of life’s journey.

In “Der Nachhauseweg” (KAF, 1:25) (“The Journey Home”), events take a similarly dispiriting turn as the narrator recounts his changing feelings while walking home after an apparently successful day at work. At first, filled with pride in his achievements, he “marches” in step with the world around him: “Mein Tempo ist das Tempo dieser Gassenseite, dieser Gasse, dieses Viertels” (“My tempo is the tempo of this side of the street, of this street, this quarter”). Like some embodiment of Schopenhauer’s universal Will, he feels responsible for all the energy being expended throughout the world, for every knock on a door or table, for all toasts, and for lovers everywhere, in beds, on scaffolding, against walls in dark alleys, or on the ottomans of brothels. On stepping into his private room, however, the man becomes pensive for no identifiable reason.
It does not help to throw open the window and to hear music (the symbol, incidentally, of the never-resting universal Will in Schopenhauer’s thought) still being played in a garden somewhere. A socially successful life, it appears, can seem satisfactory for as long as the individual keeps on the move, imagining himself to be in step with the world, but as soon as he is alone and at a standstill, the mood changes abruptly from enthusiasm to melancholy. The public world that “tore” the protagonist of “Window onto the Street” out of his isolation and toward imagined “human harmony” proves ultimately to disappoint even someone who has achieved success in social and commercial life. Neither in lonely stasis nor in social progress, it seems, can the characters of Betrachtung find rest. The final flinging-open of the window suggests an agitation of the spirit that can as little find an adequate outlet in the competitive business of normal life as it can derive consolation from music as the aesthetic apotheosis and overcoming of movement.  

In another story with a similar theme, entitled “Der Kaufmann” (KAF, 1:22–24) (“The Shopkeeper”), where the narrator-protagonist is denied even temporary success in the world of commerce, this kind of inner restlessness breaks out much more powerfully. The man’s business is small and brings him nothing but worry, but as he shuts up shop to go home, his troublesome work suddenly appears in a new light, as an activity that has at least kept at bay for a few hours the inner Aufregung (“agitation”) that had been trying to claim his attention since the morning:

Wenn nun am Abend eines Werktages das Geschäft gesperrt wird und ich plötzlich Stunden vor mir sehe, in denen ich für die ununterbrochenen Bedürfnisse meines Geschäfts nichts werde arbeiten können, dann wirft sich meine am Morgen weit vorausgeschickte Aufregung in mich, wie eine zurückkehrende Flut, hält es aber in mir nicht aus und ohne Ziel reißt sie mich mit. (KAF, 1:22)

(Now, as my business is locked up at the end of the working day and I suddenly see before me hours in which I shall not be able to work for the unceasing needs of my business, the agitation that I had sent out far ahead of me in the morning hurls itself back into me like a returning tide, but will not be contained within me and, although lacking a goal, tears me away with it.)

As he is unable or unwilling to make use of the impulse, the protagonist’s barely suppressed agitation has to express itself in other ways during his
return home so that he walks “wie auf Wellen” (“as if on waves”), his fingers shake, and he runs his hand over the hair of the children he meets coming toward him. When he is eventually alone and motionless in the elevator that will carry him up to his flat (or, more likely, room within a flat), he looks into the mirror and his agitation finds a new outlet as he begins to speak to some unidentified figures whom he sends out into the world on invisible wings, telling them at least to enjoy the constantly changing spectacle of movement the world provides, the feelings aroused by such sights, and the opportunities for adventure:

Doch genießet die Aussicht des Fensters, wenn die Prozessionen aus allen drei Straßen kommen, einander nicht ausweichen, durcheinandergehn und zwischen ihren letzten Reihen den freien Platz wieder entstehen lassen. Winket mit den Tüchern, seid entsetzt, seid gerührt, lobet die schöne Dame, die vorüberführt. (KAF, 1:23)

(But enjoy the view from the window as all the processions coming out of all three streets refuse to give way to one another, weave through one another, and then allow the empty square to re-appear in the gaps between the last rows. Wave with your handkerchiefs, be horrified, be touched, praise the fair lady riding past.)

The pleasurable movements and actions welling up in the imagination of the shopkeeper as he stands alone in the elevator are as anarchic as the agitation that feeds them, and they contrast strongly with the desperate, goal-directed haste of the man determined to escape the “confidence trickster” in order to join the party on the upper story of the “well-to-do house.” As soon as the lift stops on his floor, however, the little shopkeeper’s excited visions give way once more to quotidian routine (and the stasis awaiting him at home) as he rings the door-bell and says good evening to the maid who opens the door for him.

Considered in relation to other stories in Betrachtung, the impulse experienced as agitation or excitement by the shopkeeper appears to intimate his subjection to a desire for some utterly free and undirected form of movement that may be the source of, but could never find adequate expression in, the patterns of movement that pervade everyday life, whether in the diurnal cycle of activity and rest, the pursuit of particular goals, the desire to progress up the social hierarchy, or the general concept of life as a predictable journey from birth to death. Constrained within a rationally understood and ordered life, the desire felt—and
feared—by the little shopkeeper can only be experienced as disruptive agitation. That impulse finds its most unconstrained expression in one of the shortest texts of *Betrachtung*, entitled “Wunsch, Indianer zu werden” (KAF, 1:30) (“Wish to Become a Red Indian”). It runs like this:

Wenn man doch ein Indianer wäre, gleich bereit, und auf dem rennenden Pferde, schief in der Luft, immer wieder kurz erzitterte über dem zitternden Boden, bis man die Sporen ließ, denn es gab keine Sporen, bis man die Zügel weggewarf, denn es gab keine Zügel, und kaum das Land vor sich als glattgemähte Heide sah, schon ohne Pferdehals und Pferdekopf. (KAF, 1:30)

(If only one were a Red Indian, ready straight away, and on the galloping horse, leaning forward in the air, trembling briefly and repeatedly above the trembling ground, until one let go the spurs, for there were no spurs, until one threw away the reins, for there were no reins, and hardly saw the land ahead any more as a smooth-mown heath, already without the neck and head of the horse.)

As the narrator articulates this wish, he transforms himself verbally into something that approximates to an image of pure movement, more like an arrow flying through the air than like an Indian on horseback, as all the elements of riding disappear one after the other—spurs, reins, the neck and head of the horse, and even the land ahead of him. The story breaks off without telling us what would happen if that transformation were to be completed and self and movement were to become one. But perhaps then nothing more would happen. Perhaps being able to wish that wish would mean the end of all wishing to reach any goal. Perhaps, in other words, the rider would have achieved that paradoxical condition of rest in movement once identified by Zeno and jotted down by Kafka in one of his later notebooks: “Der fliegende Pfeil ruht” (KAF, 9:104) (“The flying arrow is at rest”).13 In comparison with such oneness of movement and rest, the alternation of agitation and stasis, or the sense of moving and getting nowhere that is experienced in everyday life, could only ever represent a poor copy of an ideal coincidentia oppositorum. But the story leaves us in doubt about whether the wish can even be wished. The notion of riding without reins or horse or the ground below negates everything we understand about riding. The images drawn from life and the use to which the narrative imagination wants to put them are fundamentally dissonant; the verbal vehicle cannot support the tenor. If such a
thing as pure movement (that is simultaneously pure rest) exists, it cannot
be narrated, since words are saturated with the things of this world, and
the things of this world do not behave like that. As it breaks off in mid-
sentence, the little wish-cum-story leaves the reader hovering, as it were,
in mid-air. We cannot decide whether to see or feel in the conundrum of
the horseless, groundless ride an intuited mode of extraordinary move-
ment that demands to be communicated via the negation of the verbal
images that allow us to share the intuition or whether the paradoxes
implicitly concede the absurdity and hence the failure of any wish for
another, “higher” mode of experience. In another context, Kafka con-
cluded that a similar wish (to conceive of the world as both weighty
and weightless at one and the same time) could not be wished, since it
proved, on reflection, not to be a wish but rather a “Verteidigung, eine
Verbürgerlichung des Nichts” (KAF, 11:180) (“a defense, an attempt to
populate and domesticate nothingness”) with the help of images created
from the words with which we attempt to master the world. The single,
breathless, unfinished sentence of the “Wish to Become a Red Indian,”
by contrast, at least leaves two possibilities open: either that the wish
does indeed adumbrate the presence of some transcendent energy in the
person making the wish, an energy that defies all attempts at verbal con-
tainment or logical comprehension, or that the story expresses a deluded
attempt to escape the constraints on all forms of movement, physical
or mental, imposed by life in this world and the language by which we
organize our lives.

One of Kafka’s chief problems as a story-teller was to devise means
of expressing and doing justice to these contrary views or experiences
of life, each related to a different form of movement: the familiar, earth-
bound life that is subject to social norms and the laws of nature and
verbal order on the one hand, and, on the other, a sudden, extraordinary
eruption of energy that is imagined to be capable of raising the self out
of and beyond the confines of such controlled and regular patterns of
activity and thought. Most of the stories in Betrachtung fail to achieve
a balance between these conflicting experiences because they tend to
reduce the sense of unconstrained movement, such as that envisaged in
“Wish to Become a Red Indian,” to the status of a brief fantasy of escape
from the routines of normality to which the protagonist must return
and submit in the end. What Kafka was feeling his way toward from
the outset was a form of narration in which the abnormal emerged as
a form of experienced reality in its own right, a reality that asserts a
claim to validity that contradicts but cannot simply be relativized by the
claims of rationality and order. A few of these early stories do point to Kafka’s later narrative method by asserting more boldly the extraordinary dimension of experience as precisely that, as something that escapes the control of all norms of understanding and behavior. One might say that in these more daring experiments Kafka allows the centrifugal force of an intuited, ungovernable dimension of reality to challenge successfully the centripetal, controlling force exerted by reason. There may therefore have been programmatic intent in his decision to open and close the collection with two of these radical experiments.

In “Kinder auf der Landstraße” (KAF, 1:13–16) (“Children on the Country Road”) with which Betrachtung opens, the narrator-protagonist, a child at the time of the events, is introduced seated and at rest after an afternoon spent playing on a swing that hangs between two trees in his parents’ garden. He is listening to the wagons passing along the road outside the garden fence and sometimes glimpsing them through gaps in the foliage as it is moves weakly, presumably blown by the wind. The swing (Schaukel) brings into focus a form of movement (hovering or oscillating) that will recur not just in this little story but again and again throughout Kafka’s oeuvre. The child’s experiences represent the meeting place of a sense of orderly routine governed by parental authority and a generalized, disorienting dynamism to which he succumbs by stages:


(Then birds flew up as if in a spray, I followed them with my gaze, saw how they rose in an intake of breath until I no longer believed that they were climbing but rather that I was falling, and, out of weakness, holding on firmly to the ropes, I began to swing a little. Soon I was swinging more strongly, as the breeze turned cooler and trembling stars appeared in place of the flying birds.)

The precarious balance between the opposing tendencies of order and disruption, rest and movement, is undone progressively as the tired child sits over an evening meal: the curtains are swelled like sails by the warm wind, passers-by speak to him through the open window, and finally
someone jumps over the window ledge to report that “the others” are waiting outside, at which point the child gets up with a sigh and runs out of the house. Once he has joined the others, a group of children apparently outside the laws not just of bed-time but of rationally graspable experience, he feels liberated:


Einer schrie einen indianischen Kriegsruf heraus, wir bekamen in die Beine einen Galopp wie niemals, bei den Sprüngen hob uns in den Hüften der Wind. nichts hätte uns aufhalten können; wir waren so im Laufe, daß wir selbst beim Überholen die Arme verschränken und ruhig uns umsehen konnten. (KAF, 1:14)

(We broke through the evening with our heads. There was no day-time and night-time. Sometimes our waistcoat buttons rubbed against each other like teeth, at others we ran at a steady distance from one another, fire in our mouths, like animals in the tropics. Like cavalry in old wars, stamping and high in the air, we drove each other down the short lane and with this run-up in our legs chased each other farther up the country road. . . .

One of us shouted out an Indian war-cry, we felt a gallop in our legs like never before, as we jumped the wind lifted us by the hips. Nothing could have stopped us, we were so at one with our running that even as we overtook one another we could fold our arms and look around calmly.)

Such moments of elated and elevating dynamism (recalling the state of oneness with sheer movement imagined in “Wish to Become a Red Indian”) are interspersed with others where the child is so overcome with tiredness that he has to lie down in a ditch to sleep, a bodily reminder of the sphere of rational, social, and natural order from which he has not yet quite escaped. Indeed, toward the end of the story the child seems about to return home to bed, for he leaves the other children and heads back toward the village before suddenly striking off alone at the next crossroads, across the fields and into the woods, with the aim of reaching the town in the south where no one sleeps, as all who live there are “fools.”
Such a place would be one of unending movement but also one where movement is indistinguishable from rest, since the “fools” who live there never become tired.

The closing story of the collection, entitled “Unglücklichsein” (KAF, 1:31–36) (“Being Unhappy”) offers no such utopian prospect of perpetual motion in perpetual rest, although it too uses the intrusion of an unusual form of movement to create a robust challenge to the conventional order of things. Here again, it is the figure of a child who, by trespassing across the threshold between the familiar and the abnormal, points to a way out of the confines of the conventional order maintained by rational consensus. In this case, however, the narrator-protagonist is not himself a child but an adult who receives an unexpected visit from a strange child that he immediately takes to be a ghost. At the beginning of the story the protagonist is in that condition of static agitation to which other figures in the collection have been subject. He runs around his room as if on an endless race-track, repulsed as much by the world beyond his window as by the image of himself reflected back from a mirror on the opposite wall of the room. As neither the outside world nor the self present an acceptable goal for his restless energy, the narrator seeks relief from the pent-up frustration within him by at least emitting a scream, the acoustic equivalent of the pure movement envisaged in “Wish to Become a Red Indian”:

. . . und aufschrie, um nur den Schrei zu hören, dem nichts antwortet und dem auch nichts die Kraft des Schreiens nimmt, der also aufsteigt, ohne Gegengewicht, und nicht aufhören kann, selbst wenn er verstummt. (KAF, 1:31)

( . . . and screamed, just so that I could hear the scream to which nothing responds and from which nothing takes away the force of the screaming, and so just rises, without a counterweight, and cannot stop, even when it falls silent.)

At that point, as if in response, an abnormal form of movement occurs as a door suddenly opens in the wall separating the protagonist’s private room from the dark communal corridor beyond:

. . . da öffnete sich aus der Wand heraus die Tür, so eilig, weil doch Eile nötig war und selbst die Wagenpferde unten auf dem Pflaster, wie wildgewordene Pferde in der Schlacht, die Gurgeln preisgegeben, sich erhoben. (KAF, 1:31)
( . . . then the door opened out of the wall so quickly, because after all speed was needed and even the carriage horses down on the street reared up, exposing their throats, like horses that had gone wild during a battle.)

This portentous moment, echoing the transformation of the protagonist of “A Sudden Walk” as he rises (sich erheben) to assume his “true form,” or the rearing cavalry imitated by the children charging along the country road, heralds the appearance of the ghost-child who darts (fuhr) out of the dark corridor and comes to rest standing on his toes “auf einem unmerklich schaukelnden Fußbodenbalken” (“on a floorboard that was rocking almost imperceptibly”), in an echo, perhaps, of the child rocking on its Schaukel in the opening story of the collection. As the child stands there, it “ließ den Luftzug von draußen um die Gelenke der Füße streichen, auch den Hals, auch die Schläfen entlang” (KAF, 1:31) (“let the draught from outside play around his ankles, and over his neck and his temples”), thereby foreshadowing a motif from a later story, namely the motif of the Luftzug (“draught or movement of air”) that will forever cool the ankles of the tamed ape Rotpeter as it blows through the tiny gap in the horizon that separates his new, socialized, and self-aware life from the pre-conscious existence with “Freiheit nach allen Seiten” (“freedom on all sides”) (KSS, 79) that he had once known as a wild young ape. As the protagonist prepares to greet this unexpected visitor, he tries to expel his pent-up agitation (“my eyelashes trembled in my face”), but the child recognizes his lack of calm (Ruhe) unerringly. That no proper meeting between the host and his guest can take place (they address each other throughout with the formal Sie, although one of them is a child) is pre-determined by the man’s designation of the child from the outset as a ghost. On the one hand, although he claims not to believe in ghosts, this is the only category to which he can assign the intruding figure; on the other hand, he claims to have been waiting for the visit from the child for a long time: “Ich bin ja so froh, daß Sie endlich hier sind. Ich sage ‘endlich,’ weil es schon so spät ist. Es ist mir unbegreiflich, warum Sie so spät gekommen sind” (KAF, 1:33) (“I’m glad you’re here at last. I say ‘at last,’ because it is already so late. It is incomprehensible to me that you have come so late”). He recognizes that he and the child share a common identity: “Ihre Natur ist meine” (“Your nature is mine”), but it is the child who points out how limited is their ability to draw close to one another: “So nah, als Ihnen ein fremder Mensch entgegenkommen kann, bin ich Ihnen schon von Natur aus” (KAF, 1:33–34) (“By nature I am as close to you as any stranger can get to you”). The
encounter of these mutually alienated beings is marked by irritation and ends with the protagonist’s departure from the room. When he returns to the empty room, however, he feels verlassen (“lonely, abandoned,” like the protagonist of “Window onto the Street”). Finally he seeks refuge in sleep, presumably because, like so many of these early protagonists, he is exhausted by the conflict he has just experienced between the world of familiar routine and the dark world beyond his room that he glimpsed beyond the door created by the entry of the child-ghost, a figure he both fears and wishes to call his own. Thus, the story that closes Betrachtung appears to create a pessimistic counterpoint to the optimistic story with which the collection opened. Whereas the first protagonist, still a child, leaves the highway and sets out across open country to find the city in the south where “fools” never sleep, the last protagonist, too little of a “fool” to be able to communicate with the child “ghost” who comes to visit him in a dark hour of agitation, is left feeling verlassen (“lonely, abandoned”), with only sleep to provide perhaps some respite from the conflict brought to a head by the visit.

In these early stories, Kafka had already moved into what he was later to call a Grenzland (“borderland”) between contrasting areas or modes of experience, and he had begun to practice a method of narration that relied to an unusual degree on images of movement to characterize the relationship between these spheres. The descriptions of the process of writing in his diaries and letters are also pervaded by the same dynamic imagery, and there too its function is to capture and communicate a very similar structure of experience. Writing, he stated repeatedly, was the “direction” taken by his whole being, the only form in which he could feel truly alive and hence connected with the life of the world:

Mein ganzes Wesen ist auf Literatur gerichtet, die Richtung habe ich bis zu meinem 30(s)ten Jahr genau festgehalten; wenn ich sie einmal verlasse, lebe ich eben nicht mehr. Alles was ich bin und nicht bin, folgert daraus. (F, 456)

(My whole being is directed toward literature; I have followed this direction unswervingly until my 30th year and the moment I abandon it I cease to live. Everything I am and am not is a result of this.) (KLF, 313)

Recognizing his essential “direction” was one thing, maintaining momentum proved to be quite another. Writing to Felice Bauer about the intermittent process of composing his first novel, for example, Kafka compared it to loading and driving a wagon:
Arme, arme Liebste, möchtest Du Dich doch nie gezwungen fühlen, diesen elenden Roman zu lesen, den ich da stumpf zusammenschreibe. Schrecklich ist es, wie er sein Aussehen ändern kann; liegt die Last auf (mit welchem Schwung ich schreibe! Wie die Kleckse fliegen!) dem Wagen oben, dann ist mir wohl, ich entzücke mich am Peitschenknallen und bin ein großer Herr; fällt sie mir aber vom Wagen herunter (und das ist nicht vorauszusehen, nicht zu verhindern, nicht zu verschweigen) wie gestern und heute, scheint sie unmäßig schwer für meine kläglichen Schultern, dann möchte ich am liebsten alles lassen und mir an Ort und Stelle ein Grab graben. (F, 231)

(Poor, poor dearest, may you never feel compelled to read this miserable novel that I am writing away at so dismally. It is terrible how it can change its appearance; once the load (the ardor I write with! How the ink-spots fly!), is on the cart, I am all right; I delight in cracking the whip and am a man of importance; but once it falls off the cart (which cannot be foreseen, prevented, or concealed) as it did yesterday and today, then it feels excessively heavy for my pitiful shoulders; all I want to do then is abandon everything and dig my grave on the spot.) (KLF, 142)

For Kafka, the progress of narration meant following the path taken by his innermost being; conversely, when writing came to a stop he experienced the cessation as a form of death. As long as a story and its characters, which he had to follow wherever they led, were in motion, the dynamism of the narrative also animated the hand of the author: “once the load is up on the wagon (with what verve I write! how the splashes of ink fly!), all is well.” To fail to tell a story to its conclusion, by contrast, was to leave the characters to die and to wish that he himself could fall into the grave, as Kafka went on to explain to Felice:

Schließlich kann es keinen schönern, der vollkommenen Verzweiflung würdigern Ort für das Sterben geben als einen eigenen Roman. Gerade unterhalten sich zwei seit Gestern recht matt gewordene Personen auf zwei benachbarten Balkonen im 8ten Stockwerk um 3 Uhr in der Nacht. Wie wäre es, wenn ich ihnen von der Gasse aus ein “Adieu” zurief und sie gänzlich verließ. Sie würden dort auf ihren Balkonen zusammen-sinken und mit Leichengesichtern durch die Geländerstangen einander ansehen. (F, 231)

(After all, there can be no more beautiful spot to die in, no spot more
worthy of total despair, than one’s own novel. At this moment two people—grown somewhat dim since yesterday—are talking to each other on two adjacent balconies on the eighth floor at 3 in the morning. How would it be if I called out “goodbye” to them from the street, and abandoned them completely? They would collapse there on their balconies and with corpselike expressions stare at each other through the railings.)

(KLF, 142)

In another passage, Kafka likened writing to traversing space by means of a telescope in order to bring into view the inner self that he felt to be separated by a great distance from the everyday, non-writing part of his self:

Aber jeden Tag soll zumindest eine Zeile gegen mich gerichtet werden wie man die Fernrohre jetzt gegen den Kometen richtet. Und wenn ich dann einmal vor jenem Satze erscheinen würde, hergelockt von jenem Satze, so wie ich z. B. letzte Weihnachten gewesen bin und wo ich so weit war, daß ich mich nur noch gerade fassen konnte und wo ich wirklich auf der letzten Stufe meiner Leiter schien, die aber ruhig auf dem Boden stand und an der Wand. Aber was für ein Boden! was für eine Wand! Und doch fiel jene Leiter nicht, so drückten sie meine Füße an den Boden, so hoben sie meine Füße an die Wand. (KAF, 9:15)

(But every day at least one line should be trained on me, as they now train telescopes on comets. And if I then should appear before that sentence once, lured by that sentence, just as, for instance, I was last Christmas, when I was so far gone that I was barely able to control myself and when I seemed really to be on the last rung of my ladder, which, however, rested quietly on the ground and against a wall. But what ground, what a wall! And yet that ladder did not fall, so strongly did my feet press it against the ground, so strongly did my feet raise it against the wall.)

(KD, 3–14)

Alternatively, the journey to the inner self could be experienced as a descent into the depths or plunging down into a stream (Strom) or river (Fluß) of creativity: “Es ist notwendig, förmlich unterzutauchen und schneller zu sinken als das vor einem Versinkende” (KAF, 11:76) (“You have to dive down, as it were, and sink more rapidly than that which sinks in advance of you”) [KD, 330]). Although Kafka wanted to reach out to others once a piece of writing was complete, he was convinced that he
could only gain access to the depths of inspiration by separating himself from the “surface” or social dimension of life and by making the descent (or ascent) in complete isolation:

(Writing that springs from the surface of existence—when there is no other way and the deeper wells have dried up—is nothing, and collapses the moment a truer emotion makes that surface shake. That is why one can never be alone enough when one writes, why there can never be enough silence around one when one writes, why even night is not night enough. That is why there is never enough time at one’s disposal, for the roads are long, and it is easy to go astray, there are even times when one becomes afraid sometimes and has the desire—even without any constraint or enticement—to run back. . . . I have often thought that the best mode of life for me would be to sit in the innermost room of a spacious locked cellar with my writing things and a lamp. . . . And how I would write! From what depths I would drag it up!) (KLF, 156)

The self that Kafka was bent on sighting revealed itself, he believed, precisely through the imagery and dynamic patterns of the writing itself:

(Wer weiß denn aus sich selbst heraus, wie es um einen steht. Dieses stürmische oder sich wälzende oder sumpfige Innere sind ja wir selbst, aber auf dem im geheimen sich vollziehenden Weg, auf dem die Worte aus uns hervorgetrieben werden, wird die Selbsterkenntnis an den Tag gebracht, und wenn sie auch noch immer verhüllt ist, so ist sie doch vor uns und ein herrlicher oder schrecklicher Anblick. Nimm mich also, Liebste, in
Schutz vor diesen widerlichen Worten, die ich da in der letzten Zeit aus mir herausbefördert habe. (F, 306)

(After all, who knows within himself how things really are with him? This tempestuous or floundering or morass-like inner self is what we really are, but on the secret, self-creating path along which words get driven out of us, self-knowledge is brought to the surface, and though it may still be veiled, yet it is there before us, wonderful or terrible to behold. So protect me, dearest, from these horrible words that I have mined out of myself recently.) (KLF, 198; translation modified)

The references here to the “im geheimen sich vollziehenden Weg” (the “secret, self-creating path,” literally, “the way which completes itself in secret”) and to the sense that the words “get driven” out of the writer express Kafka’s belief that, when writing, he was to an extent the passive instrument of a dynamic impulse that operated independently of his conscious will. As his ill body became ever thinner, he even joked blackly that his body had clearly fashioned itself into a writing implement for the use of whatever higher power (if such a thing existed) might wish to use him, via his own hand and pen, to tell its self-revealing and self-concealing stories:

Und tatsächlich, so mager wie ich bin und ich bin der magerste Mensch, den ich kenne (was etwas sagen will, da ich schon viel in Sanatorien herumgekommen bin) ebenso ist auch sonst nichts an mir, was man in Rücksicht auf das Schreiben Überflüssiges und Überflüssiges im guten Sinne nennen könnte. Gibt es also eine höhere Macht, die mich benützen will oder benützt, dann liege ich als ein zumindest deutlich ausgearbeitetes Instrument in ihrer Hand; wenn nicht, dann bin ich gar nichts und werde plötzlich in einer fürchterlichen Leere übrig bleiben. (F, 65–66)

(As thin as I am, and I am the thinnest person I know (and that’s saying something, for I’m no stranger to sanatoria), there is nothing to me that one which, in relation to writing, one could call superfluous, superfluous in the sense of overflowing. If there is a higher power that wishes to use me, or does use me, I am at its mercy, if no more than as a well-prepared instrument; if not, I am nothing and will suddenly be abandoned in a dreadful void.) (KLF, 21)

Kafka’s dependence on the dynamic impulse supplied by the “higher
power,” or whatever it was that released the unfolding of his imaginatively world, meant that narration was an extremely uncertain undertaking. As he observed in a letter to Grete Bloch, “Ich habe meine Fähigkeit des Schreibens gar nicht in der Hand. Sie kommt und geht wie ein Gespenst. Seit einem Jahr habe ich nichts geschrieben, kann auch nichts, so viel ich weiß” (F, 555–56) (“I have no control over my capacity for writing. It comes and goes like a phantom. I haven’t written anything for a year, nor can I, as far as I know” [KLF, 390]). Again and again Kafka was made to feel that the strength needed for the “Darstellung meines traumhaften inneren Lebens” (representation of my dream-like inner life) was “completely unpredictable” although he never quite gave up the hope that “vielleicht kommt sie doch noch einmal über mich” (KAF, 10:167) (“perhaps it will come upon me again” [KD, 302]). Equally frustrating, however, were those moments when he could glimpse the jostling life in the depths of his imagination but could not gain access to it because of some inner barrier or grille: “Gestern unfähig auch nur ein Wort zu schreiben. Heute nicht besser. Wer erlöst mich? Und in mir das Gedränge, in der Tiefe, kaum zu sehn. Ich bin wie ein lebendiges Gitterwerk, ein Gitter, das feststeht und fallen will” (KAF, 10:142) (“yesterday incapable of writing even one word. Today no better. Who will save me? And the turmoil in me, deep down, scarcely visible. I am like a living lattice-work, a lattice that is solidly planted and would like to tumble down” [KD, 267]). At other times he would succeed in reaching down into the “stream” of a story, only to discover that the dynamism through which the sense of pulsing life in the imagined experience became manifest then got lost in the attempt to capture that vital energy in words:

Sicher ist, daß ich alles, was ich im voraus selbst im guten Gefühl Wort für Wort oder sogar nur beiläufig aber in ausdrücklichen Worten erfunden habe, auf dem Schreibtisch beim Versuch des Niederschreibens, trocken, verkehrt, unbeweglich, der ganzen Umgebung hinderlich, ängstlich, vor allem aber lückenhaft erscheint, trotzdem von der ursprünglichen Erfindung nichts vergessen worden ist. Es liegt natürlich zum großen Teil daran, daß ich frei vom Papier nur in der Zeit der Erhebung, die ich mehr fürchte als sehehne, wie sehr ich sie auch sehehne, 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 diese 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)
(It is certain that everything I have conceived in advance, even when I
had the good feeling of having done so word by word or even just fleet-
ingly, but in specific words, appears dry, wrong, immobile, an obstacle to
everything and everyone around, timid, but above all full of gaps, when I
try to write it down at my desk, although I have forgotten nothing of the
original conception. This is naturally related in large part to the fact that
I only conceive something good away from paper at times of exaltation,
which I fear more than I long for, much as I do long for them, but then
the fullness is so great that I have to let things go past untouched. Blindly
and arbitrarily I snatch handfuls out of the stream, so that when I write it
down consciously and deliberately, my acquisition is nothing in compari-
son with the fullness in which it lived, is incapable of summoning up that
fullness, and thus is bad and disturbing because it tempts to no purpose.)
(KD, 118; translation modified)

On another occasion Kafka lamented the fact that when inspiration
did finally come, he was still unable to write because the idea or Einfall
(literally, “falling in”) of a story tended to occur somewhere in the mid-
dle rather than at the point where the narrative movement originated:

Alle Dinge nämlich die mir einfallen, fallen mir nicht von der Wurzel aus
ein, sondern erst irgendwo gegen ihre Mitte. Versuche sie dann jemand
tzu halten, versuche jemand ein Gras und sich an ihm zu halten das erst in
der Mitte des Stengels zu wachsen anfängt. (KAF, 9:15)

(All those things, that is to say, those things that come into my mind don’t
come from the root up, but rather only somewhere about their middle.
Let someone then attempt to seize them, let someone attempt to seize a
blade of grass and hold himself up by it when it begins to grow only from
the middle.) (KD, 12; translation modified)

If the flow of writing was interrupted, as inevitably happened when he
dared to attempt a longer narrative, Kafka would feel “thrown out” (ausge-
worfen) by the story or excluded (“heute verschließt sie sich völlig” [F, 204])
today it is completely closed up [KLF, 121]) and tormented by the
switch from creative dynamism to uncreative stasis: “Vollständige Stoc-
kung. Endlose Quälereien” (KAF, 11:76) (Complete standstill. Unending
torments [KD, 330]).

Kafka’s despair at the interruptions of the writing process or at being
subjected to the Einfälle of stories without a beginning related above all
to his failure to achieve the wholeness and continuity (Zusammenhang) that he considered to be the essential criterion of writing as he felt compelled to practice it: “Das Unglück, das man ertragen muß, wenn man in einer Arbeit, die immer nur in ganzem Zug gelingen kann, sich unterbricht” (KAF, 10:51) (“The unhappiness one must suffer when one interrupts oneself in a task that can only succeed if done in a single, complete movement” [KD, 192; translation modified]). By Zusammenhang Kafka understood two distinct but interrelated things. One was the internal connectedness of a narrative. The other was the connection between the writing self and what it wrote. The ideal for which Kafka strove was a “Darstellung, die von Wort zu Wort mit meinem Leben verbunden wäre, die ich an meine Brust ziehen und die mich von meinem Platz hinreißen sollte” (KAF, 9:115) (“description in which every word would be linked to my life, which I would draw to my heart and which would transport me out of myself” [KD, 36]). His ideal was to “pour out” his deepest self into a story (“mich in sie auszugießen”), so that he could feel fortgerissen (“torn away”), “im Fluß der Arbeit . . . und von ihr getragen” (F, 300) (“in the flow of work . . . and borne along by it” [KLF, 194]). The objective of such writing, he realized, was existential exploration rather than artistic perfection:

Ich habe jetzt und hatte schon Nachmittag ein großes Verlangen, meinen ganzen bangen Zustand ganz aus mir herauszuschreiben und ebenso wie er aus der Tiefe kommt in die Tiefe des Papiers hinein oder es so niederzuschreiben daß ich das Geschriebene vollständig in mich einbeziehen könnte. Das ist kein künstlerisches Verlangen. (KAF, 9:223)

(I have now, and have had since this afternoon, a great yearning to write all my anxiety entirely out of me, write it into the depths of the paper just as it comes out of the depths of me, or write it down in such a way that I could draw what had been written into me completely. This is no artistic yearning.) (KD, 134)

The complete work, then, ought to flow directly from the self and reveal through its evolving, self-creating dynamic patterns the character and direction of the impulses it embodied. Where the desired flow could not be sustained, as in his first novel, Der Verschollene (The Man Who Disappeared), the work had to be “in kleinen Stücken mehr aneinander als ineinander gearbeitet” (KKAB1, 163) (“worked in small pieces, joined to one another rather than integrated one with the other”). As a conse-
quence Kafka regarded the composition as a forced, artificial construction rather than as the trace of a dynamic, organic whole.

Given all these difficulties, it was extremely rare for Kafka to feel that he had succeeded in capturing the dynamism of his inner life and its moments of “Erhebung” satisfactorily in his narratives. His repeated failures in this respect resemble the conflicts experienced by the characters in *Betrachtung* between the empty stasis of a life spent tracing the routine patterns of social existence (to which Kafka too remained committed, to the detriment of his continuous concentration on his writing) and the pull of a quite different kind of movement that the majority of the figures refuse to follow. The one instance where Kafka felt certain that he had achieved something like complete abandonment to a unique kind of movement (such as he had envisaged in “Wish to Become a Red Indian”) was his “breakthrough” story “Das Urteil” (“The Judgment”). The story, written at a single, night-long sitting in September 1912, fulfilled the double criterion of *Zusammenhang*—that is, complete internal connectedness and immediate connection with the writer’s inner self (and, so he hoped, with any reader able to recognize and respond to such “inner truth” as it might possess). The diary entries recording this extraordinary creative event describe it as one in which the author experienced the flow of writing as a paradoxical combination of activity and passivity, as if Kafka were both a mother giving birth to a child and the child that was being brought into the world:


(This story, “The Judgment,” I wrote at one sitting during the night of the 22nd to the 23rd from ten o’clock at night until 6 o’clock in the morning. . . . The fearful strain and joy, how the story developed before me, as if I were advancing through water. Several times during this night I heaved my own weight on my back. How everything can be dared, how for everything that comes into one’s mind, even the strangest things,
there waits a great fire in which they disappear and rise up again. . . . Only in this way can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening out of the body and the soul.) (KD, 212–13)

. . . die Geschichte ist wie eine regelrechte Geburt mit Schmutz und Schleim bedeckt aus mir herausgekommen und nur ich habe die Hand, die bis zum Körper dringen kann und Lust dazu hat. (KAF, 10:125)

( . . . the story came out of me like a real birth, covered with filth and slime, and only I have the hand that can reach to the body itself and the strength of desire to do so.) (KD, 214)

The dynamism experienced by Kafka during the process of writing “The Judgment” is reflected in the story itself, imbuing it with such inner coherence that Kafka even dared speak of the “music” that had emerged along with the fear (Angst) he felt while composing it. 17 This is not the place for an extensive analysis of the dynamics of the whole work, but some brief remarks about the beginning and ending may help to clarify how closely the unfolding of the narrative itself is related to movement as it affects the figures who are first summoned into being and then disposed of on the “self-creating path” of narration.

The opening paragraph of the story reads as follows:

Es war an einem Sonntagvormittag im schönsten Frühjahr. Georg Bendemann, ein junger Kaufmann, saß in seinem Privatzimmer im ersten Stock eines der niedrigen, leichtgebauten Häuser, die entlang des Flusses in einer langen Reihe, fast nur in der Höhe und Färbung unterschieden, sich hinzogen. Er hatte gerade einen Brief an einen sich im Ausland befindenden Jugendfreund beendet, verschloß ihn in spielerischer Langsamkeit und sah dann, den Ellbogen auf den Schreibtisch gestützt, aus dem Fenster auf den Fluß, die Brücke und die Anhöhen am anderen Ufer mit ihrem schwachen Grün. (KAF, 1:39)

(It was on a Sunday morning when spring was at its most beautiful. George Bendemann, a young businessman, sat in his private room on the second floor of one of the low, lightly built houses that ran alongside the river, stretched out in a long row, hardly distinguishable from one another except in height and color. He had just finished a letter to a boyhood friend who was living abroad, closed it with playful slowness and then, with his elbow propped on the desk, looked out of the window at the
river, the bridge and the slopes on the opposite bank with their faint green.) (KSS, 3; translation modified)

The sentence with which “The Judgment” begins contains, but crucially is not simply a description of the day of the week and the time of year: “It was on a Sunday morning.” Although the verb “was” (war) would normally be classed as stative (as in: “It was Sunday morning”), its use here in combination with the preposition “on” (an) has a destabilizing and dynamic effect, making the sentence seem curiously incomplete. One would expect the sentence to continue with a “that” or “when” clause of some kind, such as “It was on a Sunday morning at the height of spring that Georg Bendemann decided to sit down and write a letter to an old friend now living abroad.” The absence from the opening sentence of any information about what precisely “it was” that happened on that morning impels the reader on to the next sentence in the expectation of completing the sense that is implied but partly withheld. This tiny grammatical oddity is the first, unremarkable manifestation of a restlessness at work in the story that seems to want to pull the reader forward to its conclusion, a dynamic force that will become ever more powerful, unmistakable and at the same time indecipherable as it creates the path of its own unfolding.

The element of instability is also at work in what the sentence describes and, although as yet unrecognizable to any first-time reader, in the ironic quality of the description. The first thing the story draws our attention to is time, specifically a Sunday morning at the height of spring. Presented like this, time seems, if anything, a beneficent force, in that Sunday morning connotes a period of rest and recuperation after the exertions of the working week, while the reference to “spring at its most beautiful” invites contemplation of the new life it brings. By the time the reader has reached the end of the story and looks back at its beginning (as certain analeptic elements will prompt him to do), time will present an utterly other, deadly, and indifferent aspect. A complicated narrative movement will have been generated thereby, one that is both circular (compelling the perplexed reader to go back to the beginning in the hope of grasping why the ending is as it is) and final (in the sense of providing a full release of the energy that has been pulsing through the story from the outset).

In the remainder of the opening paragraph, the creative restlessness that was present but barely detectable in the first sentence gradually grows more apparent as it becomes embodied in a figure’s actions and thoughts.
On the one hand, the description of Georg Bendemann as a young businessman seated in his private room develops the positive aspects of the first sentence, for he is a young man with the rest of his life to look forward to and already a man of property. On the other hand, although physically at rest, Georg Bendemann is not entirely at ease. His gaze out of the window falls on the river and the line of houses that sich hinzogen (“ran along”) beside it. The river picks up, inconspicuously, the theme of transience hinted at in the mention of spring, while the fact that Georg perceives the “lightly built” houses as if, like the river, they too were in motion, suggests that the narrative is creating in him a figure whose consciousness is filled with the same sense of instability that gave rise to the tensions in the story’s deceptively promising first sentence. The third, and last, sentence of the opening paragraph both varies these tensions and introduces some new elements that promise some information about Georg Bendemann’s past life (such as his relation to the friend abroad and his reasons for writing the letter) while also prompting questions about what he will do next. The positive possibilities in the situation then seem to come to the fore increasingly, as Georg is shown leaning on his desk and closing the letter to his friend with “playful slowness,” while his gaze travels across the river, up the slopes, and comes to rest on the “faint green” of the new shoots of spring. Yet not one of these details is unambiguously positive: the gaze across the river may hint at a restlessness that is at odds with Georg’s seemingly comfortable static situation, while the slowness with which he closes the letter may be a sign that he is hesitating, for some reason, to complete this act of communication.

In summary, the opening paragraph of “The Judgment” is impregnated with a sense of movement that issues in the unfolding of the sentences and prepares the reader for the leap across to the next and subsequent paragraphs. The instability that is most readily apparent at a thematic level, particularly in the mentality of the protagonist, is already present, as I have tried to show, before Georg is called into being by a narrating consciousness which is itself charged with a restlessness that seeks an outlet in such things as sentence structure, ambivalence and irony. From this beginning, the narration will unfold through a sequence of events that will move through conflict to resolution, or at least to an ending. On its way to that ending, the story will enact a conflict between the forward-driving impulse that generated the instability in the very first sentence and the numerous forms of resistance and retardation that first took shape in Georg Bendemann’s remaining seated at his desk long after he had finished the letter to his friend. It is not possible here to elaborate the whole, intricate interplay between the dynamics of narration itself
and the thematic and figural manifestations of movement throughout the story. Nevertheless, it is worth looking briefly at the way the story comes to an end, in order to make it clear just how unusual, possibly even unique, the part played by movement in Kafka’s mode of narration actually is.

The end of the story is notoriously catastrophic. The unfolding continuum of movement in which Georg Bendemann is caught up from the outset eventually leads him not across the river and up the slopes towards the first green shoots of spring he was contemplating at the beginning but downward to the river in which he drowns. As he drops into the water, the final direction of the movement that has seized hold of Georg’s life cuts diametrically across the trajectory of an omnibus and the rest of the “geradezu unendlicher Verkehr” (KAF, 1:52) (“virtually endless traffic”) crossing the bridge at that very moment. More radically than anything attempted in Betrachtung, what “The Judgment” narrates is thus the imagined intersection of a strange, new, disruptive form of movement with the familiar movements of natural and social existence, cyclical in the one case and goal-directed in the other. As Jim Phelan points out quite correctly, however, the path from the beginning of the story to its end leads across an “interpretive gap,” since it is never made explicit why Georg, initially introduced as a young man with good prospects, submits so rapidly to his father’s annihilating judgment. Yet the effect of that “gap” is precisely to highlight the peculiar character and integrative role of movement in Kafka’s mode of narration.

The moral crux and the interpretive gap arise from the fact that Georg accepts his father’s judgment of his conduct and carries out his lethal verdict without there being any evident, adequate justification for him to do so. Georg certainly has reason to feel guilty about having neglected his old father, but the death sentence is a wholly disproportionate punishment for such a failing. The father, himself a deceiver (Komödiant, or play-actor, as Georg calls him) and someone who clearly relishes the recovery of his former dictatorial powers, gives no sign of having the moral authority to pronounce any kind of verdict, far less one as severe as this. Psychological explanations, although rather more persuasive, also lack conviction ultimately. The father assumes the appearance of a giant Oedipal patriarch only intermittently, behaving at other times like a deranged, malicious, infantile old fool for whom Georg feels no respect. One can suggest other reasons for Georg’s submission to the death sentence, such as seeing in his father’s fate an image of the pointlessness of the notions of progress on which he intended to base his own life, or realizing that he does not possess enough strength of feeling for
his fiancée simply to sweep aside his father’s mockery of their relationship. The movement out of his own room, with its window facing across to the greening hills of springtime, and into his father’s room, darkened by the wall that looms outside the window, has certainly confronted Georg with the inescapable stasis in his life that he has been trying to keep hidden from himself with his plans for marriage and the expansion of the business. But none of this quite suffices to make Georg’s self-execution understandable within the limits of psychological plausibility. Faced with this problem, an early reviewer even felt compelled to argue that the story showed the sudden collapse of a mind into insanity, a view that only needs to be stated for it to become clear that the events simply cannot be contained within any psychological or even pathological framework.¹⁹

By this point in the story, the narration has passed out of the realm of social, moral, and psychological constraints and into one where other forces hold sway, principally the force of narrative dynamism itself, whatever its obscure source may be. What has happened on the social, moral, and psychological levels of the narrative is the progressive destruction of all the flimsy defenses that the narrator, with a mixture of sympathy and malice, has let Georg Bendemann erect around a lonely and static existence that does not fundamentally believe in itself. Once that superstructure has been destroyed in the interaction with other characters so that Georg is left with nothing to contemplate but the ruins of all the illusions on which he has based his bourgeois identity in recent years, there is nothing left to block the final unfolding of the story’s self-creating path. The dynamic force that was evident, from the beginning of the narrative, both in the world as Georg perceived it and in his own growing unease, as he closed the letter to his friend slowly and “playfully,” can now be released in full. At the very moment when the father pronounces his judgment, Georg is seized by an impersonal force (defined simply as es) and is “driven” out of the house and down to his death in the river:

Georg fühlte sich aus dem Zimmer gejagt, den Schlag, mit dem der Vater hinter ihm aufs Bett stürzte, trug er noch in den Ohren davon. Auf der Treppe, über deren Stufen er wie über eine schiefé Fläche eilte, überrumpelte er seine Bedienerin . . . Aus dem Tor sprang er, über die Fahrbahn zum Wasser trieb es ihn. Schon hielt er das Geländer fest, wie ein Hungriger die Nahrung. (KAF, 1:52)

(Georg felt himself driven from the room, the crash with which his father
As he disappears in the river below, one might say that Georg is being returned by the act of narration to the element from which the story as a whole emerged, the restless energy that formed the opening paragraph in which Georg Bendemann was brought into existence and which will continue to flow after his death in the figurations of the river and the endless flow of traffic (Verkehr) on the bridge. The opening “Es war an einem Sonntagmorgen” is answered by the “trieb es ihn” which carries the action to a close, thereby confirming the dynamic nature of that deceptively unassuming impersonal pronoun. It may well be the same little pronoun (Es rather than Er), incidentally, that Kafka allowed to assume universal proportions in one of his best-known aphorisms: “Das Wort ‘sein’ bedeutet im Deutschen beides: Da-sein und Ihm-gehören” (KAF, 6:235) (“The word ‘sein’ means both things in German: to exist and to belong to it”).

Nowadays, we tend to feel uncomfortable about things that defy rational explanation. Kafka too was tempted to devise explanations for the strange inner experiences of movement to which he was subject during those all too rare periods of Erhebung when he felt the pulse of creativity within him. In his aphorisms, for example, on which so many readings of his work rely, Kafka interpreted the biblical story of the Fall in such a way as to construct an account of all human existence as a state of permanent Vertreibung (i.e., a condition not simply of having been driven out of Paradise once and for all but of being driven out of Paradise unceasingly, for all time). His own, private experience of some extraordinary form of dynamism while writing could thereby be regarded as a particular, perhaps privileged, symbolic concretization of the general human condition post lapsum, as a mode of being that is both driven in perpetual motion and yet static, a “stehender Sturmlauf” or charging on the spot. Yet so many of Kafka’s stories embody movement in such a wide variety of ways that it is questionable whether they can all be reduced to just so many illustrations of a single overarching myth of origin and destination (like the above) or of any other single principle that his commentators might construct, such as the oft varied view that movement in Kafka’s writing is a self-referential allegory of writing itself. In the stories examined in this essay, for example, movement also serves as a vehicle to
achieve other ends, such as exploring the complexities of psychological and social existence, and it serves these purposes outstandingly well. At the same time, these stories repeatedly show the movements of social existence being intersected or interrupted by some other mode of movement for which they offer no explanation. Kafka himself felt that an extraordinary experience of movement was somehow part and parcel of his writing, although he could have no certainty about its nature, origin, or purpose, far less any control over its appearance or disappearance. At times he hoped that it was a revelatory, elevating experience of general significance. At others he felt that writing involved going down into forbidden depths, doing service to the devil and unleashing forces that, by their nature, ought to remain bound up forever. On yet another occasion, he felt that the movement of writing was merely a form of vanity, as the mind of the writer circled, moth-like, around its own reflection (MB, 2:384). In conversation with Max Brod, Kafka is reported to have said that when he wrote the last sentence of “The Judgment” (“At this moment a virtually endless [flow of] traffic went across the bridge”) he was thinking of “eine starke Ejakulation” (“a powerful ejaculation”), which suggests that the source of the energy pulsing through the story could be understood as intensely physical rather than metaphysical or transcendent. One could also argue that the movement of Kafka’s narratives is part of a “psycho-poetics,” serving, for example, as a means of exercising power, in imagination at least, over particular kinds of figure (sons, fathers, women), or indeed the world in general, calling them into being and disposing of them more or less capriciously in order to create an outlet for private psychological impulsions. Whatever the source and nature of the creative restlessness that took over his life periodically, Kafka’s narratives could only convince him of their “inner truth” for as long as he sensed that strange, dynamic impulse carrying him forward from word to word, sentence to sentence. That, at all costs, had to be “brought to the surface.” The interpretations of that impulse may multiply, but, to paraphrase Kafka’s version of the Prometheus myth: “There remains the inexplicable movement.”

Notes

1. The secondary literature listed below identifies and interprets a range of different manifestations of movement in Kafka’s fiction, from the “failure to arrive” stressed by Beißner (1958) to the “stehender Sturmablauf” (“charging on the spot”) discussed by Allemann (1998), Corngold (1988), Ramm (1971, 1979), and others,
the patterns of reversal and deviation identified by Neumann (1973), the “temporal space” discussed by Rolleston (1978), the link between movement and the search for knowledge discussed by Thiher (1987), the attempts to escape or find the self considered by Zilcosky (2003), and multifarious approaches taken by the contributors to the volume edited by Scheuer and others. While most commentaries focus on the limitations of movement, this chapter seeks to identify the exceptional conditions under which movement, both narrative and narrated, is achieved successfully.

2. Although Contemplation is available in English translation (published by Twisted Spoon Press, Prague), I have chosen to use my own translations throughout so as to follow as closely as possible the German original, regardless of whether the result makes for attractive English. In other cases (such as Kafka’s diaries or letters) I have generally used published translations where available, supplying my own where they are not.


4. “Die ungeheuere Welt, die ich im Kopfe habe. Aber wie mich befreien und sie befreien ohne zu zerreißen. Und tausendmal lieber zerreißen, als sie in mir zurückhalten oder begraben. Dazu bin ich ja hier, das ist mir ganz klar” (KAF, 10:179) (“The monstrous world I have in my head. But how to free myself and free it without being torn to pieces. And a thousand times rather be torn apart rather than retain it in me or bury it. That indeed is why I am here, that is quite clear to me” [KD, 222]).

5. Der Verschollene, more commonly known as Amerika, the title given to the fragmentary novel by its first editor, Max Brod.

6. “Doch sah ich letzthin auf der Freitreppe selbst einen ganz einfältigen gerichtsdieners mit dem Fachblick des kleinen Stammgastes der Wettrennen den Advokaten bestaunen, als dieser, hoch die Schenkel hebend, mit auf dem Marmor aufklingendem Schritt von Stufe zu Stufe stieg” (KAF, 1:199) (“Yet recently I saw a quite simple court usher with the knowing eye of a racetrack regular staring in astonishment at the lawyer as the latter, raising his flanks high in the air, mounted step by step with a stride that made the marble clang” [KSS, 60]).

7. Kafka’s notebooks contain numerous passages that cast doubt on humans’ capacity for free will. One of the most vivid describes an animal seizing its master’s whip and whipping itself in order to become master, while unaware that this is simply an illusion created by a new knot in the master’s whip; see KAF (6:232).

8. See, for example, Kafka’s despairing remarks in a letter to Felice from 1913: “Wo bin ich denn? Wer kann mich nachprüfen? Ich wünschte mir eine kräftige Hand nur zu dem Zweck, um in diese unzusammenhängende Konstruktion, die ich bin, ordentlich hineinzufahren” (F, 306) (“For where am I? Who can examine me? I wish for a strong hand for the sole purpose of thrusting it into this incoherent construction that I am” [KLF, 198]).

9. “Gesellschaft” can either mean a small gathering, such as a party, or society at large; Kafka is probably playing on both senses of the word.

10. The best known instance is the closing words of The Trial: “es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben” (KAF, 3:241) (“It was as if the shame were destined to survive him”).

11. There is a marked contrast here between the figure’s response to music and Schopenhauer’s claim that music could bring solace and release from the turmoil
of life, since it was an aesthetically distanced and disinterested symbol of the Will; see Schopenhauer (1938, 2:516). If, as seems quite likely, Kafka was well acquainted with Schopenhauer’s world-view, he appears to offer only partial assent. Schopenhauer’s conception of the blind Will could only be acceptable to the later Kafka at any rate as a diagnosis of the post-lapsarian condition of human life, not as an account of the essence of the world; equally, Schopenhauer’s view that the spirit could escape domination by the Will through aesthetic experience and philosophical reflection was at odds with Kafka’s own speculations about the hopeless severance of human beings from the oneness of spiritual existence (“die geistige Welt”) as a result of the expulsion from Paradise, which allowed no escape, whether aesthetic or philosophical, for the spirit within the “sinnliche Welt” (“world apprehended by the senses”).

12. Josef K. experiences a similar kind of movement in the corridor outside the offices of the court officials in The Trial: “Er war wie seekrank. Er glaubte auf einem Schiff zu sein, das sich in schwerem Seegang befand. Es war ihm als stürze das Wasser gegen die Holzwände, als komme aus der Tiefe des Ganges ein Brausen her, wie von überschlagendem Seewasser, als schaukelt der Gang in der Quere und als würden die wartenden Parteien zu beiden Seiten gesenkt und gehoben.” (KAF, 3:84) (“It was as if he were sea-sick. He believed he was on a ship that was in the midst of a heavy swell. He felt as if the water were flinging itself against the wooden walls, as if a roar were coming from the depths of the corridor, like that of water breaking, as if the corridor were rocking sideways, and the plaintiffs waiting on each side were being made to rise and fall”). Here again there is a striking resemblance to Schopenhauer’s image of individual existence as a frail craft afloat on a stormy sea; see Schopenhauer (1938, 1:416).

13. For a discussion of the place of this allusion in Kafka’s work, see Gerhard Neumann, “Umkehrung und Ablenkung: Franz Kafkas ‘gleitendes Paradox.’”

14. See, for example, the story of the Hunter Gracchus (KAF, 6:43) who repeatedly believes he is climbing some great staircase, only to find himself, on awakening, stuck on board ship in the same earthly waters he has been traversing for centuries since falling to his death.

15. This gentle, but nonetheless disturbing rocking may be a relative of the much more violent “Schaukeln” experienced by Josef K. in The Trial; see note 10 above.

16. See the introduction of this volume.

17. “Each sentence in this story, each word, each—if I may say so—music is connected with ‘fear.’ On this occasion the wound broke open for the first time in one long night” (KLM, 191).

18. See James Phelan’s discussion in chapter 1.

19. See Born (1979, 89).

20. In German “sein” is a homonym. As a verb it means “to be.” It is also a possessive adjective or pronoun, meaning “his” or “its.” Kafka detects in this ambiguity the possibility that “being” entails “belonging to something or someone.” The lack of autonomy implied by this idea may relate to the numerous involuntary forms of movement analyzed in this essay.


22. See the introduction of this volume.
24. See, for example, Bernheimer (1984, 154–83).

Works Cited
