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Aphorisms and Commentary

Notes for the aphorisms and commentary can be found immediately following this section, on pages 223–228.

I

Der wahre Weg geht über ein Seil, das nicht in der Höhe gespannt ist, sondern knapp über dem Boden. Es scheint mehr bestimmt stolpern zu machen, als begangen zu werden.

The true path leads along a rope stretched, not high in the air, but barely above the ground. It seems designed more for stumbling than for walking along it.

Recorded on October 19, 1917. In the octavo notebook, this text opens with the words: “I digress. The true path . . .” Kafka later added the sentence that begins with “It seems designed more” to the octavo notebook, then copied it onto sheet 1. (See the foreword for information about Kafka’s process of copying his texts.)¹

Kafka appears to have found the motif of the rope in a Hasidic story he had recently read, in which two men sentenced to death are able to save their lives by walking along a rope stretched across a pond. When the first of them has made it to the other side, he says to the other: “The most important thing is not to forget for a second that you’re walking on a rope and that your life is at stake.” In this story, the rope serves as an explicit metaphor for the “path . . . to true worship,” while Kafka relies on the logic of the image itself. As he sees it, the rope is literally lying on the path until such time as the decision is reached to walk on it.

For more on the path as metaphor, see Aphorisms 21, 26, 38, 39a, and 104.

Additional thematically related entries in the octavo notebooks are these: “The thornbush is the ancient barrier of the path. It must catch fire if you want to go farther.” “The various forms of hopelessness at the various stations on the path.” “He has too much spirit; he travels across the earth on his spirit as though he’s on a magic chariot, even where there are no paths. And he cannot figure out on his own that there are no paths there. In this way his humble plea for others to follow him turns into tyranny, and his sincere belief that he is ‘on the path’ turns into haughtiness.” “For me, the path to my fellow man is a very long one.”

In a letter to his friend Robert Klopstock in the summer of 1922, Kafka continued to develop the metaphor of the true path: “but since we are only on a path that must first lead to a second one and this to a third and so on, and then the right one doesn’t come for quite some time, and may never come at all . . .” In the same year, Kafka wrote his prose piece “A Commentary” (better known under the titles “Give Up” or “Give It Up”), in which a policeman is amused by the notion that he, of all people, would be asked about the right path. His reaction would be incomprehensible to us without knowledge of the deeper metaphorical meaning of the word.

¹ *Translator’s note:* The originals of these sheets of paper are 11 cm (4.33 inches) in length, and 14 cm (5.54 inches) wide, which makes them somewhat larger than what we normally regard as slips of paper (the standard definition of *Zettel*). Kafka cut full-size sheets into quarters for the purpose of these brief texts. Reiner Stach’s foreword provides further details on Kafka’s arrangement of the texts on paper, the numbering system, and other textual matters.