Contents

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.

2

Alle menschlichen Fehler sind Ungeduld, ein vorzeitiges Abbrechen des Methodischen, ein scheinbares Einpfählen der scheinbaren Sache.

All human errors are impatience, a premature breaking off of a methodical approach, an apparent use of posts to prop up the apparent objective.

Recorded on October 19, 1917. In the octavo notebook, this text opens with "Psychology is impatience, all human errors are impatience . . ." The definitive message, which omits any mention of psychology, is thus the outcome of Kafka's decision to broaden the scope and thereby obscure the more limited sphere of reference.

These ideas were evidently prompted by a letter he had recently received from Felix Weltsch in which Weltsch tried to come to grips with Kafka's inconsistent behavior in psychological terms, particularly with regard to his illness. Kafka responded that Weltsch's remarks belonged "to that damned circuit of psychological theory, which you love, or rather which you don't love, but which obsesses you (and me apparently as well). The nature theories [?][1] are wrong, as are their psychological counterparts."

One day after writing this aphorism, Kafka returned to the more general theme of impatience and composed Aphorism 3.

Sheets 1 and 2 are the only ones that Max Brod published back in 1926 in *Die Literarische Welt* as facsimiles, and the only ones that are housed with Brod's literary estate at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem instead of at the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

Kafka was presumably acquainted with the term *Einpfählen* from horticulture; it refers to the use of posts to prop up and stabilize young fruit trees with (usually three) posts or to the use of fence posts to enclose a pasture. Kafka had ample opportunity to observe this work in Zürau.

1 *Translator's note*: The question mark is in the original letter to Weltsch.

3

Es gibt zwei menschliche Hauptsünden, aus welchen sich alle andern ableiten: Ungeduld und Lässigkeit. Wegen der Ungeduld sind sie aus dem Paradiese vertrieben worden, wegen der Lässigkeit kehren sie nicht zurück. Vielleicht aber gibt es nur eine Hauptsünde: die Ungeduld. Wegen der Ungeduld sind sie vertrieben worden, wegen der Ungeduld kehren sie nicht zurück.

There are two cardinal human sins, from which all others derive: impatience and laxity. Impatience got them expelled from Paradise; indolence keeps them from returning. Perhaps, though, there is only one cardinal sin: impatience. Impatience got them expelled; impatience keeps them from returning.

Recorded on October 20, 1917. When Kafka copied the text onto sheet 3, he changed both instances of "banished" to "expelled." Afterward, however, he crossed out the entire text.

Aphorisms 64, 74, 82, and 84 also comment on the expulsion from Paradise. The topic had obviously been on Kafka's mind for quite some time; in the previous year he wrote to Felice Bauer about two idyllic spots he had discovered near Prague: "Both places silent as the Garden of Eden after the expulsion of man."

Additional thematically related entries in the octavo notebooks are these: "Adam's first house pet after the expulsion from Paradise was the serpent." "In one sense, the expulsion from Paradise was a stroke of luck, for if we had not been expelled, Paradise would have had to be destroyed." "According to God, the immediate consequence of eating of the Tree of Knowledge was to be death; according to the serpent (or at least it could be understood this way), becoming like God. Both were wrong in similar ways. Humans did not die but rather became mortal; they did not become like God, but they did receive an indispensable capacity to become so. Both were also correct in similar ways. Humans did not die, but paradisiac humans did; they did not become God, but did get divine knowledge." [all crossed out] "There were three possible ways of punishing man for the Fall: the mildest was the way it actually happened, the expulsion from Paradise / the second, the destruction of Paradise / the third—and this would have been the most terrible punishment—blocking off the Tree of Life and leaving all else unaltered." "If . . . thou shalt die" means that knowledge is both at once: a step toward eternal life and an obstacle to it. If you wish to attain eternal life after having gained knowledge—and you will not be able to want otherwise, for knowledge is this will—you will have to destroy yourself, the obstacle, in order to build the steps; that is the destruction. The expulsion from Paradise was thus not an act but an event." [crossed out, with the exception of the last sentence]

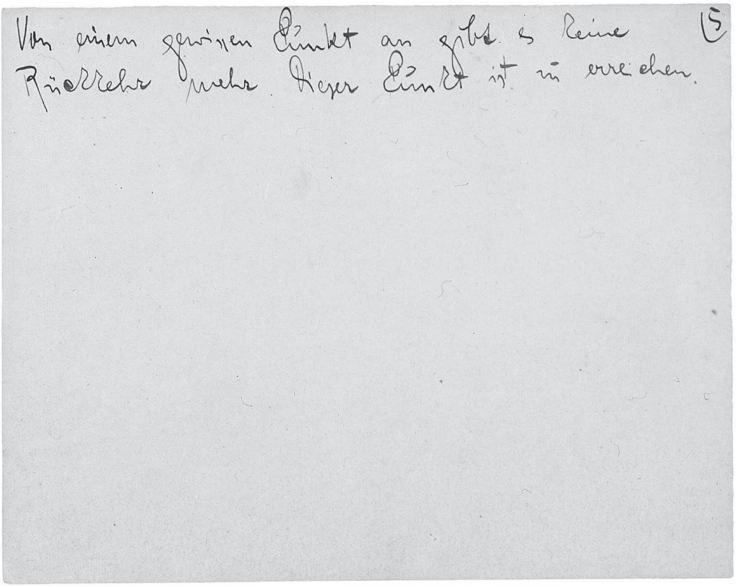
4

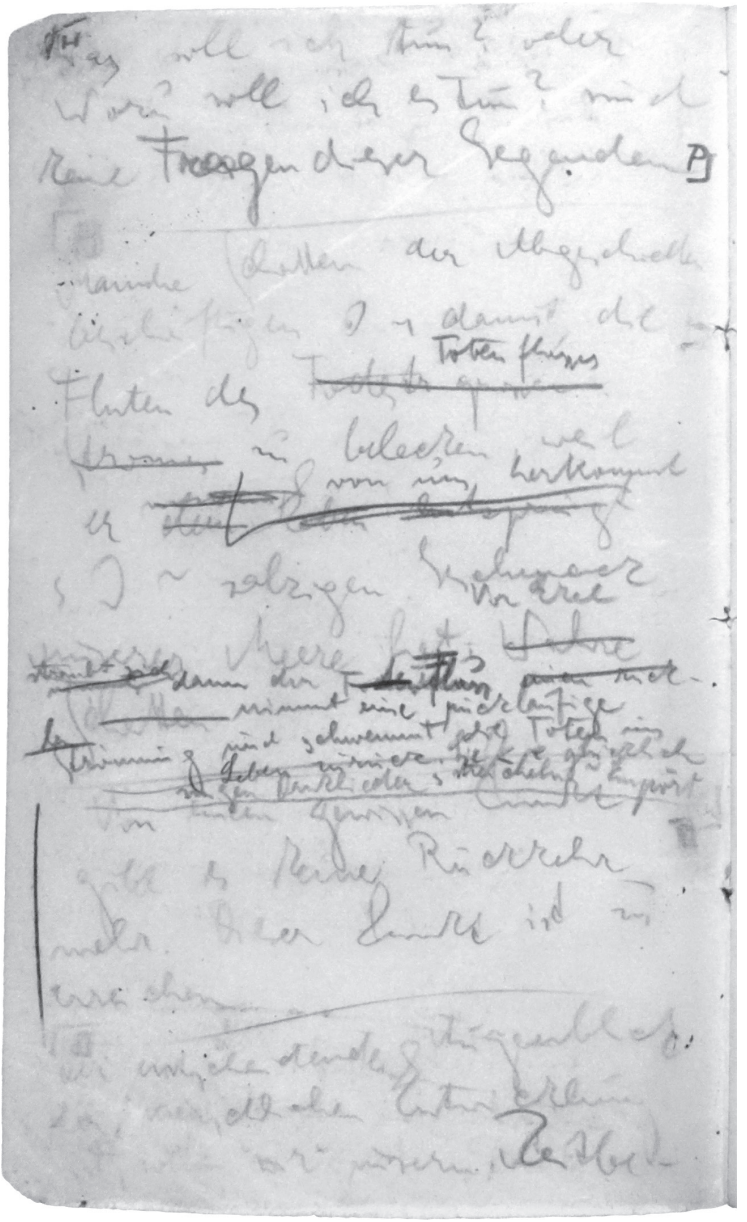
Viele Schatten der Abgeschiedenen beschäftigen sich nur damit die Fluten des Totenflusses zu belecken, weil er von uns herkommt und noch den salzigen Geschmack unserer Meere hat. Vor Ekel sträubt sich dann der Fluss, nimmt eine rückläufige Strömung und schwemmt die Toten ins Leben zurück. Sie aber sind glücklich, singen Danklieder und streicheln den Empörten.

Many shades of the departed are occupied solely with lapping at the waters of the river of death because it comes from us and still bears the salty tang of our seas. Then the river writhes in revulsion, its current flowing backward, washing the dead back into life. But they are happy, sing hymns of thanksgiving, and caress the indignant river.

Recorded on October 20, 1917. The last sentence was added later in the octavo notebook.

Kafka had played with the motif of the river of death during the previous winter in the extensive fragments about Hunter Gracchus, who, though deceased, returns to the "earthly waters" as a result of "a wrong turn of the tiller."





5

Von einem gewissen Punkt an gibt es keine Rückkehr mehr. Dieser Punkt ist zu erreichen.

From a certain point on, there is no turning back. This is the point that needs to be reached.

Recorded on October 20, 1917. In the octavo notebook, this sentence is singled out for emphasis by a vertical line in the margin.

How Kafka came upon this idea is unknown, but it is clearly applicable to several of his most pressing conflicts: the final separation from Felice Bauer, which he decided on in Zürau; disentangling himself from his father; and making the transition he yearned for from a middle-class existence to a life subject solely to the laws of writing.

It is notable how close this comes to Kafka's favorite metaphor of the "path." Stepping onto the rope in Aphorism 1 (which he had written the previous day) was also a critical juncture from which there was no turning back. And the protagonist of *The Castle* has also gone too far (in a literal as well as metaphorical sense) to return to the life he previously led.

Yet another parallel is evident in Kafka's use of the concept "threshold," such as in his 1922 diary entry: "Nothing evil; once you have crossed the threshold, all is good. Another world, and you needn't speak."

6

Der entscheidende Augenblick der menschlichen Entwicklung ist immerwährend. Darum sind die revolutionären geistigen Bewegungen, welche alles Frühere für nichtig erklären, im Recht, denn es ist noch nichts geschehen.

The decisive moment of human development is everlasting. That is why the revolutionary movements grounded in intellect, which deem invalid everything that has gone before, are correct, for as yet nothing has happened.

Recorded on October 20, 1917. In the octavo notebook, the entry begins with the words: "The decisive moment in human development is when we drop our concept of time everlastingly. The history of mankind is the split second between two strides taken by a traveler."

Kafka crossed out this second sentence in the octavo notebook. At first he used the wording "when we drop our concept of time" when writing it on sheet 6, but then he crossed that out as well.

Moreover, it took him three tries in the octavo notebook to settle on the word "invalid" (*nichtig*). First he wrote "incorrect" (*unrichtig*), then "false" (*falsch*), then "invalid" (*nichtig*).

Soon afterward, Kafka varied the basic idea of this aphorism in a letter to Max Brod, but applied it to the life of the individual: "if there are not countless opportunities for liberation, but especially opportunities at every moment of our lives, then perhaps there are none at all."

The notion that we cannot trust our limited concept of time when pondering the destiny of mankind appears in Aphorism 64 as well.

7

Eines der wirksamsten Verführungsmittel des Bösen ist die Aufforderung zum Kampf. Er ist wie der Kampf mit Frauen, der im Bett endet.

One of the most effective means of seduction that Evil employs is the call to battle. It is like the battle with women, which ends in bed.

Recorded on October 20, 1917. In the octavo notebook, this passage was initially one sentence longer: "One of the most effective means of seduction employed by Evil is the call to battle. It is like the battle with women, which ends in bed. The true infidelities of a married man are—rightly understood—never merry."

After entering the revised and abridged version onto sheet 7, Kafka crossed out the entire text.

Evil is the most frequently recurring theme in Kafka's aphorisms; see 19, 28, 29, 39, 51, 54, 55, 85, 86, 95, 100, 105. The theme of female sexuality as an instrument of Evil is also found in Aphorism 105, where the "woman's gaze" explicitly represents "Good."

There are several additional thematically related entries in the octavo notebooks: "Evil is whatever distracts" and "Evil knows of Good, but Good does not know of Evil." "Only Evil has self-knowledge." "One resource Evil has at hand is the dialogue." "Evil is the starry sky of Good." "In Paradise as always: that which causes sin and that which recognizes it for what it is are one and the same. The clear conscience is Evil, which is so triumphant that it does not even consider that leap from left to right necessary any longer." "The comfortless horizon of Evil, thinking his godlike status is evident in the very fact of his knowledge of Good and Evil. The accursedness does not seem to worsen anything in his nature: he will measure out the length of the path with his belly."

8/9

Eine stinkende Hündin, reichliche Kindergebärerin, stellenweise schon faulend, die aber in meiner Kindheit mir alles war, die in Treue unaufhörlich mir folgt, die ich zu schlagen mich nicht überwinden kann, vor der ich aber, selbst ihren Atem scheuend, schrittweise nach rückwärts weiche und die mich doch, wenn ich mich nicht anders entscheide, in den schon sichtbaren Mauerwinkel drängen wird, um dort auf mir und mit mir gänzlich zu verwesen, bis zum Ende—ehrt es mich?—das Eiter- und Wurm-Fleisch ihrer Zunge an meiner Hand.

A stinking dog, mother of numerous pups, already rotting in spots, but who was everything to me in my childhood, who follows me faithfully all the time, whom I cannot bring myself to strike, yet I shrink back from her, step by step, even avoiding her breath, and who will wind up driving me into a corner, already in sight, if I don't decide otherwise, and rot away altogether on me and with me until I end up with—does this dignify me?—the pus-filled and worm-infested flesh of her tongue at my hand.

Recorded on October 21, 1917. This passage originally bore the title "A Life." Kafka retained the title as he wrote the text on sheet 8/9, but crossed it out there.

The text in the octavo notebook initially referred to a male dog (*Hund*). Only after completing it did Kafka replace all the masculine forms by feminine forms (*Hündin*, "her") and added the words "mother of numerous pups."

Kafka initially labeled this sheet number 8, and later added the number 9. He may have noticed that he had accidentally skipped over the number 9 while numbering the empty sheet. It is also conceivable, however, that there was a sheet that Kafka numbered 9 and later destroyed.

Max Brod found this passage so repugnant that he omitted it when first publishing the numbered aphorisms in 1931; he renumbered the aphorisms that followed to conceal the omission.

10

A. ist sehr aufgeblasen, er glaubt im Guten weit vorgeschritten zu sein, da er, offenbar als ein immer verlockenderer Gegenstand immer mehr Versuchungen aus ihm bisher ganz unbekannten Richtungen sich ausgesetzt fühlt. Die richtige Erklärung ist aber die, dass ein grosser Teufel in ihm Platz genommen hat und die Unzahl der kleineren herbeikommt, um dem Grossen zu dienen.

A. is quite full of himself, believing he is far advanced in goodness, since he feels that as an evident object of increasing attraction, he is exposed to more and more temptations from directions previously unknown to him. But the true explanation is that a great devil has taken up residence within him, and an immense number of lesser devils are coming by to serve the great one.

Recorded on October 22, 1917, just after the words "Morning in bed."

On the previous day, Kafka had written a prose piece that provides a narrative context for the motif of the devil living within a person. It opens with the words: "Sancho Panza, who, it should be said, never boasted of it, was able, over the course of years, in the evening and night hours, to divert his demon—whom he later dubbed Don Quixote—away from himself by amassing a great many chivalry romances and picaresque novels."

The notion of having one or several devils "of one's own" appears in many of Kafka's letters. In 1912 he explained in his diary why there are usually many of them. In the summer of 1913 he studied Gustav Roskoff's two-volume *History of the Devil* (1869).

Kafka found confirmation for the notion that good people are exposed to an especially broad range of temptations, but also have the means to outwit the devil, in a Hasidic story he heard in 1915: A chief rabbi orders his favorite student to convert to Christianity for the time being in order to "divert his demon." Thus, Evil is not only something "that diverts" (according to Kafka's definition); Evil itself can also be diverted.

"A." is not a real person here but rather a "someone," the abstract embodiment of a course of action or a human characteristic, as is evident from the following entry in the octavo notebook and in the associated revisions: "A.'s spiritual poverty and the torpor of this poverty is an advantage, facilitating his concentration, or rather, it is itself concentration, which means, of course, that he loses the advantage that lies in the application of the power of concentration."

Kafka initially formulated this note in the first person ("My spiritual poverty . . .") but later made a series of revisions that shifted it into the third person, with "A." as the object of the message. The very next entry begins with the words: "A. is laboring under the following delusion."

Kafka also used this abbreviation in Aphorisms 49 and 107.

11/12

Verschiedenheit der Anschauungen, die man etwa von einem Apfel haben kann: die Anschauung des kleinen Jungen, der den Hals strecken muss, um noch knapp den Apfel auf der Tischplatte zu sehn, und die Anschauung des Hausherrn, der den Apfel nimmt und frei dem Tischgenossen reicht.

The diversity of views that can be had of, say, an apple: the view of the little boy who has to crane his neck in order even to glimpse the apple on the table, and the view of the master of the house, who takes the apple and easily hands it to his dinner companion.

Recorded on October 22, 1917. Kafka first marked this sheet number 11; he later filled in the number 12. Here, too, it is unclear whether he had accidentally skipped over 12 in numbering the empty sheet or whether Kafka labeled a sheet "12" and later destroyed it.

The octavo notebook indicates that the example of the apple was not as randomly chosen as it might seem; there, the passage ends with the sentence: "Between the two of them is Eve." So Kafka's mind was still on the theme of Paradise (see Aphorism 3, written two days earlier).

This is an example of Kafka's pictorial thinking: although Genesis does not make explicit mention of it, Kafka visualizes Eve first *gazing up* to the forbidden fruits on the Tree of Knowledge, then plucking them and *handing* them to her companion. In other words, her "view" of the apple was first that of the little boy, then of the master of the house.

A letter to Milena Jesenská four years later laid out a similarly image-centered argument. Jesenská had evidently described the noncommittal nature of extramarital sexuality as merely "playing with a ball," and Kafka commented in assent: "It's as if Eve had picked the apple (sometimes I think I understand the Fall like no one else), but only to show it to Adam, because she liked it. Biting into it was the decisive act; playing with it wasn't allowed, but neither was it prohibited."

13

Ein erstes Zeichen beginnender Erkenntnis ist der Wunsch zu sterben. Dieses Leben scheint unerträglich, ein anderes unerreichbar. Man schämt sich nicht mehr, sterben zu wollen; man bittet aus der alten Zelle, die man hasst, in eine neue gebracht zu werden, die man erst hassen lernen wird. Ein Rest von Glauben wirkt dabei mit, während des Transportes werde zufällig der Herr durch den Gang kommen, den Gefangenen ansehen und sagen: "Diesen sollt Ihr nicht wieder einsperren. Er kommt zu mir."

A first indication of the onset of understanding is the wish to die. This life seems unendurable, another life unattainable. One is no longer ashamed of wishing to die; one asks to be moved from the old, hated cell to a new one, which one has yet to learn to hate. A vestige of belief is also involved in thinking that the director might happen by in the corridor, look at the prisoner, and say: "You are not to lock up this man again. He's coming to me."

Recorded on October 25 or 26, 1917.

Kafka's deviation from the semantics of everyday language is striking here: While you can *believe* that a specific thing will happen even without knowing its cause and significance, you're more likely to *hope for* a merely chance event.

This aphorism is reminiscent of a prose fragment that Kafka had recorded in his diary the previous year, where a prisoner clings to the hope that the executioner who has entered his cell will not kill him but simply bring him to a different cell.

Three months after Aphorism 13, Kafka recorded a variation on the prisoner theme in the octavo notebook: "The suicide is the prisoner who sees a gallows being erected in the prison yard, mistakenly believes it is the one intended for him, breaks out of his cell in the night and goes down and hangs himself."

In later years Kafka took the metaphor further, banishing any last ray of hope: "He could have resigned himself to a prison. To end as a prisoner—that could be a life's ambition. But it was a barred cage. Casually and imperiously, as if at home, the racket of the world streamed out and in through the bars, the prisoner was actually free, he could take part in everything, nothing that went on outside escaped him, he could even have left the cage, after all, the bars were yards apart, he was not even imprisoned." "My prison cell—my fortress." "All is imaginary—family, office, friends, the street—all imaginary, far away or close at hand, the woman closest of all, but the truth is only that you are pressing your head against the wall of a windowless and doorless cell."

14

Giengest Du über eine Ebene, hättest den guten Willen zu gehn und machtest doch Rückschritte, dann wäre es eine verzweifelte Sache; da Du aber einen steilen Abhang hinaufkletterst, so steil etwa, wie Du selbst von unten gesehen bist, können die Rückschritte auch nur durch die Bodenbeschaffenheit verursacht sein und Du musst nicht verzweifeln.

If you were walking across a plain with the best of intentions in walking onward yet were still moving backward, it would be cause for despair; but as you are clambering up a steep slope, about as steep as you yourself appear from below, moving backward can be caused only by the nature of the ground, and you needn't despair.

Recorded on November 3, 4, or 5, 1917. After Kafka copied the text onto sheet 14, he crossed it out.

Kafka indicates the autobiographical context of this text—and perhaps also the reason he crossed it out—in the very next notation in the octavo notebook: "Best of intentions? You couldn't stop your thoughts of Italy / you read P. Schlemihl aloud."

The "thoughts of Italy" probably refers to the girl he had fallen in love with in October 1913 in Riva. Kafka's diary reveals that he was still thinking about this girl in July 1916 while on vacation with Felice Bauer.

During this same stay in Marienbad, Kafka read aloud some texts to Felice, including, most likely, Adelbert von Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl's Wondrous Story*; the engaged couple made a gift of this book to Felice's friend Grete Bloch. It is the story of a man who sells his shadow to the devil but in doing so cuts himself off from the human community.

The self-critical commentary in the octavo notebook can accordingly be understood as Kafka essentially sabotaging his romantic relationship with Felice Bauer even at the moment of their intensest closeness, preoccupied as he was with hidden erotic thoughts and with presenting Felice strategically chosen readings for them to enjoy together, readings that made her lover's ominous, self-imposed isolation painfully obvious to her. In light of the now-imminent end of his engagement, Kafka questioned whether he had always shown the "best of intentions" in moving forward with Felice.

The aphorism itself offers an additional variation on the path metaphor Kafka was so fond of using; see the commentary on Aphorism 1.

15

Wie ein Weg im Herbst: kaum ist er rein gekehrt, bedeckt er sich wieder mit den trockenen Blättern.

Like a path in autumn: no sooner has it been swept clean than it is once more covered with dry leaves.

Recorded on November 6, 1917.

Here, too, we find a variation on the path metaphor. It presumably intends to show that as time goes by, even the "true path" that has already been identified can become unrecognizable once again. At the time Kafka wrote this, he had the opportunity to experience these kinds of paths daily during his extended autumn walks in and around Zürau.

16

Ein Käfig ging einen Vogel suchen.

A cage went in search of a bird.

Recorded on November 6, 1917. In the octavo notebook, the sentence reads: "A cage went to catch a bird." The revision was made while he copied the text onto sheet 16.

The difference between the two versions is significant. At first Kafka was evidently thinking of an act of overpowering, with the cage as perpetrator and the bird as victim. Then he blurred the contours of the image: the cage will unquestionably deprive the bird of its freedom as soon as it has found it, but there is no longer any indication that it could do anything else to the bird. The cage and bird will come together. This is much closer to Kafka's view that those who lose their freedom or remain confined have invariably played a part in getting into this situation and hence also share the responsibility.

The second and final, apparently more innocuous, form of the aphorism could be projected onto any number of social relationships: a woman vying for a possible provider, a company seeking a loyal employee, et cetera. It cannot be determined from this brief text what specific kind of cage Kafka had in mind.

The question of whether the "bird" contains an allusion to Kafka's name must also remain open; see the commentary for Aphorism 32.

(continued...)