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SIEGFRIED KRACAUER

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A collection of unpublished works by Franz Kafka has recently appeared under the title *China*, a volume put together by the writer and guardian of his estate, Walter Schoeps. According to the afterword, interpretations are not entirely adequate for the aphorisms presented in the collection, produced during the last period before Kafka's death, written during the years of the war.

Although not a single word in the text references to these events, they find their echo, perhaps it was only the intrusion of the war that made Kafka discern and elaborate the confusion and edge of the diabolical," runs one of the aphorisms, since more of the diabolical than the human.

The image of building reappears in various aphorisms to designate the efforts of distracted workers in "Deductions of a Dog," the narrator, an engineer, of whom Kafka identifies for extensive evocations of a Dog," the narrator, an engineer, whom Kafka identifies for extensive evocations of a Dog," the narrator, an engineer, whom Kafka identifies for extensive evocations of a Dog," the narrator, an engineer, whom Kafka identifies for extensive evocations of a Dog," the narrator, an engineer.

Willy Otto Zielke, Pyramid, 1929
Franz Kafka
ON HIS POSTHUMOUS WORKS

A collection of unpublished prose works from the literary estate of Franz Kafka has recently appeared under the title The Great Wall of China, a volume put together by Max Brod, friend of the deceased writer and guardian of his estate, in collaboration with Hans Joachim Schoeps. According to the afterword by the two editors (whose interpretations are not entirely adequate), all of the narrative fragments and aphorisms presented in the collection are late works that Kafka produced during the last period before his death in 1924. They were written during the years of the war, the revolution, and the inflation. Although not a single word in the entire volume makes immediate reference to these events, they figure among its presuppositions. Perhaps it was only the intrusion of these events that enabled Kafka to discern and elaborate the confusion in the world. "There can be knowledge of the diabolical," runs one of the aphorisms, "but not belief in it, since more of the diabolical than there already is does not exist."

The image of building reappears often in the texts; its primary aim is to designate the efforts of distracted and confused people. In "Investigations of a Dog," the narrator, an animal of rare philosophical gifts with whom Kafka identifies for extended stretches, wonders, "Can I contemplate the foundations of our existence, divine its profundity, watch the laborers at the construction, at their sinister work, and still expect that all this will be brought to an end, destroyed, abandoned, just

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because of my questions?" Indeed, the building that one generation after another constructs is sinister, because this structure is to guarantee a security that men cannot attain. The more systematically they plan it, the less they are able to breathe in it; the more seamlessly they try to erect it, the more inevitably it becomes a dungeon. It rears up like a nightmare in the story "The Burrow,," where an unnamed animal, which is perhaps a mole or a hamster, tells of the cave-like construction it has built out of fear of an invasion by all conceivable forces. Since this fear also wants to eliminate those insecurities, inherent to creaturely existence, the burrow is a work of self-deception. It is no accident that its labyrinthine passageways and squares extend through subterranean night. Kafka's presentation of the burrow, which has the clarity of a daydream, takes particular care to point out the reciprocal relation between the hopeless fear and the ingenious intricacy of the architectural system. If the latter is a product of an anxiety arising from a reprehensible attempt at self-assertion, it, too, in turn creates anxiety—an increasingly threatening entanglement that eventually obliterates the animal's freedom of action. Thousands of precautionary measures must be taken before the animal dares to venture out of the cave, and its return from its daily promenade is transformed into a most unusual undertaking. Moreover, the futility of the burrow becomes apparent in the end, for no matter how well it protects against the trivial things that dig about in the earth, it cannot withstand the real enemy and may in fact even attract it. The measures provoked by existential fear are themselves a threat to existence.

Kafka also undeniably conceives of science—at least to the extent that it crosses certain boundaries—as a building, but a building that is a product less of fear than of confusion. In the prose piece "The Village Schoolmaster [The Giant Mole]," he brings the dark, boundless, and all-embracing edifice of science into confrontation with a trivial discovery by a village schoolmaster. While the latter has meaning under all circumstances because and so long as it is inseparably tied to the person who discovered it, the former, towering dizzyingly upward, abandons mankind. "Every discovery," we read in the story of the giant mole, "is introduced at once into the sum total of knowledge, and with that ceases in a sense to be a discovery; it dissolves, and one must have a schooled scientific imagination to understand it. For it is immediately related tofundamental questions that don't yet even know, and in the meantime we axioms into the clouds. How are we to understand the "Investigations of a Dog," it is asked in the "in its prodigious compass is not the comprehension of any single scholar, but a group of scholars . . ." Just as animal fear is irrational, spirit/intellect gets lost in a labyrinth, spirit/intellect gets lost in a labyrinth, spirit/intellect gets lost in a labyrinth, spirit/intellect gets lost in a labyrinth.

At one point the philosophical scholar he would have trouble penetrating. This is not because he lacks in comprehension of any single scholar, but a different science from that of prize freedom above everything earlier ones, since it implies the free and we are slaving away at a ”The “Investigations of a Dog,” it is asked in the "in its prodigious compass is not the comprehension of any single scholar, but a group of scholars . . ." Just as animal fear is irrational, spirit/intellect gets lost in a labyrinth, spirit/intellect gets lost in a labyrinth, spirit/intellect gets lost in a labyrinth, spirit/intellect gets lost in a labyrinth.

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in a sense to be a discovery; it dissolves into the whole and disappears, and
one must have a schooled scientific eye even to recognize it after that. For
it is immediately related to fundamental axioms of whose existence we
don't yet even know, and in the debates of science it is raised on these
axioms into the clouds. How are we to grasp such things?" Similarly, in
the "Investigations of a Dog," it is remarked that the science of nutrition
"in its prodigious compass is not only beyond the power of compre­
prehension of any single scholar, but beyond that of all our scholars put

Laborers building Kafka sees them everywhere. They hammer
down and pound, and their masonry is so thick that no sound can get through
to us. Foolish to expect that someone could still slip out! The doors lack
keys, and the few holes that do appear are immediately walled up again.
"Leopards break into the temple and guzzle the sacrificial chalices dry.
This is repeated time and again. Finally it can be reckoned upon before­
hand and becomes part of the ceremony." Just as animal fear ends up in the self-constructed laby­
rinth, spirit/intellect gets lost in the excesses of science.

At one point the philosophical dog admits that if he were tested by a
scholar he would have trouble passing even the easiest of scientific tests.
This is not because he lacks intelligence but because he possesses a
certain instinct whose orientation is characterized as follows: "It was
this very instinct that made me—perhaps for the sake of science itself,
but a different science from that practiced today, an ultimate science—
prize freedom above everything else." This explanation amplifies the
earlier ones, since it implies there is an ultimate science that might
possibly be attained in freedom. Our world is thus a locus of unfreedom,
and we are slaving away at a building that is obstructing our view.
Conceivably, in his description of the mole's cave, Kafka had in mind
those human organizations whose triumphs consist in trenches, barbed­
wire barriers, and wide-ranging finance projects. His awareness of
finding himself imprisoned is deepened by premonitions of a state of
freedom in which the lessons of the ultimate science can come to the
fore. Almost the opposite of a believer in progress, he transposes this
state of freedom, or rather the possibility of partaking in it, into the past.
Earlier generations, remarks the narrator of the "Investigations of a Dog," were younger. "Their memory was not so overburdened as ours today; it was easier to get them to speak out, and even if nobody actually succeeded in doing that, the possibility of it was greater . . . The true word could still have intervened, planning or replanning the structure, changing it at will, transforming it into its opposite; and the word was there, was very near at least, on the tip of everybody’s tongue—anyone might have hit upon it." All of Kafka’s work circles around this one insight: that we are cut off from the true word, which even Kafka himself is unable to perceive. Moreover, it is this insight that provides sufficient justification for the parable of the sinister building. How is it that its walls, which used to be so much thinner, have now become so impermeable? The answer proves that it is not a romantic intention that motivates Kafka’s backward glance: “No, whatever objection I may have to my age,” the investigating dog assures us, “former generations were no better than recent ones; indeed, in a certain sense they were far worse, far weaker.” The attitude manifested by this statement divests the subsequent tale about our ancestors’ misdeeds of any semblance of longing for the past. “When our first forefathers [Urvater] strayed, they certainly did not think that theirs was to be an endless wandering; after all, they could still literally see the crossroads. It seemed an easy matter to turn back whenever they pleased, and if they hesitated to turn back it was merely because they wanted to enjoy a dog’s life for a little while longer.” The reproach of indolence raised here—Kafka considers it one of the cardinal sins—also appears in the short story “The City Coat of Arms.” Here it is directed against the builders of the Tower of Babel, who, trusting in the progress of their successors, did not push themselves to the limit of their energies. Nevertheless—and this is quite important—Kafka puts less weight on the allusion to the presence of a past failure than on the memory of the loss of the true word. The latter is a leitmotif that recurs constantly, as in the fable of the dying emperor who has sent you, and you alone, a message that never arrives; in the tractatus “The Issue of the Laws,” where one reads that by their very nature laws must remain a secret; and in the image of the monumental group to which Kafka once belonged. By invoking that which has been lost, Kafka simultaneously shows that even the dream can hard-
lost, Kafka simultaneously shifts it into an unreal distance, as if to show that even the dream can hardly offer refuge to it. The emperor's messenger attempts in vain to leave even the innermost palace chambers, and the populace does not know whether the laws, which have been kept secret and which they are trying to guess, even exist. And in the strange account "The Knock at the Manor Gate," the knock—which probably did not even take place—does cause the court gate to open wide, but nothing emerges except a troop of horsemen that has dashed in only to turn back again immediately afterward.

The hallmark of the philosophical dog is his incessant inquiring about the unascertainable. The answer of the fellow dogs is—silence. This resolute silence about the "crucial things," which is constantly erecting itself anew in front of him like a bulwark, is one of the bitter fundamental experiences that the small group of authentic questioners have always had to endure. It is as if the dog were speaking in their name when he complains, "We are those who are oppressed by silence, who long to break through it, literally in order to breathe." If the questioner is condemned to loneliness, then the others are silent allies who find happiness in "the warmth of togetherness"—if they do not isolate themselves by choice, like the cave animal, who loves the silence. Indeed, the silence that reigns or is supposed to reign in the interior of his utterly dark burrow is really the only drastic cure for the true word. Since it is impossible for an entire group of creatures to fall silent simultaneously, the silence of the dogs takes a different form. Sometimes they avoid the required response; at other times they try to repress their particular way of life by spouting intolerable babble, like the aerial dogs. How can the behavior of the canine community be explained? For there are doubtless good grounds for it. The investigating dog surmises "that those who remain silent are in the right as the preservers of life." This is why he does not want to despair after all but instead unceasingly implores his allies to join him in opening the "roof of this low life," in order to ascend to freedom. But just as he is about to lift off the roof and thus eliminate the decisive obstacle, he encounters a new resistance which he is completely unable to overcome. He hears
music, which forces him to give up. For Kafka, music is the highest form of silence. It paralyzes the dog twice. The first time is during his encounter with seven musical dogs who are producing marvelous sounds. The still youthful questioner wants them to explain what drives them to such activity: "But they—incredible! incredible!—they never replied, behaved as if I were not there."24 The second time, music disturbs a hunger experiment which the dog, who has grown older in the meantime, undertakes as part of his daring investigations. As a trial that gambles with existence, its relationship to the much more noncommittal achievements of science is similar to that of the discovery of the village schoolmaster in "The Village Schoolmaster [The Giant Mole]." No sooner is the experiment—which is meant to be explosive—really in process when a foreign dog approaches the fasting one and, after trying in vain to persuade him, finally chases him away from the hunger site by means of magical song. The conversation that precedes the forced abandonment is enlightening. In the course of the conversation, the dog who has prepared himself for fasting and who does not want to allow himself to be chased away remarks that the unknown dog has gotten himself entangled in contradictions. The latter, however, refrains from correcting them and merely asks, "Don’t you understand that which is self-evident?"25 The self-evident: this is the last pretext for those who want to maintain this low life, the last bulwark behind which the guardians of silence can dig themselves in.

The treatment that the silent dogs accord the investigator leads him to raise the following suspicious question: "Did they want to lull me to sleep, to divert me, without violence, almost lovingly, from a false path, yet a path whose falseness was not so completely beyond all doubt that it would have permitted the use of violence?"26 Like the dog who is constantly being distracted—this is how Kafka feels. He looks at the world as someone who has been pushed back into it, as someone who must turn back from the pursuit of those places where the emperor lives and where the unknown laws are housed. It is not as if he would have ever found his way to them; rather, his experience is more like that of someone who has only partially awakened, whose thinking—still half caught up in sleep—remains barely dissolved and in which even as he still believes that the incomparably clear word, the incomparably clear under the sign of the revealed attempts to gather its disintegration begins to reassemble themselves. The less he is able to succeed that has now disappeared, the less he is able to succeed in achieving it the scattered fragments in order to put them in order. This chase reports in an aphorism, in every the attainment of a view of life . . . in which rise and fall, would simultaneously a dream, a hovering."27 And in this fashion, for his wish would bourgeois version of nothingness lend to nothingness."28 In fact, the former wish, but instead verifies that he traverses from one ever to unveil the world’s presumption relation of things to people in Common Confusion,"29 for it include an important business despite their best intentions to other. One could term Kafka since here, instead of the hero completely unhinged in the Kafka, Don Quixote was act however, how to render this himself. Thus, the devil incessantly Sancho Panza, who followed him "derived from them a great an days."30 In just the same way, is impotent despite its logical
caught up in sleep—remains occupied with the dream that has just barely dissolved and in which the solution of all riddles was present. Even as he still believes that he can grasp and, yes, even taste the key word, the incomparably clear image into which the world has congealed under the sign of the revealed secret begins to melt. Tortuously he attempts to gather its disintegrated parts, which, to make things worse, begin to reassemble themselves in a fundamentally wrong arrangement. The less he is able to succeed in reconstructing the magnificent image that has now disappeared, the more desperately he dashes about among the scattered fragments in order to preserve them and, where possible, put them in order. This chase conditions Kafka's artistic process. As he reports in an aphorism, in earlier years he found himself wishing "to attain a view of life . . . in which life, while still retaining its natural rise and fall, would simultaneously be recognized no less clearly as a nothing, a dream, a hovering." 27 And a few lines later: "But he could not wish in this fashion, for his wish was not a wish at all, but only a defense, a bourgeois version of nothingness, a wisp of gaiety which he wanted to lend to nothingness." 28 In fact, Kafka hardly ever complies with his former wish, but instead verifies for himself that the confused world that he traverses from one end to the other is a nothing. In order to unveil the world's presumption that it is a something, he shows that the relation of things to people is completely skewed. The anecdote "A Common Confusion," 29 for instance, recounts how A wishes to conclude an important business deal with B from H. They plan to meet, but despite their best intentions to keep the appointment they miss each other. One could term Kafka's portrayals reversed adventure novels, since here, instead of the hero conquering the world, the world becomes completely unhinged in the course of his wanderings. According to Kafka, Don Quixote was actually Sancho Panza's devil, who knew, however, how to render this devil harmless by distracting him from himself. Thus, the devil incessantly performed the craziest deeds, and Sancho Panza, who followed him out of a certain sense of responsibility, "derived from them a great and useful entertainment to the end of his days." 30 In just the same way, Kafka wards off the reasonableness that is impotent despite its logical power, and accompanies it through the
thicket of human conditions. Thanks to the continual intervention of reasonableness, the world’s defectiveness is exposed once and for all. Even if stupidity were to reign in the world, the expectation that intelligence might be able to change things would still be justified. But this very expectation is disappointed by the actual uselessness of the intervention of reasonable reflection.

Countless rational and realistic insights, doubts, and reservations pervade Kafka’s poetic writing for the sole purpose of ultimately fizzling out in the void. How carefully, for example, the cave animal ponders whether it should post a confidant as a watchman at ground level, to increase its security. But: “If there is someone whom I can trust when I see him eye to eye, can I still trust him as fully when I can’t see him and the moss covering separates us? It is comparatively easy to trust someone if you are supervising him or at least can supervise him; perhaps it is possible even to trust someone at a distance. But completely to trust someone outside the burrow when you are inside the burrow—that is, in a different world—seems to me impossible. But such doubts are not even necessary; it suffices to simply imagine that during or after my descent any one of the countless accidents of existence might prevent my confidant from fulfilling his duty…”

Although generally there is method to madness, here the methodological reflections—which are meant to be entirely realistic—are the hallmark of the world’s madness, and the fact that they do not work out unmasks their irreality completely. This irreality is not a dream; on the contrary, it is real. It is not a something, however, and is all the more negligible the more coherent it pretends to be. In this, its form of existence, it releases beings from within itself that, while invisible to the average viewer, reveal themselves to those returning with the rumor of the true word resonating in their ears: mythical beings correlated to the jumbled murmuring of life and its reasoning. Among them belong the unnamed burrow animal, which defies observation, and the freezing “scuttle rider,” who gallops on his scuttle to the coal store but is unable to attract the attention of the coal dealer’s wife. They are neither spirits /Geister/ nor ghosts but corporeal embodiments of the current state of the world, in which instead of kings there now exist only couriers. “They were given the role of kings. Like children, they all are so many couriers scurrying after each other which—since there is nothing.” The world in which pattern sheet depicting parts of the wall is used in a sense playfully to elevate itself, for instance, not content with scientific results, makes the following statement: “The essence of all knowledge is in the average viewer, the mother weans her young child into the world: ‘Wet everything, abstruseness of things that even gaity.

In “The Great Wall of China,” as historical, he depicts the ancient structure of the dog world… its structure is less an attempt at the level of a realized utopia, its impenetrability of today’s situation is to play off the dense structure of the earlier moment. The entire experiment meant to examine the “old, yet actually simplistic understanding of this intention that Kafka discusses this construction” supposed e Wall. On orders from the there no one whom I have as twenty workers were formed to five hundred yards of wall, stretch of the same length to it been made the construction c
couriers. "They were given the choice of becoming kings or the couriers of kings. Like children, they all wanted to be couriers. This is why there are so many couriers scurrying about the world, shouting messages to each other which—since there are no kings—have become meaningless." The world in which these couriers scurry to and fro is like a pattern sheet depicting parts that do not match. Kafka often takes pleasure in singling out one of the misleading lines, pursuing it, and then in a sense playfully developing it further. The investigating dog, for instance, not content with having grasped the insignificance of scientific results, makes the following observation: "In this regard the essence of all knowledge is enough for me, the simple rule with which the mother weans her young ones from her breast and sends them out into the world: 'Wet everything as much as you can.'" It is the abstruseness of things that every now and then demands a touch of gaiety.

In "The Great Wall of China," a study that Kafka himself describes as historical, he depicts the ancestral world, the one in which "the social structure of the dog world . . . was still a loose one." His depiction of its structure is less an attempt to raise this former mode of existence to the level of a realized utopia than it is an effort to characterize the impenetrability of today's situation. At least, what is most important for him is to play off the dense structure of the present against the looseness of the earlier moment. The entire investigation is, if you will, a grand experiment meant to examine what a world that granted entrance to the "old, yet actually simplistic stories" might have looked like. It is with this intention that Kafka discusses extensively the "system of piecemeal construction" supposedly employed in the construction of the Chinese wall. On orders from the leadership—"where it was and who sat there no one whom I have asked knew then or knows now"—gaps were left everywhere. "This is the way it was done: gangs of some twenty workers were formed who had to accomplish a length of, say, five hundred yards of wall, while a neighboring gang erected another stretch of the same length to meet the first. But after the junction had been made the construction of the wall was not carried on from the
point, let us say, where this thousand yards ended; instead the two
groups of workers were transferred to begin building again in quite
different areas.\textsuperscript{40} To emphasize further the fundamental importance of
such a working method, the narrator continues: "In fact it is said that
there are gaps which have never been filled in at all, an assertion,
however, which is probably merely one of the many legends surrounding
the building of the wall."\textsuperscript{41} The reproach of inexpediency could be
made against the piecemeal construction system as described above,
since according to what one hears the wall was after all meant to serve
as a protection against the races from the north. But Kafka refutes the
objection that he himself has raised: if the gap-riddled construction is
inexpedient, then it follows that the leadership wanted something inex­
pedient. He then closes with the curious supposition that the decision
to build the wall probably existed since the beginning of time and thus
was not directed against the races from the north at all. This informa­
tion rounds out the picture of a past life that the story of the Chinese
wall tries to capture. It is both an invocation and an entreaty.\textsuperscript{42} It is the
former in that it invokes and transfigures a lost form of existence in
which the properly integrated human creature does not plug up the gaps
out of a fear of life and a false need for protection—gaps that apparently
permitted this creature to hear the echo of the true word. It is an
entreaty to the extent that it contains the admonition to become aware
of the state of suspension. The light of olden times streams from it into
the present era, not in order to direct us back to its shimmer, but rather
in order to illuminate our utter darkness just enough so that we can take
the next step.

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Are we even capable of taking this step? In the "Investigations of a
Dog" one reads that "our generation may be lost."\textsuperscript{43} This weak "may
be" leaves a trace of hope. When he gets more specific on the subject of
this hope, Kafka betrays an uncertainty that corresponds precisely to the
immeasurable distance from the true word. This uncertainty is junta­
posed to the certainty with which the reflections of diabolical reason
appear and lose their footing. Just as Kafka neither acknowledges nor
entirely rejects progress, he links together the far and the near in a
similarly ambiguous fashion. The law is stretched out not at any great
distance designed more to make people view that the sought-after so­
attainable here and now, is grasps the Last Judgment as in Kafka's notebooks of 1917–1919, which contain Kafka's only reference to
"The decisive moment in history is the reason the revolutionary mind has yet happened."\textsuperscript{44} Estrangement upon the world, much too close to the subject to confusion. The decree of the radicality of intellectual/­
right. But instead, he does not recognize that what he shares in
insecurity, Kafka avoids attributing it only by a united crunching of
right. But instead, he does not recognize that what he shares in
knowledge, and not only knowledge, and not only
"Bones hard as iron, contain
only by a united crunching of
lesson of the text "On the
now, is another belief that the confusion itself is not really confusing. In
similarly ambiguous fashion. "The true way goes over a rope which is stretched out not at any great height but just above the ground. It seems designed more to make people stumble than to be walked upon." The view that the sought-after solution is unattainable, yet at the same time attainable here and now, is touched on briefly in the aphorism that grasps the Last Judgment as martial law. It is contained in the octavo notebooks of 1917–1919, which, to the best of my knowledge, also contain Kafka's only reference to the events of the [October] revolution: "The decisive moment in human development is everlasting. For this reason the revolutionary movements of intellect/spirit that declare everything before them to be null and void are in the right, for nothing has yet happened." Estranged from the world, this thought barges in upon the world, much too close to the language of the world not to be subject to confusion. The decisiveness with which this thought approves the radicality of intellectual/spiritual movements derives its justification from its inkling of the true path. Perhaps due to the just-mentioned insecurity, Kafka avoids attributing revolution to this true path outright. But instead, he does clarify his inkling at various points. According to him, only the community possesses the explosive power capable of lifting the roof off the low life. The investigating dog recognizes that what he shares with his fellow dogs is not only blood but also knowledge, and not only knowledge but also the key to knowledge. "Bones hard as iron, containing the richest marrow, can be gotten at only by a united crunching of all the teeth of all dogs." The related lesson of the text "On the Issue of the Laws" reads: "That which is so gloomy for the present is lightened only by the belief that a time will eventually come when the tradition and our research into it will jointly reach their conclusion, and, with a sigh of relief, everything will have become clear, the law will belong to the people alone, and nobility will vanish." Here and there, the individual who is lost together with the community is advised to save himself along with that community, but without any guarantee of redemption. There is no safeguard, and the fact that alongside the belief in a redemption to come in this world there is another belief that the confusion of the world is ineradicable—this in itself is not really confusing. In one aphorism is a formulation that reads:
“One develops in one’s own manner only after death, only when one is alone. Death is to the individual like Saturday night to the chimney sweep: both wash the soot from the body.”48 Or could it be that the breakthrough does not occur only after death? The tale “The City Coat of Arms” ends with the lines: “All the legends and songs that originated in this city are filled with longing for a prophesied day when the city would be destroyed by five successive blows of a gigantic fist. This is why the city has a fist on its coat of arms.”49 It is not certain whether the legends and songs that herald the destruction of the dwelling are accurate, and what perspective will then open up for us. “I have never been in this place,” Kafka says at one point. “Breathing is different, and a star adjacent to the sun shines even more brightly than the sun itself.”50 It is here that we remain, with the unconfirmed longing for the place of freedom.