

Horizontality and Impossibility in Kafka's Parabolic Quests

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**Frank W. Stevenson,**  
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**Abstract:** In his article "Horizontality and Impossibility in Kafka's Parabolic Quests" Frank W. Stevenson explores a horizontal-parabolic interpretation of several Kafka narratives. The key idea is that the meaning/truth of a parable is being thrown-beside-itself "on the horizontal": thus it is impossible not only to vertically reach any higher meaning/truth but even to "cross-over" to a truth which has now been horizontally "displaced." Noting that Derrida's and Agamben's reading of "Before the Law" — the narrator cannot "enter into the Law" because the latter "prescribes nothing," is nothing but an "opening" — not only excludes any vertical-hierarchical dimension but even any horizontal "entrance," Stevenson suggests that this impossibility of "entering into the open" is represented indirectly by the figure of a geometric parabola whose two curving sides continually "open out" without ever "reaching."

**Frank W. STEVENSON**

### **Horizontality and Impossibility in Kafka's Parabolic Quests**

In Kafka's "On Parables" a skeptic says that the abstruse words of the sages cannot really solve the real-life problems we face, since we can never actually "go over" into that fully spiritual realm these words point to. A sage responds by saying (parabolically) that we can overcome all these real-life problems simply by ourselves "becoming parables" (Kafka 457). Yet how can we (literally) "become parables"? What could this possibly mean? This may be somehow analogous to the point that even with Christ's own parables (the Words of the Son of God Himself), it seems impossible for us to fully know, let alone become, that God to whom the sacred parables all point. Both sacred and secular parabolic writings are forms of comparison; *para-bola* literally means "throw-beside," as if perhaps language or rather meaning were now being "thrown beside itself." We are no longer simply in the realm of allegory here. We may say that in the fifteenth-century morality play *Everyman* all characters have symbolic meanings, thus making the whole drama allegorical, that is, giving it an allegorical meaning on a "higher level." But although Christ's parables also appear to possess this vertical dimension or thrust, their essential form would seem to remain frustratingly "horizontal" in the sense that the purely vertical is qualified here: the stories point up toward a God (Truth, Meaning) we can never reach, whereas in *Everyman* the character "Good Deeds" really symbolizes good deeds. In Kafka's horizontal-parabolic discourse, then, is the meaning or truth being somehow "thrown-beside-itself" or "thrown-beyond-itself" in such a way that, while remaining fully immanent, we can never reach it?

Even if we frequently get vertical-hierarchical series in this author's writings, such as the many courts, many levels of the Law or of Justice stretching indefinitely upward in *The Trial*, and even if Josef K tries to climb up the ladder of this vertical series of levels, he is constantly thwarted in his efforts, so that in effect we are always thrown back onto the horizontal. A priest tells him the well-known parable "Before the Law" near the novel's end, just before K is executed for a crime whose nature he has been unable to discover: a man from the country has waited his whole lifetime in front of the gateway to the Law, which is open but which he assumes he is prevented from entering by the gatekeeper; when at last, with his dying breath, he asks the gatekeeper why no one else has ever come to this gateway seeking entrance, the latter replies that "This door was meant only for you, and now I will shut it." Here we have a clearly horizontal-parabolic design if we think of the Law as being in the innermost compartment or square within an indefinite series of "concentric" squares, each with its own open door; the man from the country cannot even enter the doorway of the outermost square or chamber, giving us a sort of labyrinthine infinite regress. It is a variation on the plight of the imperial messenger in Kafka's "Great Wall of China": though he must carry a message whispered to him by the Emperor all the way across China, due to the crowds and the continual "walls" or vertical disruptions of the vast bureaucratic structure he cannot even get outside of the imperial palace itself, let alone outside of Beijing, let alone... and so on *ad infinitum*, as in Xenon's paradoxes.

The impossibility of sending the Emperor's message – which may well be that he is dying or already dead – is somehow analogous to the impossibility of reaching or penetrating into the inmost chamber of the Law (or God, or Meaning) itself. Perhaps this is because, just as the message is one of death or nothingness or meaninglessness, there is no Law, or rather because the Law commands Nothing. Giorgio Agamben turns to Kafka's parable at the opening of Chapter 4, "Form of Law," of *Homo Sacer*: "In the legend 'Before the Law,' Kafka represented the structure of the sovereign ban in an exemplary abbreviation. Nothing — and certainly not the refusal of the doorkeeper — prevents the man from the country from passing through the door of the Law if not the fact that this door is already open and that the law prescribes nothing. ... 'The Law,' Derrida writes, 'keeps itself [*se garde*] without keeping itself, kept [*gardée*] by a doorkeeper who keeps nothing, the door remaining open and open onto nothing.' ... And Cacciari ... underlines the fact that the power of the Law lies precisely in the impossibility of entering into what is already open, of reaching the place where one already is: 'How can we hope to "open" if the door is already open? How can we hope to enter-the-open [*entrare-l'aperto*]?" (49).

Kafka's suggestion that the emperor in "The Great Wall of China" may have intentionally commanded the "piecemeal construction" of the kingdom's surrounding wall so that it would later collapse might also suggest a "law that keeps itself by not keeping itself (Agamben 54). Or better still, it might suggest "the singular "inversion" that Walter Benjamin opposes to law's being in force without significance and the enigmatic allusion in his eighth 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' to a 'real' state of exception" (Agamben 54). Benjamin proposed that "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency" (257) and Agamben continues writing that "A life that resolves itself completely into writing corresponds, for Benjamin, to a Torah whose key has been lost: 'I consider the sense of the inversion toward which many of Kafka's allegories tend to lie in an attempt to transform life into Scripture'" (54). In fact, in Kafka's story we are told that one possible reason the emperor (and/or god) commanded the piecemeal construction of the empire-defining wall is that this wall was to be the "foundation for a new Tower of Babel," which would give this paradoxical dynamic of "construction as deconstruction" a wider range of meaning (Agamben 54). One might also think here of Jacques Derrida's critique of Benjamin's ideal of a "pure language" in *Les Tours de Babel*. Derrida says that "Babel" in the *Genesis* parable refers both to the "nonsense" of a multitude of inter-translatable human languages heard all at once and to God's actual "proper name": like all proper names and especially in this case, His name (Babel, or perhaps Confusion, Nonsense, Impossibility) cannot be translated (251-53).

The dynamic of "construction as deconstruction" may also be a way, then, of looking at the horizontal-parabolic "form" of Kafka's texts. Here we are not concerned with a "distribution of states" or with the molecular breaking down of words themselves into noise, as in Deleuze's and Guattari's reading of this author, but rather with a discontinuous leap, a displacement of meaning into a totally different space or place; the event of this displacement or this indefinite opening-out implies (like "entering into the open") its own impossibility. Thus rather than the Deleuze-Guattarian dynamic of Gregor-becoming-insect in *The Metamorphosis* — a reading tied to the idea that language, which is becoming-noise, "stops being representative in order to now move towards its extremities or its limits" (Deleuze and Guattari 23) — we are taking as model the impossible moves-across or displacements of "On Parables," "Before the Law" and "The Imperial Messenger." This approach is also traditional, given the origins of textual interpretation or hermeneutics in the reading of passages in the Bible, and not least of Christ's parables and here I discuss briefly Kafka's parables starting with those which seem to involve an instantaneous moving-across or displacement and then exploring some that feature more traditional journeys or quests.

In "The Bridge" Kafka wrote that "I was still and cold, I was a bridge, I spanned an abyss (*Abgrund*). No tourist strayed to this trackless height; the bridge was not yet marked on the maps. And so I lay, waiting ... One day, toward evening — was it the first, was it the thousandth, I cannot tell, my thoughts were always racing in confusion, always, always in circles ... I heard the footstep of a man! ... He came, he knocked on me all over with the iron tip of his cane ... But then ... he jumped with both feet onto the middle of my body. I shuddered in wild pain, totally uncomprehending. Who was it? A child? A gymnast? A daredevil? A suicide? A tempter? A destroyer? And I turned to look at him [but] I had not yet turned around when I was already falling ... and in a moment I was torn apart and impaled on the sharp stones [in] the raging water [below]" (108-09). The narrator is the bridge itself, or the already-foreclosed possibility of "crossing" it, "going over" (on) it, and then there appears "a man" who, rather than crossing the bridge, jumps on its midpoint, breaking it in two. Perhaps this may be the figure of a "parable" for Kafka. We note in the first place that the horizontal bridge, now being bent down and finally broken in the center, could represent a parabolic curve which does what in geometrical terms is impossible: the apex breaks open and the whole "figure" in effect passes down through the horizontal line that, forever just out of reach, was perpendicular to the line bisecting the curve itself — or perhaps, in this case, through the surface of the raging river below. We could also see this breaking as suggesting an instantaneous passage "across" the bridge, or a transformation of who/what was on one end into who/what is now already on the other end. Perhaps we might compare this sort of dynamic or this model to the more explicitly reductive, mathematical-

logical-Hegelian one we get in "First Sorrow." Here the brilliant young trapeze artist, a variation on Kafka's hunger artist, is content with life so long as he is allowed to spend most of it up in the air, clinging to his single trapeze bar. But one day the "artist, biting his lips, said that he must in future have two trapezes for his performance instead of only one, two trapezes against each other. The manager at once agreed" (Kafka 448).

Given the "circularity" of the bridge's "thoughts ... racing in confusion," we might also think of Nietzsche's figure of the overman as tightrope walker in Zarathustra's Prologue. Zarathustra, waiting for the performance of a tightrope walker to begin, addresses the people in a small town: "Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman — a rope over an abyss (*Abgrund*). A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping" (Nietzsche 120). A little later he watches the actual performance: "For meanwhile the tightrope walker ... had stepped out of a small door and was walking over the rope, stretched between two towers and suspended over the market place and the people. When he had reached the exact middle of his course the small door opened once more and a fellow in motley clothes, looking like a jester, jumped out and followed the first one with quick steps. "Forward, lamefoot!" he shouted ... "or I shall tickle you with my heel! What are you doing here between towers? [... You] block the way for one better than yourself." And with every word he came closer and closer; but when he was but one step behind the dreadful thing happened ...: he uttered a devilish cry and jumped over the man who stood in his way. This man ... lost his head and the rope, tossed away his pole, and plunged into the depth even faster, a whirlpool of arms and legs. The market place became as the sea ...: the people rushed apart and over one another, especially at the place where the body must hit the ground (Nietzsche 131).

The "daredevil" of course can be the overman (*Übermensch*) who now "jumps over man" (or "over himself"), for Nietzsche is interested in the idea of self-overcoming (*Selbstüberwindung*), which is closely tied to the notion of the eternal return and to an awareness of a kind of radical break or discontinuity in time/history: the death of God which we ourselves have brought about, says the madman in *Joyful Wisdom*, means we have entered a "higher history than any we have known before." In Kafka temporal discontinuity is also closely tied to the figures of parabolic-horizontal-"spatial" breaks or discontinuities. In another very short parable, "Give it Up," a man is walking to the train station and seems to know how to get there; then he suddenly gets confused about the time ("As I compared the tower clock to my watch I realized it was much later than I had thought") and thus also about "the way." He thus asks directions of a policeman: "'You asking me the way?' 'Yes,' I said, 'since I can't find it myself.' 'Give it up! Give it up!' said he, and turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter" (Kafka 456). This Way in its mystical-spiritual-religious sense takes us back again to "On Parables," but now we have the temporal dimension (as too in this world vs. "the next world," and/or this world vs. "the other world") added onto the purely parabolic-horizontal one, for "crossing-over" is a spatio-temporal dynamic.

The fact that the speaker in "Give it Up" suddenly finds it is "later than I thought" when he compares the clock tower to his watch may suggest Einsteinian relativity — for after all time is relative, as the earth's many time zones also make clear. In fact Benjamin tends to interpret this author not only via their shared Jewish heritage, which includes those religious parables of the orthodox and mystical traditions, but also in physical and even relativistic terms. In "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death" (1934), Benjamin speaks of Kafka's temporal dynamics in the context of moving heavy weights: "The man who whitewashes has epochs to move, even in his most insignificant movement. On many occasions and often for strange reasons Kafka's figures clap their hands. Once the casual remark is made that 'these hands are really steam hammers'" (Benjamin 112; the impossibly heavy project of "moving epochs" may suggest the situation of Benjamin's angel of history in "Thesis IX"). At the beginning of "Some Reflections on Kafka" (contained in a letter to Gerhard Scholem dated 12 June 1938), Benjamin reveals his own interest in quantum mechanics, the other side of relativity theory, by way of describing Kafka's sense of being a "modern big-city dweller." Here he cites a passage from the physicist Arthur Stanley Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World*: "I am standing on the threshold about to enter a room. It is a complicated business. In the first place I must shove against an atmosphere pressing with a force of fourteen pounds on every square inch of my body. I must make sure of landing on a plank traveling at twenty miles a

second round the sun ... I must do so while hanging from a round planet headed outward into space, and with a wind of aether blowing at nobody knows how many miles a second through every interstice of my body. ... The plank has no form or substance. To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies. Shall I not slip through?" Benjamin then adds: 'In all of literature I know no passage which has the Kafka stamp to the same extent'" (Benjamin 141-42).

In another short Kafka passage, "The Top," "a certain philosopher" kept trying to catch the children's "top while it was spinning ... then he threw it to the ground and walked away. For he believed that the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top, for instance, was sufficient for the understanding of all things." But with each attempt (each experiment) he found that this result was not achieved. Each time, when he finally stopped the spinning and "held the silly piece of wood in his hand, he felt nauseated. The screaming of the children, which hitherto he had not heard and which now suddenly pierced his ears, chased him away, and he tottered like a top under a clumsy whip" (444). Again we sense that the "physics" of (Kafka's) parabolic language or discourse – horizontal, broken, discontinuous – is also at issue here. Tops must spin on flat surfaces; the earth and perhaps universe spin in space and time; somehow each is isolated and self-contained and yet there is a vast distance, a sort of "displacement" between them. We get purely horizontal motion combined with the presence/absence of directionality in "A Little Fable." Here a mouse, at first terrified by the vastness of a world in which he could see no walls, is happy that as he grows older "the world is growing smaller every day. ... I kept running and running, and I was glad when at last I saw walls far away to the right and left, but those long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into.' 'You only need to change your direction,' said the cat, and ate it up" (445).

If this implies that the mouse had been running in the same direction ever since it was very young, we could compare it to the case of the human speaker in "Wish to be a Red Indian" who says: "If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's neck and head would be already gone" (Kafka 390). The horseback rider is racing across the horizontal surface with the "quivering ground" beneath him and the sky (or at least "wind") above; it seems that all verticality disappears as the himself *becomes* this (vibrating?) "horizon." The ground may suggest death as well as immanent life; the implicit if absent sky might imply God (transcendence); but we are finally neither, for if we go fast enough we become their "betweenness." We get circularity – the monotony of repetition – added to the strictly linear dimension of "Red Indians" in "Reflections for Gentlemen-Jockeys": "When you think it over, winning a race is nothing to sigh for ... the flat racecourse ... soon lay empty before you save for some laggards of the previous round, small figures charging the horizon" (Kafka 389). These slowpokes who trail so far behind in the race that the victor-narrator has already "lapped" them are ironically the heroic racers who "charge the horizon," the ones who actually care about winning. This whole spatio-temporal scene implies life's inevitable circularity: unlike the Red Indian who escapes we cannot go anywhere in life, we can only "go in circles." And yet if the mouse had changed directions every now and then, perhaps even if he had kept running in circles he might have survived.

A variation on going in circles would be to abruptly reverse one's direction on a plane horizontal surface, a dynamic whose possibility is perhaps already implied by the purely linear flight of the horseback rider who wishes to become a "red Indian" and in fact "becomes the horizon." The possibility of such a reversal is more obviously implied in "Report to an Academy" with the swift "flight" of the narrator, an ape who rapidly evolved into a man only to realize that human civilization is not necessarily an improvement on ape civilization: "It is now nearly five years since I was an ape, a short space of time, perhaps, according to the calendar, but an infinitely long time to gallop at full speed, as I have done ... accompanied by ... applause, and orchestral music, and yet essentially alone, since all my escorts ... kept off the course" (Kafka 250). Kafka qualifies the intensity of the narrator's nostalgia for the past: "I felt more comfortable in the world of men and fitted it better; the strong wind that blew after me out of my past began to slacken; today it is only a gentle puff of air that plays around my heels; and the opening in the distance ... through which I once came myself,



has grown so small that ... I should have to scrape the very skin from my body to crawl through" (Kafka 250). Indeed, several of Kafka's journeys or quests are wind-propelled (although the Indian rider is "leaning against the wind"), including that of the Country Doctor, the Hunter Gracchus and the Bucket Rider, and one wonders if Walter Benjamin was influenced by the ape-man narrator's wind-from-the-past image in Thesis IX, where his angel of history "would like to stay ... But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings ... This storm irresistibly propels him into the future toward which his back is turned" (Benjamin 258).

"The Hunter Gracchus" gives us a journey or quest in the more conventional sense, even if here the protagonist is still moving in circles and is still trapped on a sort of horizontal plane between earth-and-sky or earth-and-heaven; in fact this overtly mythic or parabolic figure is suspended between life and death. Gracchus' death-ship "has no rudder, and it is driven by the wind that blows in the undermost regions of the earth" (Kafka 230). The story gives us a frozen state of horizontality or perhaps earth-heaven, death-life "interface," where the latter can ironically also be seen as a life-death interface; for perhaps on the horizontal (on the "horizon") reversals (inversions) are always possible or even necessary. The long-"dead" Gracchus tells the mayor of Riva — where his ship, in its endlessly repeated circumnavigations of the earth, has temporarily landed — that "many years ago ... I fell from a precipice in the Black Forest ... when I was hunting a chamois. Since then I have been dead. ... But ... in a certain sense I am alive too. My death ship lost its way; a wrong turn of the wheel, a moment's absence of mind on the pilot's part ... I cannot tell what it was; I only know this, that I remained on earth and that ever since my ship has sailed earthly waters. ... I am forever ... on the great stair that leads up to ... the other world. ... On that infinitely wide and spacious stair I clamber about, sometimes up, sometimes down, sometimes on the right, sometimes on the left, always in motion. The Hunter has been turned into a butterfly. Do not laugh" (Kafka 228).

The butterfly is often a symbol of transformation and of the soul once it is released from the body at the moment of death. But here we seem to have not the free flight (which might take one all the way up to the "other world") of a soul but the endlessly circular, purely horizontal wandering of a body bound by earthly space-time and apparently forever caught between the earth-and-sky. There is a vertical dimension here but it is extremely restricted, in effect flattened-out or horizontalized, for the hunter is forever on the "infinitely wide ... stair" leading upward. Gracchus goes on to say here that sometimes, as he is trying to move up the stairway, "when I make a supreme flight and see the gate actually shining before me I awaken presently on my old ship, still stranded forlornly in some earthly sea or other. The fundamental error of my onetime death grins at me as I lie in my cabin" (Kafka 229). This ever-out-of-reach "gate" of course suggests the gate of the Law in the parable at the end of *The Trial*. But does Gracchus also face here the impossibility of "entering into openness"? While "Gracchus" gives us a conventional "journey" in one sense — an apparent movement through space and time as opposed to an instantaneous and impossible transformation — we are not in normal "time": the protagonist is dead or rather frozen in a between-life-and-death state, and he can still talk to real people in "real" space-time, in the real world, like a character from out of an ancient myth or parable perhaps who has only half-"crossed-over" to us. As for "space" we are also in-between: already dead a long time the hunter (searcher, man on a quest) sails "earthly waters" but keeps going in circles, and as in myth his death-ship "has no rudder, and it is driven by the wind that blows in the undermost regions of the earth." Also as in myth or more specifically as the very type of the "parable" itself, he is caught between earth-heaven, trying in vain to cross-over. Thus in a sense the traveler has no specific purpose or goal in life beyond traveling (crossing-over) itself, as is also the case with many of the passages examined above.

But what about the "fundamental error" of Gracchus' death which (perhaps like a skull) "grins at him"? The idea that in his case a purely-contingent (?) mistake was somehow made — is it like the one made in the case of Josef K in *The Trial*? — might suggest the absence, as in the novel, of any absolute power "above" that controls everything, keeps everything in order, and the only "heaven" the protagonist seeks is to be finally really dead. One is tempted to compare this with the "false alarm" at the end of "A Country Doctor" where the doctor's quest is to save a sick patient. "Never shall I reach home at this rate ... Naked, exposed to the frost of this most unhappy of ages, with an earthly vehicle, unearthly horses, old man that I am, I wander astray. ... Betrayed! Betrayed! A false

alarm on the night bell once answered — it cannot be made good, not ever" (Kafka 225). Here, where "earthly and unearthly horses" could also imply being trapped between immanent and transcendent realms, this false alarm refers in the first place to the sick patient whom the doctor was summoned to see. The patient, a young man who is ambiguously ill/healthy and tells the doctor he wants to die, could be a self-sacrificing Christ figure, the worm-infested wound in his side a sign of radical immanence, death, decay: "Poor boy, you were past helping. I had discovered your great wound; this blossom in your side was destroying you. ... 'Will you save me?' whispered the boy. ... That is what people are like in my district. Always expecting the impossible from the doctor. They have lost their ancient beliefs" (Kafka 224).

Perhaps in this modern world, religions and Christ-figures have been replaced by medical doctors. Yet it is impossible to "cure" people who are not sick as well as those who are already dead — and perhaps even those who are "sick" (since everyone is sick). And it is impossible to "save" one who is already a (false? powerless? also true?) "savior" just as it is impossible to know if or when the long-promised Messiah will actually appear on earth, or to know whether this one is the true one. This pervasive "falsity" might fit the notion of a horizontal mirror-surface that merely reflects, having no reality in itself, just as the horizon itself is merely "virtual." For as Gracchus says, "the fundamental error of my onetime death grins at me." And one might venture to go further here and attempt to relate the whole notion or figure of a "parable" to that of a "fundamental error" or, more easily perhaps, "a false alarm." For the parable — and again we may think of Kafka's fundamental model, "On Parables" — by nature may be promising us something that it cannot give us, cannot "deliver," though paradoxically (as in "On Parables") it may also do so "in another sense." The idea of relating the two continually opening-out sides of a geometric parabola, which can "never reach" a solid line or final destination, to the form of a (metaphysical or fundamental) question also comes to mind here — that is, the possibility of relating the (impossible or hopeless) quest of the parabolic "figure" and of the literary parable to that of a philosophical "question." In one sense, such questions (and parables) may be "false alarms" since they cannot be answered.

If the quest of doctors is to save patients, that of messengers is to deliver messages. In Kafka's parable of the Imperial Messenger, within the long story "The Great Wall of China," we have a messenger trying in vain to carry a message whispered to him by the dying emperor — likely "I am dying" or (in the context of the story, and also echoing the "message" of Gracchus) "I am already dead" — from the Imperial Palace in Beijing all the way across the vast empire "to you, the humble subject, the insignificant shadow cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun; the Emperor from his deathbed has sent a message to you alone" (Kafka 244). But due to the indefinitely large number of walls that stand in his way — the obstacles/delays of a virtually infinite bureaucracy, as in *The Trial* — the messenger cannot even get out of the Imperial Palace, let alone out of Beijing, let alone all the way across the empire: "Nobody could fight his way through here even with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself" (Kafka 244). Kafka presents the "dynamics" of this messenger's projected but impossible horizontal journey — from point A to point B on a plane surface disrupted by a series of fragmentary walls, whose very fragmentariness is what makes them impossible to pass over or through, as the traveler is in effect "absorbed within" them — on the logical-mathematical model of Xenon's paradoxes. Perhaps the surface of the earth or earth-sky horizon is also a "mathematical" (if not parabolic) surface.

Let us assume, thinking again of the "The Great Wall," that this message of the Emperor's death — which might have occurred thousands of years ago, yet most of the common people had not heard it yet because the vast stretch of time/history got absorbed within the spatial "horizon" of the empire — is also in effect the Nietzschean message of the "death of God." This would be a variation on the message (suggested by "The Country Doctor") that we cannot know whether the Messiah, though infinitely delayed like the parabolic "opening" or parabolic "quest" itself, will still come (in order to save us), or whether He will never come, or whether this "figure" is purely imaginary. If the Messiah will never come then perhaps our "call" to Him is or has been in some sense a "false alarm" — where the latter might imply that we do not really need Him anymore, though it could also mean that He does not exist. And it might also be that we who are too far away to hear this message of the "Emperor" nonetheless already know it — or at least, as Kafka says in "The Imperial Messenger," we



"dream it to ourselves" — because in some sense "we have brought it about ourselves." In *Joyful Wisdom* Nietzsche's madman says after announcing God's death: "Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever will be born after us — for the sake of this deed he will be part of a higher history than all history hitherto" (130). Here he fell silent and looked again at his listeners. They too were silent and stared at him in astonishment. 'I come too early,' he said then; 'my time has not come yet.' This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering — it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars — *and yet they have done it themselves*" (Nietzsche 130; emphasis in the original).

Nietzsche of course thinks that we humans have in some sense "killed" God by no longer believing in, or understanding, Him, and yet we also do not realize fully that we have ourselves done this "momentous" deed, cannot fully come to terms with it, are not yet fully aware of its meaning or implications. Thus, while we ourselves are the cause or source of this shocking news, we have not yet "heard" it. The protracted or attenuated if not quite impossible "echo-effects" here might somehow suggest the function of the huge parabolic dish or mirror telescope which can focus energy and send it out (as a signal) from the same central focal point where it also receives energy in the form of a signal. The paradoxical possibility of simultaneously sending and receiving messages leads us to reflect further on the Nietzsche passage and on Kafka's "messenger" who is perhaps also "you," the intended receiver of the message. As a receiving instrument, the parabolic-dish telescope is used by those astronomers who want to listen to cosmic background noise, and more specifically to listen for any signals that might suggest intelligent life in the universe.

As mentioned above with the notion of the "false alarm," we might perhaps try to compare Kafka's parabolic-narrative form to the parabolic figure described by geometry. The two curving sides of this figure keep opening out in a way that is potentially infinite, even if any given point along one of these curving lines is always equidistant from its corresponding point on the vertical line that bisects the apex of the curve and its corresponding point on the horizontal line that is perpendicular to that bisecting line and passes through the apex — although here the dimensions of verticality and horizontality are interchangeable. This suggests a form of constant control, perhaps a form of beauty combined with a virtually infinite opening-out which could be taken as horizontal and/or vertical, although the whole geometrical figure appears on a horizontal surface. One might also see this as the throwing of the figure of discourse or meaning "beside itself" or (horizontally) "beyond itself." Objects thrown into the air and falling back down some distance from where we are standing will follow the path of a "parabolic curve" whose apex is the highest point reached.

But this geometric figure may appear to suggest, not so much the impossibility of "our entering into it" as what may seem a variation on this, namely the impossibility of our getting out of it, and/or of its own two sides' ever reaching or in effect "going" anywhere. The continual opening-out of these two curving sides which can never reach a destination or touch one another could also suggest an ongoing "quest" where it is certain that the goal can never be achieved, just as "open-ended" metaphysical questions can ultimately never be answered. Deleuze, reflecting on and qualifying Heidegger's *Seinsfrage*, suggests that "problems are of the order of events" (*Difference* 188) for "just as problems are not reducible to the particular solutions in which they become incarnated, so events may be supposed to exist independently of their actualizations in bodies and states of affairs" (Patton 12), which implies that such events cannot be reduced to their possible physical causes. As Paul Patton also notes, "This equivalence between transcendental problems and pure events is reaffirmed in *The Logic of Sense*, p. 123, in the account of the logical genesis of propositions" (Patton 17). In other words, the situation of being trapped or frozen on the horizontal, the Truth or Meaning having been thrown just beside or beyond us where it nonetheless remains forever out of reach, might be compared to the experience of being trapped "within" an unanswerable metaphysical question (e.g., "Does the Law exist?" etc.) which cannot be reduced to any of its possible answers, where now we are breaking down the distinction between the event of the question, which can never be reduced to its possible answers, and the physical event which cannot be reduced to its possible causes. Though this

figure breaks down the distinction between the linguistic-textual discourse of questions-answers and the physical-mechanical discourse of causes-effects, the immanent-transcendent question-event cannot be contained within either discourse.

Of course, the flat, exterior, opened-out portion of the human ear is in effect the prototype of the three-dimensional parabolic-dish telescope that gathers-in incoming signals from outer space. The question then arises: When we find ourselves being drawn into the mysterious energy-field of literary parables such as those we get in Kafka, are we listening for answers or only (and continually, still) listening for the question?

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