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## Incomplete and Self-Dismantling Structures

The Built Space, the Text, the Body

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**ABSTRACT:** The present essay engages with the short story 'The Burrow', written by Franz Kafka between 1923 and 1924, a few months before his death. The ambiguity of the original title, 'Der Bau', which defies translation by pointing at the same time at a construction and an excavation work, anticipates the multi-layered image of the burrow itself. While both nature and function of the burrow are hard to pinpoint (is it a dwelling, a shelter, a fortress, a labyrinth, a ruin?), the initially reported success of its construction is revealed as illusory, thus prompting the ongoing first-person narration of the incessant builder's work. Similarly unsuccessful is any attempt of the reader to attain metaphorical closure. In the light of other impossible, i.e., unfinished, bound-to-fail, ruinous, or self-dismantling structures portrayed by Kafka, as well as on the background of coeval texts by Paul Valéry and Georg Simmel, the essay investigates the wide and deep significance of the burrow's countering the classical ideal of architectural wholeness.

**KEYWORDS:** Kafka, Franz; Incompleteness; Ruins; Fragmentation (Philosophy) in literature; Babel; Vitruvius; Valéry, Paul; Simmel, Georg; Architecture and literature

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Between 1923 and 1924, a few months before his death, Franz Kafka wrote one of his last short stories, known in English as ‘The Burrow’. The English title is justified by the fact that the main character is a strange hybrid creature living underneath the earth,<sup>1</sup> but nonetheless fails to render the rich ambiguity of the original title. In German, ‘Der Bau’, in fact, has the more general meaning of ‘construction’, ‘building’, alongside with that of the English word ‘burrow’, ‘a hole or excavation made in the ground for a dwelling-place by rabbits, foxes and the like.’<sup>2</sup>

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1 Although we know that Kafka borrowed some features of his main character from the chapters on the ‘badger’ and the ‘mole’ of the encyclopaedic work on animal life by Alfred Elmut Brehm (*Brehms Thierleben. Allgemeine Kunde des Tierreichs. Große Ausgabe*, 2nd, rev. and enlarged edn, 10 vols [Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1876–79] <<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.1067>>), he intentionally avoids any precise description of the creature in question, not unlike he had done in the case of the ‘vermin’ (Ungeziefer) into which Gregor Samsa finds himself transformed at the beginning of ‘The Metamorphosis’. The creature of the burrow is not only hybrid because of its unclear belonging to any assignable species; it also shares important, allegedly ‘specific’, human features, such as rational thought and technical knowledge, as well as the belief in ancient legends: on this see Hermann J. Weigand, ‘Franz Kafka’s “The Burrow” (“Der Bau”): An Analytical Essay’, *PMLA*, 87.2 (1972), pp. 152–66.

2 ‘burrow, n.<sup>1</sup>’, in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 25 August 2019]

As we will see, this title, defying translation, already contains, in its most contracted form, the essence of the work, which is itself a work on the necessity and the impossibility of the work, a construction that turns itself into its opposite, by undermining its own foundations in the very process of its making.

Like many other tales and novels of Kafka, 'Der Bau' was only published posthumously.<sup>3</sup> It also remained — and this matters even more for the present purpose — very probably unfinished (a point I will come back to later). Its opening words, therefore, carry meaningful overtones: 'I have completed the construction of my burrow [Ich habe den Bau eingerichtet] and it seems to be successful.' With a characteristic move, within the tiny space of one sentence, Kafka lets the first signs of contradiction and doubt emerge, thus warning the reader that the assertive tone of the beginning might be illusory: 'All that can be seen from outside is a big hole; that, however, really leads nowhere.' After these initial remarks, we are introduced by the main character, who is also the narrator, the architect, and the builder, into his dwelling, the burrow: that is, we follow him in all the detours of his thoughts, recollections, fears, plans, actual movements, and building activities as they develop alongside his words during a long present-tense monologue that spans, uninterrupted, many years, from what he calls 'the zenith of my life' at the beginning of the story, to his old age, and his very last hours, in the proximity of death.

It will become clear soon that the burrow is neither complete, nor successful, nor will it ever be. The aim of this paper is to read it precisely as one instance of Kafka's impossible structures, as well as a figure by which the writer (re)thinks his relation to writing and literature; a privileged space that embodies the possibility of an aesthetics of failure; a chapter of an emerging narrative that, in the heart of European modernism, counters the classical ideal of architectural wholeness.

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3 First in 1928, in Witiko. *Zeitschrift für Kunst und Dichtung*, 1 (1928), pp. 89–104, then in Kafka, *Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer. Ungedruckte Erzählungen und Prosa aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. by Max Brod and Hans-Joachim Schoeps (Berlin: Kiepenheuer, 1931), pp. 77–130. The English edition used here is 'The Burrow', trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir, in Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1971), pp. 325–59.

Kafka was not new to the association of writing with architectural elements; textual structures and built spaces mirror each other often in his private writings, in diary entries as well as in letters, in passages often charged with affective investment; on 30 May 1920, for instance, in one of his impassioned letters to Milena, the Czech translator of his story 'The Stoker', he writes:

Your translation is faithful and I have the feeling that I'm taking you by the hand through the story's subterranean passages, gloomy, low, ugly, almost *endless* (that's why the sentences are almost endless, didn't you realize that?), almost *endless* [...] hopefully in order to have the good sense to disappear into the daylight at the exit.<sup>4</sup>

This passage is noteworthy also because it overturns in an interesting way the conception of maze-like structures characteristic for Kafka's stories, which are usually associated with the idea of a claustrophobic 'closure' of space; in contrast to this, the 'endless' nature of this kind of labyrinthine writing — and reading, consequently — makes us think of a new type of space, created by the very act of being said, which very much resonates with Elizabeth Grosz's elaborations on the concept of space in Bergsonian and Deleuzian thought: 'a conception of space that does not so much underlie or subtend *matter*, functioning as indifferent coordinates of the placement of matter' — rather, a conception of space that functions as an *effect* of matter and *movement*: 'an *unfolding* space defined, as time is, by the arc of movement, and thus a space open to *becoming*'.<sup>5</sup>

Now, I will not argue that Kafka's space should be read as fostering the emergence of liberating energies; still, I see a constant tension at work in most of his texts between a given, even suffocating, closure and the creative and disruptive force of writing, which incessantly strives to open up new paths, embracing the risks as well as the potentialities of becoming.

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4 Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, trans. and intro. by Philip Boehm (New York: Schocken, 1990), pp. 20–21 (emphasis added, A. C.).

5 Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Future of Space: Toward an Architecture of Invention', in Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, foreword by Peter Eisenman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 109–30 (p. 118) (my emphasis, A. C.).

Some years before, in 1917, Kafka had given shape to another incomplete structure in ‘The Great Wall of China’, a short story that, in my view, belongs to the same genealogy as ‘The Burrow’. What these two texts have in common is also, quite meaningfully, the keyword *Bau* (‘construction’) as a part of their original title, and interestingly enough, a destiny of mistranslation. In the German title ‘Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer’, the emphasis, which gets lost in translation, is precisely on the ‘construction’ of the wall as a *process* caught up in its becoming. The opening sentence of the story foreshadows that of the later text: ‘The Great Wall of China was *finished* off at its northernmost corner.’<sup>6</sup> But as we can by now expect, this first sentence is going to be soon contradicted; and so it is: from the second line onwards, we are told of how the very method employed to carry out the building of the Wall, namely the so-called ‘principle of piecemeal construction’, or ‘building in sections’, according to another translation, turns out to be the main cause of the *structural impossibility* for the work to be completed. That is, the wall was not planned to be built continuously from one end to the other; rather, the construction had to proceed independently from the two opposite sides of the Empire, in order to converge and finally meet at a certain point. The work was assigned to small groups of workers; each had to accomplish only small portions of the wall, before being transferred to ‘begin building again in quite different neighbourhoods’; but within this general master plan, as if in a sort of infinitely divisible space, between the two extremities, the western and the eastern, the principle of piecemeal construction was replicated, that is, ‘applied on a smaller scale’, with the result of an inevitably fragmented structure that cannot but fail to achieve its main goal, namely ‘to be a protection against the people of the north [...] the nomads’. Unable to provide a distinction between inside and outside, the unfinished/unfinishable wall ends up, very much like a ruin, questioning the very meaning of construction, as well as the metaphysical privilege of presence over absence:

Naturally in this way many great gaps were left, which were only filled in gradually and bit by bit, some, indeed, not till after the

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6 Kafka, ‘The Great Wall of China’, in Kafka, *Complete Stories*, pp. 235–47 (p. 235).

official announcement that the wall was finished. In fact it is said that there are gaps which have never been filled in at all.<sup>7</sup>

I cannot do justice here to the complexity of Kafka's fable, nor can I follow the many subtle hypotheses the narrator formulates and scrutinizes in order to make sense of the 'principle of piecemeal construction.' Indeed, as he remarks, 'the work had not been undertaken without thought.' Yet, there is one point still worth mentioning that helps us relate this story to 'The Burrow'. Although the narrator quickly dismisses it as one of 'the many wild ideas in people's heads at the time', at a certain point he tells us of a 'scholar' who wrote a book drawing a comparison between the construction project of the Wall and that of the Tower of Babel. His main argument was that 'the Tower of Babel failed to reach its goal not because of the reasons universally advanced [...] the tower failed and was bound to fail because of the weakness of the foundations.'<sup>8</sup> The Great Wall had to be thought, then, as the secure basis on which a new tower of Babel might be erected. The absurdity of conceiving of 'a wall, which did not form even a circle, but only a sort of quarter- or half-circle' as being capable of providing the foundations for a tower is noticed by the reporter himself. Still, this anecdote adds important layers of significance to the whole story and allows us to draw a connection between it and other places of Kafka's oeuvre in which he, more or less explicitly, reflects on — and rewrites — the biblical narrative. Among them are 'The City Coat of Arms' and the sketch, found in a notebook, of a minimal story in form of a dialogue that brings us directly back to 'The Burrow':

What are you building? — I want to dig a passage [einen Gang]. Some progress must happen [Es muss ein Fortschritt geschehen]. My station up there is much too high.  
We are digging the pit of Babel.<sup>9</sup>

As sketchily outlined as it is, this rudimentary narrative helps us bridge the set of tales revolving around the impossible construction of the

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7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 238.

9 Franz Kafka, 'Fragments from Notebooks and Loose Pages', in Kafka, *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), § 349 (modified translation, A. C.); a critical edition in German is available as part of the 'Unpublished Works 1922–1924' in *The Kafka Project*, ed. by Mario Nervi (1999–2007) <<http://www.kafka.org/index.php?ichentlief>> [accessed 5 July 2021].

tower of Babel with the story of the ambivalent, ruinous building of the burrow. Some elements are made explicit here that in *Der Bau* will be veiled by the ambiguity of the word — first of all the equation of the verb ‘to build’ (*bauen*) with the verb ‘to dig’ (*graben*). Some others seem to be caught in the middle of a metamorphic process. With regard to the subject(s) involved, as the visibly and distinctly human features gradually recede, all that remains is a voice, answering to an interpellation. No description is provided, no context either: whether it is (still) (a) human being(s) or another kind of creature(s), the subject is only defined by its doing, namely by the activity of building. As well as by its purpose, which is — again — entirely confined within the compass of this activity: to do it further, to do it better, to open a passage, *einen Gang* (to what? to whom? where to?), to progress, make progress, or — more precisely — to ‘give’ or ‘make place’ (*donner lieu*, as Derrida puts it)<sup>10</sup> in order for progress to ‘happen.’ Whoever posits this goal — which is not even a final goal — is a single subject. This is not (yet) the solitary constructor of the burrow though, since at the very end the singular ‘I’ turns into a first person plural, a ‘we’ that recalls, even in its most debased and reversed form, the collective undertaking of the construction of the tower of Babel. Yet, in this case, there is no will of elevation or power at stake; on the contrary, one’s ‘position’ has to be *lowered*; if ‘some progress must happen’, it is in the sense of a *descending* movement, no longer directed upward to the sky but down into the earth.

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10 This expression, with its emphasis on the act of *giving* (fr. *donner*) as a sort of (impersonal) *gift*, is used by Derrida in his discussion of the concept of *chora* as it is developed in Plato’s *Timaeus* (Derrida, ‘Khôra’, trans. by Ian McLeod, in Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995], pp. 89–127). Meaningfully enough, Derrida proposed to architect Peter Eisenman to read this essay for their collaboration on a garden design as part of Bernard Tschumi’s Parc de la Villette project in Paris. Irreducible to the categories of the ‘intelligible’ and the ‘sensible’, i.e., to the binary structure of the cosmos as outlined in the *Timaeus*, the *chora* — the Greek for ‘space’ or ‘site’ — is nonetheless essential to Plato’s theory of creation: it becomes an undefinable and unrepresentable third term, which Plato himself calls a ‘receptacle of becoming.’ Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman, *Chora L Works*, ed. by Jeffrey Kipnis and Thomas Leiser (New York: Monacelli, 1997). For an all-encompassing assessment of Derrida’s practical and theoretical interaction with ‘architecture’, see among others the special issue of *Aut aut*, 368 (2015): *Un matrimonio sfortunato. Derrida e l’architettura*, ed. by Petar Bojanić and Damiano Cantone.

The story of Babel, as told in Genesis 11, in fact narrates in a very condensed form of a collective enterprise, which begins in the name of perfect unity — the unity of people, identity, and place, as it is cemented by the bonds of a common language and a common project — and ends up, after the intervention of God, in the most radical dispersion of humankind and in the emergence of irreducible differences among different peoples.<sup>11</sup> The common project that is bound to fail has to do with the construction of both ‘a city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven’, that is, with the foundation of a structured dwelling space (the city) as well as with the edification of an exemplary work (the tower). In order to stop wandering and to keep its unity, the people need to settle down, to occupy and *give form* or ‘structure’ to a space. The untold violence of this (colonizing) project finds its objective correlate in the erection of the tower, which functions both as a display of power — and a (phallic) symbol of it — and as a means of control over the earth.<sup>12</sup> As is well known, what induces God to intervene is the erection of the tower, or the sheer possibility for the united peoples to achieve that goal. What often remains unnoticed is that the book of Genesis does not report anything about the destiny of the tower, whereas it is said that, after God had ‘confounded the language of all the earth’, they — the people — ‘left off building the city’.

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11 Genesis 11. 1–9: ‘And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.<sup>2</sup> And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there.<sup>3</sup> And they said one to another, “Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.<sup>4</sup> And they said, “Come, let us build us a city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”<sup>5</sup> And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of men built.<sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, “Behold, the people are one and they have all one language, and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be withheld from them which they have imagined to do.<sup>7</sup> Come, let Us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.”<sup>8</sup> So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth; and they left off building the city.<sup>9</sup> Therefore is the name of it called Babel [that is, Confusion], because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth; and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.’

12 The tower reconfigures the field of visibility: being ‘visible’ from everywhere, it tautologically restates its sheer presence, hence the monumentality that characterizes it; at the same time, it embodies the (elevated) vantage point from which the whole earth can be viewed, i.e., possessed by the gaze.



This apparent gap of information in the biblical narration has given rise, from early biblical commentaries to the works of writers and philosophers of all times, to a wonderfully varied range of explanations and inventions. Among them, the most common say that, (1) since the tower is not mentioned any longer, it must have been completed, but then, being abandoned, it fell into ruin; (2) it was torn down by God's anger; (3) it was abandoned along with the city and remained unfinished.<sup>13</sup> In any case, at a certain point, the image of the tower seems to be replaced by that of the ruin, another powerful figure of architectural incompleteness, which, in the same years of Kafka's writing activity, aroused the speculative interest of authors such as Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel, who employed it to rethink the mutual relations of aesthetics, history, and modernity.

Just to mention some dates: 1907 Georg Simmel, 'Die Ruine' ('The Ruin', essay); 1917 Kafka, 'Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer' ('The Great Wall of China'); 1921 Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos, ou l'architecte*; 1923–1924 Kafka, 'Der Bau'; 1923–1925 Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (*Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, published in 1928).<sup>14</sup>

The tower of Babel and the figure of the ruin, which — as I said — seem to converge in the image of the abandoned, unfinished, or demolished work, could also be seen as opposite figurations of architectural failure. The one representing the 'not-yet' of the work, or more precisely, the quintessential impossibility for an ambitious project to be accomplished; the other embodying the idea, to a certain extent opposite to this, of the 'no-longer' complete, of a work as 'fragment', which on the one hand critically and ambiguously points at a former, lost totality, and on the other stands on its own.

13 For a detailed discussion on this point in particular, as well as for a historical-political reading of Genesis, 11. 1–9 see the monumental Christoph Uehlinger, *Weltreich und 'eine Rede'. Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzählung (Gen 11,1–9)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990).

14 Georg Simmel, 'The Ruin', in *Georg Simmel, 1858–1918: A Collection of Essays, with Translations and a Bibliography*, ed. by Kurt H. Wolff (Cleveland: Ohio State University Press, 1959), pp. 259–66; Kafka, 'The Great Wall of China'; Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos, or The Architect*, in *Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. by Jackson Mathews, 15 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956–75), IV: *Dialogues*, trans. by William McCausland Stewart (1956), pp. 65–150; Kafka, 'The Burrow'; Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German 'Trauerspiel'*, trans. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

'Present form of a past life', according to Simmel's felicitous expression, the ruin is yet no more than a trace, from which neither the past time nor the former structure, towards which the ruin points, can be reconstructed in their wholeness and complete transparency. As the German theorist recognizes, the aesthetic experience of the ruin relies upon an '*antagonism* [between] the disharmony [...] and the formal satisfaction', a '*tension*' between 'purpose and accident, nature and spirit, past and present'. Yet, these contrasts are for him tempered by — and subsumed into — a form of higher justice: the ruin is 'tragic' but 'not sad' because it manifests the 'secret justice of destruction', a return to nature which pays back the violence that was first exerted upon it by the 'will' or the 'spirit' in the very act of construction. In this sense, Simmel seems to resolve the 'ambiguity' that he had originally envisioned — and which instead will become central in the analysis of later theorists. The 'peace, whose mood', according to him, 'surrounds the ruin' is a mood hard to find in Kafka's stories and yet Simmel's remark that its fascination 'goes beyond what is merely negative and degrading' might turn out to be a useful tool for the interpretation of the Czech writer's impossible structures as well. In this perspective, it might be interesting to look at those approaches that tend to keep the tension between opposites unresolved or to problematize it within the frame of a *dynamic* model. Thus, the ruin can be seen as a 'disturbing structure',<sup>15</sup> constitutively 'anachronistic',<sup>16</sup> which not only has the ability of questioning all sorts of *given* 'orders' or (stable) 'structures'; it is also intrinsically ambivalent,<sup>17</sup> being itself a structure and at the same time a moment of an ongoing process — that of 'ruination'. To take into account its double nature of structure/process allows us to see the dyad ruin/ruination as something that 'goes beyond' the absolute annihilation of form and is related to destruction as much as it is

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15 See Karen Dale and Gibson Burrell, 'Disturbing Structure. Reading the Ruins', in *Culture and Organization*, 2 (2011), pp. 107–21.

16 On anachronism in relation to architecture see Raoul Kirchmayr's elaboration on Derida's concepts of hauntology and 'visor effect' in Kirchmayr, 'L'arte dell'*espacement*', *Aut aut*, 368 (2015), pp. 62–87 (pp. 82–83).

17 Zygmunt Bauman defines 'ambivalence' as 'the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category'; see Baumann, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 9. For a discussion of the concept in relation to ruins, see Dale and Burrell, 'Disturbing Structure', p. 113.

— in a phantasmatic sense — to both construction (and organization) and *re-ordering*.

The story of Babel was appealing for Kafka, I believe, for its narrative power, rather than for its static figuration. Three elements among others would have caught his attention: (1) the insistence on the activity of building, i.e., on the *process* as well as on the building techniques and materials; (2) the focus on the subjects involved, the builders, the people, and their destiny; (3) the entanglement of the architectural and the linguistic. Kafka's adaptation, translation, recasting of these three motifs in both his private and creative writings contributes to the articulation of a complex imagery that counters the classical ideal of architectural wholeness, even where there is no apparent connection to the story of Babel.

Before descending again into 'The Burrow', I will take a brief detour in order to get a glimpse of the meaning and origin of this ideal. Where does it come from and what does it stand for? What are its implications? And what are the implications of transgressing against it, or denying it, in Kafka's text in particular and his writing in general? And more broadly speaking, what's the cultural and political meaning of such a gesture? This digression should help us at least to bring to the fore the importance of interconnected issues, the web of entanglements that underlies the architectural metaphor: the problem of (1) the text in its material formation and with relation to the quest — and question — of form; (2) reason and thought as the coherent edification of systems; (3) the self in the process of its spiritual *Bildung* and in its bodily relation to life and work.

I want to discuss this nexus of issues in connection — and in contrast with — another complex and fascinating text, namely Paul Valéry's *Eupalinos, or The Architect*, published in 1921. The importance of this comparison for my purpose lies not only in the fact that Valéry was very much concerned with the topic of architecture in itself, to which he would devote more than one work; but also in the fact that in this specific text he addresses many of the questions that are of key concern for Kafka as well, often providing different if not diametrically opposed answers to them. Valéry sees architecture

as the most beautiful and *complete* type of activity that a person can imagine. A finished building gives us, at a single glance, the sum of intentions, inventions, insights and forces that imply its existence; it brings to light humanity's combined work of desire, knowledge and ability. Uniquely among the arts, and in an indivisible moment of vision, architecture charges our souls with the sense of human capacity *as a whole*.<sup>18</sup>

The primacy of architecture among the arts seems to depend for Valéry precisely on its inherent capacity to configure wholes — intended both as the material products of its work and as the aesthetic experience it induces; architecture, Eupalinos explains, is, together with music, the only art

which *enclose[s]* man in man; or, rather, which *enclose[s]* the being in its work, and the soul in its acts and in the production of its acts, as our former body was *entirely enclosed* in the creations of its eye, and *surrounded* with sight. With two arts, it *wraps up* itself.<sup>19</sup>

Both Valéry and Kafka are concerned with the problem of 'closure', although their struggle with the form takes different paths and eventually ends up in quite different regions. Valéry's Phaedrus reports Eupalinos's words: 'Destroying and constructing are of equal importance, and we must have souls for the one and the other; but constructing is the dearer to my mind.'<sup>20</sup> By contrast, even if many of Kafka's characters are relentlessly busy with building activities, most of their constructions, as we have seen, reveal themselves to be unrealizable.

Valéry is nonetheless interested in the construction as a process rather than as the end-product of the work. For him, form is formation, *poiesis*. Phaedrus, in reference to Eupalinos's words, says: 'I no longer distinguish the idea of a temple and that of its construction.'<sup>21</sup>

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18 This passage, quoted in Geert Bekaert, 'Le réel du discours. Eupalinos ou l'architecte', trans. by David McKay, *OASE*, 75 (2008), pp. 227–39 (pp. 233–34), is taken from Paul Valéry's introduction to the melodrama *Amphion* (for which Arthur Honegger wrote the music). Written by Valéry in 1929, performed for the first time 1931 in Paris, *Amphion* is, as Bekaert puts it, an 'ode to the *constructive* arts, music and architecture'.

19 Valéry, *Eupalinos*, p. 96.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

21 *Ibid.*

For Valéry, there's an errancy inherent to language, which the poet must treat as 'irregular blocks' are treated by the architect-builder. There is 'no geometry without words', says Socrates to Phaedrus, but, alongside the 'simple words', which are numbers and allow for the clarity of geometry, there are complex words, their essence being that

it is impossible to conduct them through sure and far-reaching developments without *getting lost* in their ramifications. [...] So it is necessary to fit these complex words together, speculating on the *chances* and *surprises* that arrangements of this kind hold in store for us, and to give the name of 'poets' to those whom fortune favors in this work.<sup>22</sup>

Although the emphasis is always on the constructive side and on the process by which poetry like architecture gives form and order to matter, Valéry's Socrates does not conceal the violence inherent in such a process: 'The structure of every human creation is disorder', he seems to admit quite surprisingly, as Geert Bekaert observes, because it 'is the result of thought and to think is to disrupt something (*déranger quelque chose*)'. There is, as for Simmel, a necessary violence exerted by thought (Simmel would say: will) upon nature in every (architectonic) creation: 'the artisan cannot do his work without violating or disarranging an order by the forces that he applies to matter to adapt it to the idea he wants to imitate'; yet, since matter holds a complexity that inevitably exceeds thought, and is intrinsically irreducible to the idea, the structure/form of human creations produces 'things which, as a whole, are less complex than their parts'.<sup>23</sup>

Also of great interest for me is Valéry's constant reference, even when it occurs with surprising twists that complicate the scheme, to the powerful ideal of the perfect building,<sup>24</sup> as it has been shaped by

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22 Ibid., p. 108.

23 Valéry, *Eupalinos*, p. 122 (modified translation).

24 See Valéry, *Eupalinos*, p. 90 for a reference to the body and the 'equilibrium of [its] organs, this true proportions of [its] parts, which make [it] to be and to stablish ever anew in the very heart of moving things', but also pp. 128-29 for a reference to the so called vitruvian triad: 'the creations of man are made either with a view to his body, and there is the principle we call *utility*, or with a view to his soul, and that is what we seeks under the name of *beauty*' or with a view to 'the rest of the world' and to 'the movement of nature' and this is when he 'seeks *solidity* or *lastingness*'.

Vitruvius.<sup>25</sup> Here, I just want to sketch out as schematically as possible the main traits of the imagery that from the Roman architect via the humanist rediscovery during the Renaissance has arrived in present times. Above all, it tells of (1) an aesthetics of balance, decorum, and static closure; (2) of a technological dream of complete mastery, (3) of rational control over nature and accidents.

According to Vitruvius's formulation, the characteristics of the well-constructed building — or the 'three conditions' the architect ought to comply with — are: *firmitas*, 'strength', or 'durability'; *utilitas*, 'utility' or 'convenience'; *venustas*, beauty.<sup>26</sup> Such a formulation, which has been for many centuries an unquestioned and powerfully normative formula, is still influential today for our common understanding of the ultimate *telos* of architecture, despite the many attempts of reconceptualizing the field.

The deconstructivist architect Mark Wigley, for instance, in a recent discussion of the language of architecture, has quite surprisingly admitted that

the very expression 'avantgarde architecture' is probably a contradiction in terms. The word architecture has meaning in our culture only inasmuch as architecture has offered reassurance by resisting time, a dream exemplified by the classical tradition with its supposedly eternal geometries.<sup>27</sup>

If 'solidity' points at the relation of the work to the issue of time and history, by configuring its main goal as an aspiration to 'monumentality', it also addresses the problem of the 'materiality' of the work, that is, in other words, the relation between techniques and matter or materials. Vitruvius, in fact, states: 'Durability will be assured when

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25 The auratic figure that stands as a putative father to this discourse is the almost legendary Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, author of the treatise *De Architectura* (15 BC), which is considered to be the oldest source on classical Western architecture to survive. The peculiar destiny of this treatise as the lone survivor of a long tradition, alongside with its partly normative approach and its capacity of giving concise formulations to some key concerns of the time and their solutions as well, make of it also the starting point of architectural theory and discourse. See Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, trans. by Ingrid D. Rowland, commentary by Thomas Noble Howe, Ingrid D. Rowland, and Michael J. Dewar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

26 *Ibid.*, p. 26 (1, 3, 2)

27 Mark Wigley, 'The Art to Listen to Architecture', in *Eisenman/Krier: Two Ideologies*, ed. by Cynthia C. Davidson (New York: Monacelli, 2004), pp. 119–31 (p. 125).

foundations are carried down to the solid ground and materials wisely and liberally selected'.<sup>28</sup> The same issue, even though rephrased in an idealistic vocabulary, will be central to Georg Simmel's argument in his 1907 essay, where he speaks of 'the great struggle between the *will* of the spirit and the *necessity* of nature [...] between mechanical, inert *matter* which passively resists pressure, and *informing* spirituality which pushes upward'.<sup>29</sup>

For our purposes, the so-called Vitruvian triad is so important precisely because it presents a strong contribution defining a long-lasting model and ideal. Far from remaining confined to its original domain, the model of the ideal building has catalyzed and organized a long chain of concepts from other fields and has become a key figure of Western culture, not devoid of value judgements.

By considering both *utilitas* and *venustas* as conditions for the perfect building, Vitruvius's ideal pursues a balance between 'functionality' and 'aesthetics'. While the recent history of architecture has from time to time stressed the one at the expense of the other, what matters here is the wide range of topics addressed by the classical systematization as well as the constant attempt to 'keep all in balance'. Thus, *utilitas*, usefulness, or 'convenience' is to be intended in relation to both the concrete needs of bodies ('when the arrangement of the apartments [...] presents no hindrance to use'), and a given social and urban order, as well as pre-existing power structures ('when each class of building is assigned to its suitable and appropriate exposure').<sup>30</sup> At the same time, buildings have to comply with a supposedly self-evident concept of beauty, which is ultimately based on the ideal of a harmonious whole: 'when the appearance of the work is *pleasing* and in *good taste*, and when its members are in due proportion according to correct principles of symmetry'.<sup>31</sup> For Vitruvius, the ultimate model of completeness and beauty is the body of the 'well-shaped man':<sup>32</sup>

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28 Vitruvius, *Ten Books*, p. 26 (I, 3, 2).

29 Georg Simmel, 'The Ruin', p. 259 (emphasis added, A. C.).

30 Vitruvius, *Ten Books*, p. 26 (I, 3, 2).

31 Ibid. (my italics).

32 Ibid., p. 47 (III, 1, 1).

Symmetry is a proper agreement between the members of the work itself, and relation between the different parts and the whole general scheme, in accordance with a certain part selected as standard. Thus in the human body there is a kind of symmetrical harmony between forearm, foot, palm, finger, and other small parts; and so it is with perfect buildings.<sup>33</sup>

As Leonardo da Vinci's famous graphic rendering of the descriptions contained in Book III of Vitruvius's treatise emblematically shows, the human (male) body is read, interpreted and re-conceptualized by Vitruvius through the lens of geometry.<sup>34</sup>

It is precisely in this allegiance between the artistic, the technical, and the rational (*ratio* is the Latin term for 'proportion'<sup>35</sup> as well as for 'calculation' and 'reasoning') that nature, represented by its most perfect work, the human body, bridled by the straight line of the square and encompassed by the finite line of the circle, is fixed in a model of wholeness and perfection: static, never-changing, always already made and self-confined, the Vitruvian man expunges error and accident out of his perimeter alone.

The pervasiveness of the ideal of architectural wholeness should not be underestimated. Not only does it stretch out far beyond any strictly historically defined European Humanism. As Kojin Karatani points out, it seems to inform Western thought from its very beginning. By analysing the use of the architectural language in philosophy, mathematics, and economy, in his book *Architecture as Metaphor*, Karatani suggests that throughout the history of Western culture 'architecture' has served less as a name for a peculiar art or practice than as a metaphor, a set of images and figures of speech pointing at the idea of

33 Ibid., p. 25 (1, 2, 4).

34 For a revised and critical analysis of the fortune of Leonardo's drawing and for a discussion on the significance of geometry in his thought (as well as in Vitruvius's treatise), see Frank Zöllner, 'L'uomo vitruviano di Leonardo da Vinci, Rudolf Wittkower e l'Angelus Novus di Walter Benjamin', *Raccolta viciana*, 26 (1995), pp. 329–58.

35 Admittedly, the etymology of the word *rational* recalled above does not refer strictly to Vitruvius's vocabulary. In particular, Vitruvius does not use the term *ratio* for the concept usually rendered as 'proportion'. Rather, the Roman author opts for *proportio*, which is itself a transposition — and partly a mistranslation, in the wake of Cicero — of the Greek term *analogia*: 'Aedium compositio constat ex symmetria, [...] ea autem proportione paritur est, quae graece αναλογία dicitur. Proportio est ratae partis membrorum in omni opere tot(o)que commodulatio' (Vitruvius, *Ten Books*, p. 47 (III, 1, 1)).



‘formalism’ or ‘formalization.’<sup>36</sup> In this sense, the secrete force that Karatani sees at work, more or less explicitly, throughout the many domains of Western thought, and that he calls the ‘will to architecture,’<sup>37</sup> would be basically tantamount to a will to completeness and formalized wholes, ‘a way [for philosophers] of grounding and stabilizing their otherwise unstable philosophical systems.’<sup>38</sup>

To ‘demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations’, this is Descartes’s project.<sup>39</sup> It is the project of the modern, of a thought that conceives of itself as ‘critical thinking’ and yet cannot endure staring into the abyss (*Ab-grund*): in order to acquire the dignity of philosophy, thought must be ‘grounded’, it demands *solidity*; the ‘principle of systematic doubt’, like any thought aspiring to some form of system — or systematics — first needs to find, or show, that there exists something at the bottom of all critical excavation work, something beyond all doubts, which resists, cannot be shaken by any objection, a ‘firm soil,’<sup>40</sup> an origin, which might provide the starting point for any further inquiry. It needs to rest at and upon some point, and that point is notoriously for Descartes the assumption that there exists a thinking or doubting substance, the cogito: ‘I took this as the bedrock on which I could lay the *foundation* of my philosophy.’<sup>41</sup>

A problem of foundations is also the one raised, no coincidence this, by the ‘scholar’ in Kafka’s ‘Great Wall of China’, as he claims to know the true reason of the fall of the tower of Babel that was meant to be erected upon the wall. Kafka provides here a radical criticism which points to a double impossibility: by showing the wall as

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36 Kojin Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money*, ed. by Michael Speaks, trans. by Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–13.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

39 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–1991), II (1984), pp. 1–60 (p. 12), cited in Daniel L. Purdy, *On the Ruins of Babel: Architectural Metaphor in German Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 87.

40 In one reply to his critics, Descartes explains that when one builds ‘where there is a sandy topsoil’ he begins ‘by digging out a set of trenches from which he removes the sand, and anything resting on or mixed with the sand, so that he can lay his foundations on firm soil’. See Descartes, ‘Objections and Replies’, in *Philosophical Writings*, II, pp. 63–397 (p. 366) (cited in Purdy, *On the Ruins*, p. 87).

41 Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, II, p. 366.

structurally interminable, he undermines both the idea of foundation and that of any construction built upon that basis.<sup>42</sup> If seen in this perspective, 'The Burrow' represents an additional step. As is signalled by its untranslatable name meaning both a construction *and* a burrow, this work, which is forged out of a void, built up by digging out, prompts us to recognize as deeply inherent in the (twofold) structure of the *Bau* its being precisely a work *without* foundations.

But further questions are to be answered about the relation of the burrow and its inhabitant and builder to thought. Is this pensive animal a philosopher? Or a parody of it? What kind of reasoning is displayed in the structuring of 'The Burrow'? And what about the very nature of the edifice, the *telos* of the work? What is at stake here, is it the erection of a monument, a fortress, or a dwelling, for thought?

To 'demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations': Descartes takes the architectural metaphor of destruction-(re)construction seriously. And warns against the risks of a work-in-progress which does not spare any intimate space: 'before starting to rebuild your house, [...] you must also provide yourself with some other place where you can live comfortably while building is in progress.'<sup>43</sup> At stake here is the distance needed for thought to be objective and, more latently, to ward off madness. Kafka's animal will be renovating his burrow without leaving it but for brief periods, during which he will experience the impossibility of looking at his work from the outside. 'At such times it is as if I were not so much looking at my house as at *myself* sleeping.'<sup>44</sup> The initial 'joy of being in a profound slumber and simultaneously of keeping vigilant guard over myself' soon turns into an anguished feeling of dispossession: the 'entrance' of the work, in a way that recalls the doorway in the tale 'Before the Law', 'locks and bars itself against me, the builder and the possessor.'<sup>45</sup> Whatever the burrow *is* and whatever it *means* for its inhabitant and builder, the distance between them tends to decrease

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42 George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 70.

43 René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, in *Philosophical Writings*, 1 (1985), pp. 111–50 (p. 122), cited in Purdy, *On the Ruins*, p. 203.

44 Kafka, 'The Burrow', p. 334.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 340. Kafka, 'Before the Law', in Kafka, *Complete Stories*, pp. 4–5.

over time up to a point of a quasi-identification — ‘I and the burrow belong so indissolubly together [ ... ] nothing can part us for long.’<sup>46</sup>

‘The double positing of the self as both house and architect’, as Daniel Purdy has shown, is a figure of thought that comes from afar, already charged with meaning: its inherently paradoxical structure subtends the major architectural trope of *Bildung* in the eighteenth century. In his *Italian Journey*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe compares himself to an architect who, in the midst of the construction of a tower, realizes to have laid ‘a bad foundation’ and needs to amend his mistakes ‘before it is too late’; accordingly, he decides to ‘tear down all that he has built so far [ ... ], to enlarge and improve his design, to make its foundation more secure.’<sup>47</sup> Even though the metaphor of the house under renovation might allude to Descartes’s image, from now on, the self cannot but be entirely dragged into the ongoing process of renovation: the artist can no longer escape his own space, for he is both subject *and* object of the construction work. Goethe overlooks — as the builder of the burrow does — Descartes’s warning of finding a comfortable place where to live ‘while the building is in progress’. Yet, he does not seem to be caught in the ‘paradox of self-indication’<sup>48</sup> in the same tragic way as Kafka’s animal. Nor is madness on his horizon. On the contrary, he seems to be confident in the possibility of achieving a complete and successful construction of his work, that is, of the self and the writing of the self in one stroke: he ‘looks forward happily to building something that will last.’<sup>49</sup>

‘Writing denies itself to me.’ The scene of this denial frames the notebook entry of the spring 1922, in which Kafka rephrases the metaphor of the house under renovation and addresses those very issues that Goethe kept out of his sight: the paradoxes of autobiography and

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46 Ibid.

47 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey*, trans. by W. H. Auden and Elisabeth Mayer (New York: Pantheon, 1962), p. 139 (20 December 1786), quoted in Purdy, *On the Ruins*, p. 203.

48 Edgar Landgraf refers to the problem as the ‘paradox of self-indication’ as the paradox of positing a self that is distinct from the self that posits: ‘The self, in order to indicate (think) itself, must make itself different from itself to be able to do so.’ Landgraf, ‘Self-Forming Selves: Autonomy and Artistic Creativity in Goethe and Moritz’, *Goethe Yearbook*, 11 (2002), pp. 159–76.

49 Goethe, *Italian Journey*, p. 139.

the 'self-construction', the need for an experimental form of writing, the risks of a work in progress which engages the whole self, body and mind alike, and which is haunted by the spectres of madness and incompleteness:

Writing denies itself to me. Hence plan for autobiographical investigations. Not biography but investigation and detection of the smallest possible component parts. Out of these I will then construct myself, as one whose house is unsafe wants to build a safe one next to it, if possible out of the material of the old one. What is bad, admittedly, is if in the midst of building his strength gives out and now, instead of one house, unsafe but yet complete, he has one half-destroyed and one half-finished house, that is to say, nothing. What follows is madness.<sup>50</sup>

Kafka's image of the house under renovation conjures up many relevant features of the burrow. First of all, it displaces the issue of the 'solidity' of foundation, which is essential in both Descartes's and Goethe's enterprises, on to a more general question of the 'safety' of the entire structure. Like in his later text, in Kafka's notebook entry the term 'foundations' is not mentioned at all, whereas the whole house is said to be 'unsafe'. Also, this short narrative privileges the middle phase of the ongoing work over — on the one hand — the initial one of design and methodology (Descartes) and — on the other — the projection onto the final result (Goethe). Yet, the burrow differs from a house under renovation in important ways, mainly because of the sense of undecidability that surrounds the burrow, with regard to both its function and the nature of its inhabitant and creator. While in the sketch of the two houses a purpose for the entire renovation work is clearly stated, to 'construct my self', and this is put in connection to writing, in 'The Burrow' any attempt to pin down the work, to assign to it a unifying meaning is bound to fail.

Neither a house of (pure) thought, nor an image of the Self under construction, even though sharing features of both, the burrow does not coincide with them. It rather escapes classification and eludes metaphorical closure, always showing an excess, or keeping a reserve of meaning which prompts a series of infinite displacements. Instability,

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50 Franz Kafka, 'Fragments from Notebooks and Loose Pages', p. 350 (Spring 1922).

indeterminacy, hybridity become central to the structuring of the burrow as much as incompleteness turns out to be essential, not merely accidental, to it. Furthermore, conjoining the two figures of the unfinished that we have been dealing with thus far, the ‘not-yet’ and the ‘no-longer’ complete, the ‘half-destroyed’ and the ‘half-finished’, the burrow instantiates a ‘self-dismantling structure’ insofar as by revealing the fulfilment of its construction as illusory, it undoes itself in a movement that is both concrete and metaphorical.

The first and more radical ambiguity concerning the burrow concerns its very being and purpose. What the text allows us to say, apart from any interpretation that it invokes and eludes at the same time, is that (1) the burrow is a construction (*Bau*), which in this case means that, being both a process and an object, it is also the exemplary work of its builder’s life — and a substitution for it; (2) it is intended to be a dwelling, a home; (3) not only does it provide a shelter; but it (4) is also something of a fortress, if seen through some of his creator’s depictions, whereas most of the renovation projects seem to cope with some military arrangements or strategy; (5) it belongs to the order of edification and yet, (6) it is also a dig, a pit, an excavation work; (7) it is shaped as a labyrinth, at least in some of its parts; but (8) it is also a ruin, since it encompasses the remains of ‘abortive building attempts’.

There is a final question to be answered: is ‘The Burrow’ complete or is it a fragment? According to Kafka’s friend Max Brod and to Dora Dymant there was to be an encounter that would have ended with the hero’s death. As reported by Hermann J. Weigand, Malcolm Pasley asserts that the final page of the manuscript is completely filled without any terminating punctuation mark.<sup>51</sup> This he takes as a proof that there was more to follow. Still, I prefer to see the question as undecidable.

Equally undecidable remains for me the question of the allegedly violent encounter. Is it, as many maintain, the encounter with death? I would prefer to stick to what the text suggests and see it as an encounter with the Unknown, or the Unknowable, the ‘event’ as the ‘Not-yet’, towards which Kafka’s writing would open the path, give — or make — place for it to be.

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51 Weigand, ‘Franz Kafka’s “The Burrow”’, p. 164.

Antonio Castore, 'Incomplete and Self-Dismantling Structures: The Built Space, the Text, the Body', in *Errans: Going Astray, Being Adrift, Coming to Nothing*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 24 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 93–112 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-24\\_4](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-24_4)>

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