The Last Night of All

MICHAEL WOOD

No such thing then as no light. Died on to dawn and never died.
—Samuel Beckett, *Company*

It was his last afternoon as himself.
—W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"

THIS IS A BRIEF ESSAY ABOUT A LONG OR PERHAPS INTERMINABLE subject, about what I am (for the moment) calling the genre of the unfinishable work, as distinct from works that are unfinished or open-ended—the work whose themes and style involve what comes last and then what comes after that, if there is anything after that. I thought at first there might be too few of these works to form a genre. Now I am inclined to think there may be too many, but the shift or increase does give us a contrasting term and may help us consider more closely the possibility that lies between insufficiency and excess.

In recent years, there has been a lot of literary and philosophical interest in ending. Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) was reprinted in 2000, just in time, or not quite in time, for the millennium. An English selection of essays by Giorgio Agamben was published the year before under the title *The End of the Poem*. Paul Muldoon published his Oxford lectures only last year under the same title, and Adam Phillips, reviewing this book and Muldoon's most recent collection of poems, *Horse Latitudes*, said both volumes "are about what, if anything, there is to say about ends and endings" (35). "If anything" sounds an engaging note of scepticism.

More ambitiously, reviewing some translations of Hölderlin, J. M. Coetzee wondered whether the German poet had not intuited something like the genre I think I am pursuing:

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> [I]n his last productive years Hölderlin seems to have abandoned the notion of the definitive and to have regarded each seemingly completed poem as merely a stopping place, a base from which to conduct further raids into the unsaid. Hence his habit of breaking open a perfectly good poem, not in order to improve it but to rebuild it from the ground up. In such a case, which is the definitive text, which the variant, particularly when the rebuilding is broken off and not resumed? Are apparently unfinished reworkings to be regarded as abandoned projects, or might Hölderlin have been feeling his way toward a new aesthetics of the fragmentary, and an accompanying poetic epistemology of the flashing insight or vision? (70)

There is much more. Emily Apter has convincingly suggested that translation is an unfinishable task, and Ed Folsom has invited us to think of the database as an interminable archive.[1] Folsom quotes Lev Manovich, author of a book on the new media, saying that the "database and narrative are natural enemies" (225). Manovich means that narrative requires cause and effect, whereas a database doesn't care about such things. But it also seems plausible to say that the database doesn't need to have an end and that stories do. The very idea of a never-ending story is surely a contradiction in terms. As Kermode slyly says, "[I]t is one of the great charms of books that they have to end" (23). A character in Richard Powers's novel *Galatea 2.2* makes the same claim about stories: "Maybe the only universally valid generalization about stories: they end" (219).

But is this so? And even if it is, what kinds of resistance to the claim might be found? Although all complete stories by definition have an ending, there are many ways of stopping before reaching completion, and there are many reasons for not wanting a story to end, whether we are writers or readers, tellers or listeners. The cases I want to explore are works that enact or hint at various forms of refusal to end and then either end or fail to end, in just the way Coetzee sketches out for Hölderlin. This attempted refusal is not, I think, a denial of literal endings, of the fact that things wear out and vanish, that stories and people do finish or get finished. It is a refusal of (or a longing for) the acceptable, meaningful end, an insistence or a fear that an end is never anything other, cannot be anything other, than the blunt, brutal fact that the play is over and that even eternal-seeming reruns and comebacks have an end in death.

"The Messiah . . . will come not on the last day," Franz Kafka wrote in his octavo notebook in December 1917, "but on the last day of all." It's not hard to arrive at a reading of this sentence, and there are no immediate difficulties of translation: "Der Messias . . . wird nicht am letzten Tag kommen, sondern am allerletzten."[2] We could take this to mean the Messiah will come not on what seems to be the last day but on what really is the last day, or that he will come not on a day close to the last one but on the very last one. We might even feel more Kafkan than Kafka: the Messiah will come not on the last day but on the day after that.

But Kafka doesn't quite say any of this, and such readings miss the strangeness of his distinction between forms of lastness. The Messiah will come not on the last day but on . . . the last day. A day not beyond the last but inside the last, so to speak—not the last we know but the last we don't know. His coming will exhaust the very idea of lastness and make us wonder what we meant when we used the word *last*. So long as we can say this is the last, we may think, adapting a famous line from *King Lear*, the last is not.

Is lastness the same as lateness? I think not. Kafka is inviting us to wonder how late is late enough to be last and whether this question can even be answered. Theodor Adorno and Edward Said write about late style, but is there a last style? Or does lastness of the kind Kafka envisages take us beyond the very idea of style?

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I was trying to disentangle these thoughts, to make the distinction Kafka is making and only that one, when I came across a story not about the last day but about the last night. This is what Sir Richard Burton and modern critics call the "superstition" that one can't read all of *The Arabian Nights* without dying. The last night of the text, if one ever gets there, is the last night of the reader. Burton evokes the story as a joke on Western travelers who complain that they can't find a complete manuscript of *Nights*: "Evidently they never heard of the popular superstition. . . ." And then he paraphrases a gloss of the story by a famous Arab authority: "Firstly, it is a facetious exaggeration, meaning that no one has leisure or patience to wade through the long repertory. Secondly, the work is condemned as futile" (147). Abdelfattah Kilito repeats these assertions and adds that in any case the reader needn't worry. No one can read *The Arabian Nights* in its entirety, because there isn't an entirety: "The reader . . . will never reach the end of this . . . corpus of innumerable manuscripts, editions, translations, additions, interpretations, and rewritings. There is always another text of *Nights* to discover, to read" (9).

Kilito says the superstition is an homage to *Nights* ("un hommage involontaire qui leur est rendu, une reconnaissance de leur pouvoir" [9]), but I think it may also be more than a superstition. I should like to take the story about the last night as an ostensive definition of the work that is not unfinished but unfinishable, that is not accidentally incomplete or intentionally open-ended but without a conceivable term of expiry, that is precisely located between the last night and the last night of all. What such a work suggests is not, in Henry James's phrase, that "really, universally, relations stop nowhere" (5). It has no quarrel with the limitations of art, with the drawing of lines around a fictional world. On the contrary. Works of the sort I have in mind often have very clear endings. For instance, after a thousand and one nights—or, more literally and more suggestively, after a thousand nights and one night—King Shahrayar, having enjoyed Shahrazad's many stories and begotten three children with her, decides she has paid her dues, and they live happily ever after. Or, after exactly the same number of nights, he decides he has had enough stories and Shahrazad should be grateful for her long and generous deferment, and he has her beheaded as he planned to long ago.[3] These are endings, but what do they end? They call it a day, if you'll forgive the phrase; they even call it the last day. So why do we feel this is not the last day of all, or, in the language of the so-called superstition, why are we not dead?

If the suggestion of our death as readers arose, as it probably did, on the basis of an analogy between Shahrazad and ourselves—she is alive as long as she is telling stories, and we are alive as long as we are listening—then what happens when she dies or gives up her tales? First, we note that the alternative endings make no real difference to us, however drastically different they are for Shahrazad and however much we may sentimentally prefer the happy end—or, in another mode of sentimentality, the other one. We lose her stories either way. This already says something important about narrative, worth learning again even if we learned it long ago from Claude Lévi-Strauss's account of mythology. What matters, in this perspective, is not how stories end but that they end, at least in one sense, and what the fact of this ending signals to us—in this case, a residue of unfinished business and the lapse of stories themselves into silence. Second, we are alive as readers precisely because of our commitment to this unfinished business, which as I have suggested is not the rich business of ongoing life outside the narrative in question—for instance, what tales Shahrazad, if she lived, told her children, or how many actual women have saved their lives or deferred their deaths by talking—but our own unending appetite for stories or, to put that another way, our

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own endless anxiety about incompletion. We will have neither the appetite nor the anxiety when we're dead; and if we don't have them, we are probably dead already.

We need more examples. For the sake of a little precision, I'm going to suggest one nonexample, two near examples, and two examples. There is something fanciful, even fussy, about these categories, which may slide or even collapse under serious and extended examination. But one can try to be precise even about fancies. My instances are all modern and Western—works by Joyce, Pound, Musil, Proust, and Kafka—but I don't believe the genre is especially modern or especially Western. The friends I spoke to about the topic instantly came up with names from the fields they knew best: Chaucer, Spenser, Chrétien de Troyes, Virginia Woolf, many others. I can't take off into these zones now, but I do want to say in passing that F. N. Robinson's comment about Chaucer and lastness is very suggestive: "The unfinished state of [*The Canterbury Tales*] as a whole might be taken as evidence that Chaucer was occupied with it till the very end of his life. But such an inference would not be safe in the case of the man who left successively incomplete the *House of Fame*, the *Anelida,* the *Legend of Good Women*, and the *Astrolabe*" (1).

Here's my nonexample. *Finnegans Wake* is inexhaustible, infinitely multifarious, but it is not unfinished or unfinishable. It is as finished as any book ever was, and not only because of its circular structure. There are circular structures and circular structures. In one sense *Finnegans Wake* can't end, but this sense involves the fact that what happens in it has always already happened and is still going on: the same falls and rises, jokes and disgraces, continue through time and despite time. We start the book in the middle of a sentence whose beginning we haven't read yet, and so at the end we don't exactly come full circle: we pick up the story just as late as when we started it, only now we know what we missed. There is no hint of a last night of all here, not even of a last night, just one long-running late-night show. Of course, Joyce could have kept adding to the book ad infinitum, but that is part of the precision I'm looking for. He could have, but he didn't. Or he could have, but he didn't have to.

Pound's *Cantos* and Musil's *Man without Qualities* are much closer to our genre. In fact, when I first began to think about this subject, I thought of these two works as prime examples: two works that, once embarked on, would last their authors a lifetime and end only with their death. They certainly did that.

"But say I want to," Pound says in an early version of canto 2, addressing Robert Browning:

> But say I want to, say I take your whole bag
> of tricks,
> Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the
> thing's an art-form,
> Your Sordello, and that the modern world
> Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought
> in. . . . (Bush 53)

At about the time he was composing these lines, Pound advised his father to read Browning, "as my big long endless poem that I am now struggling with, starts off with a barrelful of allusions to Sordello" (Bush 75). He doesn't mean that the poem is endless, only that it feels endless and is difficult to put together. This is precisely what he says in the marvelous canto 116, probably the last piece of poetry he wrote (in the summer of 1959):

> But the beauty is not the madness
> Tho' my errors and wrecks lie about me.
> And I am not a demi-god,
> I cannot make it cohere. . . . (Pound 795–96)

And a little later:

> i.e. it coheres all right
> even if my notes do not cohere. . . . (797)

What coheres is the vision of the world that Pound cannot get into the poem. We are

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looking at a magnificently failed epic, not at the modern ragbag as an unfinishable work of art.

But of course Pound does seem almost to have dreamed the unfinishable work, and so does Musil. "I have never taken anything beyond the opening stages," Musil writes late in his life, but then he adds, with devastating fidelity to whatever it was in him that devalued the idea of completion, "I have finished the books that have the scars to show for it" (462).

Still working on the unfinished *Man without Qualities*, Musil plays with the idea of writing two other works simultaneously: a satirical fiction and an autobiography. "A major advantage," he says in his diary, "is to be found in the way the two volumes can run in parallel and also do not need to be finished" (430). His great novel, by contrast, did need to be finished and wasn't. He writes that he feels "unhappy about my botched art that comes from not being able to allow the manuscripts to ripen. . . . Because I do not know what will happen, I weave the same words around every move . . . and this is like a thick mixture, carefully applied, though its constituents are just a little different in each passage." "Not being able to allow" seems to mean two things. The manuscripts can't ripen because ripeness is not for them; it contradicts the principle of open, shifting possibilities that is their narrative and philosophical ground. And they can't ripen because they have already been plucked, published in part, and so are beyond the reach of extensive reediting: "But if only it had not yet been printed, and there was still an opportunity for cutting and tying together" (448). As late as November 1941 he was saying, in relation to that ongoing novel, "In so far as I turned, in my writing, either to matters of detail or to broader issues I felt comfortable and in control; but as soon as I try to make progress, step by step, toward completing the work I feel I'm lost in a desert without trees or shelter" (499).

However close they came to the genre of the last day or night of all, Pound and Musil did not conceive of their work in that way, and, more important for my argument, they left very few of the stylistic traces of the genre. It is essential to my view of what is going on here that the artists working toward or against silence and the readers staving off their readerly death meet in the text, that we are not solely in the realm of extraliterary anecdote. To put that another way, it is essential that whatever historical or biographical contingencies are at work in the writing or the storytelling—a murderous husband, for example, or World War I—appear in the shape of sentences and specific narrative gestures, refracted, as Adorno would say, into style.

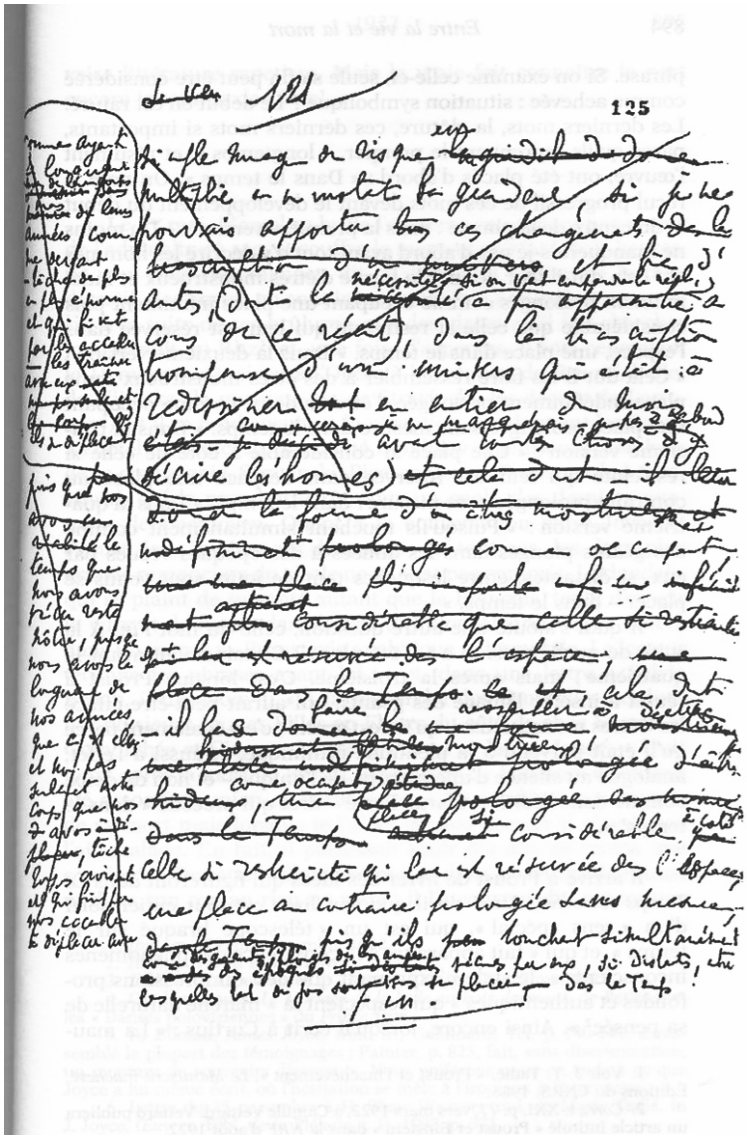
Proust is the perfect example, since he finished *À la recherche*, in one sense, before he was even halfway through. By 1913 he had planned two volumes, and they remained his end pieces, although he kept writing until he died in 1922. The early version ends just as the last one does, with the narrator's discovery of his vocation and with his perhaps even more significant understanding that the two ways—the diametrically opposed walks of his childhood, which have become allegorical representations of the options of his life—are not opposed at all or are opposed only in an arbitrary and imaginary geography. You can always switch from Swann's way to the Guermantes' way or vice versa at any number of crossing points.

Proust filled out his novel from the middle, adding five central volumes—and indeed he filled out his sentences in the same fashion, adding clause after clause to already complete syntactic forms. A close analysis would show just how this works in detail, from the reader's point of view as much as from the writer's, but the most graphic illustration of Proust's approach to the unfinishable work, the most graphic in a literal as well as metaphoric sense, happens to place us at the biographical end of things.

In the spring of 1922 Proust told his housekeeper, Céleste Albaret, that he had written the last word of his novel, "Fin" ("End"),

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and was now free to die: "Maintenant je peux mourir" (Albaret 430). This story seems too good to be true but turns out to be both true and untrue in the most interesting way. You don't need to be a textual scholar or even look at a manuscript to understand this; you have only to read Jean-Yves Tadié's excellent biography, where there is a facsimile of Proust's last page (see below). Proust does indeed write "Fin" there, but then he writes over it, adding the tail of a sentence, in slightly smaller handwriting, which crosses the top of the *F* of "Fin." When did he write "Fin"? Tadié asks as he runs through Proust's last four revisions of the sentence. Tadié promptly answers his own question: "Certainement avant la quatrième; mais après la troisième" ("Certainly before the fourth; but after the third"; 893–94). Proust wrote "Fin," and perhaps told his housekeeper about it, imagining for a moment he had reached the last word of all. And then he kept writing, because he knew the Messiah was not going to come and there was no last night of all, only the ordinary, contingent last night of



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mere mortality. The end of his work was the end of nothing more (and nothing less) than the ability to write.[4]

It's worth pausing over Proust's last sentence, since it also illustrates the stylistic possibilities of the time beyond the last day or night. Here's a very literal translation:

> So if strength was left to me long enough to accomplish my work, I should not fail first of all to describe men there, even if it made them monstrous creatures, as occupying a place so considerable alongside the so restricted place reserved for them in space, a place on the contrary extended beyond measure, since they simultaneously, like giants plunged into the years, touch periods they have lived through, so distant from each other, between which so many days have intervened—in Time.[5]

The main clause here is: "I should not fail . . . to describe men . . . as occupying a place . . . in Time." All the rest of this long sentence is parenthesis and qualification. There is a great deal to say about this remarkable (non)ending, but I restrict myself to two simple points: the sentence closes with "dans le Temps" ("in Time") in all four versions, so that in one sense it will always have ended; and we can take the final parenthesis about the giants, which appears only in the fourth version, as a perfect marker of the unfinishable. There is always room for another subordinate clause, and nothing but death will put an end to these sentences.

Kafka completed a number of short stories and published them. He completed quite a few he didn't publish. And he completed but didn't publish a whole array of brilliant parables and aphorisms. All this work is perfectly finished, couldn't be more finished: "If it had been possible to build the Tower of Babel without climbing it, it would have been permitted"; "The crows maintain that a single crow could destroy heaven. That is beyond doubt, but proves nothing against heaven, since heaven means precisely: the impossibility of crows."[6] What could we add to these miniature masterpieces; what could we take away from them? The same questions apply to my earlier quotation of Kafka, about the Messiah, a fabulously finished picture of waiting for a finish. Much of Kafka's work is as complete as the stories of Chekhov or Joyce, or the novels by Dickens and Flaubert, which Kafka so loved. All these works are marvelously unteleological. They know, as Henry James declares, that the artist's business is not ending but the appearance of ending, the drawing of a chosen circle in the midst of "the continuity of things" (5). They are not expecting the Messiah. They end when their design needs them to end; they can end because they are not about ending. Or if they are about ending, they do not seek a formal equivalent for their story, a postponed Messiah of style.

And yet Kafka never finished a novel. One could speculate forever about the reasons, and there is probably an excess even of good reasons. But here we need speculate only about the generic dimensions of the simple fact. The novel for Kafka, I suggest, was the genre in which the Messiah might always come but didn't. The three unfinished novels are very different in their takes on this condition. *The Trial* is closest to the condition of *The Cantos* and *The Man without Qualities*. Kafka tries to end his novel with a brutal murder. Joseph K. is taken out to a quarry and killed "like a dog" (*Proceß* 245; *Trial* 231). It is as if Kafka wants to force the Messiah to come, if only through violence and horror. And as if, even closer to my point, he has forgotten the impeccable theory of incompletion laid out for Joseph K. by the painter Titorelli, with its frightening and desolately comic distinction between the "apparent acquittal" of a defendant and the indefinite "protraction" of a case. They are not the same thing—in the first, the accused keeps getting rearrested; in the second, his case never proceeds beyond its beginning stages—but both are interminable.[7] The one thing you can't have in *The Trial* is a trial, and of course the German title doesn't quite promise us one.

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The Trial, then, theorizes incompletion and seeks an ending. Kafka's other two novels enact incompletion, very much in the spirit of Proust and the story about *The Arabian Nights*. *Der Verschollene* (*The Man Who Disappeared*, also titled *Amerika*) ends with what seems to be a new beginning, the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma. Without the other novels and Titorelli's theory, we might think of this book as simply unfinished; once we have them in mind, however, the signs of something else begin to multiply: "Only now did Karl begin to grasp the size of America. . . . On the first day they travelled over a high mountain range. Blue-black formations of rock approached the train in sharp wedges, they leaned out of the window and tried in vain to see their peaks. . . ."[8]

The Castle ends with a conversation between K. and the landlady of the Herrenhof Inn, a scene visually dominated by a vast closet full of her dresses. And they are only the overflow. She has two more such closets upstairs, and she is getting a new dress tomorrow. It's plain that K. is not going to get into the castle and pretty plain that even if he did, it would no longer mean much to him. He will never be at home in the village, because even the memory of a quest is enough to alienate a person from an unquesting world. Isn't this an ending? Games can end in stalemate too. No, it isn't an ending, because in a world waiting for the Messiah, what is plain is not what is final, and what is final is what is always about to come. Kafka doesn't write "End" and keep writing like Proust because he has no certainties, not even negative ones. He can't write the end, because he doesn't know for sure how many last days there are before the last day of all, or even if the last day of all is anything but a theological fantasy. The ending he perhaps thought of and that Max Brod tenderly recounts—K. on his deathbed is given permission to live in the village—is a bitter irony (*Schloß* 313). What can K. do with this retrospective permission, and did he, who wanted to enter the castle, ever need permission to live in the village? Above all, this irony itself is an attempt, whether by Kafka or by Brod, to master the novel's dispersion, to give it the shape of an aphorism.

It may be that no novel can be so elegantly shaped and still be a novel. But the novel for Kafka, it seems, was a form that not only fell short of such closure; it was doctrinally opposed to it. The novel as a genre took the weight of his aphorism about the Messiah and refused to end as a consequence. The aphorism has three parts, of which I have so far quoted only the last: "The Messiah will come only when he is not needed, he will not come until one day after his arrival, he will come not on the last day but on the last day of all."[9] None of this means the Messiah won't come, although I'm afraid all three versions do mean that when he comes he won't be the Messiah.

If we were to transpose this wonderful aphorism into the world of narrative and the definition of genre, we might arrive at the following propositions:

1. A work devoted to its own unfinishability can end only when we are no longer interested in its ending.

2. Such a work can end only some time after it has already ended.

3. There are works whose whole ambition is finally to enter the secret space between the last day and the last day of all.

Notes

1. Both were speaking in the MLA convention panel Remapping Genre, in which this essay also originated, in December 2006.

2. *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen* 67. Unattributed translations in this essay are mine.

3. "Tradition has it that in the course of time Shahrazad bore Shahrayar three children and that, having learned to trust and love her, he spared her life and kept her as his queen" (*Arabian Nights* 428). That's one tradition.

4. Tadié does not share this view of the interminable work. For him Proust reaches a "plénitude rythmique" ("fullness of rhythm") in his last version and stops there,

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finally satisfied. He writes over "Fin" but still comes to an end (894).

5. "Aussi, si elle [la force] m'était laissée assez longtemps pour accomplir mon œuvre, ne manquerais-je pas d'abord d'y décrire les hommes, cela dût-il les faire ressembler à des êtres monstrueux, comme occupant une place si considérable, à côté de celle si restreinte qui leur est réservée dans l'espace, une place au contraire prolongée sans mesure puisqu'ils touchent simultanément, comme des géants plongés dans les années à des époques, vécues par eux si distantes, entre lesquelles tant de jours sont venus se placer—dans le Temps" (625).

6. "Wenn es möglich gewesen wäre, den Turm von Babel zu erbauen, ohne ihn zu erklettern, es wäre erlaubt worden"; "Die Krähe behaupten, eine einzige Krähe könnte den Himmel zerstören. Das ist zweifellos, beweist aber nichts gegen den Himmel, denn Himmel bedeuten eben: Unmöglichkeit von Krähen" (*Hochzeitsvorbereitungen* 31, 32).

7. "»Beide Metoden haben das Gemeinsame, daß sie eine Verurteilung des Angeklagten verhindern«. »Sie verhindern aber auch die wirkliche Freisprechung«, sagte K. leise, als schäme er sich das erkannt zu haben. »Sie haben den Kern der Sache erfaßt«, sagte der Maler schnell" ("'Both methods have this in common: they prevent the accused from being convicted.' 'But they also prevent the accused from being acquitted,' said K. softly, as if ashamed of the realization. 'You've grasped the heart of the matter,' the painter said quickly"; 172; 161).

8. "Jetzt erst begriff Karl die Größe Amerikas. . . . Am ersten Tag fuhren sie durch ein hohes Gebirge. Bläulichschwarze Steinmassen giengen in spitzen Keilen bis an den Zug heran, man beugte sich aus dem Fenster und suchte vergebens ihre Gipfel. . . ." (*Verschollene* 324; *Man* 218).

9. "Der Messias wird erst kommen, wenn er nicht mehr nötig sein wird, er wird erst einen Tag nach seiner Ankunft kommen, er wird nicht am letzten Tag kommen, sondern am allerletzten" (*Hochzeitsvorbereitungen* 67).

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