



The Tower and the City

In the short story "The City Coat of Arms," Franz Kafka tells of the Tower of Babel. "The essential thing in the whole business," he says, "is the idea of building a tower that will reach to heaven. In comparison with that idea everything else is secondary." But the crude expression of the desire for power put an end to the tower's construction. The submission of all to a unique and permanent project is the fantasy of all power (in its extreme form we call it totalitarianism), but it runs contrary to the numerous different endeavours that make up a city, which is plurality and not unity. "So long as there are men on the earth there will be also the irresistible desire to complete the building." Others, with other resources, will do it more effectively. "So why exert oneself to the extreme limit of one's present powers?" "Such thoughts paralyzed people's powers, and so they troubled less about the tower than the construction of a city for the workmen." And then the disputes began: each nationality wanted the finest quarters, among endless conflicts. During times of truce they embellished the city: fresh envy, fresh conflicts. And when it was recognized that building a heaven-reaching tower was senseless, "everybody was too deeply involved to leave the city."

The Tower of Babel was not a city because it did not allow conflict or plurality. At the start of the construction "all the arrangements [...] were characterized by very good order." The city was born from the impossibility of building the tower, in the same way that the dissociating laws of *logos* break the rigidity of the organic order to make philosophy and politics possible. To think and to assume one's own destiny. All myths originating in the urban lead to the fantasy of destruction: "All the legends and songs that carne to birth in that city are filled with longing for a prophesied day when the city would be destroyed by five successive blows from a gigantic fist." Power always dreams of destroying the city, because it is the place of disorder and diversity. It destroys it or it breaks it. Prague broken by power, the places where the power has managed to annihilate the city and make it into a place—castle, office, penal colony—are Kafka's places. Because Kafka has found the absurdity of this being that wants to build towers that reach to heaven and destroys the cities that provided refuge in order to flee from the nightmare of unity. The City of K. as an allegory of spiritual desolation.