

Perhaps being human comes to this: we stand, no longer hug the hearth, smelling as we go. From the moment when we rose on two rear legs it was perhaps inevitable that up—away from the stench and dangers of level ground, closer to the trees from whose safety we had fallen—should be linked to transcendence, to the realm of the Good and of the gods. Down was ever the place of danger and dirt, of the wastes of the body and the wastes of society. When we began to stand, what had fallen from trees must be driven away on the horizontal. No longer could we shit down, and forget.

Yet if down was our dump, it was—is—also our sustenance. The ground receives our wastes and turns them into bread and wealth—and thus power. This conflicted stance toward the earth and our relationship to it is a spatial conflict. Always striving to escape the middle realm, this real world of grit and smells and decay, we talk of settlements on Mars as we burrow into mountainsides mining the planet's last oil or hunkering down for the end of time. Yet deeper we preserve always a memory of the *humus* in *human*. The middle level is an emblem of consciousness itself: we are trapped on this plane of topsoil as in our very flesh. It is our home. Yet from Christian myth to modern office tower, our yearnings map up or down—rarely to the real places and real time that, unlike our utopias, hug the earth.

This is the tragedy and absurdity of human life that the Greeks knew: our hubris. We desire the realm of the gods even as we know that this desire is a cipher for death. The conflict can be seen in the murky symbolic relationship between the forms we build and the social arrangements we agree on.

In the modern city up and down are the province of both waste and wealth. We send our refuse down into the ground and up through smokestacks, sparing the middle realm we (the inhabitants of some consensual community) inhabit. This clearing of the middle realm after our descent from the trees and organization into fixed communities was a crucial moment. The point when we sink the sewers is the point at which level ground becomes habitable for those with power. In the Roman city sewers were depressed in the center of the street; rich and poor alike lived near the ground. One could step over the sewer as one might step over a beggar. In the medieval city, where once again down—into the street—was the axis of refuse and disease, the rich moved in the opposite direction, barricading themselves in towers far from the stench and giving themselves over to internecine war. In either case, the state of the ground—the real ground on which we walk—was indissoluble from social reality. In the modern city of closed sewers, the rich again descended to live on the mezzanine (though still not on the ground floor) while the poor made

their weary way up to the garrets.

The things we build are not mirrors but lenses that focus the contradictions and conflicts of our minds and our societies. Thus it is with up and down. Our social arrangements do not map neatly onto our forms, but rather appear to lead to ever greater confusion. The mind turns lazily to modern skyscrapers and temples (really the same thing) and sees in them our striving toward apotheosis. Yet in certain places and times—including the modern dense city with its cheek-by-jowl tenements—both rich and poor have been cliff dwellers; the ‘projects’ are formally indistinguishable from their up-market cousins. Height is both aerie of the powerful and the edge to which the powerless are banished. In opera house and Greek amphitheatre the poor gather in the upper stages, far from the action. In the Roman city only the democratic institutions of the Colosseum and the baths reached for the sky. And in the modern skyscraper there is a point at which rents begin to fall with each successive floor.

In theatre or amphitheatre, corporate skyscraper or public project, it is not height but rather distance that maps to position in the social hierarchy. For however much we yearn *up*, our social arrangements unfold on the ground on which we live and die. Where the easy tautologies *up-good* and *down-bad*, *up-rich* and *down-poor* appear to disintegrate, look instead at horizontal distance, look for the hallowed ground. The greater the remove from such ground, the weaker the bond between a form’s height and its social meaning. In a modern amphitheatre city with its favela galleries, it is not the Y-axis but rather the intercept that confers status. What is high is good only where we agree that the ground beneath it is good. In the real world—the world of places where we are and will always be—run from hallowed ground always trumps rise above it.