

POETICS JOURNAL

NUMBER 10, JUNE 1998

KNOWLEDGE

Pierre Alferi	<i>Seeking a Sentence</i>	1
Lyn Hejinian	<i>La Faustienne</i>	10
Ted Pearson	<i>Things Made Known</i>	30
Joan Retallack	<i>Blue Notes on the Know Ledge</i>	39
Michael Davidson	<i>Seven Poems</i>	55
Lorenzo Thomas	<i>The Marks Are Waiting</i>	62
Leslie Scalapino	<i>War / Poverty / Writing</i>	65
Daniel Davidson	<i>Bureaucrat, my love</i>	74
Arkadii Dragomoshchenko	<i>The Eroticism of Forgetting</i>	79
Ilya Kutik	<i>The Tormentor of Life</i>	88
Barrett Watten	<i>What I See in "How I Became Hettie Jones"</i>	98
George Hartley	<i>Althusser Metonymy China Wall</i>	122
Kit Robinson	<i>Pleasanton / Embassy Suite</i>	130
Chris Tysh	<i>Dead Letters</i>	138
Rod Smith	<i>CIA Sentences</i>	141
Dennis Barone	<i>A Note on John Smith</i>	149
John Smith	<i>Philadelphia Newspapers Read Crossways</i> ...	151
Herman Rapaport	<i>Poetic Rests</i>	155
Reva Wolf	<i>Thinking You Know</i>	165
Ron Silliman	<i>The Dysfunction of Criticism</i>	179
David Benedetti	<i>Fear of Poetic (Social) Knowledge</i>	195
Carla Harryman	<i>Interview by Chris Tysh</i>	207
Robert Glück	<i>Fame</i>	218
Rodrigo Toscano	<i>Early Morning Prompts for Evening Takes</i> ...	223
Hung Q. Tu	<i>very similitude</i>	226
Ron Day	<i>Form and the Dialogic</i>	230
Jim Rosenberg	<i>Openings: The Connection Direct</i>	236
Pamela Lu	<i>from Intermusement</i>	244
Travis Ortiz	<i>from variously, not then</i>	247
Lytle Shaw	<i>Language Acquisition as Poetics</i>	249
Dodie Bellamy	<i>Can't We Just Call It Sex?</i>	255
Lisa Samuels	<i>Two Poems</i>	260
Michael Gottlieb	<i>Five Poems</i>	264
Michael Amnanan	<i>from Joe Liar</i>	268
Aaron Shurin	<i>Orphée: The Kiss of Death</i>	280
Steve Evans	<i>Gizzi's "No Both"</i>	283
Index	<i>Poetics Journal 1-10</i>	287

BARRETT WATTEN AND LYN HEJINIAN, EDITORS

ALTHUSSER METONYMY CHINA WALL

The Great Wall of China was finished off at its northernmost corner. From the southeast and the southwest it came up in two sections that finally converged there. This principle of piecemeal construction was applied also on a smaller scale by both of the two great armies of labor, the eastern and the western. It was done in this way: gangs of some twenty workers were formed who had to accomplish a length, say, of five hundred yards of wall, while a similar gang built another stretch of the same length to meet the first. But after the junction had been made the construction of the wall was not carried on from this point, let us say, where this thousand yards ended; instead the two groups of workers were transferred to begin building again in quite different neighborhoods. 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 official announcement that the wall was finished. In fact it is said that there are gaps which have never been filled in at all, an assertion, however, that is probably merely one of the many legends to which the building of the wall gave rise, and which cannot be verified, at least by any single man with his own eyes and judgment, on account of the extent of the structure.

—FRANZ KAFKA, "THE GREAT WALL OF CHINA" (235)

THERE IS A CERTAIN resemblance between Louis Althusser's description of ideological and social terrain in *Reading Capital* and Kafka's description of the production of a political terrain in "The Great Wall of China." While I am not proposing to unearth a set of preexistent connections which makes Kafka somehow Althusserian or vice versa, I want to stage those connections as an examination of the ideological value of the horizontal or metonymic enclosure of a certain terrain and the related question of a vertical or metaphorical transcendence. While both writers demystify the gesture toward transcendence in much the same way Marx had in his discussion of religion as an opiate, their explanations differ as to the exact relationship between the construction of horizon and transcendence. They differ, as well, in their depiction of the possibility or even desirability of plucking the illusory flower from the chain of oppression as Marx had demanded.

Central to both Althusser and Kafka is the familiar distinction between metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor can be seen as a transcendental movement; through metaphor we translate the terms from one field into the terms

George Hartley is the author of *Textual Politics and the Language Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) and *Beyond Representation*, from which the present article is excerpted.

of another; the relationship or positioning between these terms is vertical, a substitution from above to below, inside to outside. Metaphor assumes a certain equivalence, a reduction of differences, between the two terms in order for this substitution to be possible. Political representation is thus a form of such substitution and mediation. Metonymy, on the other hand, works laterally, establishing relationships of contiguity through pairings and displacements. This shift from metaphor to metonymy moves us from transcendence to immanence. As both Althusser and Kafka suggest, metaphor is inherently theological in its structuring of mediation itself as a relationship between something outside or above the structure or terrain, and by its positioning of the mediator as one who inhabits a space or opening between us and some external power. Metaphor, despite its initial reduction to some presupposed equivalence, creates the possibility of hierarchy, while metonymy creates a nonhierarchical contiguous space of equality-in-difference. It is this denial of metaphor that drives Althusser's desire to rid Marxism of its Leibnizian or Hegelian theology of expression and that leads him to isolate the concept of *Darstellung* as the epistemological key to Marx's theory of value. What particularly interests Althusser is that this concept of *Darstellung*, only one of the concepts which Marx uses in *Capital* in order to think the effectivity of the structure, is "both the least metaphorical and, at the same time, the closest to the concept Marx is aiming at when he wants to designate at once both absence and presence, i.e., the existence of the structure in its effects" (188).

Althusser thus seeks a mode of representation appropriate for thinking the metonymic causality of the structure, a way of mapping the social terrain that forces us to think differently the very notion of terrain itself. Althusser seeks to mark out, in the least metaphorical way possible, the structure, the boundaries, the absences and necessary blindspots of a given problematic, but to do so in such a way that the question of sight and blindness, visible and invisible, cannot simply be appropriated into a model of false consciousness, with the necessary implication of an available true consciousness. The whole problem of oversight must be represented, in other words, on a terrain that does not lead to the binaries of inside/outside, essence/phenomena, true/false, visible/invisible, all of which offer the possibility of transcendence as that which somewhere, somehow lies outside the present terrain, the field of vision. The symptomatic reading which Althusser proposes, then—the reading of the absent questions of a text which provides new answers to questions it never asked, indeed cannot ask within its given terrain—must operate metonymically rather than transcendentially. "It is impossible to leave a closed space," Althusser insists, "simply by taking up a position *outside it*, either in its exterior its profundity. [It still belongs] to *that circle*, to *that* closed space, as its repetition in *its other-than-itself*. Not the repetition but the non-repetition is the way out of this circle."

Kafka's concerns are quite similar; he will interrogate a structure much like Althusser's metonymic totality, an inquiry that will lead to a meditation

on the presence and absence of the high command who order the building of the wall. His tale itself—if it can be called that—must also be seen as a metonymic structure, a series of answers which reveal more urgent questions than the previous ones, a continuous displacement of frames and strategies of closure—such as historical narratives, childhood reminiscences, secret maxims, and parables—which like the Imperial Messenger never reach their intended end but continue the lines of flight Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari identify as the crucial political gesture of Kafka's texts.

The building of the wall presents an enigma: Why would the high command, in their intention to safeguard us from the fierce nomads of the North, plan this piecemeal method of construction which leaves gaps and lacunae in the protective structure? The answer to this leads to more enigmas. The high command, in its infinite wisdom, really intended to produce the side effects of the wall-building process—the sense of purpose, the unity, the cooperation, the willful, even enthusiastic, submission to the dictates of the high command—rather than the wall itself. Or, as one scholar explains, they really wanted to build a foundation for a tower that would complete the abandoned project of the Tower of Babel. But how can a quarter-circle structure with extensive gaps provide such a base? Hence the conclusion that the tower must be meant spiritually, metaphorically. Which raises the next question, Why then build the wall itself if the tower is only a metaphor? The narrator's answer, which comes later in the tale and with no explicit connection, is that the tower is a metaphor for the "superficial culture mounting sky-high around a few precepts that have been drilled into people's minds for centuries, precepts which, though they have lost nothing of their eternal truth, remain entirely invisible in this fog of confusion" (242). The building of the wall, the enclosure of a political and an ideological space, somehow provides a base for the installation of the high command itself in the tower, elevating them above the people like the mysterious and absent gods they appear to be to the common people. The building of the wall, in other words, maintains and constantly reproduces the conditions of hierarchy which make possible in the first place the high command, the imperial sun itself, in its metaphoric transcendence beyond the world of the village. "But it is precisely this question of empire," the narrator tells us, "which in my opinion the common people should seek to answer, since they after all are the empire's final support" (242). The support of the tower, then, is not the wall at all but the people in their process of building it as an enclosure.

The tower is the answer, but no one besides the narrator seems to recognize the question itself, the question of empire. The people, in building the wall, thus provide an answer to the question they are unable to ask. In his discussion of symptomatic reading, Althusser asks, "Why is political economy necessarily blind to what it produces and to its work of production? Because its eyes are fixed on the *old question*, and it continues to relate its new answer to its old question; because it is still concentrating on the old '*hori-*

zon' within which the new problem 'is not visible'" (24). So long as the people in Kafka's tale look to the wall, thought to exist in its totality as the empire's horizon, rather than look to the production which makes the wall and indeed the tower possible—in other words, so long as the people take the old terrain as a given—they will not be able to provide themselves with the terrain which will make the question of empire visible. As Althusser explains, "It is the field of the problematic that defines and structures the invisible as the defined excluded" (25–26). The questions of surplus value or of empire "are rejected in principle, repressed from the field of the visible; and that is why their fleeting presence in the field when it does occur (in very peculiar and symptomatic circumstances) goes *unperceived*; and becomes literally an undivulged absence—since the whole function of the field is not to see them, to forbid any sighting of them" (26).

Kafka's narrator tells us that we may be certain that in the office of the high command, forever absent from view, "through the window the reflected splendors of divine worlds fell on the hands of the leaders as they traced their plans" (240). But the question remains, as we have seen, How could this command, tracing the plans of the divine, deliberately command something so inexpedient as the piecemeal construction of the wall? In answer the narrator relates an ancient maxim: "Try with all your might to comprehend the decrees of the high command, but only up to a certain point; then avoid further meditation" (240). This interdiction seems to imply that there is some danger in going beyond that certain point; but it implies as well that it is *possible* to do so. We might be able to travel out to the margins of the empire and see for ourselves the condition of the wall; we might be able to follow the imperial messenger home and discover the location of the high command. But perhaps the danger lies not in what we might find in the borderlands or in the tower, but in the recognition that we will never know, no matter how hard we search, even where the center or the margins are, not because we did not look long enough or far enough but precisely because it is impossible to reach those points: "The limits that my capacity for thought imposes on me are narrow enough," the narrator explains, "but the province to be traversed here is infinite" (241). Imagine this:

The Emperor, so [the parable] runs, has sent a message to you, the humble subject, the insignificant shadow cowering in the remotest distance before the imperial sun.... The messenger immediately sets out on his journey; a powerful, an indefatigable man; now pushing with his right arm, now with his left, he cleaves a way for himself through the throng: if he encounters resistance he points to his breast, where the symbol of the sun glitters; the way is made easier for him than it would be for any other man. But the multitudes are so vast; their numbers have no end. If he could reach the open fields how fast he would fly, and soon doubtless you would hear the welcome hammering of his fists on your door. But instead how vainly does he wear out his strength; still he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained; the courts would still have to be crossed; and after the courts the second outer

palace; and once more stairs and courts; and once more another palace; and so on for thousands of years; and if at last he should burst through the outermost gate—but never, never can that happen—the imperial capital would lie before him, the center of the world, crammed to bursting with its own sediment. 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. (244)

When we set out toward the horizon, no matter how long we travel a horizon lies just as far before us. We can never reach the horizon, never willfully step outside of the field, simply because the horizon is an effect of the field itself. This horizon-value, the ideological illusion of an elsewhere, an outside, a traversable limit or boundary beyond which lies the truth or the real or the divine, threatens, Althusser warns us, "to induce a false idea of the nature of this field, if we think this field literally according to the spatial metaphor as a space limited by another space outside it. This other space is also in the first space which contains it as its own denegation; this other space is the first space in person, which is only defined by the denegation of what it excludes from its own limits" (26–27).

Jacques Derrida has commented that "that 'horizon'-value, that pure infinite opening for the presentation of the present and experience of meaning, suddenly becomes framed. Suddenly it is a part. And just as suddenly apart. Thrown back into play. And into question. Its de-formations are no longer even negatively regulated by any form, which is another name for presence. The transformations of meaning no longer hinge on any enrichment of 'history' and 'language' but only on a certain squaring of the text, on the obligatory passage through an open surface, on the detour through an empty square, around the column of fire" (351). It is precisely this pure infinite opening that Kafka describes in the parable of the Imperial Messenger, infinite in the sense that it lies forever before us, keeps us from making any progress toward our destination simply because there is no beyond proper to the empire where we now stand, amid all its dense populace and its sedimentation. The empire's horizon is not the demarcation of a field outside our own but the internal effect of our own, its presence forever at a distance as the horizon-value of our own dream work as we sit at the window at nightfall when the horizon will fade into darkness. Nevertheless, this very illusion, "this very weakness [is] one of the most unifying influences among our people," so says Kafka's narrator; "indeed, if one may dare to use the expression, the very ground on which we live" (247). And it is for this reason that the narrator decides to follow the ancient secret maxim and refuses to disillusion the people: "To set about establishing a fundamental defect here would mean undermining not only our consciences, but, what is far worse, our feet. And for that reason I shall not proceed any further with my inquiry into these questions" (247–48).

Kafka, on the other hand, did proceed further in that inquiry by writing "The Great Wall of China." But what are we to make of this politically? Is the narrator's refusal to disillusion his people necessarily a retrograde action? Is

Kafka's ungrounding or deterritorialization of his reader necessarily a revolutionary one? Apart from the political charge of these gestures, can we even think of them as possible, as effective in the first place? What is the meaning of agency in a territory such as Kafka's or Althusser's where the plane continually falls away as the surface of the globe or falls in on itself as the incapable interiority of the Imperial Capital? The implication in both Kafka and Althusser is that this ungrounding is a necessary antidote to mystification and transcendence. What is needed, Althusser claims, is a change of terrain, the discovery of a new continent not out beyond the horizon but right here, on the spot, as an articulation of the possibilities manifested within the absences or lapses or black holes of the first continent. But can one change terrain at will? Can Althusser or Kafka succeed where the Imperial Messenger failed? In other words, can they carry their message from the new terrain to the inhabitants of the old? Althusser himself points out that we cannot ignore that

this 'change of terrain' which produces as its effect this metamorphosis of the gaze [the production of an informed or demystified gaze] was itself only produced in very specific, complex and often dramatic conditions; that it is absolutely irreducible to the idealist myth of a mental decision to change 'view-points'; that it brings into play a whole process that the subject's sighting, far from producing, merely reflects in its own place; that in this process of real transformation of the means of production of knowledge, the claims of a 'constitutive subject' are as vain as are the claims of the subject of vision in the production of the visible; that the whole process takes place in the dialectical crisis of the mutation of a theoretical structure in which the 'subject' plays, not the part it believes it is playing, but the part which is assigned to it by the mechanism of the process. (27)

Here we have the subjectivation of the subject through the staging of "subject" as the extension of the play.

This dramatic metaphor points to the difficulty of characterizing the social and the ideological in terms of a single monolithic terrain or field. While this topography escapes an "empiricist" conception of the inside/outside terrain implied by the term "false consciousness," it nevertheless reduces the social to an enclosed, sutured totality, and reduces agency purely to the effect of a position within this unilinear terrain. But politics depends by definition on the possibility that the production of subject positions is not restricted so totally to assigned points in a structure. While the palimpsestic image of the superimposed terrains complicates and appears to open up the univocity of this model, Althusser's insistence on the mechanical processes nevertheless restricts us as at a given point to only one of the two terrains. But there is no reason to restrict ourselves to this singular model. We could instead point to the coexistence of multiple open-ended terrains which merge and repulse and cancel each other out in various ways according to very specific local conditions. The margins of these various ideological fields would thus function as the sites of articulation and contestation, the local instances of struggle made possible and limited no longer by the closure of a single field but precisely by the contiguity of these multiple fields.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, see the terrains proposed by Althusser and Kafka quite differently. A first crucial distinction is that between moments and elements: *moments* are differential positions that are articulated into a discursive or ideological field; *elements*, on the other hand, are those differential positions that are not articulated, that function within a discursive field as floating signifiers. A second distinction is between logics of equivalence and of difference. Like metaphor, *equivalence* works as a point of condensation where the differences between moments are dissolved to the point that the social breaks down into two opposing camps; the identities of these two camps are established through a relation of negativity, the one defined simply as the negation of the other, as with colonizer versus colonized, black versus white, or male versus female. Like metonymy, on the other hand, *difference* works as contiguity and displacement; a moment's identity derives from its differential position in a given field. Neither logic is ever complete unto itself, however, for then there could be no floating elements and thus no space for articulation, rupture, and change. What becomes crucial is to recognize the proliferation of nonarticulated spaces, interstitial spaces of no-man's-land at the limits of established fields. These sites provide the potential for local struggles as nodal points of articulation which can subvert the established fields at their margins.

Althusser's terrain, both social and ideological, resembles that governed by Laclau and Mouffe's logic of difference. The pure interiority that Althusser posits assigns to each moment its necessary position and function within this seamless space of the totality. While Althusser's emphatic rejection of external causation has been instrumental in leading a whole tendency within theoretical Marxism to reject the essentialism of earlier tendencies, his reduction of the social to this single space of difference closes off any possibility of hegemonic politics. To be sure, he tried to reinsert the political in his later work by positing the reproduction of the conditions of production by Ideological State Apparatuses and even later in his insistence on the essential role of class struggle in the functioning and construction of these ISAs, but these after-the-fact additions still failed to explain how class struggle could ever operate within what remains a sutured model of the totality. Thus a certain exteriority is necessary for political change. This of course cannot be a positive exteriority demarcating a different terrain outside the present one, but instead a negative exteriority which exists simply as the limit of the social and the impossibility of its complete closure. Laclau and Mouffe explain:

It is in this terrain, where neither a total interiority nor a total exteriority is possible, that the social is constituted. . . . Thus, neither absolute fixity nor absolute nonfixity is possible. . . . A system only exists as a partial limitation of a 'surplus of meaning' which subverts it. . . . *The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in*

its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity. (113; emphasis in the original)

Interestingly, it is Kafka's "Great Wall" rather than Althusser's *Reading Capital* that shows this hegemonic process at work in the production of a Chinese imaginary. The Great Wall, after all, has to be built; it does not already lie there as the border between the Chinese people and the fierce nomads of the north. And its construction is by no means guaranteed; the Chinese are prepared, molded, scripted from infancy to recognize their roles within the social structure. We see the performative dimension of their interpellation as wall-building "subjects" in their education, when the teacher makes them build miniature models of the wall and then smashes the tiny walls as a lesson in the need to build the wall ever better. The building of the wall is in fact the constant structuring and articulation—in Laclau and Mouffe's terminology—of the free-floating Chinese *elements* into *moments* of the totality. By structuring the equivalence of all Chinese as the negation of the nomads from the north—who have never actually been seen, I might add, but have simply been "represented" in the legends about them—the dominant powers construct and maintain the metaphorical transcendence of the tower. The conclusion Kafka seems to imply is that once the wall ceases to exist, only then will the tower cease. The nonclosure of the horizon—which denies the reduction to equivalence necessary for transcendence—is precisely that which the wall serves to contain. It is this no-man's-land of a negative exteriority that makes antagonism and articulation—and thus political action—possible. While Althusser's conception of the social terrain subverts the metaphorical move outside the structure, it nevertheless denies these antagonistic nodal points of negative exteriority which reveal the limits and impossibility of the social. Althusser attempts to produce a pure metonymy within a single enclosed terrain, without recognizing, it seems, that it is enclosure itself that makes the gesture toward metaphor so tempting. Kafka, on the other hand, points to horizon-building, the attempt to limit or redirect the displacements and combinations of metonymy, as the necessary condition for hegemony.

WORKS CITED

- Althusser, Louis. *Reading Capital*. London: Verso, 1970.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Disseminations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Kafka, Franz. "The Great Wall of China." In *Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer. New York: Schocken, 1971.
- Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso, 1989.