WRITING ON THE WALL: BENJAMIN, KAFKA, BORGES, AND THE CHINESE IMAGINARY

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Abstract || Using Kafka's short story "The Great Wall of China" as a starting point, this essay examines the ways in which a dialectics of inclusion and exclusion, construction and destruction, have been deployed in discussions of identity and difference. In particular, I argue that even as Walter Benjamin uses Kafka as a starting point to reflect on how the West imagines China as a space of radical alterity, Kafka's own Great Wall story is interested instead in how China conceives its relationship to *its own* strategic Other, which in turn offers a model for how we might understand the West itself.

Keywords || Walter Benjamin | Franz Kafka | Deleuze and Guattari | Minor Literature | China

What is then the origin of the Great Wall of China
that circumscribes a "proper" in the text?

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

0. Introduction

In 1934, on the tenth anniversary of Franz Kafka's death, Walter Benjamin was invited to write a commemorative essay on Kafka and his oeuvre. The resulting article offers a detailed analysis of most of Kafka's major works, but also includes a pair of lengthy quotations from Franz Rosenzweig's 1921 religious-philosophical work *The Star of Redemption*. Benjamin scholar Stephané Moses observes that Benjamin originally copied down these two passages in a series of notes he took for a 1931 radio lecture on Kafka, and adds that, "The striking thing about these two passages is that they perform no essential function in the extremely complex structure of the Kafka essay, so their inclusion seems both unmotivated and arbitrary" (Moses, 2005). Indeed, Benjamin himself acknowledges in the essay that these quoted passages from Rosenzweig's text "[refer] not to Kafka, but to—China" (Benjamin, 1999: 810).

In the first quoted passage, Benjamin argues that Karl Rossmann, the teenage protagonist of Kafka's incomplete first novel, *Amerika* (which was published posthumously in 1927), embodies Rosenzweig's characterization of the Chinese people as being "devoid of individual character, as it were. The idea of the wise man, of which Confucius is the classic incarnation, blurs any individuality of character; he is the truly characterless man—namely, the average man." In the second passage, meanwhile, Benjamin appeals to Rosenzweig's discussion of Chinese ancestor worship to describe the "inexhaustible intermediate world" found in Kafka's stories, citing Rosenzweig's description of how, in China, "the very fullness of the world is considered the only reality. All spirit must be concrete, particularized, in order to have its place and *raison d'être*. The spiritual, if it plays a role at all, turns into spirits. These spirits become definite individuals, with names and a very special connection with the name of the worshipper" (Benjamin 1999: 801, 810).[1]

What is perhaps most interesting about the inclusion of these two passages on China in Benjamin's essay, however, is not what they say about Kafka's work or even what they posit about China itself, but rather what they imply about the very possibility of cross-cultural comparison. On one hand, in both passages China is imagined as the precise inverse of contemporary Western society and culture. For instance, in contrast to Western society, which is believed to prize individualism, Rosenzweig claims that the Chinese people are instead "devoid of individual character"; and in contrast to Western metaphysics, which is believed to be grounded on a strategic opposition between the spiritual and the material, Rosenzweig

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1 | Quoted passages are taken from Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt: J. Kauffmann, 1921), part I, book 3, p. 96, and part I, book 2, pp. 76-77.

argues that in China “all spirit must be concrete.” On the other hand, Benjamin’s intent is not simply to reaffirm a stark dichotomy between Chinese and Western worldviews, but rather he argues that the qualities that Rosenzweig attributes to China also describe a set of distinctive features of Kafka’s fiction. The implication, in other words, is that in Kafka’s work we find the strategic obverse of the Western imaginary itself, but also a kernel of alterity on which the West’s self-conception is grounded in the first place.

By first outlining a vision of China as being positioned outside of Western thought and metaphysics but then using this same vision of China to describe a paradigmatically Western body of literary production (Kafka’s fictional oeuvre), Benjamin suggests the degree to which Western culture is itself haunted by its own structural obverse. In particular, Benjamin (via Rosenzweig,) suggests that Western society and culture is grounded on a set of binary oppositions (individual vs. collective, the material and the spiritual), and that China by contrast is imagined as being located outside of these binaries while at the same time offering a strategic contrast against which the West (with its self-defining binaries) is able to constitute itself in the first place. In this essay, I will examine a set of related issues as they are developed in Kafka’s own work, and specifically his short story “The Great Wall of China.” I argue that even as Benjamin uses Kafka as a starting point to reflect on how the West imagines China as a space of radical alterity, Kafka’s own Great Wall story is interested instead in how China conceives its relationship to *its own* strategic Other, which in turn offers a model for how we might understand the West itself.

1. The Great Wall of China

Although Kafka indicated at one point that he identified with the Chinese (Hsia, 1996), he nevertheless only rarely addressed China explicitly in his oeuvre. Of the China-themed works that do exist, however, the best-known is probably his short story “The Great Wall of China” (which he wrote in 1917, but which was not published until 1931), and which, as its title suggests, takes inspiration from China’s legendary Great Wall. Reputedly built by China’s First Emperor around 200 BCE across the nation’s entire three thousand mile northern frontier, the Great Wall of China has become a paradigmatic symbol of China’s historical continuity and geographic integrity. In reality, however, the Wall is actually a conjunction of a variety of individual walls that were constructed (and repeatedly reconstructed) over a period of more than two millennia. There were periods in China’s history during which these walls played an important role in the nation’s defense, but there were many periods during which the walls had little or no significance, and were therefore allowed to fall into disrepair. What is most interesting about the Wall, accordingly, is the

way in which its status as a coherent cultural symbol has managed to supersede the disjointed conditions of its original construction.

Set during an unspecified period of early China, meanwhile, Kafka's story adopts the voice of a Chinese man who is twenty years old when construction on China's legendary Great Wall begins, and who offers a fictionalized, and radically de-idealized, view of the Wall and its historical origins. The story's narrator describes how the workers recruited for the project were divided into teams of about twenty each, and each team was assigned to build a separate fifty-meter section of the Wall. Once each team completed its assigned section, the workers were then directed to start the same process anew at a different location. In this way, the Wall—currently viewed as one of the largest manmade structures in existence—was constructed in a fundamentally piece-meal fashion. The implication is that the Wall is actually a discontinuous conjunction of a vast set of independent fragments, and furthermore this discontinuity is a necessary component of the work itself (Rojas, 2010).

Kafka's narrator makes a similar point about the constitutive role of discontinuity with respect to the spatial relationship between China's dynastic center and its outer periphery. In a portion of the story that Kafka published separately in 1919 as a short parable titled "A Message from the Emperor," for instance, he describes the process by which a herald attempts to relay a message from a dying emperor to a recipient in the outer provinces. After receiving the message, the herald starts making his way to his destination, but it turns out that the imperial palace itself is so huge that he could very well spend his entire life simply trying to make his way to the palace's outer gates—and even if he were to make it that far, he would still need to travel a much longer distance to reach even the border of the city, not to mention the distant hinterland. The result is that communication between the imperial center and the periphery is subject to such vast delays that most of the residents of the outer provinces have no idea which emperor is currently on the throne, or even which dynasty currently holds power. The story contends, however, that it is precisely in these spatial and temporal gaps separating the imperial center from its periphery that we find the enabling conditions of the empire's own structural coherence. The structural cohesion of the Chinese nation is found to be predicated on the necessary and inevitable gaps in the very same Wall that has been regarded as a paradigmatic symbol of the nation's geographical unity and historical continuity.

The Wall's ability to generate a sense of collective identity, in other words, resides precisely in its status as a product of those same structural gaps with which the empire itself is necessarily riddled. Moreover, although the emperor is impossibly removed from the vast majority of his subjects, this yawning distance is presented as being

not so much a liability as it is an enabling condition for the emperor's own power and authority. It is in these gaps between the emperor and his subjects, in other words, that we find the stuff of legend, including the symbolic authority upon which the emperor's political power is itself grounded.

2. On Minorities and Barbarians

In their influential 1975 study, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari cite Kafka as a prime example for what they call a "minor literature," which is to say a body of literature written in the same language as that of a more dominant literary tradition, but against which it distinguishes itself both politically and ideologically. They argue that a minor literature tends to be distinguished by its qualities of political immediacy, collectivity, and deterritorialization, which echo Benjamin's (via Rosenzweig's) earlier characterization of Chinese culture as being located outside Western metaphysics and the sorts of binary oppositions on which it is grounded. The implication, in other words, is that minor literature, like China, occupies a space outside of familiar Western binaries, even as it comes to function as a strategic antipode for Western culture itself.

In the penultimate chapter of their book, Deleuze and Guattari cite Kafka's "The Great Wall of China" to illustrate not only the author's fascination with themes of fragmentation, but also the fundamentally fragmented quality of his works themselves—or what Deleuze and Guattari call Kafka's distinctive "mode of expression through fragments." They contend that not only is discontinuity "a distinctive feature of [Kafka's] short stories," but furthermore that "discontinuity imposes itself on Kafka especially when there is representation of a transcendental, abstract, and reified machine" (72). In particular, they argue that Kafka's work—viewed both as a set of individual texts as well as a collective oeuvre—is inherently a collection of fragments, and conclude that Kafka's "The Great Wall of China" suggests not only that the gaps in the Wall that make the illusion of unified identity possible, but also that it is precisely this perception of unified identity (the product "of a transcendental, abstract, and reified machine") that itself generates the conceptual possibility of discontinuity in the first place. That is to say, not only is the perception of a unified China necessarily predicated on the inevitable gaps in the Wall that theoretically marks the nation's limits, but furthermore that same perception of national unity also *necessitates* the recognition of figurative gaps and discontinuities that simultaneously undermine that idealized unity itself.

This dialectics of unity and discontinuity applies not only to the figure of the nation, as in Kafka's Great Wall allegory, and to a vision of an individual author's literary oeuvre, as in Deleuze and Guattari's

analysis of Kafka's literary oeuvre, but also to an understanding of literary traditions and literary canons. Extrapolating from the preceding discussions of Kafka's treatment of China's Great Wall, we would like to suggest that it is precisely in the gaps and discontinuities that are necessarily present within any dominant literary tradition, that we may find the conditions of possibility upon which that idealized tradition is itself predicated. At the same time, those same gaps and discontinuities within a dominant literary tradition—and out of which various minor discourses may emerge—impose themselves "especially when there is representation of a transcendental, abstract, and reified machine" of literary tradition and canon-formation. The implication, in other words, is that not only do "minor" literary works play a crucial role in permitting a dominant, "major" literary tradition to constitute itself, but that a major literature also effectively *generates the need* for a set of minor literatures against which its existence may be structurally opposed.

Insofar as Kafka's "The Great Wall of China" and "A Message from the Emperor" illustrate some of the structural conditions underlying Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a minor literature, another Kafka work titled "An Old Manuscript" (and first published in the same 1919 collection as "A Message from the Emperor") points to a very different—and arguably much more radical—possibility. Unlike the now-familiar notion of a minor literature, which uses a literature written in the same language as a dominant literary tradition in order to draw out the gaps and discontinuities that are inevitably present in the latter, "A Lost Manuscript" points instead to an aporia of radical unintelligibility located at the center of the social order itself.

Narrated in the first person by a cobbler whose workshop is located directly across from the emperor's palace, "An Old Manuscript" describes how the city has increasingly become overrun by nomads from the north. These nomads do not know the local language, and the narrator doubts whether they even possess a language of their own. Instead, they plunder the locals' goods and leave their streets in disarray. The narrator periodically glimpses the emperor peering out from the palace windows, and observes that it appears to be the emperor's presence that has drawn the nomads to the capital in the first place, though the emperor is powerless to prevent the nomads' encroachment. While "A Message from the Emperor" emphasizes the vast gulf that separates the emperor from his own subjects despite the fact that they nominally inhabit the same social order, "An Old Manuscript" instead describes how the locals and the nomads somehow manage to coexist in the same urban space despite the fact that they do not even share a common language, much less a common culture. Furthermore, although the narrator presents the nomads as being virtually nonhuman, the story leaves open the possibility that the nomads may in fact possess a language and culture that the narrator is simply unable to comprehend.

Even though the narrator of "A Lost Manuscript" posits that "speech with the nomads is impossible," he and his fellow townspeople nevertheless manage to establish a viable day-to-day relationship with the nomads that is more consequential than that which they have with the emperor himself. In fact, the final sentence of Kafka's story refers to a "misunderstanding"—referring not to a misunderstanding between the townspeople and the nomads, but rather to one between the townspeople and their own emperor. The misunderstanding in question refers to the situation wherein the emperor has inadvertently attracted the nomads into the capital but does not know how to drive them away, and as a result it is left to the narrator and his fellow "artisans and tradesmen" to "save our nation"—a task for which they feel radically unequipped. As a result of this putative misunderstanding, the locals end up sharing the city with a population of foreigners whom they regard as radical others, but in the process the two groups manage to establish a tenuous coexistence that virtually transcends language and culture. Viewed in allegorical terms, the result may be seen as a model for the way in which any dominant literary tradition necessarily contains within itself nodes of linguistic alterity through which its own dynamism is maintained. If Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a minor literature underscores the socio-ideological distance intervening between works that nominally share the same linguistic space, "A Lost Manuscript" suggests instead the extent to which even a putatively unitary sociocultural space or tradition may contain radically incommensurate languages or semiotic systems.

3. On Destruction and Creation

As is well-known, Kafka only published a handful of works during his lifetime, including two collections of short fiction, two long stories, and a few shorter works. Most of his works, however, remained unpublished at the time of his death, and in his will Kafka specified that his close friend and executor Max Brod should burn all of his unpublished manuscripts. Brod, however, declined to do so, and over the next decade he edited and published many of Kafka's most iconic works, including the novels *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *Amerika*, and the collection *The Great Wall of China*. In this way, the bulk of the Kafka literary works were preserved despite the author's explicit request that they be destroyed.

A similar dialectics of creation and destruction would later ground Jorge Luis Borges's reading of Kafka's "The Great Wall of China." In a short text titled "The Wall and the Books," Borges reflects on the curious fact that the same historical figure—the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty—has traditionally been credited with both the construction of the Great Wall as well as with the infamous burning of virtually all of the books available at the time. Borges is fascinated

with the notion that the same figure could be responsible for one of the world's most famous construction projects, as well as one of the most infamous acts of cultural destruction. In the text, Borges suggests various different ways by which one might reconcile these two seemingly antithetical processes—speculating that perhaps the emperor wanted to recreate the beginning of time, or that the construction of the Wall might function as a metaphor for a slavish devotion to the past, or that the emperor may have offered the Wall as a challenge for those who might seek to destroy it. In the end, Borges concludes by suggesting that the burning of the libraries and the construction of the Wall are in fact "operations that in a secret way cancel each other," noting that "the virtue of this idea may lie in its monumental opposition between processes of construction and destruction" (Borges, 2007).

Although Borges does not mention it explicitly, there is actually a section of "The Great Wall of China" that addresses this very question of the "monumental opposition between processes of construction and destruction." In particular, Kafka's narrator notes that as construction on the Great Wall was just beginning, a local scholar advanced a theory that the Tower of Babel did not fail "for the reasons commonly asserted," but rather on account of "the weakness of its foundation." The scholar then proposed that a new Tower of Babel might be constructed using the Wall as its base, despite the fact that, as the narrator points out, the Wall was itself a highly fragmented construction to begin with. More abstractly, however, this proposal suggests that it is precisely the Wall's ability to construct an artificial unity based on gaps and discontinuities that offers a structural foundation for the inverse project of creating a structure that celebrates internal difference.

Benjamin, meanwhile, was also fascinated by this dialectics of creation and destruction as it pertains to Kafka's own work. Referring to Kafka's directive, in his will, that his unpublished manuscripts be burned after his death, Benjamin remarks, "Given its background, the directive in which Kafka ordered the destruction of his literary remains is just as unfathomable, to be weighed just as carefully as the answers of the doorkeeper in 'Before the Law.' Perhaps Kafka, whose every day on earth brought him up against insoluble modes of behavior and imprecise communications, in death wished to give his contemporaries a taste of their own medicine" (804). The implication is that Kafka's directive to have his works destroyed derives from the same confrontation with the limits of interpretation and intelligibility that drive the works' creation in the first place.

Benjamin mentions Kafka's "The Great Wall of China" only twice in his 1934 essay. First, he quotes a passage from the story on the construction of the Wall and notes that it "resembles fate," and compares it to a discussion, from Metchnikoff's book *Civilization and the Great Historical Rivers*, on China's long-term attempts to control

the flow and the flooding of its great rivers (803-804). The second reference to the work, meanwhile, cites not so much the story itself but rather the eponymous collection in which it was published, and the "posthumous reflections" (Benjamin's term) that it contains. Benjamin observes, "hardly had this volume appeared when the reflections served as the basis for a body of Kafka criticism which concentrated on an interpretation of these reflections to the neglect of his actual works" (806). Just as Deleuze and Guattari argue that Kafka's general oeuvre occupies the status of a "minor literature" vis-à-vis a more canonical German literary tradition, Benjamin suggests that "The Great Wall of China" and other "posthumous reflections" occupy a minor position in relation to the author's "actual works" (most of which were also published posthumously!). It is precisely in Kafka's discussions of China in this text positioned at the margins of the "minor literature" that is the author's general oeuvre, however, that we may find an exploration of the complex dialectics of inclusion and exclusion, construction and destruction, upon which modern Western culture is itself conceived.

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