

Building Walls and Jumping over Them: Constructions in Franz Kafka's "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer"

Author(s): John M. Kopper

Source: *MLN*, Vol. 98, No. 3, German Issue (Apr., 1983), pp. 351-365

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2906014>

Accessed: 28-09-2015 14:03 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *MLN*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Building Walls and Jumping over Them: Constructions in Franz Kafka's "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer"



John M. Kopper

Franz Kafka's work has always seduced us into metaphor. Always partly anchored in our notion of the real, always simultaneously inscribed in a mentality "beyond," his novels and stories invite an interpretative activity that will explain the fantastic in terms of the real. Hence the frequency with which we ask of an image in Kafka, or of an entire text, "What does it mean?" "Why the cockroach?" for example. In responding to the question, we construct a second world, parallel to the text, which accounts as fully as possible for any troublesome mystery which the text introduces. Our goal is demystification, and our assumption is that the text is parable, a symbolic system whose terms transfigure literal representation.

Most criticism of the short story "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer," written in 1917, makes this assumption. Typically, it asks, "What is the wall?" Herbert Tauber is not unusual in his assertion: "The wall is the expression of a will to create the kingdom of God, a will to earthly perfection."¹ Clement Greenberg, though he cautions against a monological reading of the Great Wall, nevertheless believes that it should be interpreted symbolically, whether as Jewish Law, or, in a wider sense, as culture itself.²

¹ Herbert Tauber, *Franz Kafka: An Interpretation of His Works* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1968), pp. 125-126.

² Clement Greenberg, "At the Building of the Great Wall of China," in *Franz Kafka Today*, ed. Angel Flores and Homer Swander (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958), pp. 77-81.

In recent years, however, critics have started to pay attention to Kafka's preoccupation with the nature of literature, with the structure of a literary text and its place in the world. "Beim bau der chinesischen Mauer" especially demands consideration in this light. Like Kafka's two great novels, it posits a protagonist who essentially must engage in an interpretative act. The historian of the story writes about the Chinese, but is also their "reader," a scribe who both records and explicates the activity of his people. Moreover, he is writing, as few have noted, less about a wall than about the *construction* of a wall. Christian Goodden, alone among critics of the story, has been sensitive to this fact.³

Like Goodden's, my own reading of the story will concentrate on "constructions." My concern, however, will always be Kafka's meditation on the complex relationships governing author, reader, and text. I will advance both psychological and philosophical arguments to account for these relationships. If problems of perception, representation, and projection are indeed foregrounded in "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer" then psychology and philosophy must have ancillary functions in an interpretation. Having examined in some detail the quality of the narrator's voice, the nature of his subject, and his attitude toward this subject, I will try to account for that specifically Kafkan textuality that both encourages and undermines metaphorical interpretation. Above all I will scrutinize the mechanism by which the story of a construction becomes the construction of a story.

The narrator distinguishes himself early in the story as one of "wir, die Erbauer." Like any personal pronoun, "we" implies an exclusion. Who are the "not-we"? In the course of the story, the narrator's "we" receives definition through a series of excluding gestures, which refine the pronoun and separate it from a "they." "Ich stamme aus dem südöstlichen China. Kein Nordvolk kann uns dort bedrohen."⁴ ". . . Wir Chinesen gewisse volkliche und staat-

³ Christian Goodden, "'The Great Wall of China': The Elaboration of an Intellectual Dilemma," in *On Kafka: Semi-Centenary Perspectives*, ed. Franz Kuna (London: Elek Books, 1976), pp. 128-145. Beyond focusing on the history of the wall as history of a process, Goodden identifies the construction as an existential and psychological quest. "The building of the wall, like the mechanism of the quest, embodies that process whereby the creative subject points to himself and identifies himself in terms of something outside himself" (p. 135). Goodden's article represents a reading of the story's existential questions: how the issues of choice, critical consciousness, fraudulent living, and self-definition are raised by the construction of the wall and by reflection on the construction.

⁴ Franz Kafka, *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, ed. Paul Raabe (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1970), p. 293.

liche Einrichtungen . . . besitzen,” and “Frage die Führerschaft. Sie kennt uns” (p. 294). The “we” successively designates the people of southeast China, the Chinese, and Chinese subjects. Such a float in pronominal reference puts the narrator in an ambiguous position, for he redefines himself against changing backgrounds. These contextual shifts make the narrator’s voice move slightly but powerfully as it tells the story, so that the authority of the narrator, inherent in his claim to use a “we,” is reinforced by its elusiveness. At no time does the narrator introduce sufficient stability into his role to allow the reader to circumscribe him. “Wir—ich rede hier wohl im Namen vieler—haben eigentlich erst im Nachbuchstabieren der Anordnungen der obersten Führerschaft uns selbst kennengelernt . . .” (p. 292).

Self-appointed spokesperson for an undefined many, the narrator assumes the function of the historian, who assimilates and meditates upon the experience of others. The “I” which persists throughout the text is always a disclaiming center, which draws attention away from itself by means of self-effacement and displacement of focus: “Hier kann ich allerdings wieder nur von meiner Heimat sprechen” (p. 295); “Und wenn ich mir einen solchen Gedanken über die Führerschaft erlauben darf, so muß ich sagen . . .” (p. 294). The historian’s tool of research is inquiries; that is, what he tells us is simply what is there to be found for the asking. And when he ventures into the realm of opinion, the narrator asserts his right to speak by excluding himself from those groups for whom he does not speak: those from other provinces, everyone but himself, etc. The claim to veracity is implicit in the presentation of pure “facts” by a scrupulous, self-conscious researcher. But working persistently against this claim is the inability of the text to escape from the narrator’s voice. Even—and one might say, *particularly*—the narrator’s displays of self-abnegation do not allow a point of circumvention, and the reader remains imprisoned in a mind which includes everything even as it excludes.

Furthermore, the narrator, while including the reader in his monograph by making him the object of address, excludes him from the source of the monograph, the legends, parables, and documents that have been the object of his research. These data, in turn, have been selected by the narrator as relevant to his case. Hence simply by virtue of his role as medium, the narrator is a barrier between his subject matter and his audience, and in selecting certain material for presentation, he operates once again as

obstacle, preventing the reader's access to anything except the chosen information.

The narrator alternately impedes access to the source of discourse and functions as the wandering source of that discourse. According to either dynamic, it is impossible for the reader to enter the story except on the margin. And it is on margins, of course, that most activity in "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer" takes place. The narrator's people, the southerners, dwell on the border of the Tibetan Highlands, while the Chinese Wall is being constructed on the northernmost frontier. Only one point can be located with any certainty in between, the imperial city of Peking. Just as it is difficult to say for whom the narrator speaks, or what control he is exerting over the subject at hand, so it is hard to discover what Peking stands for, and how much power it holds over the Chinese.

The problem of shifting margins is raised again in the wall itself, the topic which constitutes the historian's "raison d'écrire." The story of a wall reminds one of certain recurrent themes in Kafka's oeuvre: constructions in general (cf. *Das Schloß*, "Der Bau," "In der Strafkolonie" "Ein Besuch im Berkwerk"), and the Tower of Babel in particular (cf. "Das Stadtwappen," and Aphorism 18 from "Betrachtungen über Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung, und den wahren Weg"). Construction implies plenitude, for it involves a filling of empty space, and continuity, in that the edifice erected must exist in time, for however short a duration. Therefore a structure, even when incomplete, concretizes space and time: it divides space into the unstructured and the structured, and time into before and after the construction's beginning. The English "construction" and "building," referring both to an edifice and to the erection of an edifice, contain this sense of structure as an active and persistent *occupying* of space and time. But as such, a construction creates a discontinuity in space-time at the point where its presence leaves off and its lack begins. A distinction-making vehicle, then, the construction (*Bau*) plays with those concepts which Kant considered necessary forms of thought, and which Freud located in the Conscious and Pre-Conscious.⁵ The preservation and elucidation of any structure would be, from a psychoanalytic perspective, an assertion of the Conscious over the Unconscious, and an avoidance of that domain where man's most fundamental categories collapse. Constructions reflect the space-time conception which structures our

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 13 (London: Imago, 1940), pp. 27-28.

experience, and the true function of the construction then becomes a witnessing to the continued life of the subject in the face of annihilation from the Unconscious, or of death. If one were to read "Der Bau" in such terms, then the network of tunnels would not be the unconscious mind, but a symptom, operating as an elaboration in space and time, of the conservation of consciousness. Hence one of the cardinal occupations of Kafka's characters is repairs—the officer of "In der Strafkolonie," the rodent of "Der Bau," and the engineers in "Ein Besuch im Bergwerk" are concerned with maintaining the construction in space and time against failure or a lapse in articulation.

Moreover, in its fundamental role as event—indeed a "coming out of"—the construction by its very existence implies participation in a causal system. By explicating a structure's relationship to surrounding phenomena in space and time, one can affirm the causality which Kant saw as an *a priori* concept of the mind. To put an object in context—a preeminent function of the historian—is to give it meaning. The Great Wall of China is an event to the self-appointed historian of the text. He tries to fix the wall with references to coordinates in time and space, and to a framework of causality. The wall was started when the narrator was twenty; a northern salient has just been completed by the joining of two walls converging from the south; the wall protects against "die Nordvölker."

But such concrete declarations are subject to immediate disintegration. News from Peking not only can take immeasurably long in transmission, but may sometimes fail to reach the south altogether. More interestingly, the narrator never specifies which side of the wall "die Nordvölker" are on. In a fragment of the story published by Schocken, the infidel tribes assemble before the imperial palace and shoot their arrows at the Emperor.⁶ Yet the narrator also refers to "die glänzende und doch dunkle Menge des Hofstaates—Bosheit und Feindschaft im Kleid der Diener und Freunde—, das Gegengewicht des Kaisertums, immer bemüht, mit vergifteten Pfeilen den Kaiser von seiner Waagschale abzuschießen" (p. 295). The provenance of the assaults is displaced, and then the very term "enemy" is displaced by its opposite: the enemies of the Emperor are those that look like his friends.

Preoccupied at first with completing a precise description of the

⁶ Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp. 248-249.

building of the wall, the narrator moves to investigate its “wherefore.” In a typically Kafkaan progression of raising and rejecting hypotheses, he refutes the notion that the wall is intended for defense at all:

Vielmehr bestand die Führerschaft wohl seit jeher und der Beschluß des Mauerbaues gleichfalls. Unschuldige Nordvölker, die glaubten, ihn verursacht zu haben, verehrungswürdiger, unschuldiger Kaiser, der glaubte, er hätte ihn angeordnet.

(p. 294)

By a similar examination of alternatives, the narrator concludes that the wall’s piecemeal construction flies in the face of good defense strategy and is motivated by considerations of workers’ morale. Hence the need for such a wall as exists has little if anything to do with its announced purpose. Later we will see that—the wall aside—conceptions of continua of time, space, and logic do not hold between Peking and the south, or even between points in the south. The dismissal of the wall from the story and the shift in emphasis to patterns of communication within the Empire signal the wall’s failure of coherence. The remainder of the story unravels and pursues into paradox some patterns of thinking that the narrator initially displays in discoursing on the wall.

I have increasingly cast the narrator of Kafka’s story as a debunker of received wisdom. Carrying arguments to their logical conclusions, he comes upon contradiction after contradiction in his culture’s beliefs. Yet at the same time, the narrator is himself the collator and publicist of myths, and his text is a composite of the legends, parables, and stories which he uses to supplement his own meditations. The narrator’s activity, then, contains a paradox, aptly described by Peter Beicken in his analysis of the story.

Über die historische Faktizität hinaus bietet er eine philosophische Anthropologie, die am Strukturmodell des Mauerbaues und der nötigen gesellschaftlichen Organisation zur metaphysischen Spekulation erweitert wird, wobei aber der durchaus bemerkbare Zug des skeptischen Rationalismus eine gewisse Balance schafft, die allerdings die Aussagen zu paradoxen verklausuliert. Die Ambivalenz zwischen Aufgeklärtheit und obrigkeitstreuere Unterwürfigkeit läßt den Chronisten sich in den Zirkel seines begrenzten Verständnisses fangen.⁷

For our purposes, however, the vocabulary of Roland Barthes

⁷ Peter Beicken, *Franz Kafka: Eine kritische Einführung in die Forschung* (Frankfurt: Athenaeon, 1974), p. 312.

provides terms which are more useful than “historische Faktizität” and “philosophische Anthropologie.” In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes describes five codes of textual signifiers, three of which, including the symbolic, “establish permutable, reversible connections, outside the constant of time.”⁸ Put differently, the symbolic belongs to a register of substitution and replacement. Barthes’ two remaining codes, the hermeneutic and proairetic, describe respectively the text’s posing of “answerable” enigmas and its structuring of logical sequences of human behavior (a wall to be built must have a purpose, builders, etc.).

As history, then, the narrative of “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” deals with irreversibility, with the determinism of time, space, and cause, with uniqueness and specificity. As a gesture in parable—as a parabolic gesture—its activity transcends specificity. The narrator moves into symbol, the function that can be applied promiscuously and reversibly, i.e. without reference to a metonymy of time, space, and cause.

The first parable introduced by the narrator, the parable of the river, is included in the text through exclusion. The narrator denies that the parable, which cautions against too close scrutiny of the high command’s decrees, should still be heeded, but of course its impact is not thereby vitiated. Indeed it is doubly heightened, as the parable is valorized both for its potency “in those days,” and by its very presence in the text. In other words, by resorting to parable to define the importance of his detective work, the narrator endorses it as a vehicle of communication, however much he simultaneously minimizes its content.

The second parable, “Eine kaiserliche Botschaft,” is also implicitly accepted by the narrator as an appropriate means of expression, and here he does not dispute the relevance of its subject matter. Because the parable deals specifically with the Emperor and empire, however, one questions in what sense “Eine kaiserliche Botschaft” is parable and not part of the narrator’s direct address. The essence of the parable would appear to be *that news of the Emperor’s death cannot reach the fringes of the empire*, but the possible points of emphasis are many: news cannot even leave the palace precincts, hence the southerners are no more “out of it” than if they lived in Peking itself; the Emperors are mortal and individual (they can even want to send a message to one of their

⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 30.

subjects), but it is impossible to see them as such; if he could, the Emperor would personally speak to each subject, and so forth. A first reading of the parable reduces it to a rationalization that explains the relationship each subject wants with his Emperor and why he cannot have it. Thus at first glance, the parable would appear to be attempting to make the incomprehensible comprehensible (explaining why, for example, no one gets a message from the Emperor).

But a second reading of the text suggests that the parable preserves the transcendence of the Emperor by questioning it only *in* parable. The mythology of the Emperor beyond space and time, and without connection with his people—the affirmation of an inaccessible beyond—is asserted by being denied in parable. Hence not the contents of the parable, but the movement itself into parable may represent the people's desire to relegate the possibility of a mortal Emperor to the realm of fable. According to this reading, the Chinese people do not desire a real Emperor, in touch with his people, who in death is succeeded by a new Emperor. Instead they opt for one who never dies, whose rites they can fulfill over and over again; they choose the repeatable symbol. And the wish the parable realizes is that the messenger never leave the court at all.

Interpretation is complicated by the narrator's demythologizing activity, which surrounds the parable. Immediately before it begins, he describes how "Der lebendige Kaiser aber, ein Mensch wie wir, liegt ähnlich wie wir auf einem Ruhebett." Then a little later we hear that "Der einzelne Kaiser fällt und stürzt ab . . ." (p. 295). And shortly after the end of the parable, the narrator remarks, "Längst verstorbene Kaiser werden in unseren Dörfern auf den Thron gesetzt" (p. 296). The ambiguity of our position as readers is thus heightened by the fact that the Emperor is made mortal in both temporal reality, the historian-narrator's account, and in parable, a genre set over against the temporal. Our inability to distinguish the parable as substantially different from the rest of the text threatens the parable with destruction, and it becomes in our interest, as long as the story is labeled "*parable*," to maintain it as separate. Just as the narrator must reckon with the fact that the wall fails to cohere, so we must confront the story's imminent disintegration.

We have arrived at a set of paired opposites, reality/parable, which will have broad application in this discussion of the story. The importance of the two in Kafka's literary aesthetics has been discussed by Charles Bernheimer in his recent article on the text

Brod entitled "Von den Gleichnissen."⁹ By pursuing the connotations of each term in the pair, he is able to build new oppositions that bear on Kafka's attitude toward language and writing. For my own purposes, it is important to note the homology of reality/parable with metonymy/metaphor, terms which match well with Barthes' conception of the irreversible and reversible codes. Metonymy subsumes the connotations of "reality" as a realm of contiguities in time, space, and causality, while metaphor shares with "parable" the sense of atemporality, reversibility, and repeatability. As the historian's appeal to parable is a gesture beyond the historicity of his narrative, so the Chinese people's use of parable is an option for a world outside the constraint of time, hence a longing for the repeatable. The Chinese love of ritual embodies this movement to escape the march of time. More particularly, love of ritual is a choice against life.

Such a mentality motivates the "piecemeal construction" of the Great Wall. The people develop a sense of completion as a people—a unity—from staging provisional and local completions of the wall in segments of 1000 yards. The piecemeal wall is a manifestation of the need for completion. Furthermore, according to the narrator, it assuages the impatience of the workers. As Kafka states in one of his aphorisms: "Alle menschlichen Fehler sind Ungeduld, ein vorzeitiges Abbrechen des Methodischen, ein scheinbares Einpfählen der scheinbaren Sache."¹⁰ The workers delude themselves into thinking that they have indeed created an inside and an outside with their wall.

And indeed the more one scrutinizes the Chinese universe, the more it eludes visualization at all. This failure is typified by the fate of messengers in the story. They are the ultimate emblems of coherence in the text, for in traversing distance and connecting a source with a receiver, they incarnate the concepts of space, time, and causality. They are like constructions, except they have the property of motion. Messengers, however, never arrive. In reality, they are rejected; in parable, they never leave the source. In reality, Peking is only a dot lost in the vastness of the empire; in parable,

⁹ Charles Bernheimer, "Crossing Over: Kafka's Metatextual Parable," *MLN*, 95 (1980), 1254-1268. My debt to Charles Bernheimer is greater than I can acknowledge in one note. This essay owes its inspiration, and many of its theoretical premises, to Mr. Bernheimer's seminar on Kafka, given at the University of California, Berkeley, in the fall of 1980.

¹⁰ Franz Kafka, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlaß* (New York: Fischer, 1953), p. 39, Aphorism 2.

the palace in Peking is itself a universe. Hence the relationship of places within China is subject to infinite expansion and contraction; news crosses uncertain distances and takes generations to arrive.

The most blatant failure of coherence in the topography of China is the Tower of Babel. Out of the plain of China, covered with villages and scored with the routes of messengers, it rises not as a building, but as the idea of a building. A scholar "in den Anfangszeiten des Baues" proposed that the wall be the foundation for a new Tower. The first Tower, argued the scholar, failed "keineswegs aus den allgemein behaupteten Ursachen" but because of a weak foundation. The narrator rebuts this thesis as an example of the "Verwirrung der Köpfe damals":

Die Mauer, die doch nicht einmal einen Kreis, sondern nur eine Art Viertel- oder Halbkreis bildete, sollte das Fundament eines Turmes abgeben? Das konnte doch nur in geistiger Hinsicht gemeint sein. Aber wozu dann die Mauer, die doch etwas Tatsächliches war, Ergebnis der Mühe und des Lebens von Hunderttausenden?

(p. 292)

In other words, the scholar rejects a theological interpretation of the fall of the Tower in favor of an engineering one; the narrator, in turn, finds the engineering solution to be structurally unfeasible (and, the reader will add, impossible to visualize!), and assumes that a spiritual interpretation cannot be intended, since the wall is concrete. He thereby begs the question of why, if the Tower is conceived in a spiritual sense, it need be built at all. The passage is typically Kafkan, for the two antagonists in the debate misunderstand each other over the literalization of metaphor; both take it for granted that the Tower of Babel exists not in parable but in reality.

The failure of contiguity between the wall and the tower leads us to view the latter as a realization of metaphoricity, of the world which cannot be joined to actuality. Earlier, in the discussion of "Eine kaiserliche Botschaft," we saw that this world represented a principle operating against life. Indeed one finds that in Kafka's writings the Tower of Babel is usually associated with death.

The idea crops up in "Das Stadtwappen." "Solange es Menschen gibt, wird auch der starke Wunsch da sein, den Turm [Tower of Babel] zu Ende zu bauen" (p. 306), but the citizens squabble over the pace of construction and slow their labors, on the grounds that no one generation can complete it. Nationalities fall into bloody

conflict and construction is postponed until peace is restored; meanwhile the city is “embellished.” The city is like the Great Wall, and both function in opposition to the metaphorical death of the Tower. Work on the city or wall brings unity; construction of the Tower causes discord. The scholar, the narrator, and the citizens alike are unable to escape their desire for a Tower, but the later generations—the narrator of “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” and the second and third generations of the city—cannot skirt the implications of completion, and they rationalize the postponement of construction through a literalization of metaphor. In parable, the Tower can be built. In reality, construction is senseless. The conclusion of “Das Stadtwappen” now falls into place. The city’s body of legends and songs “ist erfüllt von der Sehnsucht nach einem prophezeiten Tag, an welchem die Stadt . . . zerschmettert werden wird” (p. 307). The death wish is successfully returned to the regime of parable. “Wenn es möglich gewesen wäre, den Turm von Babel zu erbauen, ohne ihn zu erklettern, es wäre erlaubt worden,” writes Kafka in another aphorism.¹¹ Seeing in the construction of the Tower a choice against life, we might interpret this aphorism as meaning: “If it were possible to cross over into death without dying, everyone would do it.”

At this point, it is unreasonable to postpone recourse to Freud’s discussion of the life and death instincts in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*. His identification of a life-preserving and a life-destroying principle, Eros and Thanatos respectively, bears analogy with our terminology of metonymy and metaphor, concepts which we have come increasingly to perceive as referring to registers of the living and the non-living. Eros stands for unity, fullness, and life in time, Thanatos for disjunction, discreteness, and existence outside time. If one accepts the Freudian dichotomy, the result of Chinese ritual seems no accident: the villagers’ xenophobia reflects an eagerness “die Gegenwart auszulöschen,” and “Längst verstorbene Kaiser werden . . . auf den Thron gesetzt.”

The text establishes in many places the thematic coexistence of Eros and Thanatos. Earlier in the discussion, I proposed that in challenging all news from the “outside,” the people of the narrator’s village seal themselves off from temporality, and choose death over life. Their need to repeat is, in Freud’s terms, the avatar of the death instinct, a compulsion in the animate substance to cancel itself out.

¹¹ *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen*, p. 41, Aphorism 18.

*Ein Trieb wäre also ein dem belebten Organischen innewohnender Drang zur Wiederherstellung eines früheren Zustandes, welchen dies Belebte unter dem Einflusse äußerer Störungskräfte aufgeben mußte, eine Art von organischer Elastizität, oder wenn man will, die Äußerung der Trägheit im organischen Leben.*¹² (italics Freud's)

Adjustment to the news of an Emperor's death is paradoxically a movement back into life, the place where organic death, as distinct from instinctual Thanatos, exists. But the people refuse this move.

On the other hand, in seeing that labor on the wall is a rallying point for the Chinese, I have moved toward identifying horizontal construction with Eros and metonymy. And the wall, pieced together on the principle of contiguity, is itself the perfect metaphor for this metonymy, for the Chinese choice of completion over dissolution. The wall's construction is so engineered that every citizen in his lifetime will have the opportunity of working toward and achieving at least one moment of completion.

Use of the parable/reality dichotomy becomes increasingly complex. To say that the wall is a "perfect metaphor" is to say something that neither the narrator nor the other Chinese could say. For them, the important thing is that the wall exist in reality . . . for the reader, that it metaphorically depict an option for reality. Thus the wall both *is* literality and *signifies* this literality. The special Kafkan gesture is to work with metaphors which signify the absence of metaphor.

The tensions of Eros and Thanatos which exist within the story, therefore, move out to surround the reader-interpreter. For the narrator, at first the arbiter of texts, the separator of fact from fictionalizing, himself embraces parable. He introduces "Eine kaiserliche Botschaft" without qualm, and argues about the Tower of Babel as if it were real. With the narrator collapsed into the literal, the reader makes that movement which we discussed earlier in a different context—the effort to distinguish the literal from the metaphorical. The reader becomes historian. He must "distinguish the Tower of Babel from the Great Wall," so to speak, and understand that the narrator's perplexities, engendered by an effort to visualize the meeting point of the "wall" and the "tower," are symptomatic not so much of the total disjunction of the two terms, as of the violence that occurs when the narrator fails to interpret them. The story of the construction of a wall becomes the story of a

¹² Freud, p. 38.

construction of history, and now, finally, the story of the construction of a reading.

In order to escape the narrator's aporia, we engage in our own interpretative activity. Let us follow, for a moment, the line of one reading to what Kafka would call a "resting place." In doing so, we must ourselves metaphorize the Great Wall, again starting with the premise that the problem of physical constructions figures a difficulty of certain mental constructs. The Chinese people, through their construction, align themselves on the side of Eros and unity. But both the narrator and the people know the unity of the wall to be fictional—the workers see the great gaps in the wall on their journeys to and from the construction site. If the people *really* desired a unified wall, they would build outward from one point—instead they build the very principle of holes into their wall of defense. The infidel tribes, because they are not decidedly on one side of the wall or the other, would seem to symbolize projections of the people's own neuroses outside their ego shell, where they can be defended against. As Freud writes in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*,

. . . Eine Richtung des Verhaltens [is adopted] gegen solche innere Erregungen, welche allzu große Unlustvermehrung herbeiführen. Es wird sich die Neigung ergeben, sie so zu behandeln, als ob sie nicht von innen, sondern von außen her einwirkten, um die Abwehrmittel des Reizschutzes gegen sie in Anwendung bringen zu können.¹³

But an explanation of the people's desire to maintain holes in their defense escapes this particular level of interpretation, for it would have to justify why the people preserve in principle a weak ego-boundary. Again and again in reading "Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer," one reaches the point where the story denies itself as parable and demands a return to the literality of the narrative. The text consistently forces the reader to take to heart the import of the river parable.

Earlier I discussed the "collapse" of the narrator-historian into the literal. Indeed his association with a literality of narrative is enforced frequently, both in his contextualizing of parables, and in that metonymic act, generalization, upon which he tentatively ventures. In his persistent effort to reason through events and assert the need for a continuum in space, time, and causality by verbalizing its loss, the narrator chooses Eros. And his text pro-

¹³ Freud, p. 29

longs itself through metonymy. It does not conform to a pattern imposed by the narrator from a transcendent dimension, but exists in the flat, and moves by a process of association. Even the sentences move in a startlingly metonymical manner:

. . . Meiner Meinung nach bestand die Führerschaft schon früher, kam nicht zusammen, wie etwa hohe Mandarinen, durch einen schönen Morgentraum angeregt, eiligst eine Sitzung einberufen, eiligst beschließen, und schon am Abend die Bevölkerung aus den Betten trommeln lassen, um die Beschlüsse auszuführen, sei es auch nur um eine Illumination zu Ehren eines Gottes zu veranstalten, der sich gestern den Herren günstig gezeigt hat, um sie morgen, kaum sind die Lampions verlöscht, in einem dunkeln Winkel zu verprügeln.

(p. 294)

“Eiligst” is elaborated by the clause beginning “und schon am Abend,” whose later words, “die Beschlüsse auszuführen,” in turn move the sentence toward “Illumination.” The text extends itself, indeed comes into existence, by posing itself questions. These questions, furthermore, correspond to the “sich maßgebende äußere Einflüsse” of the following passage from *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*.

. . . sich maßgebende äußere Einflüsse so änderten, daß sie die noch überlebende Substanz zu immer größeren Ablenkungen vom ursprünglichen Lebensweg und zu immer komplizierteren Umwegen bis zur Erreichung des Todeszieles nötigten. Diese Umwege zum Tode, von den konservativen Trieben getreulich festgehalten, böten uns heute das Bild der Lebenserscheinungen.¹⁴

The text is the living substance, which is prevented from reaching its end by the posing of questions, answers to which delay its conclusion. The story is finished not when the narrator answers all his questions, but when he decides not to ask any more.

In its swerving the text comes into existence. Looked at differently, the text by meandering takes up and incorporates the many texts I have noted: parables, documents, the book on the Tower of Babel, etc. These discrete texts, like grains of sand entering an oyster, are the irritants that bring into existence the pearl of the text. The story is an effort to surround and explain (perhaps render harmless, at least locate according to the Kantian mental concepts) discrete experience.

¹⁴ Freud, pp. 40-41.

By reading “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” in various metaphorical ways, I have assumed the Kafka text to be parable, an assumption I admitted at the outset to be provisional. But the intention is well “motivated.” As we saw at the beginning, the narrator escapes circumscription, and we approach the text both to contain him and to contain the text. Our own hermeneutic expedition thus becomes a pearl-making event. Where the narrator closes gaps in his semantic horizons, the reader continuously opens more. He makes the text disjoint in order to cement its fragments, and thus preserves his interpretative act by inventing swerves from any univalent reading. The story may be a parable for the critical process in its twofold enactment of building: the building of the wall and the narrator’s attempt at the building of an explanation.

I have discussed the story/text in terms of interpretative process, as if talk about the process itself would give the discussion priority over other readings—for example Clement Greenberg’s interpretation of the story as a metaphor for contemporary Judaism. Hence our very career as critics, not just of one text, but of all the texts we encounter, is a realization of the ground where Eros and Thanatos meet. We admit, and survive upon, the multiplicity of interpretations that bring our own reflections into being as commentary. But we all secretly strive for the metacomment that will kill off debate by circumscribing everything. Every act of inclusion like our own, however, is presumptuous. Our admission of the validity of Greenberg’s approach no more contains his article than our discussion of “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” silences the story’s appeal to be reread.

In Aphorism 94, Kafka names our two “life” tasks as critics: “Deinen Kreis immer mehr einschränken und immer wieder nachprüfen, ob du dich nicht irgendwo außerhalb deines Kreises versteckt hältst.”¹⁵

University of California, Berkeley

¹⁵ *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen*, p. 51.