Contents

Preface, ix

Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson
Introduction: The Territory of Marxism, 1

I

Rethinking the Crisis in Marxism

Cornel West
Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression, 17
Discussion, 30

Stuart Hall
The Toad in the Garden: Thatcherism among the Theorists, 35
Discussion, 58

Henri Lefebvre
Toward a Leftist Cultural Politics: Remarks Occasioned by the Centenary of Marx’s Death, 75

Chantal Mouffe
Hegemony and New Political Subjects: Toward a New Concept of Democracy, 89
Discussion, 102

Catharine A. MacKinnon
Desire and Power: A Feminist Perspective, 105
Discussion, 117

Paul Patton
Marxism and Beyond: Strategies of Reterritorialization, 123
Discussion, 137

A. Belden Fields
In Defense of Political Economy and Systemic Analysis: A Critique of Prevailing Theoretical Approaches to the New Social Movements, 141

II

Toward a Contemporary Marxism

Étienne Balibar
The Vacillation of Ideology, 159

Oskar Negt
What Is a Revival of Marxism and Why Do We Need One Today?: Centennial Lecture Commemorating the Death of Karl Marx, 211

Gajo Petrović
Philosophy and Revolution: Twenty Sheaves of Questions, 235
Fredric Jameson

Cognitive Mapping

Without a conception of the social totality (and the possibility of transforming a whole social system), no properly socialist politics is possible. It involves trying to imagine how a society without hierarchy, a society that has also repudiated the economic mechanisms of the market, can possibly cohere.
the great historical merit of the work of Darko Suvin to repeatedly insist on a more contemporary formulation of this aesthetic value, in the suggestive slogan of the cognitive, which I have made my own today. Behind Suvin, of course, there stands the immense, yet now partially institutionalized and refuted, example of Brecht himself, to whom cognitive aesthetic in our time must necessarily pay homage. And perhaps it is no longer the theater but the poetry of Brecht that is for us still the irresistible demonstration that cognitive art need not raise any of the old fears about the contamination of the aesthetic by propaganda or the instrumentalization of cultural play and production by the message or the extraparadigmatic (but practical) impulse. Brecht's is a poetry of thinking and reflection; yet no one who has been stunned by the sculptural density of Brecht's language, by the stark simplicity with which a contemplative distance from historical events is here powerfully condensed into the ancient forms of folk wisdom and the proverb, in sentences as compact as peasants' wooden spoons and bowls, will any longer question the proposition that in his poetry at least—so exceptionally in the whole history of contemporary culture—the cognitive becomes in and of itself the immediate source of profound aesthetic delight.

I mention Brecht to forestall yet another misunderstanding, that it will in any sense be a question here of the return to some older aesthetic, even that of Brecht. And this is perhaps the moment to warn you that I tend to use the charged word "representation" in a different way than it has consistently been used in poststructuralist or post-Marxist theory: namely, as the synonym of some bad ideological and organic realism or mirage of realistic unification. For me "representation" is, rather, the synonym of "figuration" itself, irrespective of the latter's historical and ideological form. I assume, therefore, in what follows, that all forms of aesthetic production consist in one way or another in the struggle with and for representation—whether they are perspectival or trompe l'oeil illusions or the most reflexive and diacritical, iconoclastic or form-breaking modernisms. So, at least in my language, the call for new kinds of representation is not meant reflexive and diacritical, iconoclastic or form-breaking modernisms. So, at least in my language, the call for new kinds of representation is not meant.

Fredric Jameson
I have tried to describe the first kind of space of classical or market capitalism in terms of a logic of the grid—a reorganization of some older sacred and heterogeneous space into geometrical and Cartesian homogeneity, a space of infinite equivalence and extension of which you can find a kind of dramatic or emblematic shorthand representation in Foucault's book on prisons. The example, however, requires the warning that a Marxian view of such space grounds it in Taylorization and the labor process rather than in that shadowy and mythical Foucault entity called "prison.

The emergence of this kind of space will probably cut across both conceptual problems of figuration so acute as those we will confront in the later stages of capitalism, since here, for the moment, we witness that familiar process long generally associated with the Enlightenment, namely, the desacralization of the world, the decoding and secularization of the older sacred and heterogeneous space of the individual to the transcendence, the slow colonization of use value by exchange value, the "realistic" demystification of the older kinds of transcendent narratives in novels like Don Quixote, the standardization of both subject and object, the denaturalization of desire and its ultimate displacement by commodity fetishism or, in other words, "success," and so on.

The problems of figuration that concern us will only become visible in the next stage, the passage from market to monopoly capital, or what Lenin called the "stage of imperialism," and they may be conveyed by way of a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience. Too rapidly we can say that, while in older societies and perhaps even in the early stages of market capital, the immediate and limited experience of individuals is still able to encompass and coincide with the true economic and social form that governs that experience, in the next moment these two levels drift ever further apart and really begin to constitute themselves into that opposition the classical dialectic describes as Wesen und Erscheinung, essence and appearance, structure and lived experience.

In this point the phenomenological experience of the individual subject—traditionally, the supreme raw materials of the work of art—becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed-camera view of a certain section of London or the countryside or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes shape. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people.

There comes into being, then, a situation in which we can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then except for individual experience. It is evident that this new situation poses tremendous and crippling problems for a work of art; and I have argued that it is as an attempt to square this circle and to invent new and elaborate formal strategies for overcoming this dilemma that modernism or, perhaps better, the various modernisms as such emerge, in forms that inscribe in the syntax of the absent global colonial system on the very syntax of poetic language itself,
a new play of absence and presence that at its most simplified will be haunted by the erotic and be tattooed with foreign place names, and at its most intense will involve the invention of remarkable new languages and forms. At this point I want to introduce another concept that is basic to my argument, that I call the "play of figuration." This I take as an allegorical concept that supposes the obvious, namely, that these new and enormous global realities are inaccessible to any individual subject or consciousness—not even to Hegel, let alone Cecil Rhodes or Queen Victoria—which is to say that those fundamental realities are somehow ultimately kempt, reticent, or, to use the Althusserian phrase, that absent cause, one that can never emerge into the presence of perception. Yet this absent cause can find figures through which to express itself in distorted and symbolic ways: indeed, one of our basic tasks as critics of the literature is to track down and make conceptually available the ultimate realities and experiences designated by those figures, which the reading mind inevitably tends to reify and to read as primary contents in their own right. Since we have evoked the modernist moment and its relationship to the great new global colonial network, I will give a fairly simple but specialized example of a kind of figure specific to this historical situation. Everyone knows how, toward the end of the nineteenth century, a wide range of writers began to invent forms to express what I will call "monadic relativism." In Gide and Conrad, in Fernando Pessoa, in Pirandello, in Ford, and to a lesser extent in Henry James, even very obliquely in Proust, what we begin to see is the sense that each consciousness is a closed world, so that a representation of the social totality now must take the (impossible) form of a coexistence of those sealed subjective worlds and their peculiar interaction, which is in reality a passage of ships in the night, a centrifugal movement of lines and planes that can never intersect, that emerges from this new formal practice is called "irony"; and its philosophical ideology often takes the form of a vulgar appropriation of Einstein's theory of relativity. In this context, what I want to suggest is that these forms, whose content is generally that of privatized middle-class life, nonetheless stand as symptoms and distorted expressions even of middle-class lived experience by this strange new global relativity of the colonial network. The one is then the figure, however deformed and symbolically rewritten, of the latter; and I take it that this figural process is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed. There are, of course, many other features of this space one would ideally want to comment on—specifically, Lefebvre's concept of abstract space as what is simply unrepresentable or, to use the Althusserian phrase, are something like an archaic remains of earlier stages in the development of this mode of production.

At this point I realize that the persuasiveness of my demonstration depends on your having some fairly vivid perceptual sense of what is unique and original in postmodernist space—something I have been trying to convey in my course, for which it is more difficult here to substitute a shortcut. Briefly, I want to suggest that the new space involves the suppression of distance (in the sense of Benjamin's aura) and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places, to the point where the postmodern body—whether wandering through a postmodern hotel, locked into a group of strangers by means of headphones, or undergoing the multiple shocks of the Holocaust) is to be understood not simply as an experience of bombardments of the Vietnam War as Michael Herr conveys it, but as something that is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed. There are, of course, many other features of this space one would ideally want to comment on—specifically, Lefebvre's concept of abstract space as what is simply unrepresentable or, to use the Althusserian phrase, are something like an archaic remains of earlier stages in the development of this mode of production.

Let me here insert an illustration, in the form of a brief account of a book that is, I think, not known to many of you but in my opinion of the greatest importance and suggestiveness for problems of space and politics. The book is nonfiction, a historical narrative of the single most significant political experience of the American 1960s: Detroit. I Do Mind Dying, by Marvin Surkin and Dan Georgakas. (I think we have now come to the point of saying that aesthetic, formal, and narrative sophistication not only extends beyond the conventional meaning of "art" but is now a matter of political praxis, if you will. I mention this book not simply because of its ostensible subject, but because it is a useful guiding thread. You should understand that I take such spatial peculiarities of postmodernism as symptoms and expressions of a new and historically unique condition: something I have been trying to convey throughout my course, but for which it is more difficult here to substitute a shortcut. Briefly, I want to suggest that the new space involves the suppression of distance (in the sense of Benjamin's aura) and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places, to the point where the postmodern body—whether wandering through a postmodern hotel, locked into a group of strangers by means of headphones, or undergoing the multiple shocks of the Holocaust) is to be understood not simply as an experience of bombardments of the Vietnam War as Michael Herr conveys it, but as something that is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed. There are, of course, many other features of this space one would ideally want to comment on—specifically, Lefebvre's concept of abstract space as what is simply unrepresentable or, to use the Althusserian phrase, are something like an archaic remains of earlier stages in the development of this mode of production.

At this point I realize that the persuasiveness of my demonstration depends on your having some fairly vivid perceptual sense of what is unique and original in postmodernist space—something I have been trying to convey in my course, for which it is more difficult here to substitute a shortcut. Briefly, I want to suggest that the new space involves the suppression of distance (in the sense of Benjamin's aura) and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places, to the point where the postmodern body—whether wandering through a postmodern hotel, locked into a group of strangers by means of headphones, or undergoing the multiple shocks of the Holocaust) is to be understood not simply as an experience of bombardments of the Vietnam War as Michael Herr conveys it, but as something that is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed. There are, of course, many other features of this space one would ideally want to comment on—specifically, Lefebvre's concept of abstract space as what is simply unrepresentable or, to use the Althusserian phrase, are something like an archaic remains of earlier stages in the development of this mode of production.

At this point I realize that the persuasiveness of my demonstration depends on your having some fairly vivid perceptual sense of what is unique and original in postmodernist space—something I have been trying to convey in my course, for which it is more difficult here to substitute a shortcut. Briefly, I want to suggest that the new space involves the suppression of distance (in the sense of Benjamin's aura) and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places, to the point where the postmodern body—whether wandering through a postmodern hotel, locked into a group of strangers by means of headphones, or undergoing the multiple shocks of the Holocaust) is to be understood not simply as an experience of bombardments of the Vietnam War as Michael Herr conveys it, but as something that is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers and intervening mediations have been removed. There are, of course, many other features of this space one would ideally want to comment on—specifically, Lefebvre's concept of abstract space as what is simply unrepresentable or, to use the Althusserian phrase, are something like an archaic remains of earlier stages in the development of this mode of production.
Yet it is equally clear—and far clearer in virtual triumphs of this kind than in the earlier stages of neighborhood politics—that such strategy is bound and shackled to the city form itself. Indeed, one of the enormous strengths of the superstate and its federal constitution lies in the evident discontinuities between city, state, and federal power: if you cannot make socialism in one country, how much more densely, then, are the prospects for socialism in one city in the United States today? Indeed, our foreign visitors may not be aware that there exist in this country four or five socialist communes, near one of which, in Santa Cruz, California, I lived until recently. But none would want to belittle those local successes, but it seems probable that few of us think of them as the first decisive step toward the transition to socialism.

If you cannot build socialism in one city, then suppose you conquer a whole series of large key urban centers in succession. This is what the leadership of Black Revolutionary Workers in Detroit did recently; no one would want to belittle these local successes, but it seems probable that few of us think of them as the first decisive step toward the transition to socialism.

So it was logical for the League to make a film of their experience, of their experiment of that rich political decade in the United States came to a sadly undramatic end. I do not want to say that it left no traces behind, since a number of local gains remain, and in any case every rich political experiment contains something of a synthesis between Althusser and Kevin Lynch—a formula that, to be sure, does not tell you much unless you know that Lynch is the author of a classic work, The Image of the City, which in its turn spawned the whole low-level subdiscipline that today takes the phrase "cognitive mapping" as its own designation. Lynch's problematic remains locked within the limits of phenomenology, and his book can no doubt be subjected to many criticisms on its own terms (not the least of which is the absence of any conception of political agency or historical process). My use of the book will be emblematic, since the mental map of city space explored by Lynch can be extrapolated to that mental map of the social and global totality we all carry around in our heads in variously garbled forms. Drawing on the downtowns of Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles, in a series of interviews and questionnaires in which subjects we asked to draw their own cognitive maps of these city contexts from memory, Lynch suggests that urban alienation is directly proportional to the mental unmappability of local cityscapes. A city like Boston, then, with its monumental perspectives, its markers and monuments, its combination of grand but simple spatial forms, including dramatic boundaries such as the Charles River, not only allows people to have, in their imaginations, a generally successful and continuous location to the rest of the city, but in addition gives them something of the freedom and aesthetic gratification of traditional city form.

But I have always been struck by the way in which Lynch's conception of city experience—the dialectic between the here and now of immediate perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality—presents something like a spatial analogue of Althusser's great formulation of ideology itself, as "the imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence." Whatever its defects and problems, this positive conception of ideology as a necessary function in any form of social life has the great merit of stressing the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of social structures in which he or she is situated, a gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience; but this ideology, as such, attempts to span or coordinate, to map, by means of conscious and unconscious representations. The conception of cognitive mapping proposed here therefore involves an extrapolation of Lynch's spatial mapping from the realm of social structure, that is to say, in our historical moment, to the totality of class relations on a global (or should I say multinational) scale. The secondary premise is also maintained, namely, that the incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience. It follows that an aesthetic of cognitive mapping in this sense is an integral part of any socialist political project. In what has preceded I have infringed so many of the taboos and shibboleths of a faddish post-Marxism that it becomes necessary to discuss them more openly and directly before proceeding. They include the proposition that class no longer exists (a proposition that might be clarified by the simple distinction between class as an element in small-scale models of...
"expressive causality," namely, the collapsing of two semiautonomous (or, between a philosophical conception of totality and a political practice of... the treadmill of failures and capitulations. Because if capital does not... absolute barriers and limits to social changes and transformations under... fundamental laws of this world, who believes that these do not set... absolute barriers and limits to social changes and transformations under...

The conception of capital is admittedly a totalizing or systemic conception: no one has ever seen or met the thing itself; it is a philosophy of scientific reduction (and it should be obvious that scientific thinking always reduces the multiplicity of the real to a small-scale model) or the mark of an imaginary and ideological vision. But let us be serious: anyone who believes that the profit motive and the logic of capital accumulation are not the fundamental laws of this world, who believes that these do not set absolute barriers and limits to social changes and transformations undertaken in it—such a person is living in an alternative universe; or, to put it more politely, in this universe such a person—assuming he or she is progressive—is doomed to social democracy, with its now abundantly documented treadmill of failures and capitulations. Because if capital does not

society, class consciousness as a cultural event, and class analysis as a mental operation); the idea that this society is no longer motored by production but rather reproduction (including science and technology)—an idea that, in the midst of a virtually completely built environment, one is tempted to... the notion of community or the collective. Some of the dilemmas are very familiar, such as the contradiction between self-management on the local level and planning on the global level; or the problems raised by the abolition of the market, not to mention the abolition of the commodity form itself. I have found even more stimulating and problematical the following propositions about the very nature of society itself: it has been affirmed that, with one signal exception (capitalism itself, which is organized around an economic mechanism), there has never existed a cohesive form of human society that was not based on some form of transcendence or religion. Without brute force, which is never but a momentary solution, people cannot in this vein be asked to live cooperatively and harmoniously to the omnipresent desires of the id without some appeal to religious belief or transcendental values, something absolutely incompatible with any conceivable socialist society. The result is that these last achieve their own momentary coherence only under seige circumstances, in the wartime enthusiasm and group effort provoked by the great blockades. In other words, without the nontranscendental economic mechanism of capital, all appeals to moral incentives (as in Che) or to the primacy of the political (as in Maoism) must fatally exhaust themselves in a brief time, leaving only the twin alternatives of a return to capitalism or the construction of this or that modern form of "oriental despotism." You are certainly welcome to believe, as this cognizance, provided you understand that in such a case any socialist politics is strictly a mirage and a waste of time, which one might better spend adjusting and reforming an eternal capitalist landscape as far as the eye can see.

In reality this dilemma is, to my mind, the most urgent task that confronts Marxism today. I have said before that the so-called crisis in Marxism is not a crisis in Marxist science, which has never been richer, but rather a crisis in Marxist ideology. If ideology—to give it a somewhat different definition—is a vision of the future that grips the masses, we have to admit that we are in a few ongoing collective experiments, such as those in Cuba and in Yugoslavia, no Marxist or Socialist party or movement anywhere has the slightest conception of what socialism or communism as a social system ought to be and can be expected to look like. That vision will not be provided by the economic mechanism, although the Marxist economists and theorists have always been based ultimately on gender hierarchy and on the building block of the family unit, which makes it clear that this is the true juncture between a feminist problematic and a Marxist one—not an antagonistic juncture, but the moment at which the feminist project and the Marxist and socialist project meet and face the same dilemma: how to imagine Utopia...
Returning to the beginning of this lengthy excursus, it seems unlikely that anyone who repudiates the concept of totality can have anything useful to say to us on this matter, since for such persons it is clear that the totalizing vision of socialism will not compute and is a false problem within the random and undecidable world of microgroups. Or perhaps another possibility suggests itself, namely, that our dissatisfaction with the concept of totality is not a thought in its own right but rather a significant symptom, a function of the increasing difficulties in thinking of such a set of interrelationships in a complicated society. This would seem, at least, to be the implication of the remark of the Team X architect Aldo van Eyck, when, in 1966, he issued his version of the death of modernism thesis: “We know nothing of vast multiplicity—we cannot come to terms with it—not as architects or planners or anybody else.” To which he added, and the sequel can easily be extrapolated from architecture to social change itself: “But if society has no form—how can architects build its counterform?”

You will be relieved to know that at this point we can return both to my own conclusion and to the problem of aesthetic representation and cognitive mapping, which was the pretext of this essay. The project of cognitive mapping obviously stands or falls with the conception of some (unrepresentable, imaginary) global social totality that was to have been mapped. I have spoken of form and content, and this final distinction will allow me at least to say something about an aesthetic, of which I have observed that I am, myself, absolutely incapable of guessing or imagining its form. That postmodernism gives us hints and examples of such cognitive mapping on the level of content is, I believe, demonstrable.

I have spoken elsewhere of the turn toward a thematics of mechanical reproduction, of the way in which the autoreferentiality of much of postmodernist art takes the form of a play with reproductive technology—film, tapes, video, computers, and the like—which is, to my mind, a degraded figure of the great multinational space that remains to be cognitively mapped. Fully as striking on another level is the omnipresence of the theme of paranoia as it expresses itself in a seemingly inexhaustible production of conspiracy plots of the most elaborate kinds. Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age. It is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content.

Achieved cognitive mapping will be a matter of form, and I hope I have shown how it will be an integral part of a socialist politics, although its own possibility may well be dependent on some prior political opening, which its task would then be to enlarge culturally. Still, even if we cannot imagine the productions of such an aesthetic, there may, nonetheless, as with the very idea of Utopia itself, be something positive in the attempt to keep alive the possibility of imagining such a thing.

Notes


I would like to say, also for the record, that I agree with your refusal to equate totality with totalitarianism. I want to remind you that the people of the strange origins of the connotations of the word "totalitarianism" were propagated by the Congress of Cultural Freedom, which was associated with such names as Stephen Spender and Irving Kristol and with journals funded by the CIA. This is admittedly not a conclusive argument; even people funded by the CIA can come up with intelligent ideas now and then. But it should make us wary of such an equation. So I think your rebuttal is well taken and not at all irresponsible.

To my question, Jameson has a major problem with this idea of postmodernism, even though your elaboration of it is more sophisticated than...
different culture. By the same token, I trust that people who have some discursive stake in other terms, such as totality or its refusal, do not take my remarks on the subject too narrowly. For example, I consider the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau an extremely important contribution to thinking about a future socialist politics. I think one has to avoid fighting over empty slogans.

**Comment (Cornel West)**

The question of totality signals an important theoretical struggle with practical implications. I'm not so sure that the differences between Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, and a host of others can be so easily reconciled. If we continue to formulate the question in the way that conception of totality that you invoke ultimately leads toward a Leninistic or Leninist (though that is a question). If we opt for the position that Mouffe, Laclau, Aronowitz, critical of a particular conception of totality. It is important to remember that hereby is not a question of substituting a flat, dispersive politics. Nobody here has defended a reactionary enabling ones; they are critiques of a totality that is solely a regulative ideal we never achieve, never reach. And if that is the case, I really don't see the kind of reconciliation that you are talking about. I think you were very comradely in your ritualistic sense, but these are significant differences and tendencies within the Left, and I didn't want to end the discussion with a vague Hegelian reconciliation of things when what I see is very significant and healthy struggle.

**Jameson**

I don't understand how the politics I am proposing is repressive, since I don't think I have yet even proposed a politics. Any more than I have really proposed an aesthetics. Both of those seem to be all in the future. Let me try to respond by expanding on the distinction that came up in the second question, the notion of tactics versus strategy. It is not a question of substituting a both ridiculous and self-defeating. The question is how to think those local struggles, called, for want of a better word, socialism. Why must these two things go together? Because without some notion of a total transformation of society and without the sense that the immediate project is a figure for that total transformation, so that everybody has a stake in that particular struggle, the success of any local struggle is doomed, limited to reform. And then it will lose its impetus, as any number of issue local level is doomed to the sterility of sectarian politics. I am trying to suggest that a way of speaking, but also as a figure for an entire systemic transformation. And I don't see how anything substantial can be achieved without that kind of dual thinking at every moment in all of those struggles.

---

**Andrew Ross**

**The New Sentence and the Commodity Form: Recent American Writing**

The proposition that language is not about the world but is in the world itself has had as many serious political and epistemological ramifications in recent years as Marx's famous thesis on Feuerbach, which both resembles and, perhaps, supersedes. Yet the problem of the intellectual's sweaty anxiety about co-option persists: How do we tell the real thing from its simulation? The point is, there is no "real thing." Writers have been saying it, and Marxism will have to speak to it.

We imagine that there is a gap between the world of our private fantasies & the possibilities of meaningful action so it becomes easy to talk & talk on what is lacking, to discuss on end, & yet feel impotent. "What's to do." But this gap is a measure not so much of desires or depression or impotence but of ourselves. It has been the continual failure of Marxist aesthetics to insist that this gap is simply another illusion part of our commodity lives. It is at the root of our collectivity.

Charles Bernstein

"Three or Four Things I Know about Him"

The train ceaselessly reinvents the station.

Barrett Watten

1-10

Of all the "casualties" sustained by American writing in the volatile cross fire of political imperatives that prevailed in the thirties, George Oppen's case is, perhaps, the most exemplary. Barely though successfully launched as a poet in New York, and too much of a formalist to stop writing in 1932, and dropped out of literary circles for over twenty-five years, at first organizing the unemployed and then living in itinerant "exile" in California and Mexico. In her autobiography, his wife, Mary, describes their return from a trip to France as "the momentous winter of 1932... when we began to see and understand what was happening." For Oppen himself, forty-five years later, the imperative of that year was still painfully clear (though italicized, which is to say meditated): "we wanted to know if we were any good / out there" ("Disasters," Primitive). Here is the poet on trial again, and in Oppen's case somehow called on to explain where the politically irresponsible, like Pound, had long since been pardoned for their "aesthetic" crimes. Indeed, Oppen...