Following Althusser
Preface to the Korean Translation of Althusser and His Contemporaries

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To see one's book translated into a foreign language, any foreign language, is an honor. For me, however, to see *Althusser and His Contemporaries* translated into Korean is something more than an honor. In the early 1980s, I met a small group of Korean students who had fled the severe repression that followed the crushing of the Kwang-Ju revolt in May 1980 and had managed to find their way to Los Angeles's large Korean community. Life was not easy for them, financially or culturally, but Los Angeles with its relatively large and diverse community of political exiles from all over the world (Mexico, Argentina, Chile and El Salvador; Palestine, Iran and Lebanon; The Philippines and South Africa) offered not only refuge, but also solidarity and an intellectual/political community. As they gradually returned, one by one, to Korea only later to end up back in Los Angeles, I followed the progress of the popular movements of students and workers and the flowering of Marxist theory that accompanied them, including an enthusiastic interest in the work of Althusser. To be able to speak to, and with, a Korean audience about Althusser is a way of returning to that time of struggle in theory and practice, not out of nostalgia, but to gather the resources to resist and overcome the powerful forces of reaction at work in the present.

The proper name "Althusser" today designates, in addition to the individual named Louis Althusser who was born in 1918 and died in 1990, a body of work (in

English a "corpus"—a body—and in French an *oeuvre*—a work) and the principles of inclusion and exclusion that guide the selection of texts we call "Althusserian." As Foucault pointed out in "What is an Author," the name of the author is not simply one proper name among others: it also serves as a guarantee, albeit a fictitious guarantee, of the unity and integrity of the body of work we attribute to the author.[1] In this sense, the personal identity of the author, an identity that persists over time, is itself underwritten by the legal concept of the person responsible both causally and morally for the actions assigned to him, a concept that according to Foucault is anterior to the notion of author as proprietor. In either case, the notion of author acts as a kind of substrate that allows us to assert a uniquely intimate relation between works written by an individual from childhood (when the author's work is relegated to the category of juvenilia) to old age, even if such works are judged to be the products of the author's senescence, or his or her "deliria." These categories introduce divisions into an oeuvre like Althusser's whose function is to isolate the characteristics of the work of the author's maturity, situated between the "not-yet" and the "no longer," or, as François Matheron put it, between Althusser before Althusser and Althusser after Althusser.[2] In fact, Althusser poses an unusually complicated challenge for any attempt to establish a chronology of his theoretical development. Where exactly can we find the Althusser in relation to whom we speak of a before and an after? What if we discover that the divisions internal to his work are not chronological, corresponding to the legal categories of the age of minority, the age of majority and a declaration of *non compos mentis* for reasons of senility, but contemporaneous at every moment of his work, and, further, that these divisions are not stable, but, on the contrary, exhibit frequent variation in number and intensity? These are not easy questions to answer, even, or perhaps especially, for those familiar with Althusser's texts.

Moreover, as Foucault also reminds us, even what we call the "complete writings" or "collected works" of an author does not include everything he or she has written. I refer not simply to the extreme case of Nietzsche's laundry bill that he cites, but even to such texts as letters. Spinoza's *Opera Posthuma* as published in 1677, following his death, included unfinished works from both his early (the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*) and final (the *Tractatus Politicus*) periods, as well as 74 letters by both Spinoza and a number of correspondents. We know that an undetermined number of letters were destroyed on the grounds that they had no relation to his philosophical project and therefore did not merit a place in his corpus, but there exists no record of the missing letters: we do not know the dates of their composition, nor to whom or in what language they were written. Without however any sense of what they contained, we cannot be sure whether today we would agree with the judgment of Spinoza's seventeenth century editors.

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[1] Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce qu'une auteur," *Dits et Ecrits*, Tome I, texte °69
http://1libertaire.free.fr/MFoucault349.htm

[2] Louis Althusser, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques,* vol. I, ed. F. Matheron, STOCK/IMEC, Paris, 1994, 13.

The case of Althusser presents no such problem. The difficulty for us is not the scarcity of materials, but their overabundance and this very excess confers an unusual importance and difficulty in determining what we mean by "Althusser's oeuvre." It certainly includes everything he "signed," or perhaps "signed for," whether in a literal or legal sense, the texts he voluntarily submitted for publication and which, with very few exceptions, appeared under his name. Further, while posthumous publication does not often alter our sense of a philosopher's project and orientation, which typically remain tied to the texts published in his or her lifetime, in the case of Althusser, the polemics it provoked and its influence on contemporary thought render him, as in so many things, an exception. Before the still ongoing project of posthumous publication had begun, Althusser's oeuvre was widely read as organized around the central opposition or tension between structure and conjuncture, to cite Balibar's formulation;[3] after his death, a mass of material, above all a series of texts devoted to an exposition of the notion of aleatory materialism written after 1980, fundamentally complicated the reception of Althusser's oeuvre, calling into question the idea that it could be understood as organized, however tendentially, around a single opposition. More recently, the publication of a number of longer texts described by Althusser himself as belonging to a genre foreign to his work prior to 1968: the manual aimed at workers and the PCF rank and file (notably *Philosophy for Non-Philosophers*, *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy,* and *Que Faire*), together with work of extraordinary philosophical and political interest (*Machiavelli and U*s, *Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences,* and *Deux Cours sur Rousseau)*, has only further complicated any attempt to define what we mean by the term "Althusserian." And while it is necessary to acknowledge, and more importantly to understand, the heterogeneity of his project, a heterogeneity that resembles in certain ways the overdetermined contradiction he described at the beginning of his adventure, there remain serious obstacles to the task of establishing the specificity of the forces of which his work is composed and the precise points at which they enter into opposition and conflict.

We might take as a test case an apparently insignificant episode involving two of Althusser's texts, neither of which has received much attention: the two texts associated with the "Tbilisi affair."[4] Both were written in 1976, but one was first published in German translation in 1977, with his permission, while the original French version of the other was published in 1983 against his wishes. The question of whether either essay, including the text he had decided not to publish, legitimately belong to his oeuvre is not easy to answer and not simply because of the legal issues involved. Althusser wrote "Dr. Freud's Discovery," in 1976 for an international symposium on the unconscious to be held in Tbilisi, Georgia. While he submitted it to Leon Chertok, who was responsible for the French component of the symposium, he also sent copies to a number of friends, including Michel Pêcheux and Elisabeth Roudinesco. With the exception of Chertok

[3] Etienne Balibar, "Althusser's Object," *Social Text*, No. 39 (Summer, 1994), 157-188.
[4] Louis Althusser*, Ecrits sur la psychanalyse: Freud et Lacan*. Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1993, 187-245.

himself, who approved of Althusser's critique of Lacan, his interlocutors responded with detailed and profoundly negative critiques, directed above all at Althusser's crude and often inaccurate presentation of Freud. In addition, Pêcheux and Roudinesco worried that the effects of his brief critique of Lacan, as it was formulated in the essay, combined with his simplistic presentation of Freud, would be read as an endorsement of the regressive, biologistic tendencies in psychoanalysis. Althusser responded to these reactions by withdrawing the essay and replacing it with "On Marx and Freud," a text very different in every way from the first. Chertok, probably hoping to use Althusser's critique of Lacan for his own purposes, ignored Althusser's decision and included "Dr. Freud," rather than the later essay, in the version of the conference proceedings published in a special issue of the *Revue de medicine psychosomatique* in 1983, which appeared the next year in book form.[5]

This provoked Althusser to his first public statement since 1980. In a letter of protest published in *Le Monde* in 1984 he described "Dr. Freud" as an "inadequate rough draft, hastily written and unpublishable," a text he had expressly withdrawn from consideration because regarded it as a failed effort to describe what in psychoanalysis represents an attempt to develop Freud's discovery, as opposed to a regression to pre-Freudian positions.[6] But the essay was not merely "inadequate:" what proved so shocking to the friends whose evaluation he had solicited was the fact that it is difficult to reconcile "Dr. Freud" with anything else that Althusser had written on psychoanalysis and, more importantly, with anything he had written for publication. Nor were they wrong: it would be difficult to attribute this text to Althusser at all, were it not for the brief discussion of Lacan, where something of Althusser, something properly "Althusserian," certain ideas, as well as his style, which appear for a moment only to vanish into the fog of the remainder of the essay. The stark discrepancy between two segments of the same text, and the predominance of an Althusser unfamiliar to his readers is striking. It is tempting (and to some extent valid) to attribute the emergence of this "unalthusserian" Althusser to his ever worsening mental disorder. But the entire "Tbilisi affair," that is, the composition of "Dr. Freud," the reaction of colleagues and friends, his reaction to their reaction and the writing of a new essay, offers a view of Althusser "behind the scenes." We see Althusser at work, that is, his manner of thinking and writing, or more precisely of thinking through his writing. He wrote not to express already existing ideas, but to discover new ideas, ideas necessary but still lacking, to be discovered in and through the writing that produces them, something akin to what Spinoza called the idea of the idea. To make discoveries through the process of writing, however, is to confront the ever-present risk of failing to produce the necessary idea, or of mistaking, in the act of discovery, the false for the true or the inadequate for the adequate idea, or the contrary:

[5] Louis Althusser, La découverte du docteur Freud [The discovery of Dr. Freud]. *Revue de Médecine Psychosomatique et de Psychologie Médicale,* 25(2), 81-97.

[6] Althusser*, Ecrits sur la psychanalyse,* 190.

missing what the writing itself has produced. These are risks that no method or logic of discovery can avoid, they are the risks that must be taken to produce and discover what Machiavelli called *"la verità effetuale,"* not simply a truth, but an effectual and effective truth, a truth that exists in the effects it produces. Althusser sometimes marked the submission of a text for publication with the phrase "*alea jacta est,"* (attributed to Caesar, meaning "the die is cast," signifying that one has "past the point of no return" by crossing the Rubicon) in his letters to friends. His writings were experiments and tests: tests of the solidity and durability of his theory, but also tests of the dominant ideas and concepts to determine the strength of their defenses and locate their points of vulnerability. The Tbilisi affair, shaped by the effects of fortune in Machiavelli's sense, allows us to see why Althusser wrote constantly, stopping only to enter into conversations whose effect was to stimulate more writing: he was even capable of writing about his silences, experiencing and overcoming them at the same time.

He left behind an enormous repository of experiments and accounts of the risks he took with concepts and with the words in which he formulated them, of which very few were published during his lifetime. The substantial and surprisingly diverse collection of notes, manuscripts based on his courses (covering such figures as Descartes, Hobbes, Bossuet, Locke, Spinoza, Freud, Lacan, among many others), finished and unfinished essays and book projects, together with thousands of letters, collected in the Althusser archive at the IMEC has altered our understanding of Althusser's corpus, but not simply because this (still growing) collection adds to its diversity or breadth. More importantly, offers a privileged view both of the philosophical reference points and conjunctural imperatives that formed the silent and invisible backdrop to his most familiar works, and of the laboratory of concepts and the theoretical instruments with which he constructed or isolated them. It is above all in this collection of unfinished and unpublished (and often unpublishable) materials that we can read the record of his "errors," keeping in mind Althusser's high regard for the work of Canguilhem for whom error had a reality and history finally inseparable from the truths produced by a given science. We find both the failed or abortive experiments that Althusser abandoned, and the unfinished but not necessarily unfinishable experiments set aside because, as in physics today, the required instruments have yet to be designed or manufactured. And there is no doubt that, just as political practice consists of experiments that yield a knowledge of history, so philosophical experiments or interventions yield a knowledge of the concepts that constitute this knowledge. A knowledge of Althusser's errors and failures (which compels us to distinguish between projects that reached an objective impasse and those whose abandonment was determined by the rhythms of his affective life) is necessary to an adequate understanding of what in his work is true.

His writing on aleatory materialism is particularly instructive in this regard. The text given the name "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter" was written after the tragic events of 1980 and published posthumously in the form of

selections from a longer manuscript made by François Matheron. It was almost certainly abandoned by Althusser because of his worsening mental and physical condition, a fact that compels us, his readers, or those of us among his readers who continue on the path that he opened up, to determine whether this admittedly composite text contains something new, and if so whether its theses have been (or can be) tested. Its symptomatic lapses, its perversely inaccurate reading of Spinoza, but perhaps most of all the simultaneous hyperbolization and simplification of the concepts first proposed in the work of the early sixties (and perhaps the 1959 book on Montesquieu), all call attention to the concepts he appears to have set out at the end of his life to revise: the overdetermined accumulation of overdetermined contradictions, the notions of encounter, *enchevêtrement*, ruptural unity, etc. Borrowing from Epicurus and Lucretius. Althusser substituted images for what he had earlier proposed as concepts: atoms raining through the void, the swerve that in turn allows certain atoms to become hooked together for an indefinite time. I argued in *Althusser and his Contemporaries* that the aleatory materialism of the late Althusser served in part (and at a time when the revolutionary upsurge of 1968-1975 had given way to a period of counter-revolution whose end was nowhere in sight) to guarantee that capitalism whose origins lay in an encounter "that might not have happened" was destined to end, not in its completion and transformation, not even in revolution, but in an unforeseeable collision or perhaps a slow degradation of the forces that bound its disparate elements until a moment of collapse. But it also represented a return to make visible the theoretical aspects of the early work that had been overlooked by all but a few of his readers and critics, above all the unpredictable surges of the accumulation and dispersion of contradictions, that is, the movements of over- and underdetermination. Althusser was drawn to Machiavelli's notion of fortune "that brings the good with the bad and the bad with the good" in which he recognized the first form of a philosophy of the conjuncture, that always temporary combination of forces and circumstances. None of these theories was exactly synonymous with the others and all of them were what Lenin called "relatively true:" notions "sufficiently 'indefinite' to prevent science from becoming a dogma in the bad sense of the term, from becoming something dead, frozen, ossified," but at the same time sufficiently "definite to enable us to dissociate ourselves in the most emphatic and irrevocable manner from . . . philosophical idealism."[7] Each of Althusser's concepts marked out a space and defended it by occupying it in a specific conjuncture for as long as it persisted, that is, until a new conjuncture demanded a new concept.

The complexity of the struggle over concepts and words is not the only difficulty facing Althusser's readers. His materialism did not permit him any recourse to a meta-philosophy that would allow him to speak about philosophy from outside of it or to any metalanguage that would permit him to escape the often unpredictable effects of the

[7] V.I. Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-Criticism," *Collected Works*. Vol. 14. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962, 136.

constitutive heterogeneity of language. Althusser saw himself as engaging in "the struggle for one word against another word."[8] To take and hold a theoretical position against the adversary who occupies that position is "a matter of words." But how does one find the correct word, the word capable of displacing the incorrect term? "To replace one word with another means that one must find this other word, to find it, one must first look for it, to look for it and find it, nothing is better suited to the task than writing (a kind of prospecting, or foraging)."[9] The idea of writing as prospecting rather than representing, or even simply discovering what is there before us waiting to be discovered is significant: prospecting is an activity that alters the terrain over which it ranges and alters it in search of signs of previous alterations of exposed rock, the assemblages of different minerals produced by the processes of alteration. For Althusser, writing gathers words and sequences of words only to double back upon itself in search of those silences that exist by means of words, a writing that is a commentary on itself as it is written, identifying its feints and diversions through new feints and diversions, compelled to write about the compulsions that drive it. Such a writing does not conclude, too aware that a conclusion would be yet another ruse: instead, it stops, sometimes stumbling upon the silence of its own absences and sometimes halting only at the point of utter exhaustion, when the weight of the accumulated reflections that it carries causes it to stagger and collapse.

Does this mean then that Althusser, precisely by means of his insistence on rigor, has paradoxically replaced theoretical writing with a kind of poetry? Such an idea would hardly seem applicable to the author of "Lenin and philosophy" for whom "the practice of philosophy" consisting of drawing lines of demarcation to shift the balance of forces between conflicting words and concepts. Indeed, the most extraordinary moments in *For Marx* or *Reading Capital* are not formal effects of rhetoric or "eloquence," nor can they be understood as a form of sublimity, the fortunate consequences of a madness that has given him access to a truth that must remain unutterable and unrepresentable, captured, if at all, in the tracks of the absence it has left behind, which lead *nulle part*. Instead, the extraordinary moments in Althusser's writing, like the image in a dream according to Freud, are *überladen,* overladen, overloaded, words weighted down with a profusion of meanings that hold together for the instant it takes them to produce their combined effect before they come apart. His writing lights its own way as it is written, opening a space of intensities, temporary concentrations of power at a particular point, perhaps that form of intensity called, when referring to light, irradiance, a luminous concentration of energy that enlarges an area of visibility and intelligibility in proportion as it increases. There are moments of poetry, perhaps, in that the precise combination and sequence of words necessary to open the way to thought forms a configuration endowed with a power sufficient, and sufficiently luminous, to break through and clear away obstacles (the task

[8] Louis Althusser, "Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon," *Lenin and Philosophy*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971, 8.
[9] Louis Althusser, *Lettres à Franca: 1961-1973*. Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1998, 200.

of philosophy, according to Althusser). Sometimes the words necessary to "*faire bouger les choses*" may move his readers as well, in ways enjoyable to some and disturbing to others, particularly those who believe that a Marxist philosopher is obligated to write in a way that instructs without imparting any pleasure to the reader.

We might take the example of the text to which Althusser referred to in the letter cited above, written to Franca Madonia in 1962: "The '*Piccolo Teatro*': Bertolazzi and Brecht." He complained to Franca that he was compelled to engage in foraging and prospecting because he could not find the words adequate to the task of thinking theater; the immense lexicon of terms available to any discussion of theater had become little more than a wall between Althusser and what he wanted to say, or thought he wanted to say. In the end, there was no choice but to deviate from it entirely and to skirt the very notion of theater in its conventional sense, to take us backstage or just outside the theater doors. It is no accident that when Derrida delivered a eulogy at Althusser's funeral, he concluded by reading a passage from "le 'Piccolo' teatro," leaving it without commentary, allowing it to resonate, as Althusser writes of Bertolazzi's play, with a force sufficient to shatter a glass from a distance:

> Yes, we are first united by an institution – the performance, but more deeply, by the same myths, the same themes, that govern us without our consent, by the same spontaneously lived ideology. Yes, even if it is the ideology of the poor *par excellence*, as in *El Nost Milan*, we still eat of the same bread, we have the same rages, the same rebellions, the same madness (at least in the memory where stalks this ever-imminent possibility), if not the same prostration before a time unmoved by any History. Yes, like Mother Courage, we have the same war at our gates, and a handsbreadth from us, if not in us, the same horrible blindness, the same dust in our eyes, the same earth in our mouths. We have the same dawn and night, we skirt the same abysses.[10]

This passage, near the end of Althusser's essay and therefore acting as a kind of peroration, "stands out" as we say in English, not so much because it rises above the rest of the essay by virtue of its rhetorical flourishes, or by what might once have been called its eloquence, but by the opacity it brings to an otherwise lucid text. The phrase "the same madness (at least in the memory where stalks this ever-imminent possibility)," reads today like an intrusion or eruption of Althusser's personal drama in an analysis of a play that he has just argued sheds subjectivity and interiority as it moves to its conclusion : a kind of still-life arranged on stage where nobody moves, their only action a waiting for what will perhaps never come, for what may well be destined to remain always imminent and never present. Few, if any, of his readers could have detected the private meaning of the phrase or could have known that 1962 was a time of terrible suffering for him, although this

[10] Louis Althusser, "The '*Piccolo Teatro*': Bertolazzi and Brecht," *For Marx*. London, Penguin Books, 1969, 150.

meaning clouds the passage and confers upon it an opacity that readers know, without knowing exactly how they know, is an effect of the singular concatenation of words that makes the passage what it is.

There is nothing particularly surprising about any of this; on the contrary, the idea that even philosophical texts carry « private » or personal meanings that, at the extreme, may remain unknown even to the author who places them there or through whom they are transmitted without his knowledge or consent, is hardly new. That in many cases, such meanings are destined never to be known, buried in an unmarked grave of words of which the text bears no trace, is in one form or another a cliche. It is precisely the inversion of this idea that catches us by surprise and renders the drawing of a clear line separating the personal on the one side and the philosophical and political on the other, if not exactly impossible, very difficult. The nearly constant interruption of the most personal and intimate of Althusser's writings, that is, a significant number of his letters, by philosophical and theoretical reflection suggests that Althusser will have proven to be one of the philosophers whose properly philosophical writing is perhaps most difficult to separate in any definitive way from what is typically set aside by scholars as "personal," except within texts, sentence by sentence, and sometimes within the sentences themselves. The 832 pages of the *Lettres à Franca* (1961-1973) demonstrate the ways in which anything Althusser wrote could serve as a laboratory where the philosophical, the political and the personal served as experimental instruments whose application blurred the distinction between them. His correspondence with Madonia allows us to see that 1962, the year Althusser wrote and published both the essay on Bertolazzi and Brecht, and "Contradiction and Overdetermination" (as well as the year his seminar on Structuralism began), was one of the most extraordinary years in his extraordinary life. Dispersed throughout his letters to Franca during 1962 are commentaries on Lenin, on Foucault's *L'histoire de la folie*, Derrida's text on Husserl's *Origins of Geometry* (both of which appeared at roughly the same time), and, above all, on Machiavelli, whose work Althusser taught that year for the first time. Even the most extended of these commentaries, however, are tightly interwoven with deeply personal reflections, concerning not only his passionate attachment to Franca, but the mania that drove it and the depression that blocked it at every turn, as he put it, the desert that he carries with him wherever he goes.

This does not mean, however, that instead of seeking the sources of his philosophical work in the very visible, perhaps too visible, tragedies that befell him, we should look for what would be called in the language of psychoanalysis the intellectualization of his "inner world," and its conflicts, that is, a translation of its language into a philosophical idiom that, lacking the words, conceals what is most disturbing in it. Nor do these personal writings represent an attempt to draw philosophical lessons from the affective intensities that roiled within him. More, and more effectively, than in *The Future Lasts Forever*, Althusser, not only in the *Lettres à Franca* , but in his recently published correspondence with Lucien Sève, abandons himself to the

concatenation of "things," that is, of images, affects, concepts, bodily dispositions, apparatuses and configurations of subjection and struggle as they presented themselves to him. He announced to Franca in 1962, shortly after the conclusion of his 1962 course that "I was extraordinarily and ironically struck by the fact that in the guise of Machiavelli's supposed consciousness (*conscience),* I had spoken of myself."[11] What he describes here is neither projection nor introjection: what he says about Machiavelli's consciousness is no more true of him than of Machiavelli and must be described as a simultaneous attribution (*prétention*) of a consciousness to both, a consciousness or mode of thought in which Althusser and Machiavelli (that is, certain of their concepts) conjoin to form something new.

Finally, Althusser's materialism compels him in "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses" to translate consciousness into "'internal' discourse" (his quotation marks), just as Spinoza translated God into nature or, even more pertinently, the "mind of the Holy Spirit" into scripture (that is, Scriptura or writing) as it is, with its lacunae, discrepancies, and contradictions (TTP, VII). Here, Althusser has indeed found the correct word with which to replace "consciousness;" the concept of discourse nullifies the distinction between interiority and exteriority, between a person's private and public, individual and social existence, just as "interior" in quotation marks suggests that the interior is nothing more than a continuation of the exterior in manner of a Mobius strip. Althusser's gesture is of course also an affirmation of the power and productivity of Spinoza's declaration that thought and extension, mental and physical, inner and outer (and we might add personal and philosophico-political, as well as theory and practice) "are one and the same thing." If we follow the chains of association that led Althusser, who had the courage to pursue his discourse wherever it took him, to some of his most important discoveries, we find ourselves disregarding the borders and boundaries that separate the existing territories into which knowledge is divided, sometimes wandering into the wilderness of an outside defined by these borders and boundaries as their outside. The paths to Althusser's most effective thoughts, i.e., words, wind through this wilderness, over fences and walls without a thought to territorial claims, migrant thoughts that find what they need without asking permission or authorization. Those who want to think with Althusser have no choice but to follow his tracks wherever they lead in a body of writing whose limits have yet to be found.

[11] Althusser, *Lettres à Franca: 1961-1973,* 211.