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This book by Pierre Macherey is his first dealing with literature and theory since his seminal *A Theory of Literary Production*. Continuing the project of Althusserian theory, Macherey engages in a series of close exegeses of classical texts in French literature and philosophy, from the late eighteenth century down to the 1970s, that explore the historically variable but thematically similar ways in which literary texts represent philosophical *topoi* in an unmediated manner. Macherey shows the conceptual sophistication – and broad intellectual influence – that literary art has displayed in the modern period. At once a theoretical meditation of great originality and a historical work of scrupulous scholarship, *The Object of Literature* will entrench Pierre Macherey's already considerable reputation as one of the most significant contemporary theoreticians of literature.

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Literature, Culture, Theory 14



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Literature, Culture, Theory 14



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Foreword

does not fabricate the materials with which he works ... Those materials are not neutral, and so spontaneously assimilable to a unity imposed upon them by the writer; they preserve, rather, a specific weight and autonomy of their own ... The necessity of the text – which is precisely what renders it *readable*, yields us a determinate object of analysis – inheres ... in the fact that the text *produces itself* – unfolds and activates its multiple lines of meaning without conformity to ‘intention’, pre-given normative model or external reality. The task of criticism is to discover in each text the laws of that self-production, or (what amounts to the same thing) the conditions of a work’s possibility ... ¹

This Macherey has often been charged (by among others Eagleton himself) with being a formalist,² while in a somewhat later incarnation, he is said to have succumbed to the opposite errors of functionalism and reductionism.³ Doubtless, both sets of indictments will re-surface in response to the present volume. Warrant for each can be found. For example, the formalist Macherey appears virtually without adornment in the following passage from the essay on Céline:

We must abandon the attempt to look behind literature’s statements for the other discourse of which it is the distorted and deformed expression, and which constitutes its authentic meaning. For if literature does deal with truth, the truth in question has no value other than that conferred upon it by literature. It is the truth of its style. Literature establishes a real stylistics of depth rather than a metaphysics, and stylistics is in itself a partial substitute for philosophy. (p. 132 below)

Or consider the following lapidary observation from the programmatic essay that brings the book to a close: ‘In the final instance, all literary texts have as their object – and this seems to be their real “philosophy” – the non-adhesion of language to language to language, the gap that constantly divides what we say from what we say about it and what we think about it’ (p. 234 below). From Roman Jakobson to Roland Barthes, the specificity of literary language has been the mark of that ‘literariness’ which Macherey has elsewhere

- 1 Terry Eagleton, ‘Macherey and Marxist Literary Theory’, *The Minnesota Review* (Fall 1975); rpt. in Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 11, 13.
- 2 See *ibid.*, p. 18; and also Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: NLB, 1976), pp. 83–4.
- 3 See Eagleton, ‘Macherey and Marxist Literary Theory’, p. 20. Eagleton bases this interpretation on two articles: Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, ‘On Literature as an Ideological Form’, originally published in French as the introduction to Renée Balibar, *Le Français fictifs* (Paris: Hachette, 1974); and Macherey, ‘On Reflection’, *Sub-stance* 15 (1976), 6–20.

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been at such great pains to deny is even a proper category for articulating literature's objectivity.

But consider the following formulation:

the objectivity of literature is its necessary place within the determinate processes and reproduction of the contradictory linguistic practices of the common tongue, in which the effectivity of the ideology of bourgeois education is realised.

This siting of the problem abolishes the old idealist question, 'What is literature?', which is not a question about its universal essence, human and artistic. It abolishes it because it shows us directly the material function of literature, inserted within a process which literature cannot determine even though it is indispensable to it.⁴

Plainly it is possible to construe Macherey's pronouncements on literary language in other than a formalist manner, viz., in the materialist spirit in which, one surmises, he intended them. There is indeed such a thing as 'literary language', distinct from and in a sense derivative of ordinary language. Its existence issues less from the intrinsic properties of literary texts, than from a system of social stratification that trains certain readers to identify (and identify with) literature, while consigning others to the lower ranks of mere users of the *lingua franca*. Pace Eagleton, there is no inherent contradiction between the ostensible formalism of the early (and also the most recent) Macherey and the sociological criticism Macherey produced in the mid-1970s. The task of formal analysis is to expose the contradictions in a text's linguistic practices that sociological investigation demonstrates to be constitutive of literature as an ideological apparatus.

Compatible, then, with these two earlier Machereys, *The Object of Literature* nonetheless stages the literary problematic somewhat differently. It brings together in a single speculative project the philosophical and the literary. These essays all concern the ways in which literature and philosophy, representation and concepts, are intimately entwined in a range of texts from Sade and Mme de Staël to Queneau and Foucault. The relationship between these two domains is conveniently summarized in the following passage from the essay on Hugo:

4 Balibar and Macherey, 'On Literature as an Ideological Form', trans. Ian McLeod et al., *Oxford Literary Review* 3,1 (1978); rpt. in Robert Young, ed., *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 86.

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By comparing texts borrowed from Marx or Tocqueville with texts written by Sue or Hugo, and by demonstrating that comparable schemas of representation are at work in them, we are not attempting to deny the originality of their content by arguing that, ultimately, everything is mere literature; the point is to call attention to that content by showing how fictional texts can, in their own way, not only convey but produce forms of speculation which are directly expressive of a determinate historical reality. They allow us both to understand it and to imagine it. (p. 109 below)

The concept of literature scouted here is in line both with the so-called 'formalist Macherey', and with the much-vilified passage from Althusser's 'Letter on Art' that almost certainly inspired it.⁵ Literature is not history (or science or philosophy), but it stands in a quite particular relation to the historical materials out of which it produces its specific mode of existence.

What is the nature of that relation? Macherey remains an utterly impenitent Althusserian on this point, which he puts most directly near the end of the present book:

The problematical thought which runs through all literary texts is rather like the philosophical consciousness of a historical period. The role of literature is to say what a period thinks of itself. The age of literature, from Sade to Céline, does not project an ideological message which demands to be believed on the basis of the actual evidence. If taken literally, the message seems to be patently inconsistent and incoherent. It projects an outline sketch of its own limits, and that sketch is inseparable from the introduction of a relativist perspective. What, from this point of view, is the philosophical contribution of literature? It makes it possible to relocate all the discourses of philosophy, in its accredited forms, within the historical element which makes them the results of chance and circumstances, the products of a pathetic and magnificent throw of the dice. (p. 234 below)

No one trained in the history of philosophy is likely to miss the way in which a certain Hegelianism has been turned on its head in this passage. According to Macherey, it is not philosophy that paints its grey at the end of an epoch, but literature that exhibits the self-consciousness of an age. In a much-cited – if seldom understood – passage, Hegel opined that art 'is and remains for us a thing of the

5 See Louis Althusser, 'A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre', in Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 221–4. The passage has been criticized by Eagleton in *Criticism and Ideology*. For a more sympathetic reading, see Michael Sprinker, *Imaginary Relations* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 271–4.

Foreward

past'.⁶ Macherey takes up Hegel's point, while giving it a characteristically Althusserian twist. Art is a thing of the past in the same way that historical science can be said to expose to view the ideological (and other social) structures of a social form on its way to extinction. The literature of the bourgeois epoch – in Macherey's view there has never been any other – brings that epoch's ideological contradictions into plain view. We are not so far here from Marx's and Engels's celebration of Balzac, except that, as Macherey remarks elsewhere, it is not only generic realism that is capable of laying bare the contradictions of capitalist society: 'the idea of reflection correctly understood teaches us that a product can very well be objective, i.e., determined by material reality, without being exact, i.e., conforming to this reality or to our idea of reality: Kafka is no less objective than Thomas Mann, even if he is differently so ...'⁷

If there ever was a functionalist Macherey – a description I hope to have shown is open to challenge – he would appear to have been given his quietus in the essays translated here. The ambiguities and incoherences (for at least some of which Althusser himself was surely responsible) that admittedly adhere to the term 'Althusserian' cannot, for all that, disguise the fact that the research programme launched by *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'* has been continued in many works by his students and admirers.⁸ That programme, which insisted, among other things, on the necessity for any science to produce its object of investigation, has been rejoined in *The Object of Literature*, with results that will ultimately be judged not only by this book alone, but by the future that it stimulates. If we may hazard a prediction, this project is unlikely to be without issue.

6 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 11.

7 Macherey, 'The Problem of Reflection', p. 15.

8 For a preliminary assessment of Althusser's legacies in the human sciences, written twenty years on from Althusser's major interventions, see Gregory Elliott, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 330–5.



Bibliographical note



Chapters 4, 5 and 8 are based upon articles originally published as 'Corinne philosophe', *Europe* 193–4 (January 1987); 'Culture nationale et culture cosmopolite chez Mme de Staël', in *Transferts* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1988); 'Queneau scribe et lecteur de Kojève', *Europe* 650–1 (June–July 1983); 'Raymond la sagesse' in *Queneau aujourd'hui* (Paris: Editions Clancier-Guénaud, 1985); 'Figures de l'homme en bas', *Hermès* 2 (1988, Editions du CNRS); 'Le Métro magique de Céline', *Siècle* 2 (Autumn 1986).

Chapters 3, 6 and 9 are based on papers read to the Groupe de Recherche sur l'Histoire du Matérialisme, Université de Paris I.