

ÉTIENNE BALIBAR AND PIERRE MACHEREY "ON LITERATURE AS AN IDEOLOGICAL FORM" (1974)

Marxist Theses on Literature and the Category of 'Reflection'

Can there be a 'Marxist Aesthetic'?

Balibar and Macherey argue that Marxism has always been preoccupied with two basic problems: how to explain the "specific ideological mode for 'art' and the 'aesthetic' effect" (276) and how to explain the "class position . . . of the author and more materially the 'literary text' within the ideological class struggle" (276). The classic Marxist theses on literature derive from the "philosophical category of reflection" (277) which is accordingly key to understanding the Marxist conception of literature. In all the classic texts on the subject (Marx and Engels on Balzac and Lenin on Tolstoy, for example), literature is "conceived as an historic reality" (278) in so far as it a "material reflection . . . of objective reality" (278). In short, the Marxist conception

inscribes literature in its place in the unevenly determined system of real social practices: one of several ideological forms within the ideological superstructures, corresponding to a base of social relations of production which are historically determined and transformed, and historically linked to other ideological forms. (278)

By 'ideological form,' Balibar and Macherey intend not an opposition between form and content but to the "objective coherence of an ideological formation" (278).

The Materialist Category of Reflection

The Marxist concept of reflection subtends two basic problems: the "problem of the objectivity of reflection" (278), which takes the form of two questions: the first question: 'Is there an existent material reality reflected in the mind which determines thought?' And consequently . . . 'Is thought itself a materially determined reality?' Dialectical materialism asserts the objectivity of the reflection and the objectivity of thought as reflection, i.e., the determinance of the material reality which precedes thought and is irreducible to it, and the material reality of thought itself. (278)

And the second problem: "scientific knowledge of the exactitude of the reflection" (278), to wit, "'Under what conditions . . . can it provide an accurate reflection?'" (279). This usually boils down to the question: "'What form does the reflection take'" (279). Balibar and Macherey contend that reflection, in dialectical materialism, is a "'reflection without a mirror' . . . the only effective destruction of the empiricist ideology which calls the relation of thought to the real a specular (and therefore reversible) reflection" (279). The contribution of the Marxist theory of reflection to the philosophy of reflection is that it "poses the separate nature of two propositions and their articulation in an irreversible order" (279). To understand this would eliminate both 'formalism' (the "study of the reflection 'for itself,' independent of its relation to the material world" [279]) and idealism (the "assertion of the primacy of thought, a reversal of the materialist order" (279). This leads, too, to the indispensability of theorising "literature as an ideological form" (279) and the "specific process of literary production" (279).

Literature as an Ideological Form

To understand literature qua ideological form, the understanding that the "relationship of 'history' to 'literature' is not like the relationship or 'correspondence' of two 'branches,' but concerns the developing forms of an internal contradiction" (279), an "internal

relationship" (178): literature and history "are not set up externally to each other" (279), not even as the "history of literature versus social and political history" (279). Ideological forms are "not straightforward systems of 'ideas' and 'discourses,' but are manifested through the workings and history of determinate practices in determinate social relations" (280), that is, what Althusser terms Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). The "objectivity of literary production . . . is inseparable from given social practices in a given ISA" (280) and from a "given linguistic practice . . . in itself inseparable from an academic or schooling practice" (280) which defines both the consumption and the conditions of production of literature. "By connecting the objective existence of literature to this ensemble of practices, one can define the material anchoring points which make literature an historic and social reality" (280). This is why Balibar and Macherey define literature as historically constituted in the bourgeois epoch as an ensemble of . . . specific linguistic practices . . . inserted in a general schooling process so as to provide appropriate fictional effects, thereby reproducing bourgeois ideology as the dominant ideology. (280)

Literature is therefore determined in three ways: linguistic, pedagogic and "'fictive' [imaginaire]" (280), the last involving "recourse to psychoanalysis for an explanation of literary effects" (280).

By linguistic practice, Balibar and Macherey have in mind the fact that there is, for example, a 'French' literature because a French linguistic practice (i.e. a "contradictory ensemble making a national tongue" [280]) exists. There is a "linguistic determinance" (280) because literary production depends on the existence of a "common language codifying linguistic exchange, both for its material and for its aim" (280), the latter because literature contributes to the "maintenance of a 'common language'" (280). The common national language is "bound to the political form of 'bourgeois democracy' and is the historical outcome of particular class struggles" (280). It is used "unify a new class domination" (280) and, as such, refers to a "social contradiction, perpetually reproduced" (280).

This contradiction is the "effect of the historic conditions under which the bourgeois class established its political, economic and ideological dominance" (280). To accomplish this, it had to transform not just the base but also the "superstructure, the ideological formations" (280). This involved forming a new ideology, making it the dominant ideology through new ISAs, and the "remoulding of the relationships between the different ISAs" (280-281). The "school apparatus" (281) became the primary "means" (281) of forcing "individual submission" (281) to the dominant ideology" (281) and, importantly, "submission of the very ideology of the dominated classes" (281) especially. All the "ideological contradictions rest on the contradictions of the school apparatus, and become contradictions subordinated to" (281) and "within the form of schooling itself" (281). The "formal unity" (281) of the educational system is a mirage that ignores the real "coexistence of two systems or contradictory networks" (281), the "institutional division of 'levels of teaching'" (281): "basic education" (281) and "advanced education" (281). This division "reproduces the social division of a society based on the sale and purchase of individual labour-power, while ensuring the dominance of bourgeois ideology through asserting a specifically national unity" (281) but is itself "based on a linguistic division" (281).

Balibar and Macherey contend that this linguistic division in schooling does not take the form of a separation between different languages, the "'language of the common people (dialect, patois or argot), and a 'language of the bourgeoisie'" (281). Rather, the division "presupposes a common language, and is the contradiction between different practices of the same language" (281) which is instituted in and through the education

system via the "contradiction between the basic language [français élémentaire], as taught at primary school, and the literary language [français littéraire] reserved for the advanced level of teaching" (281). This translates into a contradiction between schooling techniques: the "basic exercise of 'rédaction-narration,' a mere training in 'correct' usage and the reporting of 'reality,' and the advanced exercise of comprehension, the 'dissertation--explication de texte,' so-called 'creative' work which presupposes the incorporation and imitation of literary material" (281). From this point of view, the "basis of literary production is an unequal and contradictory relation to the same ideology" (281).

Balibar and Macherey stress that the upshot of all this is that the "objectivity of literature, i.e. its relation to objective reality by which it is historically determined, is not a relation to an 'object' which it represents" (282). Nor is literature "purely simply the instrument for using and transforming its immediate material, the linguistic practices determined within the practice of teaching" (282) which "because of their contradictions, . . . cannot be used as a simple primary material" (282). All such use is an "intervention, made from a standpoint . . . from within the contradiction and hence a further development of it" (282). Balibar and Macherey conclude that the objectivity of literature is defined by its "necessary place within the determinate process and reproduction of the contradictory linguistic practices of the common tongue, in which the effectivity of the ideology of bourgeois education is realised" (282). The "contradictions of linguistic practices in schooling" (282) are "taken up and internalised (through an indefinitely repeated labour of fiction)" (282): these serve then the material base of literary production. But literature is "simultaneously product and material condition of the linguistic division in education, term and effect of its own contradictions" (282). It is not therefore surprising that the "ideology of literature . . . should work ceaselessly to deny this objective base" (282). The "root of this constitutive repression is the objective status of literature as an historic ideological form, its relation to the class struggle" (282). All this leads to a fresh consideration of the "question of the relation of literature to the dominant ideology" (282). To see literature as ideologically determined is not to "'reduce' it to moral . . . political, religious, even aesthetic ideologies . . . definable outside literature" (282). It is not a question of reverting to the "mechanical" (282) and "false dialectic of 'form' and 'content'" (282) whereby ideology is the "content to which literature brings form" (282). Rather, to define literature qua ideological form is to "pose quite another problem: the specificity of ideological effects produced by literature and the means (techniques) of production" (282).

The Process of Production of Aesthetic Effects in Literature

As a result of the foregoing, the (Marxist) critic is no longer confronted with the "false dilemma" (283) of choosing whether to "analyse literature on its own ground . . . or from an external standpoint" (283). To analyse the "ideological specificity" (283) of literature is not to reduce it "either to something other than itself or to itself" (283). This leads to a consideration of three factors:

- the "contradictions which ideological literary formations (texts) realise and develop" (283);
- the "mode of ideological identification produced by the action of fiction" (283); and
- the "place of literary aesthetic effects in the reproduction of the dominant ideology" (283).

The Specific Complexity of Literary Formations--Ideological Contradictions and Linguistic Conflicts

Balibar and Macherey contend that literary productions must be studied “not from the standpoint of their unity which is illusory and false, but from their material disparity” (283). The critic’s quest ought to be for “signs of the contradictions (historically determined) which produced them and which appear as unevenly resolved conflicts in the text” (283). Terms like the ‘Work’ (which implies an illusory unity, the text’s “totality, self-sufficiency and perfection” [283]) and the ‘Author’ (which implies a process of creation, rather than production) are “necessary illusions written into the ideology of literature” (283). The text is “materially incomplete, disparate and diffuse from being the outcome of the conflicting contradictory effect of superimposing real processes which cannot be abolished except in an imaginary way” (284).

Literature, Balibar and Macherey contend, is the product of “one or more ideological contradictions precisely because these contradictions cannot be solved within the ideology” (284). This is because “contradictory class positions” (284) are evidently “irreconcilable” (284). Ideological contradictions are not themselves literary per se but consist of “ideological positions within theory and practice, covering the whole field of the ideological class struggle, i.e. religious, judicial and political” (284) and “correspond to the conjunctures of the class struggle” (284). However, it is “pointless to look in the text for the ‘original’ bare discourse of these ideological positions, as they were ‘before’ their ‘literary’ realisations, for these ideological positions can only be formed in the materiality of the literary text” (284). They “appear in a form which provides their imaginary solution or, better still, which displaces them by substituting imaginary contradictions soluble within the ideological practices of religion, politics, morality, aesthetics and psychology” (284). Literature “‘begins’ with the imaginary solution of implacable ideological contradictions, with the representation of that solution” (284), not in the sense of “‘figuring’ (by images, allegories, symbols or arguments) a solution which is really there” (284), but of “providing a ‘mise en scène,’ a presentation as solution of the very terms of an insurmountable contradiction, by means of various displacements and substitutions” (284). The language of literature is one of “‘compromise,’ realising in advance the fiction of a forthcoming conciliation” (284) which it presents as “‘natural’ and so both necessary and inevitable” (284). The “ideological project of the author, the expression of one determinate class position, is only one of the terms of the contradiction of whose oppositions the text makes an imaginary synthesis despite the real oppositions which it cannot abolish” (284). The text is “not so much the expression of ideology (its putting into words [sa mise en mots]) as its staging [mise en scène], its display” (284).

Balibar and Macherey point out that Macherey’s classic *A Theory of Literary Production* failed to specify the precise “textual devices” (285), the “specific mechanism of the literary compromise” (285), by which this resolution is accomplished. Drawing on the work of Renée Balibar, literature’s “special language” (285) is not “outside ideological struggles” (285), its relation to these is not “secondary but constitutive; it is always already implicated in producing them” (285). In other words, literary language is “itself formed by the effects of a class contradiction” (285) which is the “material base of all literature” (285). The specificity of literary language is the product of those linguistic conflicts discussed earlier by the “development of a ‘common language’ and of an educational system which produces it on all” (285). The text shares the “material conditions necessary to the bourgeois social formation” (285). It permits the imaginary solution of ideological contradictions in so far as its special language is “both different from the common language and within it” (285) and “realises and masks in a series of compromises the conflict which constitutes it” (285). This “displacement of contradictions” (285) is what some such as Renée Balibar term ‘literary style’: it “displaces the ensemble of ideological contradictions on to a single one, or a single aspect, the linguistic conflict

itself" (285). The imaginary solution, in the final analysis, is tantamount to a "redoubling of the contradiction" (285).

Fiction and Realism: the Mechanism of Identification in Literature

Balibar and Macherey then turn their attention to the "characteristic literary effect" (285): the "identification effect" (285-286). Evidently drawing upon Althusser's appropriation of the Lacanian mirror stage, they argue that the "ideological effects of literature . . . materialise via an identification process" (286) between the "reader or the audience and the hero or anti-hero" (286), leading to the "simultaneous mutual constitution of the fictive 'consciousness' of the character with the ideological consciousness of the reader" (286). Any process of identification is "dependent on the constitution and recognition of the individual as 'subject'" (286). All ideology, as Althusser shows, hails or interpellates individuals as subjects so that they perceive themselves as such with specific "rights and duties" (286). "Each ideology has its specific mode: each gives to the 'subject'--and therefore to other real or imaginary subjects who confront the individual and present him with his ideological identification in a personal form--one or more appropriate names" (286). In the ideology of literature, the "nomenclature is: Authors (i.e. signatures), Works (i.e. titles), Readers and Characters (with their social background, real or imaginary)" (286). In literature, the "process of constituting subjects and setting up their relationships of mutual recognition necessarily takes a detour via the fictional world and its values" (286).

This raises in turn the problem of "what is specifically 'fictional' about literature?" (286). Those "novelistic" (286) genres are usually privileged as fictional literature per se because it "tells a 'story,' whether about the teller himself or about other characters" (286). In short, all literature is fictional in so far as it depends on a "story which is analogous to life" (286). Of course, all this involves the "idea of confronting a model. All 'fiction' has a reference point, whether to 'reality' or 'truth,' and takes its meaning from that. From this point of view, the text is a "transposition, a reproduction, adequate or not, and valued . . . in relation to standards of verisimilitude" (287). Literature qua fiction is profoundly linked to the philosophical category of realism as a result of which "all literature must be realist, . . . a representation of reality" (287). Fiction and realism would appear at first glance to be opposites but the one slides into the other. Balibar and Macherey argue, however, that the "category of reflection" (287) central to Marxist theory is not concerned with realism but "materialism" (287) per se. Literature is "not fiction, a fictive image of the real, because it cannot define itself simply as a figuration, an appearance of reality" (287). This is because literature is the "production of a certain reality" (287) or, to be precise, of a "material reality, and of a certain social effect" (287). This is why Balibar and Macherey prefer to think of literature as involved in the "production of fiction-effects" (287) as a result of which literature provides not a realist reproduction of 'life' because it "cannot be reduced to a straight mirroring" (287). The text produces, rather, a "reality-effect" (287) and a "fiction-effect" (287) caught up in a dialectical relationship, the text oscillating between reality per se and "diverging, infinitesimally perhaps, from the 'real'" (288). This is why Balibar and Macherey contend that fiction and realism are not concepts "for the production of literature" (287) but "notions produced by literature" (287). For this reason, the "model, the real referent 'outside' the discourse which both fiction and realism presuppose, has no function here as a non-literary non-discursive anchoring point predating the text" (287-288). This "anchorage, the primacy of the real, is . . . more complex than a 'representation'" (288). If anything, the real is an "effect of the discourse" (288): the "literary discourse itself institutes and projects the presence of the 'real' in the manner of a hallucination" (288).

The question arises: how do texts accomplish this oscillation between reality and pure fiction? Through "effects and forms of the fundamental linguistic conflict" (288) discussed before. Renée Balibar refers to the "production of 'imaginary French' [français fictif]" (288) which is not to be confused with a pseudo-language or a totally imaginary language. What Balibar and Macherey have in mind are "expressions which always diverge in one or more salient details from those used in practice outside the literary discourse. . . . These are linguistic 'compromise formations,' compromising between usages which are socially contradictory in practice and hence mutually exclude each other" (288). In these compromise formations, an "essential place" (288) is retained for the "reproduction of 'simple' language, 'ordinary' language, . . . i.e. the language which is taught in elementary school as the 'pure and simple' expression of 'reality'" (288). Balibar mentions "numerous examples which 'speak' to everyone" (288) and produce the "effect of 'naturalness' and 'reality'" (288). By comparison all the other expressions "seem 'arguable,' 'reflected' in a subjectivity" (288). These "objective" (288) expressions are the ones in the text which produce the "imaginary referent of an elusive 'reality'" (288).

Balibar and Macherey return to the identification effect of literature: "there are only ever subjects through the interpellation of the individual into a subject by a Subject who names him" (289). Characterisation is its most potent weapon in this respect: literature "unceasingly 'produces' subjects, on display for everyone" (67), endlessly transforming "(concrete) individuals into subjects" (289) and endowing them "with a quasi-real hallucinatory individuality" (67). At the heart of bourgeois ideology is the view that to "produce subjects ('persons' and 'characters') one must oppose them to objects, i.e. to things, by placing them in and against a world of 'real' things, outside but always in relation to it" (289). The reality effect is the "basis of this interpellation which makes characters or merely discourse 'live' and which makes readers take up an attitude towards imaginary struggles as they would toward real ones" (289).

The Aesthetic Effect of Literature as Ideological Domination Effect:

Balibar and Macherey argue that literary effects "cannot be reduced to ideology 'in general' because they are particular ideological effects, in the midst of others (religious, juridical, political) to which they are linked but from which they are separate" (289). This effect has three aspects worthy of being examined:

- its "production under determinate social conditions" (289);
- its "moment in the reproduction of the dominant ideology" (289); and
- its role as an "ideological domination-effect" (290).

Firstly, Balibar and Macherey posit that literary effects are "socially produced in a determined material process" (290), the "process of constitution, i.e. the making and composing of texts, the 'work' of literature" (290). The writer is neither a creator, "founder of the very conditions to which he submits" (290) nor "expendable medium, through whom is revealed the nameless power of inspiration, or history, or period, or even class" (290). The author is, rather, a "material agent" (290) an intermediary inserted in a particular place, under conditions he has not created, in submission to contradictions which by definition he cannot control, through a particular social division of labour . . . which individuates him" (290). Its determinant is the "resolution of one contradiction within another" (290) even as the "effect produced is simultaneously and inseparably the materiality of the text (the arrangement of sentences)" (290). It is both a "material outcome and a particular ideological effect" (290). The literary effect is thus "not just produced by a determinate process, but actively inserts itself within the reproduction of other ideological effects: it is not only itself the effect of material causes, but is also an effect on socially determined individuals" (290). The literary effect produces "rituals of

literary consumption" (290). This is why, Balibar and Macherey argue, when considering the literary effect to treat as equivalent both the author and the reader, the author's intention (whether expressed in the text or in his own commentaries on his text) and the reader's interpretation, criticism or commentary.

The literary text is "inserted" (291) in a "structure of the process of reproduction" (290). Its raw material consists in the "ideological contradictions which are not specifically literary but political, religious, etc.; in the last analysis, contradictory ideological realisations of determinate class positions in the class struggle" (291). The effect of the literary text is to "provoke other ideological discourses" (291-292) of a literary, aesthetic, moral, political and religious nature. The literary text is the "agent for the reproduction of ideology in its ensemble" (292), inducing by the literary effect the production of 'new' discourses which always reproduce (under constantly varied forms) the same ideology (with its contradictions)" (292). It "enables individuals to appropriate ideology and make themselves its 'free' bearers and even its 'free' creators" (292). The literary text is a "privileged operator in the concrete relations between the individual and ideology in bourgeois society and ensures its reproduction" (292). It is the "privileged agent of ideological subjection" (292) under the guise of "freedom of thought" (292) precisely because it appears as if "offered for interpretations, for the subjective private use of individuals" (292) rather than as a "mechanical imposition, forced, revealed like a religious dogma, on individuals who must repeat it faithfully" (292).

For this reason, the literary effect is "also inevitably an effect of domination: the subjection of individuals to the dominant ideology . . . of the ruling class" (292). It is, as such, an "uneven effect" (292) that affects individuals in different ways, depending on their class position amidst "different and antagonistic social classes" (292). "'Subjection' must be felt by the dominant class as by the dominated class but in two different ways" (292). Members of the former experience this domination concretely as the "'freedom' to think within ideology, a submission which is experienced and practised as if it were a mastery" (292). Members of the latter "find in reading nothing but the confirmation of their own inferiority: subjection means domination and repression by the literary discourse of a discourse deemed 'inarticulate' and 'faulty' and inadequate for the expression of complex ideas and feelings" (292). This inequality is "implicit in the very production of the literary effect and materially inscribed in the constitution of the text" (292). This it accomplishes through incorporating the linguistic conflict between literary and ordinary French discussed earlier. If literature is used in the secondary education system to "fabricate and simultaneously dominate, isolate and repress the 'basic' language of the dominated classes" (293), then it is only on condition that the same basic language should be present in literature, as one of the terms of its constitutive contradiction--disguised and masked, but also necessarily given away and exhibited in the fictive reconstructions" (293). The "effect of domination realised by literary production presupposes the presence of the dominated ideology within the dominant ideology itself" (293). "Class struggle is not abolished in the literary text and the literary effects which it produces. They bring about the reproduction, as dominant, of the ideology of the dominant class" (293).