

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

In "On Literature as an Ideological Form" (henceforth "Form"), Macherey and his co-writer Étienne Balibar returned some eight years later to the same terrain addressed by *Atheory of Literary Production*: the refinement of the Marxist approach to criticism in line with post-Saussurean developments in linguistic theory (the view in particular that signs and thus texts do not simply reflect the referent) and Althusser's rethinking of the traditional base/superstructure model. If *Theory* was very influenced by Althusser's views in *Reading Capital*, "Form" was particularly influenced by Althusser's equally famous "On Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In Eagleton's opinion, "Form" represents an attempt to correct those deficiencies, principally formalist in nature, which mar *Theory*. However, "Form" may in fact be designed to reject such criticisms by explaining some key but under-theorised aspects of the claims made in *Theory*. Drawing in particular upon Émile Benveniste's view that subjectivity is less the source of meaning in than the effect of discourse, Balibar and Macherey contend that all ideologies are material practices in so far as they are *textually* realised within determinate institutional practices such as the education system or a particular mode of literary production. As a result, their source is far less important than their consequences: the assignment of specific subject-positions to individuals.

Balibar and Macherey point out that the traditional Marxist view of literature is predicated on the concept of reflection: whether it be Marx and Engels or Lukács on Balzac, or Lenin on Tolstoy, literature is conceived as a "material reflection . . . of objective reality" (278). Rejecting the empiricist view of ideology and literature as superstructural mirrors held up in some unmediated way to the economic and social infrastructure, they contend that this notion of reflection must be rethought because it does not capture the 'relative autonomy' of the various practices comprising the social formation. At stake, therefore, is the indispensability of theorising both the specificity of ideology in relation to the other practices within the social formation and that of "literature as an ideological form" (279) in relation to the other forms taken by ideology. In the same way that ideology is both related to and different from the other practices, so too does literature possess a special relationship to the other forms of ideology which it accordingly functions to set in relief, as it were. In this way, 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) because to analyse the "ideological specificity" (283) of literature is not to reduce it either to "something other than itself or to itself" (283).

Balibar and Macherey contend that literature is socially and historically imbricated because the history of literature is not distinct from social and political history. This is because all ideological forms consist in *textually materialised* ideas and discourses themselves necessarily implicated in the "workings and history of determinate practices in determinate social relations" (280), that is, particular Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) such as the education system. The French education system, they argue, is organised around a particular, nationally unifying language without which, for example, French literature evidently could not exist. However, this national language is a "contradictory ensemble" (280) because it is the "historical outcome of particular class struggles" (280) that culminated in the ascent to power of the bourgeoisie which, to cement its hold on power, had to transform not just the base but also the superstructure in order to make its own ideology the dominant one. The "school apparatus" (281) became the primary means of enforcing submission to their ideology via a division of the education system into "basic" (281) and "advanced education" (281) which, by introducing students to the mere basics

of linguistic interpretation and more sophisticated literary uses of language, respectively, "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).

Balibar and Macherey argue that the very 'stuff' of literature is the class struggles encoded by language in this way. It is through the very language used by the author that the contradictory class positions which determine corresponding ideological conflicts in turn shape literary texts, providing it with its "material base" (285). However, these conflicting ideological positions are not found there in their "'original' bare" (284) form prior to their "'literary' realisations" (284). They appear, rather, in a form designed to provide their imaginary solution or, rather, to displace them altogether by "substituting imaginary contradictions soluble within the ideological practices of religion, politics, morality, aesthetics and psychology" (284). The biggest shortcoming of *Theory* is, Balibar and Macherey believe, its failure to specify in this way the precise textual devices, the "specific mechanism of the literary compromise" (285), by which this resolution is accomplished. From this point of view, the language of literature is not outside ideological struggles, its relation to these is not "secondary but constitutive; it is always already implicated in producing them" (285).

Balibar and Macherey stress that the upshot of all this is that the relation of literature to "objective reality by which it is historically determined, is not a relation to an 'object' which it represents" (282). The text qua ideological form does not 're-present' the economic and social levels of the social formation: it incorporates them in its very material existence through the conflict-filled language which comprises it at the same time that it cannot be reduced to either these other practices or other forms of ideology "definable outside literature" (282). They argue that far more important than the source or origin of ideological forms is their effect, to be precise, their assignment of subject-position and, thus, their role in the reproduction of the asymmetrical status quo. To define the specificity of literature qua ideological form is thus to pose the specificity of the ideological effects produced by literature and the means by which these are produced. These effects are accomplished, they argue, via an "identification effect" (285-286).

Evidently drawing upon Althusser's appropriation of the Lacanian mirror stage in his theorisation of the interpellative function of ideology and alluding to Brecht's notion of the 'Alienation-effect,' Balibar and Macherey argue that the "ideological effects of literature . . . materialise via an identification process" (286) between 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). Characterisation is the most potent weapon at the disposal of interpellation: 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). From this perspective, far from being a reflection of 'life,' literature is the "production of a certain reality" (287) and thus a "certain social effect" (287). Because 'life' is less the source of the text than an "effect of the discourse" (288), the referent 'outside' the discourse has no function here as a "non-literary non-discursive anchoring point predating the text" (287-288). Rather, 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).

It is from this perspective that Balibar and Macherey argue that literature is both product and perpetrator of social contradictions. Its raw material consists in linguistically realised ideological contradictions which are not specifically literary but political, religious,

etc., that is, contradictory ideological realisations of determinate class positions in the class struggle. However, it is also a primary agent by which the dominant ideology is reproduced by inducing certain forms of behaviour on the part of the author. 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). It is from this point of view, its effect rather than origin, that the text's relationship with history must be rethought.