

An introduction to Alain Badiou's 'The autonomy of the aesthetic process'

Bruno Bosteels

After achieving considerable critical acclaim with *Almageste* and *Portulans* – two avant-garde novels that promptly caught the attention of his long-time intellectual model Jean-Paul Sartre – Alain Badiou published 'The Autonomy of the Aesthetic Process', his first work as a philosopher.¹ Written in 1965 as part of a seminar presented under the aegis of his other proclaimed master, Louis Althusser, and published the following year in a special issue of the *Cahiers Marxistès-Léninistes* on 'Art, Language and Class Struggle', edited by members of the UJCML at the École Normale Supérieure in rue d'Ulm, the essay shows Badiou taking his distance from the discussions about art and ideology taking shape at the time – in the immediate wake of the 1965 publication of *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* – most notably an essay from the same year by Pierre Macherey, 'Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy'.²

Anticipating what would soon thereafter become his core proposal in *A Theory of Literary Production*, Macherey follows Althusser in arguing for art and literature's special status in comparison to other ideological forms. While clearly unable to produce the kind of knowledge associated with science, art also cannot be equated with the purely imaginary effects of ideology. Macherey and Althusser 'solve' this enigma of the specific difference of artistic production by positing *within* art a relation of internal distancing, or redoubling, with regard to its own ideological nature. Art, in a sense, 'shows' the functioning of ideology, rendering its operations visible and breaking the spontaneous effects of closure, recognition and misrecognition characteristic of ideology in general. 'Art, or at least literature, because it naturally scorns the credulous view of the world, establishes myth and illusion as *visible objects*', Macherey concludes his commentary on Lenin and Tolstoy. 'By means of the text it becomes possible to escape from the domain

of spontaneous ideology, to escape from the false consciousness of self, of history, and of time.'³

Badiou problematizes Macherey's principal thesis about the internal displacement of ideology in art, all the while making his own a secondary and apparently contradictory thesis, concerning the autonomy of art's form-giving processes. For Macherey, 'it could be said that the work has an ideological content, but that it endows this content with a specific form. Even if this form is itself ideological there is an internal displacement of ideology by virtue of this *redoubling*'; this is not ideology contemplating itself, but the mirror-effect which exposes its insufficiency, revealing differences and discordances, or a significant incongruity.⁴ Focusing his attention on the process of the elaboration of a specifically aesthetic form irreducible to the ideological content on which it is supposed to work, Badiou goes a step further by arguing that, far from 'redoubling' and 'demystifying' ideology as if in a broken mirror, art only ever 'turns' or 'reverts' already aestheticized elements into a kind of self-sufficient reality. Thus, instead of a *redoublement* as in Macherey and Althusser, Badiou speaks of a *retournement* as the key to the autonomy of the aesthetic process.

The pertinent unit for this kind of analysis is no longer the unique work of art, let alone the genial artist-creator, but rather what Badiou calls an aesthetic mode of production. The example he chooses to elaborate is the novel, or the novelistic mode of production. In fact, Badiou envisaged elaborating the present essay into a monograph on *L'effet romanesque* ('The Novelistic Effect'), which was to be published in the same *Théorie* book series edited by Althusser in which Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* would eventually appear in 1971 – perhaps taking the wind out of Badiou's sails. Even so, Badiou would subsequently revisit some of the same problems addressed here, particularly in a little-known series of book

reviews about the novelistic production of his friend and fellow Maoist militant Natacha Michel.⁵

Read today, this early beginning of Badiou's work as a philosopher raises a number of fascinating questions not only about what his philosophy actually became but also, and perhaps even more so, about what it could have become and did not. First, concerning the place of truth in art: does Badiou lay the groundwork of his later thesis that art is one of the generic processes or procedures for producing truth, by refusing to phrase the problem of art's status in terms of the passage from the real to the work? How, then, does truth relate – if at all – to the science/ideology dyad? Second, concerning the relation of aesthetic theory and history, or the synchronic and the diachronic, as Badiou says at the very end: to what extent has the later focus on the philosophical treatment of individual art forms such as dance, theatre, poetry or film overshadowed the earlier interest in the genealogical analysis of aesthetic modes of production? And, finally, a question that reaches beyond Badiou's mode of philosophizing but affects the work of fellow ex-Althusserians such as Jacques Rancière: how can we understand the historicity of the formulation of the relation between art and ideology in these terms? Could we not say that the demystificatory

promise of an internal distancing, privileged within art, has since the late 1960s turned out to be the very model of ideology's functioning?⁶

Notes

1. Alain Badiou, 'L'autonomie du processus esthétique', *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes* 12–13, July 1966, pp. 77–89. For further context and discussion, see Peter Hallward, 'Badiou and the Logic of Interruption', *Concept and Form*, vol. 2: *Interviews and Essays on Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, ed. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, Verso, London and New York, 2012, pp. 123–45.
2. Pierre Macherey, 'Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy', in *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978, pp. 105–19.
3. Ibid., pp. 132–3. See also Louis Althusser, 'Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New Left Books, London, 1971, p. 222.
4. Macherey, 'Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy', p. 133.
5. These reviews and other texts on poetry and prose are forthcoming in Alain Badiou, *The Age of the Poets and Other Writings on Poetry and Prose*, ed. and trans. Bruno Bosteels, Verso, London and New York.
6. See my 'Reviewing Rancière, or, the Persistence of Discrepancies', *Radical Philosophy* 170, November/December 2011, pp. 25–31 – subsequently expanded for Documenta 13 into Bruno Bosteels, *Some Highly Speculative Remarks on Art and Ideology*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2012.

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The autonomy of the aesthetic process (1965)

Alain Badiou

The following developments are meant to clarify the implications of two dogmatic statements:

Statement 1

Art is not ideology. It is completely impossible to explain art on the basis of the homological relation that it is supposed to maintain to the real of history. The aesthetic process decentres the specular relation with which ideology perpetuates its closed infinity. The aesthetic effect is certainly imaginary; but this imaginary is not the reflection of the real, since it is the real of this reflection.

Statement 2

Art is not science. The aesthetic effect is not an effect of knowledge. However, as differentiating realization and denunciation of ideology, art is closer to science than to ideology. It produces the imaginary reality of that which science appropriates in its real reality.

In the Marxist tradition, art is classified among the 'ideological forms'.¹ And yet, in the same tradition, the evaluation of certain artworks involves criteria derived from the concept of *truth* (the work is a 'real reflection of life'), the use of which implicitly assimilates certain *levels* of the work to the functioning of a theoretical knowledge. Everything appears as if the *general theory* of art were a region of the theory of ideologies; and as if, *at the same time*, the *critical practice* tended to differentiate art from ideology by conferring upon it a complex function, simultaneously descriptive and critical, through which ideology ends up being denounced and the 'real' is exhibited. In sum, we are in the presence of a chiasmic discord: theory assigns art an ideological function; but the good (ideological) use of this function – the determination of the *useful* work – presupposes a clandestine relation of some sort between the work and truth, and thus between the work and theoretical practice. It is the form of this relation that supports the evaluations. Leo Tolstoy, Lenin explains, must be valued as the real reflection

of the contradictions of the Russian peasantry. By contrast, Fyodor Dostoevsky is 'supremely bad',² *for the same reasons*: as real reflection as well, but this time of a counter-revolutionary class. The great work is thus represented as a theoretical essence (the truth that it envelops) *veiled* by an ideological existence (the imaginary of the forms). Whence the ambiguity of the critical tasks of socialist realism. This critical task indeed consists in determining the ideological existence of the artworks, by producing the concepts of their historical belonging. But it *also* consists in *unveiling* the theoretical essence that marks the singularity of the 'great works', those that gain right of access to the socialist pantheon. It is in these general terms that Mao Zedong defines the relation of criticism to the old aesthetic tradition: 'To study the development of this old culture, to reject its feudal dross and assimilate its democratic essence is a necessary condition for developing our new national culture.'³ The democratic interiority of the work is thus the unchangeable residue of a critical *reduction*. This means that the theory of feudal literature, *in so far as it is feudal*, brings out that which this theory *could not foresee*, namely its essential anti-feudalism. Or again, the theory of literature as historical process contains a truth, which is not what it signifies, the work's historicity, but what it is incapable of signifying: its transhistorical and prophetic value.

We can see that such an approach can be sustained only by reflecting upon the aesthetic products according to what are essentially *hybrid* operators: neither theory nor ideology, the artwork is the ideological appearance of the theoretical, the non-true as the glorious envelope of the true. In reality, this approach has exactly the same status as the one that Plato attributes to the right opinion: truth by chance, or truth produced as pure *fact*, the work of art stands between being and non-being. And this hybridity is so fundamental that Lenin ends up recognizing theoretical *falsity* as an almost inevitable condition of the practical effectiveness of works of art. In art

eclecticism is almost compulsory. This enables Lenin to write to Maxim Gorky:

I believe that an artist can glean much that is useful to him from philosophy of all kinds. ... in matters that concern the art of writing you are the best judge, and in deriving *this* kind of views both from your artistic experience *and from philosophy, even in idealistic philosophy*, you can arrive at conclusions that will be of tremendous benefit to the workers' party.⁴

As in the case of the right opinion, art's concluding validity can accommodate false premisses.

Now, all these remarks do *indicate* the true problem: that of the ambiguity of art in regard to the binary opposition science/ideology. We cannot declare at the same time that there is a democratic essence to feudal art and that this art is a purely ideological reflection, with a universal vocation, of the 'lived experience' of the dominant class. We cannot observe that art produces the true on the basis of the false and declare, as in a certain socialist realism, that in the final instance the *theoretical* truth conditions the *aesthetic* validity.

Mao Zedong was so sensitive to this problem that in order to elucidate the relation of aesthetic production to the theoretically constructed reality of classes, he needed no fewer than *four* concepts, whereas lazy Marxist criticism establishes a simple binary between the meaning of the work and the ideology of a class. Mao in effect distinguishes the following:

- *the class-being*: the class to which the writer belongs by birth.
- *the class-stand* or *class-position*: the general space of the problematic on the basis of which every theoretical practice is defined. The progressive writer must stand 'on the positions' of the working class, in other words formulate the problems according to the 'outlook' of the working class. The stand is *the space of the questions*. But in the sense in which Georges Canguilhem says that one can *be* in the true without *saying* the true, one can *stand on* a certain class position without the *particular* theoretical practice for this reason corresponding to that of the same class.
- *the class-attitude*: the investment of one's class-stand in a particular practical problem. The attitude thus structures not the problematic but the articulation of problems onto the problematic. The attitude is the *space of the answers*.
- *the class-study* or *class-culture*: the structure and instruments of the theoretical realm, in so far as they are charged with producing the legitimacy of the class-stand.⁵

It is clear that these terms are not necessarily linked. If we take for example the case of Tolstoy, to which I will return, we can say that:

- his *class-being* defines him as a member of the land-owning aristocracy and anchors him in feudalism;
- his *class-stand* is that of the peasantry;
- his *class-attitude* is complex, depending on the negative or positive structure of the problem: an attitude *coherent with the stand* of the critique of the landowning regime, but also on the other hand *coherent with his class-being* in its vehement anti-socialism, and even in its hostility towards bourgeois liberalism;
- his *class-culture* is essentially bourgeois.

We see that the concepts Mao put in place for the sole sake of salvaging the validity of ancient artworks break up the simple relation of the writer to his class, disarticulating and recomposing it in such a way that it appears as a series of *decentrings* between the historical reality, ideology and the aesthetic process. This distortion is what Lenin highlights in a famous witticism referring to Tolstoy: 'Before this Count there was no authentic *muzhik* in literature.'⁶

Unfortunately, Lenin like Mao takes these decentrings to be discrepancies which are certainly understandable but in the final instance regrettable. No sooner are they theoretically pinpointed than they are practically designated as that which revolutionary art must *reduce*. Thus reappears the chiasmic discord of theory – art is ideological – and criticism – art tells the true – but in its *inverted* form: in the *evaluation* of past works, what matters is to discover by way of reduction a theoretical essence steeped in an ideological appearance. In the *production* of future works, the ideological appearance should be reduced in such a way that it manifests *directly* the theoretical truth. The regressive reduction, which involved the concepts of decentring, is here inverted in a progressive reduction, which dissolves the specificity of this decentring. This is what enables the dogmatic aberrations of socialist realism. If we want to submit these descriptions to a fair judgement, I think we can say the following: they have staked out what is essential (the decentring), but they have also inverted it into the inessential. The desired art no longer fitted the concepts of real art. The programmatic aspect of Marxist criticism hid the true theoretical bearing of the descriptions and evaluations on the basis of which this programme pretended to establish its truth: a remarkable example of a theoretical project that is literally *foreclosed* by the *normative* productions it enables.

To my knowledge, we owe it to Pierre Macherey to have *problematized* what was *practised* in the chiasmic discordance of description and evaluation. In an article in *La Pensée*, Macherey indeed posits the principle of the irreducibility of the aesthetic process. We should not confuse this process, he declares, either with the theoretical grasping of reality or with the ideological process, even if evidently, in Macherey's own words, the writer 'confronts' ideology:

The analysis of a literary work will use neither the scientific concepts used to describe the historical process, nor ideological concepts. It will require new concepts which can register the literariness of the text.⁷

Going one step further, Macherey introduces explicitly the concept of *reversal* [*retournement*] to characterize the operation to which the work submits the ideological concepts:

The spontaneous ideology ... is not simply reflected by the mirror of the book; ideology is broken, reversed [*retournée*], or turned inside out by it in so far as the elaboration of a specific form gives it a different status from being a state of consciousness.⁸

For Macherey, the artwork is not what *translates* ideology, nor what *effaces* it: it is what renders it *visible*, decipherable, in so far as it confers upon it the discordant unity of a form; exposed as *content*, ideology speaks of that whereof *it cannot speak* as ideology – its contours, its limits. The *mise en œuvre*, as elaboration of a specific form – that is, the assemblage of significations in a network of *signs* – affects ideology so to speak with an *outside* which is its inevitable *reversal*, since the law of ideology's functioning is the *closed infinity* of the specular relation, a closed infinity which cannot *show* its closure without breaking the mirror in which it is reduplicated.

In the metaphor of the *visible*, of ideology not *known* but *shown*, Macherey found the means to indicate, if not operate, the determination of the structural autonomy of the aesthetic process, at the same time as he announced the 'polemical' proximity of art and science.

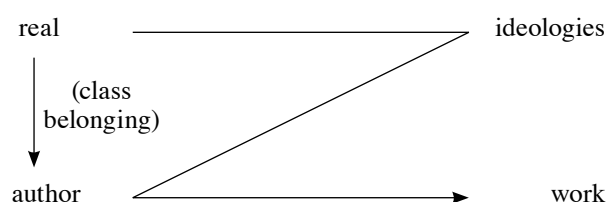
However, I am convinced that Pierre Macherey did not go all the way to the end with his idea. I would like to indicate the reason for this by commenting upon the following dogmatic statement, in which the concept of reversal figures:

Statement 3

We must conceive of the aesthetic process not as a redoubling but as a reversal [*retournement*]. If ideology

produces an imaginary reflection of reality, then the aesthetic effect produces in return [*en retour*] ideology as imaginary reality. We might say that art repeats in the real the ideological repetition of this real. Nevertheless this reversal does not produce the real; it *realizes* its reflection.

Refusing to identify it with knowledge, Macherey nevertheless problematizes the *decentring* of literary production in relation to ideology. How does he schematize this decentring, and what are for him the successive *operations* of aesthetic theory? If I understand him correctly, we must take into consideration not *two* terms (the work and the real), but *four*: to think the relation of the work to the historical real implies the representation of a double unhinging of this relation – the ideological unhinging and the 'topological' unhinging, which concerns the 'place' or point of view of the author. In sum, we would obtain a schema that looks like this:



Let us clearly fix the meaning of the words:

- by *real*, we must understand the global historical structure as it is scientifically determined. For example, in the case of Tolstoy, the real is the product of the combination of four terms in a displaceable structure-in-dominance: landowning aristocracy, bourgeoisie, peasant masses, working class.⁹
- *ideologies* are organized in *series*. The *theory* of ideologies describes them as fragmentary meaningful reflections. They are defined 'by the ensemble of pressures upon the class they represent'.¹⁰ In this way, for example, the peasant ideology reflects the structural position of the peasantry with regard to the economic and cultural domination of the bourgeoisie, the political domination of the landowning aristocracy, and the organizational and theoretical domination of the working class. Thus, it juxtaposes a revolutionary representation of the ends (critique of large landownership) and an archaic representation of the means (evangelical non-violence).
- by *author* we obviously should not understand a creative subjectivity, a projective interiority, and so

on. The author is the concept of a *place*, defined as point of view; that is, *situated* theoretically in the ideological series. Thus, Tolstoy is assigned a *mobile* place, a displaced place: spontaneous representative of the landowning aristocracy, he is a peasant ideologue. Without a doubt this is where Mao's concepts must be invested: being, stand, attitude and culture. In other words, the concept of the author is not a psychological concept, but exclusively a *topological* one.

- the *work*, finally, maintains with its production the specific relation of decentring that is not a *translation* of point of view, but the donation of form and, thus, the exhibition of limits. In this sense, Tolstoy's novels are not treatises in peasant ideology but, in Lenin's expression, the 'mirror' of a Russian revolution that Tolstoy nevertheless could not understand at all.

This is the complex meaning of the schema in Z. And such as it is, this schema answers rather well to the question that Macherey poses with regard to the structure of the problem: 'To study Tolstoy's work consists in showing which relations it maintains with the determinate historical structure.'¹¹ The schema in Z shows that this relation is not diagonal, direct, or even simply mediated by the author. In fact, it is a relation that is doubly decentred:

- by what we might call the ideological 'defile' in which the global historical structure announces itself in the metonymical reflection produced by one of its elements under the 'pressure' of the others;
- by the singular topology in which Tolstoy appears as a displaced element.

If, however, this description does not seem fully satisfying to us, it is because the very question that it poses is not entirely disengaged from an ideological perception of the literary work. Literary theory remains for Macherey the description of a *relation*; that is, the relating of the work's being, or its assemblage of signs, with its (ideological or historical) *outside*. To be sure, Macherey no doubt *deforms* the ordinary schema of ideological critique on two crucial points:

- The work for him is not a totality, but an effective multiplicity of levels.
- The relation of the work to its outside is not causal or analogical, but decentred.

However, more so than a rupture, this is in fact a deformation. And I see a sign of this pre-theoretical character in the fact that Macherey maintains the work

as *pertinent unity* of critical study. For Macherey, whereof we must represent the discrepancy remains, at bottom, the relation real-work, conceived of as the ultimate problematic given.

But in reality it is within his conception of the aesthetic process that we must look for the last obstacle that separates Macherey from the conceptual construction of this very process, as well as for the possibility of this construction. Macherey visibly thinks that art belabours certain ideological contents. Or, again, he places the autonomy of the aesthetic process within the *operators* of transformation, but not in the transformed contents. The discrepancy that can be grasped from within the work itself lies precisely in the fact that there are *heterogeneous* elements or ideological generalities that figure in it: 'The work can only exist if it introduces into itself this alien term which precipitates an internal contradiction.'¹² Within the work there is the *other* as such, shown in its difference. The result is that the mapping of ideological and heterogeneous elements is presupposed in the explanation of the work as the production of a difference. From this point of view, the work remains *internally* related to that from which it differs. We should not be surprised to see that Macherey at this point is capable of retrieving and salvaging the vocabulary of expressive causality: as internal relation to its alterity, as immanent contradiction, the work is the phenomenon of internal difference; and whatever in the work belongs to presence takes its manifest value from that which is not manifested, from that which is kept in absence: 'The absence of certain reflections, or expression – that is the true object of criticism. The mirror, from certain sides, is a blind mirror: but it is still a mirror for all its blindness.'¹³ In my language, I will say that for Macherey, the *effect of presence*¹⁴ is the production of the fact that all ideologically produced meaning can only lie in absence. But the presence of this absence, for its part, can be pinpointed as something alien at the heart of whatever this absence itself renders present. It is its *material*.

I propose to show on the contrary that the autonomy of the aesthetic process blocks us from conceiving it as *relation*. In this process, the effect of presence is not added onto an effect of meaning produced outside of it or, so to speak, *injected* as the witness of difference. Indeed, no element of the process is *by itself* ideological or aesthetic. The problem of the *passage* from ideology to art cannot be posed as such. An element is *produced* as ideological in the structure of the aesthetic mode of production. *Reversal* [*retournement*], rigorously speaking, does not mean that the aesthetic process

produces an effect of the presence of signification (the process, in this case, would work on ideological materials). *Reversal* means that the process produces an effect of signification of presence, with presence itself being an effect of the process. This is why the mode of production of reversal is *doubly* articulated: the effect of signification is *produced* just as much as the effect of presence.

In fact, I myself for a long time committed the same mistake as Macherey. And I believe it consists in a phenomenon that is all too obvious in literary production, which is the existence, within the immediate object, of *separable* ideological contents.

I will call 'separable ideological statement' a statement of the novelistic discourse that fulfils the following three conditions:

- (I) It produces in and of itself a complete effect of signification, without any enclaves.
- (II) It has the logical structure of a universal proposition.
- (III) It is not tied contextually to any subjectivity.

Let us take some examples from Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*:

(a) A statement like 'I am convinced that it is the impenetrable cloud of so-called progress that has brought it down from its arch' fulfils none of the three criteria. It is *absolutely* inseparable:

- The 'I' is an enclave whose sense can only be determined by the context. The statement produces no complete effect of signification.
- It is a singular proposition, with 'individual support'.
- It is a phrase pronounced by Ulrich: It is of the type X [d (Y)]. (X says [or thinks] that Y has such property.)

(b) A statement like 'Automobiles shot out of deep, narrow streets into the shallows of bright squares' or 'The man without qualities whose story is being told was called Ulrich' do not fulfil condition II. They are nonseparable statements. They are of the type d(A) or d(X). (An object, or a character, has such and such property.)

(c) A statement like 'All the psychic disorder of humanity, with its questions always unanswered, attaches itself to each particular question in the most disgusting way' satisfies conditions I and II, but not condition III. It is, in effect, a statement 'in quotation marks', a phrase spoken by Ulrich. Statements of this type can be said to be obliquely inseparable. They are of the type X[S]. (X thinks that such affirmation is universally true.)

(d) Finally, a statement such as 'The voice of truth is always accompanied by fairly suspect parasites, but those who are most interested want to know nothing about it' fulfils all three conditions. It is absolutely separable. We will call it type S.¹⁵

The – frequent – existence of separable statements (of the type S) seems to introduce *within the work* certain ideological witnesses of the difference produced by the work. Such statements indeed owe nothing to the structure of the work. They function in isolation. They thus bear witness, within the literary structure, to that which it is not. Hence, the work appears as the internal indication of its scission, and the essence of its power may well be, as Jacques-Alain Miller indicates in an unpublished text, the fissure it opens in wanting to close itself. Or rather: the fissure that it *operates* in transgressing towards the presence of its own text that which the text signifies anyhow. Indeed, let us compare the status of a statement of type S and a statement of type X[S] – that is, in the examples from Musil:

- (I) 'The voice of truth is always accompanied by rather suspect parasites' (S).
- (II) 'All the disorder of humanity attaches itself to each particular question in the most disgusting fashion' (X [S], thought by Ulrich).

Nothing *separates* them in their logical structure. But their *position* in the structure of novelistic discourse assigns to them two different functions, so that this difference exhibits what separates the novelistic enunciation, in its specific efficacy, from ideological enunciation. In the first case, S is validated as such. It is not accompanied by any outside, except its negation. It is thus produced as *truth*, and requires an evaluation. In the second case, S is *reversed*, since it is differentiated: it is indeed a phrase pronounced by Ulrich. In other words, this time the statement is affected with an *outside*, which is the system of conditions that render possible this enunciation rather than any other *for Ulrich*. The discrimination between the statement and its negation here is not a question of evaluation; it is a question of subjective coherence, which requires the exteriority of the *formula of coherence* proper to the system of novelistic subjectivity. This outside is also, for S, the assignation of a *presence*. This statement is indeed *present* inasmuch as it draws its legitimacy from the novelistic system of 'someone speaks'. This system is the fundamental *backdrop* of its presence.

The gap between S and X[S] in this case would be the product of the novelistic structure. And this gap is testified in the novel itself, by the mention of an S that is not transformed: $S \leftrightarrow X[S]$ would be the

space traversed by the process, the space *figured* in the work itself.

But in reality, I think that this is not the way we must present things. For if S functions entirely in an *ideological* way, then it cannot indicate *from within* the process the effect of this process. Indeed, it is wholly *exterior* to it. Here again we must avoid confusing the object as given (the novel) and the aesthetic process. An absolutely separable statement figures empirically in the object. But it is in principle excluded from what guarantees the intelligibility of this object, since the effect of signification that it produces owes nothing to the law proper to the aesthetic process. In reality, such a statement is *ideologically* produced, and remits to the theory of ideologies. To take seriously the autonomy of the aesthetic process means first of all to reject from this process itself any element of which the theory of ideologies by itself produces the knowledge. And such is, by definition, the case of separable statements.

More generally, we must clearly understand that what the aesthetic practice ‘belabours’, the generalities that it transforms, cannot be heterogeneous elements: the ‘raw material’ of the process of production is itself ‘already’ aesthetic. The aesthetic practice is incapable of aestheticizing ideological elements (for example); on the contrary, it knows how to signify ideologically certain ‘perceptible’ elements, certain specific presences produced according to determinate modes of production. We will make these remarks the object of a fourth dogmatic statement:

Statement 4

What the aesthetic process transforms is *differentially homogeneous* to that which does the transforming. The ‘raw material’ of aesthetic production is already in itself aesthetically produced. The history of art thus possesses a regional autonomy. But this history by no means corresponds to the history of creators or their works. It is the theory of the *formation* and *deformation* of aesthetic generalities.

In order to fix the ideas, let us call $E()$ the function of aesthetic transformation applied to an element (which amounts to saying that the element takes place in a structure and is submitted to the efficacy of structural causality).¹⁶ Let us call i a ‘pure’ ideological element (for example, an absolutely separable statement), e an aesthetic element, s the effect of signification, p the effect of presence. I consider inadequate the following schema:

$$E(i) \rightarrow s, p$$

Heterogeneous elements cannot ‘enter’ as such into the aesthetic process so as to be reversed therein into

presence. Or again: i cannot ‘enter’ into the process unless it is first assigned as aesthetic by the structure. In this way the schema would be the following (with the reservation that we distinguish two operations that in reality are only one):

$$\begin{array}{l} E(i) \rightarrow e \\ \swarrow \\ E(e) \rightarrow p, s \end{array}$$

I will give an example from Fyodor Dostoevsky, a scene from *Demons*, in which Varvara Petrovna chases away the sweet liberal she protects, Stepan Trofimovitch:

this is what amazed me at the time: that he stood up with remarkable dignity ... under Varvara Petrovna’s ‘curse’. Where did he get so much spirit? ... This was a deep, *real* grief, at least in his eyes, for his heart. He had yet another grief at that moment, namely, his own morbid awareness that he had acted basely: this he confessed to me later in all frankness. And a *real, undoubted grief is sometimes capable of making a solid and steadfast man even out of a phenomenally lightminded one, if only for a short time; moreover, real and true grief has sometimes even made fools more intelligent, also only for a time, of course; grief has this property*. And, if so, then what might transpire with a man like Stepan Trofimovich? A whole revolution – also, of course, only for a time.

He made a dignified bow to Varvara Petrovna without uttering a word...¹⁷

It is clear that the italicized passage is a separable segment, a statement of the type S. By this we understand that it could figure as such in a collection of maxims, since it states the general properties of grief; and that nothing *in it* announces the singularity, the *presence* of the novelistic effect: it is an abstract proposition.

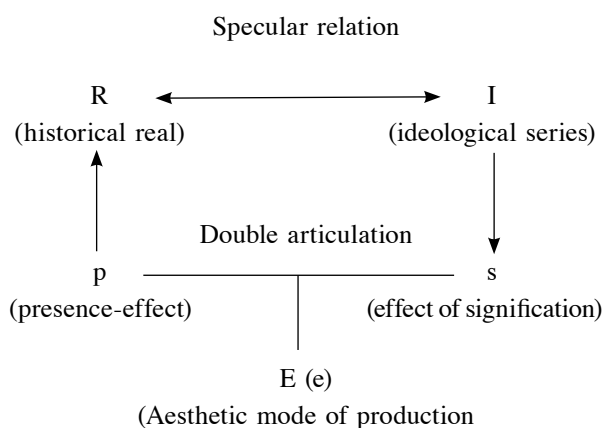
Under which conditions, though, does this segment figure in a scene from a novel? What is the rule of possibility for its novelistic pertinence? It is clear that at the end of the paragraph the ideological universality of the statement appears as the means for a determinate gesture on behalf of Stepan Trofimovich, as a condition for the plausibility of this gesture. But precisely the presenting of the ideological universal in the ‘exit’ of the character requires a pre-transformation: the ‘primary’ aestheticization of this element is assured by the syntactical anchorings that free it from its ideological self-sufficiency: the initial ‘And’ and the final ‘And, if so’ are what transforms the ideological closure of the separable statement into an opening for presenting itself in the process as being *already* transformed.

We have – in a linear fashion – the following mode of occurrence:

X [d(X)] – And ... S – Thus – d(X)

The marginal anchorings of S do not affect its separability so far as the content is concerned. But, *by opening it up to inseparable statements, they produce a formal effacement of this separability.* We could make use of a topological comparison.¹⁸ One and the ‘same’ interval can be considered either as open]a,b[or as closed [a,b]. A closed interval is, so to speak, signed by its borders and contained by them. On the other hand, an open one plunged into a straight line no longer has anything to distinguish it. We will say that a separable statement enters into the homogeneity of the aesthetic process only if it is *open*, in the sense that it is certainly closed but *no longer contains its closure*. In the example above, the element i, delivered from its closure by the syntactical anchors, is an element e. It thus can function in turn in the production of the scene’s effect of presence: in fact, in its open form, it is entirely *reversed* in the end in the dignity with which Stepan makes a bow. This gesture contains in its presence the implication of the intelligence of grief. It is the presence of the opened-up generality.

You can see how we seek to preserve the autonomy of the aesthetic process. No doubt, presence is a reality effect. No doubt, too, signification refers in the final instance (at the level of its ‘reception’) to the ideological series. But the *double effect* is articulated in a way that is homogeneous within the aesthetic process, without allowing generalities of another order to enter and remain in it. Thus, we should replace Macherey’s schema in Z with the following problematic schema:



On this basis we could develop the theory of aesthetic modes of production, or simply: theoretical aesthetics. Here it is not possible to give an idea of the problems

that would be raised in still so evanescent a discipline. But since I started with dogmatic statements, I will end in the same way, conscious though I am of having opened up many more enigmas than I have tried to solve.

Statement 5

By aesthetic mode of production we understand the combination of factors whose effect is to *operate* the reversal. To operate the reversal means to give an ideological function to certain real-imaginary elements that are regionally produced by a historically determined state of the aesthetic process.

Statement 6

To be more precise: an aesthetic mode of production is an invariant and invisible structure that distributes ways of linking real elements in such a way that these elements can *function* as ideological.

Remark: An aesthetic mode of production by no means is an *art*, like music or painting. Modes of production are transversal to the classification of the arts. Figurative space, for which Pierre Francastel in *Peinture et société* seeks to establish the genealogy, is a mode of production, not painting in general. Similarly, the tonal system, the metric system of Greek verse, and the system of novelistic subjectivity are, no doubt, modes of production.

Statement 7

An aesthetic mode of production is manifested in a double articulation:

- that which assembles the operators of transformation [presence-effect];
- that which concerns elements transformed by the place prescribed to them by the operators [effect of signification].

But the structural reality of the mode of production lies in the mechanism by which the first ‘encounter’ the second. Indeed, the operators are nowhere given other than in the elements, since the structure as such is invisible. There is thus a vectorial, or oriented, reality to the process of production: one can figure it as a ‘field’ in which are *distinguished* two hierarchical regions. One is the region of the operators, the other the region of the thematic elements. But the operators are themselves thematic so that their presence in the structured field is simply given as the encounter, or *double function*, with the characteristic asymmetry that makes it such that the first function renders

possible the second, according to a rule (the visible i) that is the structure itself.

Statement 8

The theory of an aesthetic mode of production supposes:

- (I) The definition of its elementary articulation.
- (II) The synchronic law of its effect (production of a new reality as ideological).
- (III) The diachronic law of the conditions for the *conservation* of its efficacy. (A real element that is 'ideologized' indeed risks henceforth becoming ideologically repeated – that is, *non-transformed*. In that case, it remains undoubtedly ideological, but the process that integrates it into 'the work of art' is itself ideological and not aesthetic. Or again, within the aesthetic process itself, the ideological element functions as such *on its own*.)

Statement 9

The complete intelligibility of an aesthetic mode of production presupposes that one conceives of its *genealogy*; that is to say, the process of the dissolution of the mode, anterior or contemporary to it, whose elements are rearticulated in the mode under investigation.

Translated by Bruno Bosteels

Notes

1. This tradition is strong enough to bring Louis Althusser in 1963 to write 'ideology, whether religious, political, moral, juridical or artistic', in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, Verso, London, 1990, p. 167.
2. V.I. Lenin, 'Letter to Inessa Armand', in *Collected Works*, vol. 35, Progress, Moscow, 1976, pp. 144–5. Also available in *Lenin on Literature and Art*, Wildside Press, Rockville MD, 2008, p. 178.
3. Mao Zedong, 'On New Democracy' (January 1940), in *Selected Works*, vol. 2, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1965, p. 381.
4. V.I. Lenin, 'A Letter to M. Gorky' (1942), in *Collected Works*, vol. 13, Progress, Moscow: 1972, pp. 448–54.
5. Mao Zedong, 'Talks at the Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art' (May 1942), in *Selected Works*, vol. 3, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1965, pp. 69–98.
6. See Maxim Gorky's recollection in *Lenin on Literature and Art*, p. 226.
7. Pierre Macherey, 'Lénine critique de Tolstoï', *La Pensée* 121, June 1965; 'Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy', in *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978, p. 119.
8. Macherey, 'Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy', pp. 132–3 (translation modified, as the English version skips precisely the term for *retournement*).

9. For the concept of structure-in-dominance, see Althusser, *For Marx*, pp. 200–218.
10. Macherey, 'Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy', p. 115 (translation modified).
11. Ibid., p. 112 (translation modified).
12. Ibid., p. 127.
13. Ibid., p. 128 (translation modified).
14. Cf. *infra*. For me, the aesthetic effect is the *presence* of a signification.
15. See Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995. Elsewhere I will try to show that the specific efficacy of novelistic subjectivity, conceived as aesthetic mode of production, is attached to obliquely inseparable statements, of the type X [...S...]. In this case, indeed, the *inseparability* of the ideological statement S is not automatic; it is a *result* that depends on a complex series of conditions. In other words, it is possible for the statement S actually to function as separable, if it falls within the domain of a subjectivity.
16. The theory of structural causality is still very obscure. My impression is that such a theory is impossible, if one pretends to provide it with formal models. It is to be feared that only *regional* theories are possible. From this point of view, and different from Althusser, I fear grave difficulties in the 'passage' from historical materialism to dialectical materialism.
17. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994, p. 201.
18. I say: a comparison. The epistemological status of topology in psychoanalysis and in the theory of the signifier is, according to Jacques Lacan, much more ambitious. It is 'really', and not as a figure, that the relation of signifier/signified can be seen as presented in the Möbius strip. Allow me to find this affirmation adventurous. For if it is a matter of a real identity, we will have to announce clearly that henceforth the theory of the signifier is a branch of topology, a special mathematics. Conversely, if what is at stake is a resemblance, a metaphor, this should not make one think that this theory has been furnished with the slightest bit of supplementary scientificity. Gaston Bachelard, whose teaching remains unknown in spite of all the hat tipping to which he is subject, has shown that the relation of mathematics to the sciences that rely on it is neither a relation of identity, nor a relation of analogy, nor finally an instrumental one. Between the Möbius strip and Saussure's doctrine, between the signifying chain and the algorithm with which Gottlob Frege tries – moreover in vain – to construct number, we are far from tying specific relations that would guarantee the rigour of a new object-of-knowledge. For in each case, either what is operating is merely an impotent *image* or else what we find, not as *produced* but as unsuccessfully *translated* – that is, repeated – is only the rigour of the first object: the mathematical object.