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A Dead Dog is Immortal. On Louis Althusser, Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes

(Texte établi et annoté par G.M. Goshgarian, Préface de Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France)

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Trans. Vanessa Brutsche

1.

The expression “an author without an oeuvre” appears quite frequently in Louis Althusser’s writings, across different periods. It appears notably in the *Initiation into Philosophy for Non Philosophers (Initiation)*, a work from the late 70s that was practically completed but left unpublished by Althusser, and was recently published by PUF. But this formulation “author without an oeuvre” must be linked to another series of signifiers that emerge from the semantic field – a favorite of Althusser’s – of “remnant,” “discard” and “residue.” This field of signifiers is also inscribed in the Althusserian thesis of the rejection of all forms of teleology. At this point we must emphasize the two ways the rejection of teleology works in Althusser’s thought: an absolute or Spinozist rejection, which denies ends in the name of the absolute nature of power, whether that of God or of the finite world, this “Deus quatenus...”; and a relative rejection derived from Malebranche, which opposes teleology by invoking the simply accidental nature of the causes of this world in relation to the true cause, which could only be divine. The waste product in the second case would be all the missed opportunities, all the possible causes that remained without effect. Thus, the two different ways in which teleology is rejected in the name of an absolute cause, whether immanent (Spinozist) or absent (Malebranchian). Malebranche, re-read by Althusser, includes among these missed opportunities all the phenomena that elude the principle of finalist reason, like the rain that falls upon the sea or sand.¹ There are thus beings that produce no effect or that are prevented

¹ “Malebranche wondered ‘why it rains upon sands, upon highways and seas,’ since this water from the sky which, elsewhere, waters crops (and that is very good) adds nothing to the water of the sea, or goes to waste on the roads and beaches.” Louis Althusser, *The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter* (1982), in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, Trans. G. M. Goshgarian, p. 167.

The Malebranche text reads: “God makes it rain in order to make the earth fertile, and yet it rains upon sands and upon the sea; it rains on highways: it also rains on uncultivated land. Is it not obvious by all this

from producing the effect proper to them. As Althusser will write in *Initiation*, materialist philosophy is characterized by “the affirmation that there exist many things in the world without meaning or use, [...] absolute losses (which are never compensated), failures without recourse, events without meaning or result, undertakings and even entire civilizations that fail and are lost in the nothingness of history, without leaving any trace, like these great rivers that disappear into the sands of the desert.”² This would also hold true, according to Louis Althusser, for the author “without an oeuvre.”

2.

We might wonder, moreover, what an “author without an oeuvre” could be, as the two elements of the binomial constituted by the oeuvre and its author, the author and his oeuvre, seem so inseparable. An author without an oeuvre would be either an author whose production simply does not exist, or one whose works are not his “own”, being nothing but the effect of radically external conditions of existence and production. There is a third case, which is that of the author whose works have vanished, destroyed by the author himself or by his enemies, or simply forgotten, buried by the passage of time, left to the “gnawing criticism of the mice,” in the words of Marx and Engels. The latter case is common in the history of materialism, a philosophical tendency that is essentially underground and against the current. We know the cases of Democritus and Epicurus, whose extant works are made up of meager fragments, the rest having met the fate of the rain that fell into the sea. This is probably also, at least partially, the case of Louis Althusser who, while describing the tragic fate of his friend Jacques Martin,³ is in fact telling us about himself as the melancholy figure of the philosopher without an oeuvre. However, this last interpretation regarding Althusser must not be understood to the exclusion of the two others we have just evoked: the “unproperty” (*impropreté*) of the oeuvre – which Althusser does not fail to recognize, as a critic of the concepts of subject and author – is connected to the unrealized projects, or the works that probably exist but of which we have no trace, perhaps also the large number of unpublished works gathered today in the Althusser collection at IMEC.

that God does not act according to particular wills?” My translation. From *Méditations chrétiennes et métaphysiques*, à Lyon, chez Léonard Plaignard, 1707, Méditation XIV, p. 238.

² Louis Althusser, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, Paris Presses Universitaires de France, 2014, p. 76. All translations from this text are mine.

³ On Jacques Martin, cf. Yann Moulier Boutang, *Louis Althusser-Une biographie*, 1. La formation du mythe, Paris, Grasset, 1992, Chapitre IX « Le jeu des perles de verre ».

3.

Initiation is quite a strange object. On one hand, the reader who is familiar with the work of Louis Althusser is surprised to discover in his hands the first true book written by Louis Althusser – in any case the first one that was published – since the rest of his works are essays in a shorter format, like those dedicated to Montesquieu or Rousseau, sparse texts or articles, sometimes collected in books like *For Marx*, *Positions*, or *Essays in Self-Criticism*, even contributions to seminars published with those of other participants as in *Reading Capital*, or written lectures, or just lecture notes. Thus, we are dealing with the first publication of a ‘real’ book by Althusser conceived as such. The fact that this book was not published by Althusser, despite the completed state of the manuscript, is understandably surprising for his editor, G. M. Goshgarian⁴, who also translated Althusser’s works into English. This surprise must be contextualized and relativized. Althusser voluntarily declined to publish many of his texts. A simple consultation of the catalog of the Althusser collection at IMEC held at the Ardennes Abbey reveals, in fact, the existence of numerous ‘real’ books that remain unpublished. Often the texts were not published by Althusser – as in the notable case of another large and nearly completed book, *Black Cows* – for reasons having to do with the general political conjuncture, or the internal political conjuncture of the PCF, and others for reasons having more to do with the “philosophical conjuncture”⁵. We could consider Althusser’s non-publication of *Initiation* as indicative of the profound crisis of Marxism – and the Althusserian problematic itself – at the end of the 1970s, and of which this book is symptomatic. In contrast with the relative confidence displayed in the first major texts of Althusserianism, from *Reading Capital* to *Response to John Lewis*, the crisis of Marxism is present and active in *Initiation*. The numerous allusions in the text to an eventual “last chance” to save Marxism – the encounter of the works of Marx and the labor movement that produced such extraordinary political and theoretical effects, but whose power diminished after the “post-Stalin” moment of the early 1960s, then the “post-68” moment – already foreshadow some of his other texts of the

⁴ “We do not know why Althusser chose not to publish *Initiation to Philosophy*, despite the state of near-completion evidenced by the text, presented here for the first time.” G. M. Goshgarian, Editor’s Note, in Louis Althusser, *Initiation*, p. 40.

⁵ Cf. Louis Althusser, *The Philosophical Conjuncture and Marxist Theoretical Research* (26 June 1966), in Louis Althusser, *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings (1966-67)*, Trans. G. M. Goshgarian. London, Verso, 2003, p. 1-18.

same period that openly break with the PCF line, like *What Must Change in the Party* (1978) or the lecture at the Venice conference of 1977, *The Crisis of Marxism*.

4.

Initiation, by its title and certain aspects of its exposition, could have the soothing nature of a textbook, a textbook meant to serve as the ‘popular’ account of the glory days of Marxism, enriched by the effects of the “return to Marx.” It is clear that Althusser and his circle conceived of the project of a textbook on Marxism or Marxist philosophy several times, and that it never resulted in anything. A project of this kind was in the process of being presented to a Cuban audience, but nothing was produced. However, it was in the Latino-American Althusserian circle that the true “textbook” of Althusserian Marxism appeared: Marta Harnecker’s *Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism*. This is not a textbook of Marxist philosophy, but faithful to its Althusserian inspiration, it contains, beyond the concepts and propositions of historical materialism, the theses of “dialectical materialism” that lead the way to this theory of history.

Initiation, however, is very clearly situated on the side of philosophy, which divides over the course of the text into philosophy as such, materialist philosophy, and Marxist philosophy. Yet, throughout the book, two levels of language coexist: the old “dogmatic language” of the Marxism of the PCF and another discourse that manipulates that language from the inside and transforms it into something entirely different. Indeed, the “return to Marx” invoked by Althusser is not a philological return to Marxian texts; Althusser was never a “Marxologist.” If there is a return, it is the philosophical “return” to some theses of Marx and Engels that are of strategic value and that are then reinterpreted, even diverted (in an almost Debordian sense) by Louis Althusser. Yet these theses are expressed in the principal signifiers of the “Marxism” of the Second and Third International and of Stalinism in particular, even Zhdanovism: the “primacy of practice,” or even of “politics” over “theory,” the “determination in the last instance by the economy,” the leading and unifying role of the Party, etc. Everything is there, or at least seems to be, except that everything is uniformly subverted by displacements and slippages of these signifiers, which end up meaning something entirely different from what is expected. What Raymond Aron called “imaginary Marxism”⁶ in his acerbic critique of Althusser becomes in the text of

⁶ Raymond Aron, *Marxismes imaginaires. D'une Sainte Famille à l'autre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970.

Initiation a veritable “imaginary Stalinism,” in which a “return” to Marxist or more generally materialist theses, or even the production of such theses, takes place beneath the Stalinist Marxist text.

Althusser’s method here, as in many other parts of his oeuvre, evokes that of Spinoza, which consists of an infiltration of the language of the theoretical adversary that, even while respecting its terms, manages to disrupt it from top to bottom. This is precisely what Spinoza does in *Ethics* with Cartesian philosophy and the whole of the Western metaphysical tradition, but also what he does much more openly in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* with the text of the Scripture. A technique of philosophical “imposture” or “Marranism” is at work in Althusser, but this technique is not the art of manipulation, but rather a method of truth production from the very inside of ideology. Under these conditions, *Initiation* cannot therefore be a textbook: a textbook is constructed according to the straightforward order of ideas in a finished doctrine, while in Althusser’s book we find ourselves confronted with another order, the order of polemic invention, of the infiltration and occupation of enemy territory, which does not resemble simple analysis, but brings antagonism into the very heart of the theory.

5.

If *Initiation*, shot through with this tension (that we will attempt to illustrate with some examples), cannot be a textbook, it remains nevertheless an *Initiation*, in another sense of the term. It does not have so much to do with a simple “introduction”, however, but resembles the initiation rite, this very particular practice that, from Aristotle’s *Protrepticus*, to the Cartesian *Meditations*, then to the introduction to Spinoza’s *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, controls the entrance into philosophy. If the declared – and quite modest – goal of the book is to contribute to the ability of non-philosophers to “get a sense of what philosophy is”, the methods mobilized to attain this goal will be numerous and, to a great degree, unexpected. An initiation into philosophy is just as difficult – to later prove to be so simple! – as any initiation: it “suffices,” in fact, to leave the world in which one recognizes oneself, and to move into another order of reality. And yet, there is no mysticism in this Spinozist and Machiavellian that is Louis Althusser. At the end of the journey of initiation, we will regain the same world we had at the beginning, but we will see it, once we are initiated “into” philosophy, from another point of view, in a more complete and more concrete form of abstraction.

Initiation is addressed to non-philosophers. To talk about philosophy, it is necessary to adopt the point of view of this outside – that will prove to be constitutive – of philosophical discourse: the “spontaneous philosophies”⁷ of people who are concerned with something completely different from philosophy. In particular, this means the point of view of those who seem to be most distant from philosophy: workers. Althusser’s gesture here evokes that of Machiavelli who, to talk about the Prince, occupies the people’s point of view in order to avoid any mystification and to most closely attain the “*verità effettuale*”.⁸ Philosophy – like politics, for that matter – can only be approached “materially” from the outside. Refusing any conception of philosophy that would allow it to claim that it subsumes the diversity of reality and practices under universal principles, and to deny to philosophy – as to the subject, whether a philosopher or not – any “rich” interiority and any original intentionality, Althusser seeks to understand what philosophy is “from the outside”. Philosophy is not the queen of the sciences nor of practices and neither is it their servant, but is a particular practice in “theory” that will be overdetermined by all the other practices and the other domains of reality – even those that it pretends, haughtily, to ignore. It is through these realities and these practices – which constitute what Althusser calls “non-philosophy” and which are systematically ignored by idealist philosophies (matter, work, the body, women, children, madness, prisoners, State power, class struggle, war...) – that Althusser engages the non-philosopher in a long detour. This detour recalls the Platonic or Hegelian journey, with the minor difference that it is carried out by our author on the basis of a materialist theory of history that always puts into relief the exteriority of the journey in relation to a supposed origin or subject. This “exterior” journey is indispensable to anyone who wants to go beyond an abstract conception of philosophy. Without this journey, without this study of the different instances and practices that constitute philosophy’s very conditions of existence, the risk is great that, being too hasty, one might pass from a spontaneous philosophy of the average man, (or what amounts to the same thing: ideology), to idealist positions that work to give meaning and coherence to ideology. The risk is great that vulgar abstraction will nourish

⁷ The expression “spontaneous philosophy” was first produced by Althusser in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of Scientists* (1967) regarding the spontaneous ideology of scientific practice. In *Initiation*, the term’s usage is more general and is associated with the Gramscian idea that “every man is a philosopher”.

⁸ In Italian in original. –Trans.

the “scientific” abstraction that lends it ideological coherence in the circle of specular recognition that characterizes idealist philosophy.

6.

It is thus through religion, other ideologies, and different practices, whether productive or discursive, that the journey of this “non introduction” must pass, which does not lead to the inside of philosophy (in the sense of a classical *eisagoge*) but always leads back towards an outside as towards its constitutive space. This outside, constituted by practices that give flesh and blood to the human condition, will be considered under the auspices of production (*sub quadam specie productionis*), production serving as matrix to all other practices. Production (*poiesis* in the Aristotelian sense) is only opposed to *praxis* in a tension where the two converge. The majority of the practices examined are considered from the point of view of production as a process resulting from the assemblage of a primary material, a labor force and a set of instruments – that is, the action of an agent upon an external material by means of instruments, which constituted Aristotelian *poiesis*. But regarding ideology, science, or politics, or even philosophy itself, Althusser must recognize that *poiesis* and *praxis* cannot be differentiated, since the agent and the material coincide, and as Aristotle says, illustrating *praxis* with a now-classic example, “the doctor heals himself.”

Among all these practices, two will be decisive with regard to philosophy: scientific practice and political practice. These are two practices that would be opposed, according to the dominant current of philosophy: the neutrality of science seems incompatible with political engagement. Plato himself had to explain in the *Seventh Letter* how he had had to abandon all political preoccupations in order to devote himself to philosophy. Yet for Althusser, science is not born of nothing, but always emerges from an ideological space saturated and sutured by ideology, and especially by religious ideology, which earns a chapter to itself in *Initiation* due to its status as the first great ideology, this ideology “that has always existed, even in the first communal, so-called ‘primitive’ societies.”⁹ Science, at the moment of its birth, had to establish and hold its position in the face of religion’s dominance. As a Spinozist, Althusser recognizes in the mathematical geometry of the Greeks this irruption of a new discourse, without which the delirium of teleology would have reigned unchallenged.¹⁰ However, this irruption did not occur

⁹ *Initiation* p. 61

¹⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, I, Appendix.

painlessly and required a veritable battle in the name of science and the freedom of its practice. But the battle for science is a battle in ideology – it is not a simple and immediate effect of scientific discourse, as an uninformed reader of Spinoza’s text might think. The battle through which science conquers its place in the order of discourse is not a scientific one, since science does not fight: it does not produce theses (the taking of positions), but concepts and demonstrations. The first scientists, those who produced Greek mathematics, were thus often philosophers as well, like Thales or Pythagorus, to the extent that they had to open the field of scientific practice, and keep it open – by means of another gesture, one that did not come from science.

7.

Scientific practice, as it is conceived from the point of view of materialism, is a process of production engaging from the beginning “a given primary material, a specific labor force, and existing instruments of production.”¹¹ The raw material of science, then, is “a mixture of material objects and of representations, both non-scientific and already scientific, according to the degree of development of the science.” Scientific practice thus investigates a given that, at least in part, belongs to the set of ideological representations already in effect and which, along with the results that science has already acquired (when it exists) and certain instruments of work or measurement, serve as the foundation to a process of transformation. Since these basic elements are all taken out of their “natural” or social context, they constitute a first level of abstraction or generality (Generalities I) which will be reworked by the hypotheses and instruments of a second level (Generalities II), in order to produce results in terms of new knowledge (Generalities III). It must be noted that everything in this process takes place on the level of abstraction, even when scientific practice, in its experimental practice, “touches on” objects, since it always does so through instruments of observation that, in Bachelard’s words, are nothing but “materialized theories.” In the transformation of this raw material into new knowledge, the “researcher” is not an origin, since his entire practice is embedded in a process that he does not determine. Scientific practice is thus a “process without a subject”, not in the sense that it can do without an agent, but because it is the process that determines the agent, not the inverse. Finally, this scientific practice is a practice of science on itself, a process that is immanent to science itself, not as abstract theory, but as social practice.

¹¹ *Initiation* p. 201

All this is not new in Althusser's work, since these same theses had already been produced in *For Marx* and *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of Scientists*. What is new, however, is the taking into account of the decisive role of ideology, whether it be as a primary material of scientific practice or even on the level of results, of "new knowledge." Even in science, there is no pure truth of ideology: the science–ideology break that had characterized Althusser's theoretician phase is neither absolute nor irreversible. In fact, if there can be something new in science despite the fact that it only works upon itself, it is because "it works on a contradictory object, for the theory that works upon itself, at the most, does not work on a theory that would have eliminated any self-contradiction, that is to say, that would have arrived at a final knowledge of its object. On the contrary, it is an unfinished theory that works on its own incompleteness, and which takes from this game, this gap, this contradiction, what it needs to go further, to exceed the knowledge already attained – what it needs to develop."¹² There is always impurity even in science itself, as scientific practice is embedded in a general social context that can only be dominated by ideology.

Science, of course, is at stake in a permanent battle between the philosophical positions that influence what Althusser will call, pushing even further his metaphor of production, "the philosophical relations of theoretical production." Science, partially disengaged from ideology by its own practice, is, after all, always mixed with ideological elements. The two great founding positions of philosophy – materialism and idealism – are determined contradictorily in relation to science: idealism seeks to reduce or suture the breach produced in ideology (which is a system of recognitions) by the emergence of a rational practice of knowledge production. Materialism, on the contrary, attempts to open this breach and to widen it in order to liberate scientific practice and not subject it to the ideological constraints of the reproduction of the social order. Science as such is not neutral: it is shot through with social and political tensions that represent, at the level of science, the class struggle that traverses the entirety of society.

8.

In philosophy, as "class struggle in theory," there is another practice at stake besides science that is determined by class struggle "as such": politics. In political practice, what is at stake is none other than the dictatorship of class.

¹² *Initiation* p. 210

In a class society, the appropriation of the means of production and of the surplus by the dominant class initially takes place through violent means, and violence remains the last resort for maintaining the relations of production founded on this expropriation. Violence is thus a decisive element of class dictatorship, but it is not the only aspect: every class society must also ensure the obedience of the dominated. This is true of all societies that are divided by class, but even more so of capitalism. Under capitalism, political domination and exploitation are separate. As a result, the political power of the bourgeoisie does not appear as direct power over the dominated class, but as State power in which the members of this class intervene as citizens. “We can say, then,” maintains Althusser, “that the particularity of the political practice of the bourgeoisie (radically different in this way from the political practice of feudalism and the political practice of the proletariat) has always been and remains *to act through intermediaries, more precisely through the mediating action of the class or a part of the class that it exploits and dominates.*”¹³ This mobilization of the exploited in favor of their own political domination could not happen without their consent.

Obtaining this consent is the role of ideology and ideological State apparatuses, which are its material vector. Faced with this political practice of the bourgeoisie, the proletariat was able to take advantage of another political practice with more direct and democratic forms of organization and intervention: “proletarian political organizations tend towards the greatest democracy of discussion, decision, and execution, **even if this tradition can also be lost**”.¹⁴ Althusser is thus perfectly aware of the fact that the democratic practices of proletarian organizations, just like the freedom of rational scientific practice, “can be lost” in the sense that the pressure of the political and ideological environment marked by the dictatorship of the dominant class is exerted even within “liberated” practices. Still, aside from proletarian organizations, proletarian ideology distinguishes itself from bourgeois ideology by means of its content and its functions. If everything bourgeois ideology enacts tends to obscure the reality of the relations of production and its class dictatorship, the proletariat, having incorporated a scientific doctrine as ideology – Marx’s historical materialism – will be in a position to illuminate these relations of production and the class struggle that underlies them. The freedom claimed by workers’ organizations will

¹³ *Initiation*, p. 272.

¹⁴ *Initiation*, p. 272.

thus be paralleled by a new space of freedom to defend: that of a free scientific practice that, paradoxically, serves as ideology. It is only through great struggle that this freedom will be preserved. This struggle will be at stake in a new, materialist practice of philosophy.

9.

Philosophy is situated between science and politics. As such, it has no object, but it does have stakes, just like politics itself, of which philosophy is the representative in theory. Philosophy, then, is a particular practice of theory that is not so much in the realm of knowledge as it is in the realm of action and struggle. Philosophy is expressed by “theses” and Althusser is quite aware of the military orientation of the semantic field of ‘thesis’ and ‘theme’ in Greek. They are positions – positions facing an enemy, or taken or conquered from an enemy. But philosophical combat, as Althusser conceptualizes it, is not a Clausewitzian war in which everything depends on one decisive battle. The philosophical battle was schematized by the Engelsian vulgate – whose terms Althusser recuperates – as a confrontation between materialism and idealism. Philosophy, then, is the site of a perpetual confrontation of these two tendencies: a materialism whose own stake is the liberation of scientific practice and other practices, and an idealism that seeks to suture the ideological field, whose coherence is put into question by the rational practice of science and class struggle. Materialism presents itself as a “philosophy of work and struggle, an active philosophy”¹⁵, as opposed to idealism, which is dominated by a contemplative character: “contrary to idealism, which is a philosophy of theory, materialism is a philosophy of practice”.¹⁶

If, in a statement that Engels would not have denied, Althusser tells us that “the history of all of philosophy is none other than the endless struggle of idealism against materialism”¹⁷, this struggle is by no means a battle between preexisting adversaries. In *Response to John Lewis*, we learned that class struggle is not equivalent to a “rugby match” in which the rival teams would not only exist, but would be in position, uniformed, and ready for confrontation, well before the match. Rather, it is a confrontation within which the two battling classes are defined as such. The same goes for philosophy, this practice occupying the place of class struggle in theory:

¹⁵ *Initiation*, p. 85

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Initiation*, p. 323

“every philosophy is nothing but the more-or-less-completed realization of one of two antagonistic tendencies: the idealist tendency and the materialist tendency. And it is in each philosophy that not only the tendency, but the contradiction of the two tendencies is realized.”¹⁸ Not only is Philosophy in general a battlefield (*Kampfplatz*, in the words of Kant), but each individual philosophy is a battlefield within itself. There is no idealism, no materialism that exists “as a whole”, but an endless battle in which the lines blur, with the effect that “every philosophy carries within it, so to speak, its own enemy defeated beforehand, to whose comments it responds beforehand, that it places beforehand in the enemy’s *dispositif*, and then reworks its own, in order to be capable of this absorption”¹⁹. Althusser describes here the contamination that, unfailingly, is produced in battle, but also the practices of “immunity” by which each philosophy protects itself from the influence of the other. We are not in the framework of a Clausewitzian game, where everything would play out in a decisive confrontation, but in a game of reciprocal investments and preparations for the final battle that, as in the game of “Go” or the Taoist art of war, never really takes place. No “pure philosophy”, then, and no clear limits to materialism and idealism, but an endless battle. It is in this sense that philosophy, the site of an endless battle, has no internal “history,” even while remaining embedded in the “external” history of class struggle and social formations.

10.

The Marxist philosophy that Althusser defends is presented as a practice of struggle, a combat sport in theory, and nothing like a pure theory. Lacking an object comparable to that of the sciences, it comes down to the taking of positions, to permanent dividing lines, the stakes of which are external. Philosophy is thus defined, in its materialist practice, by the outside in which it acts and produces its own effects. This outside, after the encounter of Marxism and the workers’ movement, can be known (thanks to the science of history) as the theory of social formations founded by Marx. Unlike all other philosophies, which cannot theoretically master their outside and are fated to ignore it, the Marxist philosophy that Althusser still calls “dialectical materialism” is supposed to be enlightened about its outside. Yet, ever since *For Marx*, whose preface provides an exhausting account of the results of the Stalinist period, we are aware of the extent to which the knowledge of real circumstances proved difficult for the workers’ movement, just when

¹⁸ *Initiation*, p. 323

¹⁹ *Initiation*, p. 324-325

“completed socialism” should have permitted the greatest development of this transparency of society and of history to themselves that historical materialism promised. The same paradoxical obstacle to historical and social knowledge is found on the side of working class political organizations, which are equally unable to conceive of the class struggle by which they are nevertheless inevitably marked. The social and organizational circumstances that should have favored open debate and research into the science of Marx proved to be the most resistant. In the 70s, everyone is aware of the repressive reality and practices of real Socialist countries, which are even the target of condemnation on the part of Western Communist Parties. “But,” Althusser tells us, “no Communist party – neither the CPSU, nor even the Western parties – has had the elementary political courage to attempt to analyse the causes of a history some of whose effects these parties have denounced.”²⁰

11.

Althusser thus finds himself confronted with a paradox: Marxist philosophy, on one hand, must account for the results of the Marxist theory of class struggle, which gives it the considerable advantage of being able to better combat ideology by understanding its origin “scientifically” – since truth is, in the words of Spinoza, “the index of itself and of what is false.” On the other hand, this theory of class struggle is embedded, like ideology, in the heart of political or state apparatuses that make it their ideological principle of unification. Thus, the very organizations that support Marxist theory are, fatally, the same ones that also cause it to degenerate and prevent the extension of the relative transparency of Marxist philosophy to itself. The relationship between Marxism and its political or state organizations still has a certain theological dimension for Althusser. The encounter of the workers’ movement and Marx’s theory is described elsewhere as “the greatest event of all time”, in the sense that this encounter allows the proletariat to possess the science of social formations that would render society transparent to itself. This great event shows the persistence of an ideal of “scientific socialism” for Althusser in this period, along with this authentic “incarnation” or “epiphany” of scientific socialism that is the existence of socialist countries. Of course, the fusion between Marxism and the workers’ movement is conceptualized as an aleatory encounter and not a “providential” phenomenon, but it is still dominated by a certain ideal of transparency. The philosophical work undertaken in *Initiation* leads towards a theoretical

²⁰ Louis Althusser, *Marx in his Limits*, in *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, p. 9.

elaboration of the aleatory nature of the encounter and towards a critique of transparency. These two elements will allow Althusser to think through both the extent and the limits of a materialist history and the very possibility of a politics. For this, he will have to accord full importance to ideology as an insurmountable horizon of human existence, and to a theory of the conjuncture, founded on the definitive primacy of the conjuncture (of the encounter) on structure. However, these new theoretical stakes will no longer be the stakes of a “Marxist philosophy,” but of a “Marxist practice of philosophy,” a practice that extends today into a vast work program on aleatory materialism, the politics of the conjuncture, and the transindividual. Like Marx, or Hegel, or Spinoza before him, Louis Althusser was taken for a “dead dog”: the work program that he leaves to materialist philosophy shows us the extent to which this description of “dead dog” has become a form of praise. A dead dog cannot die.