Fateful rendezvous

The young Althusser

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> I enclose…a picture of the Dijon railwaymen which appeared in *L'Humanité*… I hope that people, observing the calm strength and dignity of these men, will not one day say of us that 'the philosopher missed his rendezvous with the railwaymen'.
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> *Louis Althusser, letter to Jean Lacroix, 1949–50*

Reviewing the English translation of Althusser's 'confessions' in these pages three years ago, David Macey noted that '[t]he death of the philosopher has led to a resurrection of his writings.'[1] In addition to *L'Avenir dure longtemps* (1992), the 'posthumous edition' at that stage contained a prison journal and a collection on psychoanalysis. Together with the first instalment of Yann Moulier Boutang's comprehensive biography, these disclosed the existence of a hitherto unknown Althusser. Since then, a further six volumes have appeared; more are in preparation. If only because they exceed in quantity the material released during their author's lifetime – a rough estimate indicates some three thousand pages as against approximately two thousand – it will take considerable critical effort to acquire an adequate perspective on them, and begin the reassessment of Althusser to which Macey alludes.

Meanwhile, an Anglophone readership must await the halting, uneven process of partial translation. To date, a mere fraction of the new material has been made available in English: a careless version of the autobiography, *The Future Lasts a Long Time*, from Chatto & Windus in 1993; and an attractive selection from the *Écrits sur la psychanalyse* by Columbia University Press this year.[2] To these can now be added Verso's excellent collection of the 'early writings',* extracted from the first volume of the *Écrits philosophiques et politiques* published in France in 1994, and rounded off by a transitional text 'On Marxism' dating from 1953. Many of its virtues derive from the meticulous scholarship of the original editor, François Matheron, whose introductory materials offer invaluable guidance to the uninitiated. Others are attributable to Geoffrey Goshgarian, who has not only produced an admirable rendition of some intractable French, but appended bibliographical information well beyond the call of translational duty. Cavils aside, *The Spectre of Hegel* is the finest edition of Althusser in English.

What does it reveal? Conventionally, Althusser's career has been periodized into three main phases, spanning the years 1960–78, from the elaboration, via the revision, to the destruction of 'structural' Marxism. At the very least, this requires supplementation by another two periods of reflection and production – one antecedent, the other subsequent, to the standard chronology. The former is a pre-Althusserian moment, *circa* 1945–51, comprising texts which remained unpublished or inaccessible until the 1990s. If the fragmentary character of the last writings makes it hard to identify the philosopher's ultimate destination, these allow us to fix his postwar point of departure with greater confidence. The intellectual 'biography' of Marx outlined in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* was, it transpires, something in the nature of an 'autobiography'. The work of the mature Althusser conducted a tacit settlement of accounts with his own erstwhile philosophical consciousness; the critique of Hegelian Marxism mounted therein was a conjoint autocritique of the young Althusser. One result, as we read *The Spectre of Hegel*, is an intermittent sense of *déjà lu*. Not for nothing did Althusser remark in a review of the newly translated *Economic and*

* Louis Althusser, *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*, edited by François Matheron, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, Verso, London and New York, 1996.

Philosophical Manuscripts in 1962: 'even our own experience should remind us that it is possible to be "Communist" without being "Marxist".'[3]

The philosophico-political adventure recorded in the early writings involves an intricately overlapping and cross-cutting transition, from Catholicism to Communism, and from a variant of Hegelianism to a variety of Marxism. In the 1947 Master's thesis 'On Content in the Thought of G.W.F. Hegel' which forms the centrepiece of the volume, Althusser wrote that 'Germany's political disarray made, perhaps, as deep an impression on the young Hegel as did the formalism of its religious life; interestingly, it is only with difficulty that we can distinguish his political from his religious thought amongst the concerns of his early years.' With due alteration of detail, the observation applies to its author. Indeed, formal adhesion to the French Communist Party in 1948, at the age of thirty,[4] coincided with maximum engagement in the activities of the Catholic group, Jeunesse de l'Église. When, a year later, now no longer a lapsing but a lapsed Catholic, Althusser remonstrated with his ex-teacher Jean Lacroix's 'personalist' philosophy, he was keen to confide 'something I have experienced along with a number of your former students':

> namely, that in *actively* rallying to the working class, we have not only not repudiated what had been our reasons for living, but have liberated them by fully realizing them.… The Christian I once was has in no way abjured his Christian 'values', but now I live them …, whereas earlier I aspired to live them. (p. 221)

'Actively rallying to the working class': it is, as they used to say, no accident if the diction of Althusser's apologia was straight out of the lexicon of Gallic Stalinism.[5]

Like the young Marx under the German Confederation a century earlier, the young Althusser of the French Fourth Republic was immersed in the ideas of the age. Some of these were spawned by the 'return to Hegel' most prominently associated with that self-professed 'Stalinist of strict observance', Alexandre Kojève, prompting Jacques Derrida to react to Francis Fukuyama's re-edition of him by recalling that 'eschatalogical themes … were, in the 50s, … our daily bread.'[6] Althusser's postwar native philosophical language was that of French Hegelianism; his ideological orientation akin to what the ex-Communist Edgar Morin once dubbed 'Hegelo-Stalinism'.[7] It is also apparent, however, that at the height of the Cold War, Althusser shared in the crude anti-Hegelian turn of Stalinist Marxism. Whilst it would seem to be the case that he never fully endorsed the impostures of Lysenkoism (the 'two sciences', bourgeois and proletarian); and did not succumb to the ferruginous romance of 'socialist realism' (boy and girl meet Machine Tractor Station), he certainly did subscribe to the Zhdanovism – party partisanship in philosophy – against which later claims for the autonomy of theory were staked. To borrow the terms of his letter to Lacroix, the philosopher's 'rendezvous with the railwaymen' proceeded under the sign of the Cold War in culture, at a time when, for example, the PCF was denouncing American films as 'poison darts that corrupt the minds of French youth', and Camel cigarettes for 'waging war on French tobacco'. Whatever their intrinsic worth, Althusser's early writings are redolent of a conjuncture of combatant philosophy, evoked in the Introduction to *For Marx* in 1965, where the shade of Hegel is barely distinguishable from the spectre of Stalin.

The new slave of modern times

Repatriated after five years in a German prisoner-of-war camp, his religious faith intact but his political orientation up-ended by the infernal surprise of 1940, Althusser resumed his education at a moment memorably described by Ernest Gellner: 'End-of-war and post-war France was like the human condition, but a damn sight *more so*. If ever there was a situation when men could not find reassurance for their identity, dignity or conviction, this was it.'[8] As the first piece in *The Spectre of Hegel* – 'The International of Decent Feelings' (1946) – indicates, Althusser found reassurance in *not* heeding the ideology of the 'human condition' propagated by 'novelists turned prophets' – Malraux, Camus, Koestler and co. '[A]nguish', he wrote, 'is not the proletariat's lot: *there is no emancipating oneself from the human condition, but it is possible to emancipate oneself from the workers*.' Contrary to 'the false prophets of history', 'the Marxists and their Christian or non-Christian allies' possessed the sense of a redemptive ending:

> the road to man's reconciliation with his destiny is essentially that of the appropriation of the products of his labour, of what he creates in general, and of history as his creation. This reconciliation presupposes a transition from capitalism to socialism by way of the emancipation of the labouring proletariat, which can, through this act, rid not only itself, but also all humanity of contradiction… (p. 31)

The echo of Marx's early works is resonant; and the Paris Manuscripts are positively invoked. However,

in repudiating 'a "Western" socialism without class struggle' as a 'system of protection against Communism', Althusser was swayed by a certain Hegelianism, foregrounding a modern master–slave dialectic. That he not only undertook an intensive study of Hegel, in conjunction with Marx, in these years, but was a Hegelian, is evident from his Master's thesis, written in August–October 1947. Although 'The International of Decent Feelings' was rejected by the journal for which it was intended on account of its virulent polemic, Althusser seemingly never sought to publish this remarkable document. In a letter of 1963, he maintained that he and his friend, Jacques Martin, had responded to Merleau-Ponty's blandishments by insisting that their theses 'had merely provided an opportunity to rid ourselves of our youthful errors'. In any event, suggesting that post-Hegelian philosophy had not superseded Hegel, Althusser's text extravagantly displayed the historicist vices which he would subsequently reprove in those who conflated the Marxist and Hegelian dialectics:

> by way of history, Hegel's thought escapes the prison of a dawning age and the confines of a civil servant's mentality, offering itself to our gaze in the freedom of its realization and its objective development. In a sense that is not un-Marxist, our world has become philosophy, or, more precisely, Hegel come to maturity now stands before us – is, indeed, our world: the world has become Hegelian to the extent that Hegel was a truth capable of becoming a world. We need only read: fortunately, the letters are there before our eyes, writ large in the text of history – letters become men. (p. 36)

Contemporary readers would have had no trouble spelling out those letters: not the Emperor at Jena, but the Generalissimo of Stalingrad. Hegel was indeed 'the last of the philosophers'. Yet it was 'in the new slave of modern times' – the proletariat – that the freedom prematurely announced by the *Phenomenology* was in the process of being realized. Marx's immanent critique of the *Philosophy of Right* had demonstrated the contradictory nature of Hegel's perversely consistent benediction of the Prussian state in 1821, when actuality did not incarnate rationality. For all that, however, Marx had not surpassed Hegel, who represented his 'silent rigour':

> having denounced the alienation of the bourgeois world he lived in, and having merely predicted the end of alienation in the coming revolution, he was no more able than Hegel to leap over his time, and his own truths were recaptured by what they denounced. As philosopher, Marx was thus a prisoner of his times and hence of Hegel, who had foreseen this captivity. (p. 133)

The Marxist conception of history – a materialist humanism irreducible to any natural or economic determinism – was 'thoroughly informed by Hegelian truth':

> capitalist alienation is the birth of humanity. We need not force the terms unduly in order to identify the fecundity of this division with the Passion of Hegelian Spirit, which does not go forth from itself by chance, but in order to appropriate its true nature, and which, in this fall, attains the revelation of a depth realized by the totality. The proletarian discovers the truth of humanity in the depths of human misery. (p. 138)

Peppered with references to Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, issued while Althusser was preparing his thesis, 'On Content' is not a Kojèvian work. In a review of the volume – 'Man, That Night' – written concurrently, Althusser criticized its unilaterally anthropological interpretation, which valorized the subject at the expense of substance. The upshot was an 'existentialist Marx' – 'a travesty in which Marxists will not recognize their own'. Nevertheless, Kojève was to be applauded for 'restor[ing] part of Hegel's veritable grandeur'.

Intellectuals in arms

Even as Althusser's notice was appearing, Andrei Zhdanov was laying down the line of 'two camps' – bellicose imperialism/irenic socialism – at the inaugural meeting of the Cominform, and intimidating a conference of 'Soviet philosophical workers': 'The question of Hegel was settled long ago. There is no reason whatsoever to pose it anew.'[9] In 1950, an anonymous article, in fact penned by Althusser, was published in *La Nouvelle Critique* – a new PCF journal, significantly subtitled 'Revue du marxisme militant'. With Zhdanov's admonition as one of its epigraphs, 'The Return to Hegel: The Latest Word in Academic Revisionism' registered the Hegel phenomenon in France since the 1930s:

> The consecration followed: Hyppolite instated at the Sorbonne; Hegel recognized … as one of the masters of bourgeois thought; commentaries in the windows of all the book shops; the 'labour of the negative' in every term paper; master and slave in every academic talk; the struggle of one consciousness against another in Jean Lacroix; our theologians discoursing on the 'lesser *Logic*'; and all the to-do connected with the academic and religious jubilation over a reviving corpse. (p. 174)

Althusser, who had been compiling what he termed *Hégéliâneries* ('Hegelian inanities') – the 'Hegelian "Robinsonade" of master and slave' included – castigated the pervasive recourse to the philosophy of

history or the state. It served the ideological needs of the 'moribund bourgeoisie', which had renounced liberalism in this, the crisis-ridden imperialist stage of capitalism; in particular, it validated 'the projects of reaction in France'. Moreover, the Hegel revival tailored the revisions of Marx required to impugn Communism, seeking to discredit the 'science and … the events insep-arable from it' which portended 'the inevitable collapse of the bourgeoisie and the victory of the working class'. The question of Hegel had long since been resolved for the proletariat by the founders of 'scientific socialism', who had retrieved a revolutionary method from the reactionary system. By contrast, the bourgeois return amounted to 'a revisionism of a fascist type'.

Althusser's excoriation of modern 'irrationalism' occasionally reads like a miniature of the monument to this ideological conjuncture in the history of the international Communist movement: Lukács's *Destruction of Reason* (1953). An isolated published incident, mercifully it did not entail the destruction of his own. By now, all roads were perceived to lead either to Washington or to Moscow. On 1 July 1949, Pope Pius XII, whose record on fascism had been lamentable, issued a decree proscribing Catholics from association with Communists, and menacing recusants with sanctions.[10] That February, Althusser's 'A Matter of Fact' had featured in *Cahiers de Jeunesse de l'Église*, one of the principal French groups targeted. There he reprehended the social doctrine of the Church – propounded in the encyclicals *Rerum novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) – as 'a form of reactionary reformism'.[11] As to its present political stance,

> if we consider its policies on a global scale, we must admit that, apart from a few active but isolated small groups, the Church comprises … an objective … force that maintains a deep … commitment to world-wide reaction, and is struggling alongside international capitalism against the forces of the working class and the advent of socialism. (p. 191)

Contrariwise, its future depended

> on the number and courage of those Christians who … are developing an awareness of the necessity of the struggle and joining the ranks of the world proletariat.… The Church will live thanks to those who … are once again discovering that the Word was born among men and dwelt among them – and who are already preparing a humane place for it amongst men. (p. 195)

The July anathemas of the Holy Office (the former Inquisition) resolved Althusser's 'matter of fact' for him. Henceforth it was not equally to Roman Catholicism, but exclusively to Russian Communism, that he looked for salvation. The 'Youth of the Church' having been repressed, 'the youth of the world' – Vaillant-Couturier's characterization of Communism – absorbed Althusser's energies. In an extraordinary, disconcerting seventy-page letter to Lacroix, completed in January 1950, Althusser cited this phrase with the ardour of the convert. Part *cahier de doléances*, part confession of faith, this epistle affords privileged access to the convictions and motivations of its author in his high Stalinist phase. For a start, the later partisan of a 'left critique of Stalinism' harboured not the least doubt as to the legitimacy of the Rajk show-trial in Hungary in September 1949. Second, the former Hegelian dismissed 'the good old problem of the end of history and alienation', claiming that, in Marx's residual employment of the category, '[a]lienation is an economic concept, in the broad sense…'. Third, a version of the Viconian *verum–factum* principle, held up to ridicule in the *Reply to John Lewis* (1973), was advocated: the proletariat knew the truth of history because it made history; strictly speaking, historical materialism was a proletarian science. Finally, paying homage to Zhdanov's injunctions, Althusser extolled the 'extraordinary freedom' vouchsafed Communist intellectuals in and through their conformity to the 'partisan positions' defined by the party. The respective conditions of party and intellectuals were marked by a fundamental asymmetry:

> I would like you to understand that the truth … is the iron law and condition of the Party, and that we intellectuals, perhaps, do not always live in the same condition. The 'condition' that is ours does not require us, materially, as a question of life and death, to possess the truth, to put it to the test of struggle, to share it with other men.… We are not condemned to the truth. (p. 224)

Hence the duty to 'show ourselves worthy of our admirable brothers, who are suffering and struggling for their freedom, for our freedom'. Hence the imperative of a 'rendezvous with the railwaymen' – those heroes of a Communist Resistance mythology, not devoid of historical reality, impressed upon Althusser and his like, who were incessantly reminded of the railwayman's rendezvous with the firing squad.[12]

The imaginary debt

Reflecting on the immediate postwar period in *For Marx*, Althusser observed that 'the intellectuals of petty-bourgeois origin' recruited by the PCF 'felt that they had to pay … the imaginary Debt they thought they had contracted *by not being proletarians*'.[13] Even those, unlike Althusser, who had participated in the Resistance, were unquestionably *made* to feel it by an organization which, substituting itself for the class in whose name it spoke, abased 'its' intellectuals before *la force tranquille* of the proletariat – that is to say, itself. If for no other reason, Althusser necessarily missed his rendezvous.

The Introduction to *For Marx* suggested that '[i]n his own way, Sartre provides us with an honest witness to this baptism of history', adding: 'we were of his race as well.…' Yet the 'committed intellectual', even when a fellow traveller, was of a rather different species from the 'partisan philosopher'. (In his Master's thesis, Althusser had poked fun at Sartreanism: 'only the man who is uncommitted becomes the thinker of commitment, elevating commitment into a system'.) Comparatively sheltered, more importantly, the former vocation was – and is – 'deeply ambivalent towards politics. Exclusion from power is its life-blood.'[14] For worse and better, no such ambivalence attached to those who, seeking to escape the 'intellectual condition', and contribute to the cause of human emancipation, submitted to the voluntary servitude of Communist Party discipline after the Second World War.

As regards that baptism of history, *The Spectre of Hegel* provides us with an honest witness. It is the less surprising that when he (re)appeared on the public stage, forewarned and forearmed, Louis Althusser advanced masked.

Notes

1. 'The Lonely Hour of the Final Analysis', *RP* 67, Summer 1994, pp. 45–7, here p. 45.
2. *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*, edited by Olivier Corpet and François Matheron, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996.
3. 'The "1844 Manuscripts" of Karl Marx', in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster, Verso, London and New York, 1990, pp. 153–60, here p. 160.
4. As if in conscious contradiction of a saying of which Trotsky was fond: *avant trente ans révolutionnaire, après canaille* [before thirty, a revolutionary; thereafter, a scoundrel].
5. In particular, the exhortations of the Politburo member responsible for intellectuals, Laurent Casanova. Cf. *Le Parti communiste, les intellectuels et la nation*, Éditions Sociales, Paris, 1949, e.g. pp. 19, 80.
6. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, New York and London, 1994, p. 14.
7. *Autocritique* (1959), second edition, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1970, p. 60. See chapter 2, pp. 27–62, 'La Vulgate ou l'heure de Stalingrad'.
8. Quoted by Michael Rustin in his obituary, 'Ernest Gellner, 1925–1995', *RP* 76, March/April 1996, pp. 55–6, here p. 55.
9. 'On Philosophy', in A.A. Zhdanov, *On Literature, Music and Philosophy*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1950, pp. 76–112, here p. 102.
10. See Jean-Yves Calvez, *La Pensée de Karl Marx*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1956, Part V, chapter 2, 'L'Église catholique et le marxisme', pp. 582–602 (especially pp. 590–91). And cf. Gilles Perrault, 'La germanophilie obstinée de Pie XII', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 1997, p. 2 (a review of Annie Lacroix-Riz, *Le Vatican, l'Europe et le Reich, de la première guerre mondiale à la guerre froide*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1996).
11. One aspect of this 'reactionary reformism' – the new theology of marriage, generating 'the *illusion* of emancipation' for women (p. 239) – is mordantly analysed by Althusser in an unpublished text from 1951, 'On Conjugal Obscenity'.
12. The fate, for example, of Pierre Sémard, Communist leader and secretary of the railway workers' union, shot by the Nazis on 7 March 1942.
13. *For Marx*, p. 27. Cf. Morin, *Autocritique*, pp. 107ff, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Paris-Montpellier. P.C.-P.S.U., 1945–63* (Gallimard, Paris, 1982), p. 75, on an analogous sense of 'original sin' attendant upon privileged social origins.
14. Peter Osborne, 'Philosophy and the Role of Intellectuals', in P. Osborne, ed., *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p. xiv.