Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), xi+172 pages.

In a recent article in *The New York Times Book Review,* Christopher Hitchens declared that "by 1980 [Louis] Althusser had been exposed as the utter fraud he later confessed himself to be. . ." (5/22/05: 18). American literary critics will find this summary judgment surprising, accustomed as they are to the regular appearance of Althusser's "Ideological State Apparatuses" essay in anthologies of critical theory and cultural studies, as well as to frequent citations of Althusser's work in discussions of aesthetics and politics, gender, and law and literature. Althusser's stock among British leftists has notoriously always had its ups and downs, but one could be forgiven for thinking that his place in the contemporary canon is far from precarious. Assuming that Hitchens's statement is evidence of something more than one journalist's ill-informed opinion, the real issue may be why Althusser's work has consistently prompted widely differing evaluations among both his supporters and his detractors. In this regard, Warren Montag's *Louis Althusser* is an important new contribution to a tortuously polemical field. For Montag, the basic challenge in interpreting Althusser is the problem of engaging with a corpus that is fundamentally divided against itself. Althusser, Montag writes, "would appear to embody the opposition between postmodernism and modernism, between rationalism and irrationalism, and can be summoned in defense of either of the opposing sides" (133). Montag quickly moves beyond the suggestion that contradictory accounts of Althusser's positions are the product of the subjective vicissitudes of his interpreters, stressing that the conflicted nature of the œuvre reflects the conflicted dynamics it explores. The result is a spirited presentation of the unique understanding of literature and history offered by one of the late twentieth century's preeminent Marxists.

Published in Palgrave's *Transitions* series, *Louis Althusser* is explicitly designed to assist students by illustrating how theoretical arguments can and should inform practical textual exegesis. Following what appears to be a prescribed format, the opening chapter of the book provides a sustained scholarly account of Althusser's aesthetics. A shorter second chapter—a collection of annotated quotations from Althusser (and Pierre Macherey)—is followed by a third section in

which Montag undertakes Althusserian readings of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* and Althusser's own autobiography, *The Future Lasts Forever.*

The discussion in chapter 1 addresses two familiar essays, "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract" and "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht (notes on a materialist theater)," as well as a number of shorter pieces, including a little-known talk on drama, published in a provincial Italian paper in 1964 but never translated into English, and an unfinished text called "Sur Brecht et Marx." For Althusser in the 1960s, writes Montag, "the function of art was not so much to make reality visible as to make visible the myths that govern, without our knowledge or consent, the way we think about and 'live' this reality" (21). Crucially, this art is not a passive representational medium. To the contrary, "great art . . . carries out a displacement of the ideology it presents to us and allows it not simply to be seen as ideology but to be felt or experienced as such"—an achievement, Montag emphasizes, that may erase the distinction between art and philosophy, which both come to name a similar event of insight (35).

There is nothing particularly extravagant about these claims for "great" art's powers, and Montag immediately notes that in this form Althusser's aesthetics is "quite orthodox," resting on an opposition between genuine art, which begins with ideology only to "define itself against it," and all other art, which is "reducible to the ideology that it uncritically and unproblematically expresses" (37). Grasped in these terms, argues Montag, art is deprived "of any material existence: in [the latter] case it lapses into ideology and in the [former] it disappears into the practice of philosophy, that practice in which the future of theater lies (according to a passage from Brecht cited by Althusser)" (38). Montag makes clear that Althusser was well aware of the risk of eliding art's specificity in the very attempt to champion it. He reevaluated his positions a number of times, ultimately declaring in a 1971 text that we do not yet possess "an adequate (scientific) knowledge of the processes which produce the 'aesthetic effect' of the work of art" (41).

To characterize Althusser's further reconsiderations of these problems, Montag turns to the opening of *Reading Capital* (1975), where Althusser famously proclaims that to engage with Marx's magnum opus we must first ask: "What is it to read?" Montag's presentation of the idea of "symptomatic reading" is a bit brief. A more detailed exposition of Althusser's account of Marx on Adam Smith might have clarified how the "irreducibly contradictory economic theories"

Marx locates in his predecessor's work are evidence of a specifically textual discord. Montag does do an excellent job of detailing the debt Althusser owes to Spinoza and his rethinking of biblical hermeneutics. Spinoza calls on us to avoid treating the Scriptures as a mere pretext for an internal meaning they ostensibly articulate and problematizes any simple identification between the production of a work (and the identity of its creator) and its meaning. Instead of trying to explain away "gaps, lacunae, inconsistencies and outright contradictions of doctrine and narrative," Spinoza argues that we must concentrate on the "surface" of the text in its own right and stop speculating about the semantic "depths" supposedly lurking underneath (48).

Montag suggests that the full implications of these claims for the study of literature were explored not by Althusser but by the aforementioned Pierre Macherey, long credited with having formulated a "literary version" of Althusserian Marxism. To this end, a ten-page section of chapter 1 is dedicated to introducing Macherey's attacks on interpretive strategies that reduce the literary work to a unified intention, internal or external as it may be. While the discussion is persuasive, one wonders why it is rarely asked whether there might be some crucial differences between these two thinkers. Even when Montag goes out of his way to note how their projects diverge, he seems to be proceeding on the basis of an assumption about a more fundamental connection uniting them.

Given Althusser's well-known anti-humanism, the writers he celebrates as producing "great" art are somewhat predictable. We are accustomed to affirming the radicality of minimalist theater, abstract expressionism, and French New Wave cinema for their critiques of bourgeois subjectivity and the idea of a universal human essence. At the same time, Montag rightly reminds us that many left-wing contemporaries of Althusser dismissed the aesthetic projects of Brecht or Samuel Beckett as "the subjectivist denial of social reality or elitist formalism," a stance still present to some degree on the academic left today (22). In the face of these tensions, a comparison of the Althusser-Macherey project with the work of Theodor W. Adorno would have been interesting, not least since Adorno shared Althusser's admiration for Beckett but differed with him starkly on Brecht's importance.

From the perspective of the theoretical positions set forth in the first part of *Louis Althusser,* the exemplary readings of chapter 3 are designed to show how the literary work "bears in its very form, its letter, the struggles, the clashes, the warfare that traverse the social

realm" (67). Montag is careful to try to distinguish this paradigm of textuality from a reflective model in which the key to interpreting novels or poems lies in describing the ways in which they mirror the circumstances surrounding their production. On this score, the opening study of *Heart of Darkness* is not entirely successful, remaining by and large a fairly conventional piece of criticism organized around familiar elements of historicist and intertextual analysis. The discussion of *Robinson Crusoe* is more effective in showing how one might consider novels as "open processes transformed by the movement of history itself" rather than as dormant monuments awaiting inspection and classification at the hands of the discerning critic (68). Defoe's text, writes Montag, "progresses through a dissociative movement, the force of which pulls it apart, separating it from itself. This dissociation, however, is not the effect of some primal disorder or indeterminacy; it is historically determined by the multiple and intersecting struggles of Defoe's time. . ." (117). In this sense, the work of art has a dynamic existence; it takes place as a series of encounters between discourses and their countervailing interpellative powers. Literary texts, according to a logic that will be familiar to readers of "Ideological State Apparatuses," must therefore be grasped not as products but as self-reproducing systems, i.e., they should be understood with reference to the way in which they insist and persist through the transmissions and transformations Montag calls their history. At this point, I would have liked to see the presentation of this "dissociative movement" more closely connected to the question of textual "gaps" and "lacunae" addressed in the reading of Spinoza. Conceptualizing these relationships in a more explicitly linguistic vocabulary would have helped to distinguish Althusserian interpretation from other forms of discourse analysis, and it might have revealed that Althusser and Macherey invite us to think not only about "the very emergence in history of something called literature," but also about the emergence in literature of something called history (5).

The third exemplary reading of chapter 3, the discussion of Althusser's autobiography, addresses the charge that Althusser's theory of interpellation does not allow for the possibility of a "bad" subject who could resist or simply ignore the hails addressed to it. The irony, argues Montag, is that in *The Future Lasts Forever* Althusser has essentially taken himself as a bad subject, a subject who may not even answer his own auto-interpellation, his own call to be the subject of a narrative about himself. The result is a profound decentering of the

autobiographical project. Rather than presenting the truth of the self—for example, a self named "Louis Althusser"—the work offers us a conflicted dynamic with no clear uniting principle. Presciently anticipating the misreading of someone like Christopher Hitchens, who takes the self-denunciation in Althusser's book as evidence that the entire œuvre is rotten, Montag stresses that the naïve critical project committed to the defense of the bourgeois subject is fated to judge an autobiography rather than to read it, hence, to mistake this book's critique of subjectivism for the breakdown of a particular individual's authority.

Althusser described the beginning of the 1990s as "a time when Marxism is declared dead and buried" (125). Since this time is still very much our time, it is crucial to remember that the effort to map the logics of contemporary culture is only one dimension of the progressive project. In a brief conclusion, Montag argues that while the object of critical labor is to "produce knowledge," such an endeavor is always in part an acquisition of knowledge about the limits of knowledge, hence, it is equally a challenge to the explanatory authority of any given epistemological or historical paradigm (134). In working on Althusser, then, "it is possible . . . that we will contribute not only to a knowledge of the social world, but to its transformation, which is, after all, that to which Althusser devoted his life" (135). We can only hope that contemporary literary and cultural theory will continue forward in the same spirit.

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Ann Hartle, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), viii+303 pages.

Rarely did Montaigne's restless attention pause long enough for reflection to wrest itself free from the immediacy of lived experience. Where modern philosophy, with Descartes, is born out of an almost ascetic refusal of our worldly being, the *Essays* can trace their origins back to the contingent and concrete givens of personal existence. Montaigne is interested only in his manners, his *moeurs*, his ways of