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Pierre Macherey: Between the Quotidian and Utopia

Warren Montag

Pierre Macherey, Petits riens: ornières et dérives du quotidien. Paris: Éditions le Bord de L'Eau, 2009.

De L'utopie. Paris: De L'Incidence Editeur, 2011.

The themes of Pierre Macherey's most recent books have already occasioned a certain surprise among readers. The fact that he has devoted his most recent, and longest, works to the themes of the quotidian and the utopian, appears to offer something of a paradox. After all, a philosopher who worked closely with Louis Althusser for nearly twenty years and who is now justly regarded as one of the most important Spinoza scholars in the world today, might, from a certain perspective at least, be expected to regard these themes with the suspicion, if not disdain, for which his "hyper-critical" generation was famous. How then do we address Macherey's recent turn to the questions of the quotidian and utopia, a turn all the more surprising in that unlike so many of his contemporaries he has renounced nothing of his past, and expressed neither guilt nor regret about his association with Althusser?

But another and perhaps more important paradox, in that it is not merely biographical, consists precisely of the association of the quotidian and the utopian which, after all, constitute antithetical ways of grasping reality and imply very different strategies for its transformation. Does not the very imperative to take the ordinary as an object of inquiry confer upon it an importance, if not a value, of which utopian thought seeks to deprive it in its insistence on a negation of the existing world in favor of the world to come, as if the former could only ever be a degraded version of the latter? In the same way, would not the turn towards the particularized solidity of the everyday involve a redirection of critical energies away from that which is not (yet) and a renunciation, if not an active devaluation, of

an orientation to a beyond-the –present, even if it offers itself as a present-in-waiting, the next present, if not the next world?

For those who know Macherey's work, these paradoxes can be neither surprising nor particularly disconcerting. His thought, and one can see it clearly in his immediately recognizable prose style, operates by means of paradox, not as a method or form that it would apply from the outside on a given philosophical doctrine, but the paradox that it must embody in order to grasp any doctrine. Thus, Macherey, once reputed to be among Hegel's severest critics, and not only as part of the collective that produced Lire le Capital, but even more as the author of Hegel ou Spinoza who was forced to explain that he had not intended to contrast a bad Hegel with a good Spinoza, has in fact appropriated and put to work one of Hegel's most enduring postulates: that a philosophy can be understood only on the basis of its constitutive contradictions, the antagonisms proper to it that make it what it is. To read the texts in which the themes of "utopia" or "the quotidian" take shape is to intervene within them to make visible the not only the antagonism between the utopian and the non-utopian, but even more, between the utopian and the more than utopian, the excess of utopia that returns to discompose the text, or between the quotidian and the quotidian of the quotidian, that is, the quotidian not opposed to the essential, but to another quotidian from which it must demarcate itself, perhaps its utopian residue. Is it too much to say that Macherey has also confronted the anti-utopian tendency that continues from Spinoza to Althusser with the history of its own repressed utopianism and, equally, to see in distance that it frequently takes from the quotidian a certain symptomatic value that remains to be analyzed?

Both books can be read as a history of "l'errance du concept," a machereyan version or perhaps specification of Cavallès's imperative to produce a "philosophy of the concept" instead of a "philosophy of consciousness." Thus, Macherey refuses to consider the quotidian and the utopian outside of the textual and even stylistic forms in which alone these concepts have their existence. The absence of a logic of the quotidian or the utopian outside of and prior to its realization in the works devoted to it, each of which would be measured by the degree of its deviation from this logic, compels us to understand these concepts in their historicity, which is anything but a linear progression or regression. Shaped by histories, by struggles,

they cannot master, even in thought, these concepts always appear in singular forms which together constitute the “quotidian” or the utopian, a greater singularity which the complexity of history necessarily deprives of any finality. To follow the meanderings of a concept is perhaps another way of conceiving what Althusser, following Spinoza, called deviation without a norm and error without truth. In each of its moments the concept appears in its fragility, as if it were always ready to become something other than itself, as if it were struggling to ward off a contagion with which it had already been infected or afflicted with that allergy by which it attacks itself with the aim of rejecting the other. To follow a concept in its errance is to discover that the very means by which it seeks itself, its truth, is the means of its own evasion, as if it could exist only by fleeing itself. It is this “fuite en avant,” by which the concept chases its own identity before it, that Macherey traces with extraordinary precision in these two major works.

Accordingly, Macherey’s examination of the quotidian in Petits riens: ornières et dérives du quotidien begins with the three philosophers, Pascal, Hegel and Marx, whose work might be and has been read as its most violent condemnation. Pascal never ceased to speak of the “vanity” or nothingness of the everyday life, composed of the trivial occupations that men pursue even as their destiny is being wagered. But it was precisely in reaction against Descartes, that proud philosopher who imagined that he could disencumber himself of the quotidian whose impressions were no more real than the dreams he so often had but from which he always awoke, to discover the starting point of certain knowledge. Certainty: it was this that led to the devaluation of the necessarily uncertain and wavering world of experience. Pascal’s rejection of this quest led to his assertion that we remained confined to the quotidian not as a prison we might dream of escaping, but as the environment outside of which we could not exist. If it was our environment, however, it was not one in which we could ever be at home. The proper of the human condition was to be deprived of the property that would make it what it is, to be condemned to restlessness and “ennui:” although we cannot achieve certainty, we cannot bear uncertainty; we seek that which we can never have and cannot be content with what by nature is our share. The quotidian then is not reducible to a world of illusion; rather it is

the point at which the sacred divides from the profane, the infinite from the finite and the eternal from the temporal, that is, not a point in space at all, but a gap, a void that exists inside as well as outside of man. Pascal is not content to stop his analysis here, but goes on to theorize the practices by which men seek to escape, if only always temporarily, the misery proper to a state without stable properties, which thus is not even a state or condition, but rather its absence: the forms of *divertissement*. Here, Pascal's theology prevents him from merely condemning diversion. What concupiscence of pride would allow anyone to declare when, where and on whom God's unforeseeable grace will descend? It may be that diversion itself which, as its name suggests, is a turning away or deviation from what, for Pascal, is already itself deviant, can lead if not to grace then to an illumination of the nature of grace: the roulette wheel, no less than the crucifix, reminds us that our salvation is already wagered, the exaltation and disappointment to which it gives rise dim foreshadowings of the ecstasy or, more probably, the terror to come.

If we are surprised to learn that Pascal produces a theory of the positivity (however paradoxical) of everyday life, what can be said about Hegel, for whom Spirit has at the outset, that is, before it was itself, lost itself in otherness, the forms of existence whose negation and assimilation into Spirit constitute that mediation of itself with itself in the form of an Absolute understood as activity rather than inert being? Here, to answer this question, Macherey takes us into the heart of Hegelian idealism, or rather to its outermost limit, the point at which it threatens to become (or to discover that it already is), as Lenin noted in his study of *Der Logik der Wissenschaft*, indistinguishable from a materialism, the point where absolute transcendence and absolute immanence coincide.

Macherey takes as his point of entry the famous phrase “*die List der Vernunft*” or the ruse of reason, especially as Hegel explains it in Section 209 (together with the *Zusätze*—or supplementary student notes—appended to the section) of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Part I. Here, Hegel's focus is on the notion of teleology, specifically its role in the doctrine of the concept (*die Lehre vom Begriff*), the very notion that would appear to condemn everyday life to the status of appearance or the middle term of the syllogism by which Reason posits itself, that is, the means by which Reason realizes its ends and as such is itself subject to the violence of the

labor of the negative. Macherey, however, shows that in this particular passage Hegel seems to suggest that Reason achieves its ends not through a violent dismembering of the things that constitute the present, but rather by withdrawing into itself to allow things and people, by the actions proper to them and without its interference, to realize the rational end which they neither know nor desire by “acting upon and wearing each other away (abreibt und aufhebt),” that is, not simply through an abstract “overcoming” of their difference, but an almost physical grinding off of the features that prevent them from acting in concert (and the physicality implied by the verb “abreiben” is noteworthy here). In this sense, Reason’s ends are not external to everyday life, but immanent within it. The quotidian is no longer the means which, once the end is accomplished, will pass away, but is the necessary component of the process by which Reason produces itself. The quotidian is thus not only not a realm of appearance, but even as the form by which Reason is mediated with itself, becomes part of the self-production of the Absolute and as such a full participant in passionate disorder of the True. Thus, Hegel appears to have negated the negation of everyday life and to have restored it to its importance not as the inert reality understood by the empirical sciences, but as a concrete existence in motion through which the real becomes itself.

The notion of the ruse of reason has fascinated many of Hegel’s readers and perhaps none more than Marx. As Engels put in his retrospective survey of German philosophy (Ludwig Feuerbach, 1888), all the contradictions, political as well as philosophical, of the notion became visible in the light of Hegel’s statement in the Philosophy of Right that “all that is rational is real and all that is real is rational.” On the one hand, it is an announcement of a philosophy of immanence, if not a materialism: “since philosophy is the exploration of the rational, it is for that very reason the apprehension of the present and the actual, and not the erection of a beyond.” Hegel here appears to see everyday life (the present and the actual) as the determinate and thus sole form of the rational. To speak of an excess or a beyond would mark the failure of that apprehension that is philosophy’s vocation. On the other hand, however, as Macherey notes, the real is relegated to the status of an “instrument of the realization of the rational,” and thus deprived of its “capacity to find its own end within itself” (PR 80). It was within this contradiction that the movement known as the Young Hegelians took shape and sought to eliminate the theological element that persisted in Hegel in

favor of “an anthropology of ordinary life attentive to all the forms of human activity” (PR 94). With Feuerbach in particular the theological, abstract remainder had to be restored to the concrete man from whom it came, to make him whole and return to him his own proper grandeur which in its alienated form had tormented him with the idea of his own insignificance. For the young Marx, Feuerbach risked creating a new religion, a religion of man, but man as “species-being,” an abstraction “cut off from his historico-social determinations, from the ‘relations’ that were at once the conditions and the products of his activity” (PR 100-101). Marx would thus declare that one cannot “suppress” or “overcome” (*aufheben*) philosophy without realizing (*verwirklichen*) it. This critique of Feuerbach which, as Macherey notes, is very Hegelian, demands the absolute coincidence of philosophy and reality, a coincidence that can only come about as the result of practice, a practice moreover carried out in the most trivial yet necessary acts of everyday life, the acts by which we feed and clothe ourselves.

These philosophical reflections, which often constituted the unthought and the overlooked residue of philosophers who were typically read as condemning everyday life to the status of mere appearance, succeeded in opening “a new space” (PR 12). While the discovery and occupation of continent of the ordinary is usually credited to the phenomenological movement which in its own way and in often paradoxical forms took on the existence of a philosophical anthropology, even and perhaps especially, when it sought to contest humanism, Macherey shows that it was not the only one to occupy and claim this terrain. While the notion of intentionality introduced by Brentano and developed by Husserl seemed to overcome the opposition of consciousness and world, it tended in its various forms to leave the terms of this opposition intact. This was not the case with the developments in the human sciences which took the quotidian as an object, even a privileged object, of inquiry.

Thus, for Freud in the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, there can be no question of an originary correlation between consciousness and world; in fact, everyday life (*Alltagslebens*) is the element in which consciousness comes to know itself as pathological. Only through the analysis of its pathologies is consciousness is knowable at all, as if pathology were its normal state. The specific pathology that concerns

Freud here, however, neither manifests itself as, nor can be studied at the level of the spectacular forms of madness or “mental illness,” even if it is not entirely unrelated to them. Just as during Freud’s lifetime, the development of the microscope permitted the detection of diseases at the cellular level, so the psychoanalyst had to take as his object the “trivial” and “ephemeral” acts of daily life that had previously existed below the threshold of scientific visibility and regarded as constituting a realm of the purely contingent which, outside of any causal explanation, would remain as unintelligible as it was insignificant. The pathologies which Freud identified in his work hardly seemed worthy of the name: the “actes-manqués,” the slips, the episodes of the forgetting of words or proper names, all seemed nothing more than lapses in attention or the result of some momentary distraction that for an instant interrupted the activity of the mind. And yet he not only declared these “sub-events,” these “parapraxes” explicable in causal terms (noting thereby, as Lacan constantly reminded us, the paranoiac nature of knowledge), but also declared the primacy of consciousness’s division not from the world but from itself. It was here at the “cellular” level of “Alltagslebens” that consciousness discovered itself in its own pathologies, as if consciousness were woven from the effects of the truth, its truth, against which its entire existence was a defense.

For Macherey, Georg Simmel, Freud’s contemporary whose Metropolis and Mental Life was published around the same time as Freud’s Psychopathology, similarly advanced the notion of the intelligibility of ordinary life, applying to this notion in order to be able to take a critical distance from the dominant conception of society, as well as perhaps, if in a less obvious way, of the individual. Here too, optical images are critical: one must observe society as if through a magnifying glass (à la loupe) or microscope: “for it is the only way to detect, by placing oneself in the perspective of a society in the process of making itself, the diverse ways it effectively weaves its texture or its living tissue” (PR 133-134). For the sociologist to fix his gaze upon the hypostatized institutions and apparatuses, the state, the economy, and the military, in which society recognizes itself, is to miss the flows of energy or information, the exchanges not of money or property, but of words, glances and gestures, the movements that obey neither a calculus of self-interest, nor the rules and rituals of organizations, the thousand moments of daily contact. It is here that a society is made, the durability of its very fabric the product of

numberless minimal encounters and relations. Simmel could ask the question “what is society?” because for him “society as such, ‘in itself,’ does not exist except as a substantialist illusion nourished by a naively realist scientific objectivism” (PR 1). For the same reason, Simmel rejects the notion of the autonomous individual, another abstraction from the infinite variations of the “interindividual” in which relations and reciprocal actions make possible the forms of individuality (or being-in-society) rather than the inverse. The proper object of sociology is not a thing, society, but an action, that of socialization in which innumerable quotidian practices conjoin to produce the forms of being-in-society. Does this mean that to follow Simmel’s protocol would be to turn away from the most dramatic and troubling social problems in favor of micro-studies that by definition can never be summarized except in the form of a fictional unity that cannot even account for its own existence? On the contrary, Simmel produced one of the most striking accounts of a mode of being-in-society that could be imagined, a mode whose consequences would be enormous: that of the stranger, the one who is both inside and out and who is constituted by the forms of reciprocal actions as the internal outside. Because the stranger is a product and an effect, anyone may become a stranger and in relation to nearly any kind of action and relation. But over everything there looms a great darkness, as if socialization in Simmel’s sense has become in the modern era the perpetual production of strangers, and soon, of the stranger as internal enemy whose existence is incompatible with our own. Thus, Simmel’s extraordinary accomplishment was to show how from the instability and mobility of relations which determined the forms of both individuality and interindividuality one could explain some of history’s most decisive events.

The sole representative of the phenomenological tradition in Macherey’s account of the quotidian is the neglected figure, Alfred Schutz. Often wrongly regarded and dismissed as a sectarian of Husserlian phenomenology whose objective was to guard and tend to the concepts elaborated by Husserl, Macherey shows that, on the contrary, Schutz’s project of opening phenomenology to sociology compelled him to admit that “Husserl’s attempt to ground the constitution of intersubjectivity on the basis of the conscious operations of the transcendental Ego did not succeed” (PR 164). For Schutz, even the late Husserl, the Husserl of the *Krisis* failed to move beyond the sphere of “egologie,” sketched out in the fifth Cartesian

Meditation in which a given ego comes to experience an other, or more precisely an alter-ego. Husserl from this perspective, cannot move from the world understood as “a collection of I (s) or ego(s)” to the genuine community of a “we.” The notion of *Lebenswelt* is understood as the collection of I-you relations in which you are assumed to be essentially like me in that it is my experience of myself that allows me to experience you as an alter-ego, another I, like me. Schutz begins to question this conception of sociality not by asserting the existence of a society as a substance of which individuals would be so many attributes, but by disrupting the I-you relation itself. He does by recourse to the concept of the stranger, and not simply the stranger to me (as in the admonition to children not “to talk to strangers”), but the stranger of Scripture, the stranger in a strange land, the foreigner, immigrant, exile, refugee that Schutz himself was when he wrote his article on “The Stranger” in the middle of the Second World War. Not all alter egos are equivalent and interchangeable; the self-other relation is mediated by a primary division between the other who is like me (precisely the meaning of the biblical “neighbor” or “prochain” in Hebrew) or the one who is not like me, that is, the stranger. But Schutz goes even further: in an essay published immediately after “The Stranger,” he examines the case of the one who, having been away, returns home, not only to familiar surroundings but to those who are like him, his neighbors and friends. “The Homecomer” (based on the observation of Army veterans returning from the war in the US), discovers the fragility of the home, the neighbor and even of the “I” itself, all of which have changed, effacing any meaningful distinction between stranger and homecomer. Neither the ego nor alter ego are the same, as if social existence were a process of “devenir-étranger,” or a becoming-stranger, whose most immediate and powerful effect is, as in Freud’s analysis of everyday life, the experience of becoming strange to oneself. We might think of that great poet of the quotidian, Baudelaire, who, in “Le Cygne,” describes the experience of becoming an exile by remaining in the same place as the world changes around him.

As one might expect of Macherey, it is in the realm of literature that the question of the quotidian is most urgently posed and everyday life, rescued from the oblivion of neglect by psychoanalysis and sociology, emerges as a continent to be explored. No European literary work prior to the Second World War so assiduously, even

obsessively, adjusted the microscope to examine the heretofore ignored, repressed, or even invisible minutiae of everyday life than James Joyce's Ulysses first published in its entirety in 1922. A contemporary of both Freud and Simmel who was disdainful of the former and apparently ignorant of the latter, Joyce was nevertheless their objective ally. In what might be described as a kind of hyper-realism, he devotes nearly 75 pages (of the French edition) to each hour, one page to each minute and one line to each second in the life of Leopold Bloom, his wife, Molly and her lover, Stephen Dedalus. Life, not lives: while Joyce's technique, often called the internal monologue or stream of consciousness, appears to capture the inner world of his characters, it in fact effaces the distinction between Innenwelt and Umwelt, and thus between one inner world and another, suggesting a world in which the boundaries between egos are permeable, if they exist at all. In Ulysses the supposedly inescapable order of grammar is suspended and replaced by a series of fragments, elisions and contractions which, astonishingly, are perfectly intelligible because they represent a scrupulous transcription of quotidian language. The suspension of punctuation in the last segment of the novel, including a final period, marks a refusal of formal closure, and more importantly, of an end, that telos towards which every detail should have directed the narrative. This is all the more striking in that Joyce very openly refers the reader to the Odyssey whose episodes are repeated in the peregrinations of Bloom who like Odysseus returns home, to the point of origin. But Joyce before Schutz has already explored the inescapability of the stranger/homecomer position: Bloom, a Jewish convert to Protestantism and then to Catholicism, is a stranger in a strange land who escapes his estrangement by exiling himself from his own exile. Similarly, his homecoming is not a return even to a point of origin in space. It is not the home that it was: he has been displaced. Generations of critics, including T.S. Eliot, have insisted on the reference to the Odyssey as an ordering device in what would otherwise become a "heap of broken images," to cite a line from Eliot's "Wasteland." But is the quotidian merely an unintelligible pile of "petits riens" or little nothings without significance in the absence of a superior instance, namely myth, that would confer order upon it? Macherey is not so sure: "What has Joyce actually done? Has he mythologized the quotidian in such a way as to reveal its unimagined and generally unrecognized potentialities or has he quotidianized

myth by confining it to the banality of the novel's narrative, thus treacherously deflating its pretensions? (PR187). In fact, if anything the movement of *Ulysses* appears to reveal (epiphany was one of Joyce's keywords) a sacred so incarnate in the profane, a universal so dispersed among singularities, that the very notion of an order of everyday life can only be understood as the form of disorder proper to it.

Surrealism, of course, represented a response to the same imperative to explore the heretofore unknown and in an important sense uncolonized and therefore savage world of everyday life which had long been the Antarctica of philosophical and political reflection: huge and unexplored, but regarded as not worth the effort. Macherey examines two of surrealism's most important trajectories: that associated with André Breton and the Surrealist International and that of one of surrealism's most compelling dissidents: anthropologist Michel Leiris. According to Erich Auerbach in his great work, *Mimesis*, the emergence of literary realism was predicated on a general secularization and, to use, Weber's phrase, disenchantment of the world. The disappearance of a transcendental realm in which the world's truth would be contained, was not merely a subtraction that left the world less than it was before, as Hegel argued in his critique of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, it allowed the emergence of entire realms that had remained obscured by the shadows cast by religion. But the surrealist relation to such realism was profoundly critical; to write about the quotidian was insufficient and in fact suspect. One had to enter the ordinary and, as if "to write" had to be understood as a transitive verb, to write it rather than passively describe it. If such a position seems to suggest the necessity of intervening in everyday life which indeed became the privileged site of politico-cultural intervention, the goal of this intervention was, according to Macherey, to bring about its "re-enchantment." As Ferdinand Alquié argued, however, this "derealization" or "re-sacralization," did not seek once again to degrade the world of the quotidian as if it were a dim emanation of something more real. If the surrealists seem to point to a beyond, this beyond is neither outside nor after everyday life; it is a quasi-sacred immanent in and commingled with the quotidian, as if the natural and the surnatural, the real and the surreal were one and the same thing. To grasp the way in which as Breton put it, "the other world is included in this one" (PR 214), the surrealists would have to carry out an "opération de

dynamitage” (PR 215) to explode the existing forms of experience and allow new ways of life.

Leiris, who broke with Breton in the mid-twenties, called the experience of another world in this one the marvelous (le merveilleux). When chance events for no more than a moment suspend our normal and normalized rationality, we may glimpse something of the miraculous in the most routine activities. A literature of the marvelous will wring out of the quotidian the miraculous with which it is soaked through. But what is the marvelous if not the sign of another world? In his later work, especially La Règle du jeu, Leiris describes it as that precarious balance that constitutes human life, the sense that at any moment, for any reason, it could tip into nothingness. Similarly, the sacred in everyday life (which Macherey insists must be distinguished from the marvelous) consists in those symptomatic acts that Freud, to whom Leiris does not refer in this context, enumerates, that reveal to the self the outside that is internal to it, the fact that to know oneself is to confront the inassimilable stranger that one is and must remain to oneself.

For Georges Perec writing in the 1960s and 1970s, there can be no epiphany, no revelation of a beyond immured in the ordinary and the habitual. In a series of narratives in which the forgetting of a proper name would appear as high drama, he systematically empties the ordinary of any hint of the sacred, the marvelous or the miraculous. Perec’s treatment of the quotidian not only does not have “the allure of an amplification or of a glorification,” (PR 234) but is limited to making an inventory of objects and events that can never be organized into a system of classification. His inventories, and here Macherey refers particularly to the Tentative d’une épuisement d’un lieu parisien (1975), resemble mosaics, the irreducible difference of whose materials never allows them to cohere into a whole. His descriptions, moreover, give “the impression that something is in the process of dissolving, like the foam on the surface of a cup of coffee, about which one can do nothing but passively await its disappearance, which nothing can prevent” (PR 233). For Perec, Macherey argues, to write is to save something, a memory, an image, a trace, from oblivion by at the same time leaving an indelible mark, perhaps like a tattoo on a forearm, for someone else in another context, another world, to decipher as they will. Why the urgency to

memorialize the cellophane candy wrapper blown by the wind around the Place Saint-Sulpice, at 17:10, 18 October, 1974? His text, Je me souviens (1978) offers a clue. Perec writes as if driven by a need to record every memory before it disappears forever. To remember (a reflexive verb in French) all those things that threaten to pass away unnoticed is to remember himself, to recollect himself in every sense of the word, as if he himself were dispersed among the broken images, shattered signs and part-objects that fill the Paris street on any given day. Macherey notes here that memories conceal other memories, memories of absence or simply the absent memories they gradually become. Thus, Perec's recourse to the lipogram in La disparition (1969) to memorialize absence by eliminating a letter whose elimination it is the writer's job to conceal. Here, the quotidian is the site of a forgetting that cannot be forgotten, of unspeakable memories of which one cannot stop speaking, of an abyss that shimmers like an underground lake upon which a light has suddenly been cast. The stranger was here too once, his disappearance no more noted than that of the scrap of paper that only yesterday inched along the gutter.

Thus, for Macherey, literature was able to think, to write, the quotidian transitively in a way that did not simply reflect upon it, but participated in it, as its prolongation or overflow into writing, allowing or even compelling us, to the extent that we entered its discourse, to share this thought. If in this sense literature produced a kind of knowledge, it was something like Spinoza's third kind of knowledge in which the singular and the universal are one and the same thing. It is all the more striking then that in the final section of Petits riens the same cannot be said of the "critical approaches" Macherey examines: those of Barthes, Lefebvre, Debord and de Certeau. In a very important sense, these are critiques in both sense of the word: they explain the quotidian, but they do so in a way that identifies, if not denounces, it as dependent on something more real than itself, which the quotidian both alludes to and denies. We have returned to the point of departure: Hegel and the ruse of Reason. The literary texts discussed by Macherey insisted on the irreducible materiality of the quotidian: the marvelous, the sacred and the beautiful were consubstantial with the most sordid forms of matter and even absence, so central to Perec, remained present in the form of an indelible trace, the trace of writing.

In opposition, for Barthes in the collection, Mythologies, everyday life has been mythologized and thus derealized: everywhere history, that which is created by human labor and human struggle, is placed under the sign of nature, and the mutable becomes the immutable. The worst forms of exploitation and colonial domination became facts of nature that nothing could change. As that which must remain as it is, Nature was experienced as the obvious, that which “goes without saying,” and therefore does not require, or indeed permit, analysis. To de-mythologize the real is to describe the systems of signs, themselves arbitrary but organized into meaningful units, that uphold and “stage” myth, that produce an entire theater of pseudo-Nature.

The great merit of Henri Lefebvre, whose Critique de la vie quotidien (Critique of Everyday Life) appeared around the same time as Barthes’ Mythologies was to recognize in the quotidian not a system of deception, but that which is left over, the irreducible remainder or residue of human life, outside of the great structures and apparatuses and the mechanical behavior they demand, of social life. As such, it is precisely that which cannot be colonized or occupied by the forms of domination and exploitation that separate man from himself and from the results of his own activity which congeal into a world opposed to him. The quotidian represents that irreducible humanity that can never be alienated because it is inseparable from being human. The quotidian, or the genuinely quotidian (insofar as the quotidian must be a “liberated zone” in the midst of occupied territory) becomes the ground of disalienation. As Macherey points out, the effect of such a theory of quotidian was to rule out in advance theories of total domination as imagined by functionalist accounts of modern society. Here Lefebvre approaches Foucault in his insistence that power is always a relationship of opposing forces, rather than a substance. For Lefebvre, however, it was less a matter of opposing forces than of the opposition between the real and the possible; the question that remains is whether the possible is an ideal to be realized or on the contrary, an antagonistic tendency already inscribed in the real itself.

Although he does not use the language of semiology, Guy Debord in The Society of the Spectacle (1967) remains close to Barthes’ Mythologies. The world of the Spectacle is governed by the double logic of fetishism, or the attribution of human agency to things, and reification the tendency to view human activity and its results as

things. Everyday life, whose misery, was a Situationist theme, was the environment in which this double logic operated. Developing Lukacs's notion of the increasingly contemplative and passive character of human life in societies in which commodity production has become generalized, Debord advanced idea that from the reciprocal action of fetishism and reification there has emerged a world of images and appearances which secure the reign of commodity production, a world like that imagined in the film, The Matrix: a world of illusion that feeds upon the very human labor that the spectacle conceals. Although Debord clearly identifies with the council-communist tradition of Korsch and Pannekoek, and situates himself in the history of the workers' movement, everyday life appears so totally "spectacular" in his sense, that resistance, or the eruption of the real in the system of images that completely covers it can only take the form of an exemplary action, the creation of a "situation" that would disrupt the flow of images through everyday life and reveal the means of deception.

Petits riens concludes with an account of Michel de Certeau's L'invention du quotidien (1980), a work that Macherey insists must be understood in the light of de Certeau's earlier work on mysticism and above all his text on the collective demonic possession at the Ursuline convent in Loudun 1632-40. La possession de Loudun (1970) opens with a startling image of the world in which the phenomenon of the diabolical can emerge and flourish: it is precisely the image of a city street as it is invaded by floodwaters escaping their subterranean channels, pouring through manholes and drains, invading house and shops, making roads impassable and the city unrecognizable. This is a crisis in which the world below escapes its confinement and enters the world above. The mystical itself, to which de Certeau devoted an article in the *Encyclopedia Universalis* in 1968, was perhaps most clearly experienced in an urban setting, as if the world of congealed human labor were a veritable palimpsest which a kind of illumination, neither on the side of the subject nor the object, makes readable, a palimpsest in which the modern mystic can read the account of his own life inextricably interwoven with those of others. In his later work, L'invention du quotidien he found another kind of inner light: the quotidian was above all a place of struggles, not those organized around the great binary divisions, but a multiplicity of local struggles or practices. Drawing on Foucault, but moving beyond him, he preferred the realm of the tactical to that of

the strategic where, according to de Certeau, there is always a calculation of interests and outcomes. The tactical, though, is not a chaos of separate and fragmented practices; there too something inhabits them and draws them into a larger conspiracy that no one intended or imagined. The city is the privileged site of the quotidian: every attempt to regulate production as well as consumption, to determine the direction and velocity of movements, to distribute bodies in its spaces in some way falls short. It is here, in the interstices and moments of suspended time that resistance forms: depending on circumstances, it too can rise up and occupy every corner of the city.

Petits riens ends with the chapter on de Certeau. What are we to make of the absence of a conclusion, of any attempt to summarize or assemble into a coherent whole the mass of material presented (not simply the fourteen thinkers presented, but the causes, both the influences and the oppositions, that determined their oeuvres), something readers, especially in the case of this book, would both expect and, even more, desire? Perhaps this is Macherey's Brechtian moment (and indeed Brecht is an important reference point throughout the work), the moment at which the desire for closure, the desire to "tie things up," to offer a conclusion that would mark the point at which all the disparate pieces would converge, is confronted with the impossibility proper to it. For what has Macherey shown us if not the fact that the concept of the quotidian can never quite settle upon itself? Something of it exceeds its grasp, as if its historical development were the incessant pursuit of a misrecognized part of itself projected into a time that is always to come and a place that is nowhere, as if there could be no concept of the quotidian except by means of its contrary: utopia.

It is thus only in relation to the quotidian that we can begin to understand utopia as something other than a mere rejection of or flight from reality. For Macherey, if the quotidian is marked by an absence or lack any index of which is itself absent or lacking, the utopian in its way signals this lack by precisely imagining what is lacking, as if utopia were the missing part of the present. But it is as if "the road leading to the land of nowhere had itself been lost and even this loss itself remained unnoticed" (De L'utopie p.10).

Utopia thus begins with a gesture of divergence and division not from the real but from the forgetting by which the real denies a part of itself. As there exists a history of this denial in which neither its form nor its object remain the same, so utopia must diverge constantly from itself, to the point that Macherey, in nominalist fashion will declare there is no utopian narrative but only utopian narratives in the plural. The task of understanding utopian discourse must therefore begin by undoing the very notion of the utopian in order to restore it to the heterogeneity and multiplicity of utopias in the plural. Accordingly, Macherey begins by identifying the two fundamental methods by which until now the constitutive diversity of the utopian has been denied and “overcome:” the structural and the genetic. He closely examines the most powerful versions of each method in their textual incarnations: Pierre- François Moreau’s Le récit utopique (1982) and Karl Mannheim’s Ideology and Utopia (1929).

Moreau’s structural method seeks to define the utopian genre by its essential attributes. The utopian narrative is defined by four characteristics: utopias are closed, separate, self-sufficient, usually situated on island or in remote areas nearly impossible to reach; utopian worlds are irreducibly different, not meant to be realized: the minute particulars with which they are described serve only to underscore their unrealizability; utopias are characterized by the administration of every aspect of social life by the state; they are rational: life is made uniform in order that inequalities and the problems they engender will cease to exist. Every utopian text exhibits these characteristics; texts that do not do so cannot be called utopian. Not only has Moreau made utopian narratives utopian in the sense that they are closed, clearly and completely delimited and differentiated from the non-utopian, and thus secure from any danger of confusion or blurring of borders, but they are internally coherent, free from conflict or disorder. Particularly significant is the fact that while utopian texts are unified theoretically prior to their transformation into literary form, there is no sense of the discrepancies and errors introduced by this “translation” or transcription. For Macherey, Moreau’s methodology cannot account for the complexity and heterogeneity of utopian texts, precisely the conflictuality of a “genre” that remains open and subject to perpetual transformation.

Its apparent antithesis is Mannheim's Ideology and Utopia whose focus is precisely the evolution of the "figures" of Utopia from its origins in the German Peasant Wars of the sixteenth century and the discourses of Thomas Müntzer to its end in twentieth century communism and socialism. These figures are not simply variations on a theme but necessary stages in a linear sequence. In this sense he seems to admit a diversity that Moreau's method would exclude. For Mannheim, the origin of utopia lies not in Thomas More's dream of a rational state and a paradise of legality, a singular place given the proper name, Utopia (in 1516), but in the chiliastic theology of Muntzer who sought, in joining the great peasant revolts of 1524-1526, not an accommodation with earthly Princes, but their destruction and the building of a heaven on earth. "Im Anfang war die Tat:" Mannheim suggests that utopia is not born in the form of a concept or an idea, but in the deed that seeks not only to imagine a future but to carve out the road to it in the present. This is not merely a rejection of the present but a recognition that the present lacks something essential, something that it can only gain in becoming other than itself. Drawing on Ernst Bloch's Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution (1921) Mannheim notes the contradiction of chiliastic consciousness which demands nothing less than the "concrete opening hic et nunc of the time to come." To put an end to history, to bring about the kingdom of the just on earth is to reconcile transcendence and immanence and the eternal and the temporal: from the real negation of this movement, a new stage was born, that of the liberal humanitarian figure of utopia. In place of the "immature" demand for everything now, a demand that undoes the possibility of its own realization, the new figure of utopia that is the inverse of the first emerges. In place of the attempt to negate all that exists that succeeds only in negating itself, liberal utopia places precisely those limits on its own work that allow movement towards the goal, a movement it calls progress, in order not to provoke its own destruction. As an inversion of the chiliastic, the liberal humanist utopia reproduces its contradiction by turning it upside down: while the first neglected the means by which the end is achieved the second sees only the means and the end is perpetually deferred.

Out of this contradiction arises the third figure, the conservative utopia. While as Macherey notes the phrase might seem to be an oxymoron insofar as it marks a reaction against the notion of progress. For the conservative utopia, truth is at the origin in the

natural condition of humankind. What others have called progress is nothing more than a flight from that which is proper to mankind and which thus can be escaped only at the cost of ever-worsening crisis. This too is a utopianism: the origin and fundamental principles which it projects into the past in one sense exist nowhere and in another are inscribed in the struggles of the present as a tendency seeking to realize itself. Out of the contradiction of utopianism that works toward an end by means that make it impossible comes the figure of “socialo-communism” in which the recognition that nothing less than a fundamentally different society can solve the problems of the present combines with a science of the conjuncture in which the apocalypse can be realized but only in the precise, always fleeting, moment, the *kairos*, in which the entire system formed by the multiple relations of force that constitute the present, can be tipped into collapse by the correct intervention. This “scientific socialism” does not fail to beget its contrary, modern anarchism for which even the idea of waiting for the correct moment of intervention is a ruse of reaction and a turning away from the apocalypse that must be made hic et nunc. In this way, the historical evolution of utopia through a necessary series of stages has returned to its origin, the original division which no utopianism can fail to realize. Mannheim too has arrived at a notion of utopianism which, precisely through the apparent diversity of its figures closes upon itself to affirm the truth that utopia is an impossibility.

Macherey thus seeks to show that between the apparently opposed structural and the genetic approaches there exists a complicity in that together they appear to exhaust the possibility of conceiving the utopian as anything other than a fundamental unity expressed either in the systematicity of the synchronic or the teleology of the diachronic. How then can we conceive of the utopian in its irreducible diversity, a diversity indistinguishable from the movement by which it constantly diverges from itself evading both the confines of genre and the implacable logic of a finality, including and above all that of the end of utopia?

To begin to establish the conditions of intelligibility of the utopian narrative, Macherey calls our attention to the fact the More chose to introduce a neologism, utopia, in place of atopia which means the meaningless or the absurd, as the name of the political world he imagines. This fact serves to remind us that utopia is not simply

defined by its absolute dissimilarity to the present, a world beyond in the sense that there can be no possibility of ever reaching that world: “utopia is not, as would be the case, of the order of pure non-being or pure non-sense; it is rather related to an ought-to-be (*un devoir-être*) whose paradoxical nature is to exist as an intermediary between being, from which it borrows its necessity, and non-being which affects this necessity with something of the arbitrary without, however, reducing this “ought-to-be” to the status of things null and void” (59). Utopia is thus less a description of an ideal than a spectral presence in Derrida’s sense, the specter that haunts the present precisely because it is no more absent than present, because it is not even a potential to be realized, but the source of an uneasiness that can provoke the world to action. It is perhaps here that the title of Macherey’s book assumes its significance: not “De l’utopie,” or “on Utopia” as if it consists of a representation of utopian discourse, but an imperative, reminding us that utopian narratives are performative rather than constative, not representations of utopian ideas or ideals, but speech acts whose function is to move their auditors to act.

But does not the very term “an ought-to-be” refer to the realm of the possible or the potential, that which should be according to norms external to the real but is not? Macherey refers at this point to an extraordinary text by Henri Bergson in which the latter argues that the possible is nothing but the real projecting a part of itself into the past as that which has not yet been realized. Thus, “the possible is a retroaction of the real and not its projective anticipation”(DU 71). What is missing from the real, the already realized, is thus what is not missing but overlooked, that is, repressed, or, better, split off and projected on to an elsewhere and another time. Utopia is often denounced as dangerous, because of the violence required to move from here to there, a violence, it is often said, that utopian discourse purposely omits insofar as the cost of attaining utopia would outweigh the benefits it could possibly offer. Macherey, in opposition, argues that utopia is experienced as dangerous because it brings into the field of vision a real already in violent conflict with itself, and, if utopia points to a beyond, it is a beyond already immanent in the real.

In fact, the great anti-utopian works of the twentieth century from Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World (1932), Koestler’s Darkness at Noon (1941), Orwell’s 1984 (1949) to Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451 (1953), assume that the utopias they denounce represent tendencies

fully present in the real, even actually existing societies (primarily the USSR), whose power might allow them to impose their “visions” on the entire world. With the collapse of these societies and the transformation of China, the utopian impulse can now be seen as a relic of the past and utopias expressions of the illusion that another world, any other world, is possible. The merciless laboratory of history has shown not only that the good intentions of revolutionaries paved the road to the Hell of socialism in its real historical existence, but that their unintended Hell was itself doomed to perish and be reabsorbed into the only viable form of social, political and economic existence, capitalism as it existed in Europe and North America.

It is precisely in this context that the great “classical” utopian works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries take on their importance. As Moreau has argued, More’s Utopia (1516), Campanella’s City of the Sun and Bacon’s New Atlantis (1626) can all be read as “romans d’état” in the sense that the primary agent in each of the narratives is neither the narrator, nor even the wise ruler, but the state and its laws. Macherey notes that the only events that occur in these texts are the entrance of the foreign narrator and the act by which the state comes into existence. The management, “gestion,” of these societies by means of a state apparatus that merely “maintains” the laws, as one “maintains” a machine to insure that it functions as it should, insures that events which by definition mark an interruption of the existing system do not occur. The constant and generalized surveillance that such a regime requires implies the constitution of “a unified space, mapped out on a grid,” similar to that projected by the administrative apparatuses of the absolutist states of early modern Europe. May we then conclude that just as these absolutist regimes were foreshadowings of the great totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, so the utopia narratives inspired by them, were anticipations of the utopianism of modern communist theory? The case seems more complicated: far from the disappearance of the individual and its absorption by the state, the social spaces imagined in utopian narratives not only did not preclude a high degree of individualization, they fact required it. As Hobbes (whose Leviathan can itself be read as a utopian fiction) clearly showed, the notion of originally free and equal individuals in whose will alone legitimate sovereignty has its source in no way implies a weakening of state authority but may well be its most effective foundation. The “roman d’état” was also, and Macherey and Moreau are in agreement here, a

narrative of nature, human nature and its place in the larger natural order, and the utopian state was defined by its acknowledgment of this nature. Classical utopia was, then, as Moreau argues, based upon a very specific “juridical anthropology.”

It is this that allows us to expand the boundary of utopia to include even those works that appear anti-utopian. Mandeville’s Fable of the Bees for example purports to show the inevitable decline and fall of any society based upon a denial of the essential human attributes of greed and selfishness. But its postulation of human individuals driven to vice by their own natures but who nevertheless, without knowing or intending it (as Smith would later add), produce public virtue and prosperity can itself be regarded as utopian. By recognizing “human nature” and in consequence imposing limits upon itself, the state can by inaction produce the results that utopias produce through intervention. As Foucault has shown, however, states intervene by not intervening in times of famine or natural disaster, by abandoning the impoverished, the malnourished and the diseased, engaging in a kind of violence that does not involve weapons, but which can be just as deadly and at a far cheaper rate. Further the disciplinary regime he described developed without regard to the division between the state and civil society, a division that could not explain the functioning of power in modern societies. In the wake of the French revolution, Fourier, the great “Utopian socialist” from the perspective of Marx and Engels, was in a sense one of the first to take the struggle, so to speak, outside of and beyond the state, imagining what Macherey calls a social, opposed to political, utopia. Displacing the state from the center of social life allowed him to subject juridical and abstract notions of equality to a severe critique, and to understand them as functions of a society in which inequality in the enjoyment of material things is in part produced by the fictions of equality before the law.

Petits riens and L’Utopie must be read together as explorations of the same thing from two different perspectives. If it indeed appears that “the road leading to the land of nowhere had itself been lost and even this loss itself remained unnoticed,” Macherey shows us that this path is to be found among the things that make up everyday life, in the movements by which bodies diverge ever so slightly from the prescribed routes, in the instant of hesitation before the completion of a required motion, in the complicity of a glance, in impertinent silences or in distant voices that pass from nonsense to sense and

back again in an instant. But where can such a path lead? If Utopia has been rendered inaccessible, if it is strictly speaking to be found nowhere, this is surely because it is everywhere, as immanent as it is transcendent, the beyond incarnate in the *hic et nunc*, a critique of the present already actualized, prevented by nothing but a fragile balance of forces from possessing, that is, inundating and transforming, the real.