The fate of Louis Althusser’s work today is a remarkable one. Abruptly rescued from oblivion by the publication of his autobiography *L’avenir dure longtemps* in 1992, it has since been enriched by several volumes of unpublished texts, together with the republication of texts long unavailable in the bookshops. Thus, the conditions seemingly exist for a critical re-examination of Althusser’s thought, as suggested by the numerous works, articles, and conferences devoted to it. For many reasons, this is not quite what has happened. Over and above rather sterile polemics about the respective statuses of the ‘acknowledged œuvre’ and the posthumous œuvre; over and above the highly sensitive issue of the relations between the biographical and the conceptual; over and above disputes about inheritance and resentments towards the man and the master; over and above the excesses of a psychiatric commentary indifferent both to the texts and the ‘case’, an observation must be made: the field of Althusserian studies has still not been constituted. Thus, there is no detailed study of Althusser’s position in the history of Marxism, in philosophy, in the history of philosophy or epistemology, even in the history of French philosophy. For this kind of approach
generally assumes a comprehensive assessment,\(^1\) at least an implicit one, which Althusser’s *œuvre* precisely seems designed to discourage. How can one assess an *œuvre* that was forever destroying itself? How can one assess an *œuvre* that is so heterogeneous, where magnificent lightning flashes sit alongside shocking theoretical barbarities? How can a text as stimulating as the famous ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ be reconciled with the ‘rather terrifying’ ‘Sur la reproduction des rapports de production’, of which (minus a few details) it is nevertheless only a fragment? If retreat to the academic form of the commentary seems impossible, the same can be said of the invariably rather lazy project of separating the wheat from the chaff, of distinguishing between ‘what is living and what is dead in the *œuvre* of Louis Althusser’. Difficult to inscribe in historical continuity, this *œuvre* is, in truth, irredeemably enigmatic. It is as if, behind the many proud announcements of discoveries, there is a profoundly aporetic framework that condemns all attempts at reading to generalised uncertainty. As we know, Althusser progressively destroyed the theses he had constructed. Disquieting in itself, this conceals another phenomenon, which is much more disturbing: there is not a single Althusserian concept that is not, at bottom, immediately modified by its opposite.\(^2\) By way of a few limited examples, we shall seek to show that such is indeed Althusser’s fundamental gesture; and that it is inextricably bound up with his greatness and his misery.

If Althusser’s life is forever stamped by the seal of tragedy, his work is irrevocably placed under the sign of paradox. First of all, there is the paradox belatedly revealed by the tragedy itself: that of the autobiographical writing. As is well known, autobiography is, to say the least, absent from Althusserian philosophy, in which analysis of the ‘interpellation of individuals as subjects’ disqualifies in advance the specular illusion characteristic of the autobiographical project – such as it was practised by Althusser at least. Obviously, it can be argued in the face of all the evidence that such a paradox is unrelated to Althusser’s theoretical writings. It can also be claimed, more subtly, that what is involved is striking confirmation of the Althusserian conception of ideology: no one – not even Althusser – was able to escape the trap of specu-

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\(^1\) The only attempt of this kind is that of Gregory Elliott (Elliott 1987), which predates the appearance of Althusser’s unpublished texts. However, see the new edition, Elliott 2006.
\(^2\) In a quite different language, this is one of the lessons of the magisterial study by Yoshihiko Ichida 1997.