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## GYÖRGY LUKÁCS AND HIS AESTHETICS \*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay attempts at critically exposing Lukács' main theoretical and practical concepts of art in a historico-epistemological survey.

For some considerable time György Lukács was generally considered to be the doyen of Marxist aestheticians. This may, of course, have been partly an effect of his longevity and sheer volume of work, but it remained a fact nonetheless. Lukács brought to Marxist aesthetics a degree of philosophical sophistication that had signally eluded the practice of his predecessors. At the same time, however, it has become increasingly apparent that the basic theoretical tendency at work in Lukács' oeuvre is a major obstacle to any rigorous analysis of the conditions and means of literary production. The theoretical tendency in question is that of historicism, whose main features I propose to tackle in another forthcoming essay. It may suffice to note here that the historicist reading of Marx was a product of a reaction against the mechanicism and economism of the Second International. Originating in Rosa Luxemburg and Mehring, it was soon to burgeon under the philosophical tutelage of Korsch and Lukács. Although clearly intended as a revolutionary counterblast to the Second International, such a historicist interpretation of Marx necessarily produces political deviations. In short, the theoretical/political stakes in the historicist reading of Marx are many. At

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this point, however, one thing can be stated with surety: that the continued prevalence of the historicist tendency in purportedly Marxist works is due in no small measure to Lukács' 'pioneering' efforts.<sup>1</sup>

Be that as it may, the following essay is an attempt at a critical exposition of the main tenets of Lukácsian aesthetics. I shall be concentrating on what I take to be his most crucial assumptions and try to point out their correct philosophical bearings, implications and consequences. I hope in the end the underlying idealist fallacies will be made obvious. To begin at the beginning, one ought to look closely into Lukács' Hungarian roots.

### Part One: The Foundations of Lukács' Aesthetics

#### HUNGARIAN ROOTS

Lukács was born on April 13, 1885 in Budapest into a wealthy Jewish capitalist family. By the time of his intellectual formation the Hungarian Jewish bourgeoisie had come to find itself in an unstable position, the major factors of which have been enumerated as follows:— the belated development of Hungarian capitalism; the massive inertia of bureaucratic-statal interests; the contradictions between the two major partners of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy; the peculiar complications of Jewish emancipation; and the increasing resistance of national minorities under Hungarian domination.<sup>2</sup> Within this field of contradictions Lukács became increasingly aware of "the devastating inertia" of a Hungarian social formation which "tended to emasculate all forces of social dynamism, maintaining the suffocating grip of conservative immobility".<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Lukács has said that even a child he "felt strong urges of opposition towards the whole of official Hungary".<sup>4</sup>

Lukács' early pretensions to creative literary work were quickly jettisoned as a result of his association with the Thalia Theatre in 1905. In the light of this rude awakening, his interest in criticism redoubled and he began to undertake serious philosophical study: he "soon realized that without scientific (socio-historical) and philosophical bases no credible criticism can exist".<sup>5</sup> Lukács had no political affiliations at the time and his subsequent early criticism appeared in intellectual journals which were similarly unattached. One such journal was *Nyugat* (West) which was opposed to Hungarian chauvinism and which looked instead towards a more Europeanized Hungary. And among its contributors was one of the greatest figures of modern Hungarian literature — the poet Endre Ady. Lukács himself has indicated that his earliest political influences were reading Marx and, above all, reading Ady. In the work of Ady he was able to discover for the first time a convincing reply to the social paralysis afflicting his contemporary Hungary:

My encounter with Ady's poems was a shock. . . . Ady's decisive

effect upon me came to a head precisely because he never, not for a single moment, became reconciled to Hungarian reality and through it to reality as a whole as it then existed. . . . I did not for a long time understand the clear expression of this attitude in Marx even after I had read him several times, and so I was unable to make use of him to oppose Kantian and Hegelian philosophy in a thoroughgoing way. But what I did not understand there struck my heart in Ady's verse.<sup>6</sup>

For our present purposes, the main point is that the early Lukács shared with Ady a sombre messianism which expressed itself in dramatic imperatives. As we shall see later, this crucially affected the conceptual topography of Lukács' early works which in their turn left their stamp on many of the later formulations.

Indeed, one of the central factors in Lukács' development is his preservation in altered form — he would perhaps say 'supersession' — of certain of his pre-Marxist notions. The actual status of this supersession — how to account for the proliferation of 'idealist traces' within Lukács' 'mature Marxist' productions — can best be appreciated via an examination of the particular philosophical environment he inhabited and his specific appropriations therefrom.

#### PHILOSOPHY IN THE IMPERIALIST ERA

During the years of Lukács' intellectual apprenticeship the dominant trend in German philosophy was that represented by the neo-Kantian school.<sup>7</sup> Though heteroclitite in their respective philosophical positions, these neo-Kantians shared a common desire to adapt Kant's ideas towards answering the philosophical problems created by the rapid growth in the natural and social sciences. Lukács' own intellectual itinerary is sufficient to show that he was a camp-follower of theirs. As a student in Budapest, Lukács accepted the neo-Kantian doctrine which relegated the practise of philosophy to questions of logic and epistemology. At Berlin (1909-1910), he attended Simmel's lectures and began to hold Simmel's individualistic interpretation of neo-Kantianism. And this interpretation was itself dependent on the work of Windelband and Rickert, whose lectures Lukács attended in Heidelberg between 1913-14.

Although the neo-Kantians constituted a particular philosophical school, their work should also be seen against a current thought which dominated most German philosophical schools at the time of the Empire — *Lebensphilosophie*. This 'life philosophy' was not, however, a specifically native phenomenon and its main features can best be seen in Bergson. As Colletti has said, Bergson is "the high point of convergence between the modern 'idealist reaction against science' and certain major themes of romantic philosophy".<sup>8</sup> And in Bergson, too, we find the birthplace of that concept of reification to which Lukács subsequently gave such extended currency:

Matter is merely the creation of the intellect. 'Things' are the crystals into which our tendency to reify coagulates and congeals, i.e., our tendency to 'solidify' the world in order to act in it practically and to change it. Reification is the product of science and technology. And science and technology, in their turn, arise from the requirements of 'everyday life', i.e., that need for 'regularity' and 'stability' which is characteristic of common sense . . . that is to say, our penchant for acting in a solid and stable world, where the original élan and jubilation of Life is inverted and petrified into a mass of inert 'objects' with well-defined features.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, science is a form of positivism. This view of science was quickly to establish an authoritative place for itself in modern Western philosophy. Its leading exponents were to include Heidegger, Husserl and Jaspers, and it perhaps reaches its apogee (or nadir) in Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse. For our present purposes, we should merely note that it is in early twentieth century Germany that the themes of romantic philosophy are directly revived by the neo-Kantians, who thereby provide Lukács with his primary philosophical bearings. A brief survey of these neo-Kantian luminaries will thus help to explain the particular philosophical resonances of the early Lukács texts.

For Windelband, the basic characteristic of neo-Kantianism is " ' the impulse towards unity and the urge towards inwardness' . . . This, as Windelband says, is a question of advancing and redeeming 'a spiritual unity to life against its fragmentation in the culture that deals with the outwardness of matter' ".<sup>10</sup> In Rickert we find a similar stress on interiority and intuition, together with a critique of the intellect for installing a view of knowledge as causal explanation. It is in Simmel, though, that these themes begin to take on a more recognizable political shape:

The conflict in modern civilization consists, for Simmel, in the fact that the 'forms' engendered by 'Life' are solidified into objective institutions separated from it, that these objective institutions acquire an autonomy of their own and set themselves over against the becoming that generated them originally... The forms originally engendered as forms and functions of Life, by solidifying themselves into objective institutions, tend to subordinate and constrain Life, their own origin, into alienated routine and mechanical repetitiveness.<sup>11</sup>

And it was Simmel, too, who through his particular view of the modern labour process facilitated Lukács' misreading of Marx's theory of fetishism. In *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel argued that since each worker produces only a portion of the finished product, work becomes a mere form of instrumentalism where the worker is no longer

able to see himself in the produced object ('estrangement'). Finally, these themes are taken still further in Weberian neo-Kantianism where the 'spirit of capitalism' is seen as the extension of this instrumental rationality into all spheres of the social totality (whence Weber's much-vaunted notion of 'bureaucracy'). It is at this point, with Lukács' intermediary assistance, that one meets up with Marcuse's One-Dimensional Man.

The neo-Kantians' dethroning of the natural sciences resulted in a corresponding emphasis on the importance of history, thereby facilitating reception of what Dilthey called *Geisteswissenschaft*. The main point at issue was whether the object of philosophy was anything beyond the generalizing procedures of scientific method. As the name suggests, for Dilthey the object of this 'science of spirit' was the history and society created by the human spirit. History was essentially composed of objectifications of the human mind. Thus the method of *Geisteswissenschaft* depended not on causal explanation of the world, but a 'hermeneutic' understanding of the past through decoding the symbolic structures encountered by the historian in the imaginative recovery of other men's thoughts.

Lukács had a profound distaste for industrial capitalism long before he became a Marxist and, as I shall have occasion to note throughout this essay, his Marxism "never lost the humanistic and aesthetic traces of its origin".<sup>12</sup> It is no accident, therefore, that Lukács' philosophical work originated in literary criticism. Indeed, in the years prior to the First World War he was a member of the esoteric Stefan George circle which specialized in the cultivation of an elitist, individualist aestheticism. The Lukács of this period thus found himself acted upon by a complex network of forces:

The truth is that during those years before the First World War Lukács was torn between the neo-Kantianism of Lask, the neo-Hegelianism of Dilthey, the religious irrationalism of Kierkegaard and the aestheticism of the circle around Gundolf and George; while his political thinking reflected the influence of Sorel, who was then philosophically an admirer of Bergson.<sup>13</sup>

Jones has suggested that it was the tension between a world-sick *Lebensphilosophie* and the national democratic aspirations of the Hungarian intelligentsia (which Lukács shared) that prevented him from surrendering to romantic irrationalism.<sup>14</sup> At this stage, however, Lukács was incapable of resolving this tension at the political level. The dense poeticism of his early works is precisely to be seen as an index of the contradictoriness which characterized Lukács' position at the time.

#### PRE-MARXIST CRITICISM

Lukács' first major work was *Soul and Form*, published in 1910 when he

was twenty-five. The major concern of the book – and one that remained central to Lukács throughout his career – is to show that literary values are founded on the existence of a number of forms, coherent structures which serve as modalities of expression for the 'human soul'. The development of literary forms is not governed by any real historicity: instead these forms are seen as structural representations of the self/world relation. If we now proceed to *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), we will see how this schema is erected by Lukács into a typology of artistic forms whose effects reverberate throughout his later work.

In his 1962 Preface to *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács said that the book was "a typical product of 'intellectual science'" (*Geisteswissenschaft*).<sup>15</sup> It was a representative of Dilthey's 'hermeneutic' method and what Lukács saw as the contemplative attitude it enshrined. The conception of the world underlying the book, said Lukács, aimed at a fusion of 'left' ethics and 'right' epistemology. The apparent systematicity of the book is therefore largely illusory: its fundamental character is really essayistic. It is this 'bridging' which marks out the special quality of *The Theory of the Novel*: "The unique appeal of this work is that the contradiction is 'transcended' in it – if only subjectively – through formal accomplishment, compositional rigour, poetic imagery and passionately heightened style".<sup>16</sup>

The stylistic pyrotechnics of *The Theory of the Novel* have given the text a certain attraction, especially since the later texts often manifest an odd disjunction between the magisterial erudition of the input and the frequent banality of the output. The flaccid quality of much of Lukács' work, however, is no mere effect of a change in rhetoric: it is precisely the result of certain specifiable theoretical tendencies which are ostensibly incapable of materialist transformation.

In contrast to Lukács' earlier work, *The Theory of the Novel* is much more expressly in the nature of a philosophy of history. A whole view of world history is adumbrated to establish the notion that the epic and the novel, though historical opposites, belong together philosophically (i.e. ethically). The book opens with a lyrical and nostalgic description of the 'Greek experience' since for Lukács – as for Hegel – the Greeks represent the free development of individuals, united in a genuine totality by virtue of their complete harmonization with their historical and social structure. The epic and the novel are connected because they both represent periods where class contradictions are balanced and the production of 'the beautiful' is achieved. The historical periods in question are those of the Greek polis (the 'normal childhood' of mankind) and Europe between 1789-1830 (the lifespan of revolutionary bourgeois humanism). Lukács argued that the epic was no longer possible in modern times, as the epic was predicated upon the ability of artistic form to 'adequately' grasp the 'extensive totality' of a society which was already homogeneous. The novel, on the other hand, "is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem

yet which still thinks in terms of totality".<sup>17</sup>

For Lukács therefore the development of literature is governed by a history which constantly reduplicates the subject/object relation:

In *The Theory of the Novel* a schema is elaborated which links the epochal development of history with the evolution of literary forms in the widest sense (i.e. the succession of epic, tragedy, and novel). Literary form, in this case, as with aesthetics in general, is determined by ethics. The change of the relation between conscious subject and objective world (in terms of an increasingly radical breach between 'self' and 'world') results in a structural reproduction of that relationship in the forms of literature. The epic is the form of unconscious identity, the tragedy that of unconscious non-identity, and the novel of conscious opposition. This general periodization, recast in terms of material production, and social relations, remains with Lukács in his Marxist writings, and it is at this level that a determination model can be seen to operate.<sup>18</sup>

There are two main features which should be emphasized at this point. First is the fact that, for Lukács, periodization is necessarily a form of interdiction: it is the critic's duty to dismiss entire periods of literature (while formally acknowledging, of course, their 'historical necessity'). Second is the fact that this periodization is not founded on the concrete analysis of specific conjunctures: it is indexed instead upon ethical changes in mankind, mediated by "the individual, who stands in the foreground, circumscribed by an idealist dialectic of 'good' and 'bad'".<sup>19</sup> In the light of the foregoing, then, there is no question that *The Theory of the Novel* was a seminal work for Lukács. As we shall see later, its resonances can be caught throughout his subsequent literary output.

## HISTORY AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

After the collapse of the Hapsburg regime, the republic was established in Hungary on November 16, 1918. And on November 24, 1918 the Hungarian Communist Party was founded (led by Béla Kún). Lukács himself joined the party on December 2, a decision which he later said was taken on ethical grounds. These ethical elements can be seen in many of Lukács' essays of the period where they coexist uneasily with his newly acquired grasp of specific problems of social and economic organization (a typical example being "The Moral Mission of the Communist Party".<sup>20</sup>) These essays do, however, inaugurate a metamorphosis in Lukács' style. The poeticism of his earlier works now started to be replaced by a flatter, more sinewy style which at its best is capable of a considerable degree of rigour (I am thinking particularly

of essays such as those on Moses Hess and Lassalle <sup>21</sup>). On March 21, 1919 the Hungarian Soviet Republic was established, and during the 133 days of its existence Lukács was appointed Deputy Commissar of Public Education and Political Commissar of the Fifth Division on the Eastern Front.

*History and Class Consciousness* was the product of a frenetic period of intellectual activity following Lukács' ruminations on the failure of the Hungarian experiment. Like so many of his comrades, Lukács believed that Hungary was only an isolated example and that the tidal wave of revolution would soon sweep through the whole of Europe. It is not surprising therefore that Lukács himself regarded *History and Class Consciousness* as concluding the initial phase of his life as a Marxist. It is undoubtedly true that Lukács was later able to make some pertinent criticisms of this text (in particular his theory of reification). <sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, as far as Lukács' aesthetics is concerned, it is *History and Class Consciousness* which provides the conceptual apparatus which underlies all his later work:

All these categories find their ultimate philosophical reference in *History and Class Consciousness*: in the latter's insistence on the 'standpoint of totality' – in opposition to the paralyzing and distorting 'standpoint of particularism' – as well as on the vital importance of appropriate 'mediations' in the place of crude (naturalistic) 'immediacy'. <sup>23</sup>

The central categories of Lukács' theory are therefore those of 'totality' and 'mediation'. Whereas the concept of totality was more abstract in *The Theory of the Novel*, in *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács is concerned to establish the notion of a 'concrete totality'. He therefore does battle against any attempts to institute a 'false totality', one without the necessary mediations:

. . . the category of mediation is a lever with which to overcome the mere immediacy of the empirical world and as such it is not something (subjective) foisted on to the objects from outside, it is no value-judgement or 'ought' opposed to their 'is'. It is rather the manifestation of their authentic objective structure. . . Mediation would not be possible were it not for the fact that the empirical existence of objects is itself mediated and only appears to be unmediated in so far as the awareness of mediation is lacking so that the objects are torn from the complex of their true determinants and placed in artificial isolation. <sup>24</sup>

In literary terms, then, what characterizes both 'naturalism' and 'formalism' is their 'immediacy' which is the product of their lack of the crucial mediation. As a result



these modes of 'representing' reality are incapable of prefiguring the 'essential totality' of a non-alienated humanity, a Man whose species-being (freedom) could be fully realized.

In Marxist historiography, Lukács is generally grouped together with Korsch and Gramsci and other 'theoretical leftists' of the Russian Revolutionary period. All of these theoreticians devoted a considerable amount of time to examining the relationship between the material life of a society and its ideological phenomena. What differentiated Lukács' work, and had a determinant effect on his entire subsequent output, was his particular theorization of the problem of class consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács argued that class consciousness did not represent the mechanical reproduction of a class's position in society, but was an active product of the possibilities open to it in a given situation — its 'imputed' or 'ascribed' consciousness. According to Lukács' theory, therefore, some works of literature might 'reflect' the imputed consciousness of a class in its entirety while others might be insignificant in that respect. (One is reminded here of Goldmann's 'maximum possible consciousness of a class fraction at the level of structure', although their respective positions are not identical and should not be conflated). This argument also possesses the advantage of providing an evaluative index: as Goldmann later reiterated, it is not 'ephemeral' literature which provides the most accurate 'reflection' of society, but the great work of literature which discloses an imputed class consciousness at its most coherent.

I will return to the question of a work's coherence at various points in this essay and will suggest that the literary work is inherently uneven. Lukács, on the contrary, is unable to share this conception of the art-work because of the 'totalizing' function he assigns to ideology. With respect to *History and Class Consciousness*, Jones has noted precisely this "drastic and crippling simplification of the nature of the ideologies transmitted":

For Lukács, the dominant ideology in a social formation will be a pure manifestation of the ideology of the dominant class, and the ideology of the dominant class will be a pure reflection of the life conditions and conception of the world of that class. There are only two classes which can aspire to this form of domination — the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Internal political or social differentiation within these classes are explained simply as contingent and adventitious failures to achieve full class awareness . . . there has never existed the type of pristine ideological sway which he presupposes, because ideologies are not simply the subjective product of the 'will to power' of different classes: they are objective systems determined

by the whole field of social struggle between contending classes.<sup>26</sup>

Neither are the paralyzing defects noted by Jones mere temporary afflictions: all Lukács' later work equally bears their scars, and the text in question is subsequently to serve as the progenitor of a considerable revisionist spawn. One can see in it the birthplace of that theory of ideological domination which is later to be a central feature of Frankfurt School thinking, viz. the saturation of the 'spheres' of the social totality by a form of ideology which directly reflects the omnipotence of commodity fetishism. In all cases, one can say that such a position has the following necessary effect: it reduces the differences between the various instances constituting any social formation, and prevents any relative autonomy being granted to the ideological instance. It thereby renders impossible the construction of a genuine materialist aesthetic and eliminates the very preconditions for a radical cultural politics.

### THE POPULAR FRONT

On a number of occasions throughout this essay I have quoted Lukács' own reflections on his work. This is not because I believe they have any privileged status: it is simply because Lukács was an astute and frequent commentator on the development of his theoretical enterprise. As far as Lukács himself is concerned, it is the preparation of the *Blum Theses* ((1928-29) which brings to a close his apprenticeship in Marxism. I would not dispute this. I would simply add that it is in the period of the Popular Front that Lukács' aesthetics reaches its final stage of consolidation – the more so as it is also the occasion for his return from the political wilderness.

It has often been claimed by Isaac Deutscher among others – that Lukács' literary theory was fundamentally an adjunct and cultural justification of the Popular Front. What has to be insisted on, however, is that Lukács' writings of this period in no way amount to an *ex post facto* vindication of Popular Front policy. As we have seen, Lukács' initial theoretical response to the failure of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was the generalized messianism of *History and Class Consciousness*. After this, however, he begins (in exile) to theorize the possibilities for struggle in terms of what he takes to be essential features of the Hungarian social formation (its backwardness, its largely peasant population, the repressiveness of the Horthy regime.) *Blum Theses* came into being as a result of these efforts. Intended as a draft programme for the Hungarian Communist Party, Lukács' theses were rejected by both the Party Congress of 1929 and the Comintern itself. Lukács duly produced a self-criticism, and claimed that this self-criticism was purely tactical: "My literary activity after 1930 proves that I have not departed from the essential principles of the *Blum Theses*".<sup>27</sup> Lukács' verdict will be confirmed throughout this essay and, *pace* Deutscher, it can therefore be stated that he anticipated Popular Front policy by several years. This is not to suggest, of course, that Lukács' work remained unaffected by later develop-

ments.

The notion of a united left-wing, cemented by cultural harmony as well, was an essential component of Lukács' thinking. Much of Lukács' career had prepared him for such a historical moment as the Popular Front, and the remainder of his work bears its stamp:

It revealed for him the missing link between his 'objective idealism' and his new, radical phase, softening effectively his neophyte puritanism and grim messianism. This moment gave him a historical opportunity to restore the equilibrium of a hitherto divided output . . . <sup>28</sup>

And during the years when Popular Front policies allowed Marxists a wider terrain on which to conduct their study of literature, Lukács was working with Lifshitz in Moscow — with access to the unpublished fragments of Marx on literature. One might also recall that it was shortly before this that the *Paris Manuscripts* became available to Lukács as he collaborated with Ryazanov in their editing. Lukács must have recognized his own affinities with this early text of Marx, and drawn additional theoretical proof for the priority which he attributed to the concept of alienation.

I think it is correct to say that, at this juncture, many essential elements in the composition of Lukács' aesthetic can be glimpsed in outline. This skeleton will be fleshed out in what follows, but there is a line of continuity which remains largely unbroken. Indeed, there is an extraordinary consistency in Lukács' work from the 1930's onwards. It is on this basis that I have reserved careful periodization for this the first part. In the remainder of the essay I have assumed that, in all essentials, Lukács' work possesses a marked homogeneity. —————

## Part Two: The Primacy of Realism

### PRINCIPLES OF REALISM

Any discussion of the theoretical principles of Lukács' work must begin with an appreciation of the centrality which he conferred on the category of reflection. Lukács could assign reflection such a momentous place in his theoretical enterprise because he believed that it provided the common basis for all forms of theoretical and practical mastery of reality through consciousness.

For Lukács, his theory of reflection is a dialectical one by virtue of its avoiding the weaknesses of both idealist and mechanical materialist variants. As a reflection of reality literature was mimetic, yet it was inscribed in fictionality since the copy differs from that which has been copied: "Mimesis establishes a distance between

copy and reality, a distance not known in magical ceremony. Magic includes the object within the ceremonial sphere".<sup>29</sup> It was on these grounds that Lukács could justify his belief that 'realism' was the only adequate 'mode of supersession'. Other modes de-anthropomorphized art by returning it towards the realm of magic. So it is that Lukács can maintain that "realism is not a style but the social basis of every truly great literature".<sup>30</sup>

This sentence, though tantalisingly brief, should not pass unnoticed: the argument expressed there pollinates almost every reach of Lukács' system. Stated schematically, it is the coalescence of realism (as an epistemological notion) and 'realism' (as a historically defined literary period) which forms Lukács' pervasive *modus operandi*. As many commentators have observed, Lukács can speak of Balzac and Homer in the same breath – almost as if they were contemporaries. The remainder of this section will concern itself with the ramifications of such a position.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of Lukács' treatment of the theory of reflection is his persistent disavowal of any genuinely radical Marxist innovations. Lukács therefore begins his genealogy of the concept by citing Plato as its founder, but is kind enough to add that in its Marxist version it is – in the unfortunately predictable formulation – 'turned right side up'. One may well wonder why Lukács should make such a massive detour if he is simply concerned with laying out the basic principles of the kind of 'knowledge' produced by the art-work. In fact, his main priority seems to be the attempt to establish the category of reflection as the dominant element in every great aesthetic since Plato.

I do not deny that the so-called 'mimetic tradition' has played a predominant role in Western aesthetics, although the terms of Lukács' enquiry are at such a level of abstraction that one must seriously doubt their capacity for precise differentiations. But to say this is, of course, to miss the point. The terms employed are not intended to provide careful discriminations. What Lukács is effectively doing is by-passing the *differentia specifica* of Marxist theory in order to castigate what he sees as a form of 'cultural ultra-leftism':

The fact that Marxist aesthetics approaches this key question (reflection) without any pretension to radical innovation surprises only those who, without any basis or real knowledge, associate the ideology of the proletariat with the 'radically new', with artistic avantgarde-ism, believing that the cultural liberation of the proletariat means the complete abandonment of the past.<sup>31</sup>

Lukács is plainly concerned here with establishing the sovereignty of a 'realist tradition'. And the canonization of this tradition apparently necessitates on his part a frenzied opposition to any countervailing literary trends such as expressionism (indeed,

the figure in the carpet of the above quotation is probably Brecht: of which more later).

But however much Lukács might want to stress the affinities between his own work and that of traditional aestheticians (a highly significant strategy in itself), the Lukácsian theory necessarily possesses its own particularity. I shall follow through, then, a number of the 'mechanisms' by which the category of reflection is set in motion.

For Lukács, as a work of art cannot exist without the 'here and now', it cannot be governed by the category of universality. But because that 'here and now' can come to represent, say, a period of history, its individuality is thereby transcended. In the artwork universality and individuality coexist: in the Hegelian terms shared by Lukács, we have a 'concrete universal'. Hence Lukács' assigning a pivotal role to the 'typical':

The central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations . . . what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them...<sup>32</sup>

So Vautrin and Julian Sorel are 'typical' in their behaviour since the determinant factors of a particular phase of history are found in them in concentrated form. But they are not crudely illustrative: their characters possess a 'dialectic' which unites the individual with the typical.

The type is, therefore, a special kind of synthesis in which a contradictory identity is produced between the individual and the universal (I pass over for the moment the fact that this contradictoriness appears to be merely formal). My own difficulty here is the density, and ultimately ambiguity, of this 'universal'. Lukács' employment of the term seems to bear two main senses: 1) that which is 'essential' in man, and 2) the historical dimension which determines all individual phenomena. What I find confusing (and disconcerting) is that Lukács makes no exact demarcation between these two entirely different axes:

Through the representation of a type, the concrete, universal and essential qualities, what is enduring in man and what is individual and what is socially universal, combine in typical art.<sup>33</sup>

What is at issue, of course, is the precise articulation of this 'combination'. In this respect, it seems to me difficult to avoid the conclusion that the individual serves as a *pars totalis* which embodies the universal. We are thus able to indicate that the

totality with which Lukács operates is a Hegelian one – the essence behind the multiplicity of its phenomena.

### ARTISTIC FORMS

According to Hegel, "beauty is the rational rendered sensible, the sensible appearance being the form in which the rational content is made manifest."<sup>34</sup> This sensible embodiment can take place in three principal ways: classical art, symbolic art, romantic art. Classical art is produced where the sensible expression is 'adequate' to the idea it gives expression to and does not point vaguely beyond it; in symbolic art the sensible shape merely symbolizes the rational content: it refers away from itself to a rationality mysteriously beyond it; romantic art is characterized by a shift from balance and harmony to the turmoil of a subjectivity considered as of infinite value. These Hegelian forms are represented respectively in Lukács' work by realism, naturalism and formalism.

As Helga Gallas has shown,<sup>35</sup> Lukács' tripartite division of artistic forms is analogous to the three ways of conceiving reality given us by epistemology: as appearance, essence and essence/appearance. Naturalism is characterized by its grasping hold of the 'unmediated appearances' of reality; the failure to reproduce 'concrete appearances' and the attempt to apprehend the 'essence' of reality amounts to idealism (formalism); realism, however, is distinguished by its grasp of the unity of essence and appearance:

The goal for all great art is to provide a picture of reality in which the contradiction between appearance and reality, the particular and the general, the immediate and the conceptual, etc., is so resolved that the two converge into a spontaneous integrity in the direct impression of the work of art and provide a sense of an inseparable integrity.<sup>36</sup>

The foregoing should make it plain that Lukács' categories of realism, naturalism and formalism are not intended to penetrate the historical specificity of epochs or styles. What we have, in fact, is a series of "transcendental basic determination in the sense of a typology of artistic forms".<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, a given work is examined in the light of the degree to which it 'corresponds' to the Lukácsian schema.

Lukács' notion of form is an epistemological one derived from Hegel: ". . . 'content is nothing but the conversion of form into content, and form is nothing but the conversion of content into form'".<sup>38</sup> Lukács has little interest in the plasticity of 'technique'. Instead, he is concerned with the writer's construction of artistic forms in the struggle for the 'adequate' expression of content. In effect, Lukács "attributes an ontological existence to forms in themselves":

although he claims to see form as the product of content, in practice (e.g. in *The Historical Novel*) he starts from a general ontology of forms and collapses into its problems of any specific relationship that an artist might have to history . . . he is not interested in comparing the picture of Gentile society in Scott's novels with the reality of eighteenth century Scottish society. Indeed, there is little phenomenological description of history in Lukács' work.<sup>39</sup>

Occasionally one finds Lukács speaking of the immanent momentum of 'generic laws', but he has little real interest in or appreciation of the 'intertextuality' (Kristeva) of literature. His 'ontology of forms' therefore has the important effect of his failing to provide any rigorous examination of whether it is simply the bourgeoisie's ideological development which determines the genesis of new artistic forms.

#### 1848: THE DIVISION OF BOURGEOIS CULTURE

The central question for Lukács is: at what point did the bourgeoisie cease to play a 'historically progressive' role? The answer:

The June battle of the Paris proletariat in 1848 constitutes a turning point in history on an international scale.<sup>40</sup>

From hereon, the objective possibilities open to the bourgeoisie – its 'potential consciousness' – were counter-revolutionary. As long as the bourgeoisie was in its 'revolutionary' phase, it had the purposefulness derived from the extensiveness of its commerce with reality ('popular life'). Once on the defensive and having no 'perspective' beyond itself, it had to isolate itself from entire areas of reality. The literary products of such a 'doomed' class were therefore manifestly incapable of attaining the same levels as those of previous epochs.

The bourgeois culture of the eighteenth century, which laid the foundations for the apogee of 'great realism' in the first half of the nineteenth century, had its social basis in the fact that the bourgeoisie was objectively the leader of those progressive forces aimed at liquidating feudalism. This 'historical mission'

. . . gave the important ideological representatives of the class the courage and élan to raise all the problems posed by popular life, immerse themselves deeply therein and by grasping the forces and conflicts at work there, to represent the cause of human progress in literature even where this raising and solving of problems contradicted the narrower interest of the bourgeoisie.<sup>41</sup>

As the bourgeoisie's ideological 'representatives' found their own class threatened, they could no longer evince that – note this quite extraordinary phrase – "disinterested courage"<sup>42</sup> with which they had previously portrayed the dominant social contradictions of their time. The demise of classical realism was the expression in literary terms of the bourgeoisie's failure of will, of its refusal to 'look reality in the face'.

One of the key components in Lukács' argument in support of classical realism is the writer's alleged rootedness in 'popular life'. According to Lukács, in their public and private lives Goethe, Tolstoy and Balzac all followed in the tradition of the intellectuals of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. They participated actively in the great social struggles of their time, so that their writing bears the imprint of a profound interaction between art and society.

Now it has to be admitted that, formally speaking, there is something in this. If one compares, for example, *David Copperfield* (1850) with *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the attitude towards 'writing' disclosed in these respective works can be seen to have undergone a major shift. For *Copperfield*, writing was a profession which would carve him out a suitably rewarded niche in society; for *Dedalus*, such social recognition would have been sufficient in itself to damn his work. Unfortunately, Lukács is dedicated to operating with a crude activity/passivity dichotomy, so much so that the evidence he adduces in support of his case is curiously empiricist. He quotes an eighteenth century aesthete to the effect that a writer must live a rich life (whatever that may mean) to be capable of presenting what is really typical.<sup>43</sup>

Zola and Flaubert, on the other hand, started their literary careers in a bourgeois society which had consolidated its power after the June uprising. As against any involvement in 'popular life' (such as Goethe's role as government minister), their opposition to bourgeois society forced them to stand aloof from it. They became 'specialists' in writing, literary entrepreneurs segregated from life by the capitalist division of labour. The new type of realist was a 'virtuoso', an 'armchair scientist', and his isolation from diverse social involvement produced a narrower 'life material' which he could transform in his art.

It is clear that the notion (I hesitate to call it a concept) of 'popular life' is of extreme importance for Lukács' validation of his claims for the greatness of realist literature. The fact of the matter is, though, that it is a strangely elusive conception by virtue of its function as a theoretical catch-all. I am prepared to accept that, say, Balzac's involvement with certain capitalist procedures gave him the necessary 'raw material' with which to mount his critique of bourgeois society. What I am not prepared to accept is that an idea so vague as 'popular life' can provide any effective explanation of how a stock-exchange speculator like Balzac could achieve such a radical 'ideological displacement' in his literary work. For Lukács, on the contrary, it is pre-



cisely the writer's rootedness in 'popular life' which allows him to transcend his class position, to perceive the nature of historical reality in spite of his 'false consciousness'. The art/ideology question will be taken up later. At this point one would like to register one's intense dissatisfaction with the historical periodization which Lukács has effected on the basis of this 'popular life'.

As Sparks has pointed out,<sup>44</sup> to argue that the bourgeoisie can no longer play a progressive role on the world-scale, and must therefore necessarily cut itself off from certain aspects of 'popular life', is not in the least relevant. Lukács himself maintained that the bourgeoisie, even in its 'revolutionary' period, was incapable of providing a fully 'coherent' world vision. And in any case, overriding the historical subject matter and determining its architecture is Lukács' ubiquitous 'ontology of forms':

. . . the classical historical novel, as a result of this popular character, realized the general laws of large epic in a model form, whereas the novel of the period of decline, severed from life, largely destroyed these general laws of narrative art. . . The perspective of the novel's return to true epic greatness, to an epic-like character, must reawaken these general laws of great narrative art . . .<sup>45</sup>

This passage is an excellent encapsulation of the 'formalism' which characterizes Lukács' critical programme, a formalism all the more dangerous here for its attempt to incarcerate literary production in a set of arbitrary fictional laws. Indeed, contrary to Lukács' thesis, it is precisely the recurrent phenomenon of 'law-breaking' which provides the motor for some portion of the development of literary forms.

It seems to me that the conclusion to be drawn from this section is that Lukács signally failed to grasp the real development of the bourgeois novel. If one regards literature as a mediated political intervention, is it therefore not the case that Lukács' inability to apprehend the 'unevenness' in the evolution of the novel can be source of political retardation as well as theoretical retrogression? As we shall see later, this is exactly the point at issue between Brecht and Lukács in their justly famous debate of the 1930s.

#### REALISM – NATURALISM – FORMALISM

For Lukács, 1848 constitutes a special kind of 'epistemological break' where one mode of representing reality (realism) gives way to another (naturalism), with the excrescence of formalism to follow. For Lukács, naturalism is static and sensational: it is dependent upon a series of grey averages underpinned by an unassimilated determinism. Naturalism mistakes the 'surface' representation of life for the capturing of its 'underlying' movements. As a result, the totality is fractured and naturalistic writers

hereon concentrate on the 'meaninglessness of life'. So it is that, according to Lukács, the characters in Zola and Flaubert are merely spectators; the events simply tableaux; and we readers just observe.

Whatever disagreements one might have with Lukács' realism/naturalism scission, at least it is generally grounded in a thoroughgoing epistemology (albeit Hegelian). What is superficially more surprising – I will go into the reasons later – is the lengths to which he will go in celebrating the great realists' ability to create memorable 'characters'. Zola is therefore berated because he "has never created a single character who grew to be a type, a by-word, almost a living being".<sup>46</sup> It will be seen, however, that Lukács is situated along the same ideological continuum as those bourgeois critics who praise, say, Dickens for creating 'immortal figures' such as Micawber, Pecksniff and Gamp. And curiously enough it should be pointed out that Lukács himself employs the phrase 'immortal figures' when dealing with this very question.<sup>47</sup>

For a Marxist, it is clearly a matter of priority that careful distinctions be made between the various historical periods in which literary works are produced. What is one to make, then, of Lukács' amalgamation of naturalism and formalism? For Lukács, the distinction between realism and naturalism depends on

. . . the presence or absence in a work of art of a 'hierarchy of significance' in the situations and characters presented. Compared with this, formal categories are of secondary importance. That is why it is possible to speak of the basically naturalistic character of modernist literature – and to see here the literary expression of an ideological continuity. This is not to deny that variations in style reflect changes in society. But the particular form this principle of naturalistic arbitrariness, this lack of hierarchic structure, may take is not decisive.<sup>48</sup>

The difficulty that one experiences in trying to differentiate between Lukács' concepts of naturalism and formalism is therefore explained quite simply: for him they represent just variations on the theme of mere particularity.

According to Lukács, both in naturalism and formalism (the 'descriptive method') details become important in themselves: the composition of the novel disintegrates and becomes only a kaleidoscopic chaos. And, as Hegel said, because it is the ultimate in uniqueness, the 'here and now' is absolutely abstract. The extreme particularization that Lukács found exemplified in Joyce eliminated, he thought, any individuality and resulted in an "abstract universality" which "rests inevitably on a crass empiricism, on the commonplace and the fortuitous".<sup>49</sup> Moreover, formalism results in an attenuation of the outer world together with the further suggestion that outward reality is unalterable. In the process human activity is rendered impotent, the

extremity of this tendency being revealed in the first part of *The Sound and the Fury* ('a tale told by an idiot') and *Molloy*: in both cases we have a 'bad infinity' of subjectivization. Ultimately, then, the modernists have lost the capacity to express life dynamically: the 'descriptive method' transforms men into 'still lives'.

In most of the foregoing I have dealt with what are essentially the epistemological foundations of Lukács' hostility to anti-realist modes of writing. Underlying this resolute opposition of Lukács' is his omnipresent counterposition of Reason and Unreason:

Reason, as he understands it, is not something above the historical and social development of mankind, but is, in Hegelian fashion, reason immanent in the self-development of human history and society. The decisive factor, in his eyes, is not so much the struggle between materialism and idealism (cp. Lenin) as the decision 'pro or contra reason'. As the defender of reason, he has been an implacable enemy of all forms of irrationalism, especially of 'irrationalistic subjectivism' and the 'cult of the subconscious'.<sup>50</sup>

Regrettably, it has to be said that this reason/unreason split is the impetus for a series of Lukácsian diatribes which are frequently absurd and sometimes border on the hysterical (*Realism in Our Time* being exemplary here). One might be forgiven for wishing that these passages would simply fade into oblivion or, alternatively, one might disregard them as unfortunate aberrations. But the unhappy fact has to be faced: Lukács' system is mutually reinforcing, so that its individual elements draw their value from the systematicity of the whole.

#### THE BOURGEOIS NOVEL AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF REALISM

In principle, Lukács understood by realism the dialectical reflection of movements and trends in reality in their interrelationships. In practice, he linked the 'adequate' expression of reality to the artistic form of the nineteenth century bourgeois realist novel. Lukács employs various arguments in support of his claim for the supremacy of the realist novel, one of the most decisive being what he saw as its unflinching humanism:

Lukács adopted and adapted Hegel's notion of the progression of artistic forms: he thus came to see the classical realist novel as the final and finest expression of the whole humanist literary tradition.<sup>51</sup>

Lukács believed that great art, genuine realism and humanism were inextricably con-

nected. Humanism, he insisted, was fundamental to Marxist aesthetics. On these grounds, Stendhal is lauded even though the hopes he entertained for the bourgeoisie were totally unfounded: his retention of his "humanist ideals" made it a "historically legitimate, basically progressive illusion" and therefore the "source of his literary fertility".<sup>52</sup> In the same way, Balzac is praised for preserving the "great heritage of bourgeois humanism" in the transitional period between the waxing of "proletarian humanism" and the waning of the "revolutionary humanism of the bourgeoisie".<sup>53</sup>

Another line of attack deployed by Lukács is one we are familiar with by now: his utilization of the activity/passivity antithesis. Lukács justifies his admiration of realism by virtue of its being dynamic and developmental. To point up the difference between naturalism and realism, Lukács counterposes the respective horse races in Zola's *Nana* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. The 'description' of the horse race in *Nana* brilliantly illuminates Zola's 'virtuosity': every conceivable detail is described 'precisely' and colourfully, and Zola provides what amounts to a veritable monograph on the modern turf. But the events described are only loosely related to the overall trajectory of the plot – they could be easily eliminated. In *Anna Karenina*, on the other hand, the race represents the crisis in the unfolding of a great drama. The race is no mere tableau, but is 'narrated' in such a way that it forms the confluence of a densely interlocking network of personal and social strands.

Yet another approach – and undoubtedly an even more suspect region of Lukács' theory, as already noted – is the cardinal role that he assigns to literary characters. The model for the presentation of character is no less a work than Plato's *Symposium*:

A group of living people emerge before us, unforgettably etched in their individuality. And all these people have been individualized exclusively through their intellectual physiognomy, distinguished one from the other and developed into individuals who are simultaneously types.<sup>54</sup>

For Lukács, all the great masterpieces of world literature are characterized by their careful delineation of 'intellectual physiognomy' which, in periods of 'decadence', dwindles into vagueness. The great realists were able to portray the subtle interdependence of their characters, and this interaction allowed those characters to 'live out their lives' creatively and richly:

In Scott, Balzac or Tolstoy we experience events which are inherently significant because of the direct involvement of the characters in the events and because of the general social significance emerging in the unfolding of the characters' lives.

We are the audience to events in which the characters take active part. We ourselves experience these events.<sup>55</sup>

The 'lasting human types' that Lukács valued so highly were thus defined by their embodiment of social tendencies in their personal relationships: it was this that validated Lukács' belief in the "basic materialism of all great artists".<sup>56</sup> And precisely because it is a question of 'embodiment', the 'representativeness' of the human type was dependent of its being 'self-activating' — 'possessing its own dialectic' — within the art-work.

In effect, what Lukács is saying in the foregoing is that great literature can only be produced by emulating the artistic principles of the great bourgeois realists. For the modern period, this means the 'critical realism' which finds its highest expression in the work of Thomas Mann (of whom more later). So it is that, according to Lukács, in Joyce's case the stream-of-consciousness 'technique' is not simply a 'stylistic device': it is a formative principle. For Mann, on the contrary, the interior monologue (*Lotte in Weimar*) is simply a 'technical device': the 'compositional principle' is that of traditional epic. In the same way, Mann's 'apparent' use of a 'modern' multiple-time mechanism (*The Magic Mountain*) "only reinforces (though in a complicated, round-about way) the 'traditional' realist treatment of time as a social and historical unity".<sup>57</sup> Lukács' special pleading here has a precise source: his inability to grasp the materiality of language and his consequent incapacity to specify the real function played by particular artistic devices. And it is because of this that Lukács' exogenous stipulations transform his cultural politics into a despotic 'formalism' which offers no practical guidance to the radical artist. Brecht was to call such criticism 'legislative' and, as we shall now see, he maintained that its political effects could only be retrogressive.

## THE BRECHT – LUKÁCS DEBATE

During the 1930s, Lukács gradually acquired a commanding position as a critic within the ranks of the German literary left.<sup>58</sup> As a contributor to *Linkskurve* (the organ of the Association of Revolutionary Proletarian Writers), Lukács first distinguished himself by withering attacks on proletarian novels by Will Bredel and Ernst Ottwalt. Lukács warned that a blind faith in the class struggle leads to a sectarianism contrary to the notion of a popular front, since it condemns both the bourgeoisie and its cultural heritage. In view of the fact that Lukács had developed a popular front cultural theory several years before its official institution, it is scarcely surprising that he did not take kindly to this trend. As for the aesthetic pleasure that proletarian literature supposedly forgoes in order to fulfil its political role more effectively, Lukács made the — not very helpful — point that Marx himself was interested in works of art in and of themselves (which is questionable) and that he particularly admired ancient art.

The political activism which Ottwalt set over against pure enjoyment seemed to Lukács to bear a close resemblance to Brecht's anti-Aristotelianism. And, according to Lukács, Brecht's use of the A-effect was tantamount to viewing the 'social content' apart from its dialectical relationship with its 'human substratum';

Since these contents (the contents of the proletarian revolution), despite a praiseworthy attempt to make them concrete, remain abstract, that is to say, immediate surface phenomena, and since they are not the objective motive forces of the Revolution, their revolutionary spirit also remains an abstract sermon, a 'tendency'.<sup>59</sup>

Apart from the concentrically humanist organization which Lukács attempted to impose on the texts in question, what was most retrogressive in his account was the apparent attempt to abrogate one of Brecht's first principles: the right to fail in artistic experimentation. As we shall see, however, Brecht was able to locate a number of critical inconsistencies in Lukács' arguments — together with the theoretical system they inhabited — and to refute them with great cogency.

During 1938 Brecht wrote a series of mordant and sardonic counter-attacks against Lukács which appeared in a German magazine, where a major debate was still raging over the issue of expressionism. Brecht readily agreed with Lukács' strictures on the fetishization of 'technique'. But when it came to the positive and constructive aspects of Lukács' suggestions, Brecht was markedly less impressed. Quite simply, he felt that Lukács' proposals were totally impractical. For Brecht, it was not a question of dismantling techniques but of developing them, linking them not to "the good old days" but to "the bad new ones".<sup>60</sup> In political terms, what Brecht found inexcusable was the element of capitulation and withdrawal which he thought characterized Lukács' injunctions.

On behalf of certain readers of the magazine in which he wrote, Brecht expressed their concern that Lukács had constricted the notion of 'realism' by too narrow a definition: "several readers came to interpret this as meaning that a book is written realistically when it is 'written in the same way as the bourgeois novels of the last century'".<sup>61</sup> So where Lukács charged modernist literature with 'formalism', it was he himself who had installed a transhistorical formalism as he had deduced a series of norms from a purely literary tradition. Brecht seized on the core of the problem when he argued that if the novels of Balzac and Tolstoy were determinate products of a particular period of history, how could their 'fictional principles' be recreated in a radically different phase of the class struggle? On these grounds, it was not difficult for Brecht to underscore the absurdity of Lukács' practical propositions: "Be like Tolstoy — but without his weaknesses! Be like Balzac — only up-to-date!".<sup>62</sup>

One of the main axioms of nineteenth century German aesthetics was that of individualism. Through painful experience in the German theatre, Brecht himself was only too aware of the debilitating effects of a 'cult of the individual', and he felt that Lukács' work did not contain adequate protection against such an eventuality. For this reason, he signalled his opposition to what he thought of as Lukács' conjuring up of "a kind of Valhalla of the enduring figures of literature, a kind of Madame Tussaud's panopticon, filled with nothing but durable figures from Antigone to Nana and from Aeneas to Nekhlyudov . . ." <sup>63</sup> Lukács believed that it was the 'intellectual physiognomy of literary characters' which was determinant in a great novel. For Lukács, the novel was a Hegelian whole: an expressive totality in which the parts (essentially great characters and their satellites) 'conspired' together. The Brechtian dramaturgy, on the contrary, was founded on the principle of a dissociated structure. Indeed, Brecht occasionally referred to his plays in terms of Mao Tse-Tung's "On Contradiction" where a forerunner of Althusser's 'structure in dominance' is adumbrated. It is at points like this – and there are many of them – that we realize how Brecht had established a rupture with bourgeois aesthetics that Lukács had found impossible.

#### LUKÁCS' RELATIONSHIP TO BOURGEOIS CULTURE

Significantly enough, it was Thomas Mann who recognized in Lukács' work a powerful sense of 'tradition'. What I am concerned with here is not so much the conservatism of Lukács' choice of theme, which many commentators have noted, but the more important question of his profoundly ambivalent relationship to bourgeois culture in general. Mitchell has posed this in terms of the revolutionary in Lukács struggling "with the bourgeois humanist, with the Heidelberg don". <sup>64</sup> There may be something in this, of course, but I think Revai is much closer to the mark:

In this fight against imperialist decadence he attempted to confront fascism with the ancient plebeian popular-revolutionary forms and traditions of bourgeois democracy, generalizing, idealizing and mythologizing them. . . . Deeply embedded in the literary theory of Comrade Lukács, which confronts the literature of imperialist decadence, the ideology of fascism, with the great bourgeois realism, there lies concealed the idea of a return to 'plebeian democracy' as a system possessing a stable character. <sup>65</sup>

This is an astute piece of analysis, and one is often struck by the pervasive democratic progressivism to be found in Lukács' work. The central document here is Lukács' **Blum Theses**: his entire understanding of German culture in underpinned by the political perspective represented there. <sup>66</sup> The key literary figures in this scenario are Goethe and Mann.

One is tempted to say that Goethe is the central figure in the Lukácsian aesthetic. It is curiously appropriate that the bust of Goethe should have presided over Lukács' study in Budapest. Goethe could assume such paramount importance for Lukács because he represented

. . . the aesthetic bridge between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the consummation and self-transcendence of the Enlightenment and, at the same time, the spiritual and aesthetic preparation for Walter Scott and Byron, Balzac and Stendhal.<sup>67</sup>

At the core of Goethe's work, according to Lukács, was the attempt to create a bourgeois classical art. Lukács was obviously deeply interested in this predicament since at its very nub was the problem of form: it was not a question of providing facsimiles of antiquity, but the "attempt to study its laws of form and to apply them to the material which the modern age offers its poets".<sup>68</sup> For Goethe, "artistic forms are always but the most general and most abstract syntheses of the human essence and human relations".<sup>69</sup> And, like Lukács himself, antiquity had a special place for Goethe — all the more so in view of the perfection of its artistic forms. Antiquity was characterized by a profound anthropocentricity, and its artistic forms served to represent the 'essence of man' with a purity of expression unsurpassed in its demand for man's 'universality' and 'harmony' as a goal for the evolution of the species.

In any discussion of German culture Goethe was bound to be included. Consequently, the role in which he was cast would ineluctably affect the articulation of the overall configuration. The correct 'placing' of Goethe was therefore of extreme importance for Lukács, since he was dedicated to replacing the tradition which ran Goethe—Schopenhauer—Wagner—Nietzsche with a Lessing—Goethe—Hölderlin—Büchner—Heine—Marx tradition. In order to inaugurate such a disestablishment, it was essential that Goethe should be seen to possess the right political credentials:

. . . politically young Goethe was no revolutionary, not even within the limits possible in Germany, not even in the sense that young Schiller was. Thus, the plebeian element in him does not appear in a political form, but rather as the opposition of humanistic and revolutionary ideals both to the corporate society of feudal absolutism and to philistinism.<sup>70</sup>

What I find profoundly disconcerting is that Lukács should so effortlessly construct an equation in which the term 'humanistic ideals' is given the same — ultimately political — value as the 'revolutionary plebeian' component. This is a still further illustration of the fact that Lukács' 'popular frontism' represents not the expression of the compromises of a master-tactician, but a genuine theoretical principle which underlies his



entire mature aesthetic.

Of course, the litmus test for Goethe's political qualifications is to be found in his attitude towards the French Revolution. Lukács concludes on this that "Goethe's rejection pertains then only to plebeian methods for carrying out the Revolution, to certain plebeian demands: but in increasing measure he approves the essential social content of the French Revolution".<sup>71</sup> My own (admittedly schematic) gloss on the above would run something like this: at the outset, Goethe was an implacable opponent of what looked like becoming a kind of 'proletarian' revolution *avant la lettre*; when it eventually became clear that it was a bourgeois revolution that had been accomplished, Goethe was then notably more disposed to bestowing his blessing on the new regime. Lukács, however, is vastly impressed by Goethe's ability to discern the 'revolutionary' character of the French Revolution, this latter achievement providing still further verification of the 'historically progressive' nature of Goethe's work.

As Lichtheim has pointed out,<sup>72</sup> Goethe's view of politics exemplified the essential quality of Weimar culture: a fusion of aristocratic and bourgeois values. Yet in Lukács' *Goethe and His Age* we are confronted by an eloquent silence. Apart from the odd passing comment, there is no treatment of this fusion — an astonishing 'omission' for a practitioner of the theory which sees class struggle as the motor of human history. In Lukács' disquisition on Thomas Mann we shall again encounter a discourse which is defined by its silences.

According to Lukács, the outbreak of the First World War turned the situation of Mann and the German middle-class inside out. Its "power-protected inwardness" underwent a dramatic reversal: the "inwardness" had now to become the ideological shield of 'power', in other words reactionary Prussian-German imperialism".<sup>73</sup> It was this, according to Lukács, that explained Mann's peculiar situation in the First World War. But 'as an artist' he could not cease looking for 'bourgeois man': he wanted to seize the predicament of the German bourgeoisie at its core. Mann's work therefore represents

. . . the highest and so far last great expression of bourgeois, critical realism today. It is a bourgeois world, seen by a bourgeois, but by one who looks with an unprejudiced eye and who, in his judgement of the present, his grasp of its essential character and his understanding of the future, transcends his own class limitations.<sup>74</sup>

I shall not pause to examine the problem of Mann's 'transcendence' of his class position. One has to say, though, that it is a strange transcendence indeed, since Mann's originality is to be explained for Lukács in terms of his "true self-knowledge of the contemporary bourgeoisie".<sup>75</sup> And it is this 'self-knowledge' which provides the

momentum for Mann's heroic struggle in his 'search for Bourgeois man' in Germany.

One can begin to comprehend Mann's pivotal position within the Lukácsian schema once it is recognized that, for Lukács, he was simply taking up an age-old battle in German culture (and not only there), a battle signalled by Goethe's attitude towards the Romantics: " 'Classical I call what is healthy, Romantic what is sick' ".<sup>76</sup> Because of the centrality of this polarity in Lukács' work, he has to expunge from his account everything which contradicts his estimation of Mann as critical realist and implacable enemy of modernism. Mann's expressed opinions on both Nietzsche and Freud are therefore simply dismissed – a further witness to the monolithic character of Lukács' pervasive reason/unreason dichotomy.

Isaac Deutscher put it very well in saying that what we are faced with is "something like Lukács' intellectual love-affair" with Mann.<sup>77</sup> And, as with Goethe, we find in Lukács' treatment a crippling over-simplification of the ideological elements at play in Mann's work. Deutscher's assessment runs like this:

. . . the impulse that moved Mann into opposition and exile was not just 'progressive anti-fascism' or the 'search of bourgeois man'. It was rather the antagonism of the cultivated patrician bourgeois to the savage plebeians, the Kleinbürger and Lumpenproletarier who were running amok in the shadow of the swastika. Because of its so strongly defined character, the writer's antagonism to Nazism was 'organic' and intense, but also relatively narrow, although he sought to overcome its limitations.<sup>78</sup>

I should like to register at once the striking – though hardly surprising – parallel between Mann's position and that of Goethe's 'cultivated patrician' attitude to the 'plebeian elements' in the French Revolution. I am not qualified to judge whether Deutscher's verdict on Mann's ideological position is accurate or not. I would say, however, that it manifests a much finer appreciation of the ideological unevenness which I referred to earlier than anything to be found in Lukács' book on Mann.

Throughout this section I have been concerned with extrapolating what I take to be the basic political position exhibited in Lukács' appraisal of bourgeois (German) culture: a democratic progressivism mediated by a thoroughgoing humanism. In effect, what Lukács leaves us with is a symbol: in those fearful years of Hitler's rule, Mann writes his *Lotte in Weimar* where the majestic figure of Goethe brings together all the best forces in the German bourgeoisie. Admittedly, by virtue of its historical reference, this is a 'momentous' symbol. But it has to be understood that its iconic effect is established by default: Lukács' failure to grasp the real operation of ideology.

- \* This essay was written four years ago. I am indebted to many friends who have made invaluable suggestions during the course of these years.
- 1 Among the aestheticians who share this historicist problematic with Lukács are Adorno, Caudwell, Goldmann and Marcuse. In all of them, the problematic is usually blended with either empiricism or idealism. Furthermore, generally speaking, the political effects of the historicist problematic take the form of 'reductionism' – e.g. economism or ultra-left adventurism. See for example, Athar Hussein, "Marx's Notes on Adolf Wagner: An Introduction", *Theoretical Practice* (Spring 1972), p. 33n.
- 2 István Mészáros, *Lukács' Concept of Dialectic* (Merlin Press, 1971), p. 22.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 4 Quoted in Béla Királyfalvi, *The Aesthetics of György Lukács* (Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 5.
- 5 Quoted *ibid.*, p. 6.
- 6 Quoted in Ferenc Tökei, "Lukács and Hungarian Culture", *New Hungarian Quarterly* 13 (Autumn 1972), p. 111.
- 7 What follows is summarized from the accounts in George Lichtheim, *Lukács* (Collins/Fontana, 1970), chap.1; G.H.R. Parkinson, *George Lukács* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), chaps 1,2,3; Lucio Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel* (New Left Books, 1973), chap. 10; Roisin McDonough, "Ideology and False Consciousness; Lukács", *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 10 (1977), pp. 33-35.
- 8 Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel*, p. 157.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 12 Morris Watnick, "George Lukács: An Intellectual Biography", *Soviet Survey*, No. 23 (January-March 1958), p. 65.
- 13 Lichtheim, *Lukács*, p. 36.
- 14 Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Marxism of the Early Lukács: An Evaluation", *New Left Review* 70 (November-December 1971), p. 43.
- 15 Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Merlin Press, 1971), pp. 14-15.
- 16 Mészáros, *Dialectic*, p. 51
- 17 Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 56.
- 18 Colin Sparks, "George Lukács", *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 4 (Spring 1973), p. 70.

- 19 Werner Mittenzwei, quoted in Helga Gallas, "The part played by Georg Lukács in working out a Marxist theory of literature in the League of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers", *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 4 (Spring 1973), p. 113.
- 20 For this and other examples, see his *Political Writings, 1919-1929* (New Left Books, 1972).
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 See the Preface to *History and Class Consciousness* (Merlin Press, 1971).
- 23 Mészáros, *Dialectic*, p. 106.
- 24 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, pp. 162-163.
- 25 In what follows on class consciousness, I have been considerably assisted by Colin Sparks's previously cited article.
- 26 Jones, "Early Lukács", p. 49.
- 27 Quoted in Rodney Livingstone, "Introduction" to Lukács' *Political Writings*, p. xx.
- 28 Tamas Ungvári, "The Lost Childhood; The Genesis of Georg Lukács' concept of literature", *Cambridge Review* 93 (January 28, 1972), p. 98.
- 29 Stefan Morawski, "Mimesis: Lukács' Universal Principle", *Science and Society* (Winter 1968), p. 32.
- 30 Lukács, *Writer and Critic* (Merlin Press, 1970), p. 231, my emphasis.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- 32 Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (Merlin Press, 1970), p. 6.
- 33 Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, p.78.
- 34 H.B. Acton, "Hegel", *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 3, ed. Paul Edwards (NY: Macmillan, 1967), p. 447; what follows on Hegel's typology of artistic forms is based on this article.
- 35 Gallas, "Proletarian Writers", p. 115.
- 36 Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, p. 34, my emphasis.
- 37 Gallas, "Proletarian Writers", p. 115.
- 38 Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, p. 45.
- 39 University of Essex, Methodology Seminar in the Sociology of Literature, November 16, 1971, mimeographed copy. I am indebted to Paul Lawford who was kindly provided this.
- 40 Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (Penguin, 1969), p. 202.

- 41 Ibid., p. 285, my emphasis.
- 42 Ibid., p. 206.
- 43 Lukács, *European Realism*, p.225.
- 44 Sparks, "Georg Lukács", p. 81.
- 45 Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 422.
- 46 Lukács, *European Realism*, p. 92, my emphasis.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Lukács, *Realism in Our Time* (NY: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 34, second emphasis mine.
- 49 Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, p. 175.
- 50 Vera Maslow, "Georg Lukács and the Unconscious", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 22 (Summer 1964), p. 446.
- 51 Birmingham Literature and Society Group, "Literature and Society: Mapping the Field", *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 4 (Spring 1973), pp. 35-36.
- 52 Lukács, *European Realism*, p. 83.
- 53 Ibid., p.63.
- 54 Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, p. 150, my emphasis.
- 55 Ibid., p. 116, my emphasis.
- 56 Ibid., p. 35
- 57 Lukács, *Essays on Thomas Mann* (Merlin Press, 1964), p.84.
- 58 The following account is summarized from Henri Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics* (Cornell University Press, 1973), chap. 7; and from "Introduction to Brecht on Lukács", *New Left Review* 84 (March-April 1974).
- 59 Quoted in Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics*, p. 105.
- 60 Bertold Brecht, "Against George Lukács", *New Left Review* 84 (March-April 1974), p. 40.
- 61 Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. John Willett (NY: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 114n.
- 62 Brecht, "Against Lukács", p. 45.
- 63 Ibid., p. 46.
- 64 Stanley Mitchell, "Lukács' Concept of 'The Beautiful' ", in *Georg Lukács: the man, his*

- work and his ideas**, ed. G.H.R. Parkinson (NY: Random House, 1970), p. 235.
- 65 Quoted in Lichtheim, **Lukács**, p. 78.
- 66 Cf. Michael Löwy, "Lukács and Stalinism", *New Left Review* 91 (May-June 1975).
- 67 **Lukács, Goethe and His Age** (Merlin Press, 1968), p. 238.
- 68 *Ibid.*, p. 78 my emphasis.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 240.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 172 .
- 72 Lichtheim, **Lukács**, pp. 91-92.
- 73 **Lukács, Thomas Mann**, p. 29.
- 74 *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115, my emphasis.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 133, my emphasis.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 77 Isaac Deutscher, "George Lukács and 'Critical Realism' ", *The Listener* 76 (November 3, 1966), p. 659.
- 78 *Ibid.*

#### ÖZET

Bu yazıda G. Lukács'ın sanat anlayışı tarihsel bir perspektif içinde incelenirken idealist sapmalar ortaya konulmaya çalışılmaktadır.