GEORG

LUKÁCS

REALISM

edited by Rodney Livingstone

translated by David Fernbach

Essays on Realism

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Introduction

Lukács in the thirties

The essays collected in this volume are among the major contributions to literary theory and literary criticism published by Georg Lukács in the nineteen-thirties. They differ in character, therefore, from the writings which had made his name in the previous decade, since these had been almost entirely political.

During the twenties, after his active participation in the abortive revolutionary government in Hungary, Lukács lived in exile in Vienna, where in 1923 he produced his epoch-making contribution to Marxist theory, *History and Class Consciousness*.[1]* This book proved immensely influential as a critique of reformist Marxism but also made Lukács a highly controversial figure, attracting criticism from, among others, Bukharin and Zinoviev at the Fifth Comintern Congress in 1924. Throughout the twenties Lukács was involved in political activity and controversy, and his political career was ended for three decades by the debate following the publication of his 'Blum Theses' in 1928 (see *Political Writings, 1919–1929*, pp. 227–53), in which he proclaimed the need for a 'democratic dictatorship' in Hungary, i.e. an alliance of peasantry and proletariat, at a time when the Comintern had just moved to the left and embarked on its Third Period policy of condemning collaboration with social-democratic and other left-wing bourgeois parties. Forced to retract, Lukács withdrew from all political activity.

From 1929 to 1931 Lukács lived in Moscow where he worked at the Marx–Engels–Lenin–Institute, directed by David Riazanov. Here he was shown the typescript of Marx's *Paris Manuscripts of 1844* before their publication. They confirmed Lukács in the views he had expounded in *History and Class Consciousness*, and also strengthened the classical humanism he was to defend in his writings during the thirties.

In 1931 he moved to Berlin where he stayed until the Nazis came to

* See Notes on p. 238.

power. Here he became a leading member of the League of Proletarian-Revolutionary Writers, a literary and political organization affiliated to the International Association of Revolutionary Writers in the USSR. It was for the *Linkskurve*, the journal of the League, that the essays in this volume attacking Bredel and Ottwalt, as well as '"Tendency" or Partisanship' were written. *Linkskurve* was one of the three German-language periodicals to which Lukács contributed during the thirties. The others were *Internationale Literatur*, which generally reflected official Soviet views, and *Das Wort*, an international journal published from Moscow, which was designed to express the views of exiled writers and, broadly speaking, had a popular-front ideology. It was in *Das Wort* that the Expressionism debate appeared.

Throughout this period Lukács was involved in literary debates. He took up a position critical both of socialist realism, which became official Soviet policy after the Writers' Congress of 1934, and of 'Proletcult' and modernist or experimental writers. The ambiguity of Lukács's position is suggested by the fact that he was a member of the editorial board of *Internationale Literatur* from 1935 on, whilst at the same time he could publish in it works as critical of Stalinist bureaucracy as 'Tribune or Bureaucrat?'.

During the thirties Lukács completed some of his principal literary and philosophical works. In 1938 he was awarded a doctorate in philosophy by the Soviet Academy of Sciences for *The Young Hegel*, which was not published, however, until 1948, and in the same period he also completed *The Historical Novel* (1936/7). Other major works of the period were the essays on Russian and French realist writers, published in English as *Studies in European Realism*, and various contributions to literary theory (published in English under the title *Writer and Critic*). Of the major work as yet untranslated, particular mention should be made of the studies in German realism – including essays on Heinrich Heine, Georg Büchner, Gottfried Keller and Theodor Fontane – which have drawn favourable comment even from hostile critics like Theodor Adorno and which undoubtedly contain some of Lukács's finest work.

With the Nazi takeover in 1933 Lukács moved back to the Soviet Union where he remained until the end of the war. Regarded by some, for instance Brecht, as a powerful and more or less official spokesman of Soviet literary policy, his true position seems to have been rather more fragile. He was arrested and jailed for some months in 1941 on a charge of having been a Trotskyist agent, but was finally released on

the intervention of Dimitrov. Although Lukács did not lack an authoritarian side to his personality, he seems to have regarded himself, not without justice, as a 'partisan', in broad agreement with Soviet policies, making concessions which he thought justified by the prime need to combat fascism, but for all this retaining an independent and critical line. Precisely because of this uneasy accommodation, Ferenc Feher's reference to the 'partisan's feeling of icy isolation'[2] is perhaps the most fitting description of the Lukács of these years.

Romantic Anti-Capitalism

The picture of Lukács that emerges in his literary essays of the thirties is of a dualistic thinker. His approach is to set up contrasting concepts – the 'partisan' as opposed to the tendentious writer, the realist writer who 'portrays' as opposed to the modernist who practises 'reportage', the tribune of the people as opposed to the bureaucrat. These pairs could be augmented by reference to other works: Thomas Mann or Kafka, the writer who narrates or the writer who describes, and so on. However, this picture is over-simple, since it generally turns out that Lukács sees himself as mediating between two extremes. Thus the realist who practises dialectical portrayal is contrasted on the one hand with the superficial naturalist writer who records immediate experience, and on the other with the no less superficial expressionist whose works register utopian protest. But the dualism is then usually restored by Lukács's frequent argument that the vulgar materialism of the one is simply the obverse of the subjective idealism of the other. Each has got hold of one side of a dilemma, the key to which is in the possession of the true dialectician.

In the upshot, then, we are confronted by a body of work strangely compounded of subtlety and crudeness. On the one hand, a complex mind, attempting to forge a theory of literature with the conceptual apparatus developed in *History and Class Consciousness*, a theory with a 'democratic' bias and values rooted in the tradition of German classicism. On the other hand, the constant lapse into dualism has the Manichean overtones which point to the apparently Stalinist Lukács, the mind in chains, whose 'every criticism contains a threat' (Brecht). To strike a balance between these two aspects is not easy, but recent commentators have attempted to use Lukács's own term 'romantic anti-capitalism' as a tool to disentangle the muddle. Even though the

term itself is, as we shall see, open to objection, it is perhaps reasonable to think of Lukács as a Marxist who developed out of the tradition of romantic anti-capitalism, importing some of its themes into his major work, *History and Class Consciousness*. In the following period, he retained some of its most important insights, in particular the theory of reification. At the same time, in line with his repudiation of *History and Class Consciousness*, he turned against elements of his own past, and also against writers whose opposition to capitalism may be suspected of being 'romantic'.

What was romantic anti-capitalism? Following Löwy's account,[3] we may think of it as a wide spectrum of opposition to capitalism, ultimately tracing its roots back to the romantic movement, but acquiring a new impetus in the latter part of the nineteenth century. It includes such disparate figures as Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Thomas Mann, Stefan George and Ernst Toller. Capitalism is attacked for a variety of reasons, including machine-production, the modern division of labour, the depersonalization of individuals (Nietzsche), the growth of large towns and the break-up of small communities (Tönnies) and the inexorable growth of rational calculation (Weber). It may be summed up in the polar opposites of 'culture' versus 'civilization', the plea for a universe governed by qualitative values as opposed to the logic of rationality and the cash nexus.

The anti-capitalism of the turn of the century may be distinguished from earlier critiques by the realization that capitalism had become an irreversible process. A nostalgia for earlier, traditional societies was now joined by a mood of resignation, a 'tragic consciousness'. Overall there was a 'feeling of "spiritual impotence" when faced with an uncultured barbarian-civilized and vulgar-materialist "mass society"' (Löwy, p. 67).

The early Lukács fully shares in these attitudes though they are sharpened in his case by a greater radicalism and by the genuine revolutionary potential which characterized the Hungarian intelligentsia. In the words of a contemporary, Paul Honigsheim, Lukács was irreconcilably opposed to 'the bourgeoisie, liberalism, the constitutional state, parliamentarianism, revisionistic socialism, the Enlightenment, relativism and individualism' (quoted in Löwy, p. 95).

Lukács's two early books testify to the potency of the themes of romantic anti-capitalism. *Soul and Form* (1911) develops systematically the tragic vision already explored in *A History of the Development of Modern Drama* (written between 1906 and 1909,

published 1911) where he had argued that the conflict between the desire for personal fulfilment and the reified reality of capitalism formed the basis of modern drama. Similarly, in *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), the novel expresses the unbridgeable gulf between the individual and the community; it is the 'form of absolute sinfulness'. Both books explore a sense of tragic doom founded on the irreparable inhumanity of capitalist society and the absence of any adequate way out at least for individuals. *Soul and Form* does consider a number of attempts to achieve 'authenticity' – Theodor Storm's attitude of resignation, Stefan George's haughty rejection of society, Kierkegaard's cultivation of 'the art of living'. At the same time the rejection of these private solutions is accompanied by a search for an authentic collective which proceeds via Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky to a commitment to the proletariat as the agency which will overcome the inhumanity of capitalism by overthrowing capitalism itself. Lukács's road to Marxism involves a sharpened critique of capitalism coupled with the ultimate rejection of the ideology which had enabled him to launch that critique. But equally, certain features of that ideology survive into his Marxism.

History and Class Consciousness

The central importance of romantic anti-capitalism in Lukács's thought is immediately evident from a consideration of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Lukács's most fertile idea, the concept of reification, comes into being as the result of a marriage between his critique of capitalism and the Marxian analysis of commodity fetishism. Lukács's innovation here is to extend Marx's analysis beyond the market place and to apply it to the institutions and forms of thought of capitalist society. This is the first real attempt to elaborate Marx's own suggestive but fragmentary insights, and to construct from them a major theory of ideology.

Reification is Lukács's term for the process by which capitalism permeates the whole of society.

> Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people (*H & CC*, p. 83).

Reification, then, makes a given social formation appear natural and permanent, solidifying time into space, and so denying process, upheaval, change. But whereas Marx emphasized exploitation in the

production process, the alienation of the worker's labour power and the material degradation of the worker, Lukács stresses instead the 'principle of rationalization based on what is and can be calculated' (ibid., p. 88). The rational nature of the division of labour becomes for Lukács an ever-intensifying revolutionary force which breaks with 'the organic, irrational and qualitatively determined unity of the product' (ibid.). This opposition between rational calculation and the organic and qualitative comes from the vocabulary of romantic anti-capitalism and clearly shows his debt to it.

The same is true of the principal object of his analysis. Just as the process of production increasingly fragments the worker, reducing him to a mere appendage of the machine, so too the rationalized superstructure of society reifies human institutions, as well as stamping its imprint on 'the whole consciousness of man' (ibid., p. 100).

However, the dehumanization of man at the hands of capitalism in effect reinterprets the dilemma that had faced the romantic anti-capitalist. The latter had felt an invincible despair about the state of the world in general. By providing this diagnosis with a socio-economic explanation Lukács made it possible to discover a way out of the impasse, and was now able to argue that the processes of intensified rationalization would produce their own contradiction in the shape of the proletariat. Just as for Marx the proletariat had been the secret of capitalist production, so for Lukács, proletarian class consciousness is the secret of the reified consciousness of capitalism.

This consciousness is in the first instance neither actual nor simply desirable: it is an objective possibility appropriate to 'a particular typical position in the process of production' (ibid., p. 51). It forms itself initially in a vanguard party, whose function however is simply that of a catalyst; its task is to express and propagate the scientific truth about capitalism and to develop methods of organization and political struggle. In contrast with the *putschist* actions of utopian socialists or the reformist activities of social democrats, the working class makes this possible consciousness actual by the interaction of theory and practice in the course of its experience of struggle.

The structure of consciousness which emerges from *History and Class Consciousness* continues, albeit with significant amendments, to determine Lukács's thought in the nineteen-thirties. He delivers a searching critique of bourgeois thought and of the contradictions which result from the bourgeoisie's inability to transcend the ideological limitations which arise from its role as the prime cause of capitalist

reification. At the same time, he considers and rejects the vulgar materialism of social democracy as well as the subjective idealism of utopian socialists. The position from which he pronounces judgement is that of a dialectical materialism powerfully influenced by the critique developed by romantic anti-capitalism. In the following years a similar structure asserts itself in the field of literary debate, but with significant shifts of emphasis, since Lukács comes increasingly to commit himself to a 'classical' aesthetics based on closed mimetic forms, and to denigrate romantic anti-capitalism as 'unrealistic', full of good will, but purblind. At the same time, but also in a significantly altered way, the concept of reification is carried over into literary criticism.

As will be evident from the foregoing, the concept of romantic anti-capitalism may be said to have a function in drawing attention to certain persistent preoccupations among writers and thinkers in the earlier part of the century. But its limitations as an analytical concept are also apparent. In Lukács's own application it rapidly acquires derogatory connotations functioning as the opposite of 'Marxist', and a fairly narrow definition of Marxist at that. While it may be useful to point to the petty-bourgeois origins, the nostalgic, backward-looking values of its adherents, the term is too general to be ultimately effective. To consider it just from the point of view of political involvement, it is evident that there is a world of difference between Stefan George's proud abstentionism and Toller's active commitment to pacifism and socialism. Even more seriously, the pejorative associations of 'romantic' devalue the seriousness of the critique of capitalism. As Raymond Williams has recently noted:

> If the diffuse anti-capitalism of those days spent so much time analysing the problems of state bureaucracy, of the relations between a modern industrial system and quantitative kinds of thinking and administration, of the differences between actual communities and a centralized monetary social order, we can hardly, from the end of the seventies suppose that they were wasting their time or missing some simple truth.[4]

Reconciliation with Reality

The late twenties brought about significant shifts in Lukács's thought. Lukács himself puts it in this way:

> After 1924 the Third International correctly defined the position of the capitalist world as one of 'relative stability'. These facts meant that I had to rethink my theoretical position. In the debates of the Russian Party I agreed

> with Stalin about the necessity for socialism in one country and this shows very clearly the start of a new epoch in my thought (*H & CC*, pp. xxvii–xxviii).

The far-reaching identification with Stalinism proclaimed here, albeit with many reservations and qualifications, was to last throughout the thirties and forties. The stabilization of the international situation led Lukács to abandon revolutionary perspectives and to stress instead the need for 'realism', i.e. reconciliation with an existing reality. This expressed itself in his tendency to use the term 'utopian' as a pejorative epithet in his account of writers like Fichte, Ernst Toller or Moses Hess (see the essay on Hess in *Political Writings, 1919–1929*, pp. 181–223), who are contrasted unfavourably with Goethe, or with Hegel whose tendency to reconcile himself with reality is a mark of his 'grandiose realism' and his 'rejection of all utopias'. Even though Lukács recognized that Hegel's acceptance of Prussian reality was reactionary, he nevertheless argued that this realism was closer to materialism and hence intrinsically more progressive than the apparently more revolutionary outlook of, say, Fichte or Hess. His most developed statement of this position comes in a comparison between Hegel and Hölderlin in 1935.

> Hegel comes to terms with the post-Thermidorian epoch and the close of the revolutionary period of bourgeois development, and he builds up his philosophy precisely on an understanding of this new Thermidorian reality; he remains faithful to the old revolutionary ideal of renovating the 'polis' democracy and is broken by a reality which had no place for his ideals, not even on the level of poetry and thought. While Hegel's intellectual accommodation to the post-Thermidorian reality . . . led him into the main current of the ideological development of his class . . . Hölderlin's intransigence ended in a tragic impasse . . . The world-historical significance of Hegel's accommodation consists precisely in the fact that he grasped . . . the revolutionary development of the bourgeoisie as a unitary phase, one in which the revolutionary Terror as well as Thermidor and Napoleon were necessary phases. The heroic period of the revolutionary bourgeoisie becomes in Hegel . . . something irretrievably past, but a past which was absolutely necessary for the emergence of this unheroic phase of the present to be considered progressive (see *Goethe and His Age*, pp. 137–9).

Lukàcs justified his own accommodation to reality, an instance of which was his cynical recantation of the 'Blum Theses', as a self-sacrifice made necessary by the fascist threat:

> I was indeed firmly convinced that I was in the right, but I knew also – e.g. from the fate that had befallen Karl Korsch – that to be expelled from the Party meant that it would no longer be possible to participate actively in the struggle against Fascism. I wrote my self-criticism as an 'entry-ticket' to such activity . . . (*H & CC*, p. xxx).

Heine had used the phrase about the 'entry-ticket', not so much to justify his pro forma conversion to Christianity as to expose the scandal such a conversion implied. He did not abandon one faith for another, but the appearance of Judaism for an outward conformity with Christianity. If his apostasy was hypocritical, the blame was less his than that of the society that imposed it. Lukács's use of the phrase conceals the fact (possibly from himself) that he had made a real accommodation to Stalinism, even though in some ways he preserved his intellectual independence.

Stalinism

As with many of the leading Marxists of the thirties, not excluding obvious dissenters like Bertolt Brecht or Ernst Bloch, Lukács's relationship with Stalinism is full of ambivalence. In his case, of course, the fact that he spent the period in the USSR makes it difficult to define his position with any precision. Acts of homage cannot always be taken at their face value and genuine dissent may have smouldered beneath apparent acquiescence and the obligatory quotations from Stalin. 'Tribune or Bureaucrat?', for example, has often been taken for an outspoken attack on the bureaucracy, all the more remarkable for the fact that it was published in 1940. And no doubt that is how it should be read. But at the same time, the bureaucracy is assailed in Stalin's name, and is conceived not as something integral to the Stalinist system, but as a vestige of capitalism (see below, pp. 228–9). Moreover, in literary terms, it soon becomes apparent (cf. p. 228 below) that by 'bureaucratic phenomena' Lukács refers to the survival in Soviet literature of the very trends towards formalism and naturalism that he castigates throughout his critical essays.

Since he remained in the Soviet Union it is reasonable to assert that his acceptance of Stalinist Russia cannot have been wholly formal. Thus he writes in 1936:

> Even today, *when a socialist society has become a reality*, it would be a mistake to think that we have nothing further to learn from Gorky (*Studies in European Realism*, p. 241; my emphasis, R.L.).

His writings abound in such remarks and, whether insincere or not, they cannot simply be discounted. Löwy points out that Lukács was not opposed to the show trials and even when it became possible to speak out more clearly, after the Twentieth Congress, he went no further than the statement that they were 'superfluous' (Löwy, p. 206).

But equally, to identify Lukács wholly with Stalinism would be an even greater mistake than to stylize him into a hidden dissident. The 'reconciliation with reality' and his own beliefs undoubtedly led him to give his support to the Soviet Union and this was more than a tactical necessity exacted by the threat of fascism. At the same time, it is hard to disagree with his own subsequent assessment of the matter as expressed in the Preface to *Writer and Critic*:

> It is not hard to see today that the main direction of these essays was in opposition to the dominant literary theory of the time. Stalin and his followers demanded that literature provide tactical support to their current political policies. Accordingly, all art was to be subordinated both in the positive and negative sense, to these needs. Only acceptable characters and situations, ideas and emotions were to be introduced, only material adapted to their policies and nothing going beyond these policies. As everyone knows, no open polemics were possible during that period. Yet I did protest consistently against such a conception of literature. A revival of Marx's and Lenin's views regarding the complicated dialectic, rich in contradiction, between the political and social positions of writers and their actual works, ran counter to Zhdanov's prescriptions. In expounding such and similar views through analyses of a Balzac or a Tolstoy, I not only offered a theory in opposition to the official line but also by clear implication a critique of the official literature. As many documents attest, those I criticized were well aware of what I was doing (ibid., p. 7).

How are these two accounts to be reconciled? Both Löwy and Feher argue convincingly (though with varying emphases) that Lukács managed to retain his independence despite concessions and compromises. According to Löwy:

> Lukács was in opposition whenever Stalinism was in sharp conflict with Western (bourgeois) democracy and culture; which is why he was criticized as a right-opportunist by the Comintern and the Hungarian Communist Party in 1928–30 and why he was arrested in Moscow in 1941 (Löwy, p. 203).

And he believes that a coherent strategy may be discerned in Lukács's political and intellectual career from 1928: 'it was a consistent attempt

to "reconcile" Stalinism with bourgeois democratic culture' (ibid., p. 204).

We may conclude that if the authoritarian features in Lukács himself were powerful enough to induce him to submit to Stalinism, they were also strong enough to enable him to stand up for his own – bourgeois-democratic – version of Stalinism. This helps to explain why Brecht and others could see him as an official Soviet spokesman at the same time as he was stressing his own internal opposition.

Realism

Lukács's accommodation to Stalin's reality took the form of an attempt 'to build his personal Weimar – a cultural island among power relations unambiguously hostile to any democratic culture' (Feher, op. cit., p. 114). In this effort realism played a pivotal role. Although the earlier Lukács had always resolutely opposed modern art, his early preference was essentially for art, such as the works of Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, which contained 'solutions' to the impasse of modern culture. In the early twenties, however, his taste begins to change. In the *Theory of the Novel*, for example, Balzac is criticized because his work does not constitute a genuine totality:

> None of the parts, seen from the viewpoint of the whole, possesses an organic necessity of existence; if it were not there at all, the whole would not suffer; conversely, any number of new parts might be added and no evidence of inner completeness would prove them superfluous (*The Theory of the Novel*, p. 111).

By 1922, however, he was praising Balzac, contrasting him in his latest manner with Zola and Flaubert on the basis of the theory, to be expanded in 'Marx and the Problem of Ideological Decay', that they belong to the bourgeois decadence that dates from the collapse of the 1848 revolutions. Thus Balzac has now become 'the literary expression of the ascendant, progressive bourgeoisie', and he is praised because he

> not only knew how to describe human passions simply or to analyse them psychologically, but was able also to grasp their essence, their relationship to the totality of social life and to understand how they interacted.[5]

The scene was set, therefore, for his later advocacy of classical realism – Balzac, Scott, Tolstoy and in modern times, Thomas Mann and Gorky.

In Lukács's programme for realism, art fills the gap left vacant by the collapse of his confidence in the proletariat. It is now art and specifically

realist art whose function it is to de-reify reality; it is the realist who is the '"defetishized" man who sees through the veils of reification, penetrates appearances to arrive at their essences' (Feher, p. 126).

Lukács's view of realism as defined in these essays and elsewhere is then a form of essentialism. The underlying assumption is that actual consciousness, that which is immediately 'given', is not enough. For if under capitalism all consciousness is reified, then the immediate reflection of appearances can never transcend that reification.

Realism, then, is to be distinguished from traditional definitions, such as that of George Eliot who declared that her aim was 'to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind' (*Adam Bede*, Chapter 17), or that of Erich Auerbach for whom it was 'the serious treatment of everyday reality'.[6] For although realism must satisfy these requirements, the crucial fact for Lukács is that what we see is only appearance, whereas the great novelist reveals 'the driving forces' of history which are invisible to actual consciousness.

It is perhaps less important at this stage, now that Lukács's ideas have acquired a certain currency, to spell out the details of his position.[7] It can be seen clearly enough in the essays published here, above all in the defence of Tolstoy in 'Reportage or Portrayal?', in '"Tendency" or Partisanship?', and the clarifications in the correspondence with Anna Seghers. What should be emphasized rather is the central vision. The elision of realism and essentialism in effect invokes the message of German classicism: the hope that art can somehow break through the limitations of actual consciousness and for a moment overcome human alienation. Feher has rightly emphasized the democratic inspiration here. He draws attention to Lukács's constant invective against merely formal democracy. Lukács's praise is reserved for the small community of sophisticated individuals in *Wilhelm Meister* but more especially for the Switzerland of Gottfried Keller which, because it had not been fully penetrated by capitalism, allowed a glimpse of a more genuine democracy:

> Nevertheless, the free atmosphere in which Keller's heroes move radiates an idea of self-governed mankind: a regulative theoretical idea without which socialism is impossible (Feher, p. 118).

This democratic vision may be flawed by the authoritarian overtones of a theory in which art is presented as a closed universe, handed down to the consumer, but it is nevertheless at the core of Lukács's defence of realism.