

THEODOR
ADORNO

WALTER
BENJAMIN

ERNST
BLOCH

BERTOLT
BRECHT

GEORG
LUKÁCS

WITH AN AFTERWORD BY FREDRIC JAMESON

V **AESTHETICS
AND
POLITICS**

RADICAL'S
THINKERS

Ever since Baumgarten and Winckelmann, Germany has been the classical land of aesthetic thought in Europe. In the 20th century, Marxism itself has repeated the rule. No other country has produced a tradition of major aesthetic debate to compare with that which unfolded in German culture from the thirties to the fifties. The key texts of these great Marxist controversies over literature and art are now, for the first time anywhere outside Germany, assembled in a coherent order. They do not form a conventional collection of separate documents but a continuous debate between their *dramatis personae*. In exile before the war, Bloch and Lukács polemicized against each other over the nature of expressionism. Brecht attacked Lukács for literary formalism. Benjamin disputed over classical and modern works of art with Brecht. Adorno criticized Benjamin's hermeneutics, and challenged Brecht's poetics and Lukács's politics. The multilateral exchanges which resulted have a variety and eloquence without rival. Fredric Jameson, Professor of French at Yale University and author of *Marxism and Form* and *The Prison House of Language*, sums up their paradoxical lessons for art and criticism today, in an essay of theoretical conclusion. *Aesthetics and Politics* will provide a pole of reference and a source of illumination to students of literature throughout the English-speaking world.



Ernst Bloch
Georg Lukács
Bertolt Brecht
Walter Benjamin
Theodor Adorno

Verso

Aesthetics and Politics

Afterword by Fredric Jameson

Translation Editor: Ronald Taylor

Ernst Bloch 'Discussing Expressionism', first published in *Das Wort* 1938, then in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, Frankfurt 1962, © Suhrkamp Verlag; Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance', first published in *Das Wort* 1938, then in *Probleme des Realismus*, Neuwied 1971, © Artisjus; Bertolt Brecht, texts of 'Against Georg Lukács', first published in *Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur*, Frankfurt 1967, © Stefan Brecht, 1967. All rights reserved through Suhrkamp Verlag; Walter Benjamin 'Conversations with Brecht', first published in *Versuche über Brecht*, Frankfurt 1966, © Suhrkamp Verlag – this translation first published in Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, London 1973, © NLB; Theodor Adorno, 'Letters to Walter Benjamin', published in *Über Walter Benjamin*, Frankfurt 1970, © Suhrkamp Verlag, and Walter Benjamin 'Reply', published in *Briefe II*, Frankfurt 1966, © Suhrkamp – these translations first published in *New Left Review*, September–October 1973, © New Left Review; Theodor Adorno, 'Reconciliation under Duress' and 'Engagement', published in *Noten zur Literatur II* and *III*, Frankfurt 1961 and 1965, © Suhrkamp Verlag; Fredric Jameson, 'Reflections in Conclusion', © NLB 1977.

Aesthetics and Politics, first published 1977

© NLB 1977

Verso edition first published 1980

Verso Editions, 7 Carlisle Street, London W.1.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Whitstable Litho Ltd, Whitstable

ISBN 86091 722 3 (paper)

ISBN 902308 38 6 (cloth)

Contents

<i>Presentation I</i>		9
Ernst Bloch	Discussing Expressionism	16
Georg Lukács	Realism in the Balance	28
<i>Presentation II</i>		60
Bertolt Brecht	Against Georg Lukács	68
Walter Benjamin	Conversations with Brecht	86
<i>Presentation III</i>		100
Theodor Adorno	Letters to Walter Benjamin	110
Walter Benjamin	Reply	134
<i>Presentation IV</i>		142
Theodor Adorno	Reconciliation under Duress	151
Theodor Adorno	Commitment	177
Fredric Jameson	Reflections in Conclusion	196
Index		214

Theodor Adorno

Reconciliation under Duress

The nimbus which still surrounds the name of Georg Lukács today, even outside the Soviet bloc, is something he owes to the writings of his youth – the volume of essays *Soul and Form*, *The Theory of the Novel* and the studies collected in *History and Class Consciousness*, in which he became the first dialectical materialist to apply the category of reification systematically to philosophy. Inspired originally by people like Simmel and Kassner, his ideas were then further developed by the South-Western school.¹ He soon began to reject psychological subjectivism in favour of an objectivistic philosophy of history, which became highly influential. *The Theory of the Novel* in particular had a brilliance and profundity of conception which was quite extraordinary at the time, so much so that it set a standard for philosophical aesthetics which has been retained ever since. As early as the beginning of the twenties his objectivism started to adjust itself, albeit not without some initial resistance, to the official communist doctrine. He acquiesced in the communist custom and disavowed his earlier writings. He took the crudest criticisms from the Party hierarchy to heart, twisting Hegelian motifs and turning them against himself; and for decades on end he laboured in a series of books and essays to adapt his obviously unimpaired talents to the unrelieved sterility of Soviet claptrap, which in the meantime had degraded the philosophy it proclaimed to the level of a mere instrument in the service of its rule. Only for the sake of the early writings, which were disparaged by his Party and which he had himself abjured, has anyone outside the Eastern bloc taken any notice at all of the works he has published over the last thirty years, among them a thick volume on the young Hegel. This remains true today, even though his former talent can still be discerned in one or two of his studies on German realist

¹ I.e. the neo-Kantians in Heidelberg such as Windelband, Rickert, Emil Lask, but also Max Weber.

literature in the 19th century, in particular those on Keller and Raabe. It was doubtless his book *The Destruction of Reason* which revealed most clearly the destruction of Lukács's own. In a highly undialectical manner, the officially licensed dialectician sweeps all the irrationalist strands of modern philosophy into the camp of reaction and Fascism. He blithely ignores the fact that, unlike academic idealism, these schools were struggling against the very same reification in both thought and life of which Lukács too was a dedicated opponent. Nietzsche and Freud are simply labelled Fascists, and he could even bring himself to refer to Nietzsche, in the condescending tones of a provincial Wilhelminian school inspector, as a man 'of above-average abilities'. Under the mantle of an ostensibly radical critique of society he surreptitiously reintroduced the most threadbare clichés of the very conformism which that social criticism had once attacked.

As for the book under consideration, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*,² published in the West by Claassen Verlag in 1958, we can detect in it traces of a change of attitude on the part of the 75-year-old writer. These presumably have to do with the conflict he became involved in through his active role in the Nagy government. Not only does he talk about the crimes of the Stalin era, but he even speaks up on behalf of 'a general commitment to the freedom to write', a formulation that would earlier have been unthinkable. Lukács posthumously discovers some merit in Brecht, his adversary of many years' standing, and praises as a work of genius his *Ballad of the Dead Soldier*, a poem which must strike the East German rulers as a cultural-Bolshevist atrocity. Like Brecht, he would like to widen the concept of socialist realism, which has been used for decades to stifle any spontaneous impulse, any product incomprehensible or suspect to the apparatchiks, so as to make room for works that rise above the level of despicable trash. He ventures a timid opposition in gestures which show him to be paralysed from the outset by the consciousness of his own impotence. His timidity is no mere tactic. Lukács's personal integrity is above all suspicion. But the conceptual structure to which he has sacrificed his intellect is so restricted that it suffocates anything which might have breathed more freely; the *sacrificio dell'intelletto* does not let the intellect off scot-free. This casts a melancholy light on Lukács's unconcealed nostalgia for his own early writings. The notion of 'the immanent meaning of life' from *The Theory*

² The English edition was published by Merlin Press, London 1962. Page-numbers henceforward refer to the latter. Translations have sometimes been modified, however.

of the Novel recurs here, but it is reduced to the dictum that life in a society building up socialism is in fact full of meaning – a dogma just good enough to provide a plausible philosophical justification of the rosy positive attitude expected of art in the peoples' republics. The book is like a parfait or a sundae – half way between a so-called thaw on the one hand and a renewed freeze on the other.

Operating reductively, imperiously distributing labels such as critical or socialist realism, Lukács still behaves like a Cultural Commissar, for all his dynamic assurances to the contrary. Hegel's criticism of Kantian formalism in aesthetics is reduced to the simplified assertion that in modern art the emphasis on style, form and technique is grossly exaggerated (see esp. p. 19) – even though Lukács must be perfectly well aware that these are the features that distinguish art as knowledge from science, and that works of art which ignored their own form, would destroy themselves as art. What looks like formalism to him, really means the structuring of the elements of a work in accordance with laws appropriate to them, and is relevant to that 'immanent meaning' for which Lukács yearns, as opposed to a meaning arbitrarily superimposed from outside, something he objectively defends while asserting its impossibility. Instead of recognizing the objective function of formal elements in determining the aesthetic content of modern art, he wilfully misinterprets them as arbitrary ingredients added by an over-inflated subjectivism. The objectivity he misses in modern art and which he expects from the subject-matter when placed in 'perspective', is in fact achieved by the procedures and techniques which dissolve the subject-matter and reorganize it in a way which does create a perspective – but these are the very procedures and techniques he wishes to sweep away. He remains indifferent to the philosophical question of whether the concrete meaning of a work of art is in fact identical with the mere 'reflection of objective reality' (p. 101), a vulgar-materialist shibboleth to which he doggedly clings.

At all events, his own text disregards all the norms of the responsible criticism which his own early writings had helped to establish. No bearded Privy Councillor could pontificate about art in a manner more alien to it. He speaks with the voice of the dogmatic professor who knows he cannot be interrupted, who does not shrink from any digression, however lengthy, and who has evidently dispensed with those reactions which he castigates as aestheticist, formalistic and decadent, but which alone permit any real relationship with art. Even though the Hegelian concept of 'the concrete' still stands at a premium with him – especially

when he is concerned to restrict literature to the imitation of empirical reality – his own arguments remain largely abstract. His text hardly ever submits to the discipline imposed by a specific work of art and the problems implicit in it. Instead he issues decrees. The pedantry of his general manner is matched by his slovenliness in matters of detail. Lukács does not recoil from seedy truisms such as ‘lecturing and writing are very different activities’; repeatedly uses the expression ‘top-grade performance’ [*Spitzenleistung*], whose origins lie in the world of commerce and record-breaking (p. 11); he calls the obliteration of the distinction between abstract and concrete potentiality ‘appalling’ [*verheerend*] and recalls how ‘from Giotto on a new secularity triumphs more and more over the allegorizing of an earlier period’. (p. 40). We who figure as decadents in Lukács’s vocabulary may seriously overvalue form and style, but at least it has preserved us hitherto from formulations such as ‘from Giotto on’, as well as from the temptation to praise Kafka because he is a ‘marvellous observer’ (p. 45). Nor will modernists have had very much to say about ‘the series of extraordinarily numerous emotions which together combine to structure the inner life of man’. Confronted with such top-grade performances, which follow each other as rapidly as at the Olympic Games, one might well wonder whether a man who can write like this, in such obvious ignorance of the craft of the literature which he treats in such a cavalier manner, has any right at all to an opinion on literary matters. But in the stylistic amalgam of pedantry and irresponsibility to be found in Lukács, who was once able to write well, one senses a certain malice aforethought, a truculent determination to write badly, evidently in the belief that this sacrifice on his part will demonstrate by some magic trick that anyone who does otherwise and who takes pains with his work is a good-for-nothing. Indifference to style, we may remark in passing, is almost always symptomatic of the dogmatic sclerosis of content. The false modesty implicit in a style which believes itself to be dispassionate, as long as it abstains from self-reflection, only succeeds in concealing the fact that it has purified the dialectical process of its objective, as well as its subjective, value. Dialectics are paid lip-service, but for such a thinker all has been decided in advance. The writing becomes undialectical.

The core of his theory remains dogmatic. The whole of modern literature is dismissed except where it can be classified as either critical or socialist realism, and the odium of decadence is heaped on it without a qualm, even though such abuse brings with it all the horrors of persecution and extermination, and not only in Russia. The term ‘decadence’

belongs to the vocabulary of conservatism. Its use by Lukács, as well as his superiors, is designed to claim for the community the authority of a doctrine with which it is in fact incompatible. The idea of decadence can scarcely be entertained in the absence of its positive counterpart: the image of nature in all its vigour and abundance. The categories of nature are smuggled illicitly into the mediations of society, the very practice against which the tenor of Marx's and Engels' critique of ideology was directed. Not even the echoes of Feuerbach's doctrine of healthy sensuous existence were influential enough to procure entry for the terminology of Social Darwinism into their texts. As late as 1857–58, i.e. during the period when *Capital* was underway, we find the following statement in the rough draft of the *Grundrisse*: 'As much, then, as the whole of this movement appears as a social process, and as much as the individual moments of this movement arise from the conscious will and particular purposes of individuals, so much does the totality of the process appear as an objective interrelation, which arises spontaneously from nature; arising, it is true, from the mutual influence of conscious individuals on one another, but neither located in their consciousness, nor subsumed under them as a whole. Their own collisions with one another produce an *alien* social power standing above them, produce their mutual interaction as a process and power independent of them. . . . The social relation of individuals to one another as a power over the individuals which has become autonomous, whether conceived as a natural force, as chance or in whatever other form, is a necessary result of the fact that the point of departure is not the free social individual.'³

Such criticism does not even call a halt at that highly sensitive realm in which the appearance of the organic offers the most stubborn resistance to the social, and in which all indignation about decadence has its home: the sphere of sexuality. Somewhat earlier, in a review of C. F. Daumer's *The Religion of the New Age*, Marx had pilloried the following passage: 'Nature and womanhood are the truly Divine in contrast to humanity and manhood . . . The devotion of the human to the natural, of man to woman, is the authentic, the only true humility and selflessness; it is the most exalted, indeed the only virtue and piety that exists.' To which Marx appends the following commentary: 'We see here how the superficiality and ignorance of this speculative spokesman of religiosity are transformed into a pronounced form of cowardice. Herr Daumer flees

³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth 1973, pp. 196–7, trans. by Martin Nicolaus.

from the tragedies of history which threaten to come too close to him for comfort and seeks refuge in so-called nature, i.e. the cretinous rustic idyll, and he preaches the cult of womanhood in order to cloak his own effeminate resignation.⁴

Wherever people inveigh against decadence, this flight is re-enacted. Lukács is forced into it by a situation in which social injustice persists even though officially it has been abolished. Responsibility is shifted away from conditions for which men are responsible and back on to nature, or alternatively, on to a decadence which is conceived as its opposite. Lukács has of course made the attempt to conjure away the contradiction between Marxist theory and official Marxism by twisting the ideas of sick and healthy art back into social concepts: 'The relations between men change in the course of history, and the intellectual and emotional values placed on those relations change accordingly. But to realize this is not to embrace relativism. At any specific time one human relationship may be progressive and another reactionary. We can therefore make use of the concept of social health and establish it as the foundation of all really great art, for what is socially healthy becomes an integral part of the historical consciousness of mankind'.⁵

But the futility of this attempt is obvious. In any discussion of historical problems, the terms 'sick' and 'healthy' are best avoided altogether. They have no connection with the dimension represented by progress/reaction; they are simply dragged in for the sake of their demagogic appeal. Furthermore, the dichotomy of healthy/sick is as undialectical as that of the rise and fall of the bourgeoisie, which itself derives its norms from a bourgeois consciousness that has failed to keep pace with its own development.

I will not deign to dwell on the point that, in invoking the concepts of decadence and modernism – the two signify the same thing in his eyes – Lukács yokes together things and people who have absolutely nothing in common – not just Proust, Kafka, Joyce and Beckett, but also Benn, Jünger and perhaps even Heidegger; and in the realm of theory, Benjamin and myself. The facile tactic so popular nowadays of suggesting that an object of attack does not really exist as such, but disintegrates into a series of incompatible parts, is all too readily available to soften up attack and evade hostile argument with the gesture 'that doesn't apply to me'. At the risk therefore of being led to over-simplify by my own opposition

⁴ Karl Marx: Review of C. F. Daumer's *The Religion of the New Age*, in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, Hamburg 1850.

⁵ Georg Lukács: *Healthy Art, or Sick in G.L. zum 70. Geburtstag*, Berlin 1955, p. 243.

to over-simplification, I shall keep hold of the central thread of Lukács's argument and not differentiate between the objects of his attack much more than he does himself, except where he travesties them to excess.

His efforts to bolster up the naive Soviet verdict on modern art, i.e. on any literature which shocks the naively realistic normal mind, by providing it with a philosophical good conscience, are carried out with a very limited range of tools, all of them Hegelian in origin. In the first place, in order to press home his point that modernist literature is a deviation from reality, he drags in the distinction between 'abstract' and 'real' potentiality: 'These two categories, their affinities, differences and opposition are rooted in life itself. Viewed abstractly, i.e. subjectively, potentiality is always richer than actual life. Countless possibilities seem open to the human mind, of which only a negligibly minute percentage can ever be realized. Modern subjectivism, discerning in this apparent plenitude the authentic abundance of the human soil, contemplates it with a melancholy tinged with admiration and sympathy. However, when reality declines to realize such possibilities, these feelings become transformed into a no less melancholy contempt' (p. 21-2). This point cannot simply be shrugged off, despite the percentage. When Brecht, to take an example, devised a kind of childish shorthand to try and crystallize out the essence of Fascism in terms of a sort of gangsterism, he made his 'resistible' dictator, Arturo Ui, the head of an imaginary and apocryphal Cauliflower Trust, instead of the most powerful economic organizations. This unrealistic device proved to be a mixed blessing. By thinking of Fascism as an enterprise belonging to a band of criminals who have no real place in the social system and who can therefore be 'resisted' at will, you strip it of its horror and diminish its social significance. This invalidates the caricature and makes it seem idiotic even in its own terms: the despotic rise of the minor criminal loses its plausibility in the course of the play itself. Satire which fails to stay on the level of its subject lacks spice.

But the demand for pragmatic fidelity to life can only refer to a writer's basic experience of reality and the *membra disjecta* of the subject-matter from which he fashions his work. In Brecht's case, this can only mean the actual bonds connecting politics and the economy as well as the need for the initial situation to fit the facts. It does not apply to what happens to these facts in the course of the work. Proust provides the most striking illustration of the unity of pragmatic fidelity and – in Lukácsian terms – unrealistic manner, for in his work we find the most intimate fusion of an extremely 'realistic' observation of detail with an aesthetic form

based on the principle of involuntary recollection. If any of the intimacy of this synthesis is lost, if 'concrete potentiality' is interpreted in terms of an unreflecting overall realism, rigidly partitioned off from the object it observes, while any element of art antithetical to the subject-matter is permitted only as a 'perspective', i.e. in the sense that a meaning is allowed to become visible without reaching the centre of the work, the real objects at its core, then what results is an abuse of Hegel's distinction in the interests of a traditionalism whose aesthetic backwardness provides an index of its historical falsity.

Lukács's central line of attack, however, is the charge of 'ontologism', which, if sustained, would enable him to pin the whole of modernist literature on to the archaic existential notions of Heidegger. Of course, Lukács himself follows the fashion and insists that the question 'What is Man?' has to be put (p. 19), and that we must not be deterred by the prospect of where it might lead. However, he does at least modify it by reverting to Aristotle's familiar definition of man as a social animal. From this he deduces the scarcely contentious proposition that 'the human significance, the specific individual and typical quality' of the characters in great literature, 'their sensuous, artistic reality, cannot be separated from the context in which they were created' (Ibid.). 'Quite opposed to this', he goes on, is 'the ontological view governing the image of man in the work of leading modernist writers. To put it briefly: in their eyes "man" means the individual who has always existed, who is essentially solitary, asocial and – ontologically – incapable of entering into relationships with other human beings.' (Ibid.). This is supported by reference to a somewhat foolish utterance by Thomas Wolfe, which clearly has no relevance to literary works, to the effect that solitariness is the inescapable fact of man's existence. But as someone who claims to think in radically historical terms, Lukács of all people ought to know that in an individualistic society loneliness is socially mediated and so possesses a significant historical content.

All such categories as decadence, formalism and aestheticism can be traced back to Baudelaire, and Baudelaire shows no interest in an unchanging essence of man, his loneliness or his derelict existence [*Geworfenheit*], but rather in the essence of modernity. 'Essence' itself in this poetry is no abstract thing in itself; it is a social phenomenon. The objectively dominant idea in Baudelaire's work is that the new, the products of historical progress, are what has to be conjured up in his verse. To use Benjamin's expression, we find not an archaic, but a 'dialectical' image in his work. Hence the *Tableaux Parisiens*. Even in

Joyce's case we do not find the timeless image of man which Lukács would like to foist on to him, but man as the product of history. For all his Irish folklore, Joyce does not invoke a mythology beyond the world he depicts, but instead strives to mythologize it, i.e. to create its essence, whether benign or maleficent, by applying the technique of stylization so despised by the Lukács of today. One is almost tempted to measure the achievements of modernist writing by inquiring whether historical moments are given substance as such within their works, or whether they are diluted into some sort of timelessness.

Lukács would doubtless deprecate as idealistic the use of terms like 'image' and 'essence' in aesthetics. But their application in the realm of art is fundamentally different from what it is in philosophies of essence or of primitive images, especially refurbished versions of the Platonic Ideas. The most fundamental weakness of Lukács's position is probably his inability to maintain this distinction, a failure which leads him to transfer to the realm of art categories which refer to the relationship of consciousness to the actual world, as if there were no difference between them. Art exists in the real world and has a function in it, and the two are connected by a large number of mediating links. Nevertheless, as art it remains the antithesis of that which is the case. Philosophy has acknowledged this situation by defining art as 'aesthetic appearance'. Even Lukács will find it impossible to get away from the fact that the content of works of art is not real in the same sense as social reality. If this distinction is lost, then all attempts to provide a real foundation for aesthetics must be doomed to failure. But artistic appearance, the fact that art has set itself apart in qualitative terms from the immediate actuality in which it magically came into being, is neither its ideological Fall, nor does it make art an arbitrary system of signs, as if it merely reproduced the world without claiming to possess the same immediate reality. Any view as reductive as this would be a sheer mockery of dialectics.

More to the point is the assertion that the difference between art and empirical reality touches on the former's innermost being. It is no idealistic crime for art to provide essences, 'images'; the fact that many artists have inclined towards an idealist philosophy says nothing about the content of their works. The truth of the matter is that except where art goes against its own nature and simply duplicates existence, its task vis-à-vis that which merely exists, is to be its essence and image. This alone constitutes the aesthetic; art does not become knowledge with reference to mere immediate reality, i.e. by doing justice to a reality

which veils its own essence and suppresses its truth in favour of a merely classificatory order. Art and reality can only converge if art crystallizes out its own formal laws, not by passively accepting objects as they come. In art knowledge is aesthetically mediated through and through. Even alleged cases of solipsism, which signify for Lukács the regression to an illusory immediacy on the part of the individual, do not imply the denial of the object, as they would in bad theories of knowledge, but instead aim at a dialectical reconciliation of subject and object. In the form of an image the object is absorbed into the subject instead of following the bidding of the alienated world and persisting obdurately in a state of reification. The contradiction between the object reconciled in the subject, i.e. spontaneously absorbed into the subject, and the actual unreconciled object in the outside world, confers on the work of art a vantage-point from which it can criticize actuality. Art is the negative knowledge of the actual world. In analogy to a current philosophical phrase we might speak of the 'aesthetic distance' from existence: only by virtue of this distance, and not by denying its existence, can the work of art become both work of art and valid consciousness. A theory of art which ignores this is at once philistine and ideological.

Lukács contents himself with Schopenhauer's aperçu that the principle of solipsism is 'only really viable with complete consistency in the most abstract form of philosophy' and 'even there only with a measure of sophistry' (p. 21). But his argument is self-defeating: if solipsism cannot be sustained, if it only succeeds in reproducing what it has begun by 'bracketing out', to use the phenomenological term, then we need have no fear of it as a stylistic principle. Objectively, then, in their works, the modernists have moved beyond the position Lukács ascribes to them. Proust decomposes the unity of the subjective mind by dint of its own introspection: the mind ends by transforming itself into a stage on which objective realities are made visible. His individualistic work becomes the opposite of that for which Lukács derides it: it becomes anti-individualistic. The *monologue intérieur*, the worldlessness of modern art which makes Lukács so indignant, is both the truth and the appearance of a free-floating subjectivity – it is truth, because in the universal atomistic state of the world, alienation rules over men, turning them into mere shadows of themselves – a point we may undoubtedly concede to Lukács. The free-floating subject is appearance, however, inasmuch as, objectively, the social totality has precedence over the individual, a totality which is created and reproduces itself through alienation and through the contradictions of society. The great works of modernist

literature shatter this appearance of subjectivity by setting the individual in his frailty into context, and by grasping that totality in him of which the individual is but a moment and of which he must needs remain ignorant. Lukács evidently believes that when the Habsburg monarchy in Kafka and Musil, or Dublin in Joyce make themselves felt as a sort of 'atmospheric backcloth for the action' (p. 21), it somehow goes against the programme but nevertheless remains of secondary importance. But in arguing thus for the sake of his thesis, he clearly reduces something very substantial, a growing epic plenitude with all its negative potential, to the status of a mere accessory. The concept of atmosphere is in any event highly inappropriate as applied to Kafka. It goes back to an Impressionism which Kafka supersedes by his objectivist concern with historical essence. Even in Beckett – and perhaps in him above all – where seemingly all concrete historical components have been eliminated, and only primitive situations and forms of behaviour are tolerated, the unhistorical façade is the provocative opposite of the absolute Being idolized by reactionary philosophies. The primitivism with which his works begin so abruptly represents the final phase of a regression, especially obvious in *Fin de Partie*, in which, as from the far-distant realm of the self-evident, a terrestrial catastrophe is presupposed. His primitive men are the last men. One theme we discover in his works is something which Horkheimer and I have already discussed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: the fact that a society wholly in the grip of the Culture Industry displays all the reactions of an amphibian. The substantive content of a work of art can survive in the precise, wordless polemic which depicts the dawn of a nonsensical world; and it can vanish again as soon as it is positively asserted, as soon as existence is claimed for it, a fate similar to the one that befalls the didactic antithesis between a right and a wrong mode of life to be found in Tolstoy after *Anna Karenina*.

Lukács's favourite old idea of an 'immanent meaning' points towards that same dubious faith in the face value of things which his own theory sets out to destroy. Conceptions like Beckett's, however, have an objective, polemical thrust. Lukács twists them into 'the straightforward portrayal of the pathological, of the perverse, of idiocy, all of which are seen as types of the "condition humaine"' (p. 32) – and in this he follows the example of the film censor who regards the content as a defect of the treatment. Above all, Lukács's confusion of Beckett with the cult of Being and even with the inferior version of vitalism to be found in Montherlant (*ibid.*) exposes his inability to see what is in front of him. This blindness arises from his stubborn refusal to acknowledge the central

claims of literary technique. He sticks imperturbably to what is narrated. But in literature the point of the subject matter can only be made effective by the use of techniques – something which Lukács himself hopes for from the more than suspect concept of ‘perspective’. One would like to ask what would be left of Greek drama, which Lukács, like Hegel, has duly canonized, if the criterion of its value were the story which could be picked up in the street. The same holds good for the traditional novel and even for writers such as Flaubert who come into Lukács’s category of the ‘realist’ novel: here too composition and style are fundamental.

Today, when empirical veracity has sunk to the level of superficial reportage, the relevance of technique has increased enormously. By structuring his work, the writer can hope to master the arbitrary and the individual against which Lukács so passionately inveighs. He fails to follow the insight contained in his last chapter to its logical conclusion: the purely arbitrary cannot be overcome simply by a determination to look at things in what purports to be a more objective manner. Lukács ought surely to be familiar with the key importance of the technical forces of production in history. No doubt this was more concerned with material than with cultural production. But can he really close his eyes to the fact that the techniques of art also develop in accordance with their own logic? Can he rest content with the abstract assertion that when society changes, completely different aesthetic criteria automatically come into force? Can he really persuade himself that this justifies him in nullifying the technical advance of the forces of production and providing for the canonical restoration of older, outdated forms? Does he not simply don the dictatorial mantle of socialist realism in order to expound an immutable doctrine which differs from the one he rightly repudiates only by its greater insensitivity?

Lukács places himself in the great philosophical tradition that conceives of art as knowledge which has assumed concrete shape, rather than as something irrational to be contrasted with science. This is perfectly legitimate, but he still finds himself ensnared in the same cult of immediacy of which he myopically accuses modernist literature: the fallacy of mere assertion. Art does not provide knowledge of reality by reflecting it photographically or ‘from a particular perspective’ but by revealing whatever is veiled by the empirical form assumed by reality, and this is possible only by virtue of art’s own autonomous status. Even the suggestion that the world is unknowable, which Lukács so indefatigably castigates in writers like Eliot or Joyce, can become a moment of knowledge. This can happen where a gulf opens up between

the overwhelming and unassimilable world of things, on the one hand, and a human experience impotently striving to gain a firm hold on it, on the other.

Lukács over-simplifies the dialectical unity of art and science, reducing it to bare identity, just as if works of art did nothing but apply their perspective in such a way as to anticipate some of the insights that the social sciences subsequently confirm. The essential distinction between artistic and scientific knowledge, however, is that in art nothing empirical survives unchanged; the empirical facts only acquire objective meaning when they are completely fused with the subjective intention. Even though Lukács draws a line between Realism and Naturalism, he nevertheless fails to make it clear that, if the distinction is to hold good, realist writing must necessarily achieve that synthesis with the subjective intentions which he would like to see expelled from Realism. In fact there is no way of preserving the antithesis between realist and 'formalist' approaches which, like an inquisitor, he erects into an absolute standard. On the one hand, it turns out that the principles of form which Lukács anathematizes as unrealistic and idealistic, have an objective aesthetic function; on the other, it becomes no less obvious that the novels of the early 19th century e.g. those of Dickens and Balzac, which he holds in such high esteem, and which he does not scruple to hold up as paradigms of the novelist's art, are by no means as realistic as all that. It is true that Marx and Engels might have considered them so in their polemic against the marketable romantic literature so fashionable in their day. Today, however, we not only see romantic and archaic, pre-bourgeois elements in both novelists, but even worse, Balzac's entire *Comédie Humaine* stands revealed as an imaginative reconstruction of the alienated world, i.e. of a reality no longer experienced by the individual subject. Seen in this light, the difference between it and the modernist victims of Lukács's class-justice is not very great; it is just that Balzac, in tune with his whole conception of form, thought of his monologues in terms of the plenitude of real life, while the great novelists of the 20th century encapsulate their worldly plenitude within the monologue.

This shatters Lukács's approach to its foundations. His concept of 'perspective' sinks inexorably to the level of what he strives in vain to distinguish it from in the last chapter of his book, namely an element of tendentiousness or, to use his own word, 'agitation', imposed from without. His whole position is paradoxical. He cannot escape the awareness that, aesthetically, social truth thrives only in works of art autonomously created. But in the concrete works of modern times this

autonomy is accompanied by all those things which have been proscribed by the prevailing communist doctrine and which he neither could, nor can, tolerate. His hope was that obsolete and unsatisfactory aesthetic techniques might be legitimated if they could achieve a different standing in a different social system, i.e. that they might be justified from outside, from a point beyond their own internal logic. But this hope is pure superstition. It is not good enough for Lukács simply to dismiss the fact that the very products of socialist realism that have claimed to represent an advanced state of consciousness, in fact do no more than serve up the crumbling and insipid residues of bourgeois art-forms. This is a fact which stands in need of an objective explanation. Socialist realism did not simply have its origins, as communist theologians would like to believe, in a socially healthy and sound world; it was equally the product of the backwardness of consciousness and of the social forces of production. The only use they make of the thesis of the qualitative rupture between socialism and the bourgeoisie is to falsify that backwardness, which it has long been forbidden to mention, and twist it into something more progressive.

Lukács combines the charge of ontologism with that of individualism, which, following Heidegger's theory of man's existential forsakenness [*Geworfenheit*] from *Being and Time*, he interprets as a standpoint of unreflective loneliness. Lukács criticizes this stance (p. 51), showing how the literary work emerges from the poetic subject in all its adventitiousness, much as Hegel had shown in rigorous argument how philosophy emerges from the sensory certainties of the individual.⁶ But as that immediacy turns out to be mediated in itself, the work of art contains within itself all the elements which Lukács finds lacking in that immediacy, while, on the other hand, the poetic subject finds it necessary to start from what is nearest to itself for the sake of that anticipated reconciliation of consciousness with the objective world. Lukács extends his denunciation of individualism to include Dostoyevsky. His story *Letters from the Underworld* is 'one of the first descriptions of the decadent individual' (p. 62). But by this junction of decadence and loneliness the process of atomization which has its source in the principle of bourgeois society itself is converted into nothing more than a manifestation of decline. Over and above this, the word 'decadent' has connotations of the biological decay of individuals: it is a parody of the fact that this

⁶ *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. Baillie. See especially the end of the section on *The Unhappy Consciousness* (in Chapter IV): *Self-Consciousness passing into Reason*, which re-enacts the moves made earlier at the end of Chaps. I and II.

loneliness must have roots reaching back far beyond bourgeois society, for gregarious animals likewise form what Borchardt called a 'lonely community'; the *zoon politikon* had to be developed at a later stage. What is an historical premise of all modern art, which can only be transcended where it is fully acknowledged for what it is, appears in Lukács as an avoidable error or even as a bourgeois delusion. However, as soon as he comes to grips with the most recent Russian literature, he discovers that the structural change he had posited, has not in fact taken place. But this does not teach him to renounce such concepts as decadent loneliness. The position of the modernists he censures – or their 'transcendental situation', to use his earlier terminology – is not an ontological loneliness, but one which is historically conditioned. The ontologists of today are all too concerned with bonds which ostensibly attach Man to pure Being but in fact confer the semblance of immortality on temporal authorities of all shapes and sizes. In this they would not hit it off so badly with Lukács as one might expect. We may readily agree with him that it is illusory to think of loneliness as an *a priori* form; loneliness is a social product, and it transcends itself as soon as it reflects on itself as such.

But this is the point at which the dialectics of aesthetics rebounds against him. It is not open to the individual to transcend a collectively determined loneliness through his own decision and determination. Echoes of this can be heard distinctly enough when Lukács settles accounts with the tendentious content of the standardized Soviet novel. In general it is difficult to rid oneself of the impression one gains when reading the book, especially the impassioned pages on Kafka (vide pp. 49f.), that he reacts to the writers he anathematizes as decadent much like the legendary cab-horse which stops in its tracks on hearing the sudden sound of military music, before it goes on pulling its cart. To enable himself to resist their blandishments the more easily, Lukács joins in the chorus of censors who, ever since Kierkegaard (whom he himself classifies alongside the avant-garde), if not as far back as the furore over Friedrich Schlegel⁷ and the early Romantics, have always waxed indignant over art that is merely interesting.⁸ We would need to change the nature of this discussion. The fact that an insight or a work of art can be said to be interesting does not automatically mean it can be reduced to sensationalism or the cultural market, even though these

⁷ Focused on his 'obscene' novel *Lucinde*.

⁸ The 'interesting' developed as a concept during the Romantic period where it tended to be a defining feature of modern art and criticism, as opposed to classical beauty from which the public derived, in Kant's phrase, 'a disinterested pleasure'.

undoubtedly helped to give the concept its currency. It is certainly no seal of truth, but it has become its indispensable precondition; it is what *mea interest*, what concerns the subject, as opposed to what the overwhelming force of the powers-that-be, i.e. commodities, would like to fob us off with.

Lukács could not possibly praise what attracts him to Kafka and yet put him on his Index, were it not for the fact that, like the sceptics of late scholasticism, he secretly has a doctrine of two kinds of truth ready to hand: 'All this argues the superiority, historically speaking, of socialist realism (I cannot sufficiently emphasize that this superiority does not confer automatic success on each individual work of socialist realism). The reason for this superiority is the insights which socialist ideology, socialist perspective, make available to the writer: they enable him to give a more comprehensive and deeper account of man as a social being than any traditional ideology' (p. 115). In other words, artistic quality and the artistic superiority of socialist realism are two different things. Literature that is valid in itself is separated from literature that is valid in Soviet terms, which is supposed to be 'correct' by virtue of a sort of 'act of grace' on the part of the World Spirit.

Such a double standard ill becomes a thinker who makes such an impassioned plea in defence of the unity of reason. But if he maintains that loneliness is inescapable – and he scarcely attempts to deny that such a fate has been marked out for man by the negativity of society, by its universal reification – and if at the same time his Hegelianism makes him aware of its objective unreality, then it is scarcely possible to resist the inference that, taken to its logical conclusion, loneliness will turn into its opposite: the solitary consciousness potentially destroys and transcends itself by revealing itself in works of art as the hidden truth common to all men. This is exactly what we find in the authentic works of modern literature. They objectify themselves by immersing themselves totally, monadologically, in the laws of their own forms, laws which are aesthetically rooted in their own social content. It is this alone which gives the works of Joyce, Beckett and modern composers their power. The voice of the age echoes through their monologues: this is why they excite us so much more than works that simply depict the world in narrative form. The fact that their transition to objectivity remains contemplative and fails to become praxis is grounded in the nature of a society in which the monadological condition persists universally, despite all assurances to the contrary. Moreover, Lukács's own classicism should deter him from expecting works of art to break through

that contemplation. His assertion of artistic quality is incompatible with the pragmatic approach which enables him to summarily dismiss the responsible and progressive works of modern artists with the refrain 'bourgeois, bourgeois, bourgeois'.

Lukács quotes approvingly from my work on the ageing of modern music, which, paradoxically, runs parallel to the work of Sedlmayr,⁹ in order to play off my reflections against modern art and against my own intentions. I do not begrudge him this: 'Only those thoughts are true which fail to understand themselves',¹⁰ and no author can lay claim to proprietary rights over them. Nevertheless, it will need a better argument than Lukács's to take these rights away from me. The belief that art cannot survive when based on a notion of pure expression identical with *Angst* was one I committed myself to in *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, and even though I do not share Lukács's official optimism, I think that historically there might be less justification for that *Angst* nowadays and that the 'decadent intelligentsia' should perhaps have less need to feel afraid. But the ostensive gesture of expression, the 'This' in its purity; cannot be transcended either by adopting an undynamic, reified style, which was the charge I levelled at the ageing music of modernity, or by a leap into a positivity which is not substantial or authentic in a Hegelian sense, and which fails to constitute its own form prior to all reflection. Logically, the ageing of modern music should not drive composers back to obsolete forms but should lead them to an insistent self-criticism. From the outset, however, the unrelieved representation of *Angst* had a further dimension: it was a way of using speech, the power implicit in calling things by their true name, in order to stand one's ground. It was therefore the very opposite of all the associations evoked by the derogatory word 'decadent'. Lukács does indeed give credit to the art he maligns for responding negatively to a negative reality, the domination of all that is 'execrable'. 'But since', he goes on 'modernism portrays distortion without critical detachment, and since it devises stylistic techniques which emphasize the necessity of distortion in any kind of society, it may be said to distort distortions further. By attributing distortion to reality itself, it dismisses as immaterial, as ontologically irrelevant, all counter-forces and trends actually at work in reality.' (p. 75f.)

⁹ Hans Sedlmayr: *Verlust der Mitte*, (trans. as *Art in Crisis*) a polemical tract on modern art which enjoyed a great vogue in the 1950s in Germany because of its despairing view of modern culture. Written from a right-wing, crypto-Fascist point of view, and positing the recovery of religious faith as a way out of the crisis, it was a significant document of the Cold War years.

¹⁰ See Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, NLB, London 1974.

The official optimism implied in the notion of counter-forces and trends compels Lukács to do away with the Hegelian proposition that the negation of the negation – the ‘distortion of the distortion’ is the positive. This proposition alone is capable of laying bare the truth contained in the otherwise desperately irrationalist notion of the ‘complex and ambiguous’ nature of art, the truth namely that the expression of suffering and the pleasure taken in dissonance, scorned by Lukács as ‘sensationalism, a delight in novelty for novelty’s sake’ (p. 105), are inextricably interwoven in authentic works of art in the modern age. This phenomenon should be linked to the problem of the dialectical tension between reality and the realm of art, which Lukács evades. Since the work of art never focuses directly on reality, it never makes the sort of statement found elsewhere in the realm of knowledge to the effect that this or that is the case. Instead it asserts: Yes, that is the way things are. Its logic, then, is not that of subject and predicate, but of internal harmony. Only by means of the latter, by means of the relationship it creates between its component parts, does it adopt a stance. It is anti-thetically opposed to the empirical reality which it encapsulates, as well as being encapsulated by it, because, unlike mental procedures directly concerned with reality, it does not define any portion of that reality unambiguously. It utters no propositions [*Urteil*]; it only becomes a proposition when taken as a whole. The element of untruth inherent, in Hegel’s view, in every particular proposition because nothing is wholly identical with what it is supposed to be in a particular proposition, is eliminated by art in that the work of art synthesizes the elements within it in such a way that no one part is stated by any other. The very idea, so fashionable nowadays, of ‘stating something’ is irrelevant to art. As a synthesis which utters no propositions, art may forgo the right to make definite pronouncements on points of detail; but it more than compensates for this by its greater justice towards everything normally excised from the proposition. A work of art only becomes knowledge when taken as a totality, i.e. through all its mediations, not through its individual intentions. The latter should not be extracted from it, nor should it be judged in the light of them. Nevertheless, Lukács regularly proceeds in this manner, despite his protest against the officially licensed novelists who apply the same method in practice. Even though he very well perceives the defects of their standardized products, his own philosophy of art cannot protect him from short-circuiting the creative process, from the effects of which, the effects of an imbecility imposed from above, he then recoils.

Where the essential complexity of the work of art cannot be dismissed as a unique case of no importance, Lukács convulsively shuts his eyes to it. On the occasions when he does look at specific works, he marks in red the immediate detail and overlooks the overall meaning. He complains, for example, about an admittedly slight poem of Benn's, which goes as follows:

O, daß wir unsere Ururahnen wären.
 Ein Klümpchen Schleim in einem warmen Moor.
 Leben und Tod, Befruchtung und Gebären
 glitte aus unseren stummen Säften vor.
 Ein Algenblatt oder ein Dünenhügel,
 vom Wind geformtes und nach unten schwer.
 Schon ein Libellenkopf, ein Möwenflügel
 wäre zu weit und litte schon zu sehr.¹¹

What Lukács finds in this poem is 'the opposition of man as animal, as a primeval reality, to man as social being', and he places it in the tradition of Heidegger, Klages and Rosenberg. He sums it up as 'a glorification of the abnormal; an undisguised anti-humanist statement' (p. 32), although, even if the poem were to be identified simply with its overt content, it is clear that its final line follows Schopenhauer in its lament that the higher stage of individuation brings nothing but suffering, and Benn's nostalgia for primordial times merely reflects the intolerable burden of the present. The moralism that colours all of Lukács's critical concepts is typical of his weepings and wailings about subjectivist 'lack of reality' [*Weltlosigkeit*], just as if the modernists had literally put into practice what is known in Husserl's phenomenology, grotesquely enough, as the methodological annihilation of the world. It is in such terms that he pillories Musil: 'Ulrich, the hero of his great novel, when asked what he would do if universal power were confided into his hands, replies: "I would be compelled to abolish reality." No prolonged analysis is needed to establish the fact that the abolition of outward reality is the counterpart of a subjective existence "without qualities"' (p. 25). Yet the sentence Lukács objects to obviously points in its negativity to despair, to an uncontrollable *Weltschmerz* and to love. Lukács suppresses this and operates instead with a truly 'immediate', wholly un-

¹¹ [Oh, that we were our primordial ancestors. Small lumps of plasma in a sultry swamp. Life and death, conception and parturition – all emerging from those juices soundlessly. A piece of seaweed or a dune of sand, formed by the wind and bound to the earth. Even a dragon-fly's head or the wing of a gull would be too remote and mean too much suffering.]

First published in *Die Aktion* in 1913.

critical concept of normality, complementing it with the idea of pathological disturbance that naturally accompanies it. Only a state of mind that has been completely purged of every vestige of psychoanalysis can fail to see the connection between this view of normality and a form of social repression which has outlawed one-sided impulses. Any form of social criticism which does not blush to go on talking about the normal and the perverted, is itself still under the spell of the very ideas it claims to have superseded. The stentorian voice of manly conviction which Lukács employs to assert in good Hegelian fashion the primacy of the substantial universal over the specious, untenable 'bad existence' of mere individuals, recalls that of the public prosecutors who call for the extermination of those unfit to live or who deviate from the norm.

His ability to appreciate lyric poetry may also be doubted. The line 'O daß wir unsere Ururahnen wären' ['Oh that we were our primordial ancestors'] has a meaning completely at variance with that of a literal desire. The very word 'Urrahnen' can only be uttered with a grin. The style – which incidentally is traditional rather than modern – conveys the sense of a poetic *persona* which is comically inauthentic; Benn is playing a sort of melancholy game. The repulsive nature of the state to which the poet pretends he wishes to return, but to which no return is possible, reinforces his protest against a suffering which has historical causes. All this, as well as the montage-like 'alienation effect' arising from Benn's use of scientific words and motifs, has to be felt and experienced. His exaggeration undermines the very regression which Lukács unreservedly imputes to him. Any reader who misses all these connotations resembles that second-rate writer who diligently and astutely set about imitating Thomas Mann's style, and of whom Mann once said with a laugh: 'He writes just like me, only he means it seriously.' Over-simplifications of the type found in Lukács's excursus on Benn are not lacking in nuances, but they miss the core of the work of art itself, which only becomes a work of art by virtue of those nuances. Such analyses are symptomatic of the process of stultification which overwhelms even the most intelligent as soon as they submit to regulations like those governing socialist realism.

Earlier, in an attempt to convict modern poetry of Fascism, Lukács triumphantly unearths a bad poem by Rilke in which he rampaged around furiously like an elephant in the Viennese workshops.¹² It is an

¹² The Viennese workshops were established in 1903 as an offshoot of Art Nouveau. Under the influence of Gustav Klimt they attempted to reform the style of domestic life by applying the decorative techniques of the movement to ordinary objects. From 1908 they organized public exhibitions of their work and it was at one of these that Oskar Kokoschka first attracted public attention.

open question whether the retrograde movement discernible in Lukács, once one of the most progressive of minds, is itself an objective symptom of the regression which threatens to overshadow the European mind as a whole, a shadow cast over the developed nations by the underdeveloped ones which are already starting to follow the example of the former. Perhaps his position reveals to us something of the fate of a theory which seems to have diminished not just in terms of its anthropological assumptions, i.e. of the mental capacities of theoretical man, but which has also caused his substantive being to shrivel into a state of existence in which theory is at present deemed less vital than a practice whose sole task is to ward off the impending catastrophe.

Lukács's neo-naivety does not even call a halt before Thomas Mann, whom he plays off against Joyce with a fulsome flattery which would have nauseated the great chronicler of decay. The controversy about time triggered off by Bergson is treated like the Gordian Knot. Since Lukács is a good objectivist in all things, objective time always has to win out, while subjective time is merely a distortion inspired by decadence. What had induced Bergson to formulate his theory of experienced time was not the subjectivist spirit of subversiveness, as the stultified bureaucratic mind tends to believe, regardless of its political convictions, but the sheer inability to endure the meaningless passage of alienated, reified time – something which the early Lukács had once described so strikingly in his account of Flaubert's *Education Sentimentale*. But in *The Magic Mountain* Thomas Mann too paid his tribute to Bergson's concept of *temps durée*. To rescue him for Lukács's own theory of critical realism, a number of the characters in the book are given good marks because 'even subjectively, their experience of time is normal and objective'. He then writes, and I quote verbatim: 'Indeed, Ziemssen is dimly aware that the modern experience of time is simply a result of the abnormal life of the sanatorium, hermetically sealed off from everyday life' (p. 51). The irony which surrounds the whole character of Ziemssen has eluded our aestheticism; socialist realism has blunted his sensibility towards the critical realism he praises. Ziemssen is a narrow-minded officer, a sort of successor to Goethe's Valentin,¹³ a man who dies a soldier's death, albeit in his bed. For Lukács Ziemssen becomes the spokesman of an authentic life, much as Tolstoy had tried and failed to achieve with Levin. In truth, Thomas Mann has depicted the relation-

¹³ Valentin was Gretchen's brother in *Faust I*; it is he who dies 'als Soldat und brav', words echoed later in *The Magic Mountain*.

ship between the two concepts of time without reflection but with the keenest sensibility; he has represented that relationship as being as tortuous and ambivalent as is needed to reflect his own position and his dialectical attitude towards everything bourgeois: right and wrong are equally divided between the reified consciousness of time characteristic of the Philistine who vainly tries to flee from the sanatorium into his profession, and the phantasmagorical time of those who remain in the sanatorium, that allegory of Bohemianism and subjectivism. Thomas Mann wisely refrained from reconciling the two concepts of time as well as from declaring his preference for either.

The fact that Lukács can so drastically miss the aesthetic point of even his favourite text is explained by his *parti pris* for content and for the message of a work of literature, which he confuses with its nature as an artistic object. Even though he refuses to concern himself with stylistic factors, like the far from subtly disguised use of irony, to say nothing of more obvious rhetorical devices, he fails to derive any reward for this renunciation in the shape of a truth content purged of all subjective appearances. Instead he satisfies himself with the dregs, namely with the subject-matter, which of course is an essential preliminary to the discovery of the truth content of a work. Eager though Lukács is to prevent any regression in the novel, he still goes on reciting the various articles of the catechism, such as socialist realism, the ideologically sanctioned reflection theory [*Abbildtheorie*] of knowledge, and the dogma of the automatic progress of mankind, i.e. a progress independent of that spontaneity which has in the meantime been stifled – even though, in view of the nature of the irrevocable past, such a ‘belief in the ultimate rationality, meaningfulness of the world and man’s ability to penetrate its secrets’ (p. 43) is asking rather a lot. This belief forces him to adopt something very near to those puerile ideas about art which repel him when he encounters them in literary bureaucrats less well-versed than he. His efforts to break out are in vain. The extent to which his own aesthetic perceptions have been damaged may be seen, for example, from a passage on allegory in Byzantine mosaics: in literature allegorical art of this quality can only occur in ‘exceptional’ cases (p. 40). He talks as if the distinction between the exception and the rule had any validity in art, outside academies and conservatories, as if he had forgotten that every aesthetic work is an individual product and so always an exception in terms of its in-dwelling principle and its general implications, whereas anything which fits in with general regulations disqualifies itself from a place in the world of art. ‘Exceptional cases’ are borrowed from the same

vocabulary as 'top-grade performances'.

The late Franz Borkenau once said, after he had broken with the Communist Party, that he could no longer put up with the practice of discussing municipal regulations in the categories of Hegelian logic, and Hegelian logic in the spirit of meetings of the town council. Such contaminations, which date back to Hegel himself, bind Lukács to that cultural level which he would like to raise to his own. The Hegelian critique of the 'unhappy consciousness', the impulse, so powerful in speculative philosophy, to rise above the merely superficial ethos of isolated subjectivity, all this becomes in his hands an ideology for bigoted party officials who have not even reached the level of subjectivity. Their aggressive narrow-mindedness, a legacy of the backwardness of the petty bourgeoisie in the 19th century, is lent a spurious dignity by the attempt to interpret it as an adaptation to reality freed from the shackles of mere individuality. But a true dialectical leap is not one which leaps out of the dialectic itself and transforms the unhappy consciousness simply by the force of conviction into a happy collusion, at the expense of the objective social and technical factors governing artistic production. Based on such foundations the would-be loftier standpoint must necessarily remain abstract, in accordance with a proposition of Hegel's from which Lukács would hardly dissent. The desperate attempt at a profundity intended to counter the imbecility of the boy-meets-tractor literature, does not protect him from declamatory statements which are at once abstract and childish: 'The more general the significance of the theme of a work of art, and the deeper writers probe into different aspects of the laws and tendencies governing reality, the more completely will this reality be transformed into a purely or predominantly socialist society, and the closer will grow the ties between critical realism and socialist realism. In the process the negative (but: non-rejecting) perspective of critical realism will gradually be transformed into a positive (affirmative), a socialist perspective' (p. 114). The jesuitical distinction between the negative 'but non-rejecting' and the positive (affirmative) perspective shifts the problems of literary quality into that same sphere of pre-ordained convictions which Lukács wants most to escape from.

That he does wish to escape is not, of course, in any doubt. We can only do his book justice if we bear in mind that in countries where the decisive facts cannot be called by their proper names, the marks of the Terror have been branded on everything which is uttered in their place. On the other hand, and in consequence of this, even feeble, half-hearted and incomplete thoughts acquire a force in a particular context to which

their literal content does not entitle them. It is with considerations of this sort in mind that we have to read the whole of Chapter 3, despite the obvious disparity between the questions treated there and the intellectual apparatus brought to bear on them. This chapter contains a large number of statements which would enable us to extricate ourselves from the morass, if only they could be thought through to their logical conclusion. Like this one: 'The mere appropriation of Marxism (to say nothing of a mere sympathy for the socialist movement or even Party membership) is not of itself sufficient. A writer may acquire useful experience in this way and become aware of certain intellectual or moral problems. This may prove to be of great value for his personality and can help to transform a possibility into a reality. But it is a grave error to suppose that the process of translating a true consciousness of reality into a valid, realistic form of art is in principle easier or more direct than in the case of a false consciousness' (pp. 96-7f.). Or again, he has this to say about the sterile empiricism of the documentary novel which flourishes everywhere nowadays: 'The emergence even in critical realism of an ideal of monographic completion, as in Zola, for example, is striking evidence of an internal problem. I shall show later that similar, and perhaps even greater problems are inherent in socialist realism' (p. 100).

When Lukács goes on, in the terminology of his youth, to insist on the primacy of intensive over extensive totality, he would only need to follow his own recommendation into the realm of the created work to find himself forced to accept the very things his ex-cathedra pronouncements find fault with in the modernists. It is grotesque that he should still persist in wanting to 'overcome' the 'anti-realism of the decadent movement'. He even comes close to perceiving that the Russian Revolution has far from created a society which requires and can sustain a 'positive' literature: 'Above all else we must not lose sight of the trivial fact that even though the seizure of power represents a tremendous leap forward, the majority of people, artists included, will not be automatically transformed' (p. 104f.). He then proceeds to let out the truth about so-called socialist realism, albeit in a somewhat muted fashion, as if he were only discussing an extreme form of it: 'The upshot is an unhealthy, diluted version of bourgeois realism, or at least a highly dubious imitation of it, which in the nature of the case is only achieved at the cost of its great virtues' (p. 116). In such literature the 'real nature of the artist's perspective' is overlooked. This means that 'many writers find themselves in the presence of really progressive tendencies, but ones which only provide guidelines to the future. If

rightly viewed, they could act as the lever to bring movement into the existing situation. Instead many writers simply identify these tendencies with reality itself; something which only exists in embryonic form they represent as a fully-fledged fact, in short they mechanically equate a possible point of view, a perspective, with reality itself' (p. 116-7).

To put it in a nutshell, what this means is that the procedures of socialist realism, and the Socialist Romanticism which Lukács sees as its complement, are simply the ideological transfiguration of the prevailing unsatisfactory state of affairs. Lukács sees that the official objectivism typical of the totalitarian approach to literature ends up as pure subjectivism. He opposes to it an aesthetic concept of objectivity which is altogether more in tune with the dignity of man: 'Art too is governed by objective laws. An infringement of these laws may not have immediate practical consequences as do the infringement of economic laws, but it results no less inexorably in flawed or inferior works of art' (p. 117). Here, where he has the courage of his own convictions, his judgements are far more cogent than his philistine utterances about modern art: 'The break-up of these mediating elements leads to a false polarization. On the one hand, theory, from being a guide to practice, hardens into dogma; on the other, the element of contradiction (and even chance) disappears from the individual facts of life' (p. 118). He succinctly sums up the central issue: 'In such works, literature ceases to reflect the dynamic contradictions of social life; it becomes the illustration of abstract truth' (p. 19). The responsibility for this is put squarely at the door of 'agitation as the point of departure', as a paradigm for both art and thought, which shrivel up, ossify and degenerate into rigid schemata with an over-emphasis on praxis. 'Instead of a new dialectical structure, we find a static schematicism' (p. 121). No modernist could have put it better.

For all this, it is impossible to rid oneself of the feeling that here is a man who is desperately tugging at his chains, imagining all the while that their clanking heralds the onward march of the world-spirit. He remains dazzled by the power which would never take his insubordinate ideas to heart, even if it tolerated them. Even worse, although contemporary Russian society is oppressed and exploited, Lukács never quite manages to dispel the illusion that its contradictions are non-antagonistic in nature, to use the hair-splitting distinction worked out by the Chinese. All the symptoms at which he protests have come into being because the dictators and their hangers-on need to hammer into the masses the very thesis which Lukács implicitly endorses by his use of the term socialist

realism, and to banish from their minds anything that might lead them astray. The hegemony of a doctrine which fulfils such very real functions cannot be broken merely by demonstrating its falsity. Lukács quotes a cynical sentence by Hegel which sums up the social meaning of this process as it was seen in the traditional bourgeois novel of education [*Bildungsroman*]: 'For the end of such apprenticeship consists in this: the subject sows his wild oats, educates himself with his wishes and opinions into harmony with subsisting relationships and their rationality, enters the concatenation of the world and works out for himself an appropriate attitude to it.'¹⁴ Lukács adds this comment: 'In one sense many of the great bourgeois novels contradict Hegel's assertion; but in another sense, equally specific, they confirm his point of view. They are in conflict with it in so far as the education they have depicted does not necessarily culminate in any such recognition of bourgeois society. The struggle to realize the dreams and convictions of youth is ended by the pressures of society, the rebels are broken or driven into isolation, but the reconciliation of which Hegel speaks is not always exacted from them. No doubt, since the struggle often ends in resignation, it does not stray too far from what Hegel suggests. For on the one hand, the objective social reality does triumph over the purely subjective strivings of the individual; and on the other, the reconciliation Hegel proclaims is by no means utterly different from a feeling of resignation' (op. cit. p. 112).

The supreme criterion of his aesthetics, the postulate of a reality which must be depicted as an unbroken continuum joining subject and object, a reality which, to employ the term Lukács stubbornly adheres to, must be 'reflected' – all this rests on the assumption that the reconciliation has been accomplished, that all is well with society, that the individual has come into his own and feels at home in his world. Lukács concedes the need for all this in an anti-ascetic digression. But this would remove the resignation which Lukács discerns in Hegel and whose presence he would certainly have to acknowledge in his prototypical realist, Goethe, who actually advocated it. But the cleavage, the antagonism persists, and it is a sheer lie to assert that it has been 'overcome', as they call it, in the states of the Eastern bloc. The magic spell which holds Lukács in thrall and which prevents his return to the utopia of his youth that he longs for, is a re-enactment of that reconciliation under duress he had himself discerned at the heart of absolute idealism.

Translated by Rodney Livingstone

¹⁴ From Hegel's *Aesthetics*, vol. I, p. 593, Oxford 1975, slightly adapted from the translation by T. M. Knox.