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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

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Bertolt Brecht

Against Georg Lukács

I

[The Essays of Georg Lukács]

I have occasionally wondered why certain essays by Georg Lukács, although they contain so much valuable material, nevertheless have something unsatisfying about them. He starts from a sound principle, and yet one cannot help feeling that he is somewhat remote from reality. He investigates the decline of the bourgeois novel from the heights it occupied when the bourgeoisie was still a progressive class. However courteous he is in his treatment of contemporary novelists, in so far as they follow the example of the classic models of the bourgeois novel and write in at least a formally realistic manner, he cannot help seeing in them too a process of decline. He is quite unable to find in them a realism equal to that of the classical novelists in depth, breadth and attack. But how could they be expected to rise above their class in this respect? They inevitably testify, too, to a decay in the technique of the novel. There is plenty of technical skill; it is merely that technique has acquired a curious technicality – a kind of tyranny if you like. A formalistic quality insinuates itself even into realistic types of construction on the classical model.

Some of the details here are curious. Even those writers who are conscious of the fact that capitalism impoverishes, dehumanizes, mechanizes human beings, and who fight against it, seem to be part of the same process of impoverishment: for they too, in their writing, appear to be less concerned with elevating man, they rush him through events, treat his inner life as a *quantité négligeable* and so on. They too rationalize, as it were. They fall into line with the 'progress' of physics. They abandon strict causality and switch to statistical causality, by aban-

doing the individual man as a causal nexus and making statements only about large groups. They even – in their own way – adopt Schrödinger's uncertainty principle. They deprive the observer of his authority and credit and mobilize the reader against himself, advancing purely subjective propositions, which actually characterize only those who make them (Gide, Joyce, Döblin).¹ One can follow Lukács in all these observations and subscribe to his protests.

But then we come to the positive and constructive postulates of Lukács's conception. With a wave of his hand he sweeps away 'inhuman' technique. He turns back to our forefathers and implores their degenerate descendants to emulate them. Are writers confronted by a dehumanized man? Has his spiritual life been devastated? Is he driven through existence at an intolerable pace? Have his logical capacities been weakened? Is the connection between things no longer so visible? Writers just have to keep to the Old Masters, produce a rich life of the spirit, hold back the pace of events by a slow narrative, bring the individual back to the centre of the stage, and so on. Here specific instructions dwindle into an indistinct murmur. That his proposals are impracticable is obvious. No one who believes Lukács's basic principle to be correct, can be surprised at this. Is there no solution then? There is. The new ascendant class shows it. It is not a way back. It is not linked to the good old days but to the bad new ones. It does not involve undoing techniques but developing them. Man does not become man again by stepping out of the masses but by stepping back into them. The masses shed their dehumanization and thereby men become men again – but not the same men as before. This is the path that literature must take in outrage when the masses are beginning to attract to themselves everything that is valuable and human, when they are mobilizing people against the dehumanization produced by capitalism in its fascist phase. It is the element of capitulation, of withdrawal, of utopian idealism which still lurks in Lukács's essays and which he will undoubtedly overcome, that makes his work, which otherwise contains so much of value, unsatisfactory; for it gives the impression that what concerns him is enjoyment rather than struggle, a way of escape rather than an advance.

¹ Alfred Döblin (1878–1957): German novelist and exponent both of Expressionism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* (Neo-Objectivity). His major work was *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), written under the influence of Joyce and Dos Passos.

II

On the Formalistic Character of the Theory of Realism

The formalistic nature of the theory of realism is demonstrated by the fact that not only is it exclusively based on the form of a few bourgeois novels of the previous century (more recent novels are merely cited in so far as they exemplify the same form), but also exclusively on the particular genre of the *novel*. But what about realism in lyric poetry, or in drama? These are two literary genres which – specially in Germany – have achieved a high standard.

I shall continue in a personal vein so as to provide concrete material for my argument. My activity is, as I see it myself, much more diverse than our theorists of realism believe. They give a totally one-sided picture of me. At the present time I am working on two novels, a play and a collection of poems. One of the novels is historical and requires extensive research in the field of Roman history. It is satirical. Now the novel is the chosen sphere of our theorists. But I am not being malicious if I say that I am unable to get the smallest tip from them for my work on this novel: *The Business Affairs of Herr Julius Caesar*. The procedure, taken over by 19th century novelists from the drama, of massing all manner of personal conflicts in long, expensive drawing-room scenes, is of no use to me. For large sections I use the diary form. It has proved necessary for me to change the point of view for other sections. The montage of the points of view of the two fictitious authors incorporates my point of view. I suppose that this sort of thing ought not to have proved necessary. Somehow it does not fit the intended pattern. But this technique has proved to be necessary for a firm grasp of reality, and I had purely realistic motives in adopting it. My play, on the other hand, is a cycle of scenes which deals with life under the Nazis. So far I have written 27 separate scenes. Some of them fit roughly into the 'realistic' pattern X, if one shuts one eye. Others don't – absurdly enough, because they are very short. The whole work doesn't fit into it at all. I consider it to be a realistic play. I learnt more for it from the paintings of the peasant Breughel than from treatises on realism.

I scarcely dare to speak about the second novel, on which I have been working for a long time, so complicated are the problems involved and so primitive is the vocabulary which the aesthetic of realism – in its

present state – offers me. The formal difficulties are enormous; I have constantly to construct models. Anyone who saw me at work would think I was only interested in questions of form. I make these models because I wish to represent reality. As far as my lyric poetry goes, there too I take a realistic point of view. But I feel that one would have to proceed with extreme caution if one wished to write about it. On the other hand, there would be a great deal to be learnt about realism in the novel and drama.

While I am looking through a stack of historical tomes (they are written in four languages, in addition to translations from two ancient languages) and attempting, full of scepticism, to verify a particular fact, rubbing the sand from my eyes the whole time, so to speak, I have vague notions of colours at the back of my mind, impressions of particular seasons of the year; I hear inflections without words, see gestures without meaning, think of desirable groupings of unnamed figures, and so on. The images are extremely undefined, in no way exciting, rather superficial, or so it seems to me. But they are there. The ‘formalist’ in me is at work. As the significance of Clodius’s Funeral-Benefit Associations slowly dawns on me and I experience a certain pleasure in the discovery, I think: ‘If one could only write a very long, transparent, autumnal, crystal-clear chapter with an irregular curve, a kind of red wave-form running through it! The City puts its democrat Cicero into the consulate; he bans the armed democratic street clubs; they turn into peaceful Funeral-Benefit Associations; the leaves are golden in the autumn. An unemployed man’s funeral costs ten dollars; you pay a subscription; if you are too long in dying, it is a bad bargain. But we have the wave-form; sometimes weapons suddenly appear in these Associations; Cicero is driven from the city; he has losses; his villa is burnt down; it costs millions; how many? Let us look it up – no – it’s not relevant here. Where were the street clubs on 9 November 91 BC? ‘Gentlemen, I cannot give any guarantees’ (Caesar).

I am at an early stage of my work.

Since the artist is constantly occupied with formal matters, since he constantly forms, one must define what one means by *formalism* carefully and practically, otherwise one conveys nothing to the artist. If one wants to call everything that makes works of art unrealistic *formalism*, then – if there is to be any mutual understanding – one must not construct the concept of formalism in purely aesthetic terms. Formalism on the one side – contentism on the other. That is surely too primitive and metaphysical. Looked at purely in terms of aesthetics, the concept

presents no special difficulties. For instance if someone makes a statement which is untrue – or irrelevant – merely because it rhymes, then he is a formalist. But we have innumerable works of an unrealistic kind which did not become so because they were based on an excessive sense of form.

We can remain entirely comprehensible and yet give the concept a further, more productive, more practical meaning. We have only to look aside from literature for a moment and descend into 'everyday life'. What is formalism there? Let us take the expression: *Formally he is right*. That means that actually he is not right, but he is right according to the form of things and only according to this form. Or: *Formally the task is solved* means that actually it is not solved. Or: *I did it to preserve the form*. That means that what I did is not very important; I do what I want to do, but I preserve outward forms and in this way I can best do what I want. When I read that the autarky of the Third Reich is perfect *on paper*, then I know that this is a case of political formalism. National Socialism is socialism in form – another case of political formalism. We are not dealing with an excessive sense of form.

If we define the concept in this way, it becomes both comprehensible and important. We are then in a position, if we return to literature (without this time abandoning everyday life altogether), to characterize and unmask as formalistic even works which do not elevate literary form over social content and yet do not correspond to reality. We can even unmask works which are realistic in form. There are a great many of them.

By giving the concept of formalism this meaning, we acquire a yardstick for dealing with such phenomena as the *avant-garde*. For a vanguard can lead the way along a retreat or into an abyss. It can march so far ahead that the main army cannot follow it, because it is lost from sight and so on. Thus its unrealistic character can become evident. If it splits off from the main body, we can determine why and by what means it can reunite with it. *Naturalism* and a certain type of *anarchistic montage* can be confronted with their social effects, by demonstrating that they merely reflect the symptoms of the surface of things and not the deeper causal complexes of society. Whole tracts of literature which seem, judging by their form, to be radical, can be shown to be purely reformist, merely formal efforts which supply solutions *on paper*.

Such a definition of formalism also helps the writing of novels, lyric poetry and drama, and – last but not least – it does away once and for all with a certain formalistic style of criticism which appears to be interested

only in the formal, which is dedicated to particular forms of writing, confined to one period, and attempts to solve problems of literary creation, even when it 'builds in' occasional glances at the historical past, in purely literary terms.

In Joyce's great satirical novel, *Ulysses*, there is – besides the use of various styles of writing and other unusual features – the so-called interior monologue. A petty-bourgeois woman lies in bed in the morning and meditates. Her thoughts are reproduced disconnectedly, criss-crossing, flowing into each other. This chapter could hardly have been written but for Freud. The attacks which it drew upon its author were the same as Freud in his day suffered. They rained down: pornography, morbid pleasure in filth, overestimation of events below the navel, immorality and so on. Astonishingly, some Marxists associated themselves with this nonsense, adding in their revulsion the epithet of petty-bourgeois. As a technical method the interior monologue was equally rejected; it was said to be *formalistic*. I have never understood the reason. The fact that Tolstoy would have done it differently is no reason to reject Joyce's method. The criticisms were so superficially formulated that one gained the impression that if Joyce had only set his monologue in a session with a psycho-analyst, everything would have been all right. Now the interior monologue is a method which is very difficult to use, and it is very useful to stress this fact. Without very precise measures (again of a technical sort) the interior monologue by no means reproduces reality, that is to say the totality of thought or association, as it superficially appears to do. It becomes another case of *only formally*, of which we should take heed – a falsification of reality. This is not a mere formal problem that could be solved by the slogan 'Back to Tolstoy'. In purely formal terms we did once have an interior monologue, which we actually prized very highly. I am thinking of Tucholsky.²

For many people to recall expressionism is to be reminded of a creed of libertarian sentiments. I myself was also at that time against 'self-expression' as a vocation. (See the instructions for actors in my *Versuche*.) I was sceptical of those painful, disturbing accidents in which someone was found to be 'beside himself'. What does this position feel like? It was very soon evident that such people had merely freed themselves from grammar, not from capitalism. Hašek won the highest honours for *Schweik*. But I believe that acts of liberation should also always be taken seriously. Today many people are still reluctant to see wholesale assaults

² Kurt Tucholsky (1890–1938): radical publicist and novelist of the Weimar period, and editor of *Die Weltbühne*.

on expressionism because they are afraid that acts of liberation are being suppressed for their own sake – self-liberation from constricting rules, old regulations which have become fetters; that the aim of such attacks is to preserve methods of description which suited land-owners even after land-owners themselves have been swept aside. To take an example from politics; if you want to counter putsches, you must teach revolution, not evolution.

Literature, to be understood, must be considered in its development, by which I do not mean self-development. Experimental phases can then be noted, in which an often almost unbearable narrowing of perspective occurs, one-sided or rather few-sided products emerge; and the applicability of results becomes problematic. There are experiments which come to nothing and experiments which bear late fruits or paltry fruits. One sees artists who sink under the burden of their materials – conscientious people who see the magnitude of the task, do not shirk it, but are inadequate for it. They do not always perceive their own errors; sometimes others see the errors at the same time as the problems. Some of them become wholly absorbed in specific questions – but not all of these are busy trying to square the circle. The world has reason to be impatient with these people and it makes abundant use of this right. But it also has reason to show patience towards them.

In art there is the fact of failure, and the fact of partial success. Our metaphysicians must understand this. Works of art can fail so easily; it is so difficult for them to succeed. One man will fall silent because of lack of feeling; another, because his emotion chokes him. A third frees himself, not from the burden that weighs on him, but only from a feeling of unfreedom. A fourth breaks his tools because they have too long been used to exploit him. The world is not obliged to be sentimental. Defeats should be acknowledged; but one should not conclude from them that there should be no more struggles.

For me, expressionism is not merely an ‘embarrassing business’, not merely a deviation. Why? Because I do not by any means consider it to be merely a ‘phenomenon’ and stick a label on it. Realists who are willing to learn and look for the practical side of things could learn a great deal from it. For them, there was a lode to be exploited in Kaiser, Sternberg, Toller and Goering.³ Frankly I myself learn more easily where problems similar to my own are tackled. Not to beat about the bush, I learn with more difficulty (less) from Tolstoy and Balzac. They had to master

³ Georg Kaiser, Leo Sternberg, Ernst Toller and Reinhard Goering were all expressionist playwrights and authors of the immediate post-World War One period.

other problems. Besides – if I may be allowed to use the expression – much of them has become part of my flesh and blood. Naturally I admire these people and the way in which they dealt with their tasks. One can learn from them too. But it is advisable not to approach them singly, but alongside other authors with other tasks, such as Swift and Voltaire. The diversity of aims then becomes clear, and we can more easily make the necessary abstractions and approach them from the standpoint of our own problems.

The questions confronting our politically engaged literature have had the effect of making one particular problem very actual – the jump from one kind of style to another within the same work of art. This happened in a very practical way. Political and philosophical considerations failed to shape the whole structure, the message was mechanically fitted into the plot. The ‘editorial’ was usually ‘inartistically’ conceived – so patently that the inartistic nature of the plot in which it was embedded, was overlooked. (Plots were in any case regarded as more artistic than editorials.) There was a complete rift. In practice there were two possible solutions. The editorial could be dissolved in the plot or the plot in the editorial, lending the latter artistic form. But the plot could be shaped artistically and the editorial too (it then naturally lost its editorial quality), while keeping the jump from one idiom to another and giving it an artistic form. Such a solution seemed an innovation. But if one wishes, one can mention earlier models whose artistic quality is beyond dispute, such as the interruption of the action by choruses in the Attic theatre. The Chinese theatre contains similar forms.

The issue of how many allusions one needs in descriptions, of what is too plastic and what not plastic enough, can be dealt with practically from case to case. In certain works we can manage with fewer allusions than our ancestors. So far as psychology is concerned, the questions as to whether the results of newly established sciences should be employed, is not a matter of faith. It is in individual cases that one has to test whether the delineation of a character is improved by incorporating scientific insights or not, and whether the particular way in which they are utilized is good or not. Literature cannot be forbidden to employ skills newly acquired by contemporary man, such as the capacity for simultaneous registration, bold abstraction, or swift combination. If a scientific approach is to be involved, it is the tireless energy of science that is needed to investigate in each individual case how the artistic adoption of these skills has worked out. Artists like to take short cuts, to conjure things out of the air, to work their way through large sections

of a continuous process more or less consciously. Criticism, at least Marxist criticism, must proceed methodically and concretely in each case, in short scientifically. Loose talk is of no help here, whatever its vocabulary. In no circumstances can the necessary guide-lines for a practical definition of realism be derived from literary works alone. (Be like Tolstoy – but without his weaknesses! Be like Balzac – only up-to-date!) Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such – as a matter of general human interest.

III

[Remarks on an Essay]

One must not expect too much from people who use the word 'form' too fluently as signifying something other than content, or as connected with content, whatever, or who are suspicious of 'technique' as something 'mechanical'. One must not pay too much attention to the fact that they quote the classics (of Marxism) and that the word 'form' occurs there too; the classics did not teach the technique of writing novels. The word 'mechanical' need frighten no one, as long as it refers to technique; there is a kind of mechanics that has performed great services for mankind and still does so – namely technology. The 'right thinking' people among us, whom Stalin in another context distinguishes from creative people, have a habit of spell-binding our minds with certain words used in an extremely arbitrary sense.

Those who administer our cultural heritage decree that no enduring figures can be created without 'reciprocal human relationships in struggle', without 'the testing of human beings in real action', without 'close interaction between men in struggle'. But where in Hašek are the 'complicated' (!) methods with which old authors set their plots in motion. Yet his Schweik is certainly a figure who is hard to forget. I do not know whether it will 'endure'; nor do I know whether a figure created by Tolstoy or Balzac will endure; I know no more than the next man. To be frank, I do not set such an excessively high value on the concept of endurance. How can we foresee whether future generations will wish to preserve the memory of these figures? (Balzac and Tolstoy will scarcely be in a position to oblige them to do so, however ingenious the methods with which they set their plots in motion.) I suspect it will depend on whether it will be a socially relevant statement if someone says: 'That'

(and 'that' will refer to a contemporary) 'is a Père Goriot character.' Perhaps such characters will not survive at all? Perhaps they arose in a web of contorted relationships of a type which will by then no longer exist.

Characters and Balzac

I have no reason to advocate the montage technique used by Dos Passos, against wind or tide. When I wrote a novel I myself tried to create something in the nature of 'close interactions between human beings in struggle'. (Whatever elements of the montage technique I used, lay elsewhere in this novel). But I should not like to allow this technique to be condemned purely in favour of the creation of durable characters. First of all, Dos Passos himself has given an excellent portrayal of 'close interactions between human beings in struggle', even if the struggles he depicts are not the kind Tolstoy created, or his complexities those of Balzac's plots. Secondly, the novel certainly does not stand or fall by its 'characters', let alone with characters of the type that existed in the 19th century. We must not conjure up a kind of Valhalla of the enduring figures of literature, a kind of Madame Tussaud's panopticon, filled with nothing but durable characters from Antigone to Nana and from Aeneas to Nekhlyudov (who is he, by the way?).⁴ I see nothing disrespectful in laughing at such an idea. We know something about the bases on which the cult of the individual, as practised in class society, rested. They are historical bases. We are far from wishing to do away with the individual. But we nevertheless notice with a certain pensiveness how this (historical, particular, passing) cult has prevented a man like André Gide from discovering any individuals among Soviet youth.⁵ Reading Gide, I was on the point of discarding Nekhlyudov (whoever he may be) as an enduring figure, if – as certainly seemed possible – this was the only way those figures among Soviet youth, whom I have seen myself, could endure. To come back to our basic question: it is absolutely false, that is to say, it leads nowhere, it is not worth the writer's while, to simplify his problems so much that the immense, complicated, actual life-process of human beings in the age of the final struggle between the bourgeois and the proletarian class, is reduced to a 'plot', setting, or background for the creation of great individuals. Individuals should not occupy much more space in books and above all not a different kind of space,

⁴ Nekhlyudov: liberal aristocrat who is the central figure of Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection*.

⁵ Reference to Gide's *Retour de l'URSS*, which had been translated into German the previous year (1937).

than in reality. To talk in purely practical terms; for us, individuals emerge from a depiction of the processes of human co-existence and they can be 'big' or 'small'. It is absolutely false to say that one should take a great figure and allow it to respond in manifold ways, making its relationships with other figures as significant and lasting as possible.

The drama (force of collision), the passion (degree of heat), the range of the characters – none of this can be separated from social functions, and portrayed or propagated apart from it. Those close interactions between human beings in struggle are the competitive struggles of developing capitalism, which produced individuals in a quite particular way. Socialist emulation produces individuals in a different way and shapes different individuals. Then there is the further question whether it is as individuating a process as the competitive struggle of capitalism. In a certain sense, we hear from our critics the fateful slogan, once addressed to individuals: 'Enrich yourselves'.

Balzac is the poet of monstrosities. The multiplex character of his heroes (the breadth of their sunlit side, the depth of their shadowy side) reflects the dialectic of the progress of production as the progress of misery. 'With him business became poetical' (Taine) but: 'Balzac was first of all a businessman, indeed a businessman in debt . . . he took to speculation . . . suspended payments and wrote novels to pay his debts.' So in his case poetry in its turn became a business. In the primeval forest of early capitalism individuals fought against individuals, and against groups of individuals; basically they fought against 'the whole of society'. This was precisely what determined their individuality. Now we are advised to go on creating individuals, to recreate them, or rather to create new ones, who will naturally be different but made in the same way. So? 'Balzac's passion for collecting things bordered on monomania.' We find this fetishism of objects in his novels, too, on hundreds and thousands of pages. Admittedly we are supposed to avoid such a thing. Lukács wags his finger at Tretyakov on this account. But this fetishism is what makes Balzac's characters individuals. It is ridiculous to see in them a simple exchange of the social passions and functions which constitute the individual. Does the production of consumer goods for a collective today construct individuals in the same way as 'collecting'? Naturally one can answer 'yes' here too. This process of production does take place and there are individuals. But they are such very different individuals that Balzac would not have recognized them as such (and Gide today does not do so). They lack the element of monstrosity, the combination in one person of the lofty and the base, of criminality and

sanctity, and so on.

No, Balzac does not indulge in montage. But he writes vast genealogies, he marries off the creatures of his fantasy as Napoleon did his marshals and brothers; he follows possessions (fetishism of objects) through generations of families and their transference from one to the other. He deals with nothing but the 'organic': his families are organisms in which the individuals 'grow'. Should we therefore be reconstructing such cells, or the factory or the soviet – given that, with the abolition of private ownership of the means of production, the family is generally supposed to have ceased to shape individuals? But these new institutions which undoubtedly shape individuals today are precisely – compared to the family – the products of montage, quite literally 'assembled'. For example in contemporary New York, not to speak of Moscow, woman is less 'formed' by man than in Balzac's Paris; she is less dependent on him. So far this is quite simple. Certain struggles 'to a fever-pitch' therefore cease; other struggles which take their place (naturally others do take their place) are just as fierce but perhaps less individualistic. Not that they have no individual characteristics, for they are fought out by individuals. But allies play an immense part in them, such as they could not in Balzac's time.

IV

Popularity and Realism

Whoever looks for slogans to apply to contemporary German literature, must bear in mind that anything that aspires to be called literature is printed exclusively abroad and can almost exclusively be read only abroad. The term *popular* as applied to literature thus acquires a curious connotation. The writer in this case is supposed to write for a people among whom he does not live. Yet if one considers the matter more closely, the gap between the writer and the people is not as great as one might think. Today it is not quite as great as it seems, and formerly it was not as small as it seemed. The prevailing aesthetic, the price of books and the police have always ensured that there is a considerable distance between writer and people. Nevertheless it would be wrong, that is to say unrealistic, to view the widening of this distance as a purely 'external' one. Undoubtedly special efforts have to be made today in order to be able to write in a popular style. On the other hand, it has become easier; easier and more urgent. The people have split away

more clearly from their upper layers; their oppressors and exploiters have stepped out and joined a bloody battle with them of vast dimensions. It has become easier to take sides. An open battle has so to speak broken out among the 'public'.

The demand for a realistic style of writing can also no longer be so easily dismissed today. It has acquired a certain inevitability. The ruling classes use lies oftener than before – and bigger ones. To tell the truth is clearly an ever more urgent task. Suffering has increased and with it the number of sufferers. In view of the immense suffering of the masses, concern with little difficulties or with difficulties of little groups has come to be felt as ridiculous, contemptible.

There is only one ally against growing barbarism – the people, who suffer so greatly from it. It is only from them that one can expect anything. Therefore it is obvious that one must turn to the people, and now more necessary than ever to speak their language. Thus the terms *popular art* and *realism* become natural allies. It is in the interest of the people, of the broad working masses, to receive a faithful image of life from literature, and faithful images of life are actually of service only to the people, the broad working masses, and must therefore be absolutely comprehensible and profitable to them – in other words, popular. Nevertheless these concepts must first be thoroughly cleansed before propositions are constructed in which they are employed and merged. It would be a mistake to think that these concepts are completely transparent, without history, uncompromised or unequivocal. ('We all know what they mean – don't let's split hairs.') The concept of *popularity* itself is not particularly popular. It is not realistic to believe that it is. There is a whole series of abstract nouns in 'ity' which must be viewed with caution. Think of *utility*, *sovereignty*, *sanctity*; and we know that the concept of *nationality* has a quite particular, sacramental, pompous and suspicious connotation, which we dare not overlook. We must not ignore this connotation, just because we so urgently need the concept *popular*.

It is precisely in the so-called poetical forms that 'the people' are represented in a superstitious fashion or, better, in a fashion that encourages supersitition. They endow the people with unchanging characteristics, hallowed traditions, art forms, habits and customs, religiosity, hereditary enemies, invincible power and so on. A remarkable unity appears between tormenters and tormented, exploiters and exploited, deceivers and deceived; it is by no means a question of the masses of 'little' working people in opposition to those above them.

The history of the many deceptions which have been practised with this concept of the people is a long and complicated one – a history of class struggles. We do not intend to go into it here – we only wish to keep the fact of the deception in sight, when we say that we need popular art and mean thereby art for the broad masses, for the many who are oppressed by the few, ‘the people themselves’, the mass of producers who was for so long the object of politics and must now become the subject of politics. Let us recall that the people were for long held back from any full development by powerful institutions, artificially and forcefully gagged by conventions, and that the concept *popular* was given an ahistorical, static, undevelopmental stamp. We are not concerned with the concept in this form – or rather, we have to combat it.

Our concept of what is popular refers to a people who not only play a full part in historical development but actively usurp it, force its pace, determine its direction. We have a people in mind who make history, change the world and themselves. We have in mind a fighting people and therefore an aggressive concept of what is *popular*.

Popular means: intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of expression / assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it / representing the most progressive section of the people so that it can assume leadership, and therefore intelligible to other sections of the people as well / relating to traditions and developing them / communicating to that portion of the people which strives for leadership the achievements of the section that at present rules the nation.

Now we come to the concept of *realism*. This concept, too, must first be cleansed before use, for it is an old concept, much used by many people and for many ends. This is necessary because the people can only take over their cultural heritage by an act of expropriation. Literary works cannot be taken over like factories; literary forms of expression cannot be taken over like patents. Even the realistic mode of writing, of which literature provides many very different examples, bears the stamp of the way it was employed, when and by which class, down to its smallest details. With the people struggling and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to ‘tried’ rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws. We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master. We shall take care not to describe one particular, historical form of novel of a particular epoch as realistic – say that of Balzac or Tolstoy – and thereby erect

merely formal, literary criteria for realism. We shall not speak of a realistic manner of writing only when, for example, we can smell, taste and feel everything, when there is 'atmosphere' and when plots are so contrived that they lead to psychological analysis of character. Our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions.

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.

These are vast precepts and they can be extended. Moreover we shall allow the artist to employ his fantasy, his originality, his humour, his invention, in following them. We shall not stick to too detailed literary models; we shall not bind the artist to too rigidly defined modes of narrative.

We shall establish that the so-called sensuous mode of writing – where one can smell, taste and feel everything – is not automatically to be identified with a realistic mode of writing; we shall acknowledge that there are works which are sensuously written and which are not realistic, and realistic works which are not written in a sensuous style. We shall have to examine carefully the question whether we really develop a plot best when our ultimate objective is to reveal the spiritual life of the characters. Our readers will perhaps find that they have not been given the key to the meaning of the events if, led astray by various artistic devices, they experience only the spiritual agitation of the heroes. By adopting the forms of Balzac and Tolstoy without testing them thoroughly, we might weary our readers – the people – as much as these writers often do themselves. Realism is not a mere question of form. Were we to copy the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists.

For time flows on, and if it did not, it would be a bad prospect for those who do not sit at golden tables. Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new.

The oppressors do not work in the same way in every epoch. They cannot be defined in the same fashion at all times. There are so many means for them to avoid being spotted. They call their military roads

motor-ways; their tanks are painted so that they look like MacDuff's woods. Their agents show blisters on their hands, as if they were workers. No: to turn the hunter into the quarry is something that demands invention. What was popular yesterday is not today, for the people today are not what they were yesterday.

Anyone who is not a victim of formalistic prejudices knows that the truth can be suppressed in many ways and must be expressed in many ways. One can arouse a sense of outrage at inhuman conditions by many methods – by direct description (emotional or objective), by narrative and parable, by jokes, by over- and under-emphasis. In the theatre, reality can be represented both in objective and in imaginative forms. The actors may not use make-up – or hardly any – and claim to be 'absolutely natural' and yet the whole thing can be a swindle; and they can wear masks of a grotesque kind and present the truth. It is hardly open to debate that the means must be questioned about the ends they serve. The people understand this. Piscator's great theatrical experiments in which conventional forms were constantly destroyed, found their greatest support in the most advanced cadres of the working class; so have my own. The workers judged everything according to the truth of its content; they welcomed every innovation which helped the representation of truth, of the real mechanism of society; they rejected everything that seemed theatrical, technical equipment that merely worked for its own sake – that is to say, that did not yet fulfil, or no longer fulfilled, its purpose. The workers' arguments were never literary or stated in terms of theatrical aesthetics. One never heard it said that one can't mix theatre and film. If the film was not inserted properly in the play, then the most that was said was: 'We don't need that film. It's distracting.' Workers' choirs spoke verse-parts with complicated rhythms ('If it was in rhyme it would go down like water and nothing would be left'), and sang difficult (unfamiliar) compositions by Eisler ('That's strong stuff').⁶ But we had to change certain lines whose sense was not clear or which were wrong. In the case of marching-songs, which were rhymed so that they could be learnt more quickly, and had a simpler rhythm so that they sank in better, certain refinements were introduced (irregularities, complications). Then they said: 'There's a little twist there – that's fun.' Anything that was worn out, trivial, or so commonplace that it no longer

⁶ Reference to Brecht's work *Die Massnahme* (1930), intended as a vindication of party discipline and Comintern policy in China. The play was sharply criticized by the KPD itself, for its exaltation of expedient sacrifice. Lukács dismissed it in 1932 for reducing strategic and tactical problems of class struggle to ethical issues.

made one think, they did not like at all ('You get nothing out of it'). If one needed an aesthetic, one could find it here. I shall never forget how a worker looked at me when I replied to his suggestion that I should add something to a chorus about the Soviet Union ('It has to go in – otherwise what's the point?'), that it would destroy the artistic form. He put his head on one side and smiled. A whole area of aesthetics collapsed because of this polite smile. The workers were not afraid to teach us and they were themselves not afraid to learn.

I am speaking from experience when I say that one need not be afraid to produce daring, unusual things for the proletariat so long as they deal with its real situation. There will always be people of culture, connoisseurs of art, who will interject: 'Ordinary people do not understand that.' But the people will push these persons impatiently aside and come to a direct understanding with artists. There is high-flown stuff, made for cliques, and intended to create new cliques – the two-thousandth re-blocking of an old felt hat, the spicing of old, rotting meat: this the proletariat rejects ('What a state they must be in!') with an incredulous, yet tolerant shake of the head. It was not the pepper that was rejected, but the decaying meat: not the two-thousandth blocking, but the old felt. When they themselves wrote and produced for the stage they were wonderfully original. So-called agitprop art, at which people, not always the best people, turned up their noses, was a mine of new artistic methods and modes of expression. From it there emerged magnificent, long-forgotten elements from ages of genuine popular art, boldly modified for new social aims: breathtaking contractions and compressions, beautiful simplifications, in which there was often an astonishing elegance and power and a fearless eye for the complex. Much of it might be primitive, but not in that sense in which the spiritual landscapes of bourgeois art, apparently so subtle, are primitive. It is a mistake to reject a style of representation because of a few unsuccessful compositions – a style which strives, frequently with success, to dig down to the essentials and to make abstraction possible. The sharp eyes of the workers penetrated the surface of naturalistic representations of reality. When the workers in *Driver Henschel* said of spiritual analyses, 'We don't want to know all that', they were expressing a desire to receive a more accurate image of the real social forces at work under an immediately visible surface. To cite my own experience, they did not object to the fantastic costumes and the apparently unreal milieu of the *Three penny Opera*. They were not narrow – they hated narrowness (their homes were narrow and cramped). They did things on a grand scale; the entrepreneurs were

mean. They found some things superfluous which the artists declared to be necessary; but then they were generous and not against excess; on the contrary they were against those who were superfluous. They did not put on a muzzle on a willing horse but they saw that it pulled its weight. They did not believe in such things as 'the' method. They knew that many methods were necessary to attain their goal.

The criteria for popular art and realism must therefore be chosen both generously and carefully, and not drawn merely from existing realistic works and existing popular works, as often happens; by so doing, one would arrive at formalistic criteria, and at popular art and realism in form only.

Whether a work is realistic or not cannot be determined merely by checking whether or not it is like existing works which are said to be realistic, or were realistic in their time. In each case, one must compare the depiction of life in a work of art with the life itself that is being depicted, instead of comparing it with another depiction. Where popularity is concerned, there is one extremely formalistic procedure of which one must beware. The intelligibility of a literary work is not guaranteed merely if it is written exactly like other works which were understood in their time. These other works which were understood in their time were also not always written like the works before them. Steps had been taken to make them intelligible. In the same way, we must do something for the intelligibility of new works today. There is not only such a thing as *being popular*, there is also the process of *becoming popular*.

If we wish to have a living and combative literature, which is fully engaged with reality and fully grasps reality, a truly popular literature, we must keep step with the rapid development of reality. The great working masses are already on the move. The industry and brutality of their enemies is proof of it.

Translated by Stuart Hood