LUKÁCS AND REALISM AFTER MARX

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To the memory of Mark Goodman (1924–1997)

The purpose of this paper is to explore the following question. What, if anything, can be retained of Lukács's defence of literary realism if we suppose (as there is reason to) that the Marxist theory to which it was so closely allied is no longer viable? To limit the scope of this question, I shall be concerned solely with the version of realism which Lukács discusses in the three essays gathered together under the title *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism.*

I

The connection between realism, Marxism, and Lukács's account of the importance of literature as explained in these essays is relatively easily stated. Human beings, he contends, are essentially socio-historical beings. Thus to describe the human condition in an illuminating way, the writer must tell stories and create characters that reflect the socio-historical determinants of real life. These determinants are not, however, static; they form a process or sequence. History, in short, unfolds, but its unfolding is no more a matter of brute fact than are the elements within it. The truth is that the unfolding of history can be understood not merely as a concatenation of the contingent, but as a purposeful and directional whole, and Lukács believes that it has been successfully understood in this way by Marxist theory. Marx's account of history explains both its course and its direction. The formation of human society across time is a process of economic transformation, in which deep economic tensions resolve themselves in higher forms of social organization, the final transformation being the emergence of socialism.

Against the background of this conception Lukács contends that what marks out great literature is its deployment of a perspective in terms of which literary (and more broadly artistic) imagination is controlled and structured. This perspective is an historical one, one which appreciates the place of literary

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creation in the process of history and is conscious of its role as both a reflection and a comment upon that place.

Everything in a writer's life, every individual experience, thought and emotion he undergoes, however subjective, partakes of a historical character. Every element in his life as a human being and as a writer is part of, and determined by, the movement from and towards some goal. Any authentic reflection of reality in literature must point to this movement.

In all this, perspective plays a decisive role. . . . Objectively, perspective points to the main movements in a given historical process. Subjectively . . . it represents the capacity to grasp the existence and mode of action in these moments. (CR, pp. 54-55)

At an earlier point he explains the importance of perspective more fully.

In any work of art, perspective is of overriding importance. It determines the course and content; it draws together the threads of the narration; it enables the artist to choose between the important and the superficial, the crucial and the episodic. The direction in which characters develop is determined by perspective, only those features being described which are material to their development. (CR, p. 33)

Lukács distinguishes, accordingly, between three types of literature: modernism, critical realism, and socialist realism. Modernism is intrinsically bankrupt because it fails to recognize any element whatever of socio-historical location and cannot therefore deploy the sort of perspective which great literature requires. 'Modernism must', he says, 'deprive literature of sense of perspective.' There is more to be said about these strictures on modernism, but for the moment this brief summary will suffice. Critical realism, by contrast, does acknowledge its temporal location and in addition not only engages in analysis but in critical reflection. Its defect, and that which places it at a disadvantage over socialist realism, is the failure to appreciate the full dynamic of history and in particular its future socialist transformation. Critical realism, we might say, is marked by its understanding of present ills, but limited by its failure to understand the whole historical process in which these occur and especially its future direction. For this reason critical realism, though it has much to commend it, is crucially incomplete. It can perceive the problems of human existence in a given time and place, but not their solution. Consequently, it lacks the overarching perspective which socialist realism has, and since the possession of perspective is what makes the greatest literature possible, it lacks that feature which alone can generate the most powerful literary production.

The critical realist, following tradition, analyses the contradictions in the disintegrating old order and the emerging new order. But he does not see them as contradictions within himself. . . .

All this argues the superiority—historically speaking—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. (CR, pp. 114–115)

In the third essay in the book, from which this passage is taken, Lukács goes to considerable lengths to deny an implication that this account of the relation between critical and socialist realism might be thought to have, and one which it was erroneously taken to have in the Soviet Union under Stalin, namely that any writing which adopts the socialist perspective must be superior to any writing which lacks or denies it. Lukács is at great pains to assert that mere subscription to socialist theory is not a sufficient condition of great literature. In a parenthetical remark omitted from the previous quotation he says: ‘I cannot sufficiently emphasize that this superiority does not confer automatic success on each individual work of socialist realism.’ Socialist-inspired literature can lapse into the category of what he calls ‘revolutionary romanticism’. Conversely, the failure to subscribe to socialist theory is not an inevitable mark of literary failure. It is here that his celebrated dissent from the communist orthodoxy of the time at which he wrote is articulated, and at the same point that his reputation as a defender of artistic freedom in an era of communist oppression was founded. To support his case he invokes the authority of Lenin.

[1]It is no accident that Lenin, like Marx, should regard Tolstoy’s realism—in spite of its apparent ideological shortcomings—as a model for the literature of the future. (CR, p. 127)

To a contemporary reader this aspect of the debate in which he is engaged can only seem an historical curiosity. The details both of his comments on and the outcome of the various Congresses of the Soviet Writers Union he discusses are of little interest, and the regular appeals he makes to Lenin carry no argumentative power. What is still of interest, as it seems to me, is whether the close analysis he offers of the difference between modernism and realism can be shown to have relevance in a period such as ours when the political context has altered so radically. One way of putting this question is to ask whether the sort of perspective which he thinks significant literature requires must have its culmination in the socialism underwritten by Marxist theory.

II

To address this issue adequately something more needs to be said about the idea of realist literature. What makes literature realist? One approach to answering this question might be thought to be that of ostensive definition. Lukács gives many examples of those he regards as realist writers. One is Balzac, and in Balzac’s novel Cousin Bette there is a further clue. In a self-reference to the novel, Balzac describes it as ‘this serious and terrible study of Parisian life’. Now here we
encounter a quite general problem about realist accounts of literature, namely the relation of literature to truth. This is such a large topic that only a few comments pertinent to the subject of this essay can be made here. Balzac describes his novel as a ‘study’ but it is evident that it is to be contrasted with works of history and sociology. Whatever the relation between *Cousin Bette* and the Parisian life it appears to describe, it is obviously a work of imagination, not of empirical reporting. That there is a difference between the two is very clearly shown by the comparison between Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and Sir Roger Casement’s official report commissioned at the same time. Both concern the regime that operated in the Belgian Congo of the nineteenth century, and there is plainly some sense in which the subject of Conrad’s novel is the same as the subject of Casement’s report. But since the first is a work of imagination and the second a work of empirical inquiry there is equally plainly this important difference: the people and events on which Casement reported actually existed and happened; the characters and events which Conrad describes did not. Or, to be strictly accurate (since Conrad’s story is based upon personal experience), while it is crucial whether the people and events reported on by Casement happened, this is not of any moment for the value of Conrad’s novel.

One familiar attempt to demarcate realist fiction in the light of this sort of comparison is to appeal to verisimilitude. True, Conrad’s characters are not real people, but they are like real people. This appeal to verisimilitude as the criterion of realist literature seems at first to gather support from another relevant and important distinction—that between realism and phantasy. The eighteenth-century English novelist Henry Fielding, by way of explaining his intention to be a realistic writer, expressly eschewed the use of phantastical devices—fairies, magic and miraculous events, and so on. These sorts of things do not happen in real life, and so cannot be admitted to realistic literature. Realist literature, on this account, is to be distinguished in this way: it is constrained in the sorts of characters and agencies it can employ.

So much seems obvious, and yet further reflection shows that while it is correct to think of realist literature as operating within a special sort of constraint, the constraint is not properly captured in the distinction between the phantastical and the verisimilous. This can be demonstrated by the simple illustration of the happy ending. Charles Dickens supplies several examples of this. At the end of *Dombey and Son* and at the end of *David Copperfield*, all loose ends are tied up just a little too neatly. Worse than that, in order to do so, characters have to be wholly untrue to themselves. Mr Dombey has to lose the cold austerity and pride that are

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crucial to the dynamic of the novel in order to become the sweet old man who is
cared for by his devoted daughter. And Mr Micawber has to lose his engaging
fecklessness to become a worthy citizen on whom newspapers report favourably.
It is no accident, and a sign that this is a very great contrivance on Dickens's part,
that Micawber's conversion takes place in the (then) distant location of Australia.

Such endings are deeply unrealistic, but not in the way that Fielding means.
Dickens employs no supernatural agencies, and the fact is that people do go to
Australia, and do mend their ways (occasionally). The unrealism does not lie,
therefore, in lack of verisimilitude to the ordinary things of human existence, but
elsewhere. Where else might this be?

Some indication of the answer has already been given by the reference to
constraint. Dickens, at the end of these two novels, abandons the constraint of the
characters and narrative that have preceded these endings. In this he is to be
contrasted with Balzac. In Cousin Bette, Balzac seems to opt for a happy ending.
But at the very last, acknowledging that the character of Baron Hulot is too
securely fixed to abandon a lifetime of lechery, he adds a final section entitled 'An
appalling ending, but true to reality' in which Hulot reverts to type. What Balzac
is here acknowledging is that there is a dynamic established by novels themselves
which renders some endings implausibly unrealistic. The unreality lies here; it is
not that the ending is untrue to life (by invoking supernatural causes, for
instance), but untrue to the story itself. Another way of putting the same point
would be to say that the novel as it unfolds creates a perspective within which
some things are possible and others not. The possibility of Dombey becoming a
kind and gentle old man, or Micawber becoming a model citizen is ruled out by
this perspective. It is specially important to note that the perspective does not
arise from the contention that 'people don't do that sort of thing'. In imaginative
literature we are not presented with generalizations about human behaviour but
with characters. It is rather that Dombey, or Micawber, or Hulot, would not do
that sort of thing.

To put the point in this second way, of course, is deliberately to invoke the
term that Lukács makes much of: 'perspective'. The difference is that whereas I
have located the perspective which determines what is and what is not realistic
amongst the events and characters of a novel within the novel itself, Lukács sees
it, crucially, as lying outside and beyond the novel, namely in the realities of the
historical process. In fact, there is not quite the conflict here that might be
supposed. Any adequate account of realism in literature, it seems to me, must
lend it at some point a referential character. Conrad's Heart of Darkness is in some
way or other about colonialism, just as Casement’s report is. Balzac’s La Comédie
humaine is in some way or other about post-Napoleonic France. The differences
between invention and report are very great, no doubt, but unless we are to deny
the possibility of realism in imaginative literature altogether, we must, in my view,
retain this referential aspect and explain it.
I shall not endeavour to explain it here, however. For present purposes it is sufficient to note the necessity and ask how this is connected to Lukács's idea of perspective. One possible answer is that the perspective which the novel itself creates is in turn set within the context of a larger external perspective, that of experience. Novelists do not write in a vacuum. For one thing, they employ a language not of their own creation, notwithstanding the aspirations of the later Joyce. They also necessarily derive their materials from experience, and this experience provides the perspective within which their creations are formed. There is more to be said about this, as we shall see, and the reference to Joyce will be taken up again when we turn to Lukács's discussion of modernism. For the moment, however, it is enough to set out this possibility of what might be called a hierarchy of perspectives. Of course, for Lukács the hierarchy reaches its culmination in historical experience understood in the light of Marxist theory. Supposing (if only for the purposes of the present discussion) that this cannot actually be the culmination because the Marxism which it invokes is no longer credible, the question is whether we can preserve the general structure of his account of realism in some other way.

One answer which I shall invoke but not defend is that the role Lukács attributes to history properly understood can as well be served by the more timeless conception of the human condition. The ultimate perspective which serves as a constraint upon the imaginings of the novelist is that of the human condition to which they, like anyone else, are subject.

Might it be, then, that Lukács's Marxism can be abandoned and his analysis of realism remain if only we replace the historical component in his overall conception with that of a universal, historically unrelativized human condition? The difficulty about wholeheartedly adopting this suggestion is that it appears to make Lukács's account of realism collapse at another point, namely in the sharp contrast he draws between realism and modernism. To understand this observation and to assess the true significance of the difficulty we must now return to his account of modernism.

III

_The Meaning of Contemporary Realism_ begins with an essay entitled 'The Ideology of Modernism'. Lukács is concerned to condemn what he sees as the deeply isolationist conception of what it is to be a human being, a conception which has an enormously powerful hold on the literature of modernism and is articulated in

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the existentialist philosophy to which it was allied. To the modernist writer, human beings are essentially solitary, or to put the matter a little more accurately, the human condition is one of essential solitude.

Now expressing Lukács's objection to modernism in this way raises a question. How can Lukács contrast modernism and realism in literature if one distinguishing feature of modernism is that it offers a distinctive account of the human condition? Of course, within the Marxist framework, there is a relatively straightforward answer to this question. The picture of the human condition which modernism presents is ahistorical, or as Lukács puts it 'static' and hence unreal. But if the Marxism has to be abandoned, is there anything left to Lukács's strictures, and anything left to the distinction between realism and modernism?

In what follows I shall attempt to show that the distinction Lukács draws still makes sense, and more importantly accurately captures a profound difference between literary modes that are correctly described as realist and irrealist.

Here it is useful to return to Joyce. In the opening pages of 'The Ideology of Modernism' Lukács compares Bloom's monologue in the lavatory and Molly's monologue in bed from *Ulysses*, with Goethe's early morning monologue as conceived by Thomas Mann in *Lotte in Weimar*. Mann, for Lukács, is a realist, and Joyce a modernist, though one with 'manifest abilities' whose work it would be absurd to declare an artistic failure. Still, while on the surface, such 'stream of consciousness' monologues are similar, according to Lukács a profound difference exists between them. This difference is not to be found at the level of 'stylistic techniques', however, but in the 'weltanschauung underlying a writer's work' (p. 19). It is in fact a philosophical or metaphysical difference. In his further explanation of this, Lukács makes reference to Aristotle and the conception of *zoon politikon*, man as a social animal. In this way the entry of the socio-historical, and hence Marxist theory, is rapidly facilitated. But it is at precisely this point, I think, that we can profitably entertain other possibilities.

The conception at work in modernism, according to Lukács, whatever other interpretation he gives of it, is idealistic, in the sense of philosophical idealism. This is a metaphysical conception familiar to philosophers, the metaphysic which undergoes trenchant criticism at the hands of the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid. Reid describes this as the 'theory of ideas' and finds it at work, to deleterious effect, in the philosophy of George Berkeley, David Hume, and (to a lesser extent) John Locke. The 'theory of ideas' conceives the mind's relation to the world as mediated by the contents of the mind itself, by 'ideas' of things. The problem then arises as to how we are to establish or even discover a relation between ideas in the mind and the external objects of which

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5 Or so Lukács thinks. In this context he refers to Heidegger's concept of *Geworfenheit* (thrownness), and later makes a fleeting allusion to Sartre's 'unrevised existentialist premises'. As will be noted below, however, there is at least one aspect of his analysis of modernism with which Sartre would concur.
they are thought to be the ideas. How can we know that the contents of the mind adequately reflect, or are even related to, the external objects of which they are supposed to be a reflection? All the problems of Humean scepticism arise from this source, but the mistake, according to Reid, is to accept this conception of the division between mind and reality in the first place. By his account, and that of the 'Common Sense' school of philosophy of which he is chief representative, the mind has direct and not mediated contact with the world. There is no problem about the relation between ideas and objects for Reid, because there are no 'ideas' in the metaphysical sense. The life of the mind is not filled with ideas which reflect (or fail to reflect) reality, but with the things of reality itself.

Reid is far from being alone in his criticism of idealism. Indeed, despite Lukács's perception of a connection between modernism in literature and existentialism in philosophy, Sartre no less than Reid criticizes Hume on just this point; Hume's account of perception and imagination, he thinks, is a victim of the 'illusion of immanence'. The point, however, is that Lukács's account of modernistic literature effectively accuses it of being idealistic in this sense. Joyce's stream of consciousness, unlike Mann's, is all there is. It follows, and we should remember that Lukács's concern is with the aesthetic rather than the meta-

physical, that the sole aesthetic consideration is with the form of consciousness, never its content. We cannot ask, within the modernist conception, whether the content of our artistic imaginings is adequate to its object, because there is no object, only the image itself. Consequently, the sole criterion of significance is form. This is why modernism in literature, according to Lukács, is purely formalistic. Literature has no content. It is not about anything.

I)n modernist literature . . . the hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own experience. There is not for him—and apparently not for his creator—any pre-existent reality beyond his own self. (CR, p. 21)

Lukács quotes, in defence of his contention, the express opinion of the modernist poet Gottfried Benn who 'informs us that “there is no outer reality, there is only consciousness, constantly building, modifying, rebuilding new worlds out of its own creativity”' (CR, p. 25).

It can be argued that the fact that this quotation, which is so highly apposite to his purpose, comes from a relatively obscure source is significant. Why take Benn to be the spokesman for all modernist literature? There is, it seems to me, some justice in this complaint. What Lukács identifies as the heart of modernism in literature may not be (and plausibly is not) to be found in all literature that is known as 'modernist'. Conversely, there are traces of radical subjectivism in some literature which is thought to fall on the realist side of the divide. Even in Heart of

Darkness (my example, not Lukács's) the closing reflections of Marlowe suggest something of this sort.

Yet, at the same time it seems to me scarcely less contestible, first that there is indeed this important difference between realism and irrealism, and second that it has a counterpart in literary aspiration and self-understanding. Moreover, even if Lukács overgeneralizes, much modern literature, in contrast to nineteenth-century writing, unmistakably tends in this direction. The point to be made here, however, and the principle claim of this paper, is that both divisions can be identified, and are identified by Lukács, independently of his Marxism. It remains only to ask whether Lukács is also right in assigning to the irrealist, modernist conception a lower aesthetic value than to its realist alternative.

IV

Part of Reid's objection to the theory of ideas is that its implications violate the judgements of common sense. We might construe this as a certain sort of conservatism; if the customary beliefs of the common mind are affronted by the conclusions of philosophical speculation, we ought to reject philosophy. Such a view can be thought to derive from a mere unwillingness to entertain unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable views. This would, I believe, be a misinterpretation of Reid. His point is rather that, understood in the fullness of its implications, the theory of ideas leads to a certain kind of madness. Hume, of course, also thinks that his philosophical views end in brute contingencies which cannot ultimately be given rational foundation. He further thinks that as a consequence these are not thoughts that are easily lived with, and famously recommends the use of backgammon and other diversions to distract us from them. But the limits of reason Hume here detects are of a sophisticated sort. What Reid is pointing to is a rather lower level of inadequacy in the theory of ideas, and one which constitutes a more powerful objection to it in the end. It is, he thinks, a doctrine or conception which, placed in the context of engaging in human life, could only be judged lunatic by a well-ordered practical intelligence. If this is true, the same must be said of artistic imagination inspired (perhaps we should say infected) by it.

It is a commonplace of modern literary criticism (and art criticism more widely) that good art must be 'challenging' and even 'offensive' to ordinary sensibilities. Any clash with accepted or commonly acceptable ideas is thus automatically held to be a mark of merit. But there is often at work here an illicit inference. From the fact (if it is one) that great art often offends, it does not follow that that which offends is necessarily great art. The fallacy in supposing the contrary is what logicians call 'affirming the consequent'. Artworks can offend for no other reason than that they are offensive, and nothing is gained by disguising this with words like 'challenging'.

In a similar fashion, it is easy to be misled into thinking that works of
considerable artistic sophistication, must also be works of depth. There is no
denying, and Lukács does not deny, the abilities of Joyce or Kafka. The talent of
such writers is obvious. Still, if it is true, as he alleges, that modernist novels are
not about anything, (Parisian life in the Second Empire, say), but merely a play
upon forms or ideas, there is a fairly plain sense in which they are meaningless.
Even allowing that an etiolated historical setting is not in itself a deficiency (a
more general conception of 'decadence', say, is just as good an object), still their
idealistic character means they have nothing to say, and hence nothing to tell us.
They are in fact, egoistic to the point of solipsism. Whatever their formalistic
virtues, which may be many, we can thus conceive of alternatives which share
these virtues and yet do have something to say, and which, accordingly, we have
good reason to value more highly. There is indeed, then, a deep difference
between realism and irrealism in literature and a careful reading of *The Meaning of
Contemporary Realism* will show, I think, that Lukács's principal concern is with the
assertion and explanation of this important difference, and not with the relevance
of Marxism, despite his many utterances, and his own belief, to the contrary.\(^7\)

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