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GEORG LUKÁCS'S *THEORY OF THE NOVEL* *

PAUL DE MAN

The rather belated discovery of the work of Georg Lukács in the West and, most recently, in this country, has tended to solidify the notion of a very deep split between the early, non-Marxist and the later Marxist Lukács. It is certainly true that a sharp distinction in tone and purpose sets off such early essays as *Die Seele und die Formen* (1911) and *Die Theorie des Romans* (1914-15) from recently translated essays on literary subjects such as the *Studies in European Realism* (1953) or the political pamphlet *Wieder den mißverstandenen Realismus* (1957) published here under the title *Realism*. But the distinction can be overstated and misunderstood. It would be unsound, for instance, to hold on to the reassuring assumption that all the evil in the later Lukács came in as a result of his Marxist conversion; a considerable degree of continuity exists between a pre-Marxist work such as *Die Theorie des Romans* and the Marxist *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*; it would be impossible for an admirer of the former to dismiss the latter entirely. There is a similar danger in an oversimplified view of a *good* early and a *bad* late Lukács. The works on realism have been treated very harshly on their American publication by such diverse critics as Harold Rosenberg (in *Dissent*) and Peter Demetz (in the *Yale Review*); on the other hand, *The Theory of the Novel* is being called by Harry Levin! (*JHI*, January-March 1965, p. 150)

* Five of these articles were given, in substance, as papers at the *Yale Symposium on Literary Criticism* in the spring of 1965. Professor Jacques Ehrmann of Yale University was the Director of the Symposium.

“possibly the most penetrating essay that ever addressed itself to the elusive subject of the novel.” If the blanket condemnation of the books on realism is clearly unjustified, especially if one bears in mind the considerable amount of debatable but interesting theoretical justification offered in Lukács’s late *Ästhetik* (1963), the almost unqualified endorsement of *The Theory of the Novel* seems equally unwarranted. Whatever one may think of Lukács, he is certainly an important enough mind to be studied as a whole, and the critical interpretation of his thought has not been helped by the oversimplified division that has been established. The weaknesses of the later work are already present from the beginning, and some of the early strength remains operative throughout. Both weakness and strength, however, exist on a meaningful philosophical level and can only be understood in the larger perspective of nineteenth and twentieth-century intellectual history: they are part of the heritage of romantic and idealist thought. This stresses again the historical importance of Georg Lukács and rejects the frequent reproach made against him that he remains overconcerned with nineteenth-century modes of thought (a reproach that appears in both the Demetz and the Rosenberg reviews). Such criticism is inspired by an ill-conceived modernism or is made for propagandistic reasons.

I certainly do not intend to address myself to the complex task of defining the unifying elements in Lukács’s thought. By a brief critical examination of *The Theory of the Novel*, I hope to make some preliminary distinctions between what seems to remain valid and what has become problematic in this very concentrated and difficult essay. Written in a language that uses a pre-Hegelian terminology but a post-Nietzschian rhetoric, with a deliberate tendency to substitute general and abstract systems for concrete examples, *The Theory of the Novel* is by no means easy reading. One is particularly put off by the strange point of view that prevails throughout the essay: the book is written from the point of view of a mind that claims to have reached such an advanced degree of generality that it can speak, as it were, for the novelistic consciousness itself; it is the Novel itself that tells us the history of its own development, very much as, in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, it is the Spirit who narrates its own voyage. With this crucial difference, however, that since Hegel’s Spirit has reached a full understanding of its own

being, it can claim unchallengeable authority, a point which Lukács's novelistic consciousness, by its own avowal, is never allowed to reach. Being caught in its own contingency, and being indeed an expression of this contingency, it remains a mere phenomenon without regulative power; one would be led to expect a reductive, tentative and cautiously phenomenological approach rather than a sweeping history asserting its own laws. By translating the work in a less exalted language, one loses its moving and impressive philosophical pathos, but some of the preconceptions become more apparent.

Compared to a formalistic work such as, for instance, Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction*, or to a work grounded in a more traditional view of history such as Auerbach's *Mimesis*, *The Theory of the Novel* makes much more radical claims. The emergence of the novel as the major modern genre is seen as the result of a change in the structure of human consciousness; the development of the novel reflects modifications in man's way of defining himself in relation to all categories of existence. Lukács is not offering us, in this essay, a sociological theory that would explore relationships between the structure and development of the novel and those of society, nor is he proposing a psychological theory explaining the novel in terms of human relationships. Least of all do we find him conferring an autonomy on formal categories that would give them a life of their own, independently of the more general intent that produces them. He goes instead to the most general possible level of experience, a level on which the use of terms such as Destiny, the Gods, Being, etc. seems altogether natural. The vocabulary and the historical scheme is that of later eighteenth-century aesthetic speculation; one is indeed constantly reminded of Schiller's philosophical writings on reading Lukács's formulation of the distinctions between the main literary genres.

The distinction between the epic and the novel is founded on a distinction between the Hellenic and the Western mind. As in Schiller, this distinction is stated in terms of the category of alienation, seen as an intrinsic characteristic of the reflective consciousness. Lukács's description of alienation is eloquent, but not strikingly original; the same could be said of his corresponding description at the beginning of the essay of a harmonious unity in the ideal Greece. The original unified nature that surrounds us in "the blessed times . . . when the fire that burns in our souls is

of the same substance as the fire of the stars"¹ has now been split in fragments that are "nothing but the historical form of the alienation (Entfremdung) between man and his works (seine Gebilden)." And the following text could take its place among the great elegiac quotations of the early nineteenth century: "The epic individual, the hero of the novel, originates in the alienation from the outside world. As long as the world is inwardly one, no real qualitative distinctions occur among its inhabitants; there may well be heroes and scoundrels, worthy men and criminals, but the greatest hero only rises by a head's length above his fellow-men, and the noble words of the wise can be understood even by the fools. The autonomy of inwardness becomes possible and necessary only when the differences between men have grown to be an unbreachable gap; when the gods have grown silent and no sacrifice or prayer is capable of loosening their tongues; when the world of action loses contact with that of the self, leaving man empty and powerless, unable to grasp the real meaning of his deeds . . . : when inwardness and adventure are forever distinct." We are much closer here to Schiller than to Marx.

A definitely post-Hegelian element is introduced with Lukács's insistence on the need for totality as the inner necessity that shapes all works of art. The unity of the Hellenic experience of the world has a formal correlative in the creation of closed, *total* forms, and this desire for totality is an inherent need of the human mind. It persists in modern, alienated man, but instead of fulfilling itself in the mere expression of his given unity with the world, it becomes instead the statement of an intent to retrieve the unity it no longer possesses. Clearly, Lukács's idealized fiction of Greece is a device to state a theory of consciousness that has the structure of an intentional movement. This implies, in turn, a presupposition about the nature of historical time, to which we will have to return later.

Lukács's theory of the novel emerges in a cogent and coherent way out of the dialectic between the urge for totality and man's alienated situation. The novel becomes "the epic of a world from which God has departed" (p. 87). As a result of the separation between our actual experience and our desire, any attempt at a total understanding of our being will stand in contrast to actual experience, which is bound to remain fragmentary, particular and

¹ All quotations from *Die Theorie des Romans*, Zweite Auflage, Berlin 1963. The first edition is from 1920.

unfulfilled. This separation between life (Leben) and being (Wesen) is reflected historically in the decline of the drama and the parallel rise of the novel. For Lukács, the drama is the medium in which, as in Greek tragedy, the most universal predicament of man is to be represented. At a moment in history in which such universality is absent from all actual experiences, the drama has to separate itself entirely from life, to become ideal and otherworldly; the German classical theater after Lessing serves Lukács as an example for this retreat. The novel, to the contrary, wishing to avoid this most destructive type of fragmentation remains rooted instead in the particularity of experience; as an epical genre, it can never give up its contact with empirical reality, which is an inherent part of its own form. But, in a time of alienation, it is forced to represent this reality as imperfect, as steadily striving to move beyond the boundaries that restrict it, as constantly experiencing and resenting the inadequacy of its own size and shape. "In the novel, what is constituted is not the totality of life but rather the relationship, the valid or mistaken position of the writer who enters the scene as an empirical subject in his full stature, but also in his full limitation as a mere creature, towards this totality." The theme of the novel is thus necessarily limited to the individual, and to this individual's frustrating experience of his own inability to acquire universal dimensions. The novel originates in the Quixotic tension between the world of romance and that of reality. The roots of Lukács's later dogmatic commitment to realism are certainly to be found in this aspect of his theory. However, at the time of *The Theory of the Novel*, the insistence on the necessary presence of an empirical element in the novel is altogether convincing, all the more so since it is counterbalanced by the attempt to overcome the limitations of reality.

This thematic duality, the tension between an earth-bound destiny and a consciousness that tries to transcend this condition, leads to structural discontinuities in the form of the novel. Totality strives for a continuity that can be compared with the unity of an organic entity, but the estranged reality intrudes upon this continuity and disrupts it. Next to a "homogeneous and organic stability" the novel also displays a "heterogeneous and contingent discontinuity" (p. 74). This discontinuity is defined by Lukács as irony. The ironic structure acts disruptively, yet it reveals the truth of the paradoxical predicament that the novel represents.

For this reason, Lukács can state that irony actually provides the means by which the novelist transcends, within the form of the work, the avowed contingency of his condition. "In the novel, irony is the freedom of the poet in relation to the divine . . . for it is by means of irony that, in an intuitively ambiguous vision, we can perceive divine presence in a world forsaken by the gods." This concept of irony as the positive power of an absence also stems directly from Lukács's idealist and romantic ancestors; it reveals the influence of Friedrich Schlegel, of Hegel and most of all of Hegel's contemporary Solger. Lukács's originality resides in his use of irony as a structural category.

For if irony is indeed the determining and organizing principle of the novel's form, then Lukács is indeed freeing himself from preconceived notions about the novel as an imitation of reality. Irony steadily undermines this claim at imitation and substitutes for it a conscious, interpreted awareness of the distance that separates an actual experience from the understanding of this experience. The ironic language of the novel mediates between experience and desire, and unites ideal and real within the complex paradox of the form. This form can have nothing in common with the homogeneous, organic form of nature: it is founded on an act of consciousness, not on the imitation of a natural object. In the novel ". . . the relationship of the parts to the whole, although it tries to come as close as possible to being an organic relationship, is in fact an ever-suspended *conceptual* relationship, not a truly organic one" (p. 74). Lukács comes very close, in statements of this kind, to reaching a point from which a genuine hermeneutic of the novel could start.

His own analysis, however, seems to move in a different direction; the second part of the essay contains a sharp critical rejection of the kind of inwardness that is associated with a hermeneutic theory of language. In the 1961 preface which Lukács added to the recent reissue of his essay, he scornfully refers to the phenomenological approach as a "right-wing epistemology," that runs counter to left-wing ethics. This criticism was already implicit in the original text. When he comes closest to dealing with contemporary developments in the novel and with moments in which the novel itself seems to become conscious of its real intent, a revealing shift in the argument takes place. He shows us, convincingly enough, how inwardness for its own sake can lead to an evasion of the novel into a falsely

Utopian realm "a Utopia which, from the start, has a bad conscience and a knowledge of its own defeat" (p. 119). The romantic novel of disillusion (*Desillusions-romantik*) is the example of this distortion of the genre, in which the novel loses contact with empirical reality; Lukács is thinking of Novalis, who was attacked in similar terms in an essay from the earlier book *Die Seele und die Formen*, but he also gives examples from Jacobsen's *Niels Lyhne* and Gontcharov's *Oblomov*. He fully realizes, however, that these examples do not account for other developments in European fiction in which the same theme of disillusion is obviously present and which he neither can nor wishes to dismiss. Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, of course, is the most striking instance, a truly modern novel shaped by the overpowering negativity of an almost obsessive inwardness but which nevertheless, in Lukács's own judgment, represents the highest achievement of the genre in the nineteenth century. What is present in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* that saves it from being condemned together with other post-romantic novels of inwardness?

At this moment in the argument, Lukács introduces an element that had not been explicitly mentioned up till now: temporality. In the 1961 Preface, he points with pride to the original use of the category of time, at a moment when Proust's novel was not yet known to the public. For the decadent and belated romantic, time is experienced as pure negativity; the inward action of the novel is a hopeless "battle against the erosive power of time." But in Flaubert, according to Lukács, this is precisely not the case. In spite of the hero's continuous defeats and disappointments, time triumphs as a positive principle in the *Sentimental Education*, because Flaubert succeeds in recapturing the irresistible feeling of flow that characterizes Bergsonian *durée*. "It is time which makes possible this victory. The uninterrupted and irrepressible flow of time is the unifying principle that gives homogeneity to the disjointed parts, by putting them in a relationship that, although irrational and ineffable, is nevertheless one of unity. Time gives order to the random agitation of men and confers upon it the appearance of organic growth . . ." (p. 128). On the level of true temporal experience, the ironic discontinuities vanish and the treatment of time itself, in Flaubert, is no longer ironic.

Can we admit Lukács's interpretation of the temporal structure of the *Sentimental Education*? When Proust, in a polemical ex-

change with Thibaudet, discussed Flaubert's style in terms of temporality, what he emphasized was not homogeneity but precisely the opposite: the manner in which Flaubert's use of tenses allowed him to create discontinuities, periods of dead and negative time alternating with moments of pure origination, complexities in memory structures comparable to those achieved by Gérard de Nerval in *Sylvie*. The single-directed flow of mere *durée* is replaced by a complex juxtaposition of reversible movements that reveal the discontinuous and polyrhythmic nature of temporality. But such a disclosure of authentic temporality demands reductive moments of real inwardness in which a consciousness confronts its own true self; and this moment is precisely the one at which the organic analogy between subject and object reveals itself as false.

It seems that the organicism which Lukács had eliminated from the novel when he made irony its guiding structural principle, has reentered the picture in the guise of time. Time in this essay acts as a substitute for the organic continuity which Lukács seems unable to do without. Such a linear conception of time had in fact been present throughout the essay. Hence the necessity of narrating the development of the novel as a continuous event, as the fallen form of the archetypal Greek epic which is treated as an ideal concept but given actual historical existence. The later development of Lukács's theories on the novel, the retreat from Flaubert back to Balzac, from Dostoevsky to a rather simplified view of Tolstoi, from a theory of art as interpretation to a theory of art as reflected imitation (*Wiederspiegelung*) should be traced back to the reified idea of temporality that is so clearly in evidence at the end of *Theory of the Novel*.

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