

**Georg Lukács Las antinomias de la melancolía Levee Blanc**

**Georg Lukács: The Antinomies of Melancholy**

**Levee Blanc** . Publicado en: *Other Voices*, v.1, n.1 (March 1997)

I am reading Lukács's essays and cry. Why? Because he is the first critic I have met in my life whose philosophy, transcribed into those essays, bruises and bloodies one. He feels and sees as a creative artist and asks his questions through suffering. His criticism amounts to a conscious creative process where he displays pain and suffering about things that are antithetical to his philosophy. His works resonate with sadness, partially because his philosophy responds to feelings, and partially because the external reality, so bloody and stormy, is so hopeless. But I wonder if Baláz, Lukács and others really believe they can recruit a group that will march with them through hell and fire.

- An unknown woman writing to a friend, 1917

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What we are examining is not simply two typical literary movements of our time. We are examining a conflict between two basic tendencies, a conflict fought out, not only in one and the same writer, but often in one and the same poem, play, or novel.

- George Lukács, "Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann"

The work of the "late" Lukács, dating from 1949 to 1971, appears ponderous and outmoded in comparison to current forms of literary analysis. For the last twenty years, the capital of Marxist cultural criticism has been steadily devalued against the numerous counter-strategies of reading available to the contemporary critical public. In the discipline of literary studies, Marxist analysis has been displaced by an increasing interest in other cultural markers - predominately those of gender and ethnic background. The writings of Marx and of the various Marxisms of the past century have been recuperated, and now serve largely as the material for tenured professional academics, many of whom still rail against the "quietism" of post-structuralism yet entirely fail to comprehend how quiet they really are. Lukács could never be accused of being quiet, in fact it is just his "noisiness" that makes his work of contemporary interest. His statements against literary modernism from the 1950's are some of the most stringent and damning ever written, yet their complexity and argumentative strength demands the attention of a reader, even one lacking sympathy. His various statements on Realism from this late period are marked by the rhetoric of an ideologue, a characterization that describes much of Lukács's personality and prose style. He wrote with a rare conviction. Nevertheless, as Lukács himself realized, every strong ideology is susceptible to *ideologiekritik*. Lukács's corpus is no exception. Any critical redemption of Lukács's later work must take the form of an inversion - one in which the *Bild* of the writer represented is turned upon its head as if viewed through a *camera obscura*. Yet, mere inversion is not enough. The redemptive critic undertaking his sketch must learn to squint, to

hold both the original image and its inversion simultaneously in view. The truth, if there is one, will only be located through the juxtaposition of extremes in Lukács's own polyphonic voice. If one listens closely, Lukács can be heard to say what he himself left unsaid. And if those words take the form of a whisper in the dark, an exchange between lovers of literature penned in the wee hours of the morning, they are no less important a record than those words spoken in the full light of day.

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## I. The young Georg Lukács, Family and Friends

The young Lukács suffered from an ailment common among the sons of the Jewish bourgeoisie--a combination of alienation and loneliness, an existential condition which served as the leitmotif of his writings prior to 1918. Tentatively, it is possible to attribute his melancholic predispositions to a longing for communion absent between himself and his family. The relationship of Georg to the Lukács family was clearly strained. His father, a self-made banker and financier, worked long hours to eventually become the director of the Hungarian General Credit Bank in 1906. Georg's relationship with his mother could be best described as icy. Later in his life Lukács would write of his youth: "At home: absolute *Entfremdung*. Above all mother; almost no communication. Brother - none at all. Only father and peripherally - sister."<sup>[1]</sup> The absence of the nurturing environment of a caring family would have led other young boys into conflicts with the traditions of bourgeois society, yet the young Lukács was more the melancholic child than the rebellious youth. Confrontations between father and son were minimal. In his autobiographical notes, he writes:

Spontaneous rebellions. No direct memory. Maternal quote (referring to me at the age of 5 or 6) about how 'naughty' I used to be: 'I never say hello to strangers, I didn't invite them.' Resistance at first - then submission with the conviction: of no concern to me; if I want grownups to leave me in peace: submission, with the feeling that the whole business is quite meaningless; whether I actively formulated this at the time: no idea. The only certitude: no wild and rebellious child, no spontaneous or blind revolt against order or obedience as such. <sup>[2]</sup>

Later, in the same notes he writes that improvements in the paternal relationship were made only when father and son first began to speak critically of mother Lukács. Yet, the extant correspondence between the young Lukács and his family members during the latter half of the 1910s shows a clear aloofness on the part of the son in response to generally loving and familial words of the others.

Lukács's isolation and inwardness continued into his twenties, yet during this time it cannot be linked to a want of close friends or acquaintances. On the contrary, Lukács was able to build numerous intimate relationships with his peers and actively sought out relationships allowing for deep emotional and intellectual bonds. Béla Baláz, Ernst Bloch, Karl Mannheim, Leo Popper, and Irma Seidler all occupied the position of confidant and collaborator to Lukács at one time or another before the outbreak of the Great War. It was also during this same period that the young philosopher became the central figure of the "Sunday Circle," a loosely knit group of thirty-odd intellectuals and artists who met at the Lukács's country estate near Budapest. Thus, it appears that Lukács's alienation from the world was not due to the failure of these relationships, but in spite of their overt success. Lukács perceived the ideal relationship as one between two individuals, stemming not only



Leo Popper, c. 1908

from an acknowledgment of the other's capability in their respective *lebenswelt* - poetry, drama, music, philosophy, etc. - but also from a very metaphysical notion of mutual disclosure. Yet, Lukács's satisfaction was often thwarted when this ideal was not affirmed during the course of a particular relationship. The young Lukács often complicated these relationships by elevating his friends to positions of stature over himself. A clear cycle of over-valuation and eventual disappointment can be traced in most of Lukács's personal relationships as they are recorded in his diary and correspondences. Oddly enough, this trend was pointed out to Lukács by another over-figure, his father, in a letter dated 23 August 1909:

You are just like me. I too have always had someone around who was a braggart...they certainly did not possess more energy than me only more willpower, and the way they displayed it fascinated me and kept me in their bondage. They made me unduly appreciative so that I was unable to appreciate my own capabilities adequately...Now you put Leo [Popper] on a pedestal and hold him high above yourself...What I wish for you and consequently for myself, is that you learn to maintain the same merciless, almost cruel, objectivity toward your friends as you are able to do in your home environment.<sup>[3]</sup>

Leo Popper and others served as ego-ideals for Lukács. Thus enshrined, they remained a standard to which Lukács's quotidian existence could never compare. Regardless of its specific origin, Lukács's terrible estrangement from the world at large can be seen simply as a deep inability to overcome the distance between his own subjectivity and the objective world, be that one populated with people or things.

The disenchantment Lukács felt in regard to the relationship with his mother appears to have strongly inflected his other relations with women. In various

episodes with female friends and lovers, Lukács compulsively repeated the gesture of attempted overcoming (through Eros, or love) and met with failure. Lukács's friend and one time lover, Hilda Bauer (sister to Béla Balázs), wrote Lukács in March 1909 in response to a series of letters:



Hilda Bauer, Bela Balazs's sister

Well I know Gyuri [the familiar diminutive of Georg or György], that human beings are unapproachable, that their souls are as far from each other as stars; only the remote radiance reaches to the other. I know that human beings are surrounded by dark, great seas, and thus they look across to one another, yearning but never reaching one another. <sup>[4]</sup>

The theme of longing returns in a letter from Lukács to his friend Sari Ferenczi dated earlier that same year:

What does it mean that one is longing and what is the object of longing? Can it be that there is an emptiness in the soul that cannot be filled by what



Irma Seidler

is already one's own; it is in search for what is alien to itself, does not belong to one's life and hope to make one's own, to find the other to belong to...longing may be just the explanation Aristophanes found for the existence of Eros: all living creatures were part of a double cut in half by Zeus at one time and are now in search of the lost other half. Aristophanes was sure that at one time we were one, but Socrates understood that our love is striving for perfection must forever remain an unrequited one.[5]

With these despairing words, Lukács posits an ontological subject, one which in the recognition of its own fundamental estrangement must therefore suffer an inextricable nostalgia for its lost original unity. The importance of Lukács's youthful alienation stems from the fact that these seemingly insurmountable chasms between mother and child, man and woman, and finally art and life, formed the basis of Lukács's aesthetics during his early period. Nowhere would this dialectic of attempted *Aufhebung* and its utter failure be more completely expressed than in context of Lukács's affair with the young Jewess, Irma Seidler, and the *Werk* Lukács dedicated to her, *The Soul and the Forms*.



## II. Georg and Irma

*The Soul and the Forms* was published in Hungary in 1910 as a collection of seven essays prefaced by an introductory letter from Lukács to Leo Popper describing the essay form as genre. The work's principle themes were those of human alienation, the paradigmatic form of which was the gulf that separated man and woman, and the tragic view of life that judged alienation to be an inescapable destiny.[6] Lukács began work on *The Soul and the Forms* shortly after he met Seidler in December 1907. She and Lukács spent almost the entire next year corresponding, and meeting when possible. Although in letters he repeatedly declared his love for Irma, he was unable to bring himself to marry her--their relationship remained Platonic



Georg Lukács at the time of his love of Irma

and unconsummated. In a set of short notes from the period Lukács wrote: "Scruples: the impossible nature of marriage...Dread of the destructive influence of happiness, dread that it is beyond my capacity to get my bearings in a broader-based life."<sup>[7]</sup> Similar sentiments are found in his diary: "Last night I felt again: Irma is life."<sup>[8]</sup> Irma for Lukács symbolized "life," while his own life was dominated by the *Werk*, the creation of which represented the melding of his very Being and the realm of the "Forms."

The difficulties Lukács experienced in this relationship were for him mirrored in observable objective forms. He continually wrote of his personal relationship in the terms of others - *others'* lives, *others'* fates, *others'* works. His correspondence with Irma contains two voices; one the sentimental, longing, almost "Romantic" prose of the "lover," and then, discussions of his own emotional and existential condition couched in terms of literary narratives. It is this second aspect that clearly dominates Lukács's essayistic writings of the early period. In

the Kassner essay (in *The Soul and the Forms*), Lukács describes Kierkegaard's relationship with Regina Olson as one "created," and, "if Kierkegaard creates a life, he does not do so in order to conceal, but rather to articulate the truth."<sup>[9]</sup> Lukács's personal truth remained that of the deeply divided self, yet for him its adequate expression required the objective character of the essay whose form was thought best able to articulate the interrelationship between subject and object. The essay stood in place of poetry as Lukács's medium of subjective expression. As Lukács wrote Irma in January 1911: "You know...why these writings were written: because I cannot write poems, and you know, too, to whom these 'poems' are addressed and who awakened them within me."<sup>[10]</sup> Lukács mediated his own life through the categories of his own fledging philosophy. Once again writing to Irma, he states:

There are people who understand and do not live, and there are others that live but do not understand. The first kind cannot ever really reach the second even though they understand them, and the second can never understand the essence, but then, it doesn't matter. The feeling of love or hate, the liking somebody or the possibility of learning to like someone, exists, but the categories of understanding do not exist for them.<sup>[11]</sup>

Lukács understood the categories of human life as philosophical categories adequate to the objects described. Individuals typified these categories apparently without remainder. In this form Lukács's own alienated "life" could serve to illustrate the higher truth of the irreconcilable difference between *Leben* and the *Werk*, the Soul and the Forms.

The creation of *The Soul and the Forms* marks a key moment of critical self-reflection and self-transcendence for Lukács. On one hand, the essays represent an embodiment of his own subjectivity within the act of philosophical writing, dissolving the false objectivity of "transparent" philosophical prose, while on the other, offering a way for Lukács to cast off that self-same subject position by inscribing it upon the objective world. The writing of these critical essays offered Lukács some semblance of reconciliation with Irma, if only a highly sublimated one. Lukács referred to several of the essays in *The Soul and the Forms* as "Irma essays" thus lending them a personal allegorical character. As their relationship dissolved,

the indexical marks of Irma's handwritten letters became a bitter reminder of the distance between them. The essays Lukács penned formed a bulwark against his increasing melancholy throughout 1908. Lukács's unposted suicide letter of November 1908 includes these lines:

It was on that evening in Florence...that I posed the question of my life: Should it be my fate to lose out every time I try to establish a person-to-person relationship that goes beyond that of the intellectual one? On October 28 - the day of the delivery of your letter - the verdict was returned: 'Yes, this is how it is going to be.' And I cannot live with this verdict. Everything that you built up has now collapsed. Goodness has left me forever; even its roots are torn out. I have become bad, cold-hearted, mean - and a cynic. But there followed a period of intellectual ecstasy: books and ideas became my opium.[\[12\]](#)

In a feverish state of excitation during the following months, Lukács finished the final essays to be included in *The Soul and the Forms*.

The irreconcilable nature of Lukács's philosophical categories are symptomatic manifestations of a melancholic psyche. The bouts of mania experienced by melancholics in Freud's account of the condition are in keeping with the period of production of the second half of *The Soul and the Forms*. Freud speaks of melancholy as the "*unconscious* loss of a love-object," the specifically unconscious character of the loss differentiating this form of loss from that experienced in mourning where the loss of an object is consciously known. Given Freud's account, Lukács's loss of his love Irma would not tend to precipitate a melancholic episode if it were not the case that the subject had already suffered a similar *unconscious* loss at some previous time. Was it young Gyuri's estrangement from his mother that served as the original loss? Perhaps. But, it is certain that Lukács's melancholy formed a safe-haven against the even more fearful possibility of reconciliation that lurked below the handwritten words of the lovers' exchanged letters. Writing served as a way to objectify and thus master the sense of loss experienced. Was the act of writing simply an attempt to reestablish an object-cathexis with a more stable and available object, the object of literature? Freud writes in "Mourning and Melancholy":

If one listens patiently to the many and various self-accusations of the melancholic, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself, but that with some insignificant modification they do fit someone else, some person whom the patient loves, has loved or ought to love...So we get the key to the clinical picture - by perceiving that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted on to the patient's own ego.[\[13\]](#)

The libido that was once cathected on the love-object is withdrawn upon the experience of loss, but re-cathexis is blocked. The free libidinal energy becomes a "part of the ego [which] sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were looks upon it as an object." [\[14\]](#) Self-recriminations exist for the melancholic as displacements of the ambivalence which exists in the love relationship after the experience of loss. The ego turned against itself is representative of the hatred leveled at the lost object. Lukács's melancholy, at once a long standing feature of his psychic makeup and a condition directly related to the loss of Irma, manifested itself as an ambivalence towards the objects of his philosophical inquiries. To the degree that the works of the early Lukács gravitate toward questions of the

solubility of social antinomies within the realm of aesthetic production, they also exist as markers for the insolubility of his own personal crises. A remarkable passage from Lukács's two volume *History of the Development of Modern Drama*, written between 1906-1909 and published in 1910 just after *The Soul and the Forms*, contains his first reference to Marx's writings:

Just as in its basic essentials Max Stirner's, as Marx's, whole philosophy sprang from a common source--Fichte--so every modern drama carries within itself this duality of origins [the simultaneous emergence and cancellation of individuality], the dialectic of modern life.<sup>[15]</sup>

Using the work of Paul Ernst as an example, Lukács states that the true and great tragedian must be the "poet of his own tragedy," that is must write from the inescapable emptiness of his own *Innerlichkeit* and in the process transcend the chaos of modern existence if only in prose. The Hegelian notion that the *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* could serve as the foundation for a cultural production adequate to the Modern age had not been proven out in history. What had arisen instead was what Lukács termed "aesthetic culture," a process of cultural production which reinscribed the decentered existence of modern man in the objective realm of his creations. If existence itself was to be centered, it could only be through the tragic understanding of its own lack of centeredness. In the aesthetic culture of the later 19th and early 20th centuries, disunity reigned triumphant:

[If aesthetic culture] has a center: the completely peripheral nature of everything; [if] it symbolizes something: that nothing is symbolic, nothing is more than what it seems to be at the moment of experiencing...And this culture does have a dimension that surpasses the merely individual (it belongs to the essence of culture that it is the common treasure of men): that there is nothing that could rise beyond the merely individual. It implies a relation among men based on complete loneliness, on the absence of relatedness.<sup>[15]</sup>

The objective situation of modernity and the plight of the modern subject are here collapsed into a narcissistic identity. Lukács's recriminations against modernity are at the same time recriminations against his self.

### **III. The Bridge to Marxism**

In the preface to the 1963 German edition of his *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács reflects upon the origins and motivations which lead to the writing of his early text in the summer of 1914:

At first it was to take the form of a series of dialogues: a group of young people withdraw from the war psychosis of their environment, just as the story-tellers of the *Decameron* had withdrawn from the plague; they try understand themselves and one another by means of conversations which gradually lead to the problems discussed in the book - the outlook on a Dostoevskian world. On closer consideration I dropped this plan and wrote the book as it stands today. Thus it was written in a mood of permanent despair over the state of the world.<sup>[17]</sup>

By the outbreak of the First World War, the fin-de-siècle malaise experienced by the majority of bourgeois intellectuals in Lukács's circle became depression. On 18 May 1911 Irma Seidler jumped to her death from one of the bridges which span the Danube between Buda and Pest. Her marriage to another had turned out badly, her



*Georg Lukacs, 1913 (after the deaths of Irma and Leo)*

artistic career was flagging, and she had been involved in a damaging affair with Lukács's close friend Béla Baláz. Lukács's response was to write a short prose piece, "Von der Armut am Geiste" published in both German and Hungarian. Within the essay Lukács's own history is played out in a dialogue between two figures both representative of Lukács's self-divided relation to his own role in Irma's death. The story begins with the tragic suicide of a man's closest female friend. Writing to the woman's sister, the man relates that all is fine, he is working, and has no need for the company of other people. The sister understands that this is precisely not the case

and travels to the man's house where she finds him at his desk, writing. Confronted by the sister the author admits that he holds himself responsible for the woman's death: "She had to die, so that my work could be completed, so that nothing would remain for me other than my work."<sup>[18]</sup> The man relates that he had acted always with a sense of duty and morality, and that finally that was not enough. If only he could have acted toward her with the unconditional identification with another that he terms "goodness," Irma would have lived. Lukács's male character continues:

[Some] people, you see, can [make] do with duties and their fulfillment. Indeed, for them the fulfillment of duty is the only way in which their lives can be raised to a higher level. This is so because every ethic is formal, the postulate of duty or of form - and the more perfect the form, the more it lives its own life, the further removed it is from every immediacy. Form is a kind of bridge that dissociates, a bridge on which we come and go and always return to ourselves without ever meeting one another.<sup>[19]</sup>

For the male protagonist mere duty, in the Kantian sense, is a ridged form of alienation. It exists in the lives of men as a weak form of subjective interrelationship, a mere bond in the pejorative sense. As adhered to both in Lukács's own life and that of the male character, it potentially precipitates the most dire of circumstances. The dogged attention given to keeping one's hands clean of sin and social impropriety, makes the truly necessary and just actions unfathomable to the bourgeois subject. On his diary page for 24 May 1911 Lukács writes: "But perhaps I could have saved her [Irma] if I had taken her by the hand and led her."<sup>[20]</sup>

The self-recriminations of the male protagonist can be read in light of the melancholic disposition of the author. Lukács's ego-ideal or lost object is manifested clearly in the figure of the sister, at once both the specter of Irma herself and a



marker for the free libidinal energies of Lukács's psyche taken as an object. The sister exists in the narrative as both a stand in for a portion of Lukács's ego and as his ego's other. Lukács's speaks through both figures in more than the literal sense as author of the dialogue. Lukács's intellectual position is only completely represented through the dialogue of *both* characters. The sister's critical statements and questioning of the pseudo-Lukács are as much the author's own as they are a version of the words that Irma had written Lukács in her many letters. The characters' dialectic forms the two halves of Lukács's own ambivalent position with regard to Irma's death. "The conflict of ambivalence," Freud writes, "casts a pathological shade on the grief, forcing it to express itself in the form of self-reproaches, to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved one, i.e. desired it."<sup>[21]</sup> Overcoming such an ambivalence occasions a retreat into a narcissistic relation with one's own object of loss. As Freud states such an identification "with the object then becomes a substitute for the erotic cathexis, the result of which is that in spite of the conflict with the loved person the love-relation need not be given up."<sup>[22]</sup> The narcissistic quality of "Von der Armut am Geiste" lies in Lukács taking his own self as an object of writing, both as a character and as an author imbuing the dialogue of the two characters.

At the end of the piece, Lukács attempts an overcoming and negation of his previous intellectual position and of his previous private convictions regarding the nature of intersubjective relationships. In the final pages Lukács the tragedian turns toward a utopian realm of possible reconciliation through the introduction of the third term "Goodness" into his schema of *Leben* and *Werk*. Goodness, mentioned above in Lukács's suicide note, manifests itself in the teleological suspension of the realm of the ethical. Outside of the realm of everyday lived existence and that of incorporation of the objective world in the *Werk*, goodness is manifested as a state of grace, of redemption, that can only be prepared for, but not invoked by subjective action. Lukács writes:

We are human beings simply because we are able to create only works, because we are able to conjure up only happy islands in the midst of unhappy disquiet and the squalid flux of life. If art [*Werk*] could form life, if goodness could be transformed into action - then we would be gods. 'Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God,' Christ said.<sup>[23]</sup>

With the good man, Lukács states, thought becomes action. Goodness is a "totally illuminating knowledge of men, a knowledge in which subject and object converge; the good man no longer interprets the soul of another but "reads it as he reads his own - he has become the other."<sup>[24]</sup> Here the problematic nature of knowledge itself is cast aside in favor of a mystical-messianic form of narcissistic pseudo-knowledge. The fundamental antinomies of the divided, alienated subject, the fundamental split of the categories of *Leben* and *Werk*, the incomplete nature of the melancholic ego which has not yet mourned, are here all *Aufgehoben*. What remains is not so much the Hegelian Absolute Subject, but one freed from both the worldly constraint of duty and the law of God, and for this subject the story ends badly. In the dialogue, having no other option in the realm of the forms (i.e., of the *Werk*), the male character shoots himself. On his desk, a bible is open to the *Apocalypse*, where a passage is marked: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spue thee out of thy mouth."<sup>[25]</sup> The author, trapped between a desire to have helped Irma and a complete inability to do so, remains exiled from both Goodness and Life. Although Lukács makes no reference to it in the "Von Armut am



**Lena Grabenko**

Geiste," the following passage from *Revelations* 3:19 who have made a fitting epitaph: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent."

The sacrifice of the character Lukács allows the author Lukács to live. With this symbolic offering of himself to the God of writing, Lukács is able to set behind him the period of ambivalence toward the ideal that began with his relationship to Irma and concluded when the dead "Lukács's" pen fell out of his hand and clattered to the floor. At last, Lukács appeared to be *redeemed*. Shortly thereafter Lukács left for Florence, a place far away from the scene of his "crime," from his failure to save Irma from herself, but also the city in which the pair first declared their mutual affection for one another. The course of events had turned full circle, however this time Lukács was alone. In no time the wheel of fate began to turn once again.

In June of 1913, Lukács met the woman who was to become his first wife, a Russian émigré, Ljena Grabenko. She had been involved in the Russian revolution where she had once carried in her arms a baby, borrowed for the occasion, in order to conceal a bomb in its blanket. Imprisoned for terrorist activities, she was eventually released and sought refuge in Paris. There she met Béla Baláz in the Latin quarter. Lukács, at the behest of his friend Hilda Bauer, financed her travel to Italy where she stayed for a time with Lukács, Baláz and the visiting Marianne and Max Weber. Later that year she traveled with Lukács to Budapest where she painted (as Irma had done) and translated Lukács's "Von der Armut am Geiste" into Russian. Her love letters to Lukács portray her as an adequate counterpart to the sullen Lukács:

Sikidii, I love you, hug your head, hold it to myself and kiss it behind your ears. I do love your ears...My angel, my life, forget everything. It is not a sin that you love me. When I think of it, you have always made me happy. It is not your fault that we are the exclusive source of happiness for each other.[\[26\]](#)

Nevertheless, this position did not stop her from having several affairs both before and after her marriage to Lukács, at one point even living in a single house with both Lukács and her lover. The marriage was met by Lukács's family with all the enthusiasm of a death in the family. Lukács, still suffering from a deep need to redeem and be redeemed by a woman, went along willingly. Ljena stood in for the infinitely distant Irma. Finally at the war's end, Lukács divorced her. In words eerily reminiscent of his relationship to Irma, he said "If I was good, I would have stayed with her."[\[27\]](#) Lukács came to understand that even Goodness was beyond his reach. What was needed now was to bring the realm of the Good within reach - to bring heaven down to earth - and forge that bridge by which the "transcendentally homeless" could return to themselves.[\[28\]](#) In this belief Lukács aligned himself with the long lineage of radical Jewish heretics.

These early events set the tone for later events in Lukács's life. Like Oedipus, to whom Lukács frequently compared himself during his early years, his path appeared determined by a fate external to his will. In the role of tragic hero, Lukács resolutely faced the sins of his own life and their inevitable consequences. The closure of the Irma period had required the sacrifice of a life, and he was willing to repay that debt. In November of 1918 Lukács converted to Marxism at the hands of

Irma's brother, Ernő Seidler, thus giving up his life to the cause of world-revolution! Arriving late to a meeting of the Sunday Circle, Lukács, visibly shaken, addressed the group:

I have met someone who is right [Béla Kun, leader of the Hungarian revolution]. His reality, unlike ours, is an active reality. For the first time I have met somebody who personifies the Hegelian spirit. He actually lives what we talk about. He demonstrated to me that I never think of the consequences of my ideas. I will do something about this. I have always argued that metaphysics is very close to empirical reality. Now I realize that only a consciously redeemed man can create the empirical world. I have to revalue all of my thinking. If we believe in human freedom, we cannot live our life in class-fortified castles. The dispossessed proletariat tirelessly sacrifices itself to liberate the spirit. How then can we recoil from sin and force, we who enjoy all the fruits of sin?...I talk about myself. My destiny is heavy. For it is difficult to transfigure one's existence.[29]

Although the term "Goodness" dropped out of his writing during this period, Lukács can be seen here pursuing that same goal, transfigured from the realm of heaven to that of the profane. He moved out of his family villa where the Circle had met and joined a sect of "Franciscan" communists at the newly founded Soviet House.[30]

#### **IV. The Ideology of Lukács and the "Ideology of Modernism"**

During the period 1917-23, Lukács underwent a remarkable *auto-da-fé*. On 7 November 1917, Lukács stuffed his 1910-11 diary, and all of his manuscripts, drafts, notes, and correspondence into a small valise and took them to the Deutsche Bank of Heidelberg for deposit.[31] In 1919 he publicly renounced his previous writings, an action whose uncanny repetition continued to haunt Lukács until his death in 1971. Yet, in spite of these efforts Lukács failed to completely erase all physical or psychic traces of his earlier life and work. As Lukács later stated "A youth like mine cannot be forgotten." [32] And it is this youth as outlined above which always threatened to intrude into Lukács's present.

Many years later when Lukács turned to writing the essays in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, the difficulties of his youth appeared distant. The strange duality that manifested itself in his *Jugendschriften*, had long appeared to be absent from his writings in exile. Nevertheless, in the introduction to the German edition he writes:

Our starting point, then, is really the point of convergence of two antithesis: the antithesis between realism and modernism and the antithesis between peace and war. Yet, while emphasizing this identity, certain reservations must be made. The identity in question is essentially abstract. In individual cases it will appear in many differing, transitional forms. Indeed, it is of the essence of this complex problem that no strict polarization exists. It would be oversimplifying the matter to identify opposing or converging tendencies within individual movements or personalities. These tendencies are often to be found in one and the same individual. They are, not only as discrete stages in his development, but as *co-existent at one and the same time*, expressive of those contradictions characteristic of his stage of development.[33]

Reference to the "stage[s] of development" gives the passage a Hegelian character, as does the implicit notion that "opposing or converging tendencies" could be subject to a unity of identity and non-identity. Contradiction, the key concept and

fundamental condition of the era of modernism, marks both the individual and his age. Lukács in these later works appears to shift subjective alienation, self-estrangement or non-identity, into the realm of an objective dialectics. History, that is, the history of capitalism, precedes the formation of the self, and it is the contradictions of our historical age which are responsible for the formation of the subject. Any authentic critical writing must recognize the contradictory nature of the cultural products of such an age.

It is this conclusion that manifests itself in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, and nowhere more strongly than in the lead essay "The Ideology of Modernism." Here, Lukács adopts a style that is almost Aesopian. Ostensibly speaking in defense of bourgeois realism, as typified by the writings of "Shakespeare, Balzac, Stendhal," Lukács fails to refer directly to the works of any of the three. Instead, he produces an essay in which modernism and modernist writing take center stage and the words of other authors issue out of his "mouth." Given the critical frame which Lukács does erect, the "failures" of modernism can be presented in a self-evident manner. The fragments of modernist writing are not dissolved by the critical writing of Lukács, but allowed to stand on their own as ruins attesting to the destructive character of modernism itself. What is of interest here is the degree to which these modernist artifacts are uncannily reminiscent of Lukács's own youthful writings, and furthermore how the Aesopean style relates to the style of the same (that found in "Von Armut am Geiste" for instance).

In "The Ideology of Modernism," Lukács strongly differentiates literary Modernism from contemporary "Realism" by attacking the emphasis on a specific type of formalism emphasized by both the Modernist writers and their exemplary critics. In Lukács's view such formalism turns "technique [into] something absolute" which stands above, or in place of the ostensible content of the work itself. It becomes *the*, "principle governing the narrative pattern and the presentation of character."<sup>[34]</sup> Such use of strong formal technique overrides the presentation of content. Like the analytic concept [*Begriff*] which implies adequate and exhaustive comprehension [*Begreifen*] of its object, the modernist technique may only serve as the *Darstellung* of that which it already is. Style, Lukács would argue, rather than being rooted in formal concerns "is rooted in content; it is the specific form of a specific content."<sup>[35]</sup> Lukács briefly contrasts this Modernist emphasis on technique with the Realist concern with the technical "devices." Here the author is one who has available a certain repertoire of forms, tropes, and stylistic gadgets - "devices" which can be drawn upon at any given moment to fulfill desired ends with the wider narrative of the work. It is implied that the realist author's relationship to the literary tradition must be one of extreme familiarity, if not mastery. Yet, Lukács does not condemn Modernism for failure to master its own technique, on the contrary he often politely affirms Modernism throughout this essay and the others in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. Modernism's aesthetic differs from Lukács's ideal simply because of the objective world-picture [*Weltanschauung*] Modernism relates. On Lukács account modernism represents a "static and sensational" world given over to atemporality on one hand, and to interiority on the other. Thus Modernism is unable to comprehend the relationship between action and history - the revolutionary unity exhibited by subjective praxis in the world at large. The "modernist subject", as the atomistic, isolated, alienated, angst-ridden individual cannot serve as the basis, or origin, of the collective organization of society if such a nature is posited as the ontological condition of mankind and not merely a historical effect of objective conditions under capitalism. Or so the narrative goes.

In his 1913 essay "Aesthetic Culture," Lukács had already expressed grave doubts as to the authenticity of the "modernist" subject of *Lebensphilosophie*. If authenticity meant the narcissistic self-enjoyment of the individual and his acceptance of his isolation as an immutable fact, then the stream of fundamentally incommunicable experiences, each unique and equally valid, would lead to a dissolution of values and debasement of lived existence:

The self has flowed out into the world and, through its moods and sensations, has absorbed the world into itself. But since this means that the world has also flowed into the self, all barriers between the two have been removed. If things are no longer solid, stable entities, then neither is the self. And when facts disappear, so do values. Nothing is left within or between individuals except moods and sensations, none of which is more justified or more meaningful than any other.<sup>[36]</sup>

At the time Lukács faced this condition with a tragic visage. Even the possibility of harmonious reconciliation represented by the existence of works of art was nothing more than a reminder of subjective alienation from both God and Man:

all the perfection [artists] give to their works, all the depths of experience which they pour into them, are in vain. They remain more silent, less able to express themselves, than people in ordinary life, who are locked up in themselves. Their works may be the highest achievement of which man is capable, yet they themselves are the most unfortunate creatures of all and least capable of achieving redemption.<sup>[37]</sup>

After his conversion to Marxism, Lukács was forced to reappraise his position on the possibility of significant communication between subjects. *Entfremdung* in the "Modernism" essay is characterized as a temporary condition, one occasioned or perhaps necessitated by the concrete historical situation of a literary figure or living subject, but not a "universal *condition humaine*." Likewise, *Geworfenheit ins Dasein* no longer has the same ontological legitimacy for Lukács that it once appeared to in his youth. Yet, certain passages in the essay would appear to reveal limitations in Lukács's convictions.

Referring to the Aristotelian dictum of *zoon politikon* in defense of the indistinguishable character of an authentic subject and his social and historical environment, Lukács states: "Their significance, the specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which they were created."<sup>[39]</sup> Read flatly, this passage raises the question of the inseparability of its author from his own "context of creation" and to what degree that context was surmountable. It is significant that at this point Lukács begins his consideration of human potentiality. Following Hegel, Lukács differentiates between concrete and abstract forms of human potentiality. The latter term is marked by the idealism of subjective interiority which can imagine an infinite number of historical possibilities, yet acts to accomplish none of them. "Modern subjectivism, taking those imagined possibilities for the actual complexity of life, oscillates between melancholy and fascination. When the world declines to realize these possibilities, this melancholia becomes tinged with contempt," as Lukács well knew.<sup>[40]</sup> By contrast, human potentiality may become concrete only when abstract potential is turned into action, when a subject becomes willing to interact with objective reality to achieve its own innermost goals. The "modernist subject" of Lukács's essay is unable to set or achieve these goals for his experience has been "reduced to a sequence of unrelated experiential fragments; he is as inexplicable to others as to himself."<sup>[41]</sup> *Explicability*--cognition, knowledge

and understanding--are for Lukács available to the will which seeks out objective reality and successfully interacts with it. "Situations arise in which a man is confronted with a choice; and in the act of choice a man's character may reveal itself in a light that surprises even himself," Lukács states.<sup>[42]</sup> The conversion to Marxism was just this type of choice for Lukács. At the time he rationalized his choice by quoting Kierkegaard's saying that sacrificing one's life for a cause is always an irrational act. "To believe," Lukács told a friend, "means that a man consciously assumes an irrational attitude toward his own self--Let's be clear about it: there is not rational tragedy, because all heroism is irrational."<sup>[43]</sup> In the same paragraph of the "Modernism" essay where Lukács speaks of a man's confrontations with choice, he writes almost autobiographically:

In advance, while still a subjective potentiality in the character's mind, there is no way of distinguishing it from the innumerable abstract potentialities in his mind...It may even be buried away so completely that, before the moment of decision, it has never entered his mind even as an abstract potentiality. The subject, after making his decision, may be unconscious of his motives.<sup>[44]</sup>

The unconscious motives which propelled Lukács toward the Left at a specific "stage of his development," were identical to those which had formed his life up to that point. The revolutionary identity of thought and action served to suture the split in Lukács's melancholic psyche. By bringing the stars down to earth, he was able to obtain the existential unity that had escaped him all those years. The conversion required a "leap" in the Kierkegaardian sense that could lead to *either* the heaven of reconciliation with reality *or* the hell of subjective "incognito." Lukács had already experienced the latter. Turning away from his own history, Lukács turned toward History itself. Yet on occasion the "writing" of Lukács's own life would continue to suffer from, as he wrote of Gide's *Faux-Monnayeurs*, "a characteristic modernist schizophrenia: it was supposed to be written by a man who was also the hero of the novel."<sup>[45]</sup> Even a counterfeit coin has two sides; that is inescapable.



Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> George Lukács, *Record of a Life*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, London, Verso, 1983, pg. 145.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 145.

<sup>3</sup> *Georg Lukács: Selected Correspondence 1902-1920*, trans. Judith Marcus and Zoltan Tar, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 96-7.

<sup>4</sup> Congdon, Lee, *The Young Lukács*, Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1983, pg. 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Georg Lukács: Selected Correspondence 1902-1920*, pg. 68.

<sup>6</sup> The essays were respectively on Rudolph Kassner (the role of criticism as art and not science), Theodor Storm (alienation in life), Novalis (death and fate), Beer-Hofmann (death as foreignness and a symbol of separation), Soren Kierkegaard (foreignness and separation in life), Stefan George (the poetry of foreignness and separation), and Laurence Sterne (a satire on foreignness both in content and form).

7 Congdon, Lee, *The Young Lukács*, pg 43.

8 Heller, Agnes, "George Lukács and Irma Seidler," *Lukács Reappraised*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983, pg. 28.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., pg. 32.

11 George Lukács, *Selected Correspondence: 1902-1920*, pg. 109.

12 *Selected Correspondence: 1902-20*, pg. 56.

13 Sigmund Freud, *Collected Papers*, vol. 4, trans. Joan Riviere, New York, Basic Books, 1959, pg. 158.

14 Ibid., pg. 157.

15 Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism*, New York, Seabury Press, 1979, pg. 26.

16 Ibid., pg. 19.

17 George Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Ann Bostock, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1971, pp. 11-12.

18 Congdon, pg. 67.

19 Congdon, pg. 67-8.

20 Heller, pg. 37.

21 Freud, pg. 161.

22 Freud, pg. 160.

23 Congdon, pg. 68.

24 Arato and Breines, pg. 48.

25 Congdon, pg. 69. Revelations 3:15-16.

26 Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1991, pg. 162.

27 Kadarkay, pg. 169.

28 "Transcendental Homelessness" was a key concept in Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* which posited a utopian longing for "wholistic communities" (Gemeinschaft) that were once mankind's but have since retreated, leaving only the harmony of the work of art (as a Luciferian trace in the world of the profane) as a reminder of that unity among men.

[29](#) Kadarkay, pg. 202.

[30](#) Kadarkay, pg. 203.

[31](#) The valise was relocated in 1973 after his death and form the basis of most reconstructions of Lukács life and work in the pre-1917 period. He never mentioned this action to anyone including this second wife, Gertrud Bortstieber, yet in 1933 he returned to Heidelberg to renew their storage arrangements.



**Gertrud Bortstieber**

[32](#) Kadarkay, pg. 342.

[33](#) Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander, London, Merlin Press Limited, 1962, pg. 16. Emphasis mine.

[34](#) Ibid., pg. 18.

[35](#) Ibid., pg. 19.

[36](#) György Márcus, "Life and the Soul: the Young Lukács and the Problem of Culture," in *Lukács Reappraised*, pg. 9.

[37](#) Ibid., pg. 13. From the *Heidelberger Philosophie der Kunst*, an unfinished manuscript contained in the papers deposited in 1917 (written 1914-17).

[38](#) Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, pg. 20.

[39](#) Ibid., pg. 19.

[40](#) Ibid., pg. 22.

[41](#) *The Critical Tradition: Classic Text and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David Richter, (New York: St. Martin's Press), 1989, pg. 602.

[42](#) Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, pg. 22.



[43](#) Kadarkay, pg. 203.

[44](#) Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, pg. 23.

[45](#) Ibid., pg. 46.

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