

LUKÁCS AND THE HOLY FAMILY

by Agnes Heller

In January 1968, Lucien Goldmann organized a conference on aesthetic theory in Royaumont, France.¹ Adorno was one of the keynote speakers; I delivered a lecture on Lukács's *The Specificity of the Aesthetic*, which then was still not well known. Of course, we were immediately entangled in passionate discussions arguing for three different, and apparently irreconcilable, positions. Then something entirely unexpected happened. A young man took the rostrum and spoke with anger and irritation: Lukács, Goldmann and Adorno are all the same. They are members of the Holy Family. By standing for the autonomy of art work, they seek salvation in a celestial image of the world. They are equally old-fashioned, bourgeois and despicable. We need Arrabal instead. A chorus of young people echoed his words. "Arrabal, Arrabal," they chanted. That was when post-modernism was born. In a minute, the whole scene changed. Adorno, Goldmann and myself (representing Lukács) ended up on the same side of the proverbial barricade. Instead of criticizing, we started to support one another. The common elements in our position turned out suddenly to be more important than what divided us. The defense of the autonomous art work implied the defense of a possible unity of subjectivity and objectivity: the defense of aesthetic judgment of a kind which was not simply a matter of personal taste. It implied the assumption that *there must be* certain standards for judging the quality and the relevance of art works, that the distinction between "high" and "low" is valid, and that it is the matter of the highest importance, even a matter of life and death, to stand for one kind of art work and to reject others. The commitment to the autonomous work of art seemed then to be more important than any particular judgment. Today, I still believe that an evaluation of Beckett's plays is definitely not a matter of life and death. But for Adorno, Beckett was almost a savior, the only one who succeeded (at least in literature) in coping with problems of modernity and expressing them in the most supreme artistic form possible. For Lukács, on the contrary, Beckett was close to the devil — the writer of a self-complacent adjustment to an alienated world. For both Lukács and Adorno, however, it was almost a matter of the survival of humanity to pass these and similar judgments.

In a sense, the young man in Royaumont was right. Lukács, Adorno and Goldmann did indeed belong to the Holy Family, and one could also add Bloch to the list. The following, however, will focus mainly on Lukács.

After his turn to Marxism and the collapse of the philosophy of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács eventually repackaged his ideas in the shabby gar-

1. For a discussion between Goldmann and Adorno during this conference, see "Appendix 3" in Lucien Goldmann, *Cultural Creation* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1976), pp. 131-147.

ments of an official *Diamat*. He began speaking in a language that concealed rather than revealed the message he meant to convey. Sometimes this language was used as a camouflage, while at other times, it merged with the message itself and distorted it. Here, the method of some post-modernists becomes useful. Lukács — especially the later Lukács — has to be read “against the text.” This simply means to disregard the language of *Diamat* and all its distortions. What is to be redeemed is Lukács’ attitude towards modernity. Today, Lukács’ aesthetic writings are not read in the way they should be. Let us try, then, a different reading.

Lukács’ so-called “conservatism” did not result from any compromise with communist authorities and their cultural policy. Rather, it was the outcome of a fundamental choice made in his early youth. Lukács was brought up in the cultural atmosphere of the *fin de siècle*, during the first great upsurge of cultural relativism. His immediate environment, the Budapest Jewish bourgeoisie, made frantic attempts at assimilation and had uprooted itself, purposely losing contact with its own tradition. This milieu was in complicity with cultural relativism. When the young Lukács first read Homer and James Fenimore Cooper’s novels, he discovered a world of authenticity — a world he saw as “real” in comparison with his own environment, which he regarded as unreal. This was the fundamental experience that shaped Lukács’ attitude to culture the rest of his life. The stage was set for cultural conservatism. But this cultural conservatism was later coupled with a messianism that gave it a radical twist. Along with so many others, Lukács bet on the future, on salvation, on the arrival of a this-worldly Messiah who would destroy the world of “absolute sinfulness,” redeem culture from the abyss of a cynical relativism, and restore the old in the form of the new. In a world in which the sharp division between false and true had vanished, there is also no way to tell good from evil. But if this is the case, then the world of relativism is doomed. Redemption thus meant the restoration of the distinction between true and false, good and evil. This is why the sharp distinction between high and low, authentic and inauthentic, good and bad, progressive and regressive art work became a matter of life and death for Lukács. It was precisely the feeling that without an absolute division, an absolute standard, we lose all standards, that motivated Lukács’ quest for redemption.

Wolin has referred to certain postmodernist attempts to blur the distinction between high (autonomous) art works and the products of the culture industry, on the one hand, and substituting everyday “cultural practices” for the creation and reception of autonomous art works, on the other hand, as a “sham democracy.”² But democracy can only be called “sham” if there is an alternative, real democracy, which is both desirable and viable. But can culture, under present conditions, be both authentic and democratic at the same time? Can the creation and reception of the autonomous art work be democratic? If the answers to this question are in the negative, one has to accept the postmodern condition as a fact, as *the* condition of an *empirical* democracy. Let

2. See Richard Wolin, “Modernism vs Post-modernism” in this issue of *Telos*.

us rephrase the crucial questions: can modern Western culture be at the same time authentic and democratic? Can the creation and the reception of the modern autonomous art work be really democratic? Undoubtedly, the answers to these questions are generally negative.

Both Lukács and Adorno take up this challenge and sacrifice *one* norm, in order to meet the requirements of the other. Adorno defends authentic modern art work and relinquishes thereby the norm of democracy. Lukács rejects authentic modern art. He makes a case for traditional “realism” and, in so doing, he sides with democracy. Adorno is an elitist, Lukács is not. Adorno defends the best artistic efforts of modern culture precisely insofar as he is an elitist, while Lukács does them grave injustice by siding with works of art within the reach of everyone. For Lukács, a novel has to have a story, as well as characters. The story has to start at the beginning and proceed to the end. A painting has to be figurative and convey a message interpretable by all. Music must have a *collective*, not just an idiosyncratic, melody that can be “sung” by all. Not so for Adorno. Lukács does not sharply differentiate between low and high art in the same way Adorno does. For Lukács, there should be a constant capillary movement between “high” and “low,” a constant interplay. He does not dismiss the “culture industry” completely. The culture industry, says Lukács (without using the term) may become a means of refined manipulation, but it can also produce real stories with real characters about real life. Lukács was the advocate of what he termed the “normal” relation between everyday life and art works. The artist has to be inspired by the daily experience of average people, by the shared experience of a historical epoch. The work of art has to penetrate the everyday life of everyone, make people reflect upon their own life-style, illuminate their own problems in providing standards for reflection and understanding — including self-understanding. If this happens, the reception of works of art can contribute to the transformation of our lives for the better. The readiness to rise to the level of a utopian reality has to be present before reception. A readiness of this kind need not be conscious. It can be in the form of a mute dissatisfaction, of a longing or quest for something different, higher, more sublime. Lukács’ model is the story of Judith, the peasant woman in Gottfried Keller’s novel *The Green Heinrich*. Judith who is uneducated but endowed with a good common sense came to read Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*. The epic poem led her to understand herself and her love of Heinrich. She underwent what Lukács called “catharsis”: an insight into the essence of life that shakes one’s personality and sheds new light on every life experience in one’s past, present and future.

Both Adorno and Lukács agreed at least on one crucial point: in the modern world, only the work of art can embody a “defetishized” reality. Lukács went even further in rejecting modern social science than Adorno. In his view, modern (bourgeois) science expresses rather than critically illuminates the fetichized world. Modern “bourgeois” philosophy follows suit. Instrumental reason (termed metaphysical reason by Lukács) has gained the upper hand in both science and philosophy and challenges to metaphysical reason cul-

minate in irrationalism. Philosophy proper must become *aesthetics*, for a defetishizing message can only be deciphered from the language of the work of art. What made Lukács a *radical cultural conservative* was his commitment to democracy. He stood by his belief that modern art works express, rather than unmask, a fetishistic reality, in a fashion similar to social science of philosophy. A text that cannot be deciphered by everyone endowed with common sense is foreign to men of common sense. What is alien from human beings is alienated. The more elitist a work of art is, the more alienated it is. When speaking of *realism*, Lukács did not have in mind a literary or artistic style. A realistic art work is defetishizing insofar as it addresses everyone endowed with common sense and ready for catharsis. Further, it encourages the belief that life can be conducted otherwise, can be changed, that human beings are not subjected to an unalterable fate, that they are still free to do something about this fate. But are they?

This is an article of faith with Lukács. He emphatically denied that modern bourgeois life was completely alienated and that modern man's consciousness is completely fetishized. For him, the dialectic never became negative. If life were completely alienated, art and literature could not help but express this alienation. The expression of alienation would then be a kind of defetishization. Yet people are still confronted with real choices, real options, real alternatives. They are still able to reassert their real (albeit relative) freedom by deciding for one option rather than another. The modern world is not closed, but still open. If this is true, works of art presenting the world as closed do not defetishize it, but rather they contribute to its fetishization. Realist art works constitute worlds in which there is freedom. There are individuals who put their freedom to use or fail to do so, who confront their fate *because* they are committed to something and not as a result of an inescapable human condition. It is *their* fate, not fate "as such." Realist artists swim against the current. They are not necessarily superior to other artists as far as artistic brilliance is concerned. Yet, they are superior in the sense that they live up to the historical mission of art: defetishization. This is the reason why for Adorno and Lukács, the division between "high" and "low" cuts across the map of cultural practices in entirely different regions.

At times, Lukács seems astonishingly close to certain postmodern theoretical positions. A man so attracted by the unity of life and culture in popular festivities would be the last to raise objections to "happenings." Similarly, he would be in deep sympathy with the idea of "artistic practices" in everyday life. Lukács would not have shed a tear for the demise of elitism, nor would he have denounced "reading against the text," which he practiced himself. He did not even treat fashion with contempt. He distrusted the "high priests" of culture and detested the cultural market far more than the street corner as the appropriate *locus* of art and literature. And yet, he does belong to the "Holy Family." As I already mentioned, Lukács' attitude towards life, the basis of his philosophy, can be understood as a reaction to the *fin de siècle*, to the first emergence of the postmodern condition. His whole work is the outright reac-

tion to the postmodern condition, despite occasional coincidences between his sympathies and those of certain postmodernists.

Moreover, Lukács was a philosopher of the Enlightenment far more resolutely than Adorno. Or, more precisely, as he aged, Lukács was increasingly committed to the promise of the Enlightenment. Without disregarding the contradictions inherent in the Enlightenment project, he argued that its work was not yet finished. His critics often reproached him for defending bourgeois art. So he did. Lukács could have paraphrased Rosa Luxemburg's well-known creed: "there are no bourgeois rights, only human rights," in the following way: "there is no bourgeois art and literature, only art and literature." He regarded the emergence of the autonomous artistic sphere as a process of *emancipation*. "Real history" in Lukács does not begin with communism, as with Marx: it begins with the full emancipation of art and literature, with the fusion of decoration and representation in art forms which follow no laws but their own. As far as art and literature were concerned, Lukács was both ultra-Hegelian and anti-Hegelian. With all his respect for the cave drawings of Altamira and the refinement of ancient crafts (a respect paid all human achievements), Lukács never subscribed to cultural relativism concerning art and literature. He believed in *progression* in the creation of art. He saw the birth of the independent sphere of art, the autonomous art work, as the end result of a long progression. For it is exactly here that "real history" begins. Of course, he did not conceive of this progression in a unilinear fashion. Ancient Greek art, the self-expression of our entering real history, always preserved its paradigmatic character. He even subscribed to the Hegelian theory that all great epochs promote one art form as against others, that each has a "dominant form of art." But Lukács never subscribed to the Hegelian prediction about the end of art. This for Lukács would have meant the end of history. Rather, the period of art was not about to end, it had just begun. As early as *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács made a case for the rejuvenation of the novel in Dostoyevsky. He saw bourgeois society *sensu stricto* as a short period of history that was supposed to usher in a new epoch in which all genres of art and literature could come to full bloom. The setbacks in this progression are only temporary. Art is not defeated and it will fulfill its promise. Lukács stuck to this position till the very end of his days.

Indeed, there was something in Lukács' account which, at first glance, resembles the "deification of art." It was, however, a deification that went along with deep contempt for the "priests of art." The combination sounds strange, but here is the clue for comprehending Lukács' thoroughgoing commitment to the Enlightenment.

"Works of art exist, how are they possible?" This was the question raised by Lukács' first aesthetics — a question that, in Weber's view, completely changed our approach to aesthetics. Every art work, Lukács insisted, is a *world* of its own, a total world he called a "work individuality." Every work individuality expresses the historical consciousness of an epoch, but remains a totality, an individuality. Each and every work of art presents and represents uniqueness.

Historicity and ubiquity, the fusion of both, is what the “world” of an art work is all about. Moreover, every individual work of art *embodies universality*. This is neither an idea nor a principle; it is actually *embodied* in works. Universality does not *regulate* the creation of the art work, but it is co-constitutive of it. The three major Hegelian categories, individuality, particularity, and universality, are homogenized in the work of art. Moreover, it is historicity (particularity) which, as the overarching category, carries the other two. The more historicity carries universality and individuality, the more coherently historicity *fuses* the other two categories, the higher the work of art ranks. The model of the supreme work of art is the model of the supreme human personality. The more a person of a particular historicity can become a unique *individual* and *embody* universality (humanity) in one person, the more sublime, the “higher” he or she becomes. Moreover, one cannot have the one without the other. One cannot become an individual without embodying universality, and the quest for the universal does not make us “sublime,” should we fail to become complete and unique individuals. Lukács made no secret about his taking the model of personality from German classicism — especially Goethe. He used to quote frequently that, according to Goethe, every human being can be “complete.” This “completeness” does not depend on refinement, formal culture or good taste. Sometimes rather the opposite is the case. Moreover, the individuality of the autonomous work of art and the classical idea of personality are not simply considered “parallel” phenomena. It was Lukács’ firm conviction that the “more complete” someone is, the more one will become the true recipient of the work of art; and conversely, the reception of the autonomous work of art helps to transform the person into an autonomous personality. Lukács would have hated the idea of the deconstruction of personality, because it was precisely personality, as the unity of the individual and the human-universal, he stood for throughout his life.

Lukács was deeply aware of the social constraints at work to deconstruct the self. This is why he became a radical cultural conservative. He believed that the modern work of art makes a case for a deconstruction of the self or, at least, that it does not make a case against it. This is why the reception of modern art cannot be cathartic, cannot even be the point of departure for the construction of personality. For him it was obvious that only works of art generally conceived prior to the 20th century can perform this task. Since our world is not completely fetishized or alienated, the construction of personality is still possible. However, this process can only be facilitated by works of art which are themselves autonomous, which embody both universality and individuality, and which can be grasped by everyone who may be or may become “complete,” whether educated or non-educated, refined or unrefined.

As already mentioned real history begins for Lukács with the emergence of the autonomous work of art. Only where men attained consciousness of human essence can we speak of history proper. And this is exactly the moment when works of art become autonomous, when they become a “world” of their own. Works of art thus represent and embody the history of humanity.

For Lukács, the concept “humanity” is not empirical but normative, for he uses the term as equivalent to “generic essence” as distinct from “mute species.” Our species became vocal in art and literature. This is why the *memory* of humanity is embodied in works of art. Lukács learned his hermeneutics well. All interpretations are misinterpretations, he wrote in his first aesthetics. But our relation to an individual object is our relation to that object. We read human history in different ways as we revive the past in a variety of interpretations. But not everything qualifies as an object of historical interpretation. Autonomous works of art best qualify for such interpretation. We unveil the past by *reading* such works, but we can unveil the past only by reading *them*. Human beings without a past, without memory, cannot be personalities. We reconquer our past in our memory via the reception of art works.

Two contradictions can be detected in this conception: one apparent and one real. First, how can one emphasize the democratic character of Lukács’ aesthetics when his standards for the *sublimity* of works of art are so high that only a few art works can meet them? The answer is simple: no one cared less for the artists and the minutiae of art creation than Lukács. That contemporary artists could not perform the task he expected of them was the least of his concerns. Lukács’ interest was solely vested in the process of reception. If Homer’s, Shakespeare’s or Balzac’s works were the only ones to meet his standards, what difference would it make? People would read precisely these works, visit the statues of Michelangelo, listen to the music of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. At the same time, Lukács did not perceive the recipient as a passive container of immortal artistic effects. He envisioned a constant “to and fro” between high art and everyday practices, a continuous interplay between cathartic reception and everyday creative-artistic activity. It was rather the professional artistic creation that claimed to be “high” while losing sight of the standard, on the one hand, and the pursuit of everyday practices without the capacity for the reception of the sublime work of art, on the other hand, that he rejected. Thus, the contradiction between the highest standard and the democratic message in Lukács is only apparent.

This is, however, not the case with the second contradiction.

Lukács, as we have seen, drew a sharp line between true and false: the work of art that defetishizes is true, all other works of art are not only inferior, but false. Everyone who stands for the defetishizing (realistic) art work is right; everyone who defends fetishistic, anti-realistic art works is wrong. There are no nuances, no “more or less,” there is only an “either-or.” The art work is either true or false, it either stands for emancipation or for decadence, either for the fully developed personality or the decomposition of personality, either for alienation or for de-alienation. It was either swimming with or against the current, it is either friend or foe. Yet does such a sharp demarcation between true and false really help us distinguish good from evil? Does it provide us with a *moral* standard?

Lukács’ main concern was not aesthetics, but ethics. He wanted to construct

a wall separating true and false in order to be able to tell good from evil. He shared Adorno's view (as well as Benjamin's) that modern philosophy must become a *philosophy of art*, it must have recourse to the only defetishizing objectification. It must do so, Lukács argued, in order to circumvent the moral deadlock of our century, the disappearance of collective morality: *Sittlichkeit*. But do aesthetics or any kind of philosophy of art qualify for such a task? Despite his sharp distinction between true and false, despite raising a strict standard of aesthetic judgment, Lukács did not provide any standard for differentiating good from evil.

The art work should be autonomous; so should human personality. But the insistence on the full development of human personality, on swimming against the current, on defetishizing, does not provide a moral standard. The standards for the work of art can be established by applying the criterion of defetishization; however, art is autonomous precisely in that it has its *own* standards which are *not* moral standards, even if they have a moral implication. Human beings cannot achieve moral autonomy through the quest for autonomy as such. They must know *what* norms, *what* moral criteria they ought to observe, on the basis of what norms and criteria their personality should develop. Lukács does not provide any such criteria. Yet, searching for autonomy without observing any moral norms can make us evil as well as good. Lukács dreamt of an ethics of personality, an ethics based on Marx's messianic hope of total de-alienation. If the human species and the individual were to completely coalesce, no moral norms would be needed to make men good. But the total coalescence of individual and the species is nothing but the messianic hope of total redemption, and not a socially viable perspective, even from a utopian standpoint. An image like this does not provide us with moral guidance in the present, not even as a regulative practical idea. At this point, Lukács comes extremely close to postmodernism, despite his commitment to the contrary. He does not want to accept *any* external authority above and beyond the individual. But if all external authorities have to be rejected equally, if the personality has to obey only his or her own intrinsic laws, then *all* external authorities are alike, be they moral or immoral, despotic or democratic, universalistic or particularistic. And if one comes to the conclusion that the actualization of the idea is not yet viable, if one has to renounce the hope that heaven will come down to earth today or tomorrow, then one can reconcile oneself with *any* external authority; it no longer matters which.

The old Lukács came to realize that philosophy of art cannot be the clue to ethics. This is why he decided to write an ethics based on the ontology of social existence. Given that this ontology was organized on the paradigm of work and, as a result, all value patterns were duly derived from the patterns of purposive rationality, this last venture did not sound more promising than previous ones. But the change of attitude is still discernible. Previously, Lukács had reconciled himself with the reality of an external authority, although he was unaware of this reconciliation. This time, Lukács attains an awareness of reconciliation. But the latter is no longer the reconciliation with a political authority; rather, it is with our historicity, our being thrown into the present

world. It is a reconciliation in the spirit of the Hegelian Preface to *The Philosophy of History*: to discover the rose on the cross of the present. The awareness that the present is a cross, but that one can still find a rose on it, elicited a theoretical attachment to a novel kind of stoicism. Always stoic in inclinations, never before stoic in ethics, the old Lukács finally sought to give a theoretical expression to his own inclinations. This new kind of stoicism may have eventually generated adequate moral philosophy.

Returning to the “postmodern condition,” there is very little hope now for a cultural revival where works of art can be both autonomous and democratic. Adorno and Lukács formulated the two options of yesterday, which still remain the alternatives of today’s postmodernism. They read as follows: either we have autonomous art works which express the sublimity of our human conditions — in which case we have to resign democracy and embrace elitism — or we accept cultural conservatism in which case we can still be democratic. In a way, Lukács’ option gains momentum against Adorno’s. If no new “sublime” modern novel were written, if no new autonomous sculpture or musical composition were created, the highest products of the Western tradition would still be appealing while preserving the standards and contrast a utopian reality to the present. As long as art has a place in daily life, a rise “upward” is not entirely ruled out. And Lukács’ insistence that everything “at the top” comes from “deep down,” provided there is a personality which carries it “upwards,” provides hope. Lukács would add: the personality can never be unmade. So there is hope.

What has to be acknowledged as a complete failure in both Adorno’s and Lukács’ attempts is the grounding of philosophy in art. Philosophy, in particular moral philosophy, cannot be modelled after art. Everyday life is the only sound starting point. And here again, Lukács wins the day. A philosophy can only grow out of contemporary everyday life if one rejects the negative dialectic of complete alienation and total fetishism. But without a normative foundation, which at the same time is related to empirical life, this kind of work cannot be performed. But if this kind of work can be performed, it has to be performed in a stoic manner: without fear and hope, or, more modestly, without excessive fear and excessive hope.

The Holy Family stood for norms and standards: it stood for autonomy and personality. From this viewpoint, members of this family can serve as models. Yet, the Holy Family was not holy enough or, rather, its members were sometimes holy in the wrong way. They were not holy enough for they were either moral minimalists or moral maximalists. They failed to address the question of *normativity* in life, in politics, and in interpersonal communication. They were holy in the wrong way, for they did not accept plurality of life-styles, cultures and human personality. There are roses of different colors and scents on the cross of the present, and all of them can convey something that is true, good and beautiful. But a standard is needed, not so much to define which is the really true or good or beautiful rose, but to guide us in distinguishing the rose from the cross, as well as from those who would like to crucify us to that cross.