

## Appendix

# An Entire Epoch of Inhumanity

Georg Lukács

*This is the Foreword written by Lukács in December 1964 for Volume 6 ('The Problems of Realism, 3') of his Collected Works (Georg Lukács, Werke, 17 vols., Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1962–1974). Volume 6 contains The Historical Novel (1937) and a series of essays collected under the title 'Balzac and French Realism' (written in the period between 1934 and 1940). Lukács included three shorter texts in an appendix: 'Don Quixote' (1952), 'On an Aspect of Shakespeare's Timeliness' (1964), and 'Faust Studies' (1940). The first paragraph of the Foreword, which is essentially an extended erratum note, is omitted here. All notes are by the translator.*

I have always found it regrettable that my detailed discussions of literature have been confined to the nineteenth century. The demands placed on me by my daily life and theoretical work were such that I never had the opportunity to write about authors who sometimes meant more to me than others whom I have treated at length. I therefore include the modest preface to Cervantes and the short piece on Shakespeare here not because I attach particular importance to them. Rather, their presence bears witness to the painful gap in my literary-historical writing of which I am constantly aware.

The main topic of this volume is the intellectual and artistic transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. The new novel that emerges here – and the novel, the bourgeois epos, is the leading literary genre of this period – will set the tone for the entire nineteenth century in both its form and its idea. I am, in fact, convinced that this novel form has not lost its significance even today. That is not to say that we should see it as an immediate model or exemplar [*Vorbild*]. No such exemplarity exists in the entire history of art; where it is claimed, we usually find a misunderstanding of the 'ideal' (even if this misunderstanding is often productive). This holds true for the relationship between the *tragédie classique* and antiquity as well as the relationship between Goethe or Pushkin and Shakespeare. Aesthetically speaking, there is something far more complicated at work in the problem of exemplarity. Every great work of art conforms to the laws of its genre but extends their limits at the same time. Among writers of the greatest genius and originality, this is the expression of a historical transformation with which the subsequent generation must come to

terms. This leads to a double dilemma that confronts truly great, truly universal writers when it comes to their creative process: their modification of formal laws must incorporate that which is permanent and points to the future, but it must also exhibit a conformity commensurate with their historical situation. Already [Edward] Young, in the eighteenth century, was aware that exemplarity should not simply produce imitation. Only weak artists and confused times find themselves standing at that false crossroads where one must choose between the path of imitating so-called 'models' and that of a deracinated 'originality' that is just as dubious.

When it comes to the modern epic, the great achievement of combining conformity with modification can be credited to Walter Scott, who united the totality and completeness of the epic form with a content that was consciously socio-historical in its entirety as well as its details. I am fully aware that this characterization must sound completely outdated to the majority of those who make pronouncements about literature today. That the whole is synonymous with untruth has become a fashionable slogan for the most diverse forms of modern worldviews [*Weltanschauungen*] and repudiations of worldviews [*Weltanschauungslosigkeiten*], for whom the socio-historical appears to be a surface without essence. My aim here is not at all to portray Walter Scott as pointing the way back to a 'return'. In fact, his example illustrates most clearly the dialectic that these essays attempt to shed light on. In a certain way, Scott is not really a great writer at all. He does not possess that gift for charming and fascinating animation that extends to the smallest details of every figure in Tolstoy. Neither is he simply a discoverer of new territory, such as George Lillo and Denis Diderot are for bourgeois drama (even if this groundbreaking reputation might exist only among historians). Instead, he 'merely' gives shape to something whose newness he was the first to experience: the socio-historical as it manifests itself in the destiny of each individual. Whether it comes to the limitations of person and gifts, or to the question of that grand one-sided ambition required of all significant discoverers, Walter Scott ascends to literary heights only when he writes about man rising above his historical *hic et nunc*, about the way its irresistible might constrains his most authentic desires, about the uncomprehending confrontation between men whose attitudes are thoroughly determined by opposing social forces, etc. etc. The discrepancy between such heights of composition and descents into purely individual fortunes is what characterizes the greatness and the limitation of this writer in his singular incomparability.

Individual accomplishment matters less here than the effects [*Ausstrahlungen*] of the accomplishment, which corroborates the difference (the opposition) between exemplarity and imitation proposed earlier. Scott's discovery in relation to totality and historicity had direct consequences, of course, but who would on this account consider Manzoni or Pushkin an 'epigone' of Scott? There is a creatively productive distance that separates them from Scott, because their figures and stories grow out of a completely different history in which they find their proper home. The decisive thing about Scott's effect, and the thing

that makes him unique in his age, is that the novel of society historicized itself in his wake, challenging writers after him to grasp and give form to their own present moment as a historical one. This brought about a turn whose consequences are still in effect today and which is disregarded only at the risk of artistic inferiority.

No rule in the history of art remains without exception: the contrast between the novel of the eighteenth century and that of the nineteenth century is immediately eye-catching, but it does not apply to Swift. Or if it does, it is only with significant qualification. In Swift, a conscious expression of the socio-historical *hic et nunc* is not just absent, but explicitly and artistically set to the side. We find an entire human epoch, with its most universal conflicts, confronting man in general [*überhaupt*] or perhaps man who bears the faintest traces of his time. Today, one calls this the *human condition*, but this expression fails to capture Swift's true subject matter: not man in general but rather his fate in a historically determined society. Swift's unique genius lies in his ability to take in an entire epoch prophetically with his gaze on society. In our time, something analogous is offered only by Kafka, who sets in motion an entire epoch of inhumanity as an antagonist to the Austrian (Bohemian-German-Jewish) man of Franz Joseph's reign. His world, which can only be interpreted as the human condition in a strictly formal sense, thus contains a profound and disturbing truth. It stands in contrast to that which is aimed directly at the pure, abstract (and through abstraction, distorted) generality of human existence, which has no historical background, basis or perspective and thus ends up always striking at perfect emptiness and nothingness. Even if this nothing might be adorned with an arbitrary, somewhat existential ornamentation, it remains, in contrast to what we find in Swift and Kafka, an empty nothing.

The necessary historicity of art is only a subdomain of the general problem of historicity. This problem has been on the agenda since the French Revolution, and German Romanticism presented the world with a solution to it whose false-ness continues to afflict us. With the help of the pamphleteer Edmund Burke, German Romanticism advanced the thesis that the Enlightenment was antihistorical in spirit. It held the French Revolution to be proof of this, and claimed that the historical spirit awakens only with Romanticism and only in the theory and practice of Restoration. To still have to waste words on this thesis is tiresome: it dismisses the reality of the great historians of the Enlightenment (one needs only to think of Gibbon) and amputates the category of progress from history. It acknowledges only that which has emerged 'organically' as historical, and considers any upheaval or conscious action aimed at real change to be antihistorical. This is how Ranke gradually became (above all in Germany) the model of the historical spirit, while the positions represented by Condorcet and Fourier, Hegel and Marx came to be considered antihistorical. As facile and intuitive as it might seem, it would be nonetheless accurate to connect the beginnings of this line of thought with the countermovement against the French Revolution, especially since many of its earliest and most prominent advocates also served the cause of Restoration. This is not the place to describe

how the theorists and practitioners of this view of history eventually became the leading ideologues of the 'Second Reich' and its disastrous Wilhelminian policies. Such a view persists into the present, although sometimes accompanied by a very different intellectual apparatus. Whenever the Metternichian Restoration, for example, is celebrated as a realization of 'European thought', it is not hard to discern an intimate relationship with a primal ideology of restoration, regardless of any historically specific differences.

This theory of history justifies itself as an attack against an abstract concept of progress. But such a concept of progress is a mere myth, at least as far as the significant thinkers and writers of the nineteenth century are concerned. One does not need a fatalistic and mechanistic concept of 'progress' to account for historical change and the way completely new constellations emerge from the finest changes in interpersonal and intra-personal human relations. It would suffice to speak of an irresistible movement [*Fortbewegung*] with one consistent direction and tendency despite all internal and external contradictions. From Thierry to Gordon Childe, from Scott to Thomas Mann – one will find no forthright and rigorous thinker among them to confirm in the least this myth of mechanical progress. Quite the contrary. While we are on the topic of literature: the nonrestorative character of its view of history is grounded in the fact that its significant representatives portray and give shape to irresistible socio-historical tendencies that form men and are formed by the actions of men. The effects and results of these tendencies remain objective and independent from the convictions, wishes and sympathies of writers. This is the view of life that prevails in great literature, from the decline of clans in Walter Scott to the uprooting of the Buddenbrooks to the tragedy of *Leverkühn*. But the (ultimately, and admittedly only ultimately) irresistible movement of history consists of the activity of men, as it occurs among men and to men. No elaborate, abstract theory is needed to portray the historical existence of men as a product of their own acts and passions, in order to artistically or practically lend truth to their continuities and prospects. Only when present conditions congeal into timeless fetishes, losing their mobility and connection to concrete men, do 'living images' of the human condition arise, lending fixity to an often despised and contemptible present and turning it into an unbegotten and unchanging fate. Such a 'will to art' [*Kunstwollen*]<sup>1</sup> is possibly (but not necessarily) the product of genuine desperation, and its aims are possibly (but not necessarily) unrelated to any conscious goal of restoration; in its effect, however, it always tends towards an alliance with restoration. The tension that plays itself out around this 'possibly' is itself socio-historical: one finds no traces of restoration in Kafka himself, but many in his aesthetic successors. A respected sociologist of our day has offered the following generalization of this state of affairs: the end of history has already arrived, and the future can only consist of different ways of dealing with the forms and contents that we know today.<sup>2</sup>

This view of life and literature, along with our modern literary historical understanding, draws support from the assertion that all important figures and developments of the nineteenth century are essentially Romantic. Trends

towards homogenization have always been fashionable in the history of literature. As a young student, I heard from classmates at the university in Berlin about Dilthey's cutting remarks on the conventional understanding of the eighteenth century: 'If it doesn't make sense, call it "Spinoza"'. The same thing happens today with Romanticism, and it changes nothing that the flattening, conventionalizing effect of overgeneralization now passes for interesting and unconventional. Romanticism is an important intellectual movement of the nineteenth century that began as opposition – set off by the French Revolution in the realm of politics and literature, and by the parallel Industrial Revolution in the economic and social world. One therefore finds in its truly significant representatives a sharp, sometimes even profoundly, penetrating critique of the new contradictions that accompanied these fundamental transformations of social reality. This critique always loses its edge, however, because Romantic writers do not direct the dynamic energy of these contradictions towards the future, as do great utopian thinkers such as Fourier or [Robert] Owen. Instead, they seek to turn back the wheel of history, pitting the Middle Ages and the *ancien régime* against the present, and simple commodity exchange against capitalism. In literary terms, real Romanticism begins with Chateaubriand and passes through the German Romantic School to [Alfred de] Vigny or Coleridge. In socioeconomic terms, we find it in Sismondi, Cobbett or the young Carlyle. There is a tendency that runs from Scott to Balzac to Tolstoy and Thomas Mann (although there are naturally a few significant writers who could be excluded from it), and the overcoming of this tendency through the integration of legitimate critical elements into a realistic image of the world is a more or less essential moment in its development towards maturity.

We seem to have lost sight of this critical point of view today. Beginning with Byron (whose life-motto Goethe so wittily summarized as 'more money and less governance') and moving on to the antiquity-inspired utopian socialist Shelley and that disciple of the Enlightenment, Stendhal: the list of supposed Romantics proceeds to infinity. Wherever we find someone sympathetic and relevant for the present, we readily extend a diploma attesting to Romantic heritage. This veneration has not changed even after Fascism followed the Romantic premise to its furthest and most gruesome conclusion: contrasting the problematic present with a mythologized and idealized past, it called for an actualization of the latter in order to solve the difficulties of the former. Hitler and Rosenberg were not the only ones who took recourse to this 'primal state', which was a modern equivalent of the revival of the *ancien régime* or feudalism; [Ludwig] Klages, Jung and many others made similar attempts before them. The collapse of Fascism was not followed by a coming to terms with the past, either intellectually or in other spheres closer to daily praxis. When I had occasion to speak to staff officers of the Paulus Army after Stalingrad, I experienced in personal proximity for the first time how a sharp criticism of Hitler's 'mistake' was compatible in practical terms with an affirmation of German imperialist expansion, and in theoretical terms with a strategic retreat to the position of Spengler and Nietzsche. To what extent the unexamined past has

played a role in the renaissance of Romanticism remains unexplored, not least because it is part of the method of literary history (and here it is not alone among disciplines) to skim over vast historical differences elegantly and focus attention on semantic or psychological parallels. We therefore get boundless theories of boundlessness, flavoured with a titillating blend of the most modern and a dash of Marxism. That groups of objects have no fixed boundaries is self-evident for Marxist dialectics. For example, the exact point of division between feudal and capitalist formations is not subject to precise definition in principle, although what opposes feudalism and capitalism in principle certainly is. In the theories of boundlessness, however, objectivity itself dissolves into a semantically well-appointed nothing. One might as well conclude with the sentence that was already given a philosophical twist by Hegel: ‘By night, all cows are Romantic’.<sup>3</sup>

These few and fleeting remarks are meant to make clear that the author of these essays – most of which are more than a quarter of a century old – still stands by the principles that guided his old investigations today, heedless of the rebirth of the All-Romantic whose currents have swept along even those who before the tyranny of this fashion had correctly perceived the historical situations. (That individual interpretations here have been rendered obsolete by history is a different matter that has nothing to do with this question).

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Translated by Zachary Sng

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term *Kunstwollen* was coined by the art historian Alois Riegel (1858–1905), whom Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* refers to as one of the ‘really important historians of the nineteenth century’ (HCC 153).

<sup>2</sup> Lukács may be referring here to the conservative sociologist and philosopher Arnold Gehlen (1904–1976). In *Zeit-Bilder: Zur Soziologie und Ästhetik der modernen Malerei*, Gehlen argued that the avant-garde art movements of the early twentieth century would be followed by nothing but repetitions and variations in terms of both technique and content.

<sup>3</sup> The reference here is to Hegel’s famous criticism of Schelling’s concept of the Absolute, which in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* he dismisses as a reduction of difference into ‘a night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black’ (9).

## Works Cited

- Gehlen, Arnold (1960), *Zeit-Bilder: Zur Soziologie und Ästhetik der modernen Malerei*. Frankfurt: Klostermann.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1977), *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.