

## Chapter 9

# Art for Art's Sake and Proletarian Writing

Georg Lukács

*L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung* appeared in June 1926 in *Die Tat*, a monthly journal with the subtitle *Monatschrift für die Zukunft deutscher Kultur* that came from the press of the neoconservative Jena publisher Eugen Diederichs. In 1926 Lukács told his old friend, the dramatist Paul Ernst – the subject of the last chapter in *Soul and Form* – that he could not write for bourgeois journals and newspapers without party approval, and that this would be forthcoming only if the article's publication contributed to the communist movement's objective needs.<sup>1</sup> Given this condition, Diederichs's *Die Tat* might seem a rather odd venue, except that in his way its publisher was also a vehement critic of modern industrial society and bourgeois liberalism.<sup>2</sup> An extraordinary autodidact, Diederichs made the press he founded in 1896 into a massive propaganda machine through which a highly eclectic range of publications were disseminated, publications that he construed as weapons against the pervasive materialism and stultifying rationality of capitalist modernity and the liberal ideology of its defenders. Although he was an elitist who argued that idealism was incompatible with mass democracy, Diederichs was no apologist for the Second Reich and believed that class antagonisms needed to be assuaged to restore the unity of the Volk. Before 1914 he was already drawn to reformist socialism and published works by Eduard Bernstein and Beatrice and Sidney Webb (Stark, 1981, pp. 102–3). In the war years this perspective attracted Diederichs to corporatism, and after it to an interest in the Soviet model as an alternative to Western 'Mammonism' (*ibid.*, pp. 141–2, 178).

Characteristic of *Die Tat*'s coverage of socialism and the working-class movement are the issue of July 1926, devoted to workers' education (*Arbeiterbildung*), and a more miscellaneous group of articles on socialism in the issue of July 1927. In both cases the majority of the contributions were written by Social Democrats.<sup>3</sup> The theme of proletarian culture was the subject of two other articles in these years, one by the journalist and poet Walter Ochilewski and the other by Johannes Resch, who headed the *Freien proletarischen Hochschule in Remscheid*<sup>4</sup> (Resch, 1925a; Ochilewski, 1927; Heidler, 1988, p. 111). To judge from a letter Diederichs wrote him in January 1925, Resch was involved in organizing a *Die Tat* special issue on communism that was to have included contributions from Lukács, the dramatist and historian Karl Wittfogel and the art historian Lu Märten.<sup>5</sup> However, the publisher did not approve the texts by Wittfogel and Märten and

accepted only Lukács's essay, which appeared more than a year later in an issue in which no other contributions addressed socialist or communist themes, and that began with an article on the contemporary relevance of Dostoevsky by Ernst – a theme of common interest to him and Lukács. Both Ernst and Lukács had contact with Diederichs before the war; it seems from their correspondence that Lukács had wanted to publish the German edition of *Soul and Form* with the Diederichs Verlag before the arrangement fell through over some personal matter.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps their acquaintanceship counted for something, but Lukács's *Die Tat* essay was a mere four pages confined to the review section; set against the other contributions it definitely appeared an interloper.

Ernst had engaged with Marxism in the 1880s and 1890s but his involvement with Social Democratic politics was brief, and in 1919 he published an essay collection titled *Der Zusammenbruch des Marxismus* with the neoconservative press of Georg Müller, which marked a precisely contrary direction to the one Lukács was taking at that time.<sup>7</sup> However, their friendship survived disagreements over the war,<sup>8</sup> and Ernst was one of those distinguished writers who signed an appeal, published in the *Berliner Tageblatt* in November 1919,<sup>9</sup> that Lukács not be extradited from Vienna to Budapest; they remained on friendly, sparring terms in the 1920s.

Ernst criticized the argument of '*L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung*' in two separate articles. First, he denied Lukács's claim that the writer stood in a relationship of 'sensuously naïve immediacy' with the social order, stressing instead his intrinsic separateness and the inherently factitious character of his creations. Second, while he conceded that the proletariat was a determining stratum in European society, Ernst denied that it was a determining class, since it had not achieved a cohesive and unifying class consciousness. Shaped by the profoundly fragmenting effects of industrial capitalist relations on individual consciousness, the proletariat was not an organic social formation, as even the German bourgeoisie of Goethe's time had been, and consequently it was incapable of forming a unified culture.<sup>10</sup> Lukács responded in an undated personal letter of 1926 or 1927, entirely amicable in tone, in which he said that in spite of the objectively false character of Ernst's critique, their similar attitudes to capitalism meant they did not stand on opposite sides of the barricades.<sup>11</sup> This is the last surviving correspondence between them.

The publication of '*L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung*' in Diederichs's *Die Tat* seems indicative of its place in the transition from Lukács's romantic critique of capitalism to a more rigid and rationalistic Marxism accommodated to that of the Third International.

– Andrew Hemingway

*L'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) is always the certain sign of the despair of a class with regard to its own existence, to the possibility of creating a meaningful and humane form of life within the framework of the underlying economic structure of society and the corresponding forms and contents of social life.

Everyone who knows the great and honest representatives of *l'art pour l'art* (reference is made here to Gustave Flaubert above all, and especially to his letters), knows how strongly this despair worked in them, knows how much

their 'purely artistic' attitude was only a mask that quite transparently concealed their furious and contemptuous hatred against their own class, the bourgeoisie.

Nonetheless, even the most honest and clear-thinking representatives of this tendency could not come to a clear understanding of the true causes of their despair, let alone find a path by which to redeem their lives as artists. The reason for this is not only that as bourgeois they could not leap over their own shadows and were incapable of transcending the horizon of their class existence. For many of their class were able to move beyond the limits of their bourgeois existence, both practically and intellectually: they found the way to the proletariat, to the correct critique – critique in theory and practice – of bourgeois society. Beside the difficulty that anyone born bourgeois would have in breaking fully with his class, the barrier lay in the very fact that they were artists.

For the artist always perceives life in its *immediacy*; the truer the artist, the more direct and unmediated is his experience of life. He may engage in bold criticism of men, groups, institutions and so on, yet to remain an artist he must always stand in a relation of sensuous, naive immediacy to the underlying objective forms in which the life of his time presents itself. (In this regard, Dante stands in a line with Homer, Cervantes with Shakespeare.)

The tragedy of the artist in bourgeois society – from which tragedy the whole of the *l'art pour l'art* movement stems – lies in the fact that precisely this relation of immediacy, the basis of the artistic attitude towards reality, is disturbed, indeed made impossible. First of all, the development of bourgeois society, determined by the development of capitalism as one of the modes of production dominating all of society, makes human pursuits, the relations of humans with one another (the stuff of literature) unbearably abstract, unsensuous, incapable of being shaped into art [*ungestaltbar*]. Capitalism's social division of labour, the dominance of the exchange relationship [*Warenbeziehung*] over all aspects of human life, the fetishism of all life forms that necessarily follows, and so on, surround the artist with an environment to which he, *because* he is an artist – and thus of an intense, sophisticated and discriminating sensuality – *cannot* relate in a naive-immediate way, delighting in his world and creating joyously. However, if he wishes to remain an artist, it is just as impossible for him to relate to this in a purely critical and thus intellectual way, transcending the immediate.

And this insoluble dilemma is further intensified for the modern artist. Since every true and great art is a forming of life in its highest possibilities, it always goes beyond the obvious superficial reality of the shallow everyday. It seeks to give form to the collective life of its times in its highest expressions; it relinquishes naturalism in order to seek out living nature; it renounces the flat immediacy of the world as it is simply found before us, so as to arrive at an entire sensuous forming of life that encompasses all that is essential to it. In this sense, all true literature is a critique of the times. But when he becomes a critic of his time, the modern writer inevitably remains stuck fast in pallid, abstract, nonsensuous and artistically unsatisfactory criticism. For bourgeois consciousness, society as a whole is given at best as an abstract concept. And when, for

artistic reasons, he turns his back on this abstract totality, when he turns his gaze exclusively to the 'concrete', uncritically apprehended phenomena of perception, then he becomes artistically suffocated in the grey and barren triviality of bourgeois everyday life. His artistic conscience demands the impossible from him: the union of irreconcilable modes of conduct. (Here we need only refer only to Hebbel, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Hauptmann, etc.)

Already this would suffice to explain the desperate background of *l'art pour l'art*. But secondly, the development of bourgeois society also makes the existence of the writer problematic in a way that it never previously was – and indeed as much inwardly as outwardly. Outwardly, because the increasing capitalist transformation of society makes the true, vital need for literature, for art, ever weaker, and transforms the connection between writer and public ever more strongly into an abstract relationship subject to the value law of commodity relations. The writer knows ever less for whom he writes. And if he now expresses his social rootlessness as an arrogant theory of art for art's sake, this is at best a case of a desperate self-anaesthetization, something that the honest artists in their lucid moments already saw through as such (I refer again to Flaubert), but which lesser and less honourable ones turn into a kind of self-deception that corrupts their character as artists as well (one thinks of artists of the type of Wilde, D'Annunzio, Hofmannsthal, etc.).

This social uprootedness of the artist goes hand in hand with the inner rootlessness of art. Artistic forms, as Goethe and Schiller recognized quite clearly, emerge from the particular needs of experience, whereby the typical possibilities of the most intense sensuous fulfilment are condensed in artistic forms (epic, drama and so on). As we have shown, capitalist development, with its division of labour that abstracts human relationships (and so on), not merely annihilates the stuff of literature, but also pulverizes its forms, by engendering in abstracted and socially atomized men such a chaotic need for an intensified experience of life that these cannot be fulfilled in any adequate, truly artistic way, whatever the form. The writer must find his forms purely within himself; he must become an aesthete, an adherent of *l'art pour l'art*. A great art, an art truly perfect in form, originated always only as the fulfilment of an unequivocal and clear need of its time. Aesthetes in search of a form, whether they are called Neo-Romantics or Expressionists, must necessarily retain an inner formlessness.

There is of course, one will say, also a *Tendenzkunst*. But this in no way shows an artistic route out of the labyrinth of *l'art pour l'art*. It is rather – viewed simultaneously from a social and an artistic viewpoint – the exact opposite move. For those tendencies that are meant to define the substance and form of literary works, and that are possible in bourgeois life from a bourgeois viewpoint, float either as abstract-romantic utopias so high above materially formed life that they are never integrated with it in an artistically organic way (the late Ibsen, but also G. Kaiser, [Ernst] Toller, etc.), or they concern such abstract, trivial everyday problems of banal bourgeois life that they can never reach the height of art.

This dilemma is not coincidental either. It mirrors the social being of the bourgeois class, which – since the historical appearance and increasing importance of the proletariat – becomes ever less capable of regarding impartially the foundations of its social existence. This is because it is as impossible for the bourgeoisie to affirm this existence sincerely as to criticize it impartially. It is forced to take refuge either in a desperate hypocrisy (the ‘subjectlessness’ of *l'art pour l'art*, the sovereignty of form alone), or in that trivial hypocrisy that says that every problem it can register can be dealt with by superficial ‘reforms’.

Thus, from whichever standpoint we observe it – including the standpoint of art – *l'art pour l'art* reveals ever more clearly the hopelessness of bourgeois existence. But what can proletarian revolution offer the development of art in its place? To begin with, very little. And it ill becomes the proletarian revolutionary, the Marxist, to get carried away in utopias that ignore any actually available possibilities.

Above all, he must not forget that proletarian revolutionary art is, socially, in a much less favourable position than the art of the revolutionary bourgeoisie in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At that time, the socioeconomic forms of bourgeois life were already developing *within the feudal world*. Bourgeois writers were thus in a position to give immediate and sensuous form to this mode of existence, in whose world-redemptive calling they could still have real faith (the English novel of the eighteenth century, Diderot, Lessing, etc.). By contrast, despite all the upheavals of the present, the proletariat lives in a world whose underlying structure (rule of the law of value, division of labour, equal and abstract law, etc.), still retains the structural forms of capitalism – and this not only before the overthrow of capitalism, but also, as Marx showed incomparably in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in the first, lower phase of communism. The gigantic changes that we are experiencing, which the revolutionary proletariat has achieved, initially disrupt our *immediate, sensuous* reality (the material and form of literature) less than one might superficially suppose. This explains the ‘disillusionment’ with the Russian Revolution of those intellectuals who had expected from it the immediate solution to their own personal privations.

Nevertheless, much has already taken place in this area, even for the writers of the still-capitalist Western Europe. For those writers who have inwardly aligned themselves with the proletarian revolution, who truly experience the revolutionary development of the proletariat, this experience shows a way out of the antinomies of *l'art pour l'art*. For all its faults, Leonhard Frank's *Der Bürger* towers over ‘*Tendenzdichtungen*’,<sup>12</sup> precisely because the scale of its ‘*Tendenz*’ allows a vital artistic fusion with the concrete matter – because the clear and conscious hate of this ‘*Tendenz*’ for bourgeois society leads it beyond the formlessness of the art of pure form. And Andersen Nexø succeeds in depicting the awakening of class consciousness in a farm worker with a richness of detail and the broad view of the world that only the writers of the best period of the bourgeoisie could achieve with their material.

And while in the rest of Europe the stagnation of literature and the lack of talented younger writers are generally and correctly lamented, in Russia a whole group of new and highly talented young writers has emerged. In their works – while they might often be groping and stammering – one already senses the solid ground on which they stand as men and writers. It is hardly as if a new, unprecedented literature, completely distinct from all earlier developments, were suddenly to emerge. Those who expect and want this are exactly the most bourgeois, those closest to the over-formed formless writing of European despair (on this literature see Comrade Trotsky's book *Literature and Revolution*). But one senses that writers are *beginning* again to discover, socially, a solid ground under their feet – and that this is having a complementary effect on the material and form of their writing. And it seems to me hardly coincidental that the most strongly formed work of this development that I have yet encountered, Libedinski's *Eine Woche*,<sup>13</sup> was the work of the *most conscious proletarian and communist* among these writers. For it is in the proletarian and the communist that the process is being accomplished that is called upon to overcome bourgeois society (and with it the problems of its art). To be sure, just as, according to Marx's words, law can never rise above the economic form of society, neither can literature! But precisely when we expect no sudden wonder, no solution to all problems at a single blow, the *gigantic advances* that will also be possible for literature in the proletarian revolution become visible and recognizable to us.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Georg Lukács to Paul Ernst, 29 January 1926, in Kutzbach, 1974, p. 174.
- <sup>2</sup> For Diederichs, see Stark, 1981, pp. 15–19, 58–110, 132–48, 172–85; for *Die Tat*, see pp. 43–50 and *passim*. See also Heidler, 1998.
- <sup>3</sup> For *Die Tat*'s presentation of socialism and *Volksbildung* see Heidler, 1998, pp. 428–39.
- <sup>4</sup> With regard to Resch, see also Resch, 1925b.
- <sup>5</sup> Eugen Diederichs to Johannes Resch, 26 January 1925, in Diederichs, 1967, pp. 292–4.
- <sup>6</sup> See the 1910 correspondence in Kutzbach, 1974, pp. 6–7. Lukács also planned for a German translation of his *A modern dráma fejlődésének története* to be undertaken by Karl Mannheim and published with Diederichs; see Karl Mannheim to Georg Lukács, 25 July 1914, in Lukács, 1986, pp. 239–40. The project fell through.
- <sup>7</sup> On Ernst and Lukács in the period after 1918, see 'Einleitung', in Kutzbach, 1974, pp. xxxii–xxxvii.
- <sup>8</sup> See their correspondence of July–August 1917, in Kutzbach, 1974, pp. 117–20. These letters partly record Ernst's unsuccessful attempt to persuade Lukács to participate in the Lauenstein Kulturtag of September, a conference organized by Diederichs to consider cultural and political questions raised by the war. On the Lauenstein Kulturtagen, see Stark, 1981, p. 136.

- <sup>9</sup> Reprinted in Kutzbach, 1974, pp. 155–6. For correspondence relating to the appeal, see *ibid.*, pp. 153–9.
- <sup>10</sup> Ernst, 'Kunst und Proletariat' and 'Was nun?', in Kutzbach, 1974, pp. 181–201.
- <sup>11</sup> Georg Lukács to Paul Ernst, undated (but almost certainly 1926 or 1927), *ibid.*, p. 202.
- <sup>12</sup> Frank, 1924. The title of the 1930 English translation, *A Middle-Class Man*, is potentially misleading, since the German *Bürger* can mean a bourgeois, a citizen or a burgher, but does not imply a member of the traditional German middle class (*Mittelstand*) (translators' note).
- <sup>13</sup> Libedinski, 1923 (translators' note).

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